

**NIGERIA AND REGIONAL DIPLOMACY:
WHAT FOREIGN POLICY BENEFITS FROM AFRICA?**

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ABSTRACT

The efficiency of Nigeria's foreign policies in Africa remains uncertain amidst escalating regional insecurity and economic instability. Despite its economic and demographic might, Nigeria's limited influence in regional diplomacy raises concerns. This study examines Nigeria's foreign policy benefits from regional diplomacy through the Neorealist framework also referred to as structural realism. By applying structural realism, this research reveals that Nigeria's regional diplomacy is driven by self-interest and security concerns. However, domestic and external challenges hinder its effectiveness and undermine the ability to assert regional leadership. This study contributes to understanding Nigeria's regional diplomacy, informing policy decisions on effective foreign policy and regional engagement. The findings shed light on the complexities of Nigeria's regional interactions, highlighting areas for improvement. Recommendations centre on stronger and more strategic diplomatic partnerships and cooperation with other nations, firm approach and cooperation in conflict resolution and strengthening of internal diplomatic governance to achieve national interests diplomatically.

KEYWORDS: Foreign Policy, Regional Diplomacy, Foreign Policy Benefits, Nigeria in ECOWAS, Nigeria in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's engagement in regional diplomacy is rooted in its strategic position as Africa's most populous country and its historical leadership aspirations. Since independence, Nigeria has actively participated in various regional organizations, notably the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU). These engagements aim to promote regional integration, stability and development. Nigeria's foreign policy has traditionally emphasized African solidarity, regional cooperation and global South-South cooperation. The country has played a pivotal role in shaping regional initiatives, such as the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) and the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). Nigeria's economic might, cultural influence and diplomatic leverage make it an indispensable actor in Africa's regional affairs. However, Nigeria's regional engagement is undermined by various domestic and external factors. Internally, the country faces security challenges, economic instability and political competition that is rooted in ethnic bigotry. Externally, Nigeria navigates through complex global power dynamics, emerging global governance issues and shifting regional alignments. The changing global landscape presents opportunities and challenges for Nigeria's regional diplomacy. The African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the European Union's (EU) Africa strategy underscore the need for effective regional engagement.

Despite Nigeria's significant contributions to regional organizations and initiatives, the effectiveness of its foreign policy in achieving national interests and promoting African development remains uncertain. Nigeria's regional diplomacy faces challenges, including; Limited institutional capacity and coordination among

regional organizations, insecurity and conflict in the West African sub-region, economic competition and instability, global power shifts and emerging global governance issues. These challenges raise concerns about Nigeria's ability to optimize its benefits from regional diplomacy.

Diplomacy could remotely be traced back to Ancient Egypt where God sent emissaries to the Egyptian Pharaoh for diplomatic messages. The Holy Bible accounts for Moses and Aeron's visit to the Pharaoh to deliver God's message that Pharaoh should let His people (Israelites) go to their promised Land (American Bible School, 1979). Beyond God's messages, diplomacy among the Greek city-states occurred as early as the 5th century B.C. (Ghosh, 2024), where specialized missions were frequent enough to have some semblances with modern diplomatic practices. Thucydides documented the diplomatic practices of the Greeks, highlighting a conference in Sparta in 432 B.C. where leaders discussed strategies against Athens. In the Eastern Roman Empire, after Constantine moved the capital, effective diplomatic methods were employed. Eastern emperors successfully manipulated rival factions, utilizing reports from their representatives at foreign courts for strategic advantages. This new era saw diplomats evolve into skilled observers and communicators, expanding the scope of diplomacy to encompass accurate reporting and representation.

Modern diplomacy emerged as a structured profession in late medieval Italy (Erdem, 2010), influenced by the intense rivalries among city-states and articulated in Machiavelli's *The Prince* (Audu, 2024). Though initially informal and often lacking standards, by the 17th century, permanent diplomatic missions became established, marking the transition of diplomacy into a recognized profession essential to the nation-state system, particularly following the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 (Nigro & Bartholomeus, 2012).

On the other hand, early foreign policy was largely focused on war, territorial expansion and alliances. States pursued foreign policy through dynastic marriages, treaties and military alliances. Power and survival were central, and diplomacy was often secretive and reserved for monarchs and their envoys. During the 19th century, the idea of national interest became more defined, with leaders like Otto von Bismarck and H. J Morgenthau promoting "Realpolitik", a pragmatic approach based on power and security rather than ideological goals (Morgenthau, 1948)

After World War I, there was a shift toward idealism, championed by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, who advocated for international cooperation and collective security to prevent future conflicts (Wilson, 1918, Knock, 1992). The aftermath of World War II saw a sharp division between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, marking the beginning of the Cold War. Foreign Policy during this period focused heavily on ideological competition. The end of the Cold War and the spread of globalization expanded foreign policy's focus from military and ideological concerns to economic cooperation and integration.

Based on the foregoing, this study investigated Nigerian foreign policy gains from regional diplomacy in Africa, foreign policy benefits, and challenges undermining the achievement of diplomatic goals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Foreign policy is a set of strategies and principles that guide a country's interactions in the international system. It encompasses decisions and actions taken by a government to achieve its national interests and goals in the global arena (Senadeera, 2023). Foreign policy aims to protect and promote a country's economic, security, cultural and political interests while fostering international cooperation and stability. The concept of foreign policy has evolved significantly over time and now covers a wide array of issues, including trade, energy security, human rights and environmental sustainability (Senadeera, 2023). In the 21st century, foreign policy has broadened to address a range of global issues that transcend national borders, such as climate change, cyber security, terrorism, human rights and pandemics.

On the other hand, the term "diplomacy" originated from Greece and was later adopted by the French as "diplomatic" to describe the role of a negotiator acting on behalf of a sovereign (Roberts, 2006). 'Diplo' means

folded in two while 'ma' means an object. The folded document conferred a privilege granted by the prince to the bearer authorized to negotiate on behalf of a state. It later became an agreement between sovereign nations. Diplomacy refers to the practice of managing international relations and conducting negotiations between representatives of different countries (Audu, 2024). It involves the use of various methods and tools, such as dialogue, persuasion, compromise and discussion to influence and shape the behaviours of other actors and relational outcomes. From a more academic and wider perspective, diplomacy could be understood from five divisions: as a study encompassing the study of international relations; a practice which connotes activities in the international arena; a profession which encompasses a diplomatic career; a method which indicates different approaches involved in diplomacy; and a skill including the ability to manage relationships, navigate conflicts, and negotiate effectively between individual, groups and countries, tact, emotional intelligence etcetera.

Diplomacy serves as an instrument for achieving foreign policy by translating policy goals into action. Foreign policy sets the agenda for which diplomacy works to achieve the goals by engaging other countries in diplomatic relations. Diplomacy adapts to foreign policy dynamics and priorities. As such effective diplomacy strengthens foreign policy success. Skillful negotiations and international relations enhance a country's strength to achieve foreign policy objectives.

Regional diplomacy

Regional diplomacy refers to diplomatic efforts and interactions that occur within a specific geographical area or among countries in a particular region. This form of diplomacy typically involves the collaboration of neighbouring nations to address shared interests, challenges and issues that affect their collective security, economic development and political stability. This focuses on the interaction among states through regional organizations (Bhatia & Rana, 2023).

Regional diplomacy is primarily a phenomenon that emerged after World War II, with its origins rooted in issues of peace and security (Camilleri, 2020). The aftermath of World War II saw the establishment of several international organizations aimed at fostering cooperation and preventing future conflicts. In addition, various regional organizations emerged, such as the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1948, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949 etc. which aimed to enhance regional cooperation and collective security. The collapse of bipolar tensions created by West-East ideological rivalry allowed for increased collaboration, with a focus on economic integration through trade agreements. Regional diplomacy now addresses complex security challenges, with new institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) emerging.

Regional Diplomacy in Africa

Regional diplomacy in Africa has emerged as a crucial catalyst for fostering peace, stability, and economic integration across the continent. In the light of globalization, climate change and socio-economic challenges, effective regional cooperation and diplomatic engagement have become increasingly urgent. Regional Economic Communities (RECs), such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the East African Community (EAC), play a pivotal role in promoting economic integration, peace and security among member states. These organizations form the backbone of the African Economic Community (AEC) as outlined in the Abuja Treaty (1991, highlighting their significance in regional diplomacy (Gnanguenon, 2020). African nations recognize that regional integration is essential for overcoming the limitations of small and fragmented economies. This approach aims to facilitate structural transformation, economic growth, and cooperation among member states (UNECA, 2018). Historical economic arrangements, such as the West African and Central African CFA francs, have been integrated into regional frameworks, reinforcing existing economic ties. Key agreements like the Lagos Plan of Action (1980) and the Abuja Treaty (1991) set the stage for deeper integration, aiming to establish an African Economic Community by 2028 (UNECA, 2018).

In terms of security, regional organizations like the African Union (AU) and RECs collaborate to address pressing challenges such as terrorism, piracy, border security and maritime security (UNECA, 2018). The African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) facilitates regional security cooperation, while the AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC) and conflict resolution mechanisms promote dialogue and mediation in conflict situations. The AU's intervention in crises in Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo exemplifies its commitment to enhancing regional stability (Hara, 2011). The establishment of the AU and APSA in 2002 has solidified the role of regional organizations in peace and security, garnering international support and visibility (Gnanguenon, 2020).

The quest for regional diplomacy in Africa gained momentum after the traumatic conflicts in Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Rwanda. These events prompted regional organizations to expand their focus to include conflict prevention and management, as African nations sought to assert control over their security challenges and reduce reliance on Western interventions. This shift is reflected in the AU's increased engagement in conflict resolution, as seen in its involvement in Liberia, Togo and Somalia. While regional diplomacy has enabled African nations to leverage their collective strengths to address common challenges, it remains constrained by internal divisions and competition among regional powers (Hara, 2011). Sub-regional organizations like ECOWAS have demonstrated a growing capacity for conflict resolution and peacebuilding, evidenced by their interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau in the 1990s. ECOWAS has continued to play a vital role in promoting peaceful transitions, responding diplomatically to unconstitutional power seizures in Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire. Similarly, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has influenced international policy on Somalia, highlighting the significance of sub-regional organizations in conflict resolution. However, challenges persist, particularly when dominant regional powers, such as Ethiopia and Uganda, prioritize narrow national interests, undermining collective conflict preventive efforts.

Despite notable progress, the proliferation of security-oriented regional organizations in West and Central Africa has created challenges, including overlapping memberships and a lack of coordination. These issues have hindered the effectiveness of regional organizations in managing conflicts (Gnanguenon, 2020). To address these challenges, a collaborative approach is essential, involving coordinated efforts between regional and international actors. This cooperation is crucial for preventing policy vacuums and ensuring timely and effective responses to conflicts (Hara, 2011). Africa's regional diplomacy has experienced a surge in activity and assertiveness, led by the African Union's (AU) efforts to promote peace, security, democracy, and good governance. The AU has adopted a more interventionist approach, taking decisive actions against member states that violate democratic principles and deploying peacekeeping forces to conflict zones (Hara, 2011). The AU's assumption of primary responsibility for African conflicts reflects a postcolonial orientation and a desire to eschew perceived Western interventionism and double standards. Many African states view the UN Security Council as unrepresentative and dominated by Western interests, leading to scepticism about external interventions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Neorealism, also known as structural realism, is an extension of Hans Morgenthau's traditional realist balance-of-power theory. Among other postulations, traditional realism had advocated a balance of power as a way to achieve world peace due to the anarchic nature of the international system. In extension, neorealism anchored on this anarchic structure which it sees as the primary determinant of state behavior rather than the individual or domestic factors. It was first articulated by Kenneth Waltz in 1975 and 1979. It emphasizes the anarchic nature of international politics, where war is always a possibility (McKeown, 2014). Neorealists focus on how the distribution of capabilities among leading powers shapes outcomes, considering factors like weapons technology, such as nuclear weapons, as important systemic properties. Neorealism is characterized by several key features. It emphasizes the importance of systemic factors over individual state characteristics and uses microeconomic theories and game theory to analyze international politics (John, 1993). Neorealists also

recognize the significance of economic factors in shaping international relations. Key ideas in neorealism include the pursuit of relative gains, the natural selection of states or governments, and the irrelevance of small states. International law and institutions are seen as epiphenomena of great powers' desires, with limited impact on state behaviour. While neorealism builds on classical realism, it distinctively emphasizes complete and persistent anarchy, relative gains, and natural selection. This theory is based on the following assumptions (John, 1993): **a.** the international system is anarchic **b.** states are primary actors **c.** security is the primary goal **d.** power is a key factor in international relations.

Applying a neorealist framework, Nigeria's regional diplomacy can be understood as a strategic pursuit of power and security within Africa. Neorealism, which emphasizes that states operate in an anarchic international system, suggests that Nigeria's foreign policy is driven by a need to maximize its regional influence and ensure stability along its borders (Waltz, 1979). Nigeria has pursued regional stability by leading peacekeeping missions through the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), helping to stabilize neighbouring states and mitigate security threats close to its borders (Ogunnubi & Okeke-Uzodike, 2016). In addition, Nigeria's support for the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) aligns with neorealist ideas of relative gains, as it strengthens Nigeria's economic influence compared to other African countries (Nwokolo, 2018). This economic integration enhances Nigeria's economic leverage and its standing as a dominant player in West Africa. Nigeria also seeks to consolidate its structural power by taking on leadership roles within the African Union (AU), which strengthens its global diplomatic influence and supports its bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (Abegunrin, 2009). Through these initiatives, Nigeria's foreign policy benefits align with neorealist principles, which prioritize security, power and influence in an anarchic international environment.

Notwithstanding the above influences and aspirations, Nigeria's diplomatic endeavour in Africa does not meet goal expectations. Its powers and influences are challenged enormously, particularly by francophone African and other African nations emerging strongly in development. Internal challenges are seen as factors behind the abnormalities especially the internal governance's inability to check domestic and foreign forces from causing the nation's woes. The above weakness notwithstanding, neorealism remains adequately potent to explain Nigeria's regional diplomacy in Africa and the benefit question.

Neorealism has faced several criticisms ranging from overemphasis on structure at the expense of agency; failure to account for non-state actors and transnational relations; neglect of historical and social contexts; and deterministic view of international politics. The weakness notwithstanding, its ability to explain Nigeria's regional diplomacy in Africa based on the dictates of the international politics/system remains significant.

METHODOLOGY

The study is a qualitative research. It relied on documented data drawn from a diverse and comprehensive range of sources, including academic journals, books, government reports, conference proceedings, and reputable online resources, to provide a robust understanding of the research topic. The data and insights gathered from these sources have been carefully analyzed and synthesized to inform the findings and conclusions presented in this study. By incorporating a wide range of sources, this aims to provide a nuanced and authoritative contribution to the existing body of knowledge on the subject.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nigeria's Regional Diplomacy

Nigeria plays a vital role in regional diplomacy within West Africa and across Africa, leveraging its position as the continent's most populous nation and a major economic power. Actively engaged in organizations like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU), Nigeria's diplomacy focuses on peace, stability and economic integration. It aims to safeguard West African interests on the global stage (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). Through ECOWAS, Nigeria has taken a lead in conflict

resolution across the region, shaping policies on trade, security and governance, all guided by its “Economic Diplomacy” strategy to foster regional cooperation and development. Since gaining independence in 1960, the country has made African unity and progress the cornerstone of its foreign policy. Nigeria was instrumental in founding the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963. It has continued to champion Pan-Africanism, supporting the liberation of African countries from colonial rule and apartheid. Nigeria was, particularly, active in opposing apartheid in South Africa, supporting the anti-apartheid movement through economic sanctions and diplomatic efforts. Its efforts contributed to South Africa’s eventual transition to democracy.

Nigeria has also been a significant contributor to peacekeeping missions across Africa, with deployments in conflict zones such as Congo, Chad, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mali and Somalia. Nigeria’s peacekeeping and financial support efforts have helped stabilize volatile regions, promoting security and aiding in humanitarian support. Additionally, Nigeria has contributed financially to various African countries, including \$5 million annually to the South African Relief Fund and \$1.14 billion to Niger Republic for security support (Dimas, 2023). Embracing a “Big Brother” role on the continent, Nigeria has advocated for African representation in global governance, particularly a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council, while sustaining an African-focused foreign policy. However, Nigeria’s leadership ambitions face challenges, such as the contradiction in its border policies. Despite signing the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) and implementing a visa-on-arrival policy for Africans, it closed its borders to neighbouring West African countries in 2019, citing security concerns (Ogunnubi&Awosusi, 2021). Nevertheless, Nigeria remains dedicated to fostering peace, security and development in Africa, as reflected in former U.S. President Barack Obama’s statement that Nigeria is “critical to the rest of the continent” and essential for Africa’s progress.

Contending issues in Nigeria’s Regional Diplomacy: Contending issues on Nigeria’s regional diplomacy include: **a.** Leadership role vs national interest: No doubt Nigeria has historically positioned itself for leadership in Africa advocating for decolonization and regional integration but scholars argued that this leadership occurs at the expense of national interest and with limited reciprocal benefits (Adogamhe, 2015). **b.** Nigeria has engaged in significant investment in regional peacekeeping and its economic support in Africa has been substantial. Critics question if these efforts have yielded commensurate economic returns (Ogunnubi& Aluko, 2016). **c.** There is a contradiction between Nigeria’s internal governance challenges like corruption, bad leadership, and economic instability and its inspirations for regional influence (Falola, 2022). **d.** While the country tries to create significant influence in Africa, internal deficiencies undermine the effort. Nigeria’s influence in Africa is challenged by other emerging African countries like South Africa and Egypt (Adebajo, (2023). The contention is that Nigeria’s influence in Africa has consequently declined due to South African economic and strategic powers. **e.** Again, critics believe that Nigeria’s alliance with the West and its advocacy for Pan-African solidarity are often contradicting. The country’s reliance on Western support weakens its strength in the Pan-African solidarity struggle (Ojo, 2024). This leads to criticism of incoherence as Nigeria sometimes aligns with external powers over Africa’s self-reliance and this questions its credibility as a major Pan-Africanist leader. In the 2011 Libyan Crisis, Nigeria was a major speaker in the AU resolution that there would be no foreign intervention in the crisis, yet at the United Nations General Assembly, Nigeria, South Africa and Gabon voted for foreign intervention. The action led to the UN’s approval of foreign intervention in Libya.

Nigeria’s Foreign Policy Benefits from Regional Diplomacy

Nigeria’s regional diplomacy has been central to its foreign policy strategy, shaping its relations in Africa and positioning it as a leading actor on the continent. As Africa’s most populous country and largest economy, Nigeria has embraced a proactive role, championing African causes and leading initiatives for regional stability, peace and economic integration. This approach aligns with Nigeria’s longstanding foreign policy vision of “Africa as the centre piece”, established by former Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa shortly after independence (Adebajo, 2008). Through this regional diplomacy, Nigeria has reaped significant political, economic and cultural benefits. One of Nigeria’s primary foreign policy gains from Africa lies in its commitment to peacebuilding and stability. Nigeria has leveraged platforms like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to lead peacekeeping missions in conflict-prone countries such as Sierra

Leone, Liberia and The Gambia. This solidifies its image as a “regional police” (Ogunnubi& Okeke-Uzodike, 2016). These efforts not only enhance Nigeria’s reputation as a peace advocate but also create a more stable West African environment, reducing the risk of conflicts spilling over its borders. This peace dividend supports Nigeria’s economic interests by fostering a secure regional landscape conducive to trade and investment.

Nigeria’s diplomatic efforts have also paved the way for deeper economic integration, providing valuable trade opportunities within Africa. Through initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), Nigeria gains access to expanded markets that boost its industries and support economic diversification efforts, diminishing its reliance on international markets outside Africa (Nwokolo, 2018). Additionally, by promoting regional infrastructure projects such as the Trans-Saharan Highway and the West African Gas Pipeline, Nigeria facilitates intra-African trade. These infrastructure networks not only enhance Nigeria’s economic influence but also support its goal of stimulating growth in non-oil sectors, crucial for long-term economic stability.

On the continental level, Nigeria’s engagement with African Union (AU) programs has amplified its influence in global governance. Nigeria has utilized its leadership roles within AU peace and security bodies to guide Africa’s collective stance on global issues. It enhanced its diplomatic influence at the United Nations, the G20 and other international forums (Abegunrin, 2009). This active involvement reinforces Nigeria’s long-term ambition to represent Africa as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, a move that would solidify its status as a key global voice for African interests.

Finally, Nigeria’s focus on regional diplomacy allows it to address critical transnational challenges, including security, climate change and migration. Nigeria has collaborated with neighbouring countries to combat Boko Haram and other extremist threats, particularly through the Lake Chad Basin Commission, thereby enhancing its security and supporting broader regional stability (Onuoha, 2013). Addressing such issues through regional cooperation underscores Nigeria’s commitment to collective security and strengthens its leadership role within Africa.

Foreign Policy Loss for Nigeria

Nigeria’s foreign policy, rooted in noble intentions, has faced numerous setbacks with significant implications for the country’s sovereignty, economy, security and international standing. The nation’s reliance on foreign aid has diminished its autonomy in decision-making, hindering its ability to prioritize national interests. This dependence has restricted Nigeria’s capacity to act independently on the global stage. Additionally, trade agreements have resulted in persistent trade deficits, where imports consistently outpace exports, leading to revenue loss and stunted economic growth (African Export-Import Bank, 2024). The country’s foreign policy has also struggled to effectively address critical security threats, such as the Boko Haram insurgency and piracy (Obi, 2008), which continue to destabilize the nation and compromise security. Nigeria’s human rights record has drawn international criticism (Human Rights Report, 2021), damaging its reputation and leading to sanctions that limit its access to global markets. The country’s approach to environmental issues, including degradation and climate change, has been insufficient. This results in significant ecological damage and depletion of natural resources (Omoboye, Ibimilua&Oluwatoyin, 2024). Despite efforts to control regional conflicts, social tensions, and insecurity in neighbouring states have continued to constitute major challenges to peace. While cultural exchanges are promoted, the risk of losing cultural identity through external influences remains a concern. Nigeria has not successfully addressed the brain drain phenomenon, where skilled professionals emigrate, resulting in a loss of talents and expertise critical for national development.

Brain gain has not been able to balance the loss. Highlighting the need for economic diversification, (Igberaese, 2013)observed that over-reliance on oil exports has left Nigeria vulnerable to fluctuations in the global oil market. The interplay of human rights issues and sanctions has further complicated Nigeria’s foreign policy, affecting its diplomatic relationships and ability to engage with other nations.

Foreign Policy Challenges in Nigeria's Regional Diplomacy

Nigeria’s foreign policy challenges in regional diplomacy reflect the complexities of leading in a diverse and often politically unstable region. Nigeria, as Africa’s most populous country and one of its largest economies, aims to be a central figure in West African and continental affairs. However, balancing domestic priorities with

regional responsibilities often complicates Nigeria's diplomatic objectives. Successive Nigerian administrations have pursued a Pan-Africanist approach, emphasizing African unity, peacekeeping and economic integration through organizations such as the ECOWAS and the AU (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). Yet, the ambitious goals of Nigeria's foreign policy are frequently challenged by both internal and external factors that impact its influence across the region. One of Nigeria's primary challenges in regional diplomacy is the management of security threats, both within its borders and in neighbouring states. Nigeria's domestic security issues, such as the Boko Haram insurgency and other forms of militant violence often divert resources and attention away from regional commitments (Dickson, 2017). Although Nigeria has led numerous peacekeeping missions in the region, including in Liberia and Sierra Leone, its ongoing internal conflicts have, at times, limited its capacity to engage in regional security initiatives.

Additionally, Nigeria faces the challenge of addressing cross-border threats that spill over from its neighbours, which requires coordinated efforts with surrounding states and regional organizations (George-Okoli, 2024). This interplay between domestic and regional security priorities complicates Nigeria's role as a stable leader in West Africa. Economic challenges also play a significant role in Nigeria's foreign policy and its ability to influence regional diplomacy (Igberaese, 2013). Despite its economic size, Nigeria faces considerable challenges in achieving sustainable growth and economic stability, often relying heavily on oil exports for revenue and loans, yet the situation does not change for the better. Economic fluctuations impact Nigeria's capacity to fund regional initiatives and contribute to organizations like ECOWAS. Furthermore, Nigeria's policies, such as border closures in 2019 aimed at curbing smuggling, sometimes clash with its regional economic commitments, raising concerns among neighbouring countries. Nigeria's involvement in the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) has also been cautious, as policymakers weigh the benefits of increased regional trade against potential threats to local industries. This balancing act between regional economic cooperation and domestic protectionism presents a significant diplomatic challenge.

Nigeria's advocacy for Africa's representation in global governance, such as its long-standing push for a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council, highlights another diplomatic challenge. While Nigeria has garnered regional support for such initiatives, competing national interests across Africa sometimes hinder collective advocacy on the global stage. Nigeria's leadership aspirations can be perceived as self-serving, especially by countries that seek to assert their influence. These dynamics complicate Nigeria's efforts to present a unified African voice in international forums, particularly when regional rivals view Nigeria's aspirations with suspicion.

CONCLUSION

The study examined Nigeria's regional diplomacy in Africa and concludes that Nigeria plays a significant leadership role in regional organizations and initiatives, shaping regional agendas and policies. Nigeria's regional diplomacy yields economic benefits, including increased trade, investment, and access to regional markets. It facilitates security cooperation, including joint military operations and counter-terrorism efforts. It enhanced its diplomatic influence, allowing it to shape regional affairs and contribute to global discussions. Nigeria's regional diplomacy promotes regional integration, including economic and political cooperation. It has implications for its global relevance and influence, particularly in international organizations and forums. Domestic political stability and economic development, impacted Nigeria's regional diplomacy and foreign policy benefits. However, Nigeria is facing internal challenges, the Western alliance is undermining its Pan-African efforts and rivalries with other regional states constitute a major problem. Consequently, the country does not benefit in the same measure as its regional diplomacy contributes in Africa and its influence is declining. This weakens its diplomatic endeavours in Africa as a means for achieving foreign policy objectives capable of contributing to meaningful development of the country. The above highlight the complexities of Nigeria's regional diplomacy in Africa. It is a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon that holds significant implications for the country's foreign policy objectives. Through its leadership role, economic engagement, security cooperation, and diplomatic influence, Nigeria has established itself as a pivotal player in regional affairs, shaping the trajectory of West African politics, economics, and security. Finally, Nigeria's ability to

navigate complexities and leverage its strengths will be crucial in shaping its future as a leading African power, driving regional integration, and promoting peace, stability and prosperity across the continent with national interest and continental well-being as fundamental motives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are made to enhance Nigeria's regional diplomacy and maximize its foreign policy benefits in Africa. The following recommendations can address the challenges, explore opportunities, and provide a roadmap for Nigeria to strengthen its regional engagement and leadership. There are needs for Nigeria to:

- a. Consider the achievement of national interest as a priority for regional diplomatic engagements.
- b. Work for internal development, economic recovery and growth to muster more strength and strategies that will increase its regional influence in Africa.
- c. Diversify economic engagement: Expand trade and investment beyond traditional partners to boost economic growth and reduce dependence on a single market
- d. Strengthen regional institutions: Continue to play a leadership role in shaping and strengthening regional organizations, such as ECOWAS, to address regional stability
- e. Enhance security cooperation: Deepen security partnerships with neighbouring countries to combat transnational threats and promote regional stability
- f. Foster diplomatic partnership: Cultivate strong diplomatic relationships with key regional states to promote Nigerian interests and values
- g. Address diplomatic challenges: Prioritize domestic development and stability to enhance Nigeria's credibility and effectiveness as a regional leader.
- h. Promote regional integration: Support initiatives that foster regional integration, such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), to drive economic growth and development.
- i. Engage in conflict prevention: Proactively engage in conflict prevention and resolution efforts to maintain regional stability and protect Nigerian interests.
- j. Leverage soft power: Utilize cultural, educational, and people-to-people exchanges to promote Nigerian influence and build regional partnerships.
- k. Monitor and adapt: Continuously monitor regional developments and adapt Nigeria's regional diplomacy to respond to emerging challenges and opportunities.

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