# NIGERIAN FOREIGN POLICY: BETWEEN CITIZENS' DIPLOMACY AND RECIPROCITY

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**ABSTRACT**

Since independence, Nigerian foreign policy has been shaped by the country's aspiration for regional leadership and its commitment to African solidarity, multilateralism, and peaceful coexistence. In recent decades, however, increasing globalization, transnational migration, and recurring cases of maltreatment of Nigerians abroad have compelled a rethinking of traditional diplomatic priorities. This shift gave rise to the concept of citizens' diplomacy, which emphasizes the protection of Nigerians overseas and the alignment of foreign policy with the welfare of citizens. Alongside this development, the principle of reciprocity has gained prominence as a framework for responding to the actions and policies of other states toward Nigerian nationals. This study examines the evolving relationship between citizens' diplomacy and reciprocity in Nigeria's foreign policy. It explores how these approaches have been articulated in policy statements, applied in diplomatic practice, and contested in public discourse. The study argues that while citizens' diplomacy represents a normative and people-centered reorientation of Nigeria's external relations, its effectiveness is constrained by inconsistent application and the reluctance to employ reciprocal measures when Nigerian citizens face discrimination or abuse abroad. The study further contends that a balanced integration of citizens' diplomacy and strategic reciprocity is essential for enhancing Nigeria's diplomatic credibility and safeguarding its citizens in an increasingly interconnected global system. By analyzing Nigeria's foreign policy through this dual lens, the study contributes to broader debates on foreign policy adaptation, state responsibility, and the protection of citizens in international relations.

**Keywords:** Citizens' Diplomacy, Consular Protection, Diaspora Engagement, Reciprocity, State Responsibility

## Introduction

Since the late 2000s, Nigerians living and travelling abroad have increasingly faced xenophobic attacks, discriminatory immigration policies, arbitrary detention, and restrictions on

movement in several countries, including South Africa, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Ghana. These recurring incidents have generated domestic criticism that Nigeria's foreign policy has not adequately protected its citizens despite the country's longstanding diplomatic leadership in Africa and substantial contributions to regional peacekeeping, economic integration, and continental development. The apparent disconnect between Nigeria's international commitments and the protection of its nationals abroad has revived debates regarding the effectiveness of citizens' diplomacy and the appropriate use of reciprocity in foreign policy.

Between 2008 and 2024, South Africa experienced several major waves of xenophobic violence, including the 2008, 2015 and 2019 episodes. Official estimates indicate that the 2008 attacks resulted in more than 60 deaths and displaced over 100,000 people, while Nigerian-owned businesses were among those looted during subsequent outbreaks. Despite repeated diplomatic protests by Nigeria, attacks continued, suggesting that citizens' diplomacy alone produced limited behavioural change. Nigeria largely relied on diplomatic engagement, evacuation of affected nationals and bilateral consultations rather than reciprocal diplomatic or economic measures. This pattern illustrates the limitations of citizens' diplomacy when reciprocity is not applied in a credible manner(Ochogwu et al., 2025).

Nigerian foreign policy has historically been anchored on Afrocentrism, peaceful coexistence, non-alignment, and support for African liberation (Aluko, 1981; Gambari, 2008). While these principles enhanced Nigeria's regional influence, they were primarily state-centred and devoted limited attention to the welfare of individual citizens abroad. The introduction of citizens' diplomacy during the administration of President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua represented an important policy shift by placing the welfare and protection of Nigerians at the centre of diplomatic engagement. The doctrine sought to ensure that foreign policy would generate tangible benefits for Nigerian citizens rather than merely advancing abstract national prestige.

Closely associated with citizens' diplomacy is the principle of reciprocity, a recognised norm of international relations whereby states respond to the treatment they receive from other states. In Nigeria's context, reciprocity suggests that diplomatic, economic, and immigration policies towards foreign countries should reflect how those countries treat Nigerian citizens. Although successive governments have occasionally invoked reciprocity, its practical application has remained inconsistent, resulting in persistent questions regarding the credibility of Nigeria's commitment to protecting its nationals abroad.

Existing scholarship has examined Nigeria's Afrocentric foreign policy, the evolution of citizens' diplomacy, and the principle of reciprocity as separate themes. However, relatively few studies systematically analyse how citizens' diplomacy and reciprocity interact as complementary instruments for protecting Nigerians abroad. Likewise, existing studies often describe diplomatic events without explaining the conditions under which reciprocity strengthens or weakens citizens' diplomacy. This conceptual gap limits understanding of Nigeria's foreign policy responses to contemporary diplomatic disputes.

This study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between citizens' diplomacy and reciprocity in Nigerian foreign policy. Specifically, it analyses how these concepts have shaped Nigeria's diplomatic responses to selected cases involving the treatment of Nigerian citizens abroad. The study argues that citizens' diplomacy can only achieve its intended objectives when supported by a credible and strategically applied policy of reciprocity. By integrating Foreign Policy Role Theory and Realism, the study contributes to debates on foreign policy adaptation, state responsibility, and citizen protection in emerging powers.

**Research Objectives**

The primary objective of this study is to examine how citizens' diplomacy and the principle of reciprocity influence the protection of Nigerian citizens within the context of contemporary Nigerian foreign policy. Specifically, the study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the evolution of citizens' diplomacy in Nigeria's foreign policy.
2. To analyse the role of reciprocity in Nigeria's diplomatic relations.
3. To assess selected diplomatic cases involving Nigerians abroad.
4. To evaluate the extent to which reciprocity enhances or constrains the effectiveness of citizens' diplomacy.
5. To identify policy implications for strengthening Nigeria's foreign policy and improving the protection of Nigerian citizens abroad.

**Conceptual Clarification**

Conceptual clarity is essential for understanding the analytical foundations of Nigerian foreign policy, particularly when examining the interaction between citizens' diplomacy and reciprocity. These concepts are often used interchangeably or loosely in public discourse, yet they represent distinct but interconnected dimensions of diplomatic practice.

Foreign policy is the framework and guiding principles that states embrace to relate with others, most especially in connection with their national interest. It is the objectives that transcend the boundary of a given state. It is a set of principles that defines the objectives a given state pursues in the international arena in the process of its interactions with other international actors (Akinboye&Ottoh, 2007:116). But, for Rosenau (1974), foreign policy is authoritative actions taken by governments or are committed to take in order either to maintain the desirable aspects of the international environment or to amend its undesirable aspects.

According to Agbu (2009:52), citizen diplomacy is a political concept depicting the involvement of average citizens engaging representatives of another country or cause either inadvertently or by design. He stressed that the concept sometimes refers to "Track Two Diplomacy", which connote unofficial contacts between people of different nations, as

differentiated from official contacts between a governmental representatives. He argued that, the concept was construed by Nigeria under President Yar'Adua to mean that Nigeria's foreign policy would hence forth be focused on the Nigerian citizens at home and in the diapora.

Reciprocity is a foundational principle in international relations that governs interactions among states based on mutual exchange. It implies that the actions of one state toward another should be met with corresponding responses, whether positive or negative. Reciprocity operates as both a normative expectation and a strategic tool, encouraging cooperation while discouraging hostile or discriminatory behavior. In diplomatic practice, reciprocity may manifest in visa policies, trade agreements, diplomatic courtesies, and responses to human rights violations. For Nigeria, reciprocity has increasingly been invoked in debates about how to respond to countries that impose restrictive measures or discriminatory practices against Nigerian citizens.

The relationship between citizens' diplomacy and reciprocity is complex and often contested. Citizens' diplomacy emphasizes moral responsibility and human protection, while reciprocity introduces a strategic dimension that can involve retaliation or conditional engagement. Ideally, reciprocity should reinforce citizens' diplomacy by signalling that the mistreatment of citizens carries diplomatic consequences. However, excessive reliance on reciprocity can escalate tensions and undermine long-term diplomatic objectives, particularly for states that depend on international cooperation and regional leadership. Nigeria's challenge lies in striking a balance that protects its citizens without compromising broader strategic interests.

The Nigerian diaspora constitutes an important related concept in this analysis. The diaspora refers to citizens living outside their country of origin who maintain economic, social, and political ties with their homeland. Nigeria's diaspora plays a significant role in national development through remittances, investment, cultural diplomacy, and advocacy. As such, the protection and engagement of the diaspora have become central to contemporary foreign policy. Effective citizens' diplomacy must therefore integrate diaspora engagement strategies that recognize Nigerians abroad as partners in national development rather than passive beneficiaries of consular services.

Consular protection refers to the formal mechanisms through which a state assists its citizens abroad in matters such as legal representation, emergency assistance, and documentation. While consular protection is a legal obligation under international conventions, citizens' diplomacy expands this obligation into a broader political commitment. It seeks not only to respond to crises but also to proactively address structural discrimination and policy injustices faced by citizens in foreign jurisdictions.

These concepts provide the analytical framework for understanding Nigeria's evolving foreign policy posture. Clarifying their meanings and interconnections enables a more nuanced assessment of how Nigeria navigates the tension between moral responsibility to its citizens and strategic engagement within the international system.

## Literature Review

### Citizen Diplomacy in Nigerian Foreign Policy

Nigeria's foreign policy since independence has been influenced and guided by commitment to five principles of policy of non – alignment, legal equality of all states, non – interference in other states domestic affairs, commitment to multilateral diplomacy and making Africa centre piece of foreign policy (Aluko, 196).Since attainment of independence in 1960, Nigeria has continued to be a true Big Brother to African countries by identifying with them through thick and thin. Nigeria was a loud voice in the United Nations Committee, campaigning against Apartheid and supporting the struggle against colonialism in former Rhodesia (Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia). The country drove the democratization process in Africa from Togo, Sao Tome and Principle, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Guinea, Mali and Niger. It also provided technical and human resource support to countries in the global South, especially through the instrumentality of the Technical Aid Corp Scheme (TAC).

The peace and security credential of Nigeria spans her interventions in the Congo barely six months after independence and other peace support operations in Somalia, Sudan, Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and across the world. Nigeria has provided succor to victims of natural disaster Niger, Haiti, Ethiopia, Eritrea and a host of other countries both within and outside Africa (Gwaza&Ubi, 2017:xxi). Despite all that Nigeria has done for Africa, and especially its immediate neighbours, it appears that the general perception and attitude of neighbours to Nigeria have been one of an unwelcome intruder. Thus, Nigeria's "good – neighbor" posture calls for redefinition and re – focusing with a view to injecting some dose of realism into the policy. With the possible exceptions of countries like Ghana, Sierra – Leone, Liberia, Gambia and in recent time Republic of Benin and Niger, Nigeria seems to be unpopular in West Africa (Agbu, 2009:58).

Citizenship diplomacy is a foreign policy thrust of Yar'Adua's Administration under which te Federal Government of Nigeria seeks the assistance of Nigerian at home and in Diaspora in its efforts to develop the country economically and politically. For being people – oriented, it is an part of the broad range of Nigeria's foreign policy that promotes the aspects that look into the welfare of Nigeria's citizens and seeks to defend them wherever they are (Dickson, 2010). On Monday July 30, 2007, while addressing the opening ceremony of the conference on foreign policy and Nigeria's economic development organized by the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Nigeria's Foreign Minister Chief OjoMaduekwe, announced a new orientation in the country's foreign policy which would lay emphasis on citizen diplomacy. It was a novel idea for the Nigerian environment even though it was not fully flashed out on that occasion (Ogunsanwo, 2009:19).

From a very critical point of view, citizen diplomacy as conceived by Chief OjoMaduekwe, former Minister of Foreign Affairs is about the protection of Nigerians wherever they may find

themselves. It is about making Nigerians live correctly in accordance with the roles and regulations of their host countries as well as creating a basis for responsible citizenship in Nigeria. In this regard, Nigerians attitudinal disposition is to be guided by the policy of reciprocity or what the former Minister of foreign Affairs called Diplomacy of Consequence, such that:

Citizen – centred diplomacy will be diplomacy of consequences such that, if you are nice to us, we will be nice to you, if you are hostile to us, we will be hostile to you (Ojiabor, 2007 cited in Agba, 2009:54).

As succinctly analysed by Eke (2009), that citizen diplomacy connotes a diplomatic practice in which the citizens of Nigeria are the primary focus or concern, that is, citizens centred such that the Nigerian citizens is the subject and object of Nigeria foreign policy, the first and last line of defence and a policy that strengthen Nigerian resolve to take her political and diplomatic weight in protection of her maltreated abroad or in protection of economic at home and abroad or in protection of economic assets at home and abroad.

Again, part of the agenda of Yar'Adua citizenship diplomacy was to launder the battered image of Nigeria. On this footing, the rebrand Nigeria programme, promoted by Yar'Adua's Minister of Information and Communications, Prof. Dora Akunyili, was introduced. The rebrand Nigeria programme became a crucial talk when it was generally felt that the image of the country has deteriorated almost beyond repair in the international community. According to Prof. Dora Akunyili:

There is no doubt that this country needs change, a change in character and general orientation… despite our struggle and not – too – good reputation, we must seize every opportunity to make a change. Though Nigeria is a country with problems, it is also one with countless opportunities. Nigeria has many brilliant minds and experts who can hold their own in virtually every field of endeavor … Gradually, as a people, we are approaching a point where many feel that, there can be no redemption… (Daily Sun, 2009:1).

Therefore, an important slogan known as "Nigeria Good People, Great Nation" was hastily packaged and launched in 2009 in order to inform the whole world that Nigerians are not really as bad as they may have thought. Therefore, to generously boost the image of the country, certain philanthropic agendas gained importance.

As opined by Eke (2009), citizen diplomacy is a renewed thrust of the Nigerian foreign policy. The new objectives in the citizen diplomacy is worthwhile and a pragmatic step to restore the image, prestige and glory of Nigeria and Nigerians anywhere in the world.

In their contribution to the discourse, Okocha and Onwuka (2007:3) argue that, the central idea behind the concept of citizen diplomacy involves the protecting of the image, integrity and

interests of Nigeria and its people while also reading against countries that are hostile to the Nigerian cause and that of its people, including those who brand Nigeria as corrupt.

Citizens' diplomacy represents one of the most significant normative shifts in Nigerian foreign policy in the post-military era. It reflects an attempt to redefine the purpose of diplomacy by placing the welfare, dignity, and protection of citizens at the center of external engagement. Scholars of foreign policy increasingly argue that globalization and transnational migration have blurred the boundaries between domestic and foreign policy, making citizen protection a core responsibility of the modern state (Hocking, 2016; Murray, 2019). In this context, Nigeria's adoption of citizens' diplomacy signals an effort to align its foreign policy practice with evolving global norms. In fact, the emergence of citizens' diplomacy in Nigeria was shaped by both external pressures and internal political changes. Externally, Nigerians increasingly encountered discrimination, racial profiling, restrictive immigration regimes, and xenophobic violence in host countries, particularly in parts of Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. Internally, the return to democratic governance in 1999 expanded public expectations of accountability and state responsibility. As Gambari (2008) observes, democratization altered Nigeria's foreign policy discourse by introducing citizens as legitimate stakeholders rather than passive beneficiaries of elite diplomacy.

Citizens' diplomacy gained formal recognition during the administration of President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, when policymakers articulated the idea that the treatment of Nigerians abroad should influence diplomatic engagement with other states (Adeniji, 2010). The policy sought to reposition Nigerian embassies and high commissions as frontline institutions for citizen protection, crisis response, and advocacy. This shift aligns with broader scholarly arguments that consular services have become central instruments of foreign policy in an era of increased human mobility (Neumayer, 2010). In practice, citizens' diplomacy has been implemented through diplomatic protests, enhanced consular engagement, evacuation operations, and bilateral negotiations. Nigeria's evacuation of citizens from Libya, Sudan, and other conflict zones demonstrates an increasing willingness to assume responsibility for citizens in distress (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Nigeria, 2023). These actions reflect what Murray and McGowan (2018) describe as the growing "humanization" of diplomacy, where states respond not only to strategic interests but also to humanitarian obligations.

Despite these developments, the implementation of citizens' diplomacy has been inconsistent and largely reactive. Scholars note that Nigeria's responses tend to intensify during highly publicized crises but weaken once media attention subsides (Ogunsanwo, 2019). Structural challenges such as underfunded diplomatic missions, limited personnel capacity, and bureaucratic inefficiencies further constrain effective consular protection. This gap between policy intent and institutional capacity undermines the credibility of citizens' diplomacy and fuels public skepticism. A further dilemma lies in the moral framing of citizens' diplomacy. Nigerian officials often emphasize that citizens abroad must act responsibly and obey host country laws. While this expectation is reasonable, scholars caution that it risks shifting

responsibility away from structural discrimination and human rights violations (Adebajo, 2020). Citizens' diplomacy should therefore be grounded in universal rights rather than conditional protection.

The Nigerian diaspora occupies a central place within citizens' diplomacy. With remittances exceeding foreign direct investment in some years, the diaspora has become a strategic national asset (World Bank, 2023). Effective citizens' diplomacy requires structured diaspora engagement, including political inclusion, economic partnerships, and consultative mechanisms. As Brinkerhoff (2012) argues, diaspora engagement strengthens both state legitimacy and international influence when embedded in coherent foreign policy frameworks. Specifically, citizens' diplomacy operates within the constraints of Nigeria's broader strategic interests. Nigeria's desire to maintain regional leadership, economic partnerships, and diplomatic goodwill often limits the use of strong diplomatic pressure against host states accused of mistreating Nigerians. This reflects the reality of power asymmetries in the international system, where weaker states exercise caution in confronting stronger partners (Waltz, 1979; Suberu, 2022).

Overall, citizens' diplomacy represents a progressive and people-centered reorientation of Nigerian foreign policy. Its effectiveness, however, depends on consistent implementation, adequate institutional capacity, and the strategic integration of reciprocity. Without these elements, citizens' diplomacy risks remaining a symbolic commitment rather than a transformative diplomatic practice.

**Reciprocity in Nigerian Foreign Policy**

Reciprocity occupies a central place in diplomatic practice and remains one of the most enduring principles of international relations. At its core, reciprocity refers to the expectation that states will respond to the actions of others in kind, whether positively through cooperation or negatively through restrictive measures. Scholars argue that reciprocity functions both as a normative rule that promotes fairness and as a strategic instrument that disciplines state behavior within an anarchic international system (Keohane, 1986; Axelrod, 2006). In Nigerian foreign policy, reciprocity has gained increasing prominence as citizens and policymakers debate appropriate responses to the treatment of Nigerians abroad.

Historically, Nigeria has applied reciprocity selectively. While the principle has been acknowledged in policy statements and diplomatic rhetoric, its practical enforcement has been constrained by Nigeria's strategic interests and relative position in the global system. From a realist perspective, weaker or middle powers often exercise caution in applying reciprocal sanctions against stronger states due to concerns about economic retaliation, diplomatic isolation, or security vulnerabilities (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). This dynamic helps explain Nigeria's reluctance to impose stringent reciprocal measures on countries that maintain restrictive visa regimes or discriminatory practices against Nigerian citizens.

In the last five decades, there has been displeasure with Nigerian's African policy. Some observers and government officials such as General Joe Garba, OlugbengaAshiru and others were disturbed and have expressed concern on what they consider unrewarding African policy of the Nigerian state (Saliu, 2014:63). Not being erected on any firm principle of reciprocity, these concerned Nigerians have bemoaned the attitude of Angola, South Africa, Liberia, Sierra Leone, among other countries that have benefited from the country's assistance but have not reciprocated Nigeria's gestures. It will, however, not correct to hand this allegation only on African countries. Canada, china, Britain and other non – African countries have also demonstrated the tendency against Nigeria in their relationships (Eze, 2010).

Nevertheless, reciprocity has featured prominently in public discourse, especially in response to incidents involving visa denials, deportations, and xenophobic attacks. Public officials and civil society actors frequently invoke reciprocity as a symbol of national dignity and sovereign equality. As Ogunsanwo (2019) notes, calls for reciprocity often reflect domestic frustration with perceived diplomatic weakness rather than a fully articulated foreign policy strategy. This gap between rhetorical commitment and practical application underscores the tension between normative expectations and strategic realities. In fact, Nigeria's approach to reciprocity has largely favored diplomatic engagement over confrontation. Rather than direct retaliation, Nigerian authorities have typically employed protest notes, bilateral consultations, and appeals to international norms. This approach aligns with liberal institutionalist arguments that sustained cooperation and dialogue reduce the risk of escalation and preserve long term relationships (Keohane, 1984; Ruggie, 1998). However, critics argue that the absence of credible reciprocal consequences undermines Nigeria's bargaining position and signals tolerance for repeated violations of citizens' rights.

Nigeria's basis for seeking reciprocal respect from the international community is a legitimate and required one. Nigeria is the ninth most populous country in the world. It is the most populous country in Africa with an estimated 200 million people and a population density as high as 139 people per square mile. 20 percent of the world's black population lives in Nigeria and as is commonly said, one out of every four Africans is Nigerians, as also one out of every five black people in the world. It is alleged that over 1 million Nigerians reside in the U.S., of which over 25,000 are, it is asserted, doctors and that U.K Home office statistics relating to those holding Nigerian passports, puts the number at more than 2 million. Second and third generation Nigerians in the UK swell that number significantly, most making a serious and substantial contribution to the social and economic life in the U.K. Economically, Nigeria is the economic power house in West Africa and the second in Africa, only behind South Africa. With a GDP of over $170 billion, it contributes 50 percent of the GDP of the West African region. The GDP per head amounts approximately $692. Nigeria is the twelfth largest producer of petroleum in the world and the eight largest exported (Onyearu, 2007).

The principle of reciprocity also intersects with Nigeria's self-conception as a regional leader and stabilizing force in Africa. Role theory suggests that states act in ways consistent with

their perceived international roles (Holsti, 1970; Gambari, 2008). Nigeria's leadership ambitions within West Africa and the African Union often discourage aggressive reciprocal measures that could destabilize regional relations or undermine its diplomatic image. This restraint is particularly evident in Nigeria's responses to xenophobic violence in South Africa, where diplomatic caution has prevailed despite strong domestic pressure for retaliation. At the same time, globalization has altered the cost benefit calculus of reciprocity. The growing economic importance of the Nigerian diaspora, particularly through remittances, has increased the domestic political cost of inaction. The World Bank (2023) reports that remittances from Nigerians abroad constitute a significant source of foreign exchange, reinforcing the argument that the protection of citizens is not only a moral obligation but also an economic imperative. This development strengthens the case for more strategic and consistent reciprocal responses.

The reciprocal principle was applied to Nigeria's external economic assistance towards Sao Tome's quest for $2 billion Economic Development. Nigeria granted the fund on the condition that she owns lion share of the project. The Same foreign policy thrust was applied in the case of Ghana's $20 million gas pipeline installation project to be sited in Ghana which will pass through some ECOWAS states. According to Akinterinwa (2004: 31 – 32)), in the memorandum of Agreement between Nigeria and Ghana, Nigeria will provide technical personnel and supervise the project.

However, scholars caution that reciprocity must be applied carefully to avoid unintended consequences. Excessive reliance on retaliation can escalate diplomatic disputes and harm vulnerable citizens rather than protect them (Axelrod, 2006). Effective reciprocity therefore requires strategic calibration, where responses are proportional, targeted, and aligned with broader foreign policy objectives. For Nigeria, this means integrating reciprocity into a coherent diplomatic framework rather than deploying it as an ad hoc reaction to public pressure.

All in all, reciprocity remains a contested but indispensable element of Nigerian foreign policy. Its limited application reflects the structural constraints of power asymmetry, regional leadership responsibilities, and institutional capacity. When strategically deployed alongside citizens' diplomacy, reciprocity can enhance Nigeria's diplomatic credibility and signal commitment to the protection of its citizens. Without such integration, reciprocity risks remaining a rhetorical device rather than an effective policy tool.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts an integrated theoretical framework to explain the relationship between citizens' diplomacy and reciprocity in Nigerian foreign policy. While four theoretical perspectives—Foreign Policy Role Theory, Realism, Liberal Institutionalism, and Constructivism—are employed, Foreign Policy Role Theory and Realism constitute the primary analytical frameworks, whereas Liberal Institutionalism and Constructivism serve complementary roles. The choice of this layered framework reflects the complexity of Nigerian

foreign policy, which cannot be adequately explained by a single theoretical perspective. Nigeria's diplomatic behaviour simultaneously reflects strategic calculations, role expectations, institutional commitments, and evolving societal norms. Rather than treating these theories as competing explanations, this study uses them as complementary lenses that illuminate different dimensions of the same policy phenomenon.

Specifically, Foreign Policy Role Theory provides the central explanatory framework because it explains how Nigeria's self-conception as Africa's regional leader, peace promoter, and responsible international actor shapes its foreign policy behaviour. Realism complements this perspective by explaining why Nigeria's commitment to protecting its citizens abroad is often moderated by strategic considerations such as power asymmetries, economic interests, and security calculations. Together, these two theories explain the central tension explored in this study: Nigeria's aspiration to project regional leadership and moral responsibility while selectively applying reciprocity in response to the treatment of its citizens abroad. Liberal Institutionalism and Constructivism are incorporated as supporting perspectives. Liberal Institutionalism explains Nigeria's preference for diplomacy, multilateral engagement, and institutional dispute resolution, while Constructivism accounts for the changing domestic expectations that increasingly place citizens' welfare at the centre of foreign policy. Collectively, these perspectives provide a coherent analytical framework for understanding why citizens' diplomacy has emerged as an important policy orientation but has often been implemented inconsistently.

Foreign Policy Role Theory argues that states formulate and implement foreign policy according to the roles they perceive themselves as occupying within the international system (Holsti, 1970). These role conceptions influence policy choices by shaping how political leaders define national responsibilities, appropriate diplomatic conduct, and the state's international identity. Nigeria has historically conceived of itself as Africa's "big brother," a promoter of regional peace, and a defender of African unity (Gambari, 2008; Adebajo, 2020). These self-assigned roles have informed its commitment to peacekeeping, conflict mediation, and regional integration. However, they have also encouraged diplomatic restraint, particularly when confronting other African states over the treatment of Nigerian citizens. Consequently, citizens' diplomacy operates within the constraints of Nigeria's preferred international role, requiring policymakers to balance the protection of citizens with the preservation of Nigeria's regional leadership image.

Realism complements Role Theory by explaining how considerations of power and national interest influence the implementation of citizens' diplomacy. Classical and structural realists argue that the international system is anarchic, compelling states to pursue survival, security, and national interests above moral considerations (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). Although the principle of reciprocity suggests that states should respond proportionately to the treatment their citizens receive abroad, realism explains why Nigeria often adopts cautious rather than retaliatory measures, especially when dealing with economically or strategically powerful states.

Diplomatic restraint may therefore reflect calculated national interest rather than policy inconsistency. Realism thus explains the selective application of reciprocity, particularly where economic cooperation, foreign investment, or regional stability are perceived to outweigh the benefits of confrontational diplomacy.

While Role Theory and Realism provide the primary analytical foundations, Liberal Institutionalism offers additional insight into Nigeria's preference for dialogue, negotiation, and multilateral engagement. Liberal theorists argue that international institutions and legal regimes facilitate cooperation by establishing shared rules and reducing uncertainty among states (Keohane, 1984; Ruggie, 1998). Nigeria's reliance on diplomatic protests, bilateral consultations, ECOWAS mechanisms, and international legal frameworks reflects confidence in institutional approaches to resolving disputes involving its citizens abroad. This perspective helps explain why Nigeria frequently seeks negotiated solutions before considering reciprocal diplomatic measures.

Constructivism further enriches the analysis by highlighting the influence of ideas, identity, and social norms on foreign policy behaviour. Constructivist scholars maintain that state interests are socially constructed and evolve in response to changing domestic and international expectations (Wendt, 1999). The emergence of citizens' diplomacy reflects changing societal expectations within Nigeria, where citizens increasingly demand that foreign policy deliver tangible protection and welfare benefits. Public reactions to xenophobic attacks, discriminatory immigration policies, and other instances of maltreatment have contributed to redefining Nigeria's national interest to include the effective protection of its citizens abroad alongside traditional concerns of sovereignty and regional influence.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a coherent explanation of Nigeria's contemporary foreign policy. Foreign Policy Role Theory explains Nigeria's leadership identity and diplomatic responsibilities, Realism accounts for strategic calculations underlying the selective use of reciprocity, Liberal Institutionalism explains the preference for cooperative diplomatic engagement, and Constructivism demonstrates how evolving societal expectations have elevated citizens' welfare as a foreign policy objective. By integrating these complementary perspectives within a clearly defined hierarchy, this study provides a comprehensive analytical framework for examining the relationship between citizens' diplomacy and reciprocity in contemporary Nigerian foreign policy.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study research design because it seeks to examine how citizens' diplomacy and reciprocity have been applied in Nigerian foreign policy. The qualitative approach is appropriate for analysing diplomatic practices, policy documents, official statements, and selected international incidents that illustrate the operation of these concepts.

The study relies primarily on secondary sources, including government policy documents, Ministry of Foreign Affairs publications, academic journal articles, books, newspaper reports from reputable media organisations, communiqués of regional organisations, and official speeches by Nigerian policymakers. These documentary sources provide sufficient empirical evidence for understanding the evolution and implementation of citizens' diplomacy.

Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis. The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes relating to citizen protection, diplomatic reciprocity, foreign policy responses, and state behaviour. Three illustrative cases; the xenophobic attacks against Nigerians in South Africa, visa restrictions imposed by the United Arab Emirates, and diplomatic tensions between Nigeria and Ghana were selected because they represent different dimensions of challenges confronting Nigerian citizens abroad and demonstrate varying applications of reciprocity.

Nigeria was selected because it occupies a leading position in African diplomacy while simultaneously facing persistent challenges in protecting its citizens overseas. This dual position provides an appropriate context for examining the relationship between foreign policy aspirations and citizen-centred diplomacy.

The study is limited by its dependence on documentary evidence and the absence of interviews with diplomats or policymakers. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as analytical rather than statistically generalisable.

**Historical Evolution of Nigerian Foreign Policy**

Foreign policy is the critical area of politics which bridges the all – important boundary between the nation state and its international environment (Wallace, 1971). Nigeria's foreign policy has been traditional in its conceptual and execution, passive or reactive at its best and conciliatory in attitude at its worst. The doctrine of reciprocity breaks new ground, in the sense that it departs from these outdated modes of thought and actions, and attempts to introduce the analytical tools of deterrence strategy into Nigeria's diplomatic realities. Thus, historical evolution of Nigerian foreign policy provides essential context for understanding the emergence of citizens' diplomacy and the selective application of reciprocity. Since independence in 1960, Nigeria's external relations have been shaped by its colonial legacy, internal political dynamics, economic conditions, and regional ambitions. Retrospectively, in the immediate post-independence period, Nigeria adopted a conservative and state-centric foreign policy. The Balewa administration emphasized non-alignment, respect for sovereignty, and multilateral cooperation, particularly within the Commonwealth and the United Nations (Aluko, 1981).

Foreign policy during this era prioritized regime stability and international legitimacy, with limited attention to the protection of individual citizensabroad.Hence, the Nigerian Civil War between 1967 and 1970 marked a turning point in foreign policy assertiveness. External support for the secessionist Biafra movement heightened Nigeria's sensitivity to international interference and reinforced a commitment to territorial integrity (Stremlau, 1977). Following the

war, the oil boom of the 1970s enabled Nigeria to pursue a more activist and Afrocentric foreign policy. Under the leadership of Murtala Mohammed and Olusegun Obasanjo, Nigeria emerged as a vocal supporter of African liberation movements and regional peace initiatives (Akinyemi, 1989). During this period, foreign policy was driven by ideological and continental ambitions rather than citizen-centered concerns. But, economic decline in the 1980s and the adoption of structural adjustment policies significantly constrained Nigeria's diplomatic activism. Military regimes during this era prioritized regime survival and external legitimacy, often at the expense of citizen welfare. As economic hardship intensified, migration increased, exposing Nigerians abroad to discrimination and vulnerability, yet foreign policy responses remained limited and reactive (Ojo, 2014).

Pathetically, Nigeria's international image deteriorated further during the 1990s due to prolonged military rule, human rights abuses, and diplomatic isolation. Nigerians abroad increasingly faced stigmatization associated with the state's negative global reputation (Adebajo, 2008). Despite these challenges, foreign policy remained elite-driven, with weak institutional mechanisms for addressing citizens' grievances. Hence, the return to democratic governance in 1999 marked a gradual shift in foreign policy orientation. Democratic norms expanded public participation and accountability, creating space for new policy ideas. Citizens' diplomacy emerged within this context, gaining prominence during the Yar'Adua administration as a response to the growing visibility of Nigerians abroad and recurrent incidents of maltreatment (Adeniji, 2010). The policy reflected a broader attempt to humanize Nigerian foreign policy and align it with democratic expectations.

OjoMaduekwe, Nigeria's Minister of Foreign Affairs under the Yar'Adua civilian administration, justified and explained the introduction of citizen diplomacy thus:

Our foreign policy has come of age and the age of innocence is over. We remain proud of our tract record from Tafawa Balewa up till now. The country that is the largest Black Nation in the world could not have done otherwise. A world where one in every six black men in the world is a Nigeria could not have done otherwise or where one in every four African is a Nigerian could not have done otherwise. We should ask ourselves some hard questions: to what extent has our foreign policy benefitted Nigerians? To what extent has our foreign policy put food on our tables? In other words, where is the citizen in our foreign policy? (Maduekwe, cited in Ogunsanwo, 2007:2).

According to Maduekwe, this new foreign policy thrust would entail an international behavior characterized by a "diplomacy of consequences" or, put differently, a principle of responsible reaction and reciprocity with states, in which the acts of Nigeria towards other countries, and vice versa, would be determined by reciprocal niceness (Onyearu, 2008).

In view of this, Adeniji (2004:4) emphasized that Nigeria's foreign policy has been redefined to "Reciprocal Order" which is a principle of giving and receiving in return. Thus,

commence an era of mutual corresponding international economic relations thrust that put away the old Father Christmas and donations without returns. The then foreign minister remarked that the new foreign idea would guide Nigeria in her relations with other nations as well as help the government to maximize her economic and financial resources and above all, Nigeria would be able to recap abundantly from the external environment. Even though greater efforts were directed to develop Western Capitalist States, a lot of room was left for improvement on South – South cooperation, integration of West Africa and indeed African economies.

In the post-2010 period, globalization, digital communication, and the growing economic significance of the Nigerian diaspora further transformed foreign policy expectations. Diaspora remittances became a major source of foreign exchange, reinforcing the strategic importance of Nigerians abroad (World Bank, 2023). While government responses to crises such as xenophobic attacks and conflict evacuations became more visible, sustained reciprocal measures remained limited due to strategic and power constraints.

This historical trajectory demonstrates that Nigerian foreign policy has gradually evolved from elite-driven diplomacy toward a more people-centered orientation. However, the persistence of strategic restraint and institutional weaknesses continues to shape t balance between citizens' diplomacy and reciprocity.

Empirical Analysis of Case studies

The disconnect between Nigeria's normative diplomatic status and the operational vulnerabilities of its diaspora necessitates an empirical assessment. Rather than treating citizens' diplomacy and reciprocity as separate, abstract constructs, this section systematically analyses three distinct case studies: South Africa, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Ghana. By integrating Foreign Policy Role Theory and Realism, these cases demonstrate how asymmetric economic interdependencies, sub-state xenophobic dynamics, and institutional deficits either enhance or constrain the strategic implementation of reciprocity to achieve citizen protection.

**Case Study 1: South Africa—Sub-State Xenophobia and Asymmetric Diplomatic Leverage**

Bilateral relations between Nigeria and South Africa since 1999 have been characterized by an underlying structural tension between competitive continental hegemonic aspirations and profound domestic socioeconomic anxieties (Omitola&Akinboye, 2022). This dynamic manifests acutely in recurring waves of xenophobic violence targeted at African migrants, prominently featuring Nigerian nationals.

The structural vulnerabilities facing Nigerian citizens in South Africa are deeply intertwined with the domestic political economy of the host state. According to Statistics South Africa, the national poverty headcount ratio reached 55.5% under the upper-bound poverty line, with structural unemployment figures exceeding 32% (African Development Bank, 2023). This

economic stagnation has historically catalysed the systemic scapegoating of foreign nationals for unemployment, infrastructure deficits, and localized crime indices (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020).

During the acute xenophobic crises of 2008, 2015, and 2019, empirical data collected by civil society organizations and diplomatic reports indicated substantial targeting of small-scale commercial entities. In the 2019 violence alone, over 500 Nigerian nationals required emergency evacuation via private initiatives funded by Air Peace, which repatriated approximately 505 Nigerians from Johannesburg free of charge. Despite these recurring crises, the state-centered, Afrocentric traditions within the Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs historically constrained robust retaliatory responses, as Nigeria sought to protect its normative identity as a pan-African unifier (Chidozie&Ibietan, 2022).

**The Failure of Asymmetric Reciprocity**

The application of reciprocity in this bilateral context is structurally constrained by an asymmetric economic matrix. While the Nigerian presence in South Africa consists predominantly of informal retailers, small-to-medium enterprise (SME) owners, and skilled professionals, South African economic presence in Nigeria comprises high-capital, institutional corporate entities such as MTN Group, MultiChoice (DSTV), and Stanbic IBTC.

When domestic public pressure forced the Nigerian government to contemplate reciprocity during the 2019 crisis, the policy could not be executed symmetrically at an institutional level without inflicting severe damage on Nigeria's own domestic telecommunications and financial infrastructure. Consequently, Nigeria’s "citizens' diplomacy" was reduced to a reactive, non-state repatriation framework rather than an active, state-enforced retaliatory posture. This confirms the Realist axiom that material structural capabilities dictate the parameters of foreign policy choices, overriding the normative aspirations of Role Theory.

**Case Study 2: The United Arab Emirates (UAE) - Institutional Asymmetry and Visa Geopolitics**

The diplomatic impasse between Nigeria and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) between 2022 and 2024 offers an empirical demonstration of how institutional reciprocity operates within asymmetric consular and immigration frameworks.

In October 2022, the UAE immigration authorities imposed a blanket visa ban on Nigerian nationals, systematically rejecting all incoming applications and declaring visa processing fees non-refundable (State House, 2023). This institutional restriction was executed in tandem with severe flight frequency caps imposed on Nigeria’s flag carrier, Air Peace, which contrasted sharply with the multiple daily slots enjoyed by Emirates and Etihad Airlines within the Nigerian aviation market.

The economic and consular consequences of this dispute were substantial. Prior to the restriction, bilateral non-oil trade between the two nations stood at approximately $4.3 billion in 2024 (Onje, 2026). The total suspension of direct aviation links and commercial visas resulted in a near-total collapse of regular commercial traffic for thousands of Nigerian micro-traders, real estate investors, and medical tourists who used Dubai as a primary hub.

The resolution of this bilateral friction required sustained high-level executive diplomacy, culminating in structural agreements that restored travel access. By 2025, following the lifting of the restrictions, non-oil trade volumes recovered to $5.0 billion, and over 15,000 Nigerian nationals successfully processed travel visas to the UAE within a single calendar year (Onje, 2026).

| Indicator | 2024 | 2025 | Change |
|---|---|---|---|
| Bilateral Non-Oil Trade Volume | US$4.3 billion | US$5.0 billion | +US$700 million (+16.3%) |

Source: UAE Embassy / Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abuja (2026)

From a Realist perspective, the UAE case illustrates the strategic execution of negative reciprocity within a regulated institutional sphere. Unlike the decentralized, sub-state violence observed in South Africa, the UAE dispute was entirely state-managed. Nigeria's initial response was structurally impeded by its dependence on foreign direct investment and capital flight pathways to Dubai.

However, Nigeria's primary leverage point rested on its domestic aviation market, which represents a highly lucrative routing sector for Emirati state carriers. When Nigeria implemented counter-restrictions on Emirates Airlines' flight frequencies under the Bilateral Air Services Agreement (BASA), it demonstrated that negative institutional reciprocity could impose quantifiable material costs on the opposing state. This strategic calibration confirms that citizens' diplomacy achieves institutional credibility only when backed by the state's willingness to disrupt bilateral commercial benefits symmetrically.

**Case Study 3: Ghana - Intra-Regional Retail Disputes and ECOWAS Normative Contradictions**

The recurring diplomatic disputes between Nigeria and Ghana regarding retail trade protections illuminate a structural contradiction between the supranational mandates of regional integration and domestic protectionist legislations.

The primary source of modern diplomatic friction between Abuja and Accra stems from the enforcement of Section 27 of the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre (GIPC) Act 865. This domestic law explicitly prohibits foreign nationals from engaging in retail trade markets unless they meet a minimum foreign capital investment threshold of $1,000,000 in cash or goods, alongside the mandatory employment of at least twenty skilled Ghanaian citizens.

Between 2019 and 2020, Ghanaian inter-agency task forces, acting in concert with the Ghana Union of Traders' Associations (GUTA), executed the systematic closure of over 400 shops owned by Nigerian retail traders in Accra and Kumasi (Wikipedia, 2026). This regulatory enforcement precipitated severe economic displacement for thousands of Nigerian expatriates. The National Association of Nigerian Traders (NANTS) documented millions of dollars in lost inventory and structural operational disruptions, arguing that the enforcement directly contravened the 1979 ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment.

Ghana Investment Promotion Centre (GIPC) Act 865: Section 27 Requirements

| **Provision/Outcome** | **Requirement / Observation** |
|---|---|
| Minimum Foreign Capital Requirement (Trading Enterprises) | US$1,000,000 |
| Minimum Local Employment Requirement | At least 20 skilled Ghanaian citizens |
| Activities Reserved for Ghanaians (Section 27, Act 865) | Market trading, petty trading, hawking, and other specified retail operations |
| Observed Outcome (2019-2020 Enforcement) | Closure of more than 400 Nigerian-owned shops for alleged non-compliance with the GIPC Act |

The Ghanaian case presents a severe challenge to the operationalization of citizens' diplomacy within a shared regional block. Historically, Nigeria and Ghana have shared deeply integrated, yet cyclical, migration frictions. This history is anchored by major structural precedents, including Ghana’s 1969 Aliens Compliance Order which expelled an estimated 140,000 to 191,000 Nigerians, and Nigeria’s retaliatory 1983 expulsion of over 1.0 million undocumented Ghanaian economic migrants during a period of acute macroeconomic distress (Mail & Guardian, 2019).

In the contemporary context, Nigeria’s foreign policy response has been constrained by its commitment to the institutional integrity of ECOWAS. Because Nigeria performs the structural role of a regional hegemon (Role Theory), it cannot easily implement aggressive, protectionist retaliatory measures against Ghanaian retailers in Lagos or Kano without fundamentally subverting its grand strategy of promoting West African economic integration.

Consequently, Ghana's domestic application of Act 865 exposed the limitations of citizens' diplomacy when it is uncoupled from real economic reciprocity. By prioritizing abstract regional prestige over immediate material retaliation, Nigeria's diplomatic mechanisms failed to deter domestic legislative enforcement in Accra, rendering its defensive stance ineffective for informal diaspora traders.

**Comparative Evaluation of the Case Studies**

The following matrix compares how different structural variables across the three selected case studies directly influence the operational efficacy of Nigeria's citizens' diplomacy.

| State Actor | Nature of Threat | Core Statistical / Empirical Variable | Operational Efficacy of Reciprocity | Conceptual Impact on Citizens' Diplomacy |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| South Africa | Sub-state xenophobic violence and asset destruction. | 55.5% national poverty headcount; 505 citizens evacuated via Air Peace (2019). | Low: Inhibited by asymmetric corporate investments (MTN, DSTV). | Ineffective; reduces state action to reactive humanitarian evacuation. |
| United Arab Emirates | Institutional visa ban and aviation slot restrictions. | Non-oil trade dropped to $4.3B (2024); recovered to $5.0B with 15,000+ visas (2025). | High: Achieved via symmetrical counter-restrictions under BASA frameworks. | Effective; demonstrates that credible negative reciprocity restores protection. |
| Ghana | Regulatory closures of retail markets via domestic laws. | Section 27 of GIPC Act 865 enforced to close 400+ Nigerian retail shops (2019–2020). | Low: Constrained by regional integration norms and ECOWAS protocols. | Weakened; reveals how normative role commitments can undermine citizen protection. |

*Source: Authors' Computation (2026)*

**Tensions and Policy Dilemmas Between Citizen's Diplomacy and Reciprocity**

The coexistence of citizens' diplomacy and reciprocity in Nigerian foreign policy generates a set of enduring tensions that reflect deeper structural and normative dilemmas in international relations. While both approaches aim to protect national interest and dignity, they operate according to different logics. Citizens' diplomacy prioritizes human welfare, moral responsibility, and rights-based engagement, whereas reciprocity emphasizes strategic response, conditionality, and power balancing. Managing the interaction between these logics has proven to be one of the most difficult challenges in Nigeria's external relations. Notwithstanding, citizenship diplomacy was geared towards achieving Nigeria's foreign policy objectives and national interest that suffered under Afro – centric philosophy of Nigeria's foreign policy.

One major source of tension arises from power asymmetry in the international system. Scholars of realism argue that reciprocity presumes a degree of equality among actors, yet the global system is characterized by unequal power relations that constrain weaker states (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). Nigeria's ability to apply reciprocal measures against powerful states is therefore limited. While citizens' diplomacy demands robust action in defence of Nigerians

abroad, reciprocity often becomes selective or symbolic when strategic costs are high. This asymmetry creates a perception gap between public expectations and diplomatic reality, fuelling domestic dissatisfaction with foreign policy outcomes.

A second dilemma stems from Nigeria's regional leadership role. Nigeria has historically positioned itself as a stabilizing force in West Africa and a leading voice in continental diplomacy. Foreign policy role theory suggests that states act in ways consistent with their self-ascribed international roles (Holsti, 1970; Gambari, 2008). Aggressive reciprocal actions, such as visa restrictions or economic retaliation, may undermine Nigeria's leadership image and strain regional cooperation. As a result, policymakers often prioritize diplomatic restraint over confrontation, even when citizens' diplomacy would appear to justify stronger responses.

Institutional capacity also shapes the tension between these two approaches. Citizens' diplomacy requires well-resourced embassies, efficient consular services, and coordinated crisis response mechanisms. In contrast, effective reciprocity requires strategic planning, legal preparedness, and inter-agency coordination. Nigeria's diplomatic institutions often lack the resources and coherence needed to implement either approach consistently (Ogunsanwo, 2019). This institutional weakness leads to reactive policy responses that satisfy neither moral nor strategic objectives.

Another important dilemma relates to the risk of unintended consequences. Scholars warn that retaliatory measures taken in the name of reciprocity can expose citizens to further harm rather than protect them (Axelrod, 2006; Keohane, 1986). For example, visa restrictions or diplomatic downgrades may provoke countermeasures that disproportionately affect migrants, students, and workers. Policymakers must therefore balance the symbolic value of reciprocity against its practical impact on vulnerable citizens. This trade-off often pushes Nigeria toward cautious diplomacy rather than assertive retaliation.

Domestic political pressure further complicates policy choices. Public outrage following incidents of xenophobia or discrimination frequently generates calls for strong reciprocal action. Constructivist scholars argue that domestic norms and public opinion play an increasing role in shaping foreign policy behaviour (Wendt, 1999; Hocking, 2016). However, short-term political responsiveness can clash with long-term diplomatic strategy. Nigerian leaders must navigate the tension between satisfying domestic demands for dignity and preserving strategic partnerships critical to economic and security interests.

Clearly, there is a normative dilemma concerning the meaning of state responsibility. Citizens' diplomacy is rooted in the idea that states have an obligation to protect their citizens wherever they are. Reciprocity, by contrast, is conditional and instrumental. When reciprocity fails to deliver tangible protection, citizens' diplomacy risks being perceived as empty rhetoric. Conversely, when reciprocity is applied without regard for humanitarian consequences, it can

undermine the moral foundation of citizens' diplomacy. The challenge lies in integrating both approaches into a coherent policy framework that is principled yet pragmatic.

So far, the tension between citizens' diplomacy and reciprocity is not merely a policy inconsistency but a reflection of Nigeria's position within the international system. These dilemmas underscore the need for a calibrated foreign policy that combines moral commitment with strategic judgment. Without such calibration, Nigerian foreign policy will continue to oscillate between rhetorical advocacy and cautious restraint, limiting its effectiveness in protecting citizens and advancing national interest.

**Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

Following the reform of Nigeria's foreign policy under Yar'Adua's Administration in 2007, Nigeria adapted citizen diplomacy in order to correct the anomalies of Nigerian foreign policy since independence. Thus, citizen diplomacy was accelerated in order to boost Nigerian's image abroad, battered by the many years of military rule and despicable conduct of few Nigerians.

This study has examined Nigerian foreign policy through the dual lenses of citizens' diplomacy and reciprocity, highlighting the opportunities, tensions, and structural constraints that shape their interaction. The analysis demonstrates that Nigerian foreign policy has undergone a gradual but significant normative shift from elite driven, state centric diplomacy toward a more people-oriented framework that recognizes the protection of citizens abroad as a core responsibility of the state. This shift reflects broader global trends in diplomacy, where human security, migration, and diaspora engagement increasingly influence foreign policy priorities. At the same time, the study reveals that citizens' diplomacy in Nigeria has been unevenly implemented and frequently constrained by strategic caution. While policy pronouncements emphasize citizen welfare, actual diplomatic practice often privileges restraint, dialogue, and multilateral engagement over robust reciprocal action. This pattern is shaped by Nigeria's position within an unequal international system, its aspiration for regional leadership, and its dependence on strategic partnerships. Reciprocity, though widely invoked in public discourse, has remained largely symbolic, applied selectively and inconsistently.

The tension between citizens' diplomacy and reciprocity is therefore not simply a failure of policy coherence but a reflection of deeper structural realities. Power asymmetries, institutional limitations, domestic political pressure, and competing foreign policy roles all influence Nigeria's ability to protect its citizens abroad. The analysis underscores that neither citizens' diplomacy nor reciprocity can function effectively in isolation. Citizens' diplomacy without credible reciprocal leverage risks becoming rhetorical, while reciprocity without a human centered framework risks escalating conflicts and harming vulnerable citizens. Ultimately, the study argues that the future effectiveness of Nigerian foreign policy depends on its ability to strategically integrate citizens' diplomacy and reciprocity into a coherent, predictable, and

principled framework. Such integration is essential not only for safeguarding Nigerians abroad but also for enhancing Nigeria's diplomatic credibility and international standing.

Therefore, for Nigerian foreign policy to effectively balance citizens' diplomacy and reciprocity, several policy measures are necessary:

First, there is a need to institutionalize citizens' diplomacy beyond political rhetoric. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should embed citizen protection as a measurable policy objective, supported by clear guidelines, performance indicators, and dedicated funding. Nigerian embassies and high commissions must be adequately resourced to provide efficient consular services, legal assistance, and crisis response. Strengthening institutional capacity is essential for transforming citizens' diplomacy from an aspirational principle into an operational reality.

Second, Nigeria should adopt a calibrated reciprocity framework that is strategic rather than reactive. Reciprocity should not be applied indiscriminately but through proportional and targeted measures that signal seriousness without provoking unnecessary escalation. Such measures could include reciprocal visa policies, diplomatic engagement reviews, and conditional cooperation in areas of mutual interest. A transparent framework would also help manage public expectations and reduce the gap between rhetoric and practice.

Third, Nigeria must deepen structured engagement with its diaspora. Given the economic and political significance of Nigerians abroad, diaspora engagement should be treated as a strategic pillar of foreign policy. Regular consultations, diaspora representation in policy advisory mechanisms, and stronger communication channels between embassies and diaspora organizations would enhance trust and cooperation. This approach aligns citizens' diplomacy with long term national development objectives.

Fourth, inter agency coordination should be strengthened. Effective citizens' diplomacy and reciprocity require collaboration among the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, immigration authorities, security agencies, and relevant domestic institutions. Fragmented responses weaken policy impact and undermine credibility. A coordinated framework would ensure consistency in diplomatic messaging and action.

Fifth, Nigeria should leverage multilateral and regional institutions more strategically. While bilateral diplomacy remains important, sustained engagement within the African Union, ECOWAS, and global human rights regimes can amplify Nigeria's voice and reduce the risks associated with unilateral reciprocal actions. Multilateral pressure often provides a safer and more effective avenue for addressing systemic discrimination against citizens.

Finally, public communication and transparency should be improved. Government responses to incidents involving Nigerians abroad should be timely, clear, and informative. Transparent communication builds public trust and reinforces the legitimacy of foreign policy decisions, even when strategic restraint is necessary.

In sum, Nigerian foreign policy stands at a critical intersection between moral responsibility and strategic calculation. Citizens' diplomacy and reciprocity are not competing doctrines but complementary tools that must be carefully balanced. When integrated within a coherent framework, they can enhance Nigeria's ability to protect its citizens, assert its dignity, and maintain constructive international relations. Achieving this balance requires institutional reform, strategic clarity, and sustained political will. Without these, the promise of citizens' diplomacy will remain unfulfilled, and reciprocity will continue to oscillate between symbolism and restraint.

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