



Restoring Nigeria's Leadership for Regional Peace and Security

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What's new? Despite Nigeria's size and long-time role as one of Africa's most powerful states, its clout on the continent has diminished over the past fifteen years, as have its contributions to West African peace and security efforts.

Why does it matter? Nigeria's shrunken influence leaves a gap when it comes to leadership in conflict resolution, democracy promotion and support for faster economic development in West Africa and across the continent. Its smaller role has coincided with a period of democratic regression, conflict and insecurity in the region.

What should be done? While unlikely to return to its former diplomatic stature, Nigeria can do more for continental peace and security by reinvesting in its foreign policy institutions, continuing to help manage rifts in the Economic Community of West African States bloc and stepping up its participation in the African Union.

I. Overview

For decades, Nigeria was a diplomatic leader in Africa, but over the past fifteen years its influence has waned, along with Abuja's contributions to continental peace and security. Several factors have driven Nigeria's retreat. Domestic political flux, distracted leadership, and acute security and economic crises at home, as well as the rise of post-apartheid South Africa (along with other countries) as a continental heavyweight, have all played a role. It is difficult to know if stronger Nigerian diplomacy could have stemmed the surge of coups and conflict in West Africa, but Abuja's absence has clearly been felt. Assuming office in 2023, President Bola Tinubu declared that Nigeria was "back" as a force for regional and continental peace and security. But while this statement was welcome, Abuja is still struggling to find its footing. Although a full return to its earlier stature may not be on the cards, Nigeria could still be a key player if it strengthens its foreign policy machinery, throws its weight behind reforming the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and steps up its participation in the African Union (AU).

The first three decades after Nigeria's independence from Britain in 1960 saw the country emerge as a leader in Africa – and indeed the Black world. Nigeria's first prime minister, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, pledged that the country would be deeply involved in struggling for the complete decolonisation of Africa and particularly the termination of white minority rule in southern Africa. After Nigeria emerged from a

bloody civil war (1967-1970), successive leaders followed up on that commitment. In particular, the administrations of Generals Murtala Mohammed and Olusegun Obasanjo (1975-1979) strongly supported efforts to end colonial rule in Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, as well as apartheid in South Africa.

In the early 1990s, under General Ibrahim Babangida, Nigeria also demonstrated strong leadership in West Africa, heading up an unprecedented regional peacekeeping force, the ECOWAS Monitoring Group, which aimed to stop the deadly conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone. But as the military resisted local and external efforts to return the country to democratic rule, especially under General Sani Abacha (1993-1998), the country became internationally isolated. Abacha's sudden death in 1998 paved the way for a quick transition to democracy in 1999 and Nigeria's return to the world stage.

Following the return to democratic rule and Nigeria's rapprochement with estranged outside partners, the country's diplomacy regained its strong pan-Africanist focus. Throughout the administration of President Obasanjo (who returned to power from 1999 to 2007), Nigeria played an active role in prominent initiatives aimed at improving security, governance and development across Africa. Thereafter, however, the country's diplomatic star started to fade: Obasanjo's successors – Umaru Yar'Adua, Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari – saw the country's role recede in West Africa and throughout the continent.

Of course, it is possible to overstate the case. Nigeria has continued to contribute to efforts to avert crisis and deter instability in parts of West Africa. Notably, it sustained its support for the ECOWAS Military Stabilization Mission in The Gambia deployed in 2017 and the ECOWAS Stabilization Support Mission in Guinea Bissau dispatched in 2022. In January, following negotiations between ECOWAS and the Sierra Leonian government, the Nigerian government brought that country's former president, Ernest Bai Koroma, who had been charged with treason, to Abuja to prevent civil disorder in Sierra Leone.

Moreover, the present Nigerian government appears conscious of the country's geopolitical slippage and eager to reverse the trend. In May 2023, President Tinubu pledged that Nigeria would reassume the mantle of leadership in West Africa and refocus on Africa as the "centrepiece" of its foreign policy. Yet on his watch as ECOWAS chairperson, the regional bloc miscalculated in its strong response to a coup in Niger, prompting the three military-ruled Sahelian states – Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso – to break away from the bloc forming a new trilateral grouping and further diminishing Nigeria's influence in its immediate vicinity. Abuja remains preoccupied with domestic challenges, including an economy in deep distress and security threats in several areas, which are limiting its capacity to conduct its external relations more vigorously. At the same time, smaller states in West Africa are more likely to assert their sovereignty and reject intervention by their bigger neighbour.

For these and other reasons, Nigeria may not be able to reassume its old role as West Africa's de facto police officer and a pan-African standard bearer. Yet it is in both Nigeria's interest and the region's for Abuja to seek a greater role in resolving the many peace and security challenges that West Africa is facing. In moving down this road, it should continue its outreach to the breakaway ECOWAS members and, if its reconciliation efforts eventually fail, work with other West African countries to reformulate relations with the new bloc. It should also bolster its AU presence to

help revitalise that body. Finally, it should reinvest in Nigeria's own foreign policy institutions to handle the new, forbidding challenges the country and the surrounding region confronts.

II. The Golden Years of Nigeria's Diplomacy

Home to more than 230 million people, Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and has one of its largest economies.¹ Sometimes referred to as the “giant of Africa”, it has a long history of diplomatic leadership on the continent.² After winning independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria's leaders argued that its destiny was inextricably intertwined with that of the Black people in Africa and beyond.³ Nigeria was crucial to forming the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 and played a key role in transmuting it into the AU in 2002. In 1964, it helped establish the African Development Bank, which today is Africa's largest development finance institution. Nigeria cemented its image as a regional powerhouse in the wake of a 1973 oil embargo by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, which caused a spike in demand for Nigerian oil. Flush with petrodollars, Nigeria was a driving force behind establishing ECOWAS in 1975. The bloc aimed to promote economic cooperation among member states and, in time, came to play a pivotal role in regional peace and security.

Throughout these years, Nigeria's political leaders saw the country as a custodian of pan-Africanist ideology and Black interests. Most notably, it provided diplomatic and material support to liberation movements in southern Africa fighting white minority rule, including through mandatory contributions from Nigerian civil servants' salaries to the Southern Africa Relief Fund, popularly known as the “Mandela tax”, enabling the country to project moral authority across the continent.⁴ It also created a platform for offering human, financial and material assistance to African countries, as well as Caribbean and Pacific states with majority-Black populations, by sending thousands of professionals through its Technical Aid Corps Scheme.⁵

In addition, Nigeria regularly leveraged its economic and military weight to play a leading role in spurring security cooperation and democratic development on the

¹ Nigeria's economy ranked as Africa's largest in 2022, but it is set to slip to fourth place in 2024, behind South Africa, Egypt and Algeria, according to International Monetary Fund forecasts. “Nigeria's economy, once Africa's biggest, slips to fourth place”, Bloomberg, 18 April 2024.

² Nigeria is called “the giant of Africa” for several reasons: its demographic weight as the most populous country in Africa (and the Black world), its economic potential as one of the continent's most resource-endowed countries, the leadership role it played in ending colonial rule in Africa and apartheid in South Africa, as well as its benevolent aid to other African countries in need.

³ Crisis Group interview, Dele Kogbe, research fellow, International Centre for Policing and Security, University of South Wales, UK, 29 June 2024.

⁴ Mawuna Remarque Koutonin, “Nigeria's role in ending apartheid in South Africa”, *Msingi Afrika Magazine*, 1 February 2022.

⁵ The Technical Aid Corps Scheme, established in 1987, is a voluntary service program, through which the Nigerian government sends highly skilled Nigerians to assist needy African, Caribbean and Pacific countries for a two-year period. Under this scheme, about 9,000 Nigerian volunteers have served in over 30 countries from the late 1980s on. See “Directorate of Technical Aid Corps Scheme”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abuja, Nigeria.

continent. In West Africa, Nigeria led or participated in various military interventions that ECOWAS staged to restore peace, particularly in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s. In July 2003, it played a key role in reinstating Sao Tome and Principe's President Fradique de Menezes, who had been ousted briefly by a military coup. In January 2017, even as its influence had begun to wane, it contributed troops and provided naval and air assets to the ECOWAS force that saw off Gambia's then president, Yahya Jammeh, who had refused to cede power after an election defeat.⁶

Nigeria has also been an important player in multilateral organisations at the local, regional and global levels. It has been a member of the AU Peace and Security Council since its creation in 2004 and occupied one of the three Africa seats in the UN Security Council five times between 1966 and 2015.⁷ A member of the Commonwealth since independence in 1960, Nigeria has been an active participant in many of the organisation's important initiatives, with a particular focus on efforts to combat racism.⁸ It has also been one of the largest suppliers of peacekeepers to the UN and the AU, contributing to 41 such operations from 1960 to 2023.⁹

Although Nigeria has had times when it championed democratic and constitutional norms, it has not always been a paragon of those norms itself. For much of the period between 1966 and 1999, the country was ruled by the military. It suffered one of Africa's most bloody civil wars from 1967 to 1970. The reign of General Sani Abacha, an iron-fisted authoritarian, was particularly notorious, and saw the country become something of an international pariah.¹⁰ Global outrage was particularly pronounced when the general ordered ethnic Ogoni environmental rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others hanged in Port Harcourt on 10 November 1995, leading to Nigeria's suspension from the Commonwealth. Meanwhile, South Africa was emerging as a major actor on the continent. After white minority rule in the country ended with democratic elections in 1994, the globally revered Nelson Mandela became president, projecting his country as Africa's diplomatic and economic powerhouse.

Following the country's return to democratic rule, President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007) strove to mend external relations damaged by Abacha's dictatorship. Obasanjo was also a driving force behind initiatives such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development and the African Peer Review Mechanism, two key aspects of an

⁶ "Nigeria sends troops, jets to Senegal for Gambia force", AFP, 18 January 2017; "Troops, Nigerian warship head for Gambia to sack Jammeh", *The Punch*, 18 January 2017.

⁷ See the Nigeria page on the UN Security Council website.

⁸ A Nigerian diplomat, Emeka Anyaoku, was the organisation's secretary-general from 1990 to 2000.

⁹ "Nigeria has contributed to 41 peacekeeping operations worldwide, spent \$8bn to restore peace in Liberia, says defence chief Irabor", Arise News, 24 May 2023.

¹⁰ In November 1996, the 52-member (it now has 56) Commonwealth suspended Nigeria – an unprecedented action – in response to the execution of nine ethnic Ogoni environmental rights campaigners; it also threatened Nigeria's then-military government with expulsion if it failed to restore democracy to the country. Also protesting the executions, the European Union's fifteen member states recalled their envoys in Nigeria "for consultations". (South Africa, then under white minority rule, withdrew from the Commonwealth in 1961, protesting member states' pressure to revise its apartheid policies. It rejoined the organisation in 1994, following the end of apartheid and Nelson Mandela's election as president).

“African economic and political renaissance” envisioned by fellow pan-African leaders such as South Africa’s Thabo Mbeki.¹¹

After Obasanjo’s exit, Nigeria became less visible and less active on the regional and continental stage, although it did not withdraw altogether, as witnessed by the 2017 Gambia intervention. Additionally, it played a leading role in efforts to counter the jihadist threat in its own north east, particularly through the four-country Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) fighting militants around Lake Chad.¹²

III. The Causes and Effects of Decline

Nigeria remains important in African diplomacy, but its influence is not what it once was. Following the end of the Obasanjo administration in 2007, and particularly under the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari (who held office from 2015 to 2023), its engagement in shaping continental policies and leading major diplomatic and security initiatives diminished. The country’s loss of clout is primarily self-inflicted – a function of distracted leaders, a struggling economy and internal security challenges, low investment in foreign policy institutions and poorly managed staffing of missions abroad. These domestic deficits were accompanied by the rise of other strong actors, such as South Africa, Kenya, Egypt and Rwanda, which have indirectly challenged Nigeria’s role on the continent.¹³

A. Diminishing Stature

1. Shifting focus

Nigeria’s loss of stature relative to other continental actors started with its own foreign policy choices.

Following the end of colonial rule and apartheid, which had been among the foremost concerns of its diplomacy, the country began to search for another organising principle for how it would approach international relations. From the mid-1990s onward, Nigeria’s various military and civilian governments adopted diverse, sometimes ad hoc and poorly conceived strategies for promoting the country’s interests. Foreign policy tended to reflect the personalities and idiosyncrasies of successive

¹¹ The New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) is a socio-economic development program of the African Union, adopted by AU heads of state and governments in July 2001. It is a framework that coordinates the development of continent-wide projects, mobilising resources and engaging the outside world, regional economic communities and AU member states. Its main objectives are to reduce poverty across Africa, promote the continent’s sustainable development and foster its integration into the global economic system. The African Peer Review Mechanism was established in 2003 by the NEPAD Heads of State and Government Implementation Committee. It is an instrument for AU member states to voluntarily self-monitor their governance performance, in order to promote democracy, political stability, economic growth and sustainable development, while also accelerating sub-regional and continental economic integration.

¹² See Crisis Group Africa Report N°291, *What Role for the Multinational Joint Task Force in Fighting Boko Haram?*, 7 July 2020.

¹³ Crisis Group interview, Rwandan diplomat, Abuja, 8 July 2024.

military rulers and civilian presidents (or even their foreign ministers) rather than any nationally articulated priorities.¹⁴

As noted, Obasanjo tried to bring back a pan-African theme to the country's outside engagement, but later administrations had a very different focus.¹⁵ Moreover, both President Umaru Yar'Adua (who served from 2007 to 2010) and President Buhari suffered from ill health, which limited their ability to attend summits and sustain a robust schedule of diplomatic visits.¹⁶

But health issues aside, Obasanjo's first three successors had limited interest in international affairs.¹⁷ The same was true of many other Nigerian politicians. Parties did little to cultivate new thinking about international relations, with presidential candidates saying little or nothing about foreign policy during their campaigns.¹⁸ Nor, over the past decade, has Nigeria chosen leaders with strong pan-Africanist dispositions, in contrast to Mohammed, Babangida and Obasanjo.¹⁹ But it is also consistent with broader trends: after the end of colonial rule in Africa, the vanquishing of apartheid in South Africa and the denouement of the Cold War, Nigerian policymakers

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, retired diplomats, Abuja and Lagos, June-July 2024.

¹⁵ For instance, under the Umaru Yar'Adua administration from 2007 to 2010, the foreign minister, Ojo Maduekwe, said the country's foreign policy priority would be "citizen-centred diplomacy", namely protecting the interests, rights, dignity and privileges of all Nigerians, both at home and abroad. Osita C. Eze (ed.), *Citizen Diplomacy* (Lagos, 2009). In 2012, Yar'Adua's successor, President Goodluck Jonathan, declared that attracting greater foreign direct investment to accelerate domestic growth had become "the major focus of Nigeria's foreign policy". "Nigeria's foreign policy focus is to attract greater investment – Jonathan", *Vanguard*, 1 October 2012. During the Buhari administration, from 2015 to 2023, the foreign minister, Geoffrey Onyeama, said the priority was to support the government's three main agendas, namely fighting insecurity, curbing corruption and improving the economy. "Foreign affairs ministry to prioritise recovery of Nigeria's stolen funds abroad", *Business Day*, 16 December 2015.

¹⁶ Yar'Adua was barely two and half years in office before he was hospitalised for pericarditis in Saudi Arabia on 23 November 2009 and eventually died on 5 May 2010. Buhari also faced prolonged health challenges: from his inauguration in May 2015 to December 2022 when he started winding down his presidency, Buhari spent at least 225 days away from Nigeria on medical trips abroad. In one instance, starting in May 2017, he spent a continuous 104 days (over three months) on a single medical trip in London, his longest. "Buhari spends 225 days on medical trips, visits 40 countries", *The Punch*, 4 December 2022. With such long periods of hospitalisation, Yar'Adua and Buhari could not sustain engagement with foreign interlocutors. Crisis Group interviews, experts, Abuja and Lagos, June-July 2024.

¹⁷ Several experts said besides his health challenges, Yar'Adua was virtually "a recluse". His successor Jonathan was absorbed by the rise of the Boko Haram insurgency. Crisis Group interviews, experts, Abuja and Lagos, June-July 2024.

¹⁸ For instance, when campaigning for president in 2015, Buhari made 81 promises, including only two that explicitly focused on foreign policy. His second campaign in 2019 features nothing about foreign policy. "Campaign promises of Buhari (and APC)", *The Cable*, 29 May 2015. "30 things Buhari promised Nigerians in second term – IPC", *Premium Times*, 21 June 2019.

¹⁹ Under General Mohammed, Nigeria lent unprecedented support to the liberation movements in southern Africa. Significantly, at the extraordinary OAU summit in Addis Ababa, on 11 January 1976, Mohammed defied pressure from U.S. President Gerald Ford to rally African countries behind endorsing the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola as that country's legitimate leader following the exit of the Portuguese colonisers.

downgraded international concerns and became more absorbed with deepening domestic challenges.²⁰

2. Funding and personnel

At the same time as Nigeria's leadership increasingly shifted focus away from foreign policy, Nigerian diplomacy found itself increasingly hampered by inadequate funding.²¹ Part of the problem is that Nigeria's economic circumstances have changed dramatically compared to the boom periods of the 1970s and 1980s. The country has faced a protracted economic crisis that began with the decline in global oil prices in the 1980s and has been progressively aggravated by mismanagement, corruption and bad governance.²²

This prolonged crisis has constrained funding for the foreign ministry and its parastatal agencies. These institutions – including the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Nigerian Foreign Service Academy, Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Directorate of Technical Cooperation in Africa, Technical Aid Corps Scheme and Nigerians in Diaspora Commission – are perennially cash-strapped. Even when funding went up nominally, the slide in the value of the Nigerian currency, the naira, meant the increases had little material impact.²³ Inadequate funding has led to a dearth of working tools, including computers and other similar office fixtures, at the ministry's headquarters in Abuja and decrepit facilities in some of its parastatals.²⁴

A lack of resources also hinders personnel at the country's embassies and high commissions from doing their jobs.²⁵ Reports of missions unable to pay rent and utility bills, with some even being dragged to court by service providers, have grown increasingly common.²⁶ In July 2020, then-Foreign Affairs Minister Geoffrey Onyea-

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, foreign policy experts and retired diplomat, Abuja and Lagos, June, July and October 2024.

²¹ Hassan A., Saliu, *Aspects of Nigerian Foreign Policy in the Fourth Republic* (Ibadan, 2018), p. iv. In 1991, when Abuja replaced Lagos as the capital city, the government did not move the country's main foreign policy think-tank, the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, to the new seat of government, though the foreign ministry and diplomats are based there. Failure to do so has deprived the foreign policy process of an important source of institutional knowledge and innovation. The Institute was established by Nigeria's first prime minister, Balewa, in 1961 – just a year after independence. It was designed as a centre for generating ideas for the conduct of Nigeria's international relations, from which decision-makers could draw expert advice on contending foreign policy options. With the Institute still in Lagos, 800km from Abuja, senior foreign ministry officials are unable to participate in, and benefit from, the events it organises, such as public lectures, expert forums and diplomatic roundtables. They are also unable to use publications from its library and bookshop.

²² Crisis Group interview, Emma Jimo, politics and international relations lecturer, Lead City University, Ibadan, 22 June 2024.

²³ For instance, while the 54 billion naira which the federal government allocated to the ministry in 2020 was worth \$150 million, the 130 billion naira allocated in 2024 was worth only \$142.4 million.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, former Nigerian ambassadors, Abuja and Lagos, June-July 2024. Upon visiting two of the parastatals in July, Crisis Group found many of their facilities in various stages of abandonment and disrepair.

²⁵ "Nigerian missions abroad broke, can't meet obligations", *This Day*, 28 April 2016; "Nigerian diplomatic missions reeling under heavy debt – FG", *The Punch*, 25 October 2022.

²⁶ "Nigerian embassies in US, Canada, Switzerland in huge debts; cannot pay bills, salaries", *Daily Post*, 16 February 2013; "Nigerian missions abroad broke, can't meet obligations", *This Day*, 28 April

ma lamented that rivals like South Africa and Egypt were allocating considerably more money to their foreign ministries while also ensuring that their staff worked with modern equipment. “A lot of our procedures and systems are still very archaic”, he said.²⁷

Rampant insecurity and domestic unrest have also distracted successive governments from developing a coherent foreign policy strategy. Problems include the fifteen-year jihadist insurgency in the north east; banditry in the north west; herder-farmer violence across the north central zone; Biafra secessionist agitation and associated violence in the south east; and oil-related organised crime in the Niger Delta.²⁸ Preoccupied with these challenges, the country’s leaders have been left with limited bandwidth and material resources, as well as very low public support for pursuing an ambitious foreign agenda. Battling the domestic security challenges has also overstretched Nigeria’s police and military forces, constraining the country’s ability to project military power regionally and continentally as it did in the 1980s and 1990s.²⁹ Furthermore, the Nigerian government’s struggle to quell security challenges has eroded Nigeria’s military reputation, which historically was a factor in its clout on the regional stage.³⁰

Nigeria’s foreign policy has also suffered from poor administration and staffing decisions, including with respect to ambassadorial appointments. The Presidential Advisory Council on International Relations (1999-2015) recommended that non-career diplomats should constitute no more than 25 per cent of its envoys abroad, but successive governments have largely ignored this mandate. Under Buhari, for instance, non-career diplomats took 60 per cent of ambassadorial positions.³¹ The appointment of a disproportionate number of non-career diplomats has eroded

²⁶ 2016; “Nigerian consulate in Hong Kong sued over failure to pay rent at flat linked to late tycoon”, *South China Morning Post*, 6 February 2017; “Nigeria’s embassy in Russia lacks functional toilet, Senate panel laments”, *The Punch*, 3 April 2019; “S’Africa disconnects Nigerian consulate electricity over unpaid bills”, *The Punch*, 19 January 2023; “22-storey Nigeria House in U.S. rots away, says report”, *The Nation*, 5 September 2022.

²⁷ “Foreign ministry needs more funding to be more responsive – Onyeama”, *The Independent*, 8 July 2020.

²⁸ See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°184, *Rethinking Resettlement and Return in Nigeria’s North East*, 16 January 2023; Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°196, *JAS vs. ISWAP: The War of the Boko Haram Splinters*, 28 March 2024; Crisis Group Africa Report N°302, *Ending Nigeria’s Herder-Farmer Crisis: The Livestock Reform Plan*, 4 May 2021; and Crisis Group Africa Report N°288, *Violence in Nigeria’s North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem*, 18 May 2020.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Auwal Ibrahim Musa, executive director, Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre, Abuja, 9 July 2024. In 2022, the chief of defence staff, General Lucky Irabor, said 80 per cent of Nigerian armed forces personnel were deployed in internal security operations across all the country’s 36 states. “80% of military personnel performing police duties in 36 states – CDS”, *Daily Trust*, 24 February 2022. In February 2023, the defence minister, Bashir Magashi, a former army general, said the Nigerian military had become overstretched due to insufficient manpower to battle the country’s security challenges. “Nigeria military is overstretched – Defence Minister”, *Premium Times*, 13 February 2023.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Boladale Adekoya, columnist and deputy managing editor, *Peoples Gazette*, Abuja, 8 July 2024.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, Owei Lakemfa, president, Society for International Relations Awareness, Abuja, 26 June 2024.

morale among senior foreign ministry officials who feel stuck in Abuja.³² Moreover, as non-career ambassadors are often politicians seeking to run for office in future elections, their attention tends to be divided between their diplomatic duties abroad and their political interests at home.³³

Nigeria's diplomacy also suffers from long gaps in ambassadorial appointments. In recent years, each new president, upon assuming office, recalled almost all the country's ambassadors and high commissioners, leaving diplomatic missions with leadership gaps until the government appointed, screened and confirmed replacements. For instance, following Buhari's inauguration in May 2015, he recalled all ambassadors but did not name new ones until December 2016. Similarly, three months after assuming office, Tinubu, on 2 September 2023, recalled all the country's ambassadors, high commissioners and heads of consulates, except those at the UN missions in New York and Geneva, and also Niamey, Niger.³⁴ Tinubu has yet to name an ambassador-designate, not even to the AU and the other two Sahelian countries at loggerheads with ECOWAS. The delays are reportedly due to funding problems.³⁵

The foreign ministry has faced other capacity and administrative deficits over the years. Training and manpower development programs for foreign service officers have declined, again due to funding constraints.³⁶ High-level collaboration and synergy between the ministry and other federal ministries and agencies involved in foreign policy is often weak. Cumulatively, these deficits undermine Nigeria's capacity to engage internationally.³⁷

B. *Implications for Regional Organisations*

Nigeria's diplomatic decline in the years following Obasanjo's rule mirrors the decline in multilateral organisations that help maintain peace and security and advance development in Africa. This decline comes at a bad time for the continent. Africa faces critical, and in some cases deepening, armed conflicts, acute governance deficits, political instability, massive poverty and the increasingly devastating effects of climate change. It is also now confronted with an increasingly fractured world, in which major-power competition and middle-power assertiveness risk turning African countries into battlegrounds in the geostrategic game.

Buhari's presidency – which ended in 2023, after an eight-year tenure – marked a particularly low point in Nigeria's leadership. While the country provided the bulk

³² Crisis Group interview, retired Nigerian diplomat, Port Harcourt, 23 June 2024.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ "Tinubu recalls career, non-career ambassadors", *Daily Trust*, 3 September 2023. These comprised 42 career ambassadors and 41 non-career ambassadors appointed by Buhari in July 2020. Nigeria's UN permanent representatives in New York and Geneva were exempted from the recall, as they were at the high point of preparations for the UN General Assembly coming up later that month. "Nigerian president recalls ambassadors worldwide", *Reuters*, 2 September 2023. Nigeria has 109 diplomatic missions, comprising 76 embassies, 22 high commissions and eleven consulates worldwide.

³⁵ "Lack of fund stalling ambassadors' appointments – minister", *The Punch*, 28 May 2024.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, retired Nigerian ambassador, Abuja, 13 July 2024.

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, retired Nigerian diplomats, Abuja; foreign policy experts, Abuja, Lagos, Port Harcourt and Ibadan, June-July 2024.

of the force that saw off Gambia's Jammeh after he refused to accept defeat, Buhari was subsequently unable to keep ECOWAS member states committed to a common vision of regional development and security.³⁸

Buhari was unable to coax regional governments to adopt a unified stance on several issues, in part because of a widely held view that he had a propensity to pursue Nigeria's interests with scant concern for neighbouring governments. There was reason for this view. For example, in a bid to curb smuggling of agricultural products, firearms and refined petroleum, Buhari closed Nigeria's land borders with ECOWAS neighbours Benin and Niger – along with Chad and Cameroon – from August 2019 to December 2020.³⁹ The closure achieved some of its goals, but it violated the letter and spirit of a key ECOWAS agreement and adversely affected the economies of adjacent countries. By defaulting on the regional commitments to free trade, Buhari made Nigeria look like an untrustworthy partner.⁴⁰

Nigeria's diplomatic decline has also been felt at the AU. Nigeria is the only African country that has served on the fifteen-member AU Peace and Security Council uninterrupted since its creation in 2004. The Council is the highest decision-making body of the AU that decides on issues such as sanctions and military interventions. That West African countries, over two decades, chose to re-elect Nigeria to this semi-permanent position is an acknowledgement of the country's size and importance.⁴¹ Nigeria's role in the Council, however, is hampered by the lack of both capacity in Addis Ababa and clear policy directives from Abuja. For example, the country had to forfeit its chance to chair the Council for the month of April due to the absence of a permanent representative.⁴² The country was replaced by Gambia, which is a small fraction of Nigeria's size and lacks its traditional geopolitical heft. Meantime, a faltering AU presents an increasingly feckless face to the continent, with the vast majority of its decisions going unheeded.⁴³

To be sure, Nigeria's former statesmen still play a role in African diplomacy. The AU regularly deploys former Presidents Obasanjo and Jonathan as special envoys or heads of election observer missions.⁴⁴ These assignments, however, have apparently

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Malian diplomat, Abuja, 11 July 2024.

³⁹ The borders were reopened after a government committee reported that continued closure might be detrimental to Nigeria's economic, security and diplomatic interests. "Revealed: Negative impact of closures forced Buhari to reopen borders", *This Day*, 21 December 2020.

⁴⁰ The loss of trust in Nigeria's diplomatic leadership was further deepened by the country's actions in response to the coup in Niger in 2023, as discussed further below.

⁴¹ West Africa has four seats on the Council, North Africa has two and the southern, central and eastern regions have three each.

⁴² "Programme of Work of the PSC", Amani Africa, April 2024.

⁴³ According to the AU Commission's chairperson, Moussa Faki Mahamat. 93 per cent of the decisions its leaders have adopted over the past three years have been ignored. "AU Summit drama raises questions on whether bloc is reforming", *Nation*, 4 March 2024.

⁴⁴ In August 2021, the AU Commission chairperson appointed Obasanjo as high representative for the Horn of Africa. In October 2020, Jonathan led the AU's Elections Experts Mission to Tanzania. In 2023, Jonathan was appointed head of delegation for the AU and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa in Zimbabwe's general election. Also, two Nigerians – Akinwunmi Adesina and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala – are in their second terms as heads of the African Development Bank and the World Trade Organization, respectively.

been based primarily on the personalities involved, reflecting the influence that Nigeria once enjoyed more than its current diplomatic heft.⁴⁵

IV. An Attempt to Reassert Leadership

Since taking office in May 2023, President Tinubu has attempted to reassert Nigeria's standing on the international stage. When campaigning for the presidency in 2022, he promised a "strategic foreign policy" that would restore Nigeria's global clout. His manifesto said: "If Nigeria is not the champion of Africa and of Black people, then neither will they have a sufficiently strong champion".⁴⁶ Upon assuming office, Tinubu pledged to reinvigorate Nigeria's diplomacy. Accepting the ECOWAS rotating chairmanship in July 2023, he promised to provide leadership in halting military coups and promoting democracy, security and peace in West Africa. He also affirmed that Africa would remain the "centrepiece" of Nigeria's foreign policy, though he did not explain what he meant by this term.⁴⁷ In September 2023, in his maiden address to the UN General Assembly, Tinubu declared that he was speaking not only on Nigeria's behalf, but also all Africa's, implying that Nigeria again was putting itself forward as the continent's diplomatic leader.⁴⁸

But by then the July 2023 coup in Niger had already put Tinubu's diplomatic skills to the test. When General Abdourahamane Tchiani overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum, Tinubu pressed ECOWAS to take tough measures in response. Under Nigeria's chairmanship, ECOWAS imposed the most sweeping sanctions ever imposed on any member of the regional bloc. It also threatened military intervention as a means of ousting the generals in Niamey. As part of the sanctions, Nigeria cut off electricity supplies that had accounted for about 70 per cent of Niger's consumption. These sanctions had a devastating impact on citizens of Niger.⁴⁹ They also rattled the military leaders in Burkina Faso and Mali, who then rallied to defy ECOWAS by forming Alliance des Etats du Sahel (AES) and eventually pulling out of the former bloc, diminishing Nigeria's influence and eroding its reputation for capable crisis management on the continent.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, retired Nigerian diplomat, Abuja, 20 September 2024.

⁴⁶ "Renewed Hope 2023: An Action Plan for a Better Nigeria", 20 October 2022. The manifesto said the principles of Tinubu's foreign policy would include: "Active diplomacy to end conflict in sub-Saharan Africa, especially the West African sub-region; Within the subregion, strengthen diplomatic and military cooperation in the fight against transnational terrorism; Within ECOWAS, work to increase internal sub-regional trade, promote joint industrialisation and joint infrastructural projects; Lead Africa in seeking reforms in the World Trade Organisation and international financial institutions ... that will promote and protect African industrialisation and obtain fairer deals for our current exports; Become a voice advocating for a more attentive international policy regarding climate change and how it affects Africa".

⁴⁷ "Africa remains centrepiece of Nigeria's foreign policy – Tinubu", *Premium Times*, 24 June 2024.

⁴⁸ "Full Speech: Tinubu addresses world leaders at 78th UNGA", *The Cable*, 20 September 2023.

⁴⁹ The sanctions also caused backlash among politicians and businesspeople from northern Nigeria along the border with Niger. See Nnamdi Obasi, "ECOWAS, Nigeria and the Niger Coup Sanctions: Time to Recalibrate", Crisis Group Africa Commentary, 5 December 2023.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Nigerian diplomat, Abuja, 10 July 2024.

These developments suggest a growing realignment in at least parts of West Africa that could create more challenges for Abuja. During anti-hardship protests in August, a few participants in the northern city of Kano hoisted Russian flags and called for Russian President Vladimir Putin's intervention. Although the Russian embassy in Abuja disclaimed responsibility, the episode apparently reinforced concerns among Nigerian authorities about the risks of Moscow's growing military footprint in the region.⁵¹

Amid these challenges, the Tinubu administration has been rethinking the country's diplomatic goals. In December 2023, Foreign Affairs Minister Yusuf Maitama Tuggar unveiled the framework for the administration's foreign policy.⁵² He said the new policy rested upon four pillars, namely democracy, development, demography and diaspora, or what he called the "Tinubu four-D doctrine". Tuggar added that while promoting democracy and development in Nigeria and abroad, the government would leverage the country's large population, as well as its growing diaspora, to raise Nigeria's voice in key international forums. Its ambitions in that realm include gaining a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. This goal appears to have U.S. support as well as endorsements from Côte D'Ivoire, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau and Togo, although it faces formidable political and legal hurdles.⁵³ Nigeria also has ambitions to join the G20 and BRICS. On 3 December, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa pledged to use his country's 2025 presidency of the G20 to "keenly" support Nigeria's bid for membership in that important club.⁵⁴

This effort to reset the country's foreign policy has drawn mixed reactions. Some Nigerian officials and foreign policy analysts have welcomed it.⁵⁵ Others, however, charge that the new policy did not come from a comprehensive national dialogue and may not capture the full diversity of interests among Nigerians.⁵⁶ Still others argue that while the four elements may provide an appropriate agenda for diplomacy, the "four-D doctrine" remains "rather too fluid in conception, too broad in scope and too woolly in objective" and thus "of little use in fathoming the exact direction of Nige-

⁵¹ "Protesters regroup in Kaduna, wave Russian flag, call for Putin's intervention", *The Guardian* (Lagos), 5 August 2024. "Nigeria's gov't concerned over increased Russia's influence in the protests", *Africanews*, 13 August 2024.

⁵² Tuggar was sworn into office as foreign minister by Tinubu on 21 August 2023. He holds a master's degree in international relations from the University of Cambridge and a bachelor's degree in the same subject from the United States International University in San Diego. He served as Nigeria's ambassador to Germany from 2017 to 2023.

⁵³ Richard Gowan, "The UN Security Council in the New Era of Great-Power Competition", speech at the Centre for Grand Strategy, Kings College London, 30 May 2024. See also "US backs Nigeria, Africa's UN Security Council permanent seats' bid", *This Day*, 13 September 2024; and "UN Security Council: Nigeria gets Cote D'Ivoire, Gambia, other countries' backing", *Daily Trust*, 8 November 2024.

⁵⁴ "Ramaphosa pledges S'Africa's support for Nigeria to join G20", *The Punch*, 5 December 2024.

⁵⁵ The chairman of the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, Abdulkumuni Jibrin, hailed it as "very articulate and dynamic". The influential Abuja-based newspaper, *Daily Trust*, endorsed it as a "necessary and timely" initiative that could elevate Nigeria's diplomacy to a "position befitting its status ... if concretely developed and implemented". "Nigeria's new foreign policy thrust is necessary and timely", *Daily Trust*, 5 January 2024.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, retired Nigerian diplomats, Abuja, 27 June-15 July 2024.

ria's foreign policy".⁵⁷ A fourth group contends that tagging the new initiative as the "Tinubu four-D doctrine" ties it to one administration, reducing the chances that future presidents will keep the blueprint.⁵⁸

Nigeria's foreign ministry officials reply that adoption of the "four Ds" was preceded by wide consultation, including with members of the Association of Retired Career Ambassadors of Nigeria and experts at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs. Further, Tuggar posits that the "four Ds" are not an attempt to change Nigeria's fundamental foreign policy principles, which are enshrined in the constitution, but a strategy for advancing those precepts, in line with the realities of international relations today. Whatever the case, the "four-D doctrine" needs further elaboration to ensure buy-in from all the agencies in the foreign policy apparatus.

V. Strengthening Nigeria's Foreign Policy

In seeking to rejuvenate Nigeria's diplomatic leadership in West Africa and its influence across the continent, analysts are divided on what the foremost priorities should be. Some argue that Nigeria should first concentrate on addressing its domestic economic and security challenges.⁵⁹ Certainly, a solid domestic foundation is crucial to sustaining leadership abroad. Nigeria's domestic situation, furthermore, urgently demands effective interventions and sustained responses. The country, however, will miss important opportunities if it waits until it solves even its most pressing domestic problems before stepping up its engagement abroad. Moreover, a rejuvenated foreign policy, stronger regional cooperation and firmer engagement with a wider range of international partners could also help address some of those problems, particularly given Nigeria's extensive economic ties with its neighbours.

A. Foreign Policy Begins at Home

A first step in buttressing Nigeria's diplomatic leadership in West Africa and its influence on the continent is to clarify the country's foreign policy priorities and strengthen the apparatus for pursuing them. The foreign ministry should convene a high-level forum of former diplomats and foreign policy experts to address concerns about Tinubu's diplomatic strategy.⁶⁰ That forum should provide an opportunity to further articulate the linkages between the "four Ds" and elaborate how they will be implemented, including the projected financing and timelines. Once the forum sub-

⁵⁷ Femi Mimiko, "The 4D thrust in Nigeria's foreign policy", *Premium Times*, 3 April 2024. Mimiko is a professor of political science at Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, retired Nigerian ambassador, Port Harcourt, 2 July 2024.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, Sylvester Odion Akhaine, professor of political science, Lagos State University, Lagos, 6 July 2024; retired diplomats, Abuja, Lagos and Port Harcourt, 25 June-8 July 2024.

⁶⁰ Participants could also include representatives of all federal ministries and agencies involved in foreign policy; members of the foreign affairs committees of the national assembly (federal parliament), as well as relevant civil society groups, notably the Society for International Relations Awareness, the Retired Career Ambassadors Association of Nigeria and the Abuja-based Academy of International Affairs.

mits its report, the federal government should work to carry out its recommendations expeditiously.⁶¹

In this connection, the ministry may find it useful to consult the work of the Buhari administration's thirteen-person Presidential Committee on the Review of Number and Strategy for Resourcing Nigeria's Diplomatic Missions Worldwide. The committee's report, submitted to the government on 5 April 2023, included 115 recommendations for addressing the major challenges confronting Nigeria's diplomatic missions around the world. Receiving the report, a senior official, Boss Mustapha, said it would be forwarded to President Buhari for his endorsement.⁶² But as the Buhari government was preparing for its exit in seven weeks' time, Mustapha also said the report would be included in the transition documents to be handed over to the incoming Tinubu administration. Now in office for over a year, the Tinubu administration should revisit the report and draw from its recommendations where they are useful.

As for resources, to strengthen Nigeria's institutional capacity to meet its diplomatic and strategic objectives, the government should boost funding for the foreign ministry, along with its parastatals. It should beef up staffing and improve facilities. The government should also better equip its Foreign Service Academy in Lagos, and plug gaps in recruitment, training, expertise and deployment to strengthen the diplomatic corps.⁶³ In December 2023, to remedy the perennial underfunding, Tuggar urged the Senate to pass a bill that would place the ministry's budget needs on the first line charge.⁶⁴ That bill, stuck in parliament since the Buhari administration, deserves swift approval.

The foreign ministry should particularly focus on strengthening its Department of Planning, Research and Statistics to enable it to provide greater support for policy formulation, monitoring and implementation. Recently, the department has been working more closely with the Central Delivery Coordination Unit, in tracking the monthly performance of the ministry's various branches, backed by divisional and department appraisals that seek to improve their overall performance. The ministry should also make a determined effort for the long-overdue relocation of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs from Lagos to Abuja to allow it to contribute more effectively to foreign policy formulation. Furthermore, the ministry should coordinate better with other ministries, departments and agencies that are involved in the country's external relations, through periodic meetings of relevant officials and more regular consultations at the highest levels.

The government should also improve the operations of Nigeria's diplomatic missions abroad by taking steps to ensure that they are appropriately led. Tinubu should

⁶¹ The committee was chaired by Martin Uhomobi, a distinguished former ambassador and longest-serving permanent secretary in the foreign ministry.

⁶² "FG receives report of presidential c'ttee on review of Nigerian missions worldwide", *This Day*, 6 April 2023.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, Dele Kogbe, research fellow, International Centre for Policing and Security, University of South Wales, UK, 29 June 2024.

⁶⁴ Foreign affairs minister seeks speedy consideration of first line charge bill", News Agency of Nigeria, 13 December 2023. First line charges are deductions from the Federation Account (the account to which all federal revenues are paid) as first priorities, before the revenues are distributed to the three tiers of government (federal, state and local) in accordance with a revenue allocation formula.

quickly appoint new ambassadors to replace those recalled in October 2023. In April, he appointed twelve consuls-general and five chargés d'affaires to represent Nigeria in fourteen countries, but the absence of substantive ambassadors still leaves a serious void. In appointing ambassadors-designate, and though the diplomatic service has been depleted over the years, Tinubu should give priority to experienced career diplomats who understand how to advance the country's regional and continental interests. Appointees from outside the foreign service should have outstanding track records of achievement in their respective careers and be well informed about international affairs.

Nigeria could also boost its diplomatic stature by taking the initiative and mediating in armed conflicts. For now, Nigeria does not appear capable of taking significant action, even in conflicts it has expressed concern about – for example, the war in Sudan, which hosts Nigeria's largest diaspora population and where spillover into Chad could affect Nigeria's own security. In order to reassume its role as a diplomatic leader, Nigeria needs to enhance its mediation capacities and engage with parties in conflict, without prejudice to other efforts by regional organisations.

B. ECOWAS Reform and AES Relations

As Nigeria works to rev up its diplomatic engine, its main priority should be to navigate the crisis in ECOWAS and find common ground with the AES states on security and economic cooperation. Significantly, Nigeria's chairmanship of ECOWAS was renewed for another year at the regional leaders' summit in Abuja on 7 July. That has lent Abuja more time to work on leading ECOWAS out of its turmoil and introduce necessary reforms in the regional bloc's workings – and in so doing to help rebuild its influence in West Africa.

Nigeria should seek to persuade ECOWAS to set aside the one-year withdrawal period provided for in the ECOWAS Treaty (a period that expires on 28 January 2025) and allow more time to woo the breakaway countries back into the fold. Thus far, the repeated ECOWAS overtures to this end have come to naught. The breakaway countries say they have turned their backs “irrevocably” on the regional bloc and followed up with several actions that seem to underscore their resolve.⁶⁵ Yet Nigeria and ECOWAS should persevere in their reconciliation efforts. Extending the withdrawal period would give the facilitators of dialogue between the blocs, President Bassirou Diomaye Faye of Senegal and President Faure Gnassingbé of Togo (and possibly other mediators), additional time to bring the two sides to a compromise. If all reconciliation efforts over the extended period eventually fail, Nigeria and the ECOWAS Commission should then prepare to engage the AES countries in constructive dialogue about the relationship between the two organisations.

The first item on that dialogue's agenda should be to organise an orderly divorce that does not create more bad blood between the two blocs – and particularly between Nigeria and its northern neighbour, Niger. Nigeria, leading ECOWAS, should seek agreement with the AES on a framework for calibrated disengagement and peaceful

⁶⁵ In September, the junta leaders in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger announced that they had introduced common biometric passports for their citizens, printed in China and without the ECOWAS logo, further deepening the split from the West African regional bloc.

cohabitation. A priority should be clarifying the status of citizens of the two blocs, in terms of their rights to movement, work and residence, particularly prohibiting mass expulsions. The framework agreement should also outline procedures and timelines for relocating ECOWAS agencies and staff currently based in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, as well as for disengaging nationals of the three countries currently working in ECOWAS organs. Nigeria should play a role in assisting the ECOWAS Commission with this restructuring.

The second focus of dialogue should be cooperation, particularly on security and economic development. Nigeria and ECOWAS should not view the AES's trilateral efforts at security and economic cooperation as diametrically opposed to those of the wider regional organisation. Instead, Nigeria and ECOWAS should engage through all relevant channels with the AES states to encourage the resumption of economic and security cooperation as a means of addressing the common security, humanitarian and developmental challenges in West Africa – an outcome that would serve the interests of both regional and outside actors.⁶⁶

In formulating future relations, one option might be for ECOWAS to formally recognise the AES as a cooperative grouping within the wider region and offer it membership of the regional bloc as a “body corporate”, or otherwise grant it “observer status” in the organisation.⁶⁷ The framework for continued relationship could allow for free movement of persons and goods between the two blocs, as well as a multi-lateral trade agreement that would enable easy movement of imports and exports, similar to the agreements ECOWAS signed with Mauritania, which left the organisation in 2000.

In terms of sustaining security cooperation, it is a welcome development that on 28 August, following an advisory from the foreign minister's office, Nigeria's defence chief, General Christopher Musa, who is also chairman of the ECOWAS Committee of Defence Chiefs, met Niger's army chief, General Moussa Salaou Barmou, in Niamey and discussed strengthening bilateral and regional security cooperation.⁶⁸ Barmou accepted an invitation to Nigeria, where the two militaries will finalise the modalities for their future cooperation. That visit facilitated Niger's return to full participation in the MNJTF fighting the jihadist insurgencies in the Lake Chad region.⁶⁹ Nigeria should sustain this engagement, first to rebuild its bilateral relationship with a strategic neighbour and, secondly, to pursue the long-term goal of establishing formal security cooperation between ECOWAS and AES, including channels for intelligence sharing, early warning and coordination between the joint AES force and the proposed ECOWAS Standby Force.

Beyond rebuilding relations with the AES states, Nigeria should push for reform of ECOWAS. At the ECOWAS summit in Abuja on 8 July, the heads of state and government agreed to convene a special summit on the future of the regional organisa-

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, Nigerien diplomat, Abuja, 15 July 2024.

⁶⁷ There are cooperative groupings within ECOWAS, such as the Mano River Union between Côte D'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Tuggar has indicated: “There is room to accommodate a Sahel grouping within the ECOWAS family”. Yussuf Tuggar: It's unacceptable to give Africa only one voice”, *The Africa Report*, October-December 2024.

⁶⁸ “Nigeria's defence chief visits Niger Republic to discuss security collaboration”, *This Day*, 29 August 2024.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior foreign ministry official, Abuja, 9 November 2024.

tion, focusing on enhancing good governance, protecting constitutional order, and safeguarding regional peace and security, as well as deepening the regional integration project. The leaders also directed the ECOWAS Commission to work with the Nigerian foreign minister, in his capacity as chair of the Mediation and Security Council, to develop the format and timeframe for the special summit.⁷⁰ That summit should offer an opportunity for Nigeria to suggest fresh ideas for easing the region's turmoil. It should aim to persuade ECOWAS to reinvent itself and prevent any further splits from the bloc.

In preparation for the special summit, Nigeria should engage other ECOWAS member states in addressing the grievances that prompted the three Sahelian countries to quit the bloc. The ECOWAS states should acknowledge the need for more equitable economic relations between France and its former colonies in West Africa, a sore point in relations with the AES countries, which view ECOWAS (including Nigeria) as insensitive to their demands.

Furthermore, Nigeria and the ECOWAS Commission should also take deliberate steps to dispel perceptions – encouraged by the AES states – that the regional bloc is serving neocolonial and imperialist interests. Such perceptions are now popular in Francophone countries and in some Anglophone countries.⁷¹ In particular, while Nigeria's ties with France should not be encumbered by the troubled relations between Paris and AES states, Abuja should strive to reassure the disaffected Francophone countries that its conversations with Paris are not to their detriment. Nigeria and ECOWAS should make it clear that – though supported by external partners – ECOWAS is charting its own course, and that its decisions are taken from the perspective of regional interests. Furthermore, challenging as it is, ECOWAS members should prepare to bear most of the cost of deploying the ECOWAS Standby Force (as they earlier did with the ECOWAS Monitoring Group in the 1990s) and not depend on funding from Western partners.

Finally, given political developments and ECOWAS's limitations in responding to them, Tinubu should call on the bloc to take a hard look at its 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. While that protocol provides an important normative framework, the organisation clearly lacks the coercive power it would need to enforce democratic norms. Nigeria, leveraging its influence, should lead ECOWAS to rethink its approach, focusing on resilience rather than coercion – ie, developing programs that can help member states support electoral processes, resist military takeovers and facilitate smoother political transitions. In the same vein, Nigeria should also encourage protocol revisions that would bring greater focus on the drivers of political instability, including fraudulent elections, disregard for presidential term limits, serious human rights abuses and massive corruption.

⁷⁰ "Final Communiqué, Sixty-Fifth (65th) Ordinary Session of the Authority of Heads of State and Government", Federal Republic of Nigeria, 7 July 2024.

⁷¹ At the AES summit in Niamey on 6 July, Burkina Faso's leader, Captain Ibrahim Traoré, sharply criticised ECOWAS leaders as "house slaves" – a euphemism for African leaders who are perceived as lackeys of their former colonial masters.

C. *Improve Participation in the African Union*

A third major priority for improving Nigeria's diplomacy on the continent should be to strengthen the country's participation in the AU. Nigeria, as a major African power, should encourage the AU to deliver on its mandates and provide much-needed leadership in advancing peace and security across the continent.

The Tinubu administration has shown a promising commitment to this agenda. On 19 September 2023, at a meeting with the AU chairperson, Comorian President Azali Assoumani, Tinubu acknowledged that the AU is well positioned to secure consensus on the continent regarding important economic and socio-political issues. He pledged Nigeria's backing for the organisation's efforts.⁷² On 22 and 23 April, Nigeria hosted a High-Level African Counter-Terrorism Meeting in Abuja, aimed at strengthening regional cooperation and institution building; improving information sharing; increasing multilateral cooperation; and mobilising resources to address the evolving threat of terrorism in Africa.⁷³ Convening this meeting signalled that Nigeria may be returning to its former role as a leader in countering insecurity throughout the continent.⁷⁴ Nigeria should keep spearheading this initiative.

To further Nigeria's efforts at the AU, Tinubu should urgently designate an experienced, knowledgeable ambassador to the organisation, empowering that person with a clear mandate and appropriate resources to play an active role in the Peace and Security Council's meetings and sub-committees, as well as to lead efforts to regain the chair of the Council when the opportunity arises in 2025.⁷⁵ Nigeria should also participate more actively, in both public and closed discussions in Addis Ababa and elsewhere, on crucial issues such as how to respond to coups d'état and other crises, AU reforms, UN reforms and AU peace support operations. It should continue to support the AU's mediation, reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts, such as through the African Union Ad Hoc High-Level Committee for South Sudan, of which it is a member. It could lend further support to the AU by proposing special envoys and initiating peacemaking solutions for the continent's major trouble spots, as Crisis Group has previously written.⁷⁶

⁷² He said: "We appreciate that the AU is working hard to bring about peace in the Sahel and is actively negotiating between the warring factions in Sudan. ... You can call me at any time and we will discuss the peace and stability of AU member states. We need stability and prosperity for the Black race. This is our era". See "President Tinubu to African Union: Nigeria is behind you and we will not let you fail to secure stability and prosperity for Africa", press release, Nigerian Presidency, 19 September 2023.

⁷³ The meeting, supported by the UN, brought together four presidents, ten ministers and eight national security advisers from 29 African countries, as well as the AU Commission, other regional organisations, international partners including P5 Members of the UN Security Council, various UN agencies and civil society organisations.

⁷⁴ The UN hailed the meeting as a demonstration of Nigeria's convening power in Africa; the AU Commission's chairman, Mahamat, commended Tinubu for his "commitment to eradicating terrorism from West Africa and the entire continent".

⁷⁵ The fifteen-member Peace and Security Council is the AU's standing decision-making organ for the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°195, *Eight Priorities for the African Union in 2024*, 14 February 2024.

Finally, resolving the continent's conflicts will require more consultation and co-ordination between the AU bodies and member states. Abuja could encourage this process, and enhance its diplomatic influence on the continent, by establishing an informal forum with other major African countries to develop common positions on issues of continental and global importance.⁷⁷

VI. Conclusion

The diminution of Nigeria's status as a foreign policy powerhouse over the past decade and a half has left a gap in efforts to promote peace, security and economic integration in West Africa and across the continent. Following its inauguration in May 2023, the Tinubu administration said it wants to restore the country's stature as a regional leader and an influential actor in Africa. These objectives are laudable, but the challenges are steep. Among the most significant is an unprecedented split in ECOWAS under Tinubu's chairmanship, which underscores the need for a reset of both that bloc's priorities and Nigeria's foreign policy.

To rejuvenate Nigeria's diplomacy as a force for peace, security and development, the Nigerian government should focus on three priorities. It should begin by further clarifying the country's foreign policy objectives and oiling the machinery for achieving them. It will also need to navigate the turbulence in West Africa by working with other member states to reform ECOWAS and find common ground on security and economic cooperation with the AES states. Finally, it should strengthen its presence, voice and influence in the AU, working to strengthen that body in the interests of Nigerians and all Africans.

Dakar/Brussels, 11 December 2024

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, retired senior Nigerian foreign ministry official, Abuja, 2 July 2024.



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