NIGERIA'S ROLE IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS: CONTRIBUTIONS, COSTS AND THE LIMITS OF AFROCENTRIC MULTILATERALISM

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Abstract

Research Problem: *Nigeria has invested heavily in international organisations since 1960, yet its influence within them has been uneven and is now declining. Existing studies rarely weigh these contributions against their costs and returns across organisations and over time.*
Methods/Theory: *The study adopts a qualitative historical-analytical case study design, using documentary analysis of treaties, United Nations deployment statistics, official communiqués and peer-reviewed scholarship covering 1960 to 2025. It integrates national role conception theory with the literature on regional power and leadership.*
Results: *An Afrocentric role conception has consistently outrun Nigeria's domestic capacity. Contributions include five Security Council terms, two General Assembly presidencies, leadership in founding ECOWAS and transforming the OAU into the AU, and the largest share of ECOWAS financing. However, Nigeria's UN peacekeeping contribution fell from fourth globally in 2010 to 41st in 2025, it carries significant ECOWAS levy arrears, and its 2023 leadership could not prevent the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from ECOWAS.*
Conclusion: *Nigeria's influence now depends less on the scale of its commitments than on their selectivity, costing and coordination.*
Key Contribution to Knowledge: *The study provides an integrated cost–return assessment across four organisations, a four-phase periodisation of Nigerian multilateralism, and a Role–Capacity–Followership framework explaining how role conceptions outrun capacity.*
Recommendation: *Nigeria should report contributions and arrears annually to the National Assembly, clear ECOWAS arrears conditionally, offer specialised peacekeeping capabilities, preserve cooperation with Sahel states, consult francophone partners, and prioritise AfCFTA implementation.*

1. Introduction

International organisations matter disproportionately to states that are too large to be ignored in their regions but too weak to shape global outcomes alone. For such states, multilateral bodies provide platforms for agenda setting, coalition building and status recognition, as well as rules that constrain stronger powers (Abbott & Snidal, 1998; Keohane, 1984). Nigeria, Africa's most populous country with an estimated 237.5 million people in 2025 (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2025), is a paradigmatic case. Since its admission to the United Nations (UN) on 7 October 1960, successive governments have treated international organisations as the principal instruments of an Afrocentric foreign policy (Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). Nigeria was a founding member of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963, the leading promoter of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975, a principal architect of the African Union (AU), and for decades one of the largest contributors of troops to UN and regional peace operations (Adebajo & Mustapha, 2008; Hamman & Omojuwa, 2013).

The scholarly literature on this record falls into three broad strands. A diplomatic-historical strand documents Nigeria's leadership and sacrifices, often in celebratory terms (Hamman & Omojuwa, 2013; Metz, 1992). A second strand debates whether Nigeria is, or can become, a regional hegemon, and generally concludes that its material preponderance is not matched by legitimacy or effective influence (Aleyomi, 2022; Bach, 2007; Ogunnubi, 2017; Warner, 2017). A third strand examines Nigeria's conduct within particular organisations, such as its campaign for a permanent Security Council seat (Adeniji, 2005; Ade-Ibijola, 2015), its leadership of ECOWAS peace operations (Adebajo, 2002; Olonisakin, 2000) or its role in ECOWAS politics more generally (Oshewolo, Azeez, et al., 2024). Each strand is valuable, but none systematically weighs what Nigeria has contributed to international organisations against what it has gained and lost, across several organisations and over the full post-independence period. The hegemony debate, moreover, tends to classify Nigeria rather than explain the mechanism through which its leadership claims and its actual influence diverge.

This gap has become more consequential because recent developments challenge the familiar narrative. Nigeria's contribution to UN peacekeeping has collapsed since the mid-2010s (Akinola, 2024; United Nations Peacekeeping, 2025). Under Nigerian chairmanship, ECOWAS failed to reverse the 2023 coup in Niger, and Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger left the Community in January 2025 (ECOWAS Commission, 2025). At the same time, Nigeria has expanded its engagement with economic platforms such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and BRICS (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil, 2025; United Nations Economic Commission for Africa [UNECA], 2020). These developments have not yet been integrated into a single explanatory account.

The research problem addressed by this study is therefore the widening gap between Nigeria's sustained, costly investment in international organisations and its uneven and declining influence within them, a gap that existing scholarship describes but does not adequately explain. The study pursues three objectives: (a) to identify the roles Nigeria has performed in the UN, the OAU/AU, ECOWAS, the Commonwealth and selected economic organisations between 1960 and 2025; (b) to assess the benefits and costs this engagement has produced; and (c) to explain the gap between Nigeria's multilateral ambitions and its actual influence, and to identify adjustments that would narrow it.

The central argument is that Nigeria's multilateral behaviour has been driven by an expansive Afrocentric role conception that its material size initially made credible, but that weak domestic governance, insecurity and fiscal strain have progressively undermined. The study makes three contributions. Empirically, it provides an integrated, data-informed assessment of roles, returns and costs across four organisations and a set of economic platforms from 1960 to 2025, including the developments of 2023 to 2025. Conceptually, it proposes a four-phase periodisation of Nigerian multilateralism. Theoretically, it integrates national role conception theory with the literature on regional power and leadership into a Role–Capacity–Followership framework that specifies how role conceptions come to outrun capacity. The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature; Section 3 sets out the materials and methods; Section 4 presents the theoretical framework; Section 5 presents the results; Section 6 discusses the findings; and Section 7 concludes with recommendations and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualising Multilateralism and International Organisations

Ruggie (1992) defines multilateralism not simply as cooperation among three or more states but as an institutional form that coordinates relations on the basis of generalised principles of conduct, indivisibility and diffuse reciprocity. International organisations are the most formalised expression of this form. Liberal institutionalists explain their persistence by the functions they perform: reducing transaction costs, providing information and making commitments credible (Keohane, 1984). Abbott and Snidal (1998) add that states act through formal organisations because centralisation and a degree of independence allow organisations to pool resources, act as neutral arbiters and confer legitimacy on collective action. Realists are more sceptical. Mearsheimer (1994) argues that institutions largely reflect the distribution of power and have little independent effect on state behaviour.

These debates are useful but were developed mainly with great powers and Western institutions in mind. They say comparatively little about a different situation: that of a regional leader which helps create organisations, finances a disproportionate share of their costs and supplies much of their operational capacity, while being materially weaker than the global powers. For such a state, the functional benefits stressed by liberal institutionalism are only part of the story; organisations are also arenas in which leadership is claimed, performed and contested. Equally, the realist expectation that institutions mirror power does not explain why a state such as Nigeria continues to invest heavily in organisations whose returns to it are uncertain. This study therefore treats international organisations as arenas for role performance as well as instruments of interest, an approach that requires the role-theoretical and regional-power literatures reviewed below.

2.2 Nigeria's Role Conceptions and Foreign Policy

A substantial body of work describes the Afrocentric orientation of Nigerian foreign policy: the doctrine that Africa is its "centrepiece", its support for liberation movements and its self-image as West Africa's "big brother" (Adebajo & Mustapha, 2008; Metz, 1992). Adebajo and Mustapha's (2008) edited volume, Gulliver's Troubles, remains the most comprehensive account of Nigeria's foreign policy after the Cold War. Its metaphor of a giant constrained by many small ties captures the external and domestic limits on

Nigerian action. Oshewolo and Fayomi (2021) trace continuity, change and contradiction in Nigerian foreign policy across administrations, while Oshewolo (2019) maps the debate between realist defenders of the Afrocentric policy and critics who question whether it serves Nigeria's interests, concluding that the policy should be retained but reformed.

This literature is strong on describing the content and contradictions of Nigeria's foreign policy doctrine, but it has two limitations relevant to this study. First, it rarely uses role theory explicitly, so the persistence of the Afrocentric orientation is described rather than theorised. Second, it tends to treat the doctrine as a given and to assess it normatively, as good or bad policy, rather than asking how its implementation changes as the resources available to sustain it change. The question of why Nigeria continued to perform an expansive leadership role even as its capacity to do so declined is therefore left largely unanswered.

2.3 Regional Power, Hegemony and Leadership

The comparative literature on regional powers provides more analytical leverage. Nolte (2010) distinguishes between a state's claim to leadership, its material capabilities, its actual influence and its acceptance by others. Destradi (2010) differentiates imperial, hegemonic and leadership strategies and insists that leadership depends on followers who share, or can be persuaded to share, the leader's goals. Prys (2010) identifies an "achievement–expectations gap": regional powers often fail to provide the public goods, such as order and stability, that theories of hegemony expect of them, and she proposes a typology distinguishing hegemony, domination and detachment.

Applied to Nigeria, this literature has produced a broadly sceptical consensus. Bach (2007) characterises Nigeria's position in West Africa as "dominance without power": structural preponderance that does not translate into the capacity to shape regional outcomes. Warner (2017) argues that Nigeria exhibits "illusory hegemony", possessing the realist attributes of power but lacking the liberal legitimacy that sustains followership, a gap exposed by the Boko Haram insurgency. Ogunnubi (2017) finds that hegemonic claims in Africa amount largely to rhetoric and that hegemonic stability theory has limited explanatory value at the regional level, while Aleyomi (2022), comparing Nigeria and South Africa, attributes their limited influence to material capability unaccompanied by legitimacy and to domestic crises.

These studies sharpen the diagnosis but leave three issues open. First, much of the debate is classificatory, asking whether Nigeria is a hegemon, rather than processual, asking how and through what mechanisms its leadership claims and its influence diverge over time. Second, most analyses focus on security and on a single regional arena, and seldom trace Nigeria's behaviour across global, continental and sub-regional organisations simultaneously. Third, although several authors point to domestic weaknesses, few theorise domestic politics as an active constraint, for example through legislative veto players, as two-level game analysis would suggest (Putnam, 1988).

2.4 Empirical Studies of Nigeria in International Organisations

Empirical studies of Nigeria's conduct in specific organisations are numerous. On the UN, Adeniji (2005) and Ade-Ibijola (2015) assess Nigeria's bid for a permanent Security Council seat and conclude that domestic realities weaken its claim, while Oshewolo, Nwozor, et al. (2021) show how Nigeria has used the UN instrumentally in pursuit of regional leadership. Akinola (2024) documents Nigeria's declining role as Africa's

peacekeeper at the UN. On ECOWAS, Olonisakin (2000) and Adebajo (2002) provide authoritative accounts of the ECOMOG interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Hartmann (2017) analyses the resolution of The Gambia's 2016–2017 crisis, and Oshewolo, Azeez, et al. (2024) assess Nigeria's contributions, dividends and setbacks in ECOWAS politics. On the AU and the Commonwealth, Iliffe (2011), Uhomoibhi (2008) and Alli (2010) examine the Obasanjo administration's use of multilateral forums to restore Nigeria's standing after military rule, while Human Rights Watch (2006) and Assanvo et al. (2016) document Nigerian contributions to AU-mandated operations. Hamman and Omojuwa (2013) and Dauda et al. (2017) survey Nigeria's peacekeeping record and its costs.

Taken together, these studies establish the main facts of Nigeria's multilateral engagement, but they share three limitations. They are organisation-specific, so patterns that become visible only when organisations are compared, such as the uneven way in which Nigeria's commitments contract when resources decline, are missed. Many are period-bound, ending before the sharp fall in UN deployments after 2015 or before the ECOWAS crisis of 2023 to 2025. And benefits and costs are more often asserted than systematically assembled, with limited use of available quantitative data on deployments and financing.

2.5 Research Gap

While Adebajo and Mustapha (2008) provide a comprehensive overview of Nigeria's foreign policy after the Cold War, and Warner (2017) applies the concept of illusory hegemony to Nigeria's regional ambitions, these studies do not systematically assess the benefits and costs of Nigeria's multilateral engagement across the UN, OAU/AU, ECOWAS and the Commonwealth over the period 1960 to 2025. Despite extensive literature on Nigeria's foreign policy and its role in international organisations, there is limited systematic analysis that weighs the contributions, costs and returns of this engagement across multiple organisations over time. Existing studies often focus on a single organisation or a single period, without an integrated assessment, and the hegemony debate classifies Nigeria without specifying the mechanisms through which its role conception and its influence diverge. This study fills that gap by (a) assembling an integrated, longitudinal assessment of Nigeria's roles, returns and costs across four organisations and selected economic platforms, including the developments of 2023 to 2025, and (b) developing and applying a Role–Capacity–Followership framework that explains the divergence.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative, historical-analytical case study design. Nigeria is treated as a single, information-rich case of a regional power engaged in multiple international organisations, and its engagement is traced longitudinally from independence in 1960 to 2025. A historical-analytical design is appropriate because the research objectives concern change over time in roles, resources and outcomes, and because the explanatory claim, that role conceptions outrun capacity, can only be assessed by observing how commitments evolve as capacity changes.

3.2 Source Selection Criteria

Sources were selected according to four explicit criteria. Temporal scope: materials addressing the period from 1960 to 2025. Geographic and institutional focus: materials concerning Nigeria's engagement with the UN, the OAU/AU, ECOWAS, the Commonwealth and selected economic organisations (OPEC,

the D-8, the WTO, the AfDB, the AfCFTA and BRICS). Thematic relevance: materials dealing with Nigeria's diplomatic, military or financial commitments to these organisations, the returns from them, or the theoretical concepts used in the analysis (multilateralism, role conception, regional power and leadership). Credibility: peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, reports of established research institutions, primary legal and official documents, and reputable news reports for recent events. Undergraduate project repositories, unattributed web content and opinion pieces without supporting evidence were excluded.

3.3 Search Strategy and Selection Process

Literature was identified through searches of Google Scholar and publisher platforms (SAGE, Taylor & Francis, Oxford Academic, Wiley and JSTOR), and primary data through the websites of the UN, UN Peacekeeping, the AU, the ECOWAS Commission, UNECA, the WTO, the AfDB and Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Search terms combined "Nigeria" with "foreign policy", "Afrocentric", "multilateral", "United Nations", "Security Council", "peacekeeping", "ECOWAS", "ECOMOG", "African Union", "Commonwealth", "hegemony", "regional power" and "role conception". Retrieved materials were screened first by title and abstract and then by full text against the criteria in Section 3.2. Every bibliographic detail and every statistic used was verified against the publisher's or issuing institution's own record. The final corpus comprises 61 sources, summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Data Sources

Source type	Examples	Number	Contribution to analysis
Primary legal and official documents	OAU Charter (1963); Revised ECOWAS Treaty (1993); Constitutive Act of the AU (2000); Ezulwini Consensus (2005); UN General Assembly resolution 64/48	5	Legal and institutional frameworks; Nigeria's formal obligations and positions
Official statistics and institutional releases	UN Peacekeeping contribution rankings (2010, 2015, 2025); UN Security Council and General Assembly records; ECOWAS Commission, WTO, AfDB, UNECA, UNFPA and Brazilian government releases; Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs	17	Quantitative data on deployments and population; dates of membership, offices, ratifications and withdrawals
Peer-reviewed articles	Holsti (1970); Ruggie (1992); Nolte (2010); Destradi (2010); Prys (2010); Warner (2017); Akinola (2024); Oshewolo, Azeez, et al. (2024)	22	Theoretical foundations; empirical evidence on Nigeria's conduct in specific organisations
Scholarly books and chapters	Keohane (1984); Olonisakin (2000); Adebajo (2002); Adebajo & Mustapha (2008); Iliffe (2011); Harnisch et al. (2011)	11	Historical and theoretical context; detailed case evidence on ECOMOG, the AU and the Commonwealth

Source type	Examples	Number	Contribution to analysis
Research institution reports and news reports	Human Rights Watch (2006); Assanvo et al. (2016); Stefanelli (2023); Akinkuotu (2023); News Agency of Nigeria (2020)	6	Evidence on AU operations, ECOWAS financing and the 2023 Niger crisis
Total		61	

Note. Counts refer to the entries in the reference list.

3.4 Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in four steps. First, the evidence for each organisation was coded against the four dimensions of the theoretical framework presented in Section 4: roles claimed or performed, resources committed, returns obtained, and acceptance or resistance encountered. Second, quantitative indicators available from primary sources, principally UN peacekeeping contributions and ECOWAS Community Levy payments, were compiled to provide a consistent measure of capacity and commitment over time. Third, the coded evidence was arranged chronologically, and breaks in the pattern of engagement were used to derive, inductively, a periodisation of Nigerian multilateralism. Fourth, findings were compared across organisations to identify recurring mechanisms, and claims were triangulated across primary and secondary sources wherever possible.

3.5 Limitations

The study has two principal limitations. Comprehensive official data on Nigeria's financial outlays for peace operations and on its assessed contributions to all organisations are not publicly available, so cost assessments rely on the best available published figures and are indicative rather than exhaustive. The study also relies on documentary evidence and does not include interviews with policymakers, which would allow the motivations behind particular commitments to be examined more directly.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 National Role Conception Theory

National role conception theory originates in Holsti's (1970) seminal article, which imported the concept of role from sociology and social psychology into foreign policy analysis. Holsti defined national role conceptions as policymakers' own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions their state should perform in the international system. Drawing on official foreign policy statements from a large sample of governments, he derived a typology of role conceptions that includes "regional leader", "regional protector", "liberation supporter", "mediator-integrator" and "bridge". The approach was developed further in the 1980s (Walker, 1987) and revived in the 2000s, when scholars extended it to examine role contestation within states, role conflict and the interaction between a state's self-conception and the expectations of others (Harnisch et al., 2011).

The theory rests on three core assumptions: that foreign policy behaviour is shaped by decision makers' conceptions of their state's proper role, not only by material interests; that role conceptions are relatively stable because they are rooted in national history, identity and elite socialisation; and that states seek to enact their role conceptions consistently across issue areas. Applied to Nigeria, the theory helps explain why successive governments, military and civilian, have sustained costly multilateral commitments whose material returns were

doubtful: such commitments affirm an identity as Africa's leader and protector as well as serving an interest.

The theory has well-known limitations. It is elite-centred and can neglect the structural and material conditions that enable or constrain role performance. It tends to assume a coherent national role, underplaying domestic contestation. And it says relatively little about how others respond to a state's role claims. This study addresses the first limitation by systematically examining the gap between role conception and domestic capacity, the second by treating domestic institutions, such as the National Assembly, as potential veto players, and the third by drawing on the regional power literature on followership.

4.2 Regional Power, Hegemony and Leadership

The literature on regional powers emerged in the 2000s as scholars sought to understand the growing influence of states such as Brazil, India, South Africa and Nigeria in a more decentred international order. Its key proponents include Nolte (2010), who specified the dimensions along which regional powers can be compared; Destradi (2010), who distinguished imperial, hegemonic and leadership strategies; and Prys (2010), who highlighted the gap between what regional powers are expected to provide and what they deliver. Warner (2017) applied these insights to Nigeria through the concept of illusory hegemony. The core assumptions of this literature are that power resources do not automatically translate into influence, that regional leadership requires acceptance by neighbours, and that the strategies regional powers adopt shape the responses they elicit.

This literature, too, has limitations. Despite its emphasis on acceptance, it remains heavily oriented towards material capabilities as the starting point of analysis. Its typologies can encourage classification at the expense of explaining change over time. And it has paid limited attention to international organisations as distinct arenas in which leadership is exercised through institutional finance, office holding and agenda setting rather than through direct bilateral pressure. This study addresses these limitations by analysing legitimacy and followership alongside material capacity, by tracing change across four historical phases, and by focusing specifically on institutional arenas.

4.3 An Integrated Role–Capacity–Followership Framework

While national role conception theory explains why Nigeria has sustained costly multilateral commitments even when their material returns were doubtful, and the literature on regional powers distinguishes between the possession of power resources and the capacity to translate them into influence, neither alone accounts for the pattern observed in Nigeria's case. This study integrates them into a Role–Capacity–Followership (RCF) framework, which has not been developed in the existing literature on Nigeria. The framework comprises three linked propositions:

Role persistence: Because role conceptions are rooted in identity and elite socialisation, they change more slowly than the resources needed to sustain them. Commitments that express the role are therefore maintained even when their returns decline.

Capacity constraint: When domestic capacity falls, commitments contract, but unevenly. Commitments in arenas closest to the core of the role conception (the immediate region) are protected longest, while those in more distant arenas (global peacekeeping) are cut first.

Followership condition: Leadership claims produce outcomes only when they are accepted by other member states and by

domestic veto players. Material preponderance and formal office cannot substitute for this acceptance.

Table 2 sets out the dimensions and indicators used to apply the framework.

Table 2

Dimensions and Indicators of the Role–Capacity–Followership Framework

Dimension	Guiding question	Indicators used in this study
Role	What roles does Nigeria claim or perform?	Official doctrine and statements; leadership offices held; initiatives launched
Capacity (resources committed)	What does Nigeria commit to sustain these roles?	Troop deployments; assessed contributions and levy payments; diplomatic investment
Returns	What does Nigeria obtain in return?	Material returns (reimbursements, trade, debt relief); positional returns (offices); reputational returns
Followership	Are Nigeria's leadership claims accepted?	Support or resistance from member states; domestic legislative and public support; outcomes of Nigerian-led initiatives

4.4 Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to theory by integrating national role conception theory with the literature on regional power and leadership to analyse the gap between Nigeria's multilateral ambitions and its actual influence, and by providing empirical evidence on the mechanisms through which role conceptions outrun domestic capacity. In particular, the capacity constraint and followership propositions specify, respectively, the uneven sequence in which commitments contract and the role of domestic veto players, two elements that existing applications of either theory to Nigeria have not made explicit.

5. Results and Presentation of Data

5.1 Phases of Nigeria's Multilateral Engagement, 1960–2025

The chronological analysis of the evidence reveals four distinct phases in Nigeria's multilateral engagement, summarised in Table 3. The phases differ in the resources available to sustain Nigeria's role conception and in the principal arenas in which that role was performed.

Table 3

Phases of Nigeria's Multilateral Engagement, 1960–2025

Phase	Defining features	Illustrative evidence
1. Formative idealism (1960–1970)	Principles of non-alignment, African unity and anti-colonialism set; limited resources; pro-Western tilt in practice	Admission to the UN (1960); founding OAU membership (1963); early UN peacekeeping in the Congo; civil war reinforces OAU sovereignty norms
2. Resource-backed activism (1970–1998)	Oil revenues finance an assertive Afrocentric role; regional institution building and intervention	OPEC membership (1971); Treaty of Lagos creating ECOWAS (1975); support for liberation movements; ECOMOG in Liberia and Sierra Leone
3. Restorative multilateralism (1999–2010)	Return to civilian rule; multilateral forums used to restore international standing	Commonwealth readmission; AU transition and chairmanship; NEPAD; Paris Club debt relief (2005); peak UN peacekeeping contributions
4. Constrained leadership (2010–2025)	Domestic insurgency and fiscal strain constrain commitments; leadership contested	UN peacekeeping falls from 4th to 41st; ECOWAS levy arrears; Niger crisis and exit of Sahel states; shift towards economic platforms

Note. Phase boundaries are approximate and derived inductively from the evidence presented in Sections 5.2 to 5.6.

In the first phase, Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa set out the principles that would guide Nigerian foreign policy: non-alignment, respect for sovereignty, African unity through functional cooperation and opposition to colonialism and racial discrimination (Adebajo & Mustapha, 2008). In practice the First Republic leaned towards the West, abrogating an Anglo-Nigerian defence agreement in 1962 only after domestic opposition (Metz, 1992). The civil war of 1967 to 1970 reinforced Nigeria's attachment to OAU norms of sovereignty and territorial integrity. In the second phase, oil revenues enabled a more assertive policy: Nigeria joined OPEC in 1971, led the creation of ECOWAS, recognised the MPLA government in Angola in 1975, funded liberation movements and was treated as a "frontline state" against apartheid (Metz, 1992). The third and fourth phases are examined in detail below.

5.2 Nigeria and the United Nations

5.2.1 Representation and Leadership

Nigeria has served five two-year terms as an elected member of the Security Council, in 1966–1967, 1978–1979, 1994–1995, 2010–2011 and 2014–2015 (United Nations Security Council, n.d.). Two Nigerians have presided over the General Assembly: Joseph Garba at its 44th session in 1989 (Metz, 1992) and Tijjani Muhammad-Bande at its 74th session in 2019 (United Nations General Assembly, 2019). Adebayo Adedeji led the UN Economic Commission for Africa from 1975 to 1991 (Metz, 1992), and Amina J. Mohammed, appointed the Secretary-General's Special Adviser on Post-2015 Development Planning in 2012, has served as Deputy Secretary-General since 2017 (United Nations, n.d.). Nigeria has also chaired the General Assembly's Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C-34) continuously since 1972 and was elected for the 54th time in February 2026 (Dada, 2026).

5.2.2 Peacekeeping: From Leading Contributor to Marginal Participant

Nigeria deployed troops to UN operations from its first year of independence, including the UN Operation in the Congo (1960–1964), the UN Security Force in West New Guinea (1962–1963), the UN India-Pakistan Observation Mission (1965–1966) and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon from 1978 (Hamman & Omojuwa, 2013; Metz, 1992). By the late 2000s it was among the world's largest troop contributors. Table 4 presents the subsequent trajectory.

Table 4

Nigeria's Uniformed Personnel Contributions to UN Peacekeeping, Selected Years

Date	Total uniformed personnel	Global rank	Source
31 October 2010	5,786	4th	United Nations Peacekeeping (2010)
30 April 2015	2,975	9th	United Nations Peacekeeping (2015)
31 May 2025	253	41st	United Nations Peacekeeping (2025)

Note. Uniformed personnel include troops, police and military experts on mission.

Between 2010 and 2025 Nigeria's uniformed presence in UN operations fell by more than 95 per cent, a decline Akinola (2024) characterises as the end of Nigeria's role as Africa's peacekeeper at the UN. The fall coincides with the escalation of the Boko Haram insurgency and other internal security operations, which have absorbed the armed forces' capacity. It also carries material costs: troop-contributing countries are reimbursed by the UN at a standard rate, US$1,428 per soldier per month as of July 2019 (United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d.), and peacekeeping has provided Nigerian personnel with valuable operational experience (Dauda et al., 2017). Nigeria's continued chairmanship of the C-34 thus coexists with a minimal operational presence.

5.2.3 Norm Advocacy and Development Partnership

Nigeria has used the UN to advance norms central to its role conception. It was a leading voice in campaigns against colonialism and apartheid (Metz, 1992), supported the process launched by General Assembly resolution 64/48 that led to the Arms Trade Treaty (Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.; United Nations General Assembly, 2009), and held the first presidency of the Executive Board of UN Women (Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). President Goodluck Jonathan co-chaired, with Norway's Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, the UN Commission on Life-Saving Commodities for Women and Children launched in March 2012 (UNFPA, 2012). At the same time, Nigeria is a major recipient of UN development and humanitarian support, currently under the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2023–2027 signed on 1 December 2022 (United Nations in Nigeria, 2022).

5.2.4 Security Council Reform

Nigeria's campaign for a permanent Security Council seat is anchored in the AU's Ezulwini Consensus of 2005, which demands at least two permanent seats for Africa with all the prerogatives of existing permanent members, including the veto, and five non-permanent seats (African Union, 2005). The Consensus does not name beneficiaries, and

Nigeria faces competition from South Africa and Egypt. Scholars question its case on the grounds that its domestic governance record, economic fragility and insecurity undercut its claim to represent the continent (Adeniji, 2005; Ade-Ibijola, 2015), and Oshewolo, Nwozor, et al. (2021) note that smaller African states have at times resented Nigeria's use of the UN to pursue regional leadership.

5.3 Nigeria in the OAU and the African Union

As a leading member of the moderate Monrovia Group, Nigeria favoured a gradualist, functional approach to African unity that respected the sovereignty of new states, an approach that prevailed in the OAU Charter of 1963 (Adebajo & Mustapha, 2008; Organisation of African Unity, 1963). It became one of the most generous supporters of the OAU Liberation Committee (Metz, 1992) and led early African peace operations, including the bilateral Operation Harmony I in Chad in 1979 and the OAU force in Chad in 1981–1982 (Hamman & Omojuwa, 2013). When Libya proposed a rapid move towards a "United States of Africa" at the end of the 1990s, Nigeria joined the majority favouring gradual institutional transformation (Adebajo & Mustapha, 2008). The Constitutive Act of the African Union was to enter into force thirty days after two-thirds of OAU members had ratified it (African Union, 2000); Nigeria deposited the 36th instrument on 26 April 2001, completing the requirement, and the Act entered into force on 26 May 2001. The AU was launched in Durban in July 2002. President Olusegun Obasanjo chaired the AU from 2004 to 2006 and was a principal promoter of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the African Peer Review Mechanism (Iliffe, 2011). Nigeria provided the largest contingent to the AU Mission in Sudan (Human Rights Watch, 2006) and, since 2015, has been a principal contributor to the AU-authorised Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram (Assanvo et al., 2016), a shift from exporting stability to seeking regional assistance with a threat on its own territory.

5.4 Nigeria and ECOWAS

5.4.1 Founding and Financing

Nigeria, working closely with Togo, drove the conclusion of the Treaty of Lagos of 28 May 1975, which established ECOWAS (Metz, 1992); the Revised Treaty of 1993 extended the Community's mandate to regional peace and security (Economic Community of West African States, 1993). Since 2003 ECOWAS has been financed mainly through the Community Levy, a 0.5 per cent charge on imports from outside the region. Over sixteen years Nigeria paid about US$1.177 billion, or 40.42 per cent of the US$2.913 billion paid by all member states, more than twelve other members combined. Yet this represented only 64 per cent of its assessed obligation (News Agency of Nigeria, 2020). Nigeria is therefore simultaneously the Community's principal financier and one of its largest debtors.

5.4.2 Peace Operations: ECOMOG and The Gambia

In August 1990 the ECOWAS Standing Mediation Committee deployed the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) to Liberia. Critics, particularly among francophone members, questioned the legality of a decision taken by a sub-group of states and suspected Nigeria of pursuing its own agenda (Olonisakin, 2000). Nigeria supplied the great majority of ECOMOG's troops and funding and, in Sierra Leone, led the operation that restored the elected government of Ahmad Tejan Kabbah in 1998 (Adebajo, 2002; Olonisakin, 2000). In The Gambia in January 2017, ECOWAS combined mediation, in which Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari played a leading part, with the credible threat of force through the ECOWAS Mission

in The Gambia (ECOMIG), and President Yahya Jammeh left office without a shot being fired. ECOMIG's ground component was led by Senegal, with Nigeria contributing air and naval assets (Hartmann, 2017).

5.4.3 The Niger Crisis and the Fragmentation of ECOWAS

President Bola Tinubu was elected Chairman of the ECOWAS Authority on 9 July 2023 (ECOWAS Commission, 2023). After soldiers overthrew Niger's President Mohamed Bazoum on 26 July, the ECOWAS Authority closed borders with Niger, suspended financial transactions, froze Nigerien assets and threatened force if constitutional order was not restored (Stefanelli, 2023). Nigeria cut its electricity supply to Niger and closed its borders, but the Nigerian Senate declined to endorse military action, with northern senators warning of consequences for border communities (Akinkuotu, 2023). The threat of force was not carried out. Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger instead formed the Alliance of Sahel States, and their withdrawal from ECOWAS took effect on 29 January 2025, with a six-month window for dialogue and provisional continuation of free movement and trade arrangements (ECOWAS Commission, 2025). Oshewolo, Azeez, et al. (2024) identify resistance from francophone members and the spill-over of Nigeria's own security crises as major constraints on its ECOWAS role.

5.5 Nigeria and the Commonwealth

Nigeria joined the Commonwealth at independence. Chief Emeka Anyaoku was elected Commonwealth Secretary-General in 1989 and served from 1990 to 2000 (Metz, 1992). Nigeria was suspended in November 1995 after the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activists under the Abacha regime, and was readmitted after the return to civilian rule in 1999 (Uhomoibhi, 2008). The Obasanjo administration then used the Commonwealth to repair Nigeria's standing: Nigeria joined the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Abuja in December 2003, and Obasanjo served as Chair-in-Office until 2005 (Alli, 2010; Iliffe, 2011). Since then the Commonwealth has become a less central arena for Nigerian diplomacy.

5.6 Economic Multilateralism and Emerging Platforms

In 2005 sustained multilateral diplomacy helped secure a major debt relief agreement with the Paris Club (Iliffe, 2011). Nigeria chaired the Developing Eight (D-8) Organisation from 2010 to 2012 and established an inter-ministerial mechanism to coordinate nominations for international posts (Adetula, 2013). Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala became Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2021 and was reappointed in November 2024 (World Trade Organization, 2024), and Akinwumi Adesina served two terms as President of the African Development Bank (AfDB) from 2015 to 2025 (African Development Bank Group, 2025). Nigeria deposited its AfCFTA ratification on 5 December 2020, becoming the 34th state to do so (UNECA, 2020), and became a BRICS partner country in January 2025 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil, 2025). These developments indicate a widening of Nigerian multilateralism from security towards trade and finance.

5.7 Summary of Roles, Returns and Costs

Table 5 consolidates the findings in relation to the first two research objectives.

Table 5

Nigeria's Roles, Returns and Costs in Selected International Organisations

Organisation	Principal roles	Main returns	Main costs and constraints
United Nations	Security Council member (five terms); General Assembly President (twice); C-34 chair since 1972; troop contributor; norm advocate	Global visibility; senior appointments; peacekeeping reimbursements and experience; development support	Collapse of peacekeeping deployments; weak case for a permanent seat; aid dependence
OAU/AU	Founding member; liberation supporter; architect of AU transition; AU chair (2004–2006); AMIS and MNJTF contributor	Continental leadership; shaping of AU norms and institutions; regional support against Boko Haram	Troop and financial burdens; rivalry with South Africa and Egypt; limited followership
ECOWAS	Founder; largest financier; leader of ECOMOG; mediator; Authority chair (2023–2025)	Regional market and free movement; security buffer; leadership status	Heavy human and financial costs; levy arrears; francophone resistance; exit of Sahel states
Commonwealth	Secretary-General (1990–2000); summit host (2003); Chair-in-Office	Reputational rehabilitation after 1999; democratic legitimacy	Suspension (1995–1999); declining centrality
Economic bodies	OPEC member; D-8 chair; AfCFTA state party; BRICS partner; nationals heading WTO and AfDB	Debt relief (2005); trade and finance access; voice in global economic governance	Implementation gaps; uncertain returns from new platforms

6. Discussion of Findings

6.1 Role Persistence and the Capacity Constraint

The findings support the role persistence proposition. Across all four phases, Nigerian governments, military and civilian, defined their country as Africa's leader and protector, and they continued to seek leadership offices, from the chairmanship of the ECOWAS Authority to a permanent Security Council seat, even as the resources available to sustain that role declined. This is consistent with Holsti's (1970) expectation that role conceptions, rooted in identity, are slow to change.

The findings also support the capacity constraint proposition, including its claim that contraction is uneven. The finding that Nigeria's UN peacekeeping contribution collapsed from fourth place globally in 2010 to 41st in 2025 supports the argument that role conceptions can outrun material capacity. Significantly, the contraction began in the most distant arena, global peacekeeping, while Nigeria continued to finance the largest share of ECOWAS and to seek the chairmanship of its Authority. Yet even the regional core came under strain, as the accumulation of levy arrears shows. The sequence, global commitments first and regional commitments later, is precisely what the framework predicts,

and it explains a pattern that organisation-specific studies cannot see: Nigeria's simultaneous retreat from UN peacekeeping and persistence in ECOWAS leadership are two expressions of the same mechanism.

6.2 The Followership Condition

The finding that Nigeria's leadership during the 2023 Niger crisis failed to prevent the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from ECOWAS supports Destradi's (2010) argument that leadership depends on followers who share, or can be persuaded to share, the leader's goals. Nigeria held the formal chairmanship and possessed overwhelming material superiority, yet the military regimes of the Sahel rejected its preferred course and other members were divided. The case also demonstrates a dimension that the regional power literature has neglected: domestic followership. The Nigerian Senate's refusal to endorse military action (Akinkuotu, 2023) acted as a domestic veto, consistent with Putnam's (1988) two-level game logic, in which a negotiator's international options are bounded by what domestic constituencies will ratify.

The contrast with The Gambia in 2017 is instructive. There, ECOWAS succeeded because its goal was widely shared, the target regime was isolated, and leadership was distributed, with Senegal leading the ground component and Nigeria contributing mediation and air and naval assets (Hartmann, 2017). Effective Nigerian leadership, in other words, has been most successful when it has been shared rather than asserted.

6.3 The Costing and Coordination Deficit

A third pattern concerns the management of Nigeria's commitments. Nigeria publishes no consolidated data on what it spends on multilateral commitments or what it receives in return; the levy figures used in this study became public only through a news agency report (News Agency of Nigeria, 2020). Decisions on major deployments have often been taken at the presidential level with limited parliamentary scrutiny, until, as in 2023, the legislature asserted itself at a critical moment. Responsibilities are divided among the ministries of foreign affairs, defence and finance. The absence of systematic costing makes it difficult to judge whether particular commitments serve the national interest and leaves Nigeria's multilateral policy vulnerable to abrupt swings between activism and retrenchment.

6.4 Comparison with Existing Literature

The findings confirm, extend and in some respects challenge existing scholarship. They confirm Warner's (2017) diagnosis of illusory hegemony, but extend it beyond the Boko Haram case and bilateral security policy to Nigeria's conduct across multiple international organisations, and they specify the mechanism, uneven contraction under a persistent role conception, through which the illusion is produced. They refine Bach's (2007) characterisation of "dominance without power" by identifying institutional finance as a key arena: Nigeria's dominance as ECOWAS's largest payer coexists with arrears and with an inability to secure members' compliance. They lend support to Prys's (2010) achievement–expectations gap, since Nigeria is expected to provide regional order but increasingly lacks the means to do so.

The findings also qualify the conclusions of the hegemony debate. Ogunnubi (2017) and Aleyomi (2022) are right that Nigeria is not a hegemon in any strong sense, but the evidence suggests that the binary question of whether Nigeria is a hegemon obscures a more important finding: Nigeria remains indispensable to African multilateralism, as financier, mediator and office holder, while

being insufficient to determine its outcomes. Finally, the findings update the account offered by Adebajo and Mustapha (2008). Their metaphor of a Gulliver constrained by many small ties emphasised external constraints in the post-Cold War order; the evidence from the fourth phase indicates that Nigeria's principal constraints are now internal, arising from insecurity, fiscal strain and domestic veto players.

6.5 Implications for Policy and Practice

The central implication is that Nigeria's multilateral influence depends less on the scale of its commitments than on their selectivity, costing and coordination. A persistent role conception without matching capacity produces visible retreats, such as the collapse of peacekeeping deployments, that damage credibility more than a deliberately narrower but sustainable set of commitments would. The followership findings imply that Nigeria gains more from shared and consultative leadership than from asserting primacy, and that domestic consensus must be built before, not after, high-stakes regional commitments are made. The shift towards economic platforms offers an opportunity to align multilateral engagement more closely with domestic development, provided that commitments are matched by implementation.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

This study set out to identify the roles Nigeria has performed in international organisations, assess the benefits and costs of its engagement, and explain the gap between its ambitions and its influence. In relation to the first objective, it found that Nigeria has performed the roles of founder, financier, troop contributor, mediator and office holder across the UN, the OAU/AU, ECOWAS and the Commonwealth. In relation to the second, it found substantial positional and reputational returns and some material returns, set against heavy and rising human, financial and diplomatic costs that have produced diminishing returns since about 2010. In relation to the third, it found that the gap is explained by the interaction of a persistent Afrocentric role conception, a declining and unevenly distributed capacity to sustain it, and a deficit of external and domestic followership. By integrating national role conception theory with the literature on regional power and leadership, the Role–Capacity–Followership framework accounts for this pattern more fully than either approach alone. Nigeria remains indispensable to African multilateralism, but indispensability is not the same as influence.

7.2 Recommendations

Each of the following recommendations is derived from a specific finding of the study.

(i) Annual reporting of multilateral commitments (from the costing and coordination deficit, Section 6.3). The Federal Government should report annually to the National Assembly on assessed contributions, ECOWAS levy payments and arrears, peace operation outlays and UN reimbursements, so that commitments can be evaluated against returns.

(ii) Conditional clearance of ECOWAS arrears (from the financing findings, Section 5.4.1). Nigeria should agree a schedule for clearing its Community Levy arrears, conditional on reforms that improve the efficiency and accountability of the ECOWAS Commission and on stronger levy compliance by other members.

(iii) Specialised peacekeeping contributions (from the collapse of UN deployments, Section 5.2.2). Rather than seeking to regain its former troop numbers, Nigeria should offer specialised capabilities such as formed police units, medical, engineering and aviation enablers, and more

women peacekeepers, which are in high demand and carry reimbursement and reputational benefits at lower cost.

(iv) Cooperation with the Sahel states (from the Niger crisis and ECOWAS fragmentation, Section 5.4.3). Nigeria should use its weight within ECOWAS to preserve free movement, trade and security cooperation with Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, recognising that its own security in the north depends on stable relations with the Sahel.

(v) Consultative leadership (from the followership condition, Section 6.2). Nigeria should strengthen consultation with francophone and smaller member states, expand French-language capacity in its diplomatic service and share leadership positions and initiatives, so that its proposals command wider support, and should secure legislative backing before making high-stakes regional commitments.

(vi) Economic multilateralism (from the shift towards economic platforms, Section 5.6). Nigeria should prioritise implementation of its AfCFTA commitments and set clear objectives for its BRICS partnership, particularly in trade, infrastructure finance and technology, where multilateral engagement can deliver direct developmental returns.

7.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

As noted in Section 3.5, the study is limited by the absence of comprehensive official data on Nigeria's multilateral expenditure and by its reliance on documentary sources. Future research should address these limitations in four ways. First, interviews with serving and retired diplomats, military officers and legislators would illuminate the motivations behind particular commitments and the internal coordination of multilateral policy. Second, comparative studies of other regional powers, such as South Africa, Brazil and India, would test whether the Role–Capacity–Followership framework explains similar patterns elsewhere. Third, studies of the domestic political economy of Nigeria's multilateral commitments, including the roles of the National Assembly, the military and public opinion, would develop the domestic followership dimension identified here. Fourth, the construction of an open, longitudinal dataset of Nigeria's multilateral commitments, costs and returns, for example by the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs in partnership with the relevant ministries, would provide a stronger empirical foundation for both policy and scholarship.

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