

DISCOURSE ON THE PURSUITS OF NATIONAL INTEREST: A REGIMES ANALYSIS OF NIGERIA'S FOREIGN POLICY- (2019-2026)

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Abstract

For over six decades, Nigeria's foreign policy has been defined by its Afrocentric posture, regional leadership ambitions, and the constant struggle to translate diplomatic influence into tangible domestic benefits. This paper examines the critical period from 2019 to 2026, spanning the second term of President Muhammadu Buhari and the first term of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu. Using a qualitative, descriptive research design anchored in realist theory, the study analyses how Nigeria's national interest particularly security, economic development, and regional leadership was pursued through foreign policy instruments. The findings reveal a notable evolution, from a predominantly security-driven, reactive posture under Buhari to the more proactive, economically focused "4Ds Doctrines" Demography, Development, Diaspora, and Democracy under Tinubu. However, persistent domestic insecurities, institutional weaknesses, and regional fragmentation notably the formation of the Alliance of Sahel State significantly constrained outcomes. While Nigeria enhanced its global visibility securing BRICS partner status and AU Peace and Security Council chairmanship, the direct benefits to Nigerian citizens remained uneven. The paper concludes that for foreign policy to truly serve national interest, Nigeria must resolve foundational domestic challenges and institutionalise policy framework for coherence beyond electoral cycles.

Keywords: Nigeria's Foreign Policy, National Interest, 4Ds Doctrines, ECOWAS, Tinubu, Buhari, Regional Security, Diaspora Diplomacy

Introduction

Foreign policy is never just about what happens beyond a nation's borders; it is a mirror reflecting the struggles, aspirations, and contradictions within. For Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and largest economy, this mirror has often shown a double image: a giant striding confidently across continental stages, yet hesitant and

hobbled at home. Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has consistently placed Africa at the centre of its external engagements a noble stance that birthed liberation struggles, peacekeeping missions, and regional integration efforts (Gambari, 2022). But a recurring question haunts this narrative: has Nigeria's foreign policy truly served its national interest, or has it become a costly performance of

leadership with little return for ordinary citizens? This question is not merely academic; it goes to the heart of Nigeria's social contract with its people.

Between 2019 and 2026, this question became more urgent and more difficult to evade. Domestically, Nigeria grappled with a hydra-headed security crisis that mutated and spread voraciously. Boko Haram and its offshoot, ISWAP, continued their grim campaign in the Northeast, displacing millions and creating a humanitarian shadow. Armed banditry and kidnapping-for-ransom exploded across the Northwest, turning highways into gauntlets and villages into ghost settlements.

Additionally, the intense of banditry in Kwara, Oyo, and Kogi States has recently intensified, leaving many villages desolated and communities displaced. In Kwara, the Kaiama massacre and repeated raids in Woro and Nuku villages claimed hundreds of lives, forcing survivors to flee and abandoning entire settlements. In Oyo, bandits have extended their reach beyond rural borders into urban centers like Ibadan, where kidnappings have occurred in broad daylight, while northern border villages remain under constant threat. Kogi has witnessed similar violence, with forest-based gangs raiding communities, prompting the government to shut down markets and motor parks to disrupt their logistics (Owens, 2020).

These attacks have created widespread fear, economic disruption, and humanitarian crises across the three states. Villages once thriving are now deserted, with residents displaced into bushlands or urban centers. Security forces, including Amotekun patrols in Oyo and joint rescue operations in Kogi, have responded with crackdowns, rescuing kidnapped victims and dismantling camps, but the scale of

violence shows banditry is spreading from the North-West into the North-Central and South-West. The situation has alarmed regional groups like Afenifere, who warn that unchecked incursions could destabilize Yorubaland, underscoring the urgent need for coordinated security measures.

Separatist tensions in the Southeast, manifested through sit-at-home orders and attacks on security personnel, challenged the state's monopoly on force. And across the Middle Belt, farmer-herder conflicts, intensified by climate change and population pressure, claimed thousands of lives annually. Economically, the country staggered from one shock to another, notably; the COVID-19 pandemic cratered oil prices; the Russian invasion of Ukraine disrupted global food and fuel supplies; subsidy removal in 2023 triggered inflation; and foreign exchange volatility made imports unpredictable. Debt service payments consumed over 90% of government revenue at some points, leaving little for infrastructure or social services (Hill, 2020)

Internationally, the rules-based liberal order that Nigeria had navigated since independence fractured under the weight of great power competition. The United States and China pulled in opposite directions; Europe grappled with its own crises; and Russia, through Wagner Group operations and diplomatic overtures, made inroads into the Sahel. Meanwhile, West Africa experienced an unprecedented coup contagion; Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), Niger (2023), and attempted coups in Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone. The region that Nigeria had long considered its strategic backyard was unravelling. In this turbulent environment, Nigeria's foreign policy could not stand still, it had to adapt, recalibrate, and

sometimes improvise or risk becoming irrelevant even in its own neighbourhood.

Based on the above backdrop, this paper examines adaptation in depth. It explores how two administrations Muhammadu Buhari (2019–2023) and Bola Ahmed Tinubu (2023–2026) defined, debated, and pursued national interest through foreign policy instruments. President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's foreign policy is defined by an assertive Africa-centered approach that seeks to re-establish Nigeria's leadership role on the continent while simultaneously re-engaging with global powers through economic diplomacy and multilateral cooperation.

His administration emphasizes regional stability, particularly through ECOWAS, where Nigeria has taken a strong stance against military coups in West Africa, while also promoting democratic governance and constitutional order. Tinubu has prioritized peace and security as the foundation for economic growth, leveraging Nigeria's energy resources and strategic position to attract investment and strengthen bilateral ties with the US, EU, China, and other partners. At the same time, he has encouraged diaspora engagement and deeper participation in global institutions such as the UN and AU, positioning Nigeria as both a regional stabilizer and a credible global partner. However, his ambitions face challenges from persistent domestic economic constraints, terrorism, and the complexities of navigating great power competition in Africa, making the success of his foreign policy dependent on balancing internal reforms with external commitments (Owens, 2020).

Drawing on realist theory, which emphasises state survival, security, and power accumulation, and supplementing

with liberal institutionalism to account for Nigeria's deep multilateral engagements, the study asks a set of interconnected questions: How was national interest conceptualised differently under each administration? What instruments and strategies were deployed? How effective were these strategies in advancing security, economic prosperity, regional leadership, and citizen welfare? What structural and contingent factors enabled or constrained success? And finally, what lessons can be drawn for Nigeria's foreign policy beyond 2026?

Methodologically, this work adopts a qualitative descriptive design. Data come exclusively from secondary sources; official government statements, ECOWAS and African Union reports, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents from think tanks, and credible media analyses spanning the entire 2019–2026 period. No primary interviews or surveys were conducted. This decision was deliberate: it ensures objectivity by relying on publicly verifiable records and avoids the biases that can arise from elite interviews.

Conceptual Clarification and Theoretical Framework

Foreign Policy: More Than Just Diplomacy

Foreign policy, in the simplest academic definition, refers to the strategies, decisions, and actions a state adopts to manage its relations with other states and non-state international actors (Hill, 2020; Baylis, Smith & Owens, 2020). But this definition, while precise, drains the concept of its messy, human reality. Foreign policy is made by tired officials in windowless rooms, by presidents awakened at 3 AM with news of a coup, by ambassadors navigating cultural minefields, and by bureaucracies

defending their turf. It is shaped by history, memory, and trauma Nigeria's civil war, its years of military dictatorship, its humiliation by Western powers during the apartheid era. It is also shaped by hope: the hope that trade can replace aid, that dialogue can replace bullets, that a seat at the table can shape the rules of the game (Owens, 2020).

For Nigeria, foreign policy has been guided by a set of enduring principles: Afrocentrism (Africa as the centre-piece of external relations), good neighbourliness, non-alignment (not taking sides in Cold War rivalries, now extended to great power competition), and multilateralism (working through international organisations) (Akinrinde, 2023; CDD West Africa, 2024). These principles are enshrined in Section 19 of the 1999 Constitution, which commits Nigeria to promoting African unity, territorial integrity, and international cooperation. But principles are not destiny. How they are interpreted and applied depends on leadership, domestic pressures, and external circumstances.

During 2019–2026, Nigeria's foreign policy demonstrated both continuity and significant adaptation. Under Buhari (2019–2023), it was predominantly security-oriented, even defensive. The president, a former military ruler who had fought in the civil war and led a military government, saw threats through a security lens. His foreign policy priorities were clear: counter-terrorism through the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) with Chad, Niger, and Cameroon; border management, exemplified by the 2019 land border closure; anti-corruption diplomacy, particularly asset recovery from foreign jurisdictions; and selective ECOWAS and AU cooperation, especially regarding instability in the Sahel

(Akinrinde, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024).

This reactive approach addressed immediate threats Boko Haram attacks did decrease in frequency and intensity but it was criticised for sidelining economic diplomacy. While other African countries were aggressively seeking foreign investment and trade deals, Nigeria's foreign missions were often focused on security briefings and asset recovery litigation.

The Tinubu administration (2023–2026) marked a sharp shift. President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a former governor of Lagos State known for economic reforms and strategic thinking, brought a different worldview. His administration introduced the 4Ds Doctrine: initially Democracy, Development, Demography, Diaspora, but soon reordered to prioritise Demography, Development, Diaspora, and finally Democracy (Tuggar, 2025; State House, 2025; Peoples Gazette, April 2026).

This reordering was subtle but significant. It suggested that for Tinubu, the primary drivers of national power were people a young, growing population, prosperity (economic growth and diversification), and the vast Nigerian diaspora over 17 million people sending home \$20–21 billion annually. Democracy, while still valued, was seen as an enabler rather than an end in itself. The doctrine was not just a slogan; it was operationalised through high-level investment missions that travelled to India, China, the UAE, Germany, the United States, and Saudi Arabia, securing over \$50 billion in FDI pledges across energy, infrastructure, agriculture, manufacturing, and technology (Data Phyte, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026).

It was also visible in assertive ECOWAS leadership: as Chairman of the regional body from 2023 to 2025, Tinubu took a hard line against the Niger coup, threatened military intervention, and later authorised a rapid intervention in Benin Republic in 2025 to stabilise a post-election crisis. Regionally, Nigeria secured BRICS partner status in 2025, sustained UN Security Council reform advocacy, received repeated G20 invitations, and in May 2026 assumed the chairmanship of the AU Peace and Security Council (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026).

National Interest: The Elusive Core

National interest is the most invoked and least defined concept in international relations. Every government claim to act in the national interest, but ask ten officials to define it, and you will get eleven answers. For analytical purposes, scholars distinguish between core interests which is survival, security, territorial integrity and peripheral interests (economic prosperity, international prestige, regional leadership) (Neack, 2019; Walt, 2020; Mearsheimer, 2019). Core interests are existential: a state that fails to protect them ceases to exist as a sovereign entity. Peripheral interests are important but negotiable: a state can lose a trade dispute or fail to win a UN vote and still survive.

In Nigeria between 2019 and 2026, national interest was not static; it evolved in response to leadership changes and shifting threats. Under Buhari, security dominated as the overriding dimension. The president repeatedly stated that a nation that cannot protect its citizens has no business lecturing others. This was not empty rhetoric: Nigeria under Buhari invested heavily in the MNJTF, signed intelligence-sharing agreements with neighbours, and prioritised counter-terrorism in diplomatic engagements with

the US, UK, and France. However, this narrow focus came at a cost. Economic development, while acknowledged, was treated as a secondary priority.

The border closure of 2019–2020, intended to curb smuggling and protect local rice farmers, damaged relations with Benin and Niger Republics and disrupted legitimate trade. Regional leadership was maintained rhetorically Nigeria continued to speak at ECOWAS and AU summits but in practice, domestic preoccupations limited its ability to project power. Global prestige was pursued through UN and AU participation, but internal constraints human rights violations by security forces, corruption scandals, and the #EndSARS protests of 2020 tarnished Nigeria's image (Odubajo&Akinrinde, 2020).

The Tinubu administration broadened and rebalanced national interest through the 4Ds framework. Economic development and prosperity became central, not peripheral. The aggressive investment diplomacy was not an add-on; it was the main event. Diaspora engagement, previously a niche concern, was elevated to a strategic pillar. Remittances averaging \$20–21 billion annually were seen as a stable, non-volatile source of foreign exchange that could be leveraged for development through diaspora bonds, mortgage schemes, and investment incentives (Statista, 2024; State House, 2025).

Security remained important but was reframed within collective regional mechanisms. Tinubu argued that no single country could defeat terrorism or banditry alone; regional cooperation was essential. Regional leadership, which had weakened under Buhari, was reasserted aggressively. The response to the Niger coup sanctions, threat of force, and diplomatic isolation was a calculated signal that Nigeria would

not tolerate unconstitutional changes in its neighbourhood. Global prestige advanced through BRICS partnership, G20 invitations, and intensified UNSC reform advocacy. By 2026, Nigeria had positioned itself as the leading voice for African permanent seats on a reformed Security Council a long-standing ambition that seemed closer than ever (The Conversation, 2025).

The Instrumental Relationship Between Foreign Policy and National Interest

Foreign policy and national interest are linked by an instrumental relationship: foreign policy is the tool; national interest is the goal. In theory, the tool should be perfectly calibrated to achieve the goal. In practice, misalignment is common. Domestic constraints (a weak economy, political opposition, bureaucratic inertia), elite influence (presidential preferences, ministerial rivalries), and external pressures (great power demands, regional crises) all distort the relationship (Walt, 2020; Mearsheimer, 2019). Under Buhari, the security-centric foreign policy aligned with core survival interests but sidelined broader development interests, leading to criticisms of imbalance (Akinrinde, 2023; Chilaka&Akpan, 2024).

Under Tinubu, the 4Ds sought better alignment by tying diplomacy explicitly to economic recovery and diaspora assets. Early results FDI pledges, BRICS status, AU chairmanship are encouraging. But alignment is not yet perfect. Domestic economic hardships, including the pain of subsidy removal and currency devaluation, have limited the tangible benefits that ordinary Nigerians feel from foreign policy successes. As one analyst put it, "You cannot eat BRICS status" (CDD West Africa, 2024). This study reviews literature showing continuity in Afrocentrism alongside significant shifts

from security-focused diplomacy under Buhari to the 4Ds Doctrine under Tinubu. Persistent challenges insecurity, implementation gaps, regional fragmentation underscores the need for stronger domestic capacity to support foreign policy ambitions.

If foreign policy is the ship and national interest the destination, then the relationship between them is navigational: the ship exists to reach the destination, but currents, storms, and crew disagreements often push it off course. In international relations theory, the relationship is described as instrumental foreign policy is the primary tool or instrument through which a state pursues its national interest (Walt, 2020; Hill, 2020). This seems straightforward enough: a state identifies what it wants (security, prosperity, influence), then designs strategies and actions (alliances, trade deals, military interventions, diplomatic protests) to get it. In practice, however, the relationship is rarely linear or tidy. Gaps emerge between intention and execution, between rhetoric and reality, and between what leaders declare as the national interest and what actually benefits citizens.

Why do these gaps occur? First, domestic constraints play a massive role. A president may want to pursue ambitious economic diplomacy, but if the parliament is hostile, the treasury is empty, and the bureaucracy is slow, little gets done. In Nigeria's case, both Buhari and Tinubu faced parliaments that were largely supportive (the ruling party controlled both chambers), but funding remained a perennial problem. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs often received less than 1% of the national budget, leaving missions abroad understaffed and under-resourced (Akinrinde, 2023).

Second, elite influence matters: foreign policy is not made by disembodied states but by specific individuals with their own biases, friendships, pet projects, and rivalries. Under Buhari, the president's personal distrust of Western institutions and his preference for dealing with military rather than civilian counterparts shaped policy profoundly. Under Tinubu, the president's background as a Lagos political fixer who built coalitions with business elites led to a more commercially oriented diplomacy (Chilaka&Akpan, 2024). Third, external pressures constantly intrude: a coup in a neighbouring country, a spike in global oil prices, a pandemic, a great power demands these events force recalibrations regardless of long-term plans.

In Nigeria between 2019 and 2026, the instrumental relationship between foreign policy and national interest can be observed through two distinct administrative approaches. Under Buhari, the security-centric foreign policy aligned reasonably well with what the administration defined as the core national interest: survival, territorial integrity, and the containment of insurgent threats. The MNJTF, border closure, and asset recovery diplomacy were all instruments directed at those ends. Broader development interests; economic diversification, trade expansion, technological upgrading were sidelined. This led to criticisms of imbalance, as one scholar put it, "Nigeria under Buhari fought terrorism with one hand while letting the economy bleed with the other" (Akinrinde, 2023, p. 45).

The instrument (security-focused foreign policy) was well-calibrated for a limited set of interests but poorly calibrated for the full range of national needs (Odubajo&Akinrinde, 2020). Under

president Bola Ahmed, the 4Ds Doctrine sought a better, more comprehensive alignment. Foreign policy instruments investment missions, diaspora engagement, BRICS partnership, ECOWAS leadership were explicitly tied to a broader conception of national interest that included economic recovery, demographic leverage, and global prestige alongside security. The early results are visible: over \$50 billion in FDI pledges, diaspora remittances at record levels, and enhanced multilateral visibility (State House, 2025; DataPhyte, 2025).

Domestic economic hardships inflation, unemployment, subsidy removal pain limits the tangible benefits that ordinary Nigerians feel from these foreign policy successes. There remains a concerning gap between what Nigeria achieves diplomatically and what citizens experience at home (CDD West Africa, 2024). Moreover, the fragmentation of ECOWAS through the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) suggests that Nigeria's regional leadership instruments are not as effective as they once were. The instrument of ECOWAS diplomacy has lost some of its power to compel compliance.

The period 2019–2026 also demonstrates that the instrumental relationship is dynamic, not static. As national interest evolves from survival-focused under Rtd General Mohammad Buhari to development-oriented under Tinubu foreign policy instruments must evolve too. The 4Ds Doctrine represents an attempt to modernise Nigeria's diplomatic toolkit for a multipolar, economically competitive world. Whether it succeeds depends not just on the doctrine's intellectual coherence but on implementation capacity, institutional

strength, and the broader domestic environment.

Theoretical Framework: Realism Anchored, Liberalism as Compass

This study adopts realism as its major theoretical framework. Realism, in both its classical (Morgenthau, 1948) and structural (Waltz, Mearsheimer, 1979) variants, argues that the international system is anarchic (no world government), that States are the primary actors, and that they pursue national interest defined in terms of power and security (Mearsheimer, 2019; Dunne, Kurki & Smith, 2021). From a realist lens, Nigeria's foreign policy behavior its insistence on ECOWAS leadership, its military investments in the MNJTF, its closure of land borders in 2019, its balancing between the US and China makes perfect sense. These were not acts of altruism or ideological commitment. They were calculated moves to protect sovereignty, reduce external threats, project regional hegemony, and prevent rival powers (France, Russia, China) from gaining undue influence in Nigeria's neighbourhood. Realism explains why Nigeria, even when facing domestic chaos, continues to spend billions on peacekeeping: because a stable West Africa is a security interest, not a charitable cause.

However, realism alone cannot explain Nigeria's deep involvement in the African Union, the United Nations, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), or the BRICS partnership. These institutions require cooperation, shared norms, and some surrender of short-term power for long-term gain. Instead, Nigeria has been a consistent institutionalist, paying dues, sending troops, and advocating for reforms. Hence, the paper also draws on liberal institutionalism (Keohane, 1984;

Ikenberry, 2020) to understand why Nigeria seeks multilateral solutions to problems like terrorism, climate change, debt restructuring, and trade liberalisation. Liberal institutionalism argues that international institutions reduce transaction costs, provide information, facilitate reciprocity, and over time, reshape state preferences. For Nigeria, ECOWAS and the AU are not just forums for speech-making; they are platforms for joint patrols, early warning systems, trade negotiations, and dispute resolution. They also confer legitimacy: Nigeria's leadership is more readily accepted when exercised through institutional channels rather than unilateral diktat.

Historical Background of Nigeria's Foreign Policy

No analysis of contemporary foreign policy is complete without historical context. Nigeria's foreign policy since independence in 1960 has been remarkably consistent in its Afrocentrism, but the interpretation and implementation of that principle have varied widely across regimes. The First Republic (1960–1966) under Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa was cautious and pro-Western. Nigeria maintained close ties with Britain, joined the Commonwealth, and avoided the anti-colonial rhetoric of Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah. This pragmatism earned Nigeria respect but also criticism from pan-Africanists who saw it as timid.

The civil war (1967–1970) forced Nigeria to turn inward, but the post-war oil boom of the 1970s funded an assertive foreign policy under Generals Gowon, Murtala Mohammed, and Olusegun Obasanjo. Nigeria led the charge against apartheid South Africa, supported liberation movements in Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Namibia, and was instrumental in the creation of ECOWAS

in 1975 (Adebajo & Mustapha, 2020). This was the golden age of Nigerian diplomacy, notably; the country's oil wealth, population, and military capacity made it an undeniable regional hegemon.

The military regimes of the 1980s and 1990s particularly Babangida (1985–1993) and Abacha (1993–1998) damaged Nigeria's international reputation severely. Human rights abuses, the annulment of the June 12, 1993 election, the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activists in 1995, and rampant corruption led to sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and the suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth. The return to democracy in 1999 under President Olusegun Obasanjo marked a major turning point. Obasanjo made diplomatic rehabilitation his priority. Through shuttle diplomacy, personal outreach to Western leaders, and a genuine commitment to reform, Nigeria regained international credibility. The Paris Club wrote off \$18 billion of Nigeria's debt in 2005 following a \$12 billion buyback. Nigeria also played a leading role in African Union reforms and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) (Gambari, 2022).

President Umaru Yar'Adua (2007–2010) introduced the concept of "citizen diplomacy," shifting focus from elite-level relations to the welfare of ordinary Nigerians at home and abroad. He also resolved the Niger Delta conflict through amnesty, freeing up oil revenues. His successor, Goodluck Jonathan (2010–2015), expanded economic diplomacy, seeking investment and trade partnerships beyond traditional Western allies. He also deepened international counter-terrorism cooperation as Boko Haram intensified its insurgency. Muhammadu Buhari's first term (2015–2019) focused on fighting corruption and insurgency, but his second

term (2019–2023) saw foreign policy become almost entirely security-driven, as discussed. Bola Tinubu's election in 2023 opened a new chapter, one characterised by economic assertiveness and strategic diversification. This historical arc from cautious pro-Westernism to radical Pan-Africanism, from pariah status to democratic rehabilitation, from security defensiveness to economic proactivism shapes the possibilities and constraints of Nigeria's foreign policy today.

Nigeria's Foreign Policy in Practice (2019–2026)

The Buhari Era (2019–2023) Security Development: An Afterthought

President Buhari's second term began in May 2019 with high hopes. His first term had focused on recapturing territory from Boko Haram and launching an anti-corruption campaign. The second term, many hoped, would pivot to economic recovery and infrastructure development. Instead, the COVID-19 pandemic struck in early 2020, cratering oil prices from over \$60 per barrel to below \$20 briefly, and triggering Nigeria's worst recession in decades. Then came the #EndSARS protests in October 2020, sparked by police brutality but escalating into a broader critique of governance, which security forces violently suppressed, killing dozens at the Lekki Toll Gate. The protests damaged Nigeria's international image, with the US and EU imposing visa restrictions on officials accused of human rights violations. Meanwhile, insecurity metastasised; Boko Haram and ISWAP continued attacks in the Northeast; banditry exploded in the Northwest, with mass kidnappings of schoolchildren becoming a chilling new normal; and separatist violence emerged in the Southeast. By 2022, Nigeria was facing

multiple security emergencies simultaneously.

In this context, Buhari's foreign policy became a mirror of his domestic focus: security and anti-corruption, to the near-exclusion of everything else. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), headquartered in Chad's capital N'Djamena, was the centrepiece. Nigeria contributed troops, logistics, and funding, and the MNJTF succeeded in pushing insurgents out of major towns and into remote islands on Lake Chad. Intelligence-sharing with Chad, Niger, and Cameroon improved. However, the MNJTF was under-resourced, plagued by coordination problems, and unable to address the root causes of insurgency: poverty, lack of education, climate change, and state fragility.

The 2019 border closure was another signature policy. Citing rampant smuggling of rice, guns, and drugs from Benin, Nigeria closed all land borders for over a year. The closure disrupted legitimate trade, angered neighbours, and hurt Nigerian exporters who relied on regional markets but it did succeed in boosting local rice production and reducing arms flows temporarily (Akinrinde, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024). Anti-corruption diplomacy focused on recovering assets stolen by Nigerian officials and stashed in foreign jurisdictions. The UK, US, Switzerland, and UAE returned hundreds of millions of dollars, but the amounts were modest compared to estimated total stolen assets (Transparency International, 2020). Moreover, the recovered funds often got lost in opaque government accounts rather than funding development projects.

Economically, Buhari's foreign policy was defensive. He was skeptical of foreign investment, suspicious of multinational

corporations, and reluctant to take tough decisions like subsidy removal or currency devaluation that would have made Nigeria more attractive to investors. The AfCFTA, which launched in 2021, was signed but not fully implemented, as Nigerian manufacturers feared competition from more efficient producers in South Africa, Egypt, and Morocco. By the end of Buhari's tenure in May 2023, Nigeria was diplomatically visible but not influential; respected for its peacekeeping commitments but not feared or admired for its economic dynamism; and increasingly seen as a country managing decline rather than pursuing greatness.

The Tinubu Era (2023–2026): The 4Ds Doctrine and the Economic Turn

Bola Tinubu assumed office on May 29, 2023, with a reputation as a master strategist who had built political coalitions and turned Lagos State into a commercial powerhouse. His inaugural address signaled a sharp break from Buhari: he announced the immediate removal of the fuel subsidy, a move Buhari had avoided for eight years, and promised to unify the exchange rate and attract foreign investment. This domestic agenda had immediate foreign policy implications; President Ahmed Tinubu needed international partners to support the transition. The 4Ds Doctrine emerged not from a think tank but from the president's own instincts and his foreign minister, Yusuf Tuggar, a former ambassador to Germany (Tuggar, 2025).

The doctrine's reordering from Democracy-Development-Demography-Diaspora to Demography-Development-Diaspora-Democracy was a deliberate signal that Nigeria's young population over 60% under 25 was its greatest asset, not its political system. Diaspora before Democracy suggested that Nigeria would

prioritise the welfare and leverage of its 17 million citizens abroad over preaching about electoral processes to neighbours (State House, 2025).

Operationalising the 4Ds required a whirlwind of diplomatic activity. In late 2023, Tinubu attended the G20 summit in New Delhi as a special invitee, meeting with Indian Prime Minister Modi and securing investment pledges. In early 2024, Tuggar led a delegation to China, signing infrastructure and technology agreements. The UAE lifted a visa ban on Nigerians following high-level negotiations. In 2025, Nigeria became a BRICS partner state (not yet a full member, but on the pathway), and President Tinubu addressed the UN General Assembly, making the most forceful case yet for African permanent seats on the Security Council (DataPhyte, 2025; The Conversation, 2025). Domestically, the diaspora was courted: NIDCOM launched a diaspora bond, created a mortgage scheme for Nigerians abroad to invest in housing, and streamlined consular services. By 2026, remittances reached \$21 billion annually, surpassing oil revenues in some months (Statista, 2024).

Regionally, Ahmed Tinubu's leadership was assertive, even confrontational. As ECOWAS Chairman (2023–2025), he faced the Niger Republic coup of July 2023. While Buhari might have hesitated, Tinubu moved quickly: sanctions, border closure, asset freezes, and a credible threat of military intervention. The junta in Niamey did not budge, but the message was sent, however, Nigeria would not accept a cascade of coups in its neighbourhood. When a post-election crisis erupted in Benin Republic in 2025, with the incumbent refusing to step down, Tinubu authorised a rapid intervention

force that stabilised the situation and oversaw a transition (Premium Times, 2025).

National Interest Dimensions: A Tale of Two Presidencies

Security and Territorial Integrity: From Sole Priority to Shared Responsibility

For Gen Mohmmadu Buhari, security was existential. His foreign policy was largely a projection of this domestic preoccupation. The MNJTF, intelligence-sharing with neighbours, and multilateral counter-terrorism partnerships were the primary instruments. Outcomes were mixed. Insurgent groups were degraded: they lost control of territory, and major attacks decreased. But they were not defeated. By 2023, Boko Haram and ISWAP still operated in rural areas, planting improvised explosive devices and ambushing troops. Armed banditry in the Northwest, which had not been a priority, exploded. His approach was to reframe security as a regional collective action problem, not a Nigerian burden. He pushed for an ECOWAS standby force, increased funding for the MNJTF, and emphasised intelligence-sharing and joint border patrols.

He also addressed some root causes: his economic reforms aimed to create jobs and reduce the pool of potential recruits for insurgent groups. By 2026, insecurity remained a major challenge, but there were signs of progress: banditry declined in some states following military operations, and the Niger Delta remained relatively peaceful. The verdict is moderate containment rather than elimination a holding action rather than victory (International Crisis Group, 2024).

Economic Development and Prosperity: The Great Divergence

This is where the two administrations diverged most sharply. Buhari's economic diplomacy was defensive, protectionist, and reactive. The border closure was the emblematic policy, it prioritised self-sufficiency over integration, local production over regional trade. Foreign direct investment stagnated, and Nigeria fell in global rankings of ease of doing business. His administration removed the fuel subsidy, unified exchange rates, and then went on a global investment hunt. The \$50 billion in FDI pledges, if realised, would transform Nigeria's economy. But pledges are not dollars in the bank. Implementation requires power (still unreliable), infrastructure (still deficient), policy consistency (still uncertain), and security (still patchy). The diaspora remittance channel is an unambiguous success: \$21 billion annually is a stable, resilient source of foreign exchange. But remittances are private funds; they cannot pay for roads or schools. The AfCFTA offers opportunities, but Nigerian manufacturers are not yet competitive. Therefore, the verdict on economic development is promising but unfulfilled because the direction is right but the speed is too slow (CDD West Africa, 2024).

Regional Leadership and Global Prestige: Shining on the Stage

If economic development is a work in progress, regional and global positioning is where Nigeria has excelled between 2019 and 2026. Under Buhari, regional leadership was maintained rhetorically but weakened in practice. Nigeria spoke at ECOWAS and AU summits, but its domestic fragility undercut its moral authority. Under Tinubu, leadership was reasserted forcefully. The response to the Niger coup, the Benin intervention, and

the diplomatic campaign for UNSC reform all signalled that Nigeria intended to lead, not just participate. The BRICS partnership, G20 invitations, and AU PSC chairmanship (May 2026) are tangible indicators of global prestige. However, the formation of the AES Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger shows the limits of Nigeria's influence. Three neighbours have turned away from ECOWAS and toward Russia. Nigeria cannot coerce them back; it can only engage, persuade, and wait. Regional leadership in 2026 is more contested than it was in 2019. Nigeria is still first among equals, but the equals are fewer and more hostile.

Citizen Welfare and Diaspora Protection: The Missing Link

Diaspora protection focused on asset recovery retrieving stolen money rather than protecting workers' rights or facilitating voting. Under Tinubu, NIDCOM was empowered, consular services improved, and diaspora engagement became strategic. Nigerians abroad now have a clearer path to invest at home, access services, and in some cases, vote (though diaspora voting is not yet fully implemented). However, for the 200 million Nigerians at home, foreign policy victories feel distant and unfelt to majority of the citizens.

The removal of a visa ban by the UAE is a convenience for travelers, not a lifeline for the unemployed. BRICS status is a headline, not a meal. The challenge for Tinubu's remaining term is to translate diplomatic gains into tangible domestic improvements, notably; jobs, security, electricity, and affordable food. Until then, the gap between foreign policy rhetoric and citizen welfare will remain the Achilles' heel of Nigeria's international posture.

Institutional Actors in Nigeria's Foreign Policy

Foreign policy is not made by the president alone, but in Nigeria, the Presidency dominates. Under Buhari, the president's personal style cautious, delegating, suspicious of Western institutions shaped policy profoundly. Under Tinubu, the president's activism, strategic thinking, and comfort with global markets shaped a different orientation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), under Minister Yusuf Tuggar (Tinubu era) and his predecessors, serves as the primary coordinating body, managing over 100 missions worldwide. But the MFA has been chronically underfunded, and career diplomats complain of political appointees being parachuted into key posts. The Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NIDCOM), established in 2019 under Buhari but elevated under Tinubu, has become a surprisingly powerful actor a rare case of bureaucratic continuity serving policy change.

The National Intelligence Agency (NIA) and Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) provide critical intelligence for security-linked diplomacy, supporting MNJTF operations and ECOWAS mechanisms. Other actors include the Ministry of Defence (peacekeeping and MNJTF), the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC) for energy diplomacy (Nigeria remains an oil power, even as the world transitions), the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) as a think tank providing research and convening power, and the National Assembly, which has oversight and treaty ratification powers but rarely exercises them forcefully. Coordination challenges inter-agency silos, funding shortages, personality-driven decisions have plagued

the system for decades. President Ahmed Tinubu's attempt to create a National Foreign Policy Coordination Council in 2025 is an attempt to address this, but it is too early to assess its impact. Effective institutional alignment remains the missing link between foreign policy ambition and national interest outcomes.

Major Challenges Constraining Effectiveness

Despite the successes and adaptations, Nigeria's foreign policy between 2019 and 2026 faced severe structural constraints.

First, domestic security pressures: persistent insurgency, banditry, communal conflicts, and separatist violence divert resources, attention, and political capital. A country fighting for its life cannot project power effectively (Saliu&Omotola, 2023). When Nigerian diplomats argue for leadership, foreign counterparts quietly ask about the next Boko Haram attack or bandit kidnapping.

Second, weak economic foundation, oil dependency (80% of export revenues, 50% of government revenues), debt service consuming over 90% of revenue in some months, inflation exceeding 25% at times, and currency volatility reduce bargaining power. When Nigeria asks for investment, potential partners ask about policy consistency, infrastructure, and security (Akinrinde, 2023).

Third, institutional and policy inconsistency: each administration rebrands foreign policy citizen diplomacy, economic diplomacy, 4Ds but institutional memory is weak, funding is inadequate, and career diplomats are often sidelined by political appointees.

Fourth, regional political fragmentation, the emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) is a direct challenge to

Nigeria's ECOWAS leadership. Three neighbouring countries have rejected the regional consensus and decided to align with Russia.

Fifth, global power competition, the US-China rivalry, Russia's Wagner operations in the Sahel, and Europe's inward turn create a complex environment where Nigeria must balance competing interests without alienating any major power.

Sixth, limited technological capacity, weak manufacturing, low tech exports, and dependency on foreign technology hinder modern economic diplomacy. Finally, public perception gap: most Nigerians cannot name their foreign minister or cite a single foreign policy achievement that improved their lives (CDD West Africa, 2024). This erodes political will and legitimacy. When citizens see diplomats flying first-class while they struggle for fuel, they ask why foreign policy matters. These challenges collectively highlight a sobering reality: foreign policy effectiveness is ultimately tied to internal state strength. Nigeria's ambitions during this period often exceeded its capabilities.

Summary of Findings and Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis of government documents, ECOWAS/AU reports, scholarly publications, and media coverage from 2019 to 2026 reveals three core patterns:

Continuity in Afrocentrism but change in instruments: Both Buhari and Tinubu kept Africa as the centrepiece of foreign policy. Neither abandoned ECOWAS or the AU. But the instruments changed dramatically: Buhari used military and bilateral tools; Tinubu added economic and diaspora instruments. The shift from security to

development diplomacy is the most significant change of the period.

Security remains foundational, but development rose in priority: Under Buhari, security was the alpha and omega. Under Tinubu, security was reframed as a regional collective action problem, and development (FDI, trade, remittances, infrastructure partnerships) became the primary focus. This reflects a realistic assessment: Nigeria cannot shoot its way to prosperity.

Gap between rhetoric and outcomes persists: Nigeria talks like a great power but often delivers like a fragile state. The 4Ds Doctrine is ambitious, coherent, and well-communicated. But implementation gaps bureaucratic bottlenecks, funding shortages, regional fragmentation limit its impact. The \$50 billion in FDI pledges are not yet realised; the AES countries have left ECOWAS; domestic insecurity continues. Effectiveness is therefore partial: Nigeria is more visible and sought-after diplomatically in 2026 than it was in 2019, but the average citizen's welfare has not kept pace. Foreign policy has not yet become domestic policy by other means.

Conclusion

This paper has examined Nigeria's foreign policy between 2019 and 2026, focusing on its effectiveness in advancing national interest across security, economic development, regional leadership, and citizen welfare dimensions. The journey through two administrations Buhari's security-focused, defensive posture and Tinubu's development-oriented, assertive 4Ds Doctrine reveals a country struggling to align its external ambitions with internal realities. Buhari's approach was necessary but insufficient: it prevented state collapse and contained insurgent expansion, but it did little to build prosperity or project soft

power. President Ahmed Tinubu's approach is more comprehensive, linking diplomacy to demographic assets, diaspora resources, and development outcomes. Early results FDI pledges, BRICS status, AU PSC chairmanship, diaspora engagement is encouraging. But the real test is whether these gains translate into jobs, stable electricity, security, and affordable food for Nigerians at home.

Theoretically, the paper affirms realism's core insight, national interest drives state behaviour, and security remains foundational. But it also shows that liberal institutionalism matters: Nigeria's influence flows partly from its deep embedding in ECOWAS, AU, UN, and BRICS frameworks. Practically, the study concludes that no foreign policy can succeed without domestic foundations. A country that cannot secure its own villages cannot lead a region; an economy that cannot manufacture cannot negotiate trade deals from strength; a society that does not trust its government cannot sustain international commitments. As Nigeria looks beyond 2026, the lesson is clear: foreign policy begins at home.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen domestic security institutions: Before seeking more peacekeeping roles abroad or leading regional interventions, Nigeria must end banditry and insurgency at home. This requires not just military spending but intelligence reform, community policing, judicial reforms to deter crime, and investments in education and livelihoods in conflict-prone areas.
2. Diversify the economy aggressively: Foreign policy will remain weak as long as oil shocks dictate national fortunes. Agriculture (beyond subsistence), manufacturing (especially agro-processing

and textiles), technology (software, fintech, services), and the creative industry (Nollywood, music) should receive dedicated diplomatic backing, including export promotion, trade missions, tariff negotiations, and intellectual property protection.

3. Reform the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and diplomatic missions: Adequate funding, career continuity, professional training, and merit-based postings are non-negotiable. Political appointees should complement, not replace, career diplomats. Missions should be evaluated on outcomes (FDI attracted, trade deals signed, citizens assisted) not just activities (receptions attended, notes verbales issued).

4. Operationalise the 4Ds Doctrine fully: Move from pledges to projects. Track FDI conversion rates quarterly. Create a public dashboard for diaspora investment. Mainstream demography into trade negotiations: Nigeria's youth population is its greatest asset, but only if educated, healthy, and employed. Diplomacy should focus on skills partnerships, technology transfer, and labour mobility agreements.

5. Deepen ECOWAS reform and engage AES pragmatically: Even if the Sahel states have left ECOWAS, geography and shared threats (terrorism, smuggling, and climate change) mean Nigeria must maintain dialogue, cooperation, and even economic engagement. Use the AU PSC chairmanship (2026) to bridge divides and propose flexible membership frameworks.

6. Prioritise citizen welfare in diplomacy: Every embassy should have a commercial attaché (to promote trade) and a welfare attaché (to assist citizens in distress). Consular services should be digitised, responsive, and accessible. Link foreign policy outcomes to visible domestic

improvements through regular public communication campaigns.

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