

PRESIDENT TINUBU'S LEADERSHIP IN ECOWAS: A NEW ERA OF REGIONAL DIPLOMACY

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Abstract

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has faced significant political and security challenges in recent years, particularly with the resurgence of military coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger. These events have tested ECOWAS's capacity to uphold democratic governance and regional stability. The assumption of the ECOWAS Chairmanship by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu in July 2023 marked a critical moment for the organization's diplomatic and security strategies. This study examines Tinubu's leadership in navigating these crises, assessing his mediation efforts and their broader implications for ECOWAS diplomacy. The study employs a qualitative research methodology, drawing on secondary sources such as journal articles, policy documents, and ECOWAS communiqués. Anchored in neorealism, the theoretical framework underscores the strategic actions of state actors in maintaining regional stability and balancing power among member states. Findings reveal that Tinubu's leadership has ushered in a more assertive and interventionist approach, characterized by swift responses to unconstitutional government changes. His emphasis on economic integration, regional security, and diplomatic tools—ranging from sanctions to mediation—marks a departure from previous passive strategies. However, resistance from military juntas, internal divisions within ECOWAS, and Nigeria's domestic constraints present significant hurdles. The study concludes that while Tinubu's leadership has revitalized ECOWAS diplomacy, its sustainability hinges on long-term institutional reforms and strengthened member-state engagement. It recommends enhancing diplomatic cohesion, refining enforcement mechanisms, and fostering inclusive dialogue to ensure ECOWAS remains a credible force for regional stability.

Keywords: Leadership, ECOWAS, Regional Diplomacy, A New Era of Regional Diplomacy

Introduction

The West African region has witnessed a resurgence of political instability, driven by a combination of military coups, insurgencies, and economic challenges. These crises have tested the resilience of governance structures and posed significant threats to regional security. As the principal regional body, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has historically played a crucial role in conflict resolution and the promotion of democratic governance¹. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been instrumental in maintaining regional stability through conflict resolution and the promotion of democratic governance. Established in 1975, ECOWAS has deployed peacekeeping missions, such as ECOMOG in Liberia and Sierra Leone, to restore order in conflict-ridden states. It also mediates political crises, as seen in The Gambia (2017) and Mali (2020). Through its Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, ECOWAS enforces democratic principles by condemning unconstitutional changes in government and supporting electoral processes. Its proactive stance has strengthened governance and peace in West Africa.

However, the wave of military takeovers in Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) has severely undermined its ability to enforce democratic norms and maintain stability². Despite sanctions, suspensions, and diplomatic efforts, ECOWAS has struggled to deter military takeovers or secure the swift return to civilian rule. The coups have exposed limitations in the organization's enforcement mechanisms and raised questions about its effectiveness in upholding democratic governance amid growing political instability and security challenges in the region.

Amidst these challenges, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu assumed the Chairmanship of ECOWAS on July 9, 2023, during the 63rd Ordinary Session of the Authority of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government held in Bissau, Guinea-Bissau³. His emergence came at a critical juncture, with the region grappling with increasing threats to democratic governance. Pledging a more assertive and proactive leadership, President Tinubu sought to reinvigorate ECOWAS's diplomatic and security mechanisms, emphasizing the need for decisive interventions in crisis-hit states⁴. He pushed for stricter enforcement of democratic norms, including sanctions on coup-led governments, diplomatic engagement to restore civilian rule, and potential military intervention, as seen in the response to the Niger coup (2023). Tinubu also emphasized strengthening regional security cooperation to combat terrorism and instability, aiming to restore ECOWAS's credibility as a defender of democracy and stability in West Africa.

His tenure has been characterized by a series of bold measures, including the imposition of economic and political sanctions, direct mediation efforts, and, in extreme cases, the consideration of military intervention as a last resort⁵. During his tenure as ECOWAS Chair, President Tinubu implemented bold measures to address political instability in the region. These included imposing economic and political sanctions on coup-led governments, such as freezing assets and restricting trade to pressure juntas into restoring civilian rule. He also engaged in direct mediation efforts, sending high-level envoys to negotiate peaceful transitions. In extreme cases, ECOWAS, under his leadership, considered military intervention as a last resort, particularly in Niger (2023), to deter unconstitutional takeovers and reinforce democratic governance in West Africa.

This study examines Tinubu's leadership approach within ECOWAS, evaluating his strategies, the challenges encountered, and his overall impact on regional diplomacy. It also assesses whether his tenure, which is expected to last for one year, has marked a significant shift in ECOWAS's ability to navigate political crises and uphold democratic principles. Through an in-depth analysis, this research provides insights into the effectiveness and sustainability of Tinubu's leadership in addressing the complex security and governance issues facing West Africa.

Conceptual Clarifications

In understanding President Tinubu's leadership within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its implication for regional diplomacy, it is crucial to first clarify key concepts embedded in the topic: leadership, ECOWAS, regional diplomacy, and a new era. These concepts collectively shape the direction of the study, providing both the theoretical framework and practical context for evaluating Tinubu's impact on regional governance and diplomacy.

Leadership

Leadership, in its essence, refers to the capacity to influence, direct, and guide a group, organization, or state toward achieving defined objectives but in the context of international organizations like ECOWAS, leadership involves not only steering the organization through diplomatic negotiations and policy implementation but also making critical decisions in times of crisis⁶. President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's leadership style is distinguished by assertiveness, especially in responding to political instability within the West African region. Under his chairmanship, ECOWAS has adopted more proactive measures, including the imposition of sanctions and calls for military interventions when deemed necessary. This shift from a reactive to a more interventionist approach marks a significant departure from the traditionally cautious stance of past leaderships⁷. Tinubu's leadership can thus be analyzed through his strategies to address governance challenges, maintain regional stability, and promote democratic norms across member states.

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

ECOWAS, established in 1975, is a regional intergovernmental organization comprising 15 West African countries⁸. The organization's main objectives include fostering economic integration, political cooperation, and peace and security in the region. Over the years, ECOWAS has expanded its role beyond economic collaboration to become a central actor in conflict resolution and peacekeeping operations. It has been instrumental in mediating political crises, deploying peacekeeping forces, and upholding democratic principles within West Africa. However, the recent resurgence of military coups in countries such as Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger has severely tested the organization's capacity to uphold democratic norms and ensure regional stability⁹. This challenges the traditional role of ECOWAS as a mediator and enforcer of democratic governance, highlighting the need for more robust leadership and diplomatic strategies.

Regional Diplomacy

Regional diplomacy refers to the practice of managing and conducting diplomatic relations at the regional level, where states collaborate to address common challenges, particularly political, economic, and security issues¹⁰. In the case of ECOWAS, regional diplomacy involves collective decision-making, conflict resolution, and fostering cooperation among member states to uphold regional peace and security. ECOWAS diplomacy often includes sanctions, peacekeeping missions, mediation efforts, and engagement with external actors such as the United Nations or the African Union to address crises within the region. Under Tinubu's leadership, regional diplomacy has taken on a more assertive tone, with ECOWAS leaders making swifter and more forceful decisions in response to unconstitutional changes in government and threats to democratic governance¹¹. The bloc has imposed tougher sanctions, engaged in direct negotiations with coup leaders, and, in some cases, considered military intervention to restore democratic rule, as seen in Niger (2023). This proactive approach reflects a stronger commitment to upholding democratic governance and regional stability, signaling that ECOWAS will not tolerate military takeovers or threats to constitutional order.

Tinubu's proactive approach underscores the growing importance of regional diplomacy in managing not only economic integration but also the political stability of the West African region.

A New Era of Regional Diplomacy

The term a new era in the context of Tinubu's leadership signals a distinct shift in ECOWAS's approach to addressing regional challenges¹². This new era is defined by a more assertive, interventionist, and strategic engagement in both diplomatic and security matters. President Tinubu's tenure is seen as a critical turning point for ECOWAS, as it has moved from a predominantly reactive stance to one where diplomacy is marked by rapid responses to crises, the imposition of sanctions, and calls for direct intervention when necessary. This approach contrasts sharply with the more passive and conciliatory methods employed in the past, which often involved long periods of negotiation without immediate consequences. By emphasizing the need for stronger enforcement of democratic norms and regional security initiatives, Tinubu's leadership aims to restore the credibility and influence of ECOWAS in West African diplomacy and governance.

The concepts of leadership, ECOWAS, regional diplomacy, and a new era collectively frame the transformative changes under President Tinubu's chairmanship. His leadership has reshaped ECOWAS diplomacy by introducing bold interventions in response to political instability. Tinubu's assertive stance appears to mark the beginning of a new era in regional diplomacy, one where ECOWAS moves beyond passive engagement to actively uphold democratic governance and regional security. This shift has significant implications for how ECOWAS will address future crises in West Africa and the broader implications for regional and international relations.

Theoretical Framework:

Neorealism, also referred to as structural realism, is a dominant theory in international relations that explains state behavior within an anarchic global system. Developed by Kenneth Waltz, neorealism contends that the absence of a central governing authority in the international arena compels states to engage in power struggles to ensure their survival and maximize their strategic interests¹³. This structural constraint dictates that states act rationally, prioritizing security and influence within the global and regional order. In this context, regional organizations like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) operate within a power-driven framework, where dominant states exert significant influence in shaping collective decisions and maintaining stability¹⁴. ECOWAS operates within a power-driven framework where dominant states, such as Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal, play a crucial role in shaping collective decisions and maintaining regional stability. These influential states leverage their economic, military, and diplomatic strength to drive ECOWAS policies, enforce sanctions, and lead peacekeeping efforts. For example, Nigeria has historically led military interventions and diplomatic initiatives, as seen in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Niger. This dynamic means that while ECOWAS functions as a collective body, its effectiveness often depends on the political will and strategic interests of its most powerful member states.

Nigeria, as the largest economy and most populous country in West Africa, assumes the role of a regional hegemon, with its leadership shaping ECOWAS policies and interventions. President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's administration exemplifies neorealist principles by leveraging Nigeria's dominant position to safeguard its strategic interests while reinforcing ECOWAS's authority in regional diplomacy. His leadership approach reflects the neorealist assertion that

powerful states act as stabilizers within their regions, ensuring that security threats, economic disruptions, and political instabilities do not undermine their national interests.

Tinubu's leadership within ECOWAS is characterized by decisive actions that align with the key tenets of neorealism. His administration employs mechanisms such as economic sanctions, diplomatic mediation, and military preparedness to maintain regional order and assert Nigeria's influence. The imposition of sanctions on undemocratic regimes within West Africa is a demonstration of power politics, intended to deter instability and reinforce ECOWAS's governance framework. Similarly, diplomatic mediation in crisis-ridden states aligns with John Mearsheimer's concept of offensive realism, which argues that powerful states actively shape regional outcomes to maintain dominance and prevent rival influences¹⁵. In the context of ECOWAS, dominant states like Nigeria push for diplomatic and, at times, military interventions to uphold democratic governance and regional stability. This approach helps prevent external powers or rival factions from gaining influence, ensuring that the regional order remains favorable to their strategic interests while reinforcing ECOWAS's authority in West Africa.

Furthermore, Tinubu's emphasis on military readiness underscores Stephen Walt's theory of balance of threat, which posits that states respond to perceived threats through strategic alliances and defensive postures. Nigeria's commitment to regional security, including peacekeeping efforts and military interventions, reflects its strategic imperative to prevent the spread of insecurity that could undermine its national stability. These actions illustrate the neorealist belief that power projection and military capability are essential tools in maintaining a favorable balance of power within the region.

Therefore, President Tinubu's leadership in ECOWAS is best understood through a neorealist framework, where power, security, and strategic interests dictate state behavior. By reinforcing ECOWAS's institutional authority while simultaneously advancing Nigeria's national interests, Tinubu's administration exemplifies the principles of neorealism in regional governance and diplomacy.

Tinubu's Leadership Approach in ECOWAS: A Neorealist Perspective

President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's tenure as ECOWAS Chair has been marked by a proactive and assertive approach to regional diplomacy. His leadership reflects a strong commitment to stability, economic cooperation, and security coordination within West Africa. From a neorealist perspective, Tinubu's leadership is best understood through the lens of power politics, state survival, and regional hegemony, where ECOWAS operates as a system of self-interested states navigating an anarchic international order. Neorealism suggests that states and regional organizations like ECOWAS act primarily in pursuit of their security and strategic interests, shaping policies through a balance-of-power approach. Faced with growing political upheavals, economic challenges, and security threats, Tinubu has sought to reinforce ECOWAS's authority through strategic diplomatic engagements, economic policies, and military initiatives. His leadership style signifies a shift toward a more decisive and interventionist ECOWAS, aiming to strengthen governance and maintain regional equilibrium, which aligns with neorealist assumptions about power consolidation and strategic intervention in response to security threats. The shift in leadership within ECOWAS marks a transition toward a more decisive and interventionist approach, emphasizing stronger governance, proactive crisis management, and strategic intervention in response to security threats. Traditionally, ECOWAS has functioned as a cooperative economic and political bloc, but recent developments suggest a move toward consolidating power to maintain regional stability.

From a neorealist perspective, this shift aligns with the idea that institutions, like states, act to maximize power and security within an anarchic international system. By centralizing authority in decision-making, ECOWAS can respond more swiftly and effectively to governance crises, military coups, and conflicts, reinforcing the neorealist belief that strong institutions help sustain order in unstable environments.

Furthermore, the organization's increasing engagement in security matters reflects the neorealist emphasis on power projection. Through peacekeeping missions, sanctions, and diplomatic interventions, ECOWAS is taking active steps to deter instability, much like states use military and economic strategies to safeguard their interests. In addition, this approach contributes to maintaining a balance of power within the region, preventing any single state from becoming overly dominant while also countering external influences that could disrupt regional equilibrium.

Ultimately, this leadership shift signifies ECOWAS' evolution from a primarily economic body to a politically assertive regional bloc. By consolidating power and adopting a more interventionist stance, it embodies a neorealist strategy aimed at preserving security and stability in West Africa.

Diplomatic Engagements and Mediation Efforts

One of Tinubu's earliest and most defining diplomatic moves as ECOWAS Chair was his swift response to the July 2023 coup in Niger, where the democratically elected government of President Mohamed Bazoum was overthrown by military forces¹⁶. Recognizing the threat that repeated coups posed to democratic governance in the region, Tinubu convened an emergency ECOWAS summit to address the crisis. This summit resulted in the imposition of harsh economic sanctions, including border closures, the suspension of financial transactions, and trade restrictions aimed at isolating the military junta. Additionally, ECOWAS, under Tinubu's leadership, openly considered the use of military force to restore constitutional order, signaling a shift toward a more assertive and interventionist regional stance¹⁷. Under President Bola Tinubu's leadership, ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) adopted a firmer stance regarding regional security and constitutional order, particularly in response to the rise of military coups in West Africa. This shift signaled ECOWAS's readiness to take more assertive and interventionist actions to uphold democracy and constitutional governance in member states.

In the face of multiple coups in countries like Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, ECOWAS moved beyond its usual diplomatic measures and began contemplating the use of military force to restore civilian rule. This represented a notable departure from the more cautious, diplomatic approaches typically employed by the organization in the past.

ECOWAS, under Tinubu's leadership, aimed to curb the spread of military regimes in the region, emphasizing the importance of democracy and the rule of law. The consideration of military intervention was seen as a necessary step to ensure that the political instability caused by these coups did not undermine regional peace and development.

This shift was partly influenced by the growing frustration within ECOWAS and the international community over the inability to effectively deter coups and military takeovers. By contemplating military action, ECOWAS aimed to send a strong message that it would not tolerate the erosion of democratic norms in West Africa, positioning itself as a more proactive regional body in maintaining stability.

However, while military intervention was considered, ECOWAS also sought to balance this with diplomatic efforts and sanctions, underscoring that the use of force would only be a last resort if all other avenues failed to restore constitutional order. This approach reflected the complex realities of balancing security, diplomacy, and respect for national sovereignty in a region marked by political volatility.

From a neorealist perspective, this response aligns with the theory's emphasis on deterring threats through power projection and strategic balancing. Tinubu's actions suggest that ECOWAS, under his leadership, is attempting to deter further unconstitutional regime changes by signaling its willingness to enforce compliance through sanctions or military intervention. However, the proposed military intervention faced resistance from several ECOWAS member states, some of which expressed concerns about the potential for escalating regional conflicts. While the military option was not ultimately pursued, its consideration underlined a new phase of decisive regional diplomacy, where ECOWAS aimed to take a firmer stance against unconstitutional changes in government.

Beyond Niger, Tinubu has been actively involved in negotiations with military-led governments in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea, urging them to return to democratic rule¹⁸. He has engaged in direct dialogues with military leaders, pressing for transitional timetables and institutional reforms that would lead to credible elections. However, these diplomatic efforts have yielded mixed results. From a neorealist perspective, the reluctance of military juntas to comply with ECOWAS demands underscores the self-help nature of international politics, where states prioritize their own survival and strategic alliances over regional pressures. While ECOWAS has maintained pressure on the juntas, governments in Mali and Burkina Faso have increasingly distanced themselves from the organization, forging closer ties with Russia and aligning with alternative security arrangements¹⁹. This geopolitical realignment has complicated Tinubu's mediation efforts, highlighting the limitations of diplomatic pressure in a context where external actors, such as Russia's Wagner Group, offer alternative security partnerships that challenge ECOWAS's influence. This great-

power intervention dynamic aligns with neorealist assumptions about external actors shaping regional security competition.

From a neorealist perspective, this shift reflects the nature of international politics, where power competition dictates security dynamics. The involvement of external actors like Wagner reinforces the neorealist idea that regions are in constant security competition. In this case, the entry of Russia's private military forces into West Africa has altered the balance of power, providing countries such as Niger and Mali with military alternatives that reduce their reliance on ECOWAS. As a result, the regional body's ability to enforce governance norms through diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions is significantly weakened.

This dynamic also aligns with neorealist assumptions about the role of great-power interventions in shaping regional affairs. According to neorealism, stronger states often intervene in weaker ones to expand their influence, and Wagner's growing footprint in West Africa exemplifies this pattern. Historically, global powers have engaged in proxy conflicts and military interventions to assert their interests, and the current situation in West Africa follows a similar trajectory. This suggests that regional stability is not dictated by ECOWAS alone but is increasingly influenced by the strategic interests of external actors.

Furthermore, the rise of alternative security partnerships highlights the limits of ECOWAS's diplomatic strategies in a multipolar world. When sanctioned states can secure military and financial assistance from powerful external allies, they become less susceptible to regional pressure. This is a fundamental aspect of neorealist thought: in an international system where multiple great powers compete for influence, weaker states can exploit these rivalries to their advantage.

Ultimately, the growing involvement of external security providers such as Wagner is reshaping the security landscape in West Africa. It demonstrates how great-power interventions can undermine regional organizations and restrict their ability to enforce governance and stability. For Tinubu, this means that mediation efforts within ECOWAS will face increasing difficulties, as some member states now have alternative pathways to security and economic support, reducing their dependence on regional solutions.

Economic and Security Initiatives

Recognizing that political instability in West Africa is often fueled by economic hardship and underdevelopment, Tinubu has placed significant emphasis on regional economic integration as a means of promoting stability. His administration has advocated for an ECOWAS-wide economic resilience strategy, aimed at addressing the root causes of instability through targeted development programs. This initiative focuses on key areas such as food security, energy cooperation, and infrastructure development, ensuring that economic growth reaches vulnerable communities that are most susceptible to political upheavals²⁰. By strengthening economic ties between ECOWAS member states, Tinubu aims to reduce dependence on external actors, foster intra-regional trade, and enhance collective prosperity²¹. Under President Bola Tinubu's leadership, ECOWAS is focused on strengthening the economic ties between its member states, with the aim of reducing dependence on external actors and fostering greater intra-regional trade. By doing so, Tinubu hopes to create a more self-reliant and resilient West African region that is better equipped to navigate global challenges and enhance collective prosperity.

A key part of this vision is to lessen West Africa's reliance on foreign powers and international financial institutions. Tinubu seeks to minimize the region's vulnerability to external pressures such as fluctuating global commodity prices, debt dependency, and geopolitical influences. The goal is to encourage economic self-sufficiency within ECOWAS, allowing the region to grow sustainably and independently of external forces.

Another critical aspect of Tinubu's strategy is to boost intra-regional trade. By fostering greater economic collaboration among member states, he aims to create a stronger and more vibrant regional economy. This includes efforts to improve the free movement of goods, services, and capital, which would create a larger and more integrated market. Removing trade barriers, harmonizing tariffs, and streamlining customs procedures are central to achieving this vision. Tinubu believes that by increasing intra-regional trade, ECOWAS member states can benefit from enhanced supply chains, economies of scale, and improved economic efficiency.

Ultimately, the strengthening of economic ties within ECOWAS is aimed at improving the standard of living across West Africa. By promoting regional economic cooperation, Tinubu hopes to foster job creation, industrialization, and the development of crucial infrastructure. This would lead to better access to education, healthcare, and essential services, significantly improving socio-economic conditions. In addition, such economic integration could attract more investment from within the region and beyond, as external investors look to tap into a growing, unified market.

By enhancing the collective economic strength of the region, Tinubu envisions a more cohesive ECOWAS that can leverage its combined resources, share technologies, and increase its influence on the global stage. This would not only improve bargaining power in international trade negotiations but also make the region more attractive to global partners, paving the way for greater prosperity for all member states.

From a neorealist perspective, economic cooperation in ECOWAS is not solely driven by altruism or regional solidarity but is also a strategic means of increasing collective power and reducing dependence on external forces. Tinubu's push for economic resilience can be seen as an attempt to consolidate ECOWAS's regional influence and counterbalance external economic influences from global powers such as China, the EU, and Russia.

In addition to economic measures, Tinubu has prioritized security cooperation as a fundamental pillar of his ECOWAS leadership. The region has been grappling with rising insurgency threats, cross-border terrorism, and the proliferation of armed groups, particularly in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin. To counter these threats, Tinubu has actively championed the revitalization of the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF)—a regional military force designed for rapid deployment in crisis situations²². His administration has advocated for enhanced coordination between national defense forces, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and the creation of joint military operations to combat insurgency groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, and other militant factions operating across porous borders.

From a neorealist standpoint, security cooperation is essential for regional power projection and survival in an anarchic system. By reinforcing the ECOWAS Standby Force, Tinubu is strengthening regional military capabilities to ensure stability, deter external interference, and reduce reliance on foreign military assistance. However, despite these ambitious security initiatives, funding constraints and political divisions within ECOWAS have posed significant obstacles to the full implementation of the Standby Force²³. Many member states have expressed concerns over the financial burden of maintaining a regional military force, while some governments remain reluctant to contribute troops to collective military operations. These challenges highlight the structural weaknesses of ECOWAS's security architecture, underscoring the neorealist principle that collective security efforts are often hindered by conflicting national interests and the prioritization of state sovereignty over regional cooperation.

Challenges to Tinubu's ECOWAS Leadership

Neorealism, or structural realism, provides a useful framework for analyzing President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's leadership in ECOWAS. This international relations theory, developed by Kenneth Waltz, emphasizes the anarchic nature of the international system, where states and actors act primarily in pursuit of power and security. Under this framework, ECOWAS's actions, challenges, and geopolitical constraints can be understood as part of a broader struggle for regional stability and influence in an environment where states prioritize self-interest, security, and survival.

Neorealism and Tinubu's Assertive Leadership

Tinubu's leadership approach aligns with neorealism's emphasis on power politics and the necessity of strong regional leadership in an anarchic system. His proactive stance on military coups, economic integration, and security cooperation demonstrates an understanding of ECOWAS as a regional bloc seeking to balance power and maintain stability amid internal and external threats. The decision to impose sanctions and consider military intervention in Niger reflects a realist approach to deterrence, where ECOWAS aims to discourage unconstitutional power grabs by increasing the costs for military regimes. However, as neorealism predicts, power calculations and national interests have shaped how member states react to these interventions. As neorealism predicts, power calculations and national interests heavily influence how ECOWAS member states respond to interventions. While some states, like Nigeria and Ghana, advocate for strong measures, including sanctions and military threats, others hesitate due to economic ties, security concerns, or political alignments with coup regimes. For instance, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have resisted ECOWAS actions, prioritizing their sovereignty and regional alliances. This divergence reflects the realist view that states act based on self-interest, balancing collective security with their own strategic priorities.

Power Struggles and the Limitations of Collective Action

The resistance from military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea illustrates the neorealist principle that states act primarily in self-interest. These regimes reject ECOWAS directives because complying would weaken their control and shift power away from the ruling elites²⁴. Their engagement with alternative security partners, such as Russia's Wagner Group, further exemplifies how states seek security through alliances that serve their national interests, even at the expense of regional stability. This mirrors neorealism's concept of balancing behavior, where weaker states seek external support to counterbalance regional pressures from stronger states or organizations like ECOWAS.

Moreover, internal divisions within ECOWAS reflect the lack of a central authority in international politics, a key tenet of neorealism. The reluctance of some states, such as Cape Verde and Ghana, to support military interventions²⁵ underscores how individual member states prioritize their own strategic calculations over regional unity. This division weakens ECOWAS's collective action, illustrating a common neorealist challenge: the difficulty of achieving cooperation in an anarchic system where states remain primarily concerned with self-preservation. For example, Ghana, despite supporting democratic principles, may avoid military action to prevent regional instability that could affect its economy or security. Cape Verde, a small island nation, may prioritize diplomatic solutions over military involvement due to its limited military capacity and geographical distance from conflicts.

This division weakens ECOWAS's ability to act decisively, reinforcing a key neorealist argument: in an anarchic international system, states prioritize self-preservation over cooperation. Without a supranational authority to enforce decisions, ECOWAS struggles to maintain unity, as each member state's foreign policy is driven by its own power calculations rather than a shared regional agenda.

Economic Constraints and the Security Dilemma

Nigeria's domestic economic struggles further highlight how material capabilities shape a state's ability to exert influence in the international system. Neorealism emphasizes the importance of power, particularly economic and military strength, in shaping international outcomes. Nigeria's economic difficulties—including inflation, subsidy removals, and financial constraints²⁶—have reduced its ability to fund ECOWAS initiatives, limiting the regional body's capacity to enforce stability. This aligns with neorealism's prediction that states, including regional hegemons like Nigeria, will struggle to project power when faced with internal crises.

Additionally, the rise of external actors such as Russia and China in West Africa demonstrates the neorealist concept of great power competition. Russia's growing ties with Mali and Burkina Faso, and China's deepening economic investments in the region, suggest a shifting balance of power²⁷. In a neorealist sense, these global actors exploit ECOWAS's weaknesses to expand their influence, reducing the effectiveness of Tinubu's leadership and undermining ECOWAS's traditional role as the dominant regional authority.

Neorealism and the Future of President Tinubu's ECOWAS Strategy

Applying neorealism to Tinubu's ECOWAS leadership reveals that his challenges stem from structural constraints within the international system. ECOWAS operates in an anarchic environment where states prioritize security and survival, often at the expense of regional cooperation. Military regimes resist ECOWAS authority to maintain their power, member states hesitate to back interventions due to national interests, and external powers exploit regional instability to expand their influence²⁸.

For President Tinubu to navigate these challenges effectively, his strategy must align with neorealist principles by strengthening ECOWAS's material capabilities, leveraging Nigeria's influence to unify member states, and adapting to the shifting power dynamics in West Africa. While his leadership has demonstrated an assertive regional approach, the success of ECOWAS in maintaining stability will ultimately depend on its ability to balance power, secure economic resources, and counter external geopolitical pressures within the anarchic international system.

Conclusion

President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's leadership of ECOWAS signifies a transformative and pivotal moment in the regional diplomatic landscape of West Africa. Under his tenure, the organization has witnessed a shift towards a more assertive

and proactive approach, particularly in addressing the pressing security challenges and political instability that have plagued the region. Tinubu's tenure has been marked by his decisive interventions, exemplified by his handling of crises such as the Niger coup of 2023, where he took immediate action to impose economic sanctions and even contemplated military intervention to restore democratic order. This assertiveness has been a defining characteristic of his leadership style, aligning with the broader goals of ECOWAS to preserve regional stability and democratic governance.

However, despite these bold initiatives, the long-term success of Tinubu's leadership within ECOWAS will not be determined solely by immediate diplomatic victories or military solutions but by the organization's ability to navigate a multitude of evolving internal and external challenges. The internal challenges—ranging from divisions among member states over the effectiveness and scope of military interventions, to the differing political priorities of ECOWAS member governments—remain a major hurdle in realizing the full potential of Tinubu's regional vision. For instance, while some nations within ECOWAS support the imposition of sanctions and military interventions as necessary measures for upholding democratic principles, others, like Cape Verde and Ghana, have voiced their opposition to such aggressive actions. These differences reflect a broader lack of consensus within the regional organization, highlighting the complex and often contradictory interests that exist within ECOWAS. Addressing these internal divisions will require sustained diplomatic efforts, as well as institutional reforms that can strengthen the organization's decision-making processes and promote greater cohesion among its members.

Furthermore, ECOWAS will need to adapt to the changing global geopolitical dynamics. The growing influence of external actors, particularly Russia and China, has placed additional strain on ECOWAS's ability to assert its influence in the region. Countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, led by military juntas, have sought closer ties with these external powers, undermining the authority and legitimacy of ECOWAS. The increasing preference for alternative alliances, particularly with Russia's Wagner Group and China's economic investments, further complicates ECOWAS's diplomatic efforts. For Tinubu's vision of regional cohesion and stability to be realized, ECOWAS will need to reimagine its strategic partnerships, seeking ways to engage with global powers while maintaining its autonomy and regional relevance.

Moreover, the ability of ECOWAS to secure lasting peace in West Africa is intricately linked to its economic strategies. Tinubu's administration has rightly identified that political instability in the region is often deeply rooted in economic hardship. His advocacy for economic integration, food security, energy cooperation, and infrastructure development reflects a comprehensive understanding of the underlying causes of instability. The ECOWAS-wide economic resilience plan proposed under Tinubu's leadership is a step in the right direction; however, its successful implementation will depend on the organization's ability to secure funding, manage regional disparities, and address the structural challenges that inhibit economic integration. Nigeria's own economic challenges, such as inflation, rising unemployment, and the removal of fuel subsidies, further complicate the nation's role in funding these initiatives. Tinubu's leadership will need to focus on fostering economic cooperation among member states, with a clear emphasis on collective growth and shared prosperity that benefits all nations within the region.

Another significant aspect of Tinubu's leadership will be his ability to navigate the complex political landscape and maintain the delicate balance between military interventions and diplomatic engagement. While military solutions may sometimes seem necessary to address urgent crises, long-term peace and stability can only be achieved through democratic consolidation and institutional reforms within member states. Democratic governance remains the cornerstone of ECOWAS's mission, and Tinubu's leadership will need to ensure that democratic values are promoted not only through external interventions but also by encouraging domestic reforms that support good governance, accountability, and transparency. The promotion of civilian rule, alongside sustainable development, will be essential in preventing future conflicts and ensuring lasting peace.

In conclusion, President Tinubu's leadership in ECOWAS marks the beginning of a new era in West African diplomacy—one defined by assertive regional leadership, stronger security initiatives, and a deepened commitment to economic cooperation. Yet, the long-term success of this leadership hinges on ECOWAS's ability to adapt to evolving challenges and to engage in sustained diplomatic efforts that foster unity and resilience within the region. The institutional reforms and regional partnerships that Tinubu has championed will need to be carefully implemented and expanded, ensuring that ECOWAS remains a credible and effective force for regional peace, democracy, and

development. Ultimately, the success of his leadership will be determined by his ability to balance internal cooperation and external diplomacy, creating a unified vision for a stable and prosperous West Africa.

Recommendations

This study finds that Tinubu's leadership has revitalized ECOWAS diplomacy but faces institutional and political barriers. To enhance the effectiveness of his leadership, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Institutional Strengthening of ECOWAS – Reforming ECOWAS's decision-making structures to improve enforcement mechanisms and crisis response.
2. Economic Investment in Member States – Promoting joint economic projects to reduce dependence on external actors and enhance regional stability.
3. Enhanced Mediation Efforts – Expanding diplomatic dialogues with military juntas to ensure gradual democratic transitions rather than immediate confrontations.
4. Regional Military Collaboration – Strengthening the ECOWAS Standby Force through sustained funding and multilateral partnerships.

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