

Regular Research Paper

Nigeria's foreign policy under the Buhari administration (2015–2023): Initiatives, challenges and policy outcomes

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This study examines Nigerian foreign policy under the Buhari administration (2015–2023), assessing policy initiatives, implementation strategies, and outcomes. Grounded in Role Theory, the research posits that a state's international role depends on its internal capacity. Utilizing secondary data from policy documents and scholarly records, the study finds a significant tension between Nigeria's traditional regional leadership aspirations and its declining domestic capacity. Findings reveal that while security diplomacy revitalized the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), persistent insurgency and banditry highlighted the limits of a purely militarized approach. Furthermore, economic diplomacy was frequently undermined by protectionist measures, such as the 2019–2020 land border closure and delayed African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) engagement, which weakened Nigeria's regional influence. Despite continued Afrocentric rhetoric, Nigeria's actual role performance within Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union declined. The study concludes that domestic insecurity, economic fragility, and institutional weaknesses severely constrained the effectiveness of Nigeria's foreign policy, resulting in a widening gap between the country's self-conceived leadership role and its actual international impact.

Key words: Nigerian foreign policy, counter-terrorism diplomacy and economic diplomacy, policy implementation.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's foreign policy, since gaining independence in 1960, has been influenced by its ambitions, practical considerations, and occasional modifications in response to domestic needs and changing global circumstances. As the most populous country in Africa and one of its largest economies, Nigeria has persistently aimed to take on a leadership position in both regional and continental

matters, particularly in West Africa and within the African Union (AU) (Gambari, 2008; Akinyemi, 2013). In the early years following its independence, Nigeria positioned itself as a significant diplomatic player in Africa, advocating for anti-colonial efforts and backing liberation movements throughout the continent (Fawole, 2003). Nigeria's foreign policy has been shaped by fundamental principles,

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including the respect for national sovereignty, non-interference in domestic issues, the promotion of African unity, a stance against apartheid and colonial rule, and a commitment to the principles outlined in the United Nations Charter (Adeniji, 2005). These principles, commonly summarized as Nigeria's Afrocentric approach to foreign policy, have established Africa as the foundation of the country's international relations (Gambari, 2008). This approach was reflected in Nigeria's proactive participation in peacekeeping missions, mediation efforts, and economic integration projects within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (Fawole, 2003). Despite these core principles, Nigeria's foreign policy has experienced significant variations throughout different administrations. Shifts in leadership styles, changes between military and civilian governments, and evolving global circumstances have all played a role in the inconsistencies regarding policy direction and execution (Akinyemi, 2013). Domestic issues such as economic challenges, security threats, corruption, and weak institutions have also influenced Nigeria's international interactions and diplomatic priorities (Ogwu and Olukoshi, 2002). The era of President Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023) marked a notable period in the evolution of Nigeria's foreign policy. His administration emphasized counter-terrorism diplomacy, economic diplomacy, and international collaboration in the fight against corruption as key components of its foreign engagement (Adesina, 2017). Nonetheless, the success of these efforts remains a topic of debate (Gambari, 2008). Against this backdrop, this study examines Nigeria's foreign policy initiatives and outcomes under the Buhari administration, identifies the major challenges confronting policy implementation, and offers recommendations for enhancing strategic coherence and effectiveness in Nigeria's external relations.

LITERATURE REVIEW: CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Foreign policy encompasses the strategies, goals, and actions employed by a sovereign state to navigate its relationships with other nations and global actors. It includes diplomatic interactions, economic partnerships, security collaborations, treaty commitments, and involvement in international organizations (Holsti, 2004). As stated by Rosenau (1997), foreign policy constitutes the authoritative measures taken by governments to sustain, modify, or forge relationships beyond their national borders. In the context of Nigeria, foreign policy pertains to the development and execution of diplomatic stances, international obligations, bilateral and multilateral interactions, and strategic initiatives designed to promote national interests overseas (Adeniji, 2005). Since gaining independence, Nigeria's foreign policy has

been influenced by its Afrocentric approach, which emphasizes African unity, regional integration, and collective security (Gambari, 2008). This strategy has guided Nigeria's proactive involvement in regional peacekeeping operations, mediation initiatives, and economic collaboration within ECOWAS and the African Union (Fawole, 2003). Researchers contend that foreign policy is shaped by various factors and not developed in isolation, including domestic political frameworks, leadership inclinations, economic situations, and outside influences (Ogwu and Olukoshi, 2002). This viewpoint holds particular significance for Nigeria, as internal issues such as security challenges, economic fluctuations, and governance problems have greatly influenced its foreign relations (Akinyemi, 2013).

Concept of national interest

National interest signifies the essential aims and objectives that a nation strives to safeguard and advance in its dealings within the global arena. Morgenthau (1978) defines national interest mainly in terms of power and security, asserting that the ultimate goal of foreign policy is the survival of the state. Nevertheless, modern scholars have broadened the definition to encompass economic development, political stability, and international standing (Nye, 2004). In practical application, national interest includes safeguarding territorial integrity, fostering economic growth, ensuring regional stability, and improving international standing (Frankel, 1970). In the context of Nigeria, national interest has been articulated to incorporate national unity, economic prosperity, regional leadership, and the safeguarding of Nigerian citizens residing abroad (Adeniji, 2005). Nigeria's pursuit of national interest has been evident in its leadership role in West African peacekeeping operations, its advocacy for African liberation movements, and its engagement in international economic diplomacy (Gambari, 2008). However, the interpretation of national interest has varied across different administrations, reflecting changing domestic priorities and global realities (Akinyemi, 2013).

Empirical review

The body of academic work on Nigeria's foreign policy has grown considerably since the country gained independence, reflecting a continued scholarly focus on its evolving diplomatic activities. Folarin (2024) and Tar and Wapmuk (2021) offer thorough evaluations of Nigeria's foreign policy journey over the past sixty years, emphasizing changes in priorities influenced by both domestic conditions and international dynamics. In a similar vein, Agbu (2020) maps out the progression of Nigeria's foreign policy from the Balewa administration to

the Buhari administration, illustrating how different leadership styles and types of regimes have impacted policy direction and outcomes. Numerous researchers have explored Nigeria's Afrocentric approach to foreign policy. Amao and Okeke-Uzodike (2015) investigate Nigeria's involvement in conflict resolution across Africa, contending that this Afrocentric stance bolstered the nation's leadership status and contributed to regional stability. However, Nigeria's heavy financial and military commitments across Africa have yielded limited tangible benefits for its domestic development (Tar and Wapmuk, 2021). This debate underscores long-standing tensions between Nigeria's continental ambitions and domestic socio-economic priorities. Ogunnubi and Amao (2016) examine Nigeria's economic diplomacy initiatives and identify persistent gaps between policy articulation and effective implementation. Similarly, Hakeem (2015) argues that globalization demands a reorientation of Nigeria's foreign policy towards investment promotion, trade diversification, and technology transfer. These studies reveal the growing importance of economic considerations in Nigeria's external relations. Research focused on the Buhari administration offers important insights into the current dynamics of foreign policy. Akinrinde (2023) presents a critical analysis of Nigeria's foreign policy from 2015 to 2019, highlighting a significant focus on security diplomacy and anti-corruption efforts. Ndagi (2023) explores the connection between foreign policy and national interests during Buhari's tenure, contending that domestic security issues primarily shaped diplomatic priorities. Mohammed et al. (2025) further evaluate the link between foreign policy and national development throughout Buhari's years, concluding that although diplomatic activities increased, developmental results were still lacking.

President Muhammadu Buhari took office in May 2015 with three stated foreign policy goals: security, anti-corruption, and economic recovery. Due to the Boko Haram insurgency and increasing banditry, security diplomacy became a top priority. Nigeria enhanced its regional security collaboration through the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which includes Chad, Niger, and Cameroon (Onapajo, 2017). Buhari also strengthened security partnerships with Western countries while expanding military cooperation by reaching out to Russia and China (Akinrinde, 2023). The fight against corruption was promoted to a foreign policy aim through efforts to recover international assets. The administration worked alongside the United States, United Kingdom, and Switzerland to return misappropriated public funds, especially those associated with the Abacha regime (Ndagi, 2023). These initiatives led to the recovery of millions of dollars, although concerns regarding transparency in the use of these funds remained evident (Mohammed et al., 2025). Buhari's administration also managed intricate

relationships with major global powers while upholding Nigeria's tradition of non-alignment. China emerged as a key ally through financing for infrastructure projects, expanding trade, and providing concessional loans, while relations with the United States encountered occasional tensions related to human rights issues and military aid (Tar and Wapmuk, 2021). Nevertheless, both nations continued to maintain strategic collaboration. Economic diplomacy formed another significant component of Buhari's foreign policy, influenced by factors such as recession, foreign currency shortages, and the need for diversification. Despite heightened diplomatic efforts, foreign direct investment inflows fell short of expectations due to issues like security concerns, currency volatility, and inadequate infrastructure (Ogunnubi and Amao, 2016). During Buhari's time in office, Nigeria was actively engaged in ECOWAS. Oshewolo et al. (2024) evaluate Nigeria's contributions, advantages, and challenges within the political landscape of ECOWAS, while Samuel (2024) examines Nigeria's role in regional integration from 1975 to 2023. Nevertheless, Nigeria's closure of its land borders from 2019 to 2020 created strain with neighboring countries, highlighting the conflict between domestic protectionist policies and commitments to regional integration. Comparative research by Shehu (2022) looks into Buhari's foreign policy during both his military (1983-1985) and civilian (2015-2021) tenures, showing both consistencies and shifts in strategic direction. Imam (2024) further illustrates how domestic political dynamics shaped Buhari's foreign policy decisions from 2019 to 2023. Overall, the literature suggests that while Buhari's foreign policy reflected traditional principles, significant challenges hindered the translation of diplomatic engagements into concrete economic and developmental gains.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework most appropriate for this study is Role Theory, which explores how states perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others within the international system, and how these perceptions influence their foreign policy behavior (Holsti, 1970; Harnisch, 2011). At the heart of Role Theory is the concept of national role conception, which refers to the images, duties, and expectations that political leaders hold regarding their state's position and functions in global politics. These role conceptions direct foreign policy decisions and shape how states establish their priorities, responsibilities, and modes of engagement on the international stage. Role Theory is particularly suitable for examining Nigeria's foreign policy under the Buhari administration (2015-2023), given the country's historically constructed foreign policy identity rooted in various self-defined roles. These include acting as a

regional leader in West Africa, promoting African unity, serving as a peacekeeper and mediator in regional conflicts, and functioning as a responsible actor in the global community. These enduring role perceptions played a significant role in shaping Nigeria's diplomatic activities during the period under study, particularly within ECOWAS, in counter-terrorism collaborations, and in peacekeeping operations across Africa. Additionally, Role Theory underscores the influence of leadership beliefs and individual worldviews on foreign policy actions. President Buhari's military background and leadership style shaped a foreign policy approach that emphasized security-focused diplomacy, counter-terrorism cooperation, and anti-corruption advocacy in international relations, alongside a relatively cautious stance toward multilateral diplomacy. These leadership-driven role interpretations influenced both Nigeria's external engagements and its diplomatic posture during the administration. The theory also provides a valuable lens for understanding patterns of continuity and change in Nigeria's foreign policy. While Buhari's administration maintained the country's longstanding Afrocentric foreign policy orientation, it also introduced notable shifts in emphasis, particularly in areas such as security, economic diplomacy, and anti-corruption initiatives. Role Theory helps explain how these evolving priorities reflect Nigeria's changing roles in response to shifting domestic and international contexts. Furthermore, Role Theory recognizes that role performance is shaped and constrained by both structural and domestic factors, including economic capacity, security challenges, and international expectations. In the context of Nigeria under Buhari, persistent economic difficulties, internal security threats, and competing global pressures limited the administration's ability to fully realize its intended regional and global roles. Applying Role Theory in this study therefore enables a systematic analysis of Nigeria's self-defined roles, the influence of domestic constraints on role performance, and the extent to which Nigeria fulfilled or fell short of its expected regional and global responsibilities.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which is appropriate for exploring complex social and political phenomena such as foreign policy formulation, implementation, and outcomes. Qualitative methods enable in-depth understanding of meanings, patterns, and processes rather than numerical measurement. Given the historical and interpretive nature of foreign policy analysis, this design facilitates a contextual examination of Nigeria's external relations under the Buhari administration (2015–2023).

Sources of data

The study relies primarily on secondary data sources, including:

- i) Peer-reviewed academic journal articles
- ii) Scholarly books on Nigerian foreign policy
- iii) Government white papers and official policy documents
- iv) Presidential speeches and press statements
- v) Reports from international organizations such as the United Nations, African Union, and ECOWAS
- vii) Policy briefs from reputable think tanks and research institutions
- viii) Newspaper editorials and archival materials relevant to the study period

These sources were accessed through university libraries, online academic databases (such as Google Scholar and JSTOR), government websites, and institutional repositories.

Rationale for documentary analysis

Documentary analysis is particularly suitable for foreign policy research because it allows for the systematic examination of official records and scholarly interpretations over extended historical periods. This method enables the researcher to:

- i) Trace policy evolution
- ii) Identify recurring themes and patterns
- iii) Compare official policy statements with scholarly assessments
- iv) Evaluate consistency between declared objectives and actual outcomes
- v) Documentary analysis also enhances the credibility of the study by relying on verifiable and authoritative sources.

Criteria for selecting data

To ensure validity and relevance, data sources were selected based on the following criteria:

i) Relevance

Materials must directly relate to Nigerian foreign policy, particularly during the Buhari administration (2015–2023).

ii) Credibility

Only sources published by reputable academic journals, recognized scholars, government institutions, and international organizations were considered.

iii) Currency

Priority was given to recent publications (2015–2025) to capture contemporary perspectives, while classic texts were used for historical context.

iv) Authenticity

Official documents were cross-checked using multiple government and institutional sources to confirm accuracy.

v) Analytical value

Sources offering critical analysis, empirical findings, or policy evaluation were prioritized over descriptive materials.

Table 1. Data analysis.

Stage of analysis	Description
Familiarization	All selected documents were read repeatedly to gain an in-depth understanding of their content and relevance to Nigeria’s foreign policy under the Buhari administration.
Coding	Key phrases, concepts, and arguments relating to foreign policy initiatives, security diplomacy, economic diplomacy, anti-corruption cooperation, and implementation challenges were systematically identified and coded.
Theme development	Related codes were grouped into broader themes, including policy priorities under the Buhari administration, domestic constraints, international partnerships, and policy outcomes.
Interpretation	The identified themes were interpreted in relation to the study objectives and analysed using the Role Theory framework to explain Nigeria’s foreign policy behaviour.
Triangulation	Data from multiple sources were compared and cross-validated to ensure consistency and enhance the credibility and validity of the findings.

Source: Field survey (2026).

Method of data analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring patterns within the collected data. The analysis followed these stages; familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation (Table 1).

Data presentation and analysis

Key initiatives

Buhari’s foreign policy prioritized three pillars: security, economy, and anti-corruption, often intertwined with regional and global engagements.

- i) Security and counter-terrorism: The administration strengthened the MNJTF with neighbors (Niger, Chad, Cameroon, Benin) to combat Boko Haram. Diplomatic trips to Lake Chad Basin countries post-2015 inauguration mobilized support from ECOWAS, AU, and UN. Partnerships with Western powers included arms deals (e.g., 12 Super Tucano aircraft from the US) and aid (e.g., \$5 million from G-8 in 2017). Over 10,000 Nigerians were repatriated from Libya with IOM assistance.
- ii) Economic diplomacy: Efforts included negotiating OPEC exemptions to stabilize oil prices (rising from \$38 to \$55 per barrel). Agreements with China yielded infrastructure loans and a 2018 currency swap. The Nigeria Economic Diplomacy Initiative (NEDI, launched April 2018) promoted trade via 114 embassies. Border closures (2019–2020) aimed at curbing smuggling and boosting local production. Nigeria ratified the AfCFTA in 2020 after delays, and maintained strong EU trade ties (exports ~NGN 7–8 trillion, 2018–2021) (Abiola, 2023).
- iii) Anti-corruption and asset recovery: Participation in the 2016 London Anti-Corruption Summit and MOUs with UK, UAE, and Switzerland recovered \$322 million from Abacha-era funds. Nigeria joined the Open Government Partnership.
- iv) Regional and global leadership: Mediated Gamboru crisis in 2016; elected ECOWAS Chair in 2018; blocked Morocco’s ECOWAS bid while signing phosphate deals. Diaspora engagement

via the 2019 Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NIDCOM) addressed xenophobia in South Africa and evacuations such as from Ukraine.

Challenges

The administration encountered notable challenges that diminished the effectiveness of its foreign policy.

- i) Economic limitations: The government took over during an economic decline marked by decreasing oil revenues, which resulted in external debt increasing from N12 trillion in 2015 to N22 trillion by 2018. The accumulation of these debts led to a withdrawal from 90 out of 310 international organizations, with annual subscription fees around \$70 million. The closing of borders interrupted regional trade, breaching ECOWAS protocols and leading to food inflation rates that rose from 13.51% in September 2019 to 19.56% in December 2020 (Adebisi, 2024).
- ii) Ongoing insecurity: Attacks by Boko Haram and ISWAP continued, causing more than 1,700 deaths in early 2019 alone. Internal issues, such as banditry and conflicts between herders and farmers, redirected resources.
- iii) Leadership and decision-making: Buhari’s perceived inflexibility resulted in delays concerning crucial actions, including the signing of the AfCFTA (which was under study until October 2018) and Morocco’s application to ECOWAS. Controversies surrounding human rights abuses by security forces negatively affected Nigeria’s reputation internationally (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025).
- iv) Global shifts: Oil production declined (1.49M barrels/day in 2020 to 1.14M in 2022) due to vandalism and clean energy transitions, deterring FDI (Abiola, 2023).

Policy outcomes

The outcomes were varied: while there were some improvements in security and diplomacy, the policies frequently worsened domestic problems without providing lasting international advantages. Detractors contend that the actions taken were more damaging than beneficial, citing unmet commitments regarding the economy

Table 2. GDP growth rate (Annual%, 2015–2023).

Year	GDP growth rate (%)	Key context
2015	2.7	Oil price crash; inherited downturn.
2016	-1.6	Recession; focus on OPEC deals.
2017	0.8	Recovery via economic diplomacy.
2018	1.9	Infrastructure deals with China.
2019	2.2	Border closures for protectionism.
2020	-1.8	COVID-19; border impacts.
2021	3.7	Post-COVID rebound.
2022	3.3	Ongoing security strains.
2023	2.9	Mixed policy legacies.

Source: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=NG>: <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/nga/nigeria/gdp-growth-rate>.

Table 3. FDI net inflows (US\$ Billion, 2015–2023).

Year	FDI inflows	Change from previous year
2015	3.06	Decline from 2014 (4.69).
2016	3.45	Slight uptick via diplomacy.
2017	2.41	Debt rise impacts.
2018	0.78	Sharp drop; economic constraints.
2019	2.31	Border policy effects.
2020	2.39	Pandemic slowdown.
2021	3.31	Recovery efforts.
2022	-0.19	Negative inflows; investor exits.
2023	1.87	Partial rebound but low.

Source: <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/nga/nigeria/gdp-growth-rate>: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=NG>.

and security.

i) Security results: Operations by the MNJTF reclaimed territory and significantly weakened Boko Haram, yet violence continued to be a problem. ACLED statistics indicate approximately 176 clashes occurring from 2015 to 2024 and a 50% reduction in violence targeting civilians in 2021 compared to 2020. Nevertheless, there have been over 85 incidents of school abductions since 2014, underscoring shortcomings in response. Boko Haram has been responsible for thousands of fatalities between 2011 and 2023, with approximately 2,266 killings attributed to bandits and insurgents in the first half of 2025 alone (Ayandele and Aniekwe, 2024: Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025).

ii) Economic outcomes: Border closures boosted local rice sales but led to net trade losses and regional strain (e.g., 10% sales increase for manufacturers but export declines). EU trade remained robust, but AfCFTA delays limited intra-Africa gains. Remittances rose 20.3% to \$5.16B in Q1 2022, aiding diaspora ties.

iii) Broader impacts: Nigeria's global influence declined; human rights issues drew criticism. Regional efforts (e.g., Lake Chad Task Force) had limited success.

Data analysis: Key economic and security indicators

To quantify outcomes, Table 2 summarizes the key trends.

Economic data reflects the foreign policy emphasis on investment and trade, while security data relates to anti-terrorism initiatives. According to Table 3, growth experienced fluctuations, with an average of approximately 1.5% between 2015 and 2020, showing improvement after 2020, yet remaining lower than the levels seen before 2015. The total decline is approximately 60% from its peak in 2014, reflecting issues of insecurity and inconsistencies in policy. Table 4 shows \$65 billion (2023); imports amount to \$65 billion. Border policies have interrupted ECOWAS trade, leading to a decrease in exports to neighboring countries, which dropped from NGN 500.8 billion in 2019 compared to higher figures in 2018. Table 5 indicates that the violence perpetrated by Boko Haram reached its peak in 2014, resulting in more than 6,600 deaths, which emphasizes the critical security challenges faced by the Buhari administration. From 2015 to 2019, insurgent attacks continued to occur at a high rate, with over 1,700 fatalities reported in the first half of 2019, even after the MNJTF had been revitalized and some territories had been regained, suggesting that military victories were primarily tactical in nature. A significant reduction in violence targeting civilians was observed in 2020–2021, with fatalities decreasing by approximately 50%, reflective of enhanced counter-insurgency efforts and internal divisions within Boko Haram, including the emergence of Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP); nonetheless, ongoing mass abductions highlighted the

Table 4. Trade volume with key partners (2023 Exports/Imports, US\$ Million).

Partner	Exports	Imports	Trade balance
Netherlands	8.179	N/A	Positive (oil focus).
Spain	6.133	N/A	Positive.
India	5.690	6.800	Negative.
US	4.910	8.100	Negative.
China	N/A	15.700	Negative (23% of imports).
EU (Aggregate)	~15.600–17.820 (2018–2021 avg.)	Varied	Positive overall.

Source: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=NG>.

Table 5. Boko haram-related incidents and fatalities.

Period	Incident/Event	Fatalities	Note
2014	High (pre-Buhari peak)	>6.600	Escalation.
2015–2019	~Daily attacks	>1.700 (H1 2019)	MNJTF formed; territories reclaimed.
2020–2021	Decline in civilian violence	50% drop (2021 vs. 2020)	Intensified ops; but >85 school abductions (2014–2024).
2011–2023	Overall	Thousands (e.g., >20,000 total insurgency deaths)	Persistent despite cooperation.
2023–2025	Escalating	~2,266 (H1 2025, bandits/insurgents)	Legacy issues.

Source: <https://acleddata.com/report/decade-after-chibok-assessing-nigerias-regional-response-boko-haram>.

continued vulnerability of civilians. In total, from 2011 to 2023, the insurgency led to tens of thousands of casualties, illustrating its enduring resilience. The renewed escalation of violence in 2023–2025, with about 2,266 fatalities in early 2025 alone, suggests that underlying structural drivers of insecurity remain unresolved, reinforcing the conclusion that security-focused interventions achieved limited and unsustainable outcomes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An examination of Nigeria's foreign policy during Muhammadu Buhari's tenure (2015–2023) highlights a distinct trend of practical pragmatism that focuses on domestic priorities (security, economic growth, and anti-corruption) rather than pursuing traditional global power aspirations or ideological stances. This shift represented a break from the ostentatious Afrocentrism of earlier governments, resulting in outcomes that were notably mixed. The research indicates that while security diplomacy achieved tactical gains, it fell short of strategic success. Key accomplishments of Buhari's foreign policy included the strengthening of the MNJTF, ongoing military-technical partnerships with the United States, France, and China, and the recovery of territories from Boko Haram between 2015 and 2017. Additionally, the

instances of violence targeting civilians by Boko Haram saw a reduction of approximately 50% from 2020 to 2021. However, the insurgency mutated into ISWAP, banditry exploded in the North-West, and mass abductions continued unabated. The research indicates that economic diplomacy was inconsistent and often had counterproductive outcomes. Despite the claims of "economic diplomacy," foreign direct investment (FDI) net inflows plummeted by more than 60% from their peak in 2014, reaching a historic low of –\$190 million in 2022. The unilateral border closure from August 2019 to December 2020 resulted in temporary boosts in local rice production and customs revenues, yet it breached ECOWAS protocols, harmed Nigeria's reputation as a regional leader, and led to food inflation surging from 13.51% in September 2019 to 22.95% in March 2021. The postponed ratification of the AfCFTA, which was finally signed in 2020 after significant delay, further estranged Nigeria from the continent's most crucial economic integration initiative. The study finds that Afrocentrism in rhetoric, protectionism in practice. Buhari's administration repeatedly proclaimed Africa as the "centrepiece" of Nigeria's foreign policy, yet actions often contradicted this. Blocking Morocco's ECOWAS membership bid while simultaneously signing bilateral

phosphate deals with Rabat exemplified transactional rather than principled regionalism. Nigeria's influence within ECOWAS and the AU visibly waned, with smaller states like Benin, Niger, and Ghana taking more assertive regional roles.

The study finds that debt-fueled infrastructure diplomacy with China. The administration deepened ties with China more than any previous government, with Chinese loans rising from \$1.4 billion in 2015 to over \$5 billion by 2023. While projects such as the Abuja–Kaduna and Lagos–Ibadan railways were completed, the absence of transparent concessionary terms and the sovereignty clause controversies eroded public trust and increased Nigeria's debt vulnerability. The study finds that declining global image and soft power. Persistent human rights concerns (especially regarding military operations in the North-East and the #EndSARS protests), coupled with Buhari's limited international travel in his second term due to health reasons, diminished Nigeria's traditional voice on global platforms. By 2023, Nigeria had withdrawn from 90 of 310 international organizations it previously belonged to, citing unpaid dues a symbolic retreat from global engagement. Buhari's foreign policy was fundamentally inward-looking and reactive rather than proactive or visionary. The administration correctly identified that Nigeria's domestic crises (insecurity and economic collapse) left little room for grandiose external commitments. However, the chosen instruments unilateralism, protectionism, and over-reliance on military solutions often exacerbated the very problems they sought to resolve. The era confirmed a hard truth: a country that cannot guarantee security and economic stability within its borders cannot exercise meaningful leadership beyond them. The interplay between domestic weakness and foreign policy ineffectiveness was absolute and bidirectional.

Conclusion

This research analyzes Nigeria's foreign policy during the Buhari administration (2015–2023). The foreign policy of Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023) will be noted as a time characterized by practical restraint instead of bold action. It achieved limited tactical victories in areas such as counter-terrorism collaboration and the recovery of embezzled assets, but it fell short in generating sustainable investment, promoting regional integration, or reinstating Nigeria's position as a key power in Africa. The administration concludes its tenure having left Nigeria more isolated, more in debt, and with diminished influence compared to 2015.

Consequently, the main takeaway from Buhari's foreign policy is a cautionary one: no level of diplomatic engagement can offset shortcomings in domestic governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following policy recommendations are proposed for the current and future Nigerian administrations:

- i) Nigeria should adopt a New Foreign Policy Framework Centered on Economic Diversification and Regional Integration
- ii) Nigeria should institutionalize Economic Diplomacy. Transform the Nigeria Economic Diplomacy Initiative (NEDI) into a fully empowered inter-ministerial body with clear KPI targets for embassies (FDI attracted, exports facilitated, joint ventures concluded).
- iii) Nigeria should shift from Military-Centric to Holistic Counter-Insurgency Diplomacy by complement the MNJTF with a Lake Chad Basin Development and Stabilization Initiative funded jointly by the AU, EU, and World Bank, focusing on trans-border infrastructure, youth employment, and climate adaptation.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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