Revisiting Nigeria–Gambia Relations (2000–2024): Dynamics of Regional Cooperation

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Abstract

This study analyzes Nigeria–Gambia relations from 2000 to 2024, focusing on their diplomatic evolution, regional security cooperation, and Nigeria's role as a hegemonic stabilizer in West Africa. It seeks to explain how asymmetrical bilateral relations are shaped by regional institutions, power dynamics, and security interdependence within ECOWAS, particularly during The Gambia's 2016–2017 democratic transition. The research adopts a qualitative methodology, utilizing historical and documentary analysis of secondary sources such as academic literature, policy documents, ECOWAS communiqués, and scholarly articles. The study is anchored in Realism, Regional Security Complex Theory, and Hegemonic Stability Theory to explain Nigeria's leadership role, The Gambia's structural dependence, and the logic of ECOWAS intervention. Findings indicate that Nigeria–Gambia relations are marked by enduring asymmetry, with Nigeria acting as a regional hegemon that provides security, diplomatic mediation, and developmental assistance, while The Gambia remains dependent yet strategically integrated within ECOWAS. The study highlights Nigeria's decisive role in facilitating a peaceful transition in The Gambia during 2016–2017 through diplomatic pressure, regional coordination, and military deterrence. In the post-transition period, relations have deepened in areas such as security cooperation, governance reform, and cultural diplomacy, although economic engagement remains limited.The study concludes that these relations reflect broader patterns of West African regionalism, where stability relies on hegemonic leadership and collective security. However, long-term sustainability depends on strengthening economic integration and reducing reliance on coercive stabilization mechanisms.

Keywords: **Nigeria–Gambia relations; ECOWAS; regional security; hegemonic stability; democratic transition; West African diplomacy**

Introduction

Since 2000, the diplomatic relationship between Nigeria and The Gambia has mirrored broader trends in West African regional integration, political transformation, and diplomatic engagement. Operating under the **Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)**, both nations have engaged through a shared, structured framework aimed at enhancing economic cooperation, bolstering democratic governance, and ensuring regional security. However, despite this shared regional identity, Nigeria–Gambia relations have often been understudied in comparison to Nigeria's engagements with larger or more strategically prominent states. This article seeks to fill that gap by examining the evolution, dynamics, and implications of bilateral relations between 2000 and 2024, drawing primarily on secondary sources and contextual analysis.

Nigeria's position as a regional hegemon has significantly shaped its foreign policy orientation in West Africa. Scholars have consistently highlighted Nigeria's leadership role in peacekeeping, economic integration, and democratic promotion within ECOWAS (Adebajo 2002; Fawole 2003). The Gambia, by contrast, is one of the smallest states in the region, both geographically and economically. Yet, its strategic location along the Gambia River and its historical ties within the sub-region render it an important, albeit less prominent, partner in regional diplomacy. The asymmetry between Nigeria and The Gambia provides a compelling framework for analyzing how power differentials influence bilateral relations within a regional organization.

Between 2000 and 2016, Nigeria–Gambia relations were shaped largely by the domestic political realities of The Gambia under the authoritarian regime of Yahya Jammeh. Jammeh's governance, often characterized by repression and diplomatic unpredictability, created periodic tensions within ECOWAS and limited the depth of bilateral engagement with Nigeria. Nonetheless, Nigeria maintained a cautious diplomatic posture, balancing its commitment to regional stability with respect for state sovereignty (Saliu 2010). During this period, cooperation between the two countries remained relatively modest, focusing on multilateral engagements rather than robust bilateral initiatives.

A major turning point in Nigeria–Gambia relations occurred in 2016–2017 following The Gambia's post-election crisis. After initially conceding defeat, Jammeh rejected the electoral victory of Adama Barrow, triggering a constitutional impasse that threatened regional stability. Nigeria played a central role, alongside other ECOWAS members, in resolving the crisis through diplomatic pressure and the credible threat of military intervention under the ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG) (Hartmann 2017). The peaceful transfer of power to Barrow marked a significant milestone not only in Gambian political history but also in Nigeria's foreign policy as a promoter of democratic norms in West Africa. This episode underscores the importance of Nigeria's leadership in shaping political outcomes within smaller ECOWAS states.

In the post-2017 era, Nigeria–Gambia relations have experienced renewed momentum, characterized by increased diplomatic engagement, technical cooperation, and capacity-building initiatives. Nigeria has supported The Gambia in sectors such as education, governance reform, and security sector restructuring. These efforts align with broader ECOWAS objectives of consolidating democracy and fostering sustainable development across the region (Bah 2020). Furthermore, both countries have continued to collaborate on regional challenges, including terrorism, irregular migration, and economic integration, highlighting the interconnected nature of their bilateral and multilateral engagements.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the understanding of intra-African diplomacy, particularly among asymmetrical partners within a regional framework. While extensive literature exists on Nigeria's foreign policy and ECOWAS interventions, limited scholarly attention has been devoted specifically to Nigeria–Gambia relations. By focusing on this bilateral relationship, the article provides insights into how regional hegemony operates in practice, how smaller states navigate such dynamics, and how multilateral institutions mediate these interactions. Moreover, the study sheds light on the evolving nature of

diplomacy in West Africa, where issues of democracy, security, and development are increasingly intertwined.

This article advances the argument that Nigeria–Gambia relations between 2000 and 2024 have transitioned from limited engagement under authoritarian constraints to a more dynamic and cooperative partnership in the context of democratic consolidation and regional integration. It contends that Nigeria's role as a stabilizing force and normative leader within ECOWAS has been instrumental in shaping The Gambia's political trajectory, particularly during moments of crisis. At the same time, the article argues that The Gambia's responsiveness to regional norms and its strategic engagement with Nigeria demonstrate the agency of smaller states within asymmetrical relationships.

Methodologically, the study relies primarily on secondary sources, including academic literature, policy reports, and official documents. This approach enables a comprehensive contextual analysis of the subject, drawing on existing scholarship to identify patterns, trends, and key turning points in Nigeria–Gambia relations. While primary data would enrich the analysis, the use of secondary sources is appropriate given the study's focus on historical reflection and policy interpretation.

The introduction sets the stage for a detailed exploration of Nigeria–Gambia relations over the past two decades. By situating the bilateral relationship within the broader context of ECOWAS and West African geopolitics, the article underscores its relevance to contemporary debates on regional integration, democratic governance, and foreign policy in Africa. The subsequent sections will examine the historical evolution, key drivers, and future prospects of this relationship, providing a nuanced understanding of its significance in the changing landscape of West African international relations.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of Nigeria–Gambia relations between 2000 and 2024 requires a robust theoretical grounding capable of explaining both asymmetrical power relations and the role of regional institutions in shaping state behaviour. This study adopts a tripartite theoretical framework comprising Realism, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), and Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST). These perspectives collectively provide a comprehensive lens through which Nigeria's regional leadership, ECOWAS interventions, and The Gambia's strategic dependency can be understood within West African international relations.

Realism and Power Asymmetry in Nigeria–Gambia Relations

Realism, particularly classical and neorealist traditions, posits that international relations are fundamentally driven by the pursuit of power, security, and national interest within an anarchic international system (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). From this perspective, states are rational actors that prioritize survival and influence.

In the context of Nigeria–Gambia relations, realism is evident in the asymmetrical power structure between the two states. Nigeria, as a regional power with significant military, demographic, and economic capabilities, naturally occupies a dominant position in West African diplomacy. The Gambia, by contrast, is a small state with limited material capabilities

and therefore adopts a strategy of external alignment and institutional dependence to secure its interests.

Nigeria's interventions in The Gambia—particularly during the 2016–2017 political crisis—can be interpreted through a realist lens as an exercise of regional power projection aimed at maintaining stability within its immediate strategic environment. Preventing state failure, civil conflict, or authoritarian defiance in a neighbouring ECOWAS member state served Nigeria's broader security interests, including the prevention of refugee flows, regional instability, and reputational decline.

Thus, realism explains Nigeria's behaviour as driven not only by normative commitments to democracy but also by strategic calculations of regional order and influence preservation.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and West African Interdependence

Regional Security Complex Theory, developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, argues that security dynamics are most intensely interdependent within geographically clustered regions, where states' security concerns are so interconnected that they cannot be analyzed in isolation (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

West Africa constitutes a classic regional security complex, where instability in one state rapidly affects others due to porous borders, shared ethnic linkages, migration flows, and interconnected political systems. Nigeria and The Gambia are embedded within this regional security architecture under ECOWAS.

Within this framework, The Gambia's 2016 political crisis was not an isolated domestic issue but a regional security threat with potential spillover effects. ECOWAS intervention, led significantly by Nigeria, reflects the logic of RSCT: insecurity in one node of the system necessitates collective action to preserve the stability of the entire regional complex.

Nigeria's leadership role is particularly significant within RSCT, as it functions as a "core state" within the West African security complex. Its military and diplomatic capacity allows it to act as a stabilizing anchor, coordinating responses to crises in smaller peripheral states such as The Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Liberia.

Therefore, RSCT explains Nigeria–Gambia relations not simply as bilateral diplomacy but as part of a structurally interdependent regional security ecosystem managed through ECOWAS.

Hegemonic Stability Theory and Nigeria's Regional Leadership

Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) posits that international systems are more stable when a single dominant power (hegemon) provides public goods such as security, economic stability, and institutional order (Kindleberger, 1973; Gilpin, 1981). In return, subordinate states benefit from stability and access to collective goods.

Applied to West Africa, Nigeria functions as a regional hegemon, providing security enforcement, financial contributions, and diplomatic leadership within ECOWAS. Its role in

The Gambia's democratic transition in 2016–2017 is a clear illustration of hegemonic stability in action.

Nigeria's contributions to the ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG), its leadership in diplomatic negotiations, and its role in enforcing electoral outcomes demonstrate its provision of regional public goods, particularly:

- Maintenance of constitutional order
- Prevention of civil conflict
- Enforcement of democratic norms
- Stabilization of fragile states

In exchange, Nigeria derives strategic benefits, including regional influence, security buffer zones, and enhanced international reputation as a stabilizing power.

The Gambia, as a smaller state, benefits from this hegemonic order by receiving security guarantees and political support, albeit at the cost of partial dependency on external enforcement mechanisms.

Thus, HST explains the paternalistic yet stabilizing structure of Nigeria–Gambia relations within ECOWAS.

Integrative Analysis: The Intersection of the Three Theories

While each theory independently explains aspects of Nigeria–Gambia relations, their combined application provides a more comprehensive analytical framework.

- Realism explains Nigeria's pursuit of strategic influence and security-driven intervention.
- RSCT contextualizes the regional interdependence that necessitates collective security responses.
- HST explains Nigeria's leadership role in providing stability and institutional order within West Africa.

Together, these theories reveal that Nigeria–Gambia relations are shaped by a multi-layered structure of power, interdependence, and institutional hierarchy. Nigeria's actions are simultaneously driven by national interest, regional security logic, and hegemonic responsibility, while The Gambia's position reflects structural dependency within a hierarchically organized regional system.

The theoretical triangulation of Realism, Regional Security Complex Theory, and Hegemonic Stability Theory provides a robust analytical foundation for understanding Nigeria–Gambia relations between 2000 and 2024. These frameworks collectively demonstrate that bilateral relations cannot be understood in isolation but must be situated within broader regional power structures and institutional arrangements.

Nigeria's role as a regional hegemon, The Gambia's position as a dependent small state, and ECOWAS's function as a security governance mechanism are all mutually reinforcing dynamics that define the trajectory of West African international relations.

Ultimately, this framework underscores that Nigeria–Gambia relations are not merely diplomatic interactions but expressions of structured regional order, asymmetric power distribution, and institutionalized collective security governance in West Africa.

Historical Evolution and Diplomatic Foundations of Nigeria–Gambia Relations (2000-2016)

The evolution of bilateral relations among West African states in the post-Cold War era has been profoundly shaped by the interplay of regionalism, economic interdependence, and the pursuit of political stability. Within this broader context, relations between Nigeria and The Gambia between 2000 and 2016 reflect a pattern of continuity, asymmetry, and strategic engagement grounded in regional institutional frameworks. While Nigeria, as the largest economy and most populous state in Africa, has consistently pursued a leadership role in West Africa, The Gambia—one of the smallest states in the sub-region—has relied heavily on multilateral platforms such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) for its diplomatic, economic, and security engagements (Adebajo, 2002; Gambari, 2008).

The early twenty-first century marked a period of consolidation rather than transformation in Nigeria–Gambia relations. This phase was characterized by stable diplomatic interactions, modest economic exchanges, and a shared commitment to regional integration, albeit shaped by disparities in power and influence. Importantly, the relationship must be understood not merely as a bilateral construct but as one embedded within the wider ECOWAS framework, which functioned as the primary arena for cooperation and policy coordination (Ogwu & Alli, 2005).

Historical Context and Pre-2000 Foundations

Although this study focuses on the period from 2000 to 2016, it is essential to situate Nigeria–Gambia relations within their historical antecedents. Both countries share a common colonial heritage under British rule and gained independence in the 1960s—Nigeria in 1960 and The Gambia in 1965. This shared legacy facilitated early diplomatic engagement, reinforced by membership in the Commonwealth and other international organizations (Aluko, 1981).

During the Cold War, Nigeria's foreign policy was driven by Afrocentrism, emphasizing decolonization, anti-apartheid struggles, and regional solidarity. The Gambia, under President Dawda Jawara, maintained a relatively pro-Western orientation but remained aligned with regional initiatives. The creation of ECOWAS in 1975 marked a turning point, institutionalizing cooperation among West African states and providing a framework within which Nigeria could exercise leadership (Adebajo, 2002).

By the late 1990s, Nigeria's return to democratic governance under President Olusegun Obasanjo reinvigorated its foreign policy, restoring its credibility and enabling it to reassert its leadership role in West Africa. This transition coincided with a period of political consolidation in The Gambia under Yahya Jammeh, setting the stage for the dynamics that would define relations in the early twenty-first century.

Diplomatic Engagements and Foreign Policy Alignment (2000–2016)

Between 2000 and 2016, diplomatic relations between Nigeria and The Gambia were marked by stability, pragmatism, and continuity. Both countries maintained resident diplomatic

missions, which facilitated regular communication and coordination on bilateral and multilateral issues. High-level visits, though not frequent, were complemented by interactions at regional and international summits, particularly within ECOWAS, the African Union (AU), and the Commonwealth (Saliu, 2010).

Nigeria's foreign policy during this period was guided by principles of African unity, non-interference, and the promotion of democratic governance. Under Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007), Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (2007–2010), Goodluck Jonathan (2010–2015), and Muhammadu Buhari (from 2015), Nigeria sought to balance its leadership ambitions with domestic challenges, including economic reform and security concerns (Akinterinwa, 2004).

The Gambia, under President Yahya Jammeh, pursued a more idiosyncratic foreign policy characterized by periodic tensions with Western powers and international organizations. Despite this, The Gambia remained an active member of ECOWAS and continued to engage with Nigeria within this multilateral framework (Perfect, 2010). Nigeria's approach to The Gambia was largely pragmatic, avoiding direct confrontation over governance issues while maintaining diplomatic engagement.

This pragmatic diplomacy reflects what scholars describe as "constructive engagement," whereby states prioritize stability and cooperation over ideological differences. Nigeria's reluctance to openly challenge Jammeh's regime can be understood within the broader context of regional norms, which historically emphasized sovereignty and non-interference, even as ECOWAS gradually incorporated democratic principles into its protocols (Hartmann, 2017).

Economic Cooperation and Developmental Diplomacy

Economic relations between Nigeria and The Gambia during this period were limited in scale but significant in symbolic and strategic terms. Bilateral trade remained modest due to structural constraints, including The Gambia's small market size, limited industrial capacity, and geographic distance from Nigeria. However, economic engagement extended beyond trade to include development assistance and technical cooperation (Ogunkola, 2011).

One of the most important instruments of Nigeria's economic diplomacy was the Technical Aid Corps (TAC) scheme. Established in 1987 but actively operational in the 2000s, the TAC programme involved the deployment of Nigerian professionals and skilled manpower to other African countries, including The Gambia. These professionals contributed to sectors such as education, healthcare, engineering, and public administration, thereby enhancing human capital development in recipient countries (Adebanwi, 2011).

The TAC initiative served multiple purposes. First, it addressed critical capacity gaps in The Gambia's public sector. Second, it strengthened Nigeria's soft power by fostering goodwill and positive perceptions among Gambians. Third, it reinforced Nigeria's image as a regional leader committed to African development. Such forms of "developmental diplomacy" are central to understanding Nigeria's foreign policy in the sub-region.

In addition to official assistance, Nigerian private sector actors began expanding into West African markets during this period. Nigerian banks, telecommunications companies, and service providers explored opportunities in smaller economies, including The Gambia. Although these investments were relatively limited, they reflected broader trends of Nigerian economic expansion and regional integration (Soludo, 2007).

Regional Integration and ECOWAS as a Framework of Interaction

The most significant dimension of Nigeria–Gambia relations between 2000 and 2016 was their shared participation in ECOWAS. As a regional organization, ECOWAS provided the institutional framework for cooperation in areas such as trade, security, governance, and infrastructure development (Ogwu & Alli, 2005).

Nigeria's role within ECOWAS was both dominant and indispensable. As the largest contributor to the organization's budget and the primary provider of military and logistical support for peacekeeping operations, Nigeria wielded considerable influence over ECOWAS policies and initiatives (Gambari, 2008). The Gambia, by contrast, was a beneficiary of ECOWAS programs and relied on the organization for economic and security support.

Key ECOWAS initiatives during this period included the Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), which aimed to promote intra-regional trade, and the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, which facilitated cross-border mobility. Both Nigeria and The Gambia were signatories to these agreements, although implementation challenges persisted (Ogunkola, 2011).

ECOWAS also played a crucial role in promoting democratic governance through instruments such as the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. While The Gambia's domestic political environment often diverged from these norms, its continued participation in ECOWAS ensured a degree of regional oversight and engagement (Hartmann, 2017).

Nigeria's Regional Leadership and Strategic Interests

Nigeria's engagement with The Gambia must be understood within the broader context of its regional leadership ambitions. As a self-styled "regional hegemon," Nigeria has historically sought to shape the political and economic trajectory of West Africa. This leadership is rooted in its demographic size, economic capacity, and military strength (Adebajo, 2002).

Between 2000 and 2016, Nigeria's leadership was manifested through its support for ECOWAS, its contributions to peacekeeping operations, and its diplomatic activism. Although The Gambia did not experience major conflict during this period, Nigeria's role in maintaining regional stability indirectly benefited all ECOWAS member states.

Moreover, Nigeria's leadership extended to the promotion of normative frameworks, including democracy, human rights, and constitutional governance. However, the tension between these normative commitments and the principle of non-interference often constrained Nigeria's actions, particularly in cases such as The Gambia, where internal governance issues were sensitive (Fawole, 2003).

Constraints, Contradictions, and Emerging Challenges

Despite the generally cordial nature of Nigeria–Gambia relations, several constraints limited their depth and scope. First, economic interactions were hindered by structural factors, including weak industrial bases, limited complementarities, and logistical challenges. Second, political differences, particularly regarding governance and human rights, created underlying tensions, even if not openly expressed (Perfect, 2010).

Third, Nigeria's domestic challenges—including economic instability, corruption, and security threats such as insurgency in different parts of the country; especially Boko Haram and other terrorists —affected its capacity to sustain consistent external engagement (Adebanwi, 2011). These internal pressures often diverted attention and resources away from foreign policy initiatives.

Finally, the asymmetrical nature of the relationship meant that Nigeria's engagement with The Gambia was often subsumed within broader regional strategies, rather than driven by specific bilateral priorities. This limited the development of a more robust and mutually beneficial partnership.

The period from 2000 to 2016 represents a phase of consolidation in Nigeria–Gambia relations, characterized by stable diplomacy, modest economic cooperation, and strong multilateral engagement through ECOWAS. Nigeria's leadership role in West Africa provided the overarching framework within which these relations evolved, while The Gambia's participation in regional institutions ensured its integration into broader patterns of cooperation.

Although the relationship was constrained by structural and political factors, its resilience and continuity laid the foundation for more dynamic engagement in subsequent years. In particular, the diplomatic and institutional linkages established during this period would prove critical during The Gambia's political transition in 2016–2017, highlighting the enduring significance of the foundations laid in the early twenty-first century.

This study demonstrates that Nigeria–Gambia relations between 2000 and 2024 are best understood through the lens of asymmetrical interdependence shaped by regional power dynamics, institutional frameworks, and shared security concerns within West Africa. Nigeria's role as a dominant regional actor has been pivotal in sustaining political stability and promoting democratic governance in The Gambia, particularly during the critical 2016–2017 transition. Through a combination of diplomatic engagement, regional consensus-building, and credible military deterrence, Nigeria effectively reinforced the authority of ECOWAS as a mechanism for conflict resolution and democratic enforcement.

The findings underscore that while The Gambia benefits from Nigeria's leadership in terms of security guarantees, political support, and institutional integration, this relationship also reinforces a pattern of dependency that limits the smaller state's autonomy. The post-transition period reflects a consolidation of cooperation in governance reform, security collaboration, and cultural exchange, yet highlights a notable gap in economic engagement,

suggesting that the bilateral relationship remains narrowly concentrated in political and security domains.

Ultimately, Nigeria–Gambia relations mirror broader trends in West African regionalism, where hegemonic stability and collective security frameworks serve as the foundation for order. However, the sustainability of this model depends on a shift toward more balanced and mutually beneficial engagement, particularly through strengthened economic ties and institutional capacity-building. Without such adjustments, the continued reliance on coercive and hegemonic mechanisms may constrain the long-term effectiveness of regional integration efforts and the autonomy of smaller states within the ECOWAS framework.

Democratic Transition and Strategic Engagement: Nigeria's Role in The Gambia's Political Transformation (2016–2017)

The period 2016–2017 represents a watershed moment in the political history of The Gambia and a defining episode in the evolution of ECOWAS-led democratic intervention in West Africa. The presidential election of December 2016, which initially resulted in the defeat of long-serving incumbent President Yahya Jammeh by opposition candidate Adama Barrow, triggered a constitutional and political crisis that tested the resilience of regional diplomatic mechanisms and the credibility of ECOWAS as a collective security and democratic governance institution.

Nigeria's role in this process was central, multidimensional, and strategically consequential. Acting both independently and as the leading power within ECOWAS, Nigeria contributed diplomatically, militarily, and financially to the resolution of the crisis. This intervention underscored Nigeria's enduring identity as a regional stabilizer and highlighted the growing normative shift within ECOWAS toward the defense of constitutional order and electoral legitimacy (Adebajo, 2002; Hartmann, 2017).

The 2016 Gambian Presidential Election and Emerging Crisis

The political crisis in The Gambia emerged directly from the presidential election held on 1 December 2016. After 22 years in power, President Yahya Jammeh initially conceded defeat to opposition candidate Adama Barrow, a rare acknowledgment in the political history of authoritarian regimes in West Africa. However, this concession was abruptly reversed when Jammeh rejected the results days later, citing alleged irregularities and calling for fresh elections.

This reversal created an immediate constitutional crisis. The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) had declared Barrow the winner, and both domestic and international observers had largely endorsed the credibility of the electoral process. Jammeh's refusal to step down raised concerns about potential political violence, institutional breakdown, and mass displacement, given The Gambia's history of authoritarian consolidation and weak institutional checks (Perfect, 2010).

At the regional level, ECOWAS rapidly assumed a mediating role, recognizing the crisis not merely as an internal Gambian affair but as a threat to regional democratic norms established under the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001). Nigeria, as

ECOWAS' most influential member state, became a key driver of diplomatic and coercive engagement strategies aimed at ensuring constitutional compliance.

Nigeria's Diplomatic Leadership and Mediation Efforts

Nigeria's response to the Gambian crisis was swift and multilayered. Under President Muhammadu Buhari, who also served as ECOWAS Chair in 2016, Nigeria assumed a leadership role in coordinating regional diplomatic efforts. Buhari's dual position as Nigerian Head of State and ECOWAS Chair significantly enhanced Nigeria's influence in shaping the regional response.

Nigeria prioritized diplomatic negotiation as the first line of action. High-level ECOWAS delegations, supported by Nigerian diplomats and political actors, were dispatched to Banjul to engage Yahya Jammeh in dialogue. These efforts aimed to secure a peaceful transfer of power through persuasion, emphasizing legal obligations under Gambian constitutional law and ECOWAS protocols.

Nigeria also hosted and participated in emergency ECOWAS summits in Abuja, where regional leaders collectively condemned Jammeh's rejection of the electoral outcome and affirmed support for Adama Barrow. These diplomatic initiatives reflected Nigeria's commitment to peaceful conflict resolution and its preference for negotiated settlement over immediate military intervention.

However, as Jammeh maintained his refusal to step down, Nigeria and ECOWAS gradually shifted from purely diplomatic engagement to a strategy combining diplomacy with credible coercive deterrence.

ECOWAS, Nigeria, and the Formation of Military Deterrence

One of the most significant dimensions of Nigeria's involvement was its role in the ECOWAS military response strategy, commonly referred to as "Operation Restore Democracy." This initiative was designed to enforce the electoral outcome should diplomatic efforts fail.

Nigeria contributed significantly to this operation in terms of personnel, logistics, intelligence, and financial support. Nigerian military assets formed a substantial part of the ECOWAS Standby Force prepared for potential deployment into The Gambia. This readiness created credible pressure on Jammeh, signaling that regional actors were prepared to enforce democratic outcomes through coercive means if necessary.

The posture adopted by ECOWAS under Nigerian influence reflects what scholars describe as "coercive diplomacy," where the threat of force is used to achieve political compliance without actual warfare (Adebajo, 2002). Nigeria's military credibility within West Africa, built through decades of peacekeeping in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau, was instrumental in giving weight to ECOWAS' ultimatum.

Importantly, Nigeria's involvement ensured that the intervention retained regional legitimacy rather than external imposition. Unlike unilateral interventions by extra-African powers,

ECOWAS action under Nigerian leadership was framed as an internal African solution to an African political crisis.

Political Negotiations and the Role of Exile Arrangement

As tensions escalated in January 2017 and Jammeh's resistance persisted, diplomatic negotiations intensified. Nigeria played a crucial mediating role in crafting a political solution that would allow Jammeh to leave office without igniting civil conflict.

A key outcome of these negotiations was the agreement that Jammeh would relinquish power and go into exile. Nigeria played a central role in facilitating this arrangement, including offering asylum guarantees and logistical support for his relocation. Reports indicate that Nigeria hosted Jammeh temporarily in Calabar, Cross River State, as part of the negotiated settlement that ensured his safe exit from power.

This development was strategically significant for several reasons. First, it prevented a potentially violent military confrontation. Second, it preserved institutional continuity in The Gambia. Third, it demonstrated the effectiveness of negotiated coercion backed by credible regional force.

Nigeria's role in this arrangement reflects its long-standing diplomatic doctrine of "peace enforcement through African solutions," where regional actors resolve crises through a combination of diplomacy, pressure, and negotiated compromise.

Adama Barrow's Inauguration and Transitional Governance

Following sustained ECOWAS pressure and Jammeh's eventual agreement to step down, Adama Barrow was sworn in as President of The Gambia on 19 January 2017. Due to security concerns, the inauguration took place at the Gambian Embassy in Dakar, Senegal, underscoring the severity of the crisis.

Nigeria was among the first states to recognize Barrow's presidency and pledged continued support for the stabilization of The Gambia. ECOWAS troops, including Nigerian military personnel, entered The Gambia shortly after Barrow's inauguration to secure key state institutions and ensure a smooth transition of authority.

Nigeria also provided political and technical support for the transitional government, including assistance in governance reform, security restructuring, and institutional stabilization. This support was consistent with Nigeria's broader foreign policy objective of promoting democratic consolidation in West Africa.

Nigeria's Strategic Interests in the Gambian Crisis

Nigeria's active involvement in The Gambia's political transition was not solely altruistic; it was also informed by strategic considerations. First, instability in The Gambia risked undermining ECOWAS credibility and weakening Nigeria's leadership role within the organization. A failure to enforce electoral legitimacy could have emboldened authoritarian reversals elsewhere in the region.

Second, Nigeria's intervention reinforced its identity as a regional hegemon committed to democratic norms and stability. This was particularly important in a period when Nigeria was simultaneously confronting domestic security challenges, including the Boko Haram insurgency.

Third, Nigeria's leadership in the Gambian crisis strengthened ECOWAS as a security institution capable of collective action, thereby reducing the likelihood of external intervention by non-African powers. Thus, Nigeria's engagement reflected a convergence of normative commitments and strategic self-interest, illustrating the complexity of contemporary African regional diplomacy.

Challenges, Risks, and Criticisms

Despite its success, the intervention was not without challenges and criticisms. Some analysts raised concerns about the militarization of ECOWAS diplomacy and the potential precedent of external pressure influencing sovereign electoral disputes. Others questioned the sustainability of externally enforced democratic transitions in fragile states. Most Gambians are of the view that ECOWAS intervention forces have overstayed their welcome.

Additionally, there were logistical and financial constraints associated with maintaining ECOWAS troop readiness. Nigeria bore a disproportionate share of these burdens, reflecting its unequal responsibilities within the regional security architecture. Nonetheless, the intervention is widely regarded as a landmark success in African-led conflict resolution and democratic enforcement.

The Gambian political crisis of 2016–2017 represents a critical case study in regional diplomacy, coercive negotiation, and democratic consolidation in West Africa. Nigeria's role was decisive at every stage of the process—from diplomatic mediation to military deterrence and post-crisis stabilization.

By combining diplomatic engagement, regional leadership within ECOWAS, and strategic coercion, Nigeria contributed significantly to the peaceful resolution of the crisis and the restoration of constitutional order in The Gambia. This episode not only reinforced Nigeria's status as a regional hegemon but also demonstrated the increasing effectiveness of ECOWAS as a mechanism for democratic enforcement.

Ultimately, the Gambian transition illustrates the evolving nature of African regionalism, where sovereignty, democracy, and security are increasingly negotiated within multilateral frameworks rather than unilateral state action.

Contemporary Cooperation and Challenges in Nigeria–Gambia Relations (2017–2024)

The period between 2017 and 2024 represents a transformative phase in Nigeria–Gambia relations, characterized by intensified cooperation, institutional consolidation, and evolving strategic partnerships in the aftermath of The Gambia's democratic transition. Following the 2016–2017 political crisis and the ECOWAS-led intervention that facilitated the peaceful exit of former President Yahya Jammeh, Nigeria and The Gambia entered a new diplomatic phase defined by reconstruction, stabilization, and deepened bilateral engagement.

This contemporary period is distinguished by Nigeria's sustained involvement in The Gambia's post-authoritarian reconstruction, particularly in the areas of security sector reform, governance support, diplomatic coordination, trade facilitation, and cultural diplomacy. However, it is also marked by emerging challenges, including questions of sovereignty, dependency on external stabilization forces, limited economic integration, and shifting regional security dynamics within West Africa.

Post-Transition Diplomatic Consolidation and High-Level Engagements

Following the inauguration of President Adama Barrow in January 2017, Nigeria rapidly emerged as one of The Gambia's most reliable diplomatic partners. Nigeria's recognition of the new administration was immediate and unconditional, reflecting its broader commitment to democratic governance and constitutional order in West Africa (Hartmann, 2017).

In the aftermath of the crisis, both countries intensified diplomatic engagements through ministerial visits, bilateral consultations, and ECOWAS meetings. Nigeria played a central role in supporting The Gambia's reintegration into stable governance structures, particularly through ECOWAS frameworks and the African Union (AU). High-level meetings between Nigerian and Gambian officials in Abuja and Banjul consistently reaffirmed commitments to cooperation in diplomacy, security, and development assistance (Adebajo, 2002).

By the early 2020s, these engagements had evolved into structured strategic partnerships. Nigeria and The Gambia regularly coordinated positions on regional peace, counterterrorism, and governance reform within ECOWAS summits. The continuity of diplomatic engagement underscores the institutionalization of bilateral relations beyond crisis-response cooperation.

Security Cooperation and ECOWAS Stabilization Architecture

One of the most significant dimensions of Nigeria–Gambia relations in the post-2017 era is security cooperation under the ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG). Established in January 2017, ECOMIG was mandated to stabilize The Gambia, protect state institutions, and support security sector reform following Jammeh's departure (ECOWAS, 2017; UN Security Council Resolution 2337).

Nigeria has played a critical role in this mission, contributing troops, logistics, intelligence support, and financial resources. Nigerian military personnel formed part of the multinational ECOWAS force that ensured a peaceful transition and prevented a potential relapse into authoritarian instability. The continued presence of ECOWAS forces in The Gambia beyond the initial transition period reflects both the fragility of post-authoritarian institutions and the importance of regional security guarantees (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Beyond peace enforcement, Nigeria has also supported long-term security sector reform in The Gambia. This includes training programs for Gambian security personnel, institutional restructuring advice, and collaboration on counterterrorism frameworks. These efforts are aligned with ECOWAS's broader agenda of promoting democratic civil-military relations and preventing coups in fragile West African states (ISS Africa, 2025).

However, the prolonged presence of ECOWAS forces has generated debates within The Gambia regarding sovereignty, dependency, and the pace of domestic security reform. While the mission is widely acknowledged as stabilizing, it also highlights the tension between external security assistance and national autonomy.

Economic Relations and Trade Cooperation

Despite strong political and security ties, Nigeria–Gambia economic relations between 2017 and 2024 remain modest and underdeveloped. Trade volumes between both countries are limited due to structural economic asymmetries, geographical distance, and The Gambia's relatively small market size.

Nevertheless, Nigeria continues to play a role in The Gambia's economic development through indirect channels, including regional integration frameworks such as ECOWAS trade liberalization schemes. Both countries are members of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), which facilitates duty-free trade among member states, although implementation challenges persist across the region (Ogunkola, 2011).

Nigeria's private sector has also maintained a limited but growing presence in The Gambia, particularly in banking, telecommunications, and service industries. Nigerian firms operating in West Africa benefit from the shared regulatory frameworks and cultural affinities within the ECOWAS space. However, the scale of these investments remains constrained by market limitations and infrastructural bottlenecks.

Additionally, The Gambia benefits from Nigerian technical assistance programs and regional capacity-building initiatives, especially in governance, public administration, and education. These engagements reinforce Nigeria's role as a developmental anchor state within West Africa.

Governance Support and Institutional Cooperation

A defining feature of post-2017 relations is Nigeria's contribution to governance reform and institutional stabilization in The Gambia. Following decades of authoritarian rule, The Gambia embarked on a complex transition process involving constitutional review, transitional justice, and security restructuring.

Nigeria has supported these processes both bilaterally and through ECOWAS mechanisms. Nigerian legal experts, governance advisors, and technical consultants have participated in regional initiatives aimed at strengthening democratic institutions in The Gambia. ECOWAS's support for transitional justice mechanisms, including proposals for accountability for human rights violations under the Jammeh regime, has also been reinforced by Nigerian diplomatic backing (ECOWAS Summit Communiqué, 2024).

Furthermore, Nigeria has consistently supported The Gambia's efforts to stabilize its democratic institutions, particularly in relation to constitutional reform debates and electoral integrity. This reflects Nigeria's broader foreign policy orientation toward democratic consolidation in West Africa.

Cultural Diplomacy and People-to-People Relations

Beyond formal diplomatic and security engagements, Nigeria–Gambia relations are also sustained through cultural and social exchanges. The presence of Nigerian diaspora communities in The Gambia, as well as Gambian students and professionals in Nigeria, contributes to strong interpersonal linkages between both societies.

Cultural diplomacy is further reinforced through shared West African identity, linguistic affinities, and participation in regional organizations such as ECOWAS cultural and educational initiatives. Nigerian music, film (Nollywood), and popular culture have significant influence in The Gambia, shaping cultural consumption patterns and reinforcing soft power dynamics.

Educational cooperation is also an important component of bilateral relations. Gambian students frequently pursue higher education in Nigerian universities under regional mobility frameworks, contributing to human capital development and long-term inter-state connectivity.

Additionally, the Nigerian diaspora community in The Gambia has been instrumental in shaping the bilateral relations between the two countries, as well as contributing to cultural ties, remittances, and trade (Odo, 2021)

Emerging Challenges in Nigeria–Gambia Relations

Despite significant progress, several challenges continue to shape Nigeria–Gambia relations in the contemporary period.

First, the prolonged presence of ECOWAS forces in The Gambia raises concerns about sovereignty and dependency. While the mission has contributed to stability, debates persist about its long-term necessity and implications for Gambian autonomy (ISS Africa, 2025).

Second, economic relations remain underdeveloped. The absence of significant bilateral trade or large-scale investment limits the material foundation of the relationship, making it heavily reliant on political and security cooperation.

Third, Nigeria's broader domestic challenges—including economic pressures, insecurity, and fiscal constraints—affect its capacity to sustain extensive regional commitments. This occasionally limits the consistency of its external engagements.

Fourth, shifting geopolitical dynamics in West Africa, including coups in neighboring states and increasing competition among external powers, present new uncertainties for ECOWAS cohesion and Nigeria's leadership role.

Finally, internal political transitions in The Gambia, including debates over constitutional reform and governance restructuring, continue to test the resilience of democratic institutions and regional support mechanisms.

Strategic Assessment and Future Outlook

Despite these challenges, Nigeria–Gambia relations remain fundamentally stable and strategically significant. The post-2017 period demonstrates a clear evolution from crisis-driven cooperation to structured partnership anchored in shared regional security and governance priorities.

Nigeria's role as a stabilizing power within ECOWAS continues to reinforce its diplomatic influence, while The Gambia benefits from security guarantees, governance support, and regional integration frameworks. The relationship is therefore best understood as asymmetrical but mutually reinforcing.

Looking forward, the sustainability of Nigeria–Gambia relations will depend on three key factors: (i) the gradual withdrawal or transformation of ECOWAS security presence in The Gambia; (ii) the expansion of economic cooperation beyond symbolic engagement; and (iii) the strengthening of institutional reforms that reduce dependency on external stabilization mechanisms.

The period 2017–2024 marks a critical phase in Nigeria–Gambia relations, defined by post-crisis stabilization, security cooperation, and institutional consolidation. Nigeria's leadership within ECOWAS was instrumental in ensuring a peaceful political transition in The Gambia and continues to shape the trajectory of bilateral relations.

While significant progress has been made in diplomacy, security, and governance support, economic cooperation remains limited, and questions of sovereignty and long-term dependency persist. Nonetheless, the relationship has evolved into a stable and strategically important partnership within the broader ECOWAS regional architecture.

Ultimately, Nigeria–Gambia relations in the contemporary era reflect the broader dynamics of West African regionalism—where security, democracy, and development are increasingly pursued through collective rather than purely bilateral frameworks.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Nigeria–Gambia relations between 2000 and 2024 are best understood through the lens of asymmetrical interdependence shaped by regional power dynamics, institutional frameworks, and shared security concerns within West Africa. Nigeria's role as a dominant regional actor has been pivotal in sustaining political stability and promoting democratic governance in The Gambia, particularly during the critical 2016–2017 transition. Through a combination of diplomatic engagement, regional consensus-building, and credible military deterrence, Nigeria effectively reinforced the authority of ECOWAS as a mechanism for conflict resolution and democratic enforcement.The findings underscore that while The Gambia benefits from Nigeria's leadership in terms of security guarantees, political support, and institutional integration, this relationship also reinforces a pattern of dependency that limits the smaller state's autonomy. The post-transition period reflects a consolidation of cooperation in governance reform, security collaboration, and cultural exchange, yet highlights a notable gap in economic engagement, suggesting that the bilateral relationship remains narrowly concentrated in political and security domains.

Ultimately, Nigeria–Gambia relations mirror broader trends in West African regionalism, where hegemonic stability and collective security frameworks serve as the foundation for order. However, the sustainability of this model depends on a shift toward more balanced and mutually beneficial engagement, particularly through strengthened economic ties and institutional capacity-building. Without such adjustments, the continued reliance on coercive and hegemonic mechanisms may constrain the long-term effectiveness of regional integration efforts and the autonomy of smaller states within the ECOWAS framework.

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