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FEATURE

Can Nigeria be Africa's hegemon?

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ABSTRACT

Does the reference to regional hegemony in the African context apply to Nigeria? This study examines this question in line with increasing claims in academic and diplomatic circles of Nigerian hegemony in Africa. While scholars and leading opinion holders have described Nigeria's influence in Africa as typical of a regional hegemon, this paper interrogates the substance of this argument in the context of the nature of the country's foreign policy relations in Africa. Against this background, the article contends that Nigeria actually enjoys a dwindling influence in Africa notwithstanding its current status as Africa's largest economy. The article argues that although Nigeria has never officially harboured any hegemonic aspirations, this hardly disqualifies it from being Africa's hegemonic power. It takes the position that Nigeria remains an important regional power on the continent but is hindered by several factors in playing a hegemonic role. In making this assertion, the article considers a number of conditions that increasingly deflate Nigeria's capacity to play a meaningful hegemonic role in Africa. In doing this, it critically assesses the inherent internal and constraining external conditions that diminish Nigeria's claims to or credentials for effective regional hegemony.

KEYWORDS

Foreign policy; hegemonic stability theory; power; regional hegemony; regional power

Introduction

Political hierarchies and the anarchic nature of the international system often necessitate conduits through which states are able to navigate their power currents in order to advance their aspirations for greatness. Theoretically, it has been established that the hegemonic presence of a powerful state is an ingredient for stability within a specific region.¹ Regional powers can have an impact on their regions in both cooperative and confrontational ways. Much has been written regarding the potential of regional powers in Africa to effectively arrest conflict and underdevelopment on the continent. That Africa needs a regional hegemon capable of positively addressing the political, economic and security issues confronting the continent is not in doubt.² Reputedly, this would help to restore respect for Africa in the international sphere. Regional hegemonic powers, therefore, have the potential to promote order and regional stability on the continent.

In the African context, many discussions on regional hegemony focus on Nigeria,³ and revolve around the question of whether Nigeria (by any standard), with the various roles it plays in Africa, qualifies as a hegemon. While Nigeria is referred to as the 'military giant' of Africa, Osaghae gives it the moniker of 'a crippled giant'.⁴ Adebajo and Mustapha pejoratively refer to Nigeria as a giant with rickety feet, rendered thus by its bad governance and a chronic dependency on oil that has stifled growth in the country.⁵ Many such studies have considered

why Nigeria should *not* be tagged as a regional hegemon without advancing substantive arguments that look at whether these debilitating conditions are sufficient for disqualifying Nigeria from being regarded as a regional hegemon. In essence, this inquiry contributes to the current discourse on African regional power architecture by examining the extent to which recurring domestic and external conditions affect Nigeria's putative hegemonic claim.

This article examines the influence of Nigeria within Africa, with a focus on estimating how its inherent internal dilemmas and external contradictions have been invoked to dismiss its hegemonic ambitions on the continent. The article aims to further interrogate whether or not and, if so, how these conditions uniquely affect Nigeria's regional hegemonic prospects and, in essence, question Nigeria's (assumed) hegemonic claim. Can Nigeria be regarded as Africa's hegemon? Do specific internal and external dynamics advance or limit its claims of hegemony?

At the close of the 20th century, the celebrated re-entry of South Africa onto the international political landscape (accompanied by Nigeria's political transformation after years of military rule into an acceptable democratic civilian government) particularly affected the political-economic dynamics of Africa. More recently, the recalibration of Nigeria's gross domestic product (GDP) base, which formally made it Africa's largest economy, has renewed debates around the hegemonic profile of Nigeria vis-à-vis other regional counterparts such as South Africa and Egypt. Within parts of Africa, there seems to be an unwillingness to accept Nigeria's unofficial 'claim' to regional hegemony, which is proposed by many Nigerian scholars on the basis of its population size, Afrocentric foreign policy, vibrant economy, and success in and high-level contributions to multilateral initiatives such as the United Nations (UN), African Union (AU) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), as well as the broad-based acceptance of its leadership in Africa.

It is important to examine the degree to which Nigeria succeeds in influencing the processes, structures and institutions of the international system to its advantage. We apply our understanding of regional hegemony to these aspects in order to gain a grasp of the character and features of the hegemonic role (if any) that Nigeria plays in Africa. We approach this study from an interpretive standpoint, and consequently draw on qualitative methodology to unravel the major themes that underscore this study. Based on an extensive literature survey, our data is drawn from a wide variety of primary and secondary data relating to Nigeria's foreign policy and regional power status.

This article is divided into four main sections. The first examines the substance and nature of regional hegemonic status from the standpoint of a number of scholars. The second provides a background to the debate regarding the regional power profile of Nigeria within Africa. The third analyses the question of Nigeria's regional hegemonic claim by looking specifically at the internal and external contradictions that suppress the country's legitimate claim to such a position. Finally, based on the analysis presented, the fourth presents our position on the regional hegemonic profile of Nigeria.

What makes a regional hegemon?

The focus on regional powers has provoked debates on the categorisation and merits of any state to be classed as a regional hegemon. Scholars have attempted to draw a distinction between regional powers and other classifications of international power status such as global powers superpowers, middle powers and pivotal powers.⁶ Considerable intellectual debates also exist on the geographic context in which the concept of regional hegemon is

used in the contemporary analysis of regional interactions and for any meaningful theoretical explanation.⁷ Nolte, for instance, acknowledges the 'general lack of analytical instruments to identify and to compare regional powers, and to differentiate regional powers from great powers and middle powers'.⁸ Some scholars also concede that there are a number of uncontested assertions about what constitutes a regional hegemon, but recognise that various salient features are still largely contested and under scrutiny.⁹ The relevant literature makes clear that there is no general consensus about what makes a regional hegemon, since there are numerous approaches to describing the empirical relationship between power and leadership. More so, the term 'regional hegemon' has been used in several different contexts, leading to confusion and misuse of the term.

One of the very first attempts to define regional hegemony was made by Østerud, who referred to the notion of a 'regional *great* power' being a state which is: geographically part of a delineated region; able to stand up against any coalition of other states in the region; highly influential in regional affairs; and, contrary to a middle power, might also be a great power on the world scale in addition to its regional standing.¹⁰

Lehmke, in applying power transition theory at the regional level of analysis, conceptualises regional hegemons as 'local dominant states supervising local relations by establishing and striving to preserve a local status quo'.¹¹ Regional hegemons can be identified by the assumption of a stabilising and leading role, and the acceptance of this role by neighbouring states.¹² Regional hegemons can also be considered as role models and leaders within a particular region by carrying out leading activities that are generally accepted by neighbouring states.¹³ Similarly, regional hegemons, or what are sometimes termed 'regional leading powers', have also been conceived as states that are influential and powerful in certain geographic regions or subregions.¹⁴ In this estimation, regional powers not only possess superior power capabilities and exercise leadership within the region but are also able to convince other states (both within the region and beyond) to accept their leadership.

Flemes distinguishes regional hegemons by using four vital gauges: 'claim to leadership, power resources, employment of foreign policy instruments and acceptance of leadership'.¹⁵ Accepting the role of regional leadership means that the state in question has taken upon itself the responsibility of entrenching peace and stability and crafting policies for economic initiatives. The constructivist paradigm for global or (in this case) regional power entails that fellow nations in the international system accept one of their own as a fitting leading power.¹⁶

An exhaustive list of the features of regional hegemons is as follows: material preponderance (based mainly on its economic, military and demographic power), which makes it a giant in its region; close interconnectivity with other states in the region in political, economic and cultural terms; decisive impact of its economic development on the economic fortunes of other countries in the region; having various instruments of foreign policy at its disposal to assert its interests and equip it for a pre-eminent role in and on behalf of its region; the expression of an ambition, claim or willingness to play these dual leadership roles; predominant influence in regional affairs in terms of setting security, political and economic agendas; and the recognition and respect of other states (within the region and beyond) as a leading state in and on behalf of the region.

In recognising the lack of comparative studies of regional systems – leading to a 'conceptualisation' problem – Prys identifies three 'P's that are fundamental criteria for a regional hegemonic system: provision, projection and perception.¹⁷ Prys summarises this triad as: firstly, the provision of public good; secondly, the projection of the regional power's values and interests; and lastly, the perception of the regional power as a state both internally and

externally with a special responsibility and capacity to have an impact on behaviour and outcomes in its sphere of influence. Regional hegemonies operate within a regional hegemonic system as an outcome of a 'certain foreign policy strategy'.¹⁸ Her main thesis is that these three criteria must necessarily be blended with a fourth factor (material preponderance) for a regional hegemon to be recognised as one. The leadership and preponderant power status occupied by a regional power can be depicted as regional hegemony.¹⁹

Kappel, drawing from an analysis of the economies of regional hegemonies, describes a regional hegemon as a country that has unrivalled economic strength 'in a given region', the influence of which extends from regional to global proportions.²⁰ Such a country also has

a relatively large population ... covers a relatively large area [and] achieves high economic growth, above the regional average, over a longer period of time and thus provides a growing market for the region. It plays an important role in trade within the region.²¹

Although scholars have varied ideas about the exact attributes of a regional hegemon, they are generally in agreement about some of the features. However, although useful, these assessments and attempts at theorising hegemony are anchored largely (if not exclusively) on a-posteriori valuations, which forestall other potentially useful models of hegemonic influences that may emerge in the future.

In the context of this article, we define a regional hegemonic power as a state with superior power advantages and capabilities relative to its regional sphere, which has considerable influence on its regional neighbours through a robust foreign policy, and which enjoys a measure of acceptance, legitimacy and recognition based on its ideational leadership. We apply this understanding of regional hegemonic power to Nigeria to analyse the extent to which the country fulfils these requirements.

Interrogating the question of Nigeria's hegemony in Africa

Post-independence Nigeria has always perceived itself as a major actor in international affairs. Cemented over the years by successive Nigerian administrations, there is a palpable conviction of Nigeria's 'manifest destiny' as the 'champion' of Africa.²² It is this strong belief in itself as a formidable (real or latent) global player that has inspired Nigeria's active involvement in Africa through its foreign policy on important international issues.²³

Based on its economic and political credentials, would it be appropriate to qualify Nigeria as a continental hegemon? Ffemes and Wojczewski argue that in terms of material resources, Nigeria can only be categorised as a secondary power in sub-Saharan Africa as it 'cannot compete with South Africa's economic leadership in the long term'.²⁴ While this argument might have been accepted as compelling prior to 2014, it now begs for further interrogation. The idea that South Africa has a commanding leadership of the region is often anchored on false assumptions about its unity of purpose (in terms of its control of the economic and financial instruments used in projecting its regional power), the existence of a significant gap between South Africa and other regional members such as Nigeria, the idea that its comparative technological advancement cannot be breached in the foreseeable future, and so on. These claims are problematic. Although South Africa enjoys some advantages in the realm of economic leadership with respect to technological superiority, organisational structure and capacity, this is only a short- to medium-term advantage at best. For instance, the notion that South Africa has by far the biggest regional economy is a claim that many experts knew or suspected was anchored on inadequate information and was in fact laid

bare by a report in 2014 on the prolonged rebasing exercise of Nigeria's economy, which proved the reverse to be the case.²⁵ Hence, contrary to Flesmes and Wojcowski's claim, Nigeria indeed commands a significantly larger economy than South Africa and thus cannot be deemed a secondary power using economic strength and/or potential as the criterion.

Kappel discounts Nigeria as a regional power because it does not meet all the criteria that, according to him, typify regional powers. By his account, despite its huge population, Nigeria does not meet this benchmark because of its physical size and other political-economic factors.²⁶ He fails, however, to articulate why physical size, for instance, is a major prerequisite for regional power status. The physical size of countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), Japan, Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Israel has never been an important factor in delimiting their regional power status. Perhaps it is worth noting that at more than 923 000 km², Nigeria is bigger than Germany, Italy and the UK combined. Clearly, Kappel's views about regional hegemony are informed by assumptions that disregard ample evidence on historical and contemporary regional hegemonic arrangements across the world. Particularly in the case of Nigeria, Kappel fails to clarify why we should accept his categorisation as defining. To the contrary, there appears to be reasonably compelling evidence that Nigeria fits or seems to fit some experts' assessments of a regional hegemon, given its superior power capabilities as well as its ability to exercise considerable influence on its regional neighbours while at the same time enjoying a considerable measure of acceptance of its regional leadership.

However, several inherent domestic and external challenges and contradictions collectively have a negative impact on Nigeria's capacity to consistently play the role of a regional hegemon, to the extent that it has failed to be a convincing hegemon within the African region. Rather than disqualify Nigeria, as argued by some scholars, these multiple challenges coalesce to detract from the country's playing a regional hegemonic role either consistently or decisively.

Nigeria has had to grapple with several conflicts within its borders. Factors such as contestations over the control of crude-oil resources, an unwieldy population size and diverse ethnic identities have combined to produce polarising effects that have been the bane of its prospects for continental hegemony. While these kinds of challenges may not have stopped countries such as the United States (US), Russia, India, China and many other states from exercising regional or global influence, their poor management in Nigeria – due particularly to endemic corruption and poor leadership – appears to stifle Nigeria's hegemonic prospects. By implication, although Nigeria's regional hegemonic capability may suffer from apparent ambiguities, it may be inappropriate (in the absence of compelling logic) to tag it as a secondary power relative to its South African counterpart.

Nigeria's regional hegemonic status in Africa: contradictions and possibilities

On the surface, Nigeria meets the generally prescribed conditions for qualification as a regional hegemon. However, its regional power and capacity sometimes seem to be stunted by internal and external problems that challenge the substance of any hegemonic claims – and like every other regional (or global) power, Nigeria has apparent strengths and weaknesses that reinforce or deflate its capacity and willingness to play the role of a hegemon within Africa. We examine five specific factors that appear critical to advancing or stemming Nigeria's characterisation as an African hegemon: economic capacity, texture of polity, foreign policy articulation, international public image and external contexts.

Economic capacity

Over the years, Nigeria has been able to use its economic strength as a hard and soft power resource to project its power status, particularly within Africa. For instance, in 1975, at the peak of its economic recovery following a devastating civil war, Nigeria nudged other subregional states to establish ECOWAS. Then Nigerian leader, Yakubu Gowon, not only played a pivotal role, but also pledged that the country would be responsible for a full one-third of ECOWAS's financial needs. The unexpected oil boom of the 1970s, which brought about a buoyant economy, increased the impetus for Nigeria's rising continental prominence. The confident posture of its leadership and the economic prosperity and well-being enjoyed by the country at the time afforded it the platform to pursue a rigorous and active foreign policy, clearly manifested in the leading role it played during the struggle to secure independence for Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Namibia and Zimbabwe, as well as the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa.²⁷

Despite experiencing a severe economic downturn in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Nigeria's sustained economic resurgence since the late 1990s has re-established the country as a dominant economy in Africa. Based on rebased figures announced in April 2014, Nigeria's economy is undeniably the largest in Africa with a GDP of US\$522 billion and a growth rate of 6.2%.²⁸ In second place is South Africa, with a GDP of US\$350 billion and a growth rate of 2.6%. As the 2014 recalibration of its GDP suggests, Nigeria's economy and economic value is far less conditioned by revenue generated from the exploration for and production and exportation of crude oil, which has a 14% share of the GDP. Other sectors such as agriculture, services and manufacturing enjoy large shares of the Nigerian GDP, along with the informal sector.²⁹ Recent economic reforms have further positioned Nigeria as the third fastest-growing economy on the list of 10 emerging markets (EM10).³⁰ Nigeria also features not only as one of only two African countries on the list of 3G countries (Global Growth Generators)³¹ identified by Citigroup as sources of growth and potential investment opportunities, but also in Goldman Sachs's Next 11 countries.³²

Nigeria is the biggest oil exporter in Africa and has the largest reserve of natural gas on the continent. With these large reserves of natural resources, it has an excellent potential to build an even more prosperous economy, which would allow it to significantly reduce poverty, and provide better healthcare, education and infrastructure services.³³ In the geopolitical realm, Nigeria's significance is intrinsically tied to its economic superiority and comparative economic advantage, particularly within the West and Central African subregions. This advantage affords the country the capacity to continue playing a leading role in these subregions while also sustaining its responsibility (as enshrined in the Nigerian constitution) to protect and maintain peace among its contiguous states.

In essence, Nigeria wields the financial power to assert influence on an international scale. This substantial economic prowess gives Nigeria the wherewithal not only to intervene in regional conflicts to maintain political stability and foster development, but also to support a dynamic foreign policy that has ultimately contributed immensely to the growth and development of the continent.³⁴ To a considerable extent, Nigeria's diplomatic behaviour is rooted in concrete terms in its economic strength, which affords it the opportunity to play a subtle hegemonic role by providing focus and leadership, particularly for the African continent. This, for instance, is displayed over the years in its active commitment to the eradication of slavery, colonialism, apartheid and all forms of racial oppression, and to continental transformation. Nigeria has been able to play a leading role on behalf of Africa in multilateral institutional

arrangements such as the UN, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU, now the AU) and ECOWAS.

Paradoxically, despite its abundant human and natural resources, Nigeria has failed to maximise the returns from its economic assets by effectively translating them into national economic growth and prosperity. This is due to a myriad of factors, such as: poor planning; inconsistencies in policy formulation, implementation and monitoring; fiscal indiscipline; poor articulation of economic structures; and dysfunctional economic sectors that are not properly integrated and coordinated. As a result of long years of neglect of basic infrastructure, which is necessary to support economic vibrancy, the Nigerian economy was lopsided for decades, delivering a shadow of its true potential – a situation that translated into a poor quality of life and standard of living for many Nigerians.

One major culprit behind Nigeria's relative economic misfortune was the onset of corruption, which has become embedded in the political economy. Over the years, Nigeria's economy has been repeatedly undermined by continued bad governance and generalised theft of state assets. At the same time, rampant corruption, poverty and political violence have done very little to lessen Nigeria's attractiveness to international investors and investment bankers,³⁵ and it has seen sustained strong growth for a period well beyond a decade.

A number of economic indices paint a gloomy future for Nigeria's economy, putting a dent in its capacity to act the part of a regional hegemon. For instance, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) World Investment Report (WIR) for 2014 shows that inflows of foreign direct investment into Nigeria declined from US\$7 127 billion in 2012 to US\$5 609 billion in 2013, behind Mozambique and South Africa. According to the report:

In Nigeria, uncertainties over the long-awaited Petroleum Industry Bill, PIB, and security issues triggered a series of asset disposals from foreign Trans National Companies, TNCs. National companies and other developing country TNCs are taking over the assets of the retreating TNCs.³⁶

Texture of polity

Despite Nigeria's strong economic credentials, one major detraction from its characterisation as a regional hegemon is the rough texture of its polity, which was initiated within the first six years of its independence. As Saliu and Omotola indicate, 'the internal realities of any country count very much in its ability to function externally'.³⁷ Insecurity, violence, poverty and corruption continue to define the Nigerian state. The intermittent insurgencies that have beset Nigeria, creating a history of sustained instability, were triggered during the early years of independence and signalled by the military overthrow of Balewa's government in 1966. Much of the expectation that accompanied Nigeria's political independence in 1960 has faded away under serious political challenges and problems. After 50 years of independence, Nigeria remains within the ranks of underdeveloped countries, despite huge material and human resources.³⁸ Identity politics in Nigeria – shaped by various cleavage lines such as religion, region, ethnicity and native-settler issues – continuously threaten national peace and stability and its capacity to exert influence beyond its borders. Because of this situation, security concerns remain highly sensitive and volatile at best. Nigeria cannot be considered an authentically integrated society but rather a nation-state still in the making. It is this distinct feature

of the Nigerian state that continues to impose limits and immense costs on its foreign policy and ultimately restrict its hegemonic capacity.

Since 2009, Nigeria again has had to contend, almost on a daily basis, with an extremist and violent sect of Islamist insurgents known as Boko Haram, which has increasingly been wreaking havoc across Nigeria and neighbouring countries.³⁹ Using terrorism as a means to sabotage the secular Nigerian state, the sect aims to violently foist Islamist rule on the country. Boko Haram opposes Western civilisation by seeking to entrench Sharia law in Nigeria.⁴⁰ Over 10 000 people have been killed and many more displaced by Boko Haram since 2009, and there has been a significant and growing decline in business activities in the north.⁴¹

The ongoing violence and sabotage of Boko Haram raises serious questions about Nigeria's capacity to resolve its own internal conflicts.⁴² Boko Haram is arguably a consequence of poor governance and leadership, and its continued acts of terror are a harbinger of poor security in Nigeria.⁴³ The absence of sustained internal cohesion, evidenced in continued strife, increasingly stifles Nigeria's contention as an African leader and hegemon.⁴⁴ It is unlikely that other African nations would readily accept a leader whose house is in turmoil and whose centre is unable to hold together all domestic stakeholders. Clearly, the internal threats to Nigerian security are real and have significant bearing on its prospects for regional hegemonic leadership.

Perhaps the most emotive source of angst among many Nigerians is the issue of endemic corruption by the ruling class. The unrelenting corruption of the country's leaders has not only caused despondency among local people but is also arguably the most important factor in provoking the proliferation of anarchic and violent groups that imperil individual, national and regional security.⁴⁵ Insecurity and corruption have been the hallmarks of successive governments since the discovery of oil. Corruption has continued unrelentingly, with government officials being the main players. As Table 1 shows, Nigeria is broadly perceived as a leading country when it comes to corruption, a factor that not only damages its international reputation but also could impair business opportunities and investments, as well as its growth and development trajectory and prospects.

Though still languishing near the bottom of the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) and despite ongoing threats to its corporate existence from Boko Haram, there are signs that Nigeria remains on an upward trajectory with respect to its domestic performance. For

Table 1. Corruption Perception Index for Nigeria, 2001–14.

Year	Nigeria's score (where 10 is least corrupt)	Nigeria's ranking (in the total number of countries in the study)
2001	1.0	90/91
2002	1.6	101/102
2003	1.4	132/133
2004	1.6	144/145
2005	1.9	152/163
2006	2.2	142/179
2007	2.2	147/180
2008	2.7	121/180
2009	2.5	130/180
2010	2.4	134/178
2011	2.4	143/182
2012	2.7	139/176
2013	2.5	144/177
2014	2.7	136/174

Source: Transparency International, Corruption Perception Index, 2015, <http://www.transparency.org/research/cpi/overview> (accessed February 2016).

example, improvements in domestic governance and democratic processes have led to better CPI scores and sustained economic growth and development, and an associated reduction in poverty and increased per capita income. Nigeria's political challenges serve not only to portray it as a highly tainted regional leader but also seriously dent its regional hegemonic credentials. However, Nigeria is not unique in experiencing civil strife, as many major players in the world today such as Russia, India and China have their own challenges. Similarly, the UK, France, Indonesia and Israel continue to experience challenges to state unity and prosperity. Still, there are very few (if any) challenges to the standing or importance of these countries as regional or even global players. The point here is that although the political realities of the Nigerian state tarnish its hegemonic credentials, they do not obviate its capacity to play a meaningful hegemonic role in Africa.

Foreign policy articulation

One common thread in Nigeria's foreign policy over successive administrations has been a sustained emphasis on Africa as the centrepiece of its foreign policy, albeit with different degrees of enthusiasm. Very clearly articulated in Nigeria's foreign policy trajectories since independence is the allusion to a natural Nigerian leadership in the affairs of the African continent.⁴⁶ A number of deductions can be gleaned from this fact. Firstly, Nigeria's long years of charity-driven foreign policy diplomacy have helped to facilitate a hegemonic credential. The country's dedication to ensuring that its role as Africa's 'spokes-state' remains unfettered continues to command the respect of African countries. This demonstrates a clear premise of moral responsibility on which successive governments have anchored Nigeria's role on the continent.⁴⁷

In addition to this, Nigeria has demonstrated clarity in the principles and policy governing its external relations with Africa through a positively constructed and implemented foreign policy. There are certain undeniable reoccurring aspects that can be isolated from Nigeria's foreign policy activities since the Balewa administration:

- Eradicating apartheid
- Advocating for debt relief and reparation for Africa
- Supporting the decolonisation process in Africa
- Reforming and transforming the OAU into the AU
- Establishing ECOWAS as a subregional multilateral framework
- Securing the status as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC)
- Undertaking peace support operations (PSOs) across the world

Nigeria has no ulterior motives concerning its policies in Africa, as evidenced from the speeches in Parliament by Nigeria's early nationalists such as Chief Remi Fanni Kayode, Balewa and Chief Anthony Enahoro, who focused on African unity, African development and progress for African people everywhere. Consequently, Nigeria's foreign policy was conceptualised not purely for Nigeria but rather in service of Africa and its overall development. The feeling at the time was that Nigeria could not properly enjoy its own independence and freedom when any other African country remained shackled by colonial rule, apartheid or racism. In this way, Nigeria's national interest was intrinsically woven into Africa's interest. The absence of South Africa on the African political-economic scene between 1960 and 1990 further reinforced expectations that Nigeria (as the 'giant of Africa') would provide

leadership for the continent. In retrospect, while policy may have changed due to prevailing issues, the principles behind its commitment to Africa have remained largely the same since 1960. It is on the concrete manifestations of this Afrocentric policy that Nigeria's hegemonic claim rests.

Through this philosophical foundation Nigeria has assumed a mantle of leadership in Africa, enforced through its proactive policies and actions. Some analysts maintain that the independence and total liberation of countries such as Angola, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe would (probably) not have been as quickly achieved without the extensive financial and diplomatic assistance of Nigeria.⁴⁸ Osuntokun is resolute in asserting that '... without Lagos' steady support for the forces of liberation, the entire southern African region – including South Africa – might have spent longer years battling the forces of colonialism, settlerism and racist oppression'.⁴⁹ Apartheid in South Africa was perceived by Nigerians as a stain upon the integrity of black people everywhere; hence, confronting apartheid was a priority. In other words, particularly under the successive military administrations, Nigeria pursued a rigorous foreign policy, the *raison d'être* of which was African liberation and progress. This aggressive concentration on Africa earned it universal acknowledgement and approval.⁵⁰

Since then, Abuja's foreign policy has been explicitly accentuated to advance Nigeria's place on the centre stage of African politics.⁵¹ Despite years of military rule and an unstable political landscape, Nigeria's Afrocentric foreign policy has been further strengthened under Obasanjo's democratic government, with Nigeria assuming the leadership of a number of international organisations, including ECOWAS, the AU and the G-77. This fact was reinforced by its successful hosting of important summits and conferences, including the Commonwealth Heads of State and Government, the AU in 2004, the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) in 2005 and, on several occasions since 1999, ECOWAS. In fact, the general expectation at the time was that the liberation of the democratic space would further deepen Nigeria's commitment to the cause for Africa.⁵²

Furthermore, the fusion between policy and practice in the articulation and implementation of Nigeria's foreign policy (often at the expense of its own people) reflects the sacrifices the country has made in its dedication to the continent. Driven largely by altruistic concerns about the sociopolitical and economic challenges facing the continent, Nigeria's Afrocentric policy has often been criticised at home for relegating Nigerians to the background in pursuit of continental advancement. With the assurances that it is able to tackle Africa's problems through its enormous human and material resources, wealth and strong military, Nigeria's role in Africa has been triggered by a genuine moral conviction and commitment, which are critical ingredients for regional hegemonic status. One instance of the goodwill of Nigeria's foreign policy is its supply of electricity to West African countries such as Benin and Niger despite an inconsistent power supply within its own borders. In addition, the Technical Aid Corp Scheme (TACS), instituted in 1987 as a foreign aid initiative, continues to provide technical and developmental assistance to African and Caribbean countries.

Despite the end of colonial rule, and the end of apartheid, Nigeria remains mindful of a putative historical responsibility to the continent where its people make up the largest concentration of black people. Nigeria's foreign policy on Africa does not fit Realist theory, which argues that foreign policy is based on national interest. In fact, Nigeria did not originally define its national interest in parochial terms but with respect to the rest of Africa. Hence, the key tenets of Nigeria's foreign policy have been deliberately constructed to exert policy outcomes that align with a subtle pursuit of its hegemonic interests.

However, for many local citizens, the responsibilities that come with regional hegemony, particularly international charity, are often perceived as exercises in wastefulness. As is common in various other countries (including hegemons), many Nigerian citizens contend that the nation has enough domestic crises to cope with and, as such, should not bother itself with flexing its muscles within the region. The reactions of Nigerian citizens to Nigeria's foreign policy, especially military intervention, 'ranged from lukewarm to hostile'.⁵³ Beyond the fact that most Nigerians have little or no confidence in their political leadership as a collective, the domestic reality of severe socio-economic and human-security challenges – particularly high unemployment and criminality, rickety infrastructure and the attendant lack of basic services, and environmental decay – have combined to create a sense of foreboding and cynicism about external financial commitments. For the average Nigerian who argues that 'charity must begin at home', external needs are obviated by Nigeria's domestic imperatives.

International public image

How does the 'Nigerian image' and its international reputation affect the country's hegemonic credentials? While scholars have suggested that a positive global image is relevant in international politics,⁵⁴ in many ways this is a highly problematic claim. For instance, it is hard to accept that any of the recognised key players today enjoy a positive image all around the world. Even the US and the key Western states do not enjoy unsullied reputations across the world – certainly not outside their circles. Yet, they remain important and influential states. This is also true for Russia, China, India, Japan, Brazil and many others.

However, a favourable international image can no doubt inspire a level of credibility and respect for a nation within the international community, while an unscrupulous image has the tendency to deny any nation the required respect among other states.⁵⁵ The global perception of a state in the international arena is often bolstered by the consistency of its behaviour and that of its people towards other states, usually in line with the prescriptions of the West. North Korea, for example, is regarded by the West as a pariah state because of the constant disregard for international norms and principles by its leaders. There is, however, nothing to suggest that the North Koreans are less respectful of the so-called global norms and principles than many of the Western governments that make a pariah of them.

Similarly, Nigeria's international image took root in the years following its emergence as a sovereign state and deepened through the decades of its political development. Nigeria's global reputation ultimately has an impact on the cost of its foreign policy and, consequently, its hegemonic credence on the continent. A good example is the recent collapse of the guest house at the popular Synagogue Church of All Nations (SCOAN) owned by TB Joshua on 12 September 2014, which killed 115 people, including 84 South Africans. Incidents such as this have the tendency to dent Nigeria's already dwindling international profile, particularly in the eyes of its immediate African neighbours.⁵⁶

Overall, Nigeria's international image as a major contributor to global peace and security has been positively projected through multilateral frameworks such as the UN, the AU and ECOWAS. To date, Nigeria's sustained involvement in peacekeeping initiatives and the promotion of democratic governance among troubled neighbours such as Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Mali since the early 1990s is notable. At the insistence of Nigeria in 1990, members of ECOWAS converged in Banjul, Gambia to form the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), the military arm of ECOWAS, in response to the conflict that engulfed Liberia between 1989 and 1996.⁵⁷ Nigeria led the initiative through its human and

financial commitments.⁵⁸ Indeed, analysts claim that ECOMOG would have been an impotent international army without the support of Nigeria.⁵⁹ This responsibility has consequently reinforced Nigeria's global reputation as a leading peace-loving nation.

Under both military and civilian governments, Nigeria has continued to remain a prominent player in peacekeeping initiatives at the international, continental and subregional levels, with contributions of commanders (see Table 2 below) exceeding that of any developing country, and a contribution of over 200 000 uniformed personnel made to UN peacekeeping operations as at 2010.⁶⁰ Nigeria is currently ranked fourth in the overall troop contribution for UN global peacekeeping missions.

It is this foreign policy character and commitment that provides the basis for treating Nigeria as a regional power and a pivotal state in Africa.⁶¹

However, the country's track record in these areas must overcome the obstinate traces of an image crisis that was heightened from 1992 to 1999 and from 2007 to date.⁶² As remarked on by Mustapha, Nigeria's global identity as a country notable for cybercrime, a poor human rights record, massive corruption, institutional and infrastructural decay, drug trafficking and terrorist insurgency results in serious damage to its reputation, which thus weakens its ability to realise formal foreign policy objectives.⁶³ Leadership ineptitude has characterised Nigeria's political scene and constituted a challenge to the credibility of any reasonable hegemonic claim. A number of examples, especially during the military era, have shown Nigeria in a bad light to the other African states that it was aspiring to influence. For instance, many of the commendable works of Babangida in the international arena were subsequently marred by the annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential election, widely acclaimed in some circles as the freest in Nigeria's election history. In recent times, Nigeria has shown poor leadership in its failure to decisively deal with the Boko Haram threat. Consequently, Nigeria continues to rank poorly in the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI; see Table 3). Similarly, in the

Table 2. Nigeria's contribution of commanders, 1960–2013.

Commander	Name of Organisation	Operation Code	Period	Location
Maj. Gen. JIU Aguiyi-Ironsi	UN	ONUC	1960–4	Congo
Brig. Gen. Ademulegun	Bilateral		1964	Tanganyika (Tanzania)
Col. M Magoro	Bilateral	HARMONY II	1979	Chad
Col. J Dongoyaro	Bilateral/ ECOWAS	HARMONY I/ECOMOG	1979–80	Chad
Maj. Gen. G Ejiga	OAU	HARMONY II	1981–2	Chad
Maj. Gen. E Unimna	UN	UNAVEM I	1991	Angola
Maj. Gen. R Kupolati	ECOWAS	ECOMOG	1992	Liberia
Maj. Gen. C Garba	UN	UNAVEM II & III	1992–5	Angola
Maj. Gen. E Opaleye	UN	UNAMIR	1993	Rwanda
Maj. Gen. I Bakut	ECOWAS	ECOMOG	1993	Liberia
Maj. Gen. A Olurin	ECOWAS	ECOMOG	1994	Liberia
Maj. Gen. J Inienger	ECOWAS	ECOMOG	1995	Liberia
Maj. Gen. S.Malu	ECOWAS	ECOMOG	1996–7	Liberia
Maj. Gen. T Shelpidi	ECOWAS	ECOMOG	1998–9	Liberia
Maj. Gen. G Mujakperuo	ECOWAS	ECOMOG	1999	Liberia
Maj. Gen. G Kpambe	ECOWAS	ECOMOG	1999–2000	Liberia
Maj. Gen. S Iliya	UN	MONUC	2003–5	DRC
Maj. Gen. JO Owonibi	UN	UNMIL	2003–5	Liberia
Maj. Gen. F Okonkwo	AU	AMIS	2005–6	Sudan
Maj. Gen. C Ihekire	AU	AMIS	2006–7	Sudan
Maj. Gen. C Obiakor	UN	UNMIL	2006–8	Liberia
Maj. Gen. MI Agwai	UN/AU	UNAMID	2007–9	Sudan
Maj. Gen. MB Obi	UN	UNMIS/UNMISS	2010–2	Sudan
Maj. Gen. A Shehu	ECOWAS	AFISMA	2012–	Mali

Source: Authors' compilation.

Country Brand Index for 2012–3, which ranks countries based on their global reputation for high-quality products, a desire to visit or study in a country and perceptions of good infrastructure, Nigeria is ranked a distant 109 out of a total of 118 countries.

For Nolte, although Nigeria could be called a deserving power because of its populous army, it cannot be regarded as a leader because of its questionable and controversial moral and political reputation.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, as our conceptualisation of regional hegemonic power demonstrates, while a reputation for good morals and democratic governance is important, these criteria have never constituted a necessary or expected requirement for regional or hegemonic leadership – otherwise, no state in the world would qualify for such a status. For instance, books and newspaper articles say much about the US' predatory foreign policies and activities, but it continues to be the most dominant and influential state the world knows.

External contexts

It is important to examine which external contexts have affected Nigeria's capacity to project its influence. We highlight two external environments that have a bearing on Nigeria's regional hegemonic prospects: membership of multilateral institutions and the question of acceptance of Nigeria's leadership by its regional neighbours.

There has been a strong belief over the years in Nigeria's confidence in multilateral frameworks, which have also provided a platform for Abuja to subtly launch its ambition of hegemony. Nigeria's reintegration into the international system, against the backdrop of Obasanjo's shuttle diplomacy, is demonstrated by its reacceptance into the Commonwealth in 1999, hosting rights and chairmanship of the Commonwealth Heads of Governments Meeting (CHOGM) in 2003, and chairmanship of the G-77 in 2000. Obasanjo sought to use these multilateral platforms to rekindle interest in Nigeria within Africa and of course in the global South. Nigeria has also represented Africa on five occasions as a non-permanent member of the UNSC, in 1966–7, 1978–9, 1994–5, 2010–1, and more recently in 2014–5. In recognition of the country's efforts towards ensuring peaceful coexistence within Africa, and on the strength of its previous record at the UN, Nigeria was elected unopposed to secure a fifth tenure on the UNSC, with a total vote of 186 out of a possible 193. This ultimately puts it in strong contention for one of the two slots for Africa in the proposed enlarged permanent membership of the UNSC.⁶⁵ According to the presidency, this is a 'glowing expression of support and encouragement for Nigeria's active participation in the promotion of peace, security and political stability in Africa and other parts of the world'.⁶⁶

In the area of continental multilateralism, Nigeria played a quintessential role (along with South Africa) in the transformation of the OAU into the AU, and in establishing NEPAD as

Table 3. Nigeria's ranking in the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI), 2010–5.

Year	Ranking
2010–1	127
2011–2	127
2012–3	115
2013–4	120
2014–5	127

Source: Global Competitiveness Index reports, 2010–5.⁶⁷

part of an African initiative to find African solutions to African problems.⁶⁸ Nigeria was also instrumental in the introduction of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) and was among the first countries to subject itself to peer review in 2007. Nigeria has always demonstrated its preference for cooperation rather than confrontation in recognition of its foreign policy principle of respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all states.

Nigeria has equally successfully elevated ECOWAS (the origin of which dates back to the Lagos Charter of 1975) to the status of a celebrated and recognised subregional organisation, as well as perhaps being the most active in Africa.⁶⁹ Through the ECOWAS framework, Nigeria has also been able to successfully use the subregional body's ECOMOG as an instrument to perpetuate its power politics within the subregion, particularly in conflicts in Côte D'Ivoire (2003–4), Guinea-Bissau (1998–9), Liberia (1990–8 and 2003) and Sierra Leone (1997–2000). Nigeria used ECOMOG 'to stamp its authority in West Africa, fester its national security and defence nests, and promote the political whims of the Nigerian military cabal, thus undermining the real object of regional peacekeeping'.⁷⁰ Nigeria's interest was primarily with enhancing its status as a

meaningful [player] in the broader community and achieved this goal by pursuing regional hegemonic strategies. To say the least, Nigeria in its sub-hegemonic capacity has capitalized on its membership in ECOWAS to extract national dividends. As evident in many of these cases, it becomes incredibly difficult to engage in any military intervention without the support from Nigeria given particularly the extensive material and financial challenges involved.⁷¹

Obasanjo today is feted in many African countries as a mediator between conflict-ridden polities and also as an election observer. He played a big role in the formation of NEPAD, and when the OAU was transmuted into the AU, Obasanjo served as its first chairperson. These roles gave Nigeria a leadership role in Africa. Apart from its role in international forums, Nigeria influences African politics, economics and academics through its human resources and intellectuals of international renown. However, by virtue of its membership of these international organisations, Nigeria is also handicapped by its inability to effectively play any dominant role without key external actors. It is thus forced to resort to negotiating through its own agendas within the broader framework of the collective goals of the organisations it belongs to.

For Nigeria to deepen its claim of regional leadership, it has to be seen to match or preferably surpass French intervention in West Africa's security concerns.⁷² To this day, France has been a major force in attempts to quell West Africa's conflicts and undermine Nigeria's influence within the subregion. With the shifting global world order, less dependency on Western intervention has been touted as a conspicuous way of showing the West that different regions have internal powers capable of solving regional problems without recourse to traditional helpers. Nigeria's military intervention in Liberia and Sierra Leone showed its capability and willingness to rise to the challenge. Despite Nigeria's laying claim to being the natural hegemon of West Africa, the country has had to contend with the francophone countries that maintain amity with France and consider Nigeria a regional bully.⁷³

This reluctance on the part of African countries to accept a fellow African nation as leader is balanced by the fact that Nigerian leaders are influential in African politics. For instance, even though West African countries are loath to accept it, Nigeria remains a major power in the region, with the most sophisticated military and the largest population. What stands in the way of Nigeria's ambition is how a hegemon or regional leader can be defined. In terms of military preponderance and economic stature, Nigeria would easily pass for a regional leader. The country's military would obviously be limited in its capabilities if it was to be deployed in all

warring countries in West Africa, but it is still superior to that of other countries in the subregion. Furthermore, Adebajo claims that Nigeria had the opportunity, at the turn of the 21st century, to project itself as a regional leader because its stumbling block, France, was withdrawing from intervening politically in its erstwhile colonies.⁷⁴ However, France today continues to be a major power in resolving West African crises. Through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and sometimes individually, France has maintained its role in West Africa, a region replete with its former colonies. The 2013 French intervention in Mali (Operation Serval) is a stark reminder of just how dependent West African countries are on France, and not on Nigeria.

The most politic thing Nigeria can do to win the cooperation of francophone West Africa and Africa at large is to show evidence of bilateral and multilateral political ambition. With French influence still lingering in West Africa, Nigeria should make no pretensions of being a lone achiever. It should support French interventions, especially when it is politically defensible to do so. The worst that could ever happen would be for Nigeria to aid and abet rogue regimes.

Regional hegemony and Nigeria's credibility crisis

The crux of this article is the contestation over regional hegemony in Africa. Nigeria's foreign policy towards Africa has over the years remained constant and demonstrated a calculated move to assert a hegemonic ambition that was thrust upon it by the vastness of its resources and cemented by the national consciousness of its ruling and political elites since independence. With the recalibration of its GDP and the confirmation that it is indeed the biggest economy in Africa, we argue that Nigeria's regional hegemonic prospects would require much more than economic superiority in order to be regarded as sufficient. As our conceptualisation of a regional hegemon shows, superior economic credentials are not the only prerequisite for asserting such a position, especially in Africa.

Although Nigeria has never officially aspired to a hegemonic role in Africa, its vast economic and military resources have historically presented a platform for it to come to the forefront of issues affecting Africa. However, in playing a leadership role in Africa, Nigeria has often been confronted by severe internal challenges – including civil strife, encrusted public venality, and ethnic and religious intolerance – which have coalesced to undermine national political stability and development. Combined, these challenges have diminished Nigeria's capacity to play a hegemonic role in Africa. There is also the matter of significant external financial commitment in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific, despite a highly impoverished citizenry. As such, Nigeria still continues to punch far below its weight notwithstanding its enormous potential.⁷⁵

We submit that Nigeria's formal international behaviour and interactions with its African partners – not its domestic challenges – should be the only determining factors in assessing its regional hegemonic status. While Nigeria meets many of the requirements for regional hegemonic status, the domestic challenges that it faces put it in a precarious position and distract its focus from any meaningful hegemonic role on the continent. We argue that although these domestic impediments do not necessarily disqualify Nigeria's supposed hegemonic claim, they do distract from its capacity to effectively project power and influence externally. For Nigeria, domestic political insurgency threatens its stability and economy while endemic corruption continues to undermine developmental activities and weaken the legitimacy of the state and its leaders. While other scholars have raised the point that domestic impediments in Nigeria disqualify it from the status of regional hegemon, we argue that these issues combine to merely detract from its capacity to lead or act optimally as a hegemon

within the region. As such, Nigeria cannot be regarded as a serious regional hegemon, notwithstanding its status as Africa's biggest economy.

Conclusion

Analysing the prospects for and constraints of Nigeria's aspiration for regional hegemonic status in Africa, this article contends that despite Nigeria's economic ascendancy in Africa, it is almost an impossible intellectual exercise to make assertions of an existing or emergent regional hegemony, particularly given the existing dysfunctional domestic and external geopolitical realities confronting the Nigerian state. Although Nigeria has acted the part of hegemon around Africa (but especially within West Africa) over the years, it has not been without contestation by countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal and, more recently, South Africa. Nigeria's dominant economy, its Afrocentric foreign policy achievements and its peacekeeping record provide compelling evidence of its willingness to play a hegemonic role on the continent. However, the rough texture of its polity coupled with a poor international image provides a fragile base for the launch of any hegemonic role. As such, although Nigeria possesses significant credentials for regional hegemonic status, it nevertheless cannot be regarded as a 'complete' hegemon since it remains hindered by internal and external challenges that limit its ability to act as a dominant or hegemonic state.

What is clear is that Nigeria is yet to fully leverage its massive material and human resources to deepen its hegemonic ambition or justify such a claim on the continent. Nevertheless, the following suggestions can increase Nigeria's capacity and legitimacy to play a hegemonic role in Africa: improving the quality of its democracy; having a long-term foreign policy strategy for its African engagements; increasing involvement in multilateral institutions; recognising and effectively calibrating hard- and soft-power instruments with the country's foreign policy; and massively investing in African diplomatic missions. Nigeria's ability to transform itself into a regional hegemon is hinged on the prioritisation of these issues.

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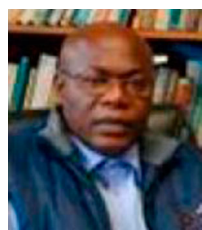
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