



## **Domestic Political Consolidation and Foreign Policy Autonomy in Emerging Democracies: A Comparative Study of Nigeria and South Africa (2023-2025)**

**BY**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines how domestic political consolidation shapes foreign policy autonomy in emerging democracies, using a comparative analysis of Nigeria and South Africa during the 2023–2025 period. While both countries possess substantial material capabilities and long-standing regional leadership roles, they experienced marked constraints on their foreign policy autonomy amid electoral transitions, economic pressures, security challenges, and shifting geopolitical alignments. Drawing on neoclassical realism and two-level game theory, the study adopts a qualitative, conceptual research design based on systematic secondary data analysis to trace the domestic mechanisms through which consolidation deficits translate into constrained international agency. The findings demonstrate that foreign policy autonomy is not determined by material power alone but is critically mediated by domestic political legitimacy, institutional capacity, economic stability, security conditions, and elite consensus. In both cases, legitimacy crises undermined diplomatic credibility, economic vulnerabilities narrowed strategic options, security preoccupations diverted resources inward, and domestic veto players constrained executive flexibility in international negotiations. The study further reveals that the relationship between consolidation and autonomy is non-linear and dynamic, with feedback effects whereby foreign policy failures exacerbate domestic political weaknesses, creating reinforcing cycles of constraint. Comparatively, the analysis identifies convergent patterns of constrained regional leadership alongside divergent dynamics rooted in institutional quality, coalition politics, alliance preferences, and regional organizational contexts. These findings refine neoclassical realist theory by foregrounding political legitimacy as a critical yet under-theorized intervening variable linking domestic politics to foreign policy outcomes, and by demonstrating multiple causal pathways through which consolidation deficits limit international agency. The study concludes that sustained foreign policy autonomy in emerging democracies depends fundamentally on domestic political consolidation. By integrating insights from international relations and comparative democratization scholarship, the article contributes to broader debates on power, autonomy, and leadership in the Global South, with policy-relevant implications for democratic consolidation, regional governance, and international partnership strategies.

**Keywords:** Foreign Policy, consolidation, Nigeria, South Africa

## 1.0 Introduction

Emerging democracies in the Global South often face complex challenges in translating material capabilities into effective foreign policy outcomes. While states such as Nigeria and South Africa possess significant economic, demographic, and military resources, their international influence is frequently constrained by domestic political fragilities. These constraints manifest through legitimacy deficits, institutional weaknesses, economic vulnerabilities, and security preoccupations, which collectively shape foreign policy autonomy.

This study examines the relationship between domestic political consolidation and foreign policy autonomy in Nigeria and South Africa during 2023–2025. By employing a comparative approach, it investigates how domestic political, economic, and institutional dynamics mediate states' capacity to exercise autonomous foreign policy. The research addresses critical gaps in both neoclassical realism and democratization literature by linking domestic consolidation processes directly to international agency.

Specifically, the study explores: (i) how legitimacy crises, economic vulnerabilities, and security challenges constrained Nigeria and South Africa's regional and international leadership; (ii) the mechanisms through which coalition politics, institutional capacity, and domestic veto players shape foreign policy outcomes; and (iii) the implications of these dynamics for theoretical understandings of power, autonomy, and democracy in the Global South.

## 2.0 Literature Review

The existing literature identifies domestic politics as a central determinant of foreign policy autonomy. Neoclassical realism emphasizes that domestic variables political institutions, elite cohesion, legitimacy, and bureaucratic capacity mediate between structural pressures and foreign policy choices (Rose, 1998; Lobell, 2009). In the African context, studies show that domestic consolidation deficits often undermine states' capacity to lead regionally or project power internationally (Adebajo, 2019; Murithi, 2014).

Democratization literature highlights the dual role of electoral processes and institutional quality in shaping governance outcomes. Weak electoral integrity, partisan polarization, and contested legitimacy reduce executive flexibility, narrow win-sets in negotiations, and diminish state credibility (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Cheeseman, 2015). Conversely, institutionalized accountability can prevent reckless foreign policy actions, though it may also constrain rapid decision-making.

Empirical research on Nigeria underscores the centrality of electoral integrity and elite consensus in regional leadership (Omoleke, 2018; Awoyemi, 2025). For South Africa, coalition politics, bureaucratic capacity, and historical non-alignment complicate engagement with both Western and BRICS partners (Marquard et al., 2024). Both cases illustrate the multiplicity of domestic factors economic, security, and normative that interact to shape foreign policy autonomy.

## 2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on neoclassical realism to link domestic political consolidation to foreign policy autonomy. Neoclassical realism posits that material capabilities alone do not determine international influence; domestic-level factors—legitimacy, institutional strength, economic stability, and security capacity—mediate the translation of power into effective foreign policy outcomes (Rose, 1998; Zakaria, 1998; Sabet, 2000).

The research also incorporates two-level game theory to examine how domestic actors (opposition, civil society, labor unions, coalition partners) constrain executive decision-making in international negotiations (Putnam, 1988). The “win-set” available to negotiators is contingent on domestic political consolidation, economic resources, and elite consensus. Weak consolidation reduces win-set size, forcing compromises that may dilute foreign policy effectiveness.

Additionally, comparative democratization perspectives inform the study's understanding of legitimacy, electoral integrity, and institutional quality as determinants of foreign policy credibility. In emerging democracies, incomplete or contested consolidation constrains the capacity to mobilize resources, sustain international commitments, and exercise strategic autonomy.

## 3.0 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, conceptual research design based on systematic secondary data analysis to examine how domestic political consolidation shapes foreign policy autonomy in Nigeria and South Africa during the 2023–2025 period. A qualitative approach is particularly suited to the study's objectives, as the concepts under investigation political legitimacy, institutional capacity, elite consensus, economic vulnerability, and foreign policy autonomy are inherently complex, relational, and context dependent. These dynamics cannot be adequately captured through quantitative indicators alone but require interpretive analysis attentive to processes, meanings, and causal mechanisms (Lim, 2025).

The study is conceptually anchored in neoclassical realism and two-level game theory, which together provide a framework for understanding how domestic political variables intervene between material capabilities and foreign policy outcomes. Rather than testing hypotheses statistically, the analysis seeks to theoretically refine the consolidation–autonomy nexus by tracing how internal political conditions enable or constrain external action in emerging democracies. Nigeria and South Africa are selected as comparative cases because they share key structural characteristics: regional power status, significant material resources, democratic institutions, and historical leadership roles yet experienced notable constraints on foreign policy autonomy during the study period (Kia, B., & Obianime, 2022). This comparative logic allows the analysis to isolate the effects of domestic consolidation deficits while holding broader structural conditions relatively constant.

The empirical foundation of the study rests entirely on secondary qualitative sources, including official government statements and policy documents, reports from regional and international organizations, election observation

assessments, governance and public opinion datasets, peer-reviewed academic literature, and reputable media investigations. Drawing on diverse sources enables triangulation and strengthens analytical credibility by cross-checking political developments, policy choices, and international responses across multiple perspectives. The focus on the 2023–2025 period captures a critical juncture characterized by electoral transitions, economic shocks, security pressures, and intensified geopolitical contestation, allowing the study to examine consolidation and foreign policy dynamics under conditions of heightened domestic and international stress.

Analysis proceeds through thematic interpretation and process-oriented reasoning, linking dimensions of domestic political consolidation such as legitimacy, institutional effectiveness, economic stability, and security capacity to observable patterns of foreign policy behavior. Particular attention is paid to causal pathways, sequencing, and feedback effects, recognizing that domestic politics and foreign policy interact dynamically rather than linearly. This approach enables identification of both constraining mechanisms (such as domestic veto players, credibility deficits, and resource diversion) and contextual conditions under which limited autonomy may still be exercised.

While the study prioritizes analytical depth and theoretical contribution over statistical generalization, its conceptual insights are relevant beyond the two cases examined. Reliance on secondary data necessarily limits access to informal elite bargaining and confidential decision-making processes; however, this limitation is mitigated through careful triangulation and comparative analysis. Overall, the methodology provides a coherent and rigorous foundation for advancing understanding of how domestic political consolidation conditions foreign policy autonomy in emerging democracies, consistent with the standards and expectations of high-impact international relations journals.

## **4.0 Nigeria: Domestic Political Fragility and Constrained Regional Leadership (2023–2025)**

### **4.1 Domestic Political Consolidation: The 2023 Electoral Crisis**

Nigeria's 2023 general elections precipitated one of the most severe legitimacy crises in the Fourth Republic's history, fundamentally undermining political consolidation and casting long shadows over subsequent governance. The elections, held in February and March 2023, were expected to demonstrate democratic maturity through technological innovations, particularly the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), designed to enhance transparency and reduce electoral fraud (Seriki et al., 2023). Instead, widespread implementation failures, logistical breakdowns, and allegations of manipulation produced outcomes that large segments of the population rejected as illegitimate.

A stark indicator of democratic decay was the historic collapse in voter turnout to 26.7%, representing a steep decline from 43.7% in 2015 and 34.8% in 2019, signaling deepening citizen disillusionment with electoral processes (Abowei, 2023). Post-election surveys revealed that 77% of Nigerians expressed dissatisfaction with how democracy functions, while 70% perceived state institutions as corrupt (Afrobarometer, 2025). These statistics underscore a

profound legitimacy crisis: formal institutions persisted but lacked meaningful public endorsement.

The election of Bola Ahmed Tinubu as president was immediately contested by major opposition candidates Atiku Abubakar (PDP) and Peter Obi (Labour Party) who challenged results in court, alleging systemic irregularities including BVAS malfunctions, vote suppression, and collation inconsistencies (Seriki et al., 2023). While the Supreme Court upheld Tinubu's victory, judicial proceedings intensified political polarization, weakening domestic authority and complicating efforts to build consensus around difficult policy reforms.

Upon assuming office in May 2023, President Tinubu implemented sweeping economic reforms, which, while economically rational, exacerbated social tensions and constrained political capital. The removal of fuel subsidies triggered price increases exceeding 200% at the pump (Nwachukwu, 2023), while the floating of the naira led to devaluation from approximately ₦460 to over ₦1,500 per US dollar, driving inflation to 34% by early 2024 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

These reforms imposed severe short-term hardships on a populace already grappling with poverty, unemployment, and insecurity. Real wages collapsed, purchasing power eroded, and millions slipped deeper into economic distress. Insufficient social safety nets and ineffective communication of reform benefits amplified public discontent, sparking protests and strikes.

Governance challenges extended beyond economic policy. The administration faced persistent security crises: Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgency in the Northeast; banditry and kidnapping in the Northwest; farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt; and separatist agitations in the Southeast (International Crisis Group, 2024). These multidimensional threats claimed thousands of lives annually, disrupted economic activity, and displaced millions internally.

Corruption remained endemic despite rhetorical commitments to accountability. High-profile scandals involving government contracts, subsidy diversion allegations, and questionable appointments reinforced public cynicism. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), though occasionally pursuing cases, faced accusations of selective prosecution and political interference, diminishing its credibility as an accountability mechanism (Ochojila, 2025).

### **4.2 Foreign Policy Implications: Diminished Regional Leadership**

Nigeria's domestic political fragilities directly constrained its foreign policy autonomy and regional leadership during 2023–2025. Historically Nigeria has served as ECOWAS's anchor state, providing financial resources, military personnel for peacekeeping missions, and diplomatic leadership (Adewuyi, 2025). The July 2023 military coup in Niger Republic posed a critical test. As ECOWAS chair, President Tinubu led efforts to restore constitutional order through sanctions and threats of military intervention (BBC News, 2023; Aliyu & Ogundare, 2025). However, domestic opposition particularly from the Senate and northern public opinion curtailed decisive action.

Sanctions proved largely symbolic. Niger's junta resisted external pressure, expelled French forces, and capitalized on anti-ECOWAS sentiment, undermining Nigeria's credibility and exposing ECOWAS's limited coercive capacity. Subsequent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea further revealed Nigeria's constrained regional leadership, allowing external actors, particularly Russia, to expand influence.

Nigeria's heavy dependence on crude oil as the backbone of its economy has long shaped and constrained its diplomatic posture. When oil prices fluctuate, as they frequently do in the global market, the effects ripple far beyond domestic revenue shortfalls to directly undermine the country's external engagements. Declining oil earnings weaken foreign exchange reserves, place pressure on the naira, and reduce the fiscal space available for strategic diplomacy. In such contexts, Nigeria's capacity to deploy financial incentives, sustain multilateral commitments, or underwrite peacekeeping and regional leadership roles becomes severely limited (Mark et al., 2023).

Currency instability has further eroded Nigeria's diplomatic leverage. Persistent depreciation of the naira raises the cost of maintaining diplomatic missions abroad, financing international initiatives, and participating effectively in regional and global institutions (Abang, et al, 2024). More importantly, exchange rate volatility signals macroeconomic fragility to international partners and investors, diminishing Nigeria's credibility as a reliable economic partner. Diplomatic influence, particularly in economic negotiations, is closely tied to perceptions of stability and predictability qualities that have been undermined by recurrent currency crises.

These pressures are compounded by chronic fiscal constraints. Rising public debt, shrinking revenues, and competing domestic priorities such as security spending and social welfare have constrained the resources available for foreign policy implementation. As a result, Nigeria has struggled to translate its demographic size, market potential, and geopolitical importance into sustained regional influence (Nwokoye et al, 2025). Limited funding has weakened its leadership role within ECOWAS and the African Union, reduced its ability to shape regional agendas, and curtailed proactive engagement in emerging global economic partnerships.

Beyond structural economic challenges, domestic governance issues have further blunted the effectiveness of Nigeria's economic diplomacy. Policy inconsistency, particularly in trade, investment, and foreign exchange management, has created uncertainty for external partners. Frequent policy reversals undermine trust and complicate long-term diplomatic and economic cooperation (Aina et al., 2025). At the same time, pervasive corruption has distorted policy priorities and weakened institutional capacity, diverting resources away from productive diplomatic engagement.

Security risks ranging from insurgency and banditry to maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea have also cast a long shadow over Nigeria's external economic relations. Persistent insecurity raises the risk profile of the country, discourages foreign direct investment, and limits Nigeria's ability to project itself as a stable anchor for regional economic integration (Piate, 2025). These economic

vulnerabilities and governance challenges have not only constrained Nigeria's foreign policy options but have also reduced its ability to leverage diplomacy as a tool for development, influence, and strategic positioning in an increasingly competitive international system.

#### 4.3 Security Cooperation and International Relations

Domestic insecurity has increasingly compelled Nigeria to turn its military and police capacities inward, prioritising internal stabilisation over external commitments. The escalation of insurgency, banditry, communal violence, and separatist agitation has stretched security institutions to their limits, leaving fewer personnel, financial resources, and logistical assets available for international peacekeeping engagements. Consequently, Nigeria's historically prominent role in African Union (AU) and United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations has diminished, weakening its visibility and influence within multilateral security governance frameworks (Duruji, 2025).

This inward redeployment has had important diplomatic consequences. Peacekeeping has long functioned as a key instrument of Nigeria's soft power, reinforcing its reputation as a regional stabiliser and a responsible international actor. As domestic security pressures intensified, Nigeria's reduced troop contributions and operational presence translated into a gradual erosion of this reputational capital. In multilateral settings where influence is often shaped by tangible commitments, diminished participation constrained Nigeria's ability to shape peacekeeping mandates, leadership appointments, and broader security norms.

Compounding these challenges, allegations of human rights abuses by security forces have further complicated Nigeria's external security partnerships. Reports of extrajudicial killings, excessive use of force, and weak accountability mechanisms have drawn international scrutiny, particularly from Western partners (Dietrich, 2015). Such concerns have triggered restrictions on military assistance, arms transfers, and specialised training programmes, thereby limiting Nigeria's access to advanced military technology, capacity-building support, and high-level intelligence-sharing arrangements.

The cumulative effect has been a narrowing of Nigeria's strategic options in both regional and global security diplomacy. Trust deficits arising from human rights concerns have made partners more cautious, while reduced peacekeeping engagement has curtailed Nigeria's traditional avenues for leadership projection (Agbaenyi & Ibenegbu, 2025). Together, these dynamics underscore how domestic security and governance challenges do not remain confined within national borders but directly shape a state's ability to engage credibly, cooperatively, and effectively in international security regimes.

#### 4.4 Diplomatic Credibility and Multilateral Engagement

Domestic legitimacy deficits have significantly weakened Nigeria's moral authority in multilateral and regional forums, where credibility is often grounded not only in material power but also in normative consistency. Persistent allegations of electoral malpractice, voter suppression, and opaque electoral management have cast doubt on the integrity of Nigeria's democratic processes (Olayinka et al, 2024). In settings such as ECOWAS, the African Union, and

the United Nations sphere Nigeria has historically positioned itself as a defender of democratic norms these controversies have undermined its capacity to speak with persuasive authority on issues of governance, constitutionalism, and the rule of law (Alhaji et al., 2025).

Governance failures have further compounded this legitimacy challenge. Enduring problems of corruption, weak accountability, and uneven service delivery have reinforced perceptions of a widening gap between Nigeria's democratic rhetoric and its domestic realities. As a result, Nigeria's advocacy for democratic transitions, human rights protections, and civilian rule in neighbouring states has increasingly been met with scepticism. Regional peers facing similar legitimacy pressures have found it easier to resist Nigerian leadership, while more reform-oriented states have questioned its normative consistency (Adamaagashi, 2023).

These credibility deficits have complicated regional consensus-building, particularly in moments of political crisis. Effective mediation and norm enforcement depend heavily on trust and perceived impartiality. When Nigeria's own democratic credentials are contested, its ability to mobilise collective action such as sanctions, diplomatic pressure, or preventive interventions within ECOWAS becomes constrained (Alhaji et al. 2025). Other member states may view Nigerian initiatives as selective, self-interested, or lacking moral standing, thereby weakening collective resolve.

At the international level, legitimacy challenges have also reduced Nigeria's influence within broader multilateral institutions. Partners and donors are less inclined to fully endorse Nigeria's leadership roles or policy proposals when domestic governance shortcomings remain unresolved. In an international environment where democratic norms increasingly shape cooperation, Nigeria's compromised domestic legitimacy has translated into diminished soft power, narrowing the space for effective diplomacy and reducing its overall credibility as a normative leader in Africa (Agbu & Nzeribe, 2023).

#### 4.5 Assessment: Political Fragility as Foreign Policy Constraint

Domestic consolidation deficits have constrained Nigeria's foreign policy through a complex and mutually reinforcing set of mechanisms that link internal fragilities to external limitations. At the most immediate level, persistent demands arising from governance challenges, social pressures, and security threats have diverted scarce state resources inward (Adams & Okoliko, 2024). Financial allocations, administrative attention, and political energy that might otherwise support sustained diplomatic engagement or regional leadership have been absorbed by domestic crisis management, narrowing the scope for proactive and strategic foreign policy initiatives.

Legitimacy deficits have further weakened Nigeria's external posture. When domestic political processes are contested and governance outcomes fail to command broad public confidence, the state's moral authority in regional and multilateral arenas is diminished. This erosion of credibility undermines Nigeria's ability to credibly champion democratic norms, mediate political crises, or mobilise collective action within institutions such as ECOWAS and

the African Union. Diplomacy rooted in normative leadership becomes increasingly difficult when domestic realities appear misaligned with external advocacy (Ogundiyi, 2009).

The presence of powerful domestic veto players has also complicated foreign policy coherence. Political elites entrenched economic interests, and security stakeholders often shape external engagements through narrow or competing priorities, limiting policy autonomy at the national level (European Commission, 2025). These internal constraints reduce the executive's flexibility to pursue long-term diplomatic strategies, encourage policy inconsistency, and weaken Nigeria's bargaining position in international negotiations.

Economic vulnerabilities have reinforced these constraints. Dependence on volatile oil revenues, currency instability, and chronic fiscal pressures have reduced Nigeria's capacity to translate its demographic size and resource endowment into sustained diplomatic influence. Economic fragility constrains investment diplomacy, weakens development partnerships, and signals uncertainty to international actors, thereby reducing Nigeria's leverage in regional and global economic governance (Ogunjumo et al., 2024).

The persistent security preoccupations have absorbed military, intelligence, and diplomatic capital, forcing Nigeria to prioritise internal stability over external leadership. Insecurity not only limits peacekeeping contributions and regional stabilisation efforts but also reshapes foreign policy around reactive rather than strategic imperatives (International Crisis Group, 2024). These interlocking dynamics have curtailed Nigeria's ability to enforce regional norms, project coherent diplomatic strategies, and effectively leverage its material and symbolic power. Rather than functioning as a consolidated regional leader, Nigeria's foreign policy has increasingly reflected the constraints of domestic fragility, underscoring the centrality of internal consolidation to external influence

### 5.0 South Africa: Coalition Politics and Strained Pan-African Leadership (2024–2025)

South Africa's May 2024 general elections marked a profound turning point in the country's post-apartheid political trajectory. For the first time since 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) lost its parliamentary majority, securing only 40.2 per cent of the national vote (Independent Electoral Commission South Africa, 2024). This electoral outcome not only symbolised deepening public dissatisfaction with governance and economic performance, but also compelled the formation of an unprecedented coalition government involving the Democratic Alliance (DA) and several smaller parties (Schulz-Herzenberg & Southall, 2024). While this arrangement preserved constitutional continuity, it fundamentally altered the dynamics of power, introducing new layers of uncertainty, contestation, and compromise into policymaking particularly in the sensitive arena of foreign policy.

The ANC–DA coalition brought together actors with sharply contrasting ideological worldviews. The ANC's foreign policy tradition, rooted in anti-imperialism, pan-African

solidarity, and redistributive political economy, has historically emphasised Global South cooperation, strategic autonomy, and normative resistance to Western dominance (International Crisis Group, 2024). By contrast, the DA has consistently advanced a pro-market orientation, stronger alignment with Western liberal democracies, and a more conventional interpretation of rules-based international order. Reconciling these divergent perspectives placed President Cyril Ramaphosa in a politically delicate position, requiring him to balance coalition partner demands while simultaneously managing entrenched factionalism within the ANC itself (Bhengi-Motsiri, 2025). This dual pressure significantly constrained foreign policy flexibility, encouraging caution, ambiguity, and incrementalism rather than bold diplomatic initiatives.

These political constraints unfolded against the backdrop of severe socioeconomic challenges that further limited South Africa's external capacity. Chronic electricity shortages driven by Eskom's institutional failures, years of underinvestment, and entrenched corruption continued to undermine economic performance. GDP growth stagnated at below one per cent annually, reflecting both supply-side constraints and declining investor confidence (Statistics South Africa, 2024). Unemployment remained alarmingly high at 32.9 per cent, with youth unemployment exceeding 60 per cent, deepening social discontent and narrowing the government's fiscal and political room for manoeuvre. Simultaneously, deteriorating transport, logistics, and industrial infrastructure eroded South Africa's traditional role as a regional economic hub, weakening its capacity to anchor Southern African development and integration.

Governance deficits further compounded these pressures. Although the Zondo Commission laid bare the depth and scale of state capture, progress in prosecuting those implicated remained slow and uneven. The persistence of corruption scandals reinforced perceptions of institutional weakness and selective accountability, undermining both domestic trust and international confidence. Within the coalition framework, these governance challenges became even more difficult to address, as political bargaining diluted reform momentum and constrained decisive executive action. The result was a governance environment marked by fragility, hesitation, and declining credibility conditions that inevitably spilled over into foreign policy.

In this context, South Africa's external posture during 2024–2025 reflected constrained diplomatic activism rather than strategic leadership. Its continued emphasis on "non-alignment," refusal to explicitly condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine, and deepening engagement with BRICS partners strained relations with Western states, particularly the United States and the European Union (Fabricius, 2023). Coalition politics amplified these tensions, as internal disagreements made it difficult to articulate a coherent and consistent international position. While the ANC framed such stances as principled autonomy, coalition partners and external observers increasingly interpreted them as policy incoherence.

The decision to pursue a case against Israel at the International Court of Justice illustrated these tensions vividly. Domestically, the move resonated strongly with ANC constituencies and reinforced South Africa's historical identity as a moral advocate for human rights and

international justice (Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa, 2024). Internationally, however, it complicated bilateral economic and diplomatic relations with key partners, underscoring the persistent tension between domestic political calculation and external policy coherence (Bischoff, 2024). Rather than enhancing South Africa's global influence, such actions often produced symbolic affirmation at home while generating strategic ambiguity abroad.

Coalition politics also complicated South Africa's engagement within BRICS. The need to balance Global South solidarity with the economic realities of deep trade and investment ties to Western economies forced the government into cautious and sometimes contradictory positions (Mansour & Baiche, 2025). This strategic ambiguity diluted South Africa's influence within both BRICS and Western-led forums, reducing its ability to shape agendas decisively in either space. At the regional level, domestic instability and leadership uncertainty weakened South Africa's mediating capacity in Southern African Development Community (SADC) conflicts and eroded its normative authority as a regional stabilizer (Qobo & Soko, 2015).

These constraints were further evident in climate diplomacy. South Africa's Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP), initially heralded as a model for climate cooperation between developed and developing economies, faced growing domestic resistance from labour unions, coal-dependent communities, and factions within the ANC. Coalition dynamics intensified these pressures, delaying implementation and undermining South Africa's credibility as a climate leader (Marquard et al., 2024). The gap between ambitious international commitments and limited domestic capacity became increasingly visible.

The coalition bargaining constraints, economic vulnerabilities, entrenched domestic veto players, unresolved tensions between normative ambition and pragmatic governance, and persistent state capacity deficits collectively narrowed South Africa's foreign policy autonomy during 2024–2025 (Fourie, 2025). Rather than projecting the confident diplomacy of a consolidated middle power, South Africa's external engagement reflected the weight of internal political fragmentation and socioeconomic strain, underscoring how domestic consolidation remains a critical prerequisite for sustained international influence.

## 6.0 Comparative Analysis: Convergence and Divergence

Both Nigeria and South Africa entered the 2023–2025 period burdened by intersecting legitimacy crises, economic vulnerabilities, security preoccupations, and a visible erosion of regional leadership capacity (Omoesho, 2025). In both cases, these domestic pressures translated directly into constrained foreign policy autonomy, underscoring a central empirical finding of this study: material power alone is insufficient for sustained international influence. Despite their demographic weight, economic scale, and historical diplomatic stature, neither state was able to consistently project leadership or enforce regional norms in the absence of robust domestic political consolidation (Salami & Okoye, 2025). Foreign policy capacity, therefore, emerged not as an automatic function of power resources but as a contingent

outcome shaped by internal political health.

At the same time, the trajectories of constraint in Nigeria and South Africa were not identical. Nigeria's consolidation crisis was rooted primarily in persistent failures of electoral integrity, weak accountability mechanisms, and contested political legitimacy. These deficits eroded elite cohesion and public trust, producing fragmented authority, and intensifying domestic veto points that narrowed foreign policy options. South Africa's challenges, by contrast, stemmed less from electoral breakdown than from the unprecedented complexities of coalition governance following the ANC's loss of its parliamentary majority. While coalition politics introduced uncertainty, bargaining costs, and ideological incoherence, South Africa benefited from comparatively stronger institutions, professional bureaucratic capacity, and judicial independence (Naidoo, 2010). These institutional buffers moderated the severity of foreign policy constraints, allowing for a degree of continuity and policy implementation despite political turbulence.

Differences in international alignments and regional organizational contexts further shaped how domestic challenges translated into external limitations. Nigeria's leadership role within ECOWAS an organization heavily dependent on anchor state capacity meant that domestic fragility had immediate and systemic regional consequences. South Africa, operating within SADC and broader global platforms such as BRICS, faced a different configuration of expectations, alliances, and constraints (Gwadabe, 2025). These contextual variations demonstrate that while consolidation deficits produce broadly similar outcomes, their intensity, expression, and policy consequences are mediated by institutional strength and geopolitical positioning.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings refine and extend neoclassical realism by foregrounding political legitimacy as a critical intervening variable between systemic pressures and foreign policy behavior. Rather than treating domestic politics as a residual category, the study demonstrates that constrained autonomy emerges from the interaction of multiple domestic mechanisms: resource diversion toward internal crises, credibility gaps that weaken normative leadership, the proliferation of domestic veto players, economic vulnerabilities that limit strategic choice, and institutional incapacities that undermine implementation (Götz, 2021). Crucially, these mechanisms do not operate linearly or independently. Instead, they interact in context-dependent ways, generating feedback loops in which foreign policy setbacks further weaken domestic consolidation, thereby deepening future constraints.

The broader implications for emerging democracies are significant. Domestic consolidation emerges as a foundational condition for effective foreign policy, not a secondary or sequential objective. States may possess material capabilities, regional ambition, and historical legitimacy, yet remain diplomatically constrained by internal fragmentation, economic fragility, and contested authority. Democratic accountability, while sometimes limiting short-term foreign policy freedom, also serves as a critical safeguard against reckless adventurism and unsustainable external commitments. In this sense, domestic constraints are not inherently pathological; when embedded

within strong institutions, they can enhance long-term strategic coherence and legitimacy (Götz, 2021).

The analysis also highlights the structural vulnerability of regional organizations that rely disproportionately on a small number of anchor states. The declining effectiveness of ECOWAS and SADC during periods of Nigerian and South African domestic strain illustrates how regional governance is inseparable from the internal political health of leading member states (Okoloagu, 2024). This finding suggests the need for institutional reforms that distribute responsibility more evenly, enhance bureaucratic autonomy, and strengthen collective norm enforcement mechanisms independent of single-state leadership.

Policy implications follow directly from these insights. At the domestic level, policymakers should prioritise institutional strengthening, elite consensus-building, economic stabilisation, security sector reform, and, critically, electoral integrity. Without credible political processes and effective state capacity, foreign policy ambition will remain constrained regardless of material resources. At the regional level, organizations such as ECOWAS and SADC require reforms aimed at reducing anchor-state dependence, strengthening peer review mechanisms, and enhancing institutional resilience. International partners, meanwhile, should adopt long-term, integrated engagement strategies that link governance support with foreign policy capacity-building, balancing respect for sovereignty with sustained attention to structural constraints.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that domestic political consolidation is a decisive determinant of foreign policy autonomy. Consolidation deficits operate through multiple, mutually reinforcing mechanisms, producing complex and non-linear effects on external behavior. The comparative experiences of Nigeria and South Africa reveal both shared patterns of constraint and context-specific dynamics that enrich our understanding of how emerging democracies navigate the consolidation autonomy nexus. By advancing neoclassical realism through the incorporation of legitimacy as a central intervening variable, and by linking democratization processes to international agency, the study offers both theoretical innovation and practical relevance.

Ultimately, the 2023-2025 period underscores a sobering but instructive lesson: foreign policy autonomy cannot be sustained in the absence of domestic political consolidation. Nigeria and South Africa illustrate the challenges of translating material power into effective international influence under conditions of internal strain. Yet their experiences also point toward pathways for renewal, suggesting that the consolidation of legitimacy, institutions, and economic foundations remains the most reliable route to enduring diplomatic agency in an increasingly complex global order.

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