

NIGERIA'S HEGEMONIC ROLE IN ECOWAS: FOREIGN POLICY, REGIONAL STABILITY AND THE LIMITS OF LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

Nigeria's claim to hegemonic leadership within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) rests on formidable material foundations a GDP constituting approximately 75% of the regional aggregate, a military with an unmatched record of regional intervention, and a founding role in the community dating to 1975. Yet this study demonstrates that material preponderance alone is insufficient to sustain effective regional leadership. Examining Nigeria's ECOWAS engagement between 2000 and 2023 through content analysis of foreign policy documents, secondary data from the ECOWAS Secretariat and the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, and elite interviews with former ministers and diplomats, the study finds that Nigeria is a hegemon in structural retreat: financial contribution compliance rates fell from 100% in 2006 to 57.8% in 2021; proportional troop contributions to ECOWAS operations declined from over 70% during the ECOMOG era to as low as 15% in Mali; and Nigeria's governance ranking within ECOWAS deteriorated to the bottom third of its own regional community by 2022. A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.81$, $p < 0.01$) between domestic governance quality and regional engagement compliance confirms that internal political instability, fiscal stress, and security crises are the primary constraints on Nigeria's hegemonic effectiveness. The coup wave of 2020–2023 — and Nigeria's failure to mount a credible response to the Niger crisis crystallized these contradictions. The study recommends the establishment of a ring-fenced ECOWAS Engagement Fund, institutional reform of Nigeria's foreign policy architecture to reduce personalization, expanded investment in soft power instruments, and sustained domestic governance reform in security accountability, electoral integrity, and anti-corruption enforcement as the foundational prerequisites for credible regional normative leadership.

Keywords: Nigeria, ECOWAS, regional hegemony, West African security, foreign policy, regional integration