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# Military Diplomacy: Nigeria's Efforts at Peacekeeping Operations in West Africa, 1975–1993

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## Abstract

This article examines Nigeria's military diplomacy and peacekeeping efforts in West Africa between 1975 and 1993, a period that witnessed the country's emergence as a dominant regional security actor. Drawing on institutional, historical, and foreign policy frameworks, the article analyses Nigeria's foundational role in establishing the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975 and its subsequent leadership of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) during the Liberian civil war beginning in 1990. The article argues that Nigeria's peacekeeping posture during this period was shaped by an interplay of genuine pan-Africanist idealism, strategic regional interests, and the particular disposition of successive military administrations. It further contends that despite institutional and operational challenges, Nigeria's military diplomacy during this era laid an enduring foundation for regional security architecture in West Africa. The study contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on the motivations, mechanisms, and consequences of Nigerian hegemony in West African security governance.

Keywords: Nigeria, military diplomacy, peacekeeping, ECOWAS, ECOMOG, West Africa, regional security, Liberia

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## 1.0 Introduction

The period between 1975 and 1993 represents one of the most consequential eras in Nigeria's foreign policy history. During these nearly two decades, Nigeria transitioned from a newly oil-wealthy state seeking continental influence to a self-declared regional hegemon committed to managing security crises across West Africa. This transformation was facilitated not merely by diplomatic pronouncements but by concrete military engagement—an approach that scholars have come to describe as military diplomacy (Fawole, 2003). Military diplomacy, in this context, refers to the deployment of armed forces and defence resources as instruments of foreign policy aimed at achieving political objectives, building alliances, and stabilising regional environments (Aning, 2004).

Nigeria's trajectory during this period was shaped by a confluence of domestic and external factors. Internally, the country was governed almost exclusively by military administrations—from the Murtala Muhammed/Olusegun Obasanjo junta (1975–1979), through the brief civilian interlude of Shehu Shagari (1979–1983), and into the long military regimes of Muhammadu Buhari (1983–1985) and Ibrahim Babangida (1985–1993). Externally, the post-independence crises of West Africa, culminating in the devastating Liberian civil war of 1989–1990, provided Nigeria with both the justification and the platform for robust regional security intervention (Adebajo, 2002a).

This article traces the evolution of Nigeria's peacekeeping posture across this period, examining the institutional foundations laid by ECOWAS in 1975, the normative and political contexts that shaped Nigeria's interventionism, and the operational realities of ECOMOG from 1990 to 1993. The central argument is that Nigeria's military diplomacy in West Africa during this era was neither purely altruistic nor straightforwardly hegemonic, but rather a complex and sometimes contradictory amalgam of idealism, interest, and institutional improvisation.

# 2.0 Theoretical Framework

## 2.1 Military Diplomacy and Regional Hegemony

The concept of military diplomacy has been variously theorised in international relations scholarship. Cottey and Forster (2004) define it broadly as the peacetime use of armed forces and defence ministries as instruments of foreign policy, encompassing defence attachés, military training programmes, joint exercises, arms transfers, and participation in multilateral peacekeeping missions. In the Nigerian context, this definition requires some adaptation, since Nigeria's military engagements in West Africa during the period under review were not purely peacetime activities but operated in the grey zone between war and diplomacy.

Scholars of African international relations have employed the concept of sub-regional hegemony to analyse Nigeria's role in West Africa. Adebajo and Rashid (2004) argue that Nigeria functions as a sub-regional hegemon whose political weight, economic resources, and military capacity position it as the indispensable actor in West African security. This hegemonic role, however, has been contested. Critics such as Olonisakin (2000) caution against uncritical acceptance of Nigeria's self-presentation as a benign regional leader, pointing to evidence that domestic political calculations and the personal ambitions of military rulers have at times driven foreign policy as much as genuine concern for regional stability.

The realist tradition in international relations would explain Nigeria's peacekeeping activism primarily in terms of national interest: securing a stable regional environment conducive to trade, preventing the spillover of conflicts into Nigerian territory, and projecting national power to enhance prestige and diplomatic leverage (Waltz, 1979). Liberal institutionalists, by contrast, would emphasise the role of ECOWAS as a framework that both enabled and constrained Nigerian action, embedding its military diplomacy within a normative structure of regional cooperation (Keohane, 1984). This article draws on both traditions while remaining attentive to the specificities of the Nigerian political context.

# 3.0 Laying the Foundations

## 3.1 ECOWAS and Nigeria's Pan-Africanist Vision, 1975–1985

The establishment of the Economic Community of West African States on 28 May 1975 through the Treaty of Lagos marked a watershed moment in West African regionalism. Nigeria, under the military government of General Murtala Muhammed and subsequently General Olusegun Obasanjo, was the principal architect and financier of this initiative (Asante, 1986). Ostensibly an economic integration project, ECOWAS from its inception carried latent security dimensions that would become explicit only in the following decade.

Nigeria's motivations in founding ECOWAS were multiple. Economically, Abuja sought to create a large market that would benefit Nigerian goods and reduce dependence on the global commodity market (Bach, 1983). Politically, the Murtala-Obasanjo regime was committed to an assertive pan-Africanist foreign policy, exemplified by Nigeria's decisive

diplomatic support for the MPLA government in Angola in 1975–1976, its sustained opposition to apartheid South Africa, and its championing of African causes within the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) (Aluko, 1981). In this ideological climate, ECOWAS served as a vehicle for projecting Nigerian leadership without the overtly coercive connotations of military intervention.

The security dimension of ECOWAS was formalised through the 1978 Protocol on Non-Aggression and the 1981 Protocol on Mutual Assistance on Defence (PMAD). The PMAD, in particular, established the framework for collective military action in response to external aggression or internal armed conflicts threatening regional stability (Sesay, 1991). Although neither protocol was immediately operationalised—partly due to Francophone scepticism about Nigerian dominance and partly due to the lack of standing institutional capacity—they provided the legal architecture that Nigeria would later invoke to justify ECOMOG.

The period of the Shehu Shagari civilian administration (1979–1983) saw some continuity in Nigeria's regional security posture, though with reduced assertiveness. Shagari maintained Nigeria's financial commitments to ECOWAS and its rhetorical commitment to African liberation, most notably in sustaining economic pressure on apartheid South Africa. However, the administration was preoccupied with domestic economic difficulties stemming from the oil price collapse and was unable to translate pan-Africanist declarations into robust regional security initiatives (Gambari, 1989). The 1983 military coup that brought General Muhammadu Buhari to power introduced a more inward-looking foreign policy orientation, with economic austerity and domestic stabilisation taking precedence over regional activism.

# 4.0 Nigeria Under Babangida

## 4.1 Rekindling Regional Security Engagement, 1985–1989

The accession of General Ibrahim Babangida to power in August 1985 inaugurated a new phase of Nigerian foreign policy activism. Babangida, a consummate political operator, recognised the diplomatic utility of regional security engagement as a means of building international legitimacy for his regime at a time when its domestic credibility was contested (Abegunrin, 2003). His administration revived Nigeria's engagement within ECOWAS and invested in rebuilding the institutional capacity of the organisation.

A particularly significant development during this period was Nigeria's role in mediating the 1989 Takoradi Agreement between the warring factions in Liberia, even before the outbreak of full-scale civil war. Nigeria deployed diplomatic resources and leveraged its relationships with neighbouring states to attempt a negotiated settlement, reflecting the preference for soft military diplomacy over direct intervention that characterised the early Babangida years (Harris, 2012). This approach would be decisively overtaken by events in December 1989, when Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) launched its insurgency from Côte d'Ivoire, plunging Liberia into a catastrophic civil war.

The Liberian crisis presented Babangida's government with a dilemma. Inaction risked regional destabilisation and would undermine Nigeria's claim to regional leadership. Direct intervention, however, carried significant military, financial, and political risks. The compromise solution was the multilateral framework of ECOMOG, which allowed Nigeria to exercise decisive military leadership while cloaking its intervention in the legitimacy of collective regional action (Adebajo, 2002b).

## 4.2 ECOMOG and the Liberian Intervention, 1990–1993

The ECOWAS Monitoring Group was established by the ECOWAS Standing Mediation Committee in August 1990. Its creation was a moment of institutional improvisation rather than deliberate design: the existing ECOWAS protocols on mutual defence did not straightforwardly authorise intervention in what was constitutionally an internal conflict, and the PMAD of 1981 had never been ratified by enough member states to come into force (Olonisakin, 2000). Nigeria's legal justification for ECOMOG therefore rested on creative interpretation of ECOWAS norms, supplemented by appeals to humanitarian necessity and the absence of effective Liberian state authority.

Nigeria's military contribution to ECOMOG was overwhelming. At the peak of the operation, Nigerian troops constituted approximately 70–80 percent of ECOMOG's total force strength, and the Nigerian government bore an estimated 70 percent of the operation's costs (Adebajo, 2002a). The Nigerian contingent was commanded by Lieutenant-General Joshua Dogonyaro, subsequently replaced by General Rufus Kupolati and later General Adetutu, with each change of command reflecting both military considerations and the complex domestic politics of the Babangida regime. The force was initially deployed to enforce a ceasefire, protect civilians, and facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance. However, it rapidly became embroiled in direct combat with the NPFL, blurring the distinction between peacekeeping and peace enforcement (Iweze, 1993).

The operational challenges confronting ECOMOG were formidable. The Liberian conflict involved multiple armed factions—the NPFL under Charles Taylor, the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) loyal to President Samuel Doe, the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL) under Prince Johnson, and later the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO). Each faction pursued distinct objectives and employed shifting alliances, making ceasefire enforcement extremely difficult (Ellis, 1995). The killing of President Samuel Doe by Prince Johnson's forces in September 1990, while ECOMOG troops were present in Monrovia, was a traumatic early setback that exposed the limitations of the force's mandate and rules of engagement.

Despite these difficulties, ECOMOG achieved significant results between 1990 and 1993. It successfully established and maintained a buffer zone in Monrovia, preventing the complete takeover of the capital by the NPFL and preserving the Interim Government of National Unity installed under ECOWAS auspices (Harris, 2012). The Yamoussoukro Accords of 1991, brokered by Côte d'Ivoire with Nigerian diplomatic support, and the Cotonou Agreement of July 1993, which established a formal peace process, both represented diplomatic achievements in which Nigeria's military presence on the ground was a critical enabling factor (Adebajo, 2002b).

France's role in the Liberian crisis introduced a complicating dimension to Nigeria's military diplomacy. French support for Charles Taylor—widely reported and suspected though never officially confirmed—reflected Paris's concern about the extension of Nigerian (and Anglophone) influence into the Francophone sphere of West Africa (Mortimer, 1996). Several Francophone ECOWAS member states, including Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, and Senegal, were either openly sympathetic to the NPFL or reluctant to contribute meaningfully to ECOMOG. This Franco-Nigerian tension within ECOWAS was an important structural constraint on Nigeria's peacekeeping ambitions throughout the period.

## 4.3 Domestic Politics and the Limits of Military Diplomacy

Any assessment of Nigeria's peacekeeping efforts between 1975 and 1993 must grapple with the domestic political context within which military diplomacy was conducted. The consistent dominance of military governments over this period had profound implications for the character of Nigeria's foreign policy, including its regional security posture.

Military governance in Nigeria centralised foreign policy decision-making in the hands of the Head of State and a small circle of senior military officials and civilian technocrats. The institutional mechanisms for legislative oversight and public accountability that characterise democratic foreign policy—parliamentary debates, treaty ratification, budget scrutiny—were either absent or severely attenuated (Fawole, 2003). This concentration of authority enabled rapid decision-making and a degree of foreign policy boldness that might have been harder to sustain under democratic conditions; but it also meant that peacekeeping commitments could be made without adequate public deliberation about their costs and objectives.

The financial burden of ECOMOG was particularly revealing of this dynamic. Nigeria's commitment to the Liberian operation cost an estimated three billion US dollars by the end of 1993, at a time when the country was experiencing severe economic difficulties and the living standards of ordinary Nigerians were declining sharply (Aning, 2004). The Babangida government's ability to sustain this financial commitment was possible precisely because it was not accountable to a legislature or an electorate. Critics, including labour unions, student organisations, and pro-democracy activists, protested against the diversion of scarce resources to a foreign military adventure, but their voices were suppressed within an authoritarian political context (Nwolise, 1992).

There is also evidence that personal factors influenced Nigeria's peacekeeping posture. Babangida's close relationship with the ECOWAS Chairman and Togolese president Gnassingbé Eyadéma, and his personal investment in the success of ECOMOG as an instrument of Nigerian prestige, shaped decision-making in ways that were not always aligned with rational calculation of national interest (Sesay, 1991). The political uses of ECOMOG for regime legitimation—both domestically, where the operation was presented as evidence of Nigeria's greatness, and internationally, where it helped sustain diplomatic relationships with Western governments despite concerns about Babangida's human rights record—were integral to understanding why and how Nigeria sustained its peacekeeping commitment.

## 4.4 Sierra Leone and the Extension of Nigeria's Peacekeeping Mandate, 1991–1993

While the Liberian operation dominated Nigeria's military diplomacy during this period, the outbreak of the Sierra Leonean civil war in March 1991 added a further dimension to Nigeria's regional security engagement. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF), operating under Foday Sankoh with logistical support from Charles Taylor's NPFL, launched an insurgency from eastern Sierra Leone that rapidly threatened the survival of the Joseph Momoh government (Rashid, 2004).

Nigeria's response to the Sierra Leonean crisis was more cautious and bilateral than its Liberian intervention. Rather than organising a new multilateral ECOWAS force, Nigeria negotiated a direct bilateral defence arrangement with the Sierra Leonean government, deploying troops under the existing bilateral Military Technical Assistance Agreement. Nigerian forces—operating as part of what would later be formalised as the Nigerian Military Assistance Force—provided critical support to the Sierra Leonean Army, which was chronically under-equipped and increasingly penetrated by RUF collaborators (Olonisakin, 2000).

The simultaneity of commitments in Liberia and Sierra Leone stretched Nigeria's military resources significantly and highlighted the structural limitations of its regional security capacity. Nigeria was the only West African state with the military capability to sustain two substantial interventions simultaneously, but doing so generated logistical strain, command-and-control challenges, and growing domestic disquiet about the costs of regional hegemony (Adebajo & Rashid, 2004). These tensions would persist and intensify in the years beyond the period covered by this article.

## 4.5 Assessment: Achievements, Contradictions, and Legacy

An honest assessment of Nigeria's military diplomacy in West Africa between 1975 and 1993 must acknowledge both its genuine achievements and its significant contradictions. On the side of achievement, Nigeria's role in founding ECOWAS created the institutional framework that has, over subsequent decades, become an increasingly effective mechanism for regional integration and security cooperation. Nigeria's willingness to bear a disproportionate share of ECOMOG's financial and military burden—whatever the mixed motivations behind that willingness—prevented the complete collapse of Liberia and contributed to the eventual peace settlement.

Nigeria also helped establish, in practice if not always in theory, the norm of regional humanitarian intervention in West Africa. ECOMOG's operation in Liberia preceded the adoption of the African Union's Constitutive Act (2000) and its codification of the principle of non-indifference, and it provided a practical template for subsequent African peace operations (Aboagye, 1999). In this sense, Nigeria's military diplomacy during this period was genuinely path-breaking at the continental level.

The contradictions, however, were equally significant. Nigeria's intervention in Liberia was characterised by significant human rights violations by ECOMOG troops, including looting, summary executions, and the shelling of civilian areas (Human Rights Watch, 1993). The absence of effective accountability mechanisms—a direct consequence of the authoritarian political context in which Nigeria's military diplomacy operated—meant that these violations were inadequately investigated or prosecuted. The legitimacy that Nigeria sought to project through its peacekeeping role was therefore undermined by the conduct of its own forces.

Furthermore, Nigeria's tendency to act first and seek multilateral legitimation afterwards—improvising the legal basis for ECOMOG rather than establishing it on a firm treaty foundation—created precedents that were legally and

institutionally problematic. The creative interpretation of ECOWAS norms that justified the 1990 intervention was simultaneously an act of regional statesmanship and a potential precedent for future extra-legal interventionism by regional powers on the African continent (Mortimer, 1996).

# 5.0 Conclusion

Nigeria's military diplomacy in West Africa between 1975 and 1993 represents a complex and consequential chapter in the history of African international relations. From the institutional architecture of ECOWAS to the operational improvisations of ECOMOG, Nigeria's engagement with regional security during this period was shaped by an interplay of pan-Africanist idealism, strategic self-interest, military-regime politics, and institutional creativity. The record is one of genuine achievement shadowed by significant contradictions.

The period left an enduring institutional legacy. ECOWAS, initially conceived primarily as an economic organisation, was transformed by Nigeria's security activism into a proto-security community with growing normative and operational capacity. ECOMOG, whatever its operational shortcomings, demonstrated that African states could organise and sustain a multilateral military operation without direct Western leadership—a demonstration of agency that carried profound implications for the subsequent development of African peace and security architecture.

At the same time, the structural limitations of Nigeria's military diplomacy during this period—the absence of democratic accountability, the dependence on the personal commitments of military rulers, the chronic underfunding of institutional capacity, and the tensions with Francophone neighbours—remind us that regional hegemony without robust institutional foundations is inherently fragile. The lessons of this period remain relevant to contemporary debates about Nigeria's role in West African security governance and the future of ECOWAS as a security organisation.

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