

## **REASSESSING NIGERIA'S HEGEMONIC STATUS IN AFRICA: FACTORS, DISCOURSE AND PROSPECTS**

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**Abstract.** The debate surrounding the hegemonic status of powerful African nations provides the context for this study, which re-evaluates Nigeria's hegemonic status. Nigeria's evolution from traditional humanitarian intervention to aligning with the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine suggests a willingness to act as a stabilizing force in an unstable region.

This role is a pressing regional concern and a matter of global interest. Essentially, the consolidation of a legitimate African hegemon could address regional instability and release substantial international humanitarian resources dedicated to the continent.

The debate between proponents and opponents of Nigeria's hegemony hinges on its historic commitment to peacekeeping and mounting domestic challenges. Using the Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST), this reviews the arguments around Nigeria's hegemonic status. It draws on qualitative data from secondary sources and primary data from in-depth interviews with key informants from specialized agencies.

The findings show that Nigeria's commitment to regional stability through peacekeeping stems from its Afrocentric foreign policy and self-imposed sense of 'manifest destiny', but these efforts alone do not confirm hegemonic status. While Nigeria exhibits a measure of normative leadership expected of a hegemon, domestic pressures undermine its capacity to fully embody the role of a hegemon.

The study concludes that Nigeria performs a 'quasi-hegemonic' function that has contributed to relative stability especially in West Africa. However, diminishing domestic capacities required for sustained regional leadership presents a significant constraint on Nigeria's transformation into an effective African hegemon with critical implications for regional stability and international humanitarian financing.

**Keywords:** Nigeria, hegemony, humanitarian intervention, R2P, peacekeeping, Afrocentric foreign policy

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## INTRODUCTION

The question of hegemonic stability in Africa remains a pivotal issue in international relations, with Nigeria's role constituting a central point of contention. This hegemonic discourse is rooted in the intractable problem of instability Africa has struggled with since the 1960s and the critical leadership role hegemons play in the attainment of regional order [Nye 2004]. This study is hinged on the argument that the lack of an effective hegemon in Africa plays a critical role in the intractable conflicts and instability crippling the continent. As such, the emergence of a true African hegemon is not merely an academic exercise but carries far-reaching implications for regional stability, economic development, international security, and allocation of global humanitarian resources. This is particularly important, given that the African continent consumes a significant proportion of these resources annually.

Nigeria, among several African countries, has the potential to become a regional hegemon to provide the crucial stability the continent requires for development. This potential is based on factors that include its immense human, natural, and financial resources derived from crude oil, as well as its relative military strength [Ojatorotu, Adeleke 2018]. By virtue of its natural endowments, many of the less endowed African countries expect Nigeria to assume a leadership role on the continent [Annan 2004]. Then there is also Nigeria's adoption of an "Afrocentric" foreign policy philosophy, by which it perceives itself as a leader and "big brother" on the African continent [Oshewolo et al. 2024]. This has compelled it to pursue numerous humanitarian engagements across the continent dating back to the 1960s, in the form of financial grants, conflict prevention, mitigation and resolution, and peacekeeping [Oshewolo 2019; Ugwu 2019].

Nigeria's contribution to humanitarian intervention and peacekeeping and their impact on regional peace is recognized internationally [Mickler, Suleiman, Maianga 2019]. Yet, Nigeria's status as regional hegemon is the subject of polarizing debate. Proponents of Nigeria's hegemonic status cite Nigeria's extensive and costly contribution to peacekeeping across the African continent [Adebajo 2018]. Proponents point further to Nigeria's pivotal role in the development of regional frameworks, like the Economic Community of West African States aimed at regional development (ECOWAS) [Oshewolo et al. 2024].

Skeptics, on the other hand, argue that despite the international recognition of Nigeria's peacekeeping record; its huge population, large economy, and human resources; its military, which is equal in numerical strength to that of all West African nations combined; as well as its vanguard role in the formation and funding of regional peacekeeping outfits like ECOMOG in multiple West African nations, including Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Cote d'Ivoire, the country nonetheless lacks the military, economic, and international support to be designated as the regional hegemon [Ojakorotu, Adeleke 2018].

Yet, despite its phenomenal endowments and achievements, it can at best be described as an important regional power because domestic contradictions, such as endemic poverty amidst plenty; pervasive insecurity despite its formidable military; a lack of social cohesion amidst diversity; bad governance and corruption; a negative international image; and diminishing continental influence, hinder it from the role of a legitimate hegemon [Adebajo, Mustapha 2008; Ogunnubi, Okeke-Uzodike 2016]

A different perspective is that Nigeria's foreign policy harbors no intents of international domination [Ogunnubi, Okeke-Uzodike 2016]. Its driving goal is genuine liberation and development of the continent, even at great national cost [Adebajo 2018; Adebajo, Mustapha 2008; Gambari 2018]. This altruistic foreign policy implies that claims or arguments of regional hegemony, whether real or assumed, do not align with Nigeria's Afrocentric philosophy, which adopts Africa as the centerpiece of its foreign policy [Ogunnubi 2017; Omaamaka, Okechukwu 2020].

Considering the above argumentations, what only a few studies have attempted [Ogunnubi 2017] is an analysis of the problem within an adequate theoretical framework. Therefore, this study is drawing heavily on Nigeria's legacy of regional interventionism, acknowledging the evolution from traditional humanitarian intervention to Responsibility to Protect (R2P) as the basis for re-evaluating Nigeria's hegemonic status within the theoretical framework of the "Hegemonic Stability Theory" (HST). The study focuses on Nigeria's years of regional intervention because it provides the strongest argument for Nigeria's hegemony with the aim of evaluating how well it holds up against counter-positions within the HST framework. This article contends that determining Nigeria's hegemonic status can provide critical insight into which aspects of its internal politics and foreign policy it needs to work on in order to transform into a legitimate stabilizing actor in Africa.

The above raises the central question of whether Nigeria's peacekeeping behavior translates into the stabilizing regional leadership expected of a hegemon. To do this, the study adopted a qualitative research design that combines secondary data with in-depth interviews with diplomats and experts in Nigerian foreign policy. Process tracing was employed to examine the causal mechanism that links Nigeria's foreign policy behavior to its perceived regional leadership role. This method helps to reveal the causal relationship through an analysis of individual cases, which, in turn, allows us to understand how decisions, capabilities, and outcomes measure against the expectations of HST.

#### HEGEMONIC STABILITY THEORY DEFINITION OF HEGEMON

The Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST), at its core, assumes that international system stability depends on the presence of a dominant state that has both the capacity and

willingness to provide leadership by making and enforcing rules for the system [Danner, Martín 2019]. HST provides a useful way to evaluate whether Nigeria's regional behavior aligns with what is expected of a hegemon. In this study, Nigeria is examined as a potential hegemon within Africa. The analysis focuses on core HST criteria:

1. Provision of Public Goods: A hegemon supplies collective goods that benefit the entire system even without direct reciprocity [Kindleberger 1986]. The public goods, in this context, encompass security goods, economic goods, and crisis prevention and management [Keohane 1984];

2. Power Resources or Capabilities: A hegemon possesses preponderance in material and ideological resources [Nye 2004]. These encompass (a) material power (which asks whether Nigeria possesses the economic, human, and military resources to enforce order and support regional stability) and (b) soft power (inquiring into whether Nigeria has cultural influence, diplomatic clout, and a normative leadership record);

3. Leadership and Willingness: A hegemon willingly bears the costs and responsibilities of leadership<sup>1</sup>. Accordingly, does Nigeria (a) have a consistent outward-looking foreign policy doctrine that aligns with the functions of a hegemon, (b) demonstrate willingness to incur short-term economic or political costs for long-term stability, and (c) take responsibility for regional security through peacekeeping, diplomacy, and humanitarian intervention?

4. Recognition and Legitimacy: A hegemon is acknowledged and accepted by other states within the system [Clark 2011]. Do other states in the region accept Nigeria's leadership role as opposed to resisting or challenging it?

5. Stability Outcomes: The dominant state's actions must translate into stability for it to be a hegemon [Katzenstein 1977]. Accordingly, (a) has Nigeria's involvement in humanitarian interventionism resulted in a measurable decrease in interstate and intrastate conflicts in Africa, and (b) do regional and subregional organizations like ECOWAS and AU function more effectively because of Nigeria's leadership and resources?

By assessing Nigeria's humanitarian intervention efforts, foreign policy commitments, and outcomes in key security interventions through these criteria, the study systematically re-evaluates the central argument of the study regarding Nigeria's hegemonic status.

## AFROCENTRISM AS BASIS FOR NIGERIA'S REGIONAL ENGAGEMENTS

Nigeria's foreign policy is built on core principles of equality and respect of the sovereign equality, territorial integrity of all African states and the pursuit of regional cooperation and unity [Ogunnubi, Isike 2018]. To practicalize these principles, Nigeria's leaders adopted Afrocentrism as the basis of its foreign policy based on notions of a "manifest destiny" to lead Africa. Manifest destiny in Nigeria's foreign policy context is different from, for example, the US context. The American foreign policy context encapsulates the conviction of the 19th century American settlers that it was their God-

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<sup>1</sup> Habib A., Landsberg C. Hegemon or Pivot? Debating South Africa's Role in Africa. *Centre for Policy Studies*. 2003. <https://sarpn.org/documents/d0000620/P611-Pivotalstate.pdf> (accessed: 28.10.2025)

given destiny to manifest democratic republicanism across North America through continental expansionism [Dobson 2013].

In contrast, Nigeria's manifest destiny is not driven by expansionism. Rather, it encapsulates Nigeria's adopted commitment to liberate Africa from foreign domination using its significant resource capabilities. On the heels of Independence, Nigeria's Prime Minister Alhaji Tafawa Balewa, in his inaugural address at the United Nations General Assembly in October, 1960, affirmed that Nigeria wanted friendliness with all nations and had no "expansionist intentions."<sup>2</sup> This declaration resonates with Articles 1(2) and 2(4) of the UN Charter, which emphasize, respectively, "friendly relations among nations" and respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states.<sup>3</sup>

Nigeria's manifest destiny aimed to prevent the exploitation of the peoples of Africa, as Nigerian leaders defined Africa's complete freedom from foreign or internal domination as Nigeria's interest [Warner 2016]. By implication, its Afrocentric foreign policy required that it had to encourage, rather than demand, the cooperation of other African countries in the struggle for continental liberation and development [Oshewolo 2019].

Afrocentrism appealed to the pioneers of Nigeria's foreign policy because it emerged as a framework for asserting the African identity [Smedley, Smedley 2018]. It contends Africans must write their own history and put themselves at the center of their own narratives as a necessary action to recapture historical spaces [Bekerie 2007] and break from Eurocentric narratives that rationalize inhumanities like slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism [Asante 2020]. Afrocentrism perceives all peoples of African descent as one community, contending that, despite their diversity, they shared the value of communal living, around which they erected economic systems of social welfarism that upheld equity, dignity, and freedom of the human person [Adeleke 2015]. Afrocentrism thus fits Nigeria's perception of the oneness of African peoples and the need to look out for each other. This set the philosophy of Nigeria's altruistic foreign policy in the continent's delayed race to self-actualization.

#### NIGERIA'S HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTIONISM THROUGH THE HEGEMONIC STABILITY THEORY

Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has provided different public goods to less powerful African states. It offered direct financial and material aid to many indigent newly independent African states [Fawole 2000]. Through a Technical Aids Corp (TAC), established in 1987, Nigeria deployed thousands of professionals to support education, training, and mentorship across Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific [Ogunnubi, Isike 2018; Onuoha, Onuoha 2022]. Additionally, Nigeria financed development projects in 17 Sub-Saharan African countries via a trust fund through the African Development Bank, totaling \$240 million by 1990 [Bukarambe 2000].

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<sup>2</sup> Maiden General Assembly Statement at the United Nations. 07.10.1960. *Permanent Mission of Nigeria to the United Nations*. <http://nigeriaunmission.org/maiden-speech-at-the-un/> (accessed: 17.11.2025)

<sup>3</sup> Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice. *United Nations. 1945*. <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/ctc/uncharter.pdf> (accessed: 17.11.2025)

Nigeria's has provided substantial moral and financial support to regional organizations. It was instrumental in forming the OAU/AU and ECOWAS, and Nigeria has consistently funded them beyond its legal obligations. It covered up to 10% of OAU's annual budget [Bukarambe 2000] and up to 75% of ECOWAS' annual funding. Through these platforms, Nigeria led and participated in numerous peacekeeping missions across Africa [Mbara, Gopal 2020]. Its efforts began with the 1960–1964 UN operation in Congo, where it contributed 1,796 soldiers and police officers and helped broker the peace deal that ended the conflict [Gambari 2012]. Recently, it has shouldered responsibility for the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) put together to combat Boko Haram<sup>4</sup> in the Lake Chad Basin.

Nigeria has taken lead roles in the creation of numerous conflict prevention and mitigation frameworks, such as the “Programme for Coordination and Assistance for Security and Development in Africa” (1997–1999);<sup>5</sup> Protocol Relating to Mutual Assistance of Defence (1981)<sup>6</sup>; ECOWAS Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security (1999)<sup>7</sup>; ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001);<sup>8</sup> the AU Constitutive Act (2000)<sup>9</sup>; and support for the R2P doctrine and the AU's shift from non-interference to non-indifference. This shift signalled Nigeria's willingness to commit to armed intervention for the protection of vulnerable populations within the territory of sovereign states. Nigeria's commitment to R2P and non-indifference as new humanitarian philosophies is also linked to the dominance of its military capacity in Sub-Saharan Africa [Ojakorotu, Adeleke 2018].

Within HST, a hegemon enjoys legitimacy through acceptance of its leadership by other states. While the above suggests Nigeria has generated significant public goods for many African states, statistics show that SSA perpetually ranks below the global average of nearly every development index, including poverty and all the dimensions of human security<sup>10</sup>. Nigeria, because of its predominant population, has one of the highest poverty rates in Africa. Up to 63% of Nigeria's total population suffer multidimensional

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<sup>4</sup> Recognized as a terrorist organization in Nigeria, the USA, EU, and by the UN Security Council.

<sup>5</sup> Program for Coordination and Assistance for Security and Development in Africa (PCASED). *Federation of American Scientists*. 1999. <https://nuke.fas.org/control/pcased/index.html> (accessed: 30.10.2025)

<sup>6</sup> Protocol Relating to Mutual Assistance in Defence. ECOWAS. 1981. *Amani Africa*. <https://amaniafrica-et.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Protocol-Relating-to-Mutual-Assistance-in-Defence-1981.pdf> (accessed: 30.10.2025)

<sup>7</sup> Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace– Keeping and Security. ECOWAS. 1999. *Amani Africa*. <https://amaniafrica-et.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Protocol-Relating-to-the-Mechanism-for-Conflict-Prevention-Management-Resolution-Peace-Keeping-and-Security-1999.pdf> (accessed: 30.10.2025)

<sup>8</sup> Protocol A/SPI/12/01 on Democracy and Good Governance. Supplementary to the Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security. ECOWAS. 2001. *EISA*. <https://www.eisa.org/pdf/ecowas2001protocol.pdf> (accessed: 30.10.2025)

<sup>9</sup> Constitutive Act of the African Union. AU. 2000. [https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/34873-file-constitutiveact\\_en.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/34873-file-constitutiveact_en.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> See: Wadhawa B. Year in Review: 2018 in 14 Charts. *World Bank Group*. 21.12.2018. <https://worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2018/12/21/year-in-review-2018-in-14-charts> (accessed: 30.10.2025), Schoch M., Lakner C., African countries show mixed progress towards poverty reduction and half of them have an extreme poverty rate above 35%. *World Bank Blogs*. 22.12.2020. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/african-countries-show-mixed-progress-towards-poverty-reduction-and-half-them-have-extreme> (accessed: 30.10.2025)

poverty<sup>11</sup>. Despite Nigeria's support for regional economic integration through frameworks like ECOWAS and the Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), the tendency is for the economies of African countries to be externally oriented, making trade more likely with countries in Europe, North America, and Asia than with each other [Ake 1996]. This suggests that Nigeria has neither been able to generate the level of collective goods that translate into prosperity nor the economic momentum to stabilize Africa as a distinct international economic system fuelled by Nigeria's own large market.

Despite claims of manifest destiny, Nigeria's role of regional leader faces increasing resistance even by countries that have benefited from Nigeria's public goods, generated often at great diplomatic and economic cost. Researchers note that Nigeria's decolonization campaign, which was key to the independence of many countries, including Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, Sao Tome and Principe, Rhodesia, Namibia, and South Africa, strained diplomatic relations with western allies [Ogunsanwo 2010]. To protest Britain's unwillingness to condemn white minority rule in Rhodesia, Nigeria nationalized the assets of British Petroleum in 1978 [Osuntokun 2008]. Nigeria lost US \$45 billion over a 15-year period enforcing an embargo on crude oil exports to apartheid South Africa [Garba 1987]. Sources claim Nigeria expended up to \$1 billion in financial aid and support for the liberation struggle in Southern Africa [Oluwafunminiyi 2021]. Other estimates put Nigeria's financial aid to countries in Africa, the Pacific, and the Caribbean at tens of billions of US \$ [Fawole 2000]. Countries that benefitted from TAC do not reciprocate when it matters<sup>12</sup>.

This lack of reciprocity manifests often as votes against Nigeria's interest at international forums. In 1995, close neighbors and other African countries voted against Nigeria's candidate for President of the African Development Bank [Mbara, Gopal 2020]. South Africa, Egypt, whom Nigeria supported during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and Ghana, whose responsibility to supply electricity to Togo and Benin is shouldered by Nigeria through the supply of fossil fuel (natural gas), did not support Nigeria's bid for a permanent UN Security Council seat. In 2009, Togo, which receives the bulk of its electricity supply from Nigeria, and Sierra Leone and Liberia, where Nigeria spent over US \$8 billion to end civil wars, did not support Nigeria when it sought a non-permanent UNSC seat [Akinterinwa 2012].

#### HINDRANCES TO STABILITY OUTCOMES OF NIGERIA'S HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION IN AFRICA

The foregoing highlights Nigeria's extensive and expensive humanitarian intervention in Africa. It also centralizes Nigeria's inability to translate its intervention *bona fides* into influence to serve its national interest. This is also evident in the levels of discrimination Nigerian citizens face in other African countries. In South Africa, for

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<sup>11</sup> Nigeria's Multidimensional Poverty Index. *National Bureau of Statistics*. 2022. <https://nigerianstat.gov.ng/elibrary/read/1241254> (accessed: 30.10.2025)

<sup>12</sup> Adebawo W. Globally Oriented Citizenship and International Voluntary Service: Interrogating Nigeria's Technical Aid Corp Scheme. *Nordic Africa Institute*. 19.01.2012. <https://coilink.org/20.500.12592/4w7f6g> (accessed: 28.11.2025)

example, Nigerians are constant victims of xenophobia [Mbara, Gopal 2020; Ogunnowo, Joshua 2019]. Nigeria's Afrocentric foreign policy has not yielded the benefits that, according to HST, flow from hegemony. Perceptions among Africans that Nigerians are loud and disrespectful intensify resistance against notions of Nigerian hegemony [Warner 2017].

Additionally, Nigeria's 60-year history of interventionism has not produced expected stability outcomes. Despite the provision of peacekeeping goods, Sub-Saharan Africa remains one of the most unstable regions in the world [Mickler, Suleiman, Maiangwa 2019]. Without disregard for Nigeria's potential to be a regional hegemon, those who deny it its putative status rely on the myriad of domestic issues that constrain its potential [Adebajo, Landsberg 2003; Herbst 2015].

### CREDIBILITY CRISIS

In an ideal case, a hegemon derives its power from a relatively stable domestic environment, from which it projects power and dominance into the international system. Yet Nigeria has a history of persistent instability observable in various incidents—from the 1966 12-day insurgency of the Niger Delta Volunteer Force, the 30-month civil war of 1967, the bloody Maitatsine Revolts of the 1980s, and the Niger Delta militancy to the agitations of secessionist groups like IPOB in the southeast region, the protracted Boko Haram insurgency, widespread banditry, and kidnapping for ransom. Though it is argued the security challenge does not diminish Nigeria's commitment to regional stability [Adebajo 2018], it has damaging implications for its international reputation [Ojakorotu, Adeleke 2018].

Thus, while Nigeria continues to affirm support for regional peace architectures like the AU Constitutive Act, the ECOWAS Protocols mentioned above, and the R2P doctrine, preoccupation with domestic insecurity, including terrorism, insurgencies, banditry, and farmer-herder clashes, increasingly reduces its attention to regional peacekeeping [Ogunnubi 2018].

Additionally, stagnation, recession, and inflation have emerged as economic problems that have forced successive regimes to divert humanitarian intervention resources towards domestic necessities. This study has highlighted the capital-intensive nature of Nigeria's humanitarian projects. Nigeria's 2013 Mali peacekeeping mission cost \$34 million, excluding financial costs of post-conflict engagement [Adigbuo 2022]. The pervasive nature and extensive economic and military resources required to combat domestic insecurity have strained Nigeria's capacity to commit increasingly scarce resources to the objective of regional stability, creating a credibility crisis for the country<sup>13</sup>.

Another fuel for the credibility crisis facing Nigeria is endemic corruption. While huge sums are reportedly earmarked for the pursuit of Nigeria's Afrocentric foreign policy, there are accusations of misappropriation of public funds under the guise of national security, regional peacekeeping, humanitarian intervention, and socio-economic

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<sup>13</sup> Interviews with RtoP expert (07.08.2024, South Africa), AU Experts (13.02.2024, Abuja), and ex-diplomats (22.05.2024, Lagos).

development of the African region [Mbara, Gopal 2020]. As there are sketchy records for the exact monies spent, Nigeria's legacy of Afrocentric philanthropy has been tainted by suspicions of being a conduit for misappropriating public funds. Countries like South Africa suppress or downplay the history of Nigeria's aid and assistance during its struggle against apartheid to create distance between itself and Nigeria's reputation for official corruption.

### LEADERSHIP DEFICIT AND FOREIGN POLICY INCONSISTENCY

Though it is taken for granted that Nigeria's foreign policy is guided by Afrocentrism, an interrogation of its focus over the years, particularly since the transition to civilian rule in 1999, shows varying priorities depending on political cycles. The Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007) and his successors, particularly the President Goodluck Jonathan (2009–2015), focused on positioning Nigeria as the dominant regional player in Sub-Saharan Africa [Ilemona 2020; Tsuwa 2022]. Their shuttle diplomacy and numerous international engagements were enabled by favorable economic circumstances, including adequate revenue from high crude oil prices. The combination of strong international support, personal priorities, and relative abundance of financial resources meant Nigeria could take seriously its Afrocentric mandate in peacekeeping.

Declining economic fortunes compelled subsequent presidents to take a different approach to regional peace and politics. President Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023) largely avoided peacekeeping commitments and pursued protectionist policies like border closures, bans on selected imported products, and delaying ratification of regional trade liberalization frameworks like AfCFTA<sup>14</sup>. Incumbent President Bola Ahmed Tinubu has cleared Nigeria's outstanding financial commitments to ECOWAS and confronted issues like the military coup in Niger with sanctions and threats of military intervention to force a return to civilian rule. Nonetheless, these proclamations did not translate to intervention, as sanctions have been lifted without achieving the intended effect.<sup>15</sup> Necessarily, their focus has been on internal economic reforms and shuttle diplomacy to attract Foreign Direct Investment, combating domestic insecurity and politicking to consolidate his position in preparation for election in 2027.

This has led to inconsistency in the application of Nigeria's Afrocentric foreign policy since 1999. The seeming withdrawal of Nigeria from its leadership role has allowed "much smaller African countries to speak on behalf of the continent" and take on significant responsibilities in international affairs [Gambari 2012: 57]. This position lines up with expert opinions that Nigeria's inconsistent leadership in recent times fuels a

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<sup>14</sup> Nwafuru P. AfCFTA: The underlying principles, objectives and benefits. *Nairametrics*. 03.03.2021. <https://nairametrics.com/2021/03/03/afcfta-the-underlying-principles-objectives-and-benefits/> (accessed: 29.10.2025)

<sup>15</sup> Mansur A. Bola Tinubu's U-Turn on Niger sanctions received with relief in northern Nigeria. *BBC*. 16.03.2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68563579> (accessed: 30.10.2025)

legitimacy and credibility crisis confronting the country despite previous peacekeeping efforts<sup>16</sup>.

### EMERGING AFRICAN POWERS

Nigeria's regional leadership deficit, inconsistent foreign policy prioritizing, particularly isolationism and focus on internal struggles as opposed to HST prescriptions of openness and outward orientation, coupled with the credibility crisis, have advanced the nosedive of Nigeria's international reputation. The "smaller African countries" with rising international profiles like South Africa, Ghana, Egypt, and Kenya stepping into the gap are becoming prominent voices for global security and regional peace in international spaces [Ogunnubi 2017]. While Nigeria has traditionally dominated mobilization of financial and human resources for peacekeeping in Africa, these "smaller African countries" with more "relative domestic stability" are willing to serve in similar roles and arguably "doing better than Nigeria in UN-mounted peacekeeping operations" [Oshewolo et al. 2024: 94]. The willingness of these countries suggests that perceptions of Nigeria as Africa's dominant leader are changing.

Among other factors that challenge arguments of Nigeria's status as regional hegemon or dominant power is the entrenched presence of external powers like France in the region. Besides maintaining strong political and economic influence over all its former colonies (many of which are countries in West Africa, Nigeria's supposed primary sphere of influence), France has also assumed responsibility for security, particularly counterinsurgency and counterterrorism in Francophone West Africa [Charbonneau 2021]. This points to the limited reach of Nigeria's influence in West Africa. It has also been suggested that undermining regional stability [Kuperman 2013] and Nigeria's ability to function in the role of regional hegemon is essential to France's strategy of protecting its strategic interests in West Africa<sup>17</sup>.

A core argument to support the theory that this destabilization is a part of France's long-term strategy for Africa draws heavily from the events leading up to the 2011 Libyan intervention. Prior to the Arab uprising, which triggered the intervention, Libya was one of Africa's most developed countries, with social development indices comparable to the European Union<sup>18</sup>. However, decades of the US and UN sanctions, coupled with rising disaffection with the dictatorship of Muammar Gaddafi and fluctuation in international crude oil pricing, negatively impacted the ability of the regime to sustain extensive social welfare essential to the stability of the Libyan state [Pradella, Taghdisi 2017]. This triggered a popular revolt in 2011 demanding reform and the dismantling of the dictatorship [Hove 2017].

A National Transitional Council (NTC) formed by protesters gained and received quick international support. Nigeria stood for the protection of civilians as protests

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with ECOWAS Official (13.02.2024, Abuja), AU Expert (13.02.2024, Abuja) and Nigeria Ambassador to the UN (18.02.2024, Abuja).

<sup>17</sup> Interview with retired Ambassadors (03.08.2023, Lagos), Head of Nigeria Mission (03.08.2023, Lagos) and NIIA Official (06.06.2023, Lagos)

<sup>18</sup> Omojowo A. Post-Gaddafi: Libyan Paradise Turns to Hell. *The Organization for World Peace*. 30.06.2016. <https://theowp.org/reports/post-gaddafi-libyan-paradise-turns-to-hell/> (accessed: 01.11.2025)

escalated and advocated for a diplomatic solution emphasizing political reforms [De Waal 2013]. While it was open to armed intervention as a last resort for civilian protection [Erameh 2018], it unequivocally rejected any form of external military intervention [De Waal, 2013].

Regardless, France spearheaded a NATO intervention, which experts concur was instrumental to the descent of Libya into chaos and civil war [Chesterman 2011; Kuperman 2019]. It was suggested that Gaddafi had denied France access to Libya's lucrative energy sector; thus, Gaddafi's removal was necessary to gain access, and evidence points to France striking energy deals with the NTC even before mass atrocity became a clear concern [Kuperman 2013]. Therefore, France's interference was a crucial factor for the escalation of the conflict.

Nigeria ultimately recognized the NTC as Libya's legitimate government and voted in support of UNSC Resolution 1973 authorizing the use of all necessary measures, including armed intervention, to protect civilians. While this marked the first operational use of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, Nigeria, despite its aversion to external intervention, did not demonstrate the political leadership or will necessary to take effective control of the situation.

Libya presently is a hotbed for transnational criminality, particularly human and arms smuggling and trafficking, as well as terrorism and the further destabilization of Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>19</sup>. By extension, the endemic instability in Libya and the growing insurgent violence destabilizing West African countries like Mali (and Nigeria) are failures of Nigeria to provide effective regional leadership when it was needed.

Apart from the pervasive influence of external forces on the continent, the post-conflict outcomes of recent Nigeria-backed interventions have not strengthened the country's self-perception as a dominant regional power. The cases of Côte d'Ivoire and Mali, two West African countries, buttress this. In Côte d'Ivoire, despite Nigeria's calls for restraint and respect for the will of the people in the wake of elections in 2011, the then president, Laurent Gbagbo refused to accept defeat. Disregarding Nigeria's admonitions and threats, he took actions that triggered a humanitarian crisis requiring intervention to address [Erameh, Ologe 2021].

Despite invoking seminal regional peace frameworks like the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001) to mediate several rounds of negotiation, Nigeria as the dominant regional power did not demonstrate effectual leadership, allowing France to lead an international intervention force under UNSC Resolution 1975 to remove Gbagbo—although the intervention force was populated by the ECOWAS Standby Force led by Nigeria, which contributed to halting the violence. However, in the following years, Cote d'Ivoire has faced new electoral violence that constantly threatens stability in the country<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Eaton T. How conflict in Libya facilitated transnational expansion of migrant smuggling and trafficking. *Chatham House*. 21.2.2025. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/02/how-conflict-libya-facilitated-transnational-expansion-migrant-smuggling-and-trafficking> (accessed: 30.10.2025)

<sup>20</sup> Cote d'Ivoire: Populations at risk. *Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect*. 02.04.2022. <https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/cote-divoire/> (accessed: 31.10.2025)

In Mali, the return of well-armed Tuareg fighters from Libya following the collapse of Gaddafi's regime triggered a rebel insurgency that led to the occupation of key towns in the northern and central regions of the country, after dislodging other armed groups previously occupying these locations [Erameh, Ojakorotu, Obor 2021]. Following an emergency summit in Abuja, ECOWAS resolved to send 3,000 troops to support 6,000 Malian troops to recover occupied territories<sup>21</sup>. Under the backing of UNSC Resolution 2085, Nigeria contributed 1,200 troops to the peacekeeping mission in Mali<sup>22</sup>. In the post-peacekeeping periods, persistent instability has enabled multiple successful military coups since 2020<sup>23</sup>. Indeed, the recent exit of Mali from ECOWAS was blamed on the inability of regional actors like Nigeria and ECOWAS to provide them with the support required to tackle insecurity and free themselves from the domination of France [Ologe, Erameh 2025].

Within the HST framework, the continued influence of France, whether real or perceived, and the controversial outcome of interventions by Nigeria, most notably, the persistence of instability and violence, delegitimized Nigeria in the estimation of emerging African powers, despite historic commitment to decolonization and past intervention successes in places like Liberia and Sierra Leone. Also, less powerful West African states, particularly Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, signed a new mutual defense pact outside of ECOWAS and the putative protection provided by Nigeria [Ologe, Erameh 2025]. These events strengthen growing regional resistance to perceptions of Nigeria's dominance. They are rooted in the desire of more African states to assert their sovereignty in the face of massive human rights violations, making it increasingly difficult for Nigeria to act in protection of vulnerable populations [Wimmer, Miner 2020].

This difficulty was a major motivation for Nigeria's eager support for the AU's shift from the founding principle of "non-interference" to "non-indifference" under the AU constitutive act and the UN-backed norm of R2P. Both concepts create legal international pathways for Nigeria to continue its tradition of humanitarian interventionism. However, as shown above, Nigeria's peacekeeping success in recent years has been mixed. Countries where Nigeria supported or participated in intervention have either become worse, like Libya, or relapsed into constant or intermittent violence and instability, like Mali and Cote d'Ivoire.

## DOMESTIC RESISTANCE

Besides regional resistance to Nigeria's dominance, Nigerians are increasingly opposed to their country's Afrocentric foreign policy. This resistance to Nigeria's idea of manifest destiny stems from local perceptions of neglect by the Nigerian state to focus on

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<sup>21</sup> Callimachi R. ECOWAS to send troops to Mali. *Global Policy Forum*. 12.11.2012. <https://archive.globalpolicy.org/humanitarian-intervention/52048-ecowas-to-send-troops-to-mali.html%3Fitemid=id.html> (accessed: 30.10.2025)

<sup>22</sup> Campbell J. Nigeria's Role in the Mali Intervention. *Council on Foreign Relations*. 25.01.2013. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/nigerias-role-mali-intervention> (accessed: 30.10.2025)

<sup>23</sup> Mali, a Coup within a Coup. *Crisis Group*. 27.05.2021. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/mali/mali-coup-within-coup> (accessed: 30.10.2025)

the development challenges of other countries without commensurate benefits to show for it, coupled with the worsening of its credibility, image, and legitimacy crisis [Mailafia 2010].

Accordingly, concerned local stakeholders argue for a shift from Nigeria's Africa-centered foreign policy, on account of its internal struggles, towards one that focuses on the Nigerian citizen and national interest defined in realist terms [Mbara, Gopal 2020; Oshewolo 2019; Ogunnowo, Joshua 2019]. Others contend that Nigeria retains the Afrocentric motivation but reforms it in such a way that it actively serves the interests of Nigerians [Amao, Okeke-Uzodike 2015; Egbe, Ushie 2022; Usman, Obiyan 2017].

Thus, despite arguments asserting Nigeria's hegemony, Nigerians at home increasingly support that Nigeria focus more on its own challenges. It is recognized that genuine governance reforms can transform Nigeria into Africa's first superpower [Cilliers, Schunemann, Moyer 2015]. Yet while these challenges persist, though Nigeria remains undeniably a powerful regional actor, it will lack the influence and dominance within the HST framework to lay claim to or be designated as a hegemon [Ogunnubi, Okeke-Uzodike 2016; Ojakorotu, Adeleke 2017].

## CONCLUSION

This paper began with the thesis that the unsettled debate around Nigeria's hegemonic status in Africa has implications for the region's stability, economic development, international security, and the allocation of global humanitarian resources. The paper thus examined the question of Nigeria's hegemony, focusing on its robust history of humanitarian intervention and peacekeeping.

The study acknowledged that Nigeria possesses core attributes, such as a formidable military power and a large economy that can mimic hegemonic posture. However, a range of entrenched domestic challenges, encompassing insecurity, corruption, and economic recession, interact to deny it the legitimacy required for full hegemony. Furthermore, the underdevelopment and persistent political instability that define West Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa in general demonstrate that Nigeria's interventionism has not yet translated into system-wide stability.

Therefore, when assessed against the study's adopted framework of the Hegemonic Stability theory, which prioritizes capacity and stability outcomes over intent, Nigeria cannot be classified as a *bona fide* regional hegemon. Its significant contributions to regional peacekeeping, while substantial, are not sufficient to overcome this deficit. Nonetheless, Nigeria's Afrocentric interventionism strongly points to a critical "quasi-hegemonic" function on the basis that it provides selective public goods like security mediation and financial aid without the comprehensive economic or ideological leadership of a true hegemon.

The country has been instrumental in ending or preventing violent conflicts across Africa, making significant contributions to the relative peace enjoyed in several countries like Liberia and Sierra Leone. Nigeria's potential to ascend to a hegemonic power status is contingent upon its ability to implement genuine internal reforms that stabilize its domestic affairs and rehabilitate its international image and credibility. Until then, its role

is best described not as a hegemon but as an indispensable, quasi-hegemonic actor in the African security landscape.

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## ПЕРЕОЦЕНКА ГЕГЕМОНИСТСКОГО СТАТУСА НИГЕРИИ В АФРИКЕ: ФАКТОРЫ, ДИСКУРС, ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ

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**Аннотация.** В основе данного исследования лежат дискуссии о гегемонистском статусе ведущих африканских государств, в частности, о переосмыслении и переоценке положения Нигерии, которая все чаще позиционирует себя в качестве стабилизирующей силы в нестабильном регионе на фоне перехода от традиционной гуманитарной интервенции к доктрине «Ответственность по защите» (*R2P*). Роль и идентичность Нигерии как регионального гегемона является насущной проблемой для региона и предметом международных дискуссий. По сути, утверждение легитимного африканского гегемона в лице Нигерии могло бы решить проблему региональной нестабильности. Дебаты между сторонниками и противниками гегемонистской позиции Нигерии вращаются вокруг ее исторической приверженности миротворчеству и растущих внутренних проблем. Используя теорию гегемонистской стабильности, статья представляет аргументы, обосновывающие нынешний статус Нигерии. Были использованы качественные данные из вторичных источников и первичные данные, полученные в ходе интервью с ключевыми экспертами из профильных структур. Результаты исследования демонстрируют, что приверженность Нигерии региональной стабильности посредством миротворческой деятельности проистекает из афроцентричного вектора ее внешней политики и чувства «особого предназначения». Однако эти усилия сами по себе не подтверждают ее статус гегемона. Хотя Нигерия демонстрирует определенную степень нормативного лидерства, ожидаемого от гегемона, недостаток внутренних ресурсов подрывает ее способность в полной мере воплощать роль гегемона. Сделан вывод о том, что Нигерия по сути выполняет «квазигегемонистскую» функцию, которая способствует достижению относительной стабильности, особенно в Западной Африке. Однако снижение внутреннего потенциала, необходимого для поддержания устойчивого регионального лидерства, представляет собой серьезное препятствие для превращения Нигерии в полноценного гегемона, что имеет критические последствия для региональной стабильности и международного гуманитарного финансирования.

**Ключевые слова:** Нигерия, гегемония, гуманитарная интервенция, *R2P*, миротворчество, афроцентричная внешняя политика

**Персональный вклад авторов:** авторы внесли равнозначный вклад в разработку проекта, проведение исследования и подготовку текста статьи.

**Конфликт интересов:** авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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