

The Logic of Regional Intervention in West Africa

Danwei Zhu

A dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2025

Reading Committee:

Danny Hoffman, Chair

Daniel Chirot

James D. Long

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies

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Danwei Zhu

University of Washington

Abstract

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Danwei Zhu

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Danny Hoffman

Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies

Why do regional organizations intervene in some internal conflicts but not others? What is the underlying logic of multilateral intervention? Drawing on empirical evidence from regional interventions in Africa, this study proposes a conceptual framework that highlights the strategic considerations shaping regional organizations' responses to various security challenges. I argue that two principal themes underlie the logic of international intervention: regime security and international norms. These factors interact in important ways: in some cases, concerns over regime security align with regional organizations' commitments to certain norms, motivating the deployment of peace operations; in other cases, military intervention is not pursued because the meaning of the relevant norms is disputed in the context of multilateral intervention, or because regime security is not perceived as an urgent issue. The

differences observed across cases are closely associated with the nature of each conflict or crisis. Variations in conflict types can lead to distinct intervention logics. However, current scholarship on multilateral intervention fails to seriously consider the typology of conflicts involving international intervention. To address this gap, I apply the regime security-norms framework to different conflict types, analyzing how their interaction influences international organizations' decisions to deploy peace operations. Two empirical case studies are presented to illustrate this framework: the Casamance secessionist conflict and the 2016-2017 Gambian political crisis.

The first Chapter conceptualizes the logic of regional multilateral intervention and contextualizes the intervention experience of West Africa. Chapter two explains the absence of ECOWAS intervention in the Casamance conflict by putting it in the context of the evolution of African secessionist conflicts. I argue that regime security and sovereignty principles are much more prominent in shaping regional organizations' attitudes toward secessionist conflicts. Chapter three examines the controversial nature of ECOWAS intervention in Gambia's political crisis and demonstrates the co-existence of the regime security motivation and normative commitment to democracy behind the multilateral intervention.

By integrating conflict typology into the study of multilateral interventions, this dissertation offers a novel perspective on the conditions under which regional organizations choose to engage in peace operations.

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Acknowledgements

The first person and undoubtedly most important person I wish to thank is Professor Danny Hoffman, my advisor and the Chair of my dissertation committee. I am extremely grateful for his mentorship, guidance, and encouragement throughout my doctoral journey. I truly appreciated and enjoyed the many hours he devoted to discussing my research and providing constructive feedback. This dissertation would not have been possible without his unwavering support.

I also wish to extend my sincere thanks to my committee members—Professor Daniel Chirot, Professor James Long, and my GSR, Professor Geoffrey Wallace. They generously offered their time and insights, even in the early stages of my research when I was still in China and we had not yet met in person. Their support during the pandemic and throughout my studies meant a great deal to me.

I would like to thank the Jackson School of International Studies and the University of Washington for their academic and financial support during my doctoral studies. This research was made possible by the support of the Chester Fritz International Research and Study Fellowship and the Ottenberg-Winans Fellowship, which enabled my fieldwork and data collection in West Africa.

I am profoundly grateful to all the individuals who offered me kindness and assistance during my fieldwork in Nigeria and Gambia. Their generosity reminded me that a dissertation is never the work of one person alone—it is built on the contributions, hospitality, and support of many.

I owe special thanks to Professor Aituafe Irene Pogson at the University of Ibadan. Without her help, I would not have been able to connect with many of the key interviewees in Nigeria. She even kindly arranged a quiet and welcoming workspace

for me in her office, providing an environment conducive to writing and reflection. I also want to thank the faculty members and Master's students at the Department of Political Science, University of Ibadan, whose openness and sincerity enriched my field experience.

My heartfelt thanks go to Professor Eghosa Osaghae for his warm welcome during my visit to the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, as well as to the researchers and scholars I interviewed there.

I am especially grateful to Mr. Yan Jiafu, who offered me accommodation in Abuja. His hospitality made it possible for me to work and rest in comfort. I also want to thank Dachu for his excellent Chinese cooking, which brought warmth and familiarity to my stay.

In Nigeria, I received vital support from the following individuals, to whom I am sincerely thankful: Dr. Nike Tioluwanikansoso, Professor Isaac Albert, Dr. Adeola Adams, Dr. Nathaniel Dominic Danjibo, Professor Isaac Ozoemenam Mbachu, Professor William Alade Fawole, Professor Femi Otubanjo, Dr. Philip Olayoku, Dr. James Okolie-Osemene, Professor Olajompo Abayomi Akinyeye, Dr. Brown Odigie, Mr. Constant C. Gnacadja, Mr. Ebenezer Asiedu, Dr. Aderemi Ajibewa, Major General Victor Ezugwu, Dr. Temilola A. George, Mr. Bekaye Coulibaly, Air Commodore Sampson Eyekosi.

In Gambia, I would like to thank Mr. Saikou Jammeh, whose generous help with accommodations, transportation, and networking made my fieldwork possible. I am also grateful to Dr. Ismaila Ceesay for his invaluable assistance in expanding my interview networks.

I am deeply honored to have received the support of Her Excellency Madam Fatoumatta Jallow Tambajang. Her time, generosity, and insights were invaluable contributions to

my fieldwork in Gambia.

My appreciation also goes to the following individuals who supported my research in Gambia: Mr. Alagie Manneh, Mr. Sheriff Bojang, Mr. Mustapha Darboe, Ms. Fatoumatta Njai, Lieutenant General Yahya Drammeh, Mr. Sait Matty Jaw, Mr. Madi Jobarteh, Mr. Kexx Sanneh, Ms. Ayesha Harun, Mr. Momodou Sabally, Ms. Tabou Njie-Sarr, Dr. Ebrima Bai Biran Jagne, Mr. Almamy Gibba.

To my dear friend Chima Uchechukwu: I will always remember that final night of the LSA Conference when I cried, overwhelmed by the sadness of saying goodbye. Thank you for your friendship. And to Esther Oluwaseun Idowu: thank you for the wonderful memories we shared at the NIIA in Lagos.

Finally, I wish to thank my friends and parents in China for their emotional support across time and distance. Special thanks to Zhu Yuhan and Qin Yidan. Beginning this Ph.D. journey in 2020, amid global uncertainty, was especially challenging, but your companionship and encouragement sustained me throughout. Your presence, even from afar, was vital and deeply cherished.

Introduction

I arrived at Banjul International Airport late at night without seeing much of the city. It was early August 2023, and I had just completed my fieldwork in Nigeria. The next day, I walked through Kerr Seign, a town near the Atlantic coast, staring at the busy highway and thinking about scheduling my following interview. Suddenly, a convoy of vehicles in black and blue camouflage passed by. On the roofs of the vehicles, soldiers holding guns scanned their surroundings warily. I clearly saw the ECOWAS emblem on the cars. It was ECOMIG—the peace operation deployed by ECOWAS, and the very reason I was here. The convoy did not attract the attention of any pedestrians but me. I had never expected to be so close to my research subject so soon. Yet it seemed to have become part of daily life for Gambians—living in a country where foreign soldiers are stationed to guard the President and secure strategic locations.

The peaceful small state experienced an electoral dispute in December 2016 that escalated into a nationwide crisis. The then President Yahya Jammeh refused to concede his defeat in the election and declared a state of emergency shortly before his term was due to end. After several rounds of failed mediation efforts, ECOWAS turned to a last resort—threatening to use military force to compel Jammeh to step down. Confronted with a credible threat from the regional body, Jammeh ultimately agreed to relinquish power and went into exile. Soon after, troops from Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana, Mali, and Togo entered Gambia under an ECOWAS mandate to secure the territory and protect the newly elected President, Adama Barrow.

In the south of Gambia, a long-standing armed conflict has raged over three decades in the Casamance region of Senegal. However, ECOWAS has remained absent from efforts to resolve the conflict. The Senegalese government has dominated the negotiation process, with only a few carefully selected international actors permitted to participate.

Why did ECOWAS send troops to a political crisis where the level of violence on the ground never reached the threshold of war? And why did it leave the Casamance conflict aside?

This was not the first time the question had surfaced in my mind. It had risen when I spoke

to scholars in Nigeria earlier during my fieldwork. In my conversations with researchers and professors at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) and the University of Ibadan, we talked a lot about Nigeria's role in ECOWAS and its involvement in Gambia's crisis. Yet we never touched on the initial conditions of that controversial intervention. In retrospect, it became clear to me, and perhaps also to the scholars I spoke with, that we had taken ECOWAS's interventionist role in Gambia for granted. None of us questioned whether the regional organization should initiate such a military mission in the first place.

During my final days in Lagos, news broke of a military coup in Niger, Nigeria's northern neighbor, which abruptly removed President Mohamed Bazoum from power. Conversations around me quickly shifted. People debated the possibility of another ECOWAS intervention; some supported restoring order through military means, while others firmly opposed it. This moment just intensified my curiosity: why do regional organizations intervene in some crises and not others? What explains the selectivity of their actions?

Christof Hartmann (2017) explained the reasons behind the ECOWAS intervention in Gambia well. A pro-democratic regional organization with a clear legal mandate, an unwelcome President, a small standing army, and a powerful neighboring country all contributed to ECOWAS's decision to deploy regional troops and its eventual success in preserving the constitutional order of Gambia. However, when we situate ECOMIG within the broader spectrum of ECOWAS peace operations and compare it to other conflicts that never attracted regional intervention, the puzzle remains: how can we make sense of ECOWAS's seemingly selective approach to military intervention? Is there a discernible pattern that helps us understand the underlying logic of such decisions? And beyond the immediate outcome, was the restoration of democracy in Gambia truly a happy ending?

This dissertation seeks to answer the above questions by developing a conceptual framework for understanding the logic of multilateral intervention led by African regional organizations. I focus exclusively on interventions initiated by African regional organizations rather than all major international organizations participating in African conflict resolution. The former displays distinct intervention logics and operates under different material and normative constraints, which scholarship on multilateral intervention fails to pay adequate attention to.

Before delving into this topic, however, reviewing some scholarly debates on the

emerging global trends of multilateral intervention is necessary. These provide important context for the arguments developed in this dissertation.

African Regional Intervention: A Unique Trajectory

Data on peace operations indicate a growing number of peace operations led by regional organizations in recent years (Bellamy and Williams 2005; Williams and Bellamy 2021), reflecting the mounting importance of regional actors in assuming security responsibility or promoting security regionalism. The expansion of regionalized practices within an increasingly diffused world order may open new opportunities for a more pluralistic and representative international system (Fawcett 2025). This makes it all the more important to understand the patterns and motivations behind regional interventions.

Scholars have made significant progress in capturing the emerging trends of multilateral intervention at both regional and global levels. These include concepts such as pragmatic peacekeeping (Karlsrud 2023), hybrid peacekeeping (Tardy 2014), communities of practice (Tieku and Yakohene 2024), and ad hoc coalitions (Karlsrud and Reykers 2020). African regional organizations, in particular, have often served as precursors and innovators, contributing substantially to many of the abovementioned developments.

However, on the other hand, pertinent to the above phenomenon is the shift in the international system, where liberal-based multilateralism has come under increasing pressure (Ikenberry 2018; Moe and Geis 2020; Karlsrud 2023). Since the 2010s, scholars have observed a normative transformation unfolding in the field of international peace operations, from liberal peacekeeping to stabilization-based peacekeeping (Karlsrud 2019a; 2019b; Moe and Geis 2020; Andersen 2018). Compared to the operations aiming at enforcing human rights and spreading democracy in the post-Cold War period, recent operations initiated by international organizations are increasingly marked by a convergence between African and international actors around the use of force to consolidate state authority and territorial control, which may “carry potential to limit the scope of these established norms” (Moe and Geis 2020, 390). Specifically, the rise of international interventions or ad hoc coalitions undertaking counterterrorism or counterinsurgency tasks has reorientated the focus of peace operations,

moving away from the foundational principles of traditional UN peacekeeping. The UN model rests on three core principles: impartiality, consent of the parties, and non-use of force except in self-defense. However, stabilization-oriented operations could involve elements of peace enforcement and transform the peacekeeping operation into an active party in the conflict. The UN mission in Mali (MINUSMA), for instance, is criticized by some as being drawn into a counterterrorism operation (Karlsrud 2023, 263). It is against this backdrop that some scholars have raised concerns about the mismatch between established UN peacekeeping norms and the realities of new stabilization mandates (Aoi et al. 2017)

Two points should be raised here. First, the argument on a global downturn in liberal multilateral interventions fails to fully account for the new dynamics of regional intervention in Africa. This is not to dismiss the value of such critiques. Instead, a more nuanced picture of regional intervention embedded in the evolving tensions between liberal norms and regime security should be highlighted to capture the security landscape in Africa. The entanglements of the two factors are far more dynamic than we thought. As the first and third chapters will demonstrate, normative frameworks on good governance and democracy are not merely rhetoric. Regional organizations practice them when the timing and conditions are favorable. The same region that has hosted numerous stabilization-oriented peace operations can also be a site where legitimacy norms are meaningfully integrated into operation mandates. The evolution of regional security governance in West Africa illustrates this pattern.

Second, international organizations' preference for stabilization mandates in peace operations is not a new phenomenon, which, according to some Western scholars, displays ongoing normative turbulence challenging the more "liberal" peacekeeping framework. Rather, regional intervention to solve the devastating civil wars in Africa during the 1990s had already embodied the features of stabilization and counterinsurgency. The problem is that the literature on multilateral intervention has been too preoccupied with the UN-led or Western states-led models of peace operations while being stingy in shedding light on the experiences of the Global South and integrating them into their theories. Moreover, a slight tendency to treat African autonomous interventions carrying the task of authority consolidation as the opposite of the liberal approach to peacekeeping can be discerned among some literature highlighting the "tectonic shifts" in the peacekeeping paradigm. This tendency may risk reducing the

complexity and dynamics of African autonomous regional intervention.

Peace operations involving military personnel are often categorized as UN-led and non-UN or regional autonomous operations. However, this dichotomy has obscured the richness of regional intervention in Africa. As Coleman (2011) indicates, the limitations of the conceptual dichotomy between regional and universal peacekeeping fail to capture the nuances of peace operations in the sub-Saharan African context. He argues that African peace operations have demonstrated a prominent feature that does not neatly fit into the category of peacekeeping missions within the UN framework. According to her, intervention for solidarity is a tradition of African regionalism derived from the pan-Africanist ideals back to the early post-independence era (Coleman 2011, 527). African leaders provided military assistance to governments of other newly independent states against foreign aggression or apartheid regime-sponsored domestic rebel groups. This kind of support underscored the fledgling African states' desire for solidarity and continental unity under the context of the Cold War politics and liberational struggle. Coleman's argument on solidarity deployments thus provides an alternative way of perceiving the phenomenon of stabilization-oriented peace operations in Africa, which rests on the historical trajectories of African regionalization, in contrast to the multilateral intervention or the peace operations under the UN system.

However, Coleman may have exaggerated the level of solidarity in post-Cold War regional intervention since ideological appeal has become less relevant. States pursuing their national interests have different positions in regional intervention. Similar to RENAMO of Mozambique, which was supported by Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa in the 1970s, the pattern of domestic rebellions that received assistance from neighboring countries continued after the Cold War. Sometimes, neighboring states even try to block regional peace operations for a variety of reasons. For instance, by supporting Charles Taylor's rebel movement, Burkina-Faso and Côte d'Ivoire played important behind-the-scenes roles in the First Liberian Civil War. They were also the countries that opposed the idea of an ECOWAS monitoring group.

Therefore, I argue that rather than analyzing the distinct feature of African autonomous peace operations through the lens of "solidarity deployments" or hybrid operations with solidarity characteristics, African countries' common consideration for regime security is more appropriate in the context of regional intervention. As discussed in the first and second chapters,

regime security is an essential factor influencing regional organizations' decisions to intervene. It does not necessarily mean that a regional peacekeeping mission shall come to save certain regimes from collapse. Instead, the logic of regime security is deeply embedded in the unique state-building history of African states, which shapes the collective regional need to restore political and security order in a state when its political authority is in great danger. On the other hand, regional organizations tend to have less incentive to intervene in a domestic armed conflict where the state regime (central government) is not under significant threat. We will see the latter scenario in the second chapter—ECOWAS remained absent in conflict resolution and peace process of the Casamance conflict, despite the fact that the repercussions of this long-lasting conflict have gone far beyond the borders of Senegal.

In addition, the idea of hybrid peace operations in Coleman's framework—combining both solidarity and peacekeeping elements—fails to take into consideration the role of regional norms in shaping the decision of regional intervention, which is considered by this study the other essential factor in understanding the logic of regional intervention. Regional norms evolve over time under different international environments, which means that certain meanings of the norm change and could be interpreted differently by regional actors. As the appeal of solidarity and unity ebbs and flows in different periods, regional norms proliferate and decline under different international environments, with some becoming prominent while others being contested or reinterpreted. Take the example of the sovereignty principle. It used to be the guardian of newly independent states to resist foreign interference. However, when the orthodox interpretation of this principle failed to meet the need for regional peace and security, sovereign states and regional bodies chose to reframe it to enable collective responsibility. The history of supporting “just wars” of liberation against colonial powers and advocating for the dilution of absolute sovereignty against the backdrop of a series of devastating civil wars in the 1990s all shaped African countries' perception of intervention and sovereignty as two sides of the same coin (Adebajo 2016).

Layout

After briefly reviewing some new trends found in multilateral intervention literature, let's

go back to the research question I raised at the beginning: why did regional organizations choose to intervene in some armed conflicts/crises but not others?

Central to my explanation is the complex interactions between regime security and norms and their compound influence in shaping or conditioning the choices of regional organizations. Three chapters are devoted to building the explanation. They are inherently linked to each other.

The first chapter serves as a theoretical framework, laying the foundation for discussion on the underlying logic of African regional intervention. In this chapter, I analyze two factors—regime security and regional norms—that are central to explaining regional organizations' logic of peacekeeping deployments. The variety of interactions between the two factors is manifested in different types of armed conflicts and crises. While current scholarship on multilateral intervention has developed various conceptual frameworks to categorize the types of peace operations, I argue that their classification tends to center on the actors who initiate the operations or the contents of peacekeeping mandates. Yet, the types of conflicts or crises also matter—they condition the means regional organizations could apply through a series of political and normative mechanisms. On one hand, internal conflicts have become the dominant security challenge to many African states. On the other hand, these conflicts vary considerably, given the different nature of their struggles. A domestic rebellion aiming at toppling the regime is far different than a secessionist conflict in terms of its implications for conflict resolution. Regional organizations built based on sovereignty and territorial integrity principles usually consider the latter a more sensitive issue. For this reason, I developed a typology based on the combination of different considerations for regime security and regional norms. Five major conflicts and crises are thus identified and explored regarding their implications for multilateral intervention. I also examine this conceptual framework by briefly reviewing the history of regional intervention in West Africa.

The second is a case study chapter focusing on an armed conflict that was never intervened by regional organizations—the Casamance secessionist conflict. To situate this case in the bigger context of multilateral intervention, I explore the academic debate on international actors' responses to secessionist conflict and the historical evolution of this type of conflict in Africa. I argue that governments' behaviors at the individual level differ from those at the regional level due to the legal constraints regional organizations face and the very different

normative implications the two types of behavior could bring. It explains why individual states may support the secessionist movements despite their common vulnerability to secession, whereas African regional organizations usually take a firm position against secessionist attempts. The history of African secessionist struggles further highlights the influence of the changing international environment and evolving norms on shaping regional organizations' attitudes toward secessionist conflict. The Casamance secessionist movement turned violent in the early 1990s, a time when the third wave of African secessionist conflict began to emerge and a turning phase when international society's attitude toward it became more ambiguous. However, though the repercussions of this armed conflict spilled across national boundaries, the central government of Senegal was able to dominate the peace process. Applying the framework developed by the first chapter to the case, I argue that ECOWAS's limited role in the peace process was conditioned by the fact that the regime of Senegal was never threatened by the armed struggle and the norm of state sovereignty remained stable at the height of the conflict.

The third chapter turns the focus to an emerging type of crisis that receives multilateral intervention—political crisis. I have used the ECOWAS military intervention in Gambia since 2017 as a case study to examine the logic, implications, and subsequent effects of regional intervention in political crises. The uniqueness of Gambia's crisis lies in the fact that there was no sign of large-scale violence breaking out when a dispute arose over the presidential election result in December 2016. Moreover, in ECOWAS's history of intervention, no peace operation has ever been deployed simply to uphold the election results of a country. It thus underscores the importance of understanding the underlying logic of regional intervention through a historical lens. I argue in the chapter that regional norms about democracy and good governance that had developed in the past two decades did come to play an important role in shaping the regional body's decision to intervene. However, with regional troops staying in the country since 2017, two more issues have complicated the image of the democratic victory that ECOMIG brought to Gambia. The first is Senegal's ambiguous motivations in the intervention. As the leading troop-contributing country of ECOMIG, Senegal is widely perceived to have a strategic interest in containing the Casamance secessionist rebels operating along the borders with Gambia, which could potentially undermine the legitimacy of ECOWAS intervention. The

second issue is the paradox of power consolidation—ECOMIG’s continued presence in Gambia has been entangled with President Adama Barrow’s need for power consolidation, exposing ECOWAS to potential legal and political risk. The stagnant progress on security sector reform and Barrow’s reliance on ECOMIG are causing a vicious circle, which could be at odds with ECOWAS’s promotion of progressive norms.

Methods

This dissertation adopts qualitative research methods to examine the dynamics of multilateral intervention in Africa. Data were gathered through a combination of in-depth interviews, fieldwork, archival research, and the analysis of official reports, statements from international organizations (IOs), and relevant literature. Overall, it is grounded in an interpretative approach, emphasizing the importance of engaging with how actors on the ground perceive and make sense of regional interventions. Various local interpretations and perceptions are essential to understanding the complexities and contested meanings of multilateral peace operations. These interventions led by regional organizations are not only events that appear in official communiqués or on international news; they often become embedded in the lived experiences and everyday realities of those directly affected.

Fieldwork was conducted in Nigeria and Gambia between June and September 2023. As a central actor within ECOWAS and the host of its institutional headquarters, Nigeria provides a strategic vantage point for examining regional decision-making and diplomatic processes. In contrast, Gambia represents a key case of regional military intervention, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how such operations are experienced and interpreted on the ground.

During my fieldwork, I conducted 46 semi-structured interviews with professionals across a range of sectors, including academia, intergovernmental organizations, government and military institutions, non-governmental organizations, and the media. The interviewees were identified through prior contacts and snowball sampling. The purpose is to include both institutional actors and civil society voices to bring varied perspectives to the conversation on regional intervention.

- Academic interviewees included scholars and researchers affiliated with universities

and policy institutes in Nigeria and The Gambia. Their work engages directly with, or is closely related to, the subject of regional intervention and peacebuilding.

- ECOWAS officers, politicians, and military personnel interviewed had either direct experience with the 2016–17 Gambian political crisis or broader involvement in ECOWAS-led peacekeeping and diplomatic efforts.
- NGO staff were affiliated with organizations focused on human rights, conflict prevention, and humanitarian affairs, offering civil society perspectives on intervention processes and outcomes.

These interviews were supplemented by local news sources, archival documents, and official publications from relevant IOs, including ECOWAS, the African Union (AU), and the United Nations (UN). In addition, I engaged with secondary literature to contextualize findings within broader theoretical and empirical debates.

Chapter One: A Typology of Multilateral Intervention in Africa

Introduction

Why do regional organizations intervene in some internal conflicts but not others? What is the underlying logic of multilateral intervention? Drawing on empirical evidence from regional interventions in Africa, this study proposes a conceptual framework that highlights the strategic considerations shaping regional organizations' responses to various security challenges. I argue that two principal themes underlie the logic of international intervention: regime security and international norms. These factors interact in important ways: in some cases, concerns over regime security align with regional organizations' commitments to certain norms, motivating the deployment of peace operations; in other cases, military intervention is not pursued because the meaning of the relevant norms is disputed in the context of multilateral intervention, or because regime security is not perceived as an urgent issue. The differences observed across cases are closely associated with the nature of each conflict or crisis. Variations in conflict types can lead to distinct intervention logics. However, current scholarship on multilateral intervention fails to seriously consider the typology of conflicts involving international intervention. To address this gap, I apply the regime security-norms framework to different conflict types, analyzing how their interaction influences international organizations' decisions to deploy peace operations.

The proliferation of peace operations in Africa since the 1990s has made the continent an "experimental laboratory" where many of today's peacekeeping norms and practices were developed (Tardy and Wyss 2014, 3). The lessons and experiences the United Nations gained from African conflicts contributed to the evolution of international norms regarding peacekeeping and peacebuilding. However, the UN has not been the only leading actor on these battlegrounds. Regional organizations in Africa, especially the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), have played a growing role in resolving conflicts collectively and innovatively. From civil wars to military coups, African regional organizations have progressively expanded the scope of peace operations through years of intervention practice.

Yet the emerging pattern of multilateral intervention led by these regional organizations has not received sufficient academic attention.

Scholars apply different frameworks to categorize the types of peace operations. For instance, Allen (2023) classifies African-led peace operations based on their mandates, including peace process facilitation, election and transition process assistance, leader protection, peace enforcement, and health crisis management. Similarly, Williams and Bellamy (2021) categorize peace operations based on their purposes—prevention, observation, assistance, enforcement, stabilization, and administration. There are also classifications of multilateral peace operations based on the actors involved. Tardy (2014) develops the concept of hybrid peace operations as an independent category, which refers to the model of two or more international actors operating simultaneously or sequentially in an operation.

The above frameworks focus on the types of approaches applied in peace missions or the actors participating in peace missions. However, little research focuses on the kinds of conflicts and their implications for peace operations. As Angstrom points out, different types of internal conflicts have different dynamics (2001, 95). While the conflicts that are intervened by international organizations are usually seen as posing threats to international/regional peace and security, their diverse conditions with respect to different categories of conflicts shape different responses and strategies of international actors.

As will be revealed in the two case studies in chapters 2 and 3, the regional organization in West Africa faced different normative and practical constraints due to the distinct socio-political settings of the two crises—the Casamance secessionist conflicts and the Gambia’s political crisis. In Gambia’s case, for example, if scholars analyze peace operations without taking into consideration the kind of crisis the regional organization (ECOWAS) intervened in, they will miss the rich implications of peace operations in an electoral dispute as opposed to a civil war. By distinguishing the types of conflicts/crises peace operations handled, it illuminates the underlying logic behind international intervention and the role of international norms in different scenarios.

1. Regime Security and Regional Norms

International organizations serve as an arena where “norms and convergent expectations

about international behavior are developed” (Finnemore 1993, 594). The development of norms and the changing expectations of international behavior are especially prominent in peace operations, epitomizing the tension and struggle between progressive norms and inviolable national boundaries.

Reviewing the history of regional intervention in Africa, two factors are central in considering intervention in conflicts and crises—regime security and regional norms about security and governance. They stand for two ways of dealing with conflicts—the former prioritizes political stability over other issues, while the latter usually symbolizes a more progressive and comprehensive understanding of security. Both factors can be found in intervention practices; they even coexist in the same case.

Abbott and Snidal argue that the role of international organizations “is best understood through a synthesis of rationalist (including realist) and constructivist approaches” (1998, 8). They not only serve as agents for states to reduce transaction costs and facilitate negotiation but can also act as principals to create, reflect, diffuse, and even enforce the norms (Finnemore 1993; Martin and Simmons 2013). In the scenario of multilateral intervention led by regional organizations, regime security represents a rationalist approach, while regional norms represent a constructivist approach. The concern for regime security could constrain the implementation of certain norms, while in turn, norms could also wield influence on the behavior of state actors through international organizations. They are in a dynamic process that shapes the policies and decisions of international organizations.

Regime Security

The protection of regime security has been at the center of the OAU since the early period. One of the Principles in the OAU Charter revealed such concern: member states shall declare their adherence to “unreserved condemnation, in all its forms, of political assassination as well as of subversive activities on the part of neighboring States or any other States” (OAU 1963, Article III). Unlike the preservation of state sovereignty, regime security focuses on the safety of the incumbent government. The context of post-independence African state-building experience provides the rationale for the predominance of regime security consideration in

structuring regional intervention: due to the fact that most profound security challenges African states face are rooted in internal sources (e.g., insurgency, coup d'état, secession), the need to protect the regime from threats thus becomes indistinguishable from state security.

Problems that caused conflicts in many Global South states were inextricably linked to the state apparatus per se. Scholars interpret this as the result of weak state rooted in flimsy statehood and governance. As Jackson argues, the combination of state weakness and internal threats creates a security challenge unique to many developing states (Jackson 2013, 166). Central to the predicament is weak states' inability to establish a monopoly on the instruments of violence. In this situation, the dynamics of the internal security dilemma are prevalent in these states. The security dilemma describes interstate security interactions in International Relations studies, as one state's action on strengthening its own security makes other states feel less secure. A group of scholars (Ayoob 1992; Job 1992) in the early 1990s re-worked it and raised the idea of an internal security dilemma extracted from third-world states' experiences. In short, "every effort by the regime to secure its own security through force provokes greater resistance and further undermines the institutional basis of the state and the security of the society as a whole" (Jackson 2013, 166). The consequences of the power struggle range from protest, ethnic/religious militias, rebellion, and even state collapse.

Brian L. Job was among the first scholars to develop the concept of insecurity dilemma (internal security dilemma). He argues that the internal and external security environments in the Third World states break the premise of security dilemma in four fields. First, these states are usually not comprised of a single nation. Groups within the state compete for security. Second, the regime lacks popular support since it only represents certain groups or social sector's interests. Third, the state lacks the proper institutional capacity to maintain security order. Fourth, the primary threat to the state comes from internal challenges to the regime or security threats generated by the regime itself (Job 1992, 17–18). This leads to two types of insecurity dilemma: 1) the effort of one group securing itself makes other domestic groups feel insecure; 2) while internal security struggle weakens the state's ability to deal with external threats, it will not make the state less fragile in the anarchic international system (1992, 18). It is worth noting that in Job's context, Third World states refer to a general situation that does not account for all variances in these states. They can have very different performances

regarding state institutional capacity and ethnic relations. Not every Third World state experiences the internal security dilemma.

The perception of a common threat coming from inside motivated political leaders to employ regional mechanisms to prevent or resolve conflicts/crises that could threaten their hold on power. Amitav Acharya makes a theoretical argument that common domestic vulnerabilities and legitimacy problems of the rulers motivated weak states of the Third World to turn to regional/subregional security arrangements to cope with their internal challenges and deter threats to regime survival (1992, 149). While his theoretical explanation draws from the experience of regional security organizations in Southeast Asia (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN) and the Gulf region (Gulf Cooperation Council, GCC), the security orientation and the role of African regional organizations nevertheless bear resemblance to these organizations.

It is worth noting that regional organizations' consideration of regime security in deploying multilateral intervention does not necessarily mean they are there to protect a certain regime. Changing regional relations and complex personal relationships among African political leaders often make it hard to reach a consensus on which side they want to stand. In an ongoing civil war, some states may support the incumbent while others provide assistance to a rebel faction. The ceasefire agreement endorsed by regional organizations may also result from compromise among different actors. Instead, the point is that when a state regime is in danger, especially amid a civil war, despite having different national interests in the crisis, regional actors have more incentive to get involved in it to restore political and security order for at least two reasons: 1) to prevent the devastating effect of the warfare from spilling over into neighboring countries; 2) to reduce the influence of the crisis that may instigate unrest in their own countries. As will be discussed in the following sub-section, the normative frameworks concerning intervention developed by African regional organizations demonstrate a mixed character of different political logic, in which the overthrow of the government is perceived as a violation of regional norms. It reflects the similar rationale embedded in African states' turbulent political history.

However, ensuring regime security is not the full picture of how regional organizations function as regional security providers in conflicts and crises. Norms are playing an

increasingly more important role in international relations, as well as in the evolution of multilateral intervention. Normative development highlighting progressive agendas such as humanitarian intervention and good governance is gaining more momentum in African regional security architectures. Regional intervention practices are influenced by dynamic interactions of the two factors—regime security concerns and normative influence.

Norms

The principles of sovereignty and non-interference are among the building blocks of contemporary intergovernmental organizations. They could also act as blocks to international intervention. African regional organizations built on the basis of decolonization and states' independence especially placed a high value on these principles. The OAU had been insistent on the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states since its creation in 1963.

However, the security situations African states faced in the post-Cold War era were much different than in the 1960s, which posed challenges to the orthodoxy of sovereignty and non-interference principles. More and more analysts and even African leaders found it necessary to reform the OAU to meet the increasing demand for resolving internal conflicts (Packer and Rukare 2002). The lesson learned from the negative effects of impunity and indifference culture motivated African leadership to adopt a more interventionist stance in its legal frameworks (Kasaija 2013, 117).

Three groups of regional norms that emerged and were promoted by African regional organizations in different time periods have played critical roles in influencing these organizations' decisions on whether or not to intervene. They, in turn, impose constraints on regime security.

The following section introduces norms developed under the OAU/AU system. I do not further specify the norms under the system of other African subregional organizations for two reasons. First, they share goals and operate at different levels—the OAU/AU provides continental frameworks that set broad norms and initiatives, while subregional organizations that operate at lower levels usually recognize/accept the principles set out in these frameworks

due to the overlapping memberships. Second, they adopt similar normative frameworks or use similar discourses when framing these regional norms.

1. Collective Security

The idea of collective security—a threat to one member is considered a threat to the whole community—has become one of the guiding principles of many international security organizations for the common defense against external aggressors or enemies. The establishment of the United Nations was the very embodiment of collective security by the end of World War II. Abbott and Snidal indicate that the UN Security Council is built on the deeper rationale of representing the community, in which interstate disputes may spill over and disrupt the larger community (1998, 25). Therefore, international organizations take action to resolve disputes for the general welfare of the community.

Collective security was intended to deal mainly with interstate conflicts, but African organizations extended its scope and adopted it as a principle to manage both interstate and intrastate conflict (Jordaan 2017, 161). For instance, the AU adopted the Non-aggression and Common Defence Pact (hereafter: Defence Pact) in 2005 in an effort to “define a framework under which the Union may intervene or authorize intervention” to prevent or address situations of aggression, in which conflicts of interstate and intrastate nature are all considered security threats (AU 2005, Article 2).

The Defence Pact identifies three types of threats that fall into the scope of collective security, including aggression, internal threats such as subversion and incursions of irregular armed groups, and terrorist attacks or other organized international crimes (AU 2005, Articles 5 and 6).

However, it is important to note that the underlying logic of building a collective security system differs from the other two norms (humanitarian and legitimacy norms) in that the starting point of collective security is preserving territory integrity and sovereignty against threats coming from outside. Even in the scenario of domestic rebellion, the primary concern of the system is to make sure that “each state party shall prohibit the use of its territory for the stationing, transit, withdrawal or incursions of irregular armed groups, mercenaries and

terrorist organizations operating in the territory of another member state (AU 2005, Article 5). The historical experience of rebel groups receiving assistance from other regional states to overthrow the government influenced such orientation of security culture in Africa. In contrast, humanitarian and legitimacy norms have the tendency to turn the focus inward—they pay attention to the governance of a state itself.

2. Humanitarian norms

International organizations experienced a normative shift during the 1990s. In the words of Williams and Bellamy, there was an emerging consensus built on the post-Westphalia idea, which highlights “the value of liberal democracy and a concomitant increase in the number of peace operations given election oversight tasks” (2021, 69). The UN’s failure in the Rwanda Genocide and Srebrenica massacre in this period further called attention to international society’s responsibility in preventing or mitigating the very disastrous effects of civil conflicts.

African regional organizations, notably the African Union and ECOWAS, pioneered the adoption of normative frameworks that signaled their updated understanding of regional security and human security. As understood by the AU and other regional organizations, the concept of security experienced a normative transformation from a state-centric notion to the co-existence of state-centric and human-centric security. The latter is informed by the new international environment and the high incidence of intrastate conflicts (AU 2004). At the same time, the understanding of sovereignty experienced a process of re-interpretation, the meaning of which has been expanded to include humanitarian elements (Chopra and Weiss 1992; Deng et al. 1996).

The AU Constitutive Act adopted in 2000 was symbolic of the normative transformation. In Artic 4 (h) of the Principles, the Act states that the AU has the right to intervene in a member state “in respect of grave circumstances, namely, war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity” (AU 2000). It is the first international treaty to recognize international intervention for a humanitarian purpose (Baimu and Sturman 2003, 40). The three types of grave circumstances are also identified as international crimes in the Roman Statute (2003, 42). Notably, the AU’s seemingly interventionist position regarding humanitarian crisis under its legal structure does not contradict its own principle of non-interference (2003, 40). The

Principles of the Act highlight “non-interference by any Member State in the internal affairs of another” (AU 2000, Article 4). In other words, non-interference in internal affairs only applies to individual member states, while the Union becomes the only legitimate body to initiate intervention.

Some scholars question the intention behind states’ request for regional intervention as stipulated in the Constitutive Act. Packer and Rukare point out the potential risk that some governments could use the intervention to their own advantage, such as gaining assistance from the AU to retain power during popular rebellion (2002, 373). However, overall, the application of humanitarian norms in legitimizing regional intervention is less disputed by international actors than the legitimacy norms below.

3. Legitimacy norms

The other important norm cluster developed and practiced by African regional organizations is associated with governance and legitimacy issues.

Due to its inherent linkage with instability and conflicts, unconstitutional change of government is considered an important threat to not only the regional agenda for democracy and good governance but also the peace and security of the continent. The African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance identifies it as “one of the essential causes of insecurity, instability and violent conflict in Africa” (AU 2007, Preamble). Therefore, any decision taken by the AU on this issue shall be in close consultation with the Regional Mechanisms for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution (AU 2010). Against this backdrop, norms concerning the issue of unconstitutional changes provide potential legal and moral justification for regional intervention.

If Article 4 (h) of the AU Constitutive Act (CA) can be seen as a remedial approach in response to the authentic threats of devastating civil wars on the continent, the highlight of *Zero tolerance for unconstitutional changes of government* is a more radical and also controversial attempt to regulate the behavior of state leaders. Article 4 (p) of the CA proclaims the AU’s “condemnation and rejection of unconstitutional changes of governments” (AU 2000). Right before the creation of the African Union, the OAU had touched on this issue by adopting a series of decisions and declarations in the late 1990s and 2000. The Lomé Declaration, which

was adopted by the 36th Ordinary Session of the OAU Assembly, defined four types of unconstitutional changes of government and has become the principal normative framework guiding the AU's attitude toward unconstitutional changes of government. The definition of the four situations is as follows:

- i. military coup d'état against a democratically elected Government;
- ii. intervention by mercenaries to replace a democratically elected Government;
- iii. replacement of democratically elected Governments by armed dissident groups and rebel movements;
- iv. the refusal by an incumbent government to relinquish power to the winning party after free, fair and regular elections.

The definition of unconstitutional changes of government (hereafter: UCG) is updated by regional legal documents over time, with more scenarios being identified and added to the list. The African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance adopted in 2007, expanded the list by adding “any amendment or revision of the constitution or legal instruments” that infringe the principle of democratic change (AU 2007, Article 23). In 2014, the AU Assembly adopted the Malabo Protocol on the Amendments to the Protocol on the Statute of the African Court of Justice and Human Rights (hereafter: Malabo Protocol), which provided the sixth type of unconstitutional changes of government—substantial modification to electoral laws six months before the election without the consent of the majority of political actors (Manirakiza 2016, 89; AU 2014, Article 28E).

It provides a legitimate reason for regional organizations to intervene in the political crisis triggered by unconstitutional changes. However, in general, very few regional interventions were initiated purely out of the mandate to deter the behavior of unconstitutional change of government. This is because, compared with humanitarian norms, applying the norm against UCG can cause more contention in international politics.

The controversy of the norm against UCG is manifested through two aspects: the latent tension within the norm and the practical problems of its application.

First, the list of UCG situations combines different underlying logics corresponding to various political considerations. Witt indicates that initial supporters of the norm against UCG

pursued different agendas, ranging from regime protection to promoting democratic governance (2012, 7). As can be found in the six situations, they actually point to different political considerations. The first three situations concern the protection of the current regime of a state from physical threat, which is aligned with the interest of the incumbent. While the latter three are associated with a more comprehensive understanding of democratic governance, this classification can be potentially adverse to the leaders who want to stay in power. In the words of Manirakiza, the two broad categories represent the classical form of UCG and the soft form of UCG (2016, 89). Throughout the history of post-independence Africa, classical UCG has happened frequently. Military coups, in particular, remain one of the major causes of political instability on the continent. However, the problem is that sometimes, a coup or an insurgency can be justified by good intentions, such as overthrowing a corrupt government or a greedy dictator. This is the so-called ‘good coup’ or ‘democratic coup.’ Regional organizations’ efforts to reinstate the previous government can lead to more controversies than solutions. Yet, on the other hand, it is a tricky question for regional organizations to determine whether a coup/rebellion is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ since it involves power relations and is usually the result of multi-party negotiation/compromise.

In cases of soft UCG, the last two situations—revision of the constitution and modification of electoral laws—are ambiguously defined and open to interpretation. To what extent does a revision or amendment to a constitution infringe the principle of democratic change? And how do we measure if a modified electoral law receives the consent of the majority of political actors? These legal documents and normative frameworks do not provide further explanation and qualification. The vagueness of the wording and the mix of different political logics thus complicate the application of the norm in real politics.

The second aspect involves applying the norm to regional intervention. The AU’s inconsistent practices of dealing with the cases of UCG—choosing pragmatism over legalism sometimes—place the organization in an untenable situation (Manirakiza 2016, 101). While the AU imposed sanctions on countries that experienced coups d’état, it has rarely taken action against political leaders who attempt to stay in power beyond constitutional limits (Jordaan 2017, 176). The complexity of political crises triggered by UCG often makes intervention in the second scenario difficult, especially when the regime remains functional. In addition,

regional intervention in such a crisis is less likely to be supported by international actors outside Africa.

Nevertheless, legitimacy norms do play a role in shaping the AU's policy. Witt (2012) examines six cases of post-coup d'état negotiation processes facilitated by the AU, and she finds out that the inclusive approach, which highlights consensus-based agreement and competitiveness of the transitional elections, was the dominant approach applied by regional actors to restore legitimate order, as opposed to the simple reinstatement of the previous government. One important conclusion she draws from the empirical study is that the argument that AU's policy on coups is ultimately an instrument for regime protection misses the nuances and complexity of normative foundations underlie these regional efforts (2012, 23).

My interviews with ECOWAS officers support a similar idea of a mutual constraint between regional norms and regime security considerations. While it has become a mechanism to send fact-finding teams to member states where issues related to elections arise, the entrance of ECOWAS personnel into the country still depends on the willingness of state leaders. If the government says no, there is no way to continue the mission.¹

To sum up, several observations can be made here. First, some norms are inherently more contentious than others and are subject to more disputes due to actors' different interpretations. Second, regional interventions in Africa can be perceived as a dynamic process where the consideration of regime security frequently interacts with the evolving regional norms. The decision on whether or not to intervene in a conflict or crisis can thus be seen as the result of such interactions.

2. Conceptualization

The concern for regime security and the promotion of norms are in a complex relationship where they could converge, coexist, and contradict each other.

In the former two scenarios, when the need for preserving regime security corresponds to or at least does not contradict the existing normative framework, consensus among member states will be easier to reach, which can be translated to a more coherent stance adopted by

¹ Author interview with Ebenezer Asiedu, July 2023.

regional organizations. In contrast, when regime security considerations conflict with norms, more vagueness and uncertainty are expected to be found in regional organizations' response to the crisis. The AU's response to the 2011 Libyan crisis confirms this pattern. While the AU recognized the humanitarian need on the ground and advocated for a political solution to end the hostilities between the rebels and Qaddafi's government, fissures emerged within the organization, further undermining the AU's already sidelined position in the crisis. Though all three African states on the UN Security Council voted in favor of a no-fly zone, the issue became more contentious when it turned out that NATO overextended the mandate to pursue regime change in Libya (Zähringer 2013, 197). Member states of the AU took different positions toward NATO's operation, with some supporting the NATO attacks on Libya and others being critical or opposed to how Western states utilized the UN resolution to remove the Qaddafi regime (Kasaija 2013, 129–30). The internal cleavage of the AU thus led to a more ambivalent position.

This does not imply that conflicts/crises that belong to the former two situations (convergence and coexistence) will necessarily result in international intervention. Because of the superiority of the sovereignty principle in international law, international norms guiding multilateral intervention, especially those associated with robust military means, are rather restrictive as opposed to non-intervention approaches. In addition, since the deployment of a peace operation predominantly depends on the material and personnel support from member states, divergent or even conflicting opinions among them could block a potential peace operation. Therefore, this issue leads to another scenario—how international organizations practice a norm in a given crisis when the norm per se or its meaning is disputed among different actors.

International or regional norms can be contested by international actors. Lantis and Wunderlich identify four types of disputes about normative meaning. They are: 1) actors disagree about which norm to apply in a given situation; 2) actors object to the norm's basic validity; 3) actors have different understandings of a norm's meaning; 4) disputes about the relative weight of individual norms (2018, 572–73). In the context of international intervention in Africa, the disputes on norms mainly involve the first type (which norm should be applied in response to the conflict/crisis) and the third type (how to put a particular norm into practice).

That is because international organizations deciding on whether or not to intervene in a crisis are in the process of picking suitable norms to justify their standpoint rather than forming ideas about particular norms.

I thus propose a framework to examine the logic behind international intervention, which consists of two dimensions, as discussed in the previous section—the consideration for regime security and the role of international norms. I then apply the two dimensions to different types of conflicts/crises to understand how they interact with each other to influence international organizations’ decisions to deploy peace operations.

My conceptualization of international intervention in conflicts and crises is inspired by Jan Angstrom’s work on the typology of internal armed conflicts. He classifies the conflicts based on two spectra: how the rule of the state is contested (idea-individual) and whether the state itself is contested. The four ideal-types of internal armed conflicts he develops include: ideological conflict, leadership conflict, resource conflict, and ethnic conflict (Angstrom 2001). However, unlike his focus on the state, my conceptual framework focuses on whether the regime of a state is contested. The other spectra in my framework is whether the norm concerning intervention in certain conflicts/crises is disputed. Since it is rare in international relations to see a norm unanimously supported or rejected by international actors, I use the level of contestation instead to describe the norm—whether it is highly disputed or less disputed under the context of multilateral intervention. Figure 1 (below) illustrates the proposed framework.

		Regime	
		Contested	Not Contested
Norms	Highly Disputed	Political Crisis	Secession
	Less Disputed	Civil War Terrorism	Interstate Conflict

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of International Intervention in Conflicts/Crises

I identify five major types of conflicts/crises based on the two dimensions. They are political crises, secession, civil war, terrorism, and interstate conflict. This list is not exhaustive. There might be other types of conflicts or crises. The reason for choosing and detailing the five is because they happen more frequently in today's Africa. Liberation war used to be a major type of warfare in Africa that led to the independence of a group of countries during the 1960s and 1970s. But it ceases to be active today. In addition, the point here is to examine how the two dimensions of consideration impact different conflicts and crises rather than developing a new typology of armed conflicts.

The conflicts and crises identified above are not fixed to a particular category. While they are different in nature, they could transform or merge with one another depending on the dynamics on the ground. For instance, a coup d'état (political crisis) may escalate to a full-scale civil war. Guinea Bissau's civil war in 1998 was triggered by an attempted coup d'état. A secessionist movement may coincide with terrorism, as happened during Mali's crisis in 2012. Conflicts and crises evolve during their course. As King puts it, "For both the strategist and soldier, the experience of violence is transformative" (King 2005, 269).

So is the evolution of international norms. Their meanings and the level of acceptance by international society also change over time. Some norms may become less controversial, thus making them easier for international organizations to implement. As introduced previously, the norms about humanitarian intervention and good governance are gaining momentum among African regional organizations due to a series of crises and shifts in the international environment. They eroded the sacrosanct boundaries of sovereignty and motivated the AU to transform from "non-intervention" to "non-indifference" concerning regional security challenges. Therefore, the level of contestation of international norms is not fixed but rather a continuum along which crises/conflicts fall. These conflicts and crises are thus dynamic and may move back and forth along the two dimensions under different conditions.

The framework helps comprehend the major concerns behind regional organizations' decision to deploy multilateral intervention. It also helps to explain why regional organizations did not intervene in some conflicts or crises.

Take humanitarian intervention as an example. Intervention based solely on humanitarian grounds can be controversial. The AU seldom invokes Article 4(h) to justify regional

intervention. The first time the AU expressly resorted to Article 4(h) in response to an ongoing crisis was during the 2015 Burundi crisis.² The political crisis of Burundi arose when President Pierre Nkurunziza attempted to seek a controversial third electoral term. Demonstrations, coup d'état attempt, and armed rebellion ensued, culminating in the violence on 11 December that killed 87 people in a single day by the army.³

At its 565th meeting on 17 December, the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) decided to deploy an African Prevention and Protection Mission in Burundi (MAPROBU), which was mandated to prevent the deterioration of the security situation and to protect civilian populations. The Communiqué conveyed the PSC's determination "to take all appropriate measures against any party or actor, whomsoever, who would impede the implementation of the present decision" (AU 2015).

However, the peace operation failed to materialize, largely due to member states' resistance to using force to solve the crisis. The result can be interpreted as the victory of regime security consideration and its interactions with normative force. For one thing, invoking Article 4(h) to use force to protect civilians without the necessary consent from the host country could lead to a clash with the incumbent regime. Military intervention in a country with a still-functioning government (such as the Nkurunziza regime) risks causing strong regional concern, as member states are reluctant to set a precedent for future interventions in similar situations. Moreover, some states, including Tanzania and Equatorial Guinea, questioned whether the kind of serious breaches envisaged under Article 4(h) had actually occurred (Dersso 2016). On the other hand, the initial robust position adopted by the PSC in deploying MAPROBU displayed the influence of regional norms based on humanitarian considerations. As Wilén and Williams put it, the PSC's unprecedented invocation of Article 4 (h) was an innovative attempt to reduce violence against civilians (2018a, 691).

Therefore, to understand the logic of regional intervention, at least in the context of African intervention, one must take both dimensions into account. The following section introduces five main types of conflicts and crises and how they interact with the two dimensions

² According to Wilén and Williams (2018), the AU Assembly invoked Article 4(h) in 2007 for the first time to support the trial of the former President of Chad, Hissène Habré, for his crimes of political killings and torture between 1982 and 1990 (p.678).

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/12/burundi-bodies-found-worst-violence-since-april-coup>

of intervention.

Political crisis

Political crisis is a broad category. It can take the form of a coup d'état that topples the current regime or other forms of unconstitutional changes of government as defined in the AU protocols. Overall, I focus on those crises where the state regime is contested.

As discussed earlier, African regional organizations have adopted a series of normative frameworks in recent years to promote good governance based on the liberal-democratic paradigm. Zero tolerance for unconstitutional changes of government is among the most important regional norms, speaking directly to the code of conduct of member states' governance. More importantly, the restrictions imposed on the incumbent government concerning the revision of the constitution or electoral laws can be viewed as a departure from the logic of regime security. However, it becomes contentious when applying the norm to regional intervention, and therefore, political crises tend to attract less multilateral intervention.

The available approaches stipulated in the AU protocols and documents are predominantly about condemnation and sanction on the perpetrator of UCG or the suspension of the state from participating in the activities of the organization, which reflects the preference of the AU to use political means to solve this type of crisis. Nevertheless, military intervention as a last resort is not removed from the list. The AU adopted the Ezulwini Framework at a Retreat of the Peace and Security Council in 2009 to enhance the effectiveness of the implementation of sanctions on UCG (Manirakiza 2016, 102). It opens up the possibility of employing peace enforcement measures if:

“At the expiration of a given period, and if no progress is made towards return to constitutional order, further steps should be taken, including the possibility of deployment of a peace enforcement mission. In this respect, and once operationalized, the African Standby Force will be able to provide some dissuasion and put pressure on coup perpetrators” (AU 2009)

Thus, while it is rare, regional intervention in political crisis can still be justified based on normative grounds. Recent examples include ECOWAS and the AU's decision to deploy a military mission to Mali after a military coup toppled the Malian government in 2012 and ECOWAS's intervention in Gambia's electoral dispute in 2017.

Civil War

It used to be a contentious issue to intervene in the internal conflict of a sovereign state. However, the catastrophic influence of civil wars that emerged by the end of the Cold War changed the security dynamics of African subregions. The extreme civil war could lead to anarchy and state collapse, such as the Somali Civil War in the 1990s.

African regional organizations face fewer constraints when deploying peace operations in response to member states' civil wars. This is because regime security considerations and normative frameworks began to converge in the context of an all-out civil war. During such wars, regimes are usually challenged by domestic rebel groups, militias, or other armed opposition forces. A common scenario involves insurgents seizing control of large swaths of territory or advancing toward the capital, posing an existential threat to the incumbent government. Compounding the situation, growing humanitarian concerns add further urgency. Against this backdrop, both humanitarian and legitimacy norms become available as justifications for intervention. In some cases, bilateral defense treaties between neighboring countries provide an additional legal and political basis for regional intervention.

Regional organizations act as the defenders of judicial statehood of the state in war. As mentioned, regime security consideration does not necessarily mean that regional intervention will be devoted to preserving the current regime. Other member states may support different sides of the conflicting parties or rival factions. The more important task for regional organizations is to monitor the ceasefire agreement and restore the state's authority through legitimate means (e.g., establish a transitional government and hold elections). Therefore, it usually involves peace operations with the mandate of stabilization and preservation of territorial integrity.

Terrorism

Terrorism is becoming one of the most lethal types of conflict in Africa. What makes the matter worse is the alarming proliferation of terrorist groups in all African regions (Aning and Abdallah 2016, 23). How to coordinate regional and subregional organizations and pool their resources in combating this type of security challenge remains a pressing issue.

Norms against terrorism are less contested due to the very nature of its indiscriminate attack against civilians and its serious violation of international humanitarian laws. International organizations also find it easier to make collective counter-terrorism strategies. Building upon previous achievements of the OAU, the AU identified terrorism as one of the common threats to Africa in the early 2000 through the AU Non-Aggression and Common Defence Pact and the Common African Defence and Security Policy (Ewi and Aning 2006, 34). Other subregional organizations made similar progress in setting the agenda for counter-terrorism strategies.

However, there is less multilateral intervention deployed by regional organizations with a mandate solely devoted to countering terrorists in Africa. In contrast, decentralized and smaller subregional initiatives, such as the Accra Initiative, G5 Sahel Joint Force, and Multinational Joint Task Force, are taking the lead in forming joint operations to combat terrorism in Africa. While some terrorist groups also aim at overthrowing the state regime and establishing alternative authority, why are there more small transnational initiatives than regional intervention? There are at least three reasons explaining this phenomenon.

First, rather than operating within one single country, terrorism in Africa has become increasingly internationalized. Transnational terrorist groups such as Boko Haram (Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, and Chad) and JNIM (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger) take advantage of porous borders and operate in remote regions close to the border areas. It increases the difficulty of deploying single peace operations since regional organizations may face problems of resource pooling and the overlapping ownership of conflict resolution.

Second, while some terrorist groups challenge state regimes directly, the asymmetric and unconventional nature of their attacks makes it hard to constitute authentic physical threats to the regime, in contrast to rebellion and insurgency. Therefore, the international organization

has less incentive to intervene militarily to save a regime that is not in danger.

Third, regional hegemonic powers lack the political will and capacity to share the burden of collective action against terrorism. West Africa is becoming a terrorism hotspot. However, Nigeria—the hegemon that used to bear the burden of peace operations—is stuck in a series of security crises itself, including terrorism. The Nigeria-led ECOMOG troops in the 1990s are less likely to be repeated today.

On the other hand, it is more feasible to create smaller initiatives to coordinate countries most influenced by terrorism. Regional organizations also welcome such an approach as it complements the broader region-wide counter-terrorism strategy and makes up for the lack of political will in collectively resolving this type of security challenge.⁴

Secession

The reason why there is a need to take secession out from civil war is that secession seeks separation from the state, but the regime itself is usually not contested. In addition, international interference in a secessionist conflict is much more controversial than intervention in a civil war.

The contention of regional intervention in secessionist conflicts lies in the fact that contemporary intergovernmental organizations are built on principles of sovereignty and territory integrity, while secessionist attempts aiming at redrawing the borders violate these principles. Preserving national borders remains one of the fundamental principles of African regional bodies, as the AU Constitutive Act makes it clear that member states shall respect “borders existing on achievement of independence” (AU 2000, Article 4). Against this normative background, regional organizations seldom get involved in such conflict directly. Furthermore, though some member states provide assistance to secessionist movements in other states at state level, mediation and intervention at regional level have much different normative implications: 1) their intervention could potentially elevate the status of secessionist groups by recognizing the latter as a “party in interest” during negotiations with the central government, which may instigate marginalized subnational groups in other states to engage in

⁴ Author interview with Ebenezer Asiedu, July 2023.

separatism or secessionism; 2) it could set the precedent for future regional intervention, which member states would strongly oppose in fear of undermining their sovereignty.

In addition, disputes can be found in the changing normative meaning of some regional/international principles. The meaning of self-determination keeps changing over time. In the context of decolonization, the claim of self-determination overlapped with the claim of independence from colonial rule. That is why the liberation wars that claim self-determination in Africa (e.g., Mozambique and Angola) received widespread international support. However, the situation changed when most former colonies gained independence during the 1960s and 1970s. Secessionist movements were now considered subversive and intolerable for political leaders of the nascent countries. The first two secessionist attempts in Katanga (Congo) and Biafra (Nigeria) were crushed violently by national governments. The secessionist conflict in Congo also involved the UN's first multilateral intervention to enforce peace. Since then, regional response to secession had been ossified on the basis of sovereignty principles, which continue to condition regional organization's decisions about secessionist conflict today.

However, by the end of the Cold War, a group of new states succeeded in seceding from their mother states, which, again, led to an international process of reinterpreting the sovereignty, human rights, and self-determination principles. The process is reflected in an ongoing intellectual debate over whether subnational groups have the inherent right to self-determination (Buchanan 1997; Hannum 1998; Horowitz 2003; Sterio 2015). Secessionists justify their movements by referring to people's right to self-determination. Regional organizations involved in secessionist conflicts will find themselves stuck in the dilemma of norm contradiction—between the principles of sovereignty and territory integrity and the principle of self-determination and humanitarian norms. Eritrea and South Sudan are among the most recent cases of gaining independence by acquiring international recognition. However, there are also secessionist movements that experienced decades of armed struggles without being recognized or intervened regionally. African regional organizations' inconsistent attitudes toward secessionist conflicts underscore the normative controversies these organizations face.

Interstate conflict

Compared with other types of conflicts or crises, international intervention in interstate conflicts causes much less normative controversies since settling conflict or dispute between member states lies at the heart of the function of international governmental organizations. The creation of the UN by the end of WWII was built on the idea of preventing interstate warfare, especially among great powers.

Interstate conflict is rare in Africa compared to intrastate conflict. A common cause of interstate conflicts is territorial disputes, such as the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998. In this case, the state regime is not challenged directly by the antagonist. As a consequence, regional organizations find their justification for intervention in international law and thus face fewer constraints.

However, there are also cases of interstate conflicts involving regime contestation. In the Second Congolese War, Uganda and Rwanda engaged in a rebellion in DRC against the then President Laurent-Désiré Kabila. When the collapse of Kabila's regime seemed imminent in August 1998, Zimbabwe announced a peace enforcement operation under the auspices of SADC (Southern African Development Community) to support Kabila. The mission is called Operation Restoring Legitimacy. In addition to Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia contributed troops to the operation. Yet, the legitimacy of this operation was contested largely due to its shaky legal foundation, as well as opposition from other regional states. According to Coleman, the SADC framework offered no legal advantages for the intervention led by Zimbabwe; states such as Botswana, Mozambique, and South Africa fiercely opposed the operation (2007, 123–25). Overall, the war in Congo saw a mixture of domestic rebellion and foreign involvement (Rwanda and Uganda), which blurred the boundaries between intrastate conflict and interstate conflict. Therefore, the multilateral intervention faced more controversies as a result of clashes of national interests among regional states.

3. Application of Typology in West Africa

International organizations have different preferences in terms of multilateral intervention. Compared with African regional organizations' more robust action in conflicts, the UN is more inclined to initiate post-conflict peacekeeping and peace-building operations after a peace

process has been concluded (Zähringer 2013, 195). Over the past two decades, a pattern of division of labor has emerged where the AU and other subregional organizations act as the first responder to devastating civil conflicts and are sometimes equipped with peace enforcement mandate, while the UN deploys peacekeeping operations when there is a peace to keep or shoulders the burden of regional organizations to deploy large-scale multidimensional peace operations (Karlsrud 2015, 41). The complementary model of the AU-UN strategic partnership also results from their comparative advantages and shortcomings (de Coning 2017). But in addition to the practical consideration of complementing each other, the difference between African regional organizations and the UN is rooted in their divergent philosophies on the purpose of peace operations (Boutellis and Williams 2013, 6).

In contrast to the UN's insistence on the peacekeeping doctrine that "deploy when there is a peace to keep," the AU "views peacekeeping as an opportunity to establish peace before keeping it" (AU 2012, 28). Other African subregional organizations, such as ECOWAS, have adopted the principle as well. When the UN waits for a ceasefire agreement between the conflicting parties before sending out peacekeeping forces, its African counterpart is more willing to enforce peace in ongoing war zones.

But the distinct philosophy of intervention demonstrated by African organizations did not appear out of nowhere. The history of conflict resolution and the evolution of regional norms were woven together to shape the style of African multilateral intervention.

The early period of African peace operations reflected African states' pragmatic consideration of blocking the spillover effects of civil wars in neighboring countries. For instance, the OAU's decision to deploy its first peace operation to Chad was heavily influenced by the Nigerian government's political campaign to contain the turmoil caused by the Chadian Civil War (Mays 2002, 23–24). The refugee problem and cross-border armed dissidents from Chad all motivated Nigeria to participate in its neighbor's conflict management. However, an underfunded and understaffed peacekeeping force led by Nigeria departed three months after it entered Chad in March 1979. The Chadian conflicting parties were hostile to Nigeria's unilateral intervention and even referred to the peacekeepers as "occupation army" (2002, 40–41). The OAU later took over the responsibility and deployed two peacekeeping missions in 1980 and 1981.

In addition, the OAU's intervention in Chad can also be understood in the context of collective security. OAU's second deployment of peacekeeping force was galvanized by Libya's incursion into Chad in late 1980 (requested by the interim Chadian government against other factions) and a potential merger between Libya and Chad (Massey and May 1998, 112). The involvement of French forces in Chad further complicated the situation since some West African countries (Nigeria in particular) strongly opposed the presence of extra-regional forces while others (Francophone countries) welcomed their assistance. Therefore, the OAU's first peace operation demonstrated a mixed character of interstate and intrastate conflict management.

Overall, the pattern of having precursor intervention (either by individual member states or subregional organizations) be deployed first, and then the AU or UN undertaking the more complex and multidimensional operations persisted. Furthermore, regional peace operations led by the OAU (AU) or other subregional organizations in the later stage would be backed by more institutionalized approaches than the ad hoc arrangement in the early era.

West Africa

At the time of writing, ECOWAS has deployed nine multilateral interventions since 1990. Among them, five were deployed in civil wars, and the other four were involved in political crises and other types of conflicts.

Table 1. ECOWAS Peace Operations (as of May 2025)

No.	Mission	Duration	Type of Conflict/Crisis
1	ECOMOG in Liberia	1990-1998	Civil War
2	ECOMOG in Sierra Leone	1997-2000	Civil War, Political Crisis (coup)
3	ECOMOG in Guinea-Bissau	1998-1999	Civil War
4	ECOMICI in Côte d'Ivoire	2002-2004	Civil War
5	ECOMIL in Liberia	2003	Civil War
6	ECOMIB in Guinea-Bissau	2012--2020	Political Crisis (coup)
7	MICEMA, AFISMA in Mali	2013	Political Crisis (coup),

			Secession, Terrorism
8	ECOMIG in Gambia	2017--	Political Crisis
9	SSMGB in Guinea-Bissau	2022--	Political Crisis

West Africa pioneered the use of regional security mechanisms to manage its conflicts. Some scholars even view ECOWAS as “the most advanced mechanisms for addressing regional peace and security in Africa” (Obi 2009, 119). However, it was an incremental and gradual process rather than an abrupt transition for ECOWAS to transform from an economic integration organization to a prominent regional security provider. The consideration for preserving regime security has been entangled with the promotion of normative agendas throughout the process.

ECOWAS’s development of normative framework came hand in hand with intervention practices.

The early age of ECOWAS saw the issue of regional security through the lens of collective security. The most crucial security protocols adopted during this period—the Protocol on Non-Aggression (PNA, 1978) and the Protocol on Mutual Assistance on Defence (PMAD, 1981)—were preoccupied with the idea of collective defense to address “external armed threat or aggression” and interstate conflicts. The only mention of internal conflict was in the scenario of being “actively maintained and sustained from outside” (ECOWAS 1981, Article 18). The PMAD also decided to establish the Allied Armed Forces of the Community (AAFC) to be responsible for implementing armed intervention. The troops of the AAFC would be drawn from the existing national armed forces of member states, an idea similar to the regional standby force that came up two decades later, though they were designed to deal with different security problems. Nevertheless, the AAFC failed to materialize.

ECOWAS’s emphasis on foreign aggression and interstate conflicts in the early period was rooted in West Africa’s strained regional relationships. The rivalry between Anglophone and Francophone countries, a series of military coups with foreign involvements, and territorial disputes (e.g., Mali and Upper Volta in 1974) all contributed to regional instability. Nigeria was concerned about the strong presence of France in West Africa both militarily and economically, while the Francophone countries were suspicious of Nigeria’s hegemonic intention. The intra-

regional division, combined with foreign interference in the shadow of the Cold War, motivated necessary regional cooperation but also hindered its further development.

However, regional security dynamics changed during the post-Cold War era, with direct external aggression less of an issue than internal unrest or conflicts. As a result, the focus of ECOWAS on external security threats has given way to internal security problems. It is worth noting that these internal conflicts were usually regionalized due to their spillover effects and the active involvement of regional actors. As Fawole puts it, “no longer are internal conflicts in West African states purely internal in terms of their origin and sponsorship;” they attracted external sponsorship and encouragement from neighboring countries (2004, 14). The desire to deter intervention and influence by extra-regional powers’ in West Africa, such as Libya, motivated regional leaders to adopt collective policies through the deployment of peace operations (2004, 15). Under this context, therefore, the early era of ECOWAS intervention can be seen as a transitional period that demonstrated a mixed feature of collective security and security governance of internal challenges.

The civil war that erupted in Liberia in 1989 was the beginning of regional intervention and also the starting point of ECOWAS’s transformation toward a regional security organization. Under the leadership of Charles Taylor, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) invaded Liberia from Côte d’Ivoire, aiming at overthrowing the regime of Samuel Doe. President Doe appealed to ECOWAS for assistance in deterring the NPFL rebels, invoking the PMAD (Obi 2009, 121). The ECOWAS Cease-fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) was established to supervise a ceasefire and an interim government. This marked the first time ECOWAS deployed a regional peacekeeping force to address an internal conflict within a member state. The mandate of ECOMOG also included elements of peace enforcement, making this initial regional intervention a robust but controversial practice.

The justification of ECOMOG largely lies on humanitarian grounds. As Adebajo indicates, “by August 1990, 225,000 Liberian refugees had flooded into Guinea, 150,000 into Côte d’Ivoire, and 69,000 into Sierra Leone; about 5,000 people had been killed, and about 3,000 Nigerian, Ghanaian, and Sierra Leonean citizens were being held hostage by the NPFL” (Adebajo 2002b, 61). The spillover effect of the war motivated neighboring and other regional states to intervene. In addition to Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Gambia

contributed troops to ECOMOG.

There was also regime security consideration behind the decision to deploy an unprecedented peacekeeping operation with troops contributed by member states. ECOWAS heads of state saw the rebellions against the incumbent government in Liberia, and later on in Sierra Leone, as a concerning trend. Obi notices this factor when explaining the rationale behind the intervention. He indicates that ruling elites in other countries were concerned about the impact of successful insurgencies, which could encourage domestic groups dissatisfied with authoritarian regimes to take up arms against them (2009, 122).

But there was also justification for intervention derived from emerging norms. The promotion of democratic institutions was becoming a regional issue during the 1990s, when political unrest and demonstrations were prevalent in West Africa and when governments faced international pressure for democratization. Against this backdrop, discourses about restoring democratic institutions in member states can be found in conversations related to ECOWAS intervention. For instance, at the UN Security Council's meeting on 8 August 1990, Nigerian Foreign Minister Rilwanu Lukman explained the reason for deploying ECOMOG as "first and foremost to stop the senseless killings of innocent civilians...and to help the Liberian people to restore their democratic institutions...ECOWAS intervention is in no way designed to back one party or punish another" (Adebajo 2002b, 53). One year later, ECOWAS adopted the Declaration of Political Principles, in which the organization claimed to "encourage and promote in each our countries, political pluralism and those representative institutions" (ECOWAS 1991). The Declaration marked the beginning of a normative transformation in West Africa, with liberal democratic principles gaining more importance in the regional agenda.

The influence of regional norms became more evident in Sierra Leone's civil war. The war started in 1991, but it was not until 1997, after the democratically elected President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah was ousted in a military coup, that ECOWAS formally extended the scope of ECOMOG's activities to Sierra Leone, which was mandated "to assist in creating the conducive atmosphere that would ensure the early reinstatement of the legitimate government of Sierra Leone" (Osakwe and Audu 2017, 113). Before ECOMOG deployment, Nigerian troops had already been stationed in Liberia by the end of 1994 (Adebajo 2002a, 84). Furthermore, during Liberia's civil war since 1990, Freetown had been the staging post for ECOMOG intervention

and the rear base for Nigerian soldiers in Liberia (2002a, 82). However, Nigeria justified the presence of its troops not through regional institutions; instead, the Nigerian government referred to the bilateral defence agreement it signed with the Kabbah government several months earlier as justification. While Nigeria may not be genuine in upholding democracy in Sierra Leone—it had supported two military leaders there between 1992 and 1996 (both Valentine Strasser and Julius Maada Bio came to power through coup d'état)—the timing of ECOWAS intervention nevertheless reflected the normative pressure on Nigeria and other regional states.

Different from Liberia and Sierra Leone's case, regional intervention in Guinea-Bissau's civil war was led by Francophone countries. The war erupted between factions of the army loyal to General Ansumane Mané and those loyal to President Vieira in June 1998. The former quickly seized control of an estimated three-quarters of Guinea-Bissau (Adebajo 2002a, 115). Senegal and Guinea, two countries with strong national interests in the conflict, sent troops in support of the Vieira regime. Senegal was concerned about a potentially friendly government of Guinea-Bissau to the Casamance secessionists if Mané won the war. Because of this, it contributed most of the troops. Both countries justified their intervention by citing the bilateral defence pacts they signed with Guinea-Bissau. Although this intervention had the backing of ECOWAS, Senegal and Guinea underestimated the difficulty of restoring peace, and their presence was rejected by Mané. ECOWAS later deployed regional forces to replace the Senegunean troops, with most troops coming from Francophone countries (Gambia was the only Anglophone country contributing troops).

All three missions mentioned above remained under the same ECOMOG title (ECOMOG I, ECOMOG II, ECOMOG III). Overall, as Adebajo indicates, the three early ECOWAS interventions demonstrated a highly improvised and uncoordinated character (2002a, 122). Nevertheless, they marked a shift away from the norm of non-intervention (Obi 2009, 121).

The legal foundation of ECOMOG rested on shaky ground, as earlier protocols had not accounted for internal conflicts. To address this gap and consolidate the legal basis for future intervention efforts, ECOWAS made a breakthrough in institutionalizing its security mechanisms by adopting the *Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace-Keeping and Security* (hereafter: the Mechanism) in 1999.

Within this protocol, ECOWAS identified several circumstances under which the Mechanism may be invoked (ECOWAS 1999, Article 25):

- In cases of aggression or conflict in any Member State or threat thereof;
- In case of conflict between two or several Member States;
- In case of internal conflict:
 - (a) that threatens to trigger a humanitarian disaster, or
 - (b) that poses a serious threat to peace and security in the sub-region;

In event of serious and massive violation of human rights and the rule of law. In the event of an overthrow or attempted overthrow of a democratically elected government; Any other situation as may be decided by the Mediation and Security Council.

In contrast to early protocols' focus on interstate conflicts and collective security, the Mechanism highlights a critical transition of focus to intrastate conflicts. From a normative perspective, regional intervention in civil war had become less of a controversial issue in West Africa. The division between the two major blocs in the region—Francophone and Anglophone states—also diminished.

Interestingly, the overthrow of the government and the massive violation of human rights are juxtaposed, reflecting a blend of security concerns that increasingly dominated the regional issue agenda. West African leaders learned from the civil wars and political instabilities that the collapse of a state regime could lead to catastrophic influence going far beyond borders.

If ECOMOG I, II, and III can be seen as the initial stage of regional intervention in West Africa, the institutionalization of conflict resolution mechanisms through the revised Treaty of ECOWAS in 1993 and the 1999 Mechanism laid the foundation for the second phase of regional intervention. Regional norms developed based on these protocols created the space for multilateral intervention in the context of civil war. It became a less controversial issue within the region to use force or threat of force collectively to enforce peace in a worn-torn member state. Despite allegations of corruption and violation of the neutrality principle of peacekeeping, ECOWAS-led peace operations in the absence of adequate financial and logistical resources were praised by international society, which further legitimized it as a

pivotal actor in resolving conflicts.

The second phase of regional intervention in West Africa was exemplified by ECOWAS peace operations during the First Ivorian Civil War and the Second Liberian Civil War. In both cases, state regimes were challenged by rebel forces who controlled vast territories and threatened to create a power vacuum at the center of the state.

In Liberia, war resumed shortly after the withdrawal of ECOMOG I in 1998. President Charles Taylor's winner-take-all approach—rewarding loyalists and integrating former wartime fighters into the security forces—accelerated rebellion against his rule (Obi 2009, 124). The anti-Taylor forces led by Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) launched offensives in the northwest and southeast of the country. Alongside an ECOWAS-imposed embargo and mounting international pressure, Taylor was forced to resign and go into exile in 2003 (Aboagye and Bah 2004, 2).

In Côte d'Ivoire, the civil war erupted after a failed coup attempt against President Laurent Gbagbo in September 2002. However, its root causes lay in the contested citizenship claims and longstanding North-South divisions, which had been exploited by politicians seeking to consolidate power (Chirot 2006; Bah 2010). The Forces Nouvelles (FN), a coalition of several rebel groups, sought to overthrow Gbagbo's government and had gained control of northern Côte d'Ivoire by late 2002.

Previous intervention in civil wars had prepared ECOWAS with the necessary experience of deploying peace operations to member states, which explained the smooth planning and deployment of regional troops to Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire. More importantly, as formalized by the 1999 Mechanism, regional norms on intervention created both incentive and legitimacy for ECOWAS to assume a greater role in conflict resolution. In other words, it was now less a controversial issue for ECOWAS to deploy international troops to a member state in civil war. The relative ease of these interventions stemmed from the broad consensus between Francophone and Anglophone countries, in contrast to the earlier divisions that had undermined ECOMOG operations. The ECOWAS Mission in Liberia (ECOMIL), which deployed to Monrovia in August 2003, consisted of troops from eight West African countries across three linguistic zones (English, French, and Portuguese) (Aboagye and Bah 2004, 5). Similarly, the ECOWAS Mission in Côte d'Ivoire (ECOMICI) included troops from both Francophone and

Anglophone countries. Previously, political divisions within ECOWAS had weakened ECOMOG interventions, with some Francophone leaders supporting rebel groups or challenging the legitimacy of operations. In addition, unlike earlier ECOWAS interventions, which were launched without UN Security Council authorization, both ECOMIL and ECOMICI received formal authorization from the UN. This shift underscored the international community's growing recognition of ECOWAS's role in regional conflict management.

The third phase of ECOWAS intervention was characterized by a shift in focus from civil war to political crises. Part of the reason was the decline of large-scale civil wars in the region. At the same time, frequent coups d'état, compounded by other security threats such as terrorism have become a major concern in West Africa. Against this backdrop, ECOWAS continues to build normative frameworks that reinforce its legitimacy in managing issues that transcend national boundaries. In 2001, ECOWAS adopted the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which specifies for the first time the principle of "Zero tolerance for power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means" (ECOWAS 2001, Article 1). The 1999 Mechanism identified the overthrow of a democratically elected government as a scenario to which it could apply. Compared to it, the 2001 Protocol took a step further by establishing zero tolerance for unconstitutional changes of government as a constitutional principle to be upheld by all member states. In such cases, ECOWAS may impose sanctions on the state concerned (2001, Article 45). In addition, at the request of member states, ECOWAS can provide assistance in the conduct of elections, which "may take any form" (ECOWAS 2001, Article 12). This provision reinforced the legitimacy of ECOWAS interventions on the basis of restoring democracy.

As a consequence, military coups have received far more regional condemnation than they did two decades ago. In some cases, ECOWAS initiated peace operations to restore the legitimacy of government authority. Interventions following the coups d'état in Mali and Guinea-Bissau in 2012, as well as the political crisis in Gambia in 2017, exemplified this trend, although each crisis was unique in its context and reflected different security dynamics.

The 2012 Mali crisis was a combination of secessionist conflict, a coup d'état, and militant Islamist insurgency. The Tuareg rebel group in northern Mali had engaged in armed struggles against the Malian government for decades, demanding autonomy or even full separation from

Mali. The resurgence of the Tuareg rebellion, led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) in 2011, resulted in the rebels' capture of the northern regions through strategic alliances with militant Islamist organizations, such as Ansar Dine. Amid the growing instability, it was the military coup that toppled Amadou Touré's regime on March 21, 2012, that precipitated ECOWAS's full involvement in the crisis. One month later, at an ECOWAS Extraordinary Summit held in Abidjan, the heads of state and government instructed the ECOWAS Commission to deploy the Standby Force to Mali with two central tasks: restoring constitutional order and assisting Mali in "regaining its unity and territory integrity" (ECOWAS 2012). Had the Malian regime not been overthrown by the military junta, it is doubtful that ECOWAS would have decided to intervene militarily within such a short timeframe. The overlap of the consideration of regime security and the commitment to the principle of "Zero Tolerance" for unconstitutional changes of government came into play in shaping ECOWAS's priority. However, ECOWAS's plan to deploy its own peace operation—ECOWAS Mission in Mali (MICEMA)—failed to materialize, largely due to the rapid deterioration of the security situation on the ground and the subregional organization's limited capacity. ECOWAS subsequently chose to cooperate with the AU and transformed MICEMA into the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA). Ultimately, the UN assumed the responsibility by deploying the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in 2013. Nevertheless, ECOWAS's early mediation efforts and its insistence on robust intervention paved the way for the establishment of the transitional government in Mali and for the UN's subsequent intervention.⁵

When the Mali crisis broke out in March 2012, another coup d'état simultaneously removed the government of Guinea-Bissau. The military of Guinea-Bissau staged the coup to disrupt the ongoing electoral process, aiming to prevent the then–Prime Minister Carlos Gomes Jr from winning the presidential election (Edu-Afful and Frimpong 2022, 247). ECOWAS reacted swiftly, reaffirming its principle of "Zero Tolerance" for power obtained by unconstitutional means. At the same Extraordinary Summit that addressed Mali's crisis,

⁵ <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/ecowas-and-the-management-of-political-transitions-in-mali-guinea-and-burkina-faso-adopting-a-three-dimensional-approach-for-stability-and-sustainable-democracy-and-development/>

ECOWAS decided to deploy a contingent of Standby Force to Guinea-Bissau (ECOWAS 2012).

Guinea-Bissau has suffered from years of political unrest since its civil war. A series of coups (and coup attempts), mutinies, and political assassinations have severely undermined state authority and the security situation, leading to increased involvement by international actors in peacebuilding and authority restoration efforts. This process was characterized by the participation of multiple international organizations, including ECOWAS, the AU, the EU, the UN, the CPLP (Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries), and key individual countries. For instance, Angola, the then chair of the CPLP, dispatched the Angolan Mission for Military and Security Assistance to Guinea-Bissau (MISSANG) in 2011 to carry out security sector reform in Guinea-Bissau. However, the mission was accused of helping the pro-Angolan government maintain its hold on power. Its political nature, as perceived by ECOWAS members, reflected Angola's economic and geopolitical ambitions in the region (Kohl 2014, 10). The coup staged by the military in 2012 was widely believed to have aimed at preventing Carlos Gomes Jr. from winning the presidential election, as he remained resolute in retaining MISSANG's presence in the country (Edu-Afful and Frimpong 2022, 247). It was against this backdrop that the ECOWAS Mission in Guinea-Bissau (ECOMIB) replaced MISSANG. However, ECOWAS faced similar criticism of acting as a biased player in the crisis, particularly for its failure to broker an inclusive transitional government, as the PAIGC—the largest party of Guinea-Bissau—was excluded from the transitional government (Aubyn 2013, 30). Some outsiders and segments of the local population even believed that ECOWAS had supported the coup, further reinforcing polarization between ECOWAS and other international actors on the ground (UN, AU, EU, CPLP) in terms of the roadmap for transition and security sector reform (Kohl 2014, 11). Nevertheless, with the assistance of ECOMIB, a peaceful presidential election was conducted in 2014, which “served as an effective deterrent” to interference by Guinea-Bissau's military (Edu-Afful and Frimpong 2022, 248).

Two years after withdrawing ECOMIB, ECOWAS deployed a new stabilization force to Guinea-Bissau in 2022. The Stabilization Support Mission in Guinea-Bissau (SSMGB) was mandated to consolidate stability following another coup attempt. Notably, ECOWAS decided to deploy the regional force just three days after the failed coup d'état. The swift response and smooth deployment of ECOWAS troops were built on years of multilateral intervention

experience in Guinea-Bissau. This also reflected the reality that countries like Guinea-Bissau—vulnerable to coups and receptive to international intervention due to unstable political authority—provide ECOWAS with opportunities to practice its normative framework more effectively.

Controversies surrounding ECOWAS intervention resurfaced during the 2016–2017 Gambia’s political crisis. The electoral dispute between then-President Yahya Jammeh and President-elect Adama Barrow escalated into a national crisis. Jammeh’s refusal to accept the election results was seen as a violation of the Community’s shared democratic values, resulting in another regional intervention in West Africa. Under pressure from ECOWAS forces, Jammeh agreed to step down and left the country for exile. While the ECOWAS mission in Gambia (ECOMIG) was widely praised for restoring democracy, the intervention sparked controversy in two major areas. First, the political nature of the crisis raised doubts about whether ECOWAS was eligible to intervene militarily (Kreß and Nußberger 2017). ECOMIG was unprecedented in that there had been neither an unconstitutional change of government nor large-scale violence on the ground when regional troops entered Gambia. Second, Senegal’s strong national interest in containing the secessionist movement along its border with Gambia cast doubt on its intention in assuming leadership of ECOMIG (Hartmann 2017; Omotosho and Senghore 2018).

ECOWAS has been a precursor of multilateral intervention since the 1990s. From its first military intervention in Liberia’s civil war to more recent involvement in political crises, the regional organization has significantly expanded the scope of its peace operations over the past three decades. The growing attention paid to political crises reflects the evolution of regional norms on security and governance, while also highlighting the influence of these norms in shaping ECOWAS decisions. However, the meaning and application of legitimacy norms remain contested, due to the underlying tension between the principle of sovereignty and member states’ concerns over regime security. This contradiction has hindered ECOWAS from undertaking more interventions to restore constitutional order, as seen in its failure to act decisively following Niger’s 2023 coup.

Conclusion

The conceptual framework developed in this chapter helps explain why international organizations are less likely to intervene in secessionist conflicts and why, despite their small numbers, there has been an increase in regional interventions in political crises in Africa. I identify two major themes influencing regional organizations' decisions to deploy multilateral intervention: the consideration of regime security and the role of regional and international norms regarding intervention. By taking these two factors and their relationship into account, one can better understand the logic behind regional intervention and be better positioned to examine the evolution of regional organizations' attitudes toward such intervention.

However, there are certain caveats to the framework developed around the two factors discussed above. First, as this chapter focuses primarily on the logic of regional intervention—specifically the initial stage of multilateral intervention—it does not provide a comprehensive analysis of the entire peace operation process. Future research could build on this work by examining how variations in the nature of conflicts/crises influence not only the intervention process but also the outcomes of international peace operations.

Second, beyond considerations of regime security and regional norms, other factors also influence regional organizations' decisions on whether to intervene. One significant factor is past intervention experience. Countries such as the Central African Republic, Somalia, and Guinea-Bissau have hosted international interventions since the 1990s and continue to accommodate peace operations aimed at stabilizing political authority and restoring security. Their fragile security conditions and weak institutional capacity make them particularly vulnerable to recurrent armed conflicts.

Moreover, regional hegemonic states play a crucial role in shaping intervention decisions and often take the lead in peace operations. Nigeria's leadership during the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, as well as Senegal's role during Gambia's political crisis, exemplifies how dominant regional powers initiate and sustain peace operations.

Another key consideration is the feasibility of a peace operation. As Christof Hartmann (2017) points out, Gambia's small size and limited standing army partly explain the success of ECOMIG. There was little doubt that regional forces were in a highly advantageous position

to pose a credible threat to Yahya Jammeh, facilitating swift and smooth intervention. By contrast, in political crises such as those in Niger and Burkina Faso, the costs and risks of military intervention are much higher, making such actions far less viable.

Ultimately, these examples illustrate the complex and multifaceted nature of multilateral interventions. A nuanced understanding of these dynamics is essential for assessing the prospects and limitations of regional peace operations.

Regional norms evolve over time. As a result, regional organizations' responses to different types of conflict have also changed. As illustrated by West Africa's experience of regional security governance, ECOWAS's increasing involvement in member states' political crises in recent years reflects the growing influence of regional norms, with democracy and good governance gaining greater prominence on the organization's agenda. This study thus highlights the importance of examining the evolution of regional and international norms in order to understand the underlying logic of multilateral intervention from a dynamic perspective.

Similarly, political culture and norms vary across regions, and in turn shape the decisions of regional organizations. Some areas have developed a more "interventionist" approach to security challenges, while others maintain a more restrained stance toward security cooperation. The distinct trajectories of ECOWAS and ASEAN illustrate this contrast: the former has extensive experience with multilateral interventions in conflicts, while the latter is known for its emphasis on consensus-building in conflict management. Even within the African continent, different regional organizations (RECs) demonstrate distinctive preferences and priorities. As a result, the perceptions of regional intervention in certain types of conflict shape divergent responses. The typology of multilateral intervention across different conflicts/crises, along with the theoretical framework proposed in this study, can thus be useful for the comparative study of regional organizations.

Chapter Two: The Absence of ECOWAS in Conflict Intervention—Revisit the Casamance Conflict

Introduction

Despite the availability of more robust approaches for ending conflict and violence, ECOWAS, West Africa's most prominent actor in conflict mediation, never participated in the peace process of the Casamance conflict, a secessionist struggle that has persisted since the 1990s. Notably, the period when the Casamance secessionist movement turned violent also witnessed the transformation of ECOWAS from a regional integration organization to a comprehensive organization with a strong security orientation. During this period, ECOWAS actively engaged in member states' conflict resolution processes and transferred these experiences into mechanization and institutions. However, no mediation effort was made by ECOWAS to mitigate the situation in Casamance, even though the Senegalese government did invite other international actors to mediate its conflict with the Casamance secessionists.

I argue in this chapter that three major factors explain ECOWAS's absence from the Casamance peace process. First, the secessionist nature of the conflict rendered it particularly sensitive within the realm of international norms, making regional organizations reluctant to engage. Second, the Senegalese government successfully framed the conflict as a strictly internal matter and maintained control over the peace process. Third, although the Casamance conflict had repercussions beyond national borders that resulted in long-term instability in border areas, ECOWAS refrained from intervening because the conflict never posed a direct threat to the survival of the Senegalese regime.

Why should we care about an old conflict that no longer poses significant security concerns in Senegal? Due to the non-intervention stance of ECOWAS, few scholarships on the Casamance conflict touched on the topic of ECOWAS, nor did ECOWAS studies pay attention to the secession conflict in Senegal. However, I argue that studying the secessionist conflict in Casamance is important for at least three reasons. First, the low-intensity armed conflict has lasted for more than three decades, and so too are its enduring effects, reaching across borders.

As will be discussed in the third chapter, it continues to impact the security landscape of Gambia as a result of the separatists' cross-border activities. To understand the controversies surrounding ECOWAS's intervention in Gambia's 2016–2017 crisis and Senegal's leadership role in that mission, it is necessary to revisit the history of the Casamance conflict.

Second, this study also extends the debate on international responses to secession. By reviewing scholarship on third parties' attitudes toward secession in other states, I identify several limitations in the existing research and argue that states behave differently at the regional level and the state level. Senegal's reluctance to allow regional organizations to intervene in the Casamance peace process reinforces the idea that actions by regional organizations carry much stronger normative implications, particularly on sensitive issues such as secession.

Third, examining the regional response to the conflict can advance our understanding of the underlying logic of multilateral intervention by analyzing the rationale behind ECOWAS's restrained stance of ECOWAS, a counterexample to typical patterns of regional intervention. This chapter addresses two key questions—why ECOWAS did not intervene in the Casamance conflict and what this absence revealed about regional organizations' underlying logic of intervention with regard to secession.

While the emergence of violent insurgency in Casamance was rooted in local causes, the conflict's influence nevertheless spilled over and continues to shape regional security and politics today. It is therefore essential to view the Casamance conflict through a regional lens. By situating the secessionist movement within the broader regional landscape of armed conflicts, we are able to discern patterns and underlying connections from a vantage point. The Casamance conflict possesses a strong regional character, both in its effects and in its dynamics. Moreover, the absence of a regional approach to the peace process not only highlights the distinctiveness of secessionist conflicts but also reveals the underlying logic of regional intervention. However, I argue that ECOWAS could have played a more active role in the peace process to mitigate the destructive impact of the conflict. As Akiba indicates, the international community has been reticent and tentative in responding to the human sufferings in Casamance (2020, 112).

This chapter begins by briefly reviewing existing studies on third-party responses to

secessionist conflicts, highlighting a key gap in the literature: the insufficient attention to the role of regional organizations in addressing secession. I then situate the Casamance conflict within the broader context of African secessionist struggles to examine the continuity and evolution of regional attitudes toward such conflicts. The chapter proceeds to analyze ECOWAS's non-intervention in Casamance by exploring the Senegalese government's motivations for keeping the issue off the regional agenda, as well as ECOWAS's logic of intervention. I conclude with a discussion of potential counterarguments concerning ECOWAS's involvement in the conflict.

1. Scholarly Debate on International Responses to Secessionist Conflicts

How does international society react to secessionist conflicts? In particular, how do international organizations respond to this type of conflict? Scholarship on international relations of secession addresses less directly the topic of international organizations' role as independent actors in secessionist conflicts. In addition to research specializing in secession per se, two broad categories of literature touch on the relationship between international organizations and secession.

The first group of scholars approaches the topic from a normative perspective. They examine the legitimacy of secessionist claims to self-determination and international organizations' responses to such claims within the framework of international law (Lloyd 1994; Buchanan 1997; Horowitz 2003; Anderson 2013; Sterio 2015). This body of work centers on the tension between people's right to self-determination and the need for states to maintain territorial integrity. Allen Buchanan (1997), for instance, evaluates different theories of secession to determine which provides the most useful guidance for international organizations' responses to secession. According to his analysis, Remedial Right Only theories—which frame secession as a last resort for groups suffering from significant injustices—offer the strongest foundation for guiding international responses to secessionist movements.

The other thread of research on international relations of secessionist conflicts investigates external involvement practices in secession conflicts, especially third-states' attitudes toward the conflicts. Their debate focuses on the motivation behind international actors' intervention in secession. Heraclides (1990) examines various assumptions about external involvement in

secession. One of his findings confirms that international normative regimes constrain states and international governmental organizations from getting involved in secessionist conflicts, though it varies from one case to another.

While the role of African international organizations as collective actors in secessionist conflicts has received some attention, it remains relatively underexplored. Among the existing literature, most focus on the OAU/AU. Early scholars such as Onyeonoro S. Kamanu (1974) questioned the appropriateness of the OAU's rigid commitment to preserving the territorial *status quo* of African states, arguing that this position often disregarded human rights concerns related to minority grievances and suffering. The OAU/AU's strict adherence to colonial borders, along with its inconsistent stance on recognizing secessionist movements, continues to be a subject of debate in more recent literature. For example, Ekeke and Lubisi (2019) argue that the AU should at least mediate in legitimate secessionist claims, given that many such movements have escalated into violent conflicts across Africa. In addition, some studies have examined the interactions between international organizations in secessionist contexts. Tiewul (1975), for instance, analyzed the relationship between the UN and the OAU, noting that issues of concurrent jurisdiction are particularly pronounced when the two organizations apply different normative frameworks to secessionist conflicts.

The following section reviews a debate on the logic of third parties' attitudes toward African secession in more detail.

Conventional wisdom assumes that states vulnerable to secession would not support secession in other states for fear of provoking secession within their own borders. It thus partially explains the motivation behind international cooperation based on norms such as non-intervention in other states' internal affairs—to preserve national borders in the name of sacrosanct sovereignty. Otherwise, states defecting from cooperation can lead to a dangerous domino effect of redrawing the boundaries (Bélanger et al. 2005, 436). This seems especially the case for African states, which were built on artificially imposed boundaries that disregarded ethnic, racial, religious, and cultural complexity. Their vulnerability to secession motivated international cooperation from the very beginning, culminating in the birth of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU).

Jackson and Rosberg argue that it was African states' civil and military weakness that

induced them to support the rules and practices of the OAU, which constrained neighboring states from supporting internal enemies (1982, 19). The international norms that uphold state jurisdiction, as reinforced by international organizations, in turn helped ‘weak states’ in Africa to persist.

Jeffrey Herbst (1989) notices the vulnerability of African states as well. But he takes a different approach to explain it. Herbst indicates that the reason why the current state system in Africa inherited from the colonial order works well is because it requires only a minimal amount of information (namely, that a government controls coastal territory or the capital city) to be effective” (1989, 689). A parallel governance strategy can be found in the colonial periods when European colonial powers faced the same challenges imposed by the continent’s demographic, geographic, and ethnographic structure. It was the reciprocal nature of such a structure that incentivized states to cooperate internationally in return for international recognition of their external sovereignty.

However, a group of scholars challenges this conventional wisdom that assumes African states’ collective action in deterring secessions and safeguarding their national borders. Stephen M. Saideman (1997; 2002; 2007) argues that states’ vulnerability to secession does not constrain them from intervening in secession in other states. Some even provided support to such secessionist attempts. He introduces the factor of ethnic ties into the conversation by asserting that political leaders’ foreign policies on secessionist conflicts in other states are instead conditioned by ethnic divisions within their own countries (1997, 722). In other words, a leader could support secession in another state if their constituencies share ethnic ties with the secessionist group. Bélanger, Duchesne, and Paquin (BDP) (2005; 2007) advance the debate by bringing the factor of regime type into the discussion. They argue that democratic states tend to refrain from supporting secessionist movements in other democratic states because, according to the political values they share, minority groups are already afforded internal self-determination within a liberal democratic order. In contrast, autocratic leaders are less constrained and more willing to support secessionist movements, given the absence of such shared political values (2005, 440).

By introducing the dynamics of domestic politics into the discussion on secession and foreign intervention, these critiques challenge the vulnerability argument and extend the level

of analysis. In their discussion, two questions underpinning the critiques of the limitation of the vulnerability argument: (1) whether states vulnerable to secession would support secessionist movements in other states, or under what condition will states support/oppose secessionist movements in other states; (2) whether such vulnerability incentivizes states to cooperate at regional/international level, or under what condition is international cooperation possible as regards secession. While both questions are essential to the argument, they focus exclusively on addressing the first question. As for the second question, they fail to deal with it thoroughly.

To put it simply, the two questions outlined above reflect two distinct levels of analysis. The first question represents the state-level perspective, while the second corresponds to the regional level. The problem is that scholars who support the vulnerability thesis focus on the regional level to explain the logic of international cooperation, whereas critics such as Saideman and BDP base their critiques on the state level of analysis. However, decision-makers at the two levels operate under different considerations, which cannot be conflated. For example, Herbst (1989) highlights the differing attitudes between individual African states and the OAU regarding secessionist movements. In his discussion of Tanzania's recognition of the Biafran secessionist movement in Nigeria—one of the few notable challenges to the preservation of African borders—he contrasts the position of individual states that supported the rebel Biafran regime with that of the OAU at the regional level, the latter of which “reaffirmed their respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Nigeria” (1989, 687).

More fundamentally, the central questions they address are different. Scholars such as Jackson and Rosberg seek to explain why weak states and artificial boundary systems have remained stable in Africa, whereas Saideman and BDP focus on identifying the conditions under which states become involved in other states' secessionist conflicts. The differences in levels of analysis and research lead to distinct analytical frameworks and explanations.

The Casamance conflict serves as a compelling example illustrating the implications of the differences between the two levels of analysis. It conforms to the vulnerability proposition at the regional/international level, but also appears to support the ethnic-ties argument at the state level.

At the regional level, West African states seem to have tacitly accepted that the long-

standing armed conflict in Casamance falls within Senegal's national boundaries. It was never placed on ECOWAS's agenda, and no regional involvement emerged in conflict resolution efforts. One could thus argue that vulnerability to boundary changes motivated regional cooperation on the Casamance issue—cooperation manifested through collective silence.

At the state level, however, individual politicians, particularly in Gambia, provided material assistance to the secessionists in their fight against the Senegalese forces. The ethnic ties between Yahya Jammeh, then-President of Gambia, and the Casamance separatists (both being Jola) help explain Jammeh's motivations for supporting the separatist movement, which is consistent with the ethnic-ties thesis.

One possible conclusion we could draw from the example above is that state behavior may differ at the state (individual) and regional (collective) levels. However, Saideman and BDP mix up the two levels of analysis and use evidence from the state level to challenge the vulnerability argument built on the regional level.

Another problem in Saideman and BDP's approaches is the application of theoretical hypotheses to diverse cases without careful consideration of the specific contexts of different secessionist conflicts. While generalization is a necessary step in theory-building, oversimplifying the conditions can undermine explanatory power. Below, I take Saideman's work as an example to illustrate the limitation, and more importantly, to highlight the necessity of understanding international responses to African secessionist conflicts through an evolving perspective.

One of Saideman's (1997) critiques of the vulnerability argument is the failure of international norms—consolidated by vulnerable African states—to inhibit member states from supporting secessionist movements. He uses three case studies of secession to examine the ethnic-ties thesis and vulnerability thesis. Among them, two cases are from Africa: the Congo Crisis (Katanga) and the Nigerian Civil War (Biafra), both of which were early secessionist conflicts that broke out in the 1960s. Unfortunately, Saideman does not extend his focus to African secessionist conflicts that emerged in later periods. He overlooked the fact that norms evolve over time. During the initial era of independence, norms such as decolonization and self-determination had not yet been fully reconciled with the principle of territory integrity. In other words, those norms could coexist, sometimes in tension, depending on the specific

context. The problem is that Saideman treats the function, conditions, and meaning of international norms as fixed, stable, and unchanging. The same applies to secessionist conflicts themselves, the themes and characteristics of which have also evolved over time. The international environment surrounding self-determination and sovereignty was much different in the 1990s compared to the 1960s, when Biafran and Katangan secessionists attempted to establish their own independent states.

In his discussion of the Biafran War, Saideman uses four African states—Gabon, the Ivory Coast, Tanzania, and Zambia—that recognized Biafran sovereignty as evidence to contradict the vulnerability argument’s assumption that states facing potential secessionist threats will refrain from supporting secession elsewhere. However, he later acknowledges the anomaly of Tanzania’s behavior, which neither the vulnerability thesis nor the ethnic-ties thesis fully explains (1997, 740). The confusion lies in the fact that Saideman’s analysis is overly preoccupied with single explanatory factors such as ethnicity and religion, while overlooking the more complex historical trajectories that shaped political leaders’ decisions. As Crawford Young (1983) points out, Julius Nyerere (Tanzania)’s moral consideration—specifically, his desire to stop what he perceived as a war against the people of Eastern Nigeria—along with Houphouët-Boigny (Ivory Coast) and Kenneth Kaunda (Zambia)’s hostility toward the colonial legacy of federations, all contributed to their sympathy to the Biafran secessionists. Without accounting for these historical contexts, one cannot fully grasp the changing nature of African states’ responses to secessionist movements.

To conclude, the current literature on the international relations of secession pays relatively little attention to the role of regional organizations in African secessionist conflicts. Existing studies either approach the question through normative investigations within the framework of international law or focus on third-party responses to secession at the individual state level. This chapter thus represents an effort to integrate both normative and practical dimensions by exploring the evolving logic of regional organizations’ responses to secession, drawing empirical evidence from the Casamance conflict.

2. Contextualizing the Casamance Conflict in African Secession Struggles

When Jeffrey Herbst wrote in 1989 that none of the separatist groups in Africa “have

succeeded in their goal of establishing a new state” in support of his thesis on the stability of African borders (Herbst 1989, 676), he likely did not anticipate the dramatic change that would occur just a few years later, when Eritrea became the first successful case of secession in Africa since independence. While Herbst’s argument remains broadly valid, the international environment surrounding secession has since shifted significantly, with three aspects particularly worth noting: international norms, secessionists’ agendas, and international organizations’ responses to secession. These elements have interacted with each other and shaped new dynamics in secessionist conflicts. This section briefly traces these changes and contextualizes the Casamance secessionist conflict within the broader trajectory of African secessionist struggles.

The Evolution of African Secessionist Conflict

Scholars have noted the changing patterns of armed conflicts in Africa during the 1990s and often pointed to the end of the Cold War as an important factor behind these shifts (Snow 1996; Kaldor 2012). While the end of the Cold War certainly contributed to these changes, it should be understood as only one part of a broader and more complex process. The transformation of armed conflicts was shaped not only by external and internal conditions, but also by the accumulated effects of previous actions and strategies. Rather than suggesting that the fundamental nature of African armed conflicts has changed, it is more plausible to view the evolving behavior and strategies of warring parties—whether soldiers or rebels—as adaptations to shifting internal and external dynamics. So is the case for secession conflict.

Secessionist and separatist conflicts can be seen as an epitome of broader armed conflicts in Africa, with their major phases of evolution roughly overlapping. The three waves of secession identified by Charles Thomas and Toyin Falola (2020a) offered a useful framework for understanding how secessionist and separatist conflicts have evolved over time.

The first wave of secession happened in the 1960s, which was characterized by the failed secessionist attempts of Katanga (Congo) and Biafra (Nigeria). It echoed the era of independence in the 1950s and 1960s when the principle of decolonization and self-determination inspired many African nationalists to get rid of colonial rule through negotiation

and recognition. Thomas and Falola characterize the secessionist struggle during this period as civil secession because of their goal to create a civil state that is multi-ethnic in nature and is “constructed around a civil structure of laws and institutions” (2020, 263). It was not a remote dream for the secessionists at that time to envision restructuring the inherited colonial boundaries and frame it under the banner of decolonization and self-determination. However, the UN’s forceful intervention in the Congo Crisis to deter the Katanga secessionists set a precedent for international organizations’ attitude toward secession—maintaining member states’ territory integrity while rejecting domestic secessionists’ claim to self-determination. Later, the establishment of the OAU and the adoption of its Charter in 1963 further confirmed the pattern by stating explicitly that all member states shall adhere to the principle of “non-interference in the internal affairs of states” and “respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each State and for its inalienable right to independent existence” (OAU 1963, Article III). In the Biafran conflict, for instance, the OAU denounced the secessionists’ attempted withdrawal from Nigeria and invoked Article III to support the federal government (Thomas and Falola 2020, 91). The fall of the Katanga secession and Biafra secession thus served as a lesson for international organizations in assessing how to react to such a crisis. The failure in the early era was also a blow to African secessionist movements since the legal justification of secession built upon the principle of self-determination was quashed by the international community.

The second wave of secession, the Long Wars, resembled global armed struggles for liberation (e.g., China and Vietnam) as well as African liberation movements against colonial and minority rule. These local guerilla wars lasted for decades, as represented by the South Sudanese and Eritrean secessionist movements during the 1960s through the 1980s. While they shared features with the earlier wave—such as the functional governance structures by secessionist organizations and the vision for multi-ethnic political projects—they differed from the first wave in many ways due to changes in the international and domestic environment.

One prominent difference was their duration. As Thomas and Toyin indicate, newly independent states, although still institutionally weak, were far more powerful than subnational groups. This advantage was not only due to superior firepower but also to the substantial subsidies they received from Cold War patrons motivated by superpower competition, which

in large part shaped secessionists' strategies toward prolonged conflicts (2020, 268). In addition, norms of territorial integrity and non-interference in other states' domestic affairs had become more deeply entrenched through previous practices of international organizations such as the OAU Charter, and the UN intervention in Katanga. States were increasingly reluctant to recognize minority groups' claims to self-determination outside the context of decolonization or apartheid (Stromseth 1992, 372). Against the backdrop of power imbalances and a frozen international order, regional and international organizations during this period generally adopted a negative stance toward secessionist attempts and refrained from getting involved in these conflicts. Yet subnational groups never stopped their struggles for secession. The Eritrean case, for example, was framed essentially as a case of denied decolonization, akin to Namibia and Western Sahara (Selassie 1988, 66). By defining themselves as "engaged in a decolonization struggle against an African colonizer" (Thomas and Falola 2020, 81), Eritrean secessionists positioned their movement outside the dominant discourse of sovereignty and territorial integrity that otherwise rejected secession from sovereign states.

The end of the Cold War brought dramatic changes not only to the international order but also to secessionist movements in Africa. A group of new nation-states joined the international community following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the breakup of Yugoslavia, receiving both international recognition and United Nations membership. The sanctity of sovereignty and territorial integrity was no longer an insurmountable barrier, as some subnational groups successfully seceded from their host states through referendums and international recognition. This normative transformation revealed a paradigm shift from a state-centered to a human-centered approach (Bereketeab 2014, 6). It marked a move away from an absolutist interpretation of territorial integrity toward a progressive interpretation that emphasizes the responsibility of states to uphold the basic moral interests of individuals and groups (Buchanan 1997, 50–51). In other words, the legitimacy of a sovereign state is now also judged by how it treats its people. The 1990s also saw a sharp rise in humanitarian interventions led by international actors to halt horrific violence within states. It was during this period that Eritrea (1993) and South Sudan (2011) ultimately succeeded in their long struggles for independence.

The third wave of secession in Africa, developed during this time, is characterized as

pursuing more openly separatist goals than secessionist goals, with ethnic-based identity gaining more importance. Compared to the political demands of immediate sovereignty by secessionists of the 1960s, the motives of new secessionists were rather ambiguous—the lines between secession, separatism, and irredentism became blurred. Some subnational groups ended up looking for “more autonomy under the umbrella of weakened state control” based on negotiated reform with the authority (Thomas and Falola 2020, 264). The Tuareg rebellion in Mali in the 1990s is typical of the new wave of secessions. While the Malian army equipped with sophisticated Soviet weapons had been able to crush the first Tuareg rebellion in the early 1960s, the situation was much different in 1990. The political leader realized that a military solution to the second rebellion could not be achieved when the regime faced severe financial constraints and political crises (Keita 1998, 112). Under such circumstances, the state chose to use political means to settle the conflict by offering the rebels more local autonomy without compromising the practical functions of the state (Thomas and Falola 2020, 257). However, such negotiations often fail to settle the problem once and for all.

Furthermore, the taboo against external interference that had long constrained African organizations from becoming involved in states’ domestic affairs was broken under exceptional circumstances, such as humanitarian disasters. This shift opened the possibility for international intervention in secessionist conflicts. Since then, international organizations have undergone a nuanced change in their approach to secessionist conflicts: while they remain firm allies of member states in preserving territorial integrity, they are now more willing to act as observers or mediators in brokering peace agreements between conflicting parties.

To sum up, the evolution of secessionist movements in Africa has accompanied the gradual transformation of international norms and regional organizations’ responses to secessionist conflicts. Emerging from the shifting regional and international environment of the 1990s, the Casamance secessionist movement corresponds to the third wave of secession. The following subsection will trace its trajectory within the broader context of continuity and change in African secessionist conflicts.

The Casamance Conflict

Like many African secessionist conflicts, the root causes of the Casamance conflict can be traced to the colonial legacy and the perceived marginalization of the Casamance region in the post-independence state policies. The geography of Casamance, along with its associated socioeconomic and ethnocultural issues, is widely recognized as an important factor shaping the conflict. Casamance is geographically separated from the rest of Senegal, sandwiched between Gambia and Guinea-Bissau.

Similar to its distinctive geography, the ethnic composition and culture of Casamance also possess unique characteristics. The ethnic Jola (Diola in French) constitute the majority group in the Ziguinchor region (Lower Casamance). Although they represent only about 5.3 percent of Senegal's total population, Jola people account for approximately 61 percent of the population in Ziguinchor (NRC 1995, 41). When tracing the root of the conflict, some accounts of the conflict highlight cultural differences between the Jola society and the Wolof-dominated Northern society in Senegal: while the Jola are often described as valuing egalitarianism and decentralized political structures, the Wolof emphasize social hierarchy and centralized political system (Fall 2010). In addition to these differences, discriminatory cultural policies, as perceived by the Jola people, further exacerbated resentment against the central government (Clark 2011). The "breadbasket" narrative, which emphasizes the North's reliance on the agricultural wealth of Casamance, along with Casamance's perceived status as a socioeconomic periphery within a Northerner/Wolof-dominated state, all point to patterns of exclusion and marginalization (Rudolf 2017, 191–93).

On 26 December 1982, a demonstration broke out in Ziguinchor demanding independence for Casamance. Protesters replaced the Senegalese flag and chanted anti-central government slogans, while the recently revived MFDC (Mouvement des forces démocratiques de Casamance) circulated pamphlets advocating independence (Amnesty International 1998; Evans 2004). The Senegalese government responded immediately by arresting and sentencing participants, including the central figure of the MFDC, the Catholic priest Augustin Diamacoune Senghor. This incident is widely regarded as the beginning of the long-lasting conflict. Between 1982 and 1983, several additional marches followed the initial demonstration.

In an effort to de-escalate tensions, it has been speculated that the Senegalese authorities' decision to divide the Casamance region into Ziguinchor and Kolda in 1984 aimed to isolate the Lower Casamance rebellion from broader regional discontent (Evans 2013, 108). However, unrest in Casamance continued. The central government's heavy-handed responses to the demonstrations accelerated the separatists' turn to violence. By 1990, the nature of the conflict had evolved from peaceful protests to more violent armed struggles, with the MFDC launching military attacks against the government and the government retaliating violently. According to Amnesty International, both sides committed serious human rights abuses, including hostage-taking, torture, and deliberate and arbitrary killings (Amnesty International 1998). Data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) indicate that by the end of 1998, the cumulative death toll from the conflict had exceeded 1,000.⁶

Unlike earlier waves of secessions that sought to establish functional civil structures capable of fulfilling the role of the state, the MFDC's operations relied heavily on military tactics—particularly guerilla warfare—while paying minimal attention to local governance within the community. The observation Thomas and Toyin make about Tuareg separatism applies to the Casamance case as well: “it is therefore difficult to say that this is necessarily a secessionist conflict without there being an understood state to be created” (Thomas and Falola 2020, 253). The ambiguity surrounding the MFDC's secessionist versus separatist goals contributed to the movement's adoption of more adaptive strategies in its relationship with the central government.

As in other African secessionist conflicts of the third wave, neither outright military victory nor a lasting political settlement was achievable in Casamance. Government troops were unable to defeat the poorly armed separatists, who operated on familiar home terrain (Akiba 2020, 112), while the separatists lacked the necessary capacity to compel the government to recognize their independence. Although the two parties signed a series of ceasefire and peace accords, recurrent violence has continued to destabilize the region. Internal divisions within the MFDC—between its political wing and military forces—as well as the

⁶ Therese Pettersson et al., “Organized violence 1989–2020, with a special emphasis on Syria,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 2021, Vol.58, No.4, <https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/>, 2022-07-01.

involvement of neighboring states further complicated the peace process and made a decisive resolution difficult to achieve. Sporadic clashes and instability have persisted for more than three decades.

Another feature of the third wave secessions in Africa is ethnic identity. Identity politics that fueled armed conflicts have become more prominent since the end of the Cold War. The label of identity plays a critical role in shaping the narrative of the fight (Kaldor 2012).

However, the MFDC separatists' struggles for independence revealed a relatively different story in relation to ethnic politics: while the MFDC emphasized its multi-ethnic character and never overtly claimed an ethnic footing (De Jong 1999), the movement itself was closely associated with ethnic Jola (Diola in French)—the majority ethnic group in Ziguinchor region (Lower Casamance). It was actually a process of ethnicization that was reinforced by the separatists' interactions with the Senegalese government.

The precursor to the current MFDC was a political party founded in 1947 that advocated for Casamance's regional interests (Bertrand and Jeram 2014). At its inception, the MFDC was neither guided by an ethnic ideology nor oriented toward separatist goals (Beck 2008, 172). According to claims later made by the current MFDC, then-President Léopold Senghor reached a deal with one of the original founders of MFDC to revisit the question of Casamance's independence and sovereignty after twenty years (Lambert 1998, 591). However, the central government took no action at the end of that period, a development believed to be linked to the resurgence of the MFDC and the eventual initiation of its armed struggle (Lambert 1998, 592; Bertrand and Jeram 2014, 115).

The resurrected MFDC pursued a strategy of highlighting the ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity of Casamance, in an attempt to legitimize their claim for territory-based independence. As Crawford Young (1983) points out, grounding self-determination claim on cultural or ethnic basis would encounter enormous obstacles, not only due to the fluid and complex nature of ethnicity, but also the fact that territorial-based sovereignty claim was indispensable to gaining any international support.

Meanwhile, the Senegalese government and many non-Senegalese reporters tended to label the separatist movement as an ethnic-centered movement. The Dakar government denounced the movement by framing it as an 'affaire diola' (De Jong 1999, 7). On the side of

the central government, it served as a convenient tool to delegitimize the movement by portraying the insurrection as a pure ethnic problem that could be solved in the domestic realm. As will be discussed in the following section, defining the Casamance conflict as an internal problem created legal and discursive space for the state authority to solve the issue in a less formalized way without foreign intervention.

More importantly, ethnic concerns bear critical political implications in Senegal as in other newly independent states. It was in the Senegalese government's interest to de-politicize ethnic identity in the name of national unity while at the same time prompting the separatist organization not to identify itself with strong ethnic character openly. Under the context of nation-building in post-independence Africa, transforming multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, or multi-racial societies into a unitary nation became a top priority for nationalist leaders (Thomson 2010, 37). Narrowly defined ethnicity sometimes contradicted such nationalist narratives and has even been seen as an obstacle to modernization. Against this backdrop, many states introduced party bans in their constitutions to remove ethnicity (and other social identities) from formal political life. In Senegal's case, the government included a provision in the 1978 constitutional amendment that prohibited political parties from referring to any ethnic identities (Hartmann 2013b, 175).⁷ The fourth constitution of Senegal adopted in 2001 further integrated the party regulation into its articles by stating that "[political parties] are forbidden to identify themselves to one race, to one ethnicity, to one sex, to one religion, to one sect, to one language or to one part of the territory" (Constitution Du Sénégal 2001, Article 4). The reason why political parties shall not be linked with a particular territory may also speak to state authority's concern about potential secessionist attempts. Due to such restrictions, neither ethnic nor the Casamance region has developed political parties representing their interests (Hartmann 2013b, 177). This helps explain why Michael Lambert cautions against labeling the Casamance separatists as 'ethnic' or 'tribal,' particularly when such labels carry political implications (1998, 598).

Nevertheless, the Casamançais identity is inextricably connected to the Jola identity. Not only did the MFDC participants mainly come from the ethnic Jola, but the MFDC also made

⁷ Racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, gender, or regional identities are not allowed to be tied to political parties.

references to Jola cultural traditions. Markus Rudolf points out that the terms Diola (Jola in French) and Casamançais are used interchangeably “in all realms of discourse” (2017, 198).

The ethnic aspect of the secession or separatist struggle can be seen as an ongoing process of formation and also a response to the totalizing state-sponsored single national identity. On the one hand, the dominant Islamo-Wolof model that served “as the reference point for Senegalese modernity” accentuated the position of Casamance as the periphery, thus giving rise to alternative ethnic claim from the periphery (Diouf 2004, 223). On the other hand, the polarization between the Casamançais and northerners, and between Jola and non-Jola was a dialectic process of state repression and the MFDC activity (De Jong 1999, 8). Local people of Casamance have experienced systematic discrimination since 1982. Rudolf points out that Casamançais were treated as potential traitors by the state, among which Jola people were the primary target. One of his informants described a scenario of the local’s everyday life— “they controlled your identity card and got the Diola out of the bus, while the others could go on” (2017, 196).

Overall, by contextualizing the Casamance separatist movement in the trajectory of secessions in Africa, one can find both continuity and changes of secessionist conflicts (ends and means) that speak to the earlier secessions. Facing the reality of blurred boundaries between secession and separatism, governments and international organizations adapted their strategies to the new security challenges.

3. The Conflict without ECOWAS Involvement

Internal Affair vs. Regional Threat

The line between internal and internationalized issues in armed conflicts—including those involving secession—is not always clearly defined. The extent to which a domestic conflict becomes an international matter is often open to interpretation and political contestation. This ambiguity applies to the Casamance conflict as well. However, Senegal’s staunch position reveals the fact that states wield considerable influence over the issue agendas of international organizations, particularly when the matter falls within the traditionally defined domain of domestic affairs.

As Buchanan observes, secession crises often have international consequences, as they are frequently accompanied by human rights violations and cross-border refugee flows (1997, 33). While the MFDC's armed struggle was rooted in the perceived socioeconomic marginalization of Casamance within the post-independence state system, the trajectory of the conflict has taken on distinctly regional dimensions. Its repercussions have extended beyond Senegal's national boundaries. Viewing it solely as a domestic issue risks obscuring both the nature of the separatist movement and the potential avenues for its resolution. Three features of the conflict are particularly worth noting.

First, spill-over effects were prominent during the conflict. Neighboring states usually find it hard to avoid being enmeshed in nearby conflicts (Heraclides 1990). Due to its special geographical location, the Casamance region is contiguous with Gambia (in the north) and Guinea-Bissau (in the south). In the context of similar colonial experiences and cross-border ethnic ties, armed struggles in the Casamance can easily spill over the porous borders into neighboring countries. The influx of refugees and combatants' cross-border activities pose a threat to local stability. A USAID report released in 2017 estimates that there are at least 10,000 refugees in Gambia and Guinea-Bissau (USAID 2017). Moreover, the conflict in Casamance indirectly triggered the civil war in Guinea-Bissau in 1998, which in turn further destabilized the regional security environment. Being accused of involving in arms trafficking to Casamance, Ansumane Mané, the High Chief of the Armed Forces of Guinea-Bissau, was dismissed by President João Bernardo 'Nino' Vieira, and he later staged a coup for self-preservation, resulting in another civil war in West Africa (Temudo 2008, 250). Factions of the MFDC participated in the civil war by joining the side of General Mané against the incumbent government. They confronted Senegalese forces who were shipped to Guinea-Bissau to support then-Bissau President Vieira (Akiba 2020, 117). In other words, a conflict that should have been resolved within Senegal's borders was instead externalized, drawing other countries into its dynamics.

Second, the conflict heavily involved multiple West African states and, therefore, cannot be reduced to a purely domestic affair of Senegal. Gambia and Guinea-Bissau were among the most active external actors. Their complex interactions with the warring parties, including direct and indirect support for various MFDC factions, shaped the trajectory of the conflict in

significant ways. As Paul Williams notes in his analysis of Africa's "regional warsapes," neighboring governments often intervene in ongoing armed conflicts to support either incumbent regimes or insurgent forces (2016, 108). Their motivations may range from seeking to destabilize regional rivals to cultivating personal or ethnic ties with local warlords. In the case of Casamance, neighboring states not only engaged in illicit armed trade with the separatists but also "provided" safe havens for MFDC factions (Evans 2000, 657). Within Bissau-Guinea's military, there were known sympathizers who supplied weapons to the MFDC through cross-border ethnic and kinship networks (Evans 2004, 8). According to Jean-François Bayart, it was widely known that the entire political-military establishment of the PAIGC—Guinea-Bissau's then-ruling party—was involved in the illicit arms trade with the Casamance rebels during the early 1990s, including individuals within President Vieira's inner circle (1998, 59). The MFDC established rear bases in Guinea-Bissau. In addition, Gambia's then-President Yahya Jammeh belongs to the Jola ethnic group. He was also "believed to have close links with the Jola-dominated MFDC's Front Nord" (Evans 2000, 655) and accused of supporting the MFDC "in a bid for leverage over Dakar."⁸

Third, cross-border movements were not limited to the flow of refugees and combatants; they also involved illicit activities such as weapons and drug trafficking, which further undermined regional security. As support from local communities declined, the MFDC factions turned to criminal activities along the border, including cattle rustling, armed robbery, and the production and trade of marijuana (USAID 2009, 33). The risk of conflict escalation also emerged from border disputes between Senegal and Guinea-Bissau, often triggered by rebel attacks. For example, on 10 April 2000, MFDC insurgents launched an attack from the Bissau-Guinean side of the border, prompting the Senegalese army to bomb another Bissau-Guinean border village, resulting in the deaths of five civilians (Evans 2000, 651). Although the likelihood of full-scale interstate war remained low, such incidents exacerbated tensions and strained regional relations. The UN Security Council subsequently called on both countries "to exercise restraint and take steps to de-escalate tensions along their shared border."⁹

However, from the perspective of the Senegalese government, the resolution of the

⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/casamance-conflict-is-unhealed-sore-for-senegal-idUSTRE81O09D/>

⁹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/c%C3%B4te-divoire/irin-update-756-events-west-africa>

Casamance conflict was firmly framed as an internal affair. Its resistance to external intervention effectively kept the issue off any regional agenda. Instead, the government selectively invited a range of actors to participate in negotiations with the MFDC. These included high-ranking domestic politicians of Casamance origin, civilian representatives, two neighboring states—Guinea-Bissau and Gambia—and the Roman Catholic Church (de Jong 2005, 394). Yet, no influential state actors or intergovernmental organizations were included in the guest list. Editor of the newspaper *Taxi*, Pape Samba Kâne, once commented that “there is no foreign government or organization acting as a guarantor.”¹⁰ An exception was when tension arose between Senegal and Guinea-Bissau owing to separatists’ cross-border attacks in 2000. Senegal’s President Wade asked the UN to send observers along the border with Guinea-Bissau (Evans 2000, 651). However, his request had nothing to do with the cause of the dispute, which may suggest the Senegalese authorities’ reluctance to involve influential international actors in the Casamance conflict per se.

In practical terms, Senegal was able to influence ECOWAS’s agenda and prevent the Casamance issue from being formally addressed. One unexpected consequence of international organizations, as Saideman argues, is that they create opportunities for member states and other actors to shape the organization’s agenda (Saideman 1994, 277). Member states can strategically use agenda-setting to include or exclude particular issues in ways that serve their national interests. There is reason to believe that Senegal’s influential position within ECOWAS enabled it to block any attempts to raise the Casamance conflict at the regional level. President Abdou Diouf served as ECOWAS Chairman from 1992 to 1993, and President Abdoulaye Wade held the same position from 2001 to 2003—two periods that coincided with significant escalations in Casamance violence.

If the Senegalese government sees the resolution of the Casamance conflict as a strictly internal matter, then why has it involved neighboring countries rather than confining the process entirely within national boundaries? Both Gambia and Guinea-Bissau have actively engaged in the peace process. As early as 1991, the first ceasefire agreement between the government and the MFDC was signed in Bissau.¹¹ At the time of writing, the most recent

¹⁰ <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/april-2005/peace-pact-raises-hope-senegal>

¹¹ <https://webarchive.archive.unhcr.org/20230602060630/https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6ac1b54.html>

peace agreement was reached in 2022, witnessed by the President of Guinea-Bissau, Umaro Sissoco Embaló. He chaired the signing ceremony as guarantor of the deal.¹² Notably, at that time, President Embaló also served as Chairman of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government.

As such, it would be inaccurate to claim that the management of the Casamance conflict lacked any international involvement. Three points are worth noting. First, the Senegalese authorities have demonstrated a willingness to engage external actors in peace negotiations with the MFDC, indicating a broader, if selective, openness to international assistance. That said, some scholars have raised doubts about the Senegalese government's motivations. Akiba, for instance, suggests that Senegal may have strategically enlisted international mediators in part to deflect international criticism over its handling of the conflict (Akiba 2020, 131).

Second, the involvement of Guinea-Bissau in the peace process lies in the fact that Senegal has leverage over Guinea-Bissau and was able to wield influence on it. While the bilateral relationship experienced fluctuations under different presidencies, Guinea-Bissau took an opportunist approach to conflict resolution. It enjoyed Senegal's support in the field of military, economy, and diplomacy (Foucher 2013). In return, the two government's cooperation helped Senegal to repulse the MFDC military factions based in Guinea-Bissau. Therefore, from the perspective of Senegal, there was no need to invite region-wide intervention.

Third, the absence of ECOWAS in the peace process highlights the distinctiveness of third-party involvements led by international/regional governmental organizations (IGOs). As discussed previously, states may behave differently at (individual) state level and (collective) regional level, and so are the implications and consequences of such distinctive behaviors. The acceptance of certain principles into international law can be interpreted as conferring legitimacy on certain types of action (Buchanan 1997, 43). Similarly, a collective decision made by a regional organization carries far greater normative implications than the unilateral policy of a single state, as it can create incentives for other actors to emulate that behavior. Thus, like the fear of the domino effect of secession, states are also concerned if regional intervention in a secessionist conflict would set a precedent for future intervention.

¹² <https://hdcentre.org/news/senegal-government-and-mfdc-separatists-advance-peace-process-with-roadmap-for-disarmament/>

Furthermore, ECOWAS involvement in the negotiation process could inadvertently elevate the status of the MFDC—transforming it from a subnational separatist group into a recognized negotiating party on equal footing with the state. This again highlights the unique normative weight of actions undertaken by international organizations.

Peace Process in Need of International Assistance

Negotiations aimed at resolving the Casamance conflict have been ongoing since the early 1990s. Yet, despite numerous rounds of peace and ceasefire agreements, these efforts have failed to deliver a lasting settlement. Lilja and Manga identify three major features of the internal peace process that have contributed to this failure: the government's selective choice of negotiating counterparts, unstructured peace-process management, and commitment problems (2013, 119). Their research highlights the importance of third-party involvement, an area where ECOWAS could have played a potentially constructive role.

The three factors are closely intertwined with the factional tendency of the MFDC. The problems of factions and spoilers have been undermining the Casamance peace process. On the one hand, factionalism undercut the MFDC's ability to mobilize and form a common front in the talks with the government (Akiba 2020, 112). On the other hand, the Senegalese government selected its preferred negotiation counterparts, which, in turn, accelerated the fragmentation of the MFDC, making a comprehensive peace agreement more difficult to achieve. The military wing of the MFDC, the *maquis* (Atika—'warriors in Jola, or *maquisards*), was established following Augustin Diamacoune Senghor's incarceration by the state authority. It was later split into two parts—Front Nord (Northern Front) and Front Sud (Southern Front)—due to the divergence between Sidy Badji and Augustin Diamacoune Senghor over the content of the ceasefire accord in 1991 (Akiba 2020, 114). Additional minor factions emerged following the initial split. The rifts, again, led to infighting and internal conflicts. Augustin Diamacoune Senghor, the spiritual leader of the MFDC, acted as the primary negotiator in the ceasefire talks with the Dakar government during the early 2000s. However, his failure to communicate effectively with other faction leaders undermined the credibility of the agreement and limited its prospect for lasting impact. Due to his house arrest, Senghor could only

communicate with MFDC militants through mail and personal messengers(Lilja and Manga 2013, 127). The poor communication between the political wing and military wing of the MFDC intensified the problem of internal disintegration. Further, it contributed to the latter's sense of exclusion from the peace talks. The unstructured and government-dominant peace process resulted in more faction splits. While the vicious circle reflected the lack of cohesiveness of the MFDC, it can also be argued that the lack of representation from the rebel side in the peace talk in large part precipitated such fragmentation.

A critical issue tied to the commitment problem in the peace process was the implementation of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR). Under the 2004 peace agreement, the MFDC committed to “canton, disarm and demobilize its military component”(Accord 2004). However, the agreement stipulated that the third parties designated to observe the process would all be domestic actors, including government representatives. Lilja and Manga characterize the treaty as a ‘surrender-like’ deal. Regrettably, the DDR process was never fully implemented: only ten combatants surrendered their weapons directly, and about 85 ex-combatants received economic support (2013, 125).

All these challenges point to the need for ECOWAS's active participation in the peace process. Stromseth outlines four potential responses the United Nations could adopt depending on the conditions of the secessionist conflicts, which can also be applied to ECOWAS. They range from mobilizing international pressure on conflicting parties to enter negotiation, initiating mediation efforts, deploying peacekeeping forces, and engaging in military enforcement (1992, 372–73). The first two options are particularly well suited to the Casamance context, where ECOWAS's past experience in facilitating peace talks, monitoring DDR processes, and leveraging international assistance could be meaningfully applied.

Beyond all else, the regional organization is responsible for mediating tensions and disputes that threaten regional peace and stability. The repercussions of the Casamance conflict have extended beyond Senegal's national borders. The long-lasting effects of the sporadic cross-border skirmishes and criminal activities continue to erode security conditions at the regional level. Given their geographic proximity, regional actors are often best positioned to influence both secessionist movements and the parent states (Nelson 2023, 1250). The dual roles played by Gambia—under President Yahya Jammeh—in facilitating peace talks and

covertly supporting the MFDC illustrate this dynamic. Thus, there is a pressing need to include ECOWAS in the negotiation process in order to limit the partisan involvement of individual actors.

4. The Logic of ECOWAS Intervention

ECOWAS Absence in Casamance

The events unfolding in Casamance did not attract meaningful attention from ECOWAS. No regional mediation efforts under ECOWAS auspices were dedicated to resolving the conflict. In fact, ECOWAS communiqués released after each Heads of State meeting mentioned the Casamance conflict only once—in 2000—when the organization commended then-Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade’s “recent peace moves in initiating dialogue with the separatist fighters in Casamance” (ECOWAS 2000). Beyond this symbolic recognition, ECOWAS’s role was limited to calling on member states to support Senegal’s domestic peace process.

However, considering that the Casamance conflict has notable regional characteristics, the absence of ECOWAS in both conflict management and peace processes is still puzzling. Around the same period, the humanitarian turn of international norms broke the boundaries of the “internal affair” of a sovereign state. Not only did the United Nations embrace the idea of *Responsibility To Protect* (R2P), but regional organizations in Africa added similar principles to their legal documents and mechanisms. ECOWAS was one of the pioneers. In practice, it started to assume security responsibility and was involved deeply in three civil wars that caused humanitarian crises in the 1990s (civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau).

Why did ECOWAS maintain silence in the Casamance issue? The previous section discusses the Senegalese government’s determination to avoid influential international actors’ participation in the peace process. Still, the perspective of ECOWAS as a regional organization needs to be examined as well.

The seeming paradox between ECOWAS’s robust interventions and the broader sensitivity of regional organizations to sovereignty issues can be explained by the central importance of regime security in its decision-making. A review of ECOWAS’s three ECOMOG

operations during the 1990s reveals that, despite the diverse backgrounds of the conflicts, they shared a common feature: the timing of intervention. ECOWAS actively engaged in conflict resolution in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau precisely when the regimes in these states were under severe threat.

When a group of 186 armed men crossed into Liberia from Cote d'Ivoire on Christmas Eve 1989 with the aim of toppling Samuel Doe's government (Adebajo 2002b, 42), they likely did not anticipate that the conflict would last for more than a decade. By the end of May 1990, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) had reportedly built up an estimated 10,000 fighters compared to the Liberian army's 2,000 available soldiers. The following month, the rebels advanced into Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, and launched attacks on the Executive Mansion (2002b, 58–59). Faced with an escalating rebellion that directly threatened the regime, ECOWAS member states convened in Banjul, Gambia, in May to discuss possible solutions. At that meeting, they established a Standing Mediation Committee (SMC) to mediate the conflict (Dumbuya 2008, 87). As the situation further deteriorated, ECOWAS authorized the deployment of ECOMOG, marking its first peacekeeping mission, which later transitioned into a peace enforcement operation.

In the case of Sierra Leone, although the civil war had been ongoing since 1991, it was not until 1997 that ECOWAS decided to deploy ECOMOG troops to the country. On May 25, 1997, a coalition of soldiers and rebels overthrew President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah's one-year-old government in a military coup. Kabbah fled to Guinea and appealed to Nigeria for assistance. At the time, Nigerian General Sani Abacha, who was serving as the chairman of ECOWAS, made the decision to deploy the Nigerian-led ECOMOG force to reverse the coup (Dumbuya 2008, 83).

As noted earlier, the Guinea-Bissau civil war was fought between General Ansumane Mané and President Vieira, with the latter reportedly commanding "only a few hundred" loyal troops when the war broke out (Massey 2004, 80). Vieira requested assistance from ECOWAS, emphasizing that the mutiny "threatens peace, security and stability in the country" (Africa Research Bulletin 1998, quoted in Massey 2004, 87). Initially, Senegal and Guinea intervened directly by dispatching troops to the battlefield. However, the presence of these foreign forces made the situation even more chaotic. While ECOWAS endorsed the interventions of Senegal

and Guinea-Bissau at first, it later decided to replace their troops with ECOMOG contingents. Despite domestic support for Mané's rebellion, ECOWAS firmly supported Vieira. As Massey observes in his analysis of the war, the impartiality of ECOWAS was called into question, and its operations in Guinea-Bissau—as in previous cases—were “to protect the sitting Head of State” (2004, 88).

Moreover, it actually mitigated the tension between sovereignty and the international community's social responsibility to protect when the regime is in great danger. As established by the OAU to preserve existing borders, the decision-making rule implies that physical control of the capital city is seen as the synonym for the control of the nation-state and cannot be challenged by other domestic or external actors (Herbst 1989, 687). Following the same logic, the ability to control the central government embodies the minimal level of internal sovereignty. Therefore, when the government/regime is overthrown suddenly by rebels or military officers, the barrier of sovereignty breaks down, and a power vacuum emerges, which calls for international involvement.

In sharp contrast to the three civil conflicts discussed above, the rebellion led by Casamance separatists never posed a threat to the survival of the Senegalese state or regime—partly explaining why ECOWAS did not assume a leading role in the conflict. Although the region suffered from this protracted conflict, the intensity of the conflict remained relatively low, and the battlefronts were limited to the Casamance and the border regions. In addition, the Senegalese army took decisive action against the MFDC whenever conditions were favorable. For instance, although framed as a mission to defend the democratically elected government of Guinea-Bissau, Senegal's military intervention (*Opération Gabou*) was, in practice, aimed at outflanking the MFDC fighters based in Guinea-Bissau (Marut 2001, 3).

The pattern of ECOWAS intervention thus reflects what Robert E. Kelly highlights—that the regional security organizations often reinforce rather than weaken sovereignty (2007, 218). State leaders share a tacit understanding to protect their regimes from political disruption, echoing what Moravcsik (2000) describes as the logic of newly established democracies “locking in” democratic rule through international institutions to reduce future political uncertainty. In this sense, regional organizations serve as platforms that help ensure “the position of the national government is supported by a consensus of foreign governments” (2000,

247). This dynamic is especially pronounced in authoritarian states, where state security becomes indistinguishable from regime security (Jackson 2013). Therefore, even though the consequences of the Casamance conflict spilled across borders, the issue itself remained confined to the national agenda.

Additionally, when violence in Casamance escalated during the 1990s, ECOWAS was swamped with three civil wars. Practically speaking, the regional body had no extra capacity to address the Casamance problem even if it had the will. As Heraclides states, nonintervention can be a genuine posture of passive neutrality when the regional organization has limited capacity or is preoccupied with other issues (1990, 346).

On the surface, the intervention led by ECOWAS regional forces to resolve civil wars may appear to represent a breakthrough, signaling that a regional integration organization has overcome the sovereignty barrier and engaged in community governance. However, a closer examination suggests that what ECOWAS effectively did was consolidate the regimes of its member states. This seemingly contradictory relationship can be understood in light of the nature of the state in West Africa. The region's predatory political systems and weak state institutions both generate the conflicts and simultaneously expose regimes to the risk of collapse—creating the need for regional powers to step in and restore order. As Kelly astutely observes, “international organizations in weak state-dense environments reflect the concerns of weak-state elites...they serve to pool sovereignty to jointly repress shared internal challengers” (2007, 201). In the case of the Casamance secession, however, the joint action taken by most West African states was to remain silent on the issue.

Therefore, in addition to the vulnerability argument that attempts to explain the lack of international involvement in member states' ongoing secessionist conflicts, the absence of international intervention in the Casamance conflict reveals another layer of consideration—regime security.

ECOWAS in Mali: A New Development?

Not only did the goals and means of secessionist conflicts in Africa evolve over time, but regional organizations' responses to the kind of conflict experienced change as well. The

secessionist crisis in Mali in 2012 and ECOWAS's reaction to it demonstrated some new features of regional intervention in secessionist conflict.

If the Casamance movement in the 1990s corresponded to the third wave of secession in Africa, as mentioned earlier, the new tendency of the combination of secessionism and Islamic extremism that emerged in Northern Mali could be seen as the latest version of secession. They differ in many aspects whilst sharing continuity from earlier eras. How ECOWAS dealt with the new challenge and what connections it has with earlier secessionist conflicts are important for understanding the bigger picture of regional intervention.

The Azawad movement in Mali can be traced to the Tuareg revolt in the early 1960s, which bears similarities with the Casamance conflict. Colonial legacies contributed to both struggles by disrupting pre-colonial governance and imposing arbitrary borders, though other historical and political dynamics are also at play. Another important connection lies in their regional dimensions—both in terms of how the conflicts have been sustained and the scope of their influence—which requires a regional framework for effective resolution. In Mali's case, cross-border smuggling networks played a critical role in sustaining the rebellion. Caparini thus argues that any solution to Mali's crisis must account for cross-border dynamics within the broader Sahelo-Sahrien context (2015, 5). The MFDC separatists in Casamance adopted a similar strategy to sustain the insurgency through illegal trafficking activities, such as timber and drugs. Casamance's unique geographic location made it a convenient transit hub, much like how Tuareg rebels exploit the Sahara Desert for cross-border operations.

The biggest factor that differentiates the Tuareg rebellion in 2012 from other secession conflicts was the joining of Islamist militant groups. The radicalized Tuareg secessionist coordinated with militant Islamists to launch their attack against the central government of Mali. The mix of the two categories—secession and terrorism—obscured the nature of the rebellion. In addition, the situation is further complicated by an ensuing coup d'état that toppled the civilian government of Mali. It was the combination of a series of conflicts and crises that precipitated regional intervention, a sharp contrast to the peace process of the Casamance conflict.

ECOWAS faced two imperative challenges when the Mali Crisis broke out—the coup d'état that overthrew the state regime and the insurgency that occupied the northern part of

Mali, taking advantage of the coup. The priority was given to the first issue, which was to restore the constitutional order of Mali. ECOWAS responded to the incident immediately by sending a mediation mission to Mali several days after the coup. Economic sanctions and diplomatic sanctions were implemented to force the military junta to transfer power back to the civilian government.

The collapse of the state prompted ECOWAS to pursue a military solution, leading to the decision to deploy a 3,000-strong force under the ECOWAS Mission in Mali (MICEMA). However, the complexity of the crisis, combined with a lack of consensus among key stakeholders, prevented MICEMA from moving beyond the planning stage.¹³ ECOWAS was unable to restore peace without assistance from other international actors.

The AU later assumed responsibility for deploying a multilateral military intervention, the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA). Although tensions emerged between AU and ECOWAS over which institution should lead the mission (Weiss and Welz 2014, 896), a more pragmatic consideration is that resolving the Mali crisis may have required capacities beyond ECOWAS's reach. Key neighboring countries, such as Algeria and Mauritania¹⁴, are not ECOWAS member states and did not support the idea of an ECOWAS-led military mission operating near their borders (Caparini 2015, 7). Algeria, in particular, has played a longstanding mediating role in Northern Mali's conflicts since the 1990s (Lacher 2013, 3). In contrast, the Casamance conflict differs from the Mali case in this regard, as all key actors involved, including Guinea-Bissau and Gambia, are ECOWAS members.

Nevertheless, ECOWAS's role in mediation and its agency of assuming the leadership role in regional intervention should not be underestimated, especially in light of its historical responses to West Africa's security challenges. Compared with its earlier reluctance to engage in the Casamance secessionist conflict, ECOWAS has shown a greater willingness to confront conflicts involving secessionist dynamics following two decades of institutional development and normative evolution.

¹³ <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/lessons-from-the-malian-crisis-for-the-international-security-architecture>

¹⁴ Mauritania used to be a member state of ECOWAS but withdrew from it in 2000.

Conclusion

Although the conflict in Casamance no longer poses a substantial threat to the Senegalese state, its lessons continue to resonate amid today's security challenges in West Africa. ECOWAS's prioritization of regime security in some conflicts has exposed substantial problems. As Olonisakin argues, "the international community might have had more success if the regional dimensions of the conflicts were recognized earlier" (2004, 182). A resolution to the Casamance conflict might have been more successful had ECOWAS acknowledged its regional character and adopted a more tailored and context-sensitive approach.

However, possible criticisms may arise regarding the manner in which ECOWAS intervenes in the conflict. For instance, the organization was accused of failing to act impartially in past intervention practices. This raises an important question: how can ECOWAS avoid being used instrumentally to advance the interests of powerful states or political leaders? Admittedly, conflict resolution mechanisms can be vulnerable to manipulation by dominant actors. Yet regional organizations are deeply invested in maintaining their legitimacy and reputation in the eyes of member states and external actors. Broadening the inclusion of member states in conflict resolution processes can help mitigate the influence of stronger players. In the case of Casamance, the problem was that too few actors were engaged to counterbalance the roles of Gambia and Guinea-Bissau, which facilitated political elites' complicity in illegal cross-border activities.

Another concern relates to the sovereignty of member states. Given that the boundaries between regional security threats and internal affairs are often blurred, a critical question arises: if intervention in a member state's domestic security problem is justified, how can regional organizations avoid sliding into interventionist behavior and safeguard member state sovereignty? It is noteworthy that intervention is not synonymous with peace enforcement or military operations. Beyond mediation and good offices, there are a range of measures available to address security risks without undermining state sovereignty. For example, assistance with refugee resettlement and cross-border small arms and light weapons control are issues that stem from regionalized conflicts and fall squarely within ECOWAS's responsibility. Moreover, these issues tend to be less sensitive and more acceptable to sovereign states—while also being

integral to effective conflict resolution. Evidence from the Casamance conflict, for instance, shows that transborder refugee movements were linked to transitions into MFDC ranks, whether through recruitment or self-identification (Evans, 2004).

Lastly, given that ECOWAS has long been criticized for lacking the capacity to effectively manage conflicts, another concern arises: what if its intervention causes more harm than good? As with the sovereignty question, the key challenge is for the organization to clearly define its appropriate role in different security contexts and tailor its approach to the specific situation. Not every conflict requires a military approach. ECOWAS can draw on the advantage of flexible mediation strategies while also leveraging its regional influence to attract greater international support. Overall, the expectation is that ECOWAS should play a more active and constructive role in addressing regional conflicts.

Chapter Three: The Logic of Intervention in West Africa: A Case Study on Gambia's Political Crisis

Introduction

In December 2016, Yahya Jammeh, then president of Gambia, refused to concede defeat in the presidential election, plunging the country into a national crisis. ECOWAS responded by deploying a military mission to pressure Jammeh to step down. Following negotiations with ECOWAS-appointed mediators, Jammeh agreed to go into exile. *Operation Restore Democracy* (later named ECOMIG), comprising troops from Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana, Mali, and Togo, entered Gambia in January 2017. While the mission successfully secured the democratic order by ensuring a peaceful transfer of power, its mandate has been extended repeatedly. The timeline for ECOMIG's withdrawal remains uncertain.

Famous for its robust military intervention in Liberia's and Sierra Leone's civil wars during the 1990s, ECOWAS has become a critical regional actor in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Its intervention in the Gambia's crisis in 2017 was also praised internationally as a triumph for democracy. However, a closer look at the dynamics on the ground reveals that the presence of ECOMIG troops has become an increasingly controversial issue within Gambian politics. Local perceptions of the foreign troops have gradually shifted—from viewing them as a timely and necessary intervention to an “overstaying force,” an “occupation force,” or even “oppressors” (Birchinger et al. 2023). Why has the image of ECOMIG changed over time? How should we understand the tensions and debates surrounding the presence of ECOWAS troops in Gambia? And what are the broader implications of ECOMIG when situated within the wider spectrum of multilateral intervention?

This study draws on archival research and interviews I conducted with Gambian politicians, scholars, journalists, activists, military officers, and ordinary citizens between August and September 2023. I argue that while ECOWAS's deployment of forces to Gambia aligned with regional norms of democracy and good governance, the intervention was also shaped by the strong interests of individual member states. Senegal led the intervention not

only because of its geographic proximity to Gambia, but also due to its counterinsurgency concerns in the Casamance region, which borders Gambia. The presence of Senegalese ECOMIG soldiers in the Foni area, adjacent to Casamance, has been perceived locally as causing more grievances than stability. Beyond the controversies surrounding the troops stationed in Foni, the fundamentally political nature of Gambia's crisis has made it almost inevitable that ECOMIG would become entangled in domestic power struggles, which increases the mission's potential political and legal risk over time.

Current scholarship on this topic has largely focused on the initial stage of the intervention or on explaining the factors that led to the successful deployment of ECOMIG (Hartmann 2017; Basiru et al. 2021). Few studies have examined what happened after the crisis, particularly regarding the dramatic shift in public opinion toward ECOMIG's continued presence in the country. Birchinger et al. (2023) made one of the first efforts in this area by conducting comprehensive interview-based research to investigate changing local perceptions of ECOMIG. However, because their study centers on the narratives local people use to interpret the regional intervention, it pays less attention to the mission itself and its broader consequences.

This chapter addresses this gap and contributes to the study of peace operations in their latter phases by examining the nuances and dynamics of the multilateral intervention in post-crisis Gambia. I argue that ECOWAS's intervention in Gambia is experiencing a paradox of power consolidation: whether intentionally or not, ECOWAS's goal to assist Gambia in reforming the security sector during the transitional period has increasingly intersected with President Barrow's need for regime security. Yet the more President Barrow relies on ECOMIG, the less confidence he places in the national armed forces—and the greater the potential legitimacy challenges ECOWAS may face in the future.

In addition, this study contributes to the conceptualization of multilateral military intervention by incorporating political crisis into the categories of intervention. Much of the existing literature on multilateral intervention fails to take into consideration the type of war or conflicts involved. Yet the variation in conflict or crisis type can shape the underlying logic of intervention—whether in cases of interstate war, civil war, military coup, or political crisis. Different types of cases are constrained by distinct material conditions and normative frameworks, particularly regarding issues such as sovereignty and human rights. In turn, the

choice of intervention approach influences both the operational process and the discursive space in which intervention is debated and justified.

This chapter is organized as follows. The next section examines the ambiguous nature of the political crisis, which has shaped the controversy surrounding ECOWAS's intervention from the outset. The subsequent section analyzes the logic behind the military mission by exploring the motivations of two key actors—ECOWAS as an organization and Senegal as a leading contributor. I then turn to the controversies and public debates surrounding the presence of ECOMIG in Gambia, with particular attention to its impact on the daily lives of ordinary Gambians. The final section addresses the potential political and legal challenges facing ECOMIG, situating them within the context of Gambia's domestic political struggles. The chapter concludes with a summary of the main findings and their implications.

1. The Puzzle of Intervention Legitimacy

The uniqueness of Gambia's case lies in the contested nature of the crisis and the way ECOWAS engaged in it. ECOMIG could be seen as the first such multilateral military intervention to resolve a political crisis. However, it also brought controversy over the issue of legitimacy. Central to the controversy are three questions: 1) what was the nature of the crisis? 2) Did the situation in Gambia constitute a threat to regional peace and security? and 3) Was ECOWAS legally entitled to intervene militarily? Among these, the question of the crisis's nature is particularly important, as it informs the applicability and justification of multilateral intervention in cases of political crisis.

To answer the first question, it is necessary to examine the naming of the incident, which reflected a varied understanding of its nature. At first, an interesting and subtle difference could be discerned when browsing related news and researching the 2016-2017 Gambia presidential election dispute. International news reports in English tend to describe the incident as a “political crisis” (e.g., Al-Jazeera,¹⁵ Guardian,¹⁶ BBC,¹⁷ Human Rights Watch¹⁸); some

¹⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/1/22/gambia-crisis-ends-as-yahya-jammeh-leaves-for-exile>

¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/19/senegal-troops-poised-at-the-gambia-border-as-jammeh-mandate-ends>

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-38650266>

¹⁸ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/01/19/gambia-crisis-heightens-new-president-inaugurated>

scholarship or analysis also refer to it as a “constitutional crisis” (Hartmann 2017; Kreß and Nußberger 2017; Comolli 2017). On the other hand, the phrase “political impasse” is used predominantly among Anglophone African writers, especially those from Gambia, though they use “crisis” in their writings as well (Jaw 2017; Odigie 2017; ECOWAS 2017; Omotosho and Senghore 2018; Drammeh 2018). Similarly, my interviews suggested that the use of “political impasse” was prevalent in Gambia.

While it is a choice of words, the marked difference between the insider and outsider nevertheless reveals the vague nature of the crisis to some extent. For instance, “political impasse” and “constitutional crisis” have different focuses and underlying implications. Political impasse highlights the stagnate moment when there is no clear victor between the two sides in the conflict, which causes widespread frustration among the affected population (Calcagno 2022). It captured the Gambians’ feelings of frustration, irritation, and anxiety when the uncertainty of domestic politics was so high. Against the background, thousands of civilians fled to neighboring Senegal during that time, fearing potential violence and retaliation by Jammeh’s regime. The term constitutional crisis, on the other hand, pays more attention to the judicial aspect of the dispute. The concept itself does not specify the kind of dispute but conveys a signal of a major challenge to the system, implying that the function of certain sectors of the state/government was in trouble. From the perspective of external observers, it appeared to be a more convenient phrase to comprehend and assess the situation.

It can be argued that the varied expressions reflected not only people’s different understandings of the event but also the ambiguity of the event itself, making it open to interpretations.

Is the use of constitutional crisis adequate to describe the situation in Gambia? While some aspects of the crisis could be linked to potential judicial problems, it did not escalate to a genuine constitutional crisis. Many authors who referred to the incident as a constitutional crisis did not specify what elements or aspects made it a constitutional problem. They tended to describe Jammeh’s dispute without further explaining the judicial implications of his challenge of the result. If this was the case, why not call it a political crisis? In an important article studying ECOWAS intervention in Gambia, Christof Hartmann (2017) framed the event as a “constitutional crisis” and compared it with ECOWAS’s involvement in the 2010/11

constitutional crisis in Côte d'Ivoire. Both crises were initially electoral disputes, while the Côte d'Ivoire incident later escalated into a civil war. However, it is still unclear in what ways they counted as constitutional crises since the elements of constitutional problems are absent in the discussion.

Then, what could be the potential constitutional problems of the Gambian Crisis? The major one concerns the conflict between Jammeh's pending petition and the new President's inauguration. The Gambian Constitution stipulates that to challenge the result of the Presidential election, the political party or independent candidate needs to "apply to the Supreme Court to determine the validity of the election...by filing a petition within ten days of the declaration of the result of the election" (Constitution 1997, Article 49). To contest the election outcome of December 2, Jammeh's APRC party filed a petition to the Supreme Court on December 13, 2016. It was allegedly the last day to appeal to the Supreme Court because December 12 was a bank holiday.¹⁹ Ironically, the Supreme Court had not met since 2015 due to a lack of judges. In the words of a research report, Jammeh had "sacked all the Supreme Court judges" (Birchinger et al. 2023, 20). The Supreme Court judges are traditionally recruited from other English-speaking countries (Kora and Darboe 2017, 154). The court thus appointed judges from Nigeria and Sierra Leone to sit on the case. A substantive hearing was scheduled for January 10.²⁰ However, the foreign judges failed to arrive in Gambia. According to Nigeria's acting chief justice, the timing of the January session was "unfavorable."²¹ Gambia's Supreme Court normally sits in May and November. Therefore, the situation appeared to reach a dead end. Jammeh sought to reverse his electoral defeat through ostensibly legitimate judicial means, but there were not enough judges to hear the case—largely because he had previously manipulated his power to remove them. Moreover, even if the court had been able to form a quorum, it would have been impossible to reach a verdict before January 19, when Jammeh's presidential term was set to expire.²² Hence, the pending case would contradict the inauguration

¹⁹ <https://guardian.ng/news/gambias-jammeh-to-contest-election-result-in-court/>

²⁰ <https://www.africanews.com/2016/12/22/gambia-appoints-judges-from-nigeria-and-sierra-leone-for-jammeh-s-poll-petition/>

²¹ <https://www.france24.com/en/20170110-gambia-president-yahya-jammeh-hearing-postponed-election-results-supreme-court>

²² <https://www.theafricancourier.de/news/africa/breaking-news-gambias-supreme-court-fails-to-form-quorum-postpones-hearing-in-jammehs-petition/>

of the new President. What made the situation more complicated was the fact that there was a precedent for the President-elect to take office before the Supreme Court heard the petition. A similar scenario occurred in 2011 when the losing candidate, Ousainou Darboe, petitioned the Supreme Court to challenge the election result. But Jammeh was successfully sworn in before the case had been heard.²³ To remove every possibility of Barrow assuming office and in his final struggle, Jammeh declared a 90-day state of emergency. Shortly, the Gambian parliament voted to extend his presidential term for another 90 days on the next day, just hours before the deadline for Jammeh's mandate.²⁴ Yet, ECOWAS's threat of military intervention brought the dispute to an end on January 19.

Overall, as outlined above, the crisis involved elements of potential constitutional problems, including the conflict between the inauguration and the pending petition, as well as the questions over the validity of Jammeh's extended term. However, it is questionable to characterize the situation as a full constitutional crisis, for at least two reasons. First, Gambia's constitution did provide mechanisms for resolving such disputes. According to Keith E. Whittington (2002), a constitutional crisis usually arises when the constitution fails to fulfill its central function, either due to flaws inherent in the constitution itself or the actions of political actors. More specifically, a constitutional crisis occurs "when important political disputes cannot be resolved within the existing constitutional framework" or "when important political actors threaten to become no longer willing to abide by existing constitutional arrangements." With respect to the first type, it is important to note that the Gambian Constitution clearly specifies procedures for resolving election disputes, with the Supreme Court authorized to issue a final ruling. Therefore, the crisis could, in principle, have been resolved within the constitutional framework. Whittington also observes that a political crisis can escalate into a constitutional crisis when "apparent constitutional imperfections in structure or law are thought to be responsible for the government's inability to respond adequately" (Whittington 2002, 2102–3). However, Gambia's case appears to present the reverse situation: it was the government's inability to respond effectively (such as the absence of judges), rather than

²³ <https://www.theafricancourier.de/news/africa/gambian-election-crisis-jammeh-appoints-six-foreign-judges-to-supreme-court-to-hear-his-petition/>

²⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/1/18/gambia-mps-extend-president-jammehs-term>

constitutional defects, that limited the constitution's role. As for the second type of crisis, although Jammeh relied on both a legal petition and parliamentary approval to justify his position, it is difficult to argue that he explicitly signaled a refusal to abide by the constitution.

Second, from the subjective perspective of the actors who participated in or experienced ECOWAS intervention, the notion of a “constitutional crisis” did not dominate public discourses at the time. At the very least, there was no consensus on how to label the crisis. In ECOWAS's final communiqué issued at its 2017 summit, the heads of state described ECOWAS's involvement in Gambia as having brought about “the peaceful and successful resolution of The Gambian political impasse”(ECOWAS 2017). This language conveyed a clear message: ECOWAS understood the situation primarily as a political impasse, and its approach to resolving the crisis was framed accordingly—not as the resolution of a constitutional crisis. On the other hand, individual actors interpreted the crisis in diverse ways. For instance, Nigerian Chief of Operations Major General Olufemi Akinjobi, speaking at a graduation ceremony for Nigerian soldiers deployed to ECOMIG, stated that the mission's purpose was “to resolve the constitutional crisis that followed the disputed presidential election of 2016.”²⁵ Interestingly, however, perspectives from within Gambia differed. Some Gambians argued that there was no constitutional crisis at the time, as Jammeh still retained authority when the dispute broke out in December 2016 and because there was no fundamental issue with the Constitution itself.²⁶ Critics of the ECOWAS intervention shared a similar rationale, contending that there was no “impasse” and, therefore, ECOWAS had no grounds to force Jammeh to step down before his term expired on January 19, 2017 (Birchinger et al., 2023). As discussed above, these claims are not without merit. In sum, describing the 2016–2017 electoral dispute as a constitutional crisis is arguably an overstatement; rather, the terms political crisis or political impasse are more appropriate in Gambia's context.

Having examined the nature of the crisis, it becomes apparent that regardless of whether the event is characterized as a constitutional crisis or a political impasse/crisis aside, it remains rare in international relations for an intergovernmental organization to intervene multilaterally in a domestic crisis that has not escalated into outright violence. This observation leads to the

²⁵ <https://standard.gm/nigeria-to-deploy-new-troops-to-gambia/>

²⁶ Author interview with Sait Matty Jaw, August 2023; author interview with Mustapha Darboe, August 2023.

second and third questions of this study: whether the incident threatened regional peace and security, and whether ECOWAS is eligible to intervene militarily.

International organizations generally adopt an extremely cautious stance toward military intervention. It usually requires strong justification before the use of armed forces. The United Nations, the African Union, and ECOWAS all outline in their charters or foundational agreements the specific conditions under which military measures may be employed. For instance, the UN Charter authorizes the Security Council to determine whether to take enforcement action in response to any “threat to the peace, breach to the peace, or act of aggression” (UN Charter, Article 39). ECOWAS has established similar provisions governing the circumstances in which military intervention may be undertaken. In addition to responding to aggression and interstate conflicts, ECOWAS expanded its framework in the late 1990s to include two categories of internal conflicts: conflicts that “threaten to trigger” humanitarian disasters and those that pose “a serious threat to peace and security in the sub-region” (ECOWAS 1999, Article 25). This underscores the importance of clarifying both the nature of the Gambian crisis and the criteria by which its nature was determined, as discussed in the previous section.

The Gambian political crisis did not pose a genuine threat to regional peace, not only because of the absence of armed clashes between the army and the opposition but also because, unlike some of its neighbors, Gambia lacked a history of violent civil conflict. As will be discussed in the next section, the only major violent incident since independence was a failed coup attempt in 1981, which resulted in at least 500 deaths (Perfect 2008).

Instead, the most pressing concern at the time centered on human rights abuses, such as arbitrary arrest, detentions, and widespread fear of repression against opposition supporters under Jammeh’s regime.²⁷ While ECOWAS reserves the right to intervene in cases of massive human rights violations or the (attempted) overthrow of a democratically elected government, Gambia’s situation again fell outside these categories. The scenario of large-scale human rights violations had not materialized prior to ECOWAS’s intervention.

Burundi’s political unrest in 2015 and 2016 brought an interesting comparative

²⁷ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2017/01/gambia-state-of-emergency-no-license-for-repression/>

perspective to the discussion of Gambia's crisis, not only because of regional organizations' initially similar responses to the crises but also because of the different trajectories of their responses. The then Burundi President Pierre Nkurunziza's attempt to run for a third term in office in 2015 caused mass protests and violent clashes between security forces and demonstrators. The event of 11 December 2015 was among the deadliest when armed groups carried out attacks on three military sites, causing at least 87 deaths on the same day (ACLED 2016). As the situation in Burundi worsened, the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the AU released a Communiqué in which it decided to deploy a military mission to prevent the deterioration of the security situation. The PSC's decision on 17 December was a bold move since it was the first time the AU invoked Article 4(h) of the Constitutive Act, which authorizes the AU to intervene in a member state's internal crisis such as genocide and crimes against humanity (Dersso, 2016; Wilén & Williams, 2018).

But the plan failed to materialize. At the AU summit in January 2016, the PSC at the level of Heads of State decided not to deploy the mission—MAPROBU.²⁸ One of the principal factors that prevented the deployment was member states' judgment that the situation on the ground was not severe enough to justify a military intervention as signs of de-escalation of violence followed. A number of members suggested at the PSC summit that the plan of sending troops to Burundi should be removed. Yahya Jammeh presented at the meeting as well. He publicly argued against the use of force, referring to the principle of sovereignty. While the majority was silent, those who voiced in the debate finally shaped the decision not to deploy MAPROBU (Dersso 2016: 6-7).

A Comparison of the two military interventions reveals important differences in their underlying logic. The starting point of MAPROBU was to prevent armed clashes in Burundi from escalating, especially given the country's history of a devastating civil war; violence and rising tensions on the ground posed significant risks both internally and regionally. However, although concerns over Burundi's conflict dominated the debate, the main cause of the crisis—the controversy over Nkurunziza's third term—was left unaddressed at the AU meeting (Wilén and Williams, 2018). In contrast, the deployment of ECOMIG was framed from the outset

²⁸ <https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/the-trend-towards-subsidiarity-a-retrospective-of-the-outgoing-psc>

around the goal of “restoring democracy” in Gambia. As stated by ECOWAS authorities, the mission would “take all necessary actions to enforce the results of 1st December 2016 elections” (ECOWAS 2016). This distinction, again, suggested the uniqueness of ECOWAS intervention in Gambia. If the preconditions for military intervention in armed conflicts are so stringent, one might reasonably expect the thresholds for intervening in a relatively low-risk electoral crisis to be even more rigorous. This highlights the need for additional context and nuance to unpack this seemingly puzzling case.

Although the political crisis in Gambia did not constitute a physical threat to regional peace, ECOWAS viewed it as a threat to regional democratic progress from a normative perspective. However, the pro-democratic justification for ECOWAS intervention raises potential concerns when viewed through the lens of international law. Scholars have questioned the legal basis for this justification. The contention lies in the threat or use of force in enforcing the outcome of a democratic election. Kreß and Nußberger (2017) argue that Gambia’s case cannot be justified as a collective security measure under the UN Charter with respect to threats to the peace, nor can it serve as a precedent for a general authorization of pro-democratic intervention. Instead, it was the international law doctrine of intervention by invitation that provided the legal foundation for ECOWAS’s involvement. Barrow’s request for international assistance, made immediately after his swearing-in at Gambia’s embassy in Senegal, became a critical component for legitimizing ECOWAS’s use of force, even in the absence of an armed conflict. Yet, to what extent Barrow’s invitation was valid also opens to debate. For instance, Williams (2017) highlights the issue of “president-in-exile,” noting that Barrow’s inauguration on foreign soil raises questions about whether a democratically elected leader who had not yet exercised authority within the state for a substantial period was eligible to issue such an invitation.

Nevertheless, ECOMIG was initially welcomed by many Gambians. When ECOWAS vehicles carrying foreign troops entered the capital, civilians took to the streets to celebrate their arrival. The narrative of “restoring democracy” was frequently echoed by local residents in street interviews, which was closely aligned with ECOWAS’s objective.²⁹

²⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuGovz3bvKU&list=PLwgLSP8V04732syc3tu2ZB-P8-AZBJoEH&index=3>

Civil society played a critical role in creating the discursive space for ECOWAS to intervene and in facilitating communication between the Gambian army and regional troops. The University of Gambia was the first institution to react to Jammeh's refusal to step down, shutting down operations and with faculty and students declaring that there would be no examinations until Jammeh left office.³⁰ Civil society organizations, such as the Gambia Press Union and the Teachers Union, collectively voiced their condemnation of Jammeh's U-turn, with the latter calling his change of mind "a recipe for chaos and disorder which undoubtedly endangers the lives of all Gambians."³¹ The Gambia Bar Association also declared Jammeh's refusal to accept the election results unconstitutional. Digital activism further contributed to online mobilization. Right before the election, hashtags trending on social media created by the Gambian youth, such as *#GambiaHasDecided*, *#EnoughIsEnough*, and *#JammehMustGo*, had become national rallying cry that galvanized voters to oppose Jammeh (Keita 2023). During the crisis, these hashtags continued to encourage public resistance to the reversal of the election outcome. Domestic mobilization, combined with support from influential regional activists such as Nigeria's Femi Falana and Ghana's Kwame Karikari, also put pressure on regional leaders to not have their citizens serve in the Gambian Supreme Court, where Jammeh's petition was expected to be heard.³²

Furthermore, women played an important role in easing tensions between the Gambian army and the incoming ECOWAS troops through dialogue and engagement. As the deployment of ECOMIG forces approached, a group of Gambian women took the initiative to bring food to the national army and persuaded the soldiers to avoid confrontation with the regional forces. As one woman working with TANGO (The Association of Non-Governmental Organisations in The Gambia) explained:

The woman on the ground, we communicated with them that they should give out [food] to the army because there was no food, nothing was coordinated. They will stand for a whole day with no food. So we give out, from the compounds, we give

³⁰ Author interview with Sait Matty Jaw, August 2023; author interview with Ismaila Ceesay, August 2023.

³¹ <https://roape.net/2017/01/18/popular-protest-class-struggle-africa-part-7/>

³² Author interview with Mustapha Darboe, August 2023.

them lunch, give them dinner. We were kinda drawing them to our side so that they will not fight. And some of them [the soldiers], they actually say, there was one who told me, “Auntie, don’t worry. Go and sleep. We won’t fight. Where can we go if we fight? And who are we going to fight? ECOMIG [soldiers] were our brothers...when ECOMIG comes into the country, we drink tea with them”.³³

The conversation reveals a generally positive picture of how civil society and rank-and-file soldiers responded to the arrival of ECOMIG forces, although concerns about potential armed clashes persisted among ordinary Gambians due to the uncertainty of the situation and limited access to information.

In conclusion, the vagueness of the Gambia crisis itself and the ambiguity surrounding the legal basis for ECOWAS’s intervention make this a particularly noteworthy case of multilateral intervention that deserves further exploration. At the same time, ECOWAS’s consistent commitment to democracy and good governance, together with the widespread popular support for restoring democratic order, provided the mission with a crucial layer of legitimacy.

2. The Logic of Intervention

While the issue of enforcing democratic election results through the threat or use of force remains unresolved, the logic or rationale of ECOWAS intervention was clear within the regional organization’s own normative and political framework. This section first examines the history of ECOWAS’s normative framework regarding its commitment to democracy and then takes a closer look at individual member states’ role in the intervention.

ECOWAS Commitment to Democracy

Despite the contentions and vagueness concerning the potential legitimate problems of ECOMIG, as mentioned in the previous section, ECOWAS’s rhetoric about its objective in the Gambia’s crisis stayed unambiguous and consistent, which echoed its commitment to democracy and good governance for years. And so is the case of the African Union. The

³³ Author interview with Tabou Njie-Sarr, August 2023.

trajectories of ECOWAS intervention practices, including ECOMIG, suggest a gradually and incrementally improved progress toward comprehensive regional governance over time.

Against the backdrop of devastating domestic conflicts, political unrest, and the emerging trend of political liberalization during the 1990s, it became imperative for West African leaders to consider the link between governance and regional security, especially the potential risk posed by domestic issues to conflict prevention and management efforts. Moreover, the increasing need to legitimize the regional organization's involvement in internal affairs of member states, such as civil wars and coups d'état, compelled ECOWAS to undergo an institutional transformation, expanding its mandate to include security-related responsibilities.

Treaties and Protocols provided instruments for bridging regional intervention and domestic security challenges, which marked one of the most critical transitions of ECOWAS in the post-Cold War era. Articles like promoting democracy and good governance were gradually incorporated into the institutional frameworks. The issue of promoting democracy and respecting human rights within the region was raised by the Declaration of Political Principles in 1991, a time when political unrest and a round of political liberalization emerged on the African continent. In the document, the operationalization of democracy relied “on the basis of political pluralism,” “respect for fundamental human rights,” and “representative institutions” (ECOWAS 1991). It was later integrated into the revised Treaty of ECOWAS in 1993 as one of the fundamental principles of the organization.

In the context of a series of devastating civil wars in West Africa during the 1990s, such as the Liberia Civil War and the Sierra Leone Civil War, ECOWAS took a significant step forward in 1999 to institutionalize instruments and mechanisms for conflict management and democratic governance consolidation. This effort culminated in the adoption of the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace-Keeping and Security (the 1999 Mechanism). As the most comprehensive framework developed by ECOWAS to address peace and security challenges, the protocol was a forceful response to the proliferation of conflicts throughout the decade. Lessons learned from ECOWAS's interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone (through ECOMOG) were formalized into permanent mechanisms, including the establishment of key organs such as the Mediation and Security Council. Notably, the 1999 mechanism, for the first time, authorized military intervention in

member states (Hartmann 2013a, 23). Article 25 sets out the conditions under which the mechanism may be invoked, including massive violations of human rights, breaches of the rule of law, and “the event of an overthrow or attempted overthrow of a democratically elected government” (ECOWAS 1999). While the reference to democratic processes remained somewhat vague in terms of operationalization, the protocol nonetheless opened up a critical discursive space for addressing domestic political issues at the regional level, which was in sharp contrast to the strict sovereignty constraints that had defined the earlier era. Importantly, these principles were oriented explicitly toward conflict resolution.

Another important framework is the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, adopted in 2001 as a supplement to the 1999 Mechanism. While earlier protocols and documents created the space for discussing democratic issues by introducing relevant concepts into the normative framework, the 2001 Protocol marked a significant advance by specifying the substance of democratic processes and operationalizing instruments to promote regional democracy and good governance. Elections, as a central element of democratic governance, are now no longer treated as purely national matters; they have become part of the regional agenda warranting attention and action. The electoral process—ranging from amending electoral laws and preparing voter rolls to conceding defeat to the winner—has been incorporated into the framework, which serves as a code of conduct for member states. Article 2 of the Protocol explicitly states that “no substantial modification shall be made to the electoral laws in the last six (6) months before the elections” (ECOWAS 2001, Article 2). Furthermore, at the request of any member state, ECOWAS may “provide assistance in the conduct of any election” and deploy election monitoring teams to the country concerned (Article 12).

It is particularly interesting to note that the assistance ECOWAS can offer under the protocol “may take any form,” and the protocol does not specify whether the deployment of a monitoring team requires the host country’s consent (Hartmann 2013a, 21). These open-ended provisions have created room for interpretation in the future. Likewise, in the section on constitutional principles, the principle of “zero tolerance for power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means” is identified as one of the core values shared by all member states. However, the protocol makes no attempt to define or qualify the range of “unconstitutional means.” By contrast, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) had already adopted the Lomé

Declaration a year earlier, in which it outlined four specific situations constituting an unconstitutional change of government (OAU 2000; Zamfir 2017).³⁴ While the ECOWAS Protocol was “mindful of” the OAU Declaration in its preamble, it did not follow the latter by specifying these situations.

Along with the progress in developing normative frameworks on democracy and good governance, ECOWAS also applied these guidelines in practice, only that the processes had not been easy. Take the ECOWAS election observation mission to Gambia as an example. As mentioned above, ECOWAS regularly sends observers to monitor member states’ elections based on the framework of the 2001 Protocol. However, it decided not to send election observers to Gambia’s presidential election in 2011 because the country’s political conditions failed to meet the minimum standards set under the 2001 Protocol. The fact-finding mission of ECOWAS that had been dispatched to Gambia earlier found “a picture of intimidation, an unacceptable level of control of the electronic media by the party in power, the lack of neutrality of state and para-statal institutions, and an opposition and electorate cowed by repression and intimidation.”³⁵ The pattern continued in the 2016 election, but this time, the Gambian Independent Electoral Commission did not accredit the ECOWAS Technical Observer Team to be deployed for the election.³⁶

The failure to send official observers to Gambia reflected the difficulty of the regional body practicing norms at the state level. Overall, it suggested that ECOWAS’s commitment to promoting democratic governance has been consistent with the normative framework. More robust action can also be found in its intervention in member states’ major crises, such as Sierra Leone’s coup d’état in 1997 and Mali’s coup d’état in 2012. The relatively different responses of ECOWAS to these crises and their different results were usually confined to the contexts of the crisis or the issue itself. The following sub-section thus introduces a critical actor essential to understanding the context of ECOWAS involvement in Gambia’s political crisis—Senegal.

³⁴ The four situations include: 1) military coup d’etat against a democratically elected Government; 2) intervention by mercenaries to replace a democratically elected Government; 3) replacement of democratically elected Governments by armed dissident groups and rebel movements; 4) the refusal by an incumbent government to relinquish power to the winning party after free, fair and regular elections.

³⁵ <https://allafrica.com/stories/201111231282.html>

³⁶ <https://old22.ecowas.int/?p=19428>

Senegal

Among the states that contributed to the deployment of ECOMIG, Senegal played a critical role. The motivation behind Senegal's intervention deserves special attention. Overall, two major factors shaped Senegal's strong interest in the intervention: the historical ties between Senegal and Gambia, and the persistent Casamance conflict.

One cannot understand Senegal's motivation without considering the history of Senegambia and the two countries' unique relationship. The colonial partition orchestrated by Britain and France in the late 19th century created two separate territories, with Gambia becoming almost entirely surrounded by Senegal. This division lasted long enough for both states to develop distinct economic and political systems, yet it was not so long as to sever the deep cultural and linguistic ties between their populations. During the independence era, proposals for unification or closer integration were explored, but they ultimately resulted in a series of collaborative treaties—such as the defense and external representation agreements of 1965 and the Treaty of Association of 1967—due to the differing preferences of the two countries. Senegal favored a higher level of integration, advocating for a customs union with Gambia over the years. By contrast, Gambia, wary of compromising its sovereignty, leaned toward maintaining a looser association (Hughes 1992; Richmond 1993). The divergence was shaped in part by the imbalance between the two states: Gambia is a small country without a strong economy, whereas Senegal has a population eight times that of Gambia and a relatively well-developed manufacturing sector. The fear of being absorbed by Senegal became deeply ingrained among Gambian political elites.

An aborted coup d'état in Gambia accelerated the push toward unification with Senegal. On July 30th, 1981, while President Dawda Jawara was visiting London, a band of civilians seized the Field Force Depot, Gambia's main military base, and attempted to overthrow the government (Hughes and Perfect 2006). The subsequent violence, vandalism, and looting by rebels and criminals plunged the country into chaos until Senegal intervened swiftly, quelling the rebellion within days. The insurgency resulted in at least 500 deaths, which is a huge number given Gambia's small population (Amnesty International 1983)). This shock expedited the unity. In November 1981, the two heads of state announced the formation of the

Senegambia Confederation, which came into effect the following year. Common political and administrative institutions were set up, with security coordination emerging as one of the confederation's key achievements (Hughes 1992).

However, due to the imbalanced nature of the relationship, the confederation failed to deliver the expected benefits to both states, which led to its final collapse in 1989. For instance, the mismatch between the two states' trade structure and policies inevitably hindered a higher level of economic cooperation. Senegal had long pursued a customs union with Gambia to eliminate the rampant smuggling along the borders, but the latter rejected such a proposal. In contrast to Senegal's high tariffs and restrictions, Gambia's more liberal import policy—low charges and non-discrimination—made it attractive for contraband activity (Richmond 1993). Clandestine trade passing through Senegalese territory played an important role in Gambia's economy. It was estimated that the re-export trade of Gambia in 1979-80, including recorded and unrecorded re-exports, represents about 25% of Gambia's tax revenue (Robson 2014). Moreover, Gambia's small and vulnerable manufacturing sector would be in no way to compete with Senegal's larger and more established industries if they integrated into a full customs union (Hughes 1992).

Seldom has scholarship on ECOMIG mentioned the failed coup in 1981 and the ensuing intervention by Senegal. However, I argue that this incident, along with the history of Senegambia, reflected the continuity and mentality of the two countries' military relations and thus is important in understanding the dynamics of the more recent intervention in Gambia.

An interesting parallel emerges when comparing Senegal's two military interventions in Gambia. First, in both the 1981 and 2017 crises, Gambian presidents—Dawda Jawara and Adama Barrow—formally requested Senegal's military assistance. During the 1981 coup attempt, Jawara invoked the defense agreement with Senegal, flew to Dakar, and persuaded Senegalese President Abdou Diouf to maintain his troops in Gambia (Hughes and Perfect 2006, 215). Thirty-five years later, after Adama Barrow was sworn in as President, he immediately called for regional intervention, with Senegal contributing the majority of ECOMIG troops.

Second, the deployment of Senegalese forces served a similar goal in both cases: ensuring regime stability and securing key state institutions. In the aftermath of the 1981 coup attempt, a confederal army battalion and gendarmerie unit were stationed in Banjul to maintain order.

Senegalese troops were tasked with securing the State House, port, and airport, and a contingent served as Jawara's personal bodyguard (Wiseman and Vidler 1995, 55). Likewise, since 2017, Senegalese ECOMIG soldiers have been responsible for safeguarding President Barrow and the State House during the transitional period.

Third, in both instances, the presence of Senegalese soldiers sparked local opposition and sentiment among Gambians. In the 1980s, critics of the Senegambia Confederation accused the Senegalese forces of occupying Gambia's territory (Hughes 1992, 209). In the more recent context, similar critiques resurfaced, with some Gambians referring to the Senegalese soldiers as an 'occupation force' in public discourse. More details on this contention will be explored in the next section.

Senegal's disproportionate advantage over Gambia in terms of military capacity and geographic position makes it relatively easy for Senegal to deploy troops across the border. However, this power asymmetry does not necessarily translate into the "stronger" state dominating the "weaker" one. As the brief history of the Senegambia Confederation demonstrates, the Gambian government consistently safeguards its sovereignty and resisted political or economic encroachment by Senegal. Nor does Senegal's capacity imply that it intervenes at will. While long-standing security concerns have motivated Senegal's involvement in its neighbor's trouble, its interventions have generally been shaped by context and opportunity, occurring only when the timing was deemed appropriate.

The Casamance conflict is among the most critical and intractable issues, adding more bitterness and tensions to the bilateral relationship. The Casamance separatist movement calls for independence from Senegal, which evolved from peaceful demonstrations in the early 1980s to militarized rebellion since the 1990s. It was thus referred to as the "longest-running civil conflict" of West Africa. Gambia is sandwiched between the Northern Senegal and the Casamance region. Its geographic proximity and cultural affinity with Casamance inevitably exposed it to the long-lasting Casamance separatist movement. Yahya Jammeh's active involvement in the conflict during his rule became the major factor shaping the fluctuations in Gambia's relations with Senegal. Although Jammeh positioned himself as a mediator between the Senegalese government and the Casamance separatists, it was not a secret in Gambia and Senegal that he had supported the MFDC and provided bases on Gambian territory for the

rebels to operate. His ethnic ties to the Casamance region, particularly as a member of the Jola ethnic group, were widely believed to have played a critical role in shaping his stance. Allegations that Jammeh mobilized Casamance residents to vote for him in past Gambian elections reflected these close connections and may partly explain his strong motivation to intervene in the Casamance issue (Saine 2009, 45).

The Casamance conflict has remained one of the most persistent challenges facing Senegalese presidents, while Gambia has become an important link in the chain of Senegal's counterinsurgency strategy. The 2016–2017 political crisis in Gambia came to be perfect timing for Senegal to tackle the stubborn headache. A Gambian army officer depicted the motivation of the Senegalese government's intervention in the crisis as follows:

Senegal was probably, therefore, the leading proponent of threatening and using military force if required. It was a two-pronged strategy by ensuring that one, Jammeh is out of power and, secondly, his influence and support to the MFDC is shattered. Jammeh's regime provided the economic environment for greater enhancement and logistic support to his brethren in Casamance. The Gambia provides them the platform to consolidate and provide room for the illicit trade of narcotics, timber, and a constant source of weapons from the government machinery of the Gambia.³⁷

The Senegalese government's strong interest in crushing the Casamance rebellion, especially in the border areas with Gambia, explained its leadership role in ECOMIG. As discussed above, Senegal's geographic and military advantage over the much smaller Gambia enables it to exert considerable influence over its neighbor's security sector. Thus, when the political crisis provided a legitimate basis for intervention, Senegal was quick to seize the opportunity. At the same time, as Omotuyi (2021) argues, Senegal's commitment was essential to the success of the ECOMIG operation. Without Senegal's decisive role, it would have been far more difficult for ECOWAS to restore democratic order in Gambia.

³⁷ Author interview with Yahya Dammeh, August 2023.

3. A Controversial Intervention—from Gambians' Perspectives

The Change of Public Attitudes

When ECOWAS troops entered Banjul on January 22, 2017, local residents lined the streets to welcome them, celebrating what they saw as a “victory for democracy.” However, the initial joy did not last long. Public opinions toward ECOMIG gradually shifted as the presence of foreign soldiers persisted in the country, continuing to this day.

Surveys conducted by Afrobarometer have revealed a declining trend in public support for ECOMIG over recent years. In a 2018 survey, half of the respondents (50%) agreed that ECOMIG “has served its purpose” and should leave to allow “the Gambian Armed Forces and Police to take charge of security matters of the country,” while 44% disagreed. Yet, the divide in opinions later narrowed: a new round of survey in 2021 showed 78% of respondents want ECOMIG to leave.³⁸

Civilians' growing support for ECOMIG's withdrawal indeed reflects that the regional intervention is no longer warmly welcomed by local residents. However, it is important to recognize the variation in people's attitudes toward ECOMIG across dimensions such as timing, intensity, issue area, and geographic distribution. For instance, according to the 2018 Afrobarometer survey, the call for ECOMIG's departure was strongest in the West Coast region (54%), which borders Casamance and hosts the Senegalese ECOMIG contingent (Jaw 2019). This region remained one of the strongest opponents to ECOMIG's presence in 2021, with 82% of respondents favoring withdrawal.³⁹ For Gambians living in this area, the presence of Senegalese troops is the primary concern and even a source of resentment. This is especially the case in the Foni area (part of the West Coast region). People there have held a stronger position against regional intervention since the very beginning. Additionally, issues such as disrupted farming activities, and illegal trafficking of cannabis and timber revolve around local people's interactions with the troops, which further exacerbate their discontent towards ECOMIG. These disputes will be discussed in the next subsection.

For Gambians from areas without ECOMIG troops stationed, the issue of sovereignty can

³⁸ <https://www.afrobarometer.org/survey-resource/gambia-round-8-data-2021/>

³⁹ <https://www.afrobarometer.org/survey-resource/gambia-round-8-data-2021/>

be more worrisome. If the appreciation of ECOWAS's deployment of military force was relatively more prominent among ordinary Gambians during the initial phase, more controversy was concentrated on the latter phase of the mission. People argue that Gambia is now in peace, and they don't see the necessity of having foreign troops on Gambia's soil. "You can't have foreign force to guard the President," a member of the National Assembly stated during the interview.⁴⁰ She was referring to the ECOMIG forces providing close protection and physical guard services for the President at the State House of Gambia.⁴¹ Such an idea is shared by many elites and everyday Gambians.

In their study on public perceptions of AU and ECOWAS interventions in Gambia, Birchinger et al. (2023) offer a nuanced picture of how Gambians experience the arrival and continued presence of ECOMIG in their daily lives. Drawing on intensive interviews conducted in Gambia, they identified five popular narratives about ECOMIG: "protecting the people," acting as an "occupying force," "restoring everyday peace," averting the "danger of a coup," and "overstaying" or even "oppressing" Gambians. Beyond tracing the shift in perceptions over time (from "protecting" to "overstaying"), they also notice divergent perceptions influenced by people's political positions and other socio-economic factors. For example, the narrative of averting a coup is commonly invoked by elites supportive of the Barrow government to justify ECOMIG's extended mandate (23). In contrast, supporters of former president Jammeh and the former ruling party, the APRC, tend to view ECOMIG as an "occupying force," given that Jammeh was ousted under the threat of regional troops (20). Overall, the majority of their research participants expressed the view that ECOMIG has become "an 'overstaying' if not an 'oppressing' force" (3), a conclusion that aligns with the trends revealed by the most recent Afrobarometer survey.

Adding more layering to the issue, ordinary Gambians have little formal knowledge about ECOWAS (11). My interviews with Gambian elites confirm this pattern. The lack of effective communication between the government and ordinary citizens has widened the information gap, fueling greater suspicion and discontent over ECOMIG's prolonged presence. Many local residents, especially those without access to political resources, were poorly informed about

⁴⁰ Author interview with Fatoumatta Njai, August 2023.

⁴¹ <https://archive.statehouse.gm/president-barrow-bids-farewell-50-ecomig-soldiers>

ECOMIG's mandate and the reason behind the continued deployment of regional forces. Furthermore, civil education departments were perceived as falling short in educating the public about the importance and role of ECOMIG.⁴²

The Controversies

Domestic views on the intervention are divided among both ordinary citizens and political elites. Two controversial issues are central to the debate: the presence of Senegalese soldiers in the Foni area and the perceived risk of a coup d'état if ECOWAS withdraws the troops.

As noted above, residents in the Foni area have been especially vocal in opposing ECOMIG's prolonged presence. A complex interplay of historical, political, social, and economic factors has fueled this strong local sentiment.

Among the areas where ECOMIG troops are deployed, Foni stands out as the only location outside the Great Banjul Area, highlighting the unique nature of ECOMIG's presence there. The ECOWAS multilateral mission draws its troops primarily from three countries—Senegal, Nigeria, and Ghana. They are deployed to different locations. A Nigerian infantry company is stationed at the Yundum Barracks in the Greater Banjul Area, while a Ghanaian infantry company is based in Barra, approximately 5 kilometers from Banjul on the opposite side of the Gambia River. Senegal, contributing the largest contingent, maintains deployments at three key sites: the State House, Bakau, and Foni.⁴³ Apart from Foni, the other two Senegalese deployment sites are situated within the Greater Banjul Area, the country's political center.

The locations in Foni where Senegalese troops are stationed were not chosen at random. Rather, Foni's deep ties to the former regime and its proximity to the Casamance conflict made it a key area of concern for both the multilateral mission and Senegal. Senegal maintains two deployments in the region: one at a camp in Kanilai and another at a checkpoint in Bwiam. Kanilai, a small village on the border with Senegal, is notably the birthplace of Yahya Jammeh. During Jammeh's rule, an elaborate palace was built there, which some Gambians came to refer

⁴² Author interview with Fatoumatta Njai, August 2023; author interview with Kexx Sanneh, August 2023.

⁴³ Author interview with ECOMIG officer (anonymous), August 2023.

to as the “second State House”.⁴⁴ Even after Jammeh went into exile in 2017, many locals in Kanilai have remained loyal to him. In fact, the tradition of celebrating the anniversary of Jammeh’s July 22, 1994 coup against the Jawara regime was revived in Kanilai in 2023.⁴⁵ Kanilai’s strong connection with the former President partially explains why the mission prioritized deploying troops there. A major concern has been the potential presence of Jammeh loyalists, including armed personnel, in the area. Moreover, reports have alleged that some “Junglers” (Jammeh’s notorious death squad) joined the MFDC rebellion in Casamance, moving freely across the porous Senegal-Gambia border—a pattern common along African frontiers.⁴⁶ From the perspective of ECOWAS and the Barrow administration, maintaining surveillance over Kanilai has been seen as critical to preventing potential armed rebellion that could destabilize the current regime. As early as ECOMIG’s initial move to Gambia in January 2017, Kanilai was among the first sites where Senegalese troops were stationed, with military installation taken over and some local soldiers disarmed.⁴⁷

With regard to the checkpoint in Bwiam, local contention centers on the issue of cross-border timber trafficking. One of the primary duties of the Senegalese soldiers stationed there is to patrol the border and intercept trucks carrying illicit timber.⁴⁸ Gambia functions as a key transit hub, where timber smuggled out of Casamance is funneled into Gambian territory before being exported to other destinations. As a result, the border villages in Foni have become frontline zones for smuggling operations. It is widely believed that the MFDC separatists from Casamance sustain their activities, in part, by participating in the illegal timber trade, which explains the Senegalese government’s rationale for cutting off this critical funding source.⁴⁹ One of the most endangered and highly valuable timber species exploited in this trade is rosewood, often referred to as the “ivory of the forest,” “conflict timber,” or “blood timber.” A 2020 report by the US-based Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) exposed the scope of rosewood-related crime in Senegal and Gambia. Its finding indicates that the trafficking networks between the two countries have been largely controlled by MFDC rebels and have

⁴⁴ Author interview with Madi Jobarteh, August 2023.

⁴⁵ <https://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/headlines/aprc-faction-to-observe-22nd-july-in-grand-style-tomorrow>

⁴⁶ Author interview with Madi Jobarteh, August 2023.

⁴⁷ <https://www.thecable.ng/ecowas-troops-disarm-gambias-army-take-jammehs-village/>

⁴⁸ <https://malagen.shorthandstories.com/profitting-from-rebellion/index.html>

⁴⁹ Author interview with ECOMIG officer (anonymous), August 2023.

become their “principal source of income” (EIA 2020). In addition to the fuel of conflicts, these contraband activities—rooted in longstanding informal trade networks along the Gambia-Casamance border—have also left Casamance vulnerable to timber overexploitation and forest degradation (Evans 2022).

While the presence of Senegalese ECOMIG troops in Foni has been intertwined with the Senegalese government’s counterinsurgency efforts against the Casamance separatists, it has paradoxically exposed local residents to heightened instability. Contrary to the intended goal of stabilizing the region, the daily interactions between Foni residents and the foreign soldiers reveal a different story. From the perspective of many local inhabitants, the presence of these troops has escalated rather than alleviated insecurity. In December 2022, five National Assembly members representing Foni submitted a formal petition to President Barrow, calling for the immediate withdrawal of ECOMIG’s Senegalese contingent from the region. The petition characterized the military presence as a deliberate militarization of Foni, rooted in what they described as the government’s “false presumptions that people of Foni are opposed to the new dispensation” and that the alleged links between the MFDC separatists, the Gambia Armed Forces, and Jammeh’s departure would “deteriorate the regime’s security” (Petition 2022). The document further cataloged a series of incidents reflecting local grievances since the arrival of the foreign troops and their sense of marginalization by the new government, including Senegalese soldiers’ confiscation of registered Gambian timber lorries, disruption of farming activities, school closure, population displacement due to sporadic clashes, and even the killing of villagers by foreign soldiers. Despite these concerns, the petition ultimately failed to elicit a substantive response from the authority.

The biggest security concern of Foni residents arises from the clashes between the Senegalese soldiers and MFDC rebels along the border areas. In January 2022, an exchange of gunfire between Senegalese ECOMIG troops and the MFDC prompted over 2,000 residents of Gambian border communities to flee their homes and seek refuge in other villages. Less than two months later, the Senegalese armed forces launched an offensive in Casamance, targeting MFDC faction bases near the Gambian border.⁵⁰ Bullets landed in the soil of Gambia,

⁵⁰ <https://reliefweb.int/report/gambia/gambia-internal-displaced-population-west-region-dref-operation-ndeg-mdrgm015-final-report>

“impacting all the Gambian border communities in Foni and the nearby districts.”⁵¹ According to Gambia’s National Disaster Management Agency, the operation displaced over 9,973 people in Foni.⁵²

The two incidents of 2022 were closely interconnected. The initial confrontation in January 2022 was believed to stem from Senegalese ECOMIG soldiers pursuing a Gambian lorry carrying timber that had crossed the Gambian border into Casamance, ultimately reaching an area controlled by the MFDC separatists (Petition 2022). The clash that followed resulted in the deaths of four Senegalese soldiers and the capture of seven others by the MFDC.⁵³ In response, the Senegalese military launched a retaliatory operation in March. Although press releases identified the operation as led by the Senegalese national army,⁵⁴ it was later accused of using the territory of Gambia as a launch pad to fire artillery (Petition 2022).

It created more confusion and questions when the boundaries between the Senegalese ECOMIG troops and the Senegalese armed forces became increasingly blurred during these incidents. Accounts explaining this ambiguity point to the bilateral security pact signed between the Gambian and Senegalese governments. According to one informant, Senegalese troops stationed in Gambia operated under two sets of mandates—one derived from the ECOWAS mandate and the other from Senegal’s bilateral security agreement with Gambia. Local populations might confuse the two mistakenly when tensions erupt in the border area.⁵⁵ This confusion was also evident in the aftermath of the killing of Haruna Jatta, a Kanilai villager allegedly shot by ECOMIG forces during a 2017 protest against their presence. On the third anniversary of Jatta’s death, the ECOMIG commander replied to villagers that “these Senegalese forces are not in the ECOMIG mandate that they are [under] the mandate of Senegal and that of the President.”⁵⁶ Notably, the 500 Senegalese troops (and an additional 500) deployed along the Casamance border through the bilateral agreement were later incorporated

⁵¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20220323145307/https://gainako.com/almost-10-thousand-people-affected-by-foni-crisis-says-ndma/>

⁵² <https://web.archive.org/web/20220323145307/https://gainako.com/almost-10-thousand-people-affected-by-foni-crisis-says-ndma/>

⁵³ <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/02/01/rebels-senegal-gambia/>

⁵⁴ For example, Al Jazeera (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/15/senegal-begins-military-operation-against-casamance-secessionists>) and Africanews (<https://www.africanews.com/2022/03/14/senegal-launches-operation-against-rebels-in-casamance/>)

⁵⁵ Author interview with ECOMIG officer (anonymous), August 2023.

⁵⁶ <https://foroyaa.net/4-years-on-family-of-kanilai-man-killed-by-ecomig-soldiers-renews-call-for-justice/>

into the ECOMIG mission under its 2019–2020 mandate (UN 2019).⁵⁷ This integration further obscured the nature of Senegalese deployment in the Foni area. Compounding the confusion, the uniforms and armored vehicles used by Senegalese troops resemble those of ECOMIG forces. Some even suggested that ECOWAS should change the color of its vehicle—perhaps to white—to help civilians more easily distinguish the regional peacekeeping troops.⁵⁸

If the arrival of ECOWAS troops in 2017 to restore Gambia’s democratic order was initially hailed as a success, the prolonged stationing of Senegalese ECOMIG forces in the Foni area presents a more complex and contentious picture of multilateral military intervention—particularly when a troop-contributing country has strong national interests at stake. This situation has raised important questions, such as whether the Senegalese ECOMIG troops’ inspection of the timber-laden lorries and their engagements with the MFDC fall within the official mandate of ECOMIG, and whether it is legitimate for regional multilateral troops to coordinate with the national military of a non-host country in suppressing that country’s domestic insurgency. Further complicating these local disputes is the lack of formal border crossing points between Gambia and Senegal, as well as the deep linguistic, cultural, and ethnic ties shared by communities on both sides of the border.

The other controversial issue related to ECOMIG deployment is the danger of a coup d’état should ECOMIG troops leave. While Birchinger et al. (2023) notice that only a minority of their research participants believe the necessity of ECOMIG’s stay to avert another coup d’état, the debate about a potential coup was not uncommon.

For people who support the idea of a potential coup once ECOMIG troops withdraw, their concerns derive not only from the risk of a possible security vacuum caused by the withdrawal but also the broader social and historical contexts that sow the seed of grievance and resentment towards the current regime. The risk of a potential security vacuum can be linked to the perceived uneasy relationship between the incumbent President and the armed forces. The legacy of ethnic favoritism and personal rule during Yahya Jammeh’s era has left an impression that Gambia military in the post-Jammeh period is unreliable to defend the state (regime). Barrow’s distrust of the army has been frequently mentioned in my interviews. The presence

⁵⁷ Author interview with Ismaila Ceesay, August 2023.

⁵⁸ Author interview with ECOMIG officer (anonymous), August 2023.

of ECOMIG forces was thus believed to provide an alternative solution to the problem and also a deterrence to potential challengers to the current regime, as explained by a Gambian scholar and politician:

When Barrow came to power, there was no trust in the army. Jammeh elements were still within the army, and they were not able to eject some of them. And we don't know what they are planning, whether they are planning a coup, whatever, we don't know. So, to be on the safe side, is to have foreign troops to provide security until the security sector reform is done. And [until] we are sure that all elements of pro-Jammeh are ejected from the army, the army is now professional, well trained.⁵⁹

However, the ongoing security sector reform of Gambia's security forces has failed to deliver tangible outcomes in the past few years, which I will turn to in the next section.

At the same time, the fact that ECOMIG troops have been “overstaying” for more than seven years may result in an additional, unintended consequence—the foreign forces being embedded with the social fabric of Gambia. Once they withdraw, they could leave behind a vacuum⁶⁰—and the critical question remains: who will fill that gap?

Another argument concerning the risk of a coup points to the entrenched culture of coup d'état in Gambia. The specter of a coup has haunted the country for decades, dating back to the presidency of Dawda Jawara. During Yahya Jammeh's rule, reports of coup plots and attempts surfaced repeatedly—in 1996, 1997, 2000, 2003, 2006, 2009, and 2014—although some of these incidents may have been used as pretexts for political purges (Dwyer 2017a, 371). Most recently, in December 2022, the Gambian government announced that it had foiled a plot by several soldiers to overthrow the government.⁶¹

While the motivation behind the 2022 attempted coup remains unclear, the scenario of disgruntled soldiers taking up guns against the government for the second time is not unimaginable, as perceived by some Gambians. Frustration about the limited progress the new government has achieved and increasing social problems such as rising crime rates and soldiers'

⁵⁹ Author interview with Ismaila Ceesay, August 2023.

⁶⁰ Author interview with Ismaila Ceesay, August 2023.

⁶¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/21/gambia-foils-alleged-coup-attempt-arrests-four-soldiers>

poor treatment could sow the seeds of future unrest. A Gambian journalist and political activist observed the feeling of discontent among soldiers based on his communication with them as follows:

Soldiers are not happy with the current government; this sentiment is prevalent. They feel they are neglected, not been respected, have food and medicine supply problems, and underpaid.⁶²

However, there are also perspectives that challenge the notion that a coup would inevitably occur if ECOMIG leaves. Some observers question whether the soldiers currently have the capacity or networks necessary to organize a successful coup. The military's morale is perceived to be low, with many soldiers having little confidence in the leadership, and some have even left the army.⁶³ For some others, their rationale of not having a coup links to the common idea shared by many Gambians that the country has been lifted from military rule and people do not want it again.⁶⁴

Though they reach different conclusions, both sides of the debate highlight a shared observation: widespread public dissatisfaction with Gambia's security, social, and economic conditions during the transitional period. The perception of Adama Barrow as an "incompetent" and "corrupt" president is far from marginal, and it often serves to provide the context for interpreting emerging political problems. The next section pays closer attention to two critical domestic issues that illustrate the predicament ECOWAS faces as it becomes (perhaps unintentionally) entangled in Gambia's domestic politics.

4. Challenges Following the Extended Mandate

In addition to the controversies surrounding the Senegalese ECOMIG contingent in the Foni area, ECOWAS intervention has, whether intentionally or not, been drawn into the increasingly contentious politics in Gambia. The multilateral intervention that brought Barrow

⁶² Author interview with Tabou Njie-Sarr, August 2023.

⁶³ Author interview with Madi Jobarteh, August 2023.

⁶⁴ Author interview with Tabou Njie-Sarr, August 2023.

into power has become the force that has to persistently consolidate the leadership of Gambia. However, the long-term consequences of this dynamic may not have been fully anticipated by ECOWAS and are unlikely to be easily managed. I argue that the ECOWAS mission in Gambia is experiencing a paradox of power consolidation, which, if not addressed with care, risks undermining the legitimacy and credibility of ECOWAS's commitment to crisis management in the country. This paradox is manifested primarily in two issue areas: the constitutional problem and the security sector reform. The following section will examine these two aspects in detail.

Term Limit Problem

Constitutional reform is one of the main tasks of peacebuilding in post-crisis Gambia, and it is also a promise Barrow and the coalition made during their election campaign. However, the twist and turn of the constitutional building process in Gambia is causing adverse effects on the peacebuilding efforts led by ECOWAS.

At the heart of the debate over constitutional reform is the issue of presidential term limits. The current constitution of Gambia was adopted and entered into force in 1997, two years after Yahya Jammeh seized power in the coup d'état. It is widely criticized as a flawed constitution deliberately crafted to eliminate political challengers and concentrate excessive power in the presidency (Saine 2009, 29; Aubyn 2022, 223). One of its most notable deficiencies is the absence of any provision for presidential term limits, a shortcoming it shares with its predecessor, the 1970 constitution (Saine 2009, 28). Following the restoration of political order in 2017, the Constitutional Review Commission (CRC) was established to review the 1997 constitution and draft a new one. The commission engaged in broad consultations with political parties, civil society actors, and the Gambian diaspora.⁶⁵ As anticipated, the draft constitution included a two-term limit for the presidency (CRC 2020, Article 102). However, the new draft was voted down at the National Assembly in 2020. According to the 1997 constitution, any amendment to its provisions requires the approval of at least three-quarters of all National

⁶⁵ <https://theconversation.com/why-the-gambias-quest-for-a-new-constitution-came-unstuck-and-what-next-147118>

Assembly members before proceeding to a referendum (Constitution 1997, Article 226). The yes vote the Bill received just met a simple majority (31 out of 54 votes) and thus failed at the initial stage.

The other thing that made the issue of presidential term limits highly contested was the dispute over Barrow's three-year-term agreement. Over the past two decades, Yahya Jammeh successfully secured his presidency through four elections (1996, 2001, 2006, 2011). The biggest lesson the opposition parties learned from their failure was the importance of building a strong, broad-based political coalition. In the 2016 election, seven Gambian political parties (including an independent candidate) formed the Gambia Coalition 2016 to compete with Jammeh's APRC. Adama Barrow, the previous deputy treasurer of the United Democratic Party (UDP), was selected as the candidate for the presidential election. Right before the strategic alliance, the leader of the UDP, Ousainou Darboe, and some other party members were arrested and sentenced to three years in prison after taking part in a protest.⁶⁶ It was under such a special situation that Barrow was chosen as the party leader and later the independent presidential candidate. In the manifesto of the Gambia Coalition 2016, Barrow promised that he "will serve for only three years at the head of a broad-based and inclusive Coalition Government aimed at conducting Constitutional, institutional and administrative reforms" (Manifesto 2016). It was further reiterated in Barrow's campaign posters, pledging that he "is committed to serve as a transitional President for 3 years to consolidate democracy."⁶⁷

However, Barrow did not keep his commitment to hand over the power after three years in office, which brought further tensions to Gambia's transitional process. Dissatisfaction with his U-turn led to the Three Years Jotna (Three years is enough) movement, demanding Barrow to honor his campaign promise and step down before the three-year agreement expires. The movement was formed in 2018 and developed into protests in December 2019.⁶⁸ The protest planned by the movement activists was first authorized but later banned by the authorities. Over a hundred protesters were arrested in January 2020, including the leader of the movement, following their clashes with security forces.⁶⁹ While the movement falls into domestic politics,

⁶⁶ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2016/12/gambia-opposition-leader-released-on-bail/>

⁶⁷ <https://panafricanvisions.com/2019/12/gambiaprotesters-call-on-barrow-to-step-down/>

⁶⁸ <https://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/article/thousands-protest-demand-barrows-resignation>

⁶⁹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/gambia-mass-arrests-risk-fuelling-tensions/>

Barrow's connection with ECOWAS was not forgotten. Among the poster signs carried by protesters, one inscription showing "ECOWAS Come and Get Your Adama Barrow 3 Years Jotna"⁷⁰ brought the regional body into the dialogue.

Similar to the discontent expressed by some civilians through the movement, Barrow's violation of the agreement was seen in the eyes of the coalition members as a betrayal of the coalition. This sense of betrayal arose from the reality that Barrow's rise to power was made possible by the collective efforts of the coalition. However, political betrayal remains within the realm of politics; the breach of a moral code within a community does not necessarily translate into a violation of legal boundaries. In other words, Barrow's reneging on his promise did not constitute a constitutional problem, as the coalition's manifesto was not a legally binding document, and the constitution grants the president a five-year term. Therefore, criticisms were mainly confined to the sphere of moral condemnation rather than legal accusations. Abdoulaye Saine, one of the most renowned Gambian scholars, emphasized this distinction in an interview, noting that "there is also a moral argument which is centered on the fact that this agreement was signed by party leaders and is morally binding."⁷¹ Likewise, in my interview with the former All People's Party (APP) leader, Ebrima Jagne, he described Barrow's behavior in a similar way:

It's a big betrayal, the betrayal of the trust that the Gambians have had in him. It's the opposition party who came together, you know. If it was UDP alone...they wouldn't have won the election. It's the coalition that won the election. All of them gathered behind Barrow. So yes, it was a betrayal, the betrayal of the worst type you could imagine.⁷²

Though not a member of the coalition, Jagne captured the feelings of those who had supported Barrow but became disappointed in him. The UDP leader, Ousainou Darboe,

⁷⁰ https://gambiana.com/the-3-years-jotna-saga-turning-a-jingle-into-a-political-branding-slogan/#google_vignette

⁷¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/16/three-years-is-enough-why-are-gambians-protesting>

⁷² Author interview with Ebrima Jagne, August 2023.

publicly stressed that Barrow should quit after the three-year mandate.⁷³

Other than condemnation of Barrow's betrayal, accounts explaining the difficulty of the fledgling government during the transitional period provide an alternative perspective of understanding the term limit dispute. Some argue that the lack of resources and poor capacity made it hard to organize a new presidential election back in 2019 if Barrow handed over his power. The former Vice President Fatoumata Tambajang offered such a point of view. Tambajang served in the Barrow administration from 2017 to 2018. She was also one of the key players contributing to the Coalition 2016. She explained the rationale for not having an election in 2019 as follows:

And the reason why he (Barrow) didn't step down, as an insider, the truth is that we didn't find the resources in the situation. Yahya Jammeh had wonderful resources. There was nothing even for budget support. It was [difficult to] run government for three years when there is no money, and we couldn't conduct a qualified election, so it was really unrealistic.⁷⁴

Whether Barrow stayed or not at that time, ECOWAS inevitably found itself entangled in Gambia's domestic politics. A series of questions arise in this context. If the difficulties of organizing a new election were genuine, should ECOWAS have assisted the Gambian government in achieving this goal or in strengthening Gambia's democracy? Conversely, if the discourse around these difficulties merely served as an excuse for Barrow to prolong his rule, should ECOWAS have played a mediating role in the political dispute? Barrow's pursuit of the presidency further complicated Gambia's transitional process. His relationship with the coalition—particularly with the leading party, the UDP—became increasingly strained. Later, he broke up with the UDP and launched his own party, the National People's Party (NPP). Ironically, the NPP went on to form an alliance with Yahya Jammeh's party, the APRC, for the 2021 presidential election.⁷⁵ In a more recent announcement in May 2024, Barrow hinted at his

⁷³ <https://panafricanvisions.com/2019/11/gambia-udp-calls-on-barrow-to-quit-after-3yrs-mandate/>

⁷⁴ Author interview with Fatoumata Tambajang, August 2023.

⁷⁵ <https://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/headlines/aprc-npp-agree-on-jammehs-return-as-duo-form-alliance-ahead-of-dec-polls>

interest in running in the 2026 presidential election, declaring, “it is clear that I am the NPP’s leader, Secretary General, and candidate.”⁷⁶ If Barrow decides to run for a third term, exploiting the absence of a constitutional term limit, what position should ECOWAS take in relation to its stated commitment to democracy and good governance?

Combined with Barrow’s term limit dispute and the ensuing political tension, failure to adopt the Draft Constitution leads to potential problems related to the status and legitimacy of ECOWAS intervention. As previous discussion on the logic of intervention indicates, part of the ECOMIG legitimacy comes from ECOWAS’s commitment to promoting democracy and good governance as a regional norm. The presidency of Barrow was thus secured not merely by regional military force; it was the normative framework behind it shared by regional and international institutions that backed his leadership. While it may not be the ECOWAS authority’s intention to do so, ECOWAS intervention to restore democracy in Gambia has been bound up with Adama Barrow and his consolidation of power. Though technically speaking, Barrow is not behaving illegally regarding his “betrayal” and pursuing power within the 1997 constitution framework, these political disputes and controversies can challenge and even undermine ECOWAS’ efforts and credibility in consolidating democratic government.

The Security Sector Reform

The stagnant security sector (SSR) reform further exacerbated the situation, putting ECOWAS in an embarrassing position. As mentioned previously, one of ECOMIG’s mandates is to assist Gambia in implementing the SSR during the transitional period. But Barrow’s tenuous position and the legacy of Jammeh’s military imprint are causing a new paradox of power consolidation—the more President Barrow relies on the regional forces to provide protection, the less he feels secure and trusts the national security forces.

Barrow launched the Security Sector Reform (SSR) Project in September 2017.⁷⁷ However, it was not until 2020 that the new government released the SSR Strategy (2020–2024), which outlined the objectives of the reform in detail. The Strategy aims to “restructure

⁷⁶ <https://www.kerrfatou.com/president-barrow-confirms-his-candidacy-for-npp-in-2026-election/>

⁷⁷ <https://unowas.unmissions.org/unowas-supports-security-reform-process-gambia>

and cultivate an effective, professional, apolitical and accountable sector” under democratic control (SSR Strategy 2020). Compared to other reform areas, such as legal frameworks and civilian management, the strategy placed greater emphasis on individual security institutions. It identified eight key security institutions targeted for reform, each with specific goals.⁷⁸ The security force-centered agenda was also reflected in the Gambian government’s cooperation with international actors. For instance, the AU Technical Support Team to The Gambia (AUTSTG) puts military topics first, resulting in a reform process largely focused on traditional security topics such as army downsizing (Birchinger 2021).

Though the reform paid particular attention to military topics, the Barrow administration was reluctant to implement related policy measures, especially with the goal of “right-sizing” the security institutions. Objections from the armed forces and Barrow’s fear of discontented forces, in large part, hindered the process. From soldiers’ perspective, they generally see the SSR as the same thing as reducing the size of the armed forces, a view not only shared by senior officers but also the rank-and-file (Dwyer 2021, 636). On the other hand, Barrow’s shaky position and the fragile security situation further weakened his willingness to push for change, which was inextricably linked to the legacy of Jammeh’s twenty-two years of rule.

It is not easy to transform the security agencies heavily embedded in the culture of favoritism, nepotism, and cronyism. Barrow stated in 2017 that “we were taking over a security sector that had been deeply politicised and not responsive to the needs of our people.”⁷⁹ As reflected in Gambia’s SSR Strategy 2020, the top priority area went to “addressing post-authoritarian legacies.” The previous regime was characterized by “blatant disregard for procedures,” “politicization and misuse of security institutions,” systematic violations of human rights,” “prevalence of attempted coups,” etc. (SSR Strategy 2020, 2). For individual security institutions such as the Gambia Armed Forces (GAF), “consideration of ethnicity and personal loyalty to the executive seems to have influenced and dominated recruitment and promotions” (2020, 14). There were widespread accusations that Jammeh favored his own ethnic group, the Jola, in military appointments, particularly at senior levels (Dwyer 2017b,

⁷⁸ They are: the Gambia Armed Forces (GAF), The Gambia Immigration Department, The Gambia Police Force (GPF), Gambia Fire and Rescue Service (GFRS), Drug Law Enforcement Agency Gambia, National Intelligence Agency, Gambia Revenue Authority, and Gambia Prison Service.

⁷⁹ <https://allafrica.com/stories/201709131009.html>

144). For example, the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) was held by ethnic Jola for most of the period between 1999 and 2017 (2017b, 209). Additionally, the president's personal guard was typically drawn from Jola officers or foreign personnel (Saine 2009, 61). This favoritism toward coethnic Jola was, in effect, a reflection of Jammeh's deep distrust of the military. From a junior officer to the President through a 'peaceful' and swift coup, he understood well the precarious security situation he could face. Frequent coup plots and attempts during Jammeh's rule posed genuine threats to his position (Dwyer 2017b, 144). Overall, security sectors during this era primarily served to consolidate the regime, whether through deliberate internal divisions or the use of force for social control. Additionally, the size of the security forces expanded substantially under Jammeh's rule. Gambia transformed from a country without a standing army until 1984 into one where security services personnel made up nearly half of the public servants by the time Jammeh left office. The size of the military expanded almost ninefold during this period (Dwyer 2021; 2023). Against this backdrop, the topic of downsizing the security forces has become particularly sensitive and potentially fraught.

On the other hand, mistrust between the president and the security forces is not unique to Yahya Jammeh; it can be traced back to the era of Gambia's first President, Dawda Jawara, and has persisted through Barrow's tenure.⁸⁰ President Barrow's subtle relationship with the armed forces has added more complexity to the SSR process. Notably, despite serving as Commander-in-Chief of The Gambia Armed Forces, at the time of writing, Barrow has not officially visited military barracks since taking office in 2017.⁸¹ The only exception was in 2021, when he briefly met with troops at the Kanilai barracks during a visit to the family of Yahya Jammeh.⁸²

However, the presence of ECOMIG has, to some extent, offset the potential challenges posed by the stalled SSR progress. As Dwyer indicates in her study, it enables President Barrow to bypass his own security forces and instead rely on external security assistance provided by international partners (Dwyer 2021, 637). By reforming the GAF, it is expected to be capable of safeguarding "the sovereignty and territorial integrity of The Gambia" (SSR Strategy 2020, 15). However, the continued presence of ECOMIG troops in key locations raises doubts about

⁸⁰ <https://blog.prif.org/2022/11/09/security-sector-reform-in-the-gambia-the-historic-roots-of-current-challenges/>

⁸¹ Author interview with Madi Jobarteh, August 2023.

⁸² <https://fatunetwork.net/president-barrow-tells-troops-at-kanilai-barracks-security-of-gambia-very-important-to-him-as-commander-in-chief/>

the effectiveness of the reform. Currently, the Gambia National Army (GNA) consists of four infantry battalions stationed in Yundum, Farafenni, Basse, and Kanilai.⁸³ As already mentioned, Yundum and Kanilai also host ECOMIG deployments. Moreover, despite the establishment of a new presidential guard unit, which has been trained abroad since 2018,⁸⁴ ECOMIG forces still assume the responsibility of guarding the president. For ordinary Banjul residents, one of the most visible symbols of this arrangement is the sight of ECOWAS convoy vehicles moving through the streets, with armed soldiers holding guns facing people. They might be just on the way, escorting Barrow to the airport to welcome the Senegalese President.⁸⁵

ECOMIG's stay in Gambia could also lead to potential legal problems. In a conversation with a National Assembly member, the interviewee indicates that President Barrow had never consulted the parliament before extending the mandate of ECOMIG.⁸⁶ The president once publicly claimed on a TV interview that extending the ECOMIG mandate "is about executive decision, this is not about National Assembly."⁸⁷ Different opinions on the National Assembly's responsibility exist among parliament members. For some, the National Assembly has a say on the issue of approving the mandate of foreign troops since, according to the constitution, the conclusion of international agreements is "subject to ratification by the National Assembly" (Constitution 1997, Article 79). However, some argue that Gambia's membership in ECOWAS and the various regional protocols it signed before could serve as a prior consent to the extension. Furthermore, the constitution does not mention the scenario of foreign troops being deployed into the country.⁸⁸ While to what extent the extension of the ECOMIG mandate falls into the scope of international agreements has not reached a conclusion and may wait for Gambia supreme court's interpretation, it exposed the potential problem of the legality of ECOMIG within Gambia's legal system. Moreover, the lack of communication and coordination between the president and the legislative branch on the mandate of foreign forces can be problematic in the future.

⁸³ <https://gaf.gm/index.php/gna/>

⁸⁴ <https://standard.gm/new-presidential-guard-personnel-leave-for-training/>

⁸⁵ Author interview with Ayesha Harun Jammeh, August 2023.

⁸⁶ Author interview with Fatoumatta Njai, August 2023.

⁸⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6ca3Q4-DxA>

⁸⁸ <https://gainako.com/factsheet-should-parliament-have-a-say-in-ecomigs-extension-in-the-gambia/>

Conclusion

This chapter examines the contested nature of ECOWAS intervention in Gambia. The deployment of ECOMIG troops raised questions about the mission's legitimacy from the outset, largely due to the ambiguity surrounding the political crisis itself. Precisely because of this ambiguity, ECOWAS's intervention in Gambia can be seen as both unprecedented and innovative within the field of crisis management. The implications of this study extend beyond ECOWAS-specific scholarship, contributing to the broader literature on multilateral intervention by introducing an additional category—political crisis arising from electoral dispute—into the typology of crises that prompt external intervention.

The presence of ECOMIG has become an increasingly controversial issue in Gambia's domestic politics. While the deployment of ECOMIG in response to Gambia's political crisis initially appeared to restore democracy by ousting a dictator and ushering in a democratically elected president, the continued stationing of foreign troops for over seven years has reinforced the perception that ECOWAS is now consolidating the power of the incumbent leader. This perception has intensified amid disputes over President Barrow's "three-year-term" agreement and the stagnant progress of security sector reform. Moreover, the presence of Senegalese ECOMIG troops in the Foni area has provoked even more tensions with local communities. The blurred boundaries between Senegalese national forces and Senegalese ECOMIG troops—both in appearance and in duties—have further fueled confusion about ECOMIG's mandate and opened space for competing narratives about what is happening in Foni.

This is not to place blame on ECOWAS. It is often the case that regional organizations get trapped in the swamp of domestic politics of the host state. Gambia's experience serves as a vivid example. Given the nature of the crisis, it was almost inevitable that ECOMIG would be dragged into the country's political struggles. Yet the more important question to ask is under what conditions regional or international actors should intervene, and how they can better adapt their strategies in response to the shifting political dynamics of the host country.

At least four recommendations can be drawn from ECOWAS's experience in Gambia, which may also apply to future regional interventions in political crises. First, to avoid or mitigate the power consolidation paradox, international organizations deploying peace

operations should prioritize supporting the host state in implementing security sector reform more effectively. The goal is to enable national security forces to assume responsibility, rather than allowing international actors to provide prolonged substitute security services. Second, it is crucial to prevent the domination of a single country in the operation by diversifying the troop-contributing countries, especially when that country has vital national interests in the crisis. Third, whether led by the host government or the international organization, clear and consistent communication with local communities about the mandate and purpose of the peace operation is essential. Keeping civilians informed helps reduce confusion and can prevent potential tensions or clashes. Finally, it is important to distinguish between mission troops and other foreign forces (as in the case of Senegalese troops in Gambia) in both mandate and appearance to preserve the impartiality and legitimacy of multilateral interventions.

Conclusion

While they share some common considerations in conflict resolution, multilateral interventions led by different international organizations have demonstrated distinct preferences and philosophies. These variations may come from their differences in institutional structures or are embedded in each region's unique historical trajectories. By exploring the underlying logic of African regional intervention, this research thus provides a fresh perspective of understanding autonomous multilateral intervention in Africa, contributing to the ongoing debate on the evolution of multilateralism and regionalism against the backdrop of a so-called downturn of liberal world order.

Research Findings

In the first chapter, I identified two major factors—regime security and regional norms—that play central roles in shaping the decisions of African regional organizations to deploy peace operations. The emphasis on regime security can be traced back to the early period of African regionalism when the OAU was established with a particular focus on maintaining the stability of state regimes. The breakout of a series of devastating civil wars in the 1990s further called attention to the destructive effects of domestic insurgencies aimed at regime change. It explains the continued pattern of stabilization elements in African autonomous peace operations, which often involve the restoration of political authority. Meanwhile, however, regional norms regarding humanitarian intervention and political legitimacy that seem to contradict regime security concerns started to gain more momentum in the early 2000s; they were later gradually integrated into the security architectures of regional organizations. Importantly, the relationship between the two factors is not always in conflict. They can co-exist and even converge, as seen in the shared regional commitment to opposing unconstitutional changes of government. Ultimately, the varying combinations of these two factors shape the conditions under which regional organizations choose to engage in specific conflicts or crises. That is why the types of conflict and crisis are important—their nature of struggles implies different combinations between the two factors. The typology developed in this chapter thus serves as a useful

framework for analyzing the dynamic interactions between the nature of conflict or crisis and the regional responses they elicit.

The second chapter focuses on the Casamance conflict and situates it within the broader context of the evolving African secessionist struggles and regional organizations' attitudes toward this type of conflict. Unlike civil war, where state power is directly contested, secessionist conflicts that do not aim at regime change present a unique challenge to regional organizations in terms of conflict resolution. These conflicts sit at the intersection of two potentially competing principles: the right to self-determination and the principle of territorial integrity. The externally imposed, arbitrary boundaries of African states further accentuate the tension between subnational groups' struggles to redraw borders and central governments' pursuit of national unity. Against this backdrop, regional organizations in Africa have tended to adopt a restrained posture, avoiding direct involvement in peace processes for secessionist conflicts. ECOWAS's absence from the Casamance conflict, in sharp contrast to its active engagement in civil wars during the same period, can be explained by this tension between the two forces, in which the priority placed on territorial integrity prevailed. Other contributing factors include the capacity and determination of the Senegalese government to dominate the peace process, and the fact that the Casamance separatists never threatened the survival of the state (regime). However, ECOWAS's disengagement has also raised concerns. The strong regional character of this low-intensity but protracted conflict has eroded the cross-border security landscape among Senegal, Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau; its repercussions continue to shape regional politics today, as illustrated by ECOMIG's controversial role in Gambia. As such, the absence of ECOWAS from the peace process presents a predicament regional organizations face in navigating secessionist conflicts and underscores the need for more flexible and context-sensitive approaches to multilateral intervention.

The third chapter examines a rare scenario of regional intervention—political crises. ECOWAS's deployment of military troops to Gambia in 2017 marked a bold assertion of its normative leadership in West Africa. However, what initially appeared as an intervention to restore democracy has since evolved into a source of controversy, as the mandate of ECOMIG has been repeatedly extended. The presence of Senegalese ECOMIG soldiers in the Foni area provoked resistance among local residents. There is a widely held perception that Senegalese

troops are here not for ECOMIG mandate but for counterinsurgency purposes. President Barrow's term limit disputes and the stalled progress of security sector reform further fueled the ongoing controversy, drawing ECOWAS into an embarrassing predicament. I identify what I call a "power consolidation paradox" in this chapter, whereby Barrow's reliance on ECOMIG has resulted in ECOWAS implicitly reinforcing the incumbent's hold on power. While it may seem contradictory that the promotion of democratic norms can coexist with the need to protect regime security, the Gambia case reveals how these two logics can operate simultaneously within a single peace operation. Moreover, the examination of ECOMIG's role in Gambia offers an empirical case for understanding multilateral intervention in political crises—an emerging and underexplored category of intervention in Africa.

Rethinking Statehood in Africa

Concepts such as *quasi-state*, *failed state*, and *fragile state* have become convenient and appealing tools for describing and diagnosing the challenges facing contemporary African states. In Hagmann and Péclard's words, it is a "pathological" approach to state institutions in Africa (2010, 541). However, the widespread use of these concepts risks obscuring the dynamic state-building processes across the continent. They are grounded in a dominant understanding of the state as a coherent, bounded, and capable entity—a view largely shaped by the historical experience of European state formation. The Weberian ideal-type of the state has become the canonical reference point, with any deviations from and variations of it being "conceptualized and measured only as distance from the ideal-type" (Migdal and Schlichte 2005, 11). This perspective reinforces a hierarchical view in which state capacity displayed by Western states is positioned at the top.

However, the examination of the evolution of African autonomous regional intervention in this study reveals a different story of statehood: one that is not fixed or predetermined but rather fluid and continually reshaped through the collective endeavors of both state and non-state actors. Whether through peace operations mediating between governments and rebels or military interventions aimed at restoring political authority, the ways African regional organizations have approached conflict and security over the past three decades have greatly

expanded our imagination of statehood as a dynamic process. Pertinent to the process is the role of regional organizations in conflict and crisis management, as well as in regional governance—both of which are integral to the ongoing reconfiguration of statehood on the continent.

The first is the use and threat of violence, traditionally positioned at the core of classical theories of the state. However, domestic armed conflict—an extreme challenge to the state’s monopoly on violence—blurs these conceptual boundaries. This becomes particularly evident when regimes face severe threats and regional organizations intervene to recalibrate the imbalanced distribution of violence.

In addition to the realm of violence, another essential power widely regarded as exclusive to the state is the authority to determine the parameters of people’s daily behavior. For example, to define what is legal and illegal in a society. Yet, the rise of regionalism that promotes common regional agendas, especially in the sphere of governance, is eroding the parameters of state behavior by offering a set of codes (norms) on what governance orientation a state should follow.

Viewed in this light, the three chapters thus touch on three recurring themes in African regional intervention: negotiating the statehood, consolidating the statehood, and complementing the statehood.

Negotiating Statehood

In the dynamic process of reconfiguring the state and negotiating statehood, regional organizations have played a pivotal role. The mechanisms of conflict resolution and crisis management developed by African regional organizations over the years have constantly provided ‘negotiation tables’ for states in crises, offering spaces where the very meaning and boundaries of statehood can be negotiated. These negotiation tables, in the words of Hagmann and Péclard, represent “a formalized setting where contending social groups decide upon key aspects of statehood” (2010, 551). During civil wars, regional organizations mediate between the state and non-state actors in the contests over state power by facilitating rounds of peace negotiations that culminate in peace agreements centered on power-sharing arrangements. Through their participation in these peace processes, rebel groups gain the opportunity to claim

power from the central government. As Mehler observes, a striking commonality across many African peace agreements is “the readiness of the international community to advocate or facilitate a strong power-sharing ingredient, which is to the benefit of armed rebel movements” (2009, 472).

However, regional organizations’ role in shaping the statehood of African states is not limited to their mediation and conflict management efforts that assist negotiation between conflicting parties. For some, they have gone even further and penetrated into the very process of negotiating empirical statehood: they promote regional agendas such as ‘democracy’ and ‘good governance,’ which define the criteria of evaluating statehood and thus endow themselves with the power to discipline the behavior of state governments. These agendas or discursive genres can be seen as repertoires, which, according to Hagmann and Peclard, “are brought into play both to defend and to challenge existing types of statehood and power relations” by different actor groups (2010, 547). This is what we see, as discussed in the first chapter, ECOWAS’s more recent shift of focus in peace operations, which gives rise to regional interventions driven largely by legitimacy norms.

Consolidating Statehood

When Robert Jackson uses *quasi-state* to describe the states that enjoy judicial statehood (negative sovereignty) but possess very limited empirical statehood (positive sovereignty), he implicitly draws a distinction between a “capable” state and an “incapable” state. The former is a “real state” while the latter falls into the category of “quasi-state”: those that are “incapable” of providing “their populations with the goods associated with developed statehood” (1990, 184), they receive extensive assistance from the international community. However, as mentioned earlier, the tendency to evaluate a state based on certain criteria or models risks distorting our understanding of the state, resulting in a very limited imagination of what a state may look like.

African states are not passive actors attaining and maintaining their judicial statehood only through enfranchisement and international recognition. Rather, state and non-state actors actively engage in weaving regional networks to consolidate statehood. One example is the way regional organizations treat secessionist conflicts. As discussed in the second chapter, they

utilized institutional instruments to preserve existing borders inherited from colonial rule. The Congo Crisis exposed African leaders to the destabilizing and contentious aspects of secession and foreign intervention, which facilitated the establishment of the OAU in 1963. The largest regional organization was designed not only for regional unity but also to contain secessionist attempts and subversive activities against the fledgling states. Though individual states may provide support for such attempts in neighboring countries, the OAU, at the regional level, often repudiated sub-national groups' claim to redraw borders. Although the regional response to secession shifted over time due to the changing international context, the RECs founded in the latter period followed this general pattern. In the case of the Casamance conflict, ECOWAS never got involved in the peace process, despite the fact that it became the prominent 'peacekeeper' during the period when the armed conflict in Casamance was at its peak. ECOWAS's attitude of non-intervention reflected this consensus on maintaining existing borders, which contributes to the consolidation of statehood in the realm of national territory.

Complementing Statehood

Another way to understand the fluidity of statehood can be found in regional organizations' multilateral interventions with stabilization mandates. In this scenario, regional troops are often deployed to assist a state in crisis in restoring its political authority. Whereas secessionist conflicts highlight the territory dimension of statehood, stabilization-oriented peace operations are more closely associated with the governance dimension of statehood. When the political authority of a state is unable to or ceased to exercise effective governance, the participation of regional forces (both military and civilian elements) in the state-building process can be seen as a way to complement the statehood. For instance, Guinea-Bissau's history of frequent political turbulence exposed it to regional intervention that highlighted political transition and security sector reform. ECOWAS and Nigeria even offered emergency financial assistance to the government of Guinea-Bissau, which had difficulty upholding basic functions such as the payment of public service workers' salaries (Yabi 2010, 23).

However, regional interventions that serve as means to complement the empirical statehood of states in crisis can lead to unintended and even negative consequences. Schlichte's (2008) study on the internationalization of rule in Uganda helps to reveal this point, which

sheds light on the dilemma between international agencies' euphemistic vision of global governance and the hindered state-building process on the ground. The paradox of power consolidation found in Gambia's post-crisis security sector reform, as discussed in chapter three, represents a similar dilemma. President Barrow's overreliance on security services provided by ECOWAS troops may become a barrier to authentic security sector reform. Moreover, the involvement of international forces brought their own interests and goals into the operation. The stationing of Senegalese ECOMIG soldiers in the Foni area of Gambia obscured the nature of ECOWAS peace operation. It risks undermining Gambia's sovereignty when Senegalese soldiers conducted counterinsurgency activities along the border, which can be found in Gambians' accusation of the Senegalese government using Foni as the launch pad against the Casamance rebels. Lastly, it also risks eroding regional organizations' legitimacy of intervention when foreign troops have stayed too long. That is because, according to Migdal and Schlichte, those international interventions embodied by "various forms of social engineering" have "come to be connected to the local dynamics of violence" (2005, 34). The political and legal predicament ECOWAS faced in Gambia's crisis—being caught amid domestic power struggles—confirms this point.

Above all, the study of regional intervention in Africa provides a new way of comprehending statehood, both practically and theoretically. It allows us to update our imagination of a more fluid and constantly changing definition of statehood that is shaped and reconfigured by a variety of actors.

Contributions

This dissertation makes several contributions across multiple academic fields.

First, it advances the scholarship on multilateral intervention by proposing a new conceptual framework for understanding the underlying logic of regional intervention in Africa. By incorporating the dual considerations of regime security and transformative norms, this framework offers a dynamic perspective for analyzing the evolving responses of regional organizations toward conflicts over time. It also enables a typological analysis of various types of conflict and crises based on different configurations of these two driving factors.

Second, this research contributes to the field of international relations, particularly debates on regionalism and global governance, by grounding theoretical inquiry in empirical insights from Africa. Some scholars argue that the liberal international order is under strain, which is evidenced by a shift in peace operations from liberal peacebuilding to stabilization-oriented missions. However, this dissertation offers a more nuanced picture. The case of ECOWAS suggests that while regime security still ranks as the priority, the evolution of ECOWAS's normative frameworks, which place greater emphasis on good governance and democracy, is playing an increasingly significant role in shaping its decision to intervene. This regional trajectory highlights the importance of incorporating Global South experiences into broader global governance frameworks, not as deviations but as critical contributions to norm development and institutional practice.

Third, the dissertation addresses a neglected area in the literature by analyzing the legal and political controversies surrounding the prolonged presence of foreign troops following regional intervention. While the initial deployment may be framed as necessary and legitimate, long-term military presence raises complex questions related to the host state's domestic politics, sovereignty, local resistance, and perceived impartiality. This line of inquiry contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the lifecycle of regional interventions and their post-crisis implications.

Fourth, the project helps bridge the gap between normative theory and security practice by showing how regional interventions in Africa are not only driven by strategic calculations but also shaped by evolving normative commitments. It contributes to a more integrated understanding of the relations between norm and practice: rather than serving merely as rhetorical tools, regional norms such as democracy and good governance can exert tangible influence on institutional behavior and decision-making.

Fifth, the dissertation contributes to the growing literature that highlights the Global South as a site of institutional innovation rather than as a passive recipient of externally defined norms. By examining ECOWAS's trajectory of regional security governance in terms of its strategic preferences, normative evolution, and patterns of restraint, the research challenges Eurocentric assumptions about African autonomous intervention and contributes to scholarship on postcolonial regionalism and norm diffusion.

Lastly, the dissertation draws attention to the non-intervention stance adopted by regional organizations in certain types of conflicts. While most scholarship tends to focus on active interventions, the study on the Casamance conflict demonstrates that ECOWAS's decision not to intervene can be equally revealing. Examining the organization's posture of restraint contributes to broader debates in international relations on silence, legitimacy, and the politics of inaction. Future research may build on this work by exploring how regional organizations negotiate the boundaries of authority, risk, and consensus in moments of deliberate non-engagement.

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