

Nigeria and the African Continental Free Trade Agreement: The Two-Level Game Analysis

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Abstract

The Nigeria's engagement with the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) highlights the complexities of balancing domestic concerns with international commitments. Without doubt, the foreign policy environments comprising the domestic and international levels play key roles in determining the outcomes of foreign policy engagements of a nation. However, what is more important and requires understanding is the linkage between the two levels and the effect of this on the conduct of foreign policy. This is the focus of this paper as it undertook an analysis of the ratification of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) by Nigeria using the two-level game theoretical framework in order to demonstrate the linkage and influence of the actors at the domestic and international levels on the conduct of Nigeria's foreign policy. The paper adopted content analysis method using secondary sources. From the analysis, it was established that the delay and eventual ratification of the AfCFTA by Nigeria was premised on the need to balance between the concerns and interests of the domestic pressure groups and the international standing of the country as well as the expected benefits that may accrue to the country from the AfCFTA. It was therefore recommended that for Nigeria's future foreign policy engagements, all the concerned actors and interest groups that may be impacted by the foreign policy outcomes should be involved in the formulation and implementation of the policy.

Keywords: Nigeria, AfCFTA, Two-Level Game Theory, Foreign Policy, Trade Agreements

Introduction

Foreign policy serves as the linkage between the domestic environment and the international environment. It is defined as the dynamic process of interaction between the changing domestic demands and support, and the changing external circumstances (Frankel, 1963). As a result of the rapid spread of globalisation, no state in the world today can afford to be in isolation and thereby making foreign policy an indispensable tool for all states. In this regard, Nigeria has not been an exemption. Through her foreign policy engagements, Nigeria has become one of the most visible and important players recognised on the African continent on the international stage. This recognition was as a result of her outstanding roles and meaningful contributions to the development of the continent and the world at large.

However, the operating environment under which the conduct of Nigeria's foreign policy takes place has significant effect on the outcomes. Therefore, understanding the domestic and the external environments of Nigeria's foreign policy and their linkage provides a sound understanding of the country's foreign policy.

The Two-Level game theory proposed by Robert Putnam posited that the power struggle is a two-level game wherein a government is pressured domestically by interest groups for domestically favourable policies while trying to minimize the possible negative consequences of pursuing such a policy (Bloja and Mano, 2020). Under this theoretical framework, there exist two levels; the national level and the international level. At the national level, domestic constituents pursue their interest by pressurising government to adopt favourable policies. At the international level, government attempts to meet the pressures and demands of their domestic constituents, while at the same time seek to minimize the possible negative effects (Meinderts, 2020). The manifestation of this is that for a successful foreign policy conduct, a leader must be able to manage the pressure of the domestic demands at the international level. This is the focus of this paper as it seeks to demonstrate the influence of the domestic actors and international levels as well as their linkage on the conduct of Nigeria's foreign policy.

For the purpose of this paper, the focus was on the conduct of Nigeria's foreign policy under the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari (2015-2023) in order to establish the influence of domestic and international environments on the formulation and implementation of Nigeria's foreign policy during the period. Based on Robert Putnam's Two-Level game theory, the conduct of Nigeria's foreign policy regarding the ratification of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) will be analysed. The choice of the agreement is in line with the position of Africa as a centrepiece of Nigeria's foreign policy. In summary, what can be said is that while foreign policy serves as a link between two distinct realms, the domestic and the external environment, at the same time, it also helps to distinguish between the two. Thus, foreign policy both divided and joined the state and the international system. For the methodology, the paper relied on qualitative research approach and it was based on secondary sources.

An Overview of Nigeria's Foreign Policy under President Muhammadu Buhari

President Muhammadu Buhari gained political power during one of the most critical period in the history of Nigeria. After three unsuccessful attempts in 2003, 2007 and 2015, he was able to defeat his main challenger, the then incumbent President, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan in the 2015 presidential election. The outcome of the 2015 presidential election was significant not only because it represented a historical landmark in which an opposition political party ousted the ruling party but also because of its far-reaching implications for Nigeria's foreign policy (Bukarambe, Agbu, Wapmuk and Ilesanmi, 2020). For instance, the outcome of the election helped to burnish the image of Nigeria and her credentials as a true democratic nation and as well the global expectation of her leadership role on the African continent. Similarly, the election outcome helped put to rest the lingering questions over the country's future and survival as a nation.

On assumption of office, the Buhari administration was confronted with many challenges due to many years of mismanagement and maladministration. With his inauguration, many expected a new dawn for the country. According to Bukarambe, Agbu, Wapmuk and Ilesanmi, (2020), this confidence was based on the personality of President Buhari as a visionary and anti-corruption crusader. Similarly, based on his campaign promises, it was expected that Nigeria's foreign policy would witness a new era during his administration. However, as they further observed, the operating environment he met on ground was quite different from what he had experienced as a military ruler between 1983 and 1985. While Nigeria's foreign policy may be seen as a

continuum, an accurate examination of Nigeria's foreign policy under Buhari administration cannot be done without considering the internal and external environments which constitutes the background for the conduct of the foreign policy.

The challenge of insecurity posed by Boko Haram terrorists in the north-eastern part of Nigeria represented the most difficult internal security problem in the history of the country since the end of the civil war. The activities of the Boko Haram terrorist had affected not only the north-east but almost all the sectors of the entire country as well. Therefore, security was on top of the Buhari government's agenda. The Buhari administration was proactive in tackling this problem. In doing this, he focused on strengthening relations with Nigeria's neighbours. Consequently, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) was reinvigorated with fresh impetus, operational mandate, concept of operations, delineation of operational boundaries and considerable funding as well as troop contribution (Tor and Bala, 2020).

Furthermore, on combating insecurity, the Buhari administration's foreign policy focused on strengthening cooperation and partnership at the regional, continental and global levels. Through these efforts, President Buhari was able to secure the purchase of Tucano aircrafts which was previously denied to his predecessor, President Goodluck Jonathan, by the United States to fight the terrorists. With these measures, the Buhari administration was able to prosecute the fight against the insurgents. Therefore, there is a general consensus that although bombing is still taking place, the administration was able to reduce the capability of the Boko Haram insurgents (Saliu, 2016).

On the economic front, in 2014 Nigerian economy had just overtaken South Africa's economy to become the largest economy in Africa (Oluoch, 2014). This was few months to the time President Buhari assumed office. Notwithstanding this, the situations of the critical sectors of the economy were nothing to write home about. The situation was compounded by a heavy drop in all prices in the global market. Thus, within few months of coming to power of President Buhari, the Nigerian economy entered into recession for the first time in twenty five years (Odubajo, 2017). To revitalize the economy, President Buhari embarked on foreign trips to attract foreign investment into the country. The president made more than 26 foreign trips within a short period of coming to power. Despite these efforts, the economy of Nigeria remained weak. It was only his trip to China, according to Attah (2020), which seemed to yield some positives with the Chinese government offering a loan package of six billion dollar and a currency swap deal to reduce the lopsided trade imbalance between the two countries.

On relations with the neighbouring countries, President Buhari on assumption of office embarked on trips to Niger and Chad as part of his first international visits. This was subsequently followed by trips to Cameroon, Guinea and Benin Republic. The aims of the visits were to re-invigorate brotherly relations with these countries and to solicit their support in the war against terrorism. These diplomatic shuttles yielded positive result with the commitment of these countries to support Nigeria in the war against the Boko Haram insurgents (Echono, 2023).

However, the decision of the Buhari administration to close the country's land borders with the neighbouring countries in August 2019 adversely affected relations between Nigeria and the countries concerned. The aim of the policy was to stop the smuggling of arms and ammunition and foreign goods, especially rice, into Nigeria in order to reduce insecurity and encourage domestic production. In the opinion of Abiola (2023), the border closure saw Nigeria caught between her desire for a strong economy with solid agricultural development and a good

relationship with her neighbours. With an estimated population of 200 million people, Nigeria leveraged on her demographic power which served as market for the rest of the West Africa owing to lack of compliance by the neighbouring countries to the rules guiding cross-border trade (Uchechukwu, 2023). The borders were reopened after a year in December 2020.

An important area where demographic considerations influence the conduct of Nigeria's foreign policy is on the issue of Nigerians in diaspora. It was estimated that there are about 70 million Nigerians living in diaspora (Uchechukwu, 2023). Due to the poor economic situation of the country, Uchechukwu (2023) observed that the number of Nigerian professionals migrating abroad in search of greener pastures is on the increase. Also, he further observed that Nigeria is one of the largest market and recruiting ground of students for major tertiary institutions around the world including those in China, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. It is estimated that nearly 100,000 Nigerian students enrolled abroad in 2020.

In recognition of the significance of the diaspora in the conduct of Nigeria's external relations, President Buhari approved the creation of the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NIDCOM) to see to the interest of Nigerians in diaspora. The commission is domiciled in the foreign affairs ministry. Since its establishment in May 2019, NIDCOM, under the leadership of the former Senior Special Assistant to the President on Foreign Affairs and Diaspora Relations, Mrs. Abike Dabiri, had dedicated efforts towards addressing specific issues confronting Nigerians in diaspora. These include amongst others organisation of town hall meetings with Nigerians abroad, intervention during xenophobic attacks on Nigerians in South Africa and Ghana, evacuation of stranded Nigerians back home during the crisis in Ukraine and Sudan, provision of assistance to Nigerians who have experienced trafficking and responding to petitions from Nigerians abroad (Abiola, 2023; Uchechukwu, 2023).

The fight against corruption is one of the cornerstone of Buhari administration's policy framework with ramifications on both the domestic and foreign policies of the country. On foreign relations, the Buhari administration was consistent in exploring relevant bilateral and multilateral platforms on tackling issue of corruption and asset recovery. For instance, in September 2015, at the Conference of States parties to the United Nations Convention against Corruption, Nigeria and South Africa led the African countries to successfully sponsor and have the resolution on "Facilitating International Cooperation on Asset Recovery and the Return of Proceeds of Crime" adopted (Owasanoye, 2023). These efforts led to the selection of President Buhari by African Union as Africa's Champion on Anti-Corruption.

Under the Buhari administration, Nigerians were able to attain some key positions in international organisations. These include the election and re-election of Dr. Akinwumi Adesina as President of African Development Bank, the emergence of Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala as the Director-General of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), Arunma Oteh was the treasurer and vice-president of the World Bank between 2015 to 2018, Amina Mohammed was appointed and currently serving as the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, Tijani Muhammad-Bande was elected as president of the 74th session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2019, Bankole Adeoye was elected Commissioner of Political Affairs, Peace and Security at the African Union, and President Buhari was also elected in August 2018 to chair the ECOWAS for a one-year term (Echono, 2023; Uchechukwu, 2023).

Theoretical Analysis: Two-Level Game Theory

Putnam's Two-Level Games has been regarded as the most successful attempt in understanding the linkage between domestic and international politics involving international negotiations, bargaining and double edged diplomacy (Wachenuka, 2021). According to Vogel (2012), Putnam called his approach a metaphor instead of a theory.

Scholars are expanding on Putnam's framework by analyzing how domestic structures are influencing foreign policy outcomes. For instance, Meunier (2021) asserted that states with decentralized political institutions are experiencing greater challenges in securing international agreements due to internal opposition. Similarly, Moravcsik (2020) suggested that democratic states are facing stronger domestic constraints, making international commitments harder to achieve. Kagan (2022) introduced the concept of nested games, where multiple domestic and international negotiations are occurring simultaneously. Chaudoin et al. (2021) further argued that public opinion and lobbying from interest groups are significantly shaping trade policy decisions, reinforcing the domestic constraints outlined in Putnam's theory.

The two-level game theory addresses the role of domestic preferences and coalition, political institutions and dynamics on foreign policy. This means that by examining a state's domestic constituents, an accurate indication of how domestic influences affect foreign policy making can be made (Putnam, 1988). Domestic influence on foreign policy exists in the form of the range of foreign policy options being restricted by what is acceptable at a domestic level. The significance of this theory lies in the fact that domestic issues will have to be considered before available foreign policy options can be determined.

Putnam conceptualized diplomatic negotiations as a two-level game whereby national and international politics intercept. This interaction between the two-levels manifests in the fact that a leader who ignores domestic pressures or who favours domestic politics above international issues will not be able to successfully conduct foreign policy (Putnam, 1988). Whether at the bilateral or multilateral levels, government officials regularly engage in "two-level games" played simultaneously at the domestic and international levels (Conceicao-Heldt and Mello, 2017). The focus of the two-level game is on the effects of intra-national interest groups on foreign policy and vice-versa. That is, how the domestic interest groups affect the nation's relations at the international level and how the various interests at the international levels affect the domestic setting.

The international environment is full of complexities and highly complicated. Each of the participants on the international scene comes with interest it seeks to achieve and protects and therefore full of expectations. These interests are products of its domestic expectations and are shaped by domestic political institutions and politics. On the other hand, since each participant comes with its interests, the interests of these participants may align or clash thereby leading to cooperation or competition. In doing this, the needs to consider and protect the domestic interest is important but at the same time take into consideration and balance the interests of the other players on the international scene. Among the core components of Two-level Game model is Win-sets. Win-sets represent the possible outcomes that are mostly acceptable to the domestic interest groups who either must ratify the agreement or provide the government with some other forms of backing. To generate a win-set (acceptable outcomes), the chief negotiator must as a matter necessity in the course of negotiations engages in discussions and specific collaborations

with the most influential authorities at the domestic level, gather their support and build coalitions (Wachenuka, 2021, Panda, 2020).

All opponents on the international levels have their own domestic win-sets and it is only when there is overlapping of the various win-sets that an agreement can be reached and ratified. That is, it is only if win-sets of all states involved in the negotiation process coincide that an agreement becomes possible (Panda, 2020). This means the possible outcomes of the negotiations must be accepted to the domestic interest groups of all participants at the international level. Under these circumstances, each negotiation seeks to satisfy opponents on the international level and at the same time, reduce the negative consequences at the domestic level. At the national level, which is called Level II by Putnam, domestic groups try to influence the government for their own interest while at the international level, which Putnam calls Level I, government seek to satisfy the internal pressure by these interest groups. This is based on the realization that any agreement found at Level I must be ratified at Level II (Vogel, 2012).

At level II (national level), intra-state groups pursue their interests by exerting pressure on national government to adopt policies that are favourable to them and politicians try to gain power, through constructing coalitions among the groups. At the same time at level I (international level), national governments try to maximize their own ability to satisfy domestic pressure while minimizing the adverse consequences of foreign developments (Wachenuka, 2021). Therefore, negotiators must not only have to take care of their counterparts in the international arena, but also have to keep their national constituents in mind. Thus, the negotiator's actions must be somewhat coherent on both levels, although it may not be possible to both satisfy the national level and keep negotiations on going at the international level (Vogel, 2012). The ability to do this successfully requires great ingenuity from the negotiator. This is what marks out a successful negotiator from others.

Nigeria and the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA): The Two-Level Game Analysis

Inter-Africa trade is one of the major objectives of Nigeria's foreign policy because inter-Africa trade has always been beneficial to Nigeria. For instance, in the second quarter of 2024, exports to the whole of Africa from Nigeria were estimated at 2.911 trillion naira which represented 9.13 % of its total foreign trade during the same period (Nnorom, 2024). In theory, the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) is a market integration agreement that present an equal opportunity and open market. It is designed to substantially remove obstructions to the movement of goods and services across Africa at the initial implementation stages. It is envisaged that ultimately the initial progression would result into a customs union with free movement of capital and business persons (Adeniji, 2020).

As Adeniji (2020) further observed, the AfCFTA is predicated on the potential of creating an enlarged marketplace for the estimated 1.2 billion people inhabiting the continent. The immediate benefit anticipated is the increase in intra-Africa trade which currently stands at a paltry 10% of the total trade in Africa. It is emphasize that an increase in inter-Africa trade would positively impacted on industrial development, economic diversification and growth and as well it would help to showcase to the world Africa's robust potential for global investments, among other key advantages. When fully implemented, AfCFTA is expected to significantly impact how individual countries negotiate with the rest of the world in terms of trade agreement.

Therefore, it is envisaged that African leaders would have stronger bargaining power on all continental and global trade issues under the AfCFTA (Adeniji, 2020).

Despite these lofty goals and in view of the pivotal roles that Nigeria played in bringing to reality the AfCFTA, the country was among the 11 countries that failed to sign the draft agreement at the 18th extraordinary session of the Assembly of the African Union Heads of State and Government on March 21 2018 in Kigali, Rwanda. The Nigerian government announced that it was delaying the signature so as to widen and deepen domestic consultations to ensure all concerns were addressed. This came on the heels of stiff opposition by the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and other interest groups in the country. For these groups, the attempt by the Nigerian government to sign the treaty without proper consultation and input of all interested groups have been received on issues concerning market access and enforcement of rules of origin was “extremely dangerous” as it would open the country’s airports, seaports and other businesses to unbridled foreign interference and domination (Adeniji, 2020).

Scholars also noted that Nigeria’s skepticism was influenced by its past experiences with regional trade agreements, such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), which is creating trade imbalances due to weak enforcement mechanisms (Ogunleye, 2022). Another major obstacle identified is weak industrial capacity, as the country’s manufacturing sector is struggling to compete with more industrialized African economies such as South Africa and Egypt (Ogunleye, 2022). Also, border security issues are creating trade distortions, as smuggling and weak enforcement mechanisms are allowing goods from non-African countries to enter Nigeria disguised as African products (false origins), thereby undermining fair competition (Eze, 2023). Additionally, the country’s reliance on crude oil exports is making policymakers cautious about diversifying into non-oil trade without adequate safeguards (Ibrahim, 2023).

On the other hand, some other Nigerians expressed opposition to the delay by the Nigerian government to sign the treaty. For instance, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, the former President of Nigeria, expressed disappointment that despite the leading role the country played in promoting the idea, it was not among the 44 countries that signed the treaty (Adeniji, 2020). This is because despite the identified challenges, AfCFTA is presenting Nigeria with significant opportunities. The agreement provides a platform for Nigeria to expand its services sector, particularly in fintech, banking, and the creative industries, where the country is holding a strong comparative advantage (World Bank, 2021).

Furthermore, if properly implemented, AfCFTA is positioning Nigeria as a major hub for intra-African trade and investment, allowing it to benefit from a larger consumer market and increased economic cooperation with other African nations (Ukaoha, 2023). In addition, according to the World Bank (2021), AfCFTA is poised to lift 30 million Africans out of poverty by 2035, with Nigeria standing to gain significantly due to its large market size and economic capacity. Also, it was suggested that if Nigeria can address the internal challenges affecting productivity she can take full advantage of the opportunities that AfCFTA is set to offer. With the signing of the treaty, Nigerian exports to the rest of Africa will increase owing to the AfCFTA (Abiola, 2023; Uchechukwu, 2023). For instance, if Nigeria is disadvantaged in the area of production of goods, its services sector such as cultural output in the film and music industry can benefit.

Furthermore, Nigeria’s refusal to join the AfCFTA would no doubt have greatly detracted from its credibility. This is because demographically, Nigeria constituted the largest share in the estimated 1.2 billion people (the market force) in the free trade area. This would not only affect

the volume of inter- Africa trade but also the bargaining power of the continent on global trade issues. At the same time, the refusal would have impacted negatively on Nigeria's standing on the Africa continents. This would be unthinkable for a country whose constitution (or by law) makes Africa the centre of her foreign policy. Therefore, politically, by ratifying the agreement, the AfCFTA would serve as a platform to strengthen Nigeria's leadership role in African economic diplomacy (Adetula, 2022). Thus, the country is reaffirming its commitment to regional trade integration, ensuring that it remains influential in shaping African trade policies (Olawale, 2023).

As a result of these divergent views, President Muhammadu Buhari inaugurated a Presidential Committee for Impact and Readiness Assessment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) on October 23, 2018 with the mandate to advise the government on the key concerns relating to rule of origin, smuggling arising from the difficulties of border controls, preferential trade agreements, low capacity and capability of local businesses to conduct international trade, costly finance, insufficient energy and transport logistics (Adeniji, 2020). This strategic move allowed the government to demonstrate responsiveness to domestic stakeholders while signaling its willingness to engage in regional economic cooperation.

Following extensive consultations, Nigeria eventually ratified AfCFTA in November 2020. The decision reflected the government's attempt to balance competing interests—addressing the concerns of local industries while ensuring that Nigeria remains an influential player in African trade policies (UNECA, 2021). By doing so, Nigeria was aligning itself with AfCFTA's broader objectives while implementing measures to protect key sectors of its economy. Nigeria's engagement with the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) exemplified the complexities of balancing domestic economic concerns with regional trade commitments. The country's delayed signing and eventual ratification of AfCFTA reflected the challenges of navigating between domestic interest groups and international obligations.

At the domestic level (Level II), Nigeria's decision-making process was influenced by strong opposition from key economic stakeholders, including the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN), the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), and the National Association of Nigerian Traders (NANTS) (Adeniji, 2023). These groups argued that Nigeria's industrial sector is not competitive enough to withstand the expected influx of goods from other African countries. Concerns were raised over the risk of job losses, the dominance of foreign goods in local markets, and the potential erosion of Nigeria's industrial base (Eze, 2023). As a result, these domestic actors exerted significant pressure on the government and thereby delayed the signing of the agreement. This was in line with the view of Chaudoin et al. (2021) who argued that public opinion and lobbying from interest groups are significantly shaping trade policy decisions, reinforcing the domestic constraints outlined in Putnam's theory.

At the international level (Level I), Nigeria faced mounting pressure to sign the AfCFTA, given its position as Africa's largest economy and a key player in regional economic integration (Olawale, 2023). Other African nations and regional organizations, including the African Union, also expected Nigeria to take a leadership role in promoting continental trade liberalization. Nigeria's refusal to sign the agreement initially generated concerns about its commitment to African economic unity and raising questions about its role in shaping trade policies on the continent (Ukaoha, 2023). In the light of the above discussions, the initial refusal and the eventual signing of the AfCFTA treaty by Nigeria under the administration of President

Muhammadu Buhari could be regarded as a power struggle between the country's domestic and international interests. This also aligned with the opinion of Meinderts (2020). On this basis, Nigeria's behaviour in the signing of the AfCFTA treaty can be analysed using the two-level game theory.

At the national level, which is called Level II by Putnam, domestic groups try to influence the government for their own interest while at the international level, which Putnam calls Level I, government seek to satisfy the internal pressure by these interest groups. This is based on the realization that any agreement found at Level I must be ratified at Level II (Vogel, 2012). At level II (national level), intra-state groups pursue their interests by exerting pressure on national government to adopt policies that are favourable to them and politicians try to gain power, through constructing coalitions among the groups. At the same time at level I (international level), national governments try to maximize their own ability to satisfy domestic pressure while minimizing the adverse consequences of foreign developments (Wachenuka, 2021).

The administration of President Buhari tried to manage the domestic pressure and demands at the international level through limiting or by minimizing the possible negative consequences of it on the conduct of Nigeria's foreign policy. This was done by reaching a favourable agreement with domestic groups which also satisfy the country's interest on the continent. This led to the eventual ratification of AfCFTA by Nigeria. This position is supported by Wachenuka, (2021) and Panda, (2020) who stated that among the core components of Two-level Game model is Win-sets. Win-sets represent the possible outcomes that are mostly acceptable to the domestic interest groups who either must ratify the agreement or provide the government with some other forms of backing.

To generate a win-set (acceptable outcomes), the chief negotiator must as a matter necessity in the course of negotiations engages in discussions and specific collaborations with the most influential authorities at the domestic level, gather their support and build coalitions (Wachenuka, 2021, Panda, 2020). Thus, through the above analysis, Nigeria's AfCFTA negotiations had been used to illustrate the core principles of Two-Level Game Theory. The government strategically managed domestic opposition while responding to international expectations, demonstrating the complexities of foreign policy decision-making in a highly interconnected world.

Conclusion

This paper has been able to undertake an analysis of Nigeria's AfCFTA negotiations under the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari. Using the two-level game theory, the influence of the foreign policy environment (domestic and international levels) on the conduct of foreign policy was analysed with focus on the ratification of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) by Nigeria. From the analysis, it was concluded that the delay and eventual ratification of the AfCFTA by Nigeria was premised on the need to balance between the concerns and interests of the domestic pressure groups and the international standing of the country as well as the expected benefits that may accrue to the country from the AfCFTA. This, thereby, clearly demonstrated the impact of the actors at the domestic and international levels on the conduct of Nigeria's foreign policy as well as the linkage between the actors.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this paper, the following recommendations are being made for Nigeria's future foreign policy engagements:

- i. Ensuring inclusive stakeholder consultations: The government should be actively involving all relevant actors—including labor unions, trade associations, and business leaders—in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy decisions. This is to ensure that policies are reflecting the interests of domestic stakeholders while aligning with international commitments.
- ii. Strengthening industrial competitiveness: Nigeria should address structural economic challenges by investing in infrastructure, supporting local industries, and implementing policies that enhance the competitiveness of domestic businesses. This will enable the country to maximize the benefits of AfCFTA while mitigating potential risks.
- iii. Enhancing trade facilitation measures: The government should improve border security, enforcing trade regulations, and simplifying trade procedures to prevent unfair competition and smuggling. These measures will ensure that Nigerian industries are not being disadvantaged in the regional trade environment.
- iv. Leveraging AfCFTA for economic diversification: Nigeria should utilize AfCFTA as an opportunity to expand its non-oil sectors, particularly in services, manufacturing, and technology. This will position the country as a key player in Africa's emerging trade ecosystem and reducing its dependence on oil exports.
- v. Maintaining a balanced foreign policy approach: Nigeria's foreign policy should prioritise both national economic interests and regional leadership responsibilities. By adopting a flexible and adaptive approach to trade negotiations, it will ensure that the country remains competitive while maintaining its influence in African economic diplomacy.

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