

A HISTORY OF NIGERIAN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND DIPLOMACY

By

Dawood Omolumen Egbefo (Prof)

Department of History and International studies

Edo State University Uzairue, Edo State Nigeria

E-mail: dawoodamirah@yahoo.com

Phone: 08109492681/ 08076709828

&

Sule Abdulganiyu

Department Of Peace Studies And Conflict Resolution

National Open University Of Nigerian, Lagos State Nigeria

Email: sulegani12@gmail.com

Phone: 08065308477

Abstract

This mixed-method study examines Nigeria's diplomatic trajectory and international relations framework from independence to the contemporary era, analyzing the evolution of the country's foreign policy objectives, diplomatic strategies, and global engagement patterns. Through a combination of archival research, diplomatic interviews, and quantitative analysis of international cooperation indicators, this research investigates Nigeria's role as a regional power, its leadership in African continental affairs, and its positioning in global multilateral institutions. The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, incorporating qualitative data from 52 in-depth interviews with diplomats, foreign policy analysts, and international relations experts, alongside quantitative survey data from 350 stakeholders across diplomatic missions, academic institutions, and policy research centers. Findings reveal Nigeria's complex diplomatic identity as both a regional hegemon and a developing nation seeking global recognition, with 82% of respondents acknowledging Nigeria's leadership role in West Africa while 67% identifying challenges in translating demographic and economic potential into effective international influence. The research contributes to understanding how post-colonial African states navigate international relations while balancing domestic priorities with continental and global responsibilities. Results indicate that Nigeria's diplomatic experience reflects broader patterns of African international engagement, offering

insights into South-South cooperation, multilateral diplomacy, and the role of middle powers in global governance structures.

Keywords: International relations, Nigerian diplomacy, African foreign policy, multilateral engagement, regional leadership

1. Introduction

The study of international relations and diplomacy in the African context has undergone significant evolution since the continent's independence movements of the 1960s, as scholars increasingly recognize the unique challenges and opportunities facing African states in the global arena. Traditional international relations theories, often developed within European and American academic contexts, have frequently failed to adequately capture the complexities of African diplomatic experiences, particularly the ways in which colonial legacies, ethnic diversity, economic dependency, and regional integration aspirations shape foreign policy formulation and implementation.¹ This paradigm shift has led to growing academic interest in examining African international relations through indigenous theoretical frameworks that account for the continent's historical experiences, cultural values, and development priorities. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes the agency of African states in shaping their diplomatic destinies, moving beyond dependency theories that portrayed African countries as passive recipients of external influence to recognize their active roles in international negotiations, regional integration, and South-South cooperation initiatives.²

Nigeria, as Africa's most populous country and largest economy, presents a compelling case study for understanding the dynamics of African international relations and diplomacy in the post-colonial era. Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has consistently positioned itself as a leader in African affairs, playing pivotal roles in continental liberation movements, regional economic integration, peacekeeping operations, and multilateral diplomatic initiatives. The country's foreign policy, anchored on principles of African unity, non-alignment, and mutual respect among nations, reflects broader African aspirations for continental solidarity and global recognition.³ Nigeria's demographic weight, with over 220 million citizens representing nearly 20% of Africa's population, combined with its position as Africa's largest oil producer and most diversified economy, has provided the foundation for its claims to regional leadership and global influence. However, the translation of these material capabilities into effective diplomatic outcomes has remained a subject of considerable debate among scholars and practitioners of international relations.

The complexity of Nigeria's international relations stems from multiple factors, including its federal structure that accommodates over 250 ethnic groups, its position as a bridge between Muslim-majority northern regions and Christian-dominated southern areas, and its role as a mediator between Francophone and Anglophone African countries. These internal dynamics significantly influence Nigeria's external relations, as domestic stability and national unity remain prerequisites for effective international engagement.⁴ Furthermore, Nigeria's

experience as a major oil exporter has shaped its integration into global economic systems while creating dependencies that complicate its pursuit of foreign policy autonomy. The country's membership in diverse international organizations, including the United Nations, African Union, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and Commonwealth of Nations, reflects its multi-dimensional diplomatic approach that seeks to maximize benefits from various international partnerships while maintaining policy flexibility.

This research is structured around three central research questions designed to examine Nigeria's diplomatic evolution and international relations patterns: (1) How has Nigeria's foreign policy evolved since independence, and what factors have shaped its diplomatic priorities and strategies? (2) What has been Nigeria's role and effectiveness in regional and continental African affairs, particularly in conflict resolution, economic integration, and political development? (3) How does Nigeria navigate its relationships with major global powers while maintaining its commitment to South-South cooperation and multilateral diplomacy? These questions are explored through a mixed-method approach that combines historical analysis, diplomatic interviews, and quantitative assessment of Nigeria's international engagement patterns. By integrating diverse research methodologies, the study seeks to provide comprehensive understanding of Nigeria's contributions to African international relations and its evolving position in global diplomacy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks in African International Relations

The application of international relations theories to African contexts has been a subject of considerable scholarly debate, with many arguing that traditional Western centric theoretical frameworks inadequately capture the unique characteristics of African diplomatic practices and foreign policy priorities. Realist theories, which emphasize power competition and national interest maximization, often fail to account for the solidarity based approaches that characterize much of African diplomacy, particularly the emphasis on pan Africanism, collective security, and mutual assistance that transcends narrow state-centric calculations.⁵ Similarly, liberal institutionalist theories, while more applicable to Africa's extensive engagement with multilateral organizations, do not fully explain the persistence of informal diplomatic networks, traditional authority influences on foreign policy, and the role of personal relationships in international negotiations that characterize African diplomatic culture.

Recent scholarship has called for the development of African centered international relations theories that incorporate indigenous concepts of governance, conflict resolution, and inter-community relations into analytical frameworks for understanding African states' international behavior.⁶ These approaches draw on traditional African political concepts such as Ubuntu (human interconnectedness), consensus-building, and restorative justice to explain diplomatic practices that prioritize dialogue, mediation, and collective problem solving over confrontational approaches. The concept of "African solutions to African problems," popularized

within African Union frameworks, reflects these indigenous approaches to international relations that emphasize continental self-reliance while maintaining engagement with global partners.

Constructivist international relations theories have gained particular relevance in African contexts, as they help explain how shared colonial experiences, cultural affinities, and liberation struggle histories shape contemporary diplomatic relationships and foreign policy preferences.⁷ The role of ideas, identities, and normative frameworks in African diplomacy becomes evident in initiatives such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), and continental integration projects that reflect shared visions of African development and international positioning.

2.2 Nigerian Foreign Policy Evolution and Principles

Nigeria's foreign policy since independence has been characterized by what scholars term "Afrocentric internationalism" a diplomatic approach that prioritizes African unity and continental development while maintaining active engagement with global partners and institutions.⁸ The foundational principles of Nigerian foreign policy, articulated during the immediate post-independence period, include African liberation and unity, promotion of international peace and security, respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs of other states, and pursuit of mutually beneficial international cooperation. These principles have remained relatively consistent across different political administrations, though their interpretation and implementation have varied significantly based on domestic political configurations, economic circumstances, and international systemic changes.

The evolution of Nigerian foreign policy can be broadly categorized into distinct phases, each reflecting different emphases and strategic orientations. The immediate post-independence period (1960-1966) was characterized by cautious engagement with former colonial powers and gradual assertion of African identity in international affairs. The civil war period (1967-1970) necessitated intensive diplomatic efforts to maintain international recognition and prevent external intervention, leading to more assertive foreign policy approaches. The oil boom era (1970s-early 1980s) enabled Nigeria to pursue ambitious continental leadership roles, including significant financial contributions to African liberation movements, leadership in establishing the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and advocacy for Southern African majority rule.⁹

The structural adjustment period (1980s-1990s) witnessed significant constraints on Nigeria's international activism due to economic challenges and domestic political instability, leading to more pragmatic and economically focused diplomatic approaches. The democratic transition period since 1999 has been marked by efforts to restore Nigeria's international reputation, rebuild relationships with Western partners while maintaining South South cooperation commitments, and assume leadership roles in continental peace and security initiatives.¹⁰ Contemporary Nigerian foreign policy under successive democratic administrations has emphasized

economic diplomacy, regional integration leadership, and global partnership diversification while maintaining core African solidarity principles.

2.3 Nigeria's Role in Regional and Continental Affairs

Nigeria's position as West Africa's dominant power has been consistently reflected in its leadership role within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) since the organization's establishment in 1975. Scholarly analysis of Nigeria's regional engagement reveals a complex pattern of hegemonic leadership that combines material capabilities with ideational influence, though not without generating concerns about Nigerian dominance among smaller West African states.¹¹ Nigeria's contributions to ECOWAS include significant financial support, providing approximately 60% of the organization's budget, leadership in developing regional integration frameworks, and spearheading initiatives for free movement of persons, goods, and services across West African borders.

The country's role in West African peacekeeping operations has been particularly significant, with Nigerian military and financial contributions forming the backbone of ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) interventions in Liberia (1990-1997), Sierra Leone (1997-2000), Guinea-Bissau (1998-1999), and other regional conflicts. These interventions, while generally successful in ending conflicts and restoring stability, have generated scholarly debates about the legitimacy and effectiveness of Nigeria's regional hegemony, with critics arguing that Nigerian interventions often reflect national interests rather than purely altruistic regional solidarity motives.¹² Supporters counter that Nigeria's regional leadership has been essential for maintaining West African stability and preventing conflicts from escalating into larger humanitarian crises.

At the continental level, Nigeria has been instrumental in major African Union initiatives, including the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), continental early warning systems, and institutional reforms aimed at enhancing African Union effectiveness.¹³ Nigeria's hosting of numerous African summits, its financial contributions to African Union operations, and its diplomatic leadership in continental consensus-building processes reflect its commitment to pan African ideals. However, recent scholarship has noted tensions between Nigeria's continental leadership aspirations and its actual influence in African affairs, particularly given competition from other regional powers such as South Africa, Egypt, and increasingly influential middle powers like Rwanda and Ghana.¹⁴

2.4 Global Engagement and Multilateral Diplomacy

Nigeria's engagement with global multilateral institutions reflects its commitment to international law, collective security, and reform of global governance structures to reflect contemporary power distributions and development priorities. As a founding member of the United Nations and one of the largest contributors to UN peacekeeping operations, Nigeria has consistently advocated for Security Council reform that would provide permanent representation for African states, reflecting

broader African demands for equitable global governance.¹⁵ Nigerian diplomats have played significant roles in various UN agencies, with the country contributing personnel to peacekeeping missions in Lebanon, Cambodia, former Yugoslavia, Somalia, and numerous other global hotspots.

Nigeria's membership in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) has been crucial for its international economic engagement, though it has sometimes created tensions between energy export interests and broader African development priorities. Recent scholarship has examined how Nigeria has used its OPEC membership to advocate for fair energy pricing, technology transfer, and South-South energy cooperation while balancing relationships with major energy consuming countries.¹⁶ The country's engagement with emerging multilateral frameworks, including BRICS partnership arrangements, South South cooperation mechanisms, and regional development banks, reflects efforts to diversify international partnerships beyond traditional Western dominated institutions.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to examine Nigeria's international relations and diplomatic practices. The approach combined qualitative diplomatic interviews with quantitative analysis of international engagement indicators to provide comprehensive assessment of Nigeria's foreign policy evolution and contemporary diplomatic challenges.

3.1 Research Design

The mixed method design facilitated triangulation of findings through multiple data sources and analytical approaches. Qualitative methods provided deep understanding of diplomatic decision-making processes, foreign policy priorities, and international relationship dynamics, while quantitative methods enabled measurement of diplomatic effectiveness patterns across different international engagement areas. The convergent parallel approach involved simultaneous collection and analysis of both data types, with integration occurring during interpretation phases.

3.2 Study Population and Sampling

The study focused on Nigerian diplomatic missions, foreign policy institutions, and international relations stakeholders across three categories: government diplomatic personnel, academic experts, and civil society international affairs analysts. These categories represent different perspectives on Nigerian international relations, providing variation in institutional affiliation and analytical orientation. Qualitative participants included senior diplomats, foreign ministry officials, international relations scholars, and policy analysts selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Quantitative participants were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across institutional categories, experience levels, and regional specializations.

Table 1: Study Population Distribution

Category	Population	Qualitative Participants	Quantitative Participants
Government Diplomatic Personnel	450	20	150
Academic Experts	280	18	100
Civil Society Analysts	320	14	100
Total	1,050	52	350

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Qualitative data collection involved semi-structured interviews lasting 75-120 minutes, conducted in English with occasional code switching to local languages where appropriate. Interview topics included Nigeria's foreign policy evolution, diplomatic challenges and successes, regional and global relationship dynamics, and perspectives on international relations effectiveness. Participant observation occurred during diplomatic events, international conferences, and policy dialogue sessions. Quantitative data collection employed a structured questionnaire administered through online platforms and face to face interviews. The instrument included sections on diplomatic effectiveness assessments, international partnership evaluations, regional leadership perceptions, and foreign policy priority rankings. Questions were developed based on literature review findings and pilot testing with diplomatic practitioners.

3.4 Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures, with interview transcripts coded for themes related to foreign policy evolution, diplomatic effectiveness, international partnership dynamics, and global engagement patterns. NVivo software facilitated coding and theme development. Member checking with selected participants validated analytical interpretations. Quantitative data analysis employed descriptive and inferential statistics using SPSS software. Chi-square tests examined associations between participant categories and diplomatic assessment indicators. Multiple regression analysis identified predictors of international relations effectiveness ratings. Significance levels were set at $p < 0.05$.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the University of Lagos Ethics Committee and followed international standards for research involving diplomatic and policy personnel. Informed consent procedures ensured participant understanding of research purposes and voluntary participation. Confidentiality protocols addressed sensitive diplomatic information and appropriate handling of classified or privileged communications during interviews and observations.

4. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: NIGERIA'S DIPLOMATIC EVOLUTION

4.1 Foundation Period: 1960-1970

Nigeria's entry into international relations as an independent nation in October 1960 was characterized by cautious engagement with the international community and gradual assertion of African identity in global affairs. The immediate post-independence foreign policy, under Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa's administration, emphasized maintaining cordial relationships with former colonial power Britain while establishing Nigeria's credentials as a sovereign African state committed to continental liberation and development.¹⁷ This balanced approach reflected the complex domestic political configuration of the First Republic, where northern and southern regional interests had to be carefully managed in foreign policy formulation and implementation.

The foundational principles of Nigerian foreign policy were articulated through a series of policy statements and diplomatic initiatives that emphasized African unity as the cornerstone of Nigeria's international engagement. The country's support for African liberation movements, particularly in Southern Africa, was demonstrated through diplomatic recognition of liberation organizations, financial contributions to freedom fighters, and advocacy within international forums for majority rule and decolonization. Nigeria's early membership in international organizations, including the United Nations, Commonwealth, and later the Organization of African Unity (OAU), reflected its commitment to multilateral diplomacy and international law as frameworks for conducting international relations.

The Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) represented a crucial test of the country's diplomatic capabilities and international relationships. The federal government's diplomatic offensive to maintain international recognition, prevent external intervention supporting Biafran secession, and secure necessary military supplies demonstrated remarkable diplomatic sophistication for a nascent state.¹⁸ The war period witnessed intensive engagement with diverse international partners, including Soviet Union military support, British diplomatic backing, and successful prevention of major Western power recognition of Biafra. This experience established Nigeria's reputation for diplomatic pragmatism and strategic thinking in international relations, while also highlighting the importance of domestic stability for effective foreign policy implementation.

4.2 Oil Boom and Continental Leadership: 1970-1985

The discovery and exploitation of petroleum resources transformed Nigeria's international relations capabilities and ambitions during the 1970s and early 1980s. Oil revenues provided the financial foundation for Nigeria's emergence as a major African power, enabling the country to assume leadership roles in continental affairs that would have been impossible based on demographic weight alone.¹⁹ The Gowon and Murtala/Obasanjo administrations utilized oil wealth to pursue ambitious foreign policy objectives, including substantial financial contributions to African liberation

movements, leadership in establishing regional integration frameworks, and active participation in global South-South cooperation initiatives.

Nigeria's role in establishing the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975 represented perhaps the most significant achievement of this period, demonstrating the country's capacity to translate material resources into institutional leadership and regional influence. The ECOWAS treaty negotiations required sophisticated diplomatic coordination among fifteen West African countries with diverse colonial backgrounds, economic structures, and political systems.²⁰ Nigeria's financial commitments to the organization, estimated at 32% of the total budget from inception, combined with diplomatic leadership in consensus-building processes, established the country as the undisputed leader of West African integration efforts.

The period also witnessed Nigeria's most assertive international posture regarding African liberation, particularly in Southern Africa where the country provided substantial financial and diplomatic support to liberation movements in Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa. Nigeria's nationalization of British Petroleum assets in 1979 following Britain's refusal to implement sanctions against South Africa demonstrated willingness to sacrifice economic interests for African solidarity principles.²¹ This action, while economically costly, significantly enhanced Nigeria's credentials as a leader of African liberation and strengthened relationships with other frontline states in Southern Africa.

4.3 Economic Crisis and Democratic Transition: 1985-1999

The collapse of oil prices in the mid-1980s combined with domestic economic mismanagement created severe constraints on Nigeria's international relations capabilities, forcing significant adjustments in foreign policy ambitions and strategies. The structural adjustment programs implemented during this period, often under International Monetary Fund and World Bank conditionalities, limited the government's capacity for international activism while creating tensions with traditional African solidarity commitments.²² Military governments during this period pursued more pragmatic and economically focused foreign policies, though maintaining core commitments to African unity and regional leadership.

The Babangida administration's foreign policy innovations included greater emphasis on economic diplomacy, South-South cooperation, and diversification of international partnerships beyond traditional Western relationships. Nigeria's leadership role in the Group of 77 developing countries forum, advocacy for debt relief mechanisms, and promotion of South-South trade arrangements reflected adaptation to changing global economic circumstances while maintaining Third World solidarity principles.²³ However, domestic political instability, including the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election, significantly damaged Nigeria's international reputation and limited diplomatic effectiveness.

The Abacha military regime (1993-1998) represented the nadir of Nigeria's international relations, with widespread international isolation following human rights violations, democratic regression, and authoritarian governance practices. The execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni activists in 1995 led to Nigeria's

suspension from the Commonwealth, bilateral tensions with Western partners, and reduced influence in African affairs.²⁴ This period demonstrated the intimate connection between domestic governance quality and international relations effectiveness, as Nigeria's diplomatic influence declined sharply despite maintaining material capabilities and regional geographic advantages.

4.4 Democratic Renewal and Contemporary Challenges: 1999-Present

The restoration of democratic governance in 1999 under President Olusegun Obasanjo marked a new phase in Nigeria's international relations characterized by efforts to rebuild international reputation, restore damaged relationships, and reassert regional leadership roles. The democratic transition provided legitimacy for renewed international engagement and enabled Nigeria to resume active roles in continental peace and security initiatives²⁵. Obasanjo's international background and personal relationships with global leaders facilitated rapid improvement in Nigeria's international standing, including restoration of Commonwealth membership and renewed Western partnership arrangements.

The period since 1999 has witnessed Nigeria's most sustained engagement with continental peace and security challenges, including military interventions in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire, leadership in African Union institutional development, and advocacy for continental integration through the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) initiative. Nigeria's contributions to African peacekeeping operations have been substantial, with over 40,000 Nigerian military personnel serving in various African conflicts since 1999.²⁶ However, these interventions have also generated domestic criticism regarding the costs and risks of international engagement when significant domestic challenges remain unresolved.

Contemporary Nigerian foreign policy faces multiple challenges including terrorism threats that complicate regional relationships, economic diversification imperatives that affect international partnership priorities, and domestic governance challenges that limit diplomatic effectiveness. The rise of Boko Haram insurgency has necessitated increased security cooperation with neighboring countries while creating tensions over border management and refugee responsibilities.²⁷ Climate change impacts, particularly in the Lake Chad region, have added environmental dimensions to Nigeria's regional diplomacy while requiring new forms of international cooperation and technical assistance.

5. RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 Quantitative Results: Diplomatic Effectiveness and International Engagement Patterns

Survey data revealed complex patterns of diplomatic effectiveness across different areas of Nigeria's international engagement. Overall assessments of Nigeria's diplomatic performance showed mixed results, with 82% of respondents acknowledging Nigeria's leadership role in West African affairs while only 58% rated the country's global diplomatic influence as effective. Significant variations appeared across institutional affiliations, experience levels, and regional specialization areas.

Table 2: Diplomatic Effectiveness Ratings by Area of Engagement

Engagement Area	Very Effective	Effective	Moderate	Ineffective
West African Leadership	34%	48%	15%	3%
Continental African Affairs	28%	44%	23%	5%
UN and Multilateral Engagement	22%	36%	32%	10%
Economic Diplomacy	18%	29%	38%	15%
Global Power Relations	12%	26%	42%	20%

Table 3: International Partnership Assessment by Region

Region/Partnership	Strong	Good	Fair	Weak
West Africa (ECOWAS)	67%	28%	4%	1%
African Union	45%	38%	15%	2%
United States	32%	41%	22%	5%
United Kingdom	29%	44%	23%	4%
China	38%	35%	21%	6%
European Union	25%	39%	28%	8%

Statistical analysis revealed significant associations between participant institutional affiliation and diplomatic effectiveness ratings ($\chi^2 = 31.45$, $p < 0.001$), with government diplomatic personnel providing more positive assessments than academic experts or civil society analysts. Experience levels showed positive correlations with effectiveness ratings, while regional specialization influenced partnership assessments. Language diplomacy and cultural exchange programs received lower effectiveness ratings compared to political and security cooperation initiatives.

5.2 Qualitative Findings: Themes of Diplomatic Evolution and Contemporary Challenges

Thematic analysis of interview data revealed five major themes: (1) adaptive leadership in regional affairs, (2) constraints of domestic challenges on international effectiveness, (3) evolving partnership strategies and relationship diversification, (4) continental integration leadership and challenges, and (5) global positioning and influence limitations.

5.2.1 Adaptive Leadership in Regional Affairs

Participants consistently described Nigeria's regional leadership as its most successful area of international relations, though noting significant evolution in leadership strategies over time. Senior diplomats emphasized how Nigeria has moved from purely hegemonic approaches to more consultative and partnership-oriented regional engagement. As one former ambassador explained: "We learned that leadership in West Africa cannot be imposed through size and resources alone. True leadership requires building consensus, respecting smaller countries' sovereignty, and demonstrating that Nigerian leadership benefits the entire region, not just Nigeria itself." ECOWAS institutional development was cited as Nigeria's most significant regional achievement, with participants noting how the organization has evolved from a primarily economic integration framework to a comprehensive regional security and political organization. The development of ECOWAS protocols on democracy, good governance, and conflict prevention reflected Nigerian diplomatic leadership in translating regional challenges into institutional solutions. Military intervention capabilities through ECOMOG operations were described as demonstrating

Nigeria's commitment to regional stability while also revealing the limits of military solutions to political problems. Participants noted that Nigeria's peacekeeping experiences in Liberia and Sierra Leone provided valuable lessons about the importance of political processes, post conflict reconstruction, and sustainable peace building that have influenced subsequent interventions.

5.2.2 Constraints of Domestic Challenges on International Effectiveness

Participants consistently identified domestic governance challenges, infrastructure deficits, and security threats as major constraints on Nigeria's international relations effectiveness. The disconnect between Nigeria's international commitments and domestic development challenges was cited as undermining diplomatic credibility and limiting resources available for international engagement. One foreign ministry official noted: "It's difficult to lead by example when we struggle with basic governance challenges at home. Our international partners often question our capacity to fulfill international commitments when we haven't solved similar problems domestically." The Boko Haram insurgency and farmer-herder conflicts were specifically mentioned as complicating regional relationships and requiring diplomatic resources that could otherwise be used for development oriented international cooperation. Participants described how security challenges have shifted Nigeria's regional engagement toward reactive crisis management rather than proactive development leadership.

Economic management challenges, including over-dependence on oil revenues, infrastructure deficits, and limited industrialization, were cited as constraining Nigeria's economic diplomacy effectiveness and limiting opportunities for mutually beneficial international partnerships. The lack of diversified export base

was particularly noted as limiting Nigeria's capacity to translate demographic and geographic advantages into economic influence.

5.2.3 Evolving Partnership Strategies and Relationship Diversification

Participants described significant evolution in Nigeria's international partnership strategies, particularly the move away from traditional Western focused relationships toward diversified engagement with emerging powers and South South cooperation initiatives. China's emergence as Nigeria's largest trading partner was cited as reflecting successful partnership diversification while also creating new dependencies that require careful management. The development of strategic partnerships with countries like India, Brazil, and South Korea was described as reflecting Nigeria's efforts to access technology, investment, and development cooperation opportunities beyond traditional Western sources. However, participants noted challenges in coordinating these diverse partnerships and ensuring consistency in foreign policy approaches across different relationship streams.

Regional partnership development within Africa, particularly with countries like Ghana, South Africa, and Kenya, was described as increasingly important for continental integration and global South advocacy. The formation of African positions on global issues through coordination with other regional powers was cited as an area of growing diplomatic sophistication.

5.2.4 Continental Integration Leadership and Challenges

Participants emphasized Nigeria's leadership roles in major African integration initiatives, particularly the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and African Union institutional reforms. Nigeria's financial contributions to African Union operations and hosting of major continental summits were cited as demonstrating continued commitment to pan-African ideals despite domestic resource constraints.

However, participants also noted challenges in Nigeria's continental leadership, including competition from other regional powers, questions about Nigeria's capacity to fulfill continental commitments, and tensions between continental integration and national sovereignty concerns. The delayed signing of the AfCFTA agreement was cited as reflecting these tensions and the need for more careful balance between continental solidarity and national interest protection. Infrastructure connectivity challenges, particularly in transportation and telecommunications, were identified as major obstacles to effective continental integration leadership. Participants noted that Nigeria's capacity to benefit from and contribute to continental integration depends significantly on domestic infrastructure development and regional connectivity improvements.

5.2.5 Global Positioning and Influence Limitations

Participants acknowledged significant limitations in Nigeria's global influence despite its African leadership positions. The country's limited representation in global governance institutions, including the UN Security Council, was cited as reflecting

broader African underrepresentation in global decision-making structures. Nigeria's advocacy for global governance reforms was described as important for African interests but limited in effectiveness due to resistance from established powers. Economic diplomacy challenges were particularly noted in relationships with major global powers, where Nigeria's export dependence on primary commodities limits negotiating leverage and partnership opportunities. Participants described efforts to develop value-added export industries and technology partnerships but noted slow progress in diversifying the economic base for international engagement.

Cultural diplomacy and soft power projection were identified as underdeveloped areas of Nigeria's international relations, despite significant cultural assets including Nollywood, music industry, and educational institutions. Participants noted missed opportunities to translate cultural influence into diplomatic leverage and enhanced international relationships.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Nigeria as a Regional Power: Achievements and Limitations

The findings of this study confirm Nigeria's position as West Africa's dominant regional power while revealing the complex challenges associated with translating material capabilities into sustained regional influence and leadership legitimacy. Nigeria's leadership in establishing and maintaining ECOWAS represents perhaps its most significant achievement in regional affairs, demonstrating capacity to build institutional frameworks that transcend bilateral relationships and create mechanisms for collective action on economic integration, political development, and security cooperation.²⁸ The evolution of ECOWAS from a purely economic integration organization to a comprehensive regional security and governance framework reflects Nigerian diplomatic sophistication and adaptation to changing regional challenges. However, the study also reveals persistent tensions in Nigeria's regional leadership that reflect broader challenges facing hegemonic powers in developing regions. Smaller West African states' concerns about Nigerian domination, despite appreciation for Nigerian contributions to regional stability and development, highlight the delicate balance required for effective regional leadership.²⁹ The concept of "hegemonic burden" emerges from participant responses, where Nigeria's regional responsibilities often exceed its capacity or willingness to bear associated costs, leading to periodic retrenchment and reduced regional activism.

The effectiveness of Nigerian regional leadership appears closely linked to domestic stability and governance quality, consistent with broader international relations literature on the relationship between domestic and international politics. Periods of domestic political crisis, economic decline, or security challenges have consistently coincided with reduced regional influence and leadership capacity, suggesting that sustained regional power requires consistent domestic governance effectiveness.³⁰ This finding has important implications for understanding how regional powers in developing contexts navigate the relationship between domestic development and international influence.

6.2 Continental Leadership and Pan-African Identity

Nigeria's continental leadership role reflects deep historical commitments to pan African ideals and African unity, consistently maintained across different political administrations and economic circumstances. The country's substantial financial contributions to African liberation movements, continental institutions, and peacekeeping operations demonstrate remarkable consistency in prioritizing African solidarity over narrow national interest calculations.³¹ This pattern supports constructivist international relations theories that emphasize the role of ideas and identity in shaping foreign policy behavior, as Nigeria's African identity appears to be a fundamental determinant of international relations priorities. However, the study reveals growing tensions between pan African commitments and domestic development priorities that reflect broader challenges facing African regional powers in the contemporary period. Domestic criticism of international activism when significant internal challenges remain unresolved suggests increasing popular demands for foreign policy accountability and domestic priority focus.³² These tensions are particularly evident in peacekeeping commitments, where Nigerian military contributions to African conflicts generate domestic questions about resource allocation and national priority management.

The competition with other African regional powers, particularly South Africa and Egypt, for continental leadership positions reflects the emergence of a more multipolar African system that challenges traditional assumptions about Nigerian hegemony in African affairs. This development requires more sophisticated diplomatic strategies that emphasize partnership and coalition-building rather than unilateral leadership approaches, suggesting evolution toward more mature continental diplomacy.³³

6.3 Global Engagement and Partnership Diversification

Nigeria's efforts to diversify international partnerships beyond traditional Western relationships represent adaptive responses to changing global power configurations and opportunities for enhanced South South cooperation. The development of strategic partnerships with emerging powers, particularly China, India, and Brazil, reflects recognition that traditional Western partners may not provide optimal frameworks for addressing Nigeria's development challenges and international aspirations.³⁴ However, the study reveals significant challenges in managing diverse partnerships with potentially conflicting expectations and requirements.

The relationship with China, while providing access to infrastructure investment and trade opportunities, also creates new forms of dependency that require careful management to avoid reproducing colonial-era asymmetrical relationships. Participants' recognition of these challenges suggests growing sophistication in Nigeria's approach to partnership management and awareness of potential risks associated with over-dependence on single partners.³⁵ The emphasis on technology transfer, local capacity building, and sustainable development in partnership negotiations reflects learning from earlier international relationship

experiences. Nigeria's engagement with multilateral institutions reveals both opportunities and limitations for middle power diplomacy in global governance contexts. While the country has achieved significant influence in some international organizations, particularly those focused on African affairs, its impact in major global governance institutions remains limited by structural inequalities and established power configurations.³⁶ The advocacy for global governance reforms, including UN Security Council expansion and international financial institution restructuring, represents long-term diplomatic strategies that may require sustained coalition-building with other emerging powers.

6.4 Domestic-International Nexus in Foreign Policy

The study reveals a critical finding regarding the intimate relationship between domestic governance quality and international relations effectiveness in Nigeria's diplomatic experience. Periods of domestic political stability, economic growth, and good governance have consistently coincided with enhanced international influence and diplomatic achievements, while domestic crises have resulted in reduced international effectiveness and damaged diplomatic relationships.³⁷ This pattern supports two level game theories in international relations that emphasize the interconnectedness of domestic and international politics, particularly for developing countries where domestic legitimacy significantly affects international credibility. The challenge of balancing domestic development priorities with international commitments emerges as a persistent theme in Nigeria's foreign policy evolution. Public criticism of international activism when domestic challenges remain unresolved reflects growing democratic accountability pressures that require more sophisticated justifications for international engagement.³⁸ This dynamic suggests that effective foreign policy in democratic contexts must demonstrate clear connections between international activities and domestic benefits, moving beyond traditional sovereignty focused approaches to foreign policy justification.

The impact of security challenges, particularly terrorism and insurgency, on Nigeria's regional and international relations illustrates how domestic security issues can quickly become international relations challenges. The Boko Haram insurgency has necessitated regional security cooperation while also creating refugee and humanitarian challenges that affect relationships with neighboring countries.³⁹ This experience demonstrates how domestic security failures can undermine broader diplomatic objectives and require significant diplomatic resources for crisis management rather than development-oriented cooperation.

6.5 Methodological Contributions and Implications

The mixed-methods approach employed in this study provides valuable methodological insights for international relations research in African contexts. The combination of quantitative diplomatic effectiveness assessments with qualitative analysis of foreign policy evolution and decision-making processes offers a more comprehensive understanding of diplomatic outcomes than either method alone

could provide. The integration of perspectives from different institutional categories government diplomats, academic experts, and civil society analysts reveals important variations in diplomatic assessment that reflect different analytical frameworks and evaluation criteria. The study's emphasis on longitudinal analysis of foreign policy evolution provides important insights into the persistence and change of diplomatic patterns over time. Rather than viewing foreign policy as static or purely reactive to external circumstances, the longitudinal approach demonstrates how Nigerian diplomacy has evolved through learning processes, institutional development, and adaptation to changing domestic and international contexts.⁴⁰ This approach offers a model for future research on African international relations that emphasizes historical depth and continuity alongside contemporary analysis.

The focus on multiple levels of analysis regional, continental, and global provides insights into how middle powers navigate different institutional contexts and relationship configurations. The finding that effectiveness varies significantly across different levels of engagement suggests the importance of differentiated analytical approaches that recognize the distinct challenges and opportunities associated with different diplomatic contexts.⁴¹

7. CONCLUSION

This comprehensive examination of Nigeria's international relations and diplomacy provides significant insights into the challenges and opportunities facing African states in contemporary global affairs. The research demonstrates that Nigeria's diplomatic experience reflects broader patterns of post-colonial African international engagement, characterized by persistent commitments to continental solidarity, adaptive responses to changing global circumstances, and ongoing struggles to translate potential into sustained international influence. The country's evolution from cautious post-independence engagement to assertive regional leadership and contemporary efforts at global partnership diversification illustrates the dynamic nature of African diplomacy and its capacity for innovation and adaptation. Several key findings emerge from this analysis that contribute to broader understanding of African international relations. First, regional leadership requires sustained domestic stability and governance effectiveness, as international influence is fundamentally dependent on domestic legitimacy and capacity. Nigeria's most successful diplomatic periods have coincided with domestic political stability and economic growth, while domestic crises have consistently undermined international effectiveness. This relationship suggests that African regional powers must prioritize domestic governance as a foundation for international engagement rather than viewing foreign policy as separate from domestic development.

Second, continental solidarity remains a fundamental driver of Nigerian foreign policy despite changing global circumstances and emerging partnership opportunities. The consistency of Nigeria's commitment to African unity across different political administrations and economic circumstances demonstrates the enduring influence of pan-African identity on foreign policy formulation. However, this commitment increasingly faces challenges from domestic accountability pressures

and resource constraints that require more sophisticated justifications and implementation strategies.

Third, the diversification of international partnerships represents both opportunities and challenges for middle powers seeking to maximize benefits from multiple relationship streams while maintaining policy coherence and sovereignty. Nigeria's experiences with emerging powers, particularly China, illustrate the potential benefits and risks of South-South cooperation and the importance of careful partnership management to avoid new forms of dependency. The study also reveals ongoing challenges that require continued attention and innovative approaches. The persistence of infrastructure deficits, security threats, and governance challenges continues to limit Nigeria's capacity for effective international engagement despite significant diplomatic assets and regional advantages. The disconnect between Nigeria's international aspirations and domestic realities remains a fundamental constraint on diplomatic effectiveness that requires integrated approaches to development and international relations.

Economic diplomacy emerges as an area requiring enhanced attention, as Nigeria's continued dependence on primary commodity exports limits negotiating leverage and partnership opportunities with major global powers. The development of value-added industries, technology partnerships, and diversified export capabilities represents essential foundations for enhanced international influence and more balanced partnership relationships.

The implications of this study extend beyond Nigeria to broader understanding of African international relations and the role of middle powers in global governance. Nigeria's experience demonstrates both the possibilities and limitations of regional leadership in developing contexts, offering lessons for other African regional powers and emerging economies globally. The emphasis on partnership diversification, multilateral engagement, and South South cooperation provides models for other developing countries seeking to navigate complex global relationship networks while maintaining sovereignty and development priorities. This research contributes to ongoing scholarly debates about the nature of power in international relations, the role of domestic factors in foreign policy effectiveness, and the potential for non-Western approaches to diplomacy and international cooperation. Nigeria's diplomatic experience challenges traditional Western centric theories of international relations while demonstrating the continued relevance of sovereignty, regional cooperation, and multilateral engagement in contemporary global affairs.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the comprehensive analysis of Nigeria's international relations and diplomatic practices, this study offers the following recommendations for enhancing the country's diplomatic effectiveness and international influence:

1. Nigeria should prioritize comprehensive governance reforms that enhance domestic stability, rule of law, and institutional effectiveness as essential foundations for sustained international influence.

2. The country must accelerate economic diversification beyond oil dependence through industrialization, agricultural modernization, and service sector development that can provide foundations for enhanced economic diplomacy.
3. Nigeria should continue leading efforts to strengthen ECOWAS institutional capacity while promoting more inclusive decision-making processes that address smaller states' concerns about Nigerian dominance.
4. The country should develop enhanced capabilities for preventive diplomacy and conflict mediation that can address regional conflicts before they require military intervention. This includes training diplomatic personnel in mediation techniques, supporting civil society peacebuilding initiatives, and developing early warning systems that can identify potential conflicts.
5. Nigeria should prioritize regional economic integration through improved infrastructure connectivity, harmonized regulations, and facilitated trade and investment flows. The country's large domestic market should be leveraged to promote regional value chains and industrial development that benefits all ECOWAS member states.
6. Nigeria should maintain strong support for African Union institutional development while promoting continental integration through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) implementation.
7. The government should establish comprehensive economic diplomacy frameworks that coordinate trade promotion, investment attraction, and development cooperation activities across different government agencies and international partners.

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