

Russia–Ukraine Conflict and Africa’s Non-Aligned Strategy: Historical and International Relations Insights from Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT: The foreign policy of non-alignment adopted by African states during the Russia–Ukraine war has been interpreted as both a mechanism to safeguard national interests and a diplomatic strategy in a multipolar world. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding how African states, particularly Nigeria, operationalize non-alignment amid contemporary geopolitical shocks and institutional constraints. This study addresses this gap by examining Nigeria’s non-aligned stance amid the conflict, focusing on its historical legacy, economic vulnerabilities, and diplomatic hedging strategies. It investigates how Nigeria balances engagement with Russia and Western powers while maintaining strategic autonomy and analyzes Nigeria’s selective voting at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and its implications for Africa’s role in global governance. Employing an exploratory qualitative research design, the study utilized secondary data from high-ranking peer-reviewed journals, official reports, and statistical sources, analyzed thematically to identify patterns in foreign policy decision-making and strategic hedging. Power Transition Theory guided the analysis, providing a framework for understanding Nigeria’s positioning within shifting global power hierarchies. Findings indicate that Nigeria’s non-aligned approach offers both opportunities and protection, enabling pragmatic engagement with global powers while minimizing coercion risks. Nonetheless, economic dependency and security vulnerabilities persist, highlighting the need for institutional safeguards and strategic frameworks. The study concludes that Nigeria’s calibrated non-alignment functions as a deliberate hedging strategy that preserves autonomy, enhances resilience, and informs contemporary African foreign policy. It contributes to knowledge by providing insights into history, international studies, political science, and security studies, and suggests that future research could conduct comparative analyses of African states’ non-alignment strategies.

KEYWORDS: Africa’s Non-Aligned Strategy, Foreign policy, Multipolarity, Nigeria, Russia-Ukraine

1- INTRODUCTION

Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the conflict’s effects have reverberated far beyond Europe, reshaping global geopolitical dynamics and prompting new alignments across the Global South. African states, navigating historical legacies and contemporary strategic calculations, have responded in diverse ways. Nigeria, a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), has reasserted its diplomatic posture of strategic autonomy amid Western pressure, reflecting a long-standing foreign policy rooted in non-alignment (Ajayi, 1985). In this context, Nigerian Foreign Minister Yusuf Tuggar has emphasized the country’s NAM heritage, highlighting diplomatic flexibility, strategic autonomy, and selective voting at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to safeguard national interests while balancing external pressures (Tuggar, 2024; Darkwa & Attuquayefio, 2024). This study examines how Nigeria’s non-aligned legacy informs its engagement with Russia amid the Ukraine conflict, highlighting Africa’s broader hedging strategies and Nigeria’s role in a multipolar global order.

Russia’s resurgence in Sub-Saharan Africa reflects an ideology-pragmatism strategy that combines civilizational narratives with transactional statecraft (Tsygankov, 2025). Moscow aims to challenge Western dominance while securing tangible economic, military, and diplomatic gains (Taiwo & Ademuyiwa, 2024; Snigyr, 2024). Within this framework, Nigeria occupies a pragmatically significant position, functioning as a transactional partner in energy, arms, and diplomatic cooperation while remaining ideologically peripheral (Tsygankov, 2025). Concurrently, Russia leverages soft power tools including public diplomacy, religious networks, and elite narratives—to expand influence across African states. In the African context, these engagements illustrate how global geopolitical shocks, such as the Russia–Ukraine conflict, impact states like Nigeria via strategic and economic channels, especially for countries reliant on imports, critical infrastructure, and international partnerships (Taiwo & Ademuyiwa, 2024; Ogunnoiki, Ani, & Iwediba, 2024).

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Nigeria’s non-aligned foreign policy tradition provides both opportunity and protection. Since independence, it has prioritized sovereign independence, engagement with multiple power centers, and strategic flexibility (Egwim, 2024). Scholars argue that this calibrated neutrality constitutes a deliberate hedging strategy: Nigeria maintains engagement with both Russia and Western powers to safeguard national interests and regional credibility (Ajayi, 1985; Talibu & Abdulrasheed, 2025). Nonetheless, such hedging carries inherent risks, particularly in security cooperation. Russia’s military engagement in Africa, including arms exports and private military actors, offers alternative security partnerships, but excessive reliance could generate long-term dependencies and reputational costs (Tsygankov, 2025; Fasanotti, 2022).

Economic vulnerabilities further reinforce the need for strategic hedging. Nigeria imports over 99% of its wheat and relies heavily on Russian and Ukrainian supplies for fertilizers, energy, and industrial inputs. Disruptions during the conflict triggered sharp price increases, exacerbating food insecurity and production costs (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2021; Guardian Nigeria, 2022; BusinessDay, 2022; Balana, Andam, Amare, Adeyanju, & Laborde, 2022; Vanguard, 2022). These trends highlight the interplay between global shocks, non-alignment, and the necessity of institutional mechanisms to protect national interests.

Despite growing research on Russia–Africa relations including analyses of Moscow’s soft-power diplomacy (Mafany & Laila, 2023), strategic communications (Babcock, 2024), and geopolitical security motives (Taiwo & Ademuyiwa, 2025), however there remains a significant gap in understanding how Nigeria operationalizes its non-aligned strategy amid the Ukraine war, particularly through institutional safeguards, economic dependencies, and diplomatic hedging practices. This study therefore addresses: How does Nigeria’s non-aligned legacy shape its engagement with Russia amid the Ukraine conflict? What institutional arrangements enable Nigeria to hedge strategically without compromising sovereignty? How do global shocks influence Nigeria’s policy choices? The objectives are to assess the interaction between Nigeria’s historical non-alignment, Russia’s Africa strategy, and domestic resilience, while proposing pathways to strengthen strategic autonomy in a multipolar world.

2: METHODOLOGY

This study employed an exploratory qualitative research design to analyze the Russia–Ukraine conflict and Africa’s non-aligned strategy, with particular focus on Nigeria. Exploratory qualitative research is appropriate for examining complex geopolitical phenomena and understanding underlying motivations, strategies, and historical contexts, especially where prior empirical studies are limited (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The qualitative approach allowed for in-depth exploration of the dynamics between Nigeria’s foreign policy, its historical non-aligned stance, and the contemporary implications of the Russia–Ukraine conflict. By prioritizing rich, descriptive data over numerical analysis, this study aimed to uncover nuanced insights into how Nigeria navigates international pressures while maintaining strategic autonomy within the global arena.

Data for this research were primarily derived from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and authoritative reports obtained from high-ranking databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, and ProQuest. Articles and reports were subjected to rigorous and systematic review, ensuring that only sources with historical and thematic relevance to the research objectives were retained, while those lacking relevance were discarded. The process involved critical evaluation of each source’s methodology, theoretical grounding, and contribution to existing knowledge on international relations, African foreign policy, and the Russia–Ukraine conflict. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns, key themes, and insights within the literature, enabling the study to synthesize historical precedents, contemporary developments, and strategic responses in a coherent analytical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2015). The use of multiple high-quality databases and meticulous selection criteria enhanced the credibility, reliability, and validity of the data.

Theoretical guidance was provided by the Power Transition Theory, which examines shifts in global power hierarchies and their influence on international relations and state behavior (Organski & Kugler, 1980). The theory was particularly useful for interpreting Nigeria’s non-aligned strategy amidst the Russia–Ukraine conflict, providing a lens through which to assess the country’s pursuit of strategic autonomy and balance between competing global powers. Power Transition Theory was integrated with qualitative thematic findings to contextualize Nigeria’s foreign policy decisions, historical alignments, and diplomatic maneuvering in response to international power shifts. By combining a rigorous literature review with a theoretically informed analytical approach, this study offers a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Nigeria’s position within the broader context of the Russia–Ukraine conflict and Africa’s non-aligned strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

3: RELATED THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Power Transition Theory was first formulated by A. F. K. Organski in his seminal work *World Politics* (1958) and later elaborated with Jacek Kugler in *The War Ledger* (1980). The theory posits that the likelihood of war and systemic instability increases during periods when the global distribution of power is shifting, particularly as rising challengers approach parity with dominant powers. It emphasises that the structure of the international system is hierarchical rather than purely anarchic, with dominant powers setting norms and shaping institutions. Hierarchical structure is therefore a key assumption, indicating that the international system is organized around a leading power rather than being fully egalitarian. The theory also assumes uneven growth, recognising that states

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grow at different rates, and that a rising power’s increasing capabilities can destabilise the status quo. Another core assumption is dissatisfaction, which suggests that rising powers may challenge the existing order if they are unhappy with the distribution of resources or influence. Parity and risk of war constitute a fourth assumption, highlighting that conflict is most likely when the challenger nears or achieves parity with the dominant power. Finally, the theory assumes preventive or pre-emptive moves, meaning that either the dominant or rising power may initiate conflict to protect or advance their relative position.

This study employs Power Transition Theory to demonstrate how Nigeria’s non-aligned strategy in response to the Russia–Ukraine conflict can be interpreted through the lens of shifting global power dynamics. Russia’s assertive actions in Eastern Europe can be seen as attempts to renegotiate the international order, asserting influence and challenging a structure dominated by Western powers, while Western sanctions and diplomatic measures highlight the efforts of established powers to contain rising threats. In this context, Nigeria’s strategic non-alignment is not passive but represents an active policy choice aimed at maintaining autonomy, balancing interests, and navigating a complex multipolar environment. The theory thus provides a conceptual framework for analysing how secondary states operate within periods of systemic flux and uncertainty, offering a way to connect global power transitions with national foreign policy decisions.

Recent scholarship illustrates the continuing relevance of Power Transition Theory in contemporary international relations. For example, J. Käkönen (2024) applied it to understand Russia’s behaviour in the Ukraine conflict, arguing that Russia’s assertiveness reflects the behaviour of a declining great power seeking to resist marginalisation. Similarly, Sawal, Zaman, and Fatima (2023) employed the theory to analyse BRICS, showing how emerging powers challenge the existing global order and interact with regional integration dynamics. However, there remains a gap in the literature, as the theory has not been widely applied to African states’ foreign policy in the context of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, particularly Nigeria’s non-aligned strategy. Applying Power Transition Theory to this phenomenon provides novel insights, emphasising the strategic agency of African states and their responses to global power shifts. The theory’s scientific contribution lies in its ability to bridge international relations theory and area studies, offering value to academic research in political science, diplomacy, and global governance, while providing practical guidance for policymakers and institutions, such as the African Union and Nigerian foreign policy bodies, in navigating multipolar tensions. Consequently, the following diagram illustrates the key assumptions of Power Transition Theory as explained in the above.

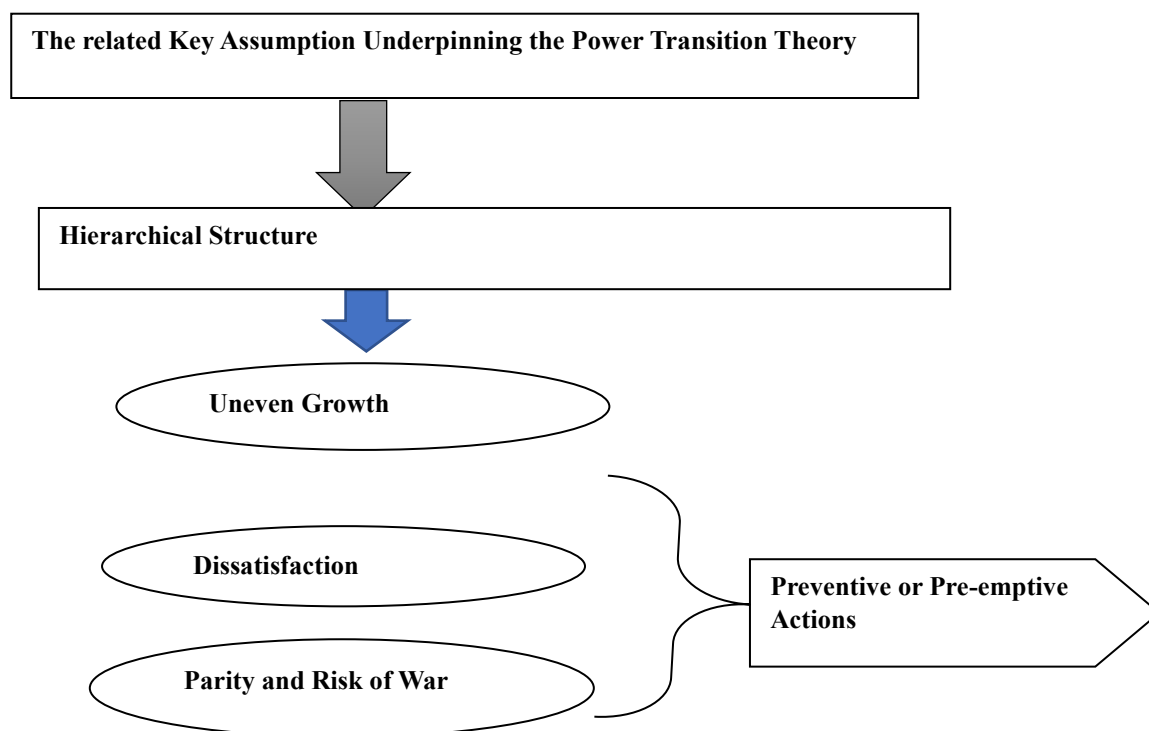


Diagram 1: Key Assumption Underpinning the Theory

Source: Researchers

4: LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1-Russia’s Ideology-Pragmatism Strategy & Nigeria’s Non-Aligned Legacy

Andrei P. Tsygankov (2025) provides a theoretically rich account of Russia’s resurgence in Sub-Saharan Africa, arguing that Moscow deploys a dual strategy combining civilizational ideology with pragmatic statecraft. He observes that Russia simultaneously

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promotes normative narratives of a post-Western, anti-hegemonic global order while engaging in transactional, economically driven partnerships with selected African states. This duality allows Moscow to advance its soft power ambitions through rhetorical legitimacy while also securing tangible gains in arms sales, energy deals, and diplomatic influence (Snigyr, 2024; Mafany & Laila, 2023). Such a hybrid strategy is particularly effective in navigating resource constraints and competing global priorities, enabling Russia to operate flexibly across diverse political and economic contexts (Tsygankov, 2025). In the African context, these engagements demonstrate how global geopolitical shocks, such as the Russia–Ukraine conflict, reverberate through the continent via both strategic and economic channels, affecting states like Nigeria that are reliant on imports, critical infrastructure, and international partnerships (Taiwo & Ademuyiwa, 2024; Ogunnoiki, Ani, & Iwediba, 2024).

Nigeria’s historical diplomatic tradition aligns closely with this ideological-pragmatic approach. Since achieving independence, Nigeria has pursued a non-aligned foreign policy emphasizing sovereign independence, strategic flexibility, and engagement with multiple power centers (Tsygankov, 2025; Mafany & Laila, 2023). Unlike states ideologically aligned with major blocs, Nigeria’s approach prioritizes pragmatic calculation over rigid ideological commitments, enabling it to navigate volatile geopolitical landscapes while maintaining national autonomy. Tsygankov (2025) describes Nigeria as a “status-quo” case in which Russia’s ideological ambitions are circumscribed and transactional considerations dominate, particularly in trade, security, and diplomatic exchanges (p. xx). In practical terms, Nigeria’s non-aligned posture functions as a buffer against coercion, permitting the country to engage foreign partners while managing vulnerabilities in economic dependencies and strategic sectors (Snigyr, 2024).

However, the literature including the scholarly works of Ogunnoiki, Ani, & Iwediba, (2024) underscores long-term risks inherent in such engagements. Russia’s ideological positioning may confer legitimacy and bolster soft power, but transactional agreements—especially in security, defense, and natural resource sectors, carry the potential to generate structural dependence. For Nigeria, short-term economic or military gains may mask longer-term vulnerabilities if institutional safeguards are absent (Taiwo & Ademuyiwa, 2024). Without transparent and accountable mechanisms, the country could face subtle leverage in political, economic, or security spheres, constraining strategic autonomy over time (Ogunnoiki, Ani, & Iwediba, 2024).

To mitigate these risks, Nigeria must institutionalize its foreign engagements. Effective policy frameworks should ensure that resource and security agreements are transparent, mutually beneficial, and integrated into broader national development strategies (Tsygankov, 2025; Mafany & Laila, 2023). Inter-agency coordination between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defense, and economic planning bodies is critical to aligning external engagements with domestic priorities. Similarly, embedding such agreements within regional and multilateral frameworks, such as the African Union or ECOWAS, enhances oversight and legitimacy (Snigyr, 2024). These institutional mechanisms transform diplomatic flexibility into tangible economic and political resilience, preventing ideological rhetoric from obscuring structural vulnerabilities.

In essence, Nigeria’s non-aligned history provides a strategic advantage. As affirmed by Tsygankov, (2025) that it enables the country to engage Russia on equal terms, pursue pragmatic cooperation, and simultaneously diversify economic and diplomatic ties. When paired with strong institutional capacity, this historical legacy allows Nigeria to buffer its economy from external shocks such as disruptions in wheat, fertilizer, and energy supply chains arising from the Russia–Ukraine conflict while preserving strategic autonomy in a multipolar world. By leveraging both historical non-alignment and robust governance structures, Nigeria can navigate the challenges of contemporary geopolitics, converting diplomatic flexibility into sustainable national advantage (Tsygankov, 2025; Taiwo & Ademuyiwa, 2024; Ogunnoiki, Ani, & Iwediba, 2024).The following table provides a comparative summary of Russia’s ideology-pragmatism strategy and Nigeria’s non-aligned legacy, highlighting strategies, objectives, risks, and institutional measures.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Russia’s Ideology-Pragmatism Strategy and Nigeria’s Non-Aligned Legacy.

Actor	Strategy/ Approach	Objectives	Risks/ Challenges	Institutional/ Measures	Policy
Russia	Ideological and Pragmatic (dual approach)	Promote post-Western, anti-hegemonic global narratives - Advance soft power legitimacy - Secure tangible gains (arms sales, energy deals, diplomatic influence)	Long-term dependence on transactional partnerships - Overextension in diverse political/economic contexts	Flexible engagement across African states - Transactional partnerships tailored to local opportunities	

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Nigeria	Non-aligned Pragmatic	/	Maintain sovereignty and strategic autonomy	Short-term economic or military gains may mask structural vulnerabilities	Strengthen domestic institutions (foreign defense, economic planning)
			Navigate multiple power centers - Buffer economy from global shocks (e.g., wheat, fertilizer, energy)	- Exposure to coercion if safeguards are weak	- Embed agreements within regional/multilateral frameworks (AU, ECOWAS) - Ensure transparency, mutual benefit, and policy alignment with national priorities

Source: Researchers develop from the literature.

4.2-Multipolarity & Great Power Competition: Russia’s Re-Pivot to Africa

Habib Badawi (2024) situates Russia’s Africa strategy within the broader vision of a multipolar world order. He contends that Moscow’s engagement is both ideologically motivated and strategically pragmatic, aiming to challenge Western hegemony while consolidating influence in resource-rich regions. Russia’s pivot to Africa, therefore, is not purely economic; it is also an effort to reconfigure global governance structures, promoting institutional weight for non-Western states (Badawi, 2024).

For Nigeria, this strategic reorientation presents both opportunities and challenges. As the most populous and geopolitically influential African state, Nigeria can leverage its position to shape multipolar governance frameworks, aligning external engagements with domestic economic and security priorities. Engagement with Russia offers a platform to advocate for Global South interests in international institutions and negotiate terms that mitigate dependency risks (Badawi, 2024).

Critics caution, however, against overestimating Russia’s capacity to institutionalize influence in Africa. While the Russian government projects a narrative of multipolarity, some engagements remain opportunistic and transactional, with limited long-term structural impact (Ramani, 2023). For Nigeria, aligning too closely with such strategies could expose it to political and economic risks without delivering sustainable institutional leverage. This underscores the importance of integrating historical awareness of non-alignment with realpolitik assessments in navigating geopolitical shocks.

Nonetheless, Ramani, (2023) is of the view that Nigeria’s agency is non-trivial. By negotiating strategic partnerships that embed capacity-building, institutional collaboration, and governance reforms, Ramani emphasised that Nigeria can maximize benefits while maintaining autonomy. Rather than merely participating in transactional deals, the country can pursue arrangements that reinforce domestic economic stability and reduce vulnerabilities to global supply chain disruptions caused by conflicts such as the Russia–Ukraine war.

If implemented effectively, Nigeria’s engagement could help co-create a multipolar order that values African voices as strategic actors rather than passive recipients of great-power largesse. This necessitates long-term thinking, institutional maturity, and strategic foreign-policy planning that balances immediate economic gains with sustainable political influence.

4.3- African Non-Alignment in Practice: UNGA Voting & Diplomatic Autonomy

African states’ voting behavior at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in response to the Russia–Ukraine conflict reflects enduring patterns of strategic non-alignment. Darkwa and Attuquayefio (2024) demonstrate that abstentions or votes against resolutions condemning Russia are often motivated less by ideological sympathy and more by pragmatic considerations of national interest and sovereignty. This behavior highlights the continued importance of diplomatic autonomy, particularly for countries navigating a multipolar global system marked by volatile geopolitical shocks. By maintaining flexibility in international forums, African states signal that they will prioritize domestic interests and regional stability over external pressures, even amid conflicts that dominate global discourse.

For Nigeria, this approach resonates with its historical identity as a non-aligned actor. Since the post-independence era, Nigeria has emphasized sovereignty, regional leadership, and the ability to manoeuvre diplomatically among competing powers. Selectively engaging with both Russia and Western countries allows Nigeria to hedge against political and economic vulnerabilities while retaining strategic manoeuvrability during crises. This approach aligns closely with the international relations (IR) concept of hedging, which posits that states facing systemic uncertainty can reduce risk exposure by cultivating multiple, sometimes competing, partnerships (Bergsten, 2022). Hedging does not equate to ideological ambivalence; rather, it reflects a calculated effort to maintain options and buffer against external shocks, whether in trade, security, or diplomacy.

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However, strategic non-alignment entails trade-offs. Abstaining from UNGA resolutions or pursuing hedging strategies can generate short-term economic or geopolitical costs. For instance, Nigeria’s reliance on critical imports such as wheat, fertilizer, and energy exposes the country to vulnerabilities when supply chains are disrupted by conflicts in supplier countries like Russia or Ukraine. Darkwa and Attuquayefio (2024) note that even states with flexible diplomatic positions may face indirect pressures from international financial institutions, donor countries, and trading partners, which can translate into tangible consequences for trade flows, investment, and aid. Therefore, diplomatic flexibility must be complemented by domestic and regional mechanisms that mitigate these risks.

Institutional capacity is essential for translating non-alignment into concrete national benefits. Nigeria’s domestic institutions spanning ministries, regulatory agencies, and strategic planning bodies—play a critical role in managing dependencies, diversifying supply chains, and negotiating effectively with foreign partners. By strengthening institutional frameworks, Nigeria can ensure that its non-aligned posture produces tangible developmental outcomes rather than symbolic diplomatic statements. This includes implementing policies that secure alternative suppliers for essential commodities, investing in domestic production capacity, and fostering regional trade integration through bodies such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to reduce reliance on conflict-affected sources.

Moreover, non-alignment provides opportunities to leverage regional and multilateral frameworks. By engaging with the African Union (AU) and other continental platforms, Nigeria can collectively negotiate with major powers, enhancing bargaining leverage while maintaining the principle of sovereign decision-making. Such engagement also reinforces the legitimacy of Nigeria’s diplomatic choices, demonstrating that its non-aligned posture is grounded in principled strategy rather than opportunism.

In sum, Nigeria’s historical commitment to non-alignment functions as a strategic asset when coupled with robust institutional capacity and proactive economic planning. By integrating hedging strategies with domestic safeguards and regional cooperation, Nigeria can navigate the challenges posed by global conflicts such as the Russia–Ukraine war while minimizing vulnerabilities and maximizing strategic autonomy. This synthesis highlights the intersection of historical foreign policy strategy, international relations theory, and economic resilience, illustrating that non-alignment is not merely a diplomatic stance but a multidimensional approach to safeguarding sovereignty and national interest in an unpredictable global system.

4.4- Security Engagement & Strategic Risk: Russia’s Role in Africa

Russia’s security engagement in Africa represents a deliberate component of its broader geopolitical strategy, aimed at expanding influence across strategically important regions while counterbalancing Western dominance. In recent years, African states have experienced a notable increase in Russian arms exports, military cooperation agreements, and the presence of private military contractors, such as the Wagner Group (Kondakov, (2022)). These engagements offer African governments, including Nigeria, an alternative pathway to strengthen national security without the stringent political conditionalities frequently imposed by Western partners (Badawi, 2024). For Nigeria, which faces persistent security challenges from insurgent groups, banditry, and organized crime, partnerships with Russia could enhance operational capacity, improve training, and provide access to advanced military technologies that might otherwise be inaccessible due to sanctions or cost constraints.

The potential benefits, however, are accompanied by significant strategic and operational risks. Overreliance on Russian security hardware, advisory personnel, or private military actors could inadvertently create long-term dependencies. Scholars of international security caution that such dependencies may constrain a nation’s strategic autonomy, leaving policymakers with reduced flexibility in foreign policy decision-making (Makinda, 2021). Makinda, For instance is critique on the exclusive reliance on a single foreign power for critical defense capabilities ad He believes that can generate structural vulnerabilities, making a state susceptible to external influence or coercion. Additionally, reputational risks emerge as African states seek to balance relations with both Western and regional partners. Heavy engagement with Russia could complicate Nigeria’s diplomatic ties with Western countries, multilateral institutions, or African regional bodies, potentially affecting trade, development assistance, or joint security operations. To mitigate these risks, Makinda, (2021). Affirmed that Nigeria must pursue a comprehensive approach that integrates legal, institutional, and multilateral frameworks. Legal mechanisms should clearly define the scope, accountability, and operational limits of foreign security partnerships. Institutional arrangements, including inter-agency coordination between the Ministry of Defense, intelligence services, and relevant civilian oversight bodies, are essential to ensure that foreign engagement aligns with national security priorities. Multilateral engagement, particularly through the African Union (AU) and subregional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), can provide an additional layer of legitimacy, operational oversight, and coordination in security matters. Such frameworks help ensure that security cooperation strengthens domestic capacity rather than undermining national sovereignty or eroding institutional resilience (Aning & Pokoo, 2020).

Scholars including Badawi, (2024) opine that Nigeria can further advocate for a multilateral African security architecture that accommodates non-Western partners while maintaining robust institutional governance. This approach positions national security within regional and international frameworks, reducing the risks associated with bilateral dependencies on any single foreign actor. By fostering partnerships that are institutionally grounded, Nigeria can benefit from diversified security cooperation while

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maintaining adherence to international norms and operational transparency. Historical experience demonstrates that Nigeria’s non-aligned posture during the Cold War allowed it to navigate competing superpower interests effectively, balancing relationships with both Eastern and Western blocs to maximize national interests without compromising sovereignty (Okolo, 2019). Applying these lessons to contemporary multipolar competition, Nigeria can pursue strategic engagement with Russia while simultaneously maintaining flexible relationships with Western partners and regional allies.

Furthermore, as noted by Kondakov, (2022) that understanding of strategic risk in the Nigerian context requires attention to the interplay between domestic and international security environments. Domestic challenges including insurgency in the Northeast, separatist agitation in the Southeast, and widespread criminality intersect with global geopolitical dynamics, amplifying vulnerabilities. Russian engagement, if properly structured, could provide specialized support in counterterrorism, intelligence sharing, and capacity-building initiatives. However, the presence of private military actors introduces additional complexity, as these entities operate in legal and ethical gray zones and are often accountable primarily to their foreign sponsors rather than host governments (Kondakov, 2022). Nigeria’s policies must therefore distinguish between state-to-state military cooperation and the involvement of private actors, ensuring that operational accountability, oversight, and integration into national security strategies are non-negotiable.

Given the above, Aning & Pokoo, (2020) noted that economic dimensions of strategic risk must also be considered. Security cooperation with Russia may carry indirect consequences for trade, foreign investment, and economic stability. In a global environment shaped by the Russia–Ukraine war and associated sanctions regimes, Nigeria’s engagements could trigger economic and diplomatic pressure from other international actors. A well-calibrated policy framework would therefore integrate security strategy with economic resilience planning, emphasizing diversified sourcing of military hardware, balanced diplomatic engagement, and contingency planning for global shocks.

5: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Russia’s Strategy and Nigeria’s Diplomatic Autonomy

This study found that Russia’s ideological-pragmatic strategy in Sub-Saharan Africa is both flexible and transactional, combining normative narratives of a post-Western global order with economically driven engagements, including arms, energy, and diplomatic deals (Tsygankov, 2025; Snigyr, 2024). The findings reveal that Nigeria’s historical non-aligned foreign policy aligns closely with this dual approach, emphasising strategic autonomy, pragmatic calculation, and engagement with multiple power centers, rather than strict ideological alignment (Mafany & Laila, 2023). The analysis highlights that Nigeria’s non-alignment functions as a buffer, allowing it to navigate external shocks—such as supply disruptions in wheat, fertilizer, and energy resulting from the Russia–Ukraine conflict—while maintaining national sovereignty and mitigating potential structural dependence.

Furthermore, the study observed that transactional engagements, while offering short-term economic and security benefits, carry inherent risks if institutional safeguards are absent, potentially constraining long-term strategic autonomy (Taiwo & Ademuyiwa, 2024; Ogunnoiki, Ani, & Iwediba, 2024). These findings underscore the importance of embedding foreign agreements within robust governance frameworks and regional institutions like the African Union or ECOWAS to enhance oversight and legitimacy. Overall, the analysis was guided by Power Transition Theory, particularly the assumption of hierarchical structure, emphasising how Nigeria, as a secondary state, strategically positions itself within a system dominated by leading powers while maintaining autonomy and leveraging diplomatic flexibility.

5.2 Multipolarity and Great Power Competition

This study observes that Russia’s pivot to Africa reflects a broader strategy to advance a multipolar world order, combining ideological motivation with pragmatic statecraft to challenge Western dominance and consolidate influence in resource-rich regions (Badawi, 2024). The results indicate that Nigeria, as Africa’s most populous and geopolitically influential state, can leverage this environment to shape multipolar governance frameworks, aligning external engagements with domestic economic and security priorities. The analysis demonstrates that engagement with Russia offers Nigeria opportunities to advocate for Global South interests and negotiate terms that mitigate dependency risks, enhancing strategic autonomy.

However, the evidence also highlights significant challenges. Some Russian engagements remain transactional and opportunistic, offering limited long-term institutional leverage (Ramani, 2023). Discussion reveals that aligning too closely with such strategies could expose Nigeria to political and economic vulnerabilities without securing sustainable influence. This study further notes that Nigeria’s historical non-alignment provides a template for balancing *realpolitik* with strategic flexibility. Overall, the findings emphasize that, guided by Power Transition Theory, particularly the uneven growth assumption which recognises that states grow at different rates and rising powers’ capabilities can destabilise the status quo Nigeria can engage Russia strategically, reinforcing domestic governance, promoting multipolar participation, and mitigating risks arising from great-power competition and global geopolitical shocks.

5.3 UNGA Voting and Diplomatic Autonomy

This study discovers that African states’ voting behavior at the UNGA during the Russia–Ukraine conflict demonstrates enduring strategic non-alignment, prioritizing pragmatic national interests over ideological alignment (Darkwa & Attuquayefio, 2024). The results indicate that abstentions or votes against resolutions condemning Russia allow states, including Nigeria, to maintain diplomatic flexibility, hedge against geopolitical risks, and safeguard domestic and regional stability (Bergsten, 2022). The analysis reveals that Nigeria’s historical non-aligned posture enables selective engagement with both Russia and Western powers, enhancing strategic maneuverability during crises.

However, the outcome also highlights trade-offs. Reliance on essential imports such as wheat, fertilizer, and energy exposes Nigeria to vulnerabilities amid global supply disruptions. Insights from the study show that domestic institutional capacity—including ministries, regulatory agencies, and strategic planning bodies—is critical to translate non-alignment into tangible benefits, diversify supply chains, and mitigate economic and geopolitical risks (Darkwa & Attuquayefio, 2024). Additionally, engagement through the African Union and ECOWAS strengthens negotiation leverage and legitimacy. Overall, the evidence underscores that, guided by Power Transition Theory, particularly the parity and risk of war assumption—which emphasizes that conflict or competition intensifies as states approach equal power—Nigeria can leverage non-alignment strategically to safeguard sovereignty, optimize national interests, and navigate a multipolar, volatile international system.

5.4 Russia’s Security Engagement and Nigeria’s Non-Aligned Strategy

This study highlights that Russia’s security engagement in Africa is a strategic effort to expand influence and counter Western dominance (Badawi, 2024). Evidence demonstrates that arms exports, military cooperation, and private military actors, including the Wagner Group, provide African states, such as Nigeria, alternative means to strengthen national security without Western conditionalities. The findings suggest that Nigeria, confronting insurgency and organized crime, can benefit from enhanced operational capacity, training, and access to advanced technologies (Makinda, 2021).

However, the analysis indicates substantial risks. Overreliance on Russian hardware or private actors may generate structural dependencies, constrain foreign policy flexibility and expose Nigeria to external influence. Discussion reveals that robust legal frameworks, inter-agency coordination, and multilateral oversight through AU and ECOWAS are essential to mitigate such risks (Aning & Pokoo, 2020; Kondakov, 2022). Overall, the study demonstrates that, guided by Power Transition Theory, particularly the dissatisfaction assumption, Nigeria can balance opportunities and dependencies while navigating multipolar security dynamics.

6: CONCLUSION

This research covers Nigeria’s historical non-alignment in the context of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, highlighting how the country navigates complex global power dynamics to safeguard sovereignty, economic stability, and national security. The study finds that Nigeria’s diplomatic flexibility allows engagement with multiple actors, including Russia and Western powers, to optimize strategic outcomes. In examining military, economic, and diplomatic dimensions, the research demonstrates that partnerships with Russia provide opportunities for capacity-building, access to advanced technologies, and broader influence in continental and global affairs, while also carrying risks of dependency, structural vulnerabilities, and potential external pressure.

Another part delves into Russia’s broader strategic reorientation toward Africa within a multipolar world. The findings reveal that Nigeria can leverage its regional influence to participate in shaping multipolar governance and advocate for Global South interests. However, the study also observes that some Russian engagements remain transactional and opportunistic, requiring Nigeria to balance short-term gains with long-term institutional and strategic resilience. By reflecting on hierarchical structure, the analysis highlights the global system’s organization around dominant powers, while uneven growth shows how rising powers’ capabilities can destabilize the status quo.

A further section examines Nigeria’s non-aligned posture in practice, including UNGA voting and hedging strategies during the conflict. The evidence demonstrates that selective engagement enhances diplomatic autonomy, mitigates systemic risk, and preserves sovereignty. The research also emphasizes **dissatisfaction**, where rising powers challenge existing global norms, parity and risk of war, where competition intensifies as powers approach equal status, and preventive/pre-emptive **moves**, highlighting how states may act to protect or advance relative positions. Domestic institutions and regional frameworks, such as the AU and ECOWAS, are critical for translating non-alignment into tangible outcomes.

In conclusion, this study employed an explorative qualitative methodology, reviewing literature from Scopus, Google Scholar, and ProQuest, analyzed thematically to ensure reliability and credibility. Guided by Power Transition Theory in its entirety, the research demonstrates that Nigeria’s non-alignment, institutional capacity, and strategic planning enable it to navigate complex multipolar dynamics, engage external powers effectively, and mitigate vulnerabilities. The study contributes academically by deepening understanding of African non-alignment under contemporary geopolitical shocks and provides practical guidance for policymakers in designing resilient foreign policy, security partnerships, and economic strategies.

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