

ATHENA NOTES

Opinion Articles of Athena Centre Staff and Guest Writers

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Nigeria Cannot Save West Africa—But It Must Secure Itself

Had the military coup d'état of December 7, 2025, in the Republic of Benin succeeded, it would have posed a fundamental challenge to ECOWAS. More importantly, it would have presented Nigeria with a strategic dilemma cutting to the core of its foreign policy posture and national security priorities.

In the end, Nigeria's response was central to ensuring that the crisis remained contained. The rapid deployment of Nigerian Air Force assets, complemented by the swift mobilisation of ground troops under the ECOWAS Standby Force, allowed the Benin authorities to quickly neutralise the attempted overthrow of the country's constitutional government.

The symbolism of a successful coup in Benin would have been significant. For decades, Benin has been regarded as a rare example of democratic continuity in Francophone West Africa. Its largely peaceful transfers of power, though imperfect, stood in clear contrast to the breakdown of constitutional order in neighbouring Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. For Nigeria, Benin represented more than a shared border; it functioned as a democratic buffer, evidence that the region's drift toward militarised politics was neither inevitable nor irreversible.

With a successful coup, that buffer would have disappeared. Nigeria's western flank and the northern approaches to



Military junta leaders of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES): Colonel Assimi Goita (Mali), General Abdourahmane Tchiani (Niger), and Captain Ibrahim Traore (Burkina Faso)

its key coastal economic zones—from Lagos westward—would be bordered almost entirely by states under military rule. This would expose Nigeria to a belt of political uncertainty and security risk, fundamentally altering its strategic environment and narrowing its room for diplomatic and security manoeuvre.

Nigeria's Strategic Contradictions

With hindsight, Nigeria's response to the coup crises that have swept West Africa since 2020 reveals deep contradictions. A successful coup in Benin would have delivered the final blow to regional stability—and exposed the limits of Abuja's strategy.

• The Democracy vs Security Paradox

Nigeria is the de facto leader of ECOWAS, an organisation whose foundational principle is "zero tolerance for unconstitutional change of government." The bloc's sanction-heavy, confrontational response to the coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—largely driven by Abuja—has yielded poor results. It pushed the Sahelian states into a defiant, anti-Western alignment, weakened ECOWAS itself, and failed to restore democracy in any of the affected countries.

To apply the same failed playbook to Benin (had the coup succeeded) would amount to strategic blindness. Failing to act would undermine Nigeria's stated commitment to democratic governance. This is the dilemma Abuja cannot avoid.

- **The Economic Lifeline at Risk**

This is where theory collides with painful reality. Over 70 per cent of goods destined for landlocked Niger, and significant volumes for Burkina Faso and Mali, transit through the Port of Cotonou and Nigerian road networks. Benin's port also handles a vast volume of informal trade, which is crucial to Nigeria's own economy.

A destabilised Benin would mean immediate economic paralysis across the hinterland, including Northern Nigeria. Sanctions, in this context, would be an act of self-immolation. They would cripple Nigerian transporters, traders, and consumers already struggling with inflation and currency pressures.

- **The Existential Security Threat**

This is the core concern. Nigeria is fighting a multi-front war against insurgents and bandits across its North-West and North-Central regions. These non-state actors thrive in ungoverned spaces and exploit porous borders.

A Benin ruled by a distracted, inward-looking military junta—especially one locked in confrontation with ECOWAS—would not be a reliable security partner. It would risk becoming a sanctuary. Weapons, fighters, and illicit goods would flow across the border with little restraint, directly fuelling violence inside Nigeria. Abuja's priority must be securing its borders, not policing Cotonou's internal politics.

A Prescriptive Path: Quiet Hard-Nosed Realism

The military takeover in Guinea-Bissau during its transitional elections in November 2025 underscored that the coup phenomenon is far from receding in West Africa. Its cumulative effect has been the emergence of a new regional geopolitics, one that is steadily fragmenting what was once a relatively unified bloc of states. Nigeria must execute a radical pivot in its regional statecraft. It should abandon the failed "loud diplomacy" of threats and sanctions in favour of quiet, hard-nosed realism.

- **Lead with Security, Not Sanctions**

Nigeria's first public move should be an offer of bilateral security cooperation with the new military authorities — however distasteful this may seem. The focus should be clear and narrow: joint border patrols, intelligence sharing on terrorist movements, and preventing cross-border criminal flows. This positions Nigeria as a pragmatic security guarantor rather than an ideological enforcer.

- **Decouple from ECOWAS Hardliners**

Behind the scenes, Nigeria should work to block any ECOWAS push for economic sanctions as the first line of action in the event of a coup d'état. It must argue, correctly, that collective punishment would produce a humanitarian crisis and create a security vacuum that would destabilise the entire coastal belt.

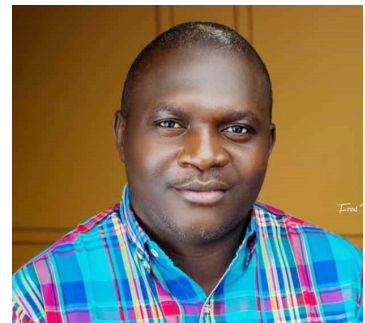
- **Play the Long Game with Incentives**

Privately, Nigeria can use its economic leverage—market access, trade facilitation, electricity exports through the West African Power Pool, etc.—to push for a clear, internationally monitored transition timeline. The objective should not be an immediate, humiliating reversal but a managed return of the military to the barracks.

Conclusion

Nigeria cannot afford to act as a democratic crusader. It must act as a survivalist. In the event of a coup d'état in the region, Nigeria's response must be guided by cold national interest: preventing the militarisation of its borders and safeguarding its vital economic corridors. This calculus calls for realpolitik, not rhetoric. The stability of Africa's most populous nation—and of its entire western flank—depends on Abuja getting this calculation right.

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Why Nigeria's Defence Planning Is Failing—and How Capability-Based Reform Can Fix It

Nigeria faces numerous security challenges today, ranging from terrorism in the North-East to banditry in the North-West, farmer-herder clashes in the Middle Belt, sea piracy, transnational crimes, and oil theft in the South. These challenges are expanding and evolving in character, demanding that the Armed Forces of Nigeria (AFN) be flexible, modern, and responsive. The AFN continues to do its best to protect the nation. However, one major issue remains:

the way defence is planned, managed, and funded still follows outdated methods, leaving clear capability gaps.

Each year, defence budgets are drawn up based on available funds rather than the specific capabilities the military requires to address both present and future threats. This approach inadvertently fails to consider the peculiar nature of defence products, which require procurement from Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs), testing and evaluation to meet the unique needs and standards of end users, sustainability, technology transfer, and the depth of the defence industrial complex. Such a short-term, money-first approach, exemplified by the envelope system, limits the AFN's ability to plan effectively for long-term strength and readiness.

Nigeria's current defence planning system continues to struggle with deep-rooted problems. Poor inter-agency coordination, weak transparency and accountability, inadequate data systems, misalignment between budgeting, programming, and procurement, and the absence of a clear long-



Troops of the Nigerian Army fighting insurgency in the North East

term strategy all persist. Often, there is no direct link between defence policy, budgetary allocations, and what is ultimately delivered on the ground. The former Chief of Army Staff, Lieutenant General Abdurrahman Danbazzau, aptly captured this situation on July 4, 2025, while delivering a presentation to the Just Friends Association of Nigeria: "Many items in the defence budget are contractor-driven and inserted by lawmakers without consulting the Services. Sometimes the items are irrelevant to the operational needs."

The Nigeria National Defence Policy 2016 stipulates a five- to ten-year budgeting cycle anchored on a broader capability plan. An analysis of defence budgets over the past five years shows an upward trend in nominal terms, but one heavily skewed towards personnel costs. This raises serious questions about the efficiency of spending and the adequacy of allocations in addressing the country's security challenges.

The 2025 Appropriation Act showed that defence was allocated approximately N3.1 trillion, of which N2.4 tril-

lion went to personnel and overhead costs, leaving only N604 billion for capital projects. This imbalance comes at the expense of modernisation and capability development required for a favourable security outcome.

Capability-Based Planning (CBP) offers a more robust and forward-looking approach. Instead of asking, "Who are we fighting?," it asks, "What must we be able to do, regardless of the nature of the threat?" This framework focuses on developing the appropriate mix of skills, equipment, infrastructure, and systems to address a wide spectrum of scenarios, from external defence and counter-terrorism to natural disasters and cyberattacks. It enables the military to prepare for contingencies rather than merely reacting to crises after they emerge.

Under Capability-Based Planning, defence planning becomes results-oriented rather than procedural. It links strategic objectives to expenditure and capability development, ensuring that every naira invested in defence directly strengthens the AFN. Capability-Based

Planning is not simply about acquiring more weapons or recruiting additional personnel. Modern warfare demands a careful balance between combat power and intelligence capability. Capability-Based Planning supports the development of non-combat capabilities such as improved information gathering, stronger civil-military cooperation, psychological operations, and technology-driven intelligence systems. It also allows for the deployment and utilisation of capabilities where they are most critically needed, reducing redundancy and obsolescence. These elements are indispensable to contemporary warfare and to building trust between the military and the population it serves.

Nigeria must also invest more deliberately in local defence industries, research, and innovation. Producing equipment, drones, and surveillance tools locally will reduce dependence on foreign suppliers and enhance the long-term self-reliance and sustainability of the Armed Forces.

To address these challenges, Nigeria should adopt a five- to ten-year Defence Capability Programme that clearly defines long-term defence objectives and links them directly to annual budgets. Such a framework would improve planning, budgeting, programming, and performance tracking, while ensuring that resources are directed towards genuinely strengthening the Armed Forces. It would reduce waste, enhance accountability, and enable the military to plan beyond a single fiscal year.

For this system to function effectively, the Ministry of Defence

should establish a small, specialised Capability Assessment Team tasked with data collection, performance monitoring, and the provision of evidence-based advice to inform decision-making. Lawmakers also have a critical role in providing robust oversight to ensure that defence expenditure is transparent and aligned with real capability requirements. Additionally, key stakeholders must develop the necessary capacity for the adoption of Capability-Based Planning. These stakeholders include the Ministry of Defence, Defence Headquarters, Service Headquarters, legislators and legislative aides, the Budget Office, the Bureau of Public Procurement, and civil society organisations, all of whom are essential to a successful transition to Capability-Based Planning.

Adopting Capability-Based Planning is vital to Nigeria's economic and industrial development. It requires political will and decisive leadership to fundamentally reform how defence is managed. Nevertheless, the benefits far outweigh the challenges. Capability-Based Planning can help Nigeria build a military that is flexible, efficient, and prepared for any threat. It will make defence spending more rational, improve coordination across the Services, and ensure that every effort genuinely enhances national security.

Above all, it will foster a military that is not only capable of fighting, but also able to adapt—protecting the nation, securing its people, and sustaining peace and stability for years to come. In doing so, it will also facilitate the growth of the nation's military-industrial complex.

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