

Between Reputation and Reality: A Comparative Assessment of Nigeria's Regional Power Status in Africa's Shifting Order

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Abstract

This study interrogates Nigeria's long-standing self-image as Africa's foremost regional power, popularly captured in the sobriquet "Giant of Africa," against recent evidence suggesting the claim may no longer rest on secure empirical foundations. Drawing on regional power theory and, secondarily, middle power theory, the study examines Nigeria's economic performance, governance quality, regional diplomacy, and soft power between 2020 and 2026, benchmarking these against Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, and Egypt, states whose comparative trajectories illuminate distinct dimensions of continental influence. Using a qualitative, comparative case-study design drawing on secondary data from the International Monetary Fund, Freedom House, and peer-reviewed literature, the study finds that Nigeria's economic volatility, though severe, is not uniquely so among the states examined, but that its regional diplomatic standing has suffered a more decisive blow: the 2024–2025 withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States to form the Alliance of Sahel States represents a genuine loss of regional followership with no parallel among the comparator states. The study further finds that Nigeria's regional and global standing appear to be decoupling, with continued advocacy for United Nations Security Council reform and G20/BRICS engagement persisting despite weakening regional foundations. These findings suggest that continental influence in Africa is increasingly distributed across multiple states and dimensions rather than concentrated in a single hegemon, and that Nigeria's foreign policy establishment faces a genuine strategic choice in reconciling its global ambitions with its regional realities.

Keywords: Nigeria, Regional Power, Middle Power, ECOWAS, Africa, Foreign Policy

1. INTRODUCTION

For over six decades, Nigeria's foreign policy identity has rested on an assumption rarely subjected to sustained empirical scrutiny: that its population size, economic weight, and historical contribution to continental affairs guarantee it an unassailable position as Africa's foremost regional power. This self-image, popularly expressed through the sobriquet "Giant of Africa," traces to Nigeria's role in decolonization struggles and the founding of the Organization of African Unity, later the African Union (Garba, 2023). Regional power theory offers a more demanding standard. Rather than treating power as a fixed attribute, scholars such as Nolte (2010), Destradi (2010), and Flemes (2007) conceive of regional power status as a relational position resting on material capability, leadership behaviour, and, crucially, recognition or followership from other states within the region.

Applied to Nigeria, recent evidence complicates the inherited narrative. The naira has depreciated by more than half its value since the 2023 unification of foreign exchange windows, accompanied by inflation above 30 percent (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2024). Freedom House (2024, 2025) continues to classify Nigeria as only "Partly Free," while recent scholarship describes a pattern of "federated autocracy" in which formally democratic institutions sustain elite dominance (Madueke, 2025). Regionally, the 2024 exit of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS to form the Alliance of Sahel States exposed real limits to Nigeria's hegemonic leverage in West Africa (Ahmed, Elijah, & Kurfi, 2025). Even Nigeria's football identity has taken a symbolic hit, with the Super Eagles missing consecutive FIFA World Cups. Yet Nigeria continues to assert itself globally, advocating United Nations Security Council reform, consistent with the African Union's 2005 Ezulwini Consensus demand for two permanent African seats (Mbete, 2026; ACCORD, 2023), and pursuing G20/BRICS membership as a self-styled middle power amid a broader continental pattern of second-tier African states seeking greater voice in an increasingly multipolar order (African Leadership Magazine, 2025b; Institute for Security Studies African Futures, 2026). This tension, between eroding regional foundations and sustained global ambition, is the puzzle this study investigates, using Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, and Egypt as comparators.

Existing literature on Nigeria's regional power status, however, falls into two largely disconnected strands. The first, rooted in regional power theory, offers theoretically rich but empirically dated comparisons, typically pitting Nigeria against South Africa alone (Ogunnubi & Okeke-Uzodike, 2016). The second is descriptive, tracking discrete post-2023 shocks, currency collapse, democratic backsliding, the ECOWAS rupture, without situating them within a unifying analytical frame (IMF, 2024; Freedom House, 2024, 2025; Ahmed et al., 2025). No study has yet drawn these strands together, systematically weighing recent economic, governance, security, and soft power developments against regional power theory's criteria while broadening the comparative lens beyond the customary Nigeria-South Africa dyad. Nor has existing work interrogated a conceptual conflation common in Nigerian discourse: the assumption that regional pre-eminence and global middle-power standing must move in tandem, when the two may in fact be decoupling.

Drawing on secondary data from 2020 to 2026, across economic performance, governance quality, regional diplomacy, and soft power, this study therefore asks two comprehensive questions. First, to what extent do Nigeria's economic, governance, and regional diplomatic trajectories between 2020 and 2026 support its long-standing claim to regional power status, when assessed against the criteria of regional power theory and benchmarked against Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, and Egypt? Second, how consistent is Nigeria's continued pursuit of enhanced global influence, including its advocacy for United Nations Security Council reform and its courtship of G20/BRICS membership, with the empirical realities of its regional material and diplomatic base? In addressing these questions, the study updates the regional-power literature on Nigeria with post-2023 developments, widens the comparative frame beyond South Africa,

and offers an evidence-based account of where Nigeria's regional leadership claims remain credible and where they require renewal.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on Nigeria's own claim to regional pre-eminence has been comparatively sparse and, where it exists, has tended to test the claim against a single rival rather than a broader field. Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike (2016) directly interrogate whether Nigeria qualifies as Africa's hegemon, concluding that while the country possesses the demographic and economic scale associated with hegemonic status, its domestic instability and inconsistent follow-through on regional commitments have historically undermined the translation of capability into recognized leadership. Garba (2023) reaches a related conclusion from a different angle, arguing that Nigeria's contribution to continental integration, though historically significant, has been constrained in recent years by the same domestic pressures. Two further strands of Nigeria-specific literature have emerged more recently. The first concerns soft power: Eshiett and Dayioğlu (2023) argue that Nigeria's Afrobeats and Nollywood industries constitute a substantial but underexploited diplomatic resource, a claim Abowei (2024) extends by showing that Nigeria's cultural influence in Anglophone West Africa, while real, has not been systematically converted into political leverage relative to Ghana and Liberia. The second concerns governance: Madueke (2025) offers the most recent and most critical assessment, characterizing Nigeria's federal system as sustaining a "federated autocracy" in which competitive elections coexist with entrenched elite control, a diagnosis consistent with Freedom House's continued classification of the country as only "Partly Free" (Freedom House, 2024, 2025).

Literature on the four comparator states illuminates dimensions of regional and middle-power status that Nigeria-specific scholarship has not fully addressed. On democratic governance, Chin (2024) documents Ghana's status as a comparatively resilient electoral democracy, marked by peaceful transfers of power in 2024, while cautioning that this resilience coexists with a worsening economic crisis and a documented erosion of liberal-democratic quality according to the Varieties of Democracy project, suggesting Ghana's advantage over Nigeria on this dimension is real but narrower than popular narratives often suggest. On regional diplomacy, Kimutai (2024) traces Kenya's extensive record of mediating conflicts in Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia, arguing that this record, anchored in successful peace processes such as the 2005 Naivasha Agreement and the 2022 Pretoria and Nairobi accords on Tigray, has positioned Kenya as an emerging diplomatic hegemon in Eastern Africa despite lacking Nigeria's demographic or economic scale. On military capability, successive Global Firepower assessments have consistently ranked Egypt as Africa's most powerful conventional military force, a position underpinned by a standing army of roughly 450,000 personnel and sustained modernization of its air and naval forces (Global Firepower, 2024). On global institutional leadership, the Institute for Global Dialogue (2024) documents South Africa's simultaneous chairship of BRICS in 2023 and its assumption of the G20 presidency in 2025, the first time an African state has led either forum, a position that has allowed Pretoria to advance African Union interests, including the AU's own 2023 admission to permanent G20 membership, at a scale no other African state currently matches.

Taken together, this literature suggests that regional and continental influence in Africa is neither concentrated in a single state nor cleanly hierarchical, but distributed unevenly across distinct dimensions, a pattern regional power theory would predict but that existing Nigeria-focused scholarship has not yet mapped systematically. What remains absent is a study that places Nigeria's own performance on each of these dimensions, economic stability, democratic governance, regional diplomacy, and military capability, alongside Ghana's, Kenya's, Egypt's, and South Africa's, using data current enough to capture the post-2023 shocks to Nigeria's regional standing. Existing comparative work either predates these shocks

or, as with Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike (2016), confines its comparison to South Africa alone. This is the gap the present study addresses.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored primarily in regional power theory, an analytical tradition that treats regional-power status not as an inherent attribute of a state but as a relational position that must be continuously established through three interlocking elements: material capability, leadership behaviour, and regional recognition (Nolte, 2010). Material capability refers to the conventional determinants of national power, population, economic output, and military strength, but regional power theorists caution against treating capability alone as sufficient evidence of regional power status (Flemes, 2007). A state may possess considerable capability and still fail to qualify as a regional power if it does not articulate a leadership role through its foreign policy behaviour, or if other states within the region decline to follow its lead (Destradi, 2010). This third element, recognition or followership, is what most sharply distinguishes regional power theory from cruder, capability-based measures of national power: it insists that regional power status is conferred, at least in part, by the very states over which influence is claimed, and can therefore be withdrawn or withheld even from a materially dominant state (Prys, 2010). Nigeria's experience with the Alliance of Sahel States withdrawal from ECOWAS, discussed above, is precisely the kind of episode this theoretical lens is well suited to interpret: a moment in which followership was visibly and collectively withdrawn from the region's presumed leader.

Because this study is also concerned with Nigeria's global, rather than purely regional, ambitions, it draws secondarily on middle power theory, an older but complementary tradition holding that certain states exercise influence in international affairs disproportionate to their raw material capability through coalition-building, multilateral diplomacy, and normative or brokering roles (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993). Jordaan (2003) refines this tradition by distinguishing traditional middle powers, wealthy, stable, and only weakly regionally oriented, from emerging middle powers, semi-peripheral, materially unequal, recently democratized states that nonetheless demonstrate considerable regional influence and self-association. Nigeria fits the emerging category more comfortably than the traditional one, a classification that helps explain why its foreign policy behaviour combines assertive global advocacy with a regional record this study finds to be considerably more uneven. Unlike regional power theory, middle power theory is assessed relative to the global system as a whole rather than a delimited geographic region, and it foregrounds diplomatic behaviour, such as advocacy within the United Nations, the G20, and BRICS, over material preponderance (Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2026). The two frameworks are related but not interchangeable, and this study treats their possible divergence in the Nigerian case as a central analytical concern rather than an assumption to be resolved in advance.

Applied together, these frameworks yield a structured basis for the analysis that follows. Regional power theory's three criteria, material capability, leadership behaviour, and regional recognition, are operationalized in this study through the four indicator categories introduced earlier: economic performance and governance quality serve primarily as proxies for material capability and the domestic stability that leadership behaviour requires, while Nigeria's standing within ECOWAS and the African Union, particularly in light of the Alliance of Sahel States episode, serves as the clearest available proxy for regional recognition. Soft power indicators, meanwhile, straddle both regional power theory's material dimension and middle power theory's emphasis on non-coercive influence, since cultural exports such as Afrobeats and Nollywood cinema in principle build recognition without requiring material coercion (Eshiett & Dayioğlu, 2023). Middle power theory, correspondingly, provides the lens through which Nigeria's global engagements, its United Nations Security Council reform advocacy and its pursuit of G20 and BRICS membership, are assessed for consistency with its regional standing. Where regional power

theory would expect global ambition to rest on a secure regional base, this study treats any observed decoupling between the two levels as itself a finding requiring explanation, rather than as a departure from theoretical expectation to be reasoned away.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative case-study design intended to evaluate Nigeria's regional power status against the criteria established in Section 3, rather than to generate new primary data through surveys, interviews, or econometric modelling. The research proceeds by assembling secondary data across four indicator categories, economic performance, governance quality, regional diplomacy and security, and soft power, for Nigeria and the four comparator states identified earlier, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, and Egypt, covering the period 2020 to 2026.

Economic data are drawn primarily from International Monetary Fund Article IV consultation reports and associated country statements (IMF, 2024), supplemented by internationally reported figures on exchange rates, inflation, and poverty incidence. Governance data draw on Freedom House's annual Freedom in the World assessments (Freedom House, 2024, 2025) and, where cited within the secondary literature reviewed in Section 2, the Varieties of Democracy project's measures of democratic quality. Regional diplomatic and security data draw on peer-reviewed accounts of the 2024–2025 Alliance of Sahel States withdrawal from ECOWAS (Ahmed, Elijah, & Kurfi, 2025) and related scholarship on regional mediation and conflict resolution (Kimutai, 2024). Military capability data draw on the Global Firepower index (Global Firepower, 2024), while soft power indicators draw on peer-reviewed assessments of cultural diplomacy and national branding (Eshiett & Dayioğlu, 2023; Abowei, 2024).

Rather than constructing a single composite power score, the study adopts a qualitative comparative method in which Nigeria's standing on each indicator is assessed individually against each comparator state, consistent with regional power theory's insistence that material capability, leadership behaviour, and recognition are analytically distinct dimensions that should not be collapsed into a single index (Nolte, 2010). This approach sacrifices the parsimony of a single ranking in favour of a more granular account of where Nigeria's regional standing remains credible and where it does not.

This methodology carries identifiable limitations. Reliance on secondary data means the study is subject to the revision cycles and definitional choices of the reporting institutions themselves, and national statistical agencies do not always apply fully comparable methodologies across countries, a constraint the study addresses by favouring internationally standardized sources, such as the IMF and Freedom House, over national government figures wherever both are available. The qualitative comparative method employed can identify patterns of convergence and divergence between Nigeria and the comparator states but cannot, on its own, establish causal relationships between any single indicator and a state's overall regional standing. Finally, the 2020–2026 timeframe was chosen deliberately to capture the specific post-2023 shocks motivating this study, and the analysis therefore engages with earlier periods only to the extent necessary to contextualize these recent developments.

5. FINDINGS

This section presents the study's findings across the four indicator categories identified in Sections 3 and 4 above, comparing Nigeria's recent performance with that of Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, and Egypt.

5.1 Economic Performance

Nigeria's economic indicators show the sharpest deterioration of the five states reviewed. The naira lost more than half its value against the US dollar following the 2023 unification of foreign exchange windows, and headline inflation exceeded 30 percent through 2024 (IMF, 2024). Ghana offers a partial parallel: its

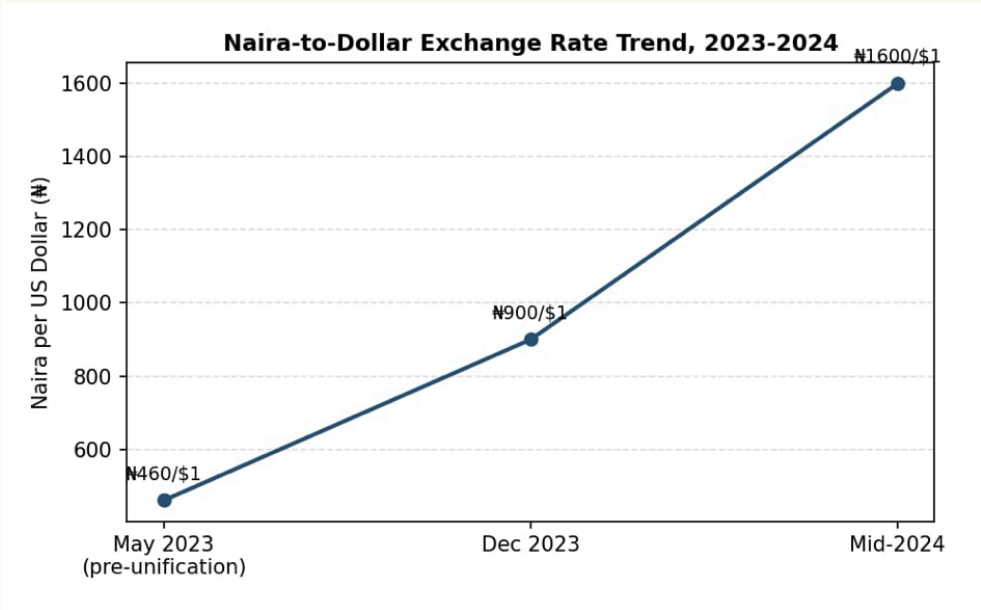
currency lost roughly 70 percent of its value over the preceding eight years and inflation peaked at 54 percent in late 2022, though an emergency IMF programme approved in 2023 helped bring inflation down to 23 percent by late 2024 (Chin, 2024). Kenya's trajectory has been comparatively steadier, with inflation falling from 7.7 percent in 2022 to 4.5 percent in 2024 and GDP growth holding at approximately 5.0 percent, even as fiscal deficits and rising debt levels constrain the outlook (Kenyan Wallstreet, 2024). The same IMF projections placed South Africa's growth at a considerably weaker 1.1 percent for 2024, while Ghana's was projected at 3.1 percent, underscoring that Nigeria's difficulties, though severe, are not uniformly worse than every comparator on every measure (Kenyan Wallstreet, 2024).

Table 1: Comparative Economic Indicators: Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa

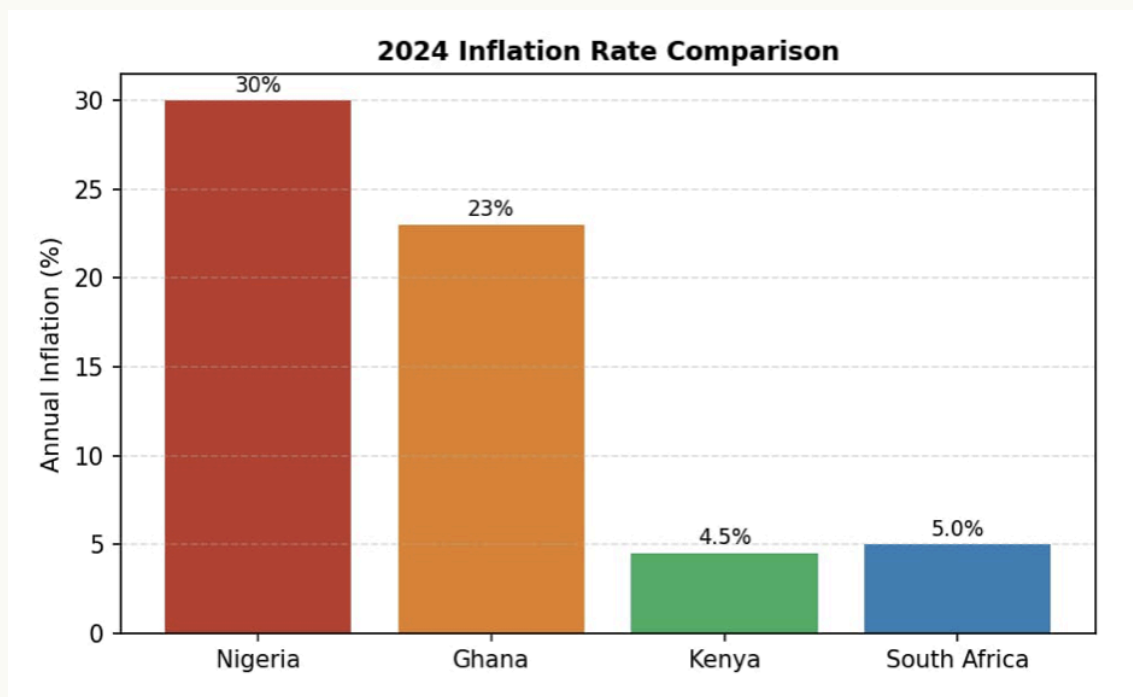
Indicator	Nigeria	Ghana	Kenya	South Africa
Currency depreciation	>50% since June 2023	~70% over 8 years	Relatively stable, 2022–2024	Relatively stable, 2022–2024
Inflation (2024)	>30%	23%, down from 54% peak	4.5%, down from 7.7%	Low single digits
GDP growth (2024, IMF)	Positive but strained by inflation	3.1%	~5.0%	1.1%

Source: Author’s compilation from International Monetary Fund (2024) for Nigeria and GDP growth projections; Chin (2024) for Ghana; and Kenyan Wallstreet (2024) for Kenya and South Africa.

Figure 1. Naira-to-dollar exchange rate movement following the June 2023 unification of foreign exchange windows.



Source: Compiled from IMF (2024).

Figure 2. Comparative 2024 annual inflation rates

Sources: IMF (2024) for Nigeria; Chin (2024) for Ghana; Kenyan Wallstreet (2024) for Kenya and South Africa.

5.2 Governance Quality

Freedom House continues to classify Nigeria as only "Partly Free," citing corruption, press restrictions, and irregularities in the 2023 general elections (Freedom House, 2024, 2025), a diagnosis reinforced by Madueke's (2025) characterisation of a "federated autocracy" in which formally competitive institutions coexist with entrenched elite control. Ghana presents a more favourable, if not unblemished, picture: its 2024 elections produced a fifth peaceful transfer of power in three decades, but Varieties of Democracy data show Ghana losing its "liberal democracy" classification over the past decade, and public trust in its Electoral Commission fell to record lows in 2024 (Chin, 2024). Neither Kenya nor Egypt features prominently in the governance literature reviewed here as a comparative democratic benchmark, suggesting that Ghana, among the four comparators, offers the most direct governance-based counterpoint to Nigeria's trajectory.

5.3 Regional Diplomacy and Security

Nigeria's regional diplomatic standing has weakened materially. The January 2024 announcement by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger that they would leave ECOWAS to form the Alliance of Sahel States, formalised in January 2025, was widely read as exposing the limits of Nigeria's hegemonic leverage in West Africa, compounded by its own internal insurgencies (Ahmed, Elijah, & Kurfi, 2025). By contrast, Kenya has built a substantial and largely uncontested record of regional mediation, hosting or facilitating peace processes in Sudan, Somalia, and, most recently, the 2022 Pretoria and Nairobi agreements on the Tigray conflict, a record scholars argue has positioned Kenya as an emerging diplomatic hegemon in Eastern Africa despite lacking Nigeria's economic or demographic scale (Kimutai, 2024). South Africa, meanwhile, has converted its diplomatic capital into institutional leadership at the global level, chairing BRICS in 2023 and assuming the G20 presidency from 2025, the first time an African state has led either forum (Institute for Global Dialogue, 2024). Egypt's regional standing rests on a different foundation altogether: with a standing army of roughly 450,000 personnel, consistently ranked Africa's strongest military force, and control of the Suez

Canal, Egypt's influence is grounded in hard power and geostrategic position rather than mediatory diplomacy (Global Firepower, 2024).

5.4 Soft Power and Cultural Influence

Nigeria's cultural exports, Afrobeats music and Nollywood cinema, remain considerable assets, with Nollywood alone contributing an estimated \$590 million annually to the national economy (African Leadership Magazine, 2025a), but the literature is consistent in finding that Nigeria has historically underutilised these resources relative to their diplomatic potential (Eshielt & Dayioğlu, 2023), a gap Abowei (2024) documents concretely in the case of Ghana and Liberia, where Nigerian cultural influence is pervasive but has not been converted into commensurate political leverage. Symbolically, Nigeria's football identity, long a source of continental prestige, has suffered consecutive setbacks, with the Super Eagles missing the 2022 and 2026 FIFA World Cups after a penalty-shootout defeat to the Democratic Republic of Congo in November 2025, a loss estimated to have cost the Nigeria Football Federation over \$10.5 million in guaranteed FIFA prize money alone (Premium Times, 2025). None of the four comparator states offers a directly equivalent soft power profile in the literature reviewed, suggesting this is a dimension on which Nigeria's underlying assets remain distinctive even where their diplomatic conversion has lagged.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings presented in Section 5 lend qualified support to the possibility raised in this study's opening paragraphs: that Nigeria's "Giant of Africa" identity has, on several material dimensions, outpaced the conditions that originally sustained it. Read through regional power theory's three criteria, material capability, leadership behaviour, and regional recognition (Nolte, 2010), the picture is mixed rather than uniformly negative. On material capability, Nigeria's economic indicators, currency depreciation exceeding 50 percent and inflation above 30 percent, represent a genuine deterioration, but they are not obviously worse than Ghana's own recent history of currency collapse and hyperinflation-adjacent conditions (Chin, 2024), suggesting that economic volatility alone cannot explain a distinctively Nigerian decline. It is on the third criterion, regional recognition, that the evidence points most clearly toward erosion. The Alliance of Sahel States withdrawal represents precisely the kind of followership failure that regional power theory treats as decisive: three states did not merely criticise Nigeria's regional leadership, they formally exited the institutional structure Nigeria has anchored since 1975 (Ahmed, Elijah, & Kurfi, 2025). No comparable withdrawal of recognition has occurred against any of the four comparator states reviewed in this study, which makes the AES episode the single strongest piece of evidence for a genuine, rather than merely reputational, decline in Nigeria's regional standing.

The comparative findings also complicate any assumption that regional leadership in Africa is a zero-sum contest with a single eventual winner. Rather, the evidence is consistent with regional power theory's expectation that material capability, leadership behaviour, and recognition can be distributed unevenly across states and across dimensions (Flemes, 2007). Kenya's diplomatic capital rests on a decades-long record of successful mediation that Nigeria has not replicated at comparable scale (Kimutai, 2024); South Africa's institutional leadership rests on a level of global engagement, chairing both BRICS and the G20, that no other African state currently matches (Institute for Global Dialogue, 2024); and Egypt's regional weight rests on hard military capability and geostrategic position rather than diplomatic brokerage (Global Firepower, 2024). Nigeria's own comparative advantage, its cultural and demographic soft power, remains real but under-converted into diplomatic leverage, a finding consistent across the soft power literature reviewed (Eshielt & Dayioğlu, 2023; Abowei, 2024). Taken together, these patterns suggest that the "Giant of Africa" framing, by implying a single, uncontested hierarchy with Nigeria permanently at its apex,

obscures a more fragmented reality in which several African states now hold meaningful, if narrower, forms of regional or continental influence.

This fragmentation bears directly on the reputation-reality gap this study set out to interrogate, and on the second research question concerning the consistency between Nigeria's regional standing and its global ambitions. The evidence here points toward decoupling rather than consistency. Nigeria's regional material and diplomatic base has visibly weakened since 2023, yet its pursuit of United Nations Security Council reform and G20/BRICS engagement has, if anything, intensified over the same period (Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2026). Middle power theory helps explain why this decoupling is possible rather than contradictory: because middle power status is assessed against the global system rather than a delimited region, and rests on diplomatic coalition-building rather than raw material preponderance (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993), a state can in principle sustain global middle-power behaviour even as its regional foundations erode, at least in the short to medium term. Whether this is sustainable over a longer horizon is a separate question this study's timeframe cannot resolve, but the finding itself, that regional and global status are empirically separable for Nigeria rather than automatically co-extensive, directly addresses the conceptual conflation identified in Section 2 and represents one of this study's principal contributions.

7. CONCLUSION

This study set out to interrogate whether Nigeria's inherited status as Africa's "Giant," a regional power whose pre-eminence has rarely been subjected to sustained empirical scrutiny, still holds under recent evidence, and to situate that question within a genuinely comparative and theoretically grounded frame. The findings suggest a picture more nuanced than either uncritical acceptance or wholesale rejection of the label would allow. On material capability, Nigeria's economic deterioration since 2023 is real but not uniquely severe among the states examined; Ghana's own history of currency collapse and inflation shows that macroeconomic volatility is a regional, not a distinctively Nigerian, affliction. On regional recognition, however, the evidence is considerably less forgiving: the Alliance of Sahel States' formal exit from ECOWAS represents a withdrawal of followership that no other state in this study's comparative frame has suffered, and it is this dimension, more than currency or inflation figures, that constitutes the clearest empirical basis for revising Nigeria's regional power claims.

The comparative analysis further shows that regional and continental influence in Africa is now distributed across multiple states and multiple dimensions, Kenya's mediatory diplomacy, South Africa's institutional leadership within BRICS and the G20, and Egypt's military and geostrategic weight, rather than concentrated in a single presumptive hegemon. Nigeria's own comparative advantage, its demographic scale and cultural soft power, remains genuine but persistently under-converted into diplomatic leverage. Perhaps the study's most consequential finding concerns the relationship between Nigeria's regional and global standing: rather than moving together, as popular discourse and much prior scholarship have assumed, the evidence points toward a decoupling, in which Nigeria's weakening regional foundations coexist with an intensifying pursuit of global middle-power status through United Nations Security Council reform advocacy and G20/BRICS engagement.

This decoupling, more than any single indicator examined here, captures the reputation-reality gap this study set out to investigate, and it suggests that Nigeria's foreign policy establishment faces a genuine strategic choice rather than a settled inheritance: whether to treat regional leadership as a precondition for global ambition, as regional power theory would suggest, or to pursue global middle-power status as a project increasingly independent of regional recognition. The qualitative, secondary-data design employed here cannot adjudicate which path Nigeria is likely to take, only that the two are not currently aligned; that

adjudication, and the policy choices it implies, are matters this study's concluding recommendations address directly.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of these findings, several recommendations follow. First, Nigerian economic policymakers should prioritize sustained macroeconomic stabilization, particularly exchange rate management and inflation control, not merely as domestic imperatives but as prerequisites for regional credibility, given that Ghana's own recovery from a comparable currency crisis suggests such stabilization is achievable within a realistic policy horizon (Chin, 2024). Second, addressing the governance deficits documented in this study, including the "federated autocracy" pattern identified by Madueke (2025), will require electoral and institutional reforms that go beyond procedural compliance toward the substantive accountability mechanisms that underpin genuine democratic legitimacy, since governance quality functions in the literature reviewed here as a proxy for the domestic stability that sustained regional leadership requires.

Third, and most urgently given this study's findings, Nigeria's foreign policy establishment should treat the Alliance of Sahel States withdrawal not as an isolated diplomatic setback but as a structural warning about the fragility of regional followership, and should invest concretely in rebuilding confidence within ECOWAS, whether through renewed financial commitment to the organization, greater sensitivity to the security concerns that drove the Sahelian states' departure, or a more consultative style of regional leadership than Nigeria has historically practiced. Fourth, Nigeria should pursue a more deliberate strategy for converting its considerable soft power assets, Afrobeats, Nollywood, and its broader cultural diaspora, into diplomatic leverage, following the kind of structured cultural diplomacy that this study's soft power literature suggests South Africa and Ghana have applied more consistently in specific bilateral contexts (Abowei, 2024).

Fifth, given this study's central finding that Nigeria's regional and global standing may be decoupling, Nigerian policymakers should explicitly reassess whether continued advocacy for United Nations Security Council reform and G20/BRICS membership is being pursued as a substitute for regional renewal or as a genuinely complementary strategy; regional power theory's emphasis on recognition suggests that global ambitions unaccompanied by regional credibility carry long-term reputational risk, even if they remain achievable in the short term. Finally, this study recommends that future research extend the comparative and indicator-based approach developed here with primary data, including elite interviews with ECOWAS and African Union officials and quantitative modelling of the relationships among the indicators examined, to test more rigorously the causal claims this qualitative study has necessarily left as informed inference rather than definitive proof.

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