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The Military and Soft Power: 
Assessing the case of Nigeria’s Security Engagement in West Africa 
from the Perception of Ghanaian and Liberian Political and Academic Elites

Fidel Abowei

When military power is evoked, what come to mind are soldiers, tanks, bombers and ships – resources that underlie the hard power behavior of coercion. Because military resources are mostly applied to limit the choices of others, their utility is usually associated with imposed behavior. Building on a rich literature on conceptualizations of soft power, this paper argues that military resources and their associated policies do have attractive potentials. It investigates the views of Liberian and Ghanaian political and academic elites towards Nigeria’s security engagement in West Africa to illuminate the relationship between certain expressions of military power and attraction. The analysis reveals that Nigeria’s repeated contributions to peace support operations within the region and its engagement in high-level military diplomacy that involve personnel exchanges and joint military exercises, are all different expressions of its military power that are viewed positively amongst Liberian and Ghanaian elites. It also remarks that Nigeria’s inability to curtail the threat of Boko Haram is a drag on its reputation for military invincibility. To the extent that the nature of Nigerian security engagement in the region is designed to enhance its leadership status and deepen sub-regional integration, the analysis stresses the effectiveness of Nigeria’s foreign policy approach.

Although recently, conventional warfare may have been reduced significantly, military resources remain the most important form of power in global politics. Not only from their dominant manifestation during the Cold War or their ability to perpetuate fourth generation warfare, but also, from the raw fact that geopolitics remain structured by their distribution. African states, especially

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1 Introduced by William Lind in 1989, “fourth generation warfare”, in its simplest sense, reflects a shift in the idea and practice of war from confrontation between organized military units operating under the authority of national governments to one where one side of the confrontation is usually a non-state actor. In other words, states no longer posses the monopoly of violence and are forced to contend with insurgencies, terrorists and other forms of threats in the absence of clearly defined battlefields. See William S. Lind et al., “The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation”, Marine Corps Gazette, Oct. 1989, 22-26; Timothy J. Junio, “Military History and Fourth Generation Warfare”, Journal of Strategic Studies, 32:2 (2009), 243-269 (244-248).
West African, are not so different in this regard since, nowadays, the absolute rarity of brazenly coercive posturing, in the form of interstate military confrontation, has limited the utility of military resources to intrastate conflicts and the quest to eliminate trans-border organized criminal groups such as Boko-Haram, Ansaru and Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) operating regionally. This regional context has allowed Nigeria, in its drive for continental leadership, to engage significantly in the security dynamics of the region, despite confronting internal security challenges — the Boko Haram insurgency in the north-east, the rise of banditry in north-west and the Niger Delta crises.

Since the 1990s, Nigeria – the most populous and largest economy in Africa – has engaged militarily in civil wars in Sierra Leone, Cote d’Ivoire, Mali and Liberia under UN, African Union (AU) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) peace operations. It also participates in joint military exercises and personnel exchanges with neighboring states to maximize inter-operability and cultural familiarity. More recently, Nigeria mobilized a coalition of West African states under the ECOWAS Mission in Gambia (ECOMIG) to oust Gambian dictator Yahaya Jammeh from power, in the aftermath of the disputed presidential elections, which took place in 2016. This paper assumes that the nature of Nigeria’s military engagement with its regional neighbors is likely to suscitate favorable perceptions for the country that may constitute a source of influence. It is suggestive of what Joseph Nye dubs the power of attraction, that is, the ability of a state to obtain the outcomes it desires in inter-state relations because other states “admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of openness – want to follow it”.


Unlike the Western, and to large extents the BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, nations, where the concept of soft power assumes various degrees of importance, most African states are less appreciative of the offerings of soft power as the dearth of scholarly works on the subject appears to suggest. The case of Nigeria is indicative of this empirical deficiency. Although a few exploratory studies of Nigeria’s soft power exist, they do not extend beyond an estimation of the country’s soft power potentials. As such, the prevalent approach is agent centered, and by implication, takes a “resourcist route” where power is confused with the resources used to drive policy action. Consequently, they do not take into consideration the perceptions of the African publics where attraction lies.

Also, as a consequence, the extent to which Nigeria’s military engagements in Africa constitutes an attractive source of influence is insufficiently explored. This deficiency is not unique to Nigeria, because, within the wider literature on soft power, the tendency of associating military resources with coercive behavior appears to limit its inclusion in conceptualizations of soft power. Thus, under what conditions does a state’s application of military resources generate attraction? On a specific note, to what extent has Nigeria’s military engagement with West African states favorably altered elite perceptions in the region towards support for Nigeria’s strategic objectives? These questions are explored using qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews in Nigeria, Liberia and Ghana, in addition to existing information and scholarly studies about the foreign policy behavior of these states towards Nigeria.

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7 These personal interviews were conducted by the author in Nigeria, Liberia and Ghana as part of PhD field research assessing Nigeria’s soft power influence in West Africa. The interviews in Ghana took place from 25 August to 8 September 2019 in the city of Accra, while the interviews in Liberia were conducted from 21 January to 3 February 2020. Examining elite perceptions of Nigeria’s behaviour and the attendant effects on foreign policy outcomes, two sampling strategies were used – purposive non-probability sampling and snowball/chain-referral sampling – to select respondents, mostly on the basis of positions and knowledge of the underlying goals, means, and ends of the foreign policies of their home states.
The analysis conducted herein is situated within the framework of Nye’s conceptualization of soft power since military resources are a vital component of a state’s power arsenal; and, as Nye suggests, the demarcation between what is hard and what is soft about power is less in the tangibility of power resources a state possesses than in the nature of the behavior of such state towards others. In other words, how a state’s military resources are applied to pursue strategic objectives is more indicative of its soft power capability than the nature of its resources. This places public attitudes, towards the behavior of a state wielding soft power, at the heart of the theorization of soft power and, by implication, the effectiveness of soft power in terms of the extent to which it causes changes in the behavior of target states. It also identifies the strategies of influences associated with the exercise of Nigeria’s military resources.

The paper is structured around four sections. The first explores the theoretical framework in the relationship between military resources and soft power, while the second section examines Nigeria’s military engagement vis-à-vis her strategic objectives in West Africa. The third section assesses the perceptions of Nigeria’s military behavior in Liberia and Ghana, and the last one interprets the relationship between elite perceptions in Liberia and Ghana of Nigeria’s behavior and foreign policy outcomes.

**Military power, attraction and foreign policy outcomes: a conceptual framework**

Soft power emerges from the Realist school of thought where power assumes a central role in international interactions. Hans J. Morgenthau’s relational understanding of power is of relevance in this regard, where a state has power if it has the ability to further its goals in a two-way relationship where others are driven to support its objectives either because of “the expectation of benefits, the fear of disadvantages and the respect or love for men or institutions”. This implies that a state may induce change in the behavior of others by exercising power through “orders, threats, persuasion, the authority or charisma of a man or of an office, or a combination of any of these”. As he notes, power should not necessarily be synonymous with the accumulation of resources, rather, what is relevant, is the ability of a state to further its goals in a bilateral relationship by leveraging its resources. In this view, “the measure of A’s power require an

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**References**

8 Nye Jr., *Soft Power*, 7
understanding of how A’s presence, decisions and actions affect others. It looks at streams of influence within a relationship”.

Nye’s conceptualization of soft power hinges on a relational understanding of power, which is contrary to the Neorealist elements of national power approach, as it does not reduce power to measurable elements or what goes into action in a power relationship. Consequently, in addition to hard power, soft power is an important component of power where the difference between the two dimensions of power stem from reactions to the behavior a state exhibits. As Nye confirms, these behaviors usually range from command to co-option. Soft power assumes the co-optive end of a one-dimensional power spectrum of behaviors that includes coercion or command at the other end, with inducement and agenda-setting lying in between. Within this spectrum, a state can lean on hard or soft power or both depending on its strategic disposition. While hard power implies the use of threats and coercion to obtain desired outcomes, soft power is “the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes”.

Given the relational or behavioral understanding of power, the same resources associated with hard power behavior can also produce soft power influence, depending on the context of their application, and more importantly the attitudes and reactions of the target to the behavior of the power agent. Bearing in mind that attraction or repulsion, whichever way the pendulum swings, depends on the mind of the perceiver, public perception or reaction to the behavior of a state plays a central role in understanding the extent to which a given power resource generates attraction and by implication soft power. This not only implies that military resources, which are often associated with hard power, may also produce soft power, but also places the location of attraction – within the exercise of military power – in the aggregation of individual reactions to a foreign state’s behavior.

When military power is evoked, what comes to mind are soldiers, tanks, bombers and ships – resources that underlie the hard power behavior of coercion. Because military resources are mostly applied to limit the choices of others, their application is usually associated with command

behavior. In what instances then do military resources generate attraction? Nye proposes three sources of attraction for a state: its culture, political values (when consistent at home and abroad), and foreign policy (when it is perceived to be legitimate and having moral authority). To the extent that military resources are instrumentalised within the context of a state’s foreign policy, their use in a non-coercive, benign and legitimate form is likely to generate attraction and tangible foreign policy benefits.

Accordingly, the strength of a state’s military, relative to others, as well as the nature of security ties and military alliances it has with other states, is likely to generate attraction especially when it is perceived as competent and providing security for others. As an important output of military alliances, providing protection for other states against threats may also generate attraction if perceived to be trustworthy and credible. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is particularly illustrative in this regard in terms of America’s soft power. Through engagement in peacekeeping operations and by overthrowing tyrannies, states may generate attraction insofar as their actions are credible and legitimate. Finally, in instances where military resources are used to assist others in terms of training, military exchanges and exercises, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, attraction is likely to result.

While these behaviors are likely to alter public perception in a target state towards the foreign state exercising military power, the extent to which attraction translates to foreign policy outcomes is dependent on the degree of influence the public has on issues of foreign policy. Given the lack of engagement of West African public opinion with issues of foreign policy, the study assumes that the elites’ perceptions of Nigerian use of military resources, in its relations with West African states, may be most appropriate to determine the attractiveness of Nigeria’s behavior. Moreover, political and academic elites are more likely to have the power and influence to shape the foreign policies of their state, in a way that may alter the behavior of their governments towards Nigeria. In view of the above, how has Nigeria applied its military resources in relation to West African states?

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18 With this assertion, the study refers to elites as those actors who not only hold high positions, but, in Laswellian terms, have the power to decide “who gets what, when and how”. The study is also driven by the assumption that assessing elite perceptions may provide valuable pointers to their policy preferences, which is pivotal in estimating their support for Nigeria’s strategic objectives in the sub-region. See Harold D. Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (Cleveland, OH: Meridian Books, 1932); David Euston, *A Framework for Political Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965).
Nigeria’s use of military power in West Africa

With the largest economy in Africa, a defence budget of USD 1.9 billion (2019 est.) and a 120,000 active military force, Nigeria’s superior military capability in West Africa is well documented. Among the leading military powers in the continent, Nigeria ranks after Egypt, Algeria and South Africa. In West Africa, the Nigerian defence budget is nearly the combined defence budget of all other fourteen states in the sub-region. After Nigeria, the biggest military spenders in the sub-region are Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire – $0.7 billion and $0.5 billion respectively. Both countries, also, come after Nigeria in terms of manpower as they boast 25,000 and 15,000 military personnel. This dominance also extends to the realm of military infrastructure and equipment whether in terms of quality and quantity.

Despite superior Nigerian material strength, its operational capability does not extend beyond the defence of its sovereignty and, to a large extent, the West African sub-region, and, thus, can best be described as a regional power. This regional power status has shaped what can be described as a largely liberalist and normative foreign policy posture – imbued in Nigerian leadership aspirations and the need to deepen sub-regional integration – that emphasizes international peace and security and, by implication, regional security and cooperation, humanitarian assistance and, finally, upholding human rights and global humanitarian norms.

They are analogous to the means by which the country seeks to attain the national interest, which the Nigerian National Defence Policy (NNDP) of 2006 and its latest iteration of 2017 categorize as vital, strategic and peripheral. Whereas the vital interest is securitarian in nature as it emphasizes the “survival” of the nation through the protection of citizens and the guarantee of sovereignty, its

19 African Development Bank, “Nigeria Economic Outlook 2020”.
22 Whereas Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have 64, 34 and 33 aircrafts respectively, the Nigerian Air Force (NAF) has an inventory of 200 to 250 aircrafts, including F-7NI (Chengdu J-7) light fighters, FT-7NI trainers, 20 Alpha light fighter jets, L-39ZA Albatross jet trainers, three C-130 Hercules, 20 Mi-35Ps and Mi-35Ms, 10 Mi-24Vs, etc.
strategic and peripheral interest contemplate the means by which the vital interest may be achieved.\textsuperscript{25}

The Armed Forces of Nigeria (AFN) have been instrumental in pursuing these objectives whether at the national, sub-regional and regional levels. Apart from the overbearing influence of the idiosyncrasies of successive Nigerian leaders, the persistent threat to Nigeria’s stability from the recurrence of intra-state conflicts, not only in states contiguous to the country’s national boundaries but all over Africa, shaped a defence policy that emphasizes multilateral and bilateral cooperation in areas of peacekeeping, joint military training and exercises, exchange of personnel and expertise, and intelligence gathering, as a means of ensuring not only regional peace and security, but, ultimately, sub-regional integration.\textsuperscript{26} The NNDP, which de-emphasizes the use of force except in instances where Nigeria’s maritime and trade routes are under threat, mandates the AFN to participate “in complex political emergencies including humanitarian assistance” under international alliances, including the UN, AU and ECOWAS.\textsuperscript{27}

According to Wasa Festus, a deputy director in the Nigerian Ministry of Defence, the country pursues “a peaceful foreign policy” and the AFN is authorized to support this objective.\textsuperscript{28} Consequently, the AFN has engaged actively in, over, 20 peacekeeping operations since it first participated in the UN Operations in the Congo (ONUC) in 1960. Under the auspices of the AU, 1,500 Nigerian troops, including military personnel and observers, participated in the peace mission in Sudan (AMIS).\textsuperscript{29} In West Africa, Nigeria led the transformation of ECOWAS from a distinctively economic union to an institution that also caters for the security challenges of the sub-region by spearheading the establishment of ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). Bearing most of ECOMOG’s economic and military burden, Nigeria led peacekeeping efforts during the civil wars in Liberia (1989-1996 and 1999-2003) and Sierra Leone (1991 to 2002), until the transfer of authority to the UN, under the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and UN Mission in Sierra Leone

\textsuperscript{26} There is no gainsaying that the African continent – from Somalia, Sudan (Darfur and South Sudan), Congo and Liberia to Sierra Leone, Mali and Ethiopia – has been, and is still littered with conflicts ranging from insurgencies to rebellions and civil wars. These conflicts are largely associated with a myriad of issues accompanying the deformation of the character of the African continent by European colonialist/imperialists, such as contests for natural resources, crippling identity politics, political exclusion, absence of democratization, and the prevalence of human rights abuses. See Fred A. Agwu, \textit{Themes and Perspectives on Africa’s International Relations} (Ibadan: University Press PLC, 2013), 59-61.
\textsuperscript{28} Personal interview with Wasa Festus, Abuja Nigeria, 3 July 2019.
Under Nigeria’s leadership, ECOMOG, which benefitted from troop contributions from all Anglophone states in the region as well as Guinea, was successful in bringing the warring factions in the Liberian civil war – the government of Samuel Doe and Charles Taylor’s National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) – to a peace-agreement in September 1996. This agreement culminated in the organization of presidential elections and the emergence of Charles Taylor as president of Liberia in July 1997. Two years later, the outbreak of the second civil war led to another Nigerian intervention under the ECOWAS Mission in Liberia (ECOMIL). As part of the agreement brokered by international actors, with Nigeria featuring prominently in these discussions, Taylor resigned and sought asylum in Nigeria. Similarly, with the support of the UN, Nigeria joined other ECOMOG forces from Mali and Senegal already stationed in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, to reinstate democratically elected president, Tejan Kabbah, who was toppled in a military coup orchestrated by Major Jonny Paul Koromah’s Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) and the Charles Taylor backed Revolutionary United Front (RUF). While this intervention, which took place in 1998, was instrumental in reinstating Kabbah, the peace was short-lived as a new round of fighting ensued, prompting the intervention of UNAMSIL, which Nigeria was also an active participant.

In recent years, Nigeria has scaled back its commitment to peacekeeping missions given internal security challenges such as the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency in northeast Nigeria, the rise of banditry in great parts of northern Nigeria and the Niger Delta crisis. Nonetheless, in 2013 it still contributed 1,200 troops to the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) and provided 200 troops, as well as air support to ECOMIG in Gambia, launched in January 2017. Also, the cross-border nature of the Boko Haram insurgency led to the expansion of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), from its original composition of Nigeria, Chad and Niger, to include Cameroun and Benin. This expansion, which took place in 2012, was due to the need to

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30 Of the 16,000 ECOMOG forces deployed in Liberia, 12,000 were from Nigeria, while the same number of soldiers was contributed to the 13,000 force deployed in Sierra Leone. See Cyril I. Obi, “Economic Community of West African States on the Ground: Comparing Peacekeeping in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, and Côte d’Ivoire”, African Security, 22-3(2009), 119-135 (120); Adekeye Adebajo, “Pax West Africana? Regional Security Mechanisms,” in Adekeye Adebajo and Ismail Rashid (eds), West Africa’s Security Challenges: Building Peace in a Troubled Region, (London: Lynne Rienner, 2004) 291-318 (304).
pool resources together to combat the rising menace of Jihadist groups in the Lake Chad Basin.\textsuperscript{32} More importantly, it is indicative of Nigerian disposition to a multilateral approach in tackling security challenges not just within West Africa but also across the continent.

Beyond peace support operations, the AFN engages also in joint military exercises and personnel exchange programmes with counterparts from West African states to enhance cultural familiarity and interoperability in times of joint missions, as a means of enhancing regional security. These practices are in line with the country’s foreign policy objective of maintaining peaceful coexistence amongst African states. In pursuit of this objective, Nigeria’s tri-service military training institutions such as the Nigerian Defense Academy (NDA), the Armed Forces Command and Staff College (AFCSC) and the National Defence College (NDC) normally facilitate military exchange programmes.\textsuperscript{33} While they are reputed in Africa for accepting military personnel well beyond the African continent, they are not alone in this.\textsuperscript{34} The Ghana Armed Forces Command and Staff College (GAFSC) as well as the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Center (KAIPITC) are also known for accepting military personnel from allied countries. As part of the efforts to enhance bilateral military cooperation between Nigeria and Ghana, personnel from the AFN have enrolled in various courses in Ghana’s military training institutions.

A confidential interview of the author with a senior military officer at the NDC revealed that Nigerian soldiers participate frequently in various courses in Ghana.\textsuperscript{35} As the source noted, “I have done about six courses [...] at different times”. Shina Alege, a minister at the Nigerian High Commission in Ghana confirmed this information in an interview with the author when he noted that a group of Nigerian military personnel are set to graduate from the GAFSC.\textsuperscript{36} In similar vein, the Liberian ambassador to Nigeria, Prof. Al-Hassan Conteh, confirmed that several waves of

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\item \textsuperscript{33} While the NDA carries out officer entry programs, the AFCSC trains operational level military officers and the NDC is known as a center of excellence for training peace support operations. The NDC is also reputed for welcoming senior officials, including generals and colonels.
\item \textsuperscript{34} In a personal interview with Aishatu Yanet, a research fellow at the Center for Strategic Research and Studies, National Defence College, in Abuja Nigeria on 18 July 2019, it was remarked that 18 military officers from allied countries, ranging from Bangladesh, India, Ghana, Liberia, etc., took part in the NDC’s Course 28.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Confidential interview with a senior military officer at the NDC, member of the Nigerian contingent in Liberia and Sierra Leone, 18 July 2019.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Personal interview with Shina Alege, Accra Ghana, 3 September 2019. Of the 52 students of the Junior Staff Course 73 that graduated in June 2020, 8 were Nigerians. See Graphic Online, “Junior Staff course 73 graduates from Ghana Armed Forces Command and Staff College”, 26 June 2020, https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/junior-staff-course-73-graduates-from-ghana-armed-forces-command-and-staff-college.html
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Liberian military cadets have also received training at the NDA while mid-level officers attend the AFCSC. Major General Suraj Alao Abdurrahmann was seconded by AFN to lead the rebuilding of the Armed Force of Liberia (AFL), as a commanding officer, from June 2007 to February 2014. In the words of ambassador Remongar Dennis, Liberia was simply “taking advantage of the good of Nigeria.”

Although Nigeria is yet to coordinate a joint military exercise of its own, it has nonetheless participated in such exercises with other West African states under the coordination of the United States and France. In a bid to enhance regional cooperation and the collective capabilities of West African and Gulf of Guinea nations, to counter sea-based illicit activities, Nigeria participated in a US Africa Command (AFRICOM) sponsored joint maritime operations exercise dubbed “Obangame Express”. This exercise was predicated on the Yaoundé Declaration on the Gulf of Guinea Security and served as the basis for similar exercises in 2018 and 2019, coordinated by the French Navy on Nigerian waters, named “Grand African Nemo”. During the last exercise, which took place in 2019, Nigeria showcased it naval ships Okpabana, Centenary and Sagbama in a demonstration of its enhanced naval capability in the sub-region. The Nigerian Navy participated in several drills with its West African counterparts, including anti-piracy and anti-poaching drills, casualty evacuation exercises, fleet maneuvers, etc.

Within Nigeria, there is contestation concerning the extent to which the country’s security engagement has enhanced Nigeria’s influence within the sub-region. As an anonymous source, cited earlier, opined: “We are perceived, the world over, to be instruments of stability [...] we are looked upon as a credible force in the region [sic], so anywhere there is a problem in the region, we are invited. They have confidence in us that when we get there we can deliver”. The source

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37 Personal interview with professor Al-Hassan Conteh, Abuja, Nigeria, 10 September 2019. Prof. Conteh, former president of the University of Liberia, is the ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary of Liberia to the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Benin, Equatorial Guinea and permanent representative of ECOWAS.

38 Personal interview with Dennis Remongar, acting director of the Foreign Service Institute, Monrovia, Liberia, 22 January 2020. When major general Suraj Abdurrahmann died in January 2015, in a letter of condolence to his widow, Liberian president Ellen Sirleaf Johnson noted that “in a span of 5 years, he transformed the new AFL into a force for good and brought his outstanding leadership, diligence and professional expertise to bear in establishing some foundation for the new force, enabling it to effectively conduct its constitutional mandate with ease.”


further notes that West Africans “know that Nigeria is a force to reckon with in terms of solving regional conflict.”

This is in contrast to other assertions that the country has gained nothing in return, in terms of tangible foreign policy gains, and is not strategic in its foreign policy approach in West Africa. In a confidential interview to the author, a deputy director in the Federal Ministry of Finance noted that “we aid African states without expecting anything in return. Our efforts are not strategic.”

In similar vein, Kelechi Nwogu, a research fellow at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs compared Nigeria to a “father Christmas”, otherwise known as Santa Clause, who freely dishes out gifts without getting anything in return.

Ghanaian and Liberian political and academic elite attitudes towards Nigeria

A question, though, arises how third parties filter the military expressions of Nigeria’s foreign policy, especially through the perceptive lenses of Ghanaian and Liberian political and academic elites. It is predicated on the assumption that the disposition of elites in both countries, whether positive or negative, towards Nigeria’s military capability and associated policies, may have some effect on their attitude, as well as the perception of public opinion in their countries, towards Nigeria. To the extent that the behavior of Nigeria is perceived favorably, it provides a basis for assessing the relationship between attraction and support for Nigeria’s strategic objectives in the region, and by implication the effectiveness of soft power as a foreign policy approach.

To this end, transcribed interviews with twenty Ghanaian and Liberian elites were subjected to thematic and content analyses using Nvivo software. Given that the data analyzed were collected as part of a study designed to measure Nigeria’s soft power capability across multiple categories/themes of potential soft power resources as prescribed by Joseph Nye, the coverage area of references to the military expressions of Nigerian engagement in West Africa constituted 5 percent of total coded themes. References to Nigeria’s military engagement were then subcategorized into three coding units, to allow for an in-depth assessment – coding for positive perception, negative perception, and invincibility.

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41 Confidential interview with a senior military officer at the NDC.
43 Personal interview with Kelechi Nwogu, Abuja, Nigeria, 29 July 2019.
As the descriptive statistics indicate (Figure 1), 63.5% of coded units referenced Nigerian military engagement in West Africa positively. This coding applied where interviewees expressed favorable views of Nigerian role in peace support operations and its commitment to the peace and stability of the sub-region. In Liberia, a feeling of gratitude towards Nigeria for its role in the peace process, buttressed by Nigeria’s role in rebuilding the AFL, suggests the presence of positive emotions for the latter. Ghanaians are quite aware of Nigeria’s security engagement in the region and consider it as a supportive contribution. But perhaps, they do not share the same level of positive emotions as Liberians because of the lack of direct contact with Nigerian forces. This is evidenced in the lower percentage of 16% positive references attributed to Ghanaian respondents against 48% for Liberians.

Negative references constituted 26.5% of coded units. These sentiments were mostly held in Liberia where Nigeria is deemed to have facilitated the emergence of some of the factions in the war. These views are suggestive in a UN Security Council report released in October 1994 revealing some extent of collaboration between ECOMOG forces and anti-NPFL combatants during the fighting in Gbarnga, an allegation that ECOMOG did not refute.\(^\text{45}\) Certainly, this has robbed off negatively on some Liberians who also hold negative sentiments surrounding the behavior of Nigerian soldiers who were known to be sexually involved with the locals — a practice, which negates UN non-fraternization policies guiding the kind of relationship troops can maintain.

with beneficiaries of assistance. These views are indicative of the extent to which negative practices by peacekeeping forces can rob off negatively on the image of the sending countries.

The prevalent issue of Boko Haram, which the Nigerian government is still unable to deal with, may also explain some of these negative perceptions, as quite a few references alluded to the inability of a seemingly powerful military like Nigeria’s to deal with the homegrown terrorist group. These negative sentiments were further compounded by reports of Boko Haram infiltrating the Nigerian army. Reactions of this nature should not come as a surprise since only 11% coded units referenced Nigeria’s military superiority in the sub-region. As a security analyst in Ghana points, “we see Nigeria as a giant just like America in the world […] they have numbers, they have money, they have equipment, so in the West Africa […] they are the giants”. The perceived invincibility of the Nigerian army comes with the expectation that, naturally, the country should assume a leading role in the security and stability of West Africa, however, the fact that the threat of Boko Haram still looms and have spread to countries like Niger, Chad, and Cameroun is beginning to erode confidence in Nigeria’s ability to do just that.

Perceptions of Nigerian security engagement in the region were largely shaped by the participation of the country’s military in peace support missions across Africa and its superior military capability, and as such, may constitute its biggest soft power assets. Other dimensions of security engagement, discussed in the previous section, are not necessarily common knowledge. This may be so because none of the interviewees have direct affiliation with the military, or because these events are far removed from the daily concern of Ghanaians and Liberians, or because the joint naval military exercises were not the initiative of ECOWAS and the exchanges are purely a military process. However, Liberians have a favorable view of Nigeria’s role in the rebuilding and training of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL).

While the nature of security cooperation may account for favorable perceptions of Nigeria, it will be farfetched to attribute the support or the lack thereof for Nigerian objectives solely to the security context of their engagement. Nigeria’s rich cultural exports to these countries, as well as the character of economic engagement it maintains with them – selling of oil at concessionary rates, economic aid, financial gifts, and technical assistances – may also explain a budding

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47 Personal interview with a security analyst, in Accra, Ghana, 6 September 2019; the identity of this respondent is withheld by mutual consent.
48 A personal interview with professor Al Hassan Conteh, revealed that the appointment of Nigerian major general Suraj Aloa Abdurrahmann, to oversee the Liberian military, was motivated by the need to depoliticize the AFL.
corporative relationship. Thus, bearing in mind that other elements of Nigeria’s behavior may also influence their subjectivity, the next section questions if favorable perceptions of Nigeria have engendered support for its foreign policy objectives. In other words, has the attraction Ghanaian and Liberian elites feel for Nigeria translated to soft power? Is there a case for military soft power?

**Between attraction and foreign policy outcomes**

Since independence, Nigeria’s African policy has been driven by the need to assert its influence or leadership all over the continent – an objective which successive Nigerian leaders believed would only be possible by deepening sub-regional integration. Although integration was mainly defined in economic terms, there is no doubt that the nature of Nigeria’s security engagement in West Africa can also be tied to this objective, as West African states, backed by France, were concerned that Nigeria’s oil and large population would serve as a precursor for the latter’s regional dominance. Thus, by participating in peace support operations and engaging in other forms of defence diplomacy, Nigeria not only sought to assuage the fears of its Francophone neighbors, that its military superiority will engender an aggressive behavior, but also mitigate emerging refugee crises which were likely to result from prolonged conflicts within the sub-region.

In Liberia and Sierra Leone where Nigerian role in the civil wars was prominent, several reasons are adjudged for its participation. In Liberia, these reasons include general Babangida’s personal relationship with president Samuel Doe, the need to keep the Nigerian military engaged in order to enhance their preparedness, Nigeria’s leadership aspirations, and, as mentioned earlier, the fear in Nigeria that these conflicts could spiral out of control and create a refugee crisis. However, what is clear is that Nigeria’s decision to mobilize a regional peacekeeping force to Liberia came only after the United States refused to intervene. Nigeria’s foray into Sierra Leone was predicated on the need to reinstate the democratically elected government of Tejan Kabbah who was ousted in a military coup in 1997 by major Jonny Paul Koromah. In fact, the absence of

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49 It is important to note that the relationship of mistrust between Francophone West African states, specifically Cote d’Ivoire, Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso, and their Anglophone counterparts largely played out in the formative years of ECOWAS. The establishment of ECOWAS in 1975 is widely believed to have reduced, if not eliminated, the issue of trust and did not factor in Nigeria’s decision to intervene in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Besides, Mali even contributed to ECOMOG forces stationed in Liberia. If anything, the case can be made that the historical ties Liberia and Sierra Leone shared with Nigeria, as they were all part of the Monrovia Group – an informal grouping of African states with a shared vision for the future of the continent – during conversations on the form of African integration, may have played some role in influencing Nigerian involvement.

50 Professor Conteh reiterated this point in an interview with this author. As he noted, “Nigeria’s involvement in Liberia happened by coincidence due to the refusal of the Americans to intervene during the early years of the civil war”.

[16]
clearly defined strategic interests in Nigeria’s involvement in regional conflicts, as exemplified in Liberia and Sierra Leone, is one of the reasons why Nigerian scholars and foreign policy analysts believe that the country’s foreign policy is anything but strategic.

Regardless of Nigeria’s intent, perceptions amongst Liberians and Ghanaians elites appear to suggest that Nigerian military engagement in West Africa is mostly positive. To the extent that this behavior is attractive, I argue that enhanced security cooperation and acceptance of Nigerian leadership status within Liberia and Ghana are commensurate with Nigeria’s foreign objectives and are indicators to the effectiveness of its approach.

West Africa’s security context has changed considerably from the Cold War and immediate post-Cold War years when Nigeria was required to play a leading role in conflict interventions. Today, civil wars have given way to new forms of threats such as the rise of armed religious extremism, maritime piracy, narco-trafficking and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. Nigeria itself is dealing with a homegrown insurgency that continues to undermine the security and stability of the northeastern part of the country as well as neighboring states, while countries like Guinea, Burkina Faso, Guinea Bissau and, recently, Mali are contending with political instabilities.

Nevertheless, the sub-region remains home of the most stable states in Africa led by Ghana, Senegal and Cape Verde. Furthermore, the role of Nigeria in Cote d’Ivoire, Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Liberia successfully transitioned these states from war to peace. West Africa has suffered less conflict and fatalities than any other sub-region in the continent.51 From a regional security stand point, ECOWAS is the only organization with a stand-by force ready to intervene in conflicts, should the need arise, thanks to Nigerian leadership. These are gains that undoubtedly illustrate an enhanced regional security context.

That Nigeria has a hand in the reassuring security profile of the sub-region is not in question, but other states in the region as well as extra-continental actors – former colonial masters and the UN – equally played some role. The fear of Nigerian dominance or hegemonic aspirations from Francophone West African states, that almost curtailed the establishment of ECOWAS in 1975, has gradually dissipated, not only because of Nigeria’s multilateral security engagement in the sub-region but also of its diplomatic initiatives in the economic and cultural realm.52 In a sign of enhanced cooperation within ECOWAS on questions of security, Operation

“Restore Democracy”, otherwise known as ECOMIG, launched in January 2017, saw francophone states like Senegal, Mali and Togo join Nigeria and Ghana in contributing troops. The current set-up of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which includes Benin, Cameroun, Niger, Chad and Nigeria, is also an indication of enhanced cooperation between Nigeria and regional neighbors in the fight to rid the region from jihadists.

One consistent determinant of the external behavior of Nigeria in Africa has been the aspiration of continental leadership, and as Figure 2 suggests, references coded under the category of perceptions of Nigerian leadership indicates that Nigeria is mostly perceived as a big brother and leader. While most Ghanaians referred to Nigeria as a “brother” or “sister”, which suggests equal relations or partnership, in part due to the competitive nature of relations between both countries, in Liberia the dominant references to Nigeria’s leadership characterized the latter as a “big brother” and “leader”. This may be due to the asymmetrical power relations between both countries because, unlike Ghana, Liberia benefits from Nigerian economic diplomacy initiatives such as the Technical Aid Corps (TAC) and financial assistance. Despite the recognition of Nigeria’s leadership, 13% of coded units referenced are also of the view that the country is not living up to its leadership responsibilities.

Figure 2. Perceptions of Nigeria’s leadership amongst political and academic elites in Ghana and Liberia

To the extent that Nigerian foreign policy objectives have revolved around the idea of boosting its leadership status, as well as enhancing cooperation and integration in the sub-region, Nigeria’s soft power approach to the use of its military resources may be deemed effective. This is in contrast to popular perceptions in Nigeria that the country’s approach has been un-strategic, as
the country has gained nothing in return from these states. With other aspects of interaction, especially in the cultural and economic realm, permeating the relational dynamics of West-African states, the analysis cannot conclusively say that overall perceptions of Nigerian behavior and its leadership status is due to the nature of its security engagement, but what is clear is that it has contributed in some way to it.

Conclusions

Perceptions of Nigerian security engagement in Liberia and Ghana suggest that military resources can have attractive effects when they are wielded in non-coercive, benign and legitimate forms. Through political, economic, and military actions on issues pertinent to African states, Nigeria, since independence, has sought to achieve its aspiration of a regional leader, while also securing its vital interests of national security. Its repeated contributions to peace support operations within the region and engagement in high-level military diplomacy, that involve personnel exchanges, military training and joint military exercises, are all different expressions of its military capabilities that generate positive emotions amongst Liberian and Ghanaian elites.

Since these elements of Nigerian foreign policy behavior are perceived mostly favorably, it can be said that they constitute soft power influence. Whether this attraction for Nigeria uniformly applies to all other West African states is not a conclusion that this study can make at this point, but the findings reveal some positive outcomes for Nigeria and the sub-region. Although a flurry of security challenges still remains unaddressed, the sub-region remains the most peaceful in the continent as the spate of civil wars have abated to some extent. Also, the threat of Nigerian dominance in the sub-region, due to its overwhelming superiority in terms of material resources, have gradually dissipated with more French-speaking states participating in security engagements with their Anglophone counterparts. More importantly, the case can be made that Nigeria’s leadership status in the sub-region is not at risk, at least not yet. However, it may be only a matter of time before lingering questions, wondering why a country that was instrumental in bringing peace to countries like Liberia and Sierra Leone is struggling to quell a home grown insurgency, become pronounced.

That military resources can engender positive emotions, when used in benign, legitimate, multilateral and, at times, non-coercive forms, suggests that soft power is not cultural power or the non-coercive use of power. It is a form of influence that emerges from the behavior of a state when such behavior is perceived favorably, regardless of what resources are applied. Thus, similar to military resources, economic, cultural and political expressions of power can also generate
attraction as well as repulsion. While this poses methodological difficulties, as every resource within a state’s power arsenal may constitute a potential source of soft power, the reliance on public attitudes as a filtering device to distinguish what is coercive from attractive behavior, may mitigate some of these challenges. More importantly it can reveal the aspects of a state’s behavior that are likely to generate attraction and also provide valuable pointers to the effectiveness of a state’s foreign policy strategy.
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