MILITARY INSTITUTIONS AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF NIGERIAN FOREIGN POLICY, 2015–2025: A CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS ANALYSIS

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.64633/wissj.v10i7.19

Keywords

Nigerian military; Foreign-policy implementation; ECOMOG; Civil-military relations; Realism; Multinational Joint Task Force

Abstract

Research Problem: *Nigerian foreign-policy implementation has long been shaped by military institutions through regional interventions, peacekeeping operations and security partnerships. Mainstream Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), however, continues to privilege civilian decision-makers, leaving an analytical blind spot regarding the military's operational role, especially between 2015 and 2025.*

Methods/Theory: *A qualitative comparative design was employed, centred on Nigeria and drawing secondary evidence from Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad. The analysis integrates classical and structural Realism with Civil-Military Relations Theory, particularly Feaver's agency model, to examine both external security drivers and internal institutional dynamics.*

Results: *Findings show that the Nigerian military has exercised substantial autonomy in implementing foreign policy via ECOMOG deployments and Multinational Joint Task Force operations. Parallel patterns in Sahelian states confirm that military actors frequently determine the content and direction of external engagement when security threats dominate.*

Conclusion: *The military functions not merely as an executor of civilian directives but as a co-architect of foreign-policy outcomes in security-driven contexts. Conventional FPA frameworks that ignore this reality remain incomplete.*

Key Contribution to Knowledge: *The study distinguishes formal civilian formulation from practical military-dominated implementation and identifies the institutional mechanisms that sustain military influence even under democratic rule.*

Recommendation: *Scholars should expand FPA models to treat military institutions as foreign-policy actors; governments should establish joint civil-military planning committees and publish regular reports on military deployments to strengthen accountability.*

1. Introduction

Foreign Policy Analysis has traditionally emphasized civilian elites, foreign ministers and diplomatic bureaucracies as the primary actors shaping a state's foreign policy (Hudson, 2014; Smith et al., 2016). It has produced valuable lessons about decision-making in established democracies, with its liberal and

institutionalised assumptions of a civilian approach. But it has always underestimated the importance of military institutions in the implementation of foreign policy, particularly in countries where military institutions still have significant institutional autonomy or historical political influence. Indeed, a vast literature on civil-military relations in post-colonial and hybrid states demonstrates that militaries in these states can transcend their formal subordination (Huntington, 1957; Feaver, 2003; Alagappa, 2001). In these environments, the armed forces are not only executing orders but also influencing threat perceptions and operational resources, and sometimes even determining the actual nature of external engagement. While this recognition is present in the study of civil-military relations, Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) has remained largely residual or secondary in its approach to the military. Nigeria is a particularly instructive case. The Nigerian foreign-policy formulation under the civilian administrations of the country has been studied in great detail by the scholars (Abegunrin, 2003; Fawole, 2003). Much less has been done, however, to explore the processes by which military institutions interpret and sometimes redefine those policies between 2015 and 2025. Existing literature on ECOMOG and counter-terrorism coalitions documents military operations but does not often delve into the institutional independence that enables the military to give more weight to hard-security instruments than to civilian diplomacy. Despite the efforts of Abegunrin (2003), Fawole (2003) and Adebajo (2002) in outlining the general framework of Nigerian foreign-policy orientation and the military periods that preceded the Fourth Republic, there has been limited systematic analysis of the role of the military in the implementation of foreign policy, especially in a security-driven context since 2015. This study attempts to fill that void by focusing on the operational dimension of foreign-policy delivery and by combining Realism with Civil-Military Relations Theory to account for external motivations and internal institutional dynamics. The research problem could be simply put as a lack of linkage between civilian-led formulation of Nigerian foreign policy and military-dominated implementation in security-related areas. This disconnection leaves a lack of civilian oversight, sometimes a lack of alignment with the overall foreign policy goals, and an incomplete theoretical explanation in traditional Foreign Policy Analysis. The study aims to:

Examine the degree of military engagement in the making and implementation of Nigerian foreign policy on selected cases of security between 2015 and 2025.

Critically examine the shortcomings of the conventional Foreign Policy Analysis approaches in explaining military influence and intervention.

Outline the institutional, structural and strategic processes that influence the outcomes of foreign policy in Nigeria.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Framework

Foreign policy is usually described as the totality of a government's actions, words and plans in relation to the outside world (Rosenau, 1980). This definition is helpful, but it can be used in a way which reinforces the importance of formal diplomatic relations. Foreign policy in this study is considered a space of contention, where civilian and military actors compete and cooperate, and where implementation often differs from the formulation. The military is known not only as a force of defence, but also as an institutional player that can influence strategic priorities by its presence in national security councils, its control over defence diplomacy, and its production of operational facts on the ground (Huntington, 1957; Siddiqa, 2007). Based on

Huntington (1957) and Feaver (2003), civil-military relations are the formal and informal mechanisms that govern the exercise of authority by civilian principals over military agents. These mechanisms are often incomplete in a hybrid or post-military regime, and give the armed forces a significant residual autonomy in external affairs (Alagappa, 2001). Foreign Policy Analysis has been a sub-field which has traditionally focused on the individual decision-makers, the politics within the bureaucracy and pressures from within the domestic society (Hudson, 2014; Allison, 1971). The present study intentionally pushes the envelope further by conceiving military institutions as constitutive, not residual, actors in the foreign-policy process.

2.2 Empirical Review and Critical Synthesis

The concepts of the works of Allison (1971), Rosenau (1980), and Hudson (2014) continue to be strongly rooted in Western democratic settings where civilian control is established. Civil-military scholarship has provided valuable correctives, such as Huntington's (1957) model of objective control, Finer's (1962) analysis of military intervention, Janowitz's (1960) sociological portrait of the professional soldier, and Alagappa's (2001) examination of persistent military political roles in Asia. The legacy of military legacies is further emphasized by Africanist contributions, such as Luckham's (1971) study of the military in Nigeria, and Bratton and van de Walle's (1997) work on regime transitions. In the Nigerian literature, Abegunrin (2003) and Fawole (2003) have written detailed histories of foreign-policy orientation under the various regimes, but both focus mainly on the formulation and doctrine of foreign policy.

While Adebajo (2002) provides rich accounts of the activities of ECOMOG, he does not attempt to systematically theorize the institutional autonomy that allowed military leaders to design regional strategy with little civilian control. The analyses conducted after 1999 tend to focus on the restoration of civilian authority, and the operational dominance of the armed forces in external engagements for security (Badmus & Ogunmola, 2010; Tar & Mustapha, 2017). Combined, these works leave a glaring gap: the operational processes by which the Nigerian military implements and sometimes redefines foreign policy between 2015 and 2025 is not sufficiently explored. The need for frameworks that can capture military centrality in external affairs is further highlighted by parallel developments in the Sahel, where the military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have reoriented external relations. The purpose of this study is to fill that void, with focus on implementation, and using a comparative approach that puts Nigeria in the context of regional patterns of military influence.

3. Materials and Methods

This study uses a qualitative comparative design, which emphasizes interpretive depth over statistical generalisation (Yin, 2018). Nigeria is the main case, while Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad are secondary comparative cases chosen because they have a history of military political interference and of recent changes in their foreign policies due to security concerns. The selection of sources was based on explicit criteria: publication between 2000 and 2025, to ensure that the sources would provide a broad historical perspective and contemporary developments; geographic focus on Nigeria and the wider Sahel and West African region; and thematic relevance to the military influence on foreign-policy implementation, civil-military relations, or regional security architecture. The sources were mainly accessed using JSTOR, Google Scholar, and the official repositories of

ECOWAS, the African Union, and the United Nations.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data according to Braun and Clarke (2006). The codes were inductively developed from the research questions and were iteratively refined. The first codes were institutional autonomy, securitisation of diplomacy, gaps in civilian oversight and operational override. These codes were then grouped into higher-order themes that were directly linked to the three research objectives. The code operational override, for instance, was used when documentary evidence indicated that military deployments were undertaken with little or late civilian authorisation, and thus the theme was used to inform the assessment of the extent of military involvement (Objective 1).

To overcome the shortcomings of relying on secondary data, triangulation was used across peer-reviewed scholarship, policy reports and historical documents. The lack of elite interviews limits the ability to gain access to private decision-making processes, but the variety of published sources allows for strong pattern identification and cross-case comparison.

Table 1. Summary of Secondary Data Sources

Source Type	Examples	No. of Sources	Contribution to Analysis
Peer-reviewed journal articles	Adebajo (2002); Tar & Mustapha (2017)	15	Empirical evidence on ECOMOG and MNJTF operations
Scholarly books	Luckham (1971); Huntington (1957); Feaver (2003)	8	Theoretical and historical context for civil-military dynamics
Policy reports	ECOWAS reports; UN documents; AU communiqués	5	Official perspectives on interventions and regional security
Historical documents	Archival records on Nigerian military rule	3	Institutional dynamics during military eras

4. Theoretical Framework

The analysis is based on two theories: Realism and Civil-Military Relations Theory. Both classical realism (Morgenthau, 1948) and structural realism (Waltz, 1979) assume an anarchic international system in which states seek survival and relative power. The most important currency of that system is military capability, and institutions that command organised force are thus in a privileged position in the design and implementation of external policy. Realism thus provides a straightforward account of why security-focused foreign-policy fields in Nigeria have been dominated by military than purely diplomatic tools. The domestic side of the equation is covered by Civil-Military Relations Theory, especially Feaver's (2003) agency model.

In this context, civilians are principals and the military is an agent whose loyalty rests on the price of surveillance and the severity of the penalty for disobedience. The agent has a high degree of autonomy in contexts of low monitoring capacity, high military prestige, and persistent security threats, as has been the case in Nigeria for much of the time under review. Feaver's model thus explains how

internal institutional conditions allow military actors to influence implementation even when there is a formal constitutional assertion of civilian supremacy. The key to the uniqueness of the present application is the conscious blending of the two traditions. Realism sheds light on the external incentives to military engagement, while Civil-Military Relations Theory accounts for the domestic institutions that enable military engagement and persistence. Previous Nigerian research has generally been based on a single lens or the other, with few using both lenses to offer a multilevel explanation of foreign-policy implementation.

Furthermore, the study goes beyond Feaver's original scope of domestic policy and shows how the agency theory can be applied to the study of external policy domains. It also challenges the state-centrism of Realism, which fails to address intra-state institutional competition, an issue directly addressed by the civil-military lens. The integrated framework is, therefore, the main theoretical contribution of the study, providing a multilevel analytical tool that can capture the systemic drivers and institutional mechanisms of military influence on foreign-policy implementation in hybrid African regimes.

5. Discussion of Findings

5.1 Extent of Military Involvement (Objective 1)

The Nigerian military has shown itself to be very active in the implementation of foreign policy in security fields, as evidenced by empirical evidence. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, military commanders determined the composition of forces, the rules of engagement and exit strategies, with little real-time civilian guidance (Adebajo, 2002). The Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram (MJTF) has also transferred operational initiative to the military, with kinetic operations taking precedence over parallel diplomatic efforts more recently, especially if Nigerian troops are in control of the force (Tar & Mustapha, 2017).

This trend has continued from 2015 to 2025. The Nigerian contingents in the Multinational Joint Task Force have enjoyed a high degree of freedom in setting the tempo, selecting targets and coordinating with other countries. The practical content of the engagements has been determined by military planning staffs, and these operations have, in general, been endorsed by civilian authorities after they have taken place. This leads to an implementation that is sometimes at odds with formal policy statements. The pattern is reinforced by comparative evidence from the Sahel. In Mali (2020-2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023), military governments have expelled French troops, ended Western security cooperation, co-founded the Alliance of Sahel States and rejected ECOWAS decisions and actions, which are made and implemented almost entirely by military governments. In Chad, the continued military centrality of the Déby government is another example of the pragmatic approach of military leadership to regional security. The cases that follow show that in times when security concerns are paramount in the external agenda, military institutions often become the main actors and, in fact, are the de facto creators of foreign policy.

5.2 Limitations of Traditional FPA (Objective 2)

The results reveal some of the major weaknesses of traditional Foreign Policy Analysis models. Theories of civilian supremacy and bureaucratic rationality (Hudson, 2014; Smith et al., 2016) have difficulty in accounting for contexts where military actors are creating the operational facts that civilian diplomacy must then accommodate. The bureaucratic-politics model (Allison, 1971) can be extended to incorporate the military as a strong actor, but even this

extension is under-theorised in the context of hybrid regimes. Mainstream Foreign Policy Analysis has been unable to account for the influence of the military in a theory because it has focused on Western democratic models. The Nigerian and Sahelian cases are not just about the military's status as a strong bureaucratic force in the mix. Instead, the military frequently works in a way that is more autonomous than what classical models assume, and is more distinct from the inter-agency bargaining that is assumed by those models. The translation of these goals into concrete external action is often delegated to military institutions, the organisational culture, threat assessments and the control of resources of which determine the final outcome.

5.3 Institutional Mechanisms (Objective 3)

Military influence is maintained by three interlocking mechanisms.

First, the autonomy of the defence and security sector enables operational decisions to be made with little or no contemporary civilian oversight.

Second, securitisation of foreign-policy issues is defined in a manner that gives greater weight to military solutions and deems diplomatic solutions less viable.

Third, historical prestige and legacy of political capital gained during previous eras of direct military rule remain as informal power even in the presence of formal democratic constitutions. These mechanisms create a lasting framework for military-led implementation beyond the formal change of government. These mechanisms are reinforcing each other. Security threat levels rise and the political costs of restraining the military grow, and the military's proven operational effectiveness strengthens public and elite notions of its indispensability. The outcome is a self-reinforcing cycle where civilian oversight is formally present but effectively restricted in the security arena.

5.4 Theoretical Integration and Comparative Synthesis

As expected in an anarchic system, the military dominates ECOMOG and Multinational Joint Task Force operations, which are in line with Realist theory that the security maximisation drives state behaviour (Waltz, 1979). At the same time, the institutional autonomy seen in Nigeria is consistent with Feaver's agency theory, which holds that the higher the monitoring costs and the higher the military's prestige, the more discretion the agent will have. The multilevel pattern observed in the cases is the result of external security incentives and internal agency slack.

Table 2. Comparative Dimensions of Military Influence

Country	Nature of Military Influence	Foreign-Policy Outcomes	Theoretical Insight
Nigeria	Institutional autonomy; operational control	Security-driven alliances; ECOMOG; MNJTF	Realism + Civil-Military Relations
Mali	Direct rule by junta	Expulsion of French forces; Russian partnership; AES	Realism (power maximisation)
Burkina Faso	Direct rule by junta	Expulsion of French troops; AES membership	Realism + Nationalism
Niger	Direct rule by junta	End of Western cooperation;	Realism (sovereignty)

		AES membership	
Chad	Pragmatic military centrality	Regional security role; regime stability	Civil-Military Relations

The comparative table highlights similarities and differences. In all five, military institutions have played a decisive role in external posture in situations where security concerns dominate. The Nigerian approach to institutional autonomy in the context of formal civilian government is analytically different from direct junta rule in the Sahel, but it does yield similar prioritisation of hard-security instruments. The discovery has implications for democratic governance, as continued military control over foreign-policy implementation can marginalize civilian diplomacy, diminish transparency and even undermine the legitimacy of external engagements that are not widely owned by the political process.

6. Conclusion

The study has considered the role of the military institutions in the implementation of Nigerian foreign policy from 2015 to 2025. The evidence shows that the Nigerian military is not just a subordinate instrument of the civilian government but often a key player in the substance and implementation of the external policy, particularly in security-related areas. Traditional Foreign Policy Analysis models based on the civilian primacy approach are still not adequate for capturing this reality. The analysis has demonstrated the interaction between external security incentives and internal institutional autonomy to generate military-dominated implementation, by combining Realism and Civil-Military Relations Theory. The comparison also shows that Nigeria's case is part of a broader regional trend, where military actors wield a dominant influence on foreign policy outcomes in the presence of existential or high-priority security threats.

The study has the following limitations: The study depends on secondary sources of data and the focus of the study is limited to Nigeria. These constraints restrict access to private decision-making processes, and warn against generalisation beyond the West African and Sahelian settings studied. Future research should include elite interviews and systematically compare Nigeria with more consolidated civilian control states like Ghana, Kenya and South Africa to isolate the impact of different civil-military configurations on foreign-policy implementation.

7. Recommendations

i. Expand FPA models: Scholars should revise existing Foreign Policy Analysis frameworks to incorporate military institutions explicitly as foreign-policy actors. Development of a typology of military influence in implementation would constitute a concrete step toward more inclusive theory.

ii. Strengthen civilian oversight: Governments should establish permanent joint civil-military committees for foreign-policy planning, equipped with clear protocols governing military deployment and diplomatic coordination.

iii. Promote transparency: States should publish regular, publicly accessible reports on military deployments and the foreign-policy objectives those deployments serve, thereby enhancing accountability and informed public debate.

iv. Encourage comparative research: Future studies should systematically compare Nigeria with Ghana, Kenya and South Africa to identify how different civil-

military configurations affect the balance between military and civilian contributions to foreign-policy implementation.

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