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EMERGING POWERS' STRATEGY FOR POWER PROJECTION: NIGERIA'S PEACEKEEPING THROUGH REGIONAL & INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

This study investigates Nigeria's strategic utilisation of peacekeeping missions as an instrument for regional influence in the post-Cold War African context. The restructuring of global security arrangements following the Cold War created avenues for emerging powers to redefine their regional roles and assert their influence, with Nigeria emerging as a leading contributor to peacekeeping missions in several war-torn African countries. This study examines Nigeria's commitment to peacekeeping with a focus on its engagement at the regional and global levels, to maximise its strategic interest while minimising resistance to its hegemonic aspirations by Francophone West African states. Through a comparative case analysis of Nigerian involvement in ECOWAS peace operations in Liberia (1989-1997) and Sierra Leone (1997-2002), alongside its participation in the UN-AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur, Sudan (2007-2020), and employing an eclectic theoretical approach, this study demonstrates (i) Nigeria's strategic rationale for prioritizing regional peacekeeping mechanisms over global ones, (ii) the impact of Nigeria's approach on its regional leadership position, and (iii) the challenges Nigeria faced in maintaining such a security framework. By indicating how Nigeria leverage peacekeeping missions to enhance international prestige and legitimise hegemonic aspirations while navigating resource constraints and neighbouring states' suspicions, the study aims to contribute to scholarly debate on the intersection between emerging powers, peacekeeping, and regionalism.

Keywords

ECOWAS, Hegemony, Nigeria, Peacekeeping, Regionalism.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa a utilização estratégica das missões de manutenção da paz pela Nigéria como instrumento de influência regional no contexto africano pós-Guerra Fria. A reestruturação dos acordos de segurança global após a Guerra Fria criou caminhos para que potências emergentes redefinissem os seus papéis regionais e afirmassem a sua influência, com a Nigéria a emergir como um dos principais contribuintes para missões de manutenção

da paz em vários países africanos devastados pela guerra. Este estudo examina o compromisso da Nigéria com a manutenção da paz, com foco no seu envolvimento a nível regional e global, para maximizar o seu interesse estratégico e minimizar a resistência às suas aspirações hegemónicas por parte dos Estados francófonos da África Ocidental. Através de uma análise comparativa do envolvimento nigeriano nas operações de paz da CEDEAO na Libéria (1989-1997) e na Serra Leoa (1997-2002), juntamente com a sua participação na Operação Híbrida da ONU-UA em Darfur, Sudão (2007-2020), e empregando uma abordagem teórica eclética, este estudo demonstra (i) a lógica estratégica da Nigéria para dar prioridade aos mecanismos regionais de manutenção da paz em detrimento dos globais, (ii) o impacto da abordagem da Nigéria na sua posição de liderança regional e (iii) os desafios que a Nigéria enfrentou para manter tal quadro de segurança. Ao indicar como a Nigéria aproveita as missões de manutenção da paz para aumentar o prestígio internacional e legitimar as aspirações hegemónicas, ao mesmo tempo que lida com as restrições de recursos e as suspeitas dos Estados vizinhos, o estudo visa contribuir para o debate académico sobre a interseção entre potências emergentes, manutenção da paz e regionalismo.

Palavras-chave

CEDEAO, Hegemonia, Nigéria, Manutenção da Paz, Regionalismo.

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Introduction

In the post-Cold War era, the increasing role of regional organisations, such as the African Union, the Organisation of American States (OAS), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), in conflict management and international peacekeeping has been supported by Western powers, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. These Western powers have promoted regional organisations as the primary responsible actors for managing security challenges in their respective regions, under the motto of "African solutions for African problems" in the African continent. In this context, Nigeria has emerged as a leading contributor to peacekeeping missions since the early 1990s, deploying funds and troops to several operations across the African continent under the auspices of the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (Williams, 2008). Nigeria deployed over 200,000 soldiers to peacekeeping missions throughout the world from its independence in 1960 to the late 2000s, accounting for almost 40% of all UN peacekeeping missions in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Europe (Adebajo, 2008, p. 14). To resolve the crises in the Mano River Basin, which lasted over a decade in the 1990s, for instance, Nigeria sacrificed over 1,500 of its soldiers and invested more than $12 billion in peacekeeping missions, despite its own dire economic conditions at that time (Adebajo, 2008, p. 20; Bah, 2005, p. 78). Specifically, Nigeria provided about 90% of funding and 80% of personnel for these peacekeeping missions – contributing 12,000 soldiers out of 16,000 to Liberia and another 12,000 of 13,000 to Sierra Leone (Obi, 2009, pp. 121–122, 125). This substantial commitment to regional security through the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) clearly reflects Nigeria's ambitions in West Africa: its utilization of peacekeeping missions as an instrument of regional leadership despite its small Francophone neighbours' fears following the withdrawal of the Cold War overlay and the reduction of French military presence in the post-1990 period (Bah, 2005, pp. 79–80).

The end of the Cold War initiated a restructuring of global security arrangements in the developing world, compelling regional powers to take responsibility for addressing their common problems, which created avenues for emerging powers to redefine their goals and assert their leadership in the regional security structure of Africa, Latin America, the

Middle East, and Asia (Söderbaum & Tavares, 2009). Although the UN remains a key player in maintaining peace and security throughout the world, its overstretch due to resource limitations and high demand across multiple conflict zones, along with the lack of political will by Western powers, has led to regional organisations expanding their security mandates. This generated what Brosig (2013, p. 171) describes as "emerging security regime complex[es]," characterised by overlapping institutional frameworks and responsibilities conducted by both African and non-African actors simultaneously on the continent. What Nigeria has been pursuing within this context is, as Adebajo (2008, p. 14) calls, "hegemony on a shoestring," an ambitious strategy of regional leadership despite significant constraints.

The Nigerian case exemplifies a dual engagement strategy employed by emerging powers whereby they endeavour to enhance their regional influence through regional organisations while maintaining their engagement with global institutions like the UN. Since the 1990s, Nigeria has been at the forefront of constructing a regional security mechanism in Africa through ECOWAS and AU engagements while maintaining its consistent participation in UN peacekeeping missions throughout the continent. This dual engagement strategy inevitably raises important questions with regard to Nigeria's foreign policy goals. If global institutions like the UN are considered somehow adequate for maintaining peace and security in the world, why do emerging powers like Nigeria prioritise regional organisations for specific initiatives such as peacekeeping? More broadly, do regional organisations generally function as complementary frameworks to global institutions, or do they merely indicate a shift toward regionalism in international politics?

Nigeria's engagements with regional and global institutions in peacekeeping deserve particular attention for several reasons. First, the "messianic references" by Nigerian political and military elites to power projection capabilities in the region indicate a widespread belief that Nigeria has a "manifest destiny" for regional leadership as West Africa's largest economy and most populous nation (Bach, 2007). Second, Nigerian active participation in West African peacekeeping missions offers valuable insights into how emerging powers can utilise regional organisations to legitimise their leadership role or reach hegemonic aspirations in their respective domains (Obi, 2009). Last, Nigerian involvement in both regional (Liberia and Sierra Leone) and hybrid (Sudan) peacekeeping operations provides an opportunity to examine the strategic interplay between regional and global security engagements in an emerging power's foreign policy.

Since the 1990s, the increasing number of peacekeeping operations by regional organisations such as the AU, ECOWAS, and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has, unsurprisingly, received scholarly attention, including works by Adebajo, Bellamy, and Williams. Analysing the peacekeeping trend toward non-UN peace operations, for instance, Bellamy & Williams (2005) show that regional organisations possess significant advantages in legitimacy, local support, and cultural understanding due to their proximity to conflict zones. Peace operations conducted by individual states or coalitions of the willing, on the other hand, often face accusations of neocolonialism or pursuit of parochial interests, rather than upholding the UN's principles and purposes. Despite these theoretical arguments favouring regional initiatives in peacekeeping, Williams (2008) persuasively argues that the "African solutions for African problems"

mantra has significant limitations regarding capacity, resources, and competitive interests of regional actors. Within this scholarly debate, the evolution of West African security architecture since the 1970s provides a critical context for understanding regional powers' peacekeeping strategies. Through Nigeria's transformational leadership in ECOWAS/ECOMOG peacekeeping missions, West Africa has gradually evolved from a mere "security complex" characterised mainly by security dynamics and, thus, mutual suspicion among regional actors, into a "security community" with shared norms, values, and practices (Bah, 2005; Jaye, 2008). Nevertheless, the West African security complex/community and Nigerian leadership position, in particular, have continuously faced significant constraints. As Bach (2007) notes, Nigerian regional ambitions reflect a position of "dominance without power," indicating grandiose roles and goals but limited capacity and resources. Furthermore, these constraints extend beyond limited resources and capacity to negative perceptions of Nigerian hegemonic ambitions by Francophone neighbouring states in the region (Adebajo & Landsberg, 2003).

In this context, this paper posits that Nigerian dual engagement with regional organisations (e.g., ECOWAS, AU) and global institutions (e.g., UN) in peacekeeping demonstrates a calculated approach to maximise its strategic interests in West Africa while minimising potential risks and costs associated with hegemonic aspirations. Drawing on Prys's (2010) typology of regional powers and particularly Pedersen's (2002) conceptualization of "cooperative hegemony," which explains how pivotal states mitigate resistance from counter-hegemonic blocs of smaller states through regional multilateralism, this paper contends that Nigerian peacekeeping strategy creates multiple avenues for projecting regional and international influence through participation in both regional and global organizations while mitigating the associated risks and costs. This approach enables Nigeria to demonstrate its commitment to regional stability, thereby enhancing its international prestige as a peace broker, while minimising expenditures of blood and treasure.

Through a comparative analysis of Nigerian peacekeeping missions in ECOWAS peace operations in Liberia (1989-1997) and Sierra Leone (1997-2002) as well as its participation in the UN-AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur, Sudan (2007-2020), this study examines (i) the factors behind Nigeria's rationale for prioritizing regional peacekeeping mechanisms over global initiatives, (ii) the impact of such prioritization on Nigerian regional leadership in West Africa, and (iii) the challenges Nigeria faces in maintaining the regional framework and implications of such challenges for its regional influence. The analysis primarily draws on primary sources, including official documents from ECOWAS, the AU, and the UN, supplemented by secondary literature, such as historical analyses and theoretical frameworks on peacekeeping and emerging powers' power projections. With these objectives and methods, this research aims to contribute to the scholarly debate on the intersection between emerging powers, peacekeeping, and regionalism. While advancing theoretical understanding of how emerging powers utilise peacekeeping missions as a strategic tool for their regional influence and legitimacy, the study also provides empirical insights into the complex interplay of regional and global security initiatives in Africa. Furthermore, it assesses the sustainability challenges confronting many African peacekeeping missions.

The paper proceeds as follows. Reviewing relevant literature on regional powers, peacekeeping, and African security architecture, the first section establishes the theoretical framework for understanding peacekeeping as a strategic tool for regional power projection. After briefly outlining the methodology in section two, the third section examines the historical evolution of Nigerian peacekeeping strategy in Africa in relation to Nigerian foreign policy. The following section analyses the three case studies in depth, namely Nigerian peacekeeping operations in (i) Liberia and (ii) Sierra Leone under ECOWAS and (iii) its participation in the UN-AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur. Synthesising the findings from these case studies, the final section concludes with the significance of the findings for understanding emerging powers' strategic approaches to regional organisations and regional security frameworks in a complex international order.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Any study on regional powers' peacekeeping strategy requires a theoretical framework that thoroughly addresses regional power dynamics and institutional arrangements. No consensus, however, exists in the relevant literature on how to identify and differentiate regional powers from middle and great powers. Nolte (2010, p. 893), in this regard, offers a comprehensive definition of regional powers based on an extensive literature review, conceptualising regional powers as possessing not only superior economic resources and military capabilities but also the will to assume regional responsibilities and leadership recognition by other actors. This definition highlights three crucial aspects of regional powerhood, namely (i) superior material resources and capabilities relative to other regional actors, (ii) leadership will and commitment to regional responsibilities, and (iii) acceptance of that leadership by regional and international actors. This multidimensional framework explains why Nigeria, despite its constraints, has consistently pursued regional power status as West Africa's gendarme through peacekeeping initiatives (Adebajo, 2000). Nigeria possesses relatively superior resources as well as capabilities and demonstrates the will to act as a responsible regional leader. However, its leadership ambitions have been repeatedly challenged by smaller neighbouring states concerned about Nigerian hegemonic aspirations, contributing to an enduring, albeit diminishing, French military presence in the region after the Cold War. Accordingly, Adebajo & Landsberg (2003, pp. 171–172) characterise Nigeria's regional role as an "aspiring or potential hegemon" or a "pivotal state," rather than a consolidated regional hegemon. Contemporary analysis confirms that Nigeria's hegemonic role within ECOWAS faces significant constraints, as the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS in 2024 due to military coups demonstrates the limitations of traditional hegemonic models, particularly when domestic challenges undermine regional leadership in West Africa (Gbenga & Oluwatobi, 2025). This also aligns with the International Crisis Group's report (2024), arguing that Nigeria's influence has waned over the past 15 years, along with its contributions to continental peace and security, due to weak leadership, political and economic crises, and acute security issues at home.

Building on Nolte's (2010) conceptualisation, Prys (2010) develops a typology of regional powers, distinguishing regional hegemonic, dominating, and detached powers, which is a central framework to this study. The hegemonic model features a regional power

perceived as exceptional, exercising leadership multilaterally through normative and institutional mechanisms while providing public goods, such as security, for all. The dominator model, however, relies on coercion, with the dominant power pursuing parochial interests through unilateral actions rather than being recognised as an exceptional leader. Unlike hegemons, dominators compel others to contribute to regional arrangements rather than providing public goods unilaterally. Detached powers, in turn, possess the necessary material resources and military capabilities but lack leadership will, prioritising domestic or global concerns over regional engagement. Consequently, their interactions with regional actors remain limited, exerting minimal influence on regional affairs. Moreover, despite their resource abundance and capabilities, they are not recognised as regional leaders (Prys, 2010, pp. 487–496).

While Nigeria's position in West Africa aligns most closely with the hegemonic model in Prys's (2010) typology, Pedersen's (2002) conceptualisation of "cooperative hegemony" provides a more nuanced and accurate depiction. Cooperative hegemons essentially establish stable, predictable, and somehow legitimate governance by encouraging participation in regional initiatives through indirect influence, multilateral arrangements, and mechanisms preventing free riding (Pedersen, 2002, pp. 683–688). Under this framework, Nigeria exercises regional leadership through multilateral institutional frameworks and mechanisms like ECOWAS/ECOMOG, designed specifically to minimise potential resistance from smaller Francophone states in West Africa. That is to say, Nigeria strategically utilises regional peacekeeping missions under ECOWAS as power projection tools in West Africa. As Beswick (2010) clearly demonstrates in her analysis of Rwanda's contribution to peacekeeping missions in Darfur, peacekeeping allows even small states to gain operational experience for their military forces while simultaneously reaffirming commitment to international norms, strengthening regional influence, and enhancing international prestige. For Nigeria, often referred to as the "Giant of Africa" (Adebajo, 2008, p. 12), regional peacekeeping missions translate its demographic and economic advantages into regional leadership while mitigating fears of hegemonic ambitions among smaller Francophone states through participation in regional organisations.

As often stated, the end of the Cold War created multiple avenues for emerging powers to exercise influence through evolving regional security architectures. Although this development has produced "security regime complexes" where multiple actors, institutions, norms and mandates play overlapping roles, resulting in inefficiency and resource wastage (Brosig, 2013), regional powers have increasingly leveraged peacekeeping initiatives to project influence in these complex environments. The post-Cold War trend toward regionalisation of peacekeeping offers several advantages for regional actors, including enhanced legitimacy, cultural awareness, and local knowledge due to their proximity to conflict zones. Moreover, regional peacekeeping initiatives reportedly allow for more flexible interpretation of mission mandates than the UN missions' doctrinal approach. Through examining how peace enforcement mechanisms are understood differently by the UN and AU, De Coning (2017) demonstrates that regional mechanisms provide greater flexibility for conducting effective operations compared to the UN's strict doctrinal approach. This adaptability enables more effective and responsive interventions to regional conflicts on behalf of the international

community (Bellamy & Williams, 2005, pp. 159–167). Within the African security regime complex, where shared regional understanding facilitates more assertive peacekeeping missions than those led by the UN, Nigeria strategically utilises regional organisations to maximise its influence while sharing peacekeeping burdens that would be impossible under strict UN peacekeeping principles, namely consent, impartiality, and the limited use of force. This approach explains Nigeria's prioritisation of regional organisations like ECOWAS for peace interventions in West Africa while simultaneously engaging with AU and UN peacekeeping operations throughout (and beyond) the continent as a strategic portfolio.

The evolution of African security architecture, in particular, reflects broader normative shifts with regard to African conflict management, where two emerging powers, Nigeria and South Africa, have leveraged peacekeeping to assert leadership in their respective regions without necessarily contradicting sovereignty norms (Adebajo & Landsberg, 2003). While the Charter of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), particularly Articles II and III, emphasized the Westphalian notion of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and "non-interference" since the 1963 founding conference in Addis Ababa (OAU, 1963), the Pan-Africanist vision of Nkrumah championed by Nigerian leader Obasanjo and South African leader Mbeki during the late 1990s facilitated a gradual normative shift from a state-centric regime survival approach to a more human security-oriented one.[1] The imperative for such a shift from "non-interference" to "non-indifference" became evident through multiple humanitarian catastrophes on the continent, particularly the Rwandan, Liberian, and Somali civil wars.

The end of the Cold War and the subsequent call for "African solutions for African [security] problems" by both African and Western leaders, along with the OAU's failed peace initiatives in the continent (e.g., Chad), renewed aspirations for an "African Renaissance" and continental unity, culminating in the establishment of the African Union (AU) in 2002. More importantly, compared to the OAU Charter, the AU Constitutive Act imposes strict limitations on the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference, particularly Articles III and IV (OAU, 2000), making it the first international treaty recognizing the right to use military interventions by an international organization in its members' domestic politics (Franke, 2009, pp. 102–106; Kindiki, 2007, pp. 44–48). As Franke succinctly puts it:

> Under the AU, member states enjoy the privileges of sovereignty, such as non-interference in their internal affairs, only as long as they fulfil their responsibility to protect their citizens. If, however, states fail, for whatever reasons, to honour this responsibility, the AU reserves for itself the right to intervene pursuant to a decision of the Assembly in respect of grave circumstances, namely war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity" (2009, p. 106).

[1] The Libyan leader Ghaddafi also proposed creating the "United States of Africa" in Sirte in 1999, advocating for a continental organization focusing on collective security and conflict management. This proposal was welcomed by both Mbeki and Obasanjo as it could potentially advance their reform agenda for the OAU. For more information why these three leaders spearheaded the transformation of the OAU into the AU and how they accommodated their diverging reform proposals, see Tieku (2004, pp. 253–265).

The reappraisal of security cooperation in Africa during the 1990s ultimately led to the establishment of the African Union in Durban in 2002, which institutionalised the principle of "non-indifference" and consequently created a considerably more proactive peace and security framework. This new framework has created a plethora of multi-layered security arrangements with several regional organisations (e.g., ECOWAS, SADC, IGAD, ECCAS, and AMU; Franke, 2009, pp. 63–76) along with the newly branded continental organisation, the African Union. Such a cooperative structure, however, does not necessarily undermine the authority and responsibility of regional organisations. Instead, the AU has benefitted from their experience and comparative advantages for peace operations. In this emerging decentralised security arrangement, the AU has served as a "clearinghouse and framework for all initiatives, thus filling the conceptual and institutional gap between the global level (the United Nations) and the regional level" (Franke, 2009, p. 107). The regional organisations, in turn, have become responsible actors in establishing continental security by eliminating potential competition among various actors at multiple levels. Although such a security framework is criticised for creating additional bureaucracy and thus preventing timely responses to grave circumstances, the injection of all actors' stakes into the process makes it less likely to fail (Franke, 2009, pp. 106–107).

The new African security mechanism, which gives African states agency in security arrangements under the "African solutions for African problems" discourse, on the other hand, faces substantial challenges before achieving success, particularly resource limitations and capacity issues. These constraints provide context for Nigeria's dilemma, as it oscillates between hegemonic aspirations and leadership constraints due to insufficient resources and limited recognition from small Francophone states in West Africa. Nigerian dual engagement with regional and global institutions for peacekeeping emerges from this dilemma, what Adebajo (2008) terms "hegemony on a shoestring," indicating an ambitious peacekeeping strategy for regional leadership despite significant constraints.[2] The Mano River Basin crises of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire, in particular, illustrate these challenges. In these cases, Nigeria-led ECOWAS missions played a more significant role than the UN during the initial phases of peace processes. In each intervention, the UN Security Council was reluctant to take a leading role initially; instead, it opted to support ECOWAS missions politically and financially to maintain regional stability. Yet when it became evident that ECOWAS was unable to exercise its mandate properly due to resource constraints, the UN subsequently took over the missions and played a decisive role in the outcome. Moreover, former colonisers, Britain and France, provided financial and military support to peace operations in Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire, respectively, before the UN takeover. The common problems in these interventions were ECOWAS's lack of resources and capacity to run the operations, and the lack of unity between ECOWAS and the UN for effective operations (Adebajo, 2011, Chapter 5; Iwilade & Agbo, 2012). Clearly, Nigeria strategically utilised peacekeeping initiatives as a tool of influence in the Mano River Basin crises while sharing the burdens with other countries through both regional and global institutions, thereby gaining

[2] For more information on what this term encapsulates, see Adebajo & Landsberg (2003, Chapter 9).

international prestige and recognition while minimising expenditure of blood and treasure.

Methodology

Despite extensive literature on the regional security framework in Africa (e.g., Adebajo (2011); Baregu & Landsberg (2003); Bellamy & Williams (2005); Brosig (2013); Franke (2009)), significant gaps remain in understanding Nigeria's dual engagement strategy with regional and global institutions in peacekeeping. Barnett & Finnemore (2004), for instance, provide a theoretical framework for analysing how international organisations exercise power; however, they devote insufficient attention to how regional powers strategically navigate multiple institutional frameworks to enhance their international influence, as observed in West Africa. Put differently, the existing literature offers limited analysis of how emerging powers like Nigeria balance hegemonic aspirations in West Africa with resource and leadership constraints through institutional mechanisms, such as ECOWAS, AU, and UN. Although Adebajo (2002a) provides a detailed account of specific peacekeeping operations in West Africa, there remains a need for a systematic analysis of how Nigeria's peacekeeping engagements form a coherent strategy for international recognition, influence, and prestige. The continued relevance of examining Nigeria's dual engagement strategy is also underscored by recent regional crises that have fundamentally challenged ECOWAS's effectiveness and Nigeria's hegemonic capacity (International Crisis Group, 2024; Gbenga & Oluwatobi, 2025), making this study particularly timely for understanding the limits of regional hegemonic power. This study, therefore, endeavours to address this gap by investigating Nigeria's engagement with regional and global institutions (ECOWAS, AU, and UN) in peacekeeping, conceptualising these engagements as a calculated approach to both opportunities and constraints in the evolving regional and global security landscape rather than discrete commitments for regional peace and stability.

To this end, this study employs a comparative case study approach to examine the Nigerian dual engagement strategy for regional power projection through peacekeeping operations. Drawing from methodological approaches of Tardy & Wyss (2014) and Van der Lijn & Avezov (2015), which analyze African peacekeeping frameworks and operations (*a.k.a.* Africa as "the peacekeeping laboratory") by focusing on institutional arrangements, operational implementation, and stakeholder responses, the study examines three carefully-selected cases representing different dimensions of Nigerian peacekeeping strategy: ECOWAS interventions in (i) Liberia (1989-1997) and (ii) Sierra Leone (1997-2002) and (iii) the UN-AU Hybrid Operation (UNAMID) in Darfur, Sudan (2007-2020). These cases were selected based on the following three criteria: (i) temporal variation to capture Nigeria's evolving peacekeeping strategy, (ii) institutional diversity to examine Nigeria's engagements across different frameworks, and (iii) strategic significance for Nigeria's hegemonic aspirations. To examine these cases, the relevant data is derived from multiple sources to ensure a comprehensive analysis, including primary sources from ECOWAS, AU, and UN documentation, complemented by secondary sources from scholarly literature on Nigeria's foreign policy, regional security dynamics, and peacekeeping operations.

Although such a methodological approach allows for systematic comparison across different peacekeeping contexts while accounting for the complex interplay between hegemonic aspirations and resource constraints, the study acknowledges its certain limitations. First, access to relevant data on the Nigerian decision-making process is constrained by limited transparency in security policies. Second, rather than covering all Nigerian peacekeeping missions, the study instead examines only three representative cases. Last but not least, due to the nature of small-N case analysis, certain causal claims regarding the external validity of these three cases should be presented with caveats. Nevertheless, by examining Nigerian peacekeeping strategy across different institutional frameworks and time periods, this study endeavours to identify patterns in Nigerian peacekeeping while accounting for contextual variations. Consequently, the study reveals how Nigeria navigates the complex interplay between hegemonic aspirations, resource constraints, and institutional arrangements in its pursuit of a strategic dual engagement through peacekeeping.

Historical Context

Nigeria's peacekeeping strategy, which began shortly after independence in 1960 through participation in the UN Operation in the Congo (ONUC), has undergone significant evolution that must be understood within the broader contextual shifts in Nigeria's foreign policy priorities as well as regional leadership aspirations. Such a historical trajectory, no doubt, reveals how Nigerian engagement has gradually transitioned from a primarily UN-focused approach to a more pronounced emphasis on regional frameworks such as the ECOWAS and AU. This evolution, moreover, represents not merely a tactical adjustment but a strategic reorientation of Nigeria's approach to regional security frameworks and arrangements.

As previously noted, Nigeria perceives itself as having a "manifest destiny" in West Africa due to its demographic and economic advantages, while simultaneously functioning as a dominant actor without power, reflecting its challenge of projecting regional influence despite limited resources and capacity constraints (Bach, 2007). Unlike South Africa, another significant hegemonic power emphasising economic integration and institutional development under its regional leadership, Nigeria has primarily utilised security mechanisms, particularly peacekeeping missions, as a cost-effective means of demonstrating its leadership in West Africa (Adebajo & Landsberg, 2003, Chapter 9). The peace operation in Liberia during the 1990s, in particular, shaped Nigeria's subsequent approaches to peacekeeping operations in Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, and Côte d'Ivoire (Obi, 2009, pp. 122–130). These early interventions and experiences have also informed Nigeria's navigation of regional and global peacekeeping frameworks and arrangements. The creation and evolution of regional organisations, such as ECOWAS and the AU, have been significantly shaped by the clash and accommodation of regional powers' interests. In this context, regional powers like Nigeria have sought to influence the institutional design of regional organisations in order to facilitate their leadership aspirations in their respective regions (Tieku, 2004, pp. 250–251).

Although Nigeria's first peacekeeping contributions began shortly after its independence in 1960 with the ONUC, it maintained a consistent, if limited, presence in UN-led peace

operations during the 1960s and 1970s, deploying troops to missions beyond Africa, including the Iran-Iraq border and Lebanon. These early engagements established Nigeria as a significant contributor to international peacekeeping efforts, aligning with its post-civil war foreign policy orientation (Adebajo, 2002a, pp. 28–30). Moreover, these initial contributions largely reflected Nigeria's commitment to multilateralism, particularly the UN system, rather than explicit regional leadership aspirations in West Africa. The 1980s, however, marked a transition in Nigeria's strategy towards regional security arrangements. As Bach (2007, p. 303) notes, its growing economic power through oil revenues and demographic weight generated "messianic references" for Nigerian leadership in West Africa. This self-perception was largely considered natural by the Nigerian political elite, given their country's relatively superior economic and demographic advantage compared to small Francophone West African states like Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast). The same period, however, witnessed the limitations of Nigerian regional leadership due to domestic political, economic, and social problems (Adebajo, 2002a, p. 34; Olonisakin, 2000, pp. 117–118), characterizing Nigeria as "dominance without power" and highlighting the gap between Nigeria's hegemonic aspirations and effective capabilities for such a role (Bach, 2007, p. 302). These underlying tensions would eventually shape Nigeria's approach to regional security frameworks and arrangements since the 1990s.

Although Nigerian military regimes under Generals Babangida (1985-1993) and Abacha (1993-1998) were particularly active in developing and supporting the emerging regional security mechanisms in the first three decades following Nigerian independence, the transition to civilian rule under former-General Obasanjo in 1999 paved the way for a more institutionalised approach to Nigeria's peacekeeping strategy. As Olonisakin (2000, Chapter 4) highlights, while the two former leaders eagerly utilized ECOWAS/ECOMOG as a tool for legitimizing their military regimes internationally, showing that Nigeria deserves a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, and projecting Nigeria's power regionally, Obasanjo emphasized multilateral frameworks and regional partnership among Anglophone, Francophobe, and Lusophone countries in West Africa. As mentioned previously, such transition in Nigeria's peacekeeping strategy coincided with the transformation of the OAU into the AU and its new peace and security architecture, in which Nigeria under Obasanjo, along with South Africa's Mbeki and Libyan leader Ghaddafi, played a significant role (Franke, 2009).

A turning point in Nigeria's peacekeeping evolution was the outbreak of Liberian civil war (1989), when growing regional instability in West Africa and limited international response eventually led Nigeria to spearhead the establishment of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in 1990 (Olonisakin, 2000, pp. 91–99). In this first major African-led peacekeeping operation on the continent, Nigeria provided approximately 80% of ECOMOG's troops and contributed almost 90% of its funding (Adebajo, 2002b, p. 48; cf. Olonisakin, 2000, pp. 109–110). This substantial commitment of blood and treasure for West African regional stability enabled Nigeria to largely shape ECOMOG's policies in the region. In other words, the Liberian intervention by ECOMOG represented a watershed moment in West Africa, establishing Nigeria's hegemonic role in regional security arrangements and thus creating an institutional framework through which Nigerian leadership was exercised.

The evolution of ECOWAS's security mechanisms during the 1990s, in particular, reflected Nigeria's strategic vision for West African security framework. As Adebajo & Landsberg (2003, pp. 189–191) and Jaye (2008) demonstrate, the development of ECOWAS from a purely regional economic organization to one with significant security functions under ECOMOG largely occurred under Nigerian leadership and thus mostly reflected its regional security priorities and aspirations. For instance, the 1991 Declaration of Political Principles condemning any seizure of political power by armed force (ECOWAS, 1991), the 1993 revision of the ECOWAS treaty formalizing its fundamental principles and security mandate (ECOWAS, 1993), the 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security (ECOWAS, 1999), and the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance emphasizing zero tolerance for political power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means (ECOWAS, 2001), along with the establishment of the Standby Force and the Early Warning System, further institutionalized Nigerian approach to regional security governance and engendered a security culture in West Africa, consisting of new norms, procedures, and capabilities (Jaye, 2008; Aning, 2007). With these new frameworks and arrangements on regional security governance, Nigeria gained legitimate international platforms for exercising leadership while distributing peacekeeping burdens among regional actors, primarily small Francophone states wary of Nigeria's hegemonic aspirations in West Africa, as well as former colonial powers, namely France and Britain.

Nigeria's approach to peacekeeping has been particularly pronounced in West Africa, where it has led contributions to several ECOWAS missions, including Liberia (1989-1997), Sierra Leone (1997-2002), Guinea-Bissau (1998-1999), and Côte d'Ivoire (2002-2004). In these operations, Nigeria followed an institutionalized approach to internal conflicts, demonstrating a consistent pattern of utilizing regional arrangements to address security issues in its immediate neighborhood (Obi, 2009). This regional focus extended beyond mere geographical proximity. Nigeria has also engaged with broader continental security mechanisms, particularly through the AU, with its participation in the UN-AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) representing engagement beyond its immediate neighborhood. Such a scope, undoubtedly, reflects strategic calculations regarding Nigeria's sphere of influence and hegemonic aspirations in the region and the continent. Nevertheless, Nigeria's contributions to peacekeeping operations beyond West Africa remained limited and selective, as its continental aspirations often stretched its limited resources and capabilities, creating tensions between hegemonic aspirations and practical constraints, domestic backlash against hegemonic overextension, and competition with South Africa, which is another potential hegemon in the continent (Adebajo & Landsberg, 2003; Bach, 2007). All these constraints and tensions compelled Nigeria to adopt a more selective stance in peacekeeping engagement within and beyond West Africa.

Case Studies

As outlined in the methodology section, Nigeria's strategy for power projection through peacekeeping can be better understood through examining its engagements across various institutional frameworks and arrangements. This section, therefore, analyzes

three representative cases illustrating Nigeria's approach to peace operations: the ECOWAS interventions in (i) Liberia, (ii) Sierra Leone and (iii) Nigeria's participation in the UN-AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur, Sudan. It is important to highlight that these cases span different time periods, institutional contexts, and regional settings; thus, offering a comprehensive view of Nigeria's strategically calculated and selective peacekeeping approaches.

ECOWAS Intervention in Liberia (1989-1997)

Following Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPLF) attacks against Samuel Doe's regime in the late 1980s,[3] the conflict rapidly escalated into a full-scale civil war with unfolding humanitarian disaster and a steady stream of refugees to neighboring countries. As the international community, including Liberia's Cold War patron the US and the UN, remained unwilling to intervene, the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) intervention in the Liberian civil war (1989-1997) became imperative, with Nigeria stepping in as a regional hegemon to fill the security vacuum in West Africa. Although some argue that General Babangida's friendship with Samuel Doe initially motivated the Liberian intervention, the primary concern was that Charles Taylor's successful overthrow of the Liberian government would embolden other rebel groups in the region to challenge central governments (Obi, 2009, p. 122). Nigerian then-President Babangida viewed the unfolding crisis as both a humanitarian emergency as well as a threat to regional stability through its spillover effects in West Africa, thus requiring Nigeria as a regional actor to intervene to mitigate refugee flows and potential regional contagion. Nigeria, however, did not undertake such an operation solely for altruistic reasons. The ECOMOG intervention under ECOWAS also served Nigeria's parochial national interests, including its aspirations for regional hegemony, the protection of Nigerian expatriates in West Africa, and the diversion of domestic socio-economic problems (Adebajo, 2002a, pp. 48–49; Adibe, 1997, pp. 473–474).

Table 1. Nigerian Participation in Regional & Continental Peace Operations, Selected Cases

Country	Mission	Type	Mandate	Nigerian Role	Troop Contri-bution	Command Role	Financial / Logistical Contribu-tion
Liberia	ECOMOG			Dominant	Yes (~80%)	Brigade Commander	Yes (~90%)

[3] The NPLF's nucleus compromised approximately 12,500 rebels, primarily Gio soldiers and Nimba farmers who had been marginalized under Samuel Doe's brutal exclusionary regime (Olonisakin, 2000, Chapter 3).

		Peace Enforce-ment	End civil war & restore order				
Sierra Leone	ECOMOG	Peace Enforce-ment	Reverse coup & restore government	Dominant	Yes (~90%)	Brigade Commander	Yes (~90%)
Sudan (Darfur)	UNAMID	Robust Peacekee-ping (Hybrid)	Protection of civilians, facilitation of humanitarian aid & support peace process	Limited	Yes (~10%)	Force Commander	Not specified

Source: Compiled by the author.

Within a short period of time, Taylor controlled most of Liberia, including the capital Monrovia, which ultimately transformed the Nigerian-led ECOMOG cease-fire monitoring mission into a peace enforcement force to control local developments (Adebajo, 2002a, p. 52; Olonisakin, 2000, pp. 102–107). Rather than acting unilaterally, Nigeria worked through ECOWAS in order to establish ECOMOG as a multinational force, securing support from other West African states including Ghana, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia. Through this multilateral approach, Nigeria gained not only legitimacy for the intervention but also shared the cost and blood with other participating states. Nevertheless, Nigeria's deployment of ECOMOG without a strong legal basis compromised its legitimacy, thus enabling Taylor and the NPLF to challenge the intervention (Adebajo, 2002a, p. 52; Adibe, 1997, pp. 475–476; Olonisakin, 2000, pp. 110–115). Generals Babangida and later Abacha addressed these challenges by emphasizing humanitarian imperatives and regional (in)stability,[4] thus establishing a precedent for regional intervention in subsequent ECOWAS operations (Arthur, 2010). Despite ECOMOG's initial success in taking control of the capital and forcing rebel factions to sign 14 peace agreements over the years, these accords proved short-lived primarily due to increased fractionalization among Liberian rebel groups (Adebajo, 2002a, Chapter 3). With eight rebel factions divided along ethnic and personal lines during the conflict,[5] ECOWAS, nevertheless,

[4] Paradoxically, the leaders of ECOMOG-contributing states, including Nigeria's Babangida and Abacha, had seized power through undemocratic means despite their role in ECOMOG's mission to counter Charles Taylor, a Liberian warlord who had initiated an insurgency against Samuel Doe's brutal regime. This contradiction attracted significant criticism regarding the mission's authenticity when led by former military rulers (Arthur, 2010, p. 10).

[5] Despite the presence of eight rebel factions fighting during the civil war, none possessed a coherent ideology aimed at fundamental transformation of the Doe regime. Instead, most warlords, including Charles Taylor, focused on private wealth accumulation in a protracted civil war through exploiting Liberia's natural resources, such as diamonds, gold, timber, rubber, and iron ore (Adebajo, 2002a, pp. 46–47; Reno, 1998, Chapter 3).

successfully brought Charles Taylor and other potent armed factions to the negotiation table in 1995 to reach a peace agreement under UN supervision, the Abuja Accord. In the ensuing elections in 1997, the National Patriotic Party secured a majority of seats while Taylor became president, winning 75% of the vote (Adebajo, 2002a, pp. 63–66; Obi, 2009, pp. 124–127).

In 1998, ECOMOG withdrew from Liberia, leaving the UN mission in its place with limited resources and personnel.[6] Most Liberians expected that Charles Taylor would embrace peaceful mechanisms rather than pursuing politics through force. Despite optimistic expectations about Liberia's future, Taylor ruled the country with a heavy hand in a way that he distributed economic resources and positions of authority to his loyalists through a winner-take-all approach. The NPLF forces, for instance, were largely converted into regular forces of Liberia, enabling Taylor to rule autocratically (Adebajo, 2002a, pp. 67–73). Consequently, Liberia experienced the recurrence of civil war within one year of the 1997 post-conflict elections. During this conflict, both Côte D'Ivoire and Guinea provided financial and military support to Liberian rebel forces fighting against the Taylor regime, namely the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) and the Liberian United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) respectively. By 2003, these two rebel groups had gained control over most of Liberia, placing Taylor in a precarious position. Furthermore, the Sierra Leone Special War Crimes Court indicted Taylor for war crimes in Sierra Leone's civil war (1997-2002), where Taylor had maintained support for the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), along with some rebel groups in Guinea. That same year, a new ECOWAS mission (ECOMIL) was deployed to Monrovia, but this time with the international support. Within a week, Charles Taylor resigned and went into exile, accepting asylum in Nigeria as part of an ECOWAS-brokered Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) (Obi, 2009, p. 124).

Nigeria's material contributions to ECOMOG, and later ECOMIL, in Liberia demonstrated both its commitment to regional hegemony and its inherent constraints. Notably, Nigeria provided approximately 80% of ECOMOG's troops and funded almost 90% of this first major African-led peacekeeping operation on the continent (Adebajo, 2002b, p. 48; cf. Olonisakin, 2000, pp. 109–110). Such commitment reflected Nigeria's material capabilities relative to other regional actors and its willingness to bear the cost and blood of being a regional hegemon. Nigeria's willingness, capabilities, and contributions, however, generated backlash within ECOMOG as other contributing West African countries expressed resentment toward Nigerian dominance in decision-making processes and command structures (Adebajo, 2002a, p. 56; Adibe, 1997, p. 483). As noted above, while ECOMOG was initially designed as a cease-fire monitoring mission, it quickly became an enforcement force against Taylor's powerful rebel force, NPLF. This mission creep resulted primarily from ECOMOG's limited preparation for complex peacekeeping environments and the fluid nature of the conflict. Described by Gberie

[6] The UN's involvement in the Liberian civil war goes back to 1993 when the Security Council established the UN Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) to support ECOMOG in implementing the Cotonou Peace Agreement. The UN could only implement the revised Cotonou peace agreement in 1997 following years of failed implementation attempts due to ongoing conflict among Liberian factions. The UNOMIL mission was over with the establishment of a democratically elected government following the 1997 elections. In the post-election period, the UN established the UN Peace-building Support Office in Liberia (UNOL) in lieu of UNOMIL to facilitate post-conflict recovery efforts (Adibe, 1997, pp. 477–481).

(2003) as "an heroic failure," the ECOMOG mission also encountered multiple challenges, including inadequate planning, limited logistical support, coordination problems among contributing states, questions over its impartiality due to personal ties among participating states and Nigerian dominance in decision-making processes, particularly from Francophone states (Adebajo, 2002a, p. 57; Adibe, 1997, pp. 482–485; Arthur, 2010, pp. 14–16; Olonisakin, 2000, Chapter 4). These challenges revealed the discrepancy between Nigeria's hegemonic aspirations in the region and its practical constraints in conducting peacekeeping operations in complex environments.

Despite significant challenges, the Liberian intervention yielded several strategic benefits for Nigeria. First and foremost, by leading the ECOMOG mission, Nigeria established itself as the primary security provider in West Africa when or where international actors were reluctant or unable to take the lead and bear the associated cost and blood. Furthermore, the first major African-led peacekeeping operation on the continent created a practical framework and procedures, thus a precedent, for subsequent regional peacekeeping missions (Arthur, 2010). Considering all the challenges and benefits, the ECOMOG mission yielded mixed results for Nigeria, oscillating between hegemonic aspirations and resource constraints. This tension, furthermore, has remained a consistent feature of Nigeria's peacekeeping strategy since the late 1980s.

ECOWAS Intervention in Sierra Leone (1997-2002)

The ECOWAS intervention in Sierra Leone exemplified the evolution of Nigeria's regional peacekeeping strategy based on lessons from the Liberian civil war. Similar to Liberia, conflicts in Sierra Leone erupted in 1991 when Foday Sankoh's Revolutionary United Front (RUF) forces, backed by Libya, Burkina Faso, and Charles Taylor's NPFL yet commanding minimal local support, attacked Momoh's regime and seized the diamond-rich southeast region. The reasons Taylor supported the RUF forces were to punish Freetown for its contributions to the ECOMOG mission in Liberia, to fragment the fragile ECOMOG coalition, to destabilize the whole region, and thus, to facilitate diamond exports from Sierra Leone to Liberia (Adebajo, 2002a, pp. 54, 82–83). In 1992, Momoh's regime was toppled by Valentine Strasser, an ex-ECOMOG army officer, who established the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), ultimately leading to ECOMOG's mandate expansion to Sierra Leone. Four years later, Julius Bio's palace coup brought Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, a former senior UN official, to power through the post-coup elections.[7] Through Côte d'Ivoire's mediation, despite allegations of RUF favoritism, the Abidjan Accord was signed in 1996, aiming to bring peace, stability, and economic development to Sierra Leone.[8] The following year, however, Johnny Paul Koroma, a putschist in previous failed coups, led a military coup, establishing the Armed Forces Ruling Council

[7] Prior to the 1996 palace coup, Brigadier-General Bio notified Nigerian President Abacha of his planned coup. Angered by Sierra Leone's censure against Nigeria at the 1995 Commonwealth Summit, Abacha assured Bio that Nigerian forces stationed in Sierra Leone would not intervene. Following the successful coup, Bio formed close ties with Abacha. The same Nigerian forces, however, later played a significant role in thwarting several coup attempts against the democratically-elected Kabbah government (Adebajo, 2002a, p. 85).

[8] Being perceived as the only moral guarantor of the Abidjan Accord alongside the UN, the OAU, and the Commonwealth, Côte d'Ivoire's mediation effort reflected the historical subregional rivalry with Nigeria in West Africa, dating back to the late 1960s when Côte d'Ivoire provided military support to the secessionist Biafra during the Nigerian civil war (Adebajo, 2002a, p. 86).

(AFRC), which subsequently invited the RUF to form a coalition. Kabbah, rejecting his government's overthrow through military means, called for help from the international community (Arthur, 2010, pp. 8–9). Nigerian President Abacha, viewing Kabbah's appeal as an opportunity to mitigate his military regime's international isolation, initiated a regional plan to restore stability in Sierra Leone.

Through this Nigerian-led initiative, ECOWAS deployed ECOMOG II to Sierra Leone, where forces, alongside a small UN Observer Mission (UNOSIL), confronted the AFRC and RUF to reinstate Kabbah within a year (Adebajo, 2002a, pp. 83–88; Obi, 2009, pp. 124–125).[9] Reflecting its dominance, Nigeria contributed approximately 90% of ECOMOG troops in Sierra Leone (~12,000 soldiers) and consequently controlled most operational decisions, with Nigerian military leaders often resembled their role to the US position in NATO (Adebajo, 2002a, p. 91). Such a dominance demonstrated Nigeria's superior capabilities and resources relative to other regional actors, which simultaneously generated regional resentment while providing multilateral legitimacy for Nigerian hegemonic aspirations. As Adebajo succinctly puts it:

> "[…] while Nigeria faced criticisms in its subregion for its military actions in Sierra Leone, many of its critics refused to contribute the troops that could have diversified the force and diluted Nigeria's preponderant strength. […] It was sometimes easier for ECOWAS states and the wider international community to criticize from the sidelines and let Nigeria bear the financial and military burden, while doing nothing to lighten this weight" (2002a, pp. 89–90).

Unlike the Liberian case, multiple factors undermined an effective ECOWAS response in Sierra Leone, including the internal divisions within ECOWAS regarding crisis response strategies, limited capacity and resources of ECOMOG compared to the UN military observers, interference from neighboring states, deteriorating relations between Nigerian forces and Sierra Leonean citizens, and Nigerian domination of decision-making processes at the expense of other contributing states. These challenges made it clear that the Nigerian-led ECOWAS initiative would fail to defeat the AFRC and RUF forces quickly (Adebajo, 2002a, pp. 90–92; Arthur, 2010, pp. 14–16; Obi, 2009, p. 125). Furthermore, following Olusegun Obasanjo's election as Nigerian President in 1999, Nigeria began to reassess the costs and benefits of ECOMOG interventions amid domestic economic and social problems. During his address to the 54th UN General Assembly in 1999, for instance, Obasanjo stated that "[f]or too long, the burden of preserving international peace and security in West Africa has been left almost entirely to a few states […] Nigeria's continual burden in Sierra Leone is unacceptably draining Nigeria financially. For our economy to take off, this bleeding has to stop" (p. 6).

Despite ECOWAS initiatives to appease the AFRC-RUF coalition to reinstate stability in Sierra Leone following the gradual withdrawal of Nigerian forces from ECOMOG, the rebels continued to attack Freetown and took UNAMSIL peacekeepers hostage to gain more concessions. In response to increasing attacks, the international community,

[9] Despite violating the UN security Council's arms embargo, three private security firms, namely Sandline International, Executive Outcomes, and International Alert, with connections to external actors (e.g., the UK, South Africa) and diamond-mining firms (e.g., Branch Energy) also supplied weapons to ECOMOG's ally, the *kamajor* militias, to reinstate the Kabbah regime (Adebajo, 2002a, Chapter 4).

particularly the former colonizer United Kingdom, deployed additional forces throughout the country to contain the instability and oversee the 2002 elections, which Kabbah won decisively (Adebajo, 2002a, pp. 93–95). In 2003, the ECOMOG mission was gradually replaced by the United Nations Peacekeeping Mission to Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) as Obasanjo announced that Nigeria would reduce its contributions to ECOMOG missions in West Africa due to economic and social problems at home (Adebajo, 2002a, pp. 97–100; Arthur, 2010, pp. 13–14; Obi, 2009, pp. 125–126). As an illustration, Nigerian forces were significantly reduced, with 8,500 soldiers withdrawn from Sierra Leone while the remaining 3,500 soldiers were rehatted as UNAMSIL peacekeepers (Obi, 2009, pp. 121–122). Nevertheless, Nigeria assisted in training 8,500 Sierra Leonean military officers at the Nigerian Defense Academy, complementing significant British training of the army and police, to promote long-term security-sector reform (Adebajo, 2002a, p. 102).

In brief, by an attempt to restore democracy in Sierra Leone though ECOMOG, Nigeria aimed to reach two primary goals. First, despite his own military seizure of power, General Abacha sought to overcome international isolation and sanctions against his military regime by restoring democracy in Sierra Leone as well as demonstrating Nigeria's indispensable peacekeeping role in West Africa, where the international community remained hesitant to intervene, invoking the mantra of "African solutions for African problems." Second, and more importantly, by assuming such a burdensome role in this volatile region, Nigeria aimed to assert its hegemonic aspirations, a position it had pursued since the establishment of ECOWAS in 1975 to counter French influence and formidable francophone states like Côte d'Ivoire (Adebajo, 2002a, p. 92). In essence, the Sierra Leone intervention served as a showcase of Nigeria's benevolent and cooperative hegemonic role in addressing West Africa's security issues, which could potentially alleviate regional suspicions of Nigeria's ultimate goals while simultaneously struggling with economic and social challenges at home.

UN-AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur (2007-2020)

In comparison to ECOWAS interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Nigeria's participation in the UN-AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur, Sudan between 2007 and 2020 demonstrates its engagement with continental peacekeeping while navigating the complex relationship between regional and global security mechanisms. The Darfur conflict erupted in 2003 when two rebel groups, namely the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), launched an insurgency against Omar al-Bashir's government, criticizing the systematic political and economic marginalization of African farmers and nomadic Arab tribes (e.g., Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa) through Arab militia forces like the *Janjaweed* along with the Popular Defense Force (PDF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) (Adebajo, 2011, p. 203; De Waal, 2007, pp. 1039–1040; El-Tom, 2011). The international community responded to the ongoing humanitarian crisis, including mass killings, village burnings, systematic rape, forced displacement, and famine, in an evolving fashion, beginning with the establishment of an African Union monitoring mission (AMIS) in 2004 on the basis of the Ndjamena Humanitarian Ceasefire Agreement that later evolved into a hybrid UN-AU mission (UNAMID) in 2007, concurrent with the 2009 arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for al-

Bashir on charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide (Flint & de Waal, 2008, Chapter 7; Kindiki, 2007, pp. 3–5; UNSC, 2005). Despite these international efforts toward peace and stability in Sudan, little progress occurred until 2020 when the Darfur Peace Agreement was reached,[10] largely because of an inconsistent international response and dysfunctional Sudanese government (De Waal, 2007, pp. 1041–1043).

Once the shortcomings of the Ndjamena Agreement became clear, the African Union peacekeeping mission (AMIS) proved inadequate to restore stability in Darfur due to its constraints, and as Khartoum continued violating the UN Security Council's resolution (S/RES/1556 (2004); UNSC, 2004),[11] the international community, particularly Americans,[12] began advocating for a UN mission with a robust mandate and sufficient resources, which subsequently led to the deployment of UNAMID in 2007 without a comprehensive peace strategy in the areas of ceasefire, civilian protection, and disarmament (De Waal, 2007, pp. 1047–1049; Flint & de Waal, 2008, Chapter 7). From 2004 to 2006, seven rounds of peace talks were held in either Addis Ababa or Abuja, with Nigerian President Obasanjo chairing most of the AU meetings. Through these peace talks, the Darfur Peace Agreement began taking shape following the 2004 Ndjamena Ceasefire Agreement (Adebajo, 2011, p. 205). When both China and Russia, two of the five veto-wielding permanent members of the UN Security Council, agreed to deploy a hybrid force with an "African Character" (S/RES/1769 (2007); UNSC, 2007), meaning that core troops would come from the continent, al-Bashir reluctantly gave consent to the UN peacekeeping mission despite his earlier characterization of UNAMID as an imperial mission (Adebajo, 2011, pp. 207–211; Gelot, 2012, p. 9).

The UN-AU Hybrid Mission was mandated to oversee the implementation of the 2006 Abuja Peace Agreement and to protect civilians with a $1.8 billion-a-year budget. As the peace force required an African character, there were serious suspicions in the international community about African states' capacity to undertake such a mission. Nevertheless, seven African countries alongside external actors such as Bangladesh, China, Thailand and Nepal, contributed forces to Darfur. Nigeria, along with Rwanda, for instance, deployed four battalions despite most deployed African forces lacking necessary equipment and logistical support, which hampered their ability to conduct effective military patrols and evacuation operations. Furthermore, most UNAMID patrols in the region were suspended due to kidnapping or shots fired against UN personnel (Adebajo, 2011, pp. 211–212, 215; Omorogbe, 2011, pp. 48–54).

[10] The Darfur Peace Agreement represents three sequential peace agreements signed between various parties to the conflict, including the Sudanese government and rebel groups such as the SLA, the JEM, and the Liberation and Justice Movement (LJM). These agreements were concluded in different locations over a fourteen-year period: Abuja (2006), Doha (2011), and Juba (2020).

[11] One year later, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1593 (2005), referring the situation in Darfur to the ICC despite Sudan not being a party to the Rome Statute. Subsequently, the ICC issued an arrest warrant for Omar al-Bashir in 2009 on charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide (De Waal, 2007, pp. 1041–1043; Flint & de Waal, 2008, Chapter 7).

[12] Given the inaction of the Clinton administration regarding the Rwanda genocide in 1994, the US House of Representatives and Secretary of State Colin Powell hastily designated events in Darfur as "genocide" amid upcoming elections, contrary to UN findings and NGO assessments. In characterizing Khartoum's response to the insurgency as genocide, a grassroots movement called "Save Darfur!" played a significant role in mobilizing international attention to the humanitarian emergency (Adebajo, 2011, p. 203; Flint & de Waal, 2008, Chapter 7).

Despite these shortcomings and challenges, Nigeria continued to provide troops (~3,000), logistical support, and leadership as force commander to the UN-AU Hybrid Mission until its withdrawal in 2020. Compared to its interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Nigeria's willingness to shoulder such a burden, albeit relatively small, in Darfur reflects its continental leadership aspirations and institutional positioning, despite the existence of alternative troop contributions and the geographic distance from its traditional sphere of influence. Through the UN-AU partnership in Darfur, Nigeria sought to achieve multiple strategic objectives, namely demonstrating its commitment to continental security mechanisms, maintaining its influence within the evolving AU, and sharing the associated costs and blood with other actors through the UN. Such a balancing act demonstrates Nigeria's peacekeeping strategy whereby it simultaneously engages with regional (e.g., ECOWAS/ECOMOG, AU) and global institutions like the UN to advance strategic benefits for hegemonic aspirations while managing resource constraints and mitigating leadership suspicions through multilateralism. Furthermore, such a hybrid mission aligns with the "African solutions for African problems" principle, whereby UNAMID strengthens African security mechanisms by providing opportunities to access UN logistical, technical, and financial support for African states. In sum, Nigerian contribution to the UN-AU Hybrid Mission underscores its African leadership while showing the importance of international partnerships for effectiveness and, more importantly, legitimacy (Gelot, 2012, Introduction; Kindiki, 2007, Chapter 4).

Conclusion

Examining Nigeria's dual engagement strategy for regional power projection through peacekeeping missions in the ECOWAS, AU, and UN frameworks, this study contributes to the scholarly debate on regionalism, emerging powers, and peacekeeping by offering a more integrated analysis of how regional powers utilize multiple institutional frameworks to maximize influence while minimizing associated costs. Analyzing Nigeria's dual peacekeeping strategy across peace operations in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Darfur, Sudan, this research sheds light on strategic calculations that guide Nigeria's approach to regional security governance in Africa's increasingly complex institutional landscape, revealing tensions between hegemonic aspirations and leadership constraints in West Africa and beyond.

Nigeria's peacekeeping strategy represents a calculated approach to maximizing its influence across West Africa and the broader continent while managing resource limitations and leadership constraints, particularly in its Francophone-dominated immediate region. Through ECOWAS, Nigeria seeks to establish itself as West Africa's security guarantor while creating necessary institutional mechanisms to legitimize its regional hegemony. Through its engagement with the AU-UN Hybrid Mission in Darfur, Nigeria aims to project its continental influence while sharing costs and blood of peacekeeping with other contributing states. With such a dual engagement strategy in peacekeeping through regional and global institutional mechanisms, Nigeria is able to exercise leadership while mitigating resistance from neighboring states to its hegemonic aspirations. Recent events, nevertheless, demonstrate that Nigeria's hegemonic aspirations face unprecedented challenges, particularly when domestic security crises

limit its capacity to project power regionally, as evidenced by its inability to prevent the withdrawal of three founding ECOWAS members in 2024 despite deploying economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure.

The case studies provide significant information with regard to Nigeria's evolutionary peacekeeping strategy. The Liberian intervention primarily exemplifies Nigeria's role as a regional gendarme while highlighting its significant resource limitations and operational challenges. The Sierra Leone intervention, on the other hand, demonstrates how Nigeria refined its peacekeeping approach by developing more robust partnerships with international actors without compromising its regional leadership. Finally, the Darfur intervention illustrates Nigeria's selective engagement with continental mechanisms whereby it balances regional leadership aspirations with practical constraints of geographic distance and resource limitations. In sum, these three cases demonstrate both the potential and constraints of regional security mechanisms that shape Nigeria's peacekeeping strategy, necessitating a selective engagement in its commitments and institutional arrangements to share burdens with international partners. Last but not least, this study's theoretical implications extend beyond Nigeria, representing a significant adaptation strategy to limitations and constraints faced by emerging powers in the Global South.

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