"Africa's Giant" or "Regional Hegemon"? Nigeria's Ambivalent Role in ECOWAS and the Politics of West African Integration, 1999–2025

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Abstract— Nigeria has long been described as the "Giant of Africa," a status that implies both capability and responsibility for regional leadership. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria has played a central role in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), leading peacekeeping interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and, more recently, The Gambia, while also shaping regional trade negotiations and institutional development. However, Nigeria's regional leadership has been persistently ambivalent and contested. Smaller West African states have periodically expressed concerns about Nigerian domination, while Nigeria's own domestic challenges, including insecurity, economic volatility, and political instability, have constrained its capacity for sustained regional engagement. This paper examines the evolution of Nigeria's role in ECOWAS since 1999, arguing that Nigeria's regional policy reflects a fundamental tension between hegemonic ambition and domestic constraint. Drawing on hegemonic stability theory and the literature on regional powers, the paper analyses Nigeria's contributions to ECOWAS peacekeeping, its influence over regional trade negotiations, and the domestic political and economic factors that have shaped its regional engagement. The study contributes to debates on regionalism, hegemony, and the foreign policy of emerging powers, and offers a framework for understanding the conditions under which regional powers can translate potential into effective leadership.

Keywords: Nigeria; ECOWAS; regional hegemony; peacekeeping; West African integration; hegemonic stability theory.

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INTRODUCTION

In August 1990, a Nigerian-led ECOWAS force, the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), intervened in Liberia's civil war. It was the first time a regional organisation in Africa had deployed a peacekeeping force, and it established a precedent that would shape West African security for decades to come (Ativie & Eguvwebere, 2025; Akoni & Eguvwebere, 2025). Nigeria provided the vast majority of the troops, the funding, and the political leadership. The intervention was controversial, both within Nigeria, where it was criticised as a costly adventure, and within ECOWAS, where some member states viewed it as a vehicle for Nigerian hegemony. Yet it also demonstrated Nigeria's capacity and willingness to act as the region's security guarantor, a role that it would play repeatedly in the years that followed.

The Liberia intervention encapsulates the ambivalence that has characterised Nigeria's role in ECOWAS since the return to civilian rule in 1999. On one hand, Nigeria has been the indispensable power in West African integration, providing the resources, the leadership, and the political will that have sustained ECOWAS through its most challenging moments. Without Nigeria, there would have been no ECOMOG intervention in Liberia, no restoration of democracy in Sierra Leone, no forced departure of Yahya Jammeh from The Gambia in 2017. Nigeria's size, population, economy, and military capacity make it the natural leader of the region, and its leaders have consistently articulated a vision of Nigeria as "Africa's Giant," a benevolent hegemon committed to regional stability and integration. As former President Olusegun Obasanjo declared in a 2004 address to the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, "Nigeria has a manifest destiny to lead Africa. We cannot and must not shirk this responsibility" (Obasanjo, 2004, p. 12).

On the other hand, Nigeria's regional leadership has been persistently contested. Smaller West African states, particularly the Francophone states that were once colonies of France, have viewed Nigerian dominance with suspicion, fearing that ECOWAS could become an instrument of Nigerian foreign policy rather than a genuinely multilateral institution. The Francophone states have their own regional organisation, the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA), which provides an alternative framework for integration and which has sometimes complicated ECOWAS decision-making. Nigeria's own domestic challenges, including prolonged military rule, economic crisis, corruption, and, since 2009, a devastating Islamist insurgency in the North-East, have periodically constrained its capacity for regional engagement, creating gaps in leadership that other states, and external actors, particularly France, have filled.

This paper examines the evolution of Nigeria's role in ECOWAS from the return to civilian rule in 1999 to the present. It argues that Nigeria's regional policy reflects a fundamental tension between hegemonic ambition and domestic constraint. Nigeria's leaders have aspired to regional hegemony, but they have been constrained by the realities of Nigerian politics, by the resistance of smaller states, and by the limitations of Nigerian state capacity. The result has been a pattern of regional engagement that is episodic rather than sustained, driven by presidential ambition rather than institutional logic, and more effective in the security domain than in the economic domain.

The paper develops this argument through seven sections. The first situates the study within the relevant scholarly literatures on hegemonic stability theory, regional powers, and African regionalism. The second traces the historical evolution of Nigeria's engagement with ECOWAS from the organisation's founding in 1975 through the return to civilian rule in 1999. The third analyses Nigeria's role in ECOWAS peacekeeping, focusing on the interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia. The fourth examines Nigeria's influence over regional trade negotiations and the politics of economic integration. The fifth analyses the domestic constraints on Nigeria's regional engagement. The sixth examines the external constraints, including the role of France and the challenge of extra-regional powers. The conclusion reflects on the future of Nigeria's role in ECOWAS and offers a framework for understanding the conditions under which regional powers can translate potential into effective leadership.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hegemonic Stability Theory and Regional Powers

Hegemonic stability theory, as developed in the context of international political economy, posits that the stability of the international system depends on the existence of a dominant power willing and able to provide public goods, including security, a stable currency, and an open trading system (Kindleberger, 1973). The hegemon bears a disproportionate share of the costs of maintaining the system, but it also reaps a disproportionate share of the benefits, including the ability to shape the rules and institutions of the system in its favour. The decline of hegemonic power, on this theory, leads to instability, as no other state is willing or able to fill the gap. Gilpin (1981) extended this analysis, arguing that hegemons provide the governance structures that enable international cooperation, but that they also face the challenge of "imperial overstretch," in which the costs of maintaining hegemony eventually exceed the benefits.

Hegemonic stability theory was developed primarily to explain the dynamics of the global economy, but it has been extended to the regional level by scholars of comparative regionalism. Regional hegemons, such as Nigeria in West Africa, South Africa in Southern Africa, and Brazil in South America, are states that possess preponderant power within their regions and that are expected, by themselves and by others, to provide regional public goods (Pedersen, 2002). However, regional hegemons face challenges that global hegemons do not. Their power is limited, both absolutely and relative to extra-regional powers that may have their own interests in the region. They must contend with the resistance of smaller states that fear domination. And they must manage the tension between their regional ambitions and their domestic constraints. Pedersen (2002) developed the concept of "cooperative hegemony" to describe a form of regional leadership in which the hegemon pursues its interests through multilateral institutions rather than unilateral action, sharing power with smaller states in order to legitimise its leadership and reduce resistance.

Nigeria's role in ECOWAS has been analysed through the lens of hegemonic stability theory by several scholars. Adebajo (2008) has argued that Nigeria has functioned as a "reluctant hegemon" in West Africa, providing leadership when it has been forced to do so by circumstances but lacking the sustained commitment and institutional capacity to translate its potential into effective regional governance. Adebajo notes that Nigeria's hegemonic ambitions have been repeatedly frustrated by its own domestic weaknesses, by the resistance of Francophone states, and by the interference of extra-regional powers, particularly France. Bach (2007) has emphasised the "regionalism of ambivalence" that characterises Nigeria's engagement, driven as much by the personal ambitions of Nigerian presidents as by any coherent regional strategy. Bach argues that Nigeria's regional policy has oscillated between assertive unilateralism and cooperative multilateralism, reflecting the competing pulls of hegemonic ambition and domestic constraint.

African Regionalism and the Politics of Integration

The literature on African regionalism has emphasised the distinctive features of regional integration on the continent. Unlike in Europe, where integration has been driven primarily by economic logic and supranational institution-building, African regionalism has been shaped by the political imperative of sovereignty preservation (Herbst, 2000). African states, most of which are relatively young and institutionally weak, have been reluctant to cede sovereignty to regional organisations, and regional integration has proceeded slowly and unevenly as a result. Clapham (1996) argued that African states are characterised by a "juridical statehood" that prioritises the maintenance of formal sovereignty over the development of substantive state capacity, and that this orientation has shaped their approach to regional integration.

ECOWAS, established in 1975, was initially conceived primarily as an economic community, with the goal of promoting trade and economic integration among its member states. The treaty that established ECOWAS was modelled on the Treaty of Rome, which had created the European Economic Community, and it envisioned a progressive deepening of integration that would eventually lead to a customs union and a common market (Asante, 1986). However, the economic dimension of ECOWAS has been overshadowed by its security dimension, particularly since the ECOMOG intervention in Liberia in 1990. ECOWAS has developed an elaborate peace and security architecture, including a conflict prevention framework, a standby force, and a mechanism for responding to unconstitutional changes of government. This evolution from economic to security integration reflects the realities of a region plagued by conflict, but it has also generated tensions, as the resources devoted to security have not been matched by resources devoted to economic integration (Francis, 2009).

The tension between the Anglophone and Francophone blocs within ECOWAS has been a persistent feature of the organisation's politics. The Francophone states, which were once colonies of France, maintain close ties with their former colonial power, including through UEMOA, which provides a common currency, the CFA franc, and a framework for economic integration that is deeper than that of ECOWAS. The Francophone states have sometimes been reluctant to support initiatives that they perceive as advancing Nigerian hegemony, and they have looked to France as a counterweight to Nigerian influence (Adebajo, 2008). This dynamic has complicated ECOWAS decision-making and has limited the organisation's effectiveness.

Nigeria's Foreign Policy and the Domestic Sources of Regional Engagement

The literature on Nigerian foreign policy has emphasised the importance of domestic factors in shaping the country's regional engagement. Nigeria's size and diversity, with over 250 ethnic groups and a history of ethnic and regional competition, have made foreign policy a sensitive domain, in which any perceived favouritism toward a particular region or ethnic group can generate domestic controversy (Akindele, 2005). The Nigerian federal character principle, which requires that appointments to public office reflect the diversity of the country, has also shaped the staffing of the foreign ministry and the conduct of diplomacy.

Nigeria's economic dependence on oil, which accounts for the vast majority of government revenue and export earnings, has made the country vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil prices, with consequent impacts on its capacity for regional engagement (Ogunsanwo, 2014). The oil boom of the 1970s provided the resources that enabled Nigeria to play an assertive regional role, funding the establishment of ECOWAS and the early ECOMOG interventions. The oil price collapses of the 1980s, 2014–2016, and 2020 undermined that capacity, forcing Nigeria to retrench and to focus on domestic priorities.

Nigeria's political instability, including prolonged periods of military rule and a civil war from 1967 to 1970, has periodically diverted attention and resources away from regional affairs. The return to civilian rule in 1999 was accompanied by a renewed emphasis on regional engagement, as President Olusegun Obasanjo sought to restore Nigeria's international standing after decades of military rule and international isolation. Obasanjo made regional integration a centrepiece of his foreign policy, playing a leading role in the transformation of the Organisation of African Unity into the African Union and in the establishment of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). His successors, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, Goodluck Jonathan, Muhammadu Buhari, and Bola Ahmed Tinubu, have all articulated commitments to regional leadership, but their capacity to deliver has varied, shaped by their personal priorities, their domestic political circumstances, and the resources available to them (Ogunsanwo, 2014).

THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF NIGERIA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH ECOWAS

From Founding to the Return to Civilian Rule, 1975–1999

ECOWAS was established by the Treaty of Lagos in May 1975, with fifteen member states. Nigeria, under the military leadership of General Yakubu Gowon, was the driving force behind the organisation's creation, seeing it as a vehicle for promoting economic integration and reducing the region's dependence on former colonial powers (Asante, 1986). The treaty established a framework for the progressive elimination of tariffs and other barriers to trade, the harmonisation of economic policies, and the promotion of cooperation in agriculture, industry, and infrastructure.

The early years of ECOWAS were characterised by slow progress on economic integration, as member states proved reluctant to implement the treaty's provisions. The reasons were multiple: the similarity of West African economies, which produced competing rather than complementary goods; the dependence of many states on tariff revenue, which they were reluctant to sacrifice; and the political tensions between Anglophone and Francophone states, which reflected the continuing influence of former colonial powers (Asante, 1986). The protocols on the free movement of persons, adopted in 1979, were implemented only partially, and the goal of a customs union remained elusive.

The security dimension of ECOWAS emerged in response to the civil war in Liberia, which began in December 1989. The conflict, which was characterised by extreme brutality against civilians, threatened to destabilise the entire region, generating refugee flows and providing a base for armed groups operating across borders. The international community, preoccupied with the end of the Cold War and the Gulf War, showed little interest in intervening. It was in this context that ECOWAS, under Nigerian leadership, took the unprecedented step of deploying a peacekeeping force, ECOMOG, to Liberia in August 1990 (Adebajo, 2002).

The decision to intervene was driven primarily by Nigeria's President, General Ibrahim Babangida, who saw the Liberia crisis as both a threat to regional stability and an opportunity to assert Nigerian leadership. Babangida was also motivated by personal ties to Liberian President Samuel Doe, who had been a friend and ally. The intervention was controversial from the outset, with some ECOWAS members, particularly the Francophone states, questioning its legality and its motives. Nevertheless, ECOMOG deployed to Monrovia, and it would remain in Liberia, in various forms, for the next eight years (Adebajo, 2002).

The Obasanjo Years and the Renewal of Regional Engagement, 1999–2007

The election of Olusegun Obasanjo as President in May 1999 marked the return of Nigeria to civilian rule after sixteen years of military dictatorship. Obasanjo, a former military head of state who had voluntarily handed over power to a civilian government in 1979, was determined to restore Nigeria's international reputation and to position the country as a leader of the African continent. Regional integration was a central component of this strategy.

Obasanjo's first term was dominated by the challenges of consolidating democracy at home and restoring Nigeria's international standing. His second term, from 2003 to 2007, saw a more activist regional policy. Obasanjo played a leading role in mediating conflicts across West Africa, including the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the political crisis in Côte d'Ivoire, and the border dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon over the Bakassi Peninsula. He also championed the transformation of the Organisation of African Unity into the African Union and the establishment of NEPAD, a framework for promoting good governance and economic development in exchange for increased aid and investment from the international community (Adebajo, 2008).

Obasanjo's regional activism was facilitated by favourable economic conditions. The rise in global oil prices during his presidency provided the resources needed to fund Nigeria's regional engagements, including substantial financial contributions to ECOWAS and the African Union. However, Obasanjo's regional activism also generated controversy. His attempt to amend the Nigerian constitution to allow him to run for a third term in 2006 was widely seen as a betrayal of democratic principles, and it undermined his moral authority as a champion of good governance. His handling of the Bakassi dispute, which was resolved by the International Court of Justice in favour of Cameroon in 2002, was criticised by Nigerian nationalists who felt that he had capitulated to international pressure. And his successor, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, who took office in May 2007, was less personally committed to regional engagement, and Nigeria's regional profile declined during his short presidency (Ogunsanwo, 2014).

From Jonathan to Tinubu: Continuity and Change, 2010–2025

The presidency of Goodluck Jonathan, from 2010 to 2015, saw a continuation of Nigeria's engagement with ECOWAS, but without the personal dynamism that had characterised the Obasanjo years. Jonathan's foreign policy was largely reactive, responding to crises as they arose rather than proactively shaping the regional agenda.

The most significant regional development during his presidency was the escalation of the Boko Haram insurgency, which increasingly took on a regional dimension, with attacks spilling over into Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. The crisis highlighted the limitations of Nigeria's capacity for regional leadership, as the Nigerian military struggled to contain the insurgency and was forced to rely on regional cooperation through the Multinational Joint Task Force (International Crisis Group, 2020).

The election of Muhammadu Buhari in 2015 brought to power a president who was personally committed to regional engagement, but whose capacity to deliver was constrained by domestic challenges. Buhari made the defeat of Boko Haram his administration's top priority, and he invested significant diplomatic capital in strengthening regional cooperation through the Lake Chad Basin Commission and the MNJTF. However, Buhari's presidency was also marked by economic recession, driven by the collapse of global oil prices, and by persistent insecurity across multiple regions of Nigeria. These domestic challenges limited the resources and attention available for regional engagement (International Crisis Group, 2021).

The election of Bola Ahmed Tinubu in 2023 has brought a new dynamism to Nigeria's regional policy. Tinubu, who campaigned on the slogan "Renewed Hope," has articulated an ambitious vision of Nigerian regional leadership, calling for a "new era of West African cooperation" and pledging to make ECOWAS "the engine of African integration" (Tinubu, 2023). However, Tinubu faces significant challenges, including a struggling economy, persistent insecurity, and the political fallout from recent military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, which have posed a direct challenge to ECOWAS's authority and to Nigeria's regional leadership.

NIGERIA AND ECOWAS PEACEKEEPING

Liberia and Sierra Leone

The ECOMOG interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone represent the most significant expressions of Nigerian regional leadership in the security domain. The Liberia intervention, which began in 1990 and continued, in various forms, until 1998, was the first peacekeeping operation undertaken by a regional organisation in Africa. Nigeria provided the overwhelming majority of the troops and the funding, and Nigerian officers commanded the force throughout its deployment.

The intervention was controversial from the outset. Nigeria's motives were questioned by other ECOWAS members, particularly the Francophone states, which suspected that Nigeria was using ECOMOG to advance its own regional ambitions. The intervention was also costly, both in financial terms and in human lives. An estimated 500 Nigerian soldiers died in Liberia, and the financial cost, estimated at over eight billion dollars, placed a significant strain on the Nigerian budget (Adebajo, 2002).

Despite these costs, the intervention achieved some significant successes. ECOMOG prevented the complete collapse of the Liberian state, protected civilians from the worst excesses of the warring factions, and eventually created the conditions for a negotiated settlement and elections in 1997. The intervention also established a precedent for regional peacekeeping that would be invoked in subsequent crises.

The intervention in Sierra Leone, which began in 1997, was a direct consequence of the Liberia intervention. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a rebel group that had been supported by Liberian warlord Charles Taylor, had been waging a brutal campaign against the Sierra Leonean government since 1991. In May 1997, a faction of the Sierra Leonean army overthrew the elected government and invited the RUF to join a military junta. ECOMOG, which had been deployed in Sierra Leone since 1995, was tasked with restoring the elected government. After intense fighting, ECOMOG succeeded in driving the junta from Freetown in February 1998 and restoring President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah to power (Adebajo, 2002).

The Gambia, 2017

The most recent expression of Nigerian regional leadership in the security domain was the intervention in The Gambia in January 2017. Yahya Jammeh, who had ruled The Gambia since a military coup in 1994, was defeated in a presidential election in December 2016 by Adama Barrow. Jammeh initially conceded defeat but subsequently reversed himself, declaring the election results null and void and refusing to step down. ECOWAS, under the leadership of Nigeria and Senegal, threatened military intervention if Jammeh did not comply with the election results.

The ECOWAS intervention in The Gambia was significant for several reasons. It was the first time that ECOWAS had invoked its Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, adopted in 2001, which commits member states to constitutional rule and provides for sanctions, including military intervention, in response to unconstitutional changes of government. It was also notable for the speed and decisiveness of the ECOWAS response, which contrasted with the prolonged and hesitant response to earlier crises. And it was notable for the active role played by Nigeria, which deployed naval vessels and aircraft to support the Senegalese-led ground force (Hartmann, 2017).

The Gambia intervention demonstrated that Nigeria, when its leadership is engaged and committed, can still mobilise effective regional action. However, it also highlighted the limitations of Nigerian power. The ground force was led by Senegal, not Nigeria, reflecting a deliberate decision to avoid the perception of Nigerian domination. The intervention was also dependent on the support of the African Union and the United Nations Security Council, which provided diplomatic legitimacy. And the long-term success of the intervention remains uncertain, as The Gambia continues to grapple with the legacy of Jammeh's rule.

The Coup Crisis and the Limits of Nigerian Power

The military coups that have occurred in Mali (2020 and 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) have posed the most significant challenge to ECOWAS's authority since the organisation's founding. The coups have been condemned by ECOWAS, which has imposed sanctions on the military juntas and threatened military intervention. Nigeria, as the largest member of ECOWAS and the chair of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government, has been at the forefront of these efforts.

However, the coup crisis has also exposed the limitations of Nigerian power. The threat of military intervention in Niger, which was articulated by President Tinubu in August 2023, was met with resistance both within Nigeria, where the Senate urged caution, and within ECOWAS, where some member states expressed reluctance to commit troops. The military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have formed an "Alliance of Sahel States" and have threatened to withdraw from ECOWAS, posing an existential challenge to the organisation. Nigeria's capacity to enforce ECOWAS decisions is limited by its own domestic challenges, including the ongoing insurgency in the North-East and the economic constraints that have reduced the resources available for military operations (International Crisis Group, 2023).

NIGERIA AND REGIONAL ECONOMIC INTEGRATION

The Politics of Trade Liberalisation

Nigeria's role in regional economic integration has been more ambivalent than its role in regional security. As the largest economy in West Africa, accounting for over 60 percent of ECOWAS GDP, Nigeria has the most to gain from regional trade liberalisation, but it has also been one of the main obstacles to progress.

The reasons for Nigeria's ambivalence are multiple. First, Nigerian manufacturers have long feared competition from more efficient producers in other ECOWAS states, and they have lobbied successfully for protectionist measures. The Nigerian government has periodically imposed import bans on a wide range of goods, including those from ECOWAS member states, in violation of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme. Second, Nigeria's dependence on oil revenue has reduced the incentive to promote non-oil exports, and the country has not developed the productive capacity to compete effectively in regional markets. Third, the smuggling of goods across Nigeria's porous borders has made a mockery of official trade statistics and has complicated the negotiation of trade agreements (Afolabi, 2019).

The ECOWAS Common External Tariff

The adoption of the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) in 2015 was a significant milestone in regional economic integration. The CET established a common set of tariffs on goods imported from outside the region, with the goal of creating a customs union. Nigeria played a leading role in the negotiation of the CET, but its implementation has been uneven. Nigeria has been slow to align its national tariff schedule with the CET, and it has continued to impose additional levies and restrictions on imports that are inconsistent with ECOWAS rules (Afolabi, 2019).

The challenges of implementing the CET reflect deeper tensions in Nigeria's approach to regional integration. On one hand, Nigerian policymakers recognise the potential benefits of a larger, integrated regional market. On the other hand, they are constrained by the demands of domestic constituencies, including manufacturers, labour unions, and state governments, that fear the consequences of liberalisation. The result is a pattern of policy inconsistency that undermines Nigeria's credibility as a regional leader.

Domestic Constraints on Nigeria's Regional Engagement

Nigeria's capacity for regional engagement has been shaped, and constrained, by domestic factors. The most significant of these is the country's persistent insecurity. The Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East, which has killed tens of thousands of people and displaced millions since 2009, has consumed enormous resources and political attention that might otherwise have been directed toward regional affairs. The escalation of armed banditry in the North-West and the persistence of farmer-herder conflicts across the Middle Belt have further stretched the capacity of the Nigerian state (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Economic volatility has also constrained Nigeria's regional engagement. Nigeria's dependence on oil revenue makes the country vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil prices. The collapse of oil prices in 2014–2016 and again in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, plunged the Nigerian economy into recession, reducing the resources available for regional engagement. The government's response to these crises, including the imposition of capital controls and the closure of borders, undermined the principles of regional integration.

Political instability has been a further constraint. Nigeria's democratic institutions remain fragile, and elections are often accompanied by violence and allegations of fraud. The country has experienced several political crises since 1999, including the impeachment of a sitting governor, the illness and death of President Yar'Adua in 2010, and the controversy surrounding President Buhari's health during his first term. These crises have consumed political attention and have made it difficult for Nigerian leaders to sustain a consistent focus on regional affairs.

EXTERNAL CONSTRAINTS ON NIGERIA'S REGIONAL LEADERSHIP

The Role of France

France has historically been the most significant external constraint on Nigeria's regional leadership. As the former colonial power in most of Francophone West Africa, France maintains close political, economic, and military ties with its former colonies. France has military bases in several West African countries, including Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and, until recently, Mali and Burkina Faso. It has intervened militarily in the region on multiple occasions, most notably in Mali in 2013, when French forces led an intervention to prevent jihadist groups from seizing control of the country.

Nigeria has long viewed France's presence in West Africa with suspicion, seeing it as a constraint on its own regional ambitions. The relationship between the two countries has been characterised by mutual distrust, with Nigeria resenting what it sees as French neo-colonialism and France viewing Nigeria as a potential rival for influence in the region. The tensions between the two countries have played out within ECOWAS, where the Francophone states have sometimes aligned with France against Nigerian initiatives (Adebajo, 2008).

The Challenge of Extra-Regional Powers

In recent years, the influence of extra-regional powers in West Africa has grown, complicating Nigeria's regional leadership. China has become a major economic partner for many West African states, providing infrastructure investment, loans, and trade. The United States has maintained a military presence in the region through its Africa Command (AFRICOM) and has provided significant security assistance to Nigeria and other states. Russia has expanded its influence through the deployment of mercenaries from the Wagner Group, which have been active in Mali and, reportedly, in other states in the region.

These extra-regional powers do not necessarily compete directly with Nigeria for regional leadership, but they create a more complex and crowded geopolitical environment in which Nigeria's influence is diluted. The coup in Niger in 2023 illustrated this complexity. While ECOWAS, under Nigerian leadership, threatened military intervention, the military junta received support from the juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso, which are backed by Russia. The crisis has become a geopolitical contest between ECOWAS, backed by the United States and France, and the Alliance of Sahel States, backed by Russia.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria's role in ECOWAS since 1999 reflects a fundamental tension between hegemonic ambition and domestic constraint. Nigeria has aspired to regional leadership, and it has periodically demonstrated the capacity and willingness to act as the region's security guarantor, leading peacekeeping interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia. Yet Nigeria's regional leadership has been episodic rather than sustained, driven more by presidential ambition than by institutional logic, and more effective in the security domain than in the economic domain.

The reasons for this ambivalence are rooted in the domestic politics and political economy of Nigeria. The country's persistent insecurity, economic volatility, and political instability have constrained its capacity for sustained regional engagement. The resistance of smaller West African states, particularly the Francophone states, has complicated Nigeria's regional ambitions. The influence of extra-regional powers, particularly France, China, and Russia, has created a more complex geopolitical environment. And the contradiction between Nigeria's protectionist trade policies and its rhetorical commitment to regional integration has undermined its credibility as a regional leader.

The future of Nigeria's role in ECOWAS will depend on the ability of Nigerian leaders to address these domestic constraints and to develop a more coherent and consistent regional strategy. Nigeria remains the indispensable power in West Africa, but leadership requires more than potential. It requires sustained commitment, institutional capacity, and a willingness to bear the costs of providing regional public goods. Whether Nigeria's leaders can rise to this challenge remains to be seen.

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