A tale of regional transformation: From political community to security regions the politics of security and regionalism in West Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article draws attention to the intersection between the politics of regionalism and the politics of security by investigating the recent reorganisation of the West African space. It shows how international actors’ reinvestment in West Africa is driven by their security priorities, and how these actions, in particular those of the European Union, are deconstructing West Africa into smaller security regions such as the Sahel. This transformation is legitimised through a regional imaginary depicting the Sahel as a fuzzy region constituted by fluctuating boundaries of networks of organised crime and terrorism. This imaginary strongly contrasts with an earlier one that conceived of West Africa as a regional political community. The tensions between these two imaginaries raises important questions about how these perceptions emerged, which agencies and interests have driven them, and what consequences this has for the re-allocation of political authority and sovereignty practices in West Africa. Hence, drawing on International Political Sociology, Critical Geopolitics and Political Geography, this article symmetrically engages with the simultaneous processes of spatialisation of security and securitisation of space to understand the production and transformation of security regionalism in West Africa.

1. Introduction

Regionalism has become a major form of political authority today, and it is crucial to study the interactions both within and between regions, as well as regions’ interactions with the international system in order to understand the working of international politics (Acharya 2007), and to consider transformations in some of the constitutive principles of this system, such as sovereignty. One policy area where Regionalism has increasing agency across the world is security and, over the years, various regional organisations have developed significant capacities to act and voice their positions in regional and international security. Moreover, security threats are increasingly being depicted as transnational issues, so both policy-makers and academicians have stressed the vital role of regionalism when dealing with them. One common view of these regional projects is that they are appropriate institutional responses to address a range of security and governance problems (Hameiri & Jones, 2015).

A significant proportion of International Relations (IR) Regionalism literature has thus argued implicitly or explicitly that re-allocating competences at the regional level is a functional choice for states dealing with transnational threats, thereby suggesting that the emergence of security regionalism is unproblematic. Regions are seen as neutral containers where security interdependence constraints states to work together. This article, however, takes issue with that view for a number of reasons. It argues that both ‘security’ and ‘region’ need to be problematised, and that in order to understand security regionalism it is necessary to delve into the ways they are connected through the various agencies involved. Indeed, as region-builders and security actors construct regionalism, they engage in negotiations and struggles over what ‘security’ and ‘region’ mean, and each connects them in ways that fit its own political purpose. This article draws on literature from Political Geography, Critical Geopolitics, and International Political Sociology (IPS) to propose a symmetrical analysis of this politics of regionalism and security. This analysis gives the two aspects equal
weight, while investigating their co-production in the constitution of security regionalism. In addition, by applying this analysis to the case of the West African region, this article also considers how the spatialisation of security and the securitisation of space are re-organising the West African space.

Studying current transformations in West Africa can offer important insights into security regionalism. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is considered the most advanced example of regionalism in the field of security on the African continent. The agency of ECOWAS is the product of the region’s internal dynamics, and the Nigerian government has played a central role in that context. The Community also derives its agency from international funding and support, in particular from the European Union (EU). Recently, however, the EU, its member states, and other international donors have started to fund smaller, more flexible, and less institutionalised regional groupings in the region such as the G5 Sahel or the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) based around the Lake Chad Basin. This article will argue that this new international investment is contributing to an ongoing redefinition of the West African space. Two parallel regional imaginaries here embody competing meanings and connections of ‘region’ and ‘security’ and are thus entangled in this process of redefinition. One of these sets up West Africa as a regional political community which has laid the foundation for ECOWAS to be acknowledged as the legitimate security actor in the region; in the other, West Africa is constituted by less clearly demarcated security regions such as the Sahel, which are characterised by fluctuating criminal networks and flows. In this latter imaginary, regions have become much more fuzzy and functional as they are defined by the problems they supposedly share. Since 2011, tensions between these two imaginaries have raised many issues that touch upon the scale of governance, and the re-allocation of political authority and sovereignty. This has happened in the midst of increasing international interventionism, and against the backdrop of concerns regarding the agency of West African actors in this spatial re-organisation.

The first section of this article draws on work from Political Geography, Geopolitics and IPS to develop a conceptual framework that allows us to symmetrically study the politics of regionalism and the politics of security. The second section examines the emergence and consolidation of the regional political community imaginary since the 1990s in West Africa. The final section investigates the complex processes and agencies that are re-organising this political space into smaller functional security regions such as the Sahel, and also highlights political concerns over the effects this has had.

2. Politics of regionalism, politics of security: Towards a symmetrical analysis

Many blind spots still plague the theoretical nexus of ‘security’ and the ‘region’ in IR’s engagement with security regionalism. Increasing numbers of scholars do accept that both ‘security’ and the ‘region’ are socially constructed, however the discipline still lacks empirical explorations of how various actors’ discourses, practices and strategies interrelate in the complex social processes that connect regionalism to security policies. The limitations of existing work are revealed by the hitherto scarce engagement of mainstream approaches such as the New Regionalism Approach, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), the Security Communities and the Regional Security Governance literatures with the agency and practices of region-builders and security actors.

Far from understanding ‘security’ and ‘region’ as being jointly produced by actors, these existing approaches tend to depict the connection of ‘security’ and ‘regions’ as a linear and often teleological process.

6 For David Harvey (1994), this corresponds to an absolute conception of space where space is a material framework having independent existence from the processes operating within it.

There have been calls for a constructivist understanding of regions in Regionalism Studies (Soderbaum, 2013), but materialist, functionalist and/or rationalist understandings of regionalism still dominate empirical studies.
in the 1980s, has led to the common assumption among critical geographers that space and thus regions are socially constructed and historically contingent processes (Harrison, 2013; Jones & Paasi, 2013; Macleod & Jones, 2007). Space, from a relational perspective, is constituted ‘of spatialized social relations – and narratives about them – which not only lay down ever-new geographies, but also work to reshape social and cultural identities and how they are represented’ (Allen et al., 2002, p. 22). Spatial identities, then, are the product (and enabler) of these relations which can be understood as embedded practices (Massey, 2005). Regions as spatial entities are thus said to be the product of ‘both material and “virtual” elements, as well as very diverging social practices and discourses’ (Paasi, 2009, p. 131). This focus brings our attention to the region-builders involved in the process of constructing and shaping the region, from ‘noisy activists’ to ‘silent’ region-builders (Paasi, 2011). In the context of security regionalism, these region-builders are the presidents, ministers, civil servants, diplomats, military and intelligence officers, policemen and women, or customs personnel who decide, elaborate, or take part in, regional security practices. These figures are also located ‘outside’ of the region as international donors fund regional initiatives and engage in region-building practices across the world (Aris & Wenger, 2014; Jones, 2006; Scott et al., 2017). The regions produced by these embedded practices are understood as particular social orders in which ‘distinctive role, capacities for action, and access to power’ are assigned (Harvey, 1990, p. 419). The different elements of these social orders, embedded in dominant imaginaries of space (region), become the object of struggles and as such are always open to change and transformation (Massey, 1992). Political geographers’ conceptualisation of regions is thus very valuable to IR as it sheds light on the centrality of power relations, contestations and exclusions in the definition of the common meaning of the region (Varrò & Lagendijk, 2013).

In a similar way, IPS provides us with the tools to unpack the constant processes of negotiation, resistance, (re)construction of networks of knowledge, power, and governance between actors in the field of security. By asking both what security means and what security does, IPS scholars take ‘the notion of a politics of security seriously, not in the sense of a security debate in the political arena of the professionals of security practices through spatial referents, politicians and defined by fluctuating criminal networks and flows of terrorism, which govern how regional space is defined and (re)organised. This symmetrical framework also requires us to pay particular attention to the knowledge production processes that underpin the politics of regionalism and security. Indeed, knowledge both frames this political struggle while at the same time operating as a resource within it.

The simultaneous processes of securitisation of space and regionalisation of security in West Africa offers a particularly relevant case study to explore these dynamics. This article draws on multiple periods of fieldwork in Brussels, Abuja and Bamako from 2012 to 2018 over which time over 150 interviews were conducted with policy-makers, civil servants, and security professionals. In this article, I will first show how the imaginary of West Africa as a political community has emerged from interactions between West African and EU actors since the 1990s. This regional imaginary, tied with a re-definition of security from regime to human security, transformed practices of sovereignty and non-interference in the region as it produced ECOWAS as a political subject, progressively endowed with a right to intervention. Secondly, however, I will then go on to show that this imaginary has recently been weakened by increasing international interventionism in West Africa. This interventionism is mediated by a new imaginary of a fuzzy Sahelian region and defined by fluctuating criminal networks and flows of terrorism, organised crime, and irregular migration, and it has led to an alternative spatialisation of security embodied by a re-orientation of financial and symbolic resources towards the G5 Sahel organisation. As the G5 Sahel is highly vulnerable to international influence and shaped by international donors’ securitisation of the Sahel as a dangerous area for their own national security, G5 Sahel member states have limited agency in the definition of regional security. Finally, in the last part of the article, I seek to unpack the ways in which these processes of spatialisation and securitisation have contributed to shape a new regional space of intervention while undermining ECOWAS and the agency of West African actors. Hence, this symmetrical investigation of the politics of regionalism and security seeks to illuminate how competing claims over the spatial scale of power, sovereignty and political authority in the region (Macleod, 1998) have re-organised the West African space.

3. A West African political community

The end of decolonisation and the disengagement of great powers in West Africa in the 1990s led to the crystallisation of the mantra ‘African solutions to African problems’. Re-shaped Regional Economic
Communities (RECs) developed mechanisms to deal with conflict prevention and management. In this respect, ECOWAS is often depicted as the landmark REC within the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) of the African Union (AU). It has developed the most advanced political and security cooperation framework in all regions in the APSA, and has helped build trust and foster dialogue between its member states (Bah, 2005; Jaye, 2008). Even though the organisation has been criticised for its lack of capacities and inefficiencies, it has become an important factor for stability in the region. Moreover, one of its more striking features is that West African governments have formally bestowed on ECOWAS the right to intervene (without government consent) in cases of a threat to democracy, a humanitarian disaster, serious violations of human rights, and threats to regional peace and security (art. 41 ECOWAS, 2008, art. 25 1999) – a unique case both on the African continent and across the world. Indeed, the AU adopted a principle of ‘non-indifference’, as embodied by art. 4(h) of the AU Constitutive Act, which gives the organisation the right to intervention (never activated) in situations of war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity. ECOWAS, in contrast, is the only REC that has expanded this right to situations of breaches of democracy.

The role acquired by ECOWAS as the legitimate regional security actor has been underpinned and made possible by an imaginary of the organisation as a regional political community founded on a set of norms and principles (Lopez Lucia, 2018). This regional imaginary has been articulated and performed by various region-builders as they sought to redefine the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in West Africa, and it has opened the way to a range of region-based security practices. In this process, the EU has been a particularly influential international region-builder. It has used its financial resources and instruments such as the EU-ECOWAS political dialogue to frame the principles, norms, and concepts of ECOWAS in line with its own regional approach (Faria, 2004; Nivet, 2006).

Until recently, the regional approach implemented by EU institutions was based on a representation of regional integration as an imperative for peace and prosperity (Africa-EU, 2007; Council of the EU, 2006; European Community-ACP, 2000). In a convincing article, Waever (1996) argued that integration has become a matter of survival for Europe. A certain quality of security has been tied to the idea of integration, underpinned by the belief that it has preserved Europe from new wars and fragmentation. The idea that the EU is in fact a peace-building project has been prevalent in official EU discourse and has been circulated by EU officials. Importantly, this has included the belief that the EU experience could be reproduced in other regional contexts (EC, 2001). It is precisely this latter representation, in combination with the EU’s securitising discourse on West Africa as a space where ‘terrorist networks will become even more dangerous [and where] State failure and organised crime spread if they are neglected’ (EU, 2003, p. 7) that has framed the EU’s policy. Two things are at play here: both a process of spatialisation of security – as security is linked to regional integration – and of securitisation of space – as the identity of a regional space, West Africa, is linked to how dangerous it is.

Since the end of the 1990s, the EU has continuously been strengthening its partnership with ECOWAS. The Nigerian government and the ECOWAS institutions became its privileged interlocutors. In many ways, the EU’s political project of turning ECOWAS into a political community has converged with the security agenda of the Nigerian government which sought to build a community that it could control and lead. Indeed, since the end of the Civil War in 1970, the Nigerian political and military elites have promoted a representation of Nigeria’s security as being inseparable from West African security (Lopez Lucia, 2018; Osuntokun, 2008). The Civil War saw the French government using Nigeria’s francophone neighbours such as Côte d’Ivoire to support the seceding Republic of Biafra (Aluko, 1971; Obi, 2008). This was a decisive moment which in 1975 led to the creation of ECOWAS to dissuade external actors from meddling in West African (and thus Nigerian) affairs. Since then, the Nigerian government has tried to weaken francophone-anglophone antagonism through its strategy of emphasising the existence of a West African community, thus seeking to ensure its consensual leadership of both sides of this community (Nwokedi, 1985; Obi, 2008; Yoroms, 1993).

Its convergence with the Nigerian government’s needs and interests was crucial to the EU’s region-building strategy. Indeed, Nigeria funds two third of ECOWAS’ budget and is considered to be the regional leader of West Africa even if its policies sometimes trigger concerns among its neighbours (Adeboyo, 2008). The EU was thus able to engage ECOWAS through various framing practices that aimed to transform West Africa into its ideal of a regional political community, underpinned by the respect of democracy, the rule of law and human rights. One such practice entailed the EU sending experts to help officials in the ECOWAS Commission when they were drafting key ECOWAS documents such as the ECOWAS Conflict Preventions Framework (ECPF) (Lopez Lucia, 2018). These European experts sought to inscribe in these documents a reflex-like approach to addressing any security issues faced by West African states at the regional (meaning ECOWAS) level. Another practice involved regular political dialogue meetings with the ECOWAS Heads of State. These were opportunities for high level EU officials to ‘make’ regional leaders react each time one of the ‘essential elements’ (human rights, democratic principles, and the rule of law) of the community was in danger of being breached, and thus foster the organisation’s agency (Lopez Lucia, 2018). Through these practices, EU actors helped construct West Africa as the appropriate and legitimate level of intervention to deal with security issues in the region (including illicit trafficking, circulation of small arms and light weapons, piracy, coup d’Etat leading to spill-over of instability) that became characteristically West African. Hence, these multifaceted interactions between European and West African actors converged to produce ECOWAS as a political subject whose legitimacy as the central regional security actor lay in its ability to tame this ‘dangerous’ space.

The activism of ECOWAS and the Nigerian government, supported by other West African states and the EU, led to the constitution of an emerging regional field of security professionals who have been meeting in various settings such as the West African Police Chief Committee (WAPCCO), the Chief of Defence Staff Committee, the ECOWAS Standby Force Headquarter, and in ECOWAS missions. By taking part in a variety of regional security practices (e.g. joint border control and maritime patrol, regional intelligence exchange, regional military interventions, and so on), these professionals have been (re)producing the imaginary of West Africa as a political community that should be defended. The

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9 The APSA is based on five RECs or Regional Mechanisms which contribute, among other things, to the African Standby Force through their own regional standby brigade and to the Continental Early Warning System.


11 Interviews conducted with EC and EEAS officials between 2011 and 2014.

12 This political project was mainly led by the European Commission (EC), and in particular by former DG DEVELOPMENT (DEV). Since the Lisbon treaty (2009) and the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in 2011, things have become more complicated as we will see in the next section.

13 This political dialogue is underpinned by a principle of conditionality: art. 96 of the Cotonou Agreement plans for the suspension of development aid in case one of the ‘essential elements’ is being breached.

14 Interviews conducted from 2011 to 2014 with EU, ECOWAS and Nigerian officials.
ECOWAS training centres\(^{15}\) are crucial institutions in this (re)production as they are settings of interaction for high-level officers\(^{16}\) from the whole region, as well as producing and disseminating knowledge on West African security. Publications produced within these centres mainly take West Africa as their referent and tend to focus on the central role of ECOWAS (for e.g. Addo, 2005; KAIPTC and GIZ, 2011; Okai et al., 2014). Furthermore, this imaginary of West Africa as a regional political community embodied by ECOWAS emerged together with a shift from an understanding of security as regime security to an understanding of security as human security. These two processes were mutually constitutive. On the one hand, the right to intervention could not easily co-exist with regime security. On the other hand, the shift to human security further legitimised ECOWAS. For instance, the consensus around ECOWAS’ central role as a security provider was strengthened by its political and sometimes military interventions to protect democracy in its member states,\(^{17}\) and also by its acknowledgement of the socio-economic root causes of security threats (ECOWAS, 2013, see for e.g. 2008). Regional imaginary and the on-going redefinition of security have thus been tightly connected and have produced a transformation in the practices and discourses of sovereignty in West Africa through the re-allocation of political authority to ECOWAS. This re-allocation has taken the form of the formal, and increasingly concrete, right to intervene without member states’ consent, alongside a re-organisation of security practices at the West African level. Several key examples testify to these changes, including ECOWAS’ handling of the Ivorian crisis in 2010,\(^{18}\) its reaction to the coup d’etat in Mali in 2012,\(^{19}\) and the recent ECOWAS military intervention in Gambia in 2017 to remove President Yahya Jammeh from power (Grebe, 2018). The next sections, however, will show that the central role of ECOWAS has also been brought into question in recent years.

4. The Sahel as a fuzzy region made of criminal flows

4.1. A re-articulation of the EU regional approach

One of the main actors behind this challenge to the role ECOWAS is precisely the organisation which was originally the most supportive: the EU. The specific context of this last decade matters. The EU, along with European states such as France and the US, increasingly raised their concerns about the deteriorating security situation in West Africa. They pointed out how transnational organised crime was financing terrorism in Northern Nigeria and in the Sahel. They were also concerned with piracy in the Gulf of Guinea diverting international trade routes as well as with insecurity and poverty feeding migration towards the European continent (Aldrich, 2014; Charbonneau, 2017; Chatham House, 2013; Raleigh & Dowd, 2013). The most relevant point here is that they have dealt with this concern by reinvesting in the region directly, circumventing ECOWAS, and by supporting weakly institutionalised security coalitions of West African states, sometimes created under their pressure.\(^{20}\) At the moment, the best example of such a coalition is the G5 Sahel, a regional organisation launched in 2014 by the Heads of States of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger to address security and development challenges in the Sahel.\(^{21}\) In February 2017, these Heads of States also decided to establish a G5 Sahel Joint Force with the aim of mutualising their efforts in the fight against common security threats. These initiatives have been strongly supported by the French government and the EU, and the Joint Force is said to be partly the outcome of cross-border military operations with the French operation Barkhane (Diallo, 2018). This new trend seemed to make sense in light of ECOWAS’ lack of experience in Sahel-Saharan political issues involving Tuareg grievances (ICG, 2016), and the rise of complex and localised security issues involving the presence of competing Islamist groups, local conflicts, and entrenched socio-economic issues and problems of governance. Previously, ECOWAS had usually intervened in very different contexts, for example the civil war in Sierra Leone and Liberia in the 1990s, where there were two clearly opposing factions, or, more recently, to deal with breaches of the democratic principle. However, as we will see, international investment in the G5 Sahel is not unproblematic in its effects.

While the EU is not the only institutional actor funding the G5 Sahel and by-passing ECOWAS, the re-articulation of its regional approach is particularly significant for the redefinition of the West African regional space. The EU was one of the main political partners of ECOWAS and its biggest funder. Until recently, most EU funding in the field of regional security in West Africa was directed at building the capacities of ECOWAS and developing its programmes and initiatives. However, a progressive change has occurred since 2011, when the EU adopted its Sahel Strategy which re-directed some of its development aid towards the Sahel. In addition, a new financial instrument was created, the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa which, among other things, funds regional groupings such as the G5 Sahel. The presence of three Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions in the Sahel (EUCAP Sahel Mali, EUTM Mali, EUCAP Sahel Niger) has also brought more money and human resources to the EU’s activities in Mali and Niger, including providing support to the operationalisation of the G5 Sahel Joint Force. More generally, the EU, together with its member states, is the largest donor in West Africa.\(^{22}\) Changes in these funding patterns tend to have important consequences and, while ECOWAS still receives significant amount of money, funding has become more scattered and now also tends to be directed towards competing initiatives as the organisation has been given less political priority. This re-articulation of the EU’s regional approach can be partly understood by examining the institutional struggles around the EU External Action exacerbated by the Lisbon Treaty reform process. Briefly summarised, the Lisbon Treaty led to the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in 2011. It also split the former European Commission (EC) DG DEV into two parts. While one part joined the EEAS, the other remained in the EC in a newly created Directorate for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO). One of the outcomes of this division was a struggle for political leadership and

\(^{15}\) There are three ECOWAS training centres of excellence: The Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC) in Ghana, l’Ecole de Maintien de la Paix in Mali, and the National Defence College in Nigeria. All three centres have signed a memorandum of understanding with ECOWAS to create a West African integrated curriculum and training to prepare civilian experts, police and military staff for deployment in peace support and electoral observation missions.

\(^{16}\) Interviews conducted with West African officials in 2013.

\(^{17}\) In Côte d’Ivoire (2010), Guinea-Bissau (2012), Mali (2013) and in The Gambia in 2017, to give some examples among many.

\(^{18}\) ECOWAS’ strong position on, and official threat of the use of force after the refusal of President Gbagbo to transfer power to the winner of the elections, Alassane Ouattara, was instrumental in resolving the crisis (ECOWAS, 2010).

\(^{19}\) Following the March 2012 coup d’état in Mali, the ECOWAS heads of state decided to apply drastic sanction against the junta, including closing the borders and freezing the state’s account at the regional central bank. They also threatened military intervention but the sanctions and political pressure were enough to rapidly lead to a post-coup transition in which ECOWAS also played a decisive role (ICG, 2016).

\(^{20}\) These new groupings aim to coordinate their members to tackle specific issues rather than engaging in ambitious and comprehensive integration processes such as ECOWAS.

\(^{21}\) The MNJTF fighting Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin is another example of this new type of grouping.

\(^{22}\) For G5 Sahel states alone, the EU, together with its member states, has provided 8 billion Euros in development assistance over 2014–2020. 1865 billion euro has been committed under the Trust Fund, and 147 million Euros have been provided to support the set-up of the G5 Sahel Joint Force (EEAS, 2019).
financial resources over EU’s African policy, legitimised through different views of the EU’s identity and role in the world.23 In the years following the creation of the EEAS, officials in DG DEVCO tended to emphasise the traditional normative and development-focused role of the EU; whereas EEAS officials stressed the need for the EU to become a ‘real’ foreign policy actor pursuing its strategic interests.24 Importantly, the promotion of regional integration remained central within DG DEVCO as part of what the officials referred to as the EU’s normative identity, while EEAS officials argued for a more pragmatic regional approach, i.e. by offering support to any form of regional initiative that coincided with the political and security interests of the EU (Lopez Lucia, 2017). It appears, however, that in recent years, EEAS officials have been winning this struggle25 and have mainstreamed the new EU regional approach, at least with regard to West Africa.26 As we will see, the crisis in the Sahel, and convergent interests with political elites in the G5 Sahel states provided a window of opportunity to strategically promote this new approach.

4.2. A fluctuating Sahelian imaginary

It is thus important to examine the re-articulation of the EU’s regional approach and how it contributes to the re-definition of the West African regional space. As already mentioned, the EU used to perform, and inscribe its action within, the imaginary of West Africa as a political community embodied by ECOWAS. In contrast, and in line with the new EU regional approach, an alternative spatial imaginary emerged, made of a more fuzzy Sahelian region as defined by fluctuating geographical boundaries based on criminal networks and flows. Such changes matter as these spatial imaginaries are often presented as truthful entities and can be powerful devices for reshaping power dynamics and changes in governance (Hakhli, 1998; Harvey et al., 2011). This raises important questions concerning the ways in which these spatial referents are evidenced, turned into ‘facts’, and used to justify particular policies. We need to ask who is the motor of this process, in whose interests are they acting, and with what consequences? Actors such as EEAS officials can, for instance, strategically engage in the production of new imaginaries by justifying a change in the nature and/or boundaries of a region to attract additional financial resources and/or strengthen their position and vision (Bach, 2016; Faasi, 2009). This in turn enables them to legitimise new entities such as the G5 Sahel, attribute new roles, prioritise and make new ‘facts’, and shape policies (Blightman de Guevara & Kostić, 2017; see; Harvey, 1990). It can also challenge established knowledges and patterns of influence (Moe & Müller, 2018), such as ECOWAS being recognised as the most legitimate regional security actor.

One internal EU report (GIT, 2014) serves as a particularly telling example of this shift. Written to reflect on how to strengthen the EU’s security policy in the Sahel, the text focuses mainly on flows and border spaces. Its authors argue that the Sahel-Sahara space is shaped by traffickers and terrorists who use traditional trade roads in a fluid and adaptive way. They thus conclude that the EU should also develop an adaptive and fluid approach to tackle these problems and respond to these realities on the ground. In this context, instead of being associated with a space with clearly defined boundaries, the region is characterised as a functional and fluctuating space defined by unifying problems and mobile criminal actors. An alternative spatialisation of security has emerged: the regional political community imaginary has been replaced by an imaginary made of networks and flows of organised crime, terrorism, and irregular migration which is now considered the right space for intervention. This process has also been closely linked to the increasing securitisation and description of the Sahel as a dangerous place, not only for the Sahelian populations, but also for European citizens.

The EU’s strategy for security and development in the Sahel (EU, 2011) was the point of departure of this Sahelian imaginary.27 Initially, it comprised four countries, Mauritania, Niger, Mali, and Algeria. In 2014, Algeria was dropped while Burkina Faso and Chad were added, partly on the basis of various conflict analyses and early warning assessments (Council of the EU, 2015). These assessments were carried out for eight countries belonging to what the Sahel Strategy Regional Action Plan (RAP) labels the ‘wider Sahel region’ (Council of the EU, 2015). To understand the new EU regional approach, two points are particularly relevant. First, the inclusion or exclusion of countries is based on assessments of criminal networks and flows. For this reason the Sahel is constantly redefined and remains rather fuzzy and fluid: encompassing a space from Mauritania, Niger and Mali; to the inclusion of Burkina Faso and Chad; and then to a ‘wider Sahel region’. Depending on the issues that need to be tackled, the borders of the Sahel can be extended or reduced. The Sahel may encompass Nigeria and Senegal when tackling migration or dealing with humanitarian assistance (Council of the EU, 2017; EEAS, 2018), or even the Lake Chad region when targeting border management and trafficking (Council of the EU, 2017). The inclusion of Nigeria and Senegal is particularly telling. Even within the same documents, both can be considered as either within and outside of the Sahel. The fuzziness of this regional imaginary is also its strength as it allows an adaptation of the geographical space to the needs and interests of these EU actors, even though we will see that this fuzziness also raises tensions as it always overflows its institutional embodiment. The production of this regional imaginary shows the extent to which the definition ultimately remains a political decision of categorisation. Policy practitioners decide which particular issue to prioritise over others and frame how these are connected to each other. Spatial and security elements and ‘facts’ have thus been articulated and re-arranged in novel ways to constitute this new regional imaginary.

Second, the identification and categorisation of these criminal networks and flows as constituting the Sahel has been used strategically by certain groups of individuals within the EU institutions to pursue their vision of the EU as a strategic actor. A partial explanation for the success of this re-definition of the region is the increasing number of experts and think tanks that have been involved in these conflict analyses and assessments.28 The authority of this expert knowledge has been mobilised by EEAS and other actors to support their position. Indeed, in the context of the institutional struggles described above, this new regional imaginary has been utilised by EEAS officials to justify the by-passing of ECOWAS, which they considered too constraining and inefficient, instead lending their support to the G5 Sahel which is presented as more flexible, efficient, and more attuned to EEAS priorities.29 The production of the Sahel as a coherent (even if fuzzy) region defined by criminal flows and networks has enabled EU officials to present the marginalisation of ECOWAS as a necessity rather than a political choice.30

23 The EEAS brought together former Commission officials with diplomats from member states and the crisis management structures of the EU. The service thus became a more ‘political’ body than the EC, which created conflicts in the elaboration and management of the EU development policy.
24 Interviews with EC and EEAS officials between 2011 and 2014.
25 Increasingly, DEVCO officials are adopting a viewpoint on these issues which is similar to the position of EEAS officials.
26 Interviews with EC and EEAS officials in 2018.
27 Obviously, the term Sahel has a longer history in which this ‘new’ imaginary is embedded. Bonnecase and Brachet (2013) explain, for example, that the concept of Sahel itself took on its geopolitical meaning in the early 1970s, in the context of famine, to designate a set of African countries essentially characterised by their extreme poverty.
28 Lines of budget in the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace are now dedicated to funding policy research to develop security expertise within the EU.
29 Interviews with EEAS officials between 2012 and 2014, and in 2018.
30 Interviews with EC and EEAS officials in 2018.
Sahel is presented as an inescapable political reality and thus as the right level of action. This strategic production of knowledge has been successful in various ways. In 2015, EEAS officials were able to make the case for the launch of a ‘common reflection on how to better ‘think and work regionally’ (Council of the EU, 2015) – one which is supposedly more flexible, pragmatic and adaptable than the support given to traditional regional organisations.31 This new approach was framed in a way that would enable the EU to become a more political and strategic actor by liberating it from its normative identity (Lopez Lucia, 2017). Concretely, it provides the EU with the opportunity to support whatever form of regional initiatives it deems appropriate to pursue its strategic priorities. In the Sahel, this meant offering unconditional support to the G5 Sahel to pursue the EU’s most pressing security interests: the fight against terrorism, transnational organised crime, and irregular migration.

This move was facilitated by the leadership of the French government and pressure from French representatives to the EU to tackle security issues at the level of the Sahel which was already constituted as a geopolitical reality in the French context (Montclos, 2019). The identification of the G5 Sahel as the institutional embodiment of the Sahel increased the influence of these actors within and increasingly beyond the EEAS as it enabled them to align their interests with those of the French government, and of the political and military elite of the G5 Sahel states. Indeed, the financial and political benefits in terms of legitimacy and support are particularly important for this Sahelian elite (Molenaar, 2018). At the same time these very benefits undermine the engagement of the Malian, Nigerien, and Burkinabe governments within ECOWAS as they have now a privileged access to EU resources through the G5 Sahel. This support to the G5 Sahel is partly an emanation of French geopolitical interests, and thus has also provided France with a renewed role in the region. That role had otherwise relatively eroded in recent decades due to the increased presence of ECOWAS and the leadership of Nigeria. The creation of the G5 Sahel has thus enabled the French government to exclude Nigeria from regional security governance. Its interest in doing so was shared with some of the governments of G5 Sahel states that have been wary both of Nigeria’s overwhelming leadership in West Africa and of ECOWAS’ institutional and normative constraints.32

At the same time, the institutional embodiment of the Sahel as the G5 Sahel is currently raising many tensions. Without questioning the fact that G5 Sahel countries suffer from similar issues, these problems go beyond the borders of the organisation. Conflict dynamics and attacks have spread to a number of West African coastal countries. In response, in September 2017, Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Togo launched the Accra Initiative to jointly respond to the threat of violent extremism. Niger and Chad cooperate with Nigeria, Benin, and Cameroon within the MNJTF to coordinate the fight against Boko Haram. In light of the conflicts spreading in this way beyond the border of the G5 Sahel states, and of the significant inefficiencies of the G5 Sahel Joint Force (ICG, 2017), it has become increasingly complicated for EU actors to justify their prioritisation of the G5 Sahel, in particular to the detriment of ECOWAS.33 This is even more the case following the ECOWAS (2019) extraordinary summit last September announcing the mobilisation of one billion dollars dedicated to fighting terrorism, and the coordination of the organisation with Chad and Mauritania, the two non-ECOWAS member states of the G5 Sahel.

This new regional imaginary is now shaping regional security practices which are competing with those derived from the regional political community imaginary. Regional security structures are being created that overlap with ECOWAS’ structures, such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force and training centres such as the Sahelian Security College and the Sahelian Defence College. These training centres are in direct competition with the three ECOWAS centres mentioned earlier which are key settings for socialisation and trust-building among military and police officers from West Africa. Moreover, while these ECOWAS centres are sites of (re)production of the West African political community imaginary underpinned by a human security perspective, the G5 Sahel colleges have the narrower francophone Sahel as their main spatial referent and focus exclusively on ‘hard’ security responses against terrorism and trafficking. In the same way, the establishment of an ECOWAS Standby Force was the counterpart of the right to intervene attributed to ECOWAS, and embodied the organisation’s place within the framework of the APSA. The building up of the G5 Sahel Joint Force is now competing with the Standby Force for international resources and attention as it is progressively being integrated within the APSA after the signature of a memorandum of understanding between the G5 and the AU. The EU, which has invested greatly into the development of the ECOWAS Standby Force, now appears to be starting all over again with the Joint Force.34 Security practices developed to control and manage borders in the Sahel are also threatening a key dimension of the ECOWAS integration process, namely in relation to the free circulation of West African citizens (Lebovich, 2018). Securitising borders control within the West African space is hindering the right to free circulation and the mobility of citizens, an important symbol of the regional political community imaginary.

4.3. Weakening West African agency

This on-going re-organisation of the West African political space has important effects as the competition between these spatial imaginaries is a struggle ‘over the right to speak sovereignty about geography, space, and territory’ (Tuathail, 1996, p. 9). Indeed, regionalism is a site of struggles that transform practices of sovereignty, thus highlighting the concept’s contingent and historical character as shown by IR post-structuralist writers (Bartelson, 1995; Walker, 1992; Weber, 1994). It does so in two important ways. Firstly, regionalism is constituted by coalitions of actors who seek to relocate ‘the governance of particular issues beyond the scope of national governance and politics’ (Hameiri, 2013, p. 314). This process can entail profound transformations as it raises the question of the spatial scale at which power, sovereignty and political authority should reside (MacLeod, 1998). Secondly, as we are seeing in West Africa, regionalism in the Global South often involves a multitude of actors including international donors, regional and international organisations, and great powers. From development programmes, to political support, military assistance and security capacity-building, international region-building can help transform the discourses and practices of sovereignty that constitute states in the Global South. It can participate in opening a legitimate space for international intervention and involvement in the politics of these states and the region. It can further (or possibly hinder) the process of re-allocation of authority at the regional level and it can also participate in region-building struggles by promising a different meaning of the region in the form of an alternative spatialisation that is embodied, for example, by a competing regionalism project. In such instances, interventions, security practices and regionalism are intertwined and produce a range of effects that re-organise spaces of interventions, sovereignty and political authority.

In particular, by undermining the re-allocation of political authority at the ECOWAS level and the legitimacy of the organisation, and by strengthening the rule of the political elite in G5 Sahel member states,

31 This new approach was also confirmed in the 2016 EU Global Strategy (EEAS, 2016, p. 33).
32 Interview with ECOWAS officials in 2018 and 2019.
33 Interviews with EEAS officials and EU field officers in 2018.
34 As commented by an EU field officer, the operationalisation of the G5 Sahel Joint Force is neither easier nor faster than the ECOWAS Standby Force even though the former has access to much more funding and technical support (interview with an EU field officer in 2018).
international actors’ intervention practices seriously weaken the agency of ECOWAS, and in doing so they limit the participation of West African actors in the struggle over definitions of security. Indeed, a crucial differentiation between the traditional and the new EU regional approaches is in the level of agency they bestow on the region. At the core of the former approach, importance was given to the development of the agency of regional organisations through various means (political dialogue, negotiations, capacity-building, etc.). In contrast, while ‘regions’ – characterised by criminal networks and flows – are still strong legitimising devices for the EU, their meaning has become functional to ‘security’ (as defined by the EU). This new version of the EU’s regional approach increasingly understands regions as problematic entities.

Two things are at stake here. First, these changes represent a threat to the process of regional integration and to the transformation of practices of sovereignty which that process enabled. Indeed, while ECOWAS has gained a degree of political authority that allows the organisation to intervene in West Africa and to set a regional (human) security agenda, this consensus is still fragile and constantly challenged by member states – particularly, the G5 Sahel and its member states entirely depend on the EU and international actors, unlike EU-ECOWAS documents. This political elite can use these resources to consolidate its own power, focusing on international actors’ priorities which also brings a range of financial flows and networks. The G5 Sahel is considered to be a flexible tool, supported by the EU, to deal with these issues, which impacted how security is being defined and dealt with because financial state interests, and mixed commitments towards the development and ‘space’ are intertwined in this transformation.

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References


5. Conclusion

To conclude, this article has put forward a symmetrical exploration into the connections between the politics of regionalism and security in West Africa. In particular it sought to bring attention to the meaning-making, social and material struggles that underpin security regionalism. Investigating the re-organisation of the West African regional space allowed us to counter the mainstream understanding of the rise of the G5 Sahel as a mere policy adaptation to new security ‘facts’ which often lies at the heart of IR accounts of security regionalism. Instead, this article has shown that various logics and interests – embedded in competing regional imaginaries– are driving this transformation. Looking simultaneously at securitisation and spatialisation processes enabled us to shed light on the negotiations and conflicts over the appropriate scale for the location of political authority and sovereignty, and also on how these underpin the exercise of transnational or supranational management of security threats in international politics. As a process of re-allocation of authority beyond the state, security regionalism is a case in point showing how meanings and practices of ‘security’ and ‘space’ are intertwined in this transformation.

38 Interviews with EEAS officials between 2011 and 2014, and in 2018. The Sahel Strategy and the RAP were, for instance, not negotiated with Sahelian actors, unlike EU-ECOWAS documents.
39 Many officials interviewed have emphasised the weakness of the G5 Sahel permanent secretariat and the tensions among the member states. Interviews with EEAS officials in 2018.


