



AN ANALYCAL FORECAST OF NIGERIA-SOUTH AFRICA BI-LATERAL RELATIONS: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

By

ABDULRASHID SANI, PhD

*Department of Political Science and International Relations,
Faculty of Social Sciences, Kaduna State University, Kaduna.
07036164831,gimisco85@gmail.com*

Abstract

This study examines the bilateral relations between Nigeria and South Africa from 1999 to 2023, using realist theory to analyze the dynamics of their interactions. The study explores how both nations have leveraged their economic and military capabilities to safeguard their national interests within a competitive regional environment. The methodology involves a qualitative analysis of political, economic, and diplomatic documents, along with secondary data from scholarly articles and government reports. The findings reveal that, despite the political and economic ties during the apartheid era, significant disruptions emerged after the end of apartheid, negatively affecting political, diplomatic, socio-cultural, and economic exchanges. Formal diplomatic relations were established in 1994, with High Commissions opened in Pretoria and Lagos. The Bi-National Commission (BNC), founded in 1999, has played a crucial role in strengthening these relations, particularly in the economic and political domains. Notable agreements, such as the Bilateral Trade Agreement, the Reciprocal Promotion and Protection of Investments Agreement, and the Avoidance of Double Taxation Agreement, reflect both countries' commitment to enhancing bilateral ties. Despite these efforts, the study highlights the ongoing competition for regional power, which has led to tensions and conflicts. This rivalry often hampers cooperation on regional and global issues. The study concludes with recommendations for both nations to focus on building mutual trust, enhancing economic cooperation and reducing competitive tensions in order to achieve broader regional and global objectives.

Keywords: *Nigeria-South Africa, Bilateral Relations, Politics, Regional Hegemony*

1. Introduction

It is common knowledge that Nigeria and South Africa are the largest economies in Africa, holding the first and second positions, respectively. As key players in continental development, they play a crucial role in regional diplomatic relations, with Nigeria influencing West Africa and South Africa shaping Southern Africa. Both countries have made concerted efforts to position Africa as a significant global actor in international relations (Banjo, 2010).

Nigeria's Afro-centric foreign policy has historically driven its engagement with South Africa, particularly during the apartheid era. Nigeria's confrontational stance against apartheid led to South



Africa's expulsion from the Commonwealth of Nations in 1961 (Banjo,2010). Additionally, Nigeria played a pivotal role in the international response to the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni Nine, which led to global protests and Nigeria's suspension from the Commonwealth.

The restoration of democratic rule in Nigeria in 1999 marked a significant turning point in the country's relations with South Africa. The establishment of the Bi-National Commission (BNC) in October 1999 and the launch of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) in 2001 aimed to strengthen bilateral relations. Trade between the two nations increased significantly between 1999 and 2008, reaching 22.8 billion South African Rand (Otto, 2012). However, relations between Nigeria and South Africa have been complex, marked by both cooperation and tension. Scholars have described this dynamic as a "love-hate" relationship (Agbu, 2010) and an "unspoken rivalry" (Games, 2013). The competition for leadership in Africa is rooted in the Afro-centric philosophical foundations of both countries' foreign policies.

This paper examines the trade, economic, and political relations between Nigeria and South Africa, exploring the inconsistencies in these areas. The study covers the period from 1999 to 2023, emphasizing Nigeria's return to civilian rule and its implications for bilateral relations between the two nations.

Historical Overview of Nigeria-South Africa Bi-lateral Relations

Nigeria's relationship with South Africa dates back to the early 1960s, driven by their shared struggle for the liberation of colonized African nations, particularly in Southern Africa. Nigeria's foreign policy has consistently been Africa-centric, with a primary focus on ending colonialism and advancing African liberation (Agbu et al., 2013). Nigeria played a pivotal role in opposing apartheid in South Africa, advocating for economic sanctions, including banning the importation of South African goods. The country was also a leading voice in the international community, calling for further sanctions against the apartheid regime (Agbu, 2010:439). Furthermore, Nigeria chaired the United Nations Security Council during the apartheid period and was a key member of the Frontline States, despite its geographical distance from South Africa (Olanrewaju, 2013:51).

The apartheid system was marked by the systemic repression of black South Africans, racial segregation, and the forced expropriation of land from the black majority. The African National Congress (ANC), Pan African Congress (PAC), and South African Youth Revolutionary Council (SAYRC) emerged as central figures in the fight for equality and the end of apartheid. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Nigeria continued to support the anti-apartheid movement, providing both financial and moral backing to revolutionary groups in South Africa. The country also used sports as a political tool, successfully mobilizing 26 African nations to boycott the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal, Canada, in protest against apartheid. The dismantling of the apartheid regime in 1994 marked a significant turning point in Nigeria-South Africa relations. Following this, the two countries established formal diplomatic ties, with the opening of High Commissions in Pretoria and Lagos in 1994. Additionally, a Bi-National Commission (BNC) was created in 1999 to enhance bilateral relations, particularly in the economic sector.



Literature Review

Nigeria-South Africa bilateral relations are characterized by volatility and tension, particularly regarding their respective leadership roles (Landsberg, 2012). Prior to 1999, the literature focused on Nigeria's pivotal role in dismantling apartheid in South Africa and the expected reciprocity from the post-apartheid state. Since 1999, however, the focus has shifted to analyzing the détente, economic revival, and the complex "love-hate" relationship between the two nations. Games (2013) identifies cooperation and competition as defining features of Nigeria-South Africa relations, shaped by leadership issues and differing approaches to continental challenges. The democratic stance of Nelson Mandela and the authoritarian nature of General Sani Abacha led to strained relations between 1995 and 1999. In contrast, the friendship between Thabo Mbeki and Olusegun Obasanjo helped foster cordial relations post-1999.

Games attributes Nigeria's economic struggles to domestic issues, including weak institutions, poor infrastructure, and over-reliance on crude oil exports to South Africa. However, his arguments have been criticized for their subjective nature and for failing to address the impact of xenophobic attacks on Nigerian businesses in South Africa. Ngwenya (2010) and Obi (2015) agree that the establishment of the Bi-National Commission (BNC) significantly improved bilateral relations. Obi underscores the importance of cooperation between Nigeria and South Africa to achieve regional development goals. Amuwo (2014) observes the decline of Nigeria's influence in continental affairs, while South Africa has made notable strides in economics, governance, and infrastructure.

Agbu (2010) explores the future prospects of Nigeria-South Africa relations, highlighting domestic obstacles such as South Africa's predominantly white bureaucracy and Nigeria's infrastructural deficits. Banjo (2010) emphasizes the need to strengthen the BNC to improve economic relations and achieve greater synergy. Sega and Lekaba (2014) examine Nigeria-South Africa relations within the context of Nigeria's GDP rebasing, arguing that economic growth in Nigeria is increasingly tied to South African investment, and that cooperation between the two nations can enhance intra-African trade.

Adekeye and Landsberg (2003) assess the rivalry between Nigeria and South Africa, suggesting that their competing hegemonic aspirations could lead to anti-hegemonic alliances and exacerbate regional tensions. Olaitan (Nigerian Tribune, 2003) compares the leadership styles of the two countries, describing Nigeria's leadership as a "mirage" due to the predatory nature of its political class. These analyses underscore the periodic rivalry and competition in Nigeria-South Africa relations, driven by conflicting national interests. To effectively lead regional development, these relations should prioritize both national strategic interests and regional imperatives.

Theoretical Framework

Theory is an essential ingredient in any study, as it provides a clear foundational structure upon which the research is anchored. Thus, the paper employed realist theory as a theoretical base, this is largely due to the level of the quest for hegemony associated with Nigeria- South Africa bi-lateral relations. This article relied on realist theory, because the assertion of the realist theory on this research work is very influential in relations to how nations relates. Realist theory is an approach which seeks to explain



issues and events such as social conflicts through their histories as they happen practically, Jae (2019). It emerged as a reaction to the idealism. Realism as a theory seeks to explain, describe and predict the direction and behavior of an individuals, groups or state in both domestic and international system as they are clear in terms.

To Morgenthau (1973), who is one of the exponent founder of the theory, it seeks to pledge motive and ideological preferences in studying and understanding the behavioral pattern and orientation of both state and non-states interactions (Alkali, 2003). Nicolas and Morgenthau were among the pioneers and leading proponents of the realist school. They contended that people by nature are inherently sinful and wicked, Jae (20219). As the nature of international media so is the nature of an individual in an existing society or community. The primary obligation or objectives of every individual in a tribe or community is to get his interest achieved. Man is always selfish, wicked, selfish-centered and always has some interest to get in his desires achieved or protected he coheres, conflicts or competes with other individuals, groups or actors because are always scarce Jae (2019).

An In-Depth Analysis of Bilateral Relations Between Nigeria and South Africa

The existing body of literature on international relations highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of Nigeria-South Africa bilateral relations over the years. These ties encompass a wide array of areas, including trade, investment, political collaboration, and economic cooperation. Additionally, the two nations have worked together on multilateral initiatives and developed strong people-to-people connections. Their partnership is evident in key initiatives such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), as well as in the significant presence of South African companies in the Nigerian market. This body of work reveals the intricacies and depth of the relationship, shaped by both cooperative and competitive forces.

The Bi-lateral Political Engagements

The Obasanjo and Mbeki era (1999-2008) faced significant challenges, inheriting a debt-ridden Africa with far-reaching implications for stability, security, and development. To address these concerns, the administrations opted for economic diplomacy and African renaissance, seeking to position Africa as a key player in global development. Nigeria and South Africa played crucial roles in advocating for debt cancellation and technology transfer from developed economies to Africa. In 2000, Obasanjo, Mbeki, and Algerian leader Abdelaziz Bouteflika attended the G-8 meeting in Japan, strongly pushing for debt forgiveness.

The Bi-National Commission (BNC) negotiations led to 20 key agreements between 1999 and 2008, improving bilateral relations. However, xenophobic attacks on Nigerians in 2008 raised questions about the historic friendship between the countries. Suspicion and mistrust grew, fueled by incidents like the 2004 insult of President Olusegun Obasanjo by a Johannesburg radio presenter (Games, 2013). Despite efforts to improve relations, challenges persisted. The deportation of Nigerians from South Africa in 2012 and the arm scandal in 2014, where Pretoria seized \$15 million from the Nigerian government, threatened to derail relations (Agwuchi, 2012; Alechenu, 2012; Fadeyi, 2012). Enhancing Nigeria-South Africa relations is crucial, given their significant political and economic influence in the region. The trajectory of their relationship will likely impact Africa's growth and development.



Bilateral Trade and Investment Relations

Nigeria, with a population of 160 million and a GDP of 509.9 billion (following the rebasing exercise in April 2014), is the largest economy in Africa. South Africa, with a population of 51.19 million and a GDP of 384.3 billion, is the second-largest economy on the continent (The Guardian Newspaper, 07 April, 2014: 1a). The Bi-National Commission (BNC) has provided a platform for strategic partnerships aimed at strengthening bilateral relations and promoting Africa's economic development. Key agreements were made in October 1999 and April 2000, focusing on issues such as the avoidance of double taxation, protection of investments, and cooperation in mining, energy, and exploration (Banjo, 2010). As a result, over 100 South African companies have invested in the Nigerian market, including major firms like MTN (which had 55.4 million subscribers in 2014), Shoprite, Stanbic Bank, and Digital Satellite Television (DSTV) (MTN Group Limited, 30 September, 2014). Similarly, Nigerian companies have made substantial investments in South Africa. The Dangote Group has invested nearly \$400 million in cement production, and Oando Oil Company is listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange.

In similar vein, Oil constitutes over 95 percent of Nigeria's exports to South Africa (Nagar and Paterson, 2012). In October 2000, South Africa increased its crude oil imports from Nigeria, signaling a rise in economic relations (Ogoegbulem, 2000). Bilateral trade grew significantly from ZAR 174 million in 1998 to ZAR 22.8 billion in 2008, accounting for nearly a quarter of South Africa's total trade with Africa that year (Otto, 2012). South Africa's exports to Nigeria increased from ZAR 505 million to ZAR 7.1 billion, while Nigeria's exports to South Africa rose from ZAR 15.7 billion to ZAR 123.6 billion during the same period (Otto, 2012). By 2010, South Africa's exports to Nigeria amounted to ZAR 4.38 billion, and Nigeria's exports to South Africa stood at ZAR 16.08 billion, with total trade reaching ZAR 20.46 billion. In 2014, these figures saw further growth, reflecting a significant leap in trade volume.

Multi-lateral Dimensions of Nigeria and South Africa Relations

Nigeria and South Africa have maintained complex multi-lateral relations since the Obasanjo and Mbeki administrations, driven by their commitment to international organizations such as the African Union (AU), United Nations (UN), and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Their cooperation has been facilitated through regional organizations like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Development Commission (SADC).

However, their relations have been strained by various factors, including the invitation of South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki to the G-8 summit in 2006, which raised suspicions about South Africa's leadership ambitions in the region. The struggle for African permanent representation on the UN Security Council has also created tension between the two nations, with Nigeria and South Africa having competing interests (Agbu, 2013). Other points of contention include their differing approaches to conflict resolution, such as in the cases of Ivory Coast and Libya. Nigeria has preferred military action, while South Africa has advocated for political negotiations. These differences have led to perceptions of South Africa's interference in regional issues and its pursuit of African leadership.

The competition between Nigeria and South Africa has also been fueled by their economic differences, with South Africa perceived as having a stronger economy and larger industrial base. South Africa's



membership in BRICS and the G-20 has further raised anxiety in Nigeria about its own leadership role in the region. Despite these challenges, it is essential for Nigeria and South Africa to maintain healthy relations, as their cooperation is crucial for regional economic growth, trade, and political stability. However, their multi-lateral relations are characterized by intense rivalries and competitiveness, which can hinder the growth of intra-African trade and economic relations (Olanrewaju, 2013).

Conclusion

The relationship between Nigeria and South Africa has been complex, marked by both cooperation and conflict. Despite this, their cordial relations are crucial for Africa's development, given their significant economic influence. The two nations have deviated from their core objective of leading economic growth and development in Africa, and instead, have resorted to rivalry on leadership status, creating setbacks since the Obasanjo and Mbeki administrations.

Recommendations

To strengthen Nigeria and South Africa's ties, the following steps can be taken:

1. Create enabling environment for foreign investment and remove trade restrictions to address trade imbalances and promote foreign investment that complements national drives to develop indigenous capital formation.
2. Diversify Nigerian economy, expand Nigeria's manufacturing base to increase trade articles and deepen trade terms.
3. Address xenophobic attacks thereby creating concrete measures should be taken to address xenophobic attacks on foreigners in South Africa to prevent further straining relations.
4. Formalize African representation by establishing a formal mechanism within the African Union to determine African representation in international organizations and rotate positions among states.
5. -v. Prioritize regional imperatives by focusing on regional imperatives rather than rivalry and competition to foster economic growth and development in Africa.
6. The Nigeria-South Africa relationship has significant implications for Africa's development, and prioritizing these recommendations can help strengthen their ties and promote economic growth in the continent.

References

- Adamson, W. I. (1980). *Hegemony and revolution: A study of Antonio Gramsci's theory of power*.
- Adekeye, A., & Landsberg, C. (2003). South Africa and Nigeria's regional hegemons. In M. Baregu & C. Landsberg (Eds.), *From Cape to Congo: Southern evolving security challenges* (pp. 185–204). Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Agbu, O. (2010). Nigeria and South Africa: The future of a strategic partnership. In O. Eze (Ed.), *Beyond fifty years of Nigeria's foreign policy: Issues, challenges, and prospects* (pp. 50–68). Lagos: Nigerian Institute of International Affairs.
- Agbu, O., Okereke, E., Wapmuk, S., & Adeniyi, B. (2013). *The foreign policy environment in Nigeria and implications for Nigeria-South Africa relations: Baseline study* (SAFPI Policy Brief 54). Johannesburg: South Africa Institute of International Affairs. http://www.safpi.org/sites/default/files/publications/SAFPI_Policy_Brief_54.pdf



- Agwuchi, U. (2012). Deportation of 125 Nigerians, South Africa risk face-off. *National Accord* (Nigeria). [Http://nationalaccordnewspaper.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5704](http://nationalaccordnewspaper.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5704)
- Alechenu, J. (2012). Row: South Africa bows, apologizes to Nigeria. *Punch* (Nigeria). <https://www.punchng.com/news/row-south-africa-bows-apologises-to-nigeria>
- Amuwo, K. (2014). Nigeria's continental diplomatic thrusts: The limit of Africa's nominally biggest economy (Policy Briefing 111). Johannesburg: South African Institute of International Affairs.
- Bach, D. (2000). Regional domination and power conversion in Africa: Soft and hard hegemony. Paper presented at the African Studies Association Meeting, Nashville, Tenn.
- Banjo, A. (2010). South Africa-Nigeria diplomatic and economic relations, 1994-2004. *African Review*, 2(1), 83–101.
- Bello, O., & Hengari, A. J. (2013). Revamping Nigeria-South Africa relations: Key to continental progress. Johannesburg: South Africa Institute of International Affairs.
- Landsberg, C. (2007). South Africa, the pivotal state in Africa: New directions in South African foreign policy. In A. Habib & C. Landsberg (Eds.), *South Africa's foreign policy: Dilemmas of a new democracy* (pp. 45-62). Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.
- Landsberg, C. (2012). Nigeria-South Africa tension leaves African leadership gap. *World Politics Review Brief*. <http://wpr.vu/amwta>
- Fadeyi, R. (2012). When South Africa's envoy came to apologize. *National Mirror* (Nigeria).
- Games, D. (2013a). *Nigeria-South Africa baseline study* (SAFPI Policy Brief 44). Johannesburg: South Africa Institute of International Affairs. <http://www.safpi.org/publications/nigeria-south-africa-baseline-study>
- Games, D. (2013b). *Nigeria-South Africa baseline study: Key findings* (SAFPI Policy Brief 45). Johannesburg: South Africa Institute of International Affairs. <http://www.safpi.org/publications/nigeria-south-africa-baseline-study-key-findings>
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks* (Q. Hoare & G. N. Smith, Trans.). London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Kindleberger, C. (1973). *The world in depression, 1929-1939*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Landsberg, C. (2012). South Africa: Pivotal state or regional hegemon? *International Affairs Review*, 17(4), 33–47.
- Langalanga, A. (2014). Nigeria and South Africa should work together. *African Conflict Review*, 6(2), 44-56.
- Mansfield, E. (1992). The concentration of capabilities and the onset of war. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 36(1), 3-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002792036001001>
- Mearsheimer, J. (2001). *The tragedy of great power politics*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- MTN Group Limited. (2014). Quarterly update. <https://www.mtn.com>
- Nagar, D., & Peterson, M. (2012). *The eagle and springbok: Strengthening the Nigeria/South Africa relationship* (Policy Brief 12). Cape Town: Centre for Conflict Resolution.
- Ngwenya, X. N. (2010). Giant of Africa limp along South Africa and Nigeria. *Opinion and Analysis*. Johannesburg: South Africa Institute of International Affairs.
- Obi, C. (2015). Recalibrating South Africa's role in global economic governance: A Nigerian perspective on some strategic challenges. *Policy Insights*, 11, 6-20.



- Ochanja, N., Esebonu, N., & Ayabam, T. (2013). Personality and Nigeria's foreign policy: A comparative analysis of Obasanjo's foreign policy as military head of state and civilian president. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(78), 74-83.
- Ogoegbulem, S. (2000). South Africa to buy more of Nigeria's crude oil. *Daily Champion* (Nigeria).
- Olaitan, A. W. (2003). Between Nigeria and South Africa. *Nigeria Tribune*, p. 9.
- Olanrewaju, S. (2013). Nigeria in the history of Mandela, South Africa: An analysis of diplomatic relations. *African Diplomacy Review*, 4(2), 99-115.
- Olupohunda, B. (2013). Why do South Africans hate Nigerians? *Punch* (Nigeria), p. 24.
- Otto, L. (2012). Unpacking the South Africa-Nigeria relationship ahead of the AU summit. *Opinion and Analysis*. Johannesburg: South Africa Institute of International Affairs.
- Pfister, R. (2005). *Apartheid South Africa and African states: From pariah to middle power, 1961-1994*. London: Tauris Academic Studies.
- Sega, D., & Lekaba, F. (2014). Nigeria's economic boom: A positive outcome for intra-Africa trade. (Policy Brief 111). Pretoria: African Institute of South Africa.
- The Guardian Newspaper (Nigeria). (2014, April 7). Nigeria's role in African peacekeeping. p. 1. Accessed on March 20, 2015.
- Wright, M. (1978). *Power politics*. London: Royal Institute of International Affairs.
- Yakubu, H., & Jae, P. (2019). Theoretical aspects in peace and conflict. In H. E. Yusuf (Ed.), *Gender, security, and development in Africa* (pp. 95-107). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.