

# A Critical Analysis of President Muhammadu Buhari Administration's Foreign Policy

**Atah Pine**

Department of Political Science,  
Benue State University, Makurdi.

## **Abstract**

The conduct of foreign policy is a major concern for leaders of countries whether developing or developed. This crucial function of governance is required to help countries pursue and establish external relations with other countries in the international system where nations depend on each other to achieve their development agendas and actualize their national interest. Given this position, this paper undertakes a critical analysis of the issues that formed the basis for foreign policy engagements under the administration of President Muhammadu Buahri between 2015–2023. Issues such as re-direction of Nigeria's external relations from the traditional dominate Western partners to the Beijing model was vigorously pursued which birth a number of gains such as currency swap deal and facilitation of developmental projects like rail and road infrastructure; collaboration for security; citizens diplomacy through the many efforts of NiDCOM; pursuit of democracy and good governance in the continent of Africa; Power Projects and many other gains were recorded under the Administration. Qualitative method of data collection and analysis was adopted for the paper and subjected to re-analysis. The paper discovered that, though the administration pursued and address critical issues in its foreign policy engagement, however, these issues were just reactive which shows a level of disconnection between successive administrations engagement with the external environment. It recommends amongst other things, that succeeding government in Nigeria should have a clearly defined foreign policy aspiration that would be pursued within the realities of the nation's development aspirations.

**Keywords:** Citizens Diplomacy; External Relations Foreign Policy; National Interest; Development

## **Introduction**

The obvious fact that no country or nation can leave as island in contemporary international system drives leaders into establishing

different agreement with development partners, independent countries and multinational cooperation through the instrumentality of foreign policy. Folarin (2010) and Morgenthau (1989) appreciated the fact that nations of the world with Nigeria as an example in establishing relationship with other countries and in playing their parts in global politics defines the parameters of engagement through national interest which forms the basis for foreign policy and external relations. Countries across the world and Nigeria in particular whether under military regimes or democratic dispensation takes the business of external relations through establishment of foreign policy agreement as central to achieving their national and development interest.

The above position was aptly established by Morgenthau (1973) when he noted that, all nations of the world whether big or small draws its national and development interest on the conduct of the business of foreign policy in formulation and implementation such that, what is to be done over a period of time is hinged on those things it has determined to achieve from home. Also, Abia (2003) was of the opinion that, the content of foreign policy aspirations pursued by any country is often drawn or in some other cases built on its clearly defined and articulated national and development interest which often is basis for establishing external engagements with countries in the international system.

The complex task of governing a diverse country in contemporary international system has placed on leaders and their appointed agents the huge responsibility of addressing varying degree of national needs and aspirations which are geared towards meeting their existential needs, developmental needs and most importantly, the need to connect with other countries through the instrumentality of foreign policy. Foreign policy amongst other things has been described as the window through which nations engage the external environment. It is seen as the basis for engagement and interaction between forces originating outside the country's borders and those working within them (cited in

Oviasogie and Shodipo, 2013). Put differently, foreign policy is interplay between the inside and the outside of a state. In line with the above definition is that of Akinboye (1999), who defines foreign policy as a dynamic process involving interaction between the domestic and the external environments.

Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, successive governments both military and democratic have addressed the core subject of foreign policy with the primary aim of putting Nigeria in the global map and also attracting development and collaborative partners either from other sovereign states or by joining multilateral either at the global, regional or sub-regional levels such as United Nations, African Union or Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and in some cases been members of specialized bodies with specific objectives which would help address the developmental challenges of members states like Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) etc.

It is important to note that, the objectives of Nigeria's foreign policy are enshrined in chapter 2, section 19 of the 1999 constitution as amended of the federal republic of Nigeria under the rubric of Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy which are stated thus: "promotion and protection of the national interest; promotion of Africa integration and support for African unity; promotion of international co-operation for the consolidation of universal peace and mutual respect among all nations and elimination of discrimination in all its manifestations; respect for international law and treaty obligations as well as the seeking of settlement of international disputes by negotiation, medication, conciliation, arbitration and adjudication; and promotion of a just world economic order".

These countries and organizations play significant role in the formulation and implementation of foreign policies especially the posture and content of foreign policy articulation which formed the basis upon which interaction, engagement and cooperation are pursued and conducted between countries in the international

system. Specifically, the Buhari's administration which commenced officially on May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015 saw the imperatives of establishing collaborative engagement that will further cement Nigeria's place and status in the international system and organization when it noted in its inaugural speech thus "... the messages I received from East and West, from powerful and small countries are indicative of international expectations of us. At home the newly elected government is basking in a reservoir of goodwill and high expectations. Nigeria therefore has a window of opportunity to fulfill our long standing potential of pulling ourselves together and realizing our mission as a great nation".

The statement above has clearly indicated the position of the president on the posture and need to leverage on the goodwill accorded his government upon emerging victorious from the poll in 2015 in charting a well defined external relationship with countries both big and small who believed in its integrity capital and the actualization of the giant status of the Nigerian state within the continent of Africa and beyond.

Consequently, the fundamental issues in this study is to undertake a critical analysis of President Buhari's foreign policy undertakings within the eight years period (2015-2023), when he held sway as the leader of the most populated country in the continent of Africa and the purported giant of Africa whose actions to a large extent has been adjudged. Importantly, the objects that formed the content upon which foreign policy businesses are conducted under the administration would be subjected to critical analysis with the ultimate goal of establishing the yardstick for measuring the various outcomes of the actions undertaken by the major institutions saddled with the task of interfacing with other countries in terms foreign policy on behalf of Nigeria within the period under review.

## **The Problematique**

The primary responsibility of government in the world over is centered on meeting the various needs of the citizens who are the most important subject of leadership responsibilities. To ensure that the citizens are adequately catered for through quality governance, leaders undertaken different actions and policies including clearly defining national interest upon which external relations and foreign policies are formulated and implemented.

Since Nigeria's return to constitutional democracy in 1999, different issues have dominated the country's foreign policy landscape such as economic diplomacy, citizenship diplomacy and many other reactive policies which are often in reaction to global, continental or sub-regional events or events against Nigerians or against its interest. This issue have significantly altered the post-independent robust foreign policy underpinnings for which the Nigerian state was known for, where various regimes have clearly define policy thrust upon which the country's external relations and engagement was conducted.

Given the forgoing position, the problematic therefore is based on the raging question across foreign policy circles where fundamental issues of the foreign policy direction of the Buhari's administration was subjected to interrogation such that, the philosophical underpinnings or the nomenclature of the country's foreign policy becomes an almost difficult or near impossible task. Therefore, questions such as, what is the major point of foreign policy under the Buhari's administration; is foreign policy under the administration pragmatic or reactive to global events; is there a clearly defined direction for foreign policy undertakings under the past administration? These and many other questions dominated public discussion with regard to the conduct of foreign policy under the administration of Buhari.

## Literature and Methodology

The study is based on the qualitative method of data collection which is subjected to re-analysis. This methods allows for collection of literature and data from existing studies on the subject from internet sources, journals, government papers and officials releases that addressed the very important subject of Nigeria foreign policy between 2015-2023.

Studies on external relations and engagements between countries of the world has extensively addressed the imperatives of national interest and foreign policy when defining the issues and content of cooperation between two or more countries of between countries through the formation and regulation of international organizations in contemporary international system. The importance of foreign policy in defining the objects and focus of a country cannot be overemphasized.

Corin (2015) and Wirajuda (2014) separately noted the importance of foreign policy thus, foreign policy is an activity that involves measures, methods, goals, strategies, guidelines, directives, understandings, program, and agreements by which national governments conduct international relations with each other, with international organizations, and with non-governmental organizations. Therefore, the description and the eventual pursuit of purposeful external engagement between countries particularly developing country like Nigeria becomes a major subject of importance to government and its appointed agents.

In the case of Nigeria's foreign policy, the role of individuals has been extensively examined in the analysis of what drives the formulations and implementation of Nigeria's foreign policy and conducting the business of external relations. For example, Abubarkar (2004: p.13) foreign policy is: The action of leaders and statement towards other states within the international environment which are constrained by the perceived circumstances of the state on behalf of which decision maker's culture, value

system, political structures, military capabilities, public opinion and interest groups. These constitute the domestic terrain that impinges on realization of nation's foreign policy.

Holsti (1967: P.107-108) conceived it as "actions or ideas designed by policy makers to solve a problem or promote some changes in the international environment". The inference from this is that foreign policy involves the process of interaction between and among states with a view to attaining a goal which is largely dependent on the position of the elites that constitute the foreign policy making body in every society in the world.

According to Uhomoibhi (2011: P.2): "in general, a nation's foreign policy not only draws its legitimacy from its domestic priorities but its policy orientation and integrity as shaped by the history, culture and social values of its people. For the country's foreign policy to remain effective it must remain in tune with the aspirations of the country as a whole. The foreign policy that is delinked from the domestic priorities of the nation is like a broken winged bird incapable of flying, such a bird can easily fall prey to predators. As it is for the bird so it is for the nation-state".

### **Nigeria's Foreign Policy under President Buhari's Administration (2015-2023)**

Leaders across the world have amongst many constitutional responsibilities the task of placing their country amongst comity of nations through the functions of formulating and implementing foreign policy and establishing external relations. This function and expectation formed the basis upon which every successive government explore the international window in forging alliance on behalf of their country in order to fulfill and achieve developmental outcomes. The need to establish external relations and extending a county's interest through foreign policy was noted by Akumah, Nnaji & Elom (2021) that foreign policy allows nations of the world to extend the various national interest which they seek

to pursue in relations with other countries in the international system.

After the inauguration of President Buhari in 2015, the first major step he took at international engagement was to travel to countries of the world in response to the recognition and goodwill accorded his emergence. The primary objective of these engagements is to amongst other things showcase to the world the need and desire of his administration to recover Nigeria's looted funds, fight the ravaging Boko Haram terrorist and drive the much needed economic development and transformation of the country. In this engagement, major powers of the world with security capabilities such as the USA, China and Russia took the center stage.

Comparing President Obasanjo and Buhari's shuttle diplomacy, Ighoshemu (2021) stated that, the Buhari's administration commenced its foreign policy engagement on the security front with a visit to USA and other world powers in order to get support such as manpower training and intelligence for the country in its fight against Boko Haram insurgents. Within this period he also travelled to neighbouring countries like Niger Republic, Benin Republic and Cameroon which led to the country joining the multinational Joint tasks force to tackle the Boko Haram terrorist, and the relocation of the Multinational Joint Task Force headquarters from Nigeria to N'Djamena in Chad and appointing a Nigerian as the Commander of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF).

Within the shuttle diplomacy component of President Buhari's external relations, he engaged holistically the People's Republic of China (PRC). This engagement led to improvement in Nigeria-China relations which birth the currency swap deal, a good number of infrastructure deals and also agreement on security particularly training of Nigeria military on counter-insurgency operations and supply of military hardware for the protection of Nigeria seaways.



Importantly, President Buhari's external engagement focused on enhancing USA-Nigeria relations where looted funds were hidden by corrupt officials of government. Under these efforts, various discoveries of stolen funds were made and repatriation agreement signed and executed. For example, it was recorded that, the US Justice Department helped Nigeria recover about 144 million dollars, proceeds of corruption seized from former minister of Petroleum Diezani Alison-Maduke and many other forfeitures such as the Abacha Loots.

Commenting on the actions of the President with regards to facilitating development partners to the country through international collaboration, Bello, Dutse & Othman (2017) noted that, the President's visit to China led to engagement with various organizations such as the Reform Commission of China, Technology and Scientific cooperation between both countries were entered into. In the visit, a number of loans were granted especially to finance the deficit of 2016 budget, infrastructure loan for trains, among others (Bello, Dutse and Othman 2017). The railway and other infrastructural projects by the Buhari administration negotiated with the Chinese government was aimed at solving the infrastructural deficit in the country, also provides needed jobs for the populace and to stimulate the economy. The trade relations between Nigeria and China in just first half of 2016 has stood at \$6.4 billion (Bello, Dutse and Othman 2017)

Diversion from USA and Western focused relations and encouraging and Strengthening Nigeria relations with other countries such as China (Infrastructure, security, currency swap, manpower training, economic development, trade and investment drive) and Russia (security, power sector development and manpower training). Under the President Buahri's administration, the frontiers of Nigeria's foreign policy engagements were expanded to cover new areas where previous government has paid little or no attention. For example, major developmental projects covering road construction and railway infrastructure

development were signed between Nigeria and China, while agreement regarding the development of the country's power sector was directed towards Germany and Russia

Conflict resolution and strengthening of democratic institutions within the continent of Africa. Under the President Buhari's administration the focus of foreign policy actions strategically pursued and ensured that the continent is peacefully and the institutions of democracy are upheld and in cases where there are incidence of military coups attempts like Gambia, Burkina Faso and Mali. Specifically, President Buhari in fulfillment of his foreign policy agenda of ensuring the sustenance of democratic practice in Africa functioned as the Chief Mediator for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in the Gambian political crisis between Yahaya Jammah and Adama Barrow.

Commenting on President Buhari's role in the Gambian political crisis, Anayo & Mzondu (2018) noted that, his action in ensuring democratic institutions and practices are upheld in Gambia was in furtherance of Nigeria's afrocentric foreign policy objective which was primarily amongst other things to ensure that Africa remains the centerpiece of Nigeria's foreign policy. In the same vein, Hartmann cited in Anayo & Mzondu (2018), with the pursuit of its altruistic foreign policy principles and the focus on peace in Africa, Nigeria championed leadership responsibility through mediation and participation in the military intervention in the Gambia without any noticeable material interest.

Furthermore, the pursuit of peace and upholding democratic practices across the continent of Africa led President Buhari during a one day working visit to Guinea Bissau, where he reaffirmed the commitment of his administration to sustaining, uphold and strengthening democratic practices, institution and good governance in the sub-region and across the African continent. There he also reiterated the Nigeria government's commitment to

supporting the administration of President Umaro Sissoco Embaló against threats from the opposing undemocratic forces.

Protection of right of Nigerians through the establishment of Nigeria Diaspora Commission under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The administration of President Buhari gave priority to the protection of Nigerian citizens abroad. In the center of this foreign policy thrust which was though reactive in nature were the various actions coordinated by the nation's Diaspora Commission where Nigerians who were victims of any form of maltreatment were offered prompt assistance.

Through a foreign policy action tagged citizenship diplomacy under previous administration, the government of President Buhari paid concerted attention to the protection of citizen's right across countries of the world. The introduction of the word into Nigeria's foreign policy engagement started under the ministership of Ojo Madueke. Noting the novelty of this subject in Nigeria's foreign policy lexicon, Ogunsanwo (2009) notes that the concept of citizen diplomacy was a novel foreign policy idea embarked upon under the Chief Ojo Maduekwe as foreign affairs minister, which places much emphasis on the citizens of Nigeria in diaspora and how they are treated. He was of the view that, this citizen-focused policy undertaking could mean that the Nigerians are the primary focus of the country's national interest and therefore the whole diplomatic machinery should be directed towards ensuring their interest is protected whatever form they are found (Ogunsanwo, 2009:22).

This foreign policy thrust also resurfaced under the administration of President Yar'Adua, which emphasis that the country's foreign policy engagement amongst other critical areas of interest would be centered on the interest of the citizens at home and in the diaspora. Maduekwe reechoing this view according to (Ojabor, 2007 in Agbu, 2009:53-54). This new foreign policy thrust implies diplomacy of consequences. He stated that, Citizen diplomacy will be diplomacy of consequences such that if you

are nice to us or my citizens, we will be nice to you, if you are hostile to us and my citizens, we will be hostile to you”.

## **Foreign Policy Outcome under President Buhari's Administration**

Every foreign policy engagement or in the broadest sense, external relations between countries in the international system is expected to yield some positive results or outcomes which are often used to measure the success or other of those endeavours. In the case of President Buhari's foreign policy engagements, the following are some identified outcomes:

**Reparation of funds:** through concerted foreign policy engagements especially those undertaken immediately after the inauguration of the administration in 2015 to the USA and other countries, looted funds were recovered such as \$622 million dollars from late Sani Abacha and \$153 Million dollars from Diezani Alison-Madueke.

**Resolving Political Impasse:** through the concerted efforts of the Nigerian government under President Buhari, the political situations in troubled countries in Africa were strategically resolved and democracy restored. For example, the president led ECOWAS mediation team to the Gambia to resolve the political situation between Yahaya Jammah and Adama Barrow. He also led other five African leaders to Togo where decisions were reached towards resolving the country's political crisis by the parties without any 'precondition'.

**Reenacting Nigeria's Citizens Diplomacy through NiDCOM:** President Buhari's administration foreign policy drive prioritized the protection of Nigerians in diaspora through the establishment of NiDCOM. The organization championed the protection and defense of Nigerians who were victim of human right abuse and ill-treatment across the world. For example, the commission took special interest in Zainab Aliyu and Ibrahim Ibrahim's cases in Saudi Arabia and others: The Commission was at the forefront for

the release of Zainab Aliyu on death row by the Saudi Arabian government for alleged drug related offences as well as Ibrahim Ibrahim. The Commission intervened positively in rescuing other Nigerians in such dilemma in Malaysia, Oman, U.A.E., China, Brazil, Morocco, Singapore, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Qatar and Ethiopia (Abdur-Rahman, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

The paper addressed the core issues that formed the bases for Nigeria's external relations through the important subject of foreign policy under the President Buhari's administration between 2015-2023. Fundamentally, issues such as expansion of Nigeria's relationship with major powers of the world i.e. from the traditional partners under the Washington Consensus to improved interaction with China under the Beijing Model, Russia and many others. This move was amongst other things meant to aggressively pursue a foreign policy aspiration based on the respective strength and capabilities of countries in the international system. The role of institutions in foreign policy engagement became very pronounced. Specifically, the Nigerian Diaspora Commission became the go-between in Nigeria's relations with other countries especially as it concerns the protection of Nigerians in Diaspora. Another important subject of foreign policy under the administration was the unity of the continent of Africa and practice of democracy and good governance, this action the President pursued in Gambia, Guinea Bissau and many other democratically challenged countries in the international system.

Consequent upon the forgoing position, the following recommendations were raised: Succeeding government in Nigeria should have a clearly defined foreign policy aspiration that would be pursued within the realities of the nation's development aspirations. These objectives must be those that would address the country's obvious domestic challenges and the levels of actualization must be measurable over a given period.

Furthermore, the institutions saddled with the responsibilities of foreign policy making and implementation must be alive to task and develop foreign policy frameworks that respond to global realities and those policies must be those that would be of benefit to the country in both the long and short terms.

Importantly, the formulation of foreign policy in Nigeria should strategically expand its frontiers beyond focusing of Afrocentrism which has not significantly benefitted the country. It should be understood that Nigeria's foreign policy has since independence focused on and address different challenges confronting countries in Africa without a clearly defined benefit to the Nigerian state.

Finally, foreign policy making by succeeding administration should not be reactive to global events but must consciously address the primary needs of the Nigerian state and its citizens. In this regard, clearly defined national interest that is critical to meeting the core and specific needs of the country should be pursued.

## References

- Abubakar, O. S. (2003), "Religion and Nigerian Foreign Policy; An Analysis of Nigerian Membership of Developing Eight Countries (D8)" in *Journal of Development and Society* Vol. 1.No.4, June 2003.
- Abdur-Rahman, B. (2021), *NiDCOM at One: So Far, So Good*; <https://nidcom.gov.ng/articles/nidcom-at-one-so-far-so-good/>
- Abia, V. (2003). *Contemporary Issues in International Relations*. Lagos: Concept Publications Limited.
- Agbu, O. (2009). "Nigerian Foreign Policy under President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua: Challenges and Prospects" in Eze, O. (ed.) *Citizen Diplomacy*, Nigeria Institute of Foreign Affairs, Victoria Island, Lagos, pp. 41-62.
- Ajayi, L.; Njoaguani, O.; Olorunyomi, B. & Folarin, S. F. (2015). *Nigeria's Foreign Policy and Codification of National Interest: A Prescriptive Analysis*, *Covenant University Journal of*

Politics and International Affairs (CUJPIA) Vol. 3 No.2 Dec. pp, 68-80

- Akinboye S.O. (1999). Nigeria's Foreign Policy. In R. Anifowose and F. Enemou (eds.) Elements of Politics. Lagos: Malthouse
- Akumah, B. I.; Nnaji, F. C & Elom, A. C. (2021). Nigeria's Foreign Policy under President Muhammedu Buhari's Administration: A Critical Analysis, African Journal of Politics and Administrative Studies Vol. 3; No.
- Anayo, U. A. & Benjamin, B. M. (2018), Nigeria and Afrocentrism: An Assessment of Nigeria's Role in the Gambian Election Crisis. International Journal of Innovative Development and Policy Studies 6(3):1-8, July-Sept.
- Bello, Dutse, A.I and Othman, M.F. (2017), Comparative analysis of Nigeria foreign policy under Muhammadu Buhari Administration. Asia Pacific Journal of Education, Arts and Social Sciences. Vol. 4, No.4, 43-52.
- Corin, V. (2015), From Peacemaking to Vigorous Self-Defence: US Foreign Policy and the Multinational Forces in Lebanon 1982-1984, PhD Dissertation London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Folarin, S.F. (2010), National Role Conceptions and Nigeria's Africa Policy. Doctoral Thesis, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria.
- Ighoshemu, B. O. (2021). Nigeria Foreign Policy Thrust: A Comparative Analysis of President <https://doi.org/10.4>, Journal of Public Administration, Finance and Law
- Morgenthau, H, (1989). Politics Among Nations the Struggle for Power and Peace. New York: Alfred Knopf.
- Ogunsanwo, A. (2009). "Citizen Diplomacy: Challenges for Nigeria's Foreign Policy" in O. Eze (ed.) Citizen Diplomacy, Lagos: NIIA, pp. 19-30
- Wirajiuda, M. (2014), The Impact of Decolonization on Indonesia Foreign Policy: Regional Cooperation, Promotion of Political Values and Conflict Management, PhD Dissertation London School of Economics and Political Science.