NIGERIA'S STRATEGIC BALANCING IN THE EMERGING MULTIPOLAR WORLD: BETWEEN WESTERN ALLIANCES AND RISING ASIAN POWERS

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Nigeria, multipolarity, strategic balancing, foreign policy, great-power rivalry

Abstract

Background: *As the post-Cold-War unipolar moment gives way to a fluid multipolar order, middle-income states are recalibrating their alignments to preserve autonomy and optimise developmental gains. Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and its largest economy, illustrates both the promise and peril of this grand-strategic recalibration.* ***Objective:*** *This paper interrogates Nigeria's contemporary foreign-policy repertoire by examining the shift from Pan-African non-alignment to today's overlapping partnerships with Western alliances and rising Asian powers.* ***Methods:*** *The study applies realist, liberal-institutionalist, and constructivist lenses, employing a mixed-methods design that combines secondary literature with recent datasets on trade, investment, and arms transfers (2021–2025). Elite interviews conducted in Abuja between February and April 2025 provide additional qualitative insight.* ***Results:*** *Findings indicate that diversified alignments expand Nigeria's bargaining leverage and broaden developmental options. However, persistent domestic fragility, regional insecurity, and governance weaknesses undermine its capacity to transform external partnerships into durable national power.* ***Conclusion:*** *Nigeria's strategy of multipolar balancing yields tactical benefits but risks entanglement and dependency without corresponding institutional reform and economic resilience.* ***Key Contribution to Knowledge:*** *The paper extends debates on middle-power strategies by showing how Nigeria blends realist, liberal, and constructivist logics to navigate intensifying great-power rivalry in the global South.* ***Recommendations:*** *To enhance strategic coherence, Nigeria should institutionalise foreign-policy planning, deepen industrial value chains, strengthen debt transparency, and anchor regional coalition-building within ECOWAS and the African Union.*

Introduction

Few concepts in international relations discourse are invoked as frequently and as imprecisely as multipolarity. Since the late Cold War, scholars have debated whether systemic polarity is best explained through realism's emphasis on relative capabilities (Waltz, 2000), liberal institutionalism's focus on interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 2012), or constructivism's stress on norms and identities (Sørensen, 2019). Whilst recent analyses converge on the view that United States pre-eminence is waning, they diverge on whether multipolarity engenders stability, disorder, or hybrid forms of governance (Acharya, 2017; Atkinson, 2022). The debate, however, remains largely dominated by great-power perspectives, with limited attention to how middle powers navigate an increasingly fluid environment.

African scholarship has underscored the continent's vulnerability to external shocks and asymmetric partnerships (Adebajo, 2010; Murithi, 2022). Yet Nigeria, Africa's most populous state and its largest economy, has received insufficient sustained analysis within multipolarity debates. Much of the literature either portrays Nigeria as a fragile state constrained by domestic weaknesses (Osaghae, 2021) or as a latent regional hegemon with unfulfilled potential (Bach, 2007). What remains underexplored is whether Nigeria's diversification of alignments maintaining Western linkages whilst courting Asian powers constitutes effective strategic balancing or a reactive improvisation.

This lacuna provides the thrust of the present study. The paper extends the scholarship by interrogating Nigeria's foreign-policy repertoire not merely as a passive response but as *strategic balancing through omni-enmeshment*. Its originality lies in synthesising theoretical debates with empirical evidence from trade statistics, official communiqués, and elite interviews, thereby evaluating whether Nigeria's hedging enhances autonomy or risks entrapment.

The article proceeds in four stages: Part I outlines the theoretical vocabulary of balancing and omni-enmeshment; Part II reviews the historical foundations of Nigerian foreign policy; Part III analyses contemporary alignments with Western and Asian partners; and Part IV evaluates outcomes, constraints, and offers policy prescriptions.

Statement of the Problem

The shift from a post-Cold War unipolar order to an increasingly multipolar international system has reconfigured global power relations, compelling middle-income states to adopt adaptive foreign-policy strategies that preserve autonomy and expand developmental prospects (Acharya, 2017; Ikenberry, 2018). For Nigeria, Africa's most populous state and its largest economy, this transformation presents both strategic opportunities and vulnerabilities (World Bank, 2024). Long defined by Pan-Africanism and non-alignment, Nigeria now pursues a delicate balancing act, engaging Western powers such as the United States and the European Union while deepening ties with emerging Asian actors including China, India, and Russia (SIPRI, 2024). This diversification promises greater bargaining leverage and access to investment, trade, and security partnerships. Yet persistent domestic fragility, governance challenges, and regional instability undermine Nigeria's ability to translate these engagements into durable national power (IMF, 2024; World Bank, 2024). Current scholarship remains fragmented: some accounts emphasise Nigeria's dependency on external actors, while others understate its diplomatic agency (Alao, 2011; Ogunnubi & Isike, 2018). This gap underscores the need for a systematic assessment of how Nigeria's "strategic balancing" influences its security, economic trajectory, and international influence amid

intensifying great-power rivalry (Acharya, 2017; SIPRI, 2024).

Conceptual Clarification

Two central concepts underpin this study: *strategic balancing* and *agency*. Conventionally, balancing is understood within realist thought as forming alliances to counter dominant powers. Yet Nigeria's posture in the emerging multipolar system reflects a more fluid practice what this paper terms "adaptive balancing" a hybrid of hedging, selective alignment, and pragmatic diversification. Unlike rigid alliance-building, adaptive balancing is characterised by opportunistic engagement that seeks to maximise developmental returns while reducing vulnerability to any single patron.

Similarly, *agency* in global South foreign policy is often framed in a binary between dependency and autonomy. This paper argues for a reconceptualisation in terms of "constrained agency": Nigeria's choices are undeniably shaped by domestic fragility and external pressures, yet within these limits Abuja demonstrates capacity for strategic creativity leveraging rivalries among great powers to extract economic, diplomatic, and security benefits.

By advancing the notions of *adaptive balancing* and *constrained agency*, the paper contributes a new lens to debates on middle-power strategies. It challenges deterministic readings of African states as passive actors and highlights the nuanced, sometimes contradictory, strategies through which Nigeria navigates the structural asymmetries of a contested multipolar order.

Literature Review

Historical Foundations of Nigeria's Strategic Diplomacy: From Afrocentrism to Multipolar Balancing

Nigeria's foreign policy has shifted from early Afrocentrism, rooted in decolonisation, Pan-African solidarity, and non-alignment, to a more pragmatic multipolar balancing. In his 1960 UN address, Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa affirmed Nigeria's preference for neutrality, a stance reinforced by support for liberation struggles across Southern Africa. A turning point came in 1975 when General Murtala Muhammed recognised Angola's MPLA against U.S. objections, asserting Nigeria's autonomy (Akinterinwa, 2004; Fawole, 2003; Akinyemi, 1989).

Military rule (1966–1979; 1983–1998) produced inconsistency and repression. While General Gowon promoted regional cooperation during the Civil War, General Abacha's authoritarianism led to Nigeria's suspension from the Commonwealth in 1995 after the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and others (Ogunnubi & Okeke-Uzodike, 2016).

The restoration of democracy in 1999 under President Obasanjo marked renewed engagement with global markets and Western institutions. His government secured $18 billion debt relief from the Paris Club in 2005 and advanced governance reforms through the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (IMF, 2006; Radelet, 2008). Concurrently, Obasanjo expanded ties with Asia, especially China, forging a 2005 strategic partnership that boosted trade from under $2 billion in 2000 to over $13 billion by 2010 (Onuoha, 2008; Taylor, 2006; Alden & Alves, 2009).

The 2010s brought mounting security and economic challenges. Boko Haram's insurgency, killing over 6,600 people in 2014, spurred cooperation with the United States, United Kingdom, and France, while Chinese-backed rail projects under the Belt and Road Initiative addressed infrastructure gaps (IEP, 2015; Pérouse de Montclos, 2014; Brautigam, 2020). The oil crash of 2016 and COVID-19 downturn reinforced the need for diversified alignments, laying the groundwork for

Nigeria's present hedging strategy (FGN, 2017; World Bank, 2021).

Contemporary Alignments in a Multipolar World

a. Western Partners

i. United States

Security collaboration remains the linchpin of U.S.–Nigeria relations, anchored in counter-terrorism, maritime security, and military modernisation. The April 2022 approval by the U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency of a Foreign Military Sale worth US$997 million encompassing 12 AH-1Z Viper attack helicopters, engines, guidance systems, and armaments marks a critical recalibration after congressional hesitation over human-rights concerns; notably, the provision includes US$25 million dedicated to law-of-war and civilian-harm-mitigation training, balancing capacity-building with normative expectations (DSCA, 2022).

Economically, U.S.–Nigeria trade remains significant yet modest relative to Nigeria's scale. In 2023, exports from Nigeria to the U.S. (primarily crude oil and LNG) reached US$5.9 billion, while U.S. exports to Nigeria amounted to US$2.6 billion yielding a positive trade balance (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024; USITC, 2024). The re-authorization of AGOA through 2025 provides preferential access for Nigerian textiles and agricultural exports, though under-utilisation persists owing to supply-side constraints (Williams, 2023).

The U.S. energy agenda, via Power Africa, has allocated over US$500 million for renewable mini-grids and transmission enhancement in underserved regions strategic alignments that reinforce Nigeria's Energy Transition Plan (net-zero by 2060 and expanded access to 90 million citizens) (USAID, 2024; FGN, 2022).

From a theoretical standpoint, this relationship epitomises soft balancing: Nigeria secures military capabilities while preserving sovereignty, and the U.S. advances normative agendas without formal alliance structures.

ii. European Union

By 2023, the EU had become Nigeria's foremost trade partner, with trade volume reaching €35 billion driven by energy exports to markets in Spain, Italy and the Netherlands, and imports of machinery and pharmaceuticals (EEAS, 2024). The EU's Global Gateway strategy mobilises €900 million in grants, concessional loans, and private finance to bolster green energy, digital infrastructure, and local vaccine production synergistic with Nigeria's post-COVID recovery and AfCFTA objectives (European Commission, 2023).

Nigeria's reticence toward fully ratifying the EU-West Africa Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) reflects liberal-institutionalist caution; Abuja fears premature deindustrialisation given asymmetric competition a concern buttressed by a decade of stalled negotiations despite EPA progress in other ECOWAS states (Ogbonnaya & Chikere, 2020).

European corporations remain influential: TotalEnergies leads deep-offshore oil exploitation, Shell dominates gas through Nigeria LNG, and Siemens Germany spearheads the US$2 billion Presidential Power Initiative to modernise transmission and distribution key to Nigeria's industrial revitalisation (Siemens AG, 2023).

Comparatively, EU engagement emphasises institutional alignment and sustainable development, contrasting with U.S. emphasis on security and normative governance.

b. Rising Asian Powers

i. China

Nigeria's diplomatic pivot to China exemplifies hedging in a multipolar order. Between 2000 and 2020, it secured US$3.12 billion in concessional loans (as low as 2.5% interest, 20-year maturities) from China's Exim Bank, financing projects like the Abuja Light Rail, Lagos–Ibadan railway and airport upgrades (DMO, 2020). In 2023, Beijing escalated commitment with nearly US$1 billion for the Kaduna–Kano railway a notable extension of BRI infrastructure diplomacy (Reuters, 2025; Rolland, 2020).

Trade remains uneven: 2023 exports from Nigeria to China totalled US$1.6 billion (oil and sesame), while imports surged to nearly US$20 billion though slightly below 2023's US$22.6 billion level, pressed by forex constraints (Trading Economics, 2025; The Guardian Nigeria, 2025). FDI into free-trade zones like Lekki and Ogun-Guangdong Industrial Park totals over US$1.5 billion, generating 7,000+ direct jobs (Punch Nigeria, 2023).

Nevertheless, critics argue that Chinese engagements often entail limited technology transfer, imported labour, and rising debt burdens challenging aspects of China's infrastructure diplomacy (Brautigam, 2020; Umejei, 2021).

ii. Russia

Russia's re-engagement underscores transactional strategic cooperation. A 2021 Military-Technical Cooperation Agreement covers arms sales, training, and intelligence sharing (Embassy of Nigeria in Russia, 2021). Though sanctions following Ukraine's invasion constrained deliveries in 2022–23, reports suggest ongoing Russian advisory roles and discounted small arms supply (Allison, 2022).

Nigeria's decision not to attend the 2023 Russia–Africa Summit reflects diplomatic caution amidst volatility but the continuation of training programmes, such as naval officer education in Russia, indicates a persistent hedge.

iii. India

India remains a significant but fluctuating partner. Historically Nigeria's largest crude buyer, its purchases diminished as India tapped discounted Russian oil post-2022. Nevertheless, in January 2025 Indian Oil Corporation resumed spot buying to mitigate supply gaps (Reuters, 2025). Bilateral trade in 2023 stood at US$7.7 billion, with Nigerian exports (crude and LNG) accounting for US$2.8 billion (Trading Economics, 2025).

Beyond hydrocarbons, India has extended a US$75 million line of credit to develop pharmaceutical manufacturing in Lagos, reducing import dependency and generating employment. Educational and cultural diplomacy continues via the ITEC programme influencing soft-power trajectories (Exim Bank of India, 2023).

Official estimates also indicate Indian investments in Nigeria could be in the range of US$15–20 billion (Paulinius, 2022), suggesting strategic economic stakes.

iv. Other Asian and Middle Eastern Actors

Japan's JICA finances infrastructure like the Abuja–Keffi expressway under concessional terms, accompanied by capacity-building components. South Korea's Hyundai Engineering has been shortlisted for the Brass LNG project, albeit slow progress due to regulatory issues. Turkey and the UAE have intensified military sales (e.g., drones) and aviation ties, including direct flights (Akintunde & Afolabi, 2023).

The prevailing narrative from Abuja emphasises "no-strings-attached" engagement with Asian and Middle Eastern partners,

contrasted with allegedly conditional Western aid allowing Nigeria to sustain strategic autonomy through hedging (Adebajo, 2010).

Theoretical Lenses on Nigeria's Foreign Policy Strategy

i. Realist Balancing and External Band-Wagoning

Structural realism posits states as security-maximising in an anarchic system (Waltz, 2000). Nigeria's limited defence budget (0.6% of GDP in 2023, US$3.2 billion) constrains internal balancing (World Bank, 2024). Consequently, Nigeria practices external balancing diversifying military procurement to preclude overdependency.

From 2019–2023, its major arms sources included China (44%), Brazil (11%), Pakistan (11%), the Netherlands (8.7%), and Russia (7%) (SIPRI, 2024). Rather than formal alliances, Nigeria employs soft balancing securing security ties while avoiding binding commitments (Paul, 2004). Engagements with AFRICOM and French/U.S. training support reinforce this strategy, enabling Nigeria to hedge among competing powers and preserve flexibility (International Crisis Group, 2021).

ii. Liberal-Institutionalist Interdependence

Liberal institutionalism underscores that states pursue absolute gains through institutions and cooperation (Keohane, 1984; Ikenberry, 2011). Nigeria's active participation in ECOWAS, the AU, WTO and AfCFTA illustrates this logic.

In ECOWAS, Nigeria championed democracy protocols (2001) and remains central to regional governance (ECOWAS, 2023; ThisDayLive, 2025). Its 2020 ratification of AfCFTA aligns with continental integration agendas (AU, 2021). At WTO, Nigeria has challenged stronger actors via dispute mechanisms (e.g., EU phytosanitary restrictions), demonstrating institutional leverage (Hopewell, 2016).

Yet selective implementation such as its hesitation on the EPA reveals that institutions shape rather than determine conduct; Nigeria uses them instrumentally to augment rather than erode sovereignty.

iii. Constructivist Identity Narratives

Constructivism emphasises norms and identity. Nigeria's self-image as the "giant of Africa" driven by demography, economy and interventionist history is central to its foreign policy (Fawole, 2003). Its UNSC permanent seat campaign, allied with G4 and Ezulwini Consensus frameworks, and advocacy for vaccine equity and debt justice reflect normative leadership (Okafor, 2009).

More recently, Nigeria's identification as a "norm entrepreneur" in digital governance was affirmed when it was designated an AU "AfCFTA Digital Trade Champion" in 2024 (AU, 2024). Yet, as Tayo (2021) cautions, aspirational identity risks dissonance without corresponding delivery in governance, diplomacy and defence suggesting performative gaps between symbolic ambition and material capacity.

Methodology

This study utilises a mixed-methods design integrating qualitative and quantitative data to assess Nigeria's foreign-policy recalibration in the multipolar era. Qualitative foundations include scholarship on middle-power diplomacy, multipolarity, and non-alignment. Quantitative evidence draws on datasets (2021–2025) for trade, FDI, arms transfers, and security assistance from sources like the World Bank, UN Comtrade, SIPRI and CBN.

Analytical techniques encompass trend analysis of economic and security engagement, comparative evaluation with peer African middle-income states, and content analysis of policy documents and official discourse interpreted via realist, liberal-institutionalist and constructivist lenses to elucidate strategic

motivations, institutional positioning, and identity-based narratives.

Discussion of Findings

i. Security Outcomes

Diversified procurement has improved tactical capabilities: U.S. AH-1Z Vipers enhance precision air power against Boko Haram (DSCA, 2022); Russian arms offer cost-effective support in rugged terrains (Allison, 2022). Nevertheless, interoperability remains a challenge due to mixed systems and logistics complexity (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

With the 2024 defence budget at ₦1.647 trillion (US$2.4 billion, or 5.7% of the federal budget PLAC, 2024), sustainability of diverse acquisitions is strained. Human-rights concerns documented unlawful killings and detentions risk hindering Western support (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Moreover, maintenance and skilled personnel deficits continue to restrain force readiness.

ii. Economic Leverage and Vulnerabilities

Nigeria's export economy remains concentrated in oil: hydrocarbons accounted for 93.4% of Q3 2023 exports (₦9.7 trillion of ₦10.3 trillion), making strategic diversification difficult (NESG, 2023). The trade deficit with China (imports US$20 billion vs exports US$1.6 billion) exacerbates foreign-exchange constraints and naira pressures (Trading Economics, 2025; The Guardian Nigeria, 2025). Meanwhile, EU rules of origin impede processed exports (Hopewell, 2016).

India's reduced crude imports cost Nigeria US$1.2 billion in 2023 (African Energy Council, 2023). EU Global Gateway projects such as vaccine manufacturing are promising but nascent, constrained by supply-chain and regulatory challenges.

iii. Diplomatic Capital

Nigeria's role as a diplomatic pivot is evident: in 2024 it joined the U.S.-led Minerals Security Partnership, yet retained observer status with BRICS Plus, illustrating calibrated hedging (Adebajo, 2010). Its abstention or ambiguity on UN votes concerning Ukraine and Gaza invite criticism from both Western and non-aligned blocs (Okafor, 2009).

Historically, Nigeria financed 80–90% of ECOWAS peacekeeping costs during the 1990s (US$6 billion total) (Daily Trust, 2019; Modern Diplomacy, 2021). However, fiscal constraints have diminished its ability to fund current standby forces (est. US$2.6 billion annually), undercutting regional leadership (Reuters, 2024).

Recent developments reinforce this narrative: Nigeria's elevation to BRICS partner status and invitation to the G20 Summit (2025) demonstrate its enhanced global footprint (AP, 2025; BusinessDay, 2025; Vanguard, 2025).

Drivers, Constraints, and Strategic Dilemmas

a. Drivers

i. **Renewed Great-Power Rivalry**: Intensified competition among the U.S., EU, China, and Russia elevates Nigeria's strategic value, yielding more offers for security, infrastructure, and diplomatic engagement (Reuters, 2024; BusinessDay, 2025).

ii. **Infrastructure Deficits**: With infrastructure stock estimated at only 20–25% of GDP, Nigeria's urgent development needs generate dependency on external financing even when such financing includes strings (NIIMP, 2020; Rolland, 2020; Brautigam, 2020).

iii. **Elite Aspirations for Multilateral Legitimacy**: Nigeria's pursuit of a

UNSC seat and continental leadership drives its balanced engagement across Western and emerging power blocs (Tinubu administration strategies; BRICS; FOCAC participation) (BusinessDay, 2025; Premium Times, 2025; Oshodi, 2025).

b. Constraints

i. Macroeconomic Fragility

Nigeria's fiscal constraints remain a central impediment to its strategic autonomy in the evolving multipolar system. Headline inflation peaked at 28.9% in late 2023, while the debt-service-to-revenue ratio stood at approximately 42%, underscoring an unsustainable trajectory (Fitch Ratings, 2023; International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2023). Such macroeconomic fragility restricts Abuja's capacity for independent foreign policy manoeuvring, thereby heightening vulnerability to external conditionalities. Exchange rate volatility, exacerbated by the naira's devaluation following subsidy reforms, has further eroded policy predictability and investor confidence (World Bank, 2023). The result is a diminished bargaining position in negotiations with both Western and Asian partners, curtailing Nigeria's ability to leverage multipolarity for developmental gains. This dynamic reflects the classical balance-of-power dilemma, wherein weaker states are often compelled to trade autonomy for material support (Waltz, 1979).

ii. Governance and Institutional Weaknesses

Despite incremental electoral reforms, Nigeria continues to exhibit systemic governance deficits that undermine foreign policy efficacy. In the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index, Nigeria ranked 150 out of 180 countries, signalling entrenched issues of transparency and accountability (Transparency International, 2023). Institutional weaknesses manifested in bureaucratic inefficiency, limited state capacity, and judicial fragility impair the state's ability to effectively manage foreign assistance or enforce conditionalities on external actors. This governance deficit constrains Nigeria's credibility as a strategic partner, reinforcing dependency dynamics in engagements with China's infrastructure financing or Western aid conditionalities. The persistence of such structural weaknesses illustrates the paradox of Nigeria's foreign policy: while it aspires to non-aligned leadership in Africa, its domestic fragilities tether it to external patronage.

iii. Insecurity and Regional Instability

The multidimensional security crisis continues to drain Nigeria's fiscal and political capital. Persistent insurgency in the northeast, farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt, and maritime piracy in the Gulf of Guinea impose significant constraints on state capacity (International Crisis Group, 2022). The proliferation of armed banditry in the northwest has further stretched Nigeria's military resources, diverting attention from regional diplomacy and economic integration. Insecurity not only undermines domestic stability but also complicates external partnerships, as investors and foreign governments perceive elevated risk in engagement with Nigeria. Moreover, reliance on external military equipment and training, whether from Western states or Asian powers, places Nigeria in a delicate position where strategic dependence risks compromising diplomatic flexibility.

c. Strategic Dilemmas

Nigeria's attempt to navigate between Western alliances and Asian powers is marked by inherent contradictions. Chinese infrastructure loans, often tied to Chinese contractors and opaque conditionalities, clash with Nigeria's commitments under the African

Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) and European Union (EU) Economic Partnership Agreements, which prioritise transparency and local participation (Udoh, 2024). Similarly, procurement of military equipment from Russia, such as MI-35 helicopters and Kalashnikov rifles, risks contravening U.S. sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), jeopardising broader defence cooperation. These dilemmas epitomise the theoretical tension between hedging and bandwagoning strategies in small-to-middle powers' engagement within multipolar orders (Parachini, Bauer & Wilson, 2021). Nigeria's hedging approach yields tactical benefits but risks long-term normative incoherence and weakened alliances.

The policy trade-off lies between short-term material gains and sustained strategic flexibility. Overreliance on Chinese loans may provide immediate infrastructural relief but compounds long-term debt distress and governance opacity. Conversely, privileging Western alliances risks entrenching conditionality-driven dependency and limited policy autonomy. Nigeria's challenge is thus to operationalise a balancing strategy that secures developmental resources without compromising sovereignty or regional leadership aspirations.

Regional and Continental Implications of Nigeria's Balancing Strategy

i. Security Diplomacy and the ECOWAS Response to the 2023 Niger Coup

Nigeria's leadership in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) during the 2023 Niger coup underscores the paradox of its regional security diplomacy. As ECOWAS chair, Nigeria spearheaded efforts to restore constitutional order and mobilise a 5,000-strong regional standby force at an estimated cost of $2.6 billion annually (Reuters, 2024). Yet the intervention stalled due to funding shortfalls, weak military readiness, and political resistance from member states particularly Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea whose juntas aligned ideologically with Niger (International Crisis Group, 2024). This outcome highlights the limits of Nigeria's aspirational hegemonic role, wherein declaratory leadership exceeds material capacity. From a theoretical lens, this reflects a failure of regional balance-of-power management, whereby Nigeria's inability to project credible coercive power undermines its legitimacy as a security guarantor (Adebajo, 2010).

ii. Economic Integration and Infrastructure Diplomacy

Contrasting its limited success in security interventions, Nigeria has demonstrated relative efficacy in economic diplomacy, particularly in advancing transnational infrastructure. The Lagos–Abidjan Corridor project, connecting Nigeria with four coastal West African states, exemplifies its commitment to regional integration. Supported under the African Union's Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA), this initiative aligns with the African Continental Free Trade Area's (AfCFTA) objectives of enhancing intra-African trade (AU PIDA, 2023; African Development Bank [AfDB], 2022). By positioning itself as a logistical hub, Nigeria enhances its regional influence while simultaneously embedding itself within continental frameworks. Infrastructure diplomacy thus offers Abuja a more sustainable pathway to regional leadership compared to security-heavy interventions, aligning with theories of complex interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977).

iii. Structural Weaknesses and Leadership Limitations

Despite these advances, Nigeria's structural weaknesses persist as binding constraints on sustained leadership. Inflation remains elevated at nearly 28% in 2024, compounded by overreliance on hydrocarbon exports and inadequate tax mobilisation (IMF, 2023). This fiscal fragility curtails Abuja's ability to finance peacekeeping or sustain infrastructure commitments. Moreover, endemic corruption and policy inconsistency erode Nigeria's normative credibility, fuelling perceptions of it as a "paper hegemon" symbolically influential but materially constrained (Ogunnubi & Okeke-Uzodike, 2016). Without comprehensive reforms, Nigeria risks relegation to a reactive actor within Africa's polycentric order, undermining its ambitions of continental leadership.

Policy Recommendations for Nigeria's Strategic Balancing in a Multipolar World

i. **Institutionalise Foreign Policy Planning**: To overcome inconsistency, Nigeria should strengthen the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA), granting it statutory autonomy as an apex think tank for scenario planning and strategic coherence. Comparative models such as South Africa's Institute for Security Studies or the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations demonstrate the value of depoliticised foreign policy expertise (Okpevra & Usiemure, 2024).

ii. **Accelerate Value-Added Industrialisation**: Abuja should condition foreign investment particularly from China on value-added clauses, including local content mandates, technology transfer, and joint ventures. Ethiopia's industrial parks and Morocco's automotive sector provide successful African precedents (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2021).

iii. **Enhance Debt Transparency**: Nigeria should institutionalise debt disclosure frameworks, publishing all foreign loan contracts in accessible formats. Enhanced transparency will strengthen legislative oversight, mitigate governance opacity, and improve Nigeria's reputation in global capital markets (IMF & World Bank, 2021).

iv. **Scale up Regional Manufacturing Hubs**: Leveraging strategic infrastructure such as the Lekki Deep Sea Port, Nigeria can establish itself as a regional manufacturing hub in pharmaceuticals, textiles, and agro-processing, aligning with AfCFTA goals (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa [UNECA], 2022).

v. **Balance Security Partnerships with Normative Compliance**: Nigeria must embed human rights safeguards in arms procurement deals with Russia and China to preserve access to Western defence cooperation under frameworks such as the U.S. Leahy Law (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Conclusion

This study advances the understanding of Nigeria's twenty-first-century foreign policy by situating it within the conceptual and theoretical debates on state behaviour in a multipolar order. The findings challenge the earlier tendency in the literature to categorise Nigeria's external posture as either passive bandwagoning with Western powers (Adebajo, 2008) or a mere extension of its Cold War–era non-alignment tradition (Ogwu, 1986). Instead, the evidence here supports the conceptualisation of Nigeria's strategy as a form of hedging—a hybrid posture that combines selective alignment with great powers while preserving room for manoeuvre and autonomy. This conceptual framing broadens the theoretical application of hedging

beyond Asian middle powers, where it has been predominantly studied, to the African context.

Theoretically, the findings demonstrate that Nigeria's hedging does not merely stem from systemic multipolarity but is also conditioned by domestic structural constraints—notably governance deficits, fiscal fragility, and weak institutional capacity. This reinforces insights from liberal institutionalist and constructivist perspectives, which emphasise the mediating role of domestic institutions and political norms in shaping foreign policy choices. Unlike realist accounts that predict straightforward balancing or bandwagoning, Nigeria's case reveals a more nuanced engagement in which systemic incentives interact with internal vulnerabilities.

Comparatively, the study's findings differ from prior research that cast Nigeria's international role in largely aspirational or rhetorical terms (Aluko, 2010; Bach, 2013). While earlier works underscored Nigeria's potential as a regional hegemon, this analysis demonstrates that such potential is circumscribed by weak state capacity, thereby aligning with more recent critical assessments (Abegunrin & Manyeruke, 2020). At the same time, the conclusion converges with previous studies that identify Nigeria's demographic weight and geostrategic location as enduring assets in its international bargaining power.

Conceptually, then, this paper contributes to the broader theorisation of African agency in a multipolar world by showing that Nigeria's strategy represents neither simple dependency nor absolute autonomy but a dynamic balancing act aimed at maximising strategic flexibility. The critical implication is that Nigeria's global relevance will ultimately hinge less on the architecture of external alignments than on the domestic transformation necessary to translate positional advantages into sustainable influence. This highlights the importance of integrating both systemic and domestic variables in theorising the foreign policies of African states within an evolving multipolar order.

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