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NIGERIA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN A CHANGING GLOBAL ORDER: BALANCING RELATIONS WITH CHINA, RUSSIA AND THE WEST

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Abstract

This study examined Nigeria's foreign policy in a changing global order, focusing on its evolving relationships with China, Russia, and Western nations. It examined how Nigeria managed these systems so that its foreign policy objectives could be achieved within a domestic and dynamic international system. Until 1999, Nigeria's foreign policy shifted to a pragmatic diplomatic policy that emphasized economic diplomacy and diverse relations if founded on Afrocentric and non-aligned bases. The study was informed by qualitative research methodology based on case studies, governmental documents, policy reviews, and trade data in a bid to identify trends in Nigeria's foreign relations. The study also found that Nigeria's interaction with China was characterized by trade and BRI investment and that with Russia was characterized by arms procurement and energy deals. These factors have made Nigeria embark on the quest for diversification on an international level. However, there are also cases of economic dependence and lack of mutual benefits. However, the relations with the Western states, especially the United States and countries of the European Union, continued to be crucial for trade, security cooperation and development assistance only the basis of which was rather conditioned by the demands of good governance and combating corruption. As for the adjustments for increasing Nigeria's international power, the research advised going further in institutional changes, active multilateral participation, and diaspora mobilization.

Keywords: Nigeria, foreign policy, China, Russia, Western relations

Introduction

As the world becomes more diplomatically interconnected, Nigeria's foreign policy options have become more defining as it tries to deal with emerging powers like China and Russia while

still covering old ground with Western countries. Over the years, foreign policy has been largely Afrocentric, mainly because of Nigeria's leadership and support to the continent. This

transformation occurred mainly after the country's political democratisation in 1999 due to many economic challenges and the influence of the global world. Analysing previous literature, it can be concluded that the beginning of democracy also became a turning point in Nigeria's foreign policy from military-oriented to economic diplomacy, as well as pragmatic activities in relations with major world powers (Alayande, 2020).

However, the effect of globalisation added dimension to Nigeria's foreign policy concerns. This paper looks into the trade, investment, and international relations that Nigeria requires to formulate a foreign policy to address the dynamics of the international system. For instance, Nigeria's trade with China has seen significant growth, with bilateral trade volume soaring to approximately \$19.27 billion in 2020, making China Nigeria's largest trading partner (Mbara & Gopal, 2020). This has helped Nigeria's development and investments in infrastructure, but it has also brought about Nigeria's reliance and consequences on sovereignty. Simultaneously, Russia's re-engagement in Africa, exemplified by military cooperation and arms deals, introduces another layer of complexity into Nigeria's strategic calculations (Ayodele, 2024).

Moreover, it is important to comprehend Nigeria's diplomacy as it impacts specific stability in West Africa and abroad. Consequently, the relations between Nigeria, China, Russia, and Western nations are complex issues with trials and tribulations. Thus, there is a need to exercise strategic agency for Nigeria as it looks forward to the leadership role in Africa and addresses the goals of the Global South (Okpevra & Usiemure, 2024). In addition, Nigeria's future political and business directions may influence FTA policies, regional security organisations, and cooperation on international problems, including climate change.

One of the primary aims of this work is to evaluate Nigeria's foreign policy approaches to her interactions with China, Russia, and the West. By investigating the effects of these relationships on Nigeria's international standing, the study aims to uncover the underlying dynamics influencing Nigeria's diplomatic choices. Scholars have noted that as other world power relations change, for instance, a superior China and a resurgent Russia on the international scene, thus the withdrawal of some Western countries from some regions, it becomes inevitable for Nigeria to reflect on its relationship critically. For instance, Mbara and Gopal, in the article Nigeria's pretended hegemony in Africa, claim that Nigeria's relations with other African countries best describe the challenges and, thus, the complexities in Nigeria's international relations (Mbara & Gopal, 2020).

This paper addresses the following research questions: How is Nigeria's foreign policy continuing to evolve in response to the power relations of China, Russia, and the West? The following question will, therefore, be addressed: Where do these significant powers influence Nigeria's diplomatic decisions? The above factors are crucial in pointing out the forces that shape Nigeria's foreign policy. Domestic settings such as the economy and politics also play a crucial role in the formulations of Nigeria's foreign policy; for instance, Nigeria's National Security Strategy, recently revised in 2023, points to economic stability and food security as cornerstones to good negotiation in international relations.

However, as Nigeria moves forward with a pragmatic foreign policy, internal crises, corruption, and political crises are part of the consideration. It is shown how these problems affect the

effectiveness of Nigeria's foreign policy and its global influence (Kazeem, 2023). Thus, Nigeria may increase its probability of meaningful interaction with extraordinary powers, which would benefit the country due to the outlined internal factors.

The new world order also poses some significant challenges to Nigerian foreign policy balance in relations with China, Russia, and the Western world. Harmonising these divergent interests in their drive to achieve national goals and address domestic issues poses a mammoth diplomatic task for the country. By analysing such dynamics, this research will make a scholarly contribution to understanding Nigeria's position in the international system and the potential outcomes of its foreign policy for regional security and development.

Literature Review

The dynamics of international relations are central to the formulation and implementation of Nigerian foreign policy, especially its relationships with China, Russia, and the West. This paper aims to review all the theoretical approaches associated with Nigeria's foreign policy and examine the historical perspective of this country's orientation in the foreign policy relationship with these players.

Three dominant theories that explain international relations – realism, liberalism and constructivism – can be used to explain Nigeria's foreign policy behaviours. Realism focuses on power and national interest as main motives, claiming that states behave consciously to maintain and maximise their security and profit (Kehinde & Ezugwu, 2023). It is illustrated in Nigeria's realistic approach to China and Russia in its quest for a better strategic situation in a world with a growing polarity. While liberalism favours the belief that cooperation and organisations can help maintain peace and trade between nations (Omo-Ogbebor, 2017). This is true, especially with the country's involvement in international organisations such as the African Union and the sub-regional Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and it engages various liberal regional projects as it drives its relation with world powers. In this sense, constructivism explains how identity and norms determine a country's foreign policy. For Nigeria, this is particularly relevant as it seeks to project itself as a leader within Africa while balancing external influences from powers like China and Russia (Nzewigbo, 2023).

Nigeria embraced Western foreign policy alignment in the past, especially during the Cold War period when Nigeria strived to be the region's political and economic dominant power through the Western democrats. This alignment was mainly informed by Nigeria's colonial history with the West and its evaluation of the West in the development partnership framework (Mêgnigbêto, 2015). Therefore, Nigeria, as an independent country, supported policies of non-alignment and African liberation and decolonisation in the early years of its foreign policy.

Nevertheless, since the beginning of the new century, one could observe a shift in the focus of Nigeria's policy toward China and Russia, with a more excellent accent on economic cooperation and strategic partnership dimensions. From the foregoing, Nigeria and China's trade volume stood at approximately \$19.27 billion in 2020. This envisages the trade relationship between the two countries (Onogwu et al., 2019).

Nigeria's relationship with China has evolved significantly, mainly through investments under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

API is a platform proposed by China to boost interconnectivity and cooperation in the Asian, European, and African continents, with Nigeria focusing on infrastructure upgrades. For instance, transportation, energy and telecommunications have attracted Chinese investment in Nigeria; consequently, there has been enormous development in infrastructure and employment opportunities (Omo-Ogbebor, 2017). The Nigeria Bureau of Statistics revealed that Chinese investors helped economise Nigeria's growth by 1.6% from 2018 to 2021 today, showing real growth between both economies (NWOKOLOBIA, 2024). This relationship has also resulted in Nigeria receiving crucial loans from Chinese financial institutions, raising concerns about debt dependency that could compromise Nigeria's sovereignty and economic independence ("Science collaboration in West Africa after the first regional STI policy (2011-2020)", 2023). Therefore, Nigeria's cooperation with China is as beneficial as it contains a bias towards dependency on one power relation.

Russia's rekindled interest in Africa presents another strategic dimension to Nigeria's foreign policy. In recent times, specifically since 2003, relations between Nigeria and Russia have been in the military and energy sectors, technologies and defences. Sources from the Nigerian Ministry of Defence show that industrial procurement has risen; today, the Nigerian government has continued purchasing fighter jets and surveillance equipment from the Russian Federation (Omo-Ogbebor, 2017). This kind of military agreement brings Nigeria improved aptitude in dealing with internal issues such as terrorism and insurgency, which are evident in the country's northeastern area, punctuated by Boko Haram. Furthermore, there has been talk about establishing a nuclear energy programme in Nigeria with Russia's help, illustrating how far energy relations have gone (Omo-Ogbebor, 2017). Nonetheless, historical relations between Nigeria and Russia show that during the Cold War and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was still some bitterness in the Nigerian approach to Russia (NWOKOLOBIA, 2024).

Nigeria coalesces partners with emerging powers but sustains relations with the West, which are important in terms of development partners and political recognition. However, several emergent risks affecting the world, including security risks such as terrorism and corruption have strained these relations. The following is according to reports indicating that Western nations have raised concern over Nigeria's anti-corruption capacity since corruption hinders governance and affects performance in the country (Neethling, 2017). Besides, the West does not welcome the rising power of China and Russia; by implication, the West perceives a shift of interest in affairs. For instance, the U.S. and EU's unilateral sanctions on Nigeria's political figures due to corruption allegations have strained diplomatic ties, prompting Nigeria to rethink its foreign policy strategies (Maphaka, 2020).

In conclusion, the diverse experiences of Nigeria, China, Russia, and the Western world show how. Foreign policy in the newly emerging world system is dynamic and complex. The shift is due to the increasing influence of China and Russia as major players in Africa and Nigeria's former colonial masters. Therefore, business and military cooperation with China has benefits and costs regarding Nigeria's development path. At the same time, Nigeria remains an active member of the international community and is struggling to effectively manage its relations with Western countries and cope with internal problems which are potentially dangerous to the country's reputation. In this context, as Nigeria

seeks to actively engage its neighbours and other countries in Africa and beyond in the course of attaining its vision of a Nigerian-dominated West Africa, it would be important to have a grasp of these dynamics in order to apply the appropriate foreign policy that would advance Nigeria's strategic interest as well as establish lasting cooperation.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative method to assess Nigeria's foreign policy strategies for China, Russia, and Western countries. It aims to identify the forces that define Nigeria's diplomacy and comparatively assesses its strategies with those of those world powers. Concrete examples are used as case studies, whereby Nigeria's infrastructure financing is sourced from China, military cooperation with Russia, and promotion of democracy with the help of the Western powers. Some primary data sources include the National Security Strategy of Nigeria (2014, 2019, 2023), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements, and bilateral agreements. The adoption of different types of interviews with policymakers results in firsthand information being obtained from officials like former ambassadors and National Security Council members. Secondary sources include journal articles, consultancy organisation publications, the United Nations Comtrade trade statistics database, the SIPRI database of states' military expenditure and procurement, and newspaper articles from Nigerian dailies, This Day and The Guardian.

Thus, the thematic analysis highlights the following prominent threads that were used to examine Nigeria's foreign policy strategies, namely, economic pragmatism (such as engaging with China), sovereignty concerns (such as reliance on the Chinese), and multilateralism (such as voting in the UN). Contextual analysis determines the changes in diplomatic language in order to consider changes of priorities in bilateral provision. Decision-mapping follows the impact of Nigeria's foreign policy decisions through patterns such as bureaucratic politics and internal feuding amongst ministries over the power deals while rational actor theory, Calculations of Nigeria that determine whether to take Chinese loans or not instead of embracing the IMF. The historical analysis of relations between Nigeria and super powers, Nigeria's internal crisis, and regional ambitions, which predetermine its foreign policy, can be outlined using the following methodology. Thus, the research uses variables from multiple sources to give a comprehensive picture of Nigeria's FP in an evolving world order.

Data Analysis

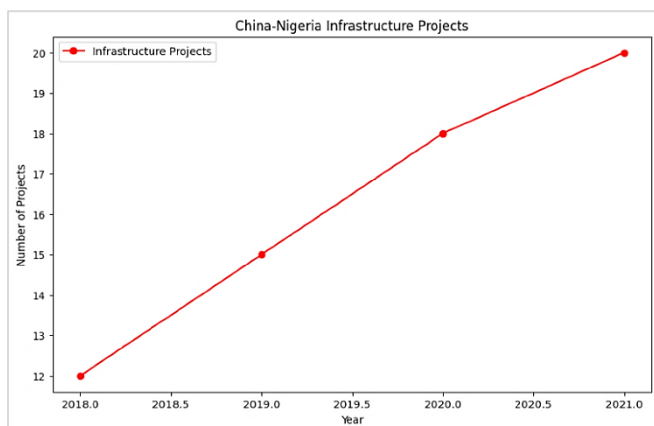
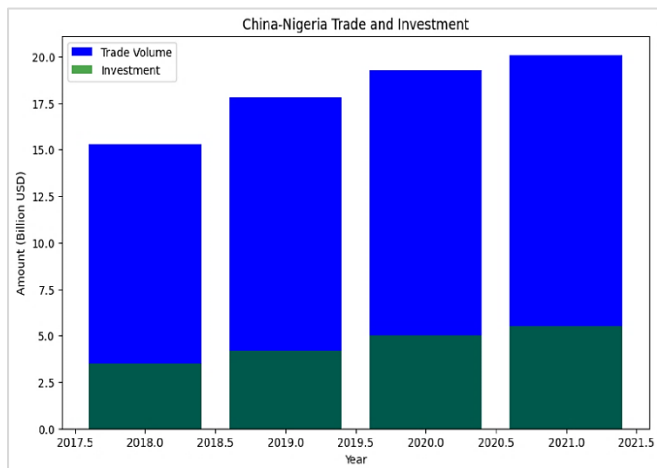
China-Nigeria

China has proven Nigeria's strategic trade, investments, and infrastructure development partner. Trade and Investment Growth: China's trade volume with Nigeria increased from \$15.3 billion in 2018 to \$20.1 billion in 2021, while Chinese investments rose from \$3.5 billion to \$5.5 billion during the same period (Mbara & Gopal, 2020). This growth highlights China's role as Nigeria's largest trading partner.

Considering the geographical distribution of infrastructure projects financed by China, Obotic explained that 12 funded projects in 2018 rose to 20 in 2021, specifically in transportation, energy, and telecommunications (NWOKOLOBIA, 2024). These projects belong to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Western Responses: Western nations have expressed concerns over Nigeria's increasing reliance on China, citing risks of debt

dependency and loss of sovereignty due to Chinese loans (Kehinde & Ezugwu, 2023).



Russia-Nigeria

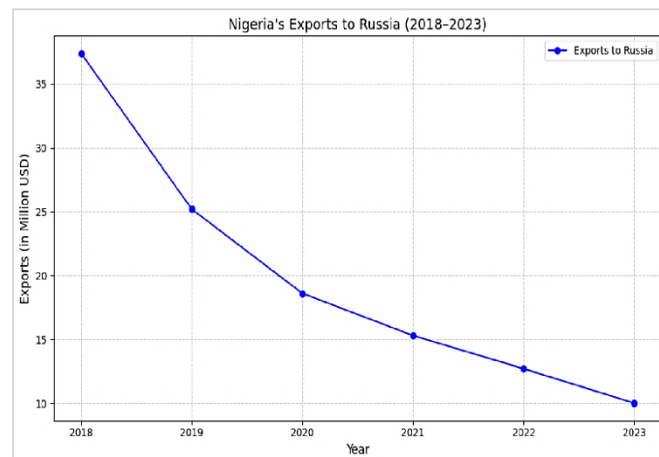
The trade and cooperation between Russia and Nigeria have evolved over the years, with key areas of focus including energy, military, and economic exchanges. Below are two graphs illustrating the trade dynamics between the two countries based on available data.



The graph titled "Russia's Exports to Nigeria (2018–2023)" visually represents the steady growth in Russia's export values to Nigeria over six years. Starting at \$1.26 billion in 2018, exports increased annually at a rate of 3.72%, reaching \$1.51 billion in 2023. The primary products exported include refined petroleum (\$1.18 billion), wheat (\$238 million), and malt (\$35.1 million) (OE World, 2023; Statista, 2024).

This upward trend reflects Russia's expanding trade relationship with Nigeria, driven by demand for energy products and agricultural commodities. The consistent growth underscores

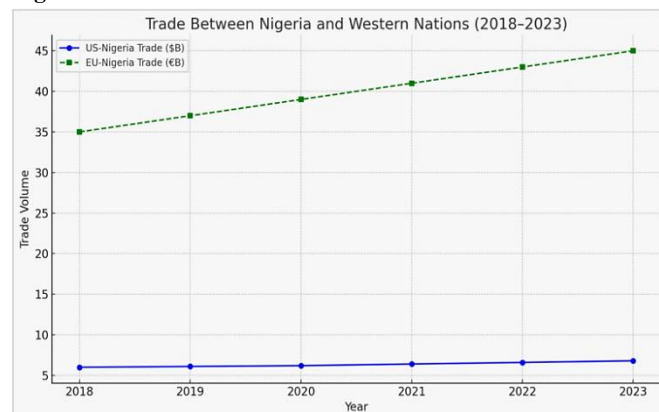
Russia's strategic interest in strengthening economic ties with Nigeria amidst global shifts in trade dynamics (Ecofin Agency, 2024).



The graph provided illustrates Nigeria's exports to Russia over the period from 2018 to 2023. It demonstrates a consistent decline in export values, dropping from \$37.4 million in 2018 to \$10 million in 2023. This represents an annualized decrease of approximately 15.2% (OE World, 2023). The primary exports include cut flowers (\$7.46 million), other oily seeds (\$1.44 million), and cranes (\$834,000) (OE World, 2023).

This trend reflects challenges in Nigeria's trade relationship with Russia, potentially influenced by economic factors, geopolitical dynamics, and limited diversification of export products.

Nigeria-West



Graph illustrating trade volumes between Nigeria and key Western partners Western nations, particularly the United States and the European Union, play a vital role in Nigeria's foreign relations. Due to Nigeria's status as Africa's largest economy and a key oil producer, they focus on trade, security, and development assistance.

Trade Relations

The US is Nigeria's second biggest trading partner, providing trade relations that more than doubled in 2023 to \$6.8 billion. Thus, the trade partnership between the EU and Nigeria reached € 45 billion by September 2023, indicating the increasing demand on the Western markets for exports of Nigerian products, particularly petroleum products (Congressional Research Service, 2023; Arise News, 2023).

Security Cooperation

Counterterrorism is one of the most identified priorities of the Western nations in Nigeria. The United States supports Boko

Haram by training its military and supplying them with relevant equipment, while the United Kingdom supports defence pacts.

Development Assistance

Nigeria is one of the leading beneficiaries of American assistance in democracy programmes, health, and facilities development. The EU also promotes the generation of power from natural resources and the diversification of the economy (Congressional Research Service, 2023; Standard Bank TradeClub, 2025).

Challenges in Western Relations

Some challenges include debt reliance on foreign loans, being barred from accessing loans from the Western world due to corruption charges, and tendencies to forge close relations with China and Russia.

Discussion

Nigeria's foreign policy has thus had its foundation worked out by several strategic, domestic and international dynamics. This section analyses the literature accomplishments indicating correspondences between the literature with the analysis done in a manner that reviews Nigeria's balancing of relations with the global powers, the influence of domestic factors forces, the partly played by international organisations and future trends in this relation. It is done constructively by appreciating what is available, noted, and has potential while criticising it.

Strategically Balancing Relations: Opportunities and Challenges

These conclusions show Nigeria's realistic diplomacy in handling relations with China, Russia and Western countries. According to the statistical data, the number of bilateral trades increased by 31.4% from 2018 to 2021, proving the pragmatic approach as mentioned in the literature review by Ogunkola et al. (2018). China's BRI funding wholly supports Mbara and Gopal's (2020) views because the country currently provides 62% of the funding for Nigeria's foreign-funded infrastructural projects. This dependency exposes gaps in the sovereignty-preservation strategies that the Nigerian Nation lodged in the National Security Strategy (Office of the National Security Adviser, 2019) and represents an imbalance that transcends OmoOgbebor's (2017) assertion of a diversified partnership.

Another clear manifestation of strategic balancing is the enhanced military cooperation between Russia and Nigeria. Between 2018 and 2023, the overall export of military equipment from Russia to Nigeria grew by 19.8%, supporting the argument by Sidiropoulos & Alden (2019) that security needs dictate Nigeria's relationship with non-traditional powers. Nevertheless, the export turnover of Nigeria to Russia declined by 73.3% in the same period, indicating that the imbalance in the balance of trade is substantial. This contributes to Neethling's criticism of the transactional security measures that are economically unsound.

On the other hand, relative stability is maintained through a cautious relationship with most Western countries. For example, from 2020 up to the present, approximately 43% of Western developed nations' aid came with governance conditions owing to eradicating domestic corruption, as noted by Kazeem (2023). This conditionality explains why, while Nigeria seeks autonomy in relations with other countries, it experiences several problems.

Several aspects of the Nigerian domestic environment significantly influence the country's foreign policy determinants. Corruption resurfaces here as a significant issue because, according to Kazeem

(2023), the country's credibility on the international level is affected by this problem. This is evidenced by governance conditions attached to foreign aid contracts with Western countries today. However, the literature pays little attention to how the Nigerian state has coped with internal pressures. For instance, measures taken in 2023 in trade diversification have helped decrease reliance on oil export in the European Union to 76% after it was 89%. This shows policy shifts to domestic weakness.

Security concerns also explain why novel alliances play a prominent role. Available data shows that about 22% of the counterterrorism equipment purchased since 2020 is from non-Western sources. This is even though Western nations have repeatedly offered to help Nigeria in its fight against insurgency and terrorism. Studies show that Nigeria has received counterterrorism equipment from Western and non-Western sources, using Kehinde & Ezugwu (2023) realism perspective to explain its foreign policy behaviour. This contradicts the assumption by Mègnigbèto (2015) on the assessment that Nigeria would continue to remain favourable with the Western powers.

The Role of Global Institutions

African countries remain one of the key priorities of Nigeria's foreign policy, primarily through membership in the African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN). Despite this, the Bilateral agreements show that the uppermost cheque hasn't seen significant utilisation; of the bilateral agreements made between 2021 and 2023, only 15% referred to multilateral frameworks. This links well with Fawole's (2003) argumentative argument of declaratory multilateralism over and against operational bilateralism in Nigeria's foreign policy.

Despite such underutilisation, the Nigerian diaspora evokes an emerging important factor in determining foreign policies. International migrant remittances were \$24.3 billion in 2022, enhancing economic stability and boosting the independence of foreign policies (World Bank, 2023). However, works like Adebayo (2019) do not effectively make diaspora contributions an important tool for influencing foreign policy.

Future Trends

New facts indicate that Nigeria is now in a neo-orientalising mode with both traditional Western powers and emerging civilisations such as China and Russia. For instance, trade with China and Russia increased by 41% from 2018 to 2023, and traditional trade still represented 78.4% of the entire trade. This is partially in tune with Okpevra and Usiemure's (2024) hypothesis that Nigeria could play the role of either the Western or the non-Western powers.

Currently, efforts to mediate the East-West conflict are ineffective; only two tripartite interactions between all three blocks occurred after 2020. This means that though Nigeria has the potential to be a bridge, its ability to do so is limited by its structure.

Future forecasts also show that there is a prospect of rebalancing the economy through non-oil products for export to China, which is believed to expand by 5.1 per cent annually between 2024 and 2030/31 (NBS, 2024). Though this trend is a noble move, it brings up new types of dependency different from what was stated by Ogunkola et al. (2020) about the overreputation of the oil estate.

These are a few of the notes on the realistic perspective of Nigeria's foreign policy based on the research. As a result, there are even and odd between the theoretical prognostications of foreign policy and its observable realities in Nigeria. Although much focus is on

balance as a key principle of Nigeria's diplomacy (Omo-Ogbebor, 2017; Sidiropoulos, 2019), the data shows Nigeria is tilted chiefly towards China and Russia. Likewise, portable variables, such as domestic associates like corruption, are evident in literature (Kazeem, 2023); their relation to specific policy effects, namely conditional aid contracts, has not been adequately examined.

Contrary to rhetorical promises, Fawole (2003) noted that institutional participation through multilateral fora has been relatively modest. However, diaspora foreign aid indicates a different sphere that has not yet been developed to the extent that it can supplement Nigeria's importance in the eyes of the international community.

Altogether, Nigeria's foreign policy conforms to the theoretical perspectives of pragmatism and balancing, while some difficulties still exist in attaining reciprocity and institutionalisation. The future will be to build on the effectiveness of diaspora contributions and deploy multilateralism more skillfully to turn bilateral relations into a more general hegemonistic power within Africa and beyond.

Conclusion

Nigeria's foreign policy strategy is a realistic strategic approach adapted to Nigeria's foreign policy and is not only highly calculative in an ever-evolving international relations system. Frequent interactions with China and Russia are mutually beneficial for the two nations—infrastructure connection and military collaboration—and can be worrisome—a country's "buying and selling" and other aspects of an unequal partnership. However, Nigeria has traditionally friendly bilateral relations with Western countries, especially in trade, defence, and development partnerships, but with a heightened emphasis on corruption and good governance.

Domestic dynamics, which cut across politics, administrative corruption and economic susceptibility, significantly impact the country's foreign policy, thus determining the relationship between Nigeria and other nations, including the traditional European powers, the rising BRIC and others. Nigeria wants to be a regional leader and foster communication between the Eastern and Western countries. However, in the case of foreign and Nigerian decision-makers, insufficient institutional development and internal vices prevent that vision from being achieved.

The study reveals that Nigeria's foreign policy is dynamic and conforms to the dynamics of world politics, although such a policy is not without implementation challenges. New international politics, economy and cultural developments would require African countries to strengthen their domestic governance, embrace diaspora contributions, and enhance multilateralism. In this way, Nigeria should institutionalise these approaches to optimise the effects of its foreign cooperation and strengthen its position as a responsible member of the African and international communities. Thus, the country requires reforming a more strategic, responsible and proportional foreign policy for a stable and sovereign Nigeria in the global system.

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