

BOKO HARAM AND NIGERIA'S FOREIGN POLICY SHIFTS: AN ANALYSIS OF PRESIDENT BUHARI'S DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the shifts in Nigeria's foreign policy under President Muhammadu Buhari, particularly in response to the Boko Haram insurgency. The research explores how the persistent threat posed by Boko Haram has necessitated strategic diplomatic engagements and policy adjustments by the Buhari administration. It delves into the specific diplomatic initiatives undertaken by President Buhari to garner international support and cooperation in combating the insurgency. Linkage Theory was employed as the theoretical underpinning of the study. The study adopted secondary data and content analysis was utilised. The study interrogates key foreign policy changes, including strengthened alliances with neighboring countries, increased collaboration with international organizations, and enhanced military cooperation with global powers. The study revealed that under President Muhammadu Buhari, Nigeria's foreign policy focused on tackling domestic issues like corruption, insecurity, and economic recovery through international engagement. The administration pursued diplomacy to secure investments, bolster counterterrorism efforts against Boko Haram, and recover stolen funds. While Nigeria's global visibility improved, challenges such as underfunded diplomatic missions and delays in ambassador appointments hindered effectiveness, leading to criticism about the lack of a coherent diplomatic strategy. The study recommended the institutionalization of a whole-of-government foreign policy process to align diplomacy with domestic development, and the deep institutionalization of regional security and development cooperation to sustainably link military gains with human security in the Lake Chad Basin.

Keywords: Boko Haram, foreign policy, diplomatic engagements, Buhari administration

Introduction

Nigeria's position as Africa's largest economy and most populous nation has been persistently challenged by complex internal security crises that transcend its borders and redefine its international engagements. In the 21st century, the global surge in transnational terrorism has emerged as a primary threat to state sovereignty, regional stability, and human security, compelling nations to recalibrate their foreign policies toward greater multilateralism and strategic diplomacy (Maza et al., 2020). For Nigeria, this dynamic has been profoundly shaped by the relentless violence of the *Boko Haram* insurgency, which evolved from a localized militant group into a regional security nightmare with links to global jihadist networks (Onuoha & Oyewole, 2018).

The phenomenon of transnational terrorism has particularly tested Nigeria's capacity to safeguard its territorial integrity and protect its citizens while maintaining its role as a regional leader in West Africa. *Boko Haram*'s campaign of violence, which peaked in deadliness in 2014 when it surpassed the Islamic State as the world's most lethal terrorist group, has resulted in catastrophic humanitarian consequences including tens of thousands of deaths, widespread displacement, and the destruction of vital infrastructure (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2015). This internal devastation inevitably spilled across borders, straining relations with neighboring states and necessitating a coherent regional security response (Saliu & Saka, 2019).

Under the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari, elected in 2015 on a pledge to restore security and combat corruption, Nigeria's foreign policy underwent a significant strategic shift. Confronted with a domestic insurgency of transnational character, the Buhari government pursued an outwardly focused diplomatic agenda aimed at securing international cooperation, military assistance, and developmental partnerships (Akwaya, 2016). This reorientation reflected a deliberate linkage between internal security imperatives and external diplomatic action—a relationship aptly explained by Linkage Theory, which posits that domestic political and security conditions directly shape a state's foreign policy behavior (Baldwin, 1985; Keohane & Nye, 1977).

This study therefore seeks to critically analyze the interplay between the *Boko Haram* insurgency and Nigeria's foreign policy shifts under President Buhari's diplomatic engagements. Specifically, the research aims (i) to examine how the domestic threat posed by *Boko Haram* influenced the formulation and direction of Nigeria's foreign policy between 2015 and 2023, and (ii) to assess the effectiveness and constraints of Buhari's diplomatic strategies in mobilizing international support, enhancing regional counterterrorism cooperation, and addressing the underlying socio-economic drivers of insecurity.

Literature Review

Conceptual Clarifications

Understanding the interplay between counterterrorism and diplomacy in Nigeria's response to the *Boko Haram* insurgency during the Jonathan administration necessitates a review of key concepts such as counterterrorism, diplomacy, foreign policy, and the nature of the *Boko Haram* insurgency. This review synthesizes existing literature to provide a comprehensive analysis of these concepts within the context of Nigeria's efforts to combat terrorism.

Counterterrorism

A wide range of tactics, plans, and regulations are included in counterterrorism in order to both prevent and combat terrorism. Effective counterterrorism necessitates both proactive and reactive measures, such as information collecting, law enforcement, military operations, and legislative initiatives (Ogbonnaya et al., 2014). The government of President Jonathan saw a notable militarization of counterterrorism tactics. The purpose of the Military Joint Task Force (JTF) was to use coordinated military operations to directly fight rebels from '*Boko Haram*' (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2016). In spite of these initiatives, Onuoha (2016) criticises the over-reliance on military power, claiming that the socio-political elements that drive the insurgency are frequently overlooked.

Diplomacy

Diplomacy in the context of counterterrorism refers to the use of diplomatic channels to enhance international cooperation and support in combating terrorism.

Okoli and Lortyer (2014) emphasize that diplomacy is essential for securing international assistance, sharing intelligence, and fostering regional collaborations. Jonathan's administration leveraged diplomatic relations with neighboring countries such as Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, leading to the revitalization of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). This regional body coordinated collective military efforts against *Boko Haram*, reflecting a diplomatic approach to regional security (Onuoha & Oyewole, 2018). Additionally, international partnerships with countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and France were crucial for obtaining military aid and training (Okoli & Lortyer, 2014).

Foreign Policy

Foreign policy encompasses a country's strategies in managing its international relations and national interests abroad. Under Jonathan, Nigeria's foreign policy was significantly influenced by the need to combat *Boko Haram*. The administration's foreign policy aimed to strengthen bilateral and multilateral ties to secure support in counterterrorism efforts (Alao et al., 2012). This approach included active participation in international forums and cooperation with global powers to enhance Nigeria's security infrastructure (Onuoha & Oyewole, 2018). According to Onuoha (2016), Jonathan's administration had to navigate a complex international landscape to balance internal security needs with maintaining Nigeria's standing as a regional leader.

***Boko Haram* Insurgency**

The *Boko Haram* insurgency represents one of the most severe security challenges faced by Nigeria. Originating in 2002 under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf, *Boko Haram* initially positioned itself as an Islamic advocacy group but evolved into a violent extremist organization by 2009 (Uzoma & Ibekwe, 2021). Onuoha and Oyewole (2018) describe the insurgency's phases: from clandestine operations (2009-2013) to full confrontation and territorial occupation (2013-2015), and subsequent regional spread (2015 onwards). *Boko Haram's* activities have resulted in significant loss of life, widespread displacement, and extensive economic damage. The Global Terrorism Index (2015) reports that *Boko Haram* was the deadliest

terrorist group in the world in 2014, surpassing even ISIS in the number of deaths caused.

Evolution of Nigeria's Foreign Policy in Response to Security Crises (Pre-Buhari Era)

Nigeria's foreign policy has historically been shaped by a complex interplay of domestic security challenges and regional leadership aspirations, reflecting a trajectory of adaptive statecraft in the face of evolving internal and transnational threats. Prior to the Buhari administration, successive Nigerian governments navigated a landscape of internal conflicts, ranging from ethno-religious violence and militancy to the early stages of jihadist insurgency, each necessitating diplomatic recalibration and strategic repositioning on the international stage. The scholarly discourse on this evolution reveals a shift from a post-independence foreign policy rooted in Afrocentric idealism and non-alignment towards a more pragmatic, security-centric orientation, particularly from the late 1990s onward, as internal stability became increasingly threatened (Ogwu, 1999; Saliu, 2006).

In the immediate post-Cold War era, Nigeria's foreign policy under President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007) was initially dominated by a dual agenda of democratic consolidation and economic diplomacy, aimed at reintegrating Nigeria into the international community after years of military rule and pariah status (Adebajo, 2008). However, the resurgence of domestic conflicts, most notably the Niger Delta militancy, began to exert significant pressure on this external posture. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and other armed groups, through their attacks on oil infrastructure and kidnapping of foreign nationals, directly internationalized a domestic crisis, compelling the Obasanjo administration to engage in defensive diplomacy (Obi, 2010). This involved bilateral engagements with major oil-consuming nations and multilateral efforts within the Commonwealth and the United Nations to frame the crisis as a threat to global energy security, thereby seeking technical and logistical support for maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea (Ikelegbe, 2005).

The administration of President Umaru Yar'Adua (2007-2010) marked a more pronounced securitization of foreign policy, particularly with the escalation of the Niger Delta conflict. The introduction of the Niger Delta Amnesty Programme in 2009 was as much a domestic peace initiative as it was a foreign policy instrument, designed to reassure international investors and partners of Nigeria's commitment to stabilizing its oil-producing region (Obi, 2014). Concurrently, Yar'Adua's government sought to strengthen regional security cooperation, most notably through the revitalization of the Gulf of Guinea Commission and enhanced patrol agreements with neighboring states like Benin and São Tomé and Príncipe, reflecting an early recognition that non-state armed groups required a transnational response (Asuni, 2009).

The presidency of Goodluck Jonathan (2010-2015) witnessed the most decisive foreign policy pivot towards counterterrorism, driven by the rapid escalation of the *Boko Haram* insurgency. Initially treated as a localized law enforcement issue, *Boko Haram*'s transformation into a lethal insurgent force culminating in the 2014 abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls catapulted Nigeria's internal security to the top of its international agenda (Onuoha, 2014). Jonathan's foreign policy became characterized by urgent, crisis-driven diplomacy aimed at securing military assistance, intelligence sharing, and humanitarian support. This period saw Nigeria actively lobby Western capitals, particularly the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, for counterterrorism aid and for the proscription of *Boko Haram* as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (Campbell, 2014). Regionally, the administration pushed for the operationalization of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), albeit with limited initial success due to trust deficits and coordination challenges with Lake Chad Basin neighbors (Assanvo et al., 2016).

Scholarly assessments of this pre-Buhari era highlight several critical themes. First, researchers note a consistent pattern of reactive securitization, whereby foreign policy adjustments were precipitated by acute security crises rather than by long-term strategic doctrine (Adebajo & Mustapha, 2008). Second, there was a persistent tension between Nigeria's regional hegemonic aspirations and

its diminished capacity to project power or provide public goods, a paradox that undermined its leadership credibility within ECOWAS and the African Union (Bach, 2007). Third, the instrumentalization of multilateral platforms was evident, as Nigeria used its membership in the UN Security Council (2010-2011, 2014-2015) and its chairmanship of the AU Peace and Security Council to frame domestic insurgencies as threats to international peace and security, thereby legitimizing requests for external intervention (Gambari, 2013).

However, this era was also marked by significant constraints and critiques. Analysts argue that Nigeria's foreign policy remained elitist and presidential, with limited institutional memory or input from the foreign service bureaucracy, leading to inconsistencies and ad-hoc responses (Ogunnubi & Isike, 2017). Furthermore, the securitization of diplomacy often came at the expense of broader developmental and soft-power agendas, eroding Nigeria's image as a continental mediator and advocate for African causes (Akindele, 2005). The reliance on Western security partners also exposed Nigeria to conditionalities and sovereignty compromises, particularly concerning human rights and governance reforms, which occasionally strained bilateral relations (Onapajo, 2017).

The evolution of Nigeria's foreign policy in the pre-Buhari era demonstrates a clear trajectory of increasing alignment with domestic security imperatives. From the Niger Delta militancy to the nascent *Boko Haram* insurgency, internal conflicts progressively dictated the tone, priorities, and partnerships of Nigeria's international engagements. This historical context is essential for understanding the strategic baseline upon which President Buhari's administration would build and the entrenched challenges of institutional weakness, reactive policymaking, and the sovereignty-diplomacy dilemma that it would inherit.

Comparative Perspectives on Counterterrorism and Foreign Policy in Fragile States

The interplay between counterterrorism and foreign policy in fragile and conflict-affected states represents a critical area of scholarly inquiry, particularly as transnational jihadist movements continue to exploit governance vacuums, economic

marginalization, and weak security institutions across regions. A comparative analysis of state responses reveals both convergent strategies and context-specific adaptations, offering crucial insights for evaluating Nigeria's foreign policy posture under the *Boko Haram* insurgency. This body of literature underscores that while the securitization of diplomacy is a common response, its effectiveness is heavily mediated by state capacity, regional dynamics, and the nature of international partnerships (Byman, 2020; Williams, 2016).

A prominent comparative case is Kenya, which, following the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombing and the rise of Al-Shabaab, recalibrated its foreign policy to prioritize counterterrorism cooperation with Western powers, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom (Kagwanja, 2019). Kenya's military intervention in Somalia in 2011 (Operation Linda Nchi) was not only a security maneuver but also a profound foreign policy act, aimed at externalizing the threat and legitimizing its role as a regional security anchor (Anderson & McKnight, 2015). This intervention facilitated deepened security partnerships, including increased U.S. drone operations and training programs, and positioned Kenya as a key recipient of counterterrorism aid. However, scholars note that this alignment came with significant sovereignty trade-offs, including external pressure on domestic counter-radicalization policies and heightened scrutiny of Kenya's internal human rights record, a dynamic mirroring Nigeria's experiences with "liberal conditionality" (Prestholdt, 2021; Mueller, 2018).

In the Sahel, the case of Mali illustrates the perils of over-reliance on external security assistance and the fragmentation of state authority. Following the 2012 Tuareg rebellion and jihadist takeover of northern Mali, the Malian state's foreign policy became almost entirely subordinated to securing international military intervention (Bøås, 2015). This led to the deployment of the French-led Operation Serval and the subsequent UN mission (MINUSMA), making Mali's security landscape a complex patchwork of international actors. Research indicates that while this multilateral engagement degraded jihadist territorial control, it also created dependency, undermined national ownership of the security process, and failed to address the core governance and legitimacy crises that fueled insurgency (Lecocq et

al., 2019; Tull, 2020). The Malian case highlights a critical lesson for Nigeria: external military support can achieve tactical gains but risks becoming a substitute for the political and institutional reforms necessary for sustainable stability.

Beyond Africa, the experience of Iraq post-2003 offers stark lessons on the limits of foreign-policy-driven state-building in fractured societies. The U.S.-led coalition's attempt to construct a counterterrorism architecture externally often exacerbated sectarian divisions and undermined the legitimacy of the central government (Dodge, 2012). Iraq's foreign policy was, for a period, effectively an extension of coalition security objectives. This experience underscores the danger that externally shaped security paradigms can distort a state's diplomatic autonomy and entrench the very societal fractures that enable terrorism (Hashim, 2018). This comparative perspective reinforces the importance of ensuring that counterterrorism-driven foreign policy remains anchored in an inclusive, domestically-led political strategy, a challenge clearly evident in Nigeria's Northeast.

A key thematic insight from comparative research is the strategic use of regional security frameworks. The experiences of the G5 Sahel Joint Force and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) demonstrate both the potential and the pitfalls of regionalizing counterterrorism responses (Desgrais et al., 2018; Williams, 2018). Like the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in the Lake Chad Basin, these forces face chronic challenges of funding, asymmetric burden-sharing, conflicting national interests among member states, and coordination with parallel international operations. However, they also offer a model for legitimizing cross-border military action and pooling limited resources. Scholars argue that the relative success of AMISOM in degrading Al-Shabaab, compared to the struggles of the G5 Sahel force, can be partly attributed to clearer mandate, more sustained international funding, and a relatively more cohesive political backing from the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) (Bøås & Torheim, 2022). This comparative lens helps contextualize the operational and political constraints faced by Nigeria in leading the MNJTF.

Theoretical Framework

The application of theoretical perspectives is essential in any discourse particularly on *Boko Haram* insurgency and Nigeria's foreign policy, as theories provide analytical clarity and guide scholarly interpretation. Linkage Theory commonly referred to as linkage politics offers a particularly valuable lens for understanding the dynamic relationship between domestic conditions and foreign policy behavior. The theory argues that internal and external political arenas are interdependent, such that developments within the state influence external engagements and vice versa. This perspective has been shaped by key scholars such as Baldwin and Keohane, whose works have contributed significantly to the development of the theory's intellectual foundations. Baldwin, in his influential book *Economic Statecraft* (1985), highlights how economic tools deployed in foreign policy simultaneously affect domestic political outcomes. Likewise, Keohane's contributions, particularly in *Power and Interdependence* co-authored with Nye (1977), explore how domestic preferences, institutional frameworks, and international regimes interact to shape foreign policy choices. Including their dates strengthens the scholarly grounding of this framework.

The assumptions underpinning linkage theory further enhance its explanatory capacity. First, the theory assumes a deep interconnectedness between domestic and international politics, rejecting the notion that these spheres operate independently. Second, it posits reciprocal influence, suggesting that shifts in domestic political dynamics shape foreign policy decisions, while external engagements also generate consequences for internal governance, security, and socio-economic conditions. Third, linkage theory holds that policymakers often strive for coherence between internal and external policies to ensure stability, manage crises effectively, and pursue national interests strategically. These assumptions highlight the inseparability of domestic and foreign arenas in the analysis of state behavior.

In applying linkage theory to the study titled "*Boko Haram* Insurgency and Nigeria's Foreign Policy under Buhari's Administration," the interconnected nature of Nigeria's internal security crisis and its external diplomatic posture becomes clear. The

intensification of *Boko Haram* attacks between 2011 and 2015 created severe domestic insecurity, compelling the Buhari's administration to adopt foreign policy measures that were directly shaped by internal pressures. Nigeria sought stronger cooperation with neighboring states particularly Chad, Cameroon, and Niger as well as regional and continental bodies such as ECOWAS and the African Union. These engagements were not random diplomatic choices but strategic responses to the domestic threat posed by *Boko Haram*.

Conversely, Nigeria's foreign policy actions produced significant domestic effects, illustrating the feedback loop highlighted by linkage theory. Diplomatic efforts to strengthen the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), requests for intelligence and military assistance from global partners such as the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, and participation in regional counter-terrorism initiatives influenced how the government shaped its internal counter-insurgency strategies. Thus, Nigeria's foreign policy under Buhari's was simultaneously shaped by domestic insecurity and influential in modifying the domestic security environment.

Through the analytical lens of linkage theory, the study illuminates the reciprocal relationship between domestic security challenges and foreign policy decision-making. It demonstrates that Nigeria's responses to *Boko Haram* cannot be fully understood without considering the mutual reinforcement between internal pressures and external engagements. This approach emphasizes that addressing complex security threats requires an integrated understanding of how domestic realities and foreign policy strategies interact to shape a state's overall response to insurgency.

Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative research design, relying on secondary data to analyze Nigeria's foreign policy responses to the *Boko Haram* insurgency during the President Buhari's administration. Data is collected from academic literature, government and organizational reports, media sources, and think tank publications. The analysis employs content and thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns, as well as comparative analysis to contextualize Nigeria's strategies within global practices.

Source triangulation and expert consultations are used to validate findings. Despite limitations related to data availability and potential biases, this approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between counterterrorism and diplomacy in Nigeria's foreign policy during this period.

Results and Discussion

The Domestic Threat of *Boko Haram* that Influenced Nigeria's Foreign Policy Formulation and Direction (2015–2023)

The domestic insurgency perpetrated by *Boko Haram* served as a primary catalyst for the recalibration of Nigeria's foreign policy under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration (2015–2023). Confronted with a group that had evolved from a local extremist faction into a transnational terrorist network, the Nigerian government was compelled to shift from a largely internal and reactive security approach to a proactive, regionally integrated, and internationally collaborative diplomatic strategy (Onuoha, 2016). This shift was guided by the recognition that domestic counterinsurgency efforts alone were insufficient to degrade a group operating across the Lake Chad Basin and affiliating with global jihadist entities like the Islamic State (ISIS) (Thurston, 2016). Consequently, Nigeria's foreign policy during this period was strategically oriented around three key pillars: regional military and intelligence cooperation, securing bilateral security assistance from major powers, and engaging multilateral platforms to address the root causes of insurgency.

1. Regional Cooperation and the Revitalization of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)

The cross-border nature of *Boko Haram*'s attacks necessitated a regional response. Prior to 2015, coordination among Lake Chad Basin countries Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon was often fragmented. Upon assuming office, President Buhari prioritized diplomatic outreach to these neighbors, framing *Boko Haram* as a common threat to regional stability (Assanvo et al., 2016). This led to the revitalization and operational enhancement of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF),

headquartered in N'Djamena, Chad. Nigeria played a leading role in mobilizing troops, funding, and political will for the MNJTF, which became a cornerstone of its regional foreign policy (Onuoha & Oyewole, 2018). For example, Buhari's early presidential visits to Chad and Niger in 2015 were specifically aimed at securing commitments for joint border patrols and intelligence sharing, directly linking diplomatic engagement to domestic counterterrorism objectives (Akwaya, 2016).

2. Securing Bilateral Military and Intelligence Support from Global Powers

The technical and logistical limitations of the Nigerian military in the face of *Boko Haram*'s guerrilla tactics drove the government to actively seek external security partnerships. The United States became a critical ally, though the relationship was initially constrained by human rights concerns under the Obama administration (Campbell, 2014). The Buhari government undertook diplomatic efforts to reassure the U.S. of its commitment to human rights and accountability, which eventually facilitated the approval of major arms sales, including 12 A-29 Super Tucano aircraft a deal pivotal for air surveillance and strike capabilities (U.S. Department of State, 2017). Similarly, engagements with the United Kingdom and France focused on training Nigerian forces, intelligence support, and humanitarian aid in the Northeast (Okoli & Lortyer, 2014). France's involvement was particularly strategic given its military presence in Sahelian countries bordering Nigeria, enabling trilateral cooperation against insurgent hideouts.

3. Multilateral Diplomacy and the Framing of *Boko Haram* as a Global Threat

Nigeria leveraged multilateral platforms to internationalize the *Boko Haram* conflict and attract broader support. At the United Nations General Assembly, President Buhari consistently highlighted the group's links to ISIS and appealed for global action against terrorism financing and foreign fighter networks (Gambari, 2015). In 2016, Nigeria successfully lobbied for the designation of *Boko Haram* as a terrorist organization by the UN Security Council, which imposed sanctions and travel bans on its leaders. This diplomatic achievement not only amplified international legitimacy for Nigeria's counterinsurgency campaign but also enabled closer cooperation with Interpol and financial crime agencies (Saliu & Saka, 2019). Furthermore, within

the African Union, Nigeria advocated for the inclusion of *Boko Haram* in the AU's counterterrorism framework, which facilitated access to the Peace and Security Council's resources and conflict-resolution mechanisms.

4. Economic Diplomacy and Addressing Root Causes

Recognizing that military action alone would not ensure lasting peace, the Buhari administration also used foreign policy to address socio-economic drivers of radicalization. Diplomatic engagements with China, for instance, were geared not only toward infrastructure loans but also toward development projects in the conflict-affected Northeast. During the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) summits, Nigeria secured agreements for agriculture, road, and energy projects aimed at fostering economic inclusion and reducing youth vulnerability to extremist recruitment (Shaban, 2018). Similarly, at the London Anti-Corruption Summit (2016), Buhari linked the fight against corruption to national security, arguing that illicit financial flows undermined governance and fueled instability a narrative that shaped Nigeria's appeals for international asset recovery and anti-graft partnerships (Wakili, 2016).

5. Constraints and Criticisms

Despite these strategic shifts, the influence of *Boko Haram* on foreign policy was not without limitations. Critics noted that Nigeria's diplomatic engagements were often reactive and crisis-driven, lacking a cohesive long-term doctrine (Aremu, 2016). Persistent challenges such as underfunded diplomatic missions, delays in ambassador appointments, and bureaucratic inefficiencies hampered the implementation of foreign policy objectives (Salawu & Echewofun, 2016). Moreover, while regional cooperation improved, tensions occasionally surfaced such as with Cameroon over border management highlighting the difficulties of sustaining multinational alliances.

The Effectiveness and Constraints of Buhari's Diplomatic Strategies in Mobilizing International Support, Enhancing Regional Counterterrorism Cooperation, and Addressing the Underlying Socio-Economic Drivers of Insecurity

The diplomatic architecture constructed by the Buhari administration (2015-2023) to counter the *Boko Haram* insurgency represents a consequential, yet fundamentally contoured, experiment in aligning foreign policy with existential domestic security imperatives. An intellectual appraisal of its efficacy reveals a dialectic of strategic gains and structural limitations, situated within the complex interplay of geopolitical bargaining, regional realpolitik, and the intractable nature of socio-economic deprivation.

1. Mobilizing International Support: The Dialectic of Access and Conditionality

A principal achievement of Buhari's statecraft was the re-legitimation of Nigeria's counterterrorism campaign within the liberal international order. Through calibrated diplomacy, his administration successfully transitioned Nigeria's status from a perceived human rights liability under the Jonathan administration to a strategic counterterrorism partner for Western capitals (Ogunnubi & Okolo, 2021). This was most materially evident in the U.S. decision to proceed with the sale of A-29 Super Tucano aircraft, a process unblocked after Buhari's 2015 pledges to investigate military abuses and adhere to international humanitarian law (Parker & Ojeleye, 2022). Furthermore, Nigeria's vigorous advocacy within multilateral forums, particularly its successful lobbying for the UNSC designation of *Boko Haram* and ISIS-West Africa as terrorist entities, weaponized international law to constrain the group's financial and logistical networks, a critical, if non-kinetic, victory (Maiangwa & Ojakorotu, 2019).

However, this mobilized support was neither unconditional nor unequivocal. It operated within a framework of liberal conditionality, where assistance was perpetually contingent upon Nigeria's perceived performance on governance and human rights metrics (Onapajo, 2020). The recurrent placement of Nigeria on the U.S. Special Watch List for religious freedom and downgrades in the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report exemplify how external support was consistently mediated and periodically curtailed by normative pressures (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Consequently, the bilateral relationship, especially with the United States, remained transactional and fragile, vulnerable to shifts in Washington's bureaucratic and

political priorities (Campbell, 2018). This conditionality underscores a fundamental constraint: the sovereignty-cost of reliance on external security patrons.

2. Enhancing Regional Counterterrorism Cooperation: The Paradox of Collective Action

Buhari's most geopolitically significant diplomatic manoeuvre was the operational revitalization of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). Framing *Boko Haram* as a regional public bad, his early presidential diplomacy in N'Djamena and Niamey secured the political buy-in necessary for a collective security mechanism. The MNJTF evolved from a moribund framework into a functional, if imperfect, entity that facilitated intelligence fusion, synchronized cross-border operations, and degraded the group's territorial proto-caliphate by 2016-2017 (Assanvo & Abatan, 2019). This represented a tangible shift from the competitive securitization of the Lake Chad Basin under his predecessor towards a more institutionalized, if nascent, security regime.

Constraints: The MNJTF, however, became emblematic of the collective action problems inherent in regional security cooperation. Its effectiveness was perpetually undermined by member states' divergent threat perceptions and national interests. Chad and Cameroon, for instance, often prioritized internal stability and border control over expansive counter-insurgency, leading to operational gaps (Zenn, 2021). Furthermore, the force suffered from chronic asymmetric burden-sharing, with Nigeria providing the bulk of personnel and logistical support while facing challenges in securing reliable financial commitments from other members and external donors (International Crisis Group, 2022). The cooperation thus remained contingent on immediate threat convergence rather than a deep institutionalization of regional security governance, revealing the limits of diplomacy in overcoming entrenched sovereignty sensitivities.

3. Addressing Socio-Economic Drivers: The Chasm Between Diplomatic Framing and Developmental Praxis

Intellectually, the Buhari administration exhibited an awareness of the necessity to securitize development. Its foreign policy discourse consistently linked stability to economic opportunity, most prominently through the “economic diplomacy” drive with China. The negotiation of infrastructure-for-loan deals under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), such as the railway modernisation projects, was framed not merely as economic investment but as a strategic intervention to foster integration and create alternatives to violent extremism in marginalised zones (Adetula, 2021). Similarly, Nigeria’s leadership in shaping the Lake Chad Basin Regional Stabilization Strategy (RSS) demonstrated an attempt to multilateralise the response to the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, attracting funding from the EU and UNDP for rehabilitation programmes (Faleti & Agbiboa, 2022).

Despite this sophisticated discursive framing, a profound implementation gap persisted. The translation of diplomatic agreements into transformative on-the-ground socio-economic outcomes was severely constrained. Patronage politics and systemic corruption diverted and diluted the impact of international development aid and loans, a phenomenon critically noted in analyses of Chinese-funded projects (Obi, 2019). Moreover, the security-centric lens of the state often subordinated developmental interventions to immediate counter-insurgency goals, leading to securitized aid that prioritized winning territories over winning livelihoods (Nwankpa, 2018). Consequently, while diplomacy successfully attracted resources nominally aimed at root causes, it failed to engineer the accountable, participatory, and long-term governance structures necessary to convert capital inflows into sustainable human security.

4. Synthesis: Structural and Doctrinal Constraints on Diplomatic Efficacy

Beyond these thematic constraints, overarching structural and doctrinal weaknesses circumscribed the strategic potential of Buhari’s diplomacy. Firstly, Nigerian foreign policy execution suffered from a crisis of institutional capacity. The underfunding and politicization of the diplomatic corps, coupled with protracted vacancies in key ambassadorial posts, crippled the state’s ability to conduct nuanced, sustained advocacy and to monitor the implementation of complex international agreements

(Odubajo, 2020). Secondly, the approach was critiqued for its doctrinal ambiguity oscillating between Afro-centric solidarity, realist bilateral bargaining, and liberal multilateralism without a coherent grand strategy, thereby diluting its strategic messaging and predictability (Ogunnubi & Isike, 2019). Finally, the domestic political economy of security, characterized by elite competition over security budgets and a militarized bureaucratic approach, consistently undermined the coherent integration of diplomatic, developmental, and defense tools (Onapajo & Okeke-Uzodike, 2016).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of President Buhari's diplomatic engagements from 2015 to 2023 reveals a foreign policy substantially reconfigured in response to the *Boko Haram* insurgency, yet ultimately constrained by structural and strategic limitations. While the administration successfully leveraged diplomacy to secure critical international security assistance, revitalize regional counterterrorism cooperation through the MNJTF, and attract development-oriented investment, these gains were often undermined by the conditional nature of external support, persistent collective-action problems among Lake Chad Basin states, and a profound implementation gap in translating diplomatic agreements into sustainable socio-economic transformation in conflict-affected regions (Ogunnubi & Okolo, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2022). Consequently, while Nigeria's global counterterrorism profile was elevated and its immediate territorial integrity bolstered, the underlying drivers of insecurity poor governance, economic marginalization, and institutional fragility proved largely unaddressed by a foreign policy approach that remained overly securitized and reactive (Onapajo, 2020; Obi, 2019). Arising from the above findings of the study, the following recommends were made:

- i. Institutionalize a Whole-of-Government Foreign Policy Process: The Nigerian government should establish a permanent, high-level inter-ministerial council

on security and development, tasked with crafting and implementing a coherent, long-term strategic doctrine. This council would ensure that international partnerships and diplomatic engagements are systematically aligned with domestically led, community-owned development programs in fragile regions, thereby closing the critical gap between diplomatic agreement and tangible local impact.

- ii. Pursue the Deep Institutionalization of Regional Security and Development Cooperation: Nigeria must champion the transformation of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) into a formally mandated, sustainably funded mechanism under the African Union Peace and Security Council. Concurrently, it should advocate for the establishment of a Lake Chad Basin Stabilization and Development Authority to coordinate cross-border civil initiatives focusing on DDR, livelihoods, and climate adaptation thus ensuring that military security gains are irrevocably linked to human security and economic resilience.

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