



WAPSeD
WEST AFRICA PEACE
AND SECURITY DIALOGUE

Charting a New Course for Peace and Security in West Africa: Defining Strategic Priorities, Opportunities and Pathways for the Next Decade

Presented by:

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**At the West Africa Peace and Security Dialogue
(WAPSeD) Review and Strategy Meeting**

29th-30th September, 2026
Abuja, Nigeria.

About the WAPSeD Initiative:

The West Africa Peace and Security Dialogue (WAPSeD) is an initiative of the Building Blocks for Peace Foundation (BBFORPEACE) aimed at strengthening collaboration, knowledge sharing, and collective action among peace and security actors across West Africa and its coastal states.

West Africa continues to experience complex and interconnected peace and security challenges, including violent extremism, unconstitutional changes of government, democratic governance crises, farmer-herder conflicts, transnational organised crime, poverty, youth unemployment and other forms of insecurity. These challenges have increasingly demonstrated that sustainable peace cannot be achieved through isolated national responses alone. They require locally grounded solutions, stronger regional cooperation, inclusive governance and meaningful partnerships among governments, civil society, communities and international actors.

It was against this backdrop that Building Blocks for Peace Foundation designed the West Africa Peace and Security Dialogue Initiative (known as WAPSeD). Created in 2024, it provides a platform for policymakers, civil society organisations, researchers, security practitioners, youth, media professionals, and other stakeholders to engage on emerging security challenges, including terrorism, violent extremism, organised crime, drug trafficking, technology-enabled threats, and disinformation. Through regional dialogues, policy analysis, capacity-building trainings, learning exchanges, and policy engagement, WAPSeD seeks to promote evidence-based decision-making, strengthen strategic partnerships, improve regional cooperation, and translate discussions into practical interventions.

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Introduction

Distinguished Chairperson, Excellencies, Honourable Ministers, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, Development Partners, Distinguished Peace and Security Scholars, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I feel highly honoured to be invited by Mr. Rafiu Adeniran Lawal of the Building Blocks for Peace Foundation to present this closing keynote address on the theme “Charting a New Course for Peace and Security in West Africa: Defining Strategic Priorities, Opportunities and Pathways for the Next Decade” at the Two-Day Review and Strategic Meeting on the West Africa Peace and Security Landscape and the Roadmap to the West Africa Peace and Security Dialogue 2027.

West Africa stands today at a historic crossroads. The region possesses immense human and natural resources, a youthful population, expanding markets, and considerable geopolitical significance. Yet, these opportunities coexist with unprecedented security challenges that threaten peace, stability, development, and democratic governance (Mbachu, 2025a).

The past decade has witnessed the proliferation of terrorism and violent extremism, military coups, organised crime, maritime insecurity, climate-induced conflicts, cyber threats, electoral violence, and humanitarian crises. Terrorist groups continue to expand across the Sahel and increasingly threaten coastal West African states. At the same time, political instability and fragmented regional security cooperation have weakened collective responses to common threats (Mbachu, 2012). This keynote address examines the evolving security environment in West Africa, identifies strategic priorities, highlights emerging opportunities, and proposes practical pathways to build sustainable peace and security over the next decade.

West Africa is undergoing one of the most challenging security transitions in its post-independence history. The region faces a complex combination of terrorism, violent extremism, unconstitutional changes of government, transnational organised crime, maritime insecurity, climate-induced conflicts, cyber threats, youth unemployment, and governance deficits (Mbachu, 2025b). These interconnected threats have undermined state authority, weakened democratic institutions, disrupted socio-economic development, and threatened regional integration efforts. This paper examines the evolving peace and security environment in West Africa and explores strategic priorities, opportunities, and pathways for achieving sustainable peace and security over the next decade. Drawing upon Regional Security Complex Theory and Human Security Theory, the paper argues that security challenges in West Africa are increasingly transnational and require integrated regional responses. The paper identifies weak governance, socio-economic exclusion, climate vulnerability, and institutional fragility as key drivers of insecurity. It further assesses the roles of ECOWAS, the African Union, the United Nations, and national governments in addressing emerging threats.

The paper recommends a comprehensive security framework that integrates democratic governance, regional cooperation, counter-terrorism, economic development, climate resilience, technological innovation, youth empowerment, and human security approaches. It proposes the adoption and operationalisation of a Regional Security Compact, enhanced intelligence-sharing mechanisms, strengthened early-warning systems, climate-security initiatives, and expanded peacebuilding programmes.

The paper concludes that the future of peace and security in West Africa depends upon visionary leadership, effective institutions, regional solidarity, and sustained investment in human development. The next decade presents a strategic opportunity for the region to transform its security architecture and build a more peaceful, resilient, and prosperous future.

This paper seeks to chart a new course for peace and security in West Africa by defining strategic priorities and setting out the opportunities and pathways that will shape the region's trajectory over the next decade.

Scope

The paper shall address the following key aspects:

- a.Introduction
- b.Conceptual Clarifications
- c.Theoretical Framework
- d.Understanding the Contemporary Security Environment in West Africa
- e.Strategic Priorities for the Next Decade
- f.Emerging Opportunities for Peace and Security
- g.Conclusion
- h.References

Conceptual Clarifications

a. International Security Environment

We define the international security environment as the ensemble of threats (military, non-military), actors (state and non-state), norms, institutions and interactions that affect the safety, stability and sovereignty of states and the well-being of populations beyond national borders (Mbachu, 2020a).

“Traditional threats” include interstate war, military aggression, and nuclear proliferation. “Non-traditional threats” include terrorism, cyber threats, pandemics, climate-related disasters, migration, etc. (Mbachu, 2025b).

b. Peaceful World

A “peaceful world” in this context implies: states or regions where conflict (internal and external) is minimal; human security is ensured; institutions (national, regional, global) are effective; cooperation and respect for human rights, rule of law, and good governance prevail. For Africa, this also implies internally stable states, regional integration, conflict prevention rather than just response, and minimal external interference purely for exploitative ends.

c. Concept of Security

The concept of security goes beyond military considerations (Mbachu, 2020b). It must be construed in terms of the security of the individual citizen to live in peace and social harmony, with access to basic necessities of life while fully participating in the affairs of his/her society in freedom and enjoying all fundamental human rights (The Kampala Document, 2008). Security is indisputably a first order value for all of mankind, although, in the traditional sense, it indeed invokes the notion of military preparedness to defend the state against external threats (Buzan, 1983:73).

McNamara offered a broad definition of security when he stated:

Security means development. Security is not military force, though it may involve it; security is not traditional military activity, though it encompasses it, security is not military hardware, though it may include it. Security is development, and without development there can be no security (McNamara, 1968:149).

d. Insurgency

A form of rebellion in which a dissident faction that has the support of a substantial part of the population instigates the commission of widespread acts of civil disobedience, sabotage, terrorism and guerrilla warfare in order to overthrow a government.

e. Internal Security

Any military role which involves primarily the maintenance and restoration of law and order and essential services in the face of civil disturbances and disobedience using minimum force (Mbachu and Bature, 2013).

Internal Security Operations

Internal security operations comprise coordinated military actions of a state in response to a developing situation. The actions could be designed as a military plan to resolve the situation in the state's favour.

Security can be conceptualised as a multi-dimensional activity, whose core goal is the achievement of social harmony and well-being, whether of the region, the nation-state, the society, the community or the individual.

Theoretical Framework

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

The principal theoretical framework underpinning this paper is the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. The theory argues that security threats are most effectively understood within regional contexts because states located within the same geographical region are interconnected by shared security concerns. According to RSCT, security interdependence among neighbouring states means that the security of one state cannot be separated from that of others within the region. This proposition is particularly relevant to West Africa, where terrorism, organised crime, irregular migration, arms trafficking, and environmental challenges transcend national borders. The spread of violent extremism from the Sahel into coastal West African states illustrates the interconnected nature of regional security. Developments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger increasingly influence security outcomes in Benin, Togo, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Nigeria (Mbachu, 2020a).

Human Security Theory

Human Security Theory emerged from the United Nations Development Programme's 1994 Human Development Report. Unlike traditional state-centric security approaches, Human Security Theory places individuals at the centre of security analysis. The theory identifies seven dimensions of security: Economic Security, Food Security, Health Security, Environmental Security, Personal Security, Community Security and Political Security.

The human security approach is particularly relevant to West Africa because many contemporary security challenges stem from poverty, inequality, unemployment, poor governance, and environmental degradation rather than conventional interstate conflict (Mbachu, 2019). The United Nations continues to emphasise the interdependence of peace, development, human rights, and rule of law in addressing contemporary African security challenges.

Governance-Security Nexus

The Governance-Security Nexus complements the above theories by emphasising the relationship between effective governance and sustainable security. Weak institutions, corruption, political exclusion, and poor service delivery undermine state legitimacy and create opportunities for extremist recruitment and social unrest. Consequently, long-term peace and security in West Africa require not only military effectiveness but also governance reforms that enhance legitimacy, accountability, and citizen trust.

Table 1: Major Security Threats in West Africa (2025–2035)

Terrorism	JNIM, ISGS, ISWAP activities	High
Organised Crime	Drugs, arms, human trafficking	High
Political Instability	Coups and constitutional crises	High
Climate Change	Resource conflicts and displacement	High
Maritime Insecurity	Piracy and Illegal Fishing	Moderate
Cyber Threats	Cybercrime and disinformation	Growing
Youth Unemployment	Recruitment vulnerability	High

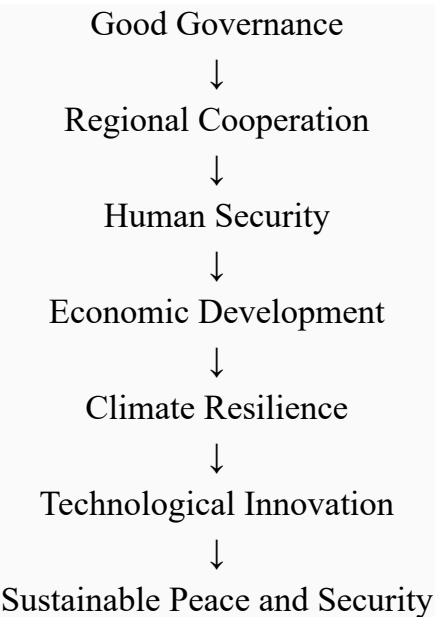


Figure 1: Proposed Strategic Security Framework

Understanding the Contemporary Security Environment in West Africa

West Africa faces a rapidly evolving security environment characterised by interconnected, transnational threats (Mbachu, 2011). The spread of terrorism from the Sahel into coastal states, increasing political instability, organised criminal networks, climate-induced resource conflicts, and cyber insecurity have collectively challenged traditional approaches to national and regional security.

The Sahel now accounts for a substantial share of global terrorism-related fatalities, while extremist groups continue to expand into previously stable areas of West Africa. The security challenges facing the region cannot be understood solely from a military perspective. Contemporary threats are deeply rooted in governance deficits, socio-economic inequalities, environmental stress, and institutional weaknesses. Terrorist organisations increasingly exploit local grievances, porous borders, weak state presence, and illicit economies to expand their influence. Organised criminal networks involved in arms trafficking, drug smuggling, illegal mining, and human trafficking provide critical support structures for extremist groups. At the regional level, **ECOWAS continues to play a critical role in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. However, recent political developments, including tensions between ECOWAS and the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), have exposed challenges to regional cohesion and collective security mechanisms (Mbachu, 2025c).** At the same time, opportunities exist for renewed cooperation through the ECOWAS Early Warning System, the Accra Initiative, the Multinational Joint Task Force, and African Union security frameworks.

West Africa's security landscape has undergone profound transformation. Traditional interstate conflicts have largely given way to complex and interconnected threats characterised by:

1. Terrorism and Violent Extremism

The Sahel has become one of the world's most volatile theatres of terrorist activity. Groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State continue to exploit weak governance, porous borders, local grievances, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. Their operational reach increasingly extends from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger into coastal states such as Benin and Togo.

2. Unconstitutional Changes of Government

Military coups in parts of the region have challenged democratic governance and strained regional cohesion. The emergence of alternative regional security arrangements and tensions between ECOWAS and some Sahelian states have complicated collective security efforts.

3. Civilian Coupists

West Africa sub-region is awash with civilian coupists. This paper defines a civilian coupist as the incumbent political leader (President, Prime Minister) who rigs election in order to remain in power; or an aspiring politician/political leader who rigs election to assume power. The incumbent political leader may pursue his/her inordinate ambition through fraudulent amendment of the constitution to avoid being accused of unconstitutional actions, assassination or arrest, detention or jailing of popular opponents; falsification of election result figures; compromised announcement of false election results; cancellation of election results that show he clearly lost and call for fresh elections; use of parliament or the judiciary to legitimise rigged election etc.

The aspiring political leader may just purchase the electoral umpire to announce fake results that declare him the winner and taunt the cheated opponents to go to court; use of the judiciary to legitimise rigged elections; compromising military and security agents to protect rigged elections. It is the civilian coupist who executes a civilian coup d'état.

4. Transnational Organised Crime

Drug trafficking, arms smuggling, human trafficking, piracy, kidnapping, money laundering, and illicit mining increasingly intersect with terrorism. Criminal networks provide financing and logistical support that sustain insurgent activities across borders.

5. Climate Change and Human Security

Climate change acts as a threat multiplier. Desertification, droughts, floods, resource scarcity, and environmental degradation intensify competition over land and water, fueling communal conflicts and displacement. ECOWAS itself recognises climate change as a major regional security concern requiring coordinated action.

6. Youth Unemployment and Demographic Pressures

West Africa possesses one of the youngest populations globally. While this demographic profile presents opportunities for economic growth, persistent unemployment and social exclusion create conditions that extremist groups can exploit for recruitment.

7. Cybersecurity and Emerging Technologies

The digital revolution has generated new vulnerabilities, including cybercrime, misinformation, disinformation campaigns, financial fraud, and attacks on critical infrastructure. Artificial intelligence and emerging technologies present both opportunities and risks for regional security management.

Strategic Priorities for the Next Decade

To secure a peaceful and prosperous future, West Africa must pursue a set of interconnected strategic priorities.

Priority One: Strengthening Democratic Governance and Rule of Law

Security cannot be achieved through military means alone. Sustainable peace depends upon accountable governance, strong institutions, constitutional order, and public trust. Good governance remains the most effective long-term antidote to insecurity.

Governments must:

1. Strengthen democratic institutions;
2. Promote transparency and accountability;
3. Combat corruption;
4. Uphold human rights;
5. Enhance judicial independence;
6. Improve public service delivery.

Priority Two: Rebuilding Regional Security Cooperation

No West African state can address contemporary security threats in isolation. Regional organisations must revitalise collective security mechanisms, including:

1. ECOWAS Early Warning System;
2. ECOWAS Standby Force;
3. Accra Initiative;
4. Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF);
5. African Union Peace and Security Architecture.

Enhanced intelligence sharing, joint operations, and coordinated border management are essential to addressing cross-border threats. Analysts increasingly emphasise the need for renewed cooperation between ECOWAS and the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) to confront shared threats.

Priority Three: Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism

A comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy must combine:

Hard Security Measures

1. Improved military capabilities;
2. Border security enhancement;
3. Intelligence-led operations;
4. Counter-terrorism financing mechanisms.

Soft Security Measures

1. Community engagement;
2. Strategic communication;
3. Deradicalisation programmes;
4. Rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives;
5. Education and civic awareness.

Military victories alone cannot eliminate extremism without addressing underlying grievances.

Priority Four: Investing in Human Security

The concept of human security broadens security beyond territorial defence to include:

1. Economic security;
2. Food security;
3. Health security;
4. Environmental security;
5. Personal security;
6. Community security.

The growing number of displaced persons and refugees across West Africa underscores the urgency of adopting people-centred security approaches. Regional humanitarian indicators remain alarming.

Priority Five: Climate Security and Environmental Resilience

Climate adaptation should become a core pillar of regional security policy.

Priority actions include:

1. Sustainable agriculture;
2. Water resource management;
3. Renewable energy development;
4. Environmental restoration programmes;
5. Climate-resilient infrastructure (Mbachu, 2025b).

Integrating climate-security assessments into national security planning will become increasingly necessary.

Priority Six: Technology and Cybersecurity

West African states must invest in:

1. Artificial Intelligence;
2. Cyber defence systems;
3. Digital surveillance capabilities;
4. Intelligence fusion centres;
5. Secure communication infrastructure.

Technology should become a force multiplier for security institutions while respecting legal and ethical safeguards.

Emerging Opportunities for Peace and Security

Economic Integration

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) offers significant prospects for economic growth, job creation, and regional interdependence. Economic integration can reduce conflict incentives and strengthen regional stability.

Demographic Dividend

West Africa's Youthful Population Represents a Strategic Asset if accompanied by:

1. Quality education;
2. Skills acquisition;
3. Entrepreneurship support;
4. Employment opportunities.

Regional Diplomacy

West Africa possesses a rich tradition of mediation, peacekeeping, and conflict resolution. The region's diplomatic experience can be leveraged to address emerging disputes before they escalate into violent conflict.

International Partnerships: Constructive partnerships with the African Union; United Nations; European Union and International financial institutions can provide resources, expertise, and capacity-building support.

Pathways Toward Sustainable Peace and Security

To translate vision into reality, the following pathways are recommended.

1. **Adopt and Operationalise the Regional Security Compact:** West African leaders should negotiate a comprehensive Regional Security Compact that defines shared threats, collective responsibilities, and measurable objectives.

2. **Operationalise Integrated Security Governance:** Security, development, governance, and humanitarian policies must be integrated rather than treated as separate sectors.

3. **Establish Regional Intelligence Fusion Centres:** Enhanced intelligence coordination is critical to disrupting terrorist and criminal networks.

4. **Prioritise Youth Development:** Governments should allocate substantial resources toward:

- Education;
- Innovation;
- Digital skills;
- Employment generation;
- Entrepreneurship programmes.

5. **Strengthen Early Warning and Early Response Systems**

Early warning mechanisms should be linked directly to preventive diplomacy and rapid intervention capabilities.

6. **Expand Peace Education**

Educational institutions should mainstream peacebuilding, civic responsibility, conflict resolution, and democratic values. The "Society for Peace Studies and Practice" (SPSP) is a prominent Nigerian-based organisation that has become a key institution for the development of peace and conflict studies in Africa. The SPSP periodically invites external lecturers to give a talk on an aspect of the vast field of peace and conflict that confronts humankind.

7. **Promote Gender-Inclusive Security**

Women remain indispensable actors in peace-building and conflict prevention. Implementing the United Nations Women, Peace and Security Agenda can strengthen community resilience and social cohesion.



Conclusion

The future of West Africa will be shaped not merely by the threats it confronts but by the choices it makes. The next decade presents a strategic opportunity to redefine regional security beyond military responses and embrace a holistic vision grounded in democratic governance, human security, economic transformation, technological innovation, climate resilience, and regional solidarity. Peace and security are not destinations; they are continuous processes requiring visionary leadership, collective responsibility, and sustained commitment. If West Africa succeeds in transforming its demographic potential into productive capacity, strengthening its institutions, revitalising regional cooperation, and addressing the root causes of insecurity, the region can emerge as a model of resilience and stability in Africa. The task before us is therefore clear: to chart a new course that secures not only our borders but also the hopes, aspirations, and dignity of our people.

The time to act is now.

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About Us

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Building Blocks for Peace Foundation: Building Blocks for Peace Foundation (BBFORPEACE) is a non-governmental and non-profit organisation working to prevent violent conflict, strengthen inclusive governance, and promote sustainable peace across Nigeria and West Africa. Founded in 2016 and formally incorporated in 2017, BBFORPEACE was established to address the exclusion of youth and women from decision-making processes while promoting their meaningful participation in peacebuilding, governance, and sustainable development.

Today, BBFORPEACE occupies a unique niche by bridging grassroots action, policy advocacy, research, and regional networking. The organisation works across the humanitarian-development peace nexus, empowering communities to prevent conflict, strengthen resilience, and build inclusive societies through evidence-based programming, strategic partnerships, and policy engagement.

Vision: A peaceful, just, and inclusive Africa where youth, women, and men lead resilient communities.

Mission: To equip youth, women, and men as peacebuilders to prevent violent conflict and promote sustainable peace.

Our Strategic Focus: BBFORPEACE delivers integrated programmes across five strategic thematic areas:

- Youth and Women, Peace and Security,
- Conflict Prevention, Mediation and Peacebuilding,
- Climate and Environmental Security,
- Governance, Civic Participation and Accountability,
- Organisational Sustainability and Partnerships.





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