

Regional Security Complex Theory and Nigeria's Role in West African Stability

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Abstract

This paper applies the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to examine Nigeria's role in shaping stability within West Africa. RSCT highlights how security threats are clustered regionally, creating interdependence among neighboring states. Within this framework, three key implications emerge. First, Nigeria's security challenges including Boko Haram insurgency, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, and spillovers from Sahel conflicts cannot be understood in isolation but are embedded in a wider West African security complex. Second, while Nigeria has historically exercised leadership within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) through peacekeeping and mediation, its domestic crises ranging from governance deficits to economic fragility limit its effectiveness as a regional stabilizer. Third, the future of West Africa stands at a crossroads, with Nigeria's internal trajectory likely to determine whether the region consolidates resilience or descends into deeper insecurity amid rising coups, terrorism, and fragile states. The study concludes that Nigeria's ability to combine domestic reform with stronger multilateral engagement will be decisive for regional stability. Recommendations include strengthening governance and security capacity, enhancing ECOWAS cooperation, addressing socio-economic drivers of insecurity, reasserting diplomatic leadership, and investing in maritime security. Ultimately, Nigeria's internal resilience and external leadership remain critical to the trajectory of West African security.

Keywords: *Regional Security Complex; Sahel insurgencies; Regional security; Leadership; Stability; Terrorism; Fragile states*

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Background to the Study

West Africa has become one of the world's most volatile security regions, where terrorism, insurgencies, maritime piracy, and political instability converge to threaten state survival and regional order. From the Boko Haram insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin to the rise of coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger, the region is gripped by crises that transcend borders and reinforce one another (Thurston, 2017; Almeida, 2022). These persistent challenges highlight the urgent need for frameworks that can explain the interdependence of security threats and the pivotal role of states within such complexes. Nigeria stands at the centre of this equation. As West Africa's largest economy and most populous country, it has historically positioned itself as a regional leader through the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), contributing troops, finance, and diplomacy in conflict management (Adebajo, 2002; Omilusi, 2018). Yet, Nigeria's own vulnerabilities including Boko Haram terrorism, farmer–herder conflicts, separatist agitations, and widespread governance deficits undermine its capacity to project stability outwardly (Agbibo, 2013; Akinola, 2019). This duality raises a central question: can a state simultaneously act as both a stabilizer and a destabilizer within its regional security complex?

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), advanced by Buzan and Wæver (2003), provides an important lens for exploring this question. RSCT argues that security threats are not evenly distributed globally but tend to cluster regionally, creating patterns of interdependence where the insecurity of one state spills into its neighbors. Applied to West Africa, RSCT underscores how Nigeria's domestic crises reverberate beyond its borders through refugee flows, transnational insurgency, and illicit arms trafficking (Zenn, 2020; Kendie & Mensah, 2021). However, much of the existing literature has remained descriptive, leaving gaps in explaining the causal mechanisms through which Nigeria's policies reshape regional security dynamics (Francis, 2006; Williams, 2011).

This paper addresses this gap by applying RSCT to Nigeria's role in West African stability. It examines how Nigeria's domestic insecurities intersect with its regional interventions and assesses the implications of its leadership within ECOWAS. The paper is structured in four parts. First, it outlines the conceptual foundations of RSCT and its relevance to West Africa. Second, it analyzes Nigeria's domestic insecurities and their spillover effects on neighboring states. Third, it evaluates Nigeria's leadership role in ECOWAS peace operations and regional security mechanisms. Finally, it considers the strategic implications of Nigeria's dual role as both guarantor and risk factor for regional security. The objective of this study is threefold: (1) to analyze how Nigeria's domestic security challenges generate regional spillovers; (2) to assess Nigeria's role in shaping ECOWAS-led security interventions; and (3) to explore the broader strategic implications of Nigeria's position as both a stabilizer and destabilizer in West Africa. By situating Nigeria within the RSCT framework, this study offers a nuanced understanding of how its internal trajectory will shape the future of West African stability.

Conceptual Regional Security Issues

RSCT and its fit for West Africa

Buzan and Wæver (2003) argue that patterns of amity/enmity cluster regionally, creating security interdependence that is tighter within regions than across them. Their earlier work

with de Wilde (1998) broadens analysis via *securitization* across military, political, economic, societal, and environmental sectors. Applied to West Africa, RSCT helps map how conflict in one state propagates through refugee flows, small-arms markets, and cross-border insurgent safe havens. Critiques stress that RSCT's state-centric foundations underplay weak state capacity, hybrid governance, and the dense role of non-state actors that structure African security (Ayoob, 1995; Williams, 2011). In this view, RSCT requires supplementation to capture vigilantes, militias, and criminal economies that mediate interdependence (Francis, 2006).

Regional Orders, Norms, And African Agency

Acharya (2011) re-centres regional agency through localization and norm subsidiarity, showing how regions adapt or generate norms rather than importing them wholesale. ECOWAS's move from an economic bloc to a security actor through its Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance and anti-coup stance illustrates indigenous norm entrepreneurship (Adebajo, 2002; Williams, 2011). This literature suggests Nigeria's leadership is not only material (troops, finance) but also normative. Yet concerns persist about paternalism and hegemonic logics whether Nigerian stewardship enables collective security or crowds out smaller members (Francis, 2006).

ECOWAS Peace Operations and Nigeria's Leadership Record

Historical analyses of ECOMOG in Liberia and Sierra Leone credit Nigeria with preventing state collapse via troop contributions, logistics, and funding (Adebajo, 2002). Still, they document uneven performance civilian protection lapses, command frictions, and sustainability issues tied to Nigeria's fiscal and political cycles (Francis, 2006; Williams, 2011). More recent work on the 2017 Gambian crisis highlights calibrated coercive diplomacy backed by limited force, where Nigeria's influence operated through coalition-building rather than unilateralism (Omilusi, 2018). The consensus is that Nigeria's regional capacity waxes and wanes with domestic governance, oil revenues, and civil–military relations.

Domestic Insecurity and Regional Spillovers

Studies of Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province show how insurgency centred in Borno became a Lake Chad Basin problem via recruitment pipelines, cross-border sanctuaries, and illicit trade (Thurston, 2017; Zenn, 2020). This pattern supports RSCT's interdependence claim. Human-security scholars also warn that force-heavy responses can amplify grievances, displacement, and borderland predation, entrenching transnational criminal networks (Francis, 2006; Williams, 2011). Thus, Nigeria's counterinsurgency choices shape both conflict trajectories and the political economy of borders.

Securitization, Legitimacy, and Audience Acceptance

Securitization theory holds that designating an issue as a security threat enables extraordinary measures, but effectiveness hinges on audience acceptance (Buzan et al., 1998). Analyses of Nigeria's counterinsurgency and anti-banditry efforts find uneven buy-in due to legacies of distrust, allegations of abuse, and centre–periphery tensions (Thurston, 2017). Without accountable force posture and community consent, securitizing moves risk backfiring, generating subnational security dilemmas that RSCT usually examines at interstate level.

Gaps, Debates, and Directions

Three gaps recur. First, many RSCT applications to West Africa remain descriptive; few identify causal pathways through which specific Nigerian policies reconfigure regional threat networks over time. Second, illicit economies fuel smuggling, artisanal mining, ransom markets are under-theorised despite stitching together violent entrepreneurs across borders. Third, evidence is often narrative; stronger inference would combine process-tracing with conflict/event data, displacement geospatial analysis, and border-trade statistics. Normatively, scholars debate sovereignty versus protection: ECOWAS's anti-coup norms advance regional order, but selective enforcement raises credibility questions (Williams, 2011; Omilusi, 2018). The literature supports using RSCT as a meso-level scaffold for analysing Nigeria's role, but it should be paired with human-security and political-economy lenses to capture non-state agency, legitimacy dynamics, and illicit cross-border markets. Nigeria's leadership appears most effective when embedded in multilateral, norm-driven frameworks with accountability, and when domestic reforms reduce incentives that externalise insecurity.

Regional Security Complex Theory: A Framework

RSCT asserts that regions are the primary level of analysis for understanding security because threats and vulnerabilities are most intense among geographically proximate states (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Within a regional security complex, the security of one state is closely linked to that of others, making security interdependence inevitable. In West Africa, this interdependence is manifested in cross-border insurgencies, arms proliferation, refugee flows, and shared environmental stresses. Nigeria, given its size, military capacity, and economic resources, plays the role of a “regional power” within this complex (Adebajo, 2002). However, its internal fragilities such as the Boko Haram insurgency, farmer herder clashes, and separatist movements complicate its ability to project stability outwardly (Agbiboa, 2013).

Nigeria's Domestic Insecurity and Regional Spillovers

Nigeria's internal conflicts often generate regional consequences. For example, Boko Haram, originating in Northeast Nigeria, has spread into Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, turning the Lake Chad Basin into a zone of transnational insecurity (Zenn, 2018). Similarly, arms trafficking linked to Nigeria's porous borders exacerbates violence in neighboring states. From an RSCT perspective, Nigeria's domestic instability cannot be isolated from regional insecurity, as threats easily transcend state boundaries.

Nigeria and ECOWAS Security Architecture

Nigeria has historically been central to ECOWAS's security interventions. During the 1990s, it led ECOMOG operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone, contributing troops, logistics, and financial resources (Adebajo, 2002). More recently, Nigeria supported interventions in The Gambia (2017) to enforce democratic transition, demonstrating its continued regional influence (Omilusi, 2018). Through ECOWAS, Nigeria embodies the role of a regional security guarantor, consistent with RSCT's identification of core powers in regional complexes. Yet, Nigeria's leadership is contested. Domestic governance deficits, corruption, and overstretched armed forces limit its ability to sustain prolonged commitments (Francis, 2001). This tension between leadership ambition and capacity is central to understanding Nigeria's dual role as both stabilizer and destabilizer in West Africa.

ECOMOG interventions: Liberia and Sierra Leone (1990s)

Nigeria was the principal contributor to the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) missions in Liberia (1990 onward) and later Sierra Leone. Lagos supplied the bulk of troops, logistics, and operational leadership that prevented rapid state collapse and created space for negotiated settlements (Adebajo, 2002). Scholars credit Nigeria with providing the hard capacity ECOWAS lacked at the time, but they also document serious operational problems command friction, poor coordination, and allegations of human-rights abuses (Francis, 2006; Williams, 2011). From an RSCT perspective, Nigeria acted as a regional core power whose choices materially shaped the security dynamics of the West African complex. Its interventions illustrate how a dominant state can alter threat perceptions regionally: by acting as guarantor, Nigeria reduced the immediate risk of interstate spillover from collapsed states, but its uneven performance also highlighted the limits of unilateral capacity in sustaining regional order.

ECOMOG helped stabilise Liberia and Sierra Leone temporarily and created conditions for international support, yet mission sustainability depended on Nigeria's domestic politics and finances. Critics argue that Nigeria's dominance sometimes sidelined multilateral legitimacy and accountability, creating a governance gap in mission oversight (Adebajo, 2002; Francis, 2006). The ECOMOG cases show RSCT's usefulness in explaining how a hegemonic regional state can both secure and unsettle a regional complex. The key policy implication is that regional leadership must be matched by institutionalization clear command structures, predictable funding, and multilateral legitimacy to translate material capacity into durable regional security (Adebajo, 2002; Williams, 2011).

The Gambia (2017): Coercive Diplomacy and Coalition Enforcement

In December 2016–January 2017, when incumbent President Yahya Jammeh refused to cede power after losing the election, ECOWAS moved to enforce the electoral outcome. Nigeria backed diplomatic pressure, economic measures, and a limited military threat that, together with other West African states, pressured Jammeh into exile (Omilusi, 2018). Unlike the protracted interventions of the 1990s, ECOWAS used calibrated coercion and political leverage.

The Gambian episode fits RSCT insofar as regional actors led by Nigeria treated an internal political crisis as a regional security issue because of its contagion risk to norms of democratic succession. Nigeria's approach illustrates how regional powers can deploy combinations of normative pressure and limited coercion to manage threats that are political rather than strictly military. The intervention is widely judged a success: it restored constitutional order without large-scale combat and rebuffed a precedent for coup- or autocracy-enabled impunity. However, scholars caution that replicability depends on political will, regional consensus, and the relative weakness of the target state; it is not a simple template for all crises (Omilusi, 2018). The Gambia shows that RSCT's focus on regional interdependence must include normative and political instruments ECOWAS's normative evolution (anti-coup/democracy stance) expands the toolkit beyond force. For policy, the case implies that norms plus credible, collective capacity can be effective, but selective application risks credibility loss.

Lake Chad Basin and Boko Haram: Transnational Insurgency and Spillover Dynamics

Boko Haram emerged in Northeast Nigeria and by the 2010s had expanded activities across the Lake Chad Basin, affecting Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. Nigeria's counterinsurgency campaigns, humanitarian crises, and irregular border control contributed to cross-border movement of fighters, refugees, and illicit flows (Thurston, 2017; Zenn, 2018). Nigeria both led regional military responses and struggled with internal governance deficits that hindered coherent regional strategy (Agbiboa, 2013). This case exemplifies RSCT's central claim: security threats are regionalized. The insurgency's transnational character shows how a domestic security failure in a core state can generate a wider security complex. Importantly, non-state actors (insurgent groups, militias), porous borders, and weak local governance mediate that interdependence factors RSCT must incorporate when applied to West Africa.

Multinational responses (e.g., the Multinational Joint Task Force) have achieved tactical gains, but persistent humanitarian displacement, local distrust of security forces, and lucrative illicit economies sustain instability (Thurston, 2017; Zenn, 2020). Critics highlight that military-centred strategies without governance and economic measures risk repeatedly externalising insecurity across borders. For RSCT-informed policy, the Lake Chad story underlines the need to treat the security complex holistically: combine military cooperation with border governance, local reconciliation, and development interventions. It also demonstrates that non-state dynamics (criminal economies, recruitment networks) are central to regional threat diffusion and must be foregrounded in analysis and policy design.

RSCT and ECOWAS Policy

Material Capacity Matters, but so do Institutions and Norms. Nigeria's material preponderance enabled decisive intervention in all three cases; institutional legitimacy (ECOWAS mechanisms, coalition breadth) and normative frameworks (democracy protocols) shaped outcomes and acceptability (Adebajo, 2002; Omilusi, 2018).

Non-State Actors and Illicit Economies Complicate Regional Interdependence. The Lake Chad case shows that RSCT's state-centric focus needs extension to account for violent entrepreneurs, smuggling networks, and local governance vacuums that cross borders (Thurston, 2017; Zenn, 2020).

Domestic Politics Condition Regional Leadership. Nigeria's ability to lead fluctuates with its fiscal position, civil–military relations, and internal security burdens—factors that determine whether it acts as stabilizer or source of spillover (Francis, 2006; Agbiboa, 2013).

Policy Combination is Essential. Effective regional management requires military cooperation, normative enforcement, and investment in local governance and development to address root causes (Adebajo, 2002; Williams, 2011).

Strategic Implications of Nigeria's Role

Applying the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) reveals three interlinked implications of Nigeria's role in West African stability.

Interdependence of Threats: Nigeria's security challenges are closely tied to the broader West African security landscape. RSCT argues that security dynamics are often clustered regionally, with threats crossing borders and creating interdependent vulnerabilities (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). In Nigeria's case, terrorism from Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) does not remain confined within its borders but spills into Cameroon, Chad, and Niger through the Lake Chad Basin (Zenn, 2020). Similarly, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea and trafficking networks create maritime and transnational threats that link Nigeria with other coastal states (Onuoha, 2013). Sahel insurgencies, particularly in Mali and Burkina Faso, increasingly threaten to destabilize Nigeria through the spread of armed groups and illicit flows (Kendie & Mensah, 2021). These examples underscore that Nigeria's security cannot be understood in isolation but must be situated within a shared and interdependent West African security space.

Regional Leadership with Constraints: Nigeria has historically positioned itself as a regional hegemon in West Africa, especially through its leadership role in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Nigeria spearheaded peacekeeping operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the 1990s and continues to exert influence in ECOWAS conflict management mechanisms (Adebajo, 2002; Francis, 2009). However, RSCT highlights that a regional leader's effectiveness is often constrained by domestic vulnerabilities (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Nigeria's internal crises—including corruption, ethnoreligious conflicts, economic instability, and governance deficits—undermine its ability to credibly lead and project stability (Akinola, 2019). While Nigeria has both demographic and economic weight, its weakened state capacity erodes the legitimacy of its leadership and hampers its ability to enforce regional security norms.

Future Stability at a Crossroads: West Africa currently faces a precarious security trajectory, with the resurgence of military coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, as well as persistent threats from terrorist organizations and fragile state institutions (Almeida, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2023). Within the RSCT framework, Nigeria's stability becomes a critical determinant of the region's overall direction. If Nigeria can overcome its domestic governance and security challenges, it may consolidate its role as a stabilizing force in West Africa. Conversely, a weakening Nigeria risks amplifying instability across the region, given the extent of interdependence and its centrality to ECOWAS (Bah, 2021). Thus, Nigeria stands at a crossroads: its internal trajectory will significantly shape whether West Africa moves toward greater resilience or deeper fragmentation.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to apply the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to examine Nigeria's role in shaping stability within West Africa. The central research focus was on how Nigeria's domestic insecurities intersect with its regional engagements, and how this duality positions the country as both a stabilizer and a potential source of instability in the wider West African security complex. The findings highlight three significant insights. First, Nigeria's domestic security crises—ranging from Boko Haram insurgency to farmer–herder conflicts—have clear regional spillovers through refugee flows, cross-border insurgencies, and

illicit trade, reinforcing RSCT's argument that threats cluster regionally (Zenn, 2020; Thurston, 2017). Second, Nigeria has historically demonstrated leadership within ECOWAS through peacekeeping and mediation, yet its effectiveness has often been constrained by governance deficits, corruption, and economic fragility (Adebajo, 2002; Akinola, 2019). Third, West Africa stands at a crossroads where Nigeria's internal trajectory will critically determine whether the region consolidates stability or descends into deeper insecurity amid coups, terrorism, and fragile states (Bah, 2021; Almeida, 2022).

This study contributes to the literature by advancing a more nuanced application of RSCT to West Africa. Unlike previous descriptive analyses, it emphasizes the causal pathways through which Nigeria's internal dynamics reshape regional threat networks. The analysis also demonstrates that RSCT, when complemented with human-security and political-economy perspectives, offers a richer understanding of how non-state actors, governance failures, and illicit economies shape regional security outcomes. In terms of practical and policy implications, the study underscores that Nigeria's domestic reforms are inseparable from its regional leadership. Strengthening democratic governance, building security sector capacity, and addressing socio-economic drivers of conflict are essential not only for Nigeria's stability but for the wider resilience of West Africa. For ECOWAS, the findings reaffirm the importance of collective security frameworks that balance Nigeria's leadership with institutional legitimacy and burden-sharing.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The analysis relies primarily on secondary sources and illustrative case studies; therefore, it may not capture all the localized or evolving dimensions of Nigeria's security role. Future research should incorporate empirical fieldwork, geospatial conflict mapping, and economic data on illicit trade to deepen understanding of how Nigeria's internal challenges translate into regional insecurity. Comparative studies with other regional powers in Africa, such as South Africa or Ethiopia, could also provide broader insights into the applicability of RSCT across contexts. Based on the findings, this study recommends that Nigeria prioritize governance reforms, strengthen its counterinsurgency strategies with development-oriented approaches, enhance maritime security cooperation in the Gulf of Guinea, and reaffirm its diplomatic leadership within ECOWAS. At the same time, ECOWAS should institutionalize predictable funding and accountability mechanisms to ensure that regional peace operations are both effective and legitimate. Nigeria's stability and leadership remain pivotal to the future of West African security. By confronting its internal vulnerabilities while embracing multilateral and norm-driven approaches, Nigeria can move from being a reluctant stabilizer to a credible guarantor of regional order. The stakes are high: the trajectory of Nigeria's domestic politics will not only shape its own security but also determine whether West Africa advances toward resilience or falls deeper into fragmentation.

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