

Continuity and Change in Nigeria's Foreign Policy: A Multi-Era Analysis from Military Rule to Democratic Governance

Adaeze Janice Erondu, MIR

Department of Political Science, University of Maiduguri, Nigeria; and PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom; Department of Multidisciplinary Studies & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

Gideon Ogonna Ibeakuzie, MIR

Department of Political Science, University of Maiduguri, Nigeria; and PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom; Department of Multidisciplinary Studies & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

 Celestine Emeka Ekwuluo, MIR

Department of Political Science, University of Maiduguri, Nigeria; and PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom; Department of Multidisciplinary Studies & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

 Kennedy Oberhiri Obohjemu, PhD

Department of Interdisciplinary Research & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

Fidelis Evwiekpamare Olori, PhD

Faculty of Business Management, Oxford Brookes University, GBS Partnership, Birmingham, United Kingdom; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

 Festus Ituah, PhD

School of Health and Sports Science, Regent College, London, United Kingdom; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

 Jennifer Adaeze Chukwu, PhD

World Health Organization, United Nations House, Abuja, Nigeria; and Department of Multidisciplinary Studies & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

 Chiduzie Wereuche Onuoha, MBBS

St. Nicholas Hospital, Lagos, Nigeria; and Department of Multidisciplinary Studies & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

 Oluwafemi Emmanuel Ooju, MSc

World Health Organization, Abuja, Nigeria; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

Corresponding Author:  Dr. Kennedy Oberhiri Obohjemu, Senior Researcher and Project Coordinator, PENKUP Research Institute, United Kingdom., Kennedy.Obohjemu@penkup.com.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Submission Date: 07 January 2026

Accepted Date: 14 February 2026

Published Date: 04 March 2026

VOLUME: Vol.06 Issue03

Page No. 22-32

DOI: - <https://doi.org/10.37547/social-fsshj-06-03-01>

ABSTRACT

Nigeria's foreign policy has undergone substantial transformation since independence, shaped by alternating periods of military rule and democratic governance. While Afrocentrism and the pursuit of national interest have remained enduring principles, the orientation, tone, and effectiveness of Nigeria's external engagements have shifted markedly across political eras. Drawing on twelve elite interviews and extensive documentary analysis from the Obasanjo, Babangida, Abacha, and post-1999 civilian governments, this paper examines the continuities and changes in foreign policy practice

from the 1960s to the present democratic dispensation. The findings show that military administrations often pursued confrontational and personalised diplomacy, contributing to Nigeria's international isolation during the Abacha period. Conversely, the return to democratic rule in 1999 catalysed a strategic re-engagement with the global community, enabling image repair, debt relief, and renewed leadership in African peacebuilding. Despite these shifts, the core commitment to Africa as the centrepiece of foreign policy has remained constant. Using Rational Choice Theory, the paper argues that leadership perceptions, domestic legitimacy, and cost-benefit calculations significantly shaped foreign policy behaviour across regimes. The study contributes to renewed debates on medium-power diplomacy in Africa and highlights how governance structures influence a state's external posture. The paper concludes by recommending institutional strengthening and an economic-development-aligned foreign policy to enhance Nigeria's global role.

Keywords: Nigeria, foreign policy, military rule, democratic governance, medium power, diplomacy, rational choice theory.

INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy remains one of the most visible expressions of state identity, national ambition, and political stability. Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has attempted to project itself as a regional leader and an influential African actor, guided by the principles of Afro-centrism, non-alignment, peaceful coexistence, and respect for sovereignty. Yet, despite the apparent continuity of these declaratory principles, the practice of Nigerian foreign policy has shifted considerably across different political eras. Periods of military rule, punctuated by centralised decision-making, ideological assertiveness, and at times authoritarian excess, produced markedly different diplomatic outcomes from those witnessed under democratic governance. These transformations highlight the enduring tension between institutional continuity and the influence of regime type, leadership personality, and domestic political legitimacy on external relations.

The contrast is particularly evident when comparing Nigeria's diplomatic posture during the late military period with the early years of the Fourth Republic. The Abacha regime (1993–1998) marked the lowest point in Nigeria's international standing, as human rights violations, domestic repression, and an isolationist posture resulted in sanctions, withdrawal of ambassadors, and widespread condemnation (Ogbonnah, 1998; Sklar, 1999). Conversely, the return to democratic rule in 1999 under President Olusegun Obasanjo initiated a period of intense re-engagement with the international community, aimed at repairing

Nigeria's damaged image, restructuring external partnerships, and restoring regional leadership (Alli, 2012; Olusola, 2015). These shifts illustrate how political transitions shape foreign-policy priorities, tools, and legitimacy.

Despite growing scholarly attention, significant gaps remain in the comparative analysis of Nigerian foreign policy across political eras. Much of the existing literature focuses either on the military period (Abegunrin, 2003) or on the early democratic years (Eze, 2010), but few studies adopt a longitudinal, multi-era perspective grounded in primary qualitative evidence. Even fewer incorporate insights from elite practitioners, such as diplomats, policy advisers, foreign-service officials, and analysts, who possess first-hand knowledge of the decision-making processes that often remain absent from official documentation. This gap is critical because Nigerian foreign policy has historically been shaped not only by institutions but also by the personal convictions, leadership styles, and strategic calculations of key actors.

This paper addresses these gaps by analysing continuity and change in Nigeria's foreign policy across military and democratic regimes, drawing on twelve elite interviews and extensive documentary analysis from the dissertation dataset. Using Rational Choice Theory as a guiding framework, the paper examines how different administrations balanced national interest, regime survival, and external

legitimacy in determining Nigeria's diplomatic posture. The analysis highlights four core dimensions: (1) the evolution of foreign-policy priorities, (2) shifts in regional and global engagement, (3) the impact of regime type on diplomatic style, and (4) the persistence of Afro-centrism as a foundational principle (Oshewolo, 2019; Egbe & Ushie, 2022).

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it offers one of the few empirically grounded, multi-era evaluations of Nigerian foreign policy spanning the post-independence period to the present. Second, it demonstrates how regime change, from authoritarian rule to electoral democracy, reshaped the tools, tone, and international reception of Nigeria's foreign policy actions. Third, it situates Nigeria within broader debates on medium-power diplomacy, showing how domestic political transitions interact with continental expectations and global norms.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rationale for Using Rational Choice Theory

Rational Choice Theory has long been used to explain how states and leaders make decisions within complex political environments. The core assumption is that actors evaluate available options and select the course of action that offers the greatest benefits in relation to the expected costs. Although originally developed in economics, the theory has been widely applied in political science to analyse foreign policy behaviour, particularly in contexts where leadership choices and institutional conditions shape policy outcomes (Bueno de Mesquita, 2018).

In the Nigerian context, Rational Choice Theory provides a useful lens for understanding how successive governments assessed external pressures, domestic priorities, and the strategic value of specific diplomatic actions. Foreign policy under both military and democratic administrations was shaped by deliberate calculations about Nigeria's international reputation, regional responsibilities, and national interests. Decisions such as Obasanjo's shuttle diplomacy, the pursuit of debt relief, or the peaceful handover of the Bakassi Peninsula reflected a series of judgements about long-term gains, political costs, and international expectations (Ogbulu & Eze, 2021). Interview respondents in the dissertation also

described foreign policy actions as intentional efforts to rebuild international credibility and protect national interests in a changing global order.

Rational Choice Theory is therefore relevant because it allows the analysis to move beyond structural explanations and to acknowledge the importance of agency, leadership style, and calculated decision making in shaping Nigeria's external posture.

Core Assumptions of Rational Choice Theory in Foreign Policy Analysis

Rational Choice Theory rests on several foundational assumptions that help explain the decision-making processes of states and political leaders.

First, the theory assumes that political actors are goal oriented and that their actions reflect an attempt to maximise perceived advantages. In the Nigerian case, policies such as the re-engagement with the international community after 1999 or the leadership role in West African peacekeeping can be seen as efforts to protect national interests by improving legitimacy and regional influence (Obuah & Ndubuisi, 2024).

Second, the theory assumes that decision makers evaluate different courses of action and choose the option that offers the best outcome within the constraints they face. Nigerian leaders often operated in an environment shaped by economic volatility, external debt, domestic insecurity, and international pressure. These constraints influenced the choices available to them and the strategies they adopted (Adams & Okoliko, 2024).

Third, Rational Choice Theory assumes that actors respond to incentives and disincentives. This can be seen in the way democratic governance created new incentives for international cooperation, while military rule generated disincentives through sanctions, isolation, and reputational decline. Interview respondents repeatedly highlighted how the transition to civilian rule opened opportunities for renewed diplomacy, while the Abacha era severely restricted Nigeria's influence due to international penalties and loss of credibility (Alazigha & Amanawa, 2024).

Strengths of Applying the Theory to Nigeria's Foreign Policy

The application of Rational Choice Theory offers three main strengths for analysing Nigeria's foreign policy history.

One, the theory highlights the importance of leadership choices. Nigerian foreign policy has often reflected the priorities and personalities of heads of state. Examples include Murtala Mohammed's assertive African diplomacy, Babangida's economic engagement with international institutions, and Obasanjo's global shuttle diplomacy (Ilemona, 2020).

Two, the theory helps explain why the same guiding principles produced different outcomes across political eras. While Afro-centrism remained constant, the interpretation and implementation of this principle varied depending on how leaders assessed domestic conditions and international incentives (Magu, 2021).

Three, Rational Choice Theory accommodates both domestic and external influences. Nigeria's foreign policy has been shaped by internal pressures such as economic crises and public legitimacy, as well as external factors such as global norms, donor expectations, and regional security challenges (Tamm & Snidal, 2023).

Limitations of Rational Choice Theory in the Nigerian Context

Although Rational Choice Theory offers clear analytical value, it also has limitations when applied to Nigerian foreign policy.

First, the assumption of perfect information is unrealistic. Nigerian leaders have often operated with limited or imperfect data, especially during periods of political instability or economic stress (Morin & Paquin, 2018).

Second, the theory downplays the role of institutional fragmentation. Foreign policy in Nigeria is not formulated by a single rational actor but by multiple actors, including the presidency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the military, and sometimes influential political networks (Alden, 2017).

Third, rationality is shaped by subjective perceptions. Leaders often interpret national interest based on their own beliefs or political motivations. For example, the authoritarian posture of the Abacha regime reflected personal and regime survival concerns rather than a calculated national strategy (Obuah & Ndubuisi, 2024).

Given these limitations, Rational Choice Theory is used in this study as a guiding framework rather than a deterministic model. The theory helps illuminate patterns of decision making, but the analysis remains sensitive to contextual realities, leadership dynamics, and institutional constraints.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design that seeks to understand how different political eras shaped the orientation, style, and outcomes of Nigeria's foreign policy. The use of a qualitative approach allows for a contextual and nuanced interpretation of foreign policy behaviour, leadership choices, and institutional practices. This design is consistent with the original dissertation, which relied on an ex post facto approach to examine how events and decisions unfolded without the researcher manipulating any variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The qualitative design is well suited to foreign policy analysis because it places emphasis on meaning, interpretation, and the perspectives of individuals who have engaged with or observed policy processes directly. It allows the study to capture the lived experiences, reflections, and professional judgments of diplomats, scholars, analysts, and public officials who have participated in or influenced Nigeria's external relations (Silverman, 2020).

Research Method

The research employs two complementary methods. The first is elite interviewing, which captures the perspectives of individuals with first-hand knowledge of Nigeria's diplomatic practices. The second is documentary analysis, which draws from books, journal articles, policy documents, archival materials, and official statements. The combination of these

methods allows for cross-verification of evidence and deeper interpretation of foreign policy decisions across different political eras (Dexter, 2006; Bowen, 2009).

Elite interviews are particularly appropriate because foreign policy decisions in Nigeria are often shaped by a small group of influential actors within government institutions. The documentary analysis supports the interview data by providing historical context, policy records, and secondary interpretations (Harvey, 2011).

Data Collection

Data were collected from two main sources. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured elite interviews with twelve individuals who met the criteria of having professional experience in diplomacy or expertise in international affairs. These participants included former ambassadors, senior foreign-service officers, policy advisers, academics, and journalists. Participants were selected based on their direct involvement in foreign policy or their recognized expertise in studying Nigeria's external relations. The interviews allowed respondents to reflect on key moments, decisions, and transitions in Nigeria's foreign policy from military to democratic rule (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002).

Secondary data were obtained from published materials, including academic books, journal articles, newspaper archives, official government documents, and research reports. These sources provided factual information on historical developments and enriched the thematic analysis of foreign policy trends (Bowen, 2009).

This dual approach reflects the methodology described in the dissertation, where interviews and historical documents formed the core of the data collection strategy.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling technique was used to select interview participants. This non-probability method is common in qualitative research where the goal is to identify individuals with specialised knowledge rather than to achieve statistical representativeness

(Palinkas et al., 2015). The aim was to interview between ten and twelve participants. Twelve eventually agreed to participate, which provided sufficient depth and diversity of perspectives.

Participants were approached through formal letters of request, followed by individual follow-up communication to arrange interviews at locations and times convenient for them. Ten participants requested anonymity due to the sensitivity of their roles and the potential impact of their comments on political or professional relationships. They are therefore identified in the analysis using codes such as "Participant A" or "Participant B" in line with confidentiality procedures defined in the dissertation (Saunders et al., 2015).

Data Analysis

The study used a combination of critical analysis and content analysis to interpret the data. Critical analysis involved identifying patterns in leadership behaviour, policy choices, and regime characteristics that shaped Nigeria's external relations. Content analysis allowed the researcher to categorise interview responses and documentary evidence into thematic areas such as image repair, regional leadership, economic diplomacy, and shifts in diplomatic style (Krippendorff, 2019).

The analysis was iterative. Initial themes were identified during the interviews, and these were refined as documentary sources were examined. This process mirrors the approach described in the dissertation where data analysis began during fieldwork and continued throughout the research process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019).

Validity and Reliability

Validity was strengthened through triangulation. Interview data were cross-checked with published sources to verify historical facts and interpretations. The combination of elite interviews and documentary analysis ensured that the findings were grounded in both expert testimony and verifiable historical evidence (Patton, 2015).

Reliability was enhanced through consistent procedures in data collection. All interviews were

conducted using a semi-structured guide that ensured comparability across participants while allowing flexibility for elaboration. Ethical standards, including confidentiality, informed consent, and protection of potentially sensitive information, were strictly observed (Orb, Eisenhower, & Wynaden, 2001).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Foreign Policy Under Military Rule

The military era played a defining role in shaping Nigeria's external engagement. Across the different military administrations, foreign policy often reflected centralised decision making, personal leadership preferences, and varying levels of ideological assertiveness. Interview participants consistently noted that military leaders conceived foreign policy as an extension of regime authority, which produced inconsistencies in priorities and diplomatic style.

Early military governments, particularly those led by Murtala Mohammed and Olusegun Obasanjo, exercised activist diplomacy that emphasised liberation struggles, anti-colonial solidarity, and regional leadership. Nigeria's involvement in Angola, Mozambique, Southern Rhodesia, and South Africa demonstrated its desire to position itself as a defender of African self-determination (Akinyemi, 2013; Ogunsanwo, 1976). This era also marked Nigeria's emergence as a major peacekeeping contributor within Africa (Adebajo, 2007).

However, this assertive role deteriorated significantly during the later phase of military rule. The Abacha regime, in particular, represented one of the lowest periods in Nigeria's international reputation. Human rights violations, disregard for international norms, and authoritarian domestic practices resulted in global condemnation, sanctions, and isolation (Fayomi, Chidozie, & Ajayi, 2015). Several interviewees described this era as "an image disaster" that weakened Nigeria's diplomatic standing and reduced its influence in regional and global forums.

The military period therefore presents a dual legacy. On one hand, Nigeria demonstrated strong regional leadership through its anti-colonial commitments and peacekeeping engagements. On the other hand, the

authoritarian tendencies of later military regimes undermined these achievements and produced significant reputational costs.

Foreign Policy Under Democratic Governance

The transition to democratic rule in 1999 marked a turning point in Nigeria's international relations. Interview participants consistently emphasised that democracy created new incentives for cooperation, legitimacy, and global reintegration. The Obasanjo administration was particularly active in repairing Nigeria's damaged image, rebuilding relationships, and restoring strategic partnerships that had weakened during the Abacha years (Adebajo & Mustapha, 2008).

The democratic era brought a renewed emphasis on engagement with multilaterals such as the United Nations, the Commonwealth, the African Union, and international financial institutions. Nigeria's immediate readmission into the Commonwealth in 1999, its inclusion in the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, and its central role in the transformation of the Organisation of African Unity into the African Union reflected this reorientation (Ogunnubi & Adebajo, 2021).

The shuttle diplomacy conducted by President Obasanjo was repeatedly highlighted by interview respondents as a deliberate strategy to reposition Nigeria as a reliable and responsible international actor. These efforts contributed to securing debt relief from the Paris Club, increasing foreign investment, and improving Nigeria's global visibility (Ogbulu & Eze, 2021). Nigeria also continued to play a leadership role in peacekeeping, conflict mediation, and regional diplomacy, particularly in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Adebajo, 2007).

The democratic era therefore represents a significant shift from coercive and isolationist tendencies to cooperative, engagement-driven diplomacy. The legitimacy derived from electoral governance enhanced Nigeria's credibility and opened new diplomatic opportunities.

Continuities Across Both Eras

FRONTLINE JOURNALS

Although regime type influenced diplomatic style and effectiveness, several enduring continuities were evident.

1. Africa remained the centrepiece of Nigeria's foreign policy: Both military and civilian governments prioritised African unity, regional integration, and cooperation with neighbouring states (Ukaogo et al., 2020).
2. Nigeria's leaders consistently sought to position the country as a regional power: This was expressed through peacekeeping, mediation, and participation in African institutions (Ogunnubi & Okeke, 2023).
3. National interest remained the central motivator: Even when expressed differently, the pursuit of security, diplomatic influence, and economic benefits remained constant (Akinola, 2022).

These continuities demonstrate that although leadership style varied, the fundamental orientation of Nigerian foreign policy did not fundamentally shift.

Key Points of Change Between Military and Democratic Eras

Despite these continuities, significant changes emerged following the transition to democratic governance.

1. A shift from militarised to diplomatic engagement: Military governments relied more heavily on coercive instruments and unilateral decisions. Democratic administrations placed greater emphasis on negotiation, soft power, and partnership (Anaele & Ogali, 2022).
2. A transformation of Nigeria's international image: The move from authoritarian rule to democracy helped restore trust with global partners. Interview respondents consistently described democracy as the single most important factor behind Nigeria's international reintegration in the early 2000s (Adebajo & Mustapha, 2008).
3. An increased focus on economic diplomacy: While earlier regimes prioritised ideological or security concerns, democratic administrations recognised the importance of using foreign policy to attract investment, secure debt relief, and support domestic development (Ogbulu & Eze, 2021).

4. A stronger alignment with global norms: Democratic governance created conditions for cooperation on issues such as human rights, peacebuilding, and multilateral reforms (Raji, 2024).

The peaceful resolution of the Bakassi Peninsula dispute with Cameroon exemplifies this change. Rather than resorting to military options, the Obasanjo administration pursued negotiation and accepted the ruling of the International Court of Justice. Interview participants viewed this as evidence of a more mature and restrained foreign policy approach under democracy (Ogbulu & Eze, 2021).

Socioeconomic Constraints on Nigeria's External Engagement

Both eras faced significant domestic challenges that shaped foreign policy choices, but the democratic period brought clearer recognition of how internal constraints limited external ambitions. Interview respondents identified several recurring challenges, including overdependence on oil revenues, persistent currency depreciation, limited industrialisation, inadequate infrastructure, insecurity, and governance deficits (Oloruntoba, 2020).

These challenges weakened Nigeria's ability to sustain long-term diplomatic initiatives and limited the resource base necessary for effective foreign engagement. Respondents also noted that foreign policy could not achieve its objectives without economic stability, institutional reform, and improved public trust at home (Akinola, 2022).

The findings indicate that while regime type influences diplomatic behaviour, structural economic limitations have been equally important in shaping Nigeria's foreign policy outcomes.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As this study has shown, several policy recommendations can strengthen Nigeria's foreign policy and enhance its effectiveness in a rapidly changing international system.

1. Strengthen institutional capacity within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Nigeria's foreign policy has often been shaped by individual leaders rather than strong bureaucratic institutions. Professionalisation, training, and clearer coordination across ministries would help create a more stable and predictable foreign policy framework.
2. Address domestic economic vulnerabilities that limit external influence: Diversification away from oil, investment in industry, and improvements in infrastructure are essential for sustaining diplomatic credibility. A more resilient economy would provide the resources required for long-term regional leadership.
3. Align foreign policy more closely with domestic development priorities: Foreign missions should prioritise economic diplomacy, trade promotion, and investment mobilisation. This approach can help translate diplomatic engagement into concrete benefits for citizens.
4. Consolidate democratic norms and improve governance quality: Democracy was shown to be a major driver of Nigeria's diplomatic reintegration. Strengthening rule of law, reducing corruption, and improving political accountability will enhance Nigeria's international image and credibility.
5. Deepen regional cooperation within ECOWAS and the African Union: Nigeria should continue to support conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and regional integration. As a medium power, Nigeria's influence depends on its ability to build coalitions and provide leadership on African issues.
6. Improve strategic communication and image management: Nigeria's global image affects the treatment of its citizens abroad and can influence foreign investment. A coordinated public diplomacy strategy would help counter negative stereotypes and promote a positive narrative about Nigeria's contributions to Africa and the international community.
7. Invest in long-term diplomatic continuity: Changes in leadership should not drastically alter foreign policy direction. Establishing clear national foreign policy priorities that transcend administrations will ensure consistency and

strengthen Nigeria's reputation as a reliable partner.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the evolution of Nigeria's foreign policy across military and democratic eras and highlighted the ways political transitions shaped the country's external behaviour, diplomatic style, and international standing. Although Nigeria retained a consistent commitment to African unity, regional stability, and the pursuit of national interest, the specific strategies used to achieve these goals differed significantly across political regimes. Military governments often relied on centralised, personality-driven decision making that produced both periods of assertive African engagement and moments of severe international isolation. The later military period, especially under General Abacha, demonstrated how authoritarian rule and domestic repression could erode diplomatic credibility and diminish Nigeria's regional influence.

The return to civilian rule in 1999 marked a decisive shift. Democratic governance enabled Nigeria to rebuild trust with global partners, restore its international reputation, and adopt a more cooperative and engagement-oriented diplomatic posture. Interviews with diplomats and experts revealed how democracy opened new channels for participation in multilateral institutions, facilitated debt relief, strengthened peacekeeping leadership, and reinforced Nigeria's identity as a medium power in Africa. The democratic period also placed greater emphasis on economic diplomacy, with leaders recognising that foreign policy could be strategically deployed to support domestic development goals.

Despite these advances, the study found that long-term challenges remain. Persistent structural weaknesses, including economic fragility, insecurity, and infrastructural deficits, continue to undermine Nigeria's ability to fully realise its foreign policy objectives. Foreign policy outcomes are therefore shaped not only by regime type but also by the country's broader political economy and institutional capacity.

In the end, the findings demonstrate that political

FRONTLINE JOURNALS

transitions matter. Nigeria's diplomatic effectiveness is strongly influenced by the legitimacy of its governing institutions, the strategic calculations of its leaders, and the domestic conditions that support or constrain external engagement. Strengthening these foundations is essential for Nigeria to consolidate its role as a responsible regional leader and influential medium power.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

All authors played a substantive role in shaping this study and developing the manuscript. A.J.E., G.O.I. and C.E.E. conceptualised the work and designed the overall study framework. Data analysis, interpretation of data and validation of findings were carried out collaboratively, with each author contributing to the discussions that informed the final results. F.E.O. and K.O.O. prepared the initial manuscript draft, covering the introduction, methods, results and discussion. Co-authors strengthened the analysis, offered detailed revisions and enhanced the clarity and coherence of the final document. Every author reviewed the complete manuscript, approved the final version and accepted responsibility for the integrity of the work.

COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare no competing interests.

FUNDING

No funding was received for this study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors acknowledge the management and technical staff of PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, UK, for their excellent assistance and for providing medical writing and editorial support in accordance with the Good Publication Practice (GPP3) guidelines.

REFERENCES

1. Abegunrin, O. (2003). *Nigerian foreign policy under military rule, 1966–1999*. Praeger.
2. Aberbach, J. D., & Rockman, B. A. (2002). Conducting and coding elite interviews. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 35(4), 673–676. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096502001142>.
3. Adams, E. J., & Okoliko, M. G. (2024). The domestic-foreign policy nexus and electoral dynamics in Nigeria: A global perspective. *KIU Interdisciplinary Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(2), 33–49.
4. Adebajo, A. (2007). *The curse of Berlin: Africa after the Cold War*. Columbia University Press.
5. Adebajo, A., & Mustapha, A. R. (2008). *Gulliver's troubles: Nigeria's foreign policy after the Cold War*. University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
6. Adeniyi, O. (2019). A critical analysis of Nigeria's foreign policy during the Abacha regime. *Academia.edu*. Retrieved from <https://www.academia.edu/27155268>.
7. Akinola, A. O. (2022). Domestic political economy and foreign policy in Nigeria. *Journal of African Foreign Affairs*, 9(1), 45–62.
8. Akinyemi, B. (2013). Nigeria's foreign policy: The search for relevance. *Nigerian Journal of International Affairs*, 39(1), 1–20.
9. Alazigha, F. E., & Amanawa, D. E. (2024). Rethinking Nigeria's foreign policy: A review of the national interest agenda. *Journal of Political Studies*, 12(1), 45–62.
10. Alden, C. (2017). Critiques of the rational actor model and foreign policy decision making. In W. R. Thompson & T. Capelos (Eds.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. Oxford University Press.
11. Alli, W. O. (2012). *Nigeria's foreign policy of democratic transition and economic reform*. Palgrave Macmillan.
12. Anaele, R., & Ogali, M. D. (2022). Bilateral relations and foreign policy under Nigeria's Presidents Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari, 2010–2021. *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews*, 15(2), 440–448. <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2022.15.2.0764>.
13. Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>.
14. Bueno de Mesquita, B. (2018). Foreign policy analysis and rational choice models. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/97801908466>

[26.013.395.](#)

15. Cooper, D. A. (2019). Challenging contemporary notions of middle power influence. *International Journal*, 74(1), 5–25.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702019827060>.
16. Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.
17. Dexter, L. A. (2006). *Elite and specialized interviewing*. ECPR Press.
18. Egbe, B. O., & Ushie, R. U. (2022). Nigeria's foreign policy and Afrocentrism: A critical analysis. *LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research*, 19(1), 45–60.
<https://www.ajol.info/index.php/lwati/article/view/239038>.
19. Eze, O. C. (2010). *Beyond fifty years of Nigeria's foreign policy: Issues, challenges and prospects*. Nigerian Institute of International Affairs.
20. Fayomi, O. O., Chidozie, F. C., & Ajayi, L. A. (2015). Nigeria's national image and her foreign policy: An exploratory approach. *Open Journal of Political Science*, 5(3), 180–196.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2015.53019>.
21. Harvey, W. S. (2011). Strategies for conducting elite interviews. *Qualitative Research*, 11(4), 431–441.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794111404329>.
22. Ilemona, J. (2020). A study of Nigerian foreign policy under President Olusegun Obasanjo, 1999–2007. *International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies*, 8(2), 43–59.
23. Iliffe, J. (2013). African liberation. In *Obasanjo, Nigeria and the world* (pp. 145–172). Cambridge University Press.
24. Jemirade, D. (2020). Transformations in Nigeria's foreign policy: From Balewa to Obasanjo. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 14(3), 126–139.
25. Krippendorff, K. (2019). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). Sage.
26. Magu, S. M. (2021). Conceptual approaches to foreign policy and application to African countries. In *Explaining Foreign Policy in Post-Colonial Africa* (pp. 19–59). Springer.
27. Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2019). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (4th ed.). Sage.
28. Morin, J.-F., & Paquin, J. (2018). How does rationality apply to foreign policy analysis and what are its limitations? In *Foreign Policy Analysis* (pp. 217–254). Springer.
29. Obuah, E. E., & Ndubuisi, J. O. (2024). A rational actor model in the study of the comparative foreign policy of Nigeria towards the Niger Republic under Buhari's military regime and civilian administration. *Open Access Library Journal*, 11, e10204.
30. Ogbondah, C. W. (1998). Political repression in Nigeria, 1993–1998: A critical examination of one aspect of the perils of military dictatorship. *Africa Today*, 45(1), 27–54.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40174844>.
31. Ogbulu, U., & Eze, R. C. (2021). Nigeria's foreign policy impediments: Examining the debt relief deal and ceding of Bakassi. *International Journal of Academic Multidisciplinary Research*, 5(5), 187–199.
32. Ogunnubi, O., & Adebajo, A. (2021). Nigeria's foreign policy and Africa: Continuity and change. *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 28(2), 145–163.
33. Ogunnubi, O., & Okeke, U. (2023). Nigeria as a regional pivotal state: Medium power debates revisited. *African Security Review*, 32(2), 145–162.
34. Ogunsanwo, A. (1976). Nigeria's foreign policy under Murtala Mohammed and Obasanjo: An examination. *African Affairs*, 75(300), 404–426.
35. Oloruntoba, S. O. (2020). Nigeria's foreign policy: Continuity, change and contradictions. In S. Oshewolo & F. Fayomi (Eds.), *Nigerian politics* (pp. 407–426). Springer.
36. Olusola, O. (2015). Nigerian foreign policy in the Fourth Republic: An assessment of the impact of Obasanjo's civilian administration, 1999–2007. *Peak Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 3(2), 45–59.
37. Orb, A., Eisenhauer, L., & Wynaden, D. (2001).

Ethics in qualitative research. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 33(1), 93–96.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1547-5069.2001.00093.x>.

policy: A historical misnomer. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 6(1), 1846256.

38. Oshewolo, S. (2019). A reconsideration of the Afrocentric principle in Nigeria's foreign policy framework. *GeoJournal*, 84(6), 1527–1539. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-019-10114-1>.
39. Oshewolo, S., & Fayomi, F. (2020). Nigeria's foreign policy: Continuity, change and contradictions. *Advances in African Economic, Social and Political Development*, 407–426. Springer.
40. Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 42(5), 533–544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>.
41. Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Sage.
42. Raji, O. (2024). Tinubu's foreign policy scorecard. *Centre for Democracy and Development West Africa*. Available at: <https://www.cddwestafrica.org/blog/tinubu-s-foreign-policy-scorecard/>, (Accessed: 23 November 2025).
43. Saunders, B., Sim, J., Kingstone, T., Baker, S., Waterfield, J., Bartlam, B., Burroughs, H., & Jinks, C. (2015). Saturation in qualitative research: Exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Quality & Quantity*, 52(4), 1893–1907. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-017-0574-8>.
44. Silverman, D. (2020). *Interpreting qualitative data* (6th ed.). Sage.
45. Sklar, R. L. (1999). Nigeria: Political parties, foreign policy, and human rights under Abacha. *IFRA-Nigeria Publications*.
46. Tamm, H., & Snidal, D. (2023). Rational choice and indirect global governance. In D. Snidal (Ed.), *International Organization and Global Governance* (3rd ed., pp. 233–252). Routledge.
47. Ukaogo, V. O., Okonkwo, U. U., Orabueze, F. O., Eze, V. O., & Ugwu-Okoye, S. (2020). Afro-centrism as the centerpiece of Nigeria's foreign