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Nigeria's Foreign Policy, South-South Cooperation, and Dynamics of Observer Status in the BRICS

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Abstract

Nigeria's longstanding role as a supporter of the Global South is increasingly challenged by shifting geopolitical alliances. This paper examines how Nigerian foreign policy engages with South–South cooperation through its observer status in BRICS, a group that is increasingly seen as a counterbalance to Western-led institutions. The study employs complementary theories of South–South cooperation and neoclassical realism as its theoretical framework. Adopting a qualitative approach, the research reviews secondary data sources such as journal articles, books, newspapers, and policy documents to investigate the political motives, economic objectives, and strategic trade-offs that characterize Nigeria's engagement with BRICS. The analysis argues that while observer status confers symbolic prestige and presents potential opportunities for investment, trade diversification, and diplomatic influence, these advantages will largely remain unrealized without deliberate policy alignment and stronger bilateral relationships with BRICS members. The findings highlight the delicate balance Nigeria must strike between ambition and practicality, revealing both the opportunities and challenges of navigating a multipolar world from the perspective of the Global South.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, South-South Cooperation, BRICS, Geopolitical Alliance.

Introduction

Over the past decade, Nigeria has increasingly aligned its foreign policy with the evolving framework of South-South cooperation and new multilateral blocs. While traditional ties with Western powers remain significant, the recent shift toward BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, and recently BRICS+) indicates a strategic recalibration in Nigeria's diplomatic approach. South-South cooperation (SSC), built on shared interests, mutual respect, and solidarity among developing nations, has long shaped

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Nigeria's foreign policy identity (Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike 2021). According to Fawole (2020), foreign policy is a set of principles, decisions, and actions through which a state defines and pursues its national interests in its interactions with other states and actors within the international system. Consequently, foreign policy continues to be a key tool for states to pursue their interests in an increasingly interconnected world. As Africa's most populous country and one of its largest economies, Nigeria's foreign policy has historically balanced regional commitments and global alignments, reflecting domestic goals and external influences. Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has supported anti-colonial movements, peacekeeping efforts, and regional integration within Africa. (Adebajo 2021 and Fawole 2020) Recently, the emergence of new economic blocs, globalization, and shifting geopolitical rivalries have prompted Nigeria to reconsider its external strategies. A major focus is on South-South cooperation, seen as a way to build political solidarity, diversify the economy, and achieve strategic independence.

South-South cooperation (SSC) is more than just solidarity among developing nations; it has become a practical tool for boosting trade, investment, technology transfer, and collective influence in global forums (UNOSSC, 2020). For Nigeria, engaging with SSC offers a chance to reduce reliance on Western partners and develop ties with emerging economies. This supports Nigeria's goal to diversify economic sources beyond oil and to strengthen its voice in global institutions. The BRICS group has expanded from its initial 5 countries, including Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, to 11 countries to include Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Indonesia, serves as an appealing platform. These countries represent 48.50% of the world's population and generate 28.36% of global GDP (Singh, 2025). BRICS combines economic power with a symbolic stand against Western dominance, providing developing countries a voice to push for fairer global reforms (Stuenkel, 2021).

However, Nigeria is not a BRICS member. It currently holds observer status within the BRICS+ framework, which presents both opportunities and limits. As an observer, Nigeria can participate in high-level discussions and develop partnerships in trade, infrastructure, and technology, but it lacks the institutional influence and decision-making power of full members. This raises key questions: What strategic benefits motivate Nigeria's engagement with BRICS as an observer? How does this reflect broader patterns of South-South diplomacy and geopolitical shifts? And how does this engagement support Nigeria's ambitions for global influence, especially within the African Union (AU) and United Nations (UN)?

The geopolitical aspect is especially important as it takes into account the interaction of geography, power, and strategy in shaping international relations (Kjellén, 1916; Mackinder, 1942), and it influences

Nigeria's foreign policy. Nigeria's location in West Africa, its natural resources, and its role as a regional leader make it a key player for deeper ties with emerging powers. Yet, its limited role in BRICS decision-making shows the tension between national ambitions and structural realities in global politics. As the world moves toward a multipolar system, Nigeria's choice to join or distance itself from such blocs could significantly affect its development and diplomatic reach.

This study explores how Nigerian foreign policy intersects with South-South cooperation and its observer role in BRICS. By analyzing Nigeria's strategic aims and structural limits, it aims to shed light on how middle powers like Nigeria navigate today's shifting global governance landscape. The research adds to academic debates on South-South cooperation by placing Nigeria's foreign policy choices within the larger context of developing countries seeking to assert their agency in a world still dominated by Western influence. It also offers practical insights into whether BRICS observer status is a stepping stone to greater influence or merely a symbolic gesture with limited strategic benefits.

Conceptual Clarifications

Foreign Policy Foreign policy is the set of goals, strategies, and actions that a state or government pursues in its interactions with other countries and international actors. Basically, a nation's foreign policy is a strategy managing the relationship of the nation with other nations, international organizations, and global issues. It reflects a government's decision and actions in dealing with the outside world based on its national interests. In brief, foreign policy is the public policy of a government aimed at guiding its relationships and interactions with other nations to safeguard its national interests and security (Omo-Ogbebor, 2017). Thus, Nigeria's foreign policy is a set of principles guiding its relationship and interactions with other countries and international organizations, primarily aimed at promoting its national interests. Nigeria's foreign policy is rooted in its commitment to African Unity, non-alignment, and economic diplomacy. Nigeria's foreign policy dates back to its colonial era, which continues to manifest in its foreign policy. The enduring impacts of the heavy British influence on Nigerian foreign policy and its ruling elites continued until the late 1960s, when the lessons of the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970 compelled Nigeria's foreign policy elite to reappraise its stand towards external actors (Nuamah, 2003 cited in Omo-Ogbebor, 2017). The Nigerian foreign policy has evolved through various phases, shaped by domestic circumstances, leadership style, continental ambitions, and changing global dynamics.

South-South Cooperation

The term South or Global South refers to regions in the world with similar political, social, and economic histories rooted in disparities from the colonial or imperialist era. The South is seen as an ideological expression of concerns facing developing regions, which are becoming more diverse in their economic and political experiences (Alden, Morphet, Vieira, 2010). The Global South is increasingly contributing

to global development, with many countries growing in economic and geopolitical importance. Historically, South-South cooperation focused on knowledge sharing and capacity building, but recently, countries of the Global South and new financial institutions have also become more active in development finance (*Ramalho, Walraf, Müller, 2019*). This collaboration represents a long-term effort to free communities and nations from the legacy of colonialism, poverty, oppression, and backwardness. It serves as the main framework and set of practices for achieving change through a vision of mutual benefit and solidarity among groups deemed "disadvantaged" in the world system. This offers hope that these communities can support each other through mutual aid, ultimately transforming the global order to better reflect their shared interests and challenge the dominance of Northern countries (Gray, Gills, Barry, 2018).

BRICS

BRICS is an acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. It is a group of emerging economies that united to promote shared economic, political, and developmental interests. BRICS acts as a platform representing the hopes and goals of the global south cooperation, also known as South-South Cooperation (SSC), involves collaboration among developing countries, mainly in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, to build political, economic, social, and technical ties with minimal reliance on Western powers or colonial systems. It can also be viewed as an intergovernmental organization focused on strengthening collaboration among emerging economies to support sustainable development and increase their influence in global affairs. According to Cooper (2016), BRICS is a "diplomatic club" with diverse domestic systems and strategic interests, yet unified in resisting Western dominance in global institutions like the IMF and World Bank. Despite internal differences, BRICS countries have established joint mechanisms, most notably the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), providing alternatives to traditional financial structures.

Geopolitics

At its simplest, **geopolitics** is the study of how geography, such as terrain, natural resources, and location, shapes political power and international relations. Contemporary definitions often describe it as a method to understand, explain, and predict foreign policy behavior through geographical variables like land, climate, and resource endowments. The term was coined by Swedish political scientist **Rudolf Kjellén** around the turn of the 20th century, who viewed the state as a "geographical organism" weaving together territory, society, and governance. Building on this, **Halford Mackinder** famously formulated the "Heartland Theory," suggesting that whoever controlled Eurasia's central landmass (the heartland) could dominate global politics. **Nicholas Spykman** later challenged this, arguing that the "Rimland", the Eurasian coastal periphery, was strategically more vital. According to Van der Wusten & Dijkink (2002) geopolitics can be understood through three interrelated lenses. As an analytical tool, it helps to study a

country's position concerning geographical factors; and as a policy doctrine, it helps to guide statecraft based on geographic insights; it also serves as discourse, helping as a narrative in framing a nation's identity and role within the world.

Beyond classical views, **critical geopolitics** emerged in the 1980s, exploring how geopolitics is socially constructed through power, identity, and discourse. Geopolitics remains highly relevant today because it is about how geography influences strategic decisions about alliances, resource access, and economic corridors, such as trade routes, ports, and pipelines. Moreover, it is a lens that helps decode international competition, control of critical territories, and long-term planning, especially in multipolar, contested regions.

Literature Review

Nigeria's Foreign Policy in the Contemporary Global Order

Nigeria's foreign policy has been historically influenced by aspirations for continental leadership, an Afro-centric identity, and a commitment to South–South cooperation norms (Nuamah, 2003; Ogunnubi & Okeke-Uzodike, 2021). Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has positioned itself as a proponent of anti-colonial efforts, regional peace, and economic integration across Africa, reflecting a commitment to solidarity and collective development among developing nations (Fawole, 2020; Adebajo, 2021). Research underscores the complex interplay between ideational motivations and structural realities. Historical factors, such as colonial legacies and post-civil war reconstruction, have shaped Nigeria's diplomatic direction, prompting a focus on both regional stability and global relevance (Nuamah, 2003). Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike (2021) argue that Nigeria's engagement in multilateral forums is rooted in a long history of South–South cooperation (SSC), viewed as a strategy aimed at reducing dependence on Western powers (UNOSSC, 2020). This perspective situates Nigeria's post-Cold War foreign policy within broader efforts to rebalance global governance. Pragmatic and strategic adjustments in Nigeria's diplomatic engagements are also significant. Magdin (2025) argues that Nigeria's potential entry into BRICS reflects a realist approach, where states seek institutional roles to enhance their global status in a multipolar world. This lens emphasizes how domestic and external factors intersect in shaping foreign policy (Magaji, 2025).

South-South Cooperation and Nigeria's Position

Scholarship on SSC highlights its role as both a normative framework and a practical platform for developing countries. Emerging to address the shortcomings of North–South development models, SSC has evolved from anti-colonial solidarity to partnerships in trade, finance, and technology transfer (Ugwuja, Ibekilo & Ekesiobi, 2024). For Nigeria, SSC serves as a fundamental aspect of its foreign policy, aligning with its identity as an African leader (Adebajo, 2021). However, empirical studies indicate that Nigeria has not fully leveraged SSC frameworks, particularly in alliances like the India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) Dialogue Forum or the BRICS grouping (Ugwuja et al., 2024). Research highlights competitive dynamics in Nigeria's economic relations with emerging

economies, revealing the limitations of traditional development institutions (Ugwuja et al., 2024). This context is crucial for understanding the significance of Nigeria's engagement with BRICS, whether as a full member or partner.

BRICS: Emergence, Expansion, and Strategic Context

The BRICS bloc, comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, offers alternatives to Western-dominated governance structures. Analyses highlight its dual role as an economic forum and geopolitical platform challenging global hierarchies (Helleiner and Wang, 2018). As BRICS expanded to include new members and partners, questions of coherence and strategic implications arose, especially with Nigeria's admission as a partner in January 2025, marking recognition of its demographic and economic relevance (Shibayan, 2025). Partner status allows Nigeria access to meetings and initiatives without the liabilities of full membership, raising questions about the impact of this status. BRICS presents itself as a counterbalance to Western dominance, advocating for fairer representation and diversified development finance (Helleiner and Wang, 2018). Nigeria's position within this context intertwines normative aspirations for equitable global governance with strategic positioning in an evolving international landscape.

Nigeria's BRICS Engagement: Opportunities and Constraints

Nigeria's engagement with BRICS brings both opportunities and challenges. Some studies suggest partner status could enhance Nigeria's access to alternative finance, trade, and strategic alliances, aiding its development goals while diversifying relations beyond Western-centric frameworks (SSC, 2020). Official statements from Nigeria's representatives highlight a commitment to reforming global governance. Conversely, structural constraints may limit Nigeria's influence within BRICS, including disparities in economic capacity with core members, internal governance issues, and potential conflicts with Western partners (Rigoli, 2025). These complexities highlight Nigeria's need to balance aspirations for global influence with its economic realities and diplomatic coherence amid geopolitical pressures (Rigoli, 2025). Nigeria risks marginalization in significant global coalitions (Helleiner & Wang, 2018). This underscores the importance of not only structural factors but also the framing of narratives in foreign policy implementation.

Gap in literature

Current studies often fail to address how Nigeria's observer status within BRICS, as a form or type of partial institutional engagement, specifically influences its foreign policy strategy in relation to South–South cooperation and the multipolar global landscape. This is the gap this study intends to fill.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on two complementary theories, **South-South Cooperation theory** and **Neoclassical Realism**. These theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive explanation of Nigeria's engagement with BRICS, capturing both the normative and strategic dimensions of its foreign policy.

South-South Cooperation Theory

South-South Cooperation (SSC) theory rests on the assumption that developing countries can advance their collective interests by forging horizontal partnerships that reduce dependency on the Global North (Adebajo, 2021; Besharati, 2020). The theory is not attributed to a single author; rather, it emerged from political movements, conferences, and collective thought in the Global South. Its intellectual and political roots are traced back to the Bandung Conference of 1955 and the Non-Aligned Movement of 1961, where Asian and African leaders advocated for solidarity against colonialism and dependency. The theory emphasizes solidarity, mutual respect, and the pursuit of alternative development pathways. Nigeria has historically identified with this normative tradition, presenting itself as a “voice” of Africa and the Global South in multilateral forums (Ogunnubi & Okeke-Uzodike, 2021).

Within the BRICS framework, Nigeria's observer status reflects its desire to align with an emerging bloc that challenges Western-dominated structures such as the IMF and World Bank. Through SSC, Nigeria seeks not only economic opportunities, such as access to infrastructure finance from the BRICS New Development Bank, but also symbolic recognition as a continental leader. The SSC perspective, therefore, illuminates how Nigeria frames its engagement in BRICS as part of a broader struggle for equity and representation in global governance.

Neoclassical Realism

While SSC explains Nigeria's normative orientation, **Neoclassical Realism** offers insights into the strategic drivers of its foreign policy. The term **Neoclassical Realism** was coined by **Gideon Rose (1998)** in his article *Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy* (World Politics). It was developed further by scholars such as **Randall Schweller, William Wohlforth, Steven Lobell, Jeffrey Taliaferro, and Norrin Ripsman**. Neoclassical Realism posits that state behavior is shaped by the international distribution of power, but filtered through domestic political, economic, and leadership factors (Rose, 1998; Ripsman et al., 2016). Nigeria's engagement with BRICS cannot be understood solely as a function of solidarity; it is equally a pragmatic response to structural shifts in global politics and internal developmental needs.

The rise of multipolarity, marked by China's ascent and the declining dominance of Western powers, has compelled Nigeria to diversify its foreign policy options (Akinola, 2022). Domestically, recurring economic crises, debt burdens, and infrastructural deficits push Nigerian leaders to explore alternative partnerships beyond traditional Western allies. Observer status in BRICS is thus a strategic calculation, which allows Nigeria to gain exposure, access networks, and test the ground for possible deeper integration without committing to full membership.

These theories, the SSC theory and Neoclassical Realism, complement each other by capturing both the *ideational* and *material* dimensions of Nigeria's foreign policy. The SSC framework explains Nigeria's self-image and its discursive positioning as a Global South leader, while Neoclassical Realism accounts for the concrete interests and constraints that drive its strategic choices. This dual-theoretical lens is therefore essential to understanding the dynamics of Nigeria's observer status in BRICS: a mix of normative solidarity and pragmatic statecraft.

NIGERIAN FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY

Nigeria's strategic approach is multidimensional, reflecting its ambitions for greater regional leadership, seeking to play a leading role in West Africa and across the continent, working together through the African Union and ECOWAS for conflict resolution and development initiatives. There's also a strong diplomatic push to attract foreign investment, grow trade, and secure development financing while enhancing relations with global powers and fostering cooperation with global emerging economies. However, Nigeria has limited or no resources to embark on a vibrant foreign policy. Nigeria's resources are not capable of producing a foreign policy that can help achieve greater heights in terms of global international systems due to domestic and external/internal challenges, insecurities, economic instability, and governance issues limiting Nigeria's global influence. Competition with other African powers like South Africa and Ethiopia for continental leadership complicates Nigeria's ambitions. Critics argued that Nigeria's foreign policy lacks consistency with frequent shifts driven by domestic political changes rather than a coherent long-term strategy (Fawole, 2020).

BRICS Developmental Agenda and Institutional Mechanisms

The BRICS bloc has become a key player in global economic governance since its formation in 2009, representing major emerging economies. BRICS aims to reform the international financial architecture, which is seen as dominated by Western institutions. The creation of important financial institutions like the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) was driven by the

group's dissatisfaction with Bretton Woods's institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which are perceived to be heavily influenced by Western powers, especially the United States and Europe (Batista, 2021, Stuenkel, 2015). Therefore, BRICS seeks to address the underrepresentation of emerging markets and developing economies in global financial governance and to reduce dependence on a US dollar-dominated system (Helleiner & Wang, 2018; Liu & Papa, 2022). The BRICS agenda emphasizes South-South cooperation, mutual respect, and strong economic relations, aiming to improve the economic standing of developing countries through financial, technological, and infrastructure support (Zhu, 2019). The establishment of the NDB and CRA is viewed as a strategic move to develop alternative financial mechanisms that focus on the developmental needs of BRICS nations and other emerging economies. According to Cooper and Cannon (2024), the BRICS development agenda is not about dismantling the current global financial order but about reforming it to reflect the increasing economic influence of emerging powers. The NDB and CRA are crucial, providing financing for infrastructure and sustainable development projects, and offering a safety net against balance of payments crises.

Nigeria's Engagement with BRICS Observer Status and Beyond

It is believed that joining BRICS could enhance Nigeria's access to alternative development financing with the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB), which prioritizes infrastructure financing, presenting an opportunity for Nigeria to reduce dependence on Western financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank, which imposes stringent loan conditions (Adebajo, 2021, as cited in Jibrin, 2025). President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's tenure has marked a pivotal phase in Nigeria's Foreign Policy, characterized by a strategic focus on emerging economies through heightened engagement with BRICS. Although Nigeria remains an observer and not a formal member of the coalition, Tinubu's administration has had several dialogues on Nigeria's potential inclusion in the bloc. Although the past administration has maintained a cautious engagement, focusing instead on traditional partnerships with Western powers. While Tinubu has shifted this approach further, emphasizing diversification of Nigeria's alliances to include emerging economies, his administration views BRICS as a platform for achieving equitable global economic reforms, reducing Western dependency, and enhancing South-South cooperation (Akinyemi, 2023). Under President Tinubu's leadership, Nigeria's engagement has been driven by a strategic pursuit of economic diversification, geopolitical influence, and regional integration. At the 2023 BRICS summit in South Africa, President Tinubu emphasized Nigeria's commitment and readiness to collaborate on infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and global financial reforms, reflecting an intent to align

with BRICS objectives of fostering inclusivity in Global Governance (Ajayi,2023). Besides, Nigeria's BRICS engagement is to strengthen its leadership role in Africa, working alongside South Africa to amplify Africa's voice in Global Governance reforms. Furthermore, BRICS' emphasis on South-South cooperation complements Nigeria's commitment to regional integration through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AFCFTA), fostering intra-African trade investment. However, critics caution that Nigeria's membership could deepen geopolitical fragmentation within Africa, particularly concerning its role in the African Union (AU) and its relationship with Western allies (Ogunnubi & Okeke-Uzodokie, 2016, cited in Jibrin, 2025). Although Nigeria's engagement with BRICS aligns with its historical non-aligned stance, balancing ties with Western powers and emerging economies could lead to conflict and instability if these ties remain unbalanced, and could result in threats and tariffs from Western powers. Additionally, Nigeria's observer status grants it access to expanded markets in China and India for oil, agriculture, and solid minerals. While maintaining its non-alignment foreign policy.

Nigeria's partnership with BRICS offers significant economic opportunities. The NDB and trade agreements with BRICS nations could facilitate infrastructure development, technology transfer, and capacity building in sectors like agriculture, ICT, and renewable energy. For instance, Nigeria's \$2billion currency swap with China exemplifies economic interdependence, potentially stabilizing its exchange rate and boosting foreign reserves. Onyeiwu (2025) highlights the potential for Nigeria to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) from BRICS nations in frontier industries like artificial intelligence, 5G, and robotics, where China, India, and Brazil hold advanced capabilities.

Also, the partnership and engagement with BRICS could offer relevant geopolitical importance. BRICS' commitment to multilateralism and a multipolar world order resonates with Nigeria's non-aligned stance, allowing it to navigate tensions between Western powers and the Global South. The 2024 BRICS Summit in Kazan emphasized diplomacy and dialogue, with India's Prime Minister Modi advocating for peaceful resolutions to global conflicts, a stance Nigeria supports. However, critics like Coughlin (2023) argue that BRICS' internal contradictions, such as India-China territorial disputes, may limit its cohesion, potentially affecting Nigeria's ability to leverage the bloc's collective influence.

Table 1: Nigeria's Observer/Partner Status and Interaction with BRICS Member Roles (2025)

BRICS Member	Core Role in BRICS	Nigeria's Interaction as Observer/Partner	Strategic Impact on Nigeria's Foreign Policy
China	Development finance leader (NDB, BRI), manufacturing hub	Access to BRICS-backed financing beyond bilateral loans; opportunity to negotiate infrastructure projects within a multilateral context	Strengthens economic diversification strategy; reduces overdependence on Western finance
India	Energy security partner, IT & pharmacy power	Enhances Nigeria's oil trade leverage; fosters digital economy and health cooperation	Supports Nigeria's "Big Brother Africa" role through South-South tech partnerships
Russia	Security & multipolar diplomacy driver	Offers Nigeria space to engage in defense and energy without undermining Western alliances	Balances Nigeria's diplomacy between the West and emerging powers
Brazil	Agro-industrial innovation, renewable energy	Cooperation in agriculture and biofuels under the SSC framework	Advances Nigeria's food security and renewable energy policy
South Africa	Africa's BRICS voice and AU linkage	Nigeria joins continental coordination, reduces South Africa's monopoly	Enhances Nigeria's leadership role in Africa; advances Nigeria in AfCFTA diplomacy
Saudi Arabia & UAE (New entrants)	Oil & gas exporters, investment financiers	Nigeria cooperates on energy market stability, secures FDI in the petroleum sector	Reinforces Nigeria's OPEC+ role; strengthens Gulf-Africa economic corridors
Iran	Energy + strategic counter-Western stance	Limited direct energy collaboration, but diplomatic cover for multipolar advocacy	Nigeria carefully leverages Iran's stance to promote Global South autonomy
Egypt & Ethiopia	African regional anchors	Nigeria works together on shared African positions within BRICS.	Enhances Nigeria's AU/continental diplomacy and creates bloc bargaining power

Nigeria's BRICS Observer Status Impact on Foreign Policy Strategy

Nigeria's inclusion as a **BRICS partner country** aligns closely with its long-standing pursuit of **strategic autonomy**, a proactive rejection of passive non-alignment in favor of self-determined diplomacy. This new status deepens Nigeria's engagement with emerging multilateral platforms, helping it shape its foreign policy more actively, beyond default alignments with Western institutions

(Akinterinwa, 2025). As a BRICS partner, Nigeria gains conditional access to the **NDB**, a financial institution that disburses infrastructure and development loans, often in local currencies. This reduces reliance on Western-dominated institutions, bringing fresh opportunities in trade diversification, infrastructure financing, and economic stabilization (Ekpobo, Ofagbor, & Akinde, 2025, and Rigoli, 2025)

Also, BRICS' economic ecosystem offers Nigeria access to emerging partners whose export-import profile complements its own. Countries like China and India import Nigerian raw materials while exporting manufactured goods- creating space for trade diversification, investment in infrastructure, and technology transfer (Ekpobo et al, 2025, and Channels TV, 2025). Though Nigeria's partner status lacks full decision-making authority, it still provides a **platform to engage in high-level dialogues, summit statements, and policy frameworks** alongside other BRICS members. This channel amplifies Nigeria's diplomatic voice, especially on global governance reforms, by giving it some footing within a growing bloc of collective Global South actors (Shibayan, 2025; Ekpobo et al, 2025; Egenuka, 2025)

More so, Nigeria's BRICS engagement is part of a broader balancing strategy, which seeks to maintain its valuable alignment with Western partners, for development assistance, security cooperation, and investment, while forging relationships with emerging powers. This "dual-track diplomacy" underscores Nigeria's adaptability and refusal to anchor its foreign policy solely in a single direction (Ripoli, 2025; Zahorik, 2025; Egenuka, 2025). As Africa's most populous nation and one of the biggest economy, Nigeria's BRICS partnership reinforces its strategic posture within regional institutions like ECOWAS and the African Union. It signals its willingness to lead regional integration and economic alignment along southern solidarity lines, potentially boosting initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (Channels TV, 2025; Zahorik, 2025; Egenuka, 2025).

Rudolf Kjellén's conceptualization of the state as an organic entity tied to geography provides a useful lens to interpret Nigeria's evolving foreign policy within the context of BRICS. Just as Kjellén argued that states, like organisms, require space, resources, and strategic positioning to survive and thrive (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024), Nigeria's engagement with BRICS as an observer or partner state can be seen as part of its broader quest to secure political relevance, economic opportunities, and geopolitical influence in a rapidly shifting global order. Nigeria's geographic and demographic profile, Africa's largest economy, most populous country, and a key oil and gas producer, positions it as a natural contender for membership in emerging power blocs (Shibayan, 2025). However, its current observer/partner status reflects the constraints and vulnerabilities that Kjellén associated with "smaller organisms" struggling within a competitive ecosystem of stronger states. BRICS full members such as

China, Russia, and India function as “dominant organisms” in this system, shaping the bloc’s direction, while Nigeria must adapt strategically to carve out space for its interests (Akinyemi, 2023; Dodds, 2022).

Nigeria’s Foreign Policy, South-South Cooperation, and Dynamics of Observer Status in BRICS

Over the past decade, Nigeria has increasingly aligned its foreign policy with the evolving framework of South-South cooperation and new multilateral blocs. While traditional ties with Western powers remain significant, the recent shift toward BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) indicates a strategic recalibration in Nigeria’s diplomatic approach. South-South cooperation (SSC), built on shared interests, mutual respect, and solidarity among developing nations, has long shaped Nigeria’s foreign policy identity. Nigeria’s involvement in regional mechanisms such as ECOWAS and the African Union reflects this legacy of interdependence and regional leadership. Globally, SSC provides ideological coherence and practical reciprocity, especially through investments, knowledge sharing, and trade in kind, rather than traditional aid models, for countries in the Global South. BRICS has emerged as a counterweight to Western-dominated institutions like the IMF and the World Bank. The group’s New Development Bank (NDB) and Contingent Reserve Arrangement offer tangible alternatives for development finance and crisis management (Shaibume & Iornumbe, 2024; Anagba, 2025).

Though not a full member, in January 2025, Nigeria attained partner-country status within BRICS. This move granted Nigeria a formal seat in the bloc’s summits and dialogues, providing access to investment, trade diversification, and influence in global governance reform (Anagba, 2025; Rigoli, 2025). Nigeria’s decision to engage with BRICS is driven by multiple strategic goals. The “4-D” diplomacy, Development, Democracy, Demography, Diaspora, embodies Nigeria’s push for strategic autonomy, shifting from blanket non-alignment toward proactive global participation (Akinterinwa, 2025). Analysts from the NATO Defense College Foundation highlight how Nigeria can benefit geopolitically by strengthening infrastructure ties to support the Lagos-Ibadan railway and Lekki Deep Seaport, accessing New Development Bank financing, and boosting technological and educational exchanges with BRICS members (Rigoli, 2025).

For instance, early signs support the opportunity-based approach where Nigeria’s recent mineral cooperation agreements, such as lithium development pacts with South Africa, demonstrate how SSC and BRICS engagement can deliver real benefits in resource management and technological transfer (Osman, 2024). At the same time, it has been argued that institutional weaknesses in the form of the structural asymmetry within BRICS, especially the dominance of China, India, and Russia, present challenges for smaller partners like Nigeria. Raising concerns about fragmented priorities and internal

tensions like geopolitical differences between India and China, suggest cautious optimism (Shaibume & Iornumbe, 2024).

Furthermore, there has been emphasis on the delicate balance between aligning with BRICS and maintaining critical relationships with Western investors and institutions. However, excessive focus on BRICS could lead to unintended diplomatic tensions (Egenuka, 2025; Rigoli, 2025). Nigeria's BRICS partner status symbolizes its leadership in the Global South and provides concrete opportunities for economic and diplomatic benefits, such as infrastructure funding, trade diversification, and participation in de-dollarizing financial systems (Oshodi, 2025; Anagba, 2025; Egenuka, 2025).

Nigeria is, therefore, faced with huge challenge on how to turn these opportunities into tangible results. From energy and mineral agreements to capacity-building, Nigeria needs effective domestic coordination, strategic planning, and a careful balance of foreign partnerships to avoid compromising sovereignty or straining relationships with traditional Western allies.

Challenges and risks

Despite the opportunities, Nigeria faces significant challenges in its BRICS involvement. First, its struggling economy and insufficient infrastructure raise concerns about its ability to compete within the bloc. Okengwu (2025) notes that Nigeria must boost productivity and global competitiveness to fully benefit from BRICS markets. Second, balancing BRICS partnerships with Western alliance's creates diplomatic risks. U.S. President Trump's 2024 threat of 100% tariffs against BRICS countries pursuing de-dollarization highlights potential economic consequences (Mustapha, 2024). According to Bolarinwa (2025), BRICS might not last long due to internal economic strains, especially in China, and external pressures from Western nations. Additionally, Nigeria's domestic governance issues, including economic you disruptions, corruption, and budget deficits, could hinder its capacity to take advantage of BRICS opportunities (Egenuka, 2025). The IEP report notes that developing countries face increasing economic instability driven by global power shifts, which could complicate Nigeria's integration. Furthermore, public skepticism, such as the backlash against China's COVID-19 aid, indicates there may be resistance to stronger BRICS ties, especially with China. In a nutshell, Nigeria's BRICS partnership could position its leadership in Africa and Global South-South advocacy, particularly in trade climate justice and global governance reforms. However literatures underline the need for Nigeria to develop a clear engagement strategy to maximize benefits while reducing risks.

This study examined Nigeria's foreign policy through the lens of South-South cooperation and its changing observer/partner status within BRICS. The analysis found that Nigeria's foreign policy path is closely linked to its domestic realities and the structural changes shaping the global order (Nuamah, 2003; UNOSSC, 2020). BRICS, and its expansion into BRICS+, has become an important platform for alternative multilateralism, challenging the dominance of Western-led institutions while giving more voice to emerging economies (Stuenkel, 2020). Nigeria's observer status means more than a symbolic association; it has concrete effects on its external actions and regional leadership goals. On one side, this position offers Nigeria opportunities to diversify partnerships, attract investment, and strengthen its presence in Africa. On the other side, it highlights the limits set by economic vulnerabilities, weak institutions, and policy inconsistency (Akinyemi, 2023; Shibayan, 2025).

The findings show that Nigeria's foreign policy is at a crucial point: its observer role in BRICS could either be a path to greater influence or a reminder of the gap between ambitions and capabilities. The main argument of this paper is that Nigeria's engagement with BRICS should be viewed as a strategic turning point in its foreign policy. If used effectively, it can help reset Nigeria's global identity, boost its domestic development efforts, and increase Africa's collective voice in international governance. However, the benefits of this engagement will depend on Nigeria's ability to align domestic reforms with proactive, coherent, and strategically grounded diplomacy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper argues that Nigeria's observer status in BRICS represents a strategic shift in its foreign policy within a multipolar international system. By engaging with BRICS, Nigeria seeks to diversify partnerships, reduce reliance on Western institutions, and strengthen its leadership in Africa. However, domestic challenges such as economic fragility, institutional weaknesses, and policy inconsistency hinder Nigeria's ability to fully leverage these emerging multilateral platforms. The paper, therefore, concludes that Nigeria's involvement with BRICS is a transitional phase offering opportunities for economic cooperation and diplomatic influence. To capitalize on these opportunities, coherent domestic reforms and proactive diplomacy are essential. Ultimately, Nigeria's BRICS engagement highlights a key paradox: the aspiration to be a major Global South power amid structural challenges that affect its international engagement.

Recommendation

The paper recommends that Nigeria must focus on structural reforms in energy, infrastructure, and industry to build credibility in its BRICS involvement. Without a resilient economy at home, its foreign policy efforts will stay fragile (Ajayi, 2023).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should create a dedicated BRICS office to coordinate engagements, making sure they align with national development plans like AfCFTA and Vision 2050, as well as international commitments.

Nigeria should pursue technology-focused partnerships with BRICS countries, especially China and India, in areas such as agriculture, digital governance, and renewable energy. This will support long-term capacity building beyond reliance on aid (UNOSSC, 2020).

Nigeria should use its observer status as a platform to build coalitions within BRICS, balancing engagement with both emerging and traditional partners. Strategic partnerships with countries like Brazil and South Africa could enhance Nigeria's influence while maintaining Western alliances.

Final Reflections Nigeria's observer status in BRICS is not just a diplomatic gesture; it is a test of Nigeria's ability to act as both a regional leader and a Southern actor. This status, if managed well, could help Nigeria move from the periphery to a central role in a multipolar global order. But if domestic weaknesses and policy inconsistencies continue, the chance may be lost. In the end, Nigeria's BRICS engagement should be seen as a call to strengthen internal resilience while seizing external opportunities, an effort that will shape its foreign policy for years to come.

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