Nigeria's National Interest in A Conflicting International System: A Critical Reflections

RAJI, Adesina Abdulfattah, Ph.D.
Department of Political Science,
Fountain University, Osogbo, Osun State, Nigeria.
abdulfattahraji@gmail.com / +2348037201811
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-9942-4570

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Abstract
Nigeria's engagement with the international system has historically been shaped by the pursuit of its national interest within a dynamic and often conflicting global environment. This study critically examines the nature, evolution, and articulation of Nigeria's national interest against the backdrop of an increasingly multipolar and tension-filled international system characterized by geopolitical rivalries, economic competition, and shifting alliances. Adopting a qualitative and analytical approach, the study interrogates how Nigeria has defined and pursued its core interests in areas such as security, economic development, regional leadership, and diplomatic influence.The study argues that while Nigeria has consistently projected an Afrocentric foreign policy orientation, its ability to effectively safeguard and advance its national interest has been constrained by domestic challenges, including weak institutional capacity, economic dependency, policy inconsistency, and internal insecurity. Furthermore, the study highlights the dilemmas Nigeria faces in balancing relations among major global powers amid intensifying conflicts, particularly in navigating pressures arising from great power competition and global governance structures. By situating Nigeria within contemporary international conflicts and cooperation frameworks, the paper reveals a gap between the country's foreign policy aspirations and its practical outcomes. It concludes that a more clearly defined and strategically pursued conception of national interest, grounded in domestic stability and economic resilience, is essential for Nigeria to function as a credible and influential actor in the global arena. The study ultimately provides reflections on the prospects for a more pragmatic, coherent, and adaptive Nigerian foreign policy in a rapidly changing world order.

Keywords: Afrocentrism, Diplomacy, Foreign Policy,International System, National Interest

Introduction

The concept of national interest occupies a central position in the study and practice of international relations, serving as the guiding principle upon which states formulate and implement their foreign policies. For a country such as Nigeria, endowed with significant demographic strength, abundant natural resources, and a strategic position within Africa, the

articulation and pursuit of national interest within an increasingly complex and conflict-prone international system remain both a necessity and a challenge. Since attaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has sought to define its role in global affairs through a foreign policy that reflects its domestic priorities, regional responsibilities, and global aspirations. However, the evolving nature of the international system has continually tested the coherence, consistency, and effectiveness of Nigeria's national interest. The contemporary international system is characterized by a transition from a unipolar order dominated by the United States after the Cold War to an emerging multipolar structure marked by the rise of new powers such as China, the resurgence of Russia, and the growing influence of regional actors (Mearsheimer, 2019; Ikenberry, 2018). This transformation has intensified geopolitical tensions, evident in strategic rivalries, proxy conflicts, and competing spheres of influence. In addition, economic competition has taken new forms through trade disputes, technological rivalry, and the politicization of global supply chains (Baldwin, 2016). These dynamics have created a conflicting international environment in which states must navigate complex alignments, shifting alliances, and competing pressures.

Within this context, Nigeria's position in global politics is both significant and paradoxical. As the most populous country in Africa and one of the continent's largest economies, Nigeria is often regarded as a natural leader in African affairs. Its active participation in regional organizations such as ECOWAS and the African Union, as well as its contributions to peacekeeping missions, underscore its commitment to regional stability and international cooperation (Adebajo, 2008). Moreover, Nigeria's Afrocentric foreign policy orientation has historically prioritized the liberation, unity, and development of Africa. Despite these strengths, Nigeria's global influence remains limited by domestic constraints and inconsistencies in policy execution, raising questions about the extent to which it can effectively project and defend its national interest on the world stage. The problem that this study addresses lies in the apparent disconnect between Nigeria's foreign policy aspirations and its actual capacity to achieve and sustain its national interest within a conflicting international system. While successive governments have emphasized the importance of national interest, there is often a lack of clarity, coherence, and strategic direction in its articulation and implementation (Fawole, 2003). Furthermore, internal challenges such as political instability, economic dependence on oil, corruption, and security threats have weakened Nigeria's external posture, making it vulnerable to external pressures and limiting its bargaining power in international affairs.

In light of these concerns, this study is guided by several key research questions. How has Nigeria historically defined and pursued its national interest? To what extent does the current international system constrain or enable Nigeria's foreign policy objectives? What are the major challenges undermining Nigeria's ability to effectively protect and advance its national interest? And what strategic adjustments are necessary for Nigeria to navigate the complexities of a conflicting global order? The significance of this study lies in its relevance to both academic scholarship and policy practice. From an academic perspective, it contributes to the discourse on foreign policy analysis and the role of middle powers in a multipolar world. It also enriches existing literature on Nigeria's international relations by providing a critical reflection on its

national interest in the context of global conflict and cooperation. From a policy standpoint, the study offers insights that may inform the formulation of a more coherent, pragmatic, and strategically oriented foreign policy capable of advancing Nigeria's interests in an increasingly competitive international environment.

Specifically, this study focuses on Nigeria's foreign policy and national interest within the post-Cold War and contemporary international system, with particular attention to the evolving dynamics of global conflict and cooperation. While historical references are made to provide context, the analysis is primarily centered on recent developments and current trends.

Conceptual Clarifications

A clear understanding of the key concepts underpinning this study is essential for a rigorous analysis of Nigeria's national interest within a conflicting international system. These concepts; national interest, foreign policy, the international system, conflict in international relations, and strategic autonomy, provide the analytical foundation upon which the study is built.

The concept of national interest has long occupied a central place in the theory and practice of international relations, although its meaning has evolved over time. Classical interpretations, particularly within the realist tradition, conceive national interest primarily in terms of power and survival. Scholars such as Morgenthau (1948) argue that the main objective of states is to pursue power in order to ensure their security and survival in an anarchic international system. In this view, national interest is objective, fixed, and largely defined by the distribution of power among states. Similarly, Waltz (1979) emphasizes the structural constraints of the international system, suggesting that states act rationally to maximize their security. However, contemporary interpretations, adopt a broader and more nuanced understanding of national interest. Rather than being limited to military power and territorial security, national interest now encompasses economic development, political stability, human security, environmental sustainability, and global cooperation (Nye, 2004). Constructivist scholars further argue that national interest is not fixed but socially constructed, shaped by identity, norms, and domestic political processes (Wendt, 1999). In the case of Nigeria, national interest reflects a combination of traditional concerns such as sovereignty and security, as well as modern priorities including economic diversification, regional leadership, and international prestige.

Closely related to national interest is the concept of foreign policy, which refers to the strategies, decisions, and actions undertaken by a state in its interactions with other actors in the international system. Foreign policy serves as the primary instrument through which national interest is articulated and pursued. According to Fawole (2003), Nigeria's foreign policy has historically been guided by principles such as Afrocentrism, non-alignment, and commitment to international peace and cooperation. Foreign policy is influenced by both internal factors—such as political leadership, economic conditions, and public opinion—and external factors, including global power dynamics and international norms (Holsti, 1995). Thus, the effectiveness of a state's foreign policy is often a reflection of its ability to align domestic capabilities with external opportunities and constraints. The international system refers to the structure and

pattern of relationships among states and other actors at the global level. Traditionally, the international system has been characterized in terms of polarity, which describes the distribution of power among major actors. A unipolar system is one in which a single dominant power exerts significant influence over global affairs, as seen in the post-Cold War dominance of the United States (Ikenberry, 2011). A bipolar system, exemplified by the Cold War era, involves two superpowers whose rivalry shapes global politics, as was the case with the United States and the Soviet Union. In contrast, a multipolar system features multiple centers of power, leading to a more complex and fluid distribution of influence (Mearsheimer, 2019). The contemporary international system is increasingly viewed as multipolar, with emerging powers challenging established hegemonies and contributing to heightened uncertainty and competition.

Conflict is an inherent feature of the international system, arising from competing interests, values, and power struggles among states. Conflict in international relations can take various forms, including ideological, economic, and military dimensions. Ideological conflicts often stem from differences in political systems and belief structures, such as the rivalry between capitalism and communism during the Cold War. Economic conflicts manifest through trade disputes, sanctions, and competition over resources and markets (Baldwin, 2016). Military conflicts, on the other hand, involve the use or threat of force, ranging from conventional warfare to asymmetric and hybrid forms of conflict. In the contemporary era, these forms of conflict are often interconnected, reflecting the complex nature of global interactions.

On the other hand, the concepts of strategic autonomy and non-alignment are particularly relevant for understanding Nigeria's approach to navigating a conflicting international system. Strategic autonomy refers to a state's ability to pursue its national interest independently, without undue reliance on or influence from external powers. It emphasizes flexibility, self-reliance, and the capacity to make sovereign decisions in foreign policy. Non-alignment, which gained prominence during the Cold War, involves a deliberate policy of avoiding formal alliances with major power blocs while maintaining cooperative relations with all (Akinboye, 2013). For Nigeria, these principles have historically informed its foreign policy posture, enabling it to balance competing global interests while maintaining its sovereignty. However, in a rapidly changing and highly interconnected world, the practical application of strategic autonomy and non-alignment requires constant adaptation and careful diplomatic engagement.

Clearly, these conceptual clarifications provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing how Nigeria defines and pursues its national interest within a complex and often conflicting international system.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of Nigeria's national interest in a conflicting international system requires a solid theoretical foundation that explains how states behave, make decisions, and interact within the global arena. This study draws on three major theoretical perspectives in international relations, namely Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism. Each of these perspectives offers distinct but complementary insights into the formulation and pursuit of national interest.

Realism provides one of the oldest and most influential explanations of state behavior in international relations. At its core, Realism views the international system as anarchic, meaning that there is no central authority governing the actions of states. In such a system, states are primarily concerned with survival and the accumulation of power. National interest, from a realist perspective, is therefore defined largely in terms of security and power maximization. Morgenthau (1948) argues that states act rationally to protect their national interests, which are rooted in power considerations. Similarly, Waltz (1979) emphasizes that the structure of the international system compels states to prioritize their security in a self help environment. For Nigeria, realism helps to explain its efforts to maintain territorial integrity, address internal and external security threats, and assert its influence within West Africa. Nigeria's involvement in regional peacekeeping missions and its leadership role in ECOWAS can be interpreted as attempts to project power and maintain regional stability in line with its national interest. However, realism tends to downplay the role of cooperation and non material factors, which are also significant in Nigeria's foreign policy.

Liberalism offers an alternative perspective by emphasizing the importance of cooperation, international institutions, and economic interdependence in shaping state behavior. Unlike realism, liberalism does not view conflict as inevitable. Instead, it argues that states can achieve mutual benefits through collaboration and the establishment of rules based international systems. Scholars such as Keohane (1984) highlight the role of international institutions in facilitating cooperation, reducing uncertainty, and promoting stability. Economic interdependence further encourages peaceful relations, as states become mutually reliant on trade and investment. In the context of Nigeria, liberalism is reflected in its active participation in international and regional organizations such as the United Nations, the African Union, and ECOWAS. Through these platforms, Nigeria seeks to promote peace, security, and development while advancing its national interest. The country's support for regional integration initiatives and global economic cooperation demonstrates its recognition of the benefits of interdependence. Nevertheless, liberalism may be limited in explaining situations where cooperation breaks down due to conflicting interests or power asymmetries.

By and large, constructivism introduces a different dimension by focusing on the role of ideas, identity, norms, and perceptions in shaping state behavior. According to Wendt (1999), the international system is socially constructed, meaning that state interests are not fixed but are shaped by historical experiences, cultural values, and social interactions. National interest, therefore, is not only about material power but also about how states perceive themselves and others. Constructivism is particularly useful in understanding Nigeria's Afrocentric foreign policy orientation, which emphasizes solidarity with African countries and a commitment to the liberation and development of the continent. This identity driven approach has influenced Nigeria's foreign policy decisions, including its support for anti colonial movements and its leadership in regional affairs. Additionally, Nigeria's international image and reputation play a role in shaping its interactions with other states.

The justification for adopting this theoretical framework lies in the complex and multidimensional nature of Nigeria's national interest. No single theory is sufficient to fully explain the country's foreign policy behavior within a conflicting international system. Realism provides insight into the role of power and security considerations, liberalism highlights the importance of cooperation and institutions, while constructivism explains the influence of identity and norms. By integrating these perspectives, the study adopts a more comprehensive analytical approach that captures both the material and non material factors shaping Nigeria's engagement with the global system.

Evolution of Nigeria's National Interest

The evolution of Nigeria's national interest is closely intertwined with its historical experiences, domestic realities, and the changing dynamics of the international system. Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria's foreign policy has undergone significant transformations, reflecting shifts in global power structures as well as internal political and economic developments. While certain core elements such as the protection of sovereignty and the pursuit of regional leadership have remained constant, the strategies and priorities through which these interests are pursued have evolved over time. In the immediate post independence period, Nigeria's foreign policy orientation was shaped by the need to assert its sovereignty, gain international recognition, and maintain territorial integrity. The country adopted a cautious and conservative approach, influenced by its colonial legacy and close ties with Western powers, particularly Britain. At the same time, Nigeria sought to establish itself as a responsible member of the international community by joining key international organizations such as the United Nations and the Commonwealth. According to Aluko (1981), Nigeria's early foreign policy was characterized by moderation, non alignment, and a commitment to peaceful coexistence. However, internal challenges such as political instability and the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 to 1970 significantly influenced its external relations, reinforcing the importance of national unity and security as central components of its national interest.

During the Cold War era, Nigeria's national interest was shaped by the bipolar structure of the international system, dominated by the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Although Nigeria officially maintained a policy of non alignment, in practice it leaned towards the Western bloc due to economic and political considerations. Nevertheless, Nigeria demonstrated a degree of strategic autonomy by engaging with both blocs when necessary. Its foreign policy during this period was marked by increased activism, particularly in Africa, where it played a leading role in supporting liberation movements and opposing apartheid in Southern Africa (Adebajo, 2008). This period also saw Nigeria leveraging its oil wealth in the 1970s to enhance its diplomatic influence and assert its position as a regional power. The national interest during this era was thus defined not only in terms of security but also in terms of ideological commitment to anti colonialism and African solidarity. A defining feature of Nigeria's foreign policy is its Afrocentric orientation, which places Africa at the center of its external relations. This policy reflects the belief that Nigeria's national interest is inextricably linked to the stability, unity, and development of the African continent. As articulated by Akinyemi (1989), Africa is considered the cornerstone of Nigeria's foreign policy. This Afrocentric approach has

manifested in Nigeria's leadership role in regional organizations such as ECOWAS and the African Union, as well as its significant contributions to peacekeeping missions in countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone. By promoting regional stability and integration, Nigeria seeks to create a favorable environment for its own security and economic development.

However, critics argue that this outward looking policy has sometimes come at the expense of domestic priorities, raising questions about the balance between altruism and self interest in Nigeria's foreign policy. The end of the Cold War marked a significant turning point in the evolution of Nigeria's national interest. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a unipolar world order led to a reconfiguration of global politics, with increased emphasis on democracy, human rights, and economic liberalization. For Nigeria, this period was characterized by both challenges and opportunities. Domestically, the country faced political instability and international isolation, particularly during periods of military rule in the 1990s. Externally, Nigeria had to adapt to a new international environment in which economic considerations and global norms played a more prominent role. According to Fawole (2003), Nigeria's foreign policy during the post Cold War era shifted towards economic diplomacy, with a focus on attracting foreign investment, promoting trade, and integrating into the global economy.

In the contemporary period, Nigeria's national interest continues to evolve in response to emerging global and domestic challenges. The current international system is increasingly multipolar, characterized by complex interdependence, geopolitical rivalries, and transnational threats such as terrorism, climate change, and pandemics. Nigeria's foreign policy has consequently expanded to address a broader range of issues, including economic diversification, energy security, and diaspora engagement. The country has also sought to strengthen its strategic partnerships with both traditional Western allies and emerging powers such as China. At the same time, persistent domestic challenges, including insecurity, corruption, and economic volatility, have constrained Nigeria's ability to effectively project its influence internationally.

Overall, the evolution of Nigeria's national interest reflects a dynamic interplay between continuity and change. While the fundamental goals of ensuring security, promoting development, and maintaining regional leadership have remained consistent, the means through which these objectives are pursued have adapted to shifting global realities. This evolution underscores the need for a more coherent and strategic approach to foreign policy that aligns Nigeria's domestic capabilities with its international ambitions.

Nigeria in a Conflicting International System

The contemporary international system is marked by a complex web of conflicts that transcend traditional military confrontations and extend into economic, ideological, and geopolitical domains. These conflicts are shaped by the diffusion of power across multiple actors, the resurgence of great power competition, and the persistence of regional instability. For Nigeria, navigating this conflicting environment requires a careful balancing of interests, strategic diplomacy, and adaptability to shifting global dynamics. In fact, one of the defining features of the current global order is the intensification of great power rivalry, particularly between the

United States and China. This competition spans multiple domains, including trade, technology, military influence, and ideological appeal. The United States seeks to maintain its global dominance, while China continues to expand its economic and strategic footprint, especially in developing regions such as Africa (Mearsheimer, 2019). For Nigeria, this rivalry presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, engagement with China has facilitated infrastructure development and investment through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative. On the other hand, Nigeria must manage its longstanding relations with Western powers, particularly in areas such as security cooperation, governance, and trade. The need to avoid overdependence on any single external partner underscores the importance of strategic balance in Nigeria's foreign policy.

In addition to great power competition, regional conflicts remain a significant feature of the international system. In Africa, persistent instability in regions such as the Sahel and the Horn of Africa has implications for Nigeria's security and regional leadership role. Issues such as terrorism, insurgency, and political instability have created transnational threats that directly affect Nigeria, particularly through groups like Boko Haram. Beyond Africa, conflicts in the Middle East and Eastern Europe also shape the global environment in which Nigeria operates. For instance, the Russia Ukraine conflict has had far reaching consequences for global energy markets, food security, and diplomatic alignments, all of which impact Nigeria's economic and strategic interests. These interconnected conflicts highlight the extent to which Nigeria's national interest is influenced by developments beyond its immediate geographical environment.

Economic conflicts have also become a prominent aspect of the global system. Trade wars, protectionist policies, and the use of economic sanctions as instruments of foreign policy have intensified competition among states (Baldwin, 2016). The imposition of sanctions by major powers and the politicization of global trade have created uncertainties in international markets, affecting developing economies like Nigeria. As an oil dependent economy, Nigeria is particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in global commodity prices and disruptions in supply chains. At the same time, economic conflicts present opportunities for Nigeria to diversify its partnerships and explore alternative markets, especially within the framework of regional initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area.

Within this conflicting international system, Nigeria's diplomatic positioning reflects a combination of pragmatism, caution, and strategic engagement. Historically committed to principles such as non alignment and peaceful coexistence, Nigeria has sought to maintain cordial relations with a wide range of global actors. Its diplomatic approach emphasizes multilateralism, conflict resolution, and regional stability. However, the complexity of contemporary global conflicts often requires Nigeria to make difficult choices, particularly when its interests intersect with those of competing powers. In other words, Nigeria's voting patterns in international organizations, especially within the United Nations, provide insight into its foreign policy orientation. Generally, Nigeria aligns with positions that promote peace, sovereignty, and development, often reflecting broader African and Global South perspectives. It tends to support resolutions that emphasize non interference, conflict resolution through dialogue, and respect for international law. However, Nigeria's voting behavior is not always

consistent, as it must balance its principles with pragmatic considerations, including diplomatic relations, economic interests, and external pressures.

Balancing relations with major global powers remains a central challenge for Nigeria. The country must navigate its partnerships with Western nations, which are important for security cooperation, development assistance, and institutional support, while also deepening its ties with emerging powers such as China and, to some extent, Russia. This balancing act requires a high level of diplomatic skill to ensure that Nigeria maximizes its benefits without compromising its sovereignty or becoming entangled in great power conflicts. The pursuit of strategic autonomy, therefore, remains critical to Nigeria's ability to effectively operate within a conflicting international system.

Hence, Nigeria's engagement with the contemporary international system is shaped by the interplay of global conflicts, regional instability, and economic competition. Its ability to successfully navigate these challenges depends on the clarity of its national interest, the coherence of its foreign policy, and the strength of its domestic foundations.

Core National Interests of Nigeria

Nigeria's national interest is multidimensional, reflecting the complex interplay between domestic priorities and external engagements within the international system. As a state with significant demographic weight, resource endowment, and regional influence, Nigeria's national interest extends beyond mere survival to encompass broader goals of development, leadership, and global relevance. These interests can be categorized into security, economic, political, and socio cultural dimensions, while also incorporating additional strategic concerns such as environmental sustainability, technological advancement, and global reputation. At the core of Nigeria's national interest are its security interests, which involve the protection of territorial integrity, sovereignty, and the safety of its citizens. Internally, Nigeria faces numerous security challenges, including insurgency in the North East, banditry and kidnapping in the North West, communal conflicts, and militancy in the Niger Delta. These threats undermine national stability and strain state capacity. Externally, Nigeria must contend with transnational threats such as terrorism, arms trafficking, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, and the spillover effects of instability in neighboring countries. From a realist perspective, these challenges necessitate the strengthening of military capability, intelligence systems, and regional security cooperation. Nigeria's active role in peacekeeping missions and regional security initiatives reflects its recognition that its security is closely tied to the stability of West Africa (Adebajo, 2008).

Closely linked to security are Nigeria's economic interests**,** which are central to its national development and global engagement. Nigeria's economy has historically been dependent on oil exports, making it vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil prices and external shocks. Consequently, a key component of its national interest is economic diversification, aimed at reducing reliance on oil and promoting sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and technology. Trade expansion, attraction of foreign direct investment, and participation in global and regional economic frameworks such as the African Continental Free Trade Area are also critical. As scholars such as Ake (1981) have noted, economic strength is fundamental to

national power and international influence. Therefore, Nigeria's pursuit of sustainable economic growth is essential for enhancing its bargaining power in the global system.

Nigeria's political interests revolve around the preservation of sovereignty, the promotion of democratic governance, and the assertion of leadership within Africa. Sovereignty remains a fundamental concern, particularly in an international system where external pressures and interventions can undermine state autonomy. Nigeria has consistently advocated for non interference in the internal affairs of states while also supporting democratic norms and constitutional order. Its leadership role in regional organizations such as ECOWAS and the African Union underscores its ambition to shape political outcomes within the continent. This leadership is not only a reflection of Nigeria's size and capacity but also a strategic effort to create a stable regional environment conducive to its own development (Akinyemi, 1989).

In addition to these material concerns, Nigeria's socio cultural interests play an important role in shaping its national interest. The Nigerian diaspora constitutes a significant asset, contributing to the economy through remittances and enhancing the country's global presence. Cultural exports such as music, film, and literature have also increased Nigeria's soft power, improving its international image and influence. By leveraging its cultural capital, Nigeria can strengthen diplomatic ties, attract investment, and promote its values on the global stage. Soft power, as Nye (2004) suggests, is an increasingly important component of national influence in a globalized world.

Beyond these traditional categories, Nigeria's national interest also encompasses several additional dimensions. One such dimension is environmental and climate security, particularly in light of challenges such as desertification in the northern regions, flooding in coastal and riverine areas, and the broader impacts of climate change. These environmental issues have direct implications for food security, economic stability, and social cohesion, making them integral to national interest.

Another emerging dimension is technological and digital development, which has become critical in the contemporary global economy. Nigeria's interest in expanding its digital infrastructure, promoting innovation, and participating in the global knowledge economy reflects the growing importance of technology in national competitiveness. Cybersecurity also forms part of this dimension, as the protection of digital assets and information systems becomes increasingly vital.

Furthermore, Nigeria's human security interests including education, healthcare, and poverty reduction are essential for sustainable development and long term stability. A population that is healthy, educated, and economically empowered enhances national productivity and resilience, thereby strengthening the state's overall capacity to pursue its interests.

Clearly, international reputation and prestige constitute an important aspect of Nigeria's national interest. A positive global image enhances diplomatic influence, attracts investment, and facilitates cooperation with other states. Conversely, issues such as corruption, insecurity, and governance challenges can undermine Nigeria's credibility and limit its effectiveness in

international affairs. Nigeria's core national interests are broad and interconnected, encompassing both traditional concerns of security and sovereignty and contemporary priorities such as economic diversification, soft power, environmental sustainability, and technological advancement. The effective pursuit of these interests requires a coherent and integrated approach that aligns domestic policies with foreign policy objectives in an increasingly complex and competitive international system.

Challenges to Nigeria's National Interest

Despite its vast potential and strategic importance within Africa and the broader international system, Nigeria faces a range of structural and systemic challenges that undermine its ability to effectively define, pursue, and protect its national interest. These challenges are deeply rooted in domestic conditions but are often exacerbated by external pressures, thereby constraining Nigeria's foreign policy effectiveness and global influence.

A major challenge lies in weak institutional capacity, which limits the efficiency and coherence of policy formulation and implementation. Strong institutions are essential for articulating national interest, coordinating foreign policy, and ensuring continuity across administrations. In Nigeria, however, bureaucratic inefficiencies, inadequate funding, and lack of professionalism within key state institutions have often resulted in fragmented and inconsistent policy outcomes. As noted by scholars such as Fawole (2003), the absence of robust institutional frameworks weakens Nigeria's ability to respond strategically to international developments and undermines its credibility in global affairs.

Closely related to this is the issue of domestic political instability and governance challenges. Nigeria's political landscape has historically been characterized by periods of military rule, electoral irregularities, elite competition, and weak democratic consolidation. Although the country has maintained civilian rule since 1999, governance deficits persist in the form of poor policy execution, weak accountability mechanisms, and limited public trust in government institutions. These internal dynamics distract from long term strategic planning and reduce the state's capacity to project a coherent national interest externally. As Ake (1981) argues, the nature of the domestic political system significantly influences a country's external behavior and effectiveness in international relations.

Another critical constraint is economic dependency and vulnerability, particularly Nigeria's overreliance on crude oil exports. This mono product economic structure exposes the country to fluctuations in global oil prices, thereby affecting government revenue, foreign exchange earnings, and overall economic stability. Such vulnerability limits Nigeria's strategic autonomy, as economic pressures often compel the state to align its policies with the interests of more economically powerful actors. Furthermore, inadequate diversification has hindered industrial growth, reduced competitiveness, and weakened Nigeria's bargaining power in international economic negotiations.

Corruption and policy inconsistency also pose significant obstacles to the effective pursuit of national interest. Widespread corruption within public institutions undermines governance, distorts resource allocation, and erodes public confidence. It also negatively affects Nigeria's international image, discouraging foreign investment and weakening diplomatic credibility. In addition, frequent changes in policy direction across different administrations create uncertainty and hinder long term planning. The lack of continuity in foreign policy undermines Nigeria's ability to build sustained partnerships and achieve strategic objectives.

Nigeria's national interest is further challenged by external pressures from global powers**,** particularly within the context of an increasingly competitive international system. As major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia seek to expand their influence, developing countries like Nigeria often face pressure to align with specific geopolitical or economic agendas. These pressures can limit Nigeria's policy independence and force difficult choices that may not fully align with its national priorities. The asymmetrical nature of global power relations means that Nigeria must constantly navigate competing interests while attempting to preserve its sovereignty and strategic autonomy.

Further**,** insecurity in its various forms remains one of the most pressing challenges to Nigeria's national interest. The country is confronted with multiple security threats, including terrorism, insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, and maritime piracy. The activities of extremist groups in the North East, along with criminal networks in other regions, have not only caused significant human and material losses but have also weakened state authority and deterred investment. Additionally, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea threatens maritime trade and regional economic stability. These security challenges divert resources away from development priorities and diminish Nigeria's capacity to engage effectively in international affairs.

So far, the challenges to Nigeria's national interest are multifaceted and deeply interconnected. Weak institutions, governance deficits, economic vulnerabilities, corruption, external pressures, and pervasive insecurity collectively constrain the country's ability to function as a strong and coherent actor in the international system. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reforms that strengthen domestic capacity, promote accountability, and enhance strategic policy coordination, thereby enabling Nigeria to more effectively pursue its national interest in a complex and conflicting global environment.

Opportunities in the Global System

Despite the numerous challenges confronting Nigeria's national interest, the evolving international system also presents a range of strategic opportunities that, if effectively harnessed, can enhance the country's global standing and advance its developmental objectives. These opportunities are embedded in Nigeria's regional influence, economic potential, demographic strength, and growing engagement with global networks.

One of the most significant opportunities lies in Nigeria's regional leadership through ECOWAS and the African Union (AU). As the largest economy and most populous country in West Africa, Nigeria is well positioned to shape regional political and economic agendas. Its leadership role in ECOWAS has enabled it to influence conflict resolution, peacekeeping, and democratic governance in the subregion, particularly through interventions in countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone (Adebajo, 2008). Similarly, Nigeria's active participation in the African Union provides a platform to contribute to continental policy frameworks, including peace and security initiatives, economic integration, and institutional reforms. By consolidating its leadership within these organizations, Nigeria can strengthen its influence and promote a stable regional environment that aligns with its national interest.

Another important opportunity is found in strategic partnerships and South South cooperation. In an increasingly multipolar world, Nigeria has the capacity to diversify its international partnerships beyond traditional Western allies to include emerging economies such as China, India, Brazil, and other countries in the Global South. South South cooperation facilitates the exchange of technology, investment, and development experiences that are often more suited to Nigeria's socio economic context (UNDP, 2013). These partnerships can also enhance Nigeria's bargaining power in global negotiations by reducing dependence on any single bloc and promoting a more balanced foreign policy.

The establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) represents a major economic opportunity for Nigeria. As one of the largest free trade areas in the world, AfCFTA aims to promote intra African trade, industrialization, and economic integration. For Nigeria, participation in AfCFTA offers access to a vast continental market, enabling the expansion of exports, stimulation of local industries, and attraction of foreign investment (UNECA, 2020). If effectively implemented, this framework can support Nigeria's long term goal of economic diversification and reduce its vulnerability to external shocks.

Nigeria's diaspora engagement also constitutes a valuable opportunity for advancing national interest. The Nigerian diaspora is one of the largest and most dynamic in the world, contributing significantly through remittances, which serve as a major source of foreign exchange. Beyond financial contributions, the diaspora provides access to global knowledge, skills, and networks that can support national development. As noted by Gamlen (2008), diaspora communities can act as agents of development, investment, and diplomacy. By strengthening institutional mechanisms for engaging its diaspora, Nigeria can leverage this resource to enhance both its economic and diplomatic influence.

In the contemporary digital age, digital diplomacy and global influence have emerged as critical tools of foreign policy. Nigeria's growing presence in digital spaces, supported by its vibrant youth population and expanding technology sector, offers opportunities to shape global narratives, promote its culture, and engage with international audiences. Digital platforms enable more direct and immediate interaction with foreign publics, thereby enhancing transparency and soft power. According to Bjola and Holmes (2015), digital diplomacy has become an essential

component of modern statecraft, allowing countries to project influence beyond traditional diplomatic channels.

Beyond these core areas, several additional opportunities further enhance Nigeria's prospects within the global system. One such opportunity is demographic advantage, often referred to as the youth bulge. Nigeria's large and youthful population, if effectively educated and empowered, can drive innovation, productivity, and economic growth. This demographic strength also enhances Nigeria's attractiveness as a market and investment destination.

Another emerging area is natural resource and energy transition opportunities**.** While Nigeria has historically depended on oil, the global shift towards renewable energy presents an opportunity to invest in alternative energy sources such as solar and wind. This transition can support sustainable development while maintaining Nigeria's relevance in global energy markets.

Nigeria also has the opportunity to enhance its role in global peacekeeping and security governance. Its long history of participation in United Nations peacekeeping missions has earned it international recognition and credibility. Continued engagement in this area can strengthen Nigeria's diplomatic profile and reinforce its commitment to global peace and security.

Furthermore**,** multilateral engagement and global governance participation provide Nigeria with platforms to influence international norms and decision making. Active participation in institutions such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization, and other global forums enables Nigeria to advocate for the interests of developing countries and contribute to shaping global policies (Keohane, 1984).

In addition, the global system, while characterized by conflict and competition, also offers Nigeria a range of strategic opportunities. Through effective regional leadership, diversified partnerships, economic integration, diaspora engagement, and digital diplomacy, Nigeria can enhance its capacity to pursue its national interest. However, the realization of these opportunities depends on the country's ability to address its domestic challenges and adopt a coherent, forward looking foreign policy strategy that aligns with the realities of a rapidly changing international environment.

Critical Reflections

A critical examination of Nigeria's national interest within a conflicting international system reveals a number of conceptual ambiguities, policy contradictions, and strategic dilemmas that continue to shape its foreign policy behavior. While Nigeria has historically projected itself as a key regional actor with clear commitments to Africa and global cooperation, questions persist regarding the clarity, coherence, and consistency of its national interest.

One of the foremost issues is whether Nigeria's national interest is clearly defined. Although official foreign policy statements frequently emphasize goals such as national security, economic development, African unity, and global relevance, these objectives are often articulated in broad and sometimes vague terms. Unlike major powers that systematically codify their strategic priorities, Nigeria's conception of national interest tends to be fluid and subject to the

preferences of political leadership at any given time (Fawole, 2003). This lack of precise definition creates challenges for long term planning and policy continuity, resulting in reactive rather than proactive foreign policy decisions. Moreover, the absence of a widely accepted national consensus on core priorities further complicates the effective pursuit of these interests.

Closely related to this ambiguity are the contradictions between domestic realities and foreign policy ambitions. Nigeria has consistently aspired to play a leadership role in Africa and to exert influence in global affairs. However, these ambitions are often undermined by persistent domestic challenges, including insecurity, economic instability, governance deficits, and infrastructural limitations. As Ake (1981) argues, the strength of a country's foreign policy is fundamentally rooted in its domestic conditions. In Nigeria's case, the gap between ambition and capacity has led to situations where the country commits significant resources to external engagements, such as peacekeeping and regional interventions, while facing pressing internal development needs. This contradiction raises important questions about the sustainability and prioritization of Nigeria's foreign policy objectives.

Another critical issue is the tension between Afrocentrism and global pragmatism. Nigeria's longstanding Afrocentric policy has positioned Africa as the centerpiece of its foreign policy, emphasizing solidarity, regional stability, and continental development. While this orientation has earned Nigeria recognition as a leader in African affairs, it has also generated debates about its strategic value in a rapidly changing global environment. Critics argue that excessive focus on Africa may limit Nigeria's ability to fully engage with broader global opportunities, particularly in areas such as trade, technology, and strategic alliances. On the other hand, a shift towards greater global pragmatism, characterized by diversified partnerships and interest based diplomacy, may risk undermining Nigeria's traditional commitments to African unity. Balancing these competing imperatives remains a central challenge for policymakers.

Furthermore, an evaluation of Nigeria's strategic choices in global conflicts highlights a pattern of cautious engagement and selective alignment. Nigeria has generally sought to maintain neutrality in major geopolitical rivalries, avoiding explicit alignment with competing global powers. This approach is consistent with its historical commitment to non alignment and strategic autonomy. However, in an increasingly polarized international system, neutrality can be difficult to sustain and may limit Nigeria's ability to secure tangible benefits from strategic partnerships. Additionally, Nigeria's responses to global conflicts have sometimes appeared inconsistent, reflecting the interplay between principle and pragmatism. For instance, decisions in multilateral forums often balance respect for sovereignty with the need to maintain diplomatic and economic relationships.

These reflections underscore a broader concern regarding the coherence of Nigeria's foreign policy strategy. While the country possesses significant potential to influence regional and global affairs, the effectiveness of its engagement is constrained by conceptual ambiguity, domestic weaknesses, and strategic dilemmas. The interplay between internal conditions and external pressures continues to shape Nigeria's ability to define and pursue its national interest in a consistent and effective manner. No doubt, Nigeria's national interest, though broadly

articulated, requires clearer definition, stronger alignment with domestic realities, and a more balanced approach to regional and global engagement. Addressing these issues is essential for enhancing the country's capacity to navigate the complexities of a conflicting international system and to achieve its long term strategic objectives.

Policy Recommendations

In light of the complexities and challenges identified in Nigeria's engagement with a conflicting international system, there is a pressing need for comprehensive and strategic policy reforms aimed at strengthening the country's capacity to define, pursue, and protect its national interest. These recommendations are anchored on the imperative of aligning domestic capabilities with foreign policy objectives while enhancing Nigeria's adaptability in a rapidly changing global environment.

A fundamental priority is the clear articulation of Nigeria's national interest. The government should develop a coherent and codified national interest framework that outlines short, medium, and long term priorities across key sectors such as security, economic development, diplomacy, and technological advancement. This framework should transcend changes in political leadership and serve as a guiding document for foreign policy decision making. As Fawole (2003) suggests, clarity in national interest enhances consistency and strategic direction in international engagement.

Closely related to this is the need for strengthening foreign policy institutions. Effective diplomacy requires well resourced and professionally managed institutions, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Nigeria's diplomatic missions abroad. Institutional reforms should focus on capacity building, merit based appointments, policy coordination, and the integration of research and strategic planning units. Strengthening these institutions will improve Nigeria's ability to respond proactively to global developments and enhance its credibility in international affairs.

Another critical recommendation is economic diversification and self reliance. Reducing dependence on oil exports is essential for enhancing Nigeria's economic resilience and strategic autonomy. The government should prioritize the development of key sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, technology, and renewable energy. Encouraging innovation, improving infrastructure, and creating a conducive business environment will attract investment and boost productivity. As Ake (1981) emphasizes, economic strength is a key determinant of national power and international influence.

The adoption of strategic neutrality and pragmatic diplomacy is also vital in navigating great power rivalries and global conflicts. Nigeria should maintain a balanced approach in its relations with major powers, engaging with all while avoiding excessive dependence on any single actor. This requires a foreign policy that is flexible, interest driven, and responsive to changing global dynamics. Pragmatic diplomacy allows Nigeria to maximize benefits from diverse partnerships while safeguarding its sovereignty and independence.

Nigeria should also focus on enhancing its regional and continental leadership role. By strengthening its commitment to organizations such as ECOWAS and the African Union, Nigeria can promote peace, stability, and economic integration within Africa. Leadership in these platforms should be accompanied by tangible contributions, including financial support, diplomatic engagement, and capacity building initiatives. A stable and prosperous region ultimately serves Nigeria's own national interest.

Further, there is an urgent need for increased investment in security and intelligence. Addressing internal and external security threats requires modernizing the armed forces, improving intelligence gathering and coordination, and enhancing regional security cooperation. Emphasis should also be placed on addressing the root causes of insecurity, such as poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion, through comprehensive development policies.

Beyond these core recommendations, several additional measures are necessary to strengthen Nigeria's position in the global system. One such measure is promoting good governance and institutional accountability. Combating corruption, strengthening the rule of law, and ensuring transparency in public administration will enhance Nigeria's domestic stability and international reputation. As governance improves, so too will the country's ability to attract investment and engage effectively in global affairs.

Another important area is leveraging diaspora engagement and soft power. The Nigerian diaspora represents a valuable resource for economic development, knowledge transfer, and international advocacy. Establishing structured channels for diaspora participation in national development can yield significant benefits. At the same time, promoting Nigeria's cultural industries and global image will enhance its soft power and diplomatic influence (Nye, 2004).

Nigeria should also invest in digital diplomacy and technological advancement. In an increasingly digital world, the ability to engage through online platforms, manage information flows, and project influence in cyberspace is critical. Strengthening digital infrastructure, supporting innovation, and developing cybersecurity capabilities will position Nigeria to compete effectively in the global knowledge economy.

In addition, active participation in multilateral institutions and global governance should be prioritized. Nigeria must continue to engage constructively in international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, advocating for the interests of developing countries and contributing to global policy discussions. Such engagement enhances Nigeria's visibility and influence in shaping international norms (Keohane, 1984).

Finally, there is a need for policy consistency and long term strategic planning. Foreign policy should not be subject to abrupt changes with each administration but should follow a coherent and sustained trajectory aligned with national priorities. Establishing mechanisms for policy continuity, including bipartisan consensus and institutional memory, will strengthen Nigeria's credibility and effectiveness in international relations.

All in all, the effective pursuit of Nigeria's national interest in a conflicting international system requires a holistic and integrated approach that addresses both domestic and external challenges. By articulating clear priorities, strengthening institutions, diversifying the economy, and adopting pragmatic diplomacy, Nigeria can enhance its capacity to navigate global complexities and secure its place as a significant actor in international affairs.

Concluding Remarks

This study has examined Nigeria's national interest within the context of a conflicting international system, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between domestic realities and external pressures in shaping the country's foreign policy. The analysis began by establishing the conceptual and theoretical foundations of national interest, drawing on realist, liberal, and constructivist perspectives to explain the motivations and behavior of states. It further traced the historical evolution of Nigeria's national interest, highlighting the continuity of core priorities such as security, economic development, and regional leadership, alongside shifts in strategy in response to changing global conditions. The study also explored the nature of contemporary global conflicts, including great power rivalry, regional instability, and economic competition, and assessed how these factors influence Nigeria's diplomatic positioning and strategic choices.

A central argument of this paper is that while Nigeria possesses significant potential to function as a major regional and emerging global actor, its ability to effectively pursue its national interest remains constrained by a combination of internal and external challenges. Weak institutional capacity, governance deficits, economic dependency, corruption, and persistent insecurity undermine the coherence and effectiveness of its foreign policy. At the same time, the country faces increasing pressure to navigate a complex international environment characterized by competing global powers, shifting alliances, and multidimensional conflicts. Despite these constraints, Nigeria also has access to important opportunities, including regional leadership, economic integration through continental frameworks, diaspora engagement, and the expanding role of digital diplomacy.

Within this conflicting global system, Nigeria occupies a position that is both strategic and precarious. On the one hand, it is a pivotal actor in West Africa and a key contributor to continental stability and development. On the other hand, its global influence remains limited by domestic vulnerabilities and inconsistencies in policy execution. Nigeria's traditional commitment to Afrocentrism and non alignment continues to shape its external engagements, yet these principles must be continuously adapted to align with the realities of a multipolar and highly competitive international order. The need to balance regional responsibilities with broader global opportunities remains a defining feature of its foreign policy.

Looking to the future, the prospects for Nigeria's effective engagement in the international system will depend largely on its ability to undertake meaningful domestic reforms and adopt a more coherent and strategic approach to foreign policy. Strengthening institutions, promoting good governance, diversifying the economy, and enhancing security are essential for building the internal capacity required to project influence externally. Equally important is the articulation of a clear and consistent national interest that guides decision making across

different administrations. In an era of increasing global uncertainty, Nigeria must embrace pragmatic diplomacy, leverage its comparative advantages, and position itself as a resilient and adaptive actor.

In sum, Nigeria's national interest in a conflicting international system is not static but continually evolving in response to both internal dynamics and external developments. By aligning its domestic priorities with its foreign policy objectives and effectively navigating global complexities, Nigeria can enhance its role as a credible and influential participant in international affairs while securing long term national development and stability.

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