



Commentary

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By Nnamdi Obasi, Crisis Group Senior Adviser, Nigeria

ECOWAS, Nigeria and the Niger Coup Sanctions: Time to Recalibrate

The sanctions imposed on Niger by the Economic Community of West African States after its July coup are hurting civilians more than anyone else. Led by Nigeria, the bloc should revise these measures to narrowly target the generals responsible for disrupting democracy.

In July, a group of military officers overthrew Niger's government, sending shock waves through coup-plagued West Africa. Within days, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) announced a raft of sanctions on Niger, the strictest the bloc has ever imposed on an errant member state. Members of the fifteen-nation bloc (excluding the four members suspended since falling under military rule – Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Niger), along with the eight-member West African Economic and Monetary Union, agreed to close all borders with Niger, suspend financial transactions and freeze the country's assets in external banks. ECOWAS also issued an ultimatum to the junta to restore constitutional order and reinstate the ousted president, Mohamed Bazoum, within one week or face other measures, notably including military intervention.

ECOWAS's initial reaction to the Niger coup was understandable, informed as it was by legitimate concerns about the risks of coup contagion in West Africa. Nigeria helped shape this reaction. Eager to earn his stripes as a strong leader amid a regional crisis, newly elected Nigerian President Bola Tinubu, who took over as ECOWAS chairman two weeks before the coup, was one of the regional heads of state who

advocated for forceful intervention to reinstate Bazoum. Most leaders seemed to agree that Nigeria's army, the biggest in West Africa, would spearhead any military action.

But ECOWAS and Tinubu appear to have overshot the mark. Although the ECOWAS sanctions sent a strong signal of disapproval concerning coups and have undoubtedly created external pressure on Niger's generals, they have also backfired in ways relevant to both Niamey and Abuja. They have created severe hardship in Niger with adverse boomerang effects on Nigeria – crippling a vibrant cross-border economy straddling the long Nigeria-Niger border, disrupting livelihoods, exacerbating humanitarian challenges, and jeopardising big rail and gas projects that could bolster regional trade. On the political front, the sanctions threaten to harm bilateral cooperation on a range of important issues, particularly security.

Months after the sanctions were imposed in early August, a policy recalibration would serve the peoples of both Niger and Nigeria, while having security and economic benefits throughout the region. While pressing to restore democratic rule in Niger, the Nigerian government should in parallel use its influence with ECOWAS to press for a review of the sanctions package in

place. In particular, ECOWAS sanctions should be recast to focus on the direct interests of junta leaders who bear responsibility for returning

the country to constitutional rule, rather than punish the populations of Niger and northern Nigeria as a whole.

Hardship and Pushback in Niger

While the ECOWAS sanctions' purpose was to pressure Niger's de facto military authorities to reinstate Bazoum, that has not happened. Meanwhile, much of the impact of the broad-based measures is being felt by civilians.

The ECOWAS sanctions have cut off Niger from many of its traditional trading partners, worsening chronic food insecurity among vulnerable groups. The junta has maintained relations with neighbours Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali, whom it sees as allies because all three are under military rule. But the borders with Benin and Nigeria, the two countries from which Niger normally imports food and other key necessities, remain closed. As a result, residents are grappling with shortages of medicine, cereals and imported foodstuffs like sugar, powdered milk and vegetable oil. In August, the price of rice surged by 21 per cent, according to the World Food Programme (WFP). By mid-October, the price of a 25kg (55 pound) bag of rice had jumped over 50 per cent over a two-month period. Before the coup, Niger was

Faso are deemed too dangerous due to the prevalence of militants there. Aid workers in Niger are meanwhile having to negotiate access to areas where vulnerable people live, with the military demanding that international organisations travel outside the capital only with armed escorts.

Power outages are further damaging Niger's brittle economy. In normal times, the country imports more than two thirds of its electricity from its much wealthier neighbour, Nigeria, but sanctions have severely curtailed supply. Unlike in 2021, following the coup in Mali – when ECOWAS excluded food, electricity and petroleum products from the punitive economic and financial restrictions it imposed – the bloc has carved out no such exemptions for Niger. Major cities like Niamey, Maradi and Zinder are suffering prolonged blackouts and serious power rationing, and many businesses have turned to using generators. With fuel in short supply, those that are unable to procure diesel or to bear the cost of a generator have shut down altogether.

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already facing its second-highest level of severe food insecurity since 2014, with 3.3 million (or 13.3 percent) of its 25 million people affected; the WFP says that number has probably more than doubled.

For its part, the junta is making life difficult for humanitarian organisations trying to deliver relief. Although Benin and Togo have made exemptions in their application of sanctions for humanitarian aid destined for Niger, Niger's authorities have thus far refused entry to trucks from Benin. Alternative routes through Burkina

As for whom Nigeriens blame for this state of affairs, there is little definitive evidence one way or another. Under a regime like that of the junta in Niamey, scoping public opinion is next to impossible, and any polls results are at best indicative. In August, a survey by a polling firm, Premise Data, found that 79 per cent of respondents supported the junta and its actions, but the sample size was small and non-representative. On the whole, the junta has sought to rally citizen support by casting its power grab as a struggle with France, the

former colonial power, which took a tough line with the generals following the August takeover. But whether political sentiment is with the junta, or anti-junta sentiment is repressed, the sanctions regime has not translated into overt domestic political pressure on the generals.

The junta has mounted a legal challenge to the sanctions. On 21 November, along with six Nigerien organisations and a Niger national, it asked the ECOWAS Court of Justice sitting in

Abuja to order the sanctions lifted. In seeking relief, the petitioners argued that ECOWAS has been punishing Nigeriens with harsher sanctions than it applied following coups in other member states. For its part, ECOWAS argued that the junta is not recognised under the regional bloc's protocol and is therefore ineligible to be granted a hearing by the regional court. The court adjourned until 7 December, when it will deliver its ruling.

Impact on Nigeria

While international attention has focused on the Nigerien people's hardship, the sanctions are also affecting Nigeria, which shares a border of roughly 1,600km with Niger.

Nigeria was already in financial distress before the turbulence in Niger. In October 2022, four months before Nigeria's presidential election, the Central Bank decided to replace the country's entire stock of naira bills (the local currency) with new bank notes in just three months, triggering an unprecedented cash shortage that left Nigerians queuing at banks for days. The sudden currency makeover proved such a disaster that it was suspended the following March; the suspension was extended indefinitely in November. Then, at his inauguration in May, Tinubu – who campaigned promising to alleviate poverty – ended long-standing fuel subsidies that had drained \$10 billion from the budget in 2022. Petrol prices almost tripled overnight. The following month, his government abandoned a years-long currency peg in order to allow the naira to drop to more market-reflective rates.

While foreign investors say Tinubu's policy measures will help fix the ailing economy, local businesses are in turmoil and citizens are paying a huge price in the meantime. The fuel subsidy's removal has sent transport costs

soaring, which in turn has accelerated the pace of price increases for basic food items amid a wider inflationary surge. In October, year-on-year food inflation rose to 32 per cent.

Since August, the closed border with Niger has been aggravating Nigeria's woes. Particularly hard hit are millions of people in Nigeria's seven northernmost states who work in agriculture or the informal sector, or who rely on cross-border trade. These states were already in a bad place economically before the coup-linked sanctions hit. Earlier in the year, the UN Food and Agricultural Organization had estimated that 3.3 million people were food-insecure in three states (Borno, Adamawa and Yobe) of the North East region and 2.9 million critically so in the North West. It also projected that these numbers could rise to 4.4 million and 4.3 million respectively, in the lean season to December, if urgent action was not taken.

But if things were bad in the north, the sanctions have certainly made them worse. In October, Cadre Harmonisé – an analytic tool for understanding food insecurity – warned that political crises in Niger (and, presumably, related measures such as the border closure) could have a “huge” impact on food security and malnutrition in both the North East and North West regions of Nigeria. Should Niger's

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Among other things, the sanctions have strained strong commercial ties that northerners have with Niger. Several border communities mostly hire labourers from Niger to work the fields. Retail shops and restaurants that rely on customers coming in from Niger are in a slump. Formal traffic across the border has ground to a halt as Nigerian officials stop vehicles from travelling to the country next door. The implications of the cessation of cross-border trade are discussed further below.

The closed border is also pushing the economy in parts of northern Nigeria underground. As was to be expected, smuggling, a long-running problem at the border and throughout the region, is on the rise. People are using motorcycles, tricycles or donkeys to ship goods across the border, notably around Illela (Sokoto state), the Jibiya to Daura/Kongolam axis (Katsina state) and in Zurmi local government area (Zamfara state), with some traversing hazardous terrain where armed gangs operate. Many smugglers work with compromised customs and immigration officers who, residents say, are demanding increasingly high bribes. Elsewhere, for example in the Dankama area of Katsina state, smugglers have reportedly

attacked security personnel who have tried to stop them. Some of these smuggling networks and the illicit economies they are establishing may be difficult to dismantle when the border opens again.

Sanctions have also had a negative effect on security. Rampant insecurity – driven by the Boko Haram insurgency, herder-farmer violence and banditry – already made daily life difficult in Nigeria’s North East and North West, and the sanctions have made it worse. Women who became sole providers after their husbands were killed by bandits or jihadists are now facing a potential loss of their livelihoods, to the extent that these were linked to cross-border trade, which in turn threatens to deepen poverty and worsen child malnutrition. The border closure also exposes women traders, who may find themselves forced onto illegal trading routes, to exploitation by smugglers and violence by bandits. A gender activist, Sarah Dantsoho Tama, told Crisis Group that the slowdown in economic activities could make women and girls in border communities increasingly susceptible to gender-based violence and human trafficking. The risk will grow as more women resort to begging for food or other coping practices and as desperate traders fall prey to armed groups along illegal smuggling routes.

Blocked Corridors

In considering the question of how sanctions on Niger are hurting the economies of Nigeria’s northernmost states, the impact on trading patterns is especially important.

The territory stretching from Niger’s second-largest city, Maradi, to the cities of Katsina and Kano in northern Nigeria is normally a vibrant trade corridor. In 2021, Nigeria exported \$180 million worth of goods and services to Niger, including electricity, tobacco and cement, according to the UN international trade database. In the same year, Niger exported \$56.8 million worth of goods to Nigeria, mainly

livestock-derived products, fruits and refined petroleum. As these figures capture merely formally declared transactions, real trade numbers are obviously much higher when informal cross-border commerce is considered.

Trade between the two countries is also an important part of the trans-Saharan corridor, a busy route connecting Nigeria to countries like Burkina Faso and Mali and a crucial source of income for Nigeria’s transport sector. An official of the Kano state’s chamber of commerce told Crisis Group that trucks carrying about 2,000 containers got stuck at the Niger border in early

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August, with those transporting perishable items having to write off their cargo. In early November, long lines of trucks loaded with goods remained stranded at the borders. Traders at Kano’s Dawanau International Grains Market, which distributes grains and other cash crops throughout Nigeria and the wider region, say sales have declined by as much as 40 per cent. Traders at major cattle markets in Illela (Sokoto state) and Maigatari (Jigawa state) are also in distress.

Governors of the seven most affected states have thus far refrained from publicly pushing back against Tinubu and ECOWAS, but economic groups like the Arewa Economic Forum and prominent civil society groups like the Northern

Elders Forum and Arewa Consultative Forum want the sanctions lifted. On 17 October, prompted by some of its northern members, Nigeria’s House of Representatives asked the federal government to reopen the Niger border. More recently, on 22 November, a group of members of the ECOWAS Parliament, led by a Nigerian senator from Borno state in the North East, Ali Ndume, appealed to ECOWAS leaders to “lift the sanctions and open the closed border” as parliament had already recommended. The overriding consensus is that the border closure is impoverishing border communities and impeding progress toward a negotiated resolution of the crisis.

Infrastructure Setbacks

The sanctions and attendant frictions between Niger and Nigeria could also delay or even derail important infrastructure projects meant to boost regional trade and human security.

One set of risks concerns a prospective rail project. In 2021, Nigeria government signed a \$2 billion agreement with Portugal’s Mota-Engil Group to build a 284km railway from Kano to Niger’s second-largest city, Maradi. The railway has the potential to transport thousands of passengers and cargo daily across the border. Funding would come from commercial European loans (Credit Suisse Group, Africa Finance and the state-owned German development bank KfW), but the EU suspended financing to Niger in the wake of the coup, and it is unclear whether these lenders will honour their commitments as long as Niger remains under military rule. In September, Nigeria’s new transport minister, Ahmed Alkali, said the project had made good progress since 2021 and was optimistic that workers would start laying

the rail line soon. But some observers say the 2025 target date for completion may have to be pushed back, as no progress can be made on the 24km stretch from the border to Maradi, at least until the sanctions are lifted. High inflation means that costs are likely to increase further.

Also at risk of delay or worse is Nigeria’s ambitious Trans-Saharan Gas Pipeline project, first proposed in the 1970s. In 2022, as global demand for natural gas rose following Russia’s all-out invasion of Ukraine, Algeria, Nigeria and Niger agreed to revive the \$13 billion project. The 4,100km pipeline is supposed to run from Nigeria through Niger to the Algerian coast, from where it could supply Europe with as much as 30 billion cubic metres of natural gas yearly. During his presidential campaign, Tinubu pledged to complete the pipeline and boost Nigeria’s gas exports and revenue. Even before the military takeover in Niamey, jihadists in Niger and bandits in north-western Nigeria posed risks to the pipeline’s construction.

The coup and ECOWAS's stringent sanctions have now cast greater doubt on the project, not least because they suggest that the future of Nigeria-Niger relations will remain uncertain, at least as long as the Niamey junta remains in

power. An official of Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation in Abuja told Crisis Group that recent developments are already creating delays.

Other Implications

At a political level, the ECOWAS sanctions are damaging longstanding relations between Nigeria and Niger. Among Nigeria's neighbours, Niger has been the most consistent security partner, particularly when it comes to fighting militants around Lake Chad. Many Nigerians think Abuja must strike a balance between its commitment to democratic ideals under ECOWAS and the reality of managing security and humanitarian challenges, which require continued partnership and cooperation with Niger, even under military rule. They point to the ways in which growing acrimony between the two countries could have long-term implications for bilateral cooperation, for several reasons.

First, the recent tensions are already hampering regional stabilisation initiatives and could impair counter-terrorism efforts. Niger and Nigeria are among four Lake Chad basin states pooling resources to fight Boko Haram and other armed groups, notably Islamic State West Africa Province. Together with Cameroon and Chad, the two countries have coordinated counter-insurgency efforts under the banner of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) since 2015. The force's operations have sometimes involved troops from one country crossing into another.

That arrangement now appears fraught. Military spokesmen in Niger and Nigeria have publicly dismissed Nigerian media reports alleging that the junta had withdrawn from the MNJTF. Still, cooperation has clearly fallen short of the level prior to the coup and the sanctions. For instance, Nigeria's director of defence media operations, Major General Edward Buba, said communication between the Nigerien units

and the MNJTF headquarters "has been less than perfect ... obviously, due to the political situation".

There are other MNJTF-related issues as well. One is that Niger has not replaced the troops that it rotated out of MNJTF headquarters in N'Djamena in September, even though it had nominated replacements. A Nigerien security source said this delay was caused by the need to concentrate military resources on defending Niamey from ECOWAS's threatened military intervention rather than any intention to withdraw from MNJTF, but at least for now, it has created a lack of personnel at the MNJTF headquarters.

Beyond the MNJTF, Niger is important to Nigeria's security in other respects. The two countries have often collaborated to tackle illicit economic activities and cross-border crime, including trafficking in drugs, arms and people. Political instability in Niger might hamper bilateral security efforts and leave young men in both countries more vulnerable to recruitment should jihadists or criminal gangs find themselves operating with fewer constraints.

Finally, Niamey has interpreted Nigeria's decision to stop sending electricity as a particularly hostile move, even if the latter was required to do so under ECOWAS's sanctions. Some observers say the measure violates decades-old resource sharing agreements. Others point out that Niger regularly failed to pay for its electricity anyway – and that its construction of the Kandadji multi-purpose dam and hydroelectric power plant already violated its agreement with Nigeria over shared use of the Niger River. Whatever the case, the power

outages have embittered Niamey vis-à-vis its more powerful southern neighbour, with potential implications for bilateral relations. “We are losing our longstanding strategic leverage with

Niger”, said Ahmed Magaji, who has served as deputy head of mission in Saudi Arabia and ambassador to São Tomé and Príncipe.

Reviewing the Sanctions

As outlined above, ECOWAS sanctions are hurting civilians in Niger and Nigeria more than the generals in Niamey. The measures are also undermining Nigeria’s security and economic interests (as well as those of other countries in the neighbourhood). With the option of military intervention now virtually off the table, all parties – ECOWAS, the Nigerian government and the junta – need to show flexibility in order to resolve the impasse and develop realistic arrangements for returning Niger to constitutional rule. Nigeria should encourage ECOWAS to reconsider how it uses sanctions and diplomacy to push for a return to constitutional rule in Niger, with a view toward mitigating the costs that sanctions are creating in the meantime.

In these respects, ECOWAS, the Nigerian government and the Niger junta, supported by other international partners (including the UN, European Union and African Union) should commit to the following five steps:

- **Aim for a constitutional transition rather than reversing the coup:** ECOWAS seems to understand that the moment for quickly reversing the military takeover has passed. The junta has rallied public support and become entrenched, taking cues and receiving support from military leaders in Guinea, Mali and Burkina Faso. Tinubu has rightly suggested that negotiations with Niger’s generals are inevitable. As ECOWAS chairman, he should convince the bloc to formally scrap its threat of military intervention. This step would send a strong and positive message to the junta to the effect that ECOWAS is genuinely committed to dialogue that could restore constitutional rule in Niger

- **Review and refine the sanctions:** The Nigerian government should use its influence to highlight the ways in which some of the sanctions have backfired as part of an effort to convince ECOWAS members to review the Niger sanctions regime. ECOWAS should retain those measures that are tailored to the specific interests of junta leaders and others identified as having played a major role in undermining Niger’s constitutional order or obstructing the restoration of democracy and rule of law. Such targeted measures should include travel bans, asset freezes and transactional restrictions on specific individuals and entities. Members of the Conseil National pour la Sauvegarde de la Patrie (National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland) should be particular targets for financial sanctions, and they and their family members should continue to be subject to travel bans.

But, at the same time, ECOWAS and the Nigerian government should review the broader sanctions that are inflicting hardship on ordinary citizens and creating ill-will between Niger’s people and those of surrounding countries. They should urgently make exemptions for food, medicines, electricity and other products essential for daily life. They should also engage with Nigerien authorities to open up, as quickly as possible, safe, unimpeded humanitarian corridors that would facilitate the delivery of aid to vulnerable groups, particularly women, children and displaced persons.

As for Niamey, once assured that the regional bloc has dropped its earlier plans for military intervention and is ready to drop border closure from its sanctions, Nigerien

authorities should reopen borders with Nigeria and Benin from their side. (After closing all borders immediately after the coup, they reopened them to most neighbours – but not Nigeria and Benin – in light of the threat of intervention.) Ideally, both parties should agree to reopen the borders simultaneously.

- **Step up diplomatic engagement:** With Nigeria's support, ECOWAS should redouble efforts to enter a dialogue with Niamey, capitalising on the good-will that would likely be created by recalibration of the sanctions regime. The junta, which initially and unwisely rebuffed ECOWAS but now seems to have had a sober rethink, should also re-engage with the regional bloc. In October, Niger's interior minister, General Mohamed Boubacar Toumba, told a peace and security conference in Togo that his country was receptive to dialogue with ECOWAS partners. On 6 November, the junta asked Togo to step in as mediator with ECOWAS and other international actors. These statements and gestures appear well-meaning, but the junta should communicate them to ECOWAS officially; bearing in mind that the regional bloc already has a three-person negotiation team set up, a compromise may be to add a Togolese representative to it.

The ECOWAS Commission and leadership should seize upon this moment to push for a dialogue, with no preconditions or ultimatums, focusing on three key goals: 1) securing Bazoum's release and granting him and his family asylum in a West African country; 2) identifying the factors that triggered the coup and exploring how ECOWAS and other international partners can help address them; and 3) formulating a transition timetable with realistic timelines, leading to the junta's exit from power and restoration of democratic governance at the earliest possible date.

So that it can come to the table prepared to discuss the restoration of constitutional

rule, the junta should initiate comprehensive dialogue with relevant stakeholders – political parties, civil society organisations and regional leaders – to discuss revising the constitution and electoral laws, and reviewing the conduct of party politics, among other issues.

- **Step up humanitarian operations and livelihood support activities in border areas:** The Nigerian government should develop multifaceted interventions that can ease the sanctions' economic fallout, especially in the North West, the hardest-hit region. The federal ministry for humanitarian affairs, as well as the Border Communities Development Agency, are well positioned to devise rapid intervention programs that can bring relief to residents whose livelihoods have been disrupted, especially women heads of household. For a start, citizens in border communities should be accorded priority in the delivery of aid, including food and cash transfers, which Nigeria's federal and state governments are offering, to cushion the hardship created by the fuel subsidy removal.
- **Keep bilateral communication lines open:** Niger and Nigeria share a long history of political, economic and socio-cultural interaction, with ample prospects for mutually beneficial cooperation in the future. Despite the prevailing tensions, senior government officials from both countries should keep lines of communication open and strive to resume the full range of bilateral cooperation as soon as the present impasse is resolved. For example, in June 2022, officials of the Nigeria-Niger Joint Commission for Cooperation signed agreements on aviation links, agriculture, environment, mining, and energy and transport. The commission should sustain communications in order to facilitate implementation of these mutually beneficial agreements once the two countries normalise relations.

Time for a Change

ECOWAS's initial reaction to the Niger coup was understandable, but the sanctions that the bloc levied have not reversed the coup and their unintended consequences are substantial. They are undermining livelihoods, disrupting economies, and aggravating humanitarian and security risks in an already fragile region. While ECOWAS should remain resolute in its demand for constitutional rule in member states, it will need to be pragmatic in the way it chooses to enforce this norm. Sanctions that are aggravating already parlous security and economic situations in Niger and elsewhere in the region, particularly across the border in Nigeria, need to be revisited.

Because of its size and influence – and because of the negative impact ECOWAS sanctions are having on its own interests – Nigeria is in a strong position to encourage the organisation to move in a new direction. Abuja

should lobby its fellow member states for a more targeted approach to Niger sanctions, and all should come to the forthcoming ECOWAS summit ready to de-escalate tensions; alleviate the unintended consequences of the sanctions; agree on the changes they can make to better protect the people living under the junta's rule; and advance prospects for a return to constitutional rule in Niger.