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**Addressing the Challenges of Illicit Arms Smuggling and Terrorism within the context of
ECOWAS Free Movement and Trade**

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Abstract

This paper explores how uncontrolled arms smuggling has adversely affected the security of Ghana, Nigeria, Mali, and Burkina Faso, against the backdrop of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). While ECOWAS was created to ensure free movement and integration of its member states, the same border openness associated with such policies has led to serious security threats through the increase in the circulation of illegal small arms and light weapons (SALW). Relying on policy documents and security reports, and employing a qualitative approach, the paper analyses trends in the distribution of weapons and terrorist activity, as well as the economic problems caused by insecurity. Results show that the lack of coordinated arms control regulations, ineffective implementation of arms regulations and border security are the key causes of weapon proliferation that is being exploited by terrorists via trade and migration routes.

Keywords: *Free movement; trade; ECOWAS; illicit arms; smuggling; terrorism*

Introduction

Founded in 1975, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established to promote economic cooperation and integration among 15 member states (Bassey, Etefia, & Ebong, 2024). One of its most significant milestones was the 1979 Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, designed to enhance development and stability across the sub-region. The Protocol granted all West Africans visa-free mobility across member states to pursue economic opportunities (Udombana, 2020; Hailu, 2024). While this freedom of movement has stimulated regional economic growth, it has also generated profound security challenges. As Ogbise, Ebong, and Washington (2020) observe, porous borders have enabled terrorist networks and criminal gangs to exploit mobility provisions. Interpol (2024) and Balogun (2024) similarly note that weak entry points facilitate the smuggling of illicit small arms and light weapons (SALW), contributing to escalating conflicts in Nigeria, Mali, and Burkina Faso (UNODC, 2024). The rise of violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram and AQIM, both responsible for severe harm and human rights violations, has further deepened insecurity, undermining economic stability and threatening millions of lives (ISS Africa, 2020; Awotayo, Yusuf & Adedayo, 2024).

Although the Protocol was intended to prevent conflict, promote stability, and sustain long-term peace, its effectiveness has been undermined by weak enforcement. The uncontrolled circulation of SALW has intensified violence across the region, as demonstrated by the civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia, where illicit weapons transformed political disputes into humanitarian catastrophes. These effects spilt into neighbouring states, prompting former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2003 to warn the Security Council about the destructive role of illicit arms and mercenaries in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire (UN News, 2003). The ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons was introduced as the primary mechanism to curb proliferation, yet implementation remains weak due to limited political will, inadequate funding, and incomplete ratification (Awotayo et al, 2022; SIPRI, 2006). In response, ECOWAS partnered with Conflict Armament Research in 2020 to strengthen tracing procedures (ECOWAS, 2020), but arms continue to move across borders with impunity. These patterns align with broader research showing how arms proliferation fuels insurgency and terrorism across West Africa (Awotayo et al, 2026).

Against this backdrop, the present paper evaluates the relationship among free movement, arms trafficking, and terrorism in West Africa. It examines how border-openness provisions have been exploited to facilitate the circulation of illicit SALW and assesses the security and economic consequences for ECOWAS member states. It also examines how the January 2025 withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to form the Alliance of

Sahel States (AES) has reshaped regional dynamics. The findings aim to support ECOWAS in recalibrating free-movement governance without eroding the integration gains achieved since 1979.

This inquiry is grounded in securitisation theory, which explains how issues shift from routine political debate to existential threats requiring extraordinary measures (Buzan, Waever, & de Wilde, 1998). Through this lens, free movement initially conceived as an economic and developmental tool becomes securitised once porous borders are publicly linked to arms trafficking and terrorism. This discursive shift legitimises calls for tighter border controls, even at the expense of regional integration. The framework also guides the analysis of the ECOWAS–AES rupture and the arms-trafficking patterns discussed below, both of which reflect deeper contestations over whether free movement should be treated primarily as a security risk or a developmental asset. As recent studies show, addressing arms proliferation requires both robust security cooperation, women's leadership, and community-inclusive peacebuilding strategies (Yusuf & Fagbadebo, 2026; Awotayo & Yusuf, 2025).

Methodology

The paper used qualitative methods for data collection and analysis. This methodology was used because policy complexities, poor enforcement, and sociopolitical elements can only be analysed qualitatively. The primary sources included the ECOWAS Protocols on Free Movement, the Convention on Small Arms, documents of the Accra Initiative, and the ECOWAS Model Guide on SALW (2021), which served as the normative foundation for the analysis of implementation in practice. Data from secondary sources included security reports compiled by ECOWAS, state governments, the United Nations, and African Union agencies, as well as research by various NGOs and think tanks on arms trafficking and terrorism in West Africa. For data analysis, thematic analysis has been adopted based on the following themes: arms proliferation, use of trading corridors by terrorist groups, enforcement gaps, and economic effects of insecurity.

Literature Review

ECOWAS was established in 1975 under the Lagos Treaty. The body adopted a framework for a common market and customs union, committing member states to maintaining political stability and socio-economic development through welfare, health, and education schemes, and to facilitating cultural interaction as the bedrock of regional identity (ECOWAS, 1975; Zanna, 2025). The Protocol on Free Movement, adopted in 1979, abolished mobility restrictions, first allowing 90 days of visa-free movement before later conferring business and employment privileges (Adebayo, 1999; Nwankwo, 2010). It prompted labour migration and helped reduce economic disparities within the subregion. ECOWAS would develop additional integration tools in subsequent years. ETLS minimised intraregional trade barriers; the ECOWAS passport facilitated travel and business; WAPP and the Trans-West African Highway enhanced physical connectivity; and WAHO coordinated responses to health emergencies, particularly Ebola and COVID-19.

However, along with these achievements have been serious structural challenges. Instability in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has tested the organisation's ability to support democracy in these states (Mbah, 2018). Indeed, the recent secession of these states from ECOWAS reflects their profound dissatisfaction with the bloc's handling of crises (Ewokor, 2024). The three seceding states, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, have established the Alliance of Sahel States (AES, hereafter used to denote this bloc throughout the paper), a security partnership among them to tackle the jihadist threat in the Sahel, without ECOWAS's involvement. As will be discussed in further detail below, this situation is one of the most serious structural upheavals in West African regional politics in years. The issue of Free Movement has been a source of several problems, including insecurity, with poorly controlled borders leading to the spread of SALWs, resulting in conflicts in both Nigeria

and Mali (ECOWAS, 2006). High migration flows have also made receiving countries vulnerable to human trafficking (ECOWAS, 2008; Aniche et al., 2023).

Having traced ECOWAS's institutional evolution and the AES rupture above, this section reviews the substantive security problem those institutions were meant to contain: the trafficking of illicit arms that has accompanied open borders. One of the most persistent challenges confronting West African states is the proliferation of illegal arms, which enables the operations of terrorists and criminal networks and fuels continuous cycles of violence (Balogun, 2024; Afuzie, 2025). Interpol (2024) estimates that more than 500,000 illicit firearms circulate across the region, many originating from conflict-affected zones in North Africa and the Middle East. Although authorities seized approximately 10,000 illegal weapons in 2023, this represents only a fraction of the total volume trafficked. In Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and Mali, roughly 70 per cent of confiscated firearms had transited multiple countries before reaching their final destination (Mangan & Nowak, 2019; UNODC, 2024). Nigeria, in particular, remains heavily affected, scoring 8.5 on the ENACT Organised Crime Index, compared to Burkina Faso and Mali's 8.0 (ENACT, 2024).

Organised criminal groups facilitate this movement through complex interregional networks, concealing weapons in vehicles, exploiting shipping routes, and using legitimate trade channels to transport arms covertly (Interpol, 2024). Encryption technologies have further complicated law enforcement efforts by obscuring communication among traffickers (Pisarcic, 2022). Security agencies across West Africa continue to face structural and leadership constraints that weaken their ability to respond effectively to arms trafficking and terrorism. These institutional gaps limit operational coordination and undermine regional security frameworks. Such challenges reflect broader leadership and governance issues within African security institutions (Yusuf et al, 2026).

Key clients for these networks include Boko Haram and AQIM, violent extremist organisations responsible for severe harm and human rights violations, which exchange money, minerals, or other resources for weapons (Kouts, 2019; Sari, 2015; ISS Africa, 2020). Recent studies show that these trafficking pipelines also sustain separatist groups and local gun-manufacturing economies within Nigeria, deepening fragility and expanding the availability of illicit weapons (Awotayo et al, 2025; Awotayo et al, 2024).

The economic implications of this insecurity are equally profound. Frequent attacks on transport corridors disrupt business operations, increase transaction costs, and generate substantial losses for Nigeria's northern regions and other conflict-affected areas. According to the Global Terrorism Index (2025), Burkina Faso is currently the most terrorism-affected country globally, followed closely by Mali. ACLED (2024) reports that Mali recorded 944 terrorism-related fatalities in 2023, a 56 per cent increase from the previous year, while Burkina Faso registered 1,135 fatalities, marking a 50 per cent rise. Heightened insecurity has significantly reduced foreign direct investment flows (Edwards, Romero, & Madjd-Sadjadi, 2016). Humanitarian pressures have also intensified, with mass displacement straining infrastructure and public services across the sub-region (Awotayo et al, 2022; ACLED, 2024). Meanwhile, defence spending averaging nearly 20 per cent of per capita income risks widening social and economic inequalities, potentially fuelling further radicalisation (Asongu et al., 2017; African Development Bank, 2022; Bamidele, 2016).

Nigeria has emerged as the worst-affected state in West Africa due to Boko Haram's terrorism campaign, which began in 2009. Over the years, the insurgency has caused more than 35,000 deaths and displaced at least 2.5 million people (Egbuta, 2024; Madubuegwu et al., 2021). While Boko Haram initially relied on improvised weapons, it soon gained access to more sophisticated arms through illicit proliferation networks (Atidoga, Yakubu, & Lamidi, 2024). Nigeria's porous borders have played a central role in enabling these flows, posing

severe challenges for security agencies attempting to contain the insurgency (UNODC, 2023). Boko Haram has expanded its tactics to include suicide bombings, abductions, and attacks on military installations, generating enormous economic losses in the north-east due to business closures and disruptions in agriculture (Alao, 2012; Agbiboa, 2013; Faluyi, Khan, & Akinola, 2019). These patterns mirror broader national trends in which illicit arms circulation and local gun production reinforce violent extremism and separatist agitations (Awotayo et al, 2025; Awotayo et al, 2024).

In Mali, the 2012 Tuareg rebellion created a vacuum that jihadists quickly capitalised on (Assanvo et al., 2019; Kisangani, 2012). In Burkina Faso, there has been a marked escalation of terror attacks, especially in northern and eastern parts, where the militants have attacked both state security and civilian populations (Kwarkye et al., 2020; ISS Africa, 2020). In total, in 2022, the Sahel region contributed 43 per cent of the world's deaths from terrorism-related violence, with 73 per cent of those fatalities concentrated in Mali and Burkina Faso (Hata et al., 2023). The regional counter-terrorism bloc, the Accra Initiative, has sought to mitigate the expansion of terrorism but faces challenges due to inadequate execution and poor member capabilities (Assanvo, 2019; Bala & Tar, 2021; Ateku & Owusu-Mensah, 2023). Neither Ghana nor Senegal has directly experienced the same effects as those in Nigeria, Mali, and Burkina Faso, yet they must prepare for potential risks (Aubyn, 2021; Asamoah, 2019). Ghana's proximity to Burkina Faso, coupled with its involvement in regional security partnerships, makes it likely that Ghana will experience spillover effects from extremism (ISS Africa, 2020; Kohnert, 2022). Transnational crime, such as money laundering and weapons trafficking, is a reality within Ghana's and Senegal's shadow economy, providing a means of financing terrorist attacks (Kohnert, 2022; UNODC, 2023).

Table 1. Countries and How They Are Affected by Terrorism and Instability

Country	Key Terrorist Groups	Estimated Deaths (2023)	Displaced Persons	Arms Smuggling Routes	Economic Impact	Sources
Nigeria	Boko Haram, ISWAP	35,000+ (since 2009)	2.5 million	Libya-Nigeria-Chad route	Business collapse; disrupted agriculture	EUAA, 2021; HRW, 2022
Mali	Al-Qaeda; Islamic State	944 (2023)	400,000+	Sahel-Sahara corridors	Limited FDI; sustained instability	HRW, 2024; FPRI, 2025
Burkina Faso	Jihadist insurgents	1,135 (2023)	1.9 million	Mali-Burkina Faso routes	Decline in trade; food insecurity	France24, 2023; HRW, 2023
Ghana	Potential extremist spillover	Low direct attacks	Migrant influx	Arms from the Sahel region	Strained resources; security budget increase	Ghana Report, 2023; Citi Newsroom, 2023
Senegal	Emerging concerns	Low direct attacks	Low displacement	Arms smuggling via ports	Rising crime rates	Organised Crime Index, 2023; UNODC, 2023

Source: Author's compilation.

ECOWAS–AES Relations and Implications for Free Movement, Trade, and Security

Having established in the literature review that AES emerged directly from ECOWAS's fractured response to the Sahelian juntas, this section turns to the implications of that rupture specifically for free movement, trade, and security cooperation, the paper's core variables. The formation of the AES marks a structural break in the existing regional integration regime in West Africa, with significant consequences for ECOWAS initiatives related to free movement, trade, and regional security cooperation. ECOWAS' Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment has traditionally provided opportunities for visa-free travel, migrant labour, and international trade among member states, thus serving as the bedrock of regional integration (ECOWAS, 1979). However, the secession of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS in January 2025 has jeopardised the regime's institutional stability.

This move stemmed principally from frustration with the sanctions ECOWAS imposed on the post-coup regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, which the respective juntas regarded as politically motivated and incongruent with their counterterrorism objectives (Ewokor, 2024; Abdulrahman et al., 2025). According to current literature, this schism within institutions has caused considerable confusion about border governance, mobility, and the legitimacy of travel/trade documents for the two communities (WANEP, 2024; WISS, 2024). This fragmentation will negate years of integration achievements by limiting cross-border movement, harming the livelihoods of individuals who depend on mobility for sustenance, especially in border areas where locals rely on informal trade and seasonal movement for subsistence (WANEP, 2024). Current findings demonstrate that regulatory differences are beginning to disrupt movement routes and activities in border areas.

There have been substantial effects on trade flows as well. The departure of the AES has negatively impacted the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme and makes it more likely that tariffs and non-tariff barriers will arise between the two zones. This fragmentation of ECOWAS has disrupted trade patterns and increased transaction costs, further contributing to food insecurity in certain areas of West Africa (Abidemi & Manjo, 2025; International Crisis Group, 2024). In general, economic literature notes that market fragmentation leads to distortions in supply chains, trade inefficiency, and stunted development in the sub-region (World Trade Organisation, 2023).

In terms of security cooperation, the divide between ECOWAS and AES countries is weakening efforts to address cross-border threats. Security cooperation among ECOWAS member states is predicated on intelligence exchange, joint patrols along borders, and collective responses in adjacent regions. The removal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger creates an unconnected region and thus diminishes the capabilities to monitor activities in strategically significant Sahel routes. As noted in the literature, such a gap can facilitate the movement of militants and the trafficking of arms and goods within insecure borderlands (Assanvo, 2017; WANEP, 2024). On another note, deteriorating relations between ECOWAS and AES governments make it more difficult to conduct intelligence exchanges and combat terrorism collectively. Apart from the operational aspects, this move signifies a paradigm shift from a more coherent mechanism of regional integration to a more fragmented approach to governance. The presence of both ECOWAS and AES in West Africa means there will be a parallel institutional system with minimal interoperability in managing issues related to mobility, trade, and security in the region (Amani Africa, 2024). This is a challenge that affects not only the existing member countries but also the efficacy of the ECOWAS mechanism within other remaining member countries.

ECOWAS should therefore rethink its priorities for internal governance while also responding to the AES's external influence. Such an approach entails further enhancing the effectiveness of free movement and trade within ECOWAS member countries through improved border governance. On the other hand, the organisation

must have mechanisms for engaging with AES countries on issues such as transit trade management, migration management, and intelligence gathering. Failure to adopt such an approach could result in increased fragmentation. Indeed, the Protocol Relating to Non-Aggression and Mutual Defence of ECOWAS continues to play a fundamental role in West African security architecture. However, the deficiencies in implementing this protocol become all too clear in the prevailing state of affairs. The need to further improve this protocol through effective enforcement mechanisms, more active civil society participation, and enhanced surveillance is crucial to overcoming ongoing insecurity. Above all, managing the spread of small arms and light weapons becomes vital, as it still forms a basis for violence in the region. Overall, sustainable socio-economic development will depend upon re-establishing functional cooperation in security and economic spheres.

Findings of the Study

The findings translate into three patterns that bear directly on ECOWAS's free movement and trade architecture. First, the Free Movement Protocol's border-openness provisions have functioned as an unintended conduit for the circulation of small arms and light weapons across member states. Second, the AES's departure from ECOWAS has begun to disrupt the trade and mobility corridors that free movement was designed to sustain, introducing new documentation and tariff frictions between the two blocs. Third, exposure to armed conflict and arms trafficking is unevenly distributed between ECOWAS's coastal member states and the AES bloc (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger), a distinction that shapes how each grouping experiences the security costs of an otherwise open regional trading and mobility regime.

Terrorism, Instability, and Arms Trafficking Patterns in West African Countries

The results show differences regarding terrorism and weapons trafficking, instability, and weapons smuggling between ECOWAS member countries and the AES bloc. It is important to note these differences when assessing the dynamics of the security architecture and its influence on stability and cooperation in the region. Nigeria, among other ECOWAS member states, differs due to a high level of terrorist activities carried out by Boko Haram and ISWAP that have led to the deaths of over 35,000 people and the displacement of almost 2.5 million individuals since 2009 (EUAA, 2021; HRW, 2022; Egbuta, 2024). Nigeria has been active in conducting weapons trafficking through international corridors linked with Libya, Chad, and the Lake Chad Basin regions, which are responsible for terrorism (Mangan & Nowak, 2019). Even in Ghana, where there has been no extensive terrorism threat, there have been spillover effects through the influx of refugees from Burkina Faso, rising expenses concerning security issues, and susceptibility to smuggling of illegal weapons from the conflict zones located in the North (Citi Newsroom, 2023; Aubyn, 2021; ISS Africa, 2020). Similarly, Senegal does not suffer from any acts of terrorism. However, it has to deal with increased arms smuggling through maritime routes within its territory, as well as involvement with criminal organisations. As a result, security concerns have risen (UNODC, 2023; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2023; Organised Crime Index, 2023). Overall, the countries along the ECOWAS coast suffer from instability due to spillover effects and arms trafficking rather than internal rebellions (Aubyn, 2021; Kohnert, 2022; Citi Newsroom, 2023).

In contrast, the AES states are those that have been directly involved in conflict situations within the region. These include nations like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger that have been faced with continuous cases of jihadism that are attributed to organisations like Al-Qaeda and ISIS. For instance, Mali had 944 fatalities due to conflicts and displacements totalling about 400,000. On the same note, the number of deaths in Burkina Faso was more than 1,100, with more than 1.9 million displacements occurring during that year (Human Rights Watch, 2024; FPRI, 2025). These states have been part of the arms trafficking and militant movement corridor in the Central Sahel region, which connects from Libya and the Greater Sahara to West African coastal nations. The above-

named factors have contributed significantly to persistent institutional weaknesses, low levels of foreign direct investment, and an escalating humanitarian crisis in the AES region. Unlike coastal nations under the ECOWAS umbrella, AES member states have not experienced instability from the spillover effects of conflicts but have been the source of such activities.

Pattern of Instability in the Region

In the last five years, more than a thousand acts of terrorism have been recorded in ECOWAS and AES member countries, most of which have been conducted by groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, and other jihadist forces in the Sahel region (ACLED, 2024). These patterns matter for the free movement and trade regime specifically because they show where its security costs are concentrated and how they travel across the region's open borders. The data above show a two-dimensional pattern of security challenges emerging in West Africa, with the epicentre of instability in the Sahel region and its repercussions reaching coastal ECOWAS countries.

Discussion of Findings

However, the results clearly indicate how such integration measures have contributed to the region's security challenges. In relation to the ECOWAS protocol on free movement of persons, although this policy has helped promote trade in the region, it has also facilitated the movement of small arms and light weapons within the region. In addition, the non-homogeneous arms control regulations have made exploitation very easy, especially with inadequate enforcement capacity. However, the greatest vulnerability is border control; without the right surveillance mechanisms in place and porous borders, it becomes easy for weapons to move into and out of ECOWAS states. Furthermore, inadequate intelligence cooperation among ECOWAS states makes it difficult to launch successful attacks on any smuggling ring that may exist. Terrorist organisations capitalise on these structural gaps by exploiting the porous nature of the borders to move men and weapons around. Poor political stability and lack of resources make it more difficult to mount an effective response. As a result, ECOWAS's economic growth goals are derailed.

There have been achievements in regional efforts such as the Accra Initiative and the Convention on Small Arms; however, their impact has been undermined by poor implementation strategies, a lack of effective monitoring mechanisms, and insufficient resources for surveillance technologies. Another structural issue emerging in the region is the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), which was created recently by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. It represents another layer in the ongoing fragmentation of the region's security governance structure, occurring at a critical time when collective action is most necessary. It is important to adopt an equilibrium approach that retains the existing free-flow system while reinforcing security. There needs to be harmonisation of arms legislation among ECOWAS member states, intensified intelligence sharing, utilisation of advanced surveillance technologies at major border checkpoints, and the development of legal-technological structures to dismantle illicit trafficking networks.

Policy Recommendations to ECOWAS

Improvement in Border Security and Intelligence Exchange

There is a need for ECOWAS countries to upgrade their border surveillance equipment through measures such as deploying drones, installing detectors and surveillance cameras, and other means. Information exchange and

cooperation task forces should also be instituted to deal with criminal activities such as terrorism, human trafficking and smuggling across borders. Joint security training exercises and workshops should also be encouraged among security organisations.

Security versus Economic Integration

ECOWAS should adopt a combined strategy that integrates its efforts toward both economic integration and national security. It will be essential to adopt assessment processes for the security implications of border transactions and investments to avoid weakening of its security standards. Dialogue between security establishments and regional economic decision-making institutions should also be encouraged.

Re-engaging the Alliance of Sahel States and Public Awareness Campaigns

Considering the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger as an alternate security architecture to ECOWAS, it is pertinent for the organisation to consider a dialogue and cooperative relationship with respect to arms control and counter-terrorism activities between the two, even though AES is not a member of ECOWAS. Security challenges, especially those related to insurgent movements like jihadism, do not adhere to the territorial boundaries of regional blocs. Engagement can help prevent ungoverned security spaces from emerging, despite the existing differences between AES and ECOWAS. To build a security culture among the populace, it is important to sensitise the population regarding security concerns related to terrorism and illicit arms trafficking. ECOWAS must develop a programme to educate the population about the dangers of arms trading and provide an accessible mechanism for reporting any suspicious activity.

Conclusion

The free trade and free movement protocols of ECOWAS require further assessment in the context of rising issues such as terrorism and illegal weapons trade within West Africa. The positive aspects of regional integration have been established beyond doubt; however, none of them will be sustainable unless security is taken more seriously. This paper maintains that, to ensure the prosperity and stability of the West African region, it will be crucial for ECOWAS to improve border security, amend the free movement protocol, increase regional cooperation, boost economic development, and create public awareness.

Another critical issue that has emerged very recently is the Alliance of Sahel States, comprising Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, which, unfortunately, is insufficiently covered in the existing academic literature and constitutes yet another example of institutional weakness in West African regional integration. ECOWAS's credibility and future success depend on demonstrating that regional integration and security can be mutually reinforcing objectives rather than contradictory ones.

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