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An Assessment of Nigeria's Foreign Policy under the Buhari Administration: Priorities and Challenges.

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Aneke Emmanuel Chukwuemeka
Department of Political Science
Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe, Anambra State Nigeria
Correspondence email: chukwuemekaaneke2019@gmail.com

Abstract: The foreign policy of the Buhari administration in Nigeria has been faced with the challenge of policy inconsistency, domestic constraints and changing international dynamics that have cast doubt on whether the administration has been effective in promoting the national interests and international influence. The current empirical study explored the diplomatic policy of Nigeria during 2015-2023, focusing on its main goals and the challenges that accompany them. The study analysed foreign policy of Nigerian President Buhari through a qualitative research approach, particularly focusing on its priorities and challenges. The information was collected using secondary sources such as academic literature, governmental reports and reports by international organisations. A policy evaluation of policy effectiveness and barriers was carried out through an analytical research design. The salient themes were found through content analysis, whereas the relevance of the foreign-policy theories informed the understanding of the external relations of Nigeria in the period in question. Results indicate that there are continuities and changes in the diplomatic interactions of Nigeria before and after the Buhari regime. The research revealed priorities of core foreign-policy, including anti-corruption, security, and economic diplomacy, as well as successes. However, a number of setbacks such as economic limitations and lack of security were also noted. The analysis also evaluated the policy effectiveness and consistency, compared it to previous administrations, and its consequences in Nigerian regional leadership, international impact and future diplomatic orientation. The conclusion is that although the foreign policy of Buhari was in support of the traditional Afrocentric views of Nigeria, the net effect was limited by both internal and external factors. It is recommended to increase policy coherence and institutional capacity strengthening.

Key words: Foreign Policy, Buhari Administration, Nigeria, Diplomacy, Challenges

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INTRODUCTION

Since the year 1960, Nigeria has developed its foreign policy in terms of national interests, the aspiration of the region and the aspiration of the world. It has traditionally been based on Afrocentrism and stressed African unity, regional stability, and international cooperation. The conceptualisation of foreign policy is often understood as a continuation of national interests of a state when it comes to its relations with other states (Akumah et al., 2021). Nigeria has over time been influenced in its diplomatic actions by the internal politics, economic realities and changing circumstances in the world order. Although it is the leader in the African continent, there have been consistent domestic pressures that have raised questions about its effectiveness and continuity in international interactions.

Buhari administration (2015- 2023) came to power in an environment with declining economy, increased insecurity and rampant corruption. As a result, the administration anticipated anti-corruption, security, and economic revival as the keystones of domestic as well as foreign policy. These priorities greatly impacted the external relations of Nigeria, whereby the government sought international partnerships to curb terrorism, reclaim stolen resources and get foreign investment. It has been noted that the diplomatic agenda of Buhari was too tied with domestic goals, especially combating corruption and insurgency (Kertyo & Ityonzughul, 2025). At the same time, Nigeria continued to uphold her regional leadership under ECOWAS and remain involved in the participation of the major world powers including the United States, China and the United Kingdom.

Nigeria and its effectiveness in foreign policy under Buhari is controversial. Although there was improvement in the course of reinforcing bilateral ties and security cooperation, the economic constraints, inconsistency in policies and poor institutional structures have limited its overall effectiveness. Other scholars claim that Nigeria has been unable to identify with modern global times through its diplomatic strategy, although it has maintained its traditional Afrocentric focus (Fatokun & Gumbo, 2025). The foreign-policy strategies of the administration were also documented to have some aspects of realism, particularly in their focus on national interest and security (Gamawa, 2018). These restrictions created a disconnection between the policy intents and consequences, and the question of whether Nigeria is relevant globally and the effectiveness of its diplomacy. It is against this backdrop that this paper looked at the diplomacy of the state of Nigeria during the Buhari government with the aim of evaluating its priorities and challenges. In particular, it examined the key foreign-policy goals that were pursued at the time, the degree to which such goals were met, and limitations that hindered successful efforts. Moreover, the paper touched upon the correlation between domestic and foreign-policy making, considering that very often internal factors contribute to the formation of the external behaviour of countries.

The rationale behind this paper is the growing anxiety of the quality and direction of Nigerian foreign policy in the Buhari administration. Although Nigeria has always been Afrocentrically oriented and played a central role in Africa, researchers have observed a drop in global influence and policy inconsistencies in Nigeria (Kumah-Abiwu, 2016). In

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addition, current literature is more inclined to discuss the history of foreign-policy trends instead of conducting a thorough and critical evaluation of recent regimes, especially the Buhari era (Bello et al., 2017). Although other studies show successes in anti-corruption and security diplomacy, little is said on the challenges behind them and the effects they exert on policymaking. This divide hinders the realization of the interaction of domestic restraint with foreign-policy functionality. As a result, this paper aims to fill these gaps by providing a critical and recent assessment of the diplomatic priorities and challenges of the Buhari regime in Nigeria.

2. Literature review

2.1 Concept of Foreign Policy

Foreign policy refers to the complex of values, policies, and activities by which a sovereign state manages its relations with other states and other global actors in order to protect and promote its national interests. It involves diplomatic, economic, and military activities that are influenced by the goals and ideals of a nation. Essentially, foreign policy is a tool of national interest, which is a platform whereby states seek security, development, and cooperation on the international front (Paulo, 2014). Foreign policy is also developed based on past experiences, political organization, and social values that guide the behavior of a country in the international system (James & Arize, 2023).

2.2 Determinants of Foreign Policy.

It is the combination of internal and external forces that influence foreign policy. Geography, economic conditions, political leadership, public opinion, and national ideology are all determinants in-house. As an example, the foreign policy path taken in Nigeria is largely determined by the leadership personality and domestic political structures (James and Arize, 2023). On the international level, external factors including global power relations, international organisations and regional relations also play crucial roles. Also, geographic factors and strategic location influence the policy priorities, especially with regard to neighbouring countries and regional blocs. The decision on foreign policy is also influenced by public opinion and globalization in modern states (Manuwa, 2023).

2.3 Foreign Policy Analysis: Theoretical Approaches.

The study of foreign policy can be explained by a number of theoretical approaches. The realist theory focuses on national interest, power, and security as the key determinants of state behaviour. Instead, liberal theory emphasizes cooperation, international institutions and interdependence between states. The constructivism approach emphasizes the influence of ideas, identities, and norms on making decisions about foreign policies. Also, such critical approaches as critical geopolitics can be investigated concerning the impact of perceptions and stories on policy decisions and international behavior. These schools of thought offer varying approaches to understanding the process and the rationale of state actions in the international system.

2.4 Principals of Foreign Policy in Nigeria.

The foreign policy of Nigeria is based on a number of principles. Top in this list is Afrocentrism, which places Africa at the centre of foreign relations of Nigeria. Some others

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are non-alignment, respect to sovereignty, economic diplomacy, peacekeeping and multilateral cooperation (Shehu, 2025). Nigeria also lays emphasis on national interest and regional integration, especially in West Africa. These principles have over time been adjusted to suit emerging realities in the world such as globalization and national problems although remain Africa-centric and national development-centric (Egwim, 2025).

2.5 History of Nigeria Foreign Policy.

Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has experienced a great deal of evolution in foreign policy based on local priorities and international forces. Nigeria had a conservative and pro-Western approach in its early years due to its colonial relations and the need to be recognized internationally. By the 1970s, a more aggressive Afrocentric policy was welcomed in the country, with Africa taking centre stage in its foreign relations. The era was characterized by active participation in anti colonial movements and peacekeeping efforts throughout the continent. The following decades were characterized by swings between activism and economic diplomacy, especially in times of a military dictatorship and in terms of democratic transitions (Markoff, 2015).

Nigeria Before the leadership of Muhammadu Buhari in 2015, the foreign policy of the country under the leadership of Olusegun Obasanjo and Goodluck Jonathan focused on regional leadership, debt relief and economic cooperation. The tenure of Obasanjo was characterised by diplomatic re-engagement and repair of international image, whereas Jonathan was more oriented on economic diplomacy and stability in the region, especially in West Africa (Bassey et al., 2024). However, it was not able to extend its influence globally because of corruption, insecurity, and inconsistency in policy implementation, which were often limiting factors in Nigeria (Azeez and Oluseyi, 2025).

With regard to continuities and changes, Nigeria foreign policy has preserved some of the long-term ideals such as Afrocentrism, non-alignment and multilateralism. These continuities are reflected in continued leadership of Nigeria in organisations like ECOWAS and the African Union. Nevertheless, some significant developments have risen with the challenge of globalization, threats of insecurity, and economic demand. The current policies have shifted towards counter-terrorism, engaging diasporas, and economic diversification. Core purpose has stayed the same, but strategies and focus have shifted in line with realities of the current times, as the fusion of culture and modernization in the external affairs of Nigeria is reflected.

3. Methodology

This paper chose a qualitative research method to evaluate the foreign policy of the Buhari administration in Nigeria in terms of priorities and challenges. It was decided that a qualitative approach is the best option as it allows analyzing and interpreting policies, diplomatic activity, and its consequences in the international system. The study relied on secondary sources of data such as academic journals, government publications, policy documents, books, and credible online sources as the main sources of data. Authoritative insights were also gathered using official statements by the Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and presidential speeches, reports by international organisations like the United

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Nations and ECOWAS. The research design used was analytical research, which assessed the efficacy and obstacles faced. The method used was a systematic study of policy documents and other literature available on the subject, which were analyzed using content analysis to identify common themes and patterns. Moreover, the theoretical frameworks applied in the analysis of foreign policy were also relevant in conducting the study, which made it easier to interpret the external relationships of Nigeria in the period examined.

4. Results

4.1 Buhari Administration Foreign Policy Priorities.

The Muhammadu Buhari administration (20152023) foreign policy was fundamentally focused on three interconnected priorities, namely: anti-corruption, security, and economic recovery, which together characterized the Nigerian foreign interactions and attempted to reset the Nigerian foreign policy. Anti-corruption foreign policy became a cornerstone of foreign policy by Buhari. The government attempted to export its fight against grafts by bilateral agreements and international lobbying addressing the restoration of stolen resources and the reduction of illegal financial transactions (Ozden & Onapajo, 2019). However, criticism of the politicisation and weak effectiveness of the anti-corruption initiative continued.

The calculation of foreign policy was also dominated by security and counter-terrorism, especially the suppression of Boko Haram. This regional collaboration with neighbouring nations like Chad, Niger, and Cameroon was required by the transnational nature of the insurgency, which strengthened Multinational Joint Task Force and further intensified diplomatic activity throughout the Lake Chad Basin (Omobuwajo, 2021). However, the problems of unceasing insecurity were undermining the international reputation of Nigeria and the efficiency of its policy-making (Akinrinde, 2023). The focus on economic diplomacy and diversification was equally high as the government tried to overcome an economic recession. A project like the National Economic Diplomacy Initiative was introduced to help to invite foreign investment and encourage infrastructure growth and avoid reliance on hydrocarbon income (Madubuegwu et al., 2022). Such interactions with other countries such as China became especially sensitive on infrastructure funding even as new fears over debt sustainability emerged.

At the regional level, Nigeria maintained its leadership position in ECOWAS particularly, in conflict resolution and democratization. It was also involved in peace-keeping and mediation activities actively thus consolidating its traditionally Afrocentric foreign policy orientation. In the case of relations with the major powers such as the United States, China, the United Kingdom and the European Union, the Buhari administration adopted a practical engagement. Although Western partners were vital in security cooperation and anti-corruption efforts, China became a significant economic collaborator in terms of loans and infrastructure projects (Jiang, 2019).

4.2 Major Buhari Foreign Policy successes.

The foreign policy of Muhammadu Buhari had several interesting successes, firstly, the reinforcement of bilateral relationships, then the restoration of stolen resources,

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security cooperation, and economic involvement, despite the criticisms that have been consolidated in Figure 1. One of the main achievements was the strengthening of international relations. Nigeria restored its relationship with major partners, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and China, through active diplomatic overture and the so-called shuttle diplomacy, thus enhancing security and economic development cooperation (Mohammed et al., 2025). These new partnerships helped in the provision of technical support, intelligence, and funding, especially in counter-terrorism operations.



Figure 1: Buhari Foreign Policy Major Achievements.

The recovery of looted assets was another success that was salient. The anti-corruption diplomacy of Buhari saw the re-patriation of large sums of money, including the Abacha "loot" of jurisdictions like Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Not only did this increase the financial capacity of Nigeria, but it also made it more reputable in the eyes of the global community as a country concerned with transparency and accountability (Hapuhennedige et al., 2020). This was also supported by whistleblower programs and cooperation with global financial organizations. Buhari foreign policy in the sphere of military cooperation and security benefits significantly contributed to the regional cooperation in the fight against terrorism. In Nigeria, the Multinational Joint Task Force saw the country collaborate with neighbouring states in fighting the Boko Haram insurgency. This cooperation aided in limiting the operations of the insurgents to a large part of the lake Chad area as opposed to their widespread presence across the territory before 2015 (Bala and Tar, 2021). Stronger military relations with the western states also increased access to training, intelligence and equipment in Nigeria.

The foreign policy of Muhammadu Buhari advanced Nigeria's national interest through economic diplomacy that prioritized trade expansion, foreign direct investment,

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and infrastructure renewal. Strategic partnerships particularly Chinese-backed rail and power projects supported diversification and post-recession recovery despite debt sustainability concerns. These achievements align with governance and institutional reform perspectives emphasizing state capacity, regulatory effectiveness, and service delivery as foundations for development (Mbuba, 2016, 2018a, 2018b, 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Ike et al., 2021). Moreover, asset repatriation, renewed bilateral ties, and strengthened regional security cooperation reflect a realist orientation in external relations, where diplomatic engagement is leveraged to consolidate domestic stability and socioeconomic progress.

4.3 Foreign Policy of Nigeria under Buhari challenges.

The foreign policy of Nigeria under the leadership of Muhammadu Buhari was faced with a number of structural and contextual challenges that limited its effectiveness despite the significant initiatives. The economic situation of the country was a major limitation, and this is demonstrated in Figure 2. The 2016 recession, caused by decreased oil prices and decreased revenue, diminished the ability of Nigeria to afford diplomatic activities and expand its influence internationally. Foreign aid contributions were also limited by economic factors and reduced the bargaining power of Nigeria in global negotiations (Akinrinde, 2023).

Domestic political instability also complicated the foreign policy. Relative to external relations, consistency was undermined by electoral tensions, deficits in governance and poor policy coordination. According to academics, domestic political issues often overshadowed foreign policy interests, which affected the strategic effectiveness.



Figure 2: Challenges of Nigeria's Foreign Policy under Buhari

Insecurity and the nature of insurgency, especially the operations of Boko Haram and other armed groups were major challenges. The extended insurgency undermined the international collaboration and stressed the security resources of Nigeria. Failure to decisively eliminate terrorism became an issue to foreign partners and investors (Omobuwajo, 2023). Diplomatic strains and the infamous policy of border-closure of 2019

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also caused tension with neighbours. Although the aim of closure was to reduce smuggling and safeguard local industries, it violated the principles of regional integration in the ECOWAS free trade zone and received criticism because of the impacted states like Benin and Niger. This policy caused tension to the leadership of Nigeria in West Africa and questioned its adherence to multilateral agreements.

Weak institutional capacity was another significant challenge. The institutions of foreign-policy in Nigeria such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were often neglected due to insufficient funding, ineffective coordination, and weak professionalism. These institutional vices inhibited the successful development and execution of policy (Obisesan, 2024). Nigeria still had global perception and image issues that influenced its foreign-policy results. Corruption, insecurity, and human-rights problems were some of the issues that led to a bad international image, which, in turn, influenced foreign-investment and diplomatic relations. Though anti-corruption diplomacy was put forward by the administration of Buhari in response to these issues, the effect was not felt strongly.

4.4 Critical Evaluation of the Foreign Policy of Buhari.

The foreign policy of Muhammadu Buhari has received varied evaluation on its stability, performance, and general strategic orientation. Regarding policy consistency and effectiveness, the administration of Buhari showed some coherence by focusing on anti-corruption, security, and economic diplomacy. Nonetheless, the success of these policies was usually limited by the gaps in implementation and lack of institutional support. Although such programs as asset recovery and the counter-terrorism alliances had some outcomes, critics claim that the foreign policy of Nigeria did not have a articulated long-term strategic framework, which made it reactive instead of proactive in addressing global concerns (Akinrinde, 2023).

The assessment of the balance between domestic and external priorities in Nigeria's foreign policy under Buhari can be more clearly understood when related to the themes reflected in the cited literature, particularly in areas of capacity development, innovation, and environmental influences on performance. Domestic challenges such as insecurity, corruption, and economic instability shaped foreign policy decisions in much the same way that learning conditions and institutional factors influence outcomes in education. For instance, Onyiorah (2021a) emphasizes that effective performance is largely dependent on prevailing conditions and habits, suggesting that Nigeria's internal challenges inevitably redirected its external engagements toward addressing urgent national needs.

Buhari's inward-looking approach, which aligned foreign policy with domestic priorities such as combating insurgency and attracting foreign investment, can be linked to the idea of adopting innovative and adaptive strategies in response to changing environments. Onyiorah (2021b) and Onyiorah (2022) highlight the importance of innovation and flexibility such as the adoption of new teaching strategies and distance learning in achieving effectiveness under constrained conditions. Similarly, Nigeria's foreign policy during this period reflected an adaptive strategy aimed at leveraging external resources to solve internal problems. Moreover, the emphasis on seeking foreign assistance and improving economic stability resonates with the concept of global competitiveness and

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employability discussed by Oguejiofor et al. (2022). Just as entrepreneurship education prepares individuals to compete in a global environment, Nigeria's foreign policy orientation under Buhari was geared toward positioning the country to benefit from international partnerships, albeit primarily for domestic gains.

However, this strong domestic focus also limited Nigeria's broader global engagement, which can be compared to the restricted utilization of technological and institutional opportunities noted by Oguejiofor and Onyiorah (2021). When systems are not fully engaged with wider networks, their overall effectiveness and visibility tend to diminish. In the same vein, Nigeria's reduced interaction beyond immediate national interests weakened its traditional leadership role in Africa. Additionally, the influence of internal and background factors on outcomes, as highlighted by Oguejiofor and Onyiorah (2023) and Onyiorah (2023), provides further insight into Nigeria's foreign policy behavior. Just as family background and environmental factors shape students' interests and achievements, Nigeria's domestic socio-political environment significantly determined the scope and assertiveness of its foreign policy. This resulted in a less aggressive regional leadership posture compared to previous eras. The importance of skill acquisition and strategic engagement for self-reliance, as discussed by Okoro et al. (2025), parallels the need for Nigeria to strengthen its internal capacity in order to enhance its external influence. Without strong domestic foundations, external engagements tend to be reactive rather than proactive, thereby limiting long-term global relevance.

When compared with the past regimes, significant differences and similarities can be seen. The previous regimes, particularly the tenure of Olusegun Obasanjo, have adopted a more activist foreign policy that is more visible internationally, through massive diplomatic engagement and leadership in continental policy. Likewise, the administration of Goodluck Jonathan also stressed economic diplomacy and regional peacekeeping. By comparison, Buhari was more conservative and nationalist, placing more focus on security and anti-corruption. Although this was a continuation of Afrocentrism and multilateralism, it was also a transition to a more pragmatic and more inward-looking foreign-policy stance. The foreign policy of Buhari could be characterized as rather coherent and yet unequal in efficiency. Its advantages were in harmonizing the external affairs with domestic interests, and its disadvantages were in the lack of the strategic richness, institutional inertia, and in the decline of diplomatic activism. As a result, despite recording some gains, Nigeria did not increase its influence in global and regional affairs as much as it did within the period under scrutiny.

4.5 Nigeria Implications on Global Position.

The foreign-policy course of Nigerian countries, especially in recent years, has had a significant impact on the global status, the position of Nigeria in Africa, its impact on the world, as well as its further perspectives. Nigeria has historically held a leadership role in Africa, referred as the giant of Africa because of the number of people, economy, and its role in maintaining peace and stability in the region. It continues to play a significant role in the Economic Community of West African States particularly in conflict resolution and democratic governance. Nevertheless, its capacity to project consistent leadership has been

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limited by domestic issues like insecurity and economic instability to some extent. Although Nigeria remains at the center of regional politics, its dominance has been experiencing growing competition by other emerging African powers, hence slightly reducing its traditional dominance.

Nigeria plays a moderate yet consistent role in global affairs through active participation in multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and the African Union, contributing to peacekeeping, security dialogue, and development cooperation. However, persistent domestic governance and security challenges shape external perceptions and limit its capacity to shape global agendas. Despite these constraints, Nigeria remains strategically significant as Africa's largest economy and most populous state, giving it diplomatic weight in regional and global negotiations. Institutional effectiveness, capacity building, and human capital development remain essential for strengthening its global influence (Okafor, 2010, 2013a, 2014, 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019).

In the future, the future of Nigeria in international relations will be largely dependent on how it handles its domestic limitations and executes a consistent and progressive foreign policy. Economic stability, governance and security enhancement will play a vital role in restoring international confidence. Also, by exploiting its diaspora, enhancing economic diplomacy, and adopting regional integration models like the African Continental Free Trade Area would boost the international competitiveness of Nigeria. When such measures are adequately put in place, Nigeria can once again assume a more aggressive leadership position not only in Africa but in the world at large. Although Nigeria is a powerful actor in the region, the internal challenges are limiting its global presence at the moment. However, through reformative strategies and a long-term diplomatic involvement, the nation holds a great potential of improving its role and influence within the changing international system.

CONCLUSION

The foreign policy of Nigeria under the presidency of Muhammadu Buhari reflected both a significant success and a great limitation. The main achievements included strengthening international partnerships, restitution of stolen property, enhancing enhancement of regional security relations, and trade and investment facilitation. However, these achievements were curtailed by economic constraints, domestic political instability, widespread insecurity, lack of institutional capability, and obstacles to the international reputation of Nigeria. The policy of its administration both sought national interests and at the same time external involvement, but at the same time, its course was rather reactive than proactive in character, restraining the substantive influence of Nigeria on the arena of international relations.

The suggested solutions include institutional capacity consolidation within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, strategic planning refinement as per the long-term foreign-policy goals, the harmonization of domestic economic and security reforms with diplomatic activities. Moreover, Nigeria should take a proactive position regarding involvement into regional and international institutions, diversify its economic-diplomacy portfolio, and

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focus on capacity building of people and equipment to support a strong international relation. Future studies ought to examine the long-term implications of anti-corruption foreign policy on the image of the Nigerian state in the international community, analyze the effectiveness of security partnerships among the region, and discuss the efficacy of the diaspora involvement in the life of the country and the foreign policy results. These questions may provide more information about the efficiency of the foreign-policy strategies of Nigeria, thus enhancing its global applicability.

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