

Communication

Reimagining Nigeria: CISNA (Commonwealth of Independent States of Niger Area) as a Confederal Path to Prosperity

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Abstract

Nigeria's persistent ethno-political fractures, resource inequity, and centrifugal federalism necessitate radical structural rethinking. This conceptual analysis proposes the Commonwealth of Independent States of Niger Area (CISNA)—a voluntary confederation of eight sovereign entities: six derived from Nigeria's geopolitical zones, plus Lagos and Abuja as autonomous city-states modelled on global successes (e.g., Singapore). CISNA transcends the failing centralized model by prioritizing *interdependent sovereignty*: member-states retain independent governance, militaries, and economies while collaborating via a minimalist intergovernmental framework headquartered in Abuja. Crucially, CISNA integrates conflict-mitigation mechanisms: rotational leadership (5-year terms), equitable privatization/distribution of federal assets, and binding accession/exit protocols. Drawing structural and operational parallels with the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), this framework addresses Nigeria's unique challenges by replacing coercive federalism with consensual confederalism. It is positioned not as fragmentation but as an *evolutionary recalibration*—fostering unity through voluntary cooperation, not imposed hierarchy. The paper argues CISNA offers a context-specific pathway to resolve cyclical power struggles, catalyze inclusive development, and unlock the region's latent potential. By situating the model within comparative confederal theory and Nigeria's socio-political exigencies, this contribution advances discourse on post-colonial state viability, institutional design for plural societies, and non-coercive pathways to stability in Africa. CISNA represents a transformative reimagining of governance capable of turning Nigeria's diversity from a fault line into a foundation for enduring peace and prosperity.

Keywords

Confederation, Nigeria, CISNA, Commonwealth of Independent States of Niger Area, Ethnic Conflict Resolution, Post-colonial Statecraft, Prosperity

1. Introduction

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and largest economy, remains ensnared in a paradox of abundant potential and persistent instability. Decades after independence, the country grapples with intractable challenges rooted in its colonial-era federal structure: deep-seated ethno-political fragmentation,

asymmetric resource distribution, and centrifugal competition that undermines national cohesion and development [1, 2]. The current centralized federal model, characterized by a powerful center and dependent constituent units, has proven inadequate in managing diversity or delivering equitable

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governance, instead fueling recurring cycles of inter-ethnic conflict, separatist agitation, and institutional fragility [3, 4]. As scholars like Suberu [5] and Ayoade [6] have argued, Nigeria's "fragile federation" suffers from a fundamental legitimacy crisis, where constituent nationalities perceive the union as coercive rather than consensual.

Efforts to reform the Nigerian state - from constitutional amendments to power-sharing arrangements like "federal character" - have yielded limited success, often merely mitigating symptoms rather than addressing structural pathologies [7, 8]. The persistence of violent conflict, economic disparity, and institutional distrust underscores the need for radical, context-specific reimagining of governance beyond incremental tinkering [9]. Comparative political theory suggests deeply divided societies require innovative institutional designs prioritizing voluntary association and subsidiarity over imposed centralization [10, 11]. Confederation models, emphasizing constituent sovereignty within synergistic cooperative frameworks, offer pathways for states where diversity acts centrifugally [12, 13].

This conceptual analysis proposes the Commonwealth of Independent States of Niger Area (CISNA) as a transformative confederal framework for Nigeria's unique ethno-political geography. CISNA draws structured inspiration from the voluntary Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) model that managed the Soviet Union's dissolution [14, 15], while adapting it to West African realities. It envisions Nigeria evolving into a voluntary association of eight sovereign entities: six nations from existing geopolitical zones, plus Lagos and Abuja as autonomous city-states modeled on successful entities like Singapore [16] and Monaco [17]. Singapore's success as a city-state—focusing on its economic dynamism, efficient governance, and urban planning—has enabled it to thrive as an autonomous entity worthy of emulation. Thus, Lagos could be modeled as an autonomous city-state, leveraging Singapore's example of high productivity and economic catalysis within a broader confederal framework like CISNA [16]. Similarly, Abuja, like Monaco, could be governed as a small city-state, emphasizing its sustainable urban model, economic autonomy, and efficient administration despite limited territorial size. This supports CISNA's vision of Abuja as an autonomous city-state, drawing parallels to Monaco's ability to function as a politically and economically independent entity within a confederal framework [17]. The focus on small-state governance is relevant to Nigeria's capital as a potential hub in CISNA. Crucially, CISNA is framed as an evolutionary recalibration—replacing coercive federalism with consensual confederalism grounded in interdependent sovereignty [18]. CISNA framework could catalyze real-time dialogue among Nigerian thought leaders, constitutional reformers, and regional advocates. Its use of adaptive confederalism to balance self-rule and shared-rule offers a nonviolent, innovative alternative to Nigeria's structural decay.

2. Chronological Odyssey of the Nigerian Federation: From Amalgamation to Fragile Union

The Nigerian federation's troubled evolution began with the 1914 amalgamation of Northern and Southern Protectorates by British colonial administrator Frederick Lugard—an administrative convenience prioritizing imperial resource extraction over socio-political cohesion [19]. This act forcibly merged over 250 distinct ethnic groups with divergent historical trajectories, governance traditions (centralized Sokoto Caliphate versus decentralized Igbo communities), and economic systems [20]. Colonial rule institutionalized division through constitutional instruments: the Richardson Constitution (1946) and Macpherson Constitution (1951) entrenched regionalism, empowering the Hausa-Fulani North, Yoruba West, and Igbo East as competing power centers [21].

At independence in 1960, Nigeria adopted a parliamentary federal system that preserved regional autonomy. The First Republic (1960-1966) rapidly devolved into zero-sum ethnic politics. Census manipulation, electoral violence, and the controversial 1964 federal election exposed the fragility of inter-regional trust [22]. The Western Region crisis of 1962-1965—a violent struggle for Yoruba political dominance—culminated in the January 1966 military coup, ending civilian rule [23]. Counter-coups in July 1966 targeted Igbo officers, triggering pogroms in the North that killed 30,000 Igbo and forced 1 million refugees eastward [24]. These events precipitated the Biafran secession (1967-1970) and a brutal civil war claiming over 1 million lives [25].

Post-war reconstruction under military rule (1966-1979) paradoxically centralized power to foster unity. General Gowon's creation of 12 states in 1967 dismantled regional hegemonies but became a patronage tool [26]. The 1979 constitution introduced an American-style presidential system yet retained a militarized, top-heavy federation. Despite oil wealth, the Second Republic (1979-1983) collapsed under corruption, disputed elections, and austerity protests [27]. Subsequent military regimes (1983-1999) further distorted federalism: General Babangida's arbitrary state creation (rising to 30 states by 1991) and General Abacha's proliferation of loyalist local governments (774 LGAs) balkanized governance to weaken opposition [28]. The 1999 constitution—imposed by a departing military junta—perpetuated centralized resource control and a policing monopoly that left subnational units vulnerable to communal violence [29].

Civilian rule since 1999 has exacerbated centrifugal pressures despite democratic pretensions. The Obasanjo administration (1999-2007) convened the National Political Reform Conference (2005), proposing resource control and rotational presidency, but its recommendations were ignored by the federal legislature [30]. Rising militancy in the Niger Delta (1998-2009) forced concessions like the 13% oil derivation

principle and amnesty programs, yet environmental degradation and endemic poverty persist [31]. The Jonathan presidency (2010-2015) confronted the Boko Haram insurgency—which displaced 2.5 million Nigerians by 2015—while failing to enact constitutional reforms devolving policing powers [32].

The Buhari era (2015-2023) intensified centralization amidst mounting crises: an economic recession (2016-2017) triggered by oil price collapse, rural banditry claiming 8,000+ lives in the Northwest (2017-2023), and the #EndSARS protests (2020) that exposed systemic police brutality and federal security failures [33]. Buhari’s tacit endorsement of regional security networks like "Amotekun" (Southwest) and "Ebube Agu" (Southeast) acknowledged federal incompetence but lacked constitutional legitimacy [34].

President Bola Tinubu’s administration (2023-present) has pursued audacious yet contentious reforms: the petrol subsidy removal (May 2023) quadrupled fuel prices overnight, worsening inflation (33.95% by May 2024) without adequate social cushions [35]; currency devaluation saw the Naira depreciate 300% against the USD (2023-2024), deepening poverty where 63% of Nigerians experience multidimensional deprivation [36]; and a state police proposal (February 2024) faces resistance from Northern elites fearing loss of federal control [37]. These measures ignore structural flaws: the federal government monopolizes 68% of revenue via the Exclusive Legislative List [38], states generate merely 13% of revenue internally [39], and persistent violence (farmer-herder clashes killing 4,000+ in 2023) fuels separatist movements like IPOB and Yoruba Nation agitators [40].

This odyssey reveals Nigeria’s federation as a Gordian Knot: administrative tweaks cannot resolve its foundational crisis—a union forged without consensus and sustained without consent.

3. Conceptual Framework for Transformation: CISNA as an Indigenous Confederal Solution

The cyclical inter-ethnic power struggles that have defined Nigeria’s political trajectory, as chronicled in Section 2, originate in the fundamental incompatibility between its plurinational character and a centralized governance structure imposed during colonial rule. To resolve this existential impasse, the Commonwealth of Independent States of Niger Area (CISNA)—a confederal framework designed to reconcile self-determination with collective prosperity through voluntary interdependence is hereby proposed. Grounded theoretically in confederalism’s capacity to accommodate deep diversity within plurinational states [13, 41], CISNA reconstitutes Nigeria into eight sovereign political entities (Figure 1). Six would emerge as nation-states corresponding to Nigeria’s extant geopolitical zones (North-West, North-East, North-Central, South-West, South-East,

South-South), each exercising full sovereignty over domestic governance, natural resource management and, security apparatuses excluding weapons of mass destruction. Complementing these would be two autonomous global city-states: Lagos, modeled on Singapore’s port-centric economic governance, and Abuja, functioning both as a sovereign entity and CISNA’s administrative headquarters—akin to Washington D. C.’s federal district status but with enhanced constitutional autonomy [42].

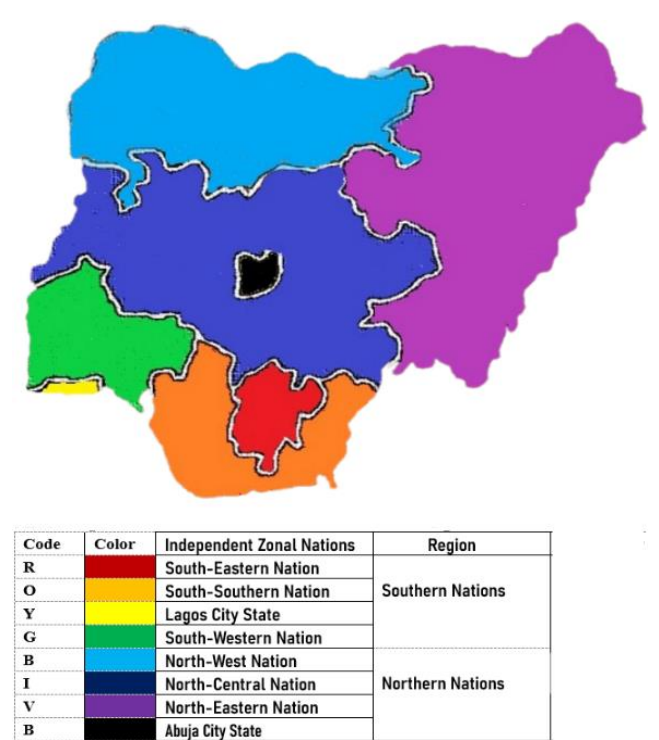


Figure 1. League: Commonwealth of Independent States of Niger Area (CISNA).

CISNA’s institutional architecture prioritizes *minimalist coordination* over hierarchical control. Leadership of the Commonwealth would rotate non-executively among member states every five years through a consensus-based sequencing mechanism, drawing inspiration from the African Union’s rotational chairmanship [43]. The dissolution of federal assets—including the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation and Central Bank—would precede a comprehensive privatization process, with proceeds redistributed according to a Modified Derivation Formula weighting population (50%), territorial size (25%), and human development indices (25%) to ensure equitable outcomes. Critical conflict mitigation protocols would include binding accession and exit clauses requiring a 75% popular referendum in any seceding state alongside CISNA approval, incorporating principles from Canada’s Clarity Act [44], and a dedicated Court of Arbitration for interstate disputes. Collective security would be ensured through a mutual defense pact against external aggression analogous to NATO’s Article 5 [45-46], while internal

security remains exclusively under zonal and city-state jurisdiction.

The framework operationalizes three core tenets of confederal theory: first, the subsidiarity principle, which locates sovereignty at the most localized feasible unit [12]; second, voluntary association, requiring continuous consent to sustain membership and thereby eliminating coercive centralism [47]; and third, asymmetric integration, permitting differentiated governance models like city-states without hierarchical subordination [48]. This theoretical grounding enables CISNA to adapt comparative best practices while avoiding documented failures. While inspired by the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States in facilitating peaceful dissociation [49], CISNA deliberately strengthens economic integration mechanisms absent in the CIS model. It rejects Ethiopia's ethnic federalism—notorious for exacerbating fragmentation [50]—but incorporates lessons from Tanzania's union-preserving decentralization [51]. The city-state component leverages global evidence of urban efficacy, positioning Lagos and Abuja not as exclaves but as interdependent economic catalysts capable of achieving Singapore-level productivity while remitting substantial revenues to agrarian zones.

Potential critiques are addressed through institutional design: the perceived "balkanization risk" is mitigated by binding economic pacts (shared currency, free movement) that incentivize cohesion, rendering secession lawful but economically costly. Military fragmentation concerns are alleviated through joint defense exercises and standardized arms treaties that maintain deterrence while localizing counterinsurgency. Resource inequities are preempted by the redistribution formula and constitutional requirements for city-states to remit up to 40% of tariff revenues to less industrialized members. CISNA thus transcends the false dichotomy between secessionist fragmentation and centralized status quos, offering a transformative third way: decoupling self-rule from shared-rule while rendering cooperation economically profitable. By converting centrifugal forces into developmental synergies, this framework reconfigures Nigeria's diversity from a liability into the cornerstone of 21st-century resilience.

4. The Practice of Confederalism: Successes and Challenges

The concept of confederalism, as proposed in this article, Commonwealth of Independent States of Niger Area (CISNA), represents a bold attempt to reimagine governance in Nigeria through a decentralized, consensual framework. This literature review examines the practice of confederalism, focusing on its successes and challenges as a governance model for plural societies, drawing on comparative political theory, historical case studies, and institutional design literature. The review situates CISNA within global confederal experiments, highlighting both its potential and the practical

hurdles it must overcome.

4.1. Successes of Confederalism

Confederal systems, characterized by voluntary association and subsidiarity, have historically succeeded in managing diversity in deeply divided societies. Burgess and Gagnon [18] argue that confederalism accommodates plurinational states by prioritizing local sovereignty while fostering cooperative interdependence, as seen in the European Union's (EU) integration model. The EU's success in harmonizing diverse national interests through shared economic and legal frameworks demonstrates confederalism's capacity to balance autonomy with unity [18]. Similarly, the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) facilitated a relatively peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union by allowing member-states to retain sovereignty while coordinating on trade and security [49]. Elazar [12] emphasizes that confederalism's subsidiarity principle—locating governance at the most local feasible unit—enhances legitimacy and efficiency, a key inspiration for CISNA's design. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) offers another success story, where seven emirates maintain distinct governance structures under a confederal umbrella, achieving economic prosperity through coordinated resource-sharing and trade policies [52]. Tanzania's union between Tanganyika and Zanzibar further illustrates how confederal arrangements can preserve cultural autonomy while fostering stability, with Zanzibar retaining its own parliament and president within a broader union [53]. These cases underscore CISNA's potential to transform Nigeria's ethnic diversity into a governance asset, leveraging city-states like Lagos, modeled on Singapore's economic efficiency [16], to drive collective prosperity. Confederalism's flexibility also allows for asymmetric integration, enabling units like Abuja to function as administrative hubs without hierarchical dominance [54]. Watts [13] highlights that such arrangements prevent the coercive centralism that fuels Nigeria's legitimacy crisis. The African Union's rotational leadership model, which CISNA emulates, has proven effective in symbolizing parity among member-states, reducing perceptions of marginalization [55]. These successes suggest that CISNA's emphasis on voluntary cooperation and equitable resource distribution could mitigate Nigeria's cyclical conflicts and unlock its developmental potential.

4.2. Challenges of Confederalism

Despite its promise, confederalism faces significant challenges, particularly in implementation and sustainability. A primary concern is the risk of fragmentation, as seen in Ethiopia's ethnic federalism, where devolution exacerbated separatist tensions rather than resolving them [50]. Ethiopia's model failed due to insufficient mechanisms for inter-unit cooperation, a pitfall CISNA seeks to address through binding economic pacts and arbitration courts. However, the com-

plexity of dissolving Nigeria's centralized federal assets—such as the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation—poses logistical and political hurdles, as evidenced by Yugoslavia's violent disintegration following asset disputes [56].

Economic disparities among confederated units also present challenges. In the CIS, uneven economic capacities led to weaker integration, with Russia dominating trade agreements [57]. CISNA's Modified Derivation Formula aims to mitigate this by redistributing resources based on population and human development but implementation requires robust institutional oversight to prevent elite capture, as observed in Nigeria's oil revenue mismanagement [58]. Furthermore, security fragmentation—where each CISNA state controls its own military—could undermine collective defense, a concern raised in NATO's early years when interoperability issues hindered joint operations [59].

Political resistance from entrenched elites, particularly in Nigeria's North, poses another barrier. Suberu [5] argues that Northern elites have historically opposed decentralization due to fears of losing federal revenue control, a dynamic that could derail CISNA's constitutional restructuring. Canada's Clarity Act, which CISNA's exit protocols emulate, faced significant domestic opposition for legitimizing secession, suggesting similar pushback in Nigeria. Moreover, the absence of a strong civic culture, as seen in Switzerland's successful confederalism [60], could undermine CISNA's reliance on popular referenda for accession and exit, given Nigeria's history of electoral mistrust [61]. Finally, the urban-rural divide complicates CISNA's city-state model. While Singapore's success inspires Lagos's role [16], rural zones may resent urban dominance, as seen in South Africa's tensions between Johannesburg and peripheral regions [62]. CISNA's revenue-sharing mechanisms aim to address this, but historical precedents suggest that sustained political will and transparency are critical to overcoming such challenges. The practice of confederalism, as envisioned in CISNA, offers a theoretically robust and contextually relevant framework for Nigeria's governance crisis. Its successes—rooted in subsidiarity, voluntary association, and asymmetric integration—draw on global models like the EU, CIS, UAE, and Tanzania, positioning CISNA as a viable pathway to peace and prosperity. However, challenges such as fragmentation risks, economic disparities, elite resistance, and civic distrust

necessitate careful institutional design and inclusive dialogue. By addressing these hurdles, CISNA can redefine Nigeria's diversity as a foundation for cooperative sovereignty, contributing to the broader discourse on post-colonial statecraft and plural governance.

5. Discussion, Implementation Analysis, and Conclusion

The proposal of the Commonwealth of Independent States of Niger Area (CISNA) as a confederal solution to Nigeria's persistent governance failures is both timely and contextually grounded. As chronicled, Nigeria's hyper-centralized federalism has failed to resolve inter-ethnic contestation, resource inequalities, and structural violence, thereby demanding a paradigm shift. CISNA provides such a shift by operationalizing consensual confederalism: a governance design where constituent nations preserve sovereignty while engaging in cooperative federal relations.

5.1. Theoretical and Practical Merits of CISNA

CISNA's architecture draws heavily from comparative confederal theory, including Elazar's principle of subsidiarity [12], Burgess and Gagnon's articulation of plurinational accommodation [18], and Watts' model of differentiated integration [13]. The inclusion of autonomous city-states (Lagos and Abuja) parallels global examples such as Singapore and Monaco [16, 17], where concentrated governance and high-density economies fuel national prosperity. The rotational non-executive headship mirrors the African Union's model [43], symbolizing parity and inclusion across member states. From a political science standpoint, CISNA aligns with Stepan's requirement for "demos-constraining" institutions in deeply divided societies [10]. It avoids the overreach of ethnic federalism (as seen in Ethiopia) [50] by replacing ethnic determinism with geopolitical pragmatism. Moreover, binding exit clauses modeled on Canada's Clarity Act [44] and the presence of a neutral Court of Arbitration reduce the risk of unilateral disintegration while holistic approach to implementation may facilitate success (Table 1).

Table 1. Strategic Implementation Framework for Commonwealth of Independent States of Niger Area.

Step	Plan	Risk Mitigation Focus	Strategy
1	Shift the Discourse from Secession to Confederal Reconfiguration	Avoid inflammatory narratives and secession fears	Consistently use terms like “voluntary association” and “shared sovereignty.” Avoid “disintegration” or “break-up.”
2	Sovereign National Dialogue	Prevent unilateral actions and build legitimacy	Convene Inclusive Convention: Civil society, minorities, youth, diaspora. Include AU/UN/ECOWAS observers. Empower judici-

Step	Plan	Risk Mitigation Focus	Strategy
3	Legal Pathway via Referendum	Avoid unconstitutional chaos	ary and legislature to oversee process. Phased Referenda: 1. National vote on confederalism 2. State-level votes on bloc membership Reference: Canada's Clarity Act; Ethiopia's Article 39.
4	Transitional Governance	Prevent power vacuums and elite sabotage	Form Interim CISNA Council with reps from each bloc. Draft/ratify a transitional constitution. Define roles for judiciary, legislature, and existing civil institutions.
5	Economic Incentives for Peaceful Transition	Mitigate fears of economic collapse or elite resistance	Joint Platforms: Shared infrastructure, VAT/customs pools. Development Banks per bloc. International guarantees (World Bank, AfDB, ECOWAS). Encourage private sector partnerships.
6	Security Sector Reform	Minimize armed resistance and build trust	Build state and regional police accountable to bloc parliaments. Establish regional security frameworks under confederal umbrella. Facilitate local trust-building initiatives.
7	International Legitimacy	Prevent isolation or external interference	Present CISNA as a Stability Model. Engage AU, ECOWAS, UN. Mobilize diaspora for advocacy and development diplomacy.
8	Civic Education and Narrative Control	Counter misinformation and ethnic fear	Launch grassroots campaigns via media, schools, faith/traditional leaders. Emphasize unity in diversity.
9	Guarantee Property Rights and Interregional Citizenship	Prevent ethnic marginalization and conflict	Enact a CISNA Citizenship Charter. Codify property and mobility rights across all blocs. Constitutional court to enforce protections.
10	Phased Transition with Monitoring Mechanisms	Avoid systemic shocks and ensure course correction	3-4 Year Timeline: 1. Dialogue & legal groundwork 2. Referenda 3. Power devolution 4. Full CISNA functionality. Oversight: Independent commission + judicial and foreign monitors.

African Union; UN - United Nations; ECOWAS - Economic Community of West African States; CISNA - Commonwealth of Independent States of Niger Area; VAT - Value Added Tax; AfDB - African Development Bank

5.2. Implementation Dynamics: Legal, Political, and Economic Considerations

Implementing CISNA requires extensive constitutional restructuring—an endeavor necessitating elite buy-in, legislative legitimacy, and civic participation (Table 1). The process should be anchored in an inclusive national dialogue convened through a Sovereign Constitutional Conference (SCC), distinct from existing legislative organs to prevent vested interests from dominating reform outcomes [63]. The SCC would ratify the dissolution of the current federation and endorse new foundational treaties, including the CISNA Charter and Accession Protocols. Economically, the transition demands transparent privatization of federal assets, overseen by an independent National Transition Commission (NTC). The Modified

Derivation Formula ensures equitable fiscal redistribution while incentivizing productivity and human capital development in less industrialized zones. Monetary and customs union mechanisms will preserve economic cohesion, while city-states like Lagos will serve as financial anchors remitting a share of customs revenue to the collective treasury [50]. Security-wise, a confederal Joint Defense Council modeled after NATO's Article 5 [45] will coordinate military preparedness without undermining zonal autonomy. Interoperability standards for training, logistics, and intelligence will mitigate concerns about fragmentation. Furthermore, a shared digital identity infrastructure can facilitate mobility and rights protection across the confederation.

5.3. Conclusion: From Fragile Union to Cooperative Sovereignty

CISNA is not a panacea, but a strategic reconfiguration grounded in historical precedent, comparative models, and indigenous realities. It rejects both anarchic secessionism and authoritarian unitarism by offering a cooperative sovereignty framework that restores consent, dignity, and efficiency to governance. Through this transformative lens, Nigeria can transcend the contradictions of its post-colonial inheritance and become a model of peace, pluralism, and prosperity in 21st-century Africa. By embracing CISNA, Nigeria does not dissolve—it evolves. CISNA reframes Nigeria's greatest weakness - its diversity - as its most potent catalyst for prosperity. This is not fragmentation; it is recomposition.

Abbreviations

AU	African Union
AfDB	African Development Bank
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CISNA	Commonwealth of Independent States of Niger Area
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
VAT	Value Added Tax

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