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FROM NON-ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: REINTERPRETING NIGERIA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN AN EMERGING MULTIPOLAR WORLD, 2015–2025

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the changing character of Nigeria's foreign policy from non-alignment towards strategic autonomy within the emerging multipolar global order between 2015 and 2025. It argues that strategic autonomy does not represent an abandonment of Nigeria's non-aligned tradition but its functional recalibration to conditions of multipolarity and complex interdependence. The paper adopts a qualitative documentary research design, drawing on scholarly literature, official policy documents, government statements, institutional reports and relevant economic and diplomatic records. The evidence is analysed through thematic content analysis, focusing on external diversification, policy discretion and domestic capacity. The findings show that Nigeria progressively diversified its external relations under the Buhari and Tinubu administrations while maintaining established Western, regional and multilateral partnerships. This orientation became more explicit under the Tinubu administration through the Demography, Development, Diaspora and Democracy (4D) foreign policy framework and engagement with emerging Global South platforms, including Nigeria's admission as a BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) partner country in 2025. However, diplomatic diversification has advanced more rapidly than the domestic capabilities required to sustain substantive autonomy. Persistent economic vulnerability, a concentrated export structure, security pressures and institutional weaknesses continue to constrain Nigeria's policy discretion. The paper conceptualises this condition as diversified dependence, whereby the multiplication of external partnerships widens diplomatic options without necessarily overcoming the structural vulnerabilities that constrain autonomous action. It concludes that Nigeria's strategic autonomy remains an emerging and constrained orientation whose consolidation depends on strengthening domestic productive and institutional capabilities while sustaining diversified and regional engagement.

Keywords: Nigeria; Non-Alignment; Strategic Autonomy; Multipolarity; Diversified Dependence; Foreign Policy

INTRODUCTION

The international system has undergone significant transformation since the end of the Cold War. The bipolar structure organised around the Western bloc led by the United States and the Soviet-led Eastern bloc initially gave way to pronounced American predominance, but the growing influence of China and other emerging powers, alternative economic arrangements and renewed

contestation over global governance increasingly point towards a more diffuse distribution of global power (Oteghekpen & Ukhurebor, 2025; Patrick et al., 2025; Wade, 2011). For countries of the Global South, this emerging multipolarity creates opportunities for diversified partnerships and greater diplomatic manoeuvrability while also generating new forms of dependence and strategic competition.

Globalisation has simultaneously deepened economic, technological, political and security interdependence. Developing states now interact with established and emerging powers through overlapping relationships, making rigid bloc-based foreign policy increasingly difficult to sustain. For Nigeria, the challenge is therefore no longer simply whether to align with or remain outside competing blocs, but how to engage different centres of power while preserving sufficient policy independence to pursue national interests (Adiele, 2025; Nwokolobia & Ikenga, 2023; Raji, 2015). This challenge has become more pronounced as BRICS expansion and growing Global South activism widen the strategic options available to developing states (Oteghekpen & Ukhurebor, 2025; Patrick et al., 2025).

Nigeria has historically approached questions of external alignment through principles including non-alignment, Afrocentrism, multilateralism and the protection of national interests. Following independence in 1960, non-alignment provided a means of maintaining relations across the Cold War divide without formal attachment to either bloc, while Africa remained central to Nigeria's external engagements (Albert-Makyur, 2020; Eshiet, 2018). Nigeria's foreign policy nevertheless evolved with changing domestic and international circumstances, incorporating peacekeeping, regional integration, economic diplomacy and wider multilateral engagement (Eshiet, 2018; Okeke, 2022; Raji, 2015).

The period 2015–2025 represents an important phase in this evolution. Spanning the Buhari and Tinubu administrations, it coincided with intensified geopolitical competition, BRICS expansion, post-pandemic realignments, the operationalisation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and renewed Global South activism (Oteghekpen & Ukhurebor, 2025; Patrick et al., 2025). During this period, Nigeria maintained relations with traditional Western partners while expanding engagement with China, India, Brazil, Gulf states and other emerging actors and South–South platforms (Adiele, 2025; Ezeanyika et al., 2024; Nwokolobia & Ikenga, 2023). Under the Tinubu administration, this orientation became more explicitly connected to strategic autonomy, economic diplomacy and Nigeria's engagement with an evolving multipolar order (Tuggar, 2025). Strategic autonomy is understood here as the capacity to preserve foreign policy discretion without excessive dependence on a particular power or bloc.

The relationship between this orientation and Nigeria's traditional non-alignment, however, remains insufficiently clarified. Existing studies have examined Nigerian foreign policy through non-alignment, globalisation, economic diplomacy and changing external partnerships (Eshiet, 2018; Ndaji, 2023; Okeke, 2022; Raji, 2015), while recent scholarship has increasingly addressed strategic balancing and flexibility within the changing global order (Abidoye, 2026; Adiele, 2025). Yet treating strategic autonomy simply as a new label for non-alignment obscures changes in the

international system and the instruments through which Nigeria now seeks policy independence. Conversely, treating it as a complete departure overlooks the historical continuity in Nigeria's preference for independent external decision-making.

A related problem is the tendency to equate diversification with autonomy. Multiple partnerships may widen diplomatic options without removing the economic, financial, technological, security and institutional vulnerabilities that constrain the exercise of those options. Nigeria may therefore reduce excessive reliance on a single external actor while remaining dependent across a broader range of relationships. This paper conceptualises this condition as diversified dependence: a situation in which expanded external partnerships increase diplomatic choice without a corresponding reduction in the structural vulnerabilities limiting substantive policy autonomy. The distinction shifts attention from the number of relationships a state maintains to the capacity with which it engages them.

Against this background, the paper examines Nigeria's movement from non-alignment towards strategic autonomy between 2015 and 2025. It argues that strategic autonomy represents neither the abandonment nor mere rebranding of non-alignment, but its functional recalibration to conditions of multipolarity and complex interdependence. The continuity lies in the pursuit of independent external decision-making; the change lies in the movement from principally avoiding bloc attachment towards cultivating multiple and increasingly issue-specific relationships. Strategic autonomy is therefore distinguished from diplomatic diversification: while diversification expands external options, substantive autonomy depends on whether those options translate into greater policy discretion, bargaining capacity and the ability to sustain independent choices.

The analysis addresses three questions: How did Nigeria diversify its external partnerships between 2015 and 2025? To what extent did such diversification enlarge Nigeria's policy discretion in its relations with competing centres of global power? How did Nigeria's domestic economic, security and institutional capabilities shape its ability to translate diplomatic diversification into substantive strategic autonomy? Correspondingly, the paper examines the pattern of Nigeria's external diversification, assesses the extent to which diversification expanded policy discretion, and evaluates the domestic capabilities underpinning the pursuit of strategic autonomy. By bringing these dimensions together, the paper assesses whether Nigeria's expanding external relationships reduced its vulnerability or primarily redistributed dependence across a wider range of actors.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION: NON-ALIGNMENT AND STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

The distinction between non-alignment and strategic autonomy is central to understanding the changing character of Nigeria's foreign policy. Both emphasise sovereign decision-making and freedom of external action, but they emerged under different international conditions. Non-alignment was principally associated with Cold War bipolarity, whereas strategic autonomy has gained greater relevance within an increasingly multipolar and interdependent international system (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2026; Steinbach, 2023).

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Non-Alignment

Non-alignment emerged as newly independent states sought to preserve their sovereignty without becoming permanently incorporated into either the Western or Soviet bloc. It did not necessarily imply neutrality or disengagement from international affairs; rather, its central purpose was to preserve freedom to assess international issues according to national interests rather than predetermined bloc loyalties (Anglin, 1964; Ifidon, 2012).

For Nigeria, non-alignment became an important foreign policy principle following independence in 1960. The country maintained relations across the Cold War divide while avoiding formal attachment to either bloc. Its implementation, however, was never straightforward. Anglin (1964) questioned the compatibility of Nigeria's political non-alignment with its substantial economic connections to the West, while Ifidon (2012) demonstrated that concerns about the independence of Nigeria's early foreign policy existed from its formative years. Nigerian non-alignment was therefore less about strict equidistance between competing powers than about preserving room for independent foreign policy choice. It operated alongside Afrocentrism, multilateralism and regional leadership, but remained conditioned by economic dependence and domestic circumstances (Albert-Makyur, 2020; Eshiet, 2018).

The end of the Cold War altered the environment in which this policy developed. Globalisation and the rise of China, India and other centres of economic and political influence widened the range of partnerships available to developing states. BRICS and other Global South platforms further complicated traditional alignment patterns (Oteghekpen & Ukhurebor, 2025; Patrick et al., 2025; Wade, 2011). The challenge consequently shifted from avoiding attachment to two competing blocs towards managing relationships among several centres of power while retaining national policy space.

Strategic Autonomy

Strategic autonomy broadly refers to the capacity of a state to determine and pursue important external policy choices without excessive dependence on, or coercive constraint from, other powers. It does not imply isolation or complete independence; rather, it concerns the degree of policy discretion a state can preserve while participating in relationships of unavoidable interdependence (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2026; Steinbach, 2023).

Unlike classical non-alignment, strategic autonomy permits active and simultaneous engagement with different or competing actors according to national interests. A state may cooperate with different partners across trade, infrastructure, technology, security and development without allowing any single relationship to determine its overall foreign policy orientation. Diversification, issue-specific cooperation and pragmatic multi-engagement can therefore enlarge policy space (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2026; Biscop, 2019).

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Diversification, however, does not by itself establish strategic autonomy. Political motivation, structural positioning and economic capacity influence the degree of autonomy a state can exercise (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2026). This is particularly important for developing states because interdependence may be asymmetric: weaker productive, technological or institutional capabilities can leave states vulnerable despite maintaining numerous external partnerships. Keohane and Nye's (2012) distinction between sensitivity and vulnerability similarly demonstrates that interdependence does not imply equality. Strategic autonomy is therefore better understood as a matter of degree and capacity rather than an absolute condition.

From Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy

Non-alignment and strategic autonomy share an underlying commitment to foreign policy independence but differ in the means through which it is pursued. Non-alignment primarily sought to prevent bloc dependence within a bipolar system; strategic autonomy seeks to enlarge policy discretion through diversified and selective engagement within a multipolar and interdependent one. The former emphasised avoidance of permanent alignment, whereas the latter permits issue-specific cooperation with different powers where such engagement advances national interests (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2026; Steinbach, 2023).

This distinction is particularly relevant to contemporary Nigeria. The country maintains established Western relationships while expanding engagement with China, India, Brazil and other emerging actors, alongside participation in Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union, South–South frameworks and BRICS-related arrangements (Adiele, 2025; Nwokolobia & Ikenga, 2023; Tuggar, 2025). Nigeria's expanding engagement with China and other emerging actors also reflects broader changes in economic and geopolitical relations between the Global South and alternative centres of global power (Ezeanyika et al., 2024).

Recent scholarship nevertheless shows that the interpretation remains contested. Abidoye (2026), for example, interprets Nigeria's contemporary posture through neo-non-alignment and strategic hedging, suggesting that non-alignment itself can be adapted to multipolar conditions. This paper takes a related but analytically distinct position. Strategic autonomy is not treated as a rejection of Nigeria's non-aligned heritage but as its functional recalibration. The continuity lies in sovereign decision-making; the transformation lies in moving from principally avoiding bloc attachment towards deliberately cultivating multiple, issue-specific relationships across economic, diplomatic and security domains.

Strategic Hedging, Multi-Alignment and Diversified Dependence

Strategic autonomy also needs to be distinguished from related concepts used to explain how states navigate contemporary geopolitical competition. Strategic hedging broadly involves managing uncertainty through calibrated engagement with competing powers rather than exclusive commitment to one side, thereby preserving alternatives and spreading geopolitical risks (Arani, 2025). In the African context, Adibe (2026) similarly presents hedging as active risk management

through engagement with competing powers, while Abidoye (2026) applies neo-non-alignment and strategic hedging to Nigeria.

Multi-alignment shifts attention from avoiding alignment to cultivating multiple relationships. Ben Hammouda (2024) associates it with the response of Global South states to geopolitical fragmentation, whereby engagement with different global poles can widen strategic options and reduce excessive reliance on one relationship. Yet the benefits remain uneven because effective diversification depends partly on states' economic, financial and strategic capabilities.

Neither concept, however, establishes whether diversified engagement has reduced a state's underlying vulnerabilities. A country may hedge between competing powers or maintain multiple alignments while remaining dependent on external finance, markets, technology, security assistance or productive inputs. Economic diversification and structural transformation consequently remain important to converting expanded external options into substantive autonomy (Usman & Landry, 2021; Wung et al., 2025).

It is within this analytical space that this paper develops diversified dependence. The concept describes a condition in which a state broadens its external partnerships and reduces excessive reliance on any single actor or bloc, yet continues to experience economic, financial, technological, security or institutional vulnerabilities that constrain substantive policy autonomy. Diversification may therefore increase diplomatic choice and bargaining opportunities without transforming the structural conditions from which dependence arises. Dependence is not necessarily eliminated; it becomes distributed across a wider range of relationships.

Diversified dependence differs from strategic hedging and multi-alignment primarily in what it seeks to explain. Hedging and multi-alignment describe strategies of external engagement—how states manage uncertainty, avoid exclusive commitment and cultivate multiple partnerships (Adibe, 2026; Arani, 2025; Ben Hammouda, 2024). Diversified dependence, by contrast, describes a possible structural condition despite such diversification: a state may improve its bargaining room while still lacking sufficient domestic capabilities to convert those options into sustained policy independence. This is consistent with evidence that external dependency can inhibit structural transformation in African economies where productive and institutional capacities remain weak (Usman & Landry, 2021; Wung et al., 2025).

The concept retains an important insight from dependency perspectives: external relationships are embedded within unequal economic structures and may reproduce vulnerability despite formal sovereign equality. It differs, however, from classical dependency interpretations by not assuming concentrated dependence on a single dominant centre. Under contemporary multipolarity, states may engage established Western powers, China and other emerging actors simultaneously while remaining vulnerable across different dimensions of those relationships. The multiplication of partners may therefore redistribute dependence without overcoming it.

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The argument also intersects with African scholarship on extraversion, which emphasises that African actors can mobilise external relationships and resources in pursuit of domestic political and economic objectives (Bayart, 2000). Diversified dependence does not deny this agency; rather, it asks whether the multiplication of external relationships is accompanied by sufficient domestic capacity to reduce the vulnerabilities embedded within them. Agency and structural dependence can therefore coexist.

For this study, diversified dependence is evident where three conditions coexist: external partnerships become more diversified; diplomatic and policy options expand; yet significant economic, security, technological or institutional vulnerabilities continue to constrain independent choices. These conditions provide an empirical basis for examining whether Nigeria's widening external relationships between 2015 and 2025 translated into substantive strategic autonomy or primarily redistributed dependence among a broader range of partners.

THEORETICAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is anchored in Complex Interdependence Theory, developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, and employs Strategic Autonomy as a complementary analytical framework. Complex Interdependence explains the interconnected international environment within which Nigeria conducts its foreign policy, while Strategic Autonomy provides a lens for assessing the policy discretion Nigeria retains within that environment.

Complex Interdependence Theory

Keohane and Nye (1977, 2012) developed Complex Interdependence partly in response to approaches that explained international relations predominantly through military power and interstate security competition. The theory emphasises multiple channels of interaction among state and non-state actors, the absence of a fixed hierarchy among international issues and the reduced utility of military force in certain interdependent relationships. Economic, technological, environmental and developmental issues consequently operate alongside security concerns, while international institutions facilitate cooperation and bargaining (Keohane & Nye, 1977, 2012).

Particularly relevant to this study is the distinction between sensitivity and vulnerability interdependence. Sensitivity concerns exposure to developments elsewhere, while vulnerability concerns the costs that remain where alternative policy options are limited (Keohane & Nye, 1977, 2012). Interdependence therefore does not imply equality; differences in economic, technological and institutional capabilities can produce unequal bargaining positions. This helps explain how Nigeria's expanding international relationships can simultaneously create opportunities and reproduce external vulnerabilities.

Complex Interdependence, however, does not sufficiently explain why states deliberately diversify their external relationships to preserve policy space. Moreover, interdependence may reproduce unequal economic and structural relationships, particularly for developing states (Gilpin, 1987;

Strange, 1996). Strategic Autonomy is therefore employed as a complementary analytical framework.

Strategic Autonomy as an Analytical Framework

Strategic Autonomy focuses on a state's capacity to preserve policy discretion while remaining engaged in international cooperation. It directs attention to diversified partnerships, domestic capability and the ability to pursue national interests without excessive dependence on a particular external actor (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2026; Biscop, 2019; Steinbach, 2023).

For this paper, diversification is necessary but insufficient for strategic autonomy. Multiple partnerships may expand external options, but meaningful autonomy also depends on the economic, technological, security and institutional capabilities required to use those options effectively. This distinction is particularly relevant to Nigeria, where extensive diplomatic relationships coexist with significant structural vulnerabilities.

Integrating Complex Interdependence and Strategic Autonomy

The two perspectives are complementary. Complex Interdependence explains Nigeria's participation in multiple relationships and the asymmetric vulnerabilities arising from them, while Strategic Autonomy assesses the policy discretion and domestic capacity available within those relationships. Accordingly, the framework examines three dimensions: the extent of Nigeria's external diversification; whether diversification enlarged policy discretion; and whether domestic economic, security and institutional capabilities were sufficient to translate diplomatic flexibility into substantive autonomy. These dimensions also provide the basis for assessing whether Nigeria reduced external vulnerability or primarily redistributed dependence among a wider range of actors.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative documentary research design to examine the evolution of Nigeria's foreign policy from non-alignment towards strategic autonomy between 2015 and 2025. Documentary analysis was appropriate because the study focused on foreign-policy orientations, official positions, diplomatic engagements and structural economic and security conditions that could be examined through policy documents, official records, institutional reports and relevant scholarly literature. The qualitative design enabled the study to interpret patterns, meanings and changes in Nigeria's external relations rather than test statistical relationships (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The empirical documentary corpus comprised 43 documents, consisting of 21 official and institutional documents and statistical reports and 22 scholarly and policy-analysis documents. The materials covered developments principally between 2015 and 2025, with a limited number of publications released in 2026 included where they reported or analysed developments occurring within the study period. The official and institutional materials included Nigerian government

policy statements and communications, ECOWAS and United Nations documents, National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) foreign-trade reports, Debt Management Office (DMO) external-debt reports, and reports from international financial and development institutions. The scholarly and policy materials directly addressed Nigeria's foreign policy, economic diplomacy, South–South cooperation, regional and security engagement, external economic relations and the emerging strategic-autonomy orientation. Earlier works were used selectively to establish the historical, conceptual and theoretical foundations of non-alignment, interdependence and structural power and were not counted as part of the empirical documentary corpus.

Documents were identified through purposive documentary selection. Inclusion was based on direct relevance to Nigeria's foreign-policy behaviour or the economic, security and institutional conditions affecting its external policy choices during the study period; identifiable authorship or institutional provenance; and sufficient information to permit verification. Priority was given to official Nigerian and intergovernmental records for factual claims and quantitative indicators, while peer-reviewed scholarship and established policy analyses were used for interpretation and contextualisation. Materials that were duplicative, lacked identifiable provenance or did not substantially address the study period or analytical themes were excluded.

Quantitative documentary evidence was used descriptively to strengthen the qualitative analysis rather than for statistical hypothesis testing. Foreign-trade values and major trading partners were extracted from NBS foreign-trade reports for selected benchmark years—2015, 2019, 2023, 2024 and 2025—while external-debt composition for corresponding benchmark years was obtained from DMO external-debt stock reports. The benchmark years were selected to capture the beginning of the study period, an intermediate pre-COVID observation and developments towards the end of the period. The figures were retained in the units reported by the originating institutions and cross-checked against the relevant year-end reports before tabulation.

The documents were analysed using qualitative thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial coding was guided by the study's conceptual and theoretical concerns, particularly policy autonomy, diplomatic diversification, economic interdependence, South–South cooperation, regional and multilateral engagement, security dependence and institutional capacity. The analysis subsequently examined patterns of continuity and change across the Buhari and Tinubu administrations and the extent to which diversified external relationships expanded or constrained Nigeria's policy discretion. Complex Interdependence provided the principal analytical framework for interpreting the relationship between expanded external options and continuing vulnerability.

Reliability was strengthened through source triangulation. Where possible, claims derived from scholarly or policy analyses were compared with official records, while economic and debt indicators were drawn directly from the relevant NBS and DMO reports. The study nevertheless recognises the limitations inherent in documentary research, including uneven availability of official records, differences in institutional reporting formats across years and the shorter observation period available for the Tinubu administration. Consequently, the analysis does not

treat the two administrations as temporally equivalent and avoids attributing longer-term outcomes to policies whose implementation remained emergent by the end of 2025.

NIGERIA'S FOREIGN POLICY UNDER BUHARI AND TINUBU: FROM PRAGMATIC DIVERSIFICATION TO STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Nigeria's foreign policy between 2015 and 2025 reflected both continuity and adjustment in response to a changing international environment. Across the Buhari and Tinubu administrations, Nigeria maintained its commitments to African regionalism, multilateralism and relations with traditional Western partners while expanding engagement with China and other emerging powers. The difference lay less in a complete change of direction than in the increasing explicitness with which diversified engagement became connected to economic diplomacy and strategic autonomy.

The Buhari Administration: Pragmatic Diversification, 2015–2023

Under President Muhammadu Buhari, Nigeria's foreign policy was shaped substantially by security concerns, economic recovery, anti-corruption diplomacy and the search for investment and development partnerships (Chilaka & Akpan, 2024; Mohammed-Yinusa et al., 2026). Relations with the United States, United Kingdom and European partners remained important, particularly in security, trade and development cooperation. Following the economic difficulties that culminated in the 2016 recession, investment, trade, development financing and economic diversification also assumed greater importance in Nigeria's external relations (Chilaka & Akpan, 2024; Hart, 2025).

Relations with China became particularly prominent. Cooperation expanded across infrastructure, transportation, telecommunications, energy, trade and development financing (Akinola & Magam-Chaka, 2025; Ezeani & Ngoka, 2022; Ezeanyika et al., 2024; Nwokolobia & Ikenga, 2023; Odey, 2023). Chinese engagement widened Nigeria's access to infrastructure finance and investment but also exposed continuing asymmetries in trade and external financing. Nigeria's debt to China, for example, increased from approximately US$1.4 billion in 2015 to US$3.3 billion in 2020, although the loans were largely concessional and tied to infrastructure projects (Africa Check, 2021). The relationship therefore illustrates both the opportunities and constraints associated with diversifying beyond traditional Western sources of finance.

China did not replace Nigeria's established Western relationships. The Buhari administration continued relations with traditional partners while expanding engagement with India, Turkey, Brazil, the United Arab Emirates, Russia and other emerging actors (Adiele, 2025; Albert-Makyur, 2020). The pattern was therefore one of diversification rather than geopolitical realignment.

Regional and continental engagement also remained important. Nigeria continued to work through ECOWAS and the African Union, while its eventual participation in the AfCFTA combined its established commitment to African integration with concerns about domestic economic interests. Nigeria initially delayed signing the agreement while consultations were undertaken over its implications for domestic producers before signing in 2019 (Omiunu, 2019). The episode illustrates

that external economic commitments were filtered through domestic interests rather than automatically embraced as expressions of regional leadership.

Buhari did not formally articulate strategic autonomy as a foreign policy doctrine. Nevertheless, maintaining Western relationships alongside deeper engagement with China and other emerging powers produced an increasingly diversified pattern of external engagement. Strategic autonomy during this period is therefore better understood as implicit and pragmatic, emerging through practice rather than explicit doctrinal formulation.

The Tinubu Administration: A More Explicit Strategic-Autonomy Orientation, 2023–2025

The Tinubu administration gave clearer expression to Nigeria's evolving strategic-autonomy orientation. Economic diplomacy, regional engagement and diversified partnerships continued, but foreign-policy discourse increasingly connected these practices to strategic autonomy and Nigeria's engagement with multiple centres of global power. Foreign Minister Yusuf Maitama Tuggar situated Nigeria's diplomacy within an evolving multipolar order and linked strategic autonomy with economic diplomacy, regional stability and multilateral engagement (Tuggar, 2025). The administration's Demography, Development, Diaspora and Democracy (4D) foreign-policy framework similarly sought to connect Nigeria's external relations more directly to domestic capabilities and development priorities (Enikanolaiye, 2025; Nwangwu, 2024).

Nigeria's admission as a BRICS partner country in January 2025 further illustrates this orientation. The move widened Nigeria's engagement with an important Global South platform while it maintained relationships with established Western, African and multilateral partners. Nigerian officials presented the decision as consistent with strategic autonomy rather than movement from one geopolitical bloc to another (Enikanolaiye, 2025; Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, 2025). Its significance therefore lies in expanding the institutional platforms through which Nigeria can pursue economic and diplomatic interests rather than replacing one alignment with another.

The tension between international engagement and domestic policy autonomy was also evident in the controversy surrounding Nigeria's signing of the Samoa Agreement in June 2024. The agreement, which provides a framework for cooperation between the European Union and members of the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States, generated domestic debate over claims concerning its human-rights provisions and their compatibility with Nigerian law. The Federal Government rejected claims that the agreement required Nigeria to recognise LGBTQ+ rights and stated that Nigeria's endorsement was accompanied by a declaration preserving the applicability of its domestic laws (Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation [FMINO], 2024). Beyond the immediate controversy, the episode illustrates the complexities of maintaining international development partnerships while responding to domestic legal, political and societal considerations.

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The administration's response to the July 2023 military coup in Niger provides a different test of policy discretion. Under Tinubu's chairmanship, ECOWAS demanded the restoration of constitutional order, imposed sanctions and indicated that measures could include the use of force (ECOWAS, 2023). The subsequent turn towards dialogue demonstrated that Nigeria's regional ambitions had to be balanced against domestic security pressures, economic considerations and regional political realities (Enikanolaiye, 2025; Obasi, 2023). The episode illustrates the distinction between diplomatic ambition and the capacity to sustain particular foreign-policy instruments.

Nigeria's multilateral behaviour also showed elements of issue-specific positioning. During the Russia–Ukraine conflict, Nigeria supported major United Nations General Assembly resolutions affirming Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity while abstaining on the April 2022 resolution suspending Russia from the UN Human Rights Council (Götz et al., 2023; United Nations General Assembly, 2022a, 2022b). This variation should not by itself be interpreted as evidence of complete strategic autonomy, but it indicates some scope for differentiating Nigeria's position according to the substance of particular issues.

The Tinubu period covers only the final part of the 2015–2025 study timeframe and therefore does not permit the same longitudinal assessment as the Buhari administration. Nevertheless, the 4D framework, BRICS engagement, the Samoa Agreement controversy, regional diplomacy and issue-specific multilateral positioning provide evidence of a more explicit articulation of strategic autonomy, although its longer-term implementation and outcomes remain emergent.

Continuity and Transformation

Across the decade, Nigeria's foreign policy displays substantial continuity alongside a change in diplomatic method. The preference for sovereign decision-making, African regional engagement, multilateralism and avoidance of exclusive attachment to a major-power bloc remained broadly intact (Albert-Makyur, 2020; Eshiet, 2018; Raji, 2015). Under Buhari, this orientation appeared primarily through pragmatic diversification; under Tinubu, it became more explicit through the language of strategic autonomy, the 4D framework and engagement with additional Global South platforms (Enikanolaiye, 2025; Tuggar, 2025).

The distinction should not be overstated. Tinubu's orientation builds upon rather than replaces the diversified relationships developed under Buhari. The broader shift is therefore better understood as a functional recalibration of Nigeria's non-aligned tradition: the longstanding preference for independent decision-making persists, while the means of pursuing it have moved from principally avoiding permanent bloc attachment towards cultivating multiple and sometimes competing relationships. The more difficult question is whether this widening of diplomatic options has increased Nigeria's substantive capacity for independent action.

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MANIFESTATIONS OF STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN NIGERIA'S FOREIGN POLICY, 2015–2025

The manifestations of Nigeria's strategic-autonomy orientation are evident not merely in the expansion of external relationships but in the extent to which those relationships have widened the country's room for policy choice. Three areas are particularly relevant: diplomatic and economic multi-engagement, South–South and BRICS engagement, and regional, multilateral and security diplomacy.

Diplomatic and Economic Multi-Engagement

Nigeria's simultaneous engagement with traditional Western partners and emerging powers has broadened its diplomatic and economic options. Cooperation with China has been particularly significant in infrastructure, transportation, telecommunications, energy, trade and development financing, while relationships with India, Brazil and other emerging actors have supplemented rather than displaced established partnerships (Adiele, 2025; Ezeani & Ngoka, 2022; Ezeanyika et al., 2024; Nwokolobia & Ikenga, 2023). The resulting pattern is therefore better understood as diversification than as a shift from one external bloc to another.

The economic significance of this diversification is more complex. Access to multiple markets, sources of investment, technology and development finance can widen Nigeria's bargaining options, but the distribution of trade relationships and the structure of exports continue to create vulnerabilities. As Table 1 shows, Nigeria maintained positive merchandise trade balances in the selected benchmark years, while its leading trading partners were distributed across established and emerging economies. At the same time, particular relationships remained concentrated: China featured prominently among Nigeria's import sources, while European and Asian markets remained important destinations for Nigerian exports. The evidence therefore demonstrates that a wider range of external relationships does not necessarily eliminate asymmetric economic dependence.

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Table 1: Selected Indicators of Nigeria's Merchandise Trade and Major Trading Partners, 2015–2025

Year	Imports (₦ million)	Exports (FOB) (₦ million)	Trade balance (₦ million)	Total trade (₦ million)	Leading export destinations (Q4)	Leading import origins (Q4)
2015	6,697,965.90	9,593,042.00	2,895,076.00	16,291,007.90	India; Spain; Netherlands; France; Brazil	China; United States; Belgium; India; Netherlands
2019	16,959,875.06	19,192,234.12	2,232,359.05	36,152,109.18	India; Spain; France; Netherlands; South Africa	India; China; United States; Netherlands; Belgium
2023[a]	30,863,065.54	35,962,392.44	5,099,326.91	66,825,457.98	Netherlands; India; Spain; Canada; France	Singapore; China; Belgium; India; United States
2024	60,590,548.84	77,442,098.95	16,851,550.11	138,032,647.80	Netherlands; France; Spain; India; Indonesia	China; India; Belgium; United States; France
2025[b]	67,346,929.17	85,126,202.84	17,779,273.67	152,473,132.02	Netherlands; India; Spain; France; Canada	China; United States; Netherlands; India; Brazil

Note. *Annual merchandise-trade values are expressed in ₦ million. Data were compiled from National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) foreign trade reports for the selected benchmark years (NBS, 2016, 2020, 2024, 2025a, 2025b, 2026). Trading partners represent the leading partners reported for the fourth quarter of each benchmark year and should not be interpreted as full-year rankings. The benchmark years represent the beginning of the study period, an intermediate pre-COVID observation and the later years of the period.* [a]*The 2023 annual values are revised NBS figures.* [b]*The January–September 2025 series was revised by NBS in preparing the Q4 2025 annual data.*

The trade pattern reinforces the distinction between diplomatic diversification and substantive economic autonomy. Although Nigeria's external trade expanded considerably over the period, its export structure remained heavily dependent on crude oil. Crude oil accounted for 71.39% of annual exports in 2024, declining to 55.72% in 2025, while non-oil exports represented 14.51% of total exports in 2025 (NBS, 2025b, 2026). The decline in crude oil's share is notable, but the continuing concentration of exports limits the extent to which wider diplomatic relationships can translate into economic resilience.

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AfCFTA provides a potential means of complementing external diversification through deeper regional production, value chains and intra-African trade (African Union, n.d.). Its contribution to strategic autonomy, however, depends on Nigeria's productive capacity and ability to take advantage of the larger continental market. Diplomatic and economic multi-engagement has therefore widened Nigeria's external options, but the capacity to convert those options into durable bargaining leverage remains conditioned by the structure and competitiveness of the domestic economy.

South–South Cooperation and BRICS Engagement

South–South cooperation has widened Nigeria's external options through relations with China, India, Brazil and other emerging economies, providing additional opportunities for trade, investment and diplomatic cooperation without displacing established partnerships (Adiele, 2025; Onyetube, 2025). Nigeria's admission as a BRICS partner country in 2025 further expanded the institutional platforms available for engagement with emerging Global South actors (Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, 2025; Onyetube, 2025).

The significance of this engagement, however, should not be equated automatically with greater autonomy. BRICS participation may expand opportunities in trade, investment, infrastructure, technology, energy security and climate cooperation, but the relevant test is whether Nigeria can translate these opportunities into tangible economic and technological gains while preserving discretion across its other external relationships. South–South engagement therefore expands Nigeria's diplomatic options; its contribution to strategic autonomy ultimately depends on the bargaining and domestic capabilities with which those options are exercised.

Regional, Multilateral and Security Diplomacy

Nigeria's continued engagement through ECOWAS, the African Union and the United Nations provides an institutional dimension to its strategic-autonomy orientation. These platforms enable Nigeria to pursue regional security, economic and diplomatic objectives through collective mechanisms rather than bilateral relationships alone, while preserving multiple channels for international engagement (Eshiet, 2018; Okeke, 2022).

Security cooperation similarly demonstrates that strategic autonomy does not require disengagement from external partners. Nigeria has relied on regional and international cooperation in counterterrorism and related security operations, including collaboration with neighbouring states through the Multinational Joint Task Force (Chilaka & Akpan, 2024). Such arrangements can strengthen operational capacity, but dependence on external equipment, technology, intelligence and training may also create vulnerabilities. The relevant issue is therefore not whether Nigeria cooperates externally, but whether it possesses sufficient domestic capacity to influence the terms of cooperation and retain meaningful policy discretion.

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Taken together, diplomatic, economic, South–South, regional and security engagement has widened Nigeria's range of external options. The evidence nevertheless distinguishes expanded choice from substantive autonomy: diversification increases the relationships and institutional platforms available to Nigeria, but their strategic value ultimately depends on the domestic capabilities with which the country engages them.

CONSTRAINTS AND CONTRADICTIONS OF NIGERIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Nigeria's movement towards strategic autonomy between 2015 and 2025 remained constrained by the domestic capabilities available to sustain it. Diversified partnerships widened the country's diplomatic options, but the capacity to use those options depends on economic resilience, security capability and effective institutions. Nigeria's experience therefore reveals a gap between diplomatic flexibility and substantive autonomy.

Economic Dependence and Limited Productive Capacity

Nigeria's pursuit of strategic autonomy remains constrained by structural economic vulnerabilities. Despite the diversification of external partnerships, the economy continues to depend substantially on commodity exports, imported manufactured and technological goods, and external financing (IMF, 2017)**.** This limits the extent to which wider diplomatic options can be converted into substantive policy autonomy. As the preceding trade evidence demonstrates, diversification of partners has occurred alongside continuing concentration in the structure of Nigeria's exports and imports.

External financing presents a similar pattern. Nigeria has diversified its borrowing across multilateral, bilateral and commercial sources, but its external debt stock increased considerably over the study period. As shown in Table 2, external debt rose from US$10.72 billion in 2015 to US$27.68 billion in 2019, US$42.50 billion in 2023 and US$51.86 billion in 2025. Multilateral institutions remained the largest creditor category in most benchmark years, while commercial borrowing also became substantial. Bilateral debt constituted a smaller share of total external debt, notwithstanding the prominence of Chinese lending within that category. The pattern therefore indicates diversified sources of external finance rather than dependence on a single creditor.

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Table 2: Composition of Nigeria's External Debt, Selected Benchmark Years, 2015–2025

Year	Multilateral (US$ million)	Bilateral (US$ million)	Commercial (US$ million)	Other (US$ million)	Total external debt (US$ million)
2015	7,560.43	1,658.00	1,500.00	0.00	**10,718.43**
2019	12,660.38	3,847.41	11,168.35	0.00	**27,676.14**
2023	21,149.37	5,957.44	15,118.35	270.00	**42,495.16**
2024	22,316.77	6,090.46	17,318.35	54.87	**45,780.45**
2025[a]	23,851.16	6,724.80	18,547.47	2,732.60	**51,856.03**

Note. *Figures represent external debt outstanding at 31 December of each benchmark year and are expressed in US$ million. Data were compiled from Debt Management Office (DMO) external debt stock reports for the selected benchmark years (DMO, 2015, 2020, 2024, 2025, 2026). "Commercial" follows DMO classifications as closely as possible across the period. In 2019, commercial debt comprised Eurobonds and the Diaspora Bond; in later reports, other syndicated/project and bank facilities reported separately by the DMO are presented as "Other."* [a]*The 2025 figures are provisional, as designated by the DMO.*

The composition of bilateral debt further illustrates why external dependence should not be reduced to any single partnership. China became Nigeria's most prominent bilateral creditor during the period, particularly through infrastructure-related financing, but bilateral borrowing itself represented only 13.30% of total external debt in 2024 and 12.97% in 2025 (DMO, 2025, 2026). This distinction is important because the scale of Nigeria–China economic engagement can obscure the wider structure of Nigeria's external obligations, which includes substantial multilateral and commercial exposure.

The evidence therefore reinforces the paper's concept of diversified dependence. Nigeria's access to multiple markets, creditors and development partners provides alternatives and can reduce exposure to any single external actor. Yet the persistence of limited productive and technological capacity, commodity dependence and growing external financial obligations constrains the bargaining leverage generated by such diversification (African Development Bank, 2024; IMF, 2025; Okeke et al., 2022; World Bank, 2024). Strategic autonomy consequently depends not only on maintaining alternative partnerships but also on strengthening the domestic economic capacity required to engage those partners without creating new forms of vulnerability.

Domestic Insecurity and Regional Leadership

Persistent domestic insecurity has constrained Nigeria's capacity to translate regional influence into strategic autonomy. Between 2015 and 2025, terrorism and insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, maritime insecurity and related challenges placed considerable demands on the state and increased the importance of regional and external security cooperation. Counterterrorism under Buhari, for example, required sustained cooperation with neighbouring countries through the Multinational

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Joint Task Force and engagement with partners outside the region (Chilaka & Akpan, 2024). Such cooperation is not inherently inconsistent with strategic autonomy; vulnerability arises where domestic limitations narrow available choices or increase reliance on external intelligence, equipment, training and diplomatic support.

The 2023 Niger crisis demonstrates this constraint more directly. Nigeria initially supported the ECOWAS demand for restoration of constitutional order and measures that could include the use of force (ECOWAS, 2023). However, possible military intervention had to be weighed against Nigeria's existing security commitments, fiscal pressures and socioeconomic ties across the Nigeria–Niger border. Independent analysis highlighted the risks of escalation, while a later assessment acknowledged that intervention could have overstretched Nigeria's armed forces and increased pressure on defence expenditure (Enikanolaiye, 2025; Obasi, 2023). The subsequent turn towards dialogue illustrates how domestic capability can delimit external policy preferences even where regional leadership creates expectations for decisive action.

Institutional Capacity and Policy Coordination

Institutional capacity presents another constraint. Strategic autonomy requires institutions capable of formulating long-term objectives, coordinating policy across sectors and maintaining continuity in implementation. Nigeria's foreign policy system has faced bureaucratic fragmentation, inadequate coordination, resource limitations and inconsistencies between policy formulation and implementation (Akinboye, 2013; Raji, 2015). These challenges become more consequential as contemporary diplomacy increasingly cuts across trade, investment, migration, technology, climate change and security.

The tension between independent policy choice and regional obligations is also evident in Nigeria's 2019 land-border closure. Justified largely by concerns over smuggling, insecurity and domestic economic interests, the closure generated tensions with neighbouring states and raised questions about Nigeria's regional integration commitments (Omotuyi, 2022). The episode demonstrates that policy discretion cannot simply be equated with unilateral freedom of action. For a country seeking both regional leadership and deeper African economic integration, national policy choices must coexist with credible multilateral commitments.

The same consideration applies to the 4D framework and the language of strategic autonomy under Tinubu. Their significance ultimately depends on coordination among foreign affairs, trade, investment, security and other domestic institutions. Doctrinal clarity without implementation capacity cannot by itself produce substantive autonomy.

The Autonomy–Interdependence Paradox

A deeper contradiction lies in interdependence itself. Nigeria seeks greater freedom of external action while participating in international markets, foreign investment, development financing, technological cooperation, security partnerships and multilateral institutions. Complex

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Interdependence explains why these relationships cannot simply be avoided and why they may simultaneously generate unequal vulnerability (Keohane & Nye, 2012). Strategic autonomy is therefore better understood not as freedom from interdependence but as the capacity to manage it without allowing asymmetric relationships to unduly restrict national policy choice (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2026).

Strange's (1996) conception of structural power further directs attention to the structures of production, finance, security and knowledge within which states exercise choice. Nigeria may acquire additional partners without fundamentally altering its position within structures governing access to finance, technology, productive capability and security resources. The number of available partners is consequently an inadequate measure of autonomy where the conditions shaping bargaining capacity remain substantially unchanged.

Nigeria therefore made clearer progress between 2015 and 2025 in diversifying its external relationships than in strengthening the domestic foundations required to convert diversification into substantive autonomy. The evidence points to increased diplomatic choice alongside continuing economic, security and institutional vulnerability. In this sense, Nigeria's experience approximates the condition identified in this paper as diversified dependence: external options have multiplied, but the structural constraints on exercising those options have not diminished at the same pace.

Conclusion

This paper examined Nigeria's movement from non-alignment towards strategic autonomy between 2015 and 2025 within an increasingly multipolar and interdependent international system. The evidence shows substantial continuity in Nigeria's preference for independent decision-making, African regional engagement and multilateralism, alongside changes in the means through which policy flexibility is pursued. Under Buhari, this was reflected largely in pragmatic diversification across traditional and emerging partners; under Tinubu, it became more explicitly articulated through strategic autonomy, the Demography, Development, Diaspora and Democracy (4D) framework and wider engagement with Global South platforms.

The paper therefore argues that strategic autonomy represents neither an abandonment nor a simple rebranding of Nigeria's non-aligned tradition. Rather, it constitutes its functional recalibration to contemporary conditions. Whereas classical non-alignment emphasised avoiding permanent attachment to competing blocs, contemporary strategic autonomy increasingly involves maintaining multiple and issue-specific relationships while preserving discretion over foreign policy choices. Nigeria's engagement with traditional partners, emerging powers, African institutions and newer Global South arrangements reflects this widening diplomatic space (Adiele, 2025; Enikanolaiye, 2025; Tuggar, 2025).

However, the analysis demonstrates that diplomatic diversification has advanced more rapidly than the domestic capabilities required to sustain substantive autonomy. Economic vulnerability, a concentrated productive and export structure, persistent insecurity and institutional weaknesses

continue to constrain the extent to which expanded external options can be converted into durable policy independence (African Development Bank, 2024; Akinboye, 2013; IMF, 2025; World Bank, 2024). Nigeria's experience therefore illustrates an important distinction between possessing alternatives and possessing the capacity to use those alternatives at acceptable cost.

It is within this gap that the paper locates its concept of diversified dependence. Nigeria has widened its diplomatic and economic relationships, reducing the risks associated with excessive reliance on any single external actor, but diversification has not eliminated the structural vulnerabilities embedded within those relationships. Multipolarity has consequently expanded Nigeria's room for manoeuvre without automatically producing substantive autonomy. This finding is consistent with the logic of vulnerability interdependence: meaningful policy discretion depends not simply on the availability of alternative partners but also on the capacity to utilise those alternatives effectively (Keohane & Nye, 2012).

Nigeria's strategic autonomy between 2015 and 2025 is therefore best understood as an emerging and constrained orientation rather than an accomplished condition. Its consolidation will depend on whether diplomatic diversification is accompanied by stronger productive, technological, security and institutional capabilities. Strategic autonomy, in this sense, is not withdrawal from interdependence but the capacity to engage within it while retaining sufficient discretion to pursue national priorities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, Nigeria should strengthen the institutional and economic foundations needed to translate diplomatic diversification into substantive strategic autonomy. Specifically, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, working with relevant trade, investment and economic institutions, should strengthen specialised trade-negotiation capacity for evaluating major trade and investment agreements, coordinating negotiating positions and assessing their implications for domestic production and national development. Such agreements should incorporate measurable provisions for local content, technology transfer and productive capacity where applicable, enabling Nigeria to derive greater domestic value from engagement with both traditional and emerging partners.

Nigeria should also subject major external infrastructure-financing agreements to systematic technical and fiscal assessment before commitments are concluded, with particular attention to borrowing costs, repayment conditions, debt implications, local-content requirements and technology transfer. Stronger coordination among foreign affairs, finance, trade and investment institutions would help ensure that competing sources of external finance expand Nigeria's policy options without creating new forms of vulnerability. This would allow diversification to contribute more effectively to economic resilience and the policy discretion required for strategic autonomy.

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