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RECEIVED 11 March 2024

ACCEPTED 13 January 2025

PUBLISHED 07 February 2025

CITATION

Magdin R (2025) Two birds, one stone: can Nigeria have the best of both worlds internationally while chasing regional leadership?
Front. Polit. Sci. 7:1399242.
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2025.1399242

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Two birds, one stone: can Nigeria have the best of both worlds internationally while chasing regional leadership?

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The main aim of the paper is to analyze how Nigeria is navigating local West African ambitions while playing a more determined role in international politics. The changes in the global dynamics offer Nigeria an unexpected opportunity to choose how to play its foreign policy game onward. On the one hand, there is a long-lasting relationship with the Western nations, particularly with the United States. On the other hand, BRICS's newly regained vitality appeals to the African country as an alternative to having more ownership of the important decisions involving itself, the region and even international politics. In this context, the main question that arises is if Nigeria is on the path to choose one of the two ideological-economic blocks already mentioned or if it is able to elegantly balance between them to pursue its national and regional interests while getting the best of both worlds.

KEYWORDS

Nigeria, foreign policy, BRICS, West Africa, Afrocentrism

1 Introduction

In 2023, during the acceptance speech for the rotating presidency of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the newly elected Nigerian president, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, proudly stated that Nigeria is back. The country's goals to be the West African leader state are not new, and they are mostly grounded in having the biggest population and economy on the continent, as well as a rather more stable state compared to the rest of the region. However, in such unpredictable waters, these ambitions can be best backed up by influence coming from states with more influence in international affairs, such as Western states or the BRICS countries.

Thus, the main scope of the paper is to analyze how Nigeria is navigating local West African ambitions while playing a more determined role in international politics. The changes in the global dynamics offer Nigeria an unexpected opportunity to choose how to play its foreign policy game onward. On the one hand, there is the long-lasting relationship with the Western nations, particularly with the United States. On the other hand, BRICS's newly regained vitality appeals to the African country as an alternative to have more ownership on the important decisions regarding itself, the region and even international politics. In this context, the main question that arises is if Nigeria is on the path to choose one of the two ideological-economic blocks already mentioned or is it able to elegantly balance between the two of them with the intention of pursuing its national and regional interests while getting the best of both worlds?

In order to better understand how the dynamics presented above emerged, what is the current situation and possible future trends and developments, this analytical attempt will follow Nigeria's foreign policy and domestic journey in six different parts. The first one will look at Nigeria's internal problems and how they are affecting its foreign policy. The second

part will question what the place of Nigeria is within the political and military dynamics of the West African region; this will be followed by a third segment discussing continental dynamics. Fourthly, Nigeria's ideological, political and economic relationship with the West will be assessed, focusing mostly on the United States and the European Union, pointing out also the France and United Kingdom situation. This will be followed by a mirror section where Nigeria's ideological, political and economic relationship with the BRICS countries, focusing mostly on China and Russia, will be the center subject. Lastly, in the concluding part, the analysis will discuss how Nigeria can advance its foreign policy objectives regionally and internationally.

From a methodological point of view, the paper will employ publicly available data sources, which are investigated and critically assessed based mainly on qualitative approaches. The analysis will be done using public discourses, official press releases and other official declarations, news, public policy reports, economic reports and data, academic articles, and other scholarly efforts to sustain the factual and theoretical foundation of the academic endeavor briefly presented above.

2 Foreign policy starts at home

The first chapter tries to follow Nigeria's path in finding its foreign policy purpose since gaining independence until the present day and the reasons for the choices made through the years as well as the internal challenges that led to them.

Since obtaining its independence in 1960, Nigeria has behaved like any other state by engaging in external relations in the region, on the continent and worldwide. These external dynamics are influenced by some unique factors. The most important are the Nigerian economy which is mono-cultural, mostly dependent on oil as the main source of economic growth; the geopolitical localization in Western Africa; the biggest population on the continent; the political environment and military capacity (Kayode, 2016, p. 1): *'The establishment of the state and evolution of its nationhood, quality of its leadership, its geographical location and the character of its followership has also made it challenging for the Nigerian state to respond to the expectations of the masses or manifest the attributes of a true state'* (Akinola, 2018, p. 89). How all these factors are connected with Nigeria's foreign policy will be further developed throughout this chapter.

Situated in the Gulf of Guinea, in the West Africa sub-region, with a big landmass and with the biggest population in Africa with 227 million inhabitants (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022), Nigeria is growing faster than any other country in the world with the expectation of reaching around 400 million in the next 25 years (Gaines, 2023) and becoming the third country in the world after surpassing the United States. From an economic point of view, this aspect is important as more consumers and job seekers would appear on the labor market of an economy that already is struggling, as we'll see below. Thus, without the proper economic instruments and policies, a blessing can easily transform into a curse, paralyzing the state while intensifying the migration process. Speaking of migration, it is already considered an issue, especially by the countries in Europe or North America, the main destinations, where the main pull factors are better economic and security conditions. The push factors are more varied but include poverty, lack of work opportunities, fallacious leadership, insecurity and many others

(Abumere and Sanni, 2022, p. 17). For example, in 2020, in the European Union, Nigerians were the number one African asylum seekers with motives varying from Boko Haram threat to sexual orientation persecution (Varin and Onuoha, 2020, p. 2).

The country's inability to function better has been also blamed on the lack of real leadership. The leadership crisis is considered one of the main obstacles to the political, social and economic development of the country due to corruption – considered one of the most challenging issues Nigeria is facing (Àkànlè and Nkpe, 2022, *passim*)— as well as a lack of knowledge and interest in effectively mobilizing Nigeria's natural and human resources (Akinola, 2018, p. 112). This is a reason why the country's also called *"a rich country of poor people"* (Agbaje et al., 2004, p. xx).

Turning inwards it is impossible to not mention other important challenges Nigeria is facing domestically (Kayode, 2016, p. 9). From terrorism, economic issues, religious issues, ethnic crises, increased violence, and the effort to consolidate democracy, Nigeria is confronting many security obstacles. All these issues shape the external behavior of the country as well, while other problems are exclusively caused by external factors. For example, as oil is the centerpiece of the Nigerian economy, the oil boom of the 1970s was a source of dynamic and practical foreign policy, while nowadays with oil prices sliding down and more and more talks on the green alternatives, Nigeria is not such a popular economic partner anymore and this can pose real problems in the future (Kayode, 2016, p. 11). This fact can also be seen by following the trend of foreign direct investment (FDI) and foreign portfolio investment. In terms of FDI, Nigeria is the biggest recipient in Sub-Saharan Africa and the third on the whole continent (Ebunoluwa and Aras, 2021, p. 31). Regardless of Nigeria's target policies and rankings, the country is still unstable with capital, money markets and capacity absorption, as well as general insecurity and a lack of critical infrastructure (Adekanmbi and Ogbaro, 2022, p. 252). Here, the oil sector remains the main interest of the investors, but it's on a descending path, declining to an average of 0.68% as a result of the 2014 oil prices crash, the economic crisis in 2016 and the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other side, the least attractive investment areas in the country remain agriculture, communication, transport and construction (Adekanmbi and Ogbaro, 2022, p. 257). On the other side, oil exploitation has also started violent conflicts in the Niger Delta, some of which became known internationally and received external reactions as well (Mai-Bornu, 2020, p. XIII).

Continuing with the economic perspective on the matter, issues such as the growing rate of unemployment, oil theft, drug smuggling, currency devaluation and a high intake of foreign goods that heightened the external deficit are also very common and directly affect the country as well as the external perceptions and business (Akinola, 2018, p. 131). The banking system is also very fragile and especially during global financial crises it's at very high risk of collapsing. This is what the Nigerian state experienced in 2008 (Ozili, 2022, p. 6). As the business environment is strongly influenced by state policies which, most of the time, are not strategically tailored for general economic benefits, entrepreneurial activities can represent a challenge for domestic and foreign investors.

Internal problems do not stop only in the economic sector. Campbell (2020, p. 159-161) believes that for Nigeria *'trouble at home has provoked a recession from the world stage'*. He starts by blaming the diplomatic structure itself which is severely underfunded and where

diplomats are often part of patronage networks that are unknown to their counterparts from other countries. In terms of preferences, the best of these diplomats are still Western-oriented in their viewpoints. However, the diplomatic service is underused and most of the last Foreign Affairs ministers did not have clear or rememberable strategies or actions. Political leaders generally prefer to contract American and British lobby firms to administer the relationship with these and other countries and most of the time diplomats abroad have less influence than the representatives of these firms.

Recently, the country was also debilitated by internal security challenges after it had been a sea of tranquility for a while, focusing on conflict resolution and regional integration in the region (Varin and Onuoha, 2020, p. 1). Each geographical zone faces at least one type of such threat. The North-East is the playground of the Boko Haram terrorists, the North West has to deal with robbers, kidnappers and cattle rustlers, the North Central is facing massive confrontations between herders and farmers over resource access, in the South East insecurity is heightened due to the ethnic militia group called the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), while the South West is facing security issues due to “*kidnapping for ransom, nomadic terrorism, ritual killings and armed robbery among others*” and the South is facing resource control issues as it represents the oil-rich part of the country (Yusufu, 2022, p. 3801). Varin and Onuoha (2020, p. 2) considers the internal security challenges the main reason behind the decline of leadership strength and aspirations on the continent in the last two decades.

The Nigerian state today still shows weakness in its policies in eradicating impoverishment, creating a strong economic reform, managing public firms, monitoring private investments or constraining the exploitative activities of the multinational companies exploiting oil on their territory. Akinola (2018, p. 89) argues that all these characteristics throw Nigeria somewhere between state collapse and state failure, closer to the later. The fair socio-economical equilibrium that was created sprinkled with all the violent responses proves that for many Nigerians, the state is unable to provide minimal security and there is a huge gap between the citizens’ lives and expectations and the political leaders’ attitude towards them.

This kind of state issues are not only common for Nigeria. Other developing countries, in the region and not only are facing similar problems. This aspect is known in the literature as the resource curse theory (Akinola, 2018, p. 133). Succinctly, the theory links certain countries with natural resource abundance with a comparatively reduced economic performance, experiencing lower growth rates than the other countries.

In terms of foreign policy directions, some scholars believe that an ideological direction is still given by a set of principles and objectives that were kept since the early days of self-governance and have been seen throughout Nigeria’s recent history. These have an Afro-centric approach (Kayode, 2016, p. 5). A few of these lines worth mentioning are the interest in the total liberation from colonial rule on the continent and opening up channels for African dialogue and African unity, promotion of international cooperation and trust in the liberal democratic institutions of the post-World War II world (with everything they stand for such as respect for international law or promotion of a fair economic order), militating against racial discrimination and last, but not least, promoting national interest. Here, the situation is a bit foggy as most of the time there are no real directions on what the actual national interest of the country is and if,

given its formulation by political leaders, it benefits its citizens or not. Further, this aspect will influence greatly the discussion about the future of Nigeria in the international setting.

The Nigeria Project (Campbell, 2020, p. 194) is a vision, an aspiration of what the country could achieve through real democracy, and peaceful multiethnicity as a pillar and a lighthouse guide for Africa’s independent action in international relations. The set of ideas was envisioned by the three founding fathers—Obafemi Awolowo, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Ahmadu Bello – in an attempt to construct national harmony in a state created by the British. As the country is diverse in religious beliefs, languages and cultures, this unity could only be created under the form of shared values. The option of keeping the big borders of the country, instead of just going back to a cultural and tribes-inspired architecture, was preferred by the British, who needed a buffer state in West Africa to face the Soviet influence, while the founders considered the size an advantage to represent the continent internationally. This vision is shared also by the Nigerian diaspora living in Western countries that are trying to promote these ideas both for people back at home as well as for the Westerners interested in the subject.

However, putting ideology into practice is never that easy. Government after government found difficulty in institutionalizing democratic principles or to construct socio-economic policy initiatives that make real changes for the citizens (Akinola, 2018, p. 4). On the contrary, while pursuing ‘petrol-capitalism’, only some stakeholders (the political leaders, the government business partners or multinational corporations) really profited of the advantage of oil richness while the communities in the exploited areas were weakened with corruption and lack of leadership. The retaliation was the emergence of the Niger Delta militant groups and with them the oil-theft activities, terrorism and armed insurgency against the state (Akinola, 2018, p. 5).

When discussing foreign policy all the above are to be considered as they are complexly interconnected. They explain how and why certain decisions are made from the Nigerian part. A rather pragmatic definition for it would be that “*foreign policy is a dynamic process of interaction between the changing domestic demands and the changing external circumstances*’ (Awosusi and Ekpo, 2022, p. 147). It is, in other words, a nation’s actions and reactions to events in the external environment and the domestic circumstances under which policies are formulated to take into account such events. Foreign policy is naturally shaped by national interest. Ota (2015, p. 57) defines national interest as “*those values and ideals which a nation so cherishes that she would rather go to war than compromise*”.

The principles and objectives of foreign policy naturally keep the national interest at its heart. However, the actual Nigerian national interest is not properly defined and has not been since the 1960s. The first time these principles were formulated was in 1961, by the first Minister of External Affairs, Jaja Wachukwu, and they have been reaffirmed constantly until the present day. Among these, we mention “*protection of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Nigerian State; promotion of the socio-economic well-being of Nigeria; enhancing Nigeria’s image and status in the world at large; respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states; non-interference in the internal affairs of other states; promotion of the unity and solidarity of the African States; total political, economic, social, and cultural emancipation and rejuvenation of Africa*” (Mbaeze, 2023, p. 1). While these could be seen as very wide

principles, most of which are being followed by most of the countries part of the UN system, there are no clear objectives shaped and promoted throughout time to be achieved and to be protected. One explanation for this is Nigeria's dependence in international relations, which will be further discussed in a future chapter (Ota, 2015, p. 58).

In the international environment there are three main variables: national interest, conflict and power. The first was already mentioned, the second is not of interest at the moment and the third, the power, actually it explains why Nigeria, a state that joined the powerplay late, has not had a real sit at the table: *"By power we mean the ability of one state to persuade, coerce, manipulate, or compel other states to accede to the progress of her national interest"* (Ota, 2015, p. 58). The country appeared in its present-day form during the Cold War, in a strategically bipolar world and tried to find its place somewhere between non-alignment and positive neutrality, pursuing mostly a cautious approach that continued after the fall of the USSR as well (Okolo and Wright, 1994, p. 125). Even more, during the 1960s and early 1970s there was an optimistic view, both internal and external, on the potential and prospects of the country to transform into a leading developing country (Anugwom, 2020, p. xi). However, the enthusiasm faded when the lack of proper management and structural issues started to unfold.

Accordingly, Nigeria has yet to acquire a foreign policy strategy that can transform it into a more powerful player. In the considered period, the country rather stagnated by adopting internal and external policies that expanded that dependence status mentioned above. An easy example here could be that since returning to its democratic path in 1999, the ineffectiveness of leadership and corruption have increased the poverty level instead of dealing positively with it (Ota, 2015, p.59). Furthermore, the number of violent conflicts was also four times bigger between 1999–2014, than between 1980–1999 (Elaigwu, 2014, p. 10). That is why Nigerian politics has been also called 'extractive' or 'rentier' and the main scope of the political leaders has been to gain elections for private benefits (Okolo and Wright, 1994, p. 129).

The internal security and economic challenges fairly described above, directly and indirectly, affect Nigeria's foreign policy and the relationship it has with other countries. In other words, *"a state with an image crisis is difficult to advertise in the diplomatic market"* (Egwemi, 2010, p. 134). To do so, besides actually trying to solve these issues, an interest in the reframing of the country's image needs to be put in. For example, the return to democracy in 1999, after isolation from the international community because of the military regime of General Abacha and its sum of violations of human and socio-political rights, meant a sustained effort of discussions with other states, memorandums signed with UK and USA, the restoration of international aid in many domains and an active discursive actions about Nigeria's new position in the international system (Akinwunmi-Othman, 2017, p. 141). A similar approach can be planned and acted upon in relation to Nigeria's image for the future, reassessing its regional goals and its sit at the international table.

3 The watchdog of the neighbourhood

After trying to create a picture of Nigeria at home and its journey since gaining independence, the next objective of this article is to look

at its relationship with the West African neighbors and how they see Nigeria's role in the region and internationally.

The Afrocentric focus of its foreign policy is best seen in its work in West Africa. In this sub-region, Nigeria has been constantly invested in defending and protecting the political independence of its neighbors as well as their territorial integrity and stability. To describe this activity, the terms most commonly attributed are that of the "big brother" of the region (Ogunnoiki, 2018, p. 60) and the regional hegemon (Campbell, 2020, p. 159). Nigeria has the largest military in the region, and it often dominates the activity of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). By encouraging and developing ECOWAS, Nigeria intended to obtain deterrence for both external threats and internal conflicts, as this process consolidates its status of regional power (Itugbu, 2017, pp. 38). This was not always easy when other states got involved. France still tried to have a word to say in relation to the francophone members of ECOWAS and the past apartheid-ruled South Africa has also tried to get involved in certain stages of the consolidation.

However, it has been clear for Nigeria how important it is to take care of the security of the region to protect its citizens for quite some time. President Ibrahim Badamasi, who served as a military statesman between 1985 and 1993, stated that: *"[In] a sub-region of 16 countries where one out of three West Africans is a Nigerian, any regime in the relentlessly strive towards the prevention or avoidance of the deterioration of any crisis which threatens to jeopardize or compromise the stability, prosperity and security of the sub-region. We believe that if [a crisis is] of such level that has [sic] the potentials to threaten the stability, peace and security of the sub-region, Nigeria in collaboration with others in this sub-region, is duty-bound to react or respond in an inappropriate manner necessary to... ensure peace, tranquility and harmony"* (Ogele, 2022, p.4). After the military regime, regional ambitions became even clearer, during the administration of President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007) when the activity peaked in initiatives to make military coups unacceptable as well as involvement in West African civil wars (Ogele, 2022, p.4). Other scholars speak about the interest of Nigeria in the region as not driven by security reasons, or its national interest, to be more precise, but by *"an unclear consideration of the goodness and welfare of her neighbors seen more as brothers and sisters"* (Ukaogo et al., 2020, p. 4) which is unsustainable for Nigeria's foreign policy going forward because it does not have any positive impact on the life of its citizens.

Alone and through ECOWAS, Nigeria tried to impose order in the region by attempting to end civil wars in Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone and Liberia. One of the most notable actions in the neighborhood are the military interventions during the Liberia Civil War (1999–2003) between President's Charles Taylor government and the rebel groups Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL). In this conflict, Nigeria led the ECOWAS Mission during the Obasanjo administration (Ogunnoiki, 2018, p. 60). Only in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Nigeria spent more than ten billion US dollars during the civil wars (Ota, 2015, p. 61). Also, Nigeria led the way in finding peaceful resolutions for its disputes with Cameroon over the Bakassi peninsula and tried to end the era of West Africa's coup tradition (Campbell, 2020, p. 159).

Peacekeeping missions have become a staple external activity for Nigeria since gaining independence, especially in West Africa. Moreover, some of these missions have even taken place outside the continent. Peacekeeping missions and peace enforcement activities

have taken place, for instance, in Congo, Chad Angola, Somalia, Rwanda, South Sudan, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Kayode, 2016, p. 9).

Nigeria's regional influence was also emphasized by states outside the continent. In the United Kingdom, for example, an article from The Times stated that: "Nigerians, justifiably, see themselves as the giants of Africa. It is the one element they are agreed upon. And they are now seeking to use their oil and emerging industrial muscle to influence opinion and guide events (...). It is Nigeria's foreign policy, more than that of any other black African country, that most determines Africa's collective future (...) Nigeria is determined to play its natural leadership role in Africa, but also to build upon it" (Itugbu, 2017, pp. 37–38).

If we take a look at the previous chapter and this one, an important question emerges. While Nigeria has been the big brother of the region for decades, advocating and helping West African countries attain a certain level of stability, it is still true that the country is facing security problems at home, like the Boko Haram insurgency, to mention only one of many. Therefore, who will save the savior (Kayode, 2016, p. 9)? The most probable answer is that Nigeria's future is mostly in its leadership hands and the ability to pursue domestic and foreign policies considering its history, size and power in the region. However, a decline in its regional activities has been observed in more recent times. This inactivity has contributed to even more regional instability showing how big of an impact its involvement had in regional dynamics (Campbell, 2020, p. 186).

In 2023, a reinforced Nigeria seems to want to go back on the big brother role. Nigerian president Bola Tinubu made a strong speech when accepting the chair of ECOWAS, a position the country held a few times, that seems to still show that Nigeria has ambitions in its sub-region: "We must stand firm on democracy. Without democracy, there is no governance, there is no freedom, there is no rule of law. We will not allow coup after coup in West Africa" (Adekaiyaoja, 2023). Soon after, on July 26, a coup in Niger burst and forced Nigeria to act on its words and issued a set of sanctions through ECOWAS. Months later, there are many reasons to believe that these actions, while they show concern, have not been thought through thoroughly and much of the actual impact is felt by the civilians instead. Additionally, they put a lot of tension on the bilateral relation between Nigeria and Niger which means a recalibration of actions needs to be seen in the short term (Obasi, 2023).

4 The biggest continental player or not quite

We have already mentioned a few times the Afrocentric ideology Nigeria uses to pursue foreign policy. Many leaders have been convinced that is Nigeria's destiny to lead Africa. In addition, Western countries have also encouraged this idea of Nigeria being "the cradle of democracy" in Africa (Itugbu, 2017, p. 37) or a country of "great promise" (Itugbu, 2017, p. 40) as stated by US president George W. Bush in 2003. The oil boom of the last century has also served to reinforce this idea, as numerous multinational oil corporations have become increasingly interested in the Niger Delta region.

All these represented a confidence boost for the country to act outside its borders as a leader and act on the ideas promoted by the first minister of External Affairs, Jaja Wachukwu, in 1961 during a United Nations General Assembly session: "the concept that Nigeria is an African nation; it is part and parcel of the continent of Africa, and

therefore it is so completely involved in anything that pertains to the continent, that it cannot be neutral and must never consider as a neutral country. We are independent in everything but neutral in nothing that affects the destiny of Africa. The moment Africa is affected, we are involved. We want to make this clear, Nigeria finds itself involved in anything affecting the African continent anywhere, [and] in any square inch of African territory—we are involved. We cannot be neutral, so that neutralism used in a broad sense, should exclude our country when it comes to Africa affairs. And being a member of the African community and feeling completely bound to its destiny and accepting our involvement in everything that pertains to it all questions of Africa must be considered as questions about Nigeria. The peace of Africa is the peace of Nigeria. Its tribulations are our tribulations and we cannot be indifferent to its future" (Ogele, 2022, p. 4).

On the continental level, Nigeria has proven to be an active player since gaining independence, engaging both bilaterally and within organizations such as the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the African Union (AU). In 2019, it signed and promoted the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), an agreement that can become the biggest free trade area in the world. Multilateralism is an important part of Nigerian foreign policy and that's why the relationship with the United Nations is one where the country is not only negotiating for itself but also Africa, trying to become the main voice in representing and advocating for African interests (Campbell, 2020, p. 163).

The country has also participated in peaceful dispute resolution outside of West Africa, such as in the case of Sudan and South Sudan, to name just one example. After gaining independence, Nigeria emerged as one of the staunchest opponents of colonialism in Africa, particularly in the case of apartheid South Africa, and it regarded itself as a frontline state in the struggle against apartheid. France's involvement in the region is also seen with distrustful eyes by Nigerians (Campbell, 2020, p. 159).

However, in comparison to West Africa, Nigeria is not the only country on the continent with leadership interests beyond its borders. In sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa has emerged as Nigeria's primary competitor. They both have the largest economies. They are the continental peacemakers and peacekeepers: South Africa also intervened in countries such as Burundi, Comoros, Sudan and Zimbabwe. While the approaches are different, their soft power game is also an important addition to their influence, Nigeria influencing with "Nollywood and technical aid corps scheme and South Africa with multinational corporations' footprint and norm entrepreneurship in the international system" (Tella, 2019, p. v). The two are also cooperating in different formats such as the African Union (AU), the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), or the Bi-National Commission (BNC) founded in 1999 and resuscitated in 2016.

In competitive terms, there were some disagreements for the AU Commission chairperson in 2010, on the Libyan crisis and the quest for a permanent African position in a reformed UN Security Council. South Africa's position in BRICS has elevated its international recognition as a major player, and it will be demonstrated in the next chapters that Nigeria is also exploring avenues to secure a more prominent position in the international arena. This development can only enhance its standing on the continent as well. While it is certain that the two countries are subregional hegemony in West Africa and Southern Africa (Edozie, 2017, p. 58), regardless of who has the biggest influence on the

continent, Tella points out something more important “it is often argued that the continent’s fate is directly linked to the success or failure of these regional powers. Relations between the two countries are thus pivotal to peace, sustainable development, Pan-Africanism and regional integration in Africa” (Tella, 2019, p. v).

Even if the leadership intentions and potential exist in Nigeria, this military and economic giant of Africa has been named “the crippled giant” (Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike, 2016, p. 110), due to its internal problems, already mentioned above, that made Nigeria less present on the continental and international scene for some years. However, recently, the new president, Bola Tinubu, has shown interest in revitalizing Nigeria’s image and attractiveness through bold economic reforms aimed at attracting foreign investors (Payton, 2024), engaging in peacekeeping and military interventions on the continent (Adekaiyaoja, 2023), making bold statements such as “Africa can become the world’s green manufacturing powerhouse” (Tinubu, 2023), and conducting numerous external visits to strengthen bilateral and multilateral relations (Rukanga, 2024).

5 Going west with the western powers

In a globalized world where all economic, political, military and ideological activities are very interconnected, it’s impossible to look at Nigeria’s leadership ambitions in foreign policy without taking a look at the relationship with the big players of the international arena, especially now, that the tectonic plates of the world order are changing the international dynamics (Chellaney, 2023) and great power rivalries are back on the central stage. However, this chapter will firstly address the relationship Nigeria had with the Western powers throughout the years and where it stands at the moment.

The start of the relationship with the West was driven by economic reasons, as the West represented the only viable market for Nigeria’s oil and in return, the African country looked for foreign goods and services. Not being a technologically advanced country, military-wise as well as in other technological domains, Nigeria was dependent on imports from these countries (Itugbu, 2017, p. 43).

The US-Nigerian bilateral relationship is mostly characterized by arms sales from the US towards Nigeria and the American push towards organizing more democratic elections and fighting corruption in the African country (Campbell, 2020, p. 166). Post-independence, for a few decades the collaboration between the two was mostly economic, around oil, while divergent views appeared on matters such as the US position on the civil war in Angola or the African opinion on the delayed response to apartheid in South Africa. The relationship depreciated during the Abacha dictatorship, but diplomatic relations were maintained, and when Nigeria transitioned to democratic civilian rule the relationship got back on track, especially during the Obasanjo administration (Campbell, 2020, p. 166).

In the 2000s President Olusegun Obasanjo, who was committed to peacekeeping missions all around West Africa, required military assistance from the United States in restructuring the Nigerian Army as well as an agreement that the US would guide Nigeria in its military procurement (Ogunnoiki, 2018, p. 63). The same president was the first African leader to call George W. Bush after 9/11, and in 2003 President Bush also visited Nigeria, a symbolic moment that the US approved of the democratic trajectory of the African state, some authors even going as far as saying that “Nigeria’s peacekeeping role was

probably more valuable to Washington than its oil” (Campbell, 2020, pp. 163–165).

After the Bush-Obasanjo friendship, US did not import as much oil from Nigeria, and the Boko Haram threat and other internal issues made it less interested in external activism. The Obama administration was concerned about the failing efforts to protect human rights as a result of the Boko Haram activity. When the African country wanted to buy attack helicopters from the US to counteract the threat, the Jonathan administration was refused based on not “doing enough to minimize civilian casualties in its war against Boko Haram” (Campbell, 2020, pp. 177). In present days, the dynamics rotate around mutual interests such as counterterrorism and security matters, health, energy access, trade and investment (Oluwagbire, 2022, p. 58). The last important meetings between state leaders were in 2018 when President Buhari was the first African leader to visit Trump and the 2021 visit of Anthony Blinken, US Secretary of State to Abuja. During the Trump era military purchases relations were good and the military purchases were allowed again from the American side (Oluwagbire, 2022, p. 58). During the Biden administration, especially starting with the inauguration of President Tinubu, the US promised to strengthen its ties with Nigeria (Shehu, 2023).

When talking about the relationship with the European Union, some of the relationship has been developing around the economic sphere, under the umbrella of the EU-ACP Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA). African scholars argue that the tendency is for the European part to have the upper hand in negotiating how the relationship develops (Oloruntoba, 2016, p. 8). From a political point of view, the two entities created a platform called EU-Nigeria Joint Way Forward, in order to expand their relationship and to point out the areas of mutual interest: “peace and security, migration, good governance and democracy, human rights, trade, and regional integration, among others. Also included are justice sector reform, support to free and fair elections and regional cooperation” (EEAS, 2021). During the Davos summit, at the beginning of 2024, the Nigerian delegation did not only confirm the EU-Nigeria collaborations, but also made a strong case for EU foreign investments in Africa (Abati, 2024).

Nigeria keeps also bilateral relations with many European countries. Of these, the most important are the United Kingdom and France. Present-day relations between the UK and Nigeria are focused on a strategic partnership. As a former colony, the cooperation on defense and security has been one of the strongest since the independence, touching more sensitive subjects for Nigeria like terrorism, drug trafficking, piracy and cyberpiracy. In 2022, the first Nigeria-UK Security and Defense partnership was held (Oluwagbire, 2022, p. 57). The other important interaction is trade, where the two have a solid relationship that was recently consolidated even further by signing a “landmark economic partnership” (GOV.UK, 2024) and the UK is also offering aid in domains related to climate change or agriculture.

With France, the dynamic is best understood from the relationship Nigeria has with its Francophone neighbors. For a period after obtaining its independence, Nigeria had protected the francophone influence in South Africa until the conflict with the Ivory Coast over the recognition of Biafra when the perception changed and its relationship with France was affected. Briefly, both countries wanted to exert influence over the francophone countries in West Africa (Oluwagbire, 2022, p. 55). This only changed when French presidents

started to pursue an economically based foreign policy instead of remaining entangled in historical ties. The turn from domination to partnership in Africa occurred, and since the Macron administration, the two countries have been partnering well, particularly when discussing the Boko Haram issue (Oluwagbire, 2022, p. 55). Nigeria has become France's leading sub-Saharan trade partner (Diplomatie, 2023). President Bola Tinubu's three-day state visit to France in November 2024, a first in over two decades marks a new chapter not just in terms of major signed agreements on critical infrastructure and food security (Daily Trust, 2024), but also in terms of dynamics, engagement approach and shift in policy. In a joint *The Africa Report* article signed by both the French President Emmanuel Macron and Nigeria's President Bola Tinubu, the two states' leaders define the relation between the two nations as a "partnership between equals," reaffirming their commitment to the "principle of strategic autonomy" (The Africa Report, 2024).

While the relationship with these states is not conflictual, Nigeria is aware that negotiations with them often occur from a position of dependency rather than equality. Even though official foreign policy strategies may adapt over time, Nigeria often finds itself without a significant presence at the table. This is the main reason why the country has chosen to look elsewhere and establish new friendships and partnerships in recent years.

6 The yellow BRICS road

The meaning of the Wizard of Oz inspired syntagm "a yellow bricks road" is explained best as the course of action taken by a person, or a state, in our case, with the belief that will lead to good things. Thus, this expression can sum up very well the reason why, in recent years, Nigeria has sought cooperation with some of the BRICS countries and has even flirted with the idea of joining the organization. Below, we will address the bilateral relationships with China and Russia, as well as the recent closeness to BRICS.

China's interest in Africa, in general, and in Nigeria, in particular, has increased considerably in recent years (Liu, 2022, p. 2). The Asian country became one of Nigeria's major commercial partners and FDI source and they have been collaborating in areas such as infrastructure (loans, investment and technology transfer), energy and power sectors and many others (Bukar, 2023, p. 109). The diplomatic and business ties between the two started in 1971 (Rindap, 2015, p. 19). China started by investing in the Nigerian agriculture sector but changed its direction towards oil, transportation, manufacturing, or electricity. China remains the biggest player in the Nigerian markets today. To put the scale into perspective, the commercial volume with China had surpassed that with the United States, a long-standing traditional partner of Nigeria, by 2009 (Bukar, 2023, p. 116).

On the Nigerian side, the aim to cooperate comes also from the similarities seen between the two, like the fact that they are the biggest economies and the most populous countries on their continents. However, for example, Bukar (2023, p. 112) does not think that things are that similar, seeing the relationship through the dependency glasses: "resources move from a "periphery" of poor and developing countries to a "core" of affluent countries, benefiting the latter at the cost of the former. Nigeria is the former, whereas China is the latter." The main arguments brought forward are that China is limiting Nigeria's growth through an imbalanced trade, apparently harmless loans,

low-quality manufactured goods and unequal labor relations. This dependency relationship started in the early 2000s when China changed its approach towards Africa, looking for opportunities there, and Nigeria, turned out to be its first commercial partner on the continent. Since then, Nigeria has never made a similar investment in the Chinese economy, failing also to export goods and commodities with added value to China while purchasing massive amounts of goods from the key Asian country. Therefore, the views around China's motives are split between the idea that China has a parasitic approach and the one that Nigeria only benefits from closing the infrastructural gap (Rindap, 2015, p. 19).

The relationship with Russia can be traced back to the Cold War period. During the Nigerian Civil War, the two had a closer relationship after Russia helped with the bombers that the Western countries refused to provide and the relationship continued to grow from there. A similar episode happened after the US refused to sell weapons during the Boko Haram threat peak and canceled some military training. As a consequence, the Jonathan administration turned to the Kremlin to obtain the desired military help (Waliyullahi, 2016, p. 330). Their cooperation in security and defense focused on arms sales and peace support operations. They also have an important economic relationship, Nigeria being the most important partner in Africa for Russia. Additionally, they assist each other occasionally in multilateral spheres. However, since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Nigeria has been more careful in dealing with the country bilaterally (Oluwagbire, 2022, p. 56), but it did not stop it from pursuing other interests.

This pursuit translates into the recent reciprocal courtship between Nigeria and BRICS. The cooperation between Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa has been called "an engine of South-South cooperation" (April et al., 2023, p. 1) that was able to shift the balance of power in the international order, emerging exactly when the Western economies were facing a massive financial crisis (Raman and Kumar, 2023, p. 2). Most of these countries are seen as important regional players with great potential for growing and developing faster and faster in the near future. Others, such as China and Russia, actors with hegemonic aspirations, are also using it purposely as a platform to destabilize the West. Collectively they represent 26% of the world in terms of territory and 40% when speaking about the population. The BRICS countries also represent the largest commercial partners of Africa as well as new potential investors. This was one of the reasons for the 2023 summit in South Africa (Lissovolik, 2023), and many countries in the region are beginning to see more advantages in South-South cooperation than in the traditional post-colonial vertical approach to dealing with this.

Nigeria is one of these countries that is attracted to the idea. Looking at its aspirations as the sub-regional and regional leader in the past decades, it is no surprise that such a concept would appeal to its leaders, particularly as South Africa, one of its direct competitors, is already part of the group. In 2023, with the news of BRICS enlargement, Nigeria was one of the countries that were thought to be shortlisted to make the cut. When the rumor that Nigeria will join BRICS sometime in the next two years appeared, the minister of Foreign Affairs, Yusuf Tuggar, declared in November 2023 that "Nigeria has come of age to decide for itself who her partners should be and where they should be, being multiple aligned is in our best interest" (Olurounbi, 2023). While Months earlier, at the BRICS summit, Vice-President Kashim Shettima declared that Nigeria is not a member of BRICS because it did not

apply yet (Wahab, 2023). Both declarations indicate that considerable thought has been given to this partnership. However, Nigeria's decision rests solely in its own hands. External voices speculate on another reason why Nigeria has not joined yet: its pro-Western attitude in contrast to all the other current or prospective members, and they are not satisfied with it (Allwell, 2023).

7 Conclusions: the best of both worlds

In this article, the main goal was to understand how Nigeria is acting in international relations and why it is acting the way it does. Recently, even if it was seen as a pro-Western country for many decades, Nigeria started to see the benefits of having closer ties with other countries in order to pursue its national interest.

Connected to its national interest, Nigeria has shown great curiosity and has been an active player on the international stage in several areas, including arms control and disarmament, international peacekeeping, and the promotion of a new, more inclusive, and equitable world order (Ota, 2015, p. 59). The latter demonstrates Nigeria's initiative, similar to that of other countries with comparable histories, in attempting to create a more homogeneous world. This entails reducing the divide between former colonized and colonizer nations, as well as between more economically developed and economically dependent parts of the world.

BRICS promotes itself as such an organization, and it's clear to see why countries like Nigeria want to join the party. However, the independent attitudes of Russia and China sometimes raise the question if it's not just a facade for hegemonic interests. Additionally, Nigeria's bilateral relationships with Russia and China are as imbalanced as those with Western powers such as the US, UK, and France, especially when considering China and its 'Belt and Road Initiative' in Africa (CMS, 2021).

Two questions arise: Is it necessary to choose between the two different ideological systems and strengthen diplomatic ties with one or the other in order to regain the leadership role the new presidency desires in the region and become an important international player? Or can Nigeria navigate both ideological systems simultaneously on its path forward? The answer is not simple, particularly because international dynamics have been rapidly changing in recent years, making the system more unpredictable and insecure.

Nigeria's path should be the one that best suits its future objectives. Looking at the 2050 agenda (The Federal Ministry of Budget and Economic Planning of Nigeria, 2023) these are: *"to be a stable democratic society, to promote peace, unity and justice. To this end, the Nigeria Agenda 2050 espouses policies, strategies, and initiatives that will be implemented to position Nigeria as an African regional power and global economic force. By 2050, Nigeria intends to be a strong, dynamic, industrialized, and knowledge-based economy, capable of generating inclusive and sustainable development for the upliftment of all its citizens"*.

Looking at the brief radiography of Nigeria made in the last few pages, it's noticeable that to become the *"regional power and global economic force"* it wants to be, the country has to look inward first. Many of its stability issues stem more from a lack of good leadership and corruption than from erroneous external relations. On the contrary, stability at home would be the perfect credibility basis to attract good deals externally. Campbell (2020, p. 213) thinks Nigeria

deserves a rethink. This means looking back at all its domestic and external activities and seeing which ones were done from the inertia of following the European postcolonial framework and which ones were done strategically to achieve the national interest goals. A lot of work is to be done on this aspect. From finding an equilibrium to sustaining social stability, implementing developmental programs and improving the economic life of its citizens, an entirely different way of doing politics has to be thought out (Akinola, 2018, p. 312).

In the region and internationally, Nigeria needs to adhere to its principles and objectives while maintaining an advantageous position in negotiations. The shifting power dynamics present an opportunity for Nigeria, which has long operated under the rules of others. The possibility of entering a multipolar world offers numerous advantages for states like Nigeria. However, joining BRICS may entail continued adherence to the rules set by others. Therefore, changing the paradigm can be achieved through two simple steps. The first step is to continue exploring diplomatic opportunities and for Nigeria to leverage its strategic position between two increasingly polarizing ideological blocs, extracting benefits from both until it determines which serves its national interests best. The second step is to assert its leadership ambitions. The new Tinubu administration appears eager to reassess Nigeria's position at the international table through bold declarations and assertive actions. A strong and confident voice, or a "fake it till you make it" strategy, is just as crucial as the actions themselves, if not more so, as it shapes perceptions rapidly.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

RM: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

RM was employed by Smartlink Communications.

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