

# Regional Disintegration a Comparative Perspective: Brexit and Sahelexit

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines why two different political systems which are, the United Kingdom and the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) both chose to exit their respective regional blocs. Drawing on neo-functionalist spillback theory and post-functionalist identity frameworks, it employs a Most Different Systems Design (MDSD) to compare Brexit (2016–2020) and the AES withdrawal from ECOWAS (2024–2025). Despite pronounced differences in governance type, economic capacity, geographic position, and institutional context, both exits were preceded by elite perceptions that continued membership-imposed costs on sovereignty and security that outweighed the benefits of integration. This study argues that similar exit logics can recur across vastly different systems when ruling elites conclude that a regional bloc has become an obstacle rather than an asset to state survival. The findings suggest that neo-functionalist spillback, when combined with post-functionalist attention to domestic identity politics, offers a more complete account of regional exit than either framework provides alone, and points toward a comparative research agenda on the conditions under which disintegration becomes the rational political choice.

**Keywords:** regional disintegration, neo-functionalism, spillback, Brexit, ECOWAS, Alliance of Sahel States, comparative regionalism, sovereignty

## INTRODUCTION

Regional integration is frequently theorised as a largely forward-moving process in which cooperation, once begun, generates incentives for its own deepening. Yet the past 20 years has produced two of the most consequential acts of regional withdrawal in modern history: the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union and the near-simultaneous exit of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States.

These two cases present an analytical puzzle. The UK is a consolidated liberal democracy with a highly developed post-industrial economy and a long history of institutional engagement with European governance. The AES states are military-led transitional regimes, among the least economically developed countries in the world, embedded in a different regional architecture, and facing an altogether different set of security challenges. By nearly every structural measure, these cases are maximally dissimilar and yet both ended in voluntary regional exit.

The central question this article addresses is: what explains the recurrence of regional disintegration across systems so different in structure, governance, and context? And what does this recurrence reveal about the limits of regional integration theory as it is currently formulated? Existing scholars on disintegration have often focused either on the European context, drawing on Brexit as its primary referent or on African regional dynamics in isolation (Vollaard, 2014; Schmitter & Lefkofridi, 2016).

Comparative studies that place a European democratic exit alongside a West African military-led withdrawal are mostly absent from academic literature. This study fills that gap by treating the two cases not as opposites to be contrasted but as a pair that can shed light on the topic of disintegration operating beneath structurally different surfaces.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### From Functionalism to Neo-Functionalism

The intellectual starting point for any theory of regional integration is David Mitrany's functionalist thesis. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, Mitrany argued that as technical and economic problems grew too complex to be solved within state boundaries, states would develop specialised cooperative institutions to manage them. Over time, this cooperation generates increasing interdependence, building trust and gradually diminishing of interstate conflict. Crucially, Mitrany envisaged this as an apolitical process: cooperation would expand through a logic of technical necessity rather than deliberate political design (Dougherty & Pfalzgraff, 2001, p. 512).

Neo-functionalism revised this account in important ways. Ernst Haas, drawing on the early experience of European integration, argued that cooperation was not driven by technical logics alone but by political elites who saw concrete material benefits in removing trade barriers and extending regional frameworks. Integration was therefore inherently political from the outset. Haas introduced the concept of "spillover" to describe the process by which cooperation in one sector generated pressures, functional, political, and cultivated to extend cooperation into adjacent sectors (Haas, 1958). Joseph Nye subsequently elaborated this framework by adding mechanisms such as rising transaction flows, deliberate linkage formation, elite socialisation, and the role of external actors in shaping regional dynamics (Nye, 1971).

Neo-functionalism departs from Mitrany most significantly in recognising that integration is neither linear nor irreversible. Schmitter and Lefkofridi (2016) formalised the concept of "spillback" to denote the reverse movement: a contraction of cooperation in response to institutional failure or elite disillusionment. Spillback is active degradation of cooperation, which can cascade across interdependent policy domains. This is the mechanism that this article uses as its primary theoretical lens, because it accounts for integration's reversibility in a way that early functionalism could not. Why neo-functionalist spillback rather than competing theories?

### Post-Functionalism as a Complementary Lens

Neo-functionalism, in its classical form, underweights the role of identity, public sentiment, and domestic political competition in shaping integration outcomes. This lacuna is addressed by post-functionalist theory. Hooghe and Marks (2009) argue that integration initially proceeds under a "permissive consensus": citizens and domestic elites allow integration to develop quietly because it is broadly beneficial and politically low-salience. As integration expands, it starts imposing on sovereignty, redistributes costs and benefits in visible ways, and trigger's identity anxieties among populations who come to associate the regional bloc with lost self-determination. At this point, integration becomes politically contested, producing what Hooghe and Marks (2009) term "constraining dissensus": domestic actors define limits on acceptable levels of supranational authority and place pressure on political elites to resist further integration or to seek exit. Post-functionalism is incorporated here not as an alternative to neo-functionalism but as a complementary layer of explanation. While spillback theory explains the structural logic of elite decisions, post-functionalism helps explain why those decisions carry domestic political legitimacy and why exit can be framed, in very different political contexts, as an act of national liberation.

### Regional Disintegration: Conceptual Framework

Regional integration, as Karl Deutsch argued, is a process by which geographically similar states construct arrangements to make war among them less likely (De Lombaerde et al., 2021). Haas defined it more narrowly as "the political unification of nations through non-coercive efforts" (De Lombaerde et al., 2021). Regional disintegration is the reversal of this process: the deliberate reduction or dissolution of the shared legal, economic, or political arrangements that constitute regional membership. It is important to note that disintegration is not synonymous with institutional failure; it refers specifically to the active withdrawal of a member state's participation in the integrative framework. Contemporary scholarship has identified three analytically distinct dimensions through which disintegration unfolds (Vollaard, 2014; Schimmelfennig & Schmahl, 2024):

**Sectoral disintegration:** refers to a reduction in the range of policy areas coordinated at the regional level. Rather than a sudden rupture, it typically involves the gradual withdrawal of a member state from shared initiatives across one sector after another. Brexit exhibited this pattern clearly: the UK did not simply leave the EU on a single date but progressively disentangled itself from the single market, the Erasmus student exchange programme, fisheries agreements, and judicial frameworks over several years. The AES withdrawal similarly involved a phased dismantling of security protocols, anti-terrorism cooperation, and travel zone arrangements with ECOWAS, a process that was considerably less orderly but no less sequential.

**Vertical disintegration:** refers to the reclamation by member states of governing authority previously delegated to regional institutions. It typically follows a pattern of accumulated institutional failure, as regional courts, legislative frameworks, and enforcement mechanisms lose practical authority over national policy. The United Kingdom's repeal of the European Communities Act 1972 and its removal from the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice are archetypal instances of vertical disintegration. The AES states engaged in a parallel process by explicitly rejecting the authority of the ECOWAS Court of Justice and the organisation's mediation mechanisms, which they characterised as instruments of external interference rather than impartial governance.

**Horizontal disintegration:** refers to a reduction in the regional institution's geopolitical reach, most directly measured by the territorial weight that departs with an exiting member state. The UK's exit from the EU removed one of the bloc's largest economies and its only permanent UN Security Council member at the time. The AES withdrawal removed three states from ECOWAS, reducing the organisation's reach by a considerable margin and introducing a contiguous zone of non-membership in the heart of West Africa.

These three dimensions are not mutually exclusive; they typically occur simultaneously, with sectoral withdrawal creating political conditions for vertical and horizontal disintegration to follow. All three are observable in both cases examined here.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employs a Most Different Systems Design (MDSD), a form of small-N comparative analysis derived from John Stuart Mill's method of agreement (Mills et al., 2010). MDSD selects cases that are maximally different on structural variables while sharing relative outcome. If cases that differ in almost every observable dimension nevertheless share an outcome, then any remaining commonalities become candidates for causal explanation.

The MDSD is appropriate here because the two cases, the United Kingdom and the Alliance of Sahel States are structurally different in governance type, economic profile, geographic position, security environment, and institutional context, but share the outcome of voluntary regional exit. The relative variable is regional disintegration, operationalized as the formal withdrawal of a state from a regional integration framework.

The comparison is structured around three analytical dimensions drawn from the theoretical framework: (a) the sovereignist rationale articulated by each exiting party; (b) the structural differences between the two cases, which MDSD requires to be identified and eliminated as explanatory factors; and (c) the causal convergence the elements common to both cases that survived the elimination of structural variables.

### Case Selection

The United Kingdom and the Alliance of Sahel States were selected because they represent the most divergent possible instances of regional exit available for comparison. The UK exit the first invocation of Article 50 is the defining case in the literature on democratic disintegration from a supranational bloc. The AES exit is the first collective withdrawal from ECOWAS representing a qualitatively different phenomenon: a military-led, sovereignty-driven exit from a primarily intergovernmental organisation in a context of active armed conflict. No previous study has placed these two cases in direct analytical dialogue. The goal of this comparison is to identify a plausible recurring pattern that warrants further testing across additional cases.

## Evidence Base

The analysis draws on multiple categories of evidence: treaty texts (the UK–EU Withdrawal Agreement 2020; the AES founding treaty 2023; ECOWAS declarations on the Niger coup 2023; policy documents and governmental statements. UK Government policy papers on Brexit and the Sahel development partnership; AES communiqués on ECOWAS sanctions; trade and macroeconomic data (IMF World Economic Outlook, 2026; ECOWAS trade figures); security assessments (Institute for Economics & Peace Global Terrorism Index, 2024; EEAS regional security reports); and secondary scholarly literature on neo-functionalism, post-functionalism, and comparative regionalism. Where claims about elite motivations are made, they are grounded in documented statements or peer-reviewed secondary analysis rather than inference alone.

## Analytical Procedure

A Structured Focused Comparison framework was applied operationally (George & Bennett, 2005). An identical set of theoretically grounded questions was posed to both cases: What was the stated rationale for exit? What institutional failures preceded the withdrawal? How was sovereignty framed in the exit discourse? What were the observable dimensions of disintegration?

## Findings

### Sovereignist Rationale

The most clearly shared feature of both exits is the articulation of a sovereignist rationale by the exiting parties that is, an elite framing of departure as necessary to reclaim authority that the regional bloc had either appropriated or compromised. In the United Kingdom, this was expressed most forcefully in the official "Take Back Control" campaign, which focused specifically on parliamentary sovereignty, immigration policy, and the authority of UK courts over EU law. Fabbrini and Zgaga (2024) document the ideological character of this position: a segment of the UK political elite had long viewed EU institutional primacy as constitutionally incompatible with the Westminster model of parliamentary sovereignty. This was not simply an economic calculation; it was a claim about the proper boundaries of self-governance. The UK's removal from the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972 were the institutional expressions of this position.

In the AES states, a comparable sovereignist framing was applied in a very different political context. The military juntas in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger characterised ECOWAS as having departed from its founding principles and having become subject to manipulation by external powers, primarily France and, by extension, Western institutions more broadly (Oluyemi, 2025). Acho (2024) documents the three grounds on which the AES states justified their departure: the characterisation of ECOWAS sanctions as "illegal, illegitimate, inhumane and irresponsible"; the claimed failure of ECOWAS to provide adequate security assistance; and the argument that the organisation had become a vehicle for restricting, rather than protecting, the rights of their citizens. Whether these characterisations are empirically accurate is analytically distinct from the observation that they constitute a coherent sovereignist narrative used to legitimise exit, one that functionally mirrors the "reclaiming sovereignty" language deployed in the Brexit debate.

What is analytically significant is not that the two rationales are identical in content but that they share the same structure: in both cases, the exiting elite framed continued membership as a constraint on legitimate self-governance and departure as a restoration of it. This framing is consistent with what Hooghe and Marks (2009) identify as constraining dissensus: the stage at which the political costs of integration become visible and domestically mobilising.

### Structural Differences

The MDSD requires that the study explicitly identify and account for the structural differences between the two cases. These differences are substantial and are not dismissed here as irrelevant; they matter for understanding how exit was executed.

**Institutional Framework;** The United Kingdom is a unitary state comprising four constituent nations: England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland all governed under a constitutional monarchy and a Westminster parliamentary system. Its institutional components include the Monarchy, Parliament, the government, departmental structures, devolved assemblies, local governments, and arm's-length executive agencies. The UK has maintained stable parliamentary democracy for several centuries, with clear constitutional procedures, a strong multi-party system, protected civil liberties, and a monarchy effectively separated from partisan politics. This stands in stark contrast to the Sahel States, whose institutional configurations are neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic, but rest on military transitional regimes. Niger lost its status as a defective democracy in 2023 after a military junta seized power, and the pattern is replicated across Mali and Burkina Faso. The core institutional distinction between the two systems is the management of civil-military relations: the United Kingdom maintains a clear separation in which the armed forces remain subordinate to civilian government with no civil-military crisis, while the Sahel States lack the civil-military relations mechanisms necessary for democratic protection, with armed forces functioning as the preeminent political actors.

**Economic Profile;** According to the International Monetary Fund (2026), the United Kingdom holds a GDP of approximately \$3.3 trillion USD and ranks as the world's sixth-largest economy, with diversified global trading patterns, sustained international relationships, and a strong currency. Its economy is dominated by service industries, finance, technology, and healthcare, which account for approximately 70% of GDP, supported by high infrastructural development and efficient human capital utilization.

The Sahel States present a starkly different picture: they are agrarian-dominated, weakly governed, and afflicted by high youth unemployment. Their landlocked geography compounds already strained circumstances, as frequent droughts generate persistent food insecurity (UK Government, 2023). Despite being resource-rich in oil, gas, uranium, and gold, a combination of poor governance, foreign exploitation, corruption, and insufficient developmental capacity has produced a resource curse rather than a resource dividend (Frankema et al., 2023). Life expectancy in the Sahel averages between 57 and 61 years, and approximately 102 children per 1,000 births do not survive to the age of five (Tang & Lan, 2023), contrasting sharply with the United Kingdom's life expectancy of over 81 years.

**Geographical setting;** The United Kingdom's maritime geography has underpinned its rise as a global trade power, affording access to raw materials and export markets while enabling the development of naval power, shipbuilding, and ocean-based industries. The Sahel, by contrast, occupies a vast transitional zone separating the Sahara Desert from the tropical savannas, characterized by severe drought, unpredictable rainfall, water shortages, and poor soil output (EBSCO Research Starters, n.d.). Being landlocked, the Sahel States are exposed to severe logistical vulnerabilities and are heavily dependent on the maritime corridors of neighboring coastal states. This dependency was vividly illustrated in 2025 when the Kayes-Nioro corridor blockade by Jama'at Nasrut al-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) demonstrated how a non-state actor could effectively cripple the Malian economy through the disruption of a single supply corridor (Jabbar, 2025).

**Security Threats;** The United Kingdom and the Sahel States face fundamentally different threat environments. The UK's security concerns centre on terrorism, antisemitic violence, and cyber threats, all serious but manageable within a stable democratic framework. The April 2026 stabbing in Golders Green, while declared a terrorist incident by the Metropolitan Police, was an isolated attack within an otherwise functioning state. The Sahel States, by contrast, face an existential crisis: Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger rank among the ten countries most affected by terrorism in the world, with the Sahel region accounting for over half of all global terrorism deaths according to the Institute for Economics & Peace (2024). Armed Islamist groups including JNIM control significant swathes of territory, governments exercise limited state presence across large portions of their own countries, and populations face systematic violence that likely amounts to crimes against humanity (EEAS, n.d.). Security operations to confront terrorists in the Sahel frequently threaten civilian populations, creating a cycle in which both terrorist groups and state forces violate civilian rights.

**Withdrawal Mechanism;** The UK left as a result of a democratic decision to pursue national sovereignty and immigration control. The withdrawal was initiated following the 2016 referendum and conducted under Article 50 of the EU Treaty, which provides a legal framework for member state exits. The UK and EU negotiated a comprehensive withdrawal agreement over nearly four years, covering trade, citizens' rights, and financial

settlements, with the withdrawal taking formal effect on 31 January 2020 and a transition period extending to 31 December 2020. The process was democratic, orderly, and conducted in full accordance with international law.

The AES departure, by contrast, was abrupt and adversarially framed. The three states announced their withdrawal in January 2024, despite ECOWAS offering a six-month extension to avert their departure, and they formally left the bloc on 29 January 2025. The exit was triggered by ECOWAS's response to the July 2023 Niger coup swift, indiscriminate sanctions and threats of military intervention which the Sahel States interpreted as hostile acts. Unlike Brexit, the AES exit was executed without negotiated arrangements for post-departure relations, leaving trade, movement, and security frameworks to be addressed piecemeal after the fact.

### **Causal Convergence: What Remains After Elimination**

Having identified the structural variables that differ between the two cases, the MDSD logic requires that we identify what is shared, that is: the residual factors that may help explain the common outcome.

Three convergent patterns are observable across both cases;

First, elite perception of net sovereignty cost: In both cases, the ruling elite concluded that the costs imposed by regional membership whether regulatory, financial, or security-related had come to outweigh the benefits. Ouedraogo (2025) argues that the AES states effectively traded market access for sovereignty, a trade-off that only becomes rational when the perceived cost of shared authority exceeds the economic premium it generates. The same logic is evident in the UK's decision to accept economic dislocation as the price of reclaiming border and trade policy. As Hirschman (1970) anticipated, the exit option becomes politically available when voice; internal advocacy for reform is judged to have been exhausted. In both cases, the exiting parties expressed an explicit belief that the regional institution was unreformable from within.

Second, institutional verdict of compromise or capture; Both exits were accompanied by an elite characterisation of the regional bloc as having been structurally compromised in ways that made reform implausible. In the UK case, this took the form of an argument that EU law had acquired a constitutional primacy over national legislation that could not be reversed through ordinary legislative means. In the AES case, it took the form of a claim that ECOWAS had become subject to direction by external powers, rendering it incapable of acting in the genuine interests of its members (Acho, 2024; Oluyemi, 2025). These characterisations differ in content and in the degree to which they can be empirically sustained the claim that ECOWAS is a straightforward proxy for Western interests is analytically contested but they share the same functional role: they constitute an institutional verdict that closes off the voice option and makes exit the only available response.

Third, identity framing of departure; Both exits were articulated not merely as policy corrections but as acts of national restoration. Brexit discourse centered on a recovery of historical sovereignty and parliamentary authority. AES exit discourse centered on a recovery of post-colonial autonomy from what the juntas characterised as a neo-colonial regional order (Oluyemi, 2025). Hooghe and Marks' (2009) framework of constraining dissensus anticipates precisely this: at a certain threshold of integration, the boundary between technocratic coordination and existential identity conflict is crossed, and the politics of exit acquires a legitimising emotional register that makes it electorally or politically sustainable regardless of economic cost.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Recurrent Exit Logic and Its Implications for Integration Theory**

The findings indicate a recurring pattern: in both cases, regional disintegration was preceded by a convergence of institutional failure, elite disillusionment, and identity politicisation. This convergence suggests that neo-functionalism's spillback; the reversal of cooperation when a bloc ceases to deliver functional benefits combined with post-functionalism's attention to sovereignty anxiety and political mobilisation, provides a more complete account of regional exit than either framework alone.

The two cases did not follow identical causal pathways, in the UK, the exit was driven primarily by domestic political competition, identity politics, and a constitutional argument about parliamentary sovereignty, in a context of manageable external threats and a functioning democratic process. In the AES, exit was driven primarily by security failure, elite resentment of post-colonial institutional arrangements, and the political calculations of military juntas with no democratic mandate.

What is shared is not the mechanism but the logic: ruling elites in both cases reached a point at which continued membership was judged to impose costs on sovereignty and self-governance that exceeded its benefits. This is not a universal law but a recurrent pattern that appears independent of the type of system in which it occurs. Tainter's (1988) observation that integrated systems tend toward collapse when the costs of maintaining the central authority exceed the benefits it delivers offers a useful structural framing for this pattern, though it must be applied with care given the very different organisational scales involved.

## Theoretical Contribution

The literature on regional disintegration has developed largely within the European context, with Brexit as its defining empirical reference point (Vollaard, 2014; Schmitter & Lefkofridi, 2016; Schimmelfennig & Schmah, 2024). The African integration literature, by contrast, has tended to focus on questions of institutional capacity and design rather than on exit dynamics (De Lombaerde et al., 2021). This article bridges the two bodies of literature by demonstrating that the disintegration dynamics theorised in the European context spillback, constraining dissensus, identity politicisation are recognisable, in modified form, in the African case as well.

This observation does not imply that the two theoretical traditions are interchangeable. Neo-functionalism was developed to explain European integration and retains Eurocentric assumptions about the relationship between economic interdependence and political institution-building. Applied to the Sahel, its explanatory power is partial: the AES exit cannot be adequately explained by reference to spillback dynamics alone, without accounting for the specificities of post-colonial political economy and security failure. Post-functionalism fares somewhat better, because its focus on identity and sovereignty is transferable across different political contexts. Nevertheless, Hooghe and Marks (2009) developed their framework primarily with reference to European democratic publics; its applicability to military transitional regimes, where there is no electoral mechanism through which constraining dissensus is expressed, is an open theoretical question that this article raises without fully resolving.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article set out to explain why two radically different political and economic systems both chose regional exit, and what that recurrence reveals about the limits of integration theory. The comparison of Brexit and the AES withdrawal from ECOWAS, conducted through a Most Different Systems Design, produces three principal findings.

First, both exits were preceded by an elite judgment that regional membership had become a net constraint on sovereignty rather than a net enabler of state advancement. This judgment was reached through different political processes and expressed in different institutional forms, but it constitutes a common causal condition across both cases.

Second, in both cases exit was articulated through an identity frame parliamentary sovereignty in the UK, post-colonial autonomy in the Sahel that gave the decision political legitimacy beyond a narrow cost-benefit calculation. This is consistent with post-functionalist arguments about the conditions under which integration becomes politically unsustainable.

Third, and most importantly for theory, the recurrence of this exit logic across maximally different systems suggests that the conditions generating regional disintegration may be more general than the existing literature focused predominantly on the European case has recognised. This does not amount to a universal theory; two cases are insufficient for that claim. It does, however, indicate that comparative regionalism scholars would benefit from extending its disintegration research agenda beyond Europe.

The causal weight assigned to security failure in the AES case versus the weight of identity politics in the Brexit case raises the question of whether there are multiple pathways to disintegration that converge on the same endpoint through different mechanisms.

Regional integration remains one of the central organising principles of the contemporary international order. Understanding the conditions under which it reverses is therefore not merely an academic question but a matter of considerable practical significance. This study contributes to that understanding by showing that the question of when integration fails is not confined to any one region, regime type, or level of development.

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