From Nonalignment to Multialignment in the Emerging Global Order: Options for Nigeria as a Middle Power

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Key Judgments

Nigeria's status as a middle power in global affairs has significant implications for regional and global governance. Despite domestic challenges, the country is well positioned to shape global affairs and advance African interests. Specifically:

- Its middle power status is primarily shaped by Nigeria's natural, tangible, and intangible sources of power. These instruments of state power are expected to inform its engagement in global affairs in the years ahead.
- Over time, Nigeria has demonstrated a capacity to influence both regional and global processes and outcomes. Its substantial involvement across diverse sectors provides a foundation for Nigeria to consolidate on its gains in the coming years.
- Nigeria's economic, diplomatic, and cultural resources drive its middle power status. However, its ability to maintain this standing will be increasingly contested by other emerging middle powers.
- Nigeria continues to play a major role within international institutions, such as the United Nations, the Commonwealth of Nations, and the World Trade Organization. At the same time, its regional influence through bodies such as ECOWAS and the African Union is expected to remain strong.
- As geostrategic competition erodes the rules-based order and a new global order emerges, Nigeria's leadership remains important to promoting regional integration, peace, and security in Africa and beyond, ensuring the continent's voice is amplified in this new global landscape. The country will retain a critical role in regional and global governance.

Nigeria's Role and Importance as a Middle Power

The shift from one global order to another tends to occur gradually, sometimes imperceptibly, over a long period of time. However, the underlying forces of change progress inexorably until the transition itself eventually bursts into the open. The unipolar moment, which emerged under the hegemony of the United States as the sole standing superpower after the collapse of the Soviet Union, began to erode almost as soon as it was consolidated. This erosion has been driven by three primary factors: the reemergence of China as a major global economic powerhouse, with commensurate ambitions for global leadership; the military and political resurgence of Russia; and the dynamism of several middle powers, such as India, Brazil, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Nigeria, seeking to carve out autonomous roles in global governance. As a result, existing global governance institutions find themselves struggling to cope with the many conflicting demands of a nascent new order whose contours are still being shaped.

As the world grapples with multifaceted development, security, and governance challenges — including climate change, terrorism, poverty and economic inequality, pandemics, and more — middle powers like Nigeria yearn to be recognized as strategic partners in seeking sustainable solutions. More importantly, as the world evolves into a multipolar geopolitical theater marked by renewed superpower contestation, the role of middle powers in bridging and balancing the associated geopolitical divides cannot be discounted.

Nigeria's middle power status is reflected in its regional leadership role. Over the years, it has spearheaded efforts by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), and the African Union. The country wields paramount economic influence as Africa's leading economy.

It also leads in peacekeeping and the promotion of collective security in Africa and beyond. Its dominant role in ECOWAS and peacekeeping leadership garnered considerable global recognition.[1] Nigeria clearly ranks as a middle power by salient economic and demographic metrics, as well as its military posture and global power projection (See Table 1). With a growing economy—gross domestic product (GDP) of over $377.37 billion is projected for 2026, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF)[2]— a formidable military, and a strong diplomatic presence across the world, Nigeria has the capacity for regional and global influence.[3]–

Nigeria enjoys natural endowments that position it in the international order. As the most populous country in Africa and among the most populous in the world—with projections indicating it will become the world's third most populous country after India and China in the coming decades—Nigeria's power potential is bound to increase, cementing its place as the natural giant of Africa. The country ranks as the world's 8th largest by surface area, with an estimated 76.2% of land classified as arable for permanent crops and pastures. This agricultural potential far exceeds that of other large African nations. Among the continent's eight largest countries — Algeria, Sudan, Libya, Chad, Niger, Angola, Mali, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo — the average share of cultivatable land is 31.4%, less than half of Nigeria's.[4] Unfortunately, domestic instability impedes its ability to realize its potential as a food security guarantor, including terrorism in the Northeast and certain areas of the Northwest, armed conflicts between cattle herders and farmers in the North Central and Southwest, and sporadic secessionist movements in the Southeast and parts of the South-South.

The precarious state of Nigeria's economy and security has occasionally led to its status and prospects as a middle power being challenged. Still, the country exerts considerable influence in global politics within Africa and across the globe. Some of the most significant moments in Nigeria's post-independence foreign policy have coincided with periods when the country purposefully sought to drive a national rebirth. During these times, a motivated leadership sought to make a difference regardless of the country's economic circumstances. Periods of domestic national reset inevitably refract into foreign policy, producing a more robust foreign policy posture. For example, when Nigeria embedded the principle of mutual reciprocity[5] firmly in its foreign policy — ending the timidity and tentativeness that characterized its early post-independence stance — this coincided with General Murtala Muhammed's 1976 "Africa has come of age" speech, delivered in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. This declaration of Africa's independence reflected the ideological underpinnings of Nigeria's post-civil-war domestic agenda, buoyed by its prominent role in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and the Non-Aligned Movement.

Foreign policy activism anchored by national purpose and a leadership prepared to leverage the country's natural endowments saw Nigeria play a crucial role in establishing the new African Union and the earlier formation of ECOWAS, now the continent's foremost regional bloc. This same foreign policy activism drove Nigeria to champion a role for itself and other middle powers in the quest for a more stable and equitable global order. Nigeria's pursuit of a concert of middle powers and the proposed South Atlantic Treaty Organization reflects the national ambition to ensure that Africa claims its rightful place at the table in a reformed international multilateral system. Although the concert of middle powers did not gain traction at the time, there was no mistaking Nigeria's middle power responsibilities in Africa. It led ECOWAS in military interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone to help end civil wars engulfing both countries at a time when Nigeria's economic situation was parlous.

But in assessing Nigeria's status as a middle power, a crucial question arises: Where does Nigeria position itself within the hierarchy of global influence? And what strategic resources and capabilities does the nation possess to sustain its momentum and assert regional and sub-regional leadership in pursuit of its strategic objectives?

To objectively engage with these questions, we must acknowledge that Nigeria's Sisyphean burden of advancing its influence is connected to the very challenges that have held it back. As Africa's largest economy and most populous nation, Nigeria holds immense economic potential. Its vast natural resources and human capital, including oil, gas, agriculture, and a resourceful population, position it as a pivotal player in global markets. However, the extent to which these resources can elevate Nigeria's global and regional standing depends on its ability to overcome persistent structural and governance challenges that have historically impeded progress.[6] Understanding Nigeria's status through the prism of middle power politics provides a clearer grasp of the country's prominent place in international relations and its potential for leadership in both regional and global affairs.

Nigeria's Middle Power Partnerships

Nigeria strategically cultivates diverse partnerships with other middle powers to advance its global position and navigate complex geopolitical dynamics.

1. **South-South cooperation:** Nigeria actively fosters its relationship with other countries in the Global South by cultivating economic, technical, and cultural ties. It has built significant relationships with countries such as Brazil, India, and Turkey.

2. **Joint initiatives in peacekeeping:** Nigeria has a strong record of peacekeeping efforts, particularly under the United Nations. Additionally, it has formed strategic alliances with other middle powers within ECOWAS and the African Union, such as Ghana and South Africa, and within the UN, specifically India and Pakistan. Through joint exercises and training programs, Nigeria has enhanced the capabilities of its armed forces and security agencies, improving their effectiveness in complex peacekeeping environments. Consistent deployment of troops and resources in missions like the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in Sierra Leone and Liberia underscores its prime role in security and stability.[7]

3. **Navigating the U.S.-China rivalry:** Nigeria knows it cannot navigate great power dynamics in isolation, so it adopts strategic autonomy rather than choosing between Washington and Beijing. Its diverse relationships with countries like Turkey, Brazil, South Africa, and India give it access to different sources of investment, diplomatic engagement, and technological innovation, free from dependence on any single power. By coordinating and forming blocs with other middle powers in the UN and G77, Nigeria positions itself to exert global influence and mitigate great-power dominance. Russia is seeking to gain control of energy and other natural resources as it pursues a range of military, political, and economic interests across Africa. This could impact Nigeria's regional influence. However, Nigeria is conscious that Russia has nothing to offer for the time being, given its ongoing war in Ukraine.[8]

4. **Diplomatic engagements:** To promote an advanced multilateral international system, Nigeria leverages its unique regional and global position to engage diplomatically with other middle powers. It promotes African regional interests during these engagements, building consensus on issues such as debt relief, among others. It also continues to play an active role in ECOWAS through its commitment to regional integration.[9] Despite the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), Nigeria maintains diplomatic engagement with these countries.

Nigeria's relationship with other middle powers is not merely transactional. Instead, it is rooted in the promotion of shared prosperity and a peaceful global order. While these collaborations provide Nigeria with economic opportunities and diplomatic leverage, they also facilitate the security cooperation necessary to navigate complex geopolitical dynamics and assert the nation's influence as a significant actor on the world stage.

To bolster its status as a middle power, Nigeria must reposition its foreign policy strategy, leveraging its competitive economic, diplomatic, and cultural strengths to achieve its national interest. This entails optimizing the country's middle power capabilities to exert influence and shape regional and global outcomes in a more strategic and rewarding way. This shift should emphasize several critical priorities, as highlighted in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Priority Areas of Nigeria's Middle-Power Strategy

Priority	Remarks
Regional Leadership	Reinvigorating the country's stake and role in regional organizations such as ECOWAS and AU
Multilateral Engagement	Active participation in global forums such as the United Nations and the Commonwealth
Diplomatic Mediation	Continued mediation in regional conflicts through third-party diplomacy
Cultural Diplomacy	Leveraging the country's cultural assets, such as music, sports, film, tourism, and hospitality, to promote its national image and build functional relationships with other nations
Economic Diplomacy	Promoting the country's economic interests through diplomatic tactics, including negotiating favorable trade and investment terms and opportunities

Source: Author's original compilation (2025)

Nigeria's Political and Macroeconomic History: Continental Superpower, or Underwhelming Middle Power?

Scholars and practitioners have provided several accounts of Nigeria's foreign policy since it attained independence in 1960, ranging from theoretical and academic traditions to biographical accounts. In his depiction of Nigeria as a regional power, Bolaji Akinyemi highlighted several key moments of progressive foreign policy, despite what he describes as "episodic realism," especially in the immediate post-independence era.[10] He outlines Nigeria's break with France over the latter's atomic tests in the Algerian Sahara, which led to the killing of several Algerians and radioactive contamination. Other bold moves include the nationalization of British petroleum, peacekeeping efforts in Chad, and Nigeria's frontline status during the apartheid struggle, despite not sharing a contiguous border with Southern Africa. Akinyemi buttresses Nigeria's growing standing as a major international player by highlighting the country's outright refusal[11]in 1976 to host Henry Kissinger for a visit where he would explain the U.S. government's position on Angola, despite his influential position in foreign policy at the time. He also highlights the frequent consultations by U.S. and British leaders with Nigeria over key African matters.[12]

Nigeria's role as one of the leading states in Africa — and as the regional hegemon in West Africa — has rarely been questioned since its independence in 1960. Many speak of Nigeria's "missionary zeal" and describe its role as its "manifest destiny," while others hail it as the "Giant of Africa," "West African Giant," "older brother," and even the "crippled giant."[13] Chapter 2, Section 19 of the Nigerian Constitution of 1999 expressly highlights Nigeria's foreign policy objectives. It stipulates the promotion and protection of national interest, African integration and support for African unity, international cooperation to consolidate universal peace, and respect for international law and treaty obligations. It also expressly emphasizes seeking settlement of international disputes through negotiation, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, and adjudication, as well as promoting a just world economic order.

Centering Africa in its foreign policy objectives was a deliberate choice for Nigeria. [14]This choice only sharpened following its bitter experience during the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970, during which several African states recognized the breakaway Republic of Biafra. This further cemented a foreign policy posture undergirded by global norms and standards, placing the emancipation of Africa at the heart of Nigeria's diplomatic efforts. In line with this position, Adekeye Adebajo asserts that *Pax Nigeriana,* which refers to Nigeria's assumed mandate from the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), as a regional hegemon has underpinned Nigeria's various peacekeeping interventions across West Africa since the R2P doctrine was adopted in the 2000s.[15]

Various epochal normative missions have shaped Nigeria's foreign policy interventions. From the 1960s to the late 1980s, Nigeria was preoccupied with supporting African states' decolonization efforts and ending settler colonialism and apartheid rule in Southern Africa. From the late 1980s until the early 2000s, it was focused on stabilizing a West African sub-region riven by conflict and humanitarian disasters. Then, in the early 2000s, Nigeria partnered with other regional hegemons — including South Africa, Ethiopia, and Algeria — to advance the African renaissance concepts that led to the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). This era coincided with Nigeria's return to democratic rule under President Olusegun Obasanjo, an international affairs enthusiast, characterized by the lifting of Nigeria's suspension from the Commonwealth and Obasanjo's chairmanship of the African Union from 2004 to 2006. During this period, Nigeria hosted peace talks on the devastating conflict in Darfur, Sudan, and the 2003 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Abuja. Despite this continental focus, Nigeria maintained its sub-regional leadership roles and responsibilities.

In the post-colonial era, Nigeria maintained close and functional ties with Commonwealth member states, though the exigencies of the Nigerian Civil War significantly hindered its rise as a global player. Despite this setback, Nigeria continued to play a prominent role within both the Commonwealth and the Non-Aligned Movement. The Movement, founded in 1961, is an international forum of 121 developing countries that are not formally aligned with or against any major power bloc in the international system. Then, the oil boom in the 1960s and early 1970s transformed Nigeria's fortunes, making it one of the largest oil-producing states in the world. Buoyed by surging oil export revenue, which translated into a higher per capita income, the country took a frontline role in the struggle to liberate Southern Africa from settler colonialism and apartheid. Simultaneously, it worked to strengthen bonds of solidarity across the African world. The hosting of the Second World Black Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in 1977 served as a salutary example of Nigeria's soft power.

In the mid-1970s, Nigeria began to play a dominant role in the West African sub-region's politics and governance with the establishment in 1975 of a regional economic community, ECOWAS, aiming to foster economic integration. By the 1990s, Nigeria started spearheading major peacekeeping efforts in the sub-region and successfully halted the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. It also played a prominent role in the African Union, Africa's continental body. The consolidation of democracy in Nigeria during the 2000s, coupled with the era's burgeoning oil economy, catapulted Nigeria into a position of global reckoning. Since then, Nigeria has played a key role in African politics and diplomacy as well as certain aspects of global affairs.

Nigeria's foreign policy posture has long been characterized by its policy of nonalignment,[16] as is evidenced in the continued swing of the country's foreign policy pendulum between the East and West—though arguably in favor of the latter rather than the former.[17] However, Nigeria is also an active participant in numerous Global South coalitions aimed at fostering a multipolar world in response to the tradition of liberal internationalism that seeks to make the world "safe for democracy." These engagements include groupings like the G77, which promote a new international economic order, and organizations like OPEC, where Nigeria joins other oil producers to assert greater leverage over natural energy resources.

In this context, Nigeria has worked with other members to influence international norms and global standards, impacting nuclear nonproliferation, trade, global finance, and energy and the environment, codifying in international law the duty to compensate postcolonial countries through distributive justice[18] Post-independence, this policy set the stage for Africa to become the cornerstone of Nigeria's foreign policy, with a focus on four principles: sovereign equality for all states irrespective of their size; respect for the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of every African state; non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries; and commitment to functional cooperation as a means of promoting inter-African unity.[19]

Politically, Nigeria has maintained stable and continuous democratic transitions since 1999. It plays a leading role in regional organizations such as ECOWAS and the AU, frequently engaging in multilateral diplomacy and peacekeeping missions in Africa and beyond. This influence is backed by a large, well-equipped military; Nigeria currently ranks as the third-largest military power in Africa owing to its large active manpower, sustained defense budget investments, and continuous equipment modernization.[20] In the past, the country has committed its military resources to peacekeeping in Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Gambia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Nigeria is also endowed with significant soft power diplomatic assets. In addition to its overall population growth, Nigeria's demographic profile is extremely youthful, with the median age being 18.1 years and more than half of its population being under the age of 30. This makes Nigeria a potential powerhouse of knowledge, skills, and innovation, with an enormous, game-changing capacity if properly harnessed. Nigeria has consistently deployed these assets through initiatives such as the Technical Aid Corps Scheme (TACS), which has sent Nigerian professionals — such as health workers and teachers — to less endowed countries in Africa and the Caribbean since the mid-1980s. This youthful population has already delivered artistic innovation, with globally competitive art, music, literature, film, and sports in recent years. Finally, Nigeria has a growing digital economy, with the tech industry producing the highest number of unicorns — tech startups valued at more than $1 billion — in Africa, fueling economic growth.

The Nigerian diaspora also presents an opportunity to advance the country's foreign policy objectives. Having spent many years away from Nigeria, the diaspora community now has a strong sense of connection to their home country. They are concerned and committed to national development, with the skills and resources to contribute to Nigeria's socioeconomic growth, making the diaspora community a potent army of international ambassadors. Additionally, in 2024, Nigeria received over $25 billion, making it Africa's largest remittance recipient.[21] Diaspora remittance has consistently ranked higher than foreign direct investment in Nigeria's GDP in the last decade, underscoring the importance of this population segment. More importantly, this attribute enables the country to exert influence and shape global and regional outcomes subliminally.

Over the years, Nigeria has navigated the complex dynamics of the evolving international system by strategically positioning itself to leverage the ongoing competition between the great powers — specifically the United States and China — rather than bowing to external pressures. Nigeria seemingly understands that choosing between the United States and China may not always serve its interests; its adaptive foreign policy aims to create space for cooperation between both states rather than competition and conflict.

Nigeria has had a longstanding strategic partnership with the United States, with cooperation on trade, especially in the oil and gas sector; security, particularly counter-terrorism; and human capital development, particularly in the health sector. Today, the United States is Nigeria's third-largest trade partner, following the EU and China.[22] Nigeria has used this duality to its benefit, often turning to China for arms to enhance its military capabilities when vetting processes from Western partners create acquisition difficulties.[23] A prime example occurred in May 2025, when Nigeria signed a memorandum of understanding with the Chinese government to acquire arms and establish a regional hub for the maintenance of Chinese military equipment. This strategy displays Nigeria's ability to diversify partnerships and avoid becoming overly reliant on one great power while forcing both the United States and China to compete in their offers of engagement.

Economically, Nigeria's recent attempts to diversify its economy aim to help reduce external influence. By expanding trade and investment relationships worldwide and prioritizing economic reform, Nigeria would, in this thinking, mitigate the impact of conditionalities typically attached to aid or investments from global powers such as the United States and China. Beijing's investment offers are considered to have fewer conditions than those of the United States, and this lower conditionality is the case with Nigeria as well. This strategic economic recalibration would help create a strong foundation for an independent foreign policy.[24]

In the Global South, Nigeria is a vocal proponent of multilateralism, advocating for a more equitable international system. It pushes for reforms in global institutions, such as the UN Security Council, while seeking permanent representation and full membership in organizations such as the G20 and BRICS. Notably, Nigerian President Bola Ahmed Tinubu attended the G20 Leaders' summits in New Delhi and Brasilia in 2023 and 2024, where he met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to discuss bilateral and global concerns — including Nigeria's accession to full membership. The country also played a key role in talks leading up to the 2025 G20 Summit hosted by South Africa. Nigeria's aspiration for full membership in the G20 and BRICS stems from a desire to benefit from the geostrategic advantage inclusion offers, especially in fostering multilateral solidarity in spheres of mutual interest, championing developing nations' interests, and addressing shared challenges of trade equity, security, and climate change. Membership would also give Nigeria the opportunity to subtly nudge the United States and China toward cooperation rather than competition.[25] Furthermore, Nigeria has had a long-standing relationship with the EU, with cooperation on trade, development, security, and migration. This relationship was recently strengthened following the 8th Nigeria-EU ministerial dialogue in March 2026 with the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in attendance in Abuja.

At the same time, Nigeria is actively pursuing support from Gulf states like the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with which it signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement in January 2026, and Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which have committed more than $8 billion and $50.7 billion respectively. This type of support remains crucial to Nigeria's strategic interests, requiring it to be both forward-thinking and clear-headed in its diplomatic engagement. President Tinubu has prioritized international engagement, with recent visits to India[26] and Qatar,[27] to boost trade and investment. He also visited the UAE for COP28,[28] Brazil for the BRICS summit in 2025, and Turkey in January 2026. During his visit to Qatar, the president signed seven multisectoral agreements and memorandums of understanding on education, labor, tourism, trade, mining, agriculture, and sports.

Similarly, Nigeria's decision to participate in the Global Financing Pact Summit in June 2023 — convened by President Emmanuel Macron of France barely a month after Tinubu assumed the presidency — demonstrated the country's prioritization of development financing from the Global North. This diplomacy extended into early January 2024, when President Tinubu called for strengthened cooperation with France to combat terrorism. Furthermore, Nigeria's participation at the 15th BRICS Summit in Johannesburg in 2023 demonstrates the administration's commitment to pursuing mutually accelerated growth, sustainable development, and inclusive multilateralism.

At COP28 in Dubai, President Tinubu announced initiatives aimed at ensuring a sustainable and eco-friendly future.[29] This followed former President Muhammadu Buhari's earlier net-zero pledge at COP26 in Glasgow, Scotland. In addition to global sustainability efforts, President Tinubu led a delegation of Nigeria's top private-sector players to secure significant investment pledges totaling nearly $14 billion during the Nigeria-India Presidential Roundtable and Conference in New Delhi, India.[30] These commitments span steel, petrochemicals and fertilizer production, power generation, digital economic transformation, space communications, and defense equipment manufacturing. Since assuming the presidency in 2023, Tinubu has attracted $30 billion in foreign direct investment commitments, including manufacturing, telecommunications, health care, oil and gas, and more.[31]

Nigeria has also asserted itself on the geopolitical stage, calling for the de-escalation of hostilities and a humanitarian truce between Israel and Hamas following the October 7, 2023, attacks, as well as de-escalation following Iran's attack on Israel in April 2024. Attesting to the recognition of Nigeria's global leadership potential, the nation was included in a ministerial committee of eight foreign ministers assigned by the Joint Arab-Islamic Summit to advocate for a cessation of hostilities in the Israeli-Hamas war in November 2023.

Nigeria-U.S. Relations

Relations between Nigeria and the United States have been largely cordial since Nigeria's independence in 1960. During the early years of Nigerian sovereignty, U.S. foreign policy was largely driven by the containment of communism and the Soviet bloc. However, in his speech on Nigeria's admission into the United Nations, Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa made it clear that his country did not wish to be dragged into the Cold War rivalry between the East and the West. As a matter of policy, he stated, Nigeria would not be a member of any power bloc. Actions taken by the Balewa administration and all subsequent administrations have remained consistent with that principle of nonalignment.

While the substance of Nigeria–U.S. relations has remained steady, the style, tone, and tenor of those relations have changed with successive governments, often reflecting the shifting geopolitical context. For example, Yakubu Gowon's administration, which prosecuted the Nigerian Civil War from 1967 to 1970, was frustrated by the U.S. refusal to sell weapons to Nigeria. Gowon accused the United States of neutrality that, in fact, favored the breakaway region of Biafra and instead procured arms from the Soviet Union as well as other countries. Despite these diplomatic tensions, relations remained cordial at the end of the war in 1970, eventually strengthened by increased oil revenues on the back of improved trade relations.

When Murtala Muhammed replaced Gowon in 1975, he reshaped bilateral relations by adopting a more assertive, pan-Africanist outlook, particularly on apartheid and settler colonialism in Southern Africa. With Africa as the centerpiece of its foreign policy, Nigeria led the Organization of African Unity's decision to recognize the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), backing the MPLA as Angola's legitimate government over Holden Roberto's National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA), which the United States supported. In announcing the decision, General Muhammed affirmed that the "continent would no longer entertain interference from extra-continental powers." In addition, Nigeria rejected the U.S. demand that Soviet and Cuban military personnel withdraw from Angola as a condition for recognizing the MPLA government. Although General Muhammed was assassinated in 1976, his successor, General Olusegun Obasanjo, continued this foreign policy stance, leading to the nationalization of British Petroleum assets in the country and increasing friction between the departing Ford administration and the Nigerian government.

When Jimmy Carter was elected president of the United States in 1977, his conciliatory, consultative approach won over the Nigerian leadership and improved bilateral relations, though it did not necessarily represent a policy change for either side. Still, the two countries began treating one another as relevant partners on regional and global matters.[32] Unlike Henry Kissinger's Cold War rhetoric, President Carter's cardinal principle was to "weave a worldwide web of bilateral, political and, where appropriate, economic relations with the new emerging regional powers," as stated in a memo[33] by his National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski. Nigeria, in President Carter's view, was one such influential country. In the 1980s and 1990s, the relationship was dominated by economic considerations under Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. During this period, direct oil sales to the United States rose to over 50% of Nigeria's production, strengthening trade relations even as political and diplomatic tensions frequently surfaced.

In the last two decades, Nigeria-U.S. relations have remained steady, with both parties stressing the importance of the relationship. Despite the United States' dwindling interest in Africa's most populous country, Nigeria is still its second-most important trading partner in sub-Saharan Africa and its third-most important trading partner across the entire continent of Africa as of 2026[34], allowing Nigeria to benefit from the African Growth and Opportunity Act, including duty-free access to the U.S. market for over 1,800 products.[35] Nigeria continues to occupy a key strategic position for the United States' interests in Africa. Furthermore, the United States is now a major arms supplier to Nigeria,[36] with the country depending on U.S. arms sales to combat the Boko Haram insurgency.[37] However, China has emerged as Nigeria's top arms supplier,[38] following the United States' refusal to supply critical ammunition due to allegations of a poor human rights record.[39] As of 2026[40], China serves as the top overall arms supplier to sub-Saharan Africa, accounting for 44% of Nigeria's imports between 2019 and 2023, while the United States remains a secondary but strategically critical supplier.[41]

Today, the tense bilateral relations that followed President Trump's return to the White House in 2025—which included accusations of a Nigerian "Christian genocide" by the administration[42]—appear to have shifted toward improved engagement with the Nigerian authorities. Still, the concrete impact on Nigeria-U.S. relations remains to be seen. Given the absence of sub-Saharan Africa from the United States' global priorities in the National Security Strategy, Nigeria is unlikely to be a top U.S. priority in the near term.

Nonetheless, as the most populous and fastest-growing country in Africa, Nigeria remains inextricably intertwined with the future of the United States. Furthermore, China's influence on Nigeria and the broader African region remains a concern for the U.S. government, as Beijing sees the continent as a testing ground for its own challenge to the rules-based international system.

Nigeria-China Relations

China-Nigeria relations date to 1971, the year the People's Republic of China assumed membership on the UN Security Council. This relationship evolved while China was still a developing country — albeit one with clear economic and security aspirations. China's evolution into a superpower caused the dynamics of the China-Nigeria relationship to shift as a result. As China's influence and wealth increase, its Africa-centered policy has also evolved. This has led to changes in four broad areas.

First, the sectoral expansion of China's peace and security involvement is largely driven by the concept of developmental peace, which refers to an international approach to peace and stability that prioritizes economic development, supports existing central governments, and provides aid without political conditions.[43] It is worth noting that China has previously addressed peace and security on the continent through a "non-interference" approach that focuses on infrastructure investment with capacity building, in addition to bilateral security partnerships and UN peacekeeping. Second, China seeks to be a norm maker rather than a norm complier. Third, the actors involved in China-Nigeria relations have diversified beyond national leaders to include business enterprises, civil society organizations, and academia. Fourth, China emphasizes using multilateral stages, such as the United Nations and the African Union, to influence change.

China has pursued these goals through a policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of partner countries like Nigeria. On a continent where nations resent the Western practice of tying development assistance to human rights and democracy conditionalities, China's non-interference policy endears it to many partners. In this way, China encouraged Nigeria to adhere to the "One China" policy.

While China's early relationship with Nigeria focused primarily on trade, it has expanded to include arms supplies and developmental peace, with contributions to nation-building processes, particularly through infrastructure development. China's main exports to Nigeria include light mechanical, industrial, and electric products, but it has targeted Nigeria's extractive sector to secure much-needed oil, gas, and other natural resources.[44] China is currently constructing several wholly owned or joint ventures in Nigeria across many sectors. These include oil and gas, technology, services, education, and transportation, such as the construction of major rail lines between Abuja and Kaduna and between Lagos and Ibadan. Chinese firms are also operating the Lekki Free Trade Zone in collaboration with the Lagos State Government.[45]

In trade relations, Nigeria imports more from China than the United States. As of the first quarter of 2026, China accounted for 37.4% of Nigeria's total imports according to Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics.[46] In terms of infrastructure, China has exploited the vacuum created by the United States' declining interest in Nigeria, investing in infrastructure to win the support of the Nigerian government.[47] The country has secured Chinese loans to fund several railways, airports, and power plants, as well as technological infrastructure.[48] However, China has cut infrastructure funding across Africa in recent years, beginning from 2017 with annual loan commitments dropping from $28.8 billion in 2016 to $9.9 billion by 2018, while falling under $5 billion annually starting in 2020 and reaching just $2.1 billion by 2024[49], which may force Nigeria to look to the United States or Europe.[50] Still, the FOCAC Beijing Action Plan (2025-27) promises $50 billion in financial support to Africa and commits Beijing to finance 1,000 projects to improve people's livelihoods. A number of scholars have concluded that despite the increase in trade volume over the decades, there exists a huge trade imbalance between China and Nigeria.[51] [52]Scholars such as Goddy Osimen et al. argued in 2022 that:

> "Nigeria exclusively imports more from China than from USA and India combined, with little exports in return. China only imports unprocessed agricultural items like cotton and timber and minerals like crude oil from Nigeria. China has added mechanical and human expertise and investment capital to its list of exports to Nigeria with over 200 Chinese companies operating in Nigeria. The China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation is almost exclusively in charge of rehabilitating Nigeria's railway system. The China National Petroleum Company (CNPC) and the China National Petroleum and Chemicals Corporation (CNPCC) are getting juicy projects and making enviable inroads into Nigeria's deep water oil fields."[53]

China is also integral to Nigeria's space program. In May 2007, Nigeria launched its first communications satellite, NIGCOMSAT-1, marking Africa's first contribution to a Global Navigation Satellite System. The satellite launch aimed to facilitate telecommunications across Africa, with a focus on improving broadcasting, internet access, and telemedicine. NIGCOMSAT-1 was deorbited in 2008 due to operational failure and has since been replaced by other satellites, all through Chinese technical and financial assistance. In 2018, the Nigerian government announced $500 million in Chinese funding to launch two additional satellites to boost communications output for Nigerian companies that had previously sourced these services from abroad.[54]

China's sponsorship of the NIGCOMSAT satellites, alongside the significant role it plays in providing services and maintenance for the oil and gas sector, railways, and roads, further demonstrates the cordial business relations between China and Nigeria. Starting in 1999 under then-President Obasanjo and continuing through the current Tinubu administration, each Nigerian president has visited China and hosted Chinese leaders. China, meanwhile, remains focused on advancing its geostrategic interests by leveraging Nigeria's natural resources and large population as a market. Beijing uses infrastructure projects and loans as tools to secure Nigerian cooperation.

Climate and Energy

A critical pillar of Nigeria's geopolitical interest is its approach to global climate and energy issues, reflecting the nation's resource endowment and commitment to sustainable development. While primarily recognized for its contribution to OPEC and its vast oil and gas reserves, Nigeria is strategically positioning itself within the global green energy transition. This dual approach has allowed Nigeria to maintain its identity as an oil producer while adapting to a changing world.

Nigeria's crude oil production consistently falls short of national targets, creating significant fiscal pressure. For example, while the 2025 production target was 2.0 million barrels per day (mbpd), production averaged 1.486 mbpd in April 2025, with an average of 1.468 mbpd during the first quarter.[55] Towards the end of 2025, it had averaged around 1.5 to 1.6 mbpd, reaching approximately 1.6 mbpd by November 2025, with an overall 2025 average of about 1.4 mbpd.[56] Despite these shortfalls, Nigeria retains its position as Africa's largest crude oil exporter. From January 2002 to January 2025, crude oil production averaged 1.885 mbpd, peaking at 2.496 mbpd in November 2005 with a low of 1.015 mbpd in September 2022.[57]

The Nigerian economy is heavily dependent on oil and gas exports,[58] and they make up the bulk of government revenues. For instance, the 2025 budget projected 21 trillion Nigerian naira (about $13.8 billion to $15.4 billion) from oil revenue, representing approximately 50% of the total federal government's retained revenues.[59] The consistent failure to meet oil production targets directly translates into lower-than-projected oil revenues, which exacerbates Nigeria's record fiscal deficit, projected at N14.1 trillion in 2025.[60] This reliance on hydrocarbon revenue to bridge fiscal gaps creates a powerful economic imperative that can slow the transition away from fossil fuels. It also highlights the nation's vulnerability to global oil price fluctuations and domestic production challenges. Despite these obstacles, Nigerian fossil fuels continue to attract significant attention from global powers. Both the United States and China have pledged significant investments in the Nigerian oil and gas sector, notably the $25 billion African Atlantic Gas Pipeline project, designed to transport natural gas and green hydrogen to European countries.[61] Most recently, Shell CEO Wael Sawan pledged a $20 billion investment during a January 2026 visit with President Tinubu.

While the U.S.-China relationship with Nigeria is heavily influenced by energy, the competition between the two countries is increasingly defined by broader trade dynamics. For instance, in the second quarter of 2024, China was Nigeria's top trading partner, while the United States ranked third, behind India.[62] In September 2024, Nigeria's exports to China totaled $105.8 million,[63] while exports to the United States reached $124.9 million.[64] Beyond oil, it is pertinent to note that Nigeria holds over 210 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves, with 76% untapped, making it Africa's largest gas holder and a top-10 global player in terms of reserves.[65]

At the same time, Nigeria is committed to the green energy transition, alongside its "Decade of Gas" initiative, which aims to transform Nigeria from an oil- into a gas-powered economy by 2030 through its natural gas reserves. Nigeria has formally pledged to reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2060, with an interim 2030 emissions reduction target outlined in its Nationally Determined Contributions. Other key initiatives in the green energy transition include Solar Photovoltaic technology, hydropower, and legislative reforms such as the Electricity Act of 2023. Additionally, the administration has supported various innovations with pay-as-you-go (PAYG) models, aimed at improving energy access for over 2 million households and creating approximately 10,000 jobs in the solar industry. Furthermore, the government aims to convert 1 million vehicles to compressed natural gas by 2027,[66] with the goal of changing vehicles now powered by gasoline to use CNG instead, in accordance with its pledge to eliminate gas flaring.

Despite its many benefits, various interconnected challenges pose a risk to renewable energy adoption in Nigeria. These include inadequate infrastructure, a lack of diverse and affordable financing options, and inconsistent and unstable policy and regulatory frameworks that deter investment through cumbersome permit processes and fragmented agency oversight. The ongoing dominance of the fossil fuel industry, often propped up by subsidies, further distorts market incentives for renewables, which already face high upfront costs and a shortage of skilled professionals.

To navigate great power interests in the green energy transition, Nigeria and China have deepened their bilateral relationship through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC).[67] Meanwhile, the United States has taken a dual approach to its relations with Nigeria, showing interest in its natural gas reserves while supporting the energy transition through technical assistance.

While Nigeria is among the top 10 countries vulnerable to climate change impact, it contributes less than 4% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Nigeria has leveraged this vulnerability by launching a diplomatic campaign to host the 32nd Conference of the Parties (COP32) in 2027,[68] to position itself as a key player in shaping climate action across Africa.

To achieve long-term geostrategic relevance and economic resilience, Nigeria must bridge implementation gaps and overcome challenges that pose a risk to its green energy transition. This requires diversifying its economy beyond hydrocarbons and translating its diplomatic aspirations into tangible domestic actions.

Technology

While China currently dominates the Nigerian telecommunications market, the United States is the primary provider of cloud services.[69] Simultaneously, local telecommunications companies like MTN, Globacom, Airtel, and 9mobile lead the internet provider space.[70] While the jury is still out on the technological competition between China and the United States, any observable Chinese technological supremacy over the United States in core areas could impact Nigeria's disposition toward the great powers. For example, the release of DeepSeek as an open-source artificial intelligence (AI) technology has posed a significant challenge to U.S. AI labs such as OpenAI. Although China's technological ascendancy could encourage Nigeria to side with Beijing to expand its technological and human capital capabilities, Nigeria is unlikely to do so openly given its determination to maintain cordiality with the United States. Ultimately, a coalition of middle power recipients of these technologies might be able to influence both the United States and China to prioritize interoperability over monopoly, since most countries lack control over the technology they use. The concern remains how to manage this — especially for those at the intersection of commercial technology and national security.

Chinese digital technology offers Nigeria relatively cheaper access to affordable Chinese smartphones compared with Apple's iPhone and other U.S. products that are too expensive for many citizens. This is an area the current government is determined to prioritize in the country's development agenda. Nigeria considers technological advancement and the digital economy important aspects of its national development. With a vibrant technology industry and a rapidly growing digital infrastructure, the country finds itself navigating the U.S.-China rivalry for technological influence. Nigeria's digital economy is a significant contributor to its GDP, with the information and communication technology sector contributing 11.3% to nominal GDP in the third quarter of 2024, and the broader digital economy peaking at an unprecedented 19.8% in the second quarter of 2024.[71] This growth is driven by the rise of various private startups valued at over $1 billion, such as Moniepoint, OPay, Flutterwave, Andela, and Interswitch. Together, these companies have helped 90% of Nigeria's small and medium-sized firms formalize their operations.[72] Nigeria is also Africa's largest internet market, with over 142 million active internet subscribers and 169 million active mobile subscriptions as of January 2025.

Broadband penetration reached more than 48% in April 2025, missing the ambitious 70% target for 2025. Barriers include low-speed internet deployment (4G at 47%, 5G at 2.4%), multiple taxation, and infrastructure vandalism. Despite these challenges, internet usage surged to over 1 million terabytes in January 2025, a 93% increase from January 2023. While institutions like the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and the University of Ibadan are highly productive in scientific output, translating this research into commercial products remains difficult due to funding and collaboration gaps.

As these growth figures show, Nigeria is undergoing a digital transformation. China has established a significant footprint in Nigeria's telecommunications market through state-linked firms like Huawei and ZTE, which built a substantial portion of Africa's 3G and 4G networks.[73] China's success is driven by pricing up to 30% cheaper than Western rivals and attractive financial terms, including concessional loans with fewer political conditions.[74] Chinese investments include early rural telephony projects, Nigerian Communications Satellite (NIGCOMSAT) projects involving loans of $200 million and $400 million, and the national fiber optic backbone supported by loans of $100 million and $347 million.[75] More recently, Nigeria partnered with Chinese firm Galaxy Space to deploy direct-to-device satellite communication technology nationwide by the end of 2025. The partnership aims to eliminate network blind spots and facilitate technology transfer from China to Nigeria.

In contrast, the United States leads in global cloud services, with Amazon Web Services holding roughly 31% of the market share, Microsoft Azure 21%, and Google Cloud Platform 12% as of 2026. In 2025, Nigeria's cloud computing market was estimated at $1.03 billion and projected to grow to $3.28 billion by 2030. While U.S. companies dominate, Chinese tech giant Huawei also offers cloud solutions in Nigeria. Additionally, MTN Nigeria, a South African provider, recently partnered with Microsoft to deliver data hosting solutions via Azure. This division of influence leaves Nigeria's digital ecosystem reliant on both powers, creating a complex dependency structure.

While navigating the U.S.-China technology competition, Nigeria is increasingly aware of the importance of global technology governance. Across Africa, countries are actively engaging in dialogue and devising roadmaps for emerging technologies, leveraging their growing economic strength to influence institutions like the African Union, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), and the United Nations. Technology is now viewed as a lever of diplomacy, sovereignty, and regional integration.[76] Nigeria participates in pan-African digital alignment efforts, emphasizing harmonized fintech regulations and shared cybersecurity protocols within frameworks like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).[77] Additionally, the African Union has introduced frameworks such as the AU Data Policy Framework and the Malabo Convention on Cybersecurity and Personal Data Protection to guide member states in the alignment of national AI regulation and data protection laws.[78]

Nigeria's National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) is also developing its own digital public infrastructure standards, focused on interoperability, data security, and digital privacy. Simultaneously, it is seeking international partnerships with entities like Google and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).[79] To enhance technological diplomacy, in June 2025 Nigerian Minister of Communications, Innovation, and Digital Economy Bosun Tijani assumed leadership of the ITU as vice chairman of the board. He is also co-chair of the Digital Innovation Board of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Innovation and Entrepreneurship Alliance for Digital Development and of the International Advisory Board on Submarine Cable Resilience.

Nigeria's active participation in international standards-setting bodies is crucial to prevent "technological colonization" and ensure its interests are represented in global tech standards. A joint statement in July 2024 by the U.S. Department of Commerce and the Nigerian Ministry of Communications, Innovation, and Digital Economy affirmed shared priorities for strengthening the digital economy, promoting innovation, and increasing digital trade, including cooperation on AI research and international standards to support interoperability.[80]

Trade and Finance

Trade and finance are central to Nigeria's economic development and its efforts to diversify within the global economy. As a result, it actively seeks to attract foreign direct investment, drive regional integration, and secure its place in influential economic forums like the G20 and BRICS.[81] One of Nigeria's primary economic development goals is to diversify its economy and export sector beyond oil. By leveraging agricultural and mineral resources to non-oil and value-added items such as textiles and manufactured goods, the nation aims to reduce its reliance on volatile oil prices and foster industrial growth.

To achieve these goals, President Tinubu's administration has pursued foreign direct investment, securing over $50 billion in commitments between May 2023 and January 2025. Notable pledges include $14 billion from India, $25 billion from Shell, $10 billion from ExxonMobil, $8 billion from Indorama Ventures, and $3 billion from Jindal Steel, among others. These investments target essential sectors such as manufacturing, telecommunications, and health care, along with oil and gas, reflecting a broad economic strategy.

Nigeria's trade relations with major global players are complex. The United States is a significant trading partner. In 2025, U.S. goods exports to Nigeria were $6.8 billion, up 58.3% from 2024, whereas U.S. goods imports from Nigeria totaled $5.0 billion in 2025, down 13% from 2024.[82] While China is Nigeria's largest source of imports, the relationship is characterized by a significant imbalance.[83] As of the first quarter of 2026, Nigeria's total imports from China stood at $1.12 billion while Nigeria's exports to China stood at $78.5 million in the same period.[84] In 2023, mineral fuels dominated China's imports from Nigeria, accounting for nearly 60% of the total trade value ($1.41 billion), with minimal contribution from manufactured goods. This trade asymmetry with China, with Nigerian imports far exceeding exports, undermines local manufacturing and raises concerns about economic dependence.

However, Nigeria's development financing is heavily influenced by its debt profile. Chinese loans have significantly contributed to infrastructure development, particularly in transportation, energy, and telecommunications. While these loans have helped bridge critical infrastructure gaps, they have also increased the debt burden, raising concerns about fiscal sustainability, debt-servicing capacity, and economic sovereignty. This situation requires Nigeria to adopt smarter borrowing practices and diversify its financing sources to mitigate risks and ensure long-term stability.

Leveraging Middle Power Status to Influence the Changing World Order

In an era of intense competition and shifting global power dynamics, states that fall outside the traditional categories of great or emerging powers face significant uncertainty. Middle powers have also demonstrated distinctive approaches in particular policy areas, positioning them to influence global efforts specific to these domains. In doing so, they can create incentives or dampen the overall temperature of U.S.-China relations. Over the years, Nigeria has utilized such opportunities to carve out its strategic role in the international system. This section focuses on areas where Nigeria has leveraged its advantages to forge specific alignments based on shared interests and compatible objectives.

Reform of Global Governance

The question of global governance reform is as old as the United Nations itself. Nigeria has been at the forefront of the movement to redress the historical injustice of the UN Security Council lacking permanent representation from Africa. Given its frontline role in decolonization and the subsequent struggle against apartheid, Nigeria has long been seen as a primary candidate for a permanent seat on the Security Council. This is not just on account of its foreign policy activism, but also a reflection of its size and population. Indeed, when it was recommended that Africa receive three permanent seats, Nigeria, Egypt, and South Africa emerged as the natural representatives for the continent.

Nigeria joined forces with other victims of historical injustice from Asia and Latin America, partnering with countries like Brazil and India to compel other countries to reform the UN agenda. Furthermore, recent discourse at the 2026 World Economic Forum (WEF) annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland, reinforced the influence and relevance of middle powers in a fragmented international system. In his special address, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney emphasized the strategic logic underpinning the evolving middle power identity, with a focus on preserving a rules-based international order and middle powers' stabilizing role.[85] Carney argued that great powers alone can no longer sustain global stability; increasingly, it depends on coordinated leadership by credible middle powers, as reflected in Nigeria's long-standing commitment to multilateralism, nonalignment, and institutional legitimacy. He framed middle powers as "guardians of rules, norms, and collective problem-solving." Nigeria mirrors these themes in its historical role in peacekeeping, multilateral diplomacy, regional integration, and norm entrepreneurship across ECOWAS, the African Union, the UN system, and the Global South.[86]

In addition to its UN campaign, Nigeria's pursuit of membership in BRICS and G20 derives from the same strategic imperative: working with countries of overlapping interests to exert the collective weight necessary to sway the evolving geopolitical order. BRICS is an evolving bloc of influential countries seeking to counter what they perceive as the United States' disproportionate control over the global financial system — a concern deepened by the Trump administration's punitive economic actions and rhetorical threats. While the bloc prioritizes South-South cooperation and more balanced and diversified partnerships over reflexive opposition to the United States, the United States' continued retreat from its traditional leadership role and the erosion of norms that have shaped multilateralism since the end of World War II have positioned BRICS as a viable alternative platform. This is especially true for potential members drawn to its emphasis on trade and investment, providing them with the leverage to influence China and Russia, thus impacting global governance, financial, and multilateral architecture. Similar objectives motivate Nigeria's interest in G20 membership.

Global Tax Reform Agenda

Over the past decade, Nigeria has led the Africa Group at the UN, working closely with the G77 to address international tax abuse and illicit financial flows. At the 2024 UN General Assembly, a landmark resolution on the "Promotion of inclusive and effective international tax cooperation at the United Nations" — proposed by Nigeria on behalf of the Group of African States — passed with 119 votes in favor, nine against, and 43 abstentions.[87] This vote came a decade after the African Union and UN Economic Commission for Africa established the High-Level Panel on Illicit Financial Flows from Africa, chaired by former South African President Thabo Mbeki, in 2012. In its report, the panel called on African leaders to advocate for a more prominent UN role in tackling illicit financial flows. The report noted that illicit financial flows were not firmly established in the UN policy agenda and urged more rigorous efforts to build a unified global architecture to address the issue. Measures undertaken include efforts towards the adoption of a UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation specifically reshaping global tax governance, shifting power away from the OECD, and addressing base erosion and profit shifting (BEPS).[88] In 2026, Nigeria hosted and engaged heavily in high-level sessions of the African Union's Sub-Committee on Tax and Illicit Financial Flows to align national tax administrations with broader continental economic defense. Similarly, the Nigerian government has expanded international tax cooperation in addition to automated information-sharing mechanisms to trace offshore assets and recover public revenues lost to illicit channels. These efforts remain ongoing.

Given its role in establishing the African Union's High-Level Panel, Nigeria assumed leadership of the African Group at the UN. By working with the G77 and campaigning relentlessly, Nigeria successfully formed a UN Tax Convention. The convention aims to establish an inclusive, fair, transparent, efficient, equitable, and effective international tax system for sustainable development, strengthening the legitimacy, certainty, resilience, and fairness of international tax rules while addressing the challenges of domestic resource mobilization. The Mbeki report estimated that at least $50 billion is lost annually by African countries to illicit financial flows. The convention seeks to address these systemic weaknesses, targeting illicit financial flows, taxation of income derived from cross-border services, and taxation of high-net-worth individuals and corporations engaging in transfer pricing, among other issues.

Population Dynamics and Labor Migration

By 2033, projections by the African Development Bank indicate significant growth in Africa's youth population, that is, individuals aged 15 to 35 years.[89] Further, between 2030 and 2050, sub-Saharan Africa is expected to drive approximately 90% of the global growth in the working-age population, with Nigeria accounting for a substantial share of this surge. By 2050, Nigeria is projected to become the third-most populous country after India and China. The extent to which this demographic shift translates into economic and social progress will depend on how effectively the country prepares for it. Strategic investments in job creation, skills development, and social inclusion will be critical in harnessing the potential of this demographic. At the same time, countries like Nigeria — with large, skilled, and young populations — will need to mitigate the risks associated with rapid urbanization, given the pivotal role of labor migration in negotiations. Nigeria must take a careful, distinctive approach to this increasingly prominent policy issue, particularly because its response may sway others' stance on labor migration.

Given the influence of population flows and migration on labor market dynamics, Nigeria is poised to play a key role. It is positioned to lead the African countries, particularly those with overlapping interests on migration, to produce a coordinated policy response. This responsibility presents an opportunity for Nigeria to define and consolidate its middle power status while also addressing a strategic national interest. Nigeria must take ownership of its future in an increasingly multipolar world, and addressing these issues can help it do so. The African Common Position on Migration and Development framework underscores the need for a collective effort to address the fundamental causes of migration from a development perspective. This includes addressing African governments' significant investment losses in human resource development and the subsequent brain drain in priority sectors. It also highlights the impact of labor migration and remittance flows — which now double the amount of foreign aid to Africa — while linking migration to peace, security, and stability, among other cross-cutting issues such as human rights, gender, public health, the environment, and access to social services. Given these evolving geopolitical dynamics, migration presents another strategic avenue for Nigeria to enhance its middle-power status by leading the continental agenda.

Regional Security

Nigeria has consistently defined its security obligations beyond its borders, incorporating a "concentric circles" approach that integrates the security of its immediate neighbors, sub-regional states, and the continent at large. This regional responsibility directly serves Nigeria's internal security objectives, as local insurgent franchises are inextricably linked to their external wings. It informed its Pan-African fight against colonialism and apartheid in Southern Africa and its peacekeeping interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, and the Gambia. It is worth noting that Nigeria currently faces grave internal security challenges, including the scourge of banditry in its northwest and northcentral regions, violent extremism owing to the activities of Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in northeast Nigeria, the nefarious activities of the Eastern Security Network, which is the paramilitary wing of the secessionist movement Indigenous People of Biafra, in its southeast region. In its South-South and Southwest regions, it faces militancy and other forms of organized criminal gang activities, respectively. These challenges no doubt affect its ability to effectively meet its regional and global ambitions as it means resources that would otherwise be expended in pursuit of these ambitions have to be diverted towards its own internal security. Given current developments in the West African sub-region, where ECOWAS has guaranteed regional security through its pioneering interventions amid the exit of AES states, Nigeria must seize this moment to reimagine and recalibrate the regional security project in all its dimensions. The current crisis offers a unique opportunity for ECOWAS to move from an elite-driven institution to one that truly represents and serves the West African people. However, the challenges of poverty, inequality, governance deficits, and insecurity cannot be addressed by ECOWAS in its current form. As a result, there is an urgent need for a new, citizen-centered approach that prioritizes the concerns of ordinary Africans over the interests of political leaders.

As ECOWAS reaches the half-century mark, it faces a moment of reckoning. Now is the time for deep reflection, bold reforms, and a renewed commitment to the principles of regional integration, regional security, and inclusive governance. Nigeria must also consider how to address regional instability with a focus on regional security and the role of the military, particularly in curbing proliferating insurgencies, terrorism, and militancy. Based on historical events, traditional military strategies alone appear inadequate in tackling the complex threats posed by insurgent and terrorist groups. Many are now deeply embedded within communities and, in some cases, within the military itself. Addressing the region's security challenges requires a more sophisticated, intelligence-based approach and a comprehensive human security strategy that deals with poverty, inequality, and governance failures that extremist groups continue to exploit.

To achieve these goals, however, Nigeria has a primary responsibility to restore confidence in the regional integration project by first securing its own people. In addressing this immediate need, Nigeria has championed the African Standby Force (ASF), established by the African Union (AU) in 2020 as a continental peacekeeping force organized into five regional units that can be rapidly deployed during crises. This presents an opportunity to deploy its middle-power attributes to reassert its influence and restore peace.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Nigeria has cultivated a reputation as a stabilizing force in Africa through its support of UN peacekeeping operations and contributions to West African peace and stability. Similarly, its involvement in the struggle for African liberation illustrates its long-standing willingness to participate in global politics. During the second half of the 20th century, Nigeria directly confronted the United States over its support for white minority regimes in Southern Africa. This history demonstrates a diplomatic spirit that is still relevant today, especially as the geopolitical competition between the United States and China intensifies in Africa.

Nigeria should prioritize its own interests and those of Africa above the superpower rivalry. By leveraging its historic goodwill, it can serve as a model for integrating the two superpowers' interests to promote complementary, mutual, and significant development. This approach may facilitate increased engagement with other African nations in various multilateral initiatives, enhancing Nigeria's national prestige and public leadership both regionally and globally.

Additionally, Nigeria's engagement with global institutions like the United Nations, the G20, and the Non-Aligned Movement reflects its aspiration to shape global governance while maintaining strategic autonomy. These natural, tangible, and intangible potentials, as demonstrated by Nigeria's strategic actions, are an asset for Africa as the United States and China operate on the continent and the world stage. However, domestic challenges — including governance deficits, economic instability, corruption, and security threats such as terrorism and insurgency — continue to limit Nigeria's prospects. The country must address these internal obstacles, as they limit its ability to fully leverage its middle-power status for broader international influence.

Given Nigeria's crucial role in Africa and its many resources, the United States and China should establish a trilateral cooperation framework with Nigeria. By focusing on joint infrastructure development, economic diversification, and security assistance — the issues that matter most to Africans both on the continent and in the diaspora — the partnership would contribute to global stability. Aligning investments with Nigeria's development priorities, rather than geopolitical competition, would allow Beijing and Washington to move beyond rhetoric and contribute to a more peaceful and prosperous world order.

Nigeria's middle power status is a remarkable development, with significant implications for key regional and global issues. However, to sustain it and optimize its current strategic advantages, Nigeria must leverage its cultural and diplomatic strength to build strategic partnerships while addressing its domestic challenges around security, economic vulnerabilities, and collapsing institutions.

Nigeria's status offers significant possibilities for the country to push its strategic interests more forcefully amid the multipolar geopolitical competitions currently playing out. It also presents opportunities for a more active role in shaping global affairs, advancing African interests, and contributing to global concerns. As the international system continues to evolve, Nigeria's ability to reinvent itself through strategic statecraft will be essential to its continued relevance in global politics. The country's ability to adapt, innovate, and lead will be critical determinants of its prospects for maintaining influence in the ever-changing global landscape.[90]

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