

Leveraging Citizen Diplomacy to Resolve Bilateral Tensions: A Comparative Analysis of Nigeria-South Africa Relations in the Context of Migration and Economic Competition.

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria and South Africa share a complex bilateral relationship shaped by historical ties, economic competition, and migration-related tensions. This study explores the dynamics of their interactions, focusing on the socio-economic and political factors that influence their partnership. Drawing on a narrative literature review and primary data from key informant interviews with 15 institutional and diplomatic stakeholders, the research highlights the persistent challenges of xenophobia, trade imbalances, and competing aspirations for regional leadership. Despite these tensions, the study indicates that institutional stakeholders perceive citizen diplomacy as a potentially viable mechanism for conflict resolution. Through cultural exchange programs and grassroots economic initiatives, citizen-driven efforts can foster mutual understanding and collaboration. The proposed Bilateral Tension-Diffusion and Citizen Resolution (BTD-CR) model, grounded in established citizen diplomacy and conflict transformation theory, integrates historical, economic, and social dimensions, positioning citizen diplomacy as a central strategy for mitigating tensions and promoting sustainable cooperation. The paper offers a comprehensive analysis, contributing to existing scholarship by highlighting underexplored issues, such as systemic challenges faced by Nigerian migrants and the untapped potential of regional frameworks like the African Continental Free Trade Agreement. The findings underscore the need for targeted policy interventions and collaborative strategies to strengthen bilateral relations. This research provides actionable insights for policymakers and scholars seeking to address the complexities of Nigeria-South Africa relations.

Keywords: Nigeria-South Africa relations, citizen diplomacy, migration tensions, economic competition, conflict resolution

INTRODUCTION

The bilateral relationship between Nigeria and South Africa represents one of the most intricate dynamics in African geopolitics, shaped by historical collaboration, economic competition, and migration-related tensions (Ebegbulem, 2013; Odubajo & Akinboye, 2017). Nigeria's pivotal role in the anti-apartheid movement and its subsequent expectations for enduring solidarity with South Africa underscores a history marked by both unity and rivalry (Ebegbulem, 2013). However, post-apartheid relations have often been strained by competing ambitions for regional leadership, trade imbalances, and recurring xenophobic violence, which highlight the fragility of their partnership (Olutola, 2019; Niworu, 2018). This study aims to explore these complex interactions, focusing on the evolving socio-economic and political dimensions of Nigeria-South Africa relations.

Existing literature emphasizes the critical role of migration in shaping bilateral relations, noting how economic disparities and xenophobia have fueled tensions despite the socio-economic contributions of Nigerian migrants in South Africa (Mogekwu, 2005; Sega & Lekaba, 2014). Economic competition further exacerbates these

challenges, with Nigeria's oil-dominated economy contrasting sharply with South Africa's diversified economic base, resulting in trade imbalances and unequal engagements (Tian & Dong, 2015). Despite these conflicts, citizen diplomacy has been identified as a promising mechanism for mitigating tensions by fostering mutual understanding and collaboration through cultural and grassroots initiatives (Ezeudji, 2013; Awosusi & Fatoyinbo, 2019). This paper contributes to this discourse by proposing the Bilateral Tension-Diffusion and Citizen Resolution (BTD-CR) model, which integrates historical, economic, and social dimensions to address these persistent tensions.

The purpose of this article is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics shaping Nigeria-South Africa relations, drawing on both primary and secondary data to present nuanced insights. The paper is structured into six key sections. The introduction outlines the study's focus, situating it within existing research. The literature review synthesizes relevant studies on migration, economic competition, and citizen diplomacy, identifying gaps addressed by this research. A conceptual framework, embodied in the BTD-CR model and grounded in established citizen diplomacy and conflict transformation theory, is proposed to provide a theoretical lens for understanding bilateral tensions and their resolution. The methodology details the qualitative approach employed, combining key informant interviews and a narrative literature review. The results and discussion integrate primary data with thematic analysis, highlighting key findings and situating them within the broader academic discourse. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the study's contributions and suggests practical and theoretical implications, as well as directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Dynamics of Nigeria-South Africa Bilateral Relations

The bilateral relationship between Nigeria and South Africa has transitioned through various phases, from political antagonism during apartheid to cooperative efforts in the post-apartheid era. This transformation is well-documented, highlighting both collaborative efforts and persistent tensions. Ebegbulem (2013) underscores that the end of apartheid marked a pivotal shift towards economic partnership, aligning with shared goals of regional leadership. However, Odubajo and Akinboye (2017) argue that this relationship remains a delicate balance of collaboration and competition, driven by both nations' ambitions for continental hegemony. Leadership transitions in South Africa, particularly its reintegration into the global sphere post-1994, brought significant changes to its foreign policy, with notable implications for its ties to Nigeria (Banjo, 2010). This period witnessed diplomatic highs and lows as both countries navigated shared regional ambitions and external pressures. Olutola (2019) observes that, despite mutual economic interests, competition often arises, particularly in the context of trade and influence over Africa's regional agenda.

Several scholars have noted the role of crises in shaping Nigeria-South Africa relations. Diplomatic disputes, often rooted in economic opportunities or incidents like xenophobic violence, have intermittently strained the partnership. Umezurike and Asuelime (2015) highlight that these crises have necessitated recalibrations of bilateral strategies. Despite these challenges, Ogo and Ani (2015) emphasize that Nigeria and South Africa remain pivotal players in Africa's leadership landscape, advocating for strategic cooperation to ensure sustainable regional development. The coexistence of conflict and collaboration is further evident in economic interactions. Amusan and Wyk (2011) observe that bilateral trade and regional economic agendas have defined the post-apartheid relationship, with each nation seeking to capitalize on its strengths. Similarly, Onuoha (2005) notes the emergence of both nations as regional powers, highlighting the fluctuating dynamics that characterize their interactions.

Leadership aspirations also play a central role in bilateral tensions. According to Landsberg (2012), the oscillation between Nigeria and South Africa for leadership in Africa often leaves a vacuum in continental politics, exacerbating regional instability. Meanwhile, Ekanem (2022) observes that even in the face of violent xenophobic incidents targeting Nigerians, the diplomatic ties between the two countries have remained a critical aspect of their bilateral interactions, showcasing a resilience grounded in shared geopolitical priorities. The historical evolution of Nigeria-South Africa relations reflects a complex interplay of cooperation and competition. While the post-apartheid era ushered in opportunities for partnership, the persistence of diplomatic

crises and competing leadership ambitions highlights the need for sustained dialogue and strategic engagement between these two African giants.

The Role of Migration in Nigeria-South Africa Relations

Migration has been a persistent and contentious issue in the relationship between Nigeria and South Africa, reflecting broader socio-economic and political dynamics. According to Big-Alabo (2019), migration between these two nations is significantly driven by economic disparities, often intensifying diplomatic tensions. Sega and Lekaba (2014) add that economic competition and ambitions for regional dominance exacerbate these tensions, creating a complex backdrop for bilateral relations. The socio-economic contributions of Nigerian migrants in South Africa have been widely acknowledged, yet these contributions coexist with rising xenophobic sentiments and violent attacks. Niworu (2018) highlights that these incidents have not only strained bilateral relations but also underscored the urgency of effective migration management strategies. Similarly, Oloruntoba (2019) observes that both nations have struggled to manage the socio-economic impacts of migration, which often manifests as political friction and public unrest.

The contrasting diplomatic approaches of Nigeria and South Africa further complicate migration issues. Chidozie, Agbude, and Oni (2013) describe Nigeria's "megaphone diplomacy" as an assertive stance on migration-related disputes, whereas South Africa's "quiet diplomacy" reflects a more restrained approach. These differences have shaped policy responses and amplified tensions during migration crises. Historically, migration policies have been intertwined with broader economic and political strategies. Ojieh (2014) analyzes how Nigeria's economic policies from the 1970s to the 1990s influenced its migration and diplomatic strategies towards South Africa, reflecting the broader framework of historical materialism. Migration dynamics, as Chidozie (2014) notes, are also deeply embedded in the economic dependency and cooperation between these nations, highlighting their interconnected national interests.

Efforts to mitigate migration-related tensions have emphasized integration and collaboration. Seteolu and Okuneye (2017) argue that bilateral economic and political engagements, influenced by migration, have the potential to foster stronger regional leadership aspirations. Oloruntoba (2019) echoes this sentiment, proposing that integrating economic policies between Nigeria and South Africa could mitigate migration-related conflicts and strengthen bilateral ties. Xenophobia, however, remains a significant challenge. Ekanem (2022) and Niworu (2018) underscore how recurrent xenophobic violence against Nigerians in South Africa has created diplomatic crises, calling for robust mechanisms to address these underlying issues. Chidozie, Agbude, and Oni (2013) advocate for strategic dialogue and cooperation to navigate these challenges, emphasizing the need for long-term solutions. Migration has been a defining feature of Nigeria-South Africa relations, shaped by economic disparities, political strategies, and socio-cultural dynamics. Even though it has fueled tensions, it also presents opportunities for deeper bilateral cooperation, provided both nations commit to addressing the root causes and fostering strategic dialogue.

Economic Competition and Bilateral Trade Disparities Between Nigeria and South Africa

Economic competition and trade imbalances have been central to Nigeria-South Africa relations, shaping both collaboration and rivalry. Nigeria's economic boom in 2014 significantly altered intra-African trade dynamics, challenging South Africa's long-standing dominance (Sega & Lekaba, 2014). Despite this shift, South Africa's diversified economy and strategic expansion across Africa continue to provide it with a trade advantage over Nigeria (Ebegbulem, 2013). The rivalry between the two nations often reflects their broader struggle for regional hegemony. Odubajo and Akinboye (2017) argue that this competition limits their ability to jointly promote Africa's continental interests. Trade disparities are also linked to differing economic structures; while Nigeria relies heavily on oil exports, South Africa has a diversified trade portfolio that enhances its competitiveness (Tian & Dong, 2015).

Historical trade patterns further highlight the asymmetric relationship. Banjo (2010) notes that post-apartheid relations, while fostering collaboration, revealed South Africa's economic edge due to its stronger macroeconomic foundation. Umezurike and Isike (2018) observe that South Africa's strategic business expansions into Nigeria and other African markets have reinforced its trade dominance, overshadowing Nigeria's

oil-centric economy. Moreover, bilateral trade relations have been influenced by national interests and external partnerships. For instance, Nigeria's trade engagement with China offers insights into managing asymmetrical trade relationships, a dynamic that is also evident in Nigeria-South Africa economic interactions (Udeala, 2010). These external ties underscore the need for recalibrated trade strategies to balance disparities.

Periodic fluctuations between cooperation and competition characterize trade engagements. While both countries benefit from regional economic integration, their rivalry often hampers progress. Olutola (2019) contends that addressing these imbalances requires leveraging mutual strengths, particularly in sectors like energy and manufacturing. Similarly, Seteolu and Okuneye (2017) highlight how national priorities often take precedence over collective regional development, further entrenching trade disparities. Economic competition and trade imbalances are defining features of Nigeria-South Africa relations. Whereas their rivalry reflects broader aspirations for regional dominance, fostering sustainable collaboration could enhance both nations' roles in driving Africa's economic growth.

Citizen Diplomacy as a Tool for Conflict Resolution

Citizen diplomacy has emerged as a significant tool in mitigating tensions between Nigeria and South Africa, particularly in the areas of migration and economic competition. As noted, By fostering mutual understanding and addressing xenophobia, citizen-led initiatives have proven to be an effective means of resolving socio-political tensions (Ezeuduji, 2013). These efforts not only ease diplomatic friction but also enhance bilateral relations. Economic collaboration driven by citizen engagement helps bridge disparities between the two nations. For instance, Odubajo and Akinboye (2017) emphasize that citizen involvement in trade relations promotes mutual benefits. Similarly, initiatives prioritizing shared development goals, such as those highlighted by Sega and Lekaba (2014), have been instrumental in fostering bilateral cooperation and addressing economic competition.

Cultural exchange programs are another critical dimension of citizen diplomacy. These programs, as noted by Amusan and Wyk (2011), are especially effective in addressing migration-related tensions. Additionally, Pay and Nwosu (2020) argue that citizen participation in diplomacy offers a pathway to overcoming economic competition by encouraging open dialogue and shared problem-solving. The African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) also provides a platform for citizen diplomacy to thrive. Mhonyera and Meyer (2023) argue that AfCFTA can resolve bilateral trade disputes through citizen-driven advocacy for regional economic integration. Udeala (2010) similarly observes that grassroots economic partnerships foster trust and cooperation, helping nations navigate structural trade disparities.

Cultural understanding plays a pivotal role in reducing migration-related conflicts. Awosusi and Fatoyinbo (2019) suggests that citizen diplomacy programs emphasizing cultural respect can alleviate the animosity fueling xenophobic violence. This view is reinforced by Ezeuduji (2013), who points out that such initiatives enhance tolerance and appreciation for diversity, reducing tensions in migration-affected areas.

Strategic citizen diplomacy initiatives have shown long-term potential in fostering collaboration. For example, Udeala (2013) asserts that these initiatives focus on economic partnerships that yield mutual benefits, addressing both economic and migration-related conflicts. In the same vein, Odubajo and Akinboye (2017) argue that sustained citizen-driven dialogue is essential for bridging disparities and ensuring lasting regional development. Citizen diplomacy is a pragmatic and effective approach to addressing Nigeria-South Africa tensions. When the advantages of cultural exchange are taken, and migration issues are addressed, it fosters economic partnerships, thereby creating opportunities for sustainable bilateral cooperation.

Theoretical Foundations of the BTDCR Model

The BTDCR model draws on an established body of theory concerning unofficial diplomacy and intergroup relations, rather than standing as an unanchored, researcher-derived construct. Montville's (1987) foundational account of Track Two diplomacy holds that unofficial interaction between members of adversarial or estranged groups can develop strategies and mobilise resources that complement, without substituting for, official statecraft; this distinction between formal diplomatic channels and citizen-level engagement underlies the BTDCR

CR model's positioning of citizen diplomacy as a mitigating rather than a replacement mechanism. Sharp (2001) extends this foundation by conceptualising citizen diplomats as international actors in their own right, a framing this study adopts in treating the perceptions of Nigerian and South African stakeholders as a legitimate, though elite-inflected, form of evidence regarding citizen diplomacy's diplomatic function.

The model's proposition that cultural exchange and grassroots contact can reduce xenophobic sentiment is grounded in intergroup contact theory. Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analytic synthesis of more than five hundred independent studies establishes that structured intergroup contact reliably reduces prejudice across a broad range of settings, providing a strong empirical warrant for treating cultural exchange as a plausible mechanism for reducing xenophobia rather than a merely aspirational one. The model's structural, multi-track logic draws in turn on Lederach's (1997) conflict transformation framework, which argues that sustainable peace depends on rebuilding relationships across multiple levels of society rather than resolving discrete issues in isolation. Where existing scholarship on Nigeria-South Africa relations has treated historical rivalry, migration, and economic competition largely as separate strands of analysis, the BTDCR model's distinctive contribution lies in integrating these three dimensions within a single framework centred on citizen diplomacy, thereby extending rather than supplanting the theoretical traditions on which it draws.

Bilateral Tension-Diffusion and Citizen Resolution (BTD-CR) Model

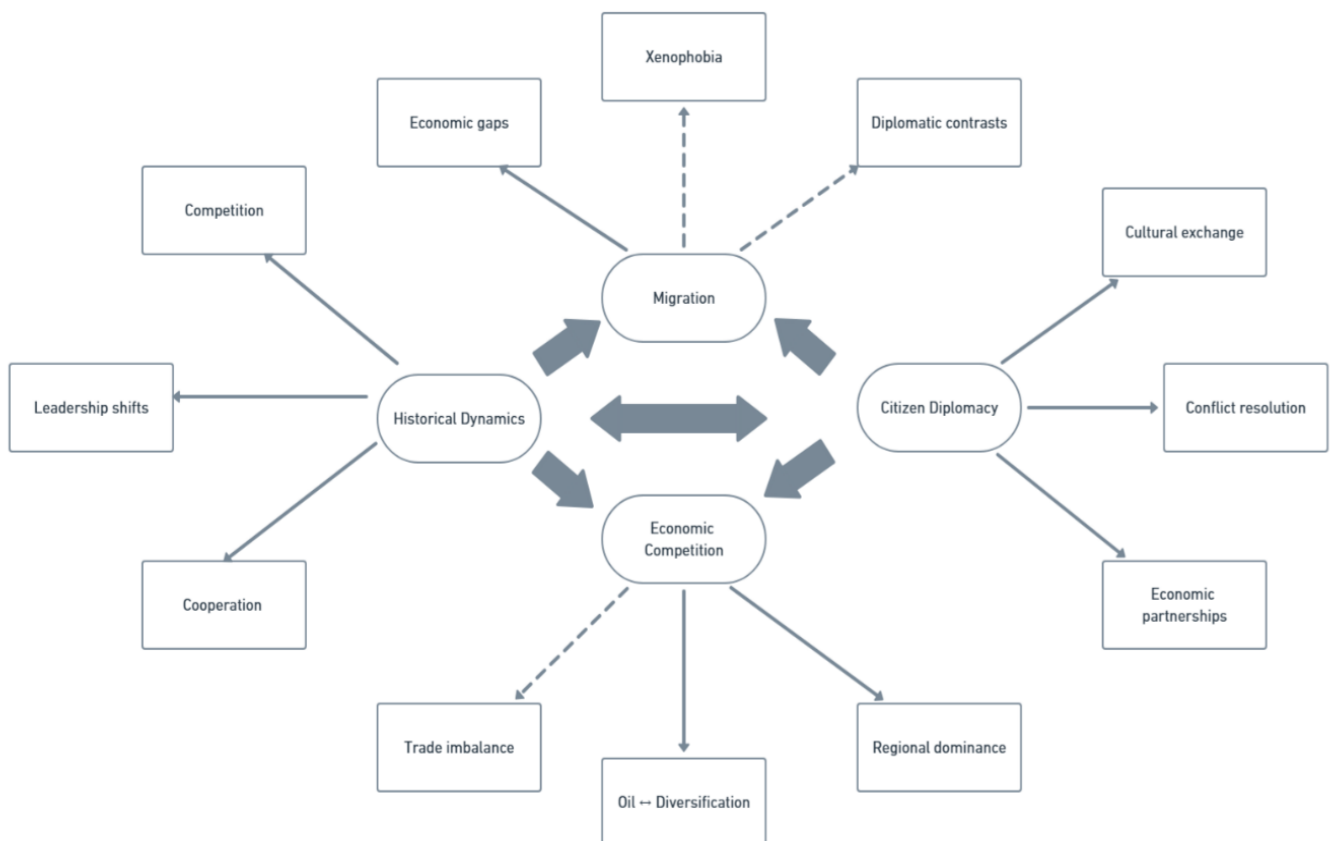


Figure 1: BTD-CR model

The conceptual model (figure 1) illustrates the interplay between historical dynamics, migration, economic competition, and citizen diplomacy in Nigeria-South Africa relations. These components are interconnected, with citizen diplomacy serving as the central mechanism to mitigate tensions and promote cooperation.

Historical Dynamics: Foundations of Tensions

The relationship between Nigeria and South Africa is rooted in a complex history of both collaboration and competition. Historically, their ties have oscillated between political confrontation during apartheid and

economic cooperation post-apartheid (Ebegbulem, 2013). Leadership transitions in South Africa, particularly after its reintegration into the global sphere in 1994, significantly influenced foreign policy toward Nigeria, creating new opportunities and challenges (Banjo, 2010). However, ambitions for regional hegemony have continuously fueled competition, with both countries striving to assert dominance in Africa (Odubajo & Akinboye, 2017). This historical backdrop provides the **foundation** for current bilateral tensions.

Migration: Catalyst for Conflict

Migration acts as a critical driver of socio-political tensions. Economic disparities between the two countries have led to significant migration flows, with Nigerian migrants contributing to South Africa's economy but also facing xenophobic violence (Niworu, 2018). These attacks have strained diplomatic ties, highlighting the urgent need for effective migration management (Oloruntoba, 2018). Moreover, contrasting diplomatic approaches—Nigeria's assertive "megaphone diplomacy" versus South Africa's "quiet diplomacy"—have further complicated efforts to address migration-related challenges (Chidozie et al., 2013). This makes migration a **catalyst** for bilateral strain.

Economic Competition: Structural Rivalry

Economic competition represents a structural source of tension between the two nations. Nigeria's oil-centric economy contrasts with South Africa's diversified economic base, creating trade imbalances and unequal economic engagements (Tian & Dong, 2015). The rivalry for regional economic dominance is compounded by differing national priorities and external partnerships, as seen in Nigeria's relationship with China, which offers lessons for managing asymmetrical trade relationships (Udeala, 2010). This competition, though occasionally collaborative, often amplifies existing diplomatic and socio-political conflicts (Odubajo & Akinboye, 2017). Thus, economic rivalry is a **persistent source of conflict**.

Citizen Diplomacy: A Mitigating Force

Citizen diplomacy emerges as the **key mechanism** to address tensions arising from migration and economic disparities. Grassroots initiatives, including cultural exchange programs and trade advocacy, foster mutual understanding and trust. For example, cultural diplomacy programs have been shown to alleviate xenophobic sentiments and promote tolerance (Ezeuduji, 2013). Similarly, citizen-led efforts under frameworks like the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) can enhance regional trade integration and resolve economic conflicts (Mhonyera & Meyer, 2023). Strategic engagement of citizens thus provides a pathway for sustainable conflict resolution (Odubajo & Akinboye, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both primary and secondary sources of data to comprehensively address the research objectives. The combination of these methods allowed for an in-depth exploration of the complexities of Nigeria-South Africa relations, providing robust insights that integrated historical and contemporary perspectives.

A narrative literature review was conducted to gather secondary data, thematically structured around the study's core concepts of historical relations, migration, economic competition, and citizen diplomacy. This approach was adopted in place of a full systematic review protocol; no predefined database search strategy, screening log, or PRISMA-style flow diagram was maintained, and the review is accordingly characterised as narrative rather than systematic. This process involved identifying and analyzing relevant literature to extract insights that addressed the research questions. Themes were drawn directly from the study topic to guide the literature search, ensuring alignment with the study's objectives. The search included literature from reputable publishers, encompassing historical and contemporary works to capture the full scope of relevant developments. No restrictions were placed on the year of publication, as the study incorporated historical components crucial for understanding the evolution of Nigeria-South Africa relations. This inclusive approach enabled the identification of key insights across different periods, which may have been overlooked in a more narrowly focused review. Literature that lacked depth or failed to address the identified themes or research questions was excluded to

maintain the quality and relevance of the analysis. Thematic analysis of secondary data was then conducted to synthesize findings and complement the primary data. Also, the literature offered insights that helped in the development of a conceptual model for the study. This model was designed using whimsical drawing tool.

Primary data collection involved Key Informant Interviews (KII), a qualitative method chosen for its ability to provide in-depth and nuanced insights. Interviews followed a common semi-structured protocol and lasted approximately 10 to 30 minutes each. Fifteen stakeholders were interviewed, including officers from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (representing the Foreign Service Inspectorate, Office of the Permanent Secretary, Office of the Honourable Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Economic, Consular, and Legal Department), representatives from the South African Embassy in Nigeria, and officials from the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA). These respondents were purposively selected based on their direct knowledge and professional experience related to the study's focus areas. Purposive sampling ensured that the participants possessed the expertise necessary to provide meaningful and informed contributions to the research. It should be noted that this sampling frame captured institutional and diplomatic elite perspectives on citizen diplomacy rather than the direct experiences of migrants, business actors, or grassroots civil society participants; the primary data are accordingly interpreted throughout this study as evidence of elite-level perception rather than of citizen-led diplomatic practice.

The interviews were conducted with strict adherence to ethical research practices. Anonymity of respondents was maintained throughout the study to protect their identities and encourage candid participation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they were fully aware of the purpose of the research, how their contributions would be used, and their right to withdraw at any point. Data from the interviews were manually coded and analyzed thematically. Some of the insights shared by respondents were presented verbatim to preserve their authenticity and direct relevance to the study's goals. Others were paraphrased to align with the study's narrative and objectives while retaining the substance of the information provided.

In the interest of methodological transparency, coding was undertaken manually by a single researcher, without a second coder and without a formal inter-coder reliability statistic; interpretations were subsequently discussed and cross-checked between the co-authors rather than independently coded. Interview recruitment continued until the fifteen planned key informant positions had been filled rather than until a predetermined saturation criterion was met, and no formal saturation assessment was therefore conducted. These procedural choices are addressed further in the Limitations of the Study section below.

The use of both primary and secondary data allowed for a triangulation of findings, strengthening the validity and reliability of the study. The secondary data provided a historical and theoretical framework, while the primary data added depth and specificity through firsthand accounts and experiences. This methodological integration ensured a comprehensive analysis of the bilateral relations between Nigeria and South Africa, with a focus on migration, economic competition, and the role of citizen diplomacy.

Limitations of the Study

While the study employed a relatively small sample size for interviews, the participants were carefully selected key informants with significant expertise and strategic roles within institutions in both Nigeria and South Africa. This ensured that the data collected offered deep, context-specific insights into the dynamics of migration, xenophobia, and economic competition, providing a high degree of relevance and accuracy. It is nonetheless a material limitation that all fifteen informants were drawn from institutional and diplomatic settings; the study does not include the direct testimony of Nigerian migrants, South African host communities, cross-border business operators, or civil-society organisations who participate in or are affected by citizen diplomacy on the ground. The findings should accordingly be read as evidence of elite-level perception and policy orientation towards citizen diplomacy, rather than as direct evidence of citizen-led conflict-resolution activity. The reliance on qualitative data analysis through thematic coding, while allowing for nuanced interpretation, may introduce an element of subjectivity. However, this approach enabled the research to capture the complexities of the subject matter, uncovering patterns and relationships that more rigid methods might overlook.

Additionally, while the inclusion of older literature was necessary to provide historical context and enrich the analysis, it may not fully account for more recent shifts in global economic and geopolitical dynamics. This limitation was mitigated by integrating contemporary primary data from interviews, ensuring that the findings remain relevant and timely. So, even though there were limitations, the study offers substantial contributions by focusing on strategically significant insights, leveraging a conceptual framework, and proposing actionable recommendations for fostering Nigeria-South Africa cooperation. Its integration of historical, economic, and social dimensions provides a robust foundation for future research and policy formulation.

Three further methodological constraints warrant explicit acknowledgement. First, the secondary literature was reviewed narratively rather than systematically; no PRISMA-style protocol, database log, or reproducible screening record was maintained, and the resulting synthesis should not be read as a systematic literature review in the methodological sense of that term. Second, saturation was not formally assessed against a predetermined criterion, and inter-coder reliability was not statistically established, since coding was performed by a single researcher. Third, as noted above, the primary data reflect the perspectives of institutional and diplomatic elites rather than of citizens directly engaged in grassroots diplomatic activity. Future studies should address these constraints by conducting a larger, saturation-sampled programme of semi-structured interviews, of comparable duration to those undertaken here, with Nigerian migrants, South African host communities, cross-border traders, and civil-society organisations, supported by a second coder and a reported inter-coder reliability statistic, and, where a systematic review is intended, a fully documented PRISMA-compliant search and screening protocol.

FINDINGS

Historical Dynamics of Bilateral Relations

"Nigeria played a huge role in liberating South Africa from apartheid, but instead of gratitude, South Africa has often acted as an adversary, especially during Nigeria's military regime." – [Key Informant, Nigerian Institute of International Affairs].

"The relationship has been shaped by rivalry, not brotherhood, despite shared continental leadership goals." – [Key Informant, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Nigeria].

"We expected Nigeria's contributions to the liberation struggles to create a lasting alliance, but it feels like South Africa has forgotten its history." – [Key Informant, South African Embassy].

The historical foundation of Nigeria-South Africa relations is complex. Scholars like Ebegbulem (2013) confirm that Nigeria's active role in anti-apartheid efforts created an expectation of strong bilateral ties post-apartheid. However, South Africa's actions during Nigeria's political crises, such as campaigning for its suspension from the Commonwealth in the 1990s, exacerbated tensions. These events align with informants' claims of rivalry overshadowing gratitude. Odubajo and Akinboye (2017) add that competition for regional dominance has remained a recurring issue, preventing harmonious collaboration. While the literature supports informants' views on rivalry, it also highlights post-1999 improvements, such as initiatives like the Bi-National Commission (Umezurike & Asuelime, 2015), suggesting efforts have been made to repair relations.

Migration Dynamics

"The xenophobic attacks have become a recurring nightmare for Nigerians in South Africa. It is a failure of the South African government to control its citizens." – [Key Informant, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nigeria].

"Our people are not just victims of violence but also systemic harassment in everyday life—at immigration, hospitals, and even police stations." – [Key Informant, Nigerian Institute of International Affairs].

"The narrative in South Africa unfairly blames Nigerian migrants for crime and unemployment." – [Key Informant, South African Embassy].

Migration issues are among the most contentious aspects of Nigeria-South Africa relations. Niworu (2018) documents how xenophobic violence against Nigerians has strained diplomatic ties, echoing informants'

observations. Informants' concerns about systemic harassment also align with Bishogo's (2020) findings, which report that Nigerian migrants face prejudice in accessing social services and protection from law enforcement in South Africa. However, the literature also highlights underlying causes, such as economic competition and resource scarcity in South Africa, which exacerbate anti-immigrant sentiments (Mogekwu, 2005). This nuance is often missing in informants' accounts but is critical for understanding the broader dynamics driving xenophobia.

Economic Competition and Trade Disparities

"South Africa dominates the Nigerian market with its companies, while only a few Nigerian firms can operate successfully in South Africa." – [Key Informant, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nigeria].

"The trade relationship is unequal. Nigeria exports oil while South Africa floods our markets with finished goods." – [Key Informant, Nigerian Institute of International Affairs].

"South Africa's economic strategy has always been expansionist, and Nigeria is a major target of its ambitions." – [Key Informant, African Affairs Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nigeria].

Explanation and Literature Insights: The economic imbalance between Nigeria and South Africa is a well-documented issue. Ebegbulem (2013) supports informants' claims, noting that over 100 South African companies operate in Nigeria across sectors like telecommunications, retail, and construction, while only a handful of Nigerian firms have a footprint in South Africa. Similarly, Tian and Dong (2015) argue that Nigeria's reliance on raw material exports, such as oil, puts it at a disadvantage in bilateral trade relations. Odubajo and Akinboye (2017) explain this disparity as a reflection of structural economic differences, with South Africa benefiting from a more diversified and industrialized economy. While the literature largely corroborates informants' concerns, it also emphasizes the potential for collaboration in areas like manufacturing and energy, which could reduce these disparities.

Citizen Diplomacy

"Citizen diplomacy is underutilized. It could help bridge gaps caused by migration and trade conflicts." – [Key Informant, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nigeria].

"Cultural exchange programs could reduce xenophobia and improve public perceptions on both sides." – [Key Informant, South African Embassy].

"The Nigerian government needs to do more to protect its citizens abroad. Citizen diplomacy must go beyond symbolic gestures." – [Key Informant, Economic, Consular, and Legal Department, African Affairs Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nigeria].

Informants' emphasis on the role of citizen diplomacy aligns with Ezeuduji's (2013) findings, which highlight its potential to foster cultural understanding and reduce xenophobia. Respondents' calls for greater governmental support also echo Offor et al.'s (2018) critique of Nigeria's weak implementation of citizen diplomacy. However, the literature provides additional context. Mhonyera and Meyer (2023) propose that regional initiatives like AfCFTA could complement citizen diplomacy by creating economic interdependence, fostering cooperation. This suggests that while informants focus on the social aspects of citizen diplomacy, its economic potential should also be considered.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal the nuances shaping Nigeria-South Africa relations, particularly the interplay of historical, migratory, economic, and diplomatic dimensions. These findings are contextualized within existing literature, with novel insights that highlight gaps and propose implications for policy and practice. Nigeria-South Africa relations have long been influenced by a complex history of rivalry and collaboration. This study reaffirms that historical tensions and aspirations for regional dominance remain pivotal. Existing research, such as that by Ebegbulem (2013) and Odubajo and Akinboye (2017), emphasizes mutual political ambitions and post-apartheid

collaboration. However, the study uncovers an emotional undercurrent in bilateral relations, with informants highlighting perceived ingratitude from South Africa despite Nigeria's significant role in the anti-apartheid struggle. This emotional dimension, less explored in the literature, adds depth to understanding the trust deficit that continues to affect diplomatic ties.

Migration emerges as a critical factor in bilateral tensions, reflecting broader socio-political and economic challenges. Informants highlight the persistent issue of xenophobia, echoing findings by Niworu (2018) and Moge kwu (2005), who emphasize its roots in South Africa's socio-economic inequalities. The study also brings to light systemic issues such as harassment faced by Nigerian migrants in South Africa, which complements existing narratives but provides more granularity. The literature proposes collaborative approaches to migration management, as seen in Oloruntoba (2019). However, this study underscores the urgency for targeted South African policy reforms to address both xenophobic violence and systemic biases, particularly in public services and law enforcement.

Economic disparities between the two nations also underpin many of the tensions highlighted in the study. Informants frequently cited the unequal nature of trade relations, reflecting critiques by Tian and Dong (2015) and Ebegbulem (2013). South Africa's economic strategy is perceived as expansionist, with over 100 South African companies dominating Nigerian markets across various sectors, while Nigerian firms face limited success in South Africa. These insights align with structural critiques of African economies, which emphasize the challenges posed by resource dependence, particularly Nigeria's reliance on oil exports. This study adds to the discourse by emphasizing the potential for collaborative ventures in manufacturing and renewable energy. Leveraging such opportunities could foster economic balance and mutual benefit, as suggested by Seteolu and Okuneye (2017).

Citizen diplomacy is a recurring theme in addressing these multifaceted tensions. Informants advocate for enhanced use of cultural exchange programs and grassroots initiatives, consistent with findings from Ezeuduji (2013). This study also highlights the potential for regional frameworks, such as the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), to complement citizen diplomacy by fostering economic interdependence. The dual role of citizen diplomacy in addressing both social and economic challenges enriches existing discourse, offering a holistic approach to tension mitigation.

A key contribution of this study is the development of the Bilateral Tension-Diffusion and Citizen Resolution (BTD-CR) model. This model positions citizen diplomacy as the central mechanism for conflict mitigation. It does this by integrating historical, economic, and social dimensions. Unlike prior frameworks that often address these factors in isolation, the BTD-CR model provides a cohesive and actionable approach to resolving bilateral tensions. This integrative perspective represents a significant theoretical advancement, offering a new lens through which to understand Nigeria-South Africa relations.

The findings carry significant implications for policy and practice. Migration management strategies must prioritize protection for migrants and address systemic biases. Policymakers in both nations should collaborate on narratives that counter xenophobia and foster public goodwill. Economic collaboration, particularly in sectors like manufacturing and renewable energy, offers an opportunity to recalibrate trade relations and reduce structural disparities. Regional agreements like AfCFTA provide a practical framework for advancing these objectives. Citizen diplomacy should be institutionalized, with increased investment in cultural exchange programs and grassroots initiatives that encourage mutual understanding. Finally, the adoption of the BTD-CR model in diplomatic efforts could streamline strategies by emphasizing interconnected factors and the pivotal role of citizen-driven initiatives.

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of Nigeria-South Africa relations, highlighting the enduring impacts of historical dynamics, the socio-political complexities of migration, and the structural challenges of economic competition. This research advances theoretical understanding while offering practical frameworks for fostering sustainable cooperation. This is possible through foregrounding the potential of citizen diplomacy and proposing the BTD-CR model.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the multifaceted dynamics of Nigeria-South Africa relations, examining the historical evolution, migration-driven tensions, economic competition, and the potential of citizen diplomacy as a conflict resolution tool. The findings reveal that while historical collaborations, such as Nigeria's pivotal role in the anti-apartheid struggle, created expectations of solidarity, the relationship has often been defined by rivalry and mutual suspicion. Migration emerges as a persistent source of tension, fueled by xenophobic violence and systemic challenges faced by Nigerian migrants in South Africa. Economic competition, underpinned by trade imbalances and structural differences in the economies, further complicates bilateral ties. However, informants across both diplomatic services perceive citizen diplomacy as a potentially viable mechanism for mitigating these tensions. Through cultural exchange programs and grassroots economic initiatives, citizen-driven efforts can foster mutual understanding, reduce xenophobia, and promote equitable collaboration. The proposed Bilateral Tension-Diffusion and Citizen Resolution (BTD-CR) model offers a comprehensive framework for addressing these complex issues, integrating historical, social, and economic dimensions. This approach underscores the importance of leveraging citizen initiatives alongside formal diplomatic strategies to achieve sustainable cooperation. While Nigeria and South Africa's relationship is fraught with challenges, it also holds significant potential for mutual benefit in that if the root causes of migration-related tensions are addressed as well as recalibrating economic collaborations, and investing in citizen diplomacy, both nations can strengthen their partnership and contribute to Africa's broader developmental goals.

Suggestion for Further Studies

Future research could focus on exploring the long-term impacts of citizen diplomacy initiatives, such as cultural exchange programs and grassroots economic collaborations, to assess their effectiveness in reducing bilateral tensions and fostering mutual understanding. Comparative studies examining Nigeria-South Africa relations alongside other intra-African partnerships would provide broader insights into the dynamics of regional hegemony and cooperation within Africa. Evaluating the effectiveness of specific policy interventions, such as migration management strategies or trade agreements under frameworks like the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), could also yield actionable recommendations for policymakers seeking to enhance bilateral relations. Further investigations into migration-related tensions could adopt a gendered perspective, examining how these dynamics affect women and other vulnerable groups. This approach would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the socio-political and economic implications of migration between the two nations. Additionally, the role of digital platforms, including social media, in shaping public perceptions and fostering cross-border understanding between Nigerians and South Africans could offer insights into innovative avenues for conflict resolution and cultural integration.

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