Can the Crippled Giant Walk Again? Evaluating Nigeria's Rising State Credentials in Environmental Resource Governance

Michael Ayobami Fajobi, Fadeke Esther Olu-Owolabi and Felix Chidozie
Department of Political Science and International Relations, College of Leadership and Development Studies, Covenant University, Ota, Nigeria

michael.fajobi@covenantuniversity.edu.ng
fadeke.owolabi@covenantuniversity.edu.ng
felix.chidozie@covenantuniversity.edu.ng

Abstract: Nigeria, often referred to as the "Giant of Africa", has long been perceived as an emerging power with evident regional influence, a perception that stems from its foreign policy adopted by successive administrations since independence. However, internal challenges have transformed the accolade into a "crippled giant" in literature. Drawing on secondary sources, this paper assesses Nigeria's credentials as a rising state in an emerging multipolar world, where traditional Western hegemony is contested by rising Asian powers, the expansion of the BRICS, and shifting global alliances. The analysis reveals that Nigeria has substantial credentials, including its youthful demographic, enormous military capabilities, growing soft power projection, rapid technological expansion, particularly in fintech, and abundant natural resources, including oil, lithium, and sand. However, unlike traditional credentials of rising states that emphasise military and economic capabilities in existing international relations scholarship, this paper argues that strategic natural resource endowment and environmental governance constitute an additional pivotal credential of rising states, as the ability to harness these resources can translate into economic prosperity. Nevertheless, these credentials remain under-optimised due to structural and institutional challenges, environmental security issues, corruption, and policy inconsistency, which undermine Nigeria's capacity. The paper concludes that for Nigeria to realistically join the league of rising states, transformational leadership must be embraced, accompanied by domestic reforms in governance, security, and economic diversification beyond oil. Until such conversion is pragmatically embraced, the crippled giant is unlikely to walk again on the global stage, and as a result, Nigeria's potentials will remain unrealised.

Keywords: Environmental security, Hegemony, Resource governance, Rising states, Sand resource, Soft power

1. Introduction

The contemporary international system is experiencing a significant transformation characterised by the gradual decentralisation of hegemony beyond the traditional Western dominance to a wider constellation of states whose economic, demographic and strategic resources are on the rise (Alexandroff & Cooper, 2010).

Some scholars in international relations (Jaafar, 2025; Urio, 2024) have notably interpreted this development as the transition from a unipolar world order to a multipolar global system or what Archaya (2025) called a multiplex order, where there are multiple emerging states competing for power and expanding their influence abroad. This paradigm shift has stimulated a growing body of scholarship on rising powers, especially in relation to states such as China, India, Brazil, South Africa, and Turkey. Within this emerging order, a league of rising states is routinely classified as potential emerging powers due to their growing economic bases, population, and enhanced diplomatic drive in the international system. In Africa, Nigeria frequently appears as a potential rising power with over 220 million people, the largest demographic base in Africa and one of the largest economies on the continent (Ogunnubi, & Awosusi, 2022).

Some studies have argued that Nigeria possesses several structural attributes that are congruent with the cluster of emerging powers (Osimen et al, 2024; Onuoha, 2019; Oshewolo, 2019). The reason is not far-fetched; Osaghae (1998) and Akinboye (2013) have documented a chronological record of diplomatic influence and the display of power in Africa to the extent that the appellation "giant of Africa" has been bestowed on Abuja. However, Osaghae (1998) rechristened the appellation as "crippled giant" due to the structural weaknesses that have crippled Nigeria since its inception. It was on this note that Akinboye (2013) described the foreign policy of Nigeria since independence as "beautiful abroad but ugly at home". This paradox raises a germane question: Does Nigeria possess the credentials necessary to join the league of rising states in an emerging multipolar international system? Addressing this national question is the main thrust of this paper. However, to make this achievable, this paper is divided into six distinctive sections. Following this introduction, the second section appraises the conceptual debates surrounding rising powers in international relations literature. The third section explores Nigeria's colonial origin and the structural contradictions embedded in its formation. The fourth presents an overview of Nigeria's regional and global influence through the foreign policy engagements of successive administrations since independence. The fifth section evaluates Nigeria's credentials and whether

Abuja can realistically join the league of rising states given its structural contradictions. The sixth section entails the conclusion.

2. Methodology

This paper adopted a qualitative research design relying solely on secondary data from peer-reviewed articles, books, and internet sources. Given the exploratory nature of this paper, the paper adopted this approach to interrogate Nigeria's credentials for joining the league of rising states. The researchers sourced these documents using SCOPUS, Google Scholar, and the Springer Nature database. The credibility of the cited documents and the outlets where they were published are the primary criteria for selecting documented sources. The documents gathered were analysed using content analysis.

2.1 Rising Powers in International Relations Discourse

The concept of rising powers has taken centre stage in the modern international relations literature, although the term came to fore during the post-Cold War period, its intellectual foundation could be traced back to the earlier theoretical attempts that aimed to explain shifts in the global power structure.

One of the earliest theories to consider such dynamics is the Power Transition Theory by A.F.K. Organski, which posits that international instability often emerges when rapidly developing states are challenged by the emergence of rising powers within the international system. This theory posits that rising states are those that undergo faster development in terms of economic, military and demographic capabilities, thereby challenging the status quo of power distribution (Organski, 1958).

Likewise, the theory of long cycles in world politics by George Modelski holds that the international system is characterised by the emergence and decline of world powers. In these cycles, new states ultimately usurp the hegemony of powerful states, creating a condition of systemic instability and geopolitical change (Modelski, 1987).

This debate has been enhanced further by contemporary scholarship. The resuscitation of the "Thucydides Trap" by Allison Graham is based on the traditional observation that the rise of Athens and the resulting fear in Sparta provoked the war in ancient Greece. In contemporary settings, this model is often used to examine conflict between emerging and established powers, most especially the strategic rivalry between China and the United States of America (Allison, 2017).

More elaborately, the term "emerging power" gained traction in political economy, where complementary term like "emerging market" is often used to describe fast-emerging economies that have been absorbed into international financial systems. As time went by, this economic term was extended to political analysis, creating a broader notion of emerging powers in international relations (Folarin et al., 2016). Equally, the concept of "middle powers" has conventionally been used to refer to states with moderate degrees of material power that engage in multilateral diplomacy and alliance-building in international politics (Manicom, & Reeves, 2014).

In spite of this conceptual divergence, emerging powers must possess certain sterling qualities such as sustained economic growth, growing populations, increasing military capabilities, expanding technological and industrial capacity, regional leadership roles, and growing participation in global governance institutions (Mingst & McKibben Arreguin-Toft, 2018).

2.2 The Birth of the Giant: Nigeria's Historical Formation and Structural Contradictions

Prior to the formation of Nigeria as a sovereign state, the territory was governed by the British Colonial Government, commencing with the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914; a strategic move that was initiated by Lord Fredrick Lugard, who was the Governor-General at that time (Oni et al, 2026). It would be recalled that Lugard likened this merger to a union between the rich wife of substance (the economically prosperous Southern Protectorate) and the poor husband (the Northern Protectorate), as a necessary step toward prosperity for both. The colonial government consolidated this union by introducing indirect rule, which governed the local people through the traditional leaders. Consequently, this unsolicited union birthed structural consequences, including regionalism and ethnic fragmentation, weak national integration, resource allocation challenges, and persistent ethno-religious conflict (Oshagae, 1998).

The post-independence politics inherited these structural tensions, leading to the demise of the First Republic (1960-1966) following the first military coup in Nigeria. This development was followed by the Nigerian Civil War, which lasted from 1967 to 1970, and years of military rule until democratic rule was reinstated in 1999.

Despite its domestic hardships, Nigeria was also pursuing an ambitious foreign policy agenda in Africa. This is the paradox of internal vulnerability and external activism, which has characterised Nigeria's external relations.

2.3 Nigeria's Regional and Global Influence: An Overview

The foreign policy of the post-independent Nigerian government has been guided by the principle that the African continent is the centrepiece of its foreign policy. Successive administrations have sought to position Nigeria as a regional leader, promoting stability and integration across the continent. This section provides a chronological overview of Nigeria's regional and global influence since independence. This is imperative to set the pace for evaluating Nigeria's credentials in the subsequent section.

2.4 Alhaji Tafawa Balewa Administration (1960-1966)

The first prime minister of Nigeria, Tafawa Balewa, laid out the principles of Nigerian foreign policy soon after independence on October 1st, 1960. His government focused on African unity, anti-colonialism and non-alignment in the geopolitical situation of the Cold War (Akinboye, 2013). The government of Balewa was an active sponsor of liberation movements in Africa, especially in regions that were under colonial rule, such as Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Angola, and Mozambique. Nigeria also contributed majorly to the formation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963, which aimed to enhance the unity, independence, and cooperation of the newly independent states in Africa.

2.5 Yakubu Gowon Government (1966-1975)

Following the Nigerian Civil War, General Gowon dedicated ample effort to restoring the international reputation of Nigeria and making it a stronger leader in Africa. The oil boom after the war gave Nigeria greater financial capacity, enabling the country to pursue a more aggressive regional policy. Among the greatest successes of the Gowon administration was Nigeria's role in the formation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Furthermore, Nigeria became a member of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1971, which contributed to improving its global economic image as a major oil producer. Belonging to OPEC enhanced Nigeria's bargaining power in international energy markets and provided substantial financial resources to project Nigeria's influence in Africa.

2.6 Muritala Mohammed/Olusegun Obasanjo Administration (1975-1979)

The short-lived yet memorable rule of General Muritala, later followed by General Obasanjo after Muritala's assassination. Nigeria took a strong stance and self-reliant diplomatic crusade, especially on behalf of the African liberation movements. Among the most striking is the acknowledgement of the Movement for the People's Liberation in Angola (MPLA) government in 1975, despite heavy pressure from the Western powers backed by the United States (Garba, 1987).

2.7 Mohammadu Buhari Administration (1983- 1985)

The focus of Nigeria's foreign policy marked a noticeable retreat from Nigeria's traditional "Big Brother" role in the region, as the regime prioritised stringent national interests amid severe economic crisis, rampant corruption, and domestic austerity over expansive regional benevolence. The administration also closed the Nigerian land borders against neighbouring states, a border policy that further reinforces the hegemonic position of Nigeria in West Africa, as other West African states felt the harsh consequences, especially the Benin Republic, whose market is largely dependent on Nigeria's economy (Abegunde, & Fabiyi, 2020).

2.8 General Ibrahim Babangida Administration (1985-1993)

The foreign policy of Nigeria under the administration of Babangida was based on regional diplomacy and economic revitalisation. Babangida was at the forefront in reinforcing ECOWAS as a regional security outfit. Nigeria's leadership was most evident during the first Liberian Civil War, when ECOWAS formed the Economic Community of West African Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) peacekeeping force in 1990. Nigeria provided the greatest number of troops, financial resources, and logistical support to the operation, and Nigerian forces were decisive in preventing the Liberian state from collapsing and in restoring relative stability (Babangida, 2025).

2.9 General Sani Abacha Administration (1993-1998)

Despite widespread international outcry over Nigeria's domestic political situation under Abacha due to the inhumane treatment of the Ogoni leaders, Nigeria continued to play an important role in regional security during this period.

Nigerian forces were highly active in the ECOMOG in both Liberia and Sierra Leone. In 1997, Sierra Leone was intervened in by Nigerian-led forces to restore a democratically elected government under President Ahmad Tejan Kabah, who had been overthrown in a military coup. These actions strengthened Nigeria's position as a regional hegemon in West Africa.

2.10 General Abdulsalami Abubakar Administration (1998-1999)

The short-term transitional government of General Abdulsalami was significant in restoring Nigeria's international image after decades of military rule. His leadership restored democratic rule and continued to participate in peacekeeping activities in the region. Nigeria maintained its engagement in ECOMOG missions in Sierra Leone to stabilise the entire region. The restoration of civilian rule in 1999 significantly improved Nigeria's international image and opened new diplomatic opportunities with other states.

2.11 Chief Olusegun Obasanjo Government (1999-2007)

President Obasanjo's return to power as a civilian president marked a pivotal turning point in Nigeria's politics and foreign policy. Obasanjo's administration prioritised rebuilding Nigeria's international credibility following decades of military rule. Obasanjo was an active diplomat who travelled to many countries and strengthened ties with world powers. One of the success stories of his administration was the Nigerian leadership in peacekeeping missions in Liberia during the Second Liberian Civil War in 2003.

2.12 Umaru Musa Yar'Adua Administration (2007-2010)

President Yar'Adua adopted a more conservative foreign policy, yet the period still saw Nigeria as a key mediator in regional political crises. It is worth noting that Nigeria was involved in a diplomatic intervention to stabilise Guinea-Bissau after the 2008 political crisis.

2.13 Goodluck Jonathan Administration (2010-2015)

President Jonathan assumed office following the death of Musa Yar'Adua. Jonathan's administration maintained Nigeria's regional leadership, particularly in peacekeeping and conflict management. In response to the 2012 military coup and the Islamist insurgency in northern Mali, Nigeria made a significant contribution to the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), deploying an estimated 1,200 troops and becoming the mission's largest contributor.

2.14 Muhammadu Buhari Administration (2015-2023)

The leadership of President Buhari prioritised regional security collaboration, especially in countering the Boko Haram insurgency. Nigeria strengthened the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) with the support of Chad, Niger and Cameroon to combat insurgent groups operating within the Lake Chad Basin (Alufoge, & Duruji, 2020).

2.15 Bola Ahmed Tinubu Administration (2023-Present)

The incumbent administration has maintained Nigeria's leadership in ECOWAS, especially in reaction to the Sahelian military coup wave. Nigeria has been at the forefront of diplomatic and military pressure by ECOWAS after the 2023 coup in the Republic of Niger, demanding that constitutional order be restored. A new foreign-policy framework, known as the 4D Doctrine (Democracy, Development, Demography, and Diaspora), has also been presented by the Tinubu administration, aimed at revisiting Nigeria's role as a significant diplomatic and economic player in Africa (Nwangwu, 2024).

3. Evaluating Nigeria's Credentials as a Rising State

Assessing whether Nigeria can realistically join the league of rising states requires examining the structural foundations of national power. In international relations scholarship, the capabilities of rising states are typically evaluated through a combination of demographic capacity, economic strength, military capability, and soft power projection (Nye, 2022). These indicators collectively determine whether a state possesses the structural resources necessary to influence regional and global politics. Nigeria exhibits several of these characteristics, suggesting that the nation has considerable latent potential and attributes of a rising state. To this end, this section appraises Nigeria's credentials.

3.1 Demographic Strength

Population size is a basic element of national strength in international relations. Large populations provide a state with an enormous pool of labour, a potentially large pool of military recruits, and a large domestic market for economic activity. Demography is therefore a key indicator in national capability indices and power calculations; countries such as China and India benefit greatly from their large populations (Archaya, 2025).

In this regard, Nigeria has one of the largest populations in the world. With over 220 million people the most populous country in Africa and the sixth most populous country in the world. Reports have shown that by 2050, Nigeria will have a population of about 350 million, making it the third most populous country in the world after India and China (United Nations, 2024).

3.2 Economic Capability

A nation's economy is one of the most significant indicators of attaining increasing power status. Organski (1958), in his power-transition theory, holds that when a state's economic growth is sustained, it gains the resources needed to build its military strength and gain enormous influence in the international system.

Without doubt, Nigeria has significant economic potential, one of the largest African economies, with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of $285 billion, competing with South Africa and Egypt for continental leadership (International Monetary Fund, 2025). Nigeria also possesses one of the largest domestic markets in Africa, driven by its large population and expanding urban middle class. The oil export industry has traditionally been the driver of Nigeria's economy since the discovery of crude oil in Oloibiri, Bayelsa State, in 1956. Oil revenues have been at the centre stage in determining Nigeria's fiscal capacity and international economic posture. Since the country joined OPEC in 1971, its global economic relevance in the energy sector has increased further.

Furthermore, Nigeria is a key actor in regional economic integration. Abuja is projected to take the lead in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) alongside South Africa, an ambitious initiative that aims to establish the world's largest free trade area by connecting over 1.3 billion people across the continent. Nigeria's economic size gives it the potential to shape trade flows, industrial development, and regional value chains across West Africa (Chidozie, Osimen, & Newo, 2024).

3.3 Military Capability

The Realist theory of international relations holds that military power remains critical in asserting a state's influence on the global stage as it enables a state to defend its national interests and deter rivals. Some indicators of military capability include defence expenditure, military personnel, and power-projection capabilities (Mearsheimer, 2014).

Nigeria has one of the biggest and most experienced armed forces in Africa. The Nigerian Armed Forces have historically played a significant role in regional peacekeeping and conflict-resolution efforts across West Africa. Nigeria has the largest active military personnel in West Africa, with about 230,000 active personnel and sixth in Africa after Ethiopia, Egypt, Morocco, Eritrea, and Sudan (Global Firepower, 2026).

3.4 Regional Leadership and Soft Power Projection

A state's ability to lead the region and wield diplomatic power is another indicator of rising power. The regional powers have become regular contributor to the political order in their geographical areas and hold key positions in regional institutions. Nigeria has been such a primary player in West Africa. In 1975, the country became a founding member of ECOWAS and the organisation's largest financial contributor, offering leadership and logistical services to ECOWAS programs to advance economic integration and regional security (Ogunnubi & Awosusi, 2022).

Nigeria's diplomatic activity extends even further to include the African Union and numerous United Nations projects. Nigerian diplomats have held high-profile positions in international bodies, and Nigerian peacekeeping units have served in many United Nations missions. Over the past years, Nigeria has pursued a broader diplomatic agenda outside the continent, showing interest in joining international governance structures such as BRICS, indicating its intention to be more involved in shaping international economic and political structures (Archarya, 2025).

In addition to regional leadership, the emerging powers are increasingly dependent on soft power to complement their power projection ability. Soft power is the ability of a state to influence the preferences of others via attraction, culture, and values rather than through coercion (Nye, 2008). Nigeria has a significant soft

power projection, especially in the cultural industries. The Nigerian film industry, often referred to as Nollywood, is one of the largest film production hubs in the world and contributes significantly to cultural discourse in Africa and the African diaspora in the world at large (Ezepue, 2020).

3.5 Technological Growth and Industrial Capacity

Innovative ideas have become an influential factor in national power in the twenty-first century. Rising states such as Singapore and India have been investing heavily in technological development to enhance their competitiveness globally. Nigeria, in turn, has demonstrated potential in the digital economy, specifically in fintech and start-up innovation. It has one of the largest technology start-up ecosystems in Africa, with most of it concentrated in Lagos, which has become a significant technology hub commonly referred to as the Silicon Lagoon of Africa.

3.6 Strategic Natural Resource Endowment and Environmental Governance

Nigeria's wealth of natural resources is an asset that is underutilised in power projection. Since its discovery, crude oil has been the state's major source of national wealth, yet the Nigerian state has not effectively translated this wealth into blessings. However, with the growing demand for lithium and the recent intensification of exploration in the Northern and Southern parts of the state, a new opportunity opens for Nigeria to realign itself in the changing political economy of the global energy transition. With proper management and sustainable exploitation, lithium reserves can be a significant source of wealth, strengthening Nigeria's position in global value chains for renewable energy. Also important is Nigeria's enormous sand resource, which is often ignored, as an asset for the country's development. Sand is a key raw material for urbanisation, transport infrastructure, and mega-scale infrastructure construction, which are essential for economic transformation. However, the importance of this divine endowment is not determined by the number of resources available, but by the government's ability to manage its extraction responsibly, to reduce environmental security impacts, and transform the benefits of resource wealth into sustainable national development. Nigeria's natural resource endowment, if properly managed, can be a strategic credential that enhances the country's profile as a rising state.

4. Giant in Size, Crippled in Structure: Barriers to Nigeria's Emergence as a Rising State

Despite Nigeria's credentials for joining the league of rising states, the country is battling with structural challenges that limit its full potential as an emerging power. This section appraises some of the barriers.

4.1 Structural Economic Constraints

Nigeria may have one of the largest economies on the African continent, but its organisational structure imposes heavy constraints that make it difficult to rise to the league of rising states. The Nigerian economy is highly reliant on crude oil exports, which form a major part of the government's revenue and foreign-exchange earnings (Oladoyin, Pokubo, & Osimen, 2024). Such dependence makes the country susceptible to fluctuations in global energy markets. In contrast to the already rising powers of China, India, and Brazil, whose growth patterns have been shaped by diversified industrial production and manufacturing surges, Nigeria's productive base is relatively limited. Besides dependence on oil, Nigeria is facing severe infrastructure shortages that also limit economic output. Poor electricity supply and industrial infrastructure increase production costs and reduce the competitiveness of local industries in international markets.

4.2 Weak Human Development Indicators

The development of human capital is a crucial yardstick for assessing a country's ability to transform demographic magnitude into productive national power. Despite Nigeria's high and fast-growing population, education, healthcare, and the standard of living of the people are severely challenged, hindering labour productivity and innovation capacity. Nigeria's human development indicators are relatively low compared to those of other emerging economies. Large segments of the population have limited access to quality education and health services, and unemployment and underemployment also limit the productive use of the labour force. Such structural constraints undermine the country's capacity to exploit the benefits of its demographic growth.

Conversely, it would be recalled that China and India invested enormous resources in education, the development of technical skills, and the human capital of their people during their transition phase. Without such investments, Nigeria risks demographic growth without the relative economic productivity that typically characterises the rise of a major power.

4.3 Security Challenges and Internal Instability

Constant security issues are another notable structural constraint on Nigeria's ability to maximise its potential as an emerging power. The nation has suffered a series of internal security crises over the last two decades, undermining its stability. The Boko Haram insurgency in the northeastern region has burdened the security apparatus of the state to a large extent (Alufoge & Duruji, 2020). Rampant banditry, Fulani Herdsmen attack, tribal violence and secessionist movements in different parts of the country are also posing gross problems to internal stability.

4.4 Institutional and Governance Weakness

The core factors that determine whether a state can translate national potential into long-lasting geopolitical influence are institutional power and the effectiveness of governance. Governance issues remained a major hindrance to establishing Nigeria's place as an emerging power in the international system. The continued corruption, weak bureaucratic institutions and electoral systems, and above all, inconsistent policy implementation undermine the effectiveness of state institutions and erode the citizens' trust in government. Stable institutions are needed to organise long-term economic policy required for a country's development.

5. Conclusion

Without doubt, Nigeria's historical formation since inception has created structural vulnerabilities that continue to shape its political trajectory. Nevertheless, the country has demonstrated regional leadership and continental activism in the past. Therefore, this paper concludes that the credentials for rising power status are present but under-optimised. The key question, however, is not whether Nigeria has the credentials to become a rising power; of course, it does. The more precise question is whether Nigeria can undertake the structural transformation necessary to convert potential into sustained geopolitical influence in an emerging multipolar world. Until this conversion occurs, Nigeria remains not a rising power but a state with rising potential.

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