

GEOPOLITICS AND NIGERIA'S RESPONSE TO RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE

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Abstract

This study delves into the realm of geopolitics by analyzing Nigeria's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Against the backdrop of escalating tensions in Eastern Europe, Nigeria's stance holds significant implications for its foreign policy outlook and regional dynamics. The paper examines Nigeria's historical relations with both Russia and Ukraine, highlighting key diplomatic engagements and geopolitical alignments. Furthermore, it explores the economic and strategic considerations guiding Nigeria's response, including energy dependencies, international partnerships, and regional stability concerns. By analyzing Nigeria's response to the Ukraine crisis, this paper offers insights into the complex interplay of global power dynamics and regional interests, shedding light on the evolving landscape of geopolitics in the 21st century.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, Geopolitics, Invasion and Conflict, Russia, Ukraine,

Introduction

In context, Russia's invasion of Ukraine defines a post-liberal global order. This is because the invasion posed enormous challenges for international peace and security. The impacts of the invasion were also felt by the countries of the Global South, including Nigeria. While Moscow's behaviour had elicited a strong response from Western countries, led by the United States and its allies, they have imposed regimes of hurtful sanctions on Moscow. However, some countries from the Global South refrained from toeing the line of Western sanctions but merely condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine's territorial integrity. On Nigeria's response, hers was cautious, navigating between her value-driven foreign policy goals and expressing independent but cautious pragmatic behaviour.

The immediate official response of Nigeria was a form of surprise that Russia could flagrantly aggress on an independent Ukraine territory (Ajala, 2022). Furthermore, the Nigerian government issued another official response condemning Russia's "special military operation¹" in Ukraine and called for an immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine's territory (Okafor, 2022). Abuja played in her candid action a passive neutrality card in her response to Russia's invasion. Unlike the West, led by the United States rolled out regimes of comprehensive sanctions on Russia, Nigeria's response was understandable in the context of her guiding value-driven foreign policy objectives which are:

1. Respect for every state's sovereignty and independence in line with international norms and conventions.
2. Recognition of the right of every independent state to defend its territorial integrity against any form of aggression.
3. Promoting world peace and security.
4. Maintaining cooperation and friendliness with other countries.

Abuja's display of a neutral stance on the imposition of sanctions on Russia was also a demonstration of cautious pragmatism. Although, Abuja aligned with the UN norms by also condemning Russia's

¹ Russia's operation in Ukraine was dubbed a 'special military operation.'

behaviour, her position on the United Nations General Assembly's (UNGA) resolutions showed she acted in line with her national interest goals. For instance, her voting behaviour as stated in the table below revealed her position on the invasion.

Nigeria's Voting Pattern in UNGA on the Russia/Ukraine Conflict

Date	UNGA resolutions	Voting Pattern
02-Mar 2022	Condemnation	Y
07-Apr-2022	Suspend	A
12-Oct-2022	Annex	Y
14-Nov-2022	Reparation	A
23-Feb-2023	End war	Y

A- Abstain

N- No voted against

Y- Yes in favour

Source: Author's extraction from Golpaldas R. (2023)

The table presents UNGA's resolutions since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. There were five significant votes, Nigeria had voted in favour of three and abstained on two. Abuja had voted yes in favour of the resolutions condemning Russia's invasion, affirming Ukraine's sovereignty, and demanding Russia's unconditional withdrawal. She however abstained on the second vote on suspending Russia from UNHRC; voted yes on the third resolution not to recognize Russia's annexation claims of Ukrainian territories. Cautiously abstained on the issue determining Russia paying reparation for the invasion of Ukraine war. On the fifth, Abuja voted yes in calling for an end to the war.

In analysing Nigeria's position and stance as showed in her voting patterns on UNGA, one is likely to conclude that Abuja's stance was shaped by some factors that are in tandem with her national interest. These are:

1. The tendency to act within the nonalignment ideological stance.
2. The historical relationship between her and Russia especially on Abuja's post-colonial liberation struggles, was a major plank of Nigeria's foreign policy in the 1970s and 80s.
3. Russian positive contributions to Nigeria's developmental agenda.
4. Russia's growing influence in Nigeria's energy needs and food security.

Consciously or not, Nigeria did not want to be a pawn in the re-emerging Cold War-like rivalry between the West and Russia. This is because, since the invasion, the war has assumed the dimension of the one fought on old ideological and military alliances. Therefore, it is more rational and pragmatic that Nigeria did not throw her hat in the ring to take sides with any of the warriors.

In theoretical terms, one is compelled to affirm that Nigeria acted within the prism of the Rational Actor Model (RAM). It posits that the behaviour of state actors is rational when the action agrees with a state's national interest or when the behaviour of state actors is purposeful (Schmidt and Wight 2023). In addition, a state actor is rational if her choice of action is designed to achieve outcomes consistent with her goals. The model treats foreign policy choices as the main products of the state actors. Given the narrative, a rational decision-maker considers the foreign policy goals of the nation and determines which ones take priority over others. Then, she identifies and analyzes the diverse options available and focuses on the costs and benefits associated with each option, that is, she tries to estimate the consequences of making choices. This involves not just the gains and losses, but also estimating the relative likelihood of various outcomes. The relationship between this theory and Nigeria's response to Russia's invasion was in consonance. Every state actor must be rational in the decision-making process, especially on matters of national interest. Thus, Nigeria's stance and position were at best rational within her national interest goals. Her call for condemnation, cessation

of hostility, withdrawal, and an end to the war was rationally value-driven (Schmidt and Wight 2023). Same as her position to abstain from controversial issues showed her cautious pragmatic behaviour.

Historical Background to the Russian Ukraine Invasion and Literature Review

Historically, Ukraine was part of the old Soviet Union (USSR), in 1991 Ukraine got its independence from the disintegrating USSR. The Soviet Union was a Russian-dominated political construct with the Ukrainian acting more of a puppet of the central authority in Moscow. As with many other Soviet republics, Ukraine was effectively colonised by Moscow, a relationship carried over from the pre-revolutionary era of Tsarist imperial Russia. Due to this turbulent history, Ukraine was a traumatised nation at its independence with no statecraft tradition of its own on which to build a new, independent state.

Therefore, the story of contemporary Ukraine is largely the story of its attempts to define a new future for itself in Europe and Russia's attempts to obstruct this new direction. Earlier in its independence, the Ukrainian declaration was ratified by a referendum with a 90 per cent vote making its transition to independence peaceful, with both the communists and democrats agreeing to break away, largely due to the predicted economic potential of the country (Chatham House 2022). However, the origins of the 2022 invasion lie in Russia's long-standing aspiration to control Ukraine as its periphery. Part of the agenda by Russia was to tie Ukraine's development to Russia's economic and political interests. Initially, Russia's strategy was soft coercion, but it became more assertive and aggressive due to unexpected changes in the pro-Western Ukrainian government. In particular, it was the Orange Revolution of 2004 that made the Russian government under the leadership of President Putin reconsider his tactics. His favoured candidate for the Ukrainian presidency, Viktor Yanukovich, was ousted by Victor Yushchenko, a pro-western opposition candidate.

This did not stop Russia's influence in the Ukrainian economy and politics, Russia maintained a grip on key sectors of the Ukrainian economy and politics. Ukraine's exports were still primarily to Russia, top security positions were held by individuals with Russian passports, and it was completely dependent on Russian gas: Ukraine had signed a very unfavourable gas deal in 2008, which committed it to being the largest buyer of Russian gas, at a higher than market price. Meanwhile, the Russian navy's Black Sea fleet continued to be based in Crimea, with a 2010 deal ensuring it would remain there for decades to come. However, all Ukrainian presidents (including Yanukovich) had to respond to a growing public demand for closer integration with the European Union (EU). This is because the EU offered far better economic benefits and respect for human rights than continuing ties to Russia. This did not go down well with Moscow who wished to prevent a democratic Ukraine from becoming part of the EU market, thereby upping its hostile rhetoric against the EU as well as NATO.

The annexation of Crimea

The path to annexation began when Ukraine's attempts to build closer political and trade relationships with the EU. Russia annexed Crimea during February and March 2014 when Ukraine was vulnerable with a temporary government and an unprepared military. Putin deployed 30,000 troops without insignia to seize control of the regional infrastructure and then staged a referendum to legitimize the occupation (Antwi-Boateng, Osman and Al Nuaimi, Mohammed Huwaishel, 2023). The West urged Ukraine not to react with force. Russia further aggressed by leading a revolt in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine. By creating a new problem elsewhere, Russia distracted international attention from the Crimean takeover which had been bloodless. Russian special forces, jointly with local militias in Donbas, declared independent 'people's republics' leading to open military conflict with Ukrainian armed forces.

Between 2014 and 2021 the conflict cost Ukraine more than \$10 billion, caused 14,000 deaths, and left Donbas the most landmined area in Europe. President Putin's tactic was to force Ukraine into concessions by waging this prolonged, low-intensity conflict. Even diplomatic efforts like the Minsk agreements of 2014 and 2015 could not resolve the crisis as the demand by Russia to grant unique powers and autonomous status for the Donbas region was not accepted by Ukraine (Chatman House

2022). Over time key diplomatic players such as France and Germany shifted their position to support Kyiv's interpretation of the Minsk agreement and Ukraine's gradual but steady integration with the EU as part of its Association and Trade Agreement was offensive to the sensibility of Moscow. By 24 February 2022, the Russian President ordered a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, to denazify Ukraine. Their initial objective, to swiftly install a Russian puppet government in Kyiv, failed.

Russia's invasion however has three main objectives, all of which have strong domestic motivations. First, Ukraine is viewed as belonging to the Russian 'sphere of influence', a territory rather than an independent state. Ukraine and Belarus, as former Soviet Union states, are believed to form a single historic 'triune' nation with Russia. Putin started the war to destroy Ukraine's nation-building project, aiming to restore a 'historical Russia' according to borders before 1917. Ukraine's attempts to break away are seen as a direct, Western-backed attack on Russia's sovereignty. This strong sense of entitlement drives the Kremlin to obstruct Ukraine's integration with Euro-Atlantic structures. Initially, Russia tried to use the Donbas conflict to keep Ukraine unstable, weak, toxic for Western investments, and unfit for membership in any collective security alliance, especially NATO. The 2022 invasion indicated a strategic shift as Russia sought to subjugate Ukraine by force, although this appears to have been an enormous miscalculation. Russia's second objective is to solidify its autocratic rule at home. He wants to prevent the emergence of an alternative, democratic system of government on the Russian border. A defeated, compliant Ukraine serves as a lesson to ordinary Russians – that revolution leads to disaster. A failed Ukraine is an antidote to democratic sentiments inside Russia, where memories of the chaos following the Soviet collapse remain powerful. Third, Putin uses Ukraine to feed a wider narrative of Russia as being a fortress under siege by the West and needing a strong commander-in-chief to protect its 'civilization'. In Russian media, the war in Ukraine is portrayed as a 'special operation' in response to a Western project to undermine Russia.

The Weight of Russia's Invasion on Nigeria-Russia Relations

The weight of Russia's invasion of Nigeria's socio-economic space was huge. It impacted more in two areas of economic engagement. One on her energy needs and two on her food security. Nigeria's main imports from Russia are refined petroleum, potassic fertilizer, and wheat (OEC, 2022). Nigeria's imports from Russia have increased at an annual rate of 16.5 per cent from \$27.3m to \$1.25b (OEC, 2022). In 2021, Russia's exports to Nigeria were \$1.25b and it was mainly made up of refined petroleum worth \$503m, wheat (\$493), and potassic fertilizer worth \$71.4m (OEC, 2022).

The weight on food security: According to Reinhart (2022), Nigeria relies on Russian grains and wheat, which account for over 30 per cent of the required grain need. Nigeria also imports from Ukraine US\$604.29 million worth of goods in 2021 with 80 percent of these imports on food-related imports, especially wheat and grains (Tradingeconomics, 2023). Nigeria is also one of the 10 countries with the highest number of people in the food crisis. According to the 2022 Global Report on Food Crises; 12.94 million people were in acute food insecurity in 2021 alone (HRW, 2022). With this gory data on the food-related crisis, the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) data stated further that wheat is the third most-consumed grain in Nigeria after maize and rice, and Russia was the second-largest source of wheat imports to Nigeria, meeting close to 30 per cent of her needs (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2021). The food security situation looks increasingly worrisome and frightening as the war rages and this has put more pressure on Nigeria to get enough food to feed her people.

On energy relations: Nigeria is one of the biggest African oil producers. However, her nonfunctional refining capacity has made her vulnerable and dependent on imports from European countries, especially Belgium and the Netherlands. Unfortunately, these two countries rely heavily on Russian oil, but the sanction has made fuel importation from these countries difficult. Deepening this oil challenge was a global rise in the prices of crude oil from \$63 to over \$100 per barrel. Ordinarily, Nigeria as a leading oil producer should have benefitted from the price increase, it was a dream boom but a reality doom. The oil prices were a curse rather than a blessing. This was a result of her non-existing refining capacity and as an importer of refined petroleum products from Europe, she had to bear the consequences of increased oil prices. Worsened by European sanctions or boycott of Russian

oil, sourcing for alternative oil means in economic terms an increase in demand, and in the face of short supply, the increased cost will be borne by end users, including Nigeria. Consequently, any gain from crude oil sales owing to the surge in prices was wiped out by the import of refined petroleum products regime. As the conflict grows, the prices of petroleum products such as diesel, aviation fuel, kerosene, and cooking gas surged, leading to a high cost of living and poor quality of life.

The positive story from the global energy crisis was a call for an accelerated energy transition that would move Nigeria and many other countries away from highly polluting fuels to low-carbon energy such as renewables and nuclear (IEA 2023). Nigeria has now shifted its attention to improving its energy efficiency by deploying renewables, promoting energy savings, and increasing gas supplies for domestic usage. In the same vein, her policy on energy security has gradually shifted to the Trans-Sahara Gas Pipeline with the hope of feeding the European market that was most hit in the wake of the Russian invasion. Nigeria's prospect as a gas exporter is more realistic in the wake of European blockage of Russia's oil through her plan to develop three major infrastructure projects (Pinto, 2023). These are the Ajaokuta-Kaduna-Kano pipeline (AKK), the Trans-Saharan Gas Pipeline (TSGP), linking West Africa to Europe and the Nigeria-Morocco Gas Pipeline (NMGP). These projects have received renewed attention from the Nigerian government and given Europe's new energy strategy, these projects if delivered, will surely be a game changer and usher in Nigeria as a global energy producer.

Other areas of relations: As Europe reduces its business dealings with Russia, there are attempts from the Russian nation to find an inroad to African countries. The recent presence of the Wagner group, a Russian private military contractor, whose presence in the Sahel countries of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger is creating a security concern for Nigeria. The presence of the remnant of the Islamic State and Boko Haram has continued to pose a huge security concern for Nigeria. So is the flow of illicit arms and banditry groups. Former Nigeria President, Muhammadu Buhari, believed the region's problem could worsen through armed flow from the Ukraine war (Obiezu, 2022). Even if remotely possible, it is highly unlikely as the war rages because of the ammunition needs and the distance of Sahel to the theatre of war. Russia's involvement in Nigeria's steel development was another historical line of engagement. The Russian government was involved in one of Nigeria's biggest developmental projects, the Ajaokuta steel mill, an essential component of the Nigerian industrialization agenda. The steel complex, which took off in the 1960s, was contracted to Russia's Tyazprom to build the plant and was incorporated in 1979 (Adekoya, 2022) but it has not seen the light of the day. With over \$8b invested, in 2021, Nigeria re-entered an agreement with the Russian government to complete the project. However, the new sanctions Russia is facing in the light of its invasion of Ukraine have created a setback for the project.

Nigeria's stance and how it has shaped the world order?

Nigeria's decision to condemn and call for the withdrawal of Russian troops sends a signal to how she and other African countries would like to be viewed globally. It showed how independent and rational she could be in deciding on an international issue without recourse to hegemonic considerations. Her refusal to back Western sanctions on Russia similarly demonstrated an independent decision-taker who had rationally considered many options without pandering to any of the global powerful blocs. Also, her position to abstain from voting on Russia's reparation payment was instructive. She could make a pragmatic decision without offending any party. All this signals the reality of the world order that is not constructed on a Western unipolarity or West-East bipolarity.

The statement made by her voting pattern on the UNGA resolutions provided insights into the relevance of her nonaligned ideological stance. It demonstrated that the new world order was likely to be multiplex where the sanctity of alliances may play less role in how the international order is crafted. There is no gainsaying that the voting pattern of many countries on Russia's invasion showed a lack of unity. There was hardly a common position on a matter as simple as the condemnation of Russia's aggression and assault on UN norms. This position is likely to embolden Russia and reinforce the notion of a world order as viewed by realist scholars as having no moralizing compass and that the

action of the state is based on the interest of the state. Nigeria's action and position demonstrated this and portends that the world order is likely to be constructed on the value of the state's independent rationalism.

Given the historical context of Nigerian-Russian relations, it is not out of context to conclude that her actions in voting on Russia's invasion were willingly or not willingly shaped by their historical interactions. Their relationship might have guided Nigeria to respond the way she did. This portends great insight into how the post-liberal world order could be shaped shortly. Nigeria's position reinforces that old ideological nuances will play a factor in the making and unmaking of the post-liberal world order.

While the international economic space might gradually be re-evolving in a manner that new alliances can emerge, it is Nigeria's energy policy that may be changing the trajectory of the world order. Although not yet fully realized, Nigeria's eye on the European market may usher in a new international energy order. For instance, energy projects like the Ajaokuta-Kaduna-Kano pipeline (AKK), the Trans-Saharan Gas Pipeline (TSGP), linking West Africa to Europe, and the Nigeria-Morocco Gas Pipeline (NMGP) were triggered by Russia's invasion and may redefine the global energy map that would make Nigeria a regional leader and Europe ally.

Finally, does Nigeria's position on the invasion tend toward embracing the BRICS organization? This is one question whose answer remains contentious. BRICS are countries of emerging economies, made up of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. One may not be out of tune to say all these countries tacitly backed Russia's invasion of Ukraine. I said tacitly because these countries never gave serious disapproval of Russia's behaviour and disrespect of UN norms. Therefore, could Nigeria's position be shaped by his intention to join this organization? According to the Nigerian Foreign Affairs minister, Nigeria will welcome joining the organization by the year 2026. He believed "Nigeria has come of age to decide for itself who her partners should be and where they should be. Being multiple aligned is in our best interest," (Silk Road Briefing 2023). Although this appeared speculative, the expression of the Minister revealed Nigeria's intent to join. BRICS's reputation and influence are growing globally, she and her allies such as Turkmenistan and Venezuela have already pocketed close to 73% of all global gas reserves, and with Nigeria in their kitty, BRICS nations plus their allies (Iraq and Libya) would hold over 80 per cent of all proven global oil reserves. The reality of a post-liberal world order is evolving. It is likely to dethrone Western hegemony.

Concluding Remarks

Nigeria's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been marked by cautious neutrality. The country abstained from voting on the United Nations General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's actions and has refrained from making strong public statements either in support of Ukraine or against Russia: Several key factors contribute to this stance:

1. **Economic Considerations:** Nigeria's economy, heavily reliant on oil and gas exports, faces vulnerabilities in the global energy market. Russia is a significant player in this market, and antagonizing Moscow could have economic repercussions for Nigeria. Additionally, Nigeria maintains trade relationships with both Russia and Western nations, making a neutral stance economically pragmatic.
2. **Domestic Concerns:** Nigeria is grappling with internal challenges, including economic instability, security issues, and political unrest. In this context, a non-confrontational foreign policy allows Nigeria to focus on domestic priorities without becoming entangled in distant geopolitical conflicts.
3. **Regional Dynamics:** Within the African continent, Nigeria plays a leading role and often advocates for African unity and non-interventionist policies. Aligning too closely with Western positions might alienate other African nations that favour neutrality or have stronger ties with Russia.

Nigeria's passive neutralism and cautious pragmatism have several implications for its international relations:

1. **Relations with Western Countries:** While Nigeria's neutral stance may strain some aspects of its relations with Western nations, it is unlikely to result in significant diplomatic fallout. Western countries recognize Nigeria's strategic importance in Africa and are likely to continue engaging with it on various fronts, including security, trade, and development.
2. **Relations with Russia:** By not condemning Russia outright, Nigeria maintains diplomatic channels with Moscow. This could be beneficial for bilateral relations, particularly in sectors such as energy and defence.
3. **African Unity and Leadership:** Nigeria's stance reinforces its role as a leader in advocating for African unity and non-alignment. This could enhance its influence within continental organizations like the African Union (AU) and bolster its position in regional diplomacy.

Nigeria's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine exemplifies a policy of passive neutralism and cautious pragmatism. This approach is informed by Nigeria's historical foreign policy principles, economic considerations, and domestic challenges. While it presents certain risks, particularly in relations with Western countries, it also offers opportunities for maintaining strategic autonomy and regional leadership. Understanding Nigeria's response provides insight into the complexities of international relations in a multipolar world and the nuanced positions that middle-power countries often adopt.

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