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Following the latest extraordinary summit of the West African regional body, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), on the coup in Niger and its decision calling on the African Union (AU) to endorse all its decisions, the major preoccupation in diplomatic discussions in Addis Ababa is whether the AU's principal decision-making body on matters of peace and security, the Peace and Security Council, would heed the call from ECOWAS and give its full blessing by rubber stamping the ECOWAS decision as a package. No doubt this is a major policy issue of immediate concern. However, there is a more pressing aspect of the policy challenge the AU faces from the ECOWAS request for a wholesale endorsement of its decisions.

As the junta entrenches itself and gets more radical in an attempt to defy the sanctions and threat of force, and, on its part, ECOWAS doubles down on its threat of force, the two are locking themselves on a dangerous path of escalation. If this is not reversed, it could degenerate into armed fighting. Such

fighting is sure to frustrate the end state ECOWAS seeks to accomplish through its planned military intervention—reinstating the deposed President back to power, thereby reversing the coup and restoring constitutional order.

Yet, the failure of the military intervention to achieve its end state would be the least consequential outcome. Unfortunately, the fighting that this intervention stands to precipitate is sure to accelerate the dangerous set of conditions put in motion that could blow up Niger, triggering calamitous consequences for the entire region and reverberating across the continent.

First, after the [warning](#) by the two other central Sahelian countries under military rule, Burkina Faso and Mali, that military measure against Niger amounts to a declaration of war against them, ECOWAS military intervention in Niger risks to trigger regionalized war.

Second, with the announcement of the formation of [a movement led by a former rebel leader](#) aiming at reinstating President Bazoum back to power, Niger faced the danger of internal fighting and hence the acceleration of its fragility.

Third, any military intervention that targets and weakens Niger's army also exposes Niger to the danger of collapse. With an army battered by a fight with forces from neighboring countries, Niger will easily be [overrun by the armed terrorist groups](#) operating in the Sahel.

Thus, the most pressing dilemma for the AU is to help ECOWAS find a path for a non-military and non-punitive (for Nigerien people) resolution of the constitutional crisis in Niger and the attendant democratic setback it represents for the region.

For the West Africa region, the coup in Niger represented the case with the most significant regional and geostrategic implications. It is the sixth coup to take place in the region since August 2020. With Niger, nearly one in five

countries in the region are now under military rule.

However, more than any of the earlier cases, the coup in Niger sent shockwaves for much of the governments of the region. As an attack on a 'democratically elected' government, it has triggered understandable concern for governments of the region that, if not reversed, no government in the West Africa and beyond could remain immune from becoming victim of coup.

For the regional body, ECOWAS, which has been in the forefront of fighting coups, the occurrence of the coup in Niger puts spotlight on the efficacy of how it handled the other coups.

It signals that the anti-coup posture and approach of ECOWAS has lost all its potency and credibility – under the weight of elections with questionable credibility, prolongation of power by incumbents through tampering with constitutional provisions on term limits, erosion of civic space and worsening bad governance.

Coming not long after the ascent of Nigeria's new president to the helm of leading ECOWAS, the coup also came as a major foreign policy challenge for President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, who wishes to reaffirm the regional and continental leadership role of Nigeria.

When ECOWAS set its first extraordinary summit following the coup, the mood on the part of political elites in West Africa was to send a strong message against the putsch in Niger for drawing a line on coups in the region. Indicating that they should have been firm in how they responded to earlier coups, [President of Senegal](#) said 'now that we are together on this, we should take action to make sure that it does not continue.' Niger was thus slapped with the most severe regime sanctions that the regional body imposed '[in the history of the region.](#)' It closed air and land borders. It suspended financial and economic transactions with Niger.

Not surprisingly, President Tinubu's administration took a

tougher stance against the coup. In addition to the ECOWAS sanctions, Nigeria cut power supply to Niger.

It is these measures that took centre stage in ECOWAS effort to reverse the coup. As a follow up to the one-week ultimatum and to add pressure on the junta, on 2-4 August the ECOWAS Committee of Chiefs of Defense staff met in Abuja to draw up a plan of military intervention.

With the space and the air sucked by the harshly punitive sanctions and the threat of military intervention, diplomacy ended up taking a very far secondary place. Indeed, the nature and scope of the sanctions and the ratchetting up of the threat of use of force, instead of facilitating diplomacy, raised the stakes for both Niger and ECOWAS. While the sanctions exact heavy price and the threat of use of force puts Niger's survival in peril, for ECOWAS it is perceived, albeit wrongly, as a matter of its credibility per Cote d'Ivoire's President [Alassane Outtara](#).

Having exhausted all of its other ammunition at a go, ECOWAS is left with military intervention as the only instrument of pressure. Not totally surprisingly, when the second extraordinary summit of ECOWAS was convened on 10 August, the regional body doubled down on its stance, including on its threat of use of force. Thus, notwithstanding the admission of President Tinubu on the failure of the one week ultimatum given to the junta, ECOWAS, among others, [decided](#) to 'immediately activate the ECOWAS Standby Force with all its elements' and ordered 'the deployment of ECOWAS Standby Force to Niger to restore constitutional order.' With all these, ECOWAS has locked itself in a tight corner.

On the other hand, the harsh punitive sanctions and the use of force have given the junta the context for stirring nationalist fervour of Nigeriens and ride on their anti-neo-colonial sentiments. ECOWAS' position is made more difficult due to charges that it was being used to advance the interests

of foreign powers in the face of the persistent diplomatic manoeuvring of France and until recently the US centred on securing the reinstatement of President Bazoum.

In the process, the junta has increasingly taken positions that are less amendable to diplomatic engagements. On 3 August a massive demonstration in support of the coup was staged. The ECOWAS diplomatic delegation headed by former Nigerian President General Abdulsalami Abubakar sent on August 6, was [prevented from leaving Niamey airport](#) and returned to Nigeria without meeting the coup leader. On 8 August, the junta [declined to receive](#) a tripartite delegation from ECOWAS, AU and the UN, alleging that 'anger and revolt among the population' against ECOWAS' sanctions made it impossible to guarantee the envoys' safety. In the last few days, it was [reported](#) that the junta warned that it would kill the deposed president if military intervention is followed through.

All of the foregoing signal that Niger and ECOWAS are on [a war footing](#). The AU should rise to the occasion and mobilize robust diplomatic effort aiming at helping ECOWAS and Niger find a path that steers them clear of military intervention. This effort should include, (as proposed [here](#)) and as Joseph Sany, Vice President of USIP rightly [counselled](#), 'avoiding military action that could worsen the crisis and shaping sanctions in ways to reduce suffering within the general population.' AU would fail to play a more responsible role if it takes the easy option of reducing itself to rubber stamping the decision of ECOWAS despite all the risks.

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