



# Executive Summary



Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press

## THE CAUSES OF INSTABILITY IN NIGERIA AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

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Despite the impression received from most news accounts of Nigeria, there is much more involved in the debilitating violence, corruption, and poverty there than ethnic and religious fighting. The classic concept of political economy, the “interconnection of economic and political structures in social formation,” helps to reveal the complex interaction of economic, political, ideological, ethnic, religious, and historic factors that interact with each other to create the domestic difficulties in which Nigerians find themselves. The mismanagement of the distribution of power and allocation of state revenues from abundant energy resources creates deep fissures in Nigerian society that threaten the integrity of the state. These basic causes account for Nigeria’s poor record of economic development as a rentier state.

Control over state power and resources have become the surest way to wealth among Nigerians to the detriment of their economy and their welfare. The negative skewing of the political economy has exacerbated religious and ethnic differences among Nigeria’s 250 cultural groups and its Christian, Muslim, and native beliefs sects, which many mistakenly view as the main causes of problems in Nigeria. Although part of the problem, such differences long have been manipulated by the country’s elite for their own benefit, and the political and governmental structures long have supported such machinations. The inadvertent consequence of these chronic pressures is the possible fragmentation of the Nigerian state, as

nearly occurred with the secession of Biafra in the 1960s. Many of those same pressures continue today as individuals and groups compete for a greater share of Nigeria’s wealth and power. Historic political and cultural divisions still manifest themselves in Nigeria and, unless better managed, could fracture the state. Such pressures are seen today in the Niger Delta region, as well as the coastal Igbo and Yoruba homelands.

The influence the United States can use to improve the situation in Nigeria for both states’ interests must be focused but subtle. Nigeria’s strong regional influence and military power, economic strength through energy exports, and large and diverse population insulate it from the direct levers of statecraft that the United States often employs. Although Nigeria must remain integrated in the global economy to sustain its economic growth and the well-being of its people, the root causes of its political economy problems must be addressed by the Nigerians themselves with only limited foreign assistance, and with military assistance being particularly delicate. From this, Americans must understand that the possibility of Nigeria fracturing into smaller states, as did Yugoslavia, is real and must be carefully addressed. Paradoxically, few Nigerians actually want their country to break up. Finally, poor governance by Nigeria’s often corrupt leaders and inappropriate government structures are contributing causes to the country’s many other problems and against which outside assistance may be most fruitful.

To counter these problems within the restraints outlined, U.S. foreign aid that is focused tightly on specific areas, where outside assistance may help, could be useful in areas like the health sector, governance and human rights, and education—all of which address political economy issues. For the U.S. military, security force assistance to help Nigerian forces better address their domestic insurgencies has been too small to be influential and should be increased, especially through related International Military Education and Training and peacekeeping training, both of which can positively bolster the influential Nigerian military's role in its political economy. The U.S. military could also help with its expertise in counterterrorism, anti-piracy, and transnational crime operations, which plague Nigeria. To make the most of these initiatives, the U.S. military as a whole should follow the lead of the U.S. Army by developing units that are regionally aligned to Nigeria, or at least West Africa, in order to build and keep the understanding of this region that pays long-term dividends.

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