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Between BRICS and the West: Strategic Choices and Security Implications for West African Integration



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Introduction

The international system is undergoing significant geopolitical and economic realignment, and BRICS has emerged as an important forum for cooperation and partnership among emerging economies. For African countries, this offers new markets, alternative financing, industrial technology and infrastructure investment. It also raises questions about strategic dependence, national security and the ability to maintain productive relationships with several external powers whose interests may conflict.

West Africa is a particularly important case. It combines natural resources, a large and youthful population and established regional trade arrangements, yet it also faces violent extremism, organised crime, maritime insecurity, illicit financial flows and institutional weaknesses. It is also a region of overlapping commitments: a single state may be party to the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), a member of ECOWAS or the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA), a signatory to an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the European Union, and a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Within this layered system, this paper asks where BRICS engagement fits, what economic opportunities and risks it brings, and what it means for the role of AfCFTA in regional integration.

West Africa's Engagement with BRICS

BRICS is an intergovernmental forum, not a treaty-based economic union. It has no free trade area, customs union, common external tariff, binding dispute settlement mechanism or supranational trade institutions. Its outputs are summit declarations, working groups, the New Development Bank (NDB), the Contingent Reserve Arrangement and an ongoing discussion about local-currency settlement (BRICS Brazil, 2025). Members keep their own trade policies, subject to their other international obligations.

Nigeria was announced as a BRICS partner country on 17 January 2025, the ninth partner after the category was created at the Kazan summit in October 2024 (African Markets, n.d.). In early October 2026, Ghana's Cabinet approved the principle of a formal application during a visit by India's External Affairs Minister. Ghana is seeking partner-country status rather than full membership, which in any case depends on the approval of existing members, and it has clarified that the move is not meant to displace traditional partnerships (Business Today, 2026; Graphic Online, n.d.).

The distinction matters. Partner countries take part in selected projects and dialogue but do not vote or shape decisions, and partner status in itself creates no trade obligations. Any legal tension with AfCFTA, ECOWAS or EPA commitments arises only from what follows, such as bilateral trade deals, BRICS-linked financing or new payment arrangements. Nor does BRICS participation imply alignment with Russia's security

policies, just as Western partnerships do not require a country to reject cooperation with China or India.

Opportunities and Strategic Risks

Closer engagement with BRICS holds opportunities for any participating country, beginning with wider export destinations. Ghana has said it wants deeper ties with India, Brazil and China, targeting roughly US$7 billion in trade with India. The NDB offers an alternative to the World Bank and IMF, sometimes with different conditionality and faster processing, which matters for the infrastructure, energy and industrial projects that AfCFTA's value-chain ambitions require. Supporters also argue that engagement strengthens bargaining power on fairer trade practices, technology access and reform of global economic governance (Afenyo-Markin, n.d.).

The risks are equally real. Access to a large market will not automatically diversify West African exports or build domestic capacity, and infrastructure finance, though it can address real constraints, may carry collateral arrangements, tied procurement, opaque terms and long-term dependence on foreign operators or maintenance. These risks are not unique to BRICS lenders; they also arise with Western governments, multilateral institutions and private investors. Economic sovereignty does not require isolation. It requires enough policy space and productive capacity to work with multiple partners without becoming dependent on any one of them, and diversification helps only if it produces genuine alternatives. Partner status, which Ghana is seeking, confers no voting rights and could therefore deliver more symbolism than substance, while the costs, such as strained Western relations, remain real.

Western Responses and the False Choice

The United States, United Kingdom, France and the EU have substantial and differing interests in West Africa, spanning trade, energy, maritime security, counterterrorism and migration, so their policies should not be treated as a single strategy. Possible consequences of closer BRICS ties include tougher negotiations over sensitive technology, closer scrutiny of investments, altered terms of security cooperation and diplomatic friction. US officials have also publicly warned of additional tariffs on countries seen as aligning with BRICS positions. Exporters that rely on the US market, or on preference programmes such as AGOA, therefore face the risk that alignment becomes a bargaining chip in third-party trade policy. These are plausible scenarios, not inevitable outcomes.

Closer BRICS relations need not mean worse Western relations. China, India, Brazil, Russia and South Africa have different trade policies, security priorities and objectives, as do Western governments. A practical approach is issue-specific cooperation, for

example engaging one partner on agricultural technology and another on maritime security, always within national law and international commitments. This demands diplomatic skill, institutional coordination and clear boundaries around sensitive information, strategic infrastructure and critical dependencies.

Security and Intelligence Implications

Economic partnerships often carry security, technology and information dimensions. Counterterrorism and organised-crime work depends on timely exchange among domestic agencies and foreign partners (U.S. Department of State, 2024), and existing partners may reassess what they share when a government builds new relationships. This usually means restricting particular categories of information, sources or systems rather than ending cooperation altogether.

Deeper ties also widen partner intelligence services' access through diplomatic missions, state-linked firms, training programmes, media partnerships and technology vendors. Russian information operations and private military companies in Africa are well documented, and the perception that Ghana is shifting towards Russia has been deepened by its recent visa waiver agreement with Russia for service and diplomatic passports.

China has built substantial communications and data infrastructure across Africa. One widely cited assessment counted 266 Chinese technology initiatives on the continent and reported that Huawei's Safe City projects supplied surveillance technology to 16 countries. These investments are often financed by Chinese state-bank loans, and facial recognition technology has been sold to states including Ghana and Nigeria (ASPI Strategist, n.d.; VOA, n.d.). The concerns are data exposure, which depends on contract terms, hosting and vendor control, and dependence on a single vendor for maintenance and upgrades.

BRICS-linked finance often funds energy, ports, telecoms and digital systems, where the risks are embedded vulnerabilities, vendor remote access, supply-chain compromise and operational dependence. Governments need to know who controls administrative access, where data is stored, how updates are managed and what happens if relations sour.

Finally, BRICS includes states under Western sanctions, so closer financial links raise the risk of inadvertent sanctions exposure, correspondent-bank de-risking and compliance burdens, especially for payment innovations designed to bypass dollar channels. West African states already face scrutiny on anti-money-laundering and counter-terrorism financing standards, and financial intelligence units should be resourced to monitor new flows.

The Sahel, Regional Fragmentation and Comparative Cases

Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger moved towards Russia as their relations with Western partners deteriorated, and in 2024 agreed a deal with Russia for telecommunications and surveillance satellites (The Defense Post, 2024). Analysts argue that such regime-centric partnerships can sideline regional mechanisms and erode shared intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capability (Small Wars Journal, 2025; Critical Threats Project, 2025). China's Global Security Initiative is likewise described as institutionally ambiguous, with police training, surveillance exports and military cooperation that could create structures parallel to African-led frameworks (CAF Radar, n.d.). These developments should not be attributed to BRICS membership. The analytical issue is how divergent security choices affect neighbours' ability to cooperate against common threats. Foreign military assistance cannot by itself resolve governance failures, local conflicts and economic exclusion, and coastal states remain exposed through border communities and trade corridors (Wilson Center, 2024).

Nigeria and Ghana face different circumstances. Nigeria, a partner country with a dominant regional economy, accounts for well over two-thirds of ECOWAS GDP, and it maintains established security cooperation with Western partners that it must preserve while expanding other ties (Government of Nigeria, 2025). Ghana is pursuing diversification while honouring its AfCFTA and ECOWAS commitments, with open questions around digital infrastructure, maritime security and regional intelligence cooperation. Neither faces Sahel-style pressures, and BRICS partner status carries no security commitments.

The lesson is that economic partnerships can become gateways to security relationships and should be managed deliberately. If Nigeria, Ghana and the UEMOA states pursue divergent external partnerships, ECOWAS's ability to speak with one voice in trade negotiations will weaken.

Conclusion

BRICS partner status in itself neither breaches nor suspends AfCFTA or ECOWAS obligations, and its direct economic benefits are modest. The consequential choices lie in what follows: bilateral trade deals, financing, technology procurement and security cooperation. These are constrained legally by AfCFTA's conditional Most Favoured Nation clause, the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) and existing EPAs, and practically by risks relating to data, infrastructure, intelligence exposure and sanctions. States that handle them through coordinated regional positions and rigorous vetting can use BRICS engagement to widen their options, while those that act bilaterally and opportunistically risk undermining the integration AfCFTA is meant to build.

The appropriate response is neither automatic alignment with BRICS nor rejection of partnerships with Western countries. It is strategic autonomy supported by strong

institutions, transparent agreements, effective intelligence safeguards, resilient infrastructure and regional cooperation. The key question is therefore not whether West African countries should choose between BRICS and the West, but whether they can build international relationships on terms that strengthen national sovereignty, regional security and Africa's long-term economic transformation.

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