

Nigeria and “Illusory Hegemony” in Foreign and Security Policymaking: *Pax-Nigeriana* and the Challenges of Boko Haram

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Western observers of African foreign and security policy formation are often perplexed by African regimes’ reactions to insurgencies: the actions of the latter are often read to be duplicitous and self-damaging—and thus irrational—by the former. This article suggests that one cause for this perception rests in the often incomplete appreciation for certain Global South states’ self-identities as “regional hegemons,” which compels them to make foreign and security policy decisions based on maintaining the semblance of power projection capabilities to those in their intended spheres of influence. Particularly, this article suggests that when Global South states possess the *realist* attributes of a hegemon (military power, economic strength, and a large population) but lack the *liberal* attributes of a hegemon (the legitimacy for rightful rule), they often undertake a process here termed “illusory hegemony” or foreign and security policy prevarication. Yet, this pursuit of illusory hegemony frequently has the opposite unintended effect of undermining, rather than improving, the perception of rightful rule. This article combines an analysis of current events with International Relations theory and foreign policymaking analysis to present a case study on how Nigeria’s pursuit of its grand strategy of *Pax-Nigeriana* is being retarded by Boko Haram and the Chibok kidnappings, specifically as a result of Nigeria’s projection of “illusory hegemony.”

Since May 2011, the Islamist Boko Haram insurgency has killed some 14,000 persons, primarily in northeastern Nigeria, and, despite ebbs and flows in the group’s power, it remains solidly entrenched as of late 2015 (Council on Foreign Relations 2015). Having arisen to re-install a version of the Islamic Sokoto caliphate in northeastern Nigeria that was destroyed and incorporated into the modern Nigerian state in 1903, Boko Haram is a militant arm that seeks to delegitimize the Nigerian government and all Western influences within the country, including Western forms of education, cultural practices, religions, and even populations whose beliefs do not coincide with Boko Haram’s conservative interpretation of Islam. Particularly troubling for Nigeria is that, while Boko Haram began as a homegrown insurgency, it has since morphed into a decidedly transnational group, having launched attacks in Nigeria’s neighbors Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, and also reportedly using spaces in these countries as havens for its operations. In short, what started as an isolated domestic insurgency has since grown to become not only Nigeria’s main domestic problem, but also its main foreign and security policy preoccupation.

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The international community was made acutely aware of the extent to which Boko Haram is a formidable opponent for the Nigerian government with the May 2014 kidnapping of the “Chibok Girls”—more than 200 teenaged female students—which Abuja has, as of December 2015, still not located. While the abductions themselves were emblematic of the gravity of the Boko Haram problem in general, the nature of the Nigerian government’s reactions to the Chibok kidnapping has come to stand as a microcosm of its larger approach to Boko Haram, which many have read to be halfhearted, confused, self-damaging, and duplicitous.

Immediately after the abductions it was suggested that even before they occurred, Nigerian military commanders knew that a raid was underway, though they did nothing to counteract it (Duthiers et al. 2014). Once the kidnappings took place, Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan and his administration were largely silent (“#BringBackOurGirls” 2014), with Jonathan releasing his first statement about the incident an entire three weeks later (“Why I Will Not Visit” 2014). The day immediately following the kidnappings—and much to the chagrin of many Nigerians—Jonathan was photographed dancing at a political rally in Kano (Faul 2014b). Shortly after the kidnappings Nigerian women in civil society groups around the country began protesting the government response. In reaction, the Nigerian first lady, Patience Jonathan, publicly chastised them and even ordered the arrests of some, claiming that the kidnappings were a falsified publicity stunt orchestrated by foreigners (Faul 2014a). Rather than visiting parents of the Chibok Girls in June 2014, President Jonathan supposedly canceled the planned visit and instead went to a Paris security summit, much to the confusion of his population and the world at large; it was later revealed that he had never planned to go to Chibok at all (Adetayo 2014). In what one Nigerian author calls a “rather fantastic flourish of incompetence,” Jonathan claimed in October 2014 to have negotiated a cease-fire for the release of the Chibok Girls: in response, the leader of Boko Haram released a video soon thereafter relaying that no such cease-fire had been negotiated (Attiah 2015).

Given these reactions, the responses of the Nigerian government to the kidnappings specifically and to Boko Haram more broadly have been a source of confusion and consternation for observers in the West: Nigeria’s reactions, it seems, are simply illogical, and its statements about developments to find the Chibok Girls and combat Boko Haram are full of untruths. US officials’ initial reaction to the kidnappings was that Abuja’s response was “tragically and unacceptably slow” and “disturbingly slow and half-hearted” (#BringBackOurGirls 2014; Faul 2014b). Months later, critiques had not much improved. One American newspaper in August 2014 asserted that Nigeria’s foreign and security policy “doesn’t inspire much confidence,” given that the Jonathan administration “offers no evidence” of its efforts to locate the girls; “is dismissive of . . . foreign help”; and sends nothing but “ambiguous details about who is negotiating and what’s on the table” (*USA Today* Editorial Board 2014). Discussing the US-Nigerian relationship in mid-2015, former US Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, Johnnie Carson (2015), asserted that ties between the United States and Nigeria had been “frayed” because

Officials at both the State Department and the Defense Department were exasperated with President Goodluck Jonathan for his reluctance to appoint competent military commanders, to deal with growing levels of corruption in the army and to adopt a more effective and comprehensive security and economic revitalization strategy to deal with Boko Haram.

What accounts for Nigeria’s seemingly incomprehensible responses to the Chibok kidnappings specifically, and to Boko Haram more broadly? In the main, this piece argues that such bewilderment from observers in Western government, military, and media spheres over Nigeria’s foreign policy choices can be clarified,

at least partially, with the recognition of the country's projection of what this article refers to as "illusory hegemony." In short, it suggests that "illusory hegemony" is the process whereby regional powers within the Global South that generally meet the realist requirements of hegemony (military and economic power, and large populations) but lack the liberal credentials of hegemony (authority for rightful rule) undertake a culture of foreign policy prevarication to downplay their failures and continue to assert their rightful rule over their regions. Inherent in the projection of "illusory hegemony" is the downplaying or ignoring of military or political failures; "buck-passing" responsibility for such failures; issuing contradictory or untrue statements about foreign and military policies; and insisting on primacy in all regional affairs.¹ Yet, the projection of illusory hegemony often has the opposite effect: rather than bolstering would-be hegemonic states' reputations in their regions, the process of illusory hegemony can engender negative feedback loops, rendering would-be hegemon's attempts at leadership more illegitimate the more often the tactic is employed. By recognizing the existence of and imperatives surrounding the pursuit of illusory hegemony, the foreign policy actions undertaken by such semi-powerful regional states become far more rational than they are understood to be by external observers.

More specifically, this piece takes Nigeria as a case study and argues that its pursuit of regional dominance in West Africa via its grand strategy of *Pax-Nigeriana* has been fundamentally frustrated by the presence of Boko Haram generally and the kidnapping of the Chibok Girls specifically. Indeed, while the country seemingly possesses the realist attributes to be effective against Boko Haram, when it has failed to do so, it has undertaken a strategy of illusory hegemonic power projection by making false claims about its internal security landscape, downplaying its military failures, and being deeply reluctant to accept external assistance, all of which are intended to demonstrate to regional neighbors its true capacity for rightful leadership. And, as will be elucidated further, although illusory hegemony is primarily a strategy to assert hegemonic credentials to the region, it also has a domestic corollary: by downplaying failures and vaunting notions of regional leadership, undertaking a policy of illusory hegemony helps entrench elites in their positions of power within what are often neo-patrimonial modes of national governance.

This article proceeds as follows: The first section introduces the nature of Nigeria's grand strategy of *Pax-Nigeriana*, or its blueprint for attaining power in both West African and pan-African affairs. The second section disaggregates the term "hegemony" itself: in so doing, it suggests that hegemony can be pursued via realist means or liberal means, but that both must be present for actual hegemony to exist. To that end, it discusses the extent to which Nigeria fulfills these, and how despite its fulfillment of realist attributes, it lacks, due to a host of factors, the liberal demands of legitimacy for rightful rule, thus leading it to undertake a policy of illusory hegemony. The third section forms the brunt of the Nigerian case study. In separating out the four circles of Nigerian foreign policymaking intended to achieve *Pax-Nigeriana*, it details the ways in which Nigeria's desire to prove its regional hegemonic credentials have led to its projection of illusory hegemony in relation to Boko Haram and the Chibok kidnappings, which have hurt, rather than helped, its quest for dominance.

¹While the projection of illusory hegemony is both a strategy toward projecting regional hegemonic credentials and a byproduct of possessing them incompletely, it should be noted upfront that it is both an implicit (thus unstated though underlying) component of *Pax-Nigeriana*, though likely not an officially sanctioned, discussed—or potentially even recognized—national foreign and security policy "goal" as such.

An Introduction to *Pax-Nigeriana*

The preeminent guiding principle of Nigerian foreign and security policymaking is known as *Pax-Nigeriana*, or the “Nigerian Peace.” In essence, *Pax-Nigeriana* is premised upon the notion that Nigeria is the rightful, intuitive, and undisputed hegemon of the West African subregion. By displaying leadership and exerting its intuitive hegemony, it can, and should, provide security and prosperity not only for the region, but also for greater sub-Saharan Africa. In short, *Pax-Nigeriana* is an unequivocal statement of Nigeria’s quest to become a regional power and is a critical component of its foreign and security policy ethos.

Coined by Nigerian Foreign Minister Bolaji Akinnyemi in 1970 to describe Nigeria’s efforts in helping establish the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963, *Pax-Nigeriana* has come to be used as a shorthand by Nigerian military, government, and civil society members who share an understanding of Nigeria’s “manifest destiny” to serve as a “big brother” in West Africa (Adebajo 2008; Shaw and Fasehun 1980).² To that end, Nigerian foreign policy and defense experts view their country as the giant of West Africa, with a need to manage—or at least substantially assist—smaller and less capable neighbors, since they believe that Nigeria is “more experienced and thus responsible for protecting its younger siblings” (Adebajo 2008, 13). To the extent that Nigeria’s grand strategic aims—particularly within its region—are deeply hegemonic, various authors have noted Nigeria’s self-comparisons to the US presence in the Caribbean, and have thus referred to *Pax-Nigeriana* as Nigeria’s version of the Monroe Doctrine (Adebajo 2008, 12).

Nigeria has long maintained a self-perception of its preeminence in West African and pan-African affairs, to the extent that the pursuit of *Pax-Nigeriana* has been an undergirding principle, to varying degrees, of every Nigerian administration in the postcolonial period. Indeed, while various Nigerian administrations have pursued *Pax-Nigeriana* in different ways, it has been the case that “from the 1960s onwards, *Pax-Nigeriana* involved all regimes from Balewa to Babangida” (Adebajo 2008, 10). To that end, Adebajo (2008) underlines that “the aspiration to continental leadership, manifest since independence in 1960, is central to understanding some principal features of Nigeria’s foreign policy,” including the breaking off of diplomatic relations with France in 1961, the creation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975, the support of the Frontline States against apartheid in South Africa, and Nigerian leadership in various West African peacekeeping missions. This idea has been such a constant thread in Nigerian military and foreign policy that many scholars have noted that Nigerian governance, in its pursuit of *Pax-Nigeriana*, has been more marked by continuity than by change (Adebajo and Mustapha 2008).

Importantly, the ways that Nigerian military and diplomatic elites think about *Pax-Nigeriana* is organized around a rubric referred to as “the concentric circles of foreign policy.”³ As described by Adebajo (2008) and Gambari (2008), four circles characterize Nigerian grand strategy. From innermost to outermost, these are Nigeria’s relationships with its immediate neighbors (Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Niger, and São Tomé and Príncipe), Nigeria’s relations within broader West Africa, Nigeria in pan-African politics, and Nigeria’s standing in the

²Interestingly, early calls for the intuitive nature and enactment of *Pax-Nigeriana* were also appealed to through the invocation of culturally ascribed norms, or what Yoroms (1993, 85) has referred to as “the traditional African concept of collectivism.”

³Importantly, Nigeria is not the only West African country to employ this concept in national conceptualizations of foreign policy. For instance, Schraeder (1999) describe that contemporary Senegal’s foreign policy is based on its first president, Léopold Sédar Senghor’s, concept of “cercles concentriques.” Moreover, Rüländ (2014, 187) also offers a fascinatingly in-depth discussion about the emergence of concentric circles of foreign policymaking in Indonesia.

world. The extent to which Nigeria has achieved its goals of attaining hegemonic status in each of these four circles is the subject of Section 3.

Nigeria and the Attributes of Regional Hegemony: Realism and Liberalism

When a globally non-hegemonic state like Nigeria seeks, with limited means, to assert its preeminence within its region, what options are available? This article suggests that at least one strategy is to pursue a foreign and security policy strategy called “illusory hegemony.” Simply put, the projection of “illusory hegemony” occurs when a state aspirant of regional or subregional hegemony possesses some, but not all, of the empirical qualities typical of a hegemon: namely, the realist attributes of a hegemon without the attendant liberal credentials. In recognizing this, it can seek to cultivate the *appearance* of hegemony via sundry tactics that seek to legitimize its claims to power and leadership, even when they exist incompletely in *empirical* terms. Put otherwise, illusory hegemony is a process by which mid-level states in the international system (those that are powerful regionally but less so globally) that seemingly possess realist attributes of a regional hegemon but lack the liberal attributes of one seek to cover up insufficiencies in the latter through rhetorical assertions of competence, prevarication about failures, and rejections of intrusion by outsiders that might undermine their reputation as regional leaders. Moreover, as will be explained later, the pursuit of illusory hegemony can often create an undercutting feedback loop, wherein regional legitimacy is, in fact, undermined rather than enhanced, the more that the tactic is employed. This section offers an introduction to the concept of regional hegemony and describes two ways to conceptualize what attributes lead a state to qualify as a “hegemon.”

Regional Hegemony

Theoretically, the recognition of the projection of “illusory hegemony” by states in the Global South is built primarily around the desire to show that one is the rightful leader of a given region. Thus, it is imperative to recognize that, contrary to most discussions of power in International Relations, “hegemony” can exist below the systemic level: that is, though hegemony is typically associated with a preponderance of power at the global level of analysis, it can also exist at other levels of international society, particularly the region. While most (neo-)realist⁴ accounts of international politics typically retain a narrow focus on explaining international outcomes by looking at the world’s preeminent states, hierarchies of states exist everywhere in the international system. For instance, Morgenthau (1948) has reiterated that although traditional International Relations thinking has tended to focus on systemic outcomes, the international system itself “is composed of a number of subsystems which. . . maintain within themselves a balance of power on their own.” For his part, Lemke (2002, 49) describes:

In a similar structure to the overall international power hierarchy, each of these local [regional] hierarchies has a dominant local state supervising local relations, by establishing and striving to preserve a local status quo. Just as with the global system

⁴For the purposes of simplicity, this piece uses the term “realist” and “neo-realist” interchangeably, though they do, of course, refer to distinct outlooks on International Relations. While classical realist International Relations thinking has suggested that the belligerence of state behavior is derived from an inherently Hobbesian state of human nature, neo-realists suggest that it is instead the presence of international systemic anarchy that compels states to be inherently self-interested and thus security seeking. Despite these divergences, both paradigms understand hegemony or power to be derived from the combination of sources—wealth, military, and population—referred to herein.

and the overall dominant state, local dominant states bother to create and defend the local status quo because they anticipate gains from doing so.

To the degree that hegemony can and do exist at the non-global level, observers of African International Relations typically agree that only two states on the continent—Nigeria and South Africa—could potentially justify that moniker. To that end, in addition to having been referred to as “hegemons” (Buzan and Waever 2003, 249; Gandois 2009, 42; Khadiagala and Lyons 2001, 9; Landsberg 2008; Tavares 2011; Wright 1999, 16), others have referred to both Nigeria and South Africa differentially as Africa’s “champions” (Wright 1999, 10); “local giants” (Buzan and Waever 2003, 232); and “local great powers” (Buzan and Waever 2003, 232). For its part, Nigeria alone has been referred to as “the unrivaled superpower of West Africa” (Dokken 2008, 64) and West Africa’s “big brother” (Adebajo 2008, 13). Mazrui even once went so far as to suggest that “Nigeria would probably be more influential than either Britain or France” (Mazrui in Wright 1999, 16). Thus, outwardly, Nigeria’s claims for its own hegemony seem to carry at least some perceptual water, at least in comparison to other potential options in the West African region.⁵

Realist Interpretations of Hegemony

Though many observers suggest that Nigeria might be a hegemon and Nigeria’s articulated aims at pursuing a *Pax-Nigeriana* are evidence of its desire for regional hegemony, what attributes does a country need to possess to qualify as a regional hegemon at all? The next section offers a discussion of what International Relations theorists from two traditions—realists and liberals—think render a country a hegemon.

Most International Relations scholars in the (neo-)realist vein are quick to assert that hegemony—even regional—rests in a combination of military and economic power. For his part, Kenneth Waltz describes that states have two genres of power: latent and military. Whereas latent power describes the economic wealth and the size of a state’s population, military power refers to a state’s military capabilities and the nature of its military power in comparison to other regional states (Waltz in Mearsheimer 2003, 55). To be sure, military power and wealth are so intimately intertwined that one cannot be divorced from the other: military power begets wealth, and wealth can lead to the accumulation of greater military power. For his part, Keohane (2005), drawing on work from Viner (1948), also underlines that a combination of wealth and power is at the core of realist conceptions of hegemony, which entails economic power or “a preponderance of resources” (32), and military power, sufficient to “protect the international political economy that it dominates from incursions by hostile adversaries” (39).

At its core, though, the link between wealth and power is useful only insofar as it allows hegemony to provide a modicum of stability for those around them. As per Kindleberger’s (1986) hegemonic stability theory, peace is most likely to be assured in the shadow of a hegemon. While this need not always be the case,⁶ powerful states are thought to help ensure peace in a number of ways, not least, as previously mentioned, by providing order and a preponderance of strength. This is particularly true in Africa. As Tavares (2011, 167) notes, “given the financial and military challenges of deploying a military force, it would be difficult for [an African] subregion to act effectively with no support from a subregional power.”

⁵To be sure, not all of the authors in the above discussions have suggested that Nigeria is a definitive regional hegemon. While some have gone so far, others simply insinuate that it *might* be, or simply that given its attributes, it *should* be.

⁶For the most compelling argument to date about the instability engendered by unipolarity, see Monteiro 2014.

On the surface, and as evidenced by Figure 1, 2, and 3, Nigeria displays all of the attributes of a regional hegemon expected by realist International Relations scholars (GlobalSecurity.org 2015; World Bank 2015). Militarily, Nigeria has always possessed the most dominant military in its West African neighborhood, and indeed, one of the largest armies on the continent. In 1970, with 250,000 troops, Nigeria’s army was the undisputed powerhouse in West Africa, standing four times larger than the combined forces of the other thirteen West African states at that time (Wright and Okolo 1999, 123). By 2008 the country’s smaller army at 94,500 was still larger than the sum of all of its fourteen West African neighbors (Adebajo 2008, 8). So great is Nigeria’s military power in relation to those countries that it borders, Nigerian military personnel have “tended to assume that they are not vulnerable to any of their neighbors acting alone, without extra-regional or extra-African military power” (Osuntokun 2008, 142).

As concerns population size, Nigeria is also an unquestioned leader not only in West Africa, but also across the continent. With an estimated 2013 population of more than 173 million, Nigeria is nearly twice as populous as the second largest sub-Saharan African country, Ethiopia, at 95 million. In West Africa the numbers are even more disparate: Nigeria has an estimated 60 percent of all of West Africa’s population, and an estimated one in every four sub-Saharan Africans is from Nigeria (Adebajo 2008; World Population Review 2014).

Economically, Nigeria has also historically been a powerful force not only in West Africa, but also in sub-Saharan Africa more generally. As early as 1974 Nigeria’s GDP at \$19.7 billion stood out as not only the largest economy in the West African region, but also larger than the economies of all other West African countries combined. Nigerians celebrated when it was revealed that as of 2014 the country had eclipsed South Africa as sub-Saharan Africa’s largest economy, with a GDP of more than \$500 billion annually (“Nigeria becomes” 2014). In West Africa, Nigeria’s economic dominance is unrivaled: in 2008, the country alone accounted for an estimated 75 percent of West African economic production (Adebajo 2008).

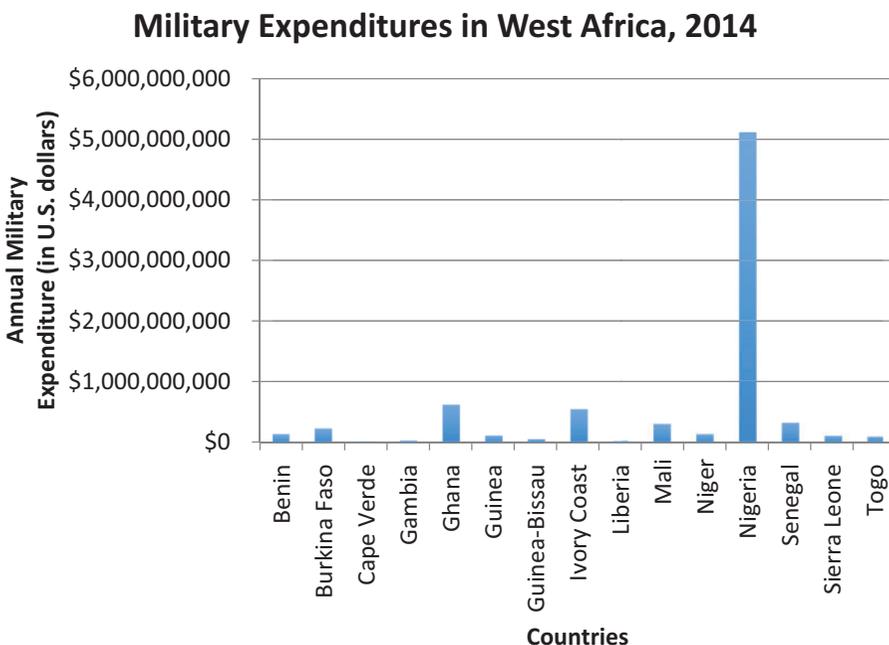


Figure 1. Military expenditures in West Africa, 2014

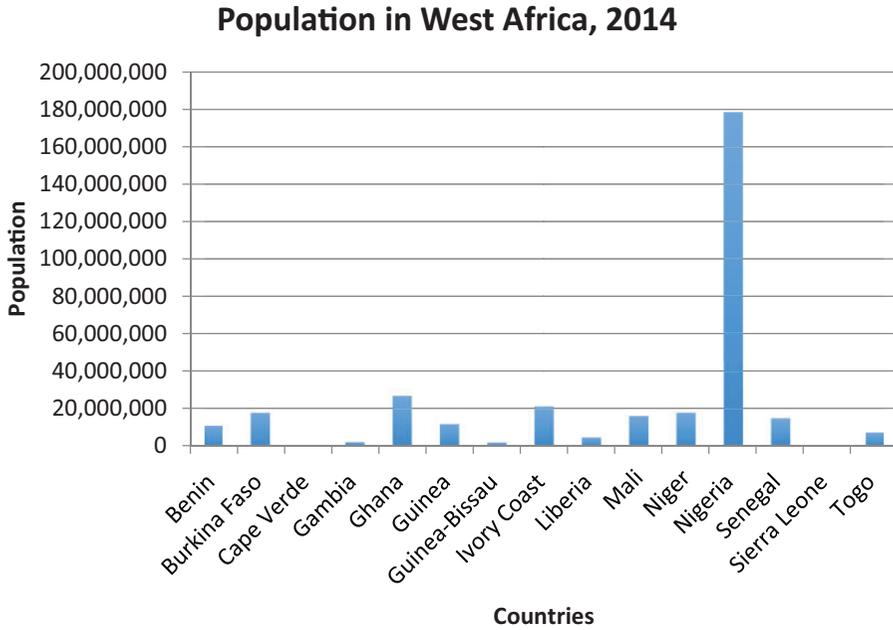


Figure 2. Population in West Africa, 2014

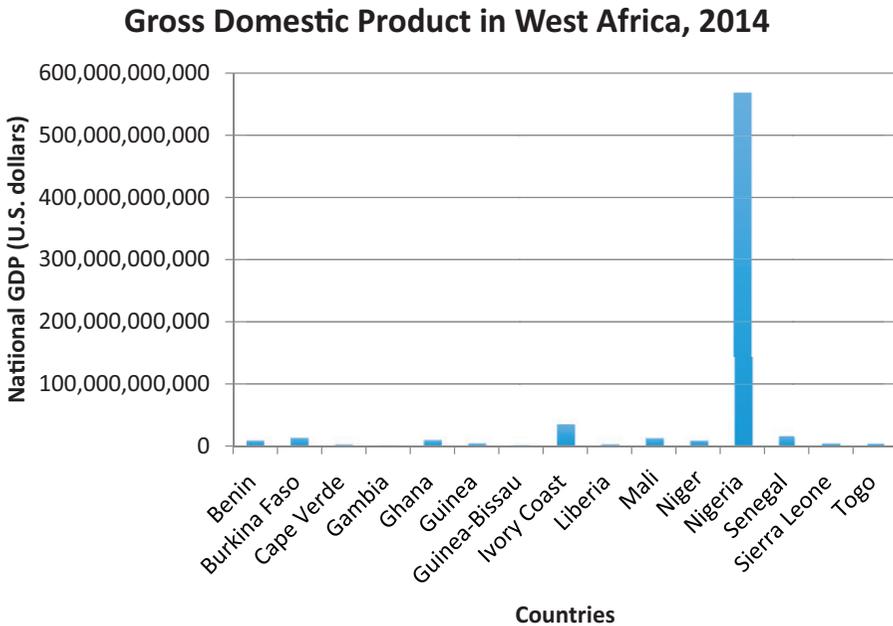


Figure 3. Gross domestic product in West Africa, 2014

In concluding, it should be noted that while the existence of the three most important realist attributes of hegemony—military, economic, and population dominance—superficially render Nigeria a realist hegemon, indeed, even the extent to which it fully qualifies as such might be called into question. The possession of such attributes, put otherwise, is a necessary—*though not sufficient*—condition for

realist hegemony. Thus, while it could be debated as to whether or not Nigeria *actually* fulfills the role of a realist hegemon beyond statistics, given its overwhelming possession of realist hegemonic credentials, its behavior and self-perception as such, and the lack of any other regional state that could even potentially be considered as such, it will be considered as one for the purposes of this work.

Liberal Interpretations of Hegemony

Yet, for scholars outside the (neo-)realist tradition of International Relations, simple military, economic, and population strength are not sufficient: the question of legitimacy, or reputation for rightful rule, is an equally important component of hegemonic status. Rather than simply accepting Thucydides' well-worn dictum that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must," scholars in the liberal International Relations tradition tend to believe that norms of reciprocity and respect for and from the governed is at the core of true leadership, and thus an incumbent part of hegemony in both global and regional contexts. Perhaps one of the most fundamental aspects of liberal understandings of statuses of power rests in the notion of what Lake (2011, 3) calls "relational authority," or the understanding that "the right to rule rests on a social contract in which the ruler provides a political order of value to the ruled, who in turn, grant legitimacy to the ruler and comply with restraints on behavior necessary for the production of that order."⁷

While the previous section made the case that Nigeria does indeed fulfill the realist attributes of a hegemon, the reality is that it tends not to fulfill the liberal attributes of one. Imbued within discussions of legitimacy is the notion of reputation, or the exertion of Nye's (1990) image of "soft power." As has been insinuated thus far, Nigeria's poor international reputation has led to a distinct dearth of soft power and resultantly, legitimacy problems, which it has assiduously sought to downplay or explain away. Various factors lie at the heart of Nigeria's lack of legitimacy. Among them, Nigeria's image problems come from its lamentable distinction as home to "419" schemes involving financial email and advanced fee fraud (Smith 2008); its significant role in transnational drug trafficking (Warner 2011a); its perceived role in the perpetration of West African cybercrime (Warner 2011b); the perception of rampant and widespread corruption in the Nigerian government, from embezzling oil wealth (Smith 2008; Smith and Smith 2007) and the manipulation of discourses of national security to embezzle money (Egbo et al. 2012); its notorious ethnic clashes in its Middle Belt region between Christians and Muslims (Fawole 2008); and a general perception of some Nigerians as "loud, brash, and arrogant" (Adebajo 2008). Today, Nigerian newspaper stories proliferate about Nigeria's poor image internationally. Various national media have wondered, "Does Nigeria Have an Image Problem?" (Nwaubani 2014) and colloquia have been held around the country entitled "Managing Nigeria's Image," which blames everyone from Nigerian and international media to corrupt politicians to citizen criminals and fraudsters to insurgent groups for contributing to the country's problematic portrayals ("Nigeria's Worsening Image" 2014). Even reputable travel guides like *Lonely Planet* introduce Nigeria by

⁷This notion of relational authority in Africa has been taken up, artfully, by Gebrewold (2014), who has offered the most interesting discussion to date on the concept of legitimacy in continental regional relations. In his study on the quality of regional leadership by Nigeria, South Africa, and Ethiopia, he suggests that states can be considered regional powers only if they fulfill three requirements—domestic legitimacy, regional legitimacy, and international reliability—suggesting forthrightly that, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, legitimacy is an inextricable component of regional hegemonic status. Articulated succinctly by Adebajo (2008, 12): "hegemony [in Africa] involves leadership and influence and not just bullying dominance."

stating, “We shouldn’t beat around the bush: Nigeria has an image problem” (*Lonely Planet* 2014).⁸

Underlining the extent to which Nigeria’s image problems have frustrated its foreign policy, improving Nigeria’s image abroad has been a central concern for Nigerian foreign policymakers since the transition to democratic rule in 1999. Lanre and Olumide (2015) note that upon his ascension to the presidency in 1999, Olusegun Obasanjo undertook a “rebranding of the nation’s image abroad as an important aspect of his foreign policy.” These were accomplished through extensive public relations campaigns to help improve the country’s battered international image, which was tarnished, at that point, as a result of a poor governmental human rights record under various military regimes (particularly those of Ibrahim Babangida [1985–1993] and Sani Abacha [1993–1998]). For his part, Osuntokun (2008, 158) has noted that “the image of the ‘ugly Nigerian’ has become a significant obstacle to good relations, not only with Nigeria’s neighbors, but also on the continent and further afield.” And Mustapha (2008, 52) has argued that “Nigeria’s national reputation or identity has a bearing on its foreign policy... Simply stated, Nigeria’s national reputation in the international arena as a country of alleged fraudsters and drug barons makes some of its national foreign policy objectives very difficult to attain.” Yet, despite a historically poor international reputation, Nigeria’s approach to addressing the Boko Haram insurgency is predicated on proving itself worthy of the title of hegemon via its quest for rightful rule, which it has done through the tactic of projecting illusory hegemony.

***Pax-Nigeriana*, Illusory Hegemony, and the Four Concentric Circles of Foreign Policymaking**

Despite its drive for a *Pax-Nigeriana*, nearly all observers agree that Nigeria has yet to achieve that goal (Adebajo 2000, 2004, 2008; Buzan and Waever 2003, 55; Gambari 2008; Gebrewold 2014; Wright and Okolo 1999, 126–30). Why is this so? Many explanations have been put forward.

The first prominent explanation comes from those who have opined that the pursuit of *Pax-Nigeriana* has been retarded by the hijacking of the state apparatus by Nigerian elites (Adebajo 2008, 2; Bayart and Hibou 1999; Obi 2008, 188; Wright and Okolo 1999, 121–22). Adebajo (2008) compares Nigeria to a potentially prosperous Gulliver, and Nigeria’s leaders as the Lilliputians, “whose petty ambitions and often inhumane greed... have prevented a country of enormous potential from fulfilling its leadership aspirations and developmental potential.” A second line of reasoning suggests that Nigeria’s non-cohesive domestic social landscape has had deleterious impacts on the process of Nigerian policymaking (Mustapha 2008; Wright and Okolo 1999, 120). Given that loyalty typically tends to lie with ethnicity over nationality, the historical ethnic tensions in the country (exacerbated by colonialism, geography, and resource endowments) have created a fractured foreign policymaking apparatus, which Mustapha (2008) conjectures have led to suboptimal foreign policy and security outcomes.

A third explanation comes from those who believe that it is Nigerian civil society’s indifference toward the pursuit of *Pax-Nigeriana* that could be at the heart of the country’s inability to achieve it. It has rarely been the case that Nigerian foreign policymaking has served to benefit the modal Nigerian (Wright and Okolo

⁸Anecdotally, when Vladimir Putin annexed the Ukrainian Crimean Peninsula in the name of Russia in March 2014, *Time* suggested that Russia was “transformed from a superpower into a corrupt petro-state,” or what Google cofounder Sergey Brin described as “Nigeria with snow” (Shuster 2014, 74).

1999),⁹ and thus Nigerians have been historically opposed to the government's eagerness to engage in peacekeeping (Hill 2009, 292). Thus, writing in 2000, Adebajo (195) noted that average Nigerians' opinions of Nigeria's peacekeeping leadership in Sierra Leone and Liberia "ranged from lukewarm to hostile," while Gandois (2009, 127) asserted that Nigerians were "quite skeptical" of the 1990s West African interventions.¹⁰

This article suggests that the current crisis of *Pax-Nigeriana* is underwritten by a confluence of the above hypotheses. However, it adds to them by taking seriously the distinctions in "hegemony" between realist and liberal variants. In short, it argues that while Nigeria does (arguably) fully possess the realist attributes of a West African hegemon (economic, military, and population superiority), it fails to exert actual hegemony and achieve *Pax-Nigeriana* because of a failure of legitimacy in the liberal sense. This lack of legitimacy for rightful rule is undercut, first and foremost, in its domestic sphere, by a combination of corruption, a fractured social fabric, and an uninterested civil society whose lives and aspirations do not align with those of neo-patrimonial elites. These domestic problems have led to a crisis of legitimacy in the international sphere, which leadership at various levels of the Nigerian government works to conceal, to downplay, or sometimes ignore.

Clarifying Illusory Hegemony

Before moving forward, the notion of "illusory hegemony" demands a bit more nuance. First, it should be noted that a country can undertake a policy of illusory hegemony projection in relation to varying time horizons: countries that *have been* or even *are* regionally hegemonic may still employ a tactic of illusory hegemony as need arises: the enactment of a foreign and security policy of illusory hegemony can occur either in the short term (to cover up failure in relation to a onetime, isolated incident) or in the long term (as a grand strategic tactic aimed at cementing rightful regional leadership over decades in the face of enduring insufficiencies).¹¹

Second, although "illusory hegemony" is a policy that is first and foremost designed to give legitimacy to would-be hegemons within their *external* environments, at least in the case of Nigeria, the employment of such a strategy is also undertaken to bolster elites' positions within the *domestic* Nigerian government as well. To be sure, patterns of governance in Nigeria have long been characterized as being neo-patrimonial, and built upon a system of corruption and collusion between international oil companies (whose activities bankroll approximately 80 percent of the national budget), Nigerian elites (who often usurp these profits for personal gain), and citizens at all levels of society (who often seek to find "patrons" with access to these rents for survival). Thus, particularly when entrenchment within the state apparatus is viewed as such a deeply lucrative position, the imperatives for leaders at all levels of policymaking to vaunt their achievements (real or not) and simultaneously ignore, overlook, or downplay failures is a rational choice. Put otherwise, undertaking a policy of promoting illusory hegemonic status in the international sphere simultaneously helps safeguard elites'

⁹And, as Khadiagala and Lyons (2001, 11–12) have emphasized, "neither Nigeria's leadership [in peacekeeping]...nor its quest for a seat on the UN Security Council has any resonance with ordinary citizens preoccupied with basic survival."

¹⁰To that end, Hill (2009, 292) notes that one of the first acts that Olusegun Obasanjo undertook upon assuming the presidency in 1999 was ordering the repatriation of all extant Nigerian peacekeepers in Sierra Leone.

¹¹Nigeria, for instance, has at points in its post-independence history most certainly fulfilled the attributes of a hegemon in *both* the realist and liberal senses: most notably, it played an imperative hegemonic role in the formulation of ECOWAS; was a vociferous critic of the apartheid regime in South Africa; demonstrated leadership in the ECOMOG missions; and remains a strong voice in articulating West African concerns in African and global fora.

positions against critiques of incompetence, and thus, departure from seats of governance.

Third, one might rightly ask whether Nigeria’s pursuit of “illusory hegemony” is a concerted, articulated policy objective, or, if instead, the prevarications that define it might simply be an act of triage within the Nigerian government to cover up mistakes from strategic and tactical failures. Here, it is suggested that illusory hegemony should be understood to fall somewhere between a purposive (though unarticulated) “strategy” inherent in the pursuit of *Pax-Nigeriana*, on one hand, and an implicit and unrecognized “behavior norm,” on the other. While the presence of an officially delineated policy cannot be traced, the prevalence of misinformation, lack of information, conflicting stories, and outright prevarication that prevails from the government (especially the Jonathan administration) in the otherwise information-rich Nigeria suggests that the pursuit of illusory hegemony is likely more than just happenstance convergence of unrelated mix-ups over the course of many years.¹²

Finally, given that this article paints a very broad picture about the pursuit of *Pax-Nigeriana* and the undertaking of illusory hegemony through time, space, and levels of analysis, it should be recalled that the evidence presented here is part of an inductive, rather than deductive, argument. It is thus inherently anecdotal, context specific, and thus does not claim to present an entirely comprehensive picture of Nigerian foreign and security policymaking since independence. Rather, it simply aspires to offer one lens through which to better understand the rationality of Nigerian policymaking that is frequently misunderstood by observers outside the country.

Circle One: Nigeria and Its Immediate Neighbors

The first circle of Nigerian grand strategy is its concern with its immediate neighbors: Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Niger, and São Tomé and Príncipe. In this circle, Nigeria’s primary goal is to ensure its own security against attacks from these neighbors, in addition to asserting its leadership in military, economic, and political affairs. Within the context of its first foreign policy circle of protection against its neighbors, Nigeria inevitably demonstrates a preponderance of economic and military resources: as Chad’s president Idris Déby recently said, “When Nigeria sneezes, the neighboring countries catch cold” (Oladeji 2015). However, its poor reputation and lack of legitimacy hamper its ability to attain the status of regional hegemon.

Though on paper Nigeria’s large economy, superior military, and overwhelming population should allow it to exert its presence among its neighbors, its potential achievement of *Pax-Nigeriana* is retarded by its tumultuous domestic security landscape,¹³ which inevitably hampers its reputation for international leadership among its immediate neighbors. Indeed, Nigeria has faced no shortage of insurgent and vigilante groups in the country. These include, among others, the Bakassi Boys, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta

¹²A convincing argument, for instance, might be made that Nigeria’s tendencies for illusory hegemony are emblematic of a domestic culture of “buck-passing” within the federal government, where admissions of failures are never formally recognized, and blame and non-blame circulated to the point where taking responsibility becomes ancillary to righting the policy issues that led to the failure in the first place.

¹³For his part, Clapham (1996, 122) underlines the irony that African states that are physically large enough to potentially serve as regional hegemonies have been retarded in their abilities to fulfill those roles because of the difficulties associated with the control of such large territories in the first place. As he writes: “A . . . major impediment to the emergence of regional leadership was the internal division of would-be hegemonic states themselves. It was an almost inevitable consequence of the generally small size of indigenous African political communities, and the externally dominated process of state formation, that any state with a large enough territory and population should have serious problems of internal coherence. Every large state in Sub-Saharan Africa—Nigeria, Ethiopia, South Africa, DRC, Sudan was deeply riven by internal conflict, and most suffered civil wars.”

(MEND), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansaru, and, intuitively, Boko Haram. Unable to control the territory within its borders, Nigeria scarcely can control its international borders, thus serving as a destabilizing force for its neighbors. Drawing on Nathan's (2006) recognition that a regional security community is first premised upon each member's maintenance of domestic stability, Omode (2006) noted that "the highly porous and easily permeable nature of [Nigeria's] boundaries, coupled with an incoherent border policy by Nigeria and the governments of contiguous states, accounts for the lukewarm and sometimes frosty relations between Nigeria and her immediate neighbors." To the extent that Nigeria lacks a Weberian monopoly on violence domestically, its pursuit of *Pax-Nigeriana* has been slowed by the fact that rather than standing at the frontlines of security provision among its neighbors, it is instead a "perceived source, or incubator, of some security threats to the subregion" (Obi 2008, 184).¹⁴

Yet, despite its inability to maintain domestic—and thus international—control of its borders, Nigerian foreign policymakers, in the maintenance of illusory hegemony, have vehemently defended their nation's internal security landscape, particularly in response to the Chibok kidnappings: throughout the Chibok debacle, prevarication has been a common theme. In the initial aftermath of the March 2014 kidnappings, Jonathan simply ignored them (*USA Today Editorial Board* 2014), until the Nigerian spokesman Major General Chris Olukolade claimed that the Nigerian military had freed 100 girls (Dorell 2014), a statement that was later proven to be untrue (Adedeji 2014). This early cover-up fundamentally undermined Nigeria's credibility in its subsequent actions. Not long after, the Nigerian first lady, Patience Jonathan, threatened to arrest civil society members protesting the government's response (Faul 2014a), while the Jonathan administration claimed that the protesters had simply invented the kidnappings as a political stunt to discredit him in advance of the 2015 elections (*USA Today Editorial Board* 2014). Nor could the Nigerian military, even months later, produce a clear number of precisely how many girls had been abducted (Murdock 2014).¹⁵

After Jonathan finally acknowledged the kidnappings three weeks after they occurred, the military began to claim—to international skepticism—that it knew the whereabouts of the girls. In a May 2014 interview, a Nigerian air chief marshall asserted definitely that the Nigerian army had located the girls, yet could not reveal where they were to the outside world. In an anecdotal instance of the maintenance of illusory hegemony, he was quick to reemphasize the competency of the Nigerian military, asserting: "I can tell you that our military can and will" rescue the girls. "Nobody should say [the] Nigerian military does not know what it is doing," he said. "We cannot come and tell you the military secret, just leave us alone, we are working to get the girls back" (Ford 2014). As of this writing in December 2015, the girls had not yet been returned.¹⁶

On a broader plane, the tendency for prevarication has characterized Nigeria's response to Boko Haram since the group appeared. As Zenn (2013b) has noted, since the emergence of Boko Haram in 2010, the Nigerian government has

¹⁴To that end, some contemporary observers recall Ghana's pejorative reference to Nigeria as a "big for nothing" during the 1960s (Gambari 2008, 69).

¹⁵As Commissioner Tanko Lawan relayed, "it is really difficult to say the actual number of girls that were abducted" even nearly a month after the kidnappings, given that "not all of the girls were full-time students at the school" (Murdock 2014).

¹⁶To the extent that buck-passing characterized the Jonathan administration's responses, another tendency for the projection of illusory hegemony were the Jonathan administration's frequent claims to assert that the Boko Haram insurgency was not nearly as threatening as some suggested, but instead, was a political tactic used by governors of northern states of Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe to discredit him and his People's Democratic Party (PDP) in advance of the 2015 elections against the ultimately successful All Progressives Congress (APC), led by current President Muhammadu Buhari.

claimed to have killed its leader, Abubakar Shekau, at least five times.¹⁷ Indeed, on the day that Boko Haram released video showing images of the kidnapped girls with Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau, the Nigerian government insisted, counterintuitively, that he was in fact dead.¹⁸ Today, analysts almost universally agree that Shekau is indeed alive and well, despite new—and ultimately untrue—claims by the Nigerian government in late September 2014 that he had been killed, yet again.

The Nigerian military is also known for its tendencies toward prevarication in relation to its internal operational culture. On one hand, Nigerian military personnel have been accused of committing and then denying grave human rights abuses against the very Nigerian citizens they are supposed to be protecting, thus generating a perception of the military as being as dangerous as Boko Haram itself (see Hill 2009). Such claims have been made throughout the Boko Haram insurgency (since approximately 2010): the Nigerian counterterrorism forces in the joint task force are known for not following due process in seizures and for perpetrating indiscriminate violence. Damningly, reports from September 2014 have suggested that Nigerian military personnel slit the throats of suspected militants in front of mass graves. The Nigerian state has vehemently denied the majority of these claims, despite the fact that many international observers have rigorously documented such crimes (Ibeh 2014; Human Rights Watch 2012).

Beyond human rights abuses, the Nigerian military has been faced with a significant number of mutinies and desertions from within its ranks, all of which it has sought to cover up or explain away to the outside world in the protection of its claims to legitimacy. For instance, stories were reported in June 2014 that the Nigerian military began firing on its leaders in protest of orders that they go into battle against Boko Haram, which the soldiers felt sure they would lose. The Nigerian military denied these, explaining instead that the soldiers were “firing into the air,” in anger about the killing of their colleagues by Boko Haram, and that claims of mutiny were “an unfounded rumor” (Audu 2014). Nearly all reports deny this and assert with certainty that this was indeed a mutiny. Similarly, when it was revealed that at least 480 Nigerian soldiers crossed into Cameroon in August 2014, the Nigerian military deemed it to be a “tactical maneuver,” though it was later revealed that the Nigerian troops were, in fact, fleeing from Boko Haram itself (“Close to 500” 2014).

Circle Two: Nigeria and the West African Region

The second circle in Nigeria’s pursuit of *Pax-Nigeriana* is the West African region. Indeed, Nigeria’s primary stumbling block to the achievement of *Pax-Nigeriana* within the West African region is questionable legitimacy among other countries beyond its immediate neighbors. Since the beginning of the pursuit of *Pax-Nigeriana* in the early years of independence beginning in the 1960s, other West African states have been wary of Nigerian leadership in West Africa.¹⁹ More contemporarily, few scholars debate the extent to which Nigeria’s regional neighbors retain a healthy skepticism of its leadership (Adebajo 2000, 2008; Obi 2008; Gebrewold

¹⁷The supposed instances of Nigerian government killing of Shekau have ostensibly occurred, among others, in July 2009, in massive clashes between Nigerian police and Boko Haram; on August 1, 2013, in a Boko Haram mutiny or by Nigerian security forces; and on August 19, 2013, in Cameroon, either by border guards or as a result of a gunfight (Zenn 2013a, 2013b).

¹⁸Rather, the government claimed the person in the video was just a look-alike, since, as government spokeswoman Marilyn Ogar said: “Boko Haram is a franchise...anybody can assume any name. The person that is the National Leader of Boko Haram has just adopted the name Abubakar Shekau” (Murdock 2014).

¹⁹For instance, during the creation of ECOWAS in the 1970s, Senegal and Côte d’Ivoire initially pushed for the inclusion of Zaire as part of West Africa so as to balance potential Nigerian hegemony (Adedeji 2004, 22, 29; Gandois 2009).

2014, 13): despite the fact that many Nigerian elites view the country's leadership role as "inevitable," Adebajo notes that its regional policy "smacks of paternalism," and that Nigeria's "unilateral, arrogant style has often been questioned by its neighbors" (Adebajo 2008, 10–13). To that end, he has underlined that most West African countries "do not question the need for Nigeria's leadership," but instead, dislike its "penchant for a unilateral diplomatic style that offends the sensibilities of smaller, poorer, and weaker states" (Adebajo 2000, 194).²⁰

This limited legitimacy for rightful rule—and attendant attempts at covering up realist failures via the projection of illusory hegemony—have been most evident in this second circle of Nigeria's foreign policymaking when it comes to the battle against Boko Haram. Nigeria's relationship with Cameroon has been shaken due to Nigerian tendencies to assert itself as the leader in the fight against Boko Haram, even while the comparatively diminutive Cameroon consistently accomplishes military victories against the group that Nigeria cannot. Instances of the Cameroonian military successfully driving Boko Haram militants out of its own territory and back into Nigeria throughout 2014 and 2015 have been common, and Cameroonian rescue missions have embarrassed Nigeria. Notably in May and July 2014, Boko Haram militants kidnapped the wife of Cameroon's deputy prime minister, Amadou Ali, along with many others, in a border town by Nigeria: the Cameroonian military promptly rescued them all by October 2014. Nigerian commentators bristled, lamenting that their country, the "big brother of West Africa," should now actively seek to emulate its smaller and less powerful neighbor.

The same tendencies toward strained regional relationships within this second circle of *Pax-Nigeriana* have been present with Chad. For his part, Chadian president Idriss Déby has been explicit on numerous occasions about his frustration with the Nigerian approach to trying to capture Shekau. His collected critiques from throughout 2015 include Nigeria's tendency to downplay the regional threat of Boko Haram; its unwillingness to undertake joint operations with other countries; and Nigeria's unwillingness to communicate with other countries, even months after the ostensible start of joint operations (Umar et al. 2015).

Apart from its contemporary drive toward *Pax-Nigeriana* being frustrated by its current inability to deal with Boko Haram, Abuja has historically also faced challenges in exerting its regional hegemonic legitimacy by a non-African presence: France. Paris, having been the colonizer in ten of West Africa's fourteen states, has historically been one of Nigeria's biggest threats in the region, due to each country's perception that the other is infringing upon its rightful sphere of influence (Buzan and Waever 2003, 250). The relationship between the two countries has been rocky since Nigeria's independence, when France assiduously sought to undermine Nigeria's postcolonial regional gravitas.²¹ Nigeria has been rightfully concerned: Adebajo (2000, 186) notes, "Nigeria's leaders have historically considered their country to be the natural hegemon of West Africa, while the sub-regional francophone states have looked to France for protections against a country that they regarded as a potential neighborhood bully." Thus, Nigeria has long made reducing French weight in the region a foreign policy priority (Gambari 1991; Fawole 2008).

²⁰Further, Nigeria served to undermine its leadership credentials in West Africa when, in 1983, it expelled some 2 million West African immigrants with only 14 days' notice, many of whom were citizens within the larger ECOWAS community, angering regional states (Gandois 2009, 115; Wright and Okolo 1999, 128).

²¹As many Nigerian scholars have noted, Lagos (then the capital of Nigeria) cut off formal relations with France in 1961 in protest of Paris's testing of nuclear weapons in the Sahara, and poor relations were exacerbated when France supported the Biafran separatists in 1967 to diminish Nigeria's preeminence in the region; counteracted Nigerian interventions into Chad in 1981–1982; and supported Charles Taylor in Liberia, even as a Nigerian-led ECOMOG (Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group) force was attempting to oust him (Adebajo 2008, 8; Clapham 1996, 121–25).

Among other realist tactics to counter French presence in the region, Nigeria has sought to use its influence in ECOWAS as a tool to promote its regional hegemony, a strategy that has arguably proven more or less successful.²² Having recognized its need to bolster its image in the face of French entrenchment in the post-independence 1960s and simultaneously create a forum to demonstrate regional leadership to its neighbors, Nigeria spearheaded the creation of ECOWAS along with Togo, in a 1972 proposal that was ultimately accepted by 1975.²³ To the extent that Nigeria viewed itself as hegemonic, Gandois (2009, 106) notes that once consensus was achieved within Nigerian foreign policy circles of the cogency of Nigerian Adebayo Adedeji’s plan for West African regional integration (see Adedeji 1970), it began undertaking a regional diplomatic offensive described by Ojo (1980) as “spraying,” or giving economic inducements to its neighbors, thanks to its booming oil economy,²⁴ and was thus responsible for “singlehandedly promoting” ECOWAS’s creation (Gandois 2009, 108).²⁵

Since spearheading the creation of ECOWAS, Nigeria has worked to assert its leadership regionally via the organization; yet, as in other spheres, attempts at hegemony have been undercut by reputational problems. Particularly, regional distrust of Nigeria was very much on display as it took the reins of various peacekeeping missions in West Africa, beginning in the 1990s. Specifically, under the auspices of ECOWAS and its peacekeeping force ECOMOG, Nigeria led interventions in Liberia (1990–1998 and 2003) and Sierra Leone (1997–1998) as tools at least partly²⁶ to promote its hegemonic credentials in West Africa (Obi 2008, 190).²⁷ Despite wide international support for Nigerian leadership by the United States and the United Nations, other ECOWAS members remained skeptical of Nigeria’s intentions. On one hand, Nigeria was critiqued by its neighbors for being overly eager to take a leadership role in such missions for hegemonic aims (Gebrewold 2014, 12); on the other, many complained of the poor behavior of Nigerian peacekeepers in Liberia (1990),²⁸ who were so infamous for looting from those that they were supposed to protect that “ECOMOG” came to be derisively known as meaning “Every car or movable object gone” (Hill 2009).²⁹

²²However, Gandois (2009, chapter 2) has also noted how France’s presence was also—somewhat counterintuitively—the catalyst for early West African regionalism.

²³Both Adedeji (2004, 28) and Gandois (2009, 106) have detailed that an important variable in the creation of ECOWAS was the 1972 initiative launched by Nigeria and Togo, which ultimately came to be adopted. In short, their joint commitment to the initiative was imperative, as it demonstrated cooperation among the most salient divides of the region, namely between a strong Anglophone state and a poorer Francophone state, which had historically been stumbling blocks to cooperation in the region.

²⁴Despite Nigeria’s strategy of “spraying” wealth to its West African neighbors, those like Wright and Okolo (1999, 124) have questioned the efficacy, given that, despite the Nigerian generosity, it did not produce “much corresponding influence.”

²⁵Throughout, France tried to forestall the creation of ECOWAS to continue to assert its presence, most notably calling a 1975 emergency meeting of its former colonies in Niamey, Niger, where it warned them of the regional elephant (Nigeria) that was hungry to devour the West African grass (the francophone African states) within the context of ECOWAS (Adedeji 2004, 31).

²⁶Yet, to be sure, these interventions were not undertaken unilaterally. On one hand, the deposed president of Sierra Leone requested the ECOMOG intervention, as did the UN. Moreover, given the prominence of Nigeria’s place in the region, its leadership in ECOMOG was also generally supported by the United States, thus giving Nigeria the international credibility to spearhead the force.

²⁷Having contributed 80% of the troops and 90% of the funding for the two operations, Nigerian aspirations for leadership in the West African region were made clear (Adebajo and Rashid 2004, 293; Hailu 2012, 128).

²⁸To that end, Hill (2009, 293) has detailed that the abuses of Nigerian peacekeepers can be broken down into five categories: “the rape and sexual abuse of women and children; the looting of private property; the summary execution of enemy fighters and their alleged civilian supporters; the unlawful detention of combatants and non-combatants alike; and the failure to minimize civilian casualties during combat operations.”

²⁹Hill (2009), in conducting an analysis of the behavior of Nigerian peacekeepers in both Liberia and Sierra Leone, has hypothesized that the cause of Nigerian peacekeepers’ poor behavior abroad can be traced to the poor nature of civil-military relations domestically.

That Nigeria is an unsuccessful would-be West African regional leader has been underlined in different ways by various observers. [Buzan and Waever \(2003, 204\)](#) have noted in the simplest terms about Nigerian leadership in West Africa that “The paradox is that Nigeria is both the mainstay [of ECOWAS] and itself hanging in the brink of failure as a state.” And, as [Adebajo \(192\)](#) presciently wrote in 2000:

There are two paradoxes involved in Nigeria’s hegemonic quest in West Africa: First, while it lacks the military and economic resources to fulfill the role effectively, Nigeria still possesses more resources and capabilities than its neighbors, allowing it to project power in its subregion. Second, Nigeria’s greatest opportunity to dominate its subregion is occurring at a time of continuing political troubles and severe economic problems at home.

In discussing the likelihood of a regional security community coalescing in West Africa, [Buzan and Waever \(2003, 255\)](#) have noted that “although the West Africa[n region] is clearly unipolar, a Nigeria-centered order would have limited legitimacy.” Moreover, Nigerian policies of prevarication endure: despite its commitments to ECOWAS for the purposes of establishing its presence as the region’s legitimate unipole, “Nigeria’s security practice has not matched its rhetoric on addressing [West Africa’s] transnational security threats” ([Obi 2008, 193](#)). Writing more recently, [Gebrewold \(2014, 18\)](#) comes to a similar conclusion: “Nigeria. . .show[s] a considerable gap between [its] aspirations and [its] ability to act as [a] regional stabilizer, mainly due to a lack of legitimacy.”

Circle Three: Nigeria and Pan-African Relations

The third concentric circle of Nigerian foreign policymaking includes the entirety of the African continent, another realm in which it undertakes a policy of illusory hegemony. In this circle, Nigeria seeks to assert that it is the intuitive leader of the African continent (along with South Africa), a claim that it has attempted to substantiate via displays of leadership in continental politics since independence. Among others, Nigeria’s first president, Nnamdi Azikiwe, was at the forefront of the creation of the OAU in 1963, and Nigeria always played a strong leadership role in the organization. More specifically, Nigeria was fundamental in the decolonization struggle across southern Africa, investing a reported one billion dollars in the decolonization movement in South Africa, especially in Zimbabwe, Angola, and South Africa ([Osuntokun 2008, 142](#); [Gambari 2008](#); [Inamete 2001](#)).³⁰ Later, Nigeria, and particularly President Olusegun Obasanjo, laudably played a fundamental role in restructuring the OAU to the African Union (AU) in 2002, including the provision of progressive language on the right of intervention ([Tieku 2004](#); [Haggis 2009](#)). Given this leadership, Nigeria is indeed contemporarily known to be a “key player” in AU affairs ([Gandois 2009, 42, 57](#)) while, specifically in relation to its early peacekeeping efforts, others have rightly questioned whether Nigeria is “Africa’s new gendarme” ([Adebajo 2000](#)).

Yet, while Nigeria, along with South Africa, has a preponderance of power among the comparatively weaker states across sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria’s lack of internal domestic control continues to hamper its ability to achieve *Pax-Nigeriana* in the third concentric circle of pan-African affairs. Most importantly, Nigeria continues to register poorly on most failed state indicator lists, ranking in

³⁰Indeed, [Wright and Okolo \(1999, 129\)](#) note that it was Nigeria’s leadership in galvanizing pan-African dissent against the South African apartheid-era regime that gave Nigeria its largest source of credibility on the continental level ([Wright and Okolo 1999, 129](#)). Yet, the double-edged sword for Nigeria was that the downfall of the apartheid regime served to undercut Nigeria’s pan-African authority, precisely because Abuja lacked a similarly important issue around which to attempt to exert leadership.

2014 as the world’s 17th most failed state (Fund for Peace 2014),³¹ falling well behind the average sub-Saharan African state over which it seeks to claim hegemony. Moreover, in 2014 Nigeria also garnered the lamentable distinction of having one of Africa’s highest numbers of internally displaced persons at 975,000, boasting a poorer record only than Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2015).

Examples of Nigeria’s demands to prove its power at the pan-African level, particularly the fight against Boko Haram, were put front and center at the January 2015 semi-annual meeting of the African Union. While Nigeria had historically worked assiduously to keep the Boko Haram insurgency out of discussions at the AU in previous years, by early 2015, the insurgency was so powerful that West African states, namely Ghana, pressured it to be taken up. The outcome was that the AU pledged to commit an 8,700-person force to be sent to the country.

Nigeria, which would have had its hegemonic credentials deeply undermined with the entrance of a pan-African force into its borders—a clear sign that it was impotent in its own fight—quickly restructured the approved force from being a functionally AU force to a regional force. At that point, one would have assumed that the peacekeeping force would be based at ECOWAS, a more contemporary version of an ECOMOG force. Yet, Nigeria’s insistence on maintaining control over its domestic security landscape, in the vein of the hegemon it aspires to be, asserted that the new force should be operated by the countries of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), a regional grouping of countries that few outside the region had ever heard of. With its members of Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, in addition to Benin, the LCBC is now at the head of the fight against Boko Haram. To be sure, the deftness with which the Nigerian policymaking establishment succeeded in wrangling the anti-Boko Haram coalition away from not only the pan-African African Union (and potential rivals like South Africa or Ethiopia), but even away from the West African ECOWAS (and powerful member-states like Ghana and Senegal), Nigeria’s distillation of the force to be managed by a handful of four countries in addition to itself, is both a remarkable grand strategic accomplishment and a rational policy choice.

Since the LCBC has taken on the fight against Boko Haram, Nigeria has made sure that it stays firmly at the reins of all of its activities. For instance, while some members had suggested that leadership of the LCBC joint task force should rotate among countries, Nigeria made sure that it alone would retain control over the operation (“Buhari Wants Nigeria to Lead” 2015), and appointed its own major general Illiya Abbah—a former commander of counterinsurgency efforts in the Niger Delta—to the position in July 2015 (*Jeune Afrique* 2015). Moreover, Nigeria also, in a strong-armed attempt to show that it was in the lead of its neighbors, and not the other way around, forbid soldiers within the LCBC joint task force from crossing into Nigeria, a move that was just lifted in August 2015. Indeed, the dogged Nigerian insistence on maintaining control over the LCBC speaks of not only its self-perceptions as a hegemon, but its desire to involve as few voices as possible “behind the scenes” of its foreign and security policymaking apparatus.

A second contemporary instance in which Nigeria’s non-monopoly over its domestic security politics subverts its pan-African leadership quest can be seen in relation to its reaction to the new AU-based rapid-response mechanism to stop conflict, the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises (ACIRC). ACIRC, which was proposed by South Africa in 2013, is intended to be a volunteer, multinational rapid-deployment force capable of quickly intervening in African

³¹Of course, it should be noted that the utility of such “failed state” indexes is debated with fervor (see Engleburt and Tull 2013). Nevertheless, they are revelatory of broad patterns of state efficacy, and thus should not be fully discounted.

member-states in the likely event of state collapse and/or human rights abuses. Despite widespread continental support, however, Nigeria has declined to contribute to the initiative, a development that came as a surprise to many onlookers. Various observers have suggested that duplicity is at play. Officially, Nigeria has said that it is reluctant to commit because ACIRC is a duplication of preexisting rapid-deployment mechanisms within the AU (namely, the African Standby Force [ASF]) (Warner 2015). Others, however, believe that in fact Nigeria is apprehensive about committing troops or materiel to pan-African conflicts, given that it desperately needs to use them first at home to fight Boko Haram (Du Plessis 2014). To support this claim, they point to the fact that Nigeria had to withdraw troops from the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MIUSMA) in order to redeploy its troops to fight Boko Haram within its own borders in Borno state (Campbell 2013).

Circle Four: Nigeria in Global Politics

The final circle of *Pax-Nigeriana* is an aspiration for global prominence. While Nigeria can in no way really compete with globally preeminent states for true hegemony, Nigerian military and government leaders have long championed the country as Africa's natural global representative, and a powerful ideological force for pan-African emancipatory purposes. To the extent that Nigeria views itself as serving as an intuitive African representative in global politics, various observers of Nigerian foreign and military policymaking have noted that the country has "exhibited a missionary zeal, claiming a responsibility to protect, or at least speak on behalf of, black people in apartheid South Africa, pre-civil rights America, and contemporary Brazil" (Adebajo 2008). Anecdotally, former Nigerian leader General Yakubu Gowon once said that "Peoples of African descent throughout the world see in a strong Nigeria as a banner of hope, and an instrument for achieving self-respect for the black man, so long degraded everywhere" (Adebajo 2008, 14), while two leading Nigerian academics have written that "There can be no nobler task for Nigeria to accomplish than to employ prudently Nigeria's leverage to obtain accelerated freedom and justice for all blacks" (Akinyemi and Ogwu in Wright and Okolo 1999).

Primarily, Nigeria's maintenance of the semblance of reputational legitimacy at the global level of analysis entails the rejection of non-African international military assistance, the acceptance of which would signal its incompetence in being able to deal with its own problems. Despite assurances from officials in both the United States and the UK that they offered assistance immediately after the Chibok kidnappings in April 2014, Nigeria rejected them until a month later, in May (Faul 2014b). Nigeria also denied having ever received offers of foreign military assistance from Australia, which was later shown to be untrue (Amaeule and Adepegba 2014).

In perhaps the most notable example of Nigerian rejection of international assistance, Nigeria cancelled a planned US training program for Nigerian troops in November 2014, after the late Nigerian Ambassador to the United States, Adebowale Adefuye, chastised the United States for failing to sell Nigeria weapons. Particularly as concerns its relationship with Washington under the Jonathan administration, numerous Nigerian diplomats, especially Ambassador Adefuye in a November 2014 speech at the Council on Foreign Relations, were prone to claim that by not selling Nigeria weapons, it was actually the United States' fault that Boko Haram had not been vanquished. To that end, and in line with the imperatives of the projection of illusory hegemony, Ambassador Adefuye has been described as "a zealous and fearless advocate for Jonathan's often-shaky administration" (O'Grady 2015).

Conclusion

This article has argued that although Nigeria ostensibly possesses the realist attributes of a hegemon, its quest for *Pax-Nigeriana* has been retarded by the ways in which it has sought to deal with its incomplete fulfillment of its liberal credentials, especially in relation to the Chibok kidnappings and the Boko Haram insurgency. To cover up its questionable liberal credentials for rightful rule (underwritten by sundry domestic factors), it has undertaken a process of foreign and security policymaking that this article has referred to as “illusory hegemony,” or the downplaying of military and security failures so as to maintain its reputation for regional leadership. Yet, while this strategy is intended to bolster reputational legitimacy, it often has the unintended consequence of undermining it instead.

Various conclusions can be drawn from the preceding discussion. As concerns the tangible elements of real-world politics, as of late 2015, the track record of Nigeria’s new president Muhammadu Buhari has seemed to indicate more continuity than change, in both the approach to *Pax-Nigeriana* broadly and the fight against Boko Haram specifically. Buhari’s election signaled initial optimism for its peaceful and democratic nature, and ushered in a hope that the fight against Boko Haram would soon be over. And yet, while Buhari has indeed undertaken numerous efforts that suggest a renewed seriousness of purpose toward Boko Haram—a wide-ranging reshuffling of the nation’s military; a move of the military command center to the northeast; and efforts to root out corruption related to military contracting—his concrete accomplishments have been few. Moreover, his odd decision to mandate a deadline for Boko Haram’s termination in December 2015 has come and gone, suggesting, similarly, the continuation of the policy of illusory hegemony.³²

A few theoretical conclusions should also be made explicit. For Western observers of Nigeria’s foreign policy, this article has sought to explain why Nigeria’s foreign and security policies seem to be irrational: in the maintenance of its quest to be a West African and pan-African hegemon, Nigeria must portray itself in a capable, organized, and powerful fashion, even if this means being vague, exacerbating citizens’ insecurity, and, at times, being visibly duplicitous. Rather than being surprised by such actions, observers should appreciate that in its pursuit of regional hegemony, Nigerian policymakers view the adoption of such façades as a necessity. Resultantly, Nigeria will likely continue to be wary of accepting international military aid from either African or non-African allies, thus imperiling the security of its neighbors as it attempts to maintain its pursuit of a primarily Nigerian-centric battle in an incommensurate effort to address a deeply transnational threat.

In sum, this article has sought to show why taking Nigerian perspectives on the country’s role within West Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and globally is imperative for understanding its security and foreign policy decision-making. Rather than assuming that Abuja’s duplicity toward Boko Haram and the Chibok kidnappings is simply irrational, it should be understood as a conscious, concerted, and actually quite logical outcome in Nigerian security governance, one that will likely endure until the pursuit of *Pax-Nigeriana* is either achieved or quashed definitively.

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³²More broadly—and despite its status as a locus of insecurity—Nigeria continues to maintain its prominence in ECOWAS and the African Union, and is even campaigning for a UN Security Council Seat.

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