U.S. Strategic Influence and the Great Power Rivalry in Africa: The Case of Nigeria

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Introduction

The *U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa* put forward by President Joe Biden and his administration in 2022 clearly defines the challenge China presents to the United States in Africa: "The People's Republic of China […] sees the region as an important arena to challenge the rules-based international order, advance its own narrow commercial and geopolitical interests, undermine transparency and openness, and weaken U.S. relations with African peoples and governments" (p. 5). Nigeria, as the continent's largest economy and most populous nation, has been a key target of Chinese influence in the region. The U.S. meanwhile considers Nigeria among its most vital African allies, as the country's prominence and influence in the region make it a geopolitical asset. Given Nigeria's influence, the U.S. has increased its efforts to remain the country's premier partner and maintain superiority in the region.

As the great power rivalry between the U.S. and China plays out around the globe, Africa has grown to become a key battleground both countries are keen to master. China's rise throughout Africa and subsequent U.S. response has been increasingly studied by academia and policymakers alike (see, for example, Conteh-Morgan, 2018; Hofstedt, 2009; China in Africa, 2011); yet there exists little analysis on how the U.S. has responded specifically to China's rise in Nigeria. Nigeria's value in the region makes it a prime case to analyze how the U.S. has used its power to attempt to influence the country.

The following research question has been chosen to guide this paper's analysis: Whether and how has the United States attempted to strategically influence Nigeria to counter an increased Chinese presence? Using mostly qualitative data obtained from reports, news articles, and press releases, I examine U.S. influence in Nigeria based on five forms of influence that existing literature has identified as the most favored by the U.S. in their influence attempts.

Through a military dimension, the use of joint military exercises (JMEs) and arms transfers are key forms; for economic influence, foreign aid and foreign direct investment (FDI) appear to be the most used; and diplomatically, leadership visits and statements stand out as the U.S.' preferred forms of signaling.

Following my analysis of Nigeria using these five forms of U.S. strategic influence, I find that the U.S. has undeniably increased its influence attempts in Nigeria. Militarily, the U.S. has increased the sophistication of JMEs with Nigeria and has drastically increased both the value and type of arms transferred to the country. Economically, U.S. foreign aid to Nigeria has increased almost every year and while U.S. FDI in the country has also increased, China is increasingly challenging the U.S.' dominance in the oil and gas sector. While visits by U.S. officials have slightly increased, statements increasingly promote democracy and good governance in the country to counter China's undemocratic advances.

Section I will review the existing literature on the five forms of influence that have been identified. Section II will provide a brief case study on Nigeria and U.S. interests in the country while also focusing on the rise of China in Nigeria and their deepening relationship. Furthermore, this section justifies the selection of Nigeria as a case and explains the research method used in the analysis. Section III is the primary analysis and discussion of the findings and is split up by each of the five forms of influence. Finally, the conclusion briefly repeats the analysis' aims and findings and discusses possible limitations and recommendations for further research.

Section I

Review of Existing Literature

Existing scholarship has identified three dimensions in which the United States can strategically exert influence on a foreign nation. The use of military, economic, and diplomatic means are often the most favored 'tools in the toolbox' for the U.S. and have been used over several decades by numerous administrations to woe potential allies and signal the strategic interest the U.S. has in a country (Meierding & Sigman, 2021). Within each of these three dimensions of influence, a variety of specific means are available for such influence to be carried out. This review of the existing literature will focus on five specific forms of influence that are relevant to the selected case of Nigeria. For military influence, joint military exercises and arms transfers stand out as the preferred tools; for economic, foreign aid and foreign direct investment stand out; and for diplomatic, leadership statements and visits seem to be the preferred form of signaling. While several other ways exist for the U.S. to strategically influence a nation, these five forms appear most relevant to the case of Nigeria. Other forms of influence (such as deployment and increased presence of U.S. troops) would likely have adverse effects on the U.S. influence attempts on Nigeria; thus, these five specific forms of strategic influence are the ones the U.S. is most likely to use given the local conditions in Nigeria.

Joint Military Exercises

As public displays of military cooperation, joint military exercises (JMEs) help "forge partnerships between military personnel and can serve as an important signal of a state's interests" (Bernhardt, 2020, p. 76). Blankenship and Kuo (2022) find that, despite being tightly defined at an operational level, JMEs also serve a broader purpose as signals of strategic and political support. They argue that states generally have two paths to generate security: through

arms acquisitions and through alliances (p. 7). JMEs converge and advance both paths by improving the military performance of participating countries while also signaling the willingness of those countries to cooperate. Despite being less visible and binding than alliances, JMEs still offer strong signals of support. McManus and Nieman (2019) use a quantitative model to estimate the overall level of support that a major power intends to signal for a protégé state's security as well as which signals of support are most informative when sent by each major power. The authors conclude that along with alliances, "joint exercises are generally likely to be among the most informative signals" (p. 371). The same authors find that, unlike Russia and China, for which nuclear deployments and alliances signal the most overall support, military exercises signal the most overall support by the United States and other Western nations. JMEs are therefore one of the most meaningful actions that can be taken by the U.S. in support of a foreign country.

In a similar sense, U.S. military training has been found to lead to an expression of more pro-U.S. foreign policies. Martinez Machain's (2021) analysis finds that the U.S. training of foreign military officers relates to stronger expressions of pro-U.S. foreign policies, with this effect amplified in states where the military has the strongest influence. As Meierding and Sigman (2021) note, the United States' rising level of interest in Africa has resulted in increased military engagement by the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) with African militaries throughout the continent. An invitation to train and conduct military exercises alongside the U.S. means recognition of the partner force's capabilities and brings respect among African militaries, who are often eager to be treated as true partners. Larger roles played by the partner state in joint exercises and operations indicate increased recognition by the U.S. vis-à-vis the partner state and its capabilities (p. 11).

The United States is not alone in recognizing the importance JMEs bring; China has also been increasingly participating in and facilitating them. Despite JMEs not being as strong of a signal by China as nuclear deployments and alliances (as found by McManus and Nieman (2019)), China has employed bilateral and multilateral exercises to foster a climate of regional trust in Africa (Chau, 2011, p. 69). As a result, the U.S. may feel a need to increase the number and sophistication of their JMEs in Africa to directly respond to China.

Arms Transfers

In comparison to the often-public nature of joint military exercises, arms transfers are often a less visible way for the U.S. to show support to a country. The U.S. has a long history of using arms transfers to develop new strategic partnerships and reward and punish existing partners. McManus and Yarhi-Milo (2017) note that several countries not allied with the U.S. have received high levels of U.S. military aid and arms sales, signaling their international strategic value to the U.S. (p. 702). With arms transfers being a costly investment by one country into another, high levels of arms sales directly indicate a strong signal of support. All U.S. arms sales must be approved by the U.S. government, meaning that no U.S. arms are legally sold to countries that the U.S. does not support (p. 714). Along with leader statements, McManus and Nieman (2019, pp. 370-371) find that arms transfers signal the most overall level of U.S. support, but such sales contribute less to overall support signaled by China, the UK, and France. As a result, U.S. arms transfers to Nigeria could be considered a stronger signal of support than Chinese arms transfers.

Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper (2016) show how U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and Israel have been intended as signals of support and serve both deterrence and reassurance functions in the two countries. The authors also find that arms transfers are especially strong

signals of support when they are large, include offensive rather than purely defensive weapons, and are institutionalized over a longer term (pp. 95-96). Arms transfers are often quicker and easier than alliances (as they rarely require legislative approval), and the magnitude and type of weapons being transferred can be altered more easily (p. 95). They also facilitate more than just weapons; countries wanting to buy U.S. arms and defense systems also seek a relationship with the U.S. (Shapiro, 2012, p. 29). Such engagement between two countries forms bilateral ties and creates strong incentives for the recipient country to maintain favorable relations with the U.S.

Several disadvantages hamper the practice of arms transfers. Sislin (1994) defines a successful outcome as an influence attempt where the recipient state altered its behavior to be more in line with U.S. preferences. The author finds that U.S. efforts to influence other countries through arms exports only "succeeded slightly less than half of the time" over the 1950-1992 period (p. 681). Influence attempts were more likely to succeed when the U.S. attempted to influence civilian regimes, supplied more arms, and made attempts when the U.S. was an uncontested global hegemon (p. 665). Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper (2016) point out that while consistent arms transfers may create the perception of a close partnership, such partnerships generally lack an expletive commitment to come to a client state's aid.

Foreign Aid

Similar to the use of arms transfers, the strategic allocation of U.S. foreign aid has been repeatedly used by successive administrations to exert influence internationally. Especially during the Cold War, U.S. foreign aid was a vital tool of diplomacy aimed at bolstering friendly governments in opposition to the Soviet Union (see Lancaster, 2007; Zimmerman, 1993). Often under the guise of development aid, U.S. security interests played essential roles in the allocation

of foreign aid, with the U.S. favoring strategic partners during the Cold War period (McKinlay & Little, 1977; Boschini & Olofsgård, 2007).

Several studies have suggested that with the end of the Cold War, aid has been used more for developmental purposes (see Meernik et al., 1998; Fleck & Kilby, 2010). However, the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent War on Terror reshaped U.S. aid policy and indicated a return to the Cold War-era aid policy. With the increased economic and military competition between the U.S. and China often characterized as the beginning of a second Cold War, it is plausible to assume that foreign aid's role as a geopolitical tool will increase once again, with increased U.S. aid to Taiwan a prominent example (Zengerle, 2021).

Despite the intuitive connection between foreign aid and foreign influence, the limited literature on this relationship has yet to produce conclusive findings. Much of the literature in this area focuses either on foreign aid's effect on democracy and human rights or on vote compliance in the United Nations (see Sullivan et al., 2011, p. 278). However, most scholars agree that foreign aid is a tool of influence and a valuable foreign policy tool. Palmer, Wohlander, and Morgan (2002) contend that states provide aid because "they believe it encourages recipients to take desired actions" (p. 11). Likewise, Tarnoff and Lawson (2016) consider foreign aid as a flexible tool of diplomatic policy and argue that the provision and termination of aid serve as 'the carrot and the stick' that shape recipient states' behavior.

Foreign Direct Investment

Foreign direct investment (FDI) is another economic tool favored by the United States to strategically influence a foreign nation. As Blanton and Machain (2022) find, U.S. military aid to a given country is associated with an increase in investment by U.S. firms in the same country.

Such military aid signals U.S. commitment to the recipient country and therefore implies that the U.S. is willing to protect U.S. firms in countries that are of strategic interest. While military aid is not enough of a signal for firms to make an initial investment, once stable investments in the country are established, U.S. military aid perceives to be a signal convincing firms to invest more in the host nation. Furthermore, as argued by Blanton & Machain (2022), U.S. military aid has the added effect of potentially improving a state's economic and social infrastructure, which in return may encourage U.S. investment.

Throughout the Cold War, the U.S. strengthened its investments in Africa for the strategic purpose of countering Soviet influence (Schlesinger et al., 1973). As is the argument for foreign aid (and in the same way the U.S. did throughout the Cold War), it is plausible to expect an increased promotion of U.S. FDI by the U.S. government to counter growing Chinese economic influence in Africa. Recent trips to Africa by U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen came with promises to increase U.S. investment in Africa to directly counter Chinese investment, a strong indicator that the use of U.S. FDI as a foreign policy tool has returned (Shalal & Plessis, 2023).

Leadership Statements and Visits

Statements and visits made by U.S. leaders to foreign nations are among the most public signals of support. As McManus and Yarhi-Milo (2017) explain, public ceremonial visits create hand-tying costs as "they typically feature images of the U.S. President smiling, praising, and shaking hands" with their foreign counterpart (p. 714). This creates a public suggestion that the president (and by extension the U.S.) cares about the country, creating political and reputation costs should the president later abandon said country. Especially when granted to weaker countries, such visits are considered strong signals of support. While not as strong of a signal as

nuclear deployments or joint military exercises, McManus and Nieman (2019) find that leader visits still contribute to strong levels of U.S. support. Leader visits are also useful as deterrence against small-scale disputes between the target state and military adversaries; however, the lack of both legal weight and long-term commitment that a visit provides brings skepticism to this point (McManus, 2018).

Traveling abroad allows the president to advance the country's strategic interests and woe potential allies (Ostrander & Rider, 2019, p. 838). Lebovic and Saunders (2016) argue and find support for the idea that economic and security interests have the strongest influence on U.S. diplomatic visits abroad. The end of the Cold War opened the door to U.S. political outreach to formerly Soviet-aligned states in Eastern Europe and Africa, who were now often eager to align themselves with the new unipolar power. These findings are corroborated by Koliev and Lundgren (2021), who find that both in- and outgoing diplomatic visits are shaped by economic and security considerations.

Section II

Case Study on Nigeria and its Strategic Importance to the U.S.

This brief case study will lay out Nigeria's history as well as U.S. strategic interests in the country to exemplify why Nigeria is of such importance to U.S. policy in Africa (for a more detailed and in-depth history of Nigeria, see Falola and Heaton, 2008; Bourne, 2015).

Prior to the British organization of Nigeria, "there was no overarching cultural or political unity" (Campbell & Page, 2018, p. 18). The area of what is today known as Nigeria came into British control in 1861 and gained independence in 1960. Government institutions lacking indigenous Nigerian roots and popular legitimacy were left behind, unable to contain or limit

violent competition for power and resources among elites. After independence, civil war devastated the country from 1967 to 1970 and paved the way for long periods of military dictatorship characterized by attacks on human rights. Only in 1999 did civilian rule return to Nigeria, with democracy gradually improving since then.

Present-day Nigeria faces several security challenges, most notably from the terrorist group Boko Haram in the northeast and militancy in the oil-rich Niger Delta in the south. Founded in the early 2000s, Boko Haram has evolved into one of the world's deadliest extremist groups (see Husted, 2022, pp. 12-13). "Violence involving Nigerian security forces, Boko Haram, and an Islamic State-affiliated splinter faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province (IS-WA), is reported to have killed over 40,000 people in Nigeria, mostly civilians, in the past decade" (p. 12). Violence has primarily been concentrated in northeastern Nigeria but has increasingly spilled into neighboring countries. Splitting from Boko Haram in 2016, IS-WA has since surpassed Boko Haram in capacity and size, and the U.S. State Department has designated both as Foreign Terrorist Organizations. Nigerian military offensives and air strikes periodically claim numerous Boko Haram and IS-WA fatalities, but the government still struggles to restore stability.

The Niger Delta "has long been a site of political unrest, criminality, and intermittent armed militancy linked to local grievances over perceived neglect, exploitation, and environmental devastation by oil operators" (Husted, 2022, p. 17). Peaking in the 2000s, attacks on oil facilities and personnel have become the norm and have resulted in dwindling oil production and revenues. Illegal oil trafficking and piracy have become major concerns and have now spread into the Gulf of Guinea.

Oil is at the forefront of U.S.-Nigeria economic relations, with crude oil accounting for 75 percent of U.S. imports from Nigeria in 2020 (Husted, 2022, p. 23). Economically, Nigeria is, according to the World Bank (2021) and the African Development Bank (2023), Africa's largest economy and among Africa's fastest-growing economies. The nation is also Africa's most populous, with a steadily rising population (World Bank, 2021). Nigeria is thus one of the continent's most profitable markets ripe with investment opportunities for U.S. firms. Furthermore, situated along the Gulf of Guinea and with prime access to the Atlantic, the country hosts several seaports vital to international trade (Mohseni-Cheraghlou & Aladekoba, 2023, p. 13).

From a geopolitical standpoint, the U.S. views Nigeria's stability and prosperity as inseparable from that of the region, and "successive U.S. Administrations have described the U.S. partnership with Nigeria as among the most important bilateral relationships on the continent" (Husted, 2022, p. 1). Nigeria has made significant contributions to African peacekeeping missions as the U.S. has become increasingly hesitant to deploy its military forces to Africa (Ayam, 2008, p. 117). U.S. policymakers also argue that U.S. security, development, and public health objectives in Africa hinge on the advancement of such goals in Nigeria (Husted, 2022, p. 1). As the region's economic, political, and military power, Nigeria "has provided some anchor of stability for the region" (Ayam, 2008, p. 124). Were the Nigerian state to deteriorate, however, such destabilizing forces could have a ripple effect on the nation's neighbors and spread chaos through the already fragile West African region (p. 124).

China-Nigeria Relations

As China has increased its engagement with Africa over the past decade, the Sino-Nigerian political, economic, and diplomatic relationship has become more important to Beijing.

The two countries signed their first trade agreement in 2001 and established a ‘strategic partnership’ in 2006, making Nigeria the first African country to sign such an agreement (McDowell, 2012, p. 1; Taylor, 2007, p. 631).

Economic relations are at the core of Sino-Nigerian relations, with Nigeria receiving substantial amounts of Chinese FDI and being among the largest recipients of Chinese investment and construction in sub-Saharan Africa (Mohseni-Cheraghlou & Aladekoba, 2023, p. 14). China is also one of Nigeria’s largest trading partners, with trade between the two countries rapidly increasing from $1.2 billion in 2003 to $13.7 billion in 2019 (Anwar et al., 2022, p. 66). Chinese loans account for close to 85 percent of the country’s total debt, with several observers expressing concern over so-called ‘Chinese debt trap diplomacy’ (Balogun, 2023; Majed, 2022). In 2018, Nigeria officially joined China’s famed Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), making the country “a top investment destination for BRI projects in Africa”. (Majed, 2022). So far, China has made substantial investments in several large infrastructure projects throughout Nigeria.

Over the past several decades, China has often become a vital political ally and market for Nigerian oil when the country was stigmatized by the West for its human rights abuses. When Western aid to Nigeria was cut for much of the 1990s due to the Abacha dictatorship’s poor human rights record, Nigeria adopted a ‘Look East’ policy, strengthening the Sino-Nigerian alliance further and building trust between the two nations (Adunbi & Stein, 2019, p. 194).

The growing relationship between China and Nigeria has made China the top arms exporter to Nigeria, now surpassing the historically dominant Russia for two consecutive years (Mohseni-Cheraghlou & Aladekoba, 2023, p. 14). Beijing has also started selling more advanced weaponry to Nigeria, highlighting the country’s centrality to China’s geopolitical calculations in the region (p. 14). As was the case historically with aid, Nigeria often turns to China as an

alternate arms supplier when the U.S. refuses to supply the military equipment the country wants (Campbell & Page, 2018, p. 146). China has also provided military support to counterinsurgency efforts in the Niger Delta, supplying military technology and sending military trainers to assist Nigerian forces (Adunbi & Stein, 2019, p. 194). Furthermore, Sino-Nigerian bilateral military exercises have been held in the past, as have naval port calls to Nigeria by Chinese warships (USCC, 2020, p. 415).

Justification of Case Selection and Research Method

Nigeria was chosen as the case for this analysis because, as exemplified in the previous section, China's role in the country has grown considerably over the past two decades. The U.S. recognizes the strategic importance of Nigeria and has significant military, economic, and political interests in the country. Figure 1 shows the competition potential between the U.S. and China in Africa presented by Cohen and colleagues (2023) in their report on great-power competition and conflict in the 21st century, with Nigeria having the highest competition potential between the two superpowers in Africa.

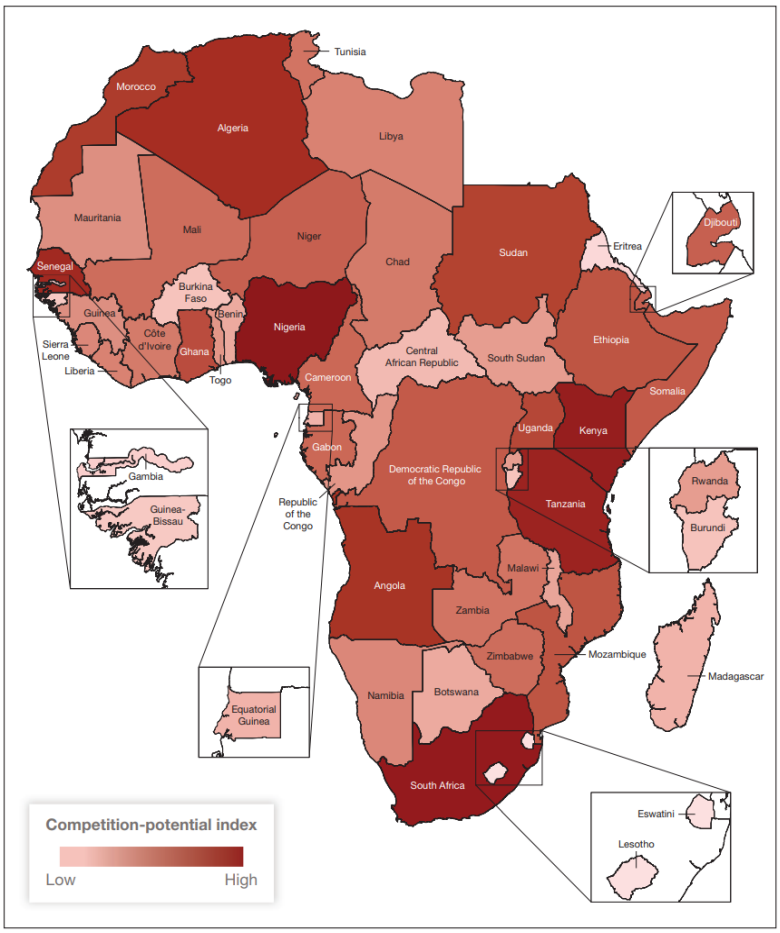
To analyze how the U.S. has responded to increased Chinese influence and presence in Nigeria, this analysis will look at changes to the five specific forms of influence often used by the U.S. These forms of influence, as introduced in the literature review, are joint military exercises, arms transfers, foreign aid, foreign direct investment, and leadership statements and visits. A mix of quantitative (e.g., data on yearly U.S. FDI and foreign aid flows to Nigeria) and qualitative (e.g., reports on U.S. military activities in Nigeria) sources will be utilized and analyzed. The time frame of this analysis will be from 2001 to 2022. The justification for starting the analysis in this year is twofold. Firstly, only in 2001 did China and Nigeria sign their first trade agreement signaling a serious economic interest by China in the West African state

(McDowell, 2012, pp. 1-2). Furthermore, Nigeria only emerged from consistent military rule in 1999, providing a signal to many potential international partners that working with the country would hopefully be easier under the new civilian-led government.

Secondly, most of the qualitative and quantitative sources used, such as annual reports on U.S. military training and data on U.S. FDI and foreign aid flows, are only available from the early 2000s onward. Similarly, publicly available and reliable data on Chinese FDI in Nigeria is only available from 2003 onwards, making it difficult to properly analyze previous years' FDI flows. Therefore, the 2001-2022 timeframe has been chosen for this analysis.

Figure 1

U.S.-China Competition Potential in Africa



Source: Cohen et al., 2023, p. 29

Section III

Analysis

Joint Military Exercises

Nigeria has, for almost two decades now, regularly participated in bilateral and multilateral joint military exercises (JMEs) alongside the United States. These include large multi-nation U.S.-organized JMEs such as Obangame Express and Flintlock as well as more bilaterally focused exercises with U.S. special operations forces and other U.S. military entities focused on capacity building and interoperability (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

While the number of U.S.-led annual JMEs in West Africa has not necessarily increased, they have become increasingly complex and are covering a wider range of aims. Nigeria plays a vital role in Flintlock, AFRICOM's largest annual special operations exercise, and has repeatedly hosted the exercise. U.S. officials are adamant that U.S. JMEs such as Flintlock are an essential way to counter an increasing number of African governments turning to Russian and Chinese mercenary groups, and that engagement in democratic processes is necessary (Ismay & Holston, 2023). Recent Flintlock exercises have therefore also included sessions on the rule of law alongside the usual military training, aiming to promote collaboration between militaries and judiciaries.

By continuously including Nigeria in such exercises, the U.S. attempts to present itself as the premier counterterrorism partner in the region. Furthermore, the expansion of JMEs into the realm of civil society allows the public to consider the U.S. as a positive force countering terrorist threats. China does conduct some counterterrorism training with African nations but does not directly conduct military operations meant to disrupt extremist organizations (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). In contrast, U.S. counterterrorism operations, often alongside

African partner nations, have become a key feature of AFRICOM missions and have increased in West Africa.

Obangame Express represents another JME where Nigeria increasingly plays a large and vital role. As the largest multinational maritime exercise in Western and Central Africa, Nigeria has been a regular participant in Obangame Express and has hosted it a record number of times. According to Blédé (2017), Obangame Express allows "U.S. naval forces to acquire some control of the military terrain in the Gulf of Guinea", aiding U.S. advancement of strategic interests in the region. By benefitting both the U.S. and its African partners, the complexity and participation of Obangame Express have been consistently increasing and it has thus become a sustainable form of U.S. influence in the Gulf of Guinea.

Nigeria has particularly benefitted from Obangame Express. The country was very keen on hosting Obangame Express in 2019 to demonstrate to the U.S. the progress its navy made over the past few years (Walker, 2019). By continuously organizing the event and improving military relations with Nigeria, the U.S. is cementing itself as the go-to military power in the region. Nigeria, in turn, has seemingly accepted the U.S.' increased influence in the region through its JMEs and has been expanding the military resources it uses during the exercises. In line with the findings of Meierding and Sigman (2021), the larger roles being played by Nigeria in U.S. JMEs signify the increased recognition by the U.S. of Nigeria's military capabilities and further signals U.S. support for the country.

While the U.S. has not publicly considered its JMEs in and with Nigeria as a counter to increased Chinese presence, the aims of their expansion hint at their usefulness to do so. Recent maritime exercises aimed at combating illegal fishing in the Gulf of Guinea, which Chinese companies are top perpetrators of (Inveen, 2023). While such exercises do not explicitly counter

Chinese governmental influence, they do aid in keeping Chinese corporations in check and providing local nations with the training necessary to counter illicit Chinese actions.

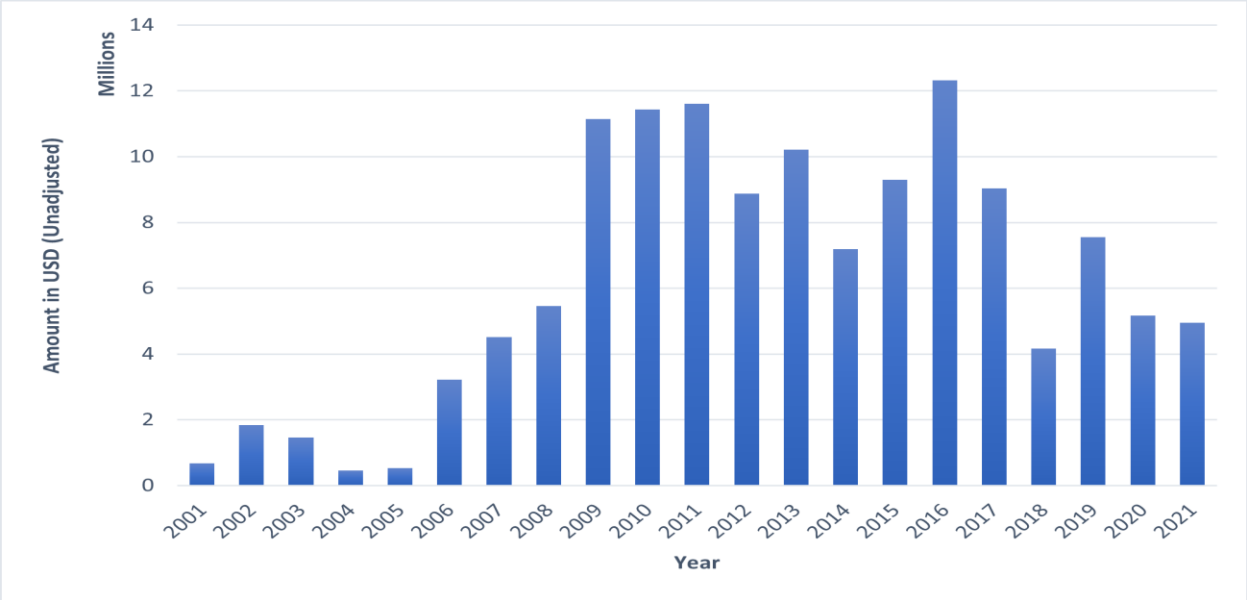
In 2018, China participated for the first time in a Nigerian-led multilateral military exercise focused on piracy and threats to shipping in the Gulf of Guinea (Long, 2018). While China has been routinely conducting JMEs in the Indo-Pacific for years, this exercise appears to be one of the few publicly known instances of Chinese participation in West Africa. Chinese participation also coincided with 2018's iteration of Obangame Express, which took place during the same week throughout the same region but without China as a participant. However, China's participation in Nigeria's 2018 exercise stands alone as the only recorded JME between the two nations, dwarfed by the number of U.S. JMEs that occur annually and continuously include Nigeria.

Aside from JMEs but similarly related, U.S. military training of Nigerian forces has substantially increased between 2001 and 2022. Figure 2 shows the cost of U.S. military training and education in Nigeria over the past two decades according to annual reports on foreign military training by the U.S. Department of State and Department of Defense.

Per the U.S. Department of State (2021), Nigeria boosts one of sub-Saharan Africa's largest U.S. International Military Education and Training (IMET) programs, and over 40,000 students have received training through this security cooperation partnership. For Nigeria, creating a military link between itself and the U.S. boosts its strategic image internationally as it is actively training with a global superpower and receiving its support.

Figure 2

Cost of U.S. Military Training & Education in Nigeria



Source: Data compiled from annual U.S. Department of Defense & U.S. Department of State reports on foreign military training, 2001-2021

Despite Nigerian military rule ending over two decades ago, the military still plays an important role in Nigeria's society, especially in its counterterrorism efforts (Ayitogo, 2022). With U.S. training of foreign military officers found to relate to stronger expressions of pro-U.S. foreign policies (per Martinez Machain, 2021), U.S. engagement with African military officers is concentrated primarily in West African nations such as Nigeria, whereas China's interactions occur more in southern Africa (Devermont et al., 2021, p. 1). Nigerian naval and air chiefs have received degrees from China's University of National Defense; however, the U.S. engages with far more African security chiefs than China does, with this trend increasing over the past decade (p. 5).

The U.S. does, however, face several challenges concerning its military training of Nigerian forces. Most importantly from a U.S. standpoint, as Nylen and colleagues (2022, p. 8)

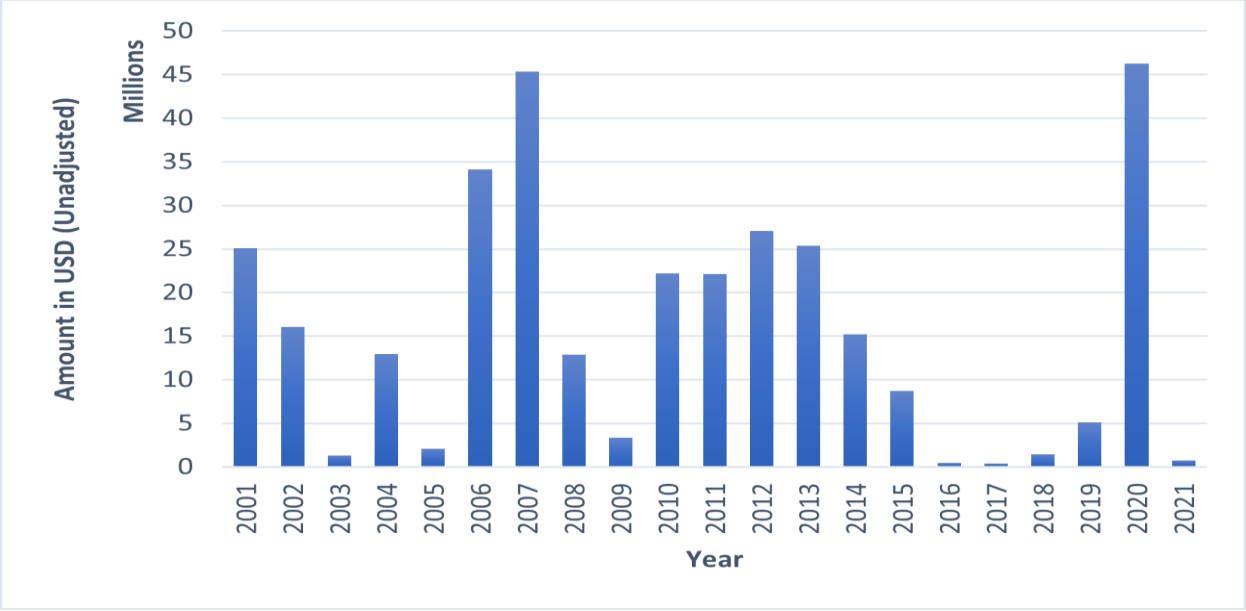
find, is the fact that a large variety of other international partners provide military assistance to Nigeria. This presents a limiting factor to U.S. influence in the country, as Nigerian officials can diversify their security partners to fend off U.S. pressure on human rights concerns. In late 2014, for example, Nigeria's military canceled a planned bilateral military training exercise following the U.S.' refusal to sell lethal military equipment to the country following reports of human rights violations (Husted, 2022, p. 27).

Arms Transfers

U.S. arms transfers, which include both government-to-government foreign military sales and direct commercial sales from U.S. manufacturers to the Nigerian government, have continuously been substantial, both in the costs of such sales and in the type of equipment being sent. Figure 3 shows the value of U.S. direct commercial sales to Nigeria from 2001 to 2021 according to annual reports by the U.S. Office of Defense Trade Controls.

Figure 3

Direct Commercial U.S. Arms Sales to Nigeria



Source: Data compiled from annual reports U.S. Office of Defense Trade Controls reports on arms exports, 2001-2021

A 2022 report by Nylen and colleagues found that the 2022 arms sale of $997 million worth of weapons to Nigeria constituted the largest U.S. military sale to sub-Saharan Africa in history. Before that, the record also belonged to Nigeria with a $593 million sale in 2017. The authors also find that direct commercial sales to Nigeria from the U.S. have become steadier and more consistent over the years, averaging about $17 million per year since 2000. While the increase in arms does exemplify the continued and increasing U.S. strategic interest in Nigeria, the arms are undoubtedly also aimed at supporting joint counterterrorism efforts against Boko Haram and IS-WA and not solely as a form of influence to counter China.

The type of military equipment procured by Nigeria from the U.S. has also changed, with more than just traditional weapons being transferred. Both the $593 million sale in 2017 and the $997 million sale in 2022 consisted of highly advanced attack helicopters and aircraft with state-of-the-art capabilities. These two major deals contrast past deals that normally supplied less-sophisticated weapons and necessary munitions. As found by Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper (2016), the move from transferring purely defensive weapons to increasingly including offensive weapons can be seen as a strong signal of U.S. support.

The Chinese have responded to increased U.S. transfers by also supplying offensive weapons, with recent Chinese arms shipments including battle tanks and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) armed with laser-guided bombs and missiles (Devermont et al., 2021, p. 10). While most Chinese-originating transfers are still small arms and light weapons, the procurement of more sophisticated technologies means China will likely have to expand its training to Nigeria. This likely increase in Chinese training will pose a challenge for the U.S., which has a strong track record on train-and-equip engagements in Nigeria. Furthermore, Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine has opened additional opportunities for Chinese military influence in

Nigeria, as Russian arms exports are already decreasing and being replaced by Chinese exports (Mohseni-Cheraghlou & Aladekoba, 2023, p. 14).

Similar to arms sales, U.S. security assistance to Nigeria (which entails U.S. funding to support Nigerian security partners) has also increased over the past decades, with the U.S. providing more than $232 million in security assistance since 2000 (Nylen et al., 2022, p. 4). The two countries also signed an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement in 2016, institutionalizing the exchange of common types of military equipment (Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, 2022).

Despite the recent record-breaking number of arms transfers, Nigerian human rights violations have regularly led to friction between the U.S. and Nigeria. Public statements and blockings of arms sales from the U.S. suggest that human rights are increasingly being noted as a priority in the U.S.-Nigeria security cooperation partnership, though some critics still consider not enough is being done by the U.S. (Nylen et al., 2022, p. 8). The U.S. State Department has prohibited Nigeria from receiving certain types of security assistance several times; however, successive administrations waived these restrictions and allowed U.S. assistance to continue, citing strategic interests in the country (p. 27). While human rights remain a high-priority issue for the U.S. and have at times soured its military relationship with Nigeria, the flow of U.S. weapons has not slowed, with 2020 seeing the largest influx of direct commercial weapons sales to Nigeria in the last twenty years (Nylen et al., 2022, p. 7).

Unlike Chinese arms sales, which rarely come with conditions and assurances for human rights, U.S. officials have not been afraid to temporarily pause sales or deny them altogether. But faced with increased extremist activity in Nigeria's northeast and an increasingly active China continually supplying weapons, the U.S. has had to increase its arms sales to the country to

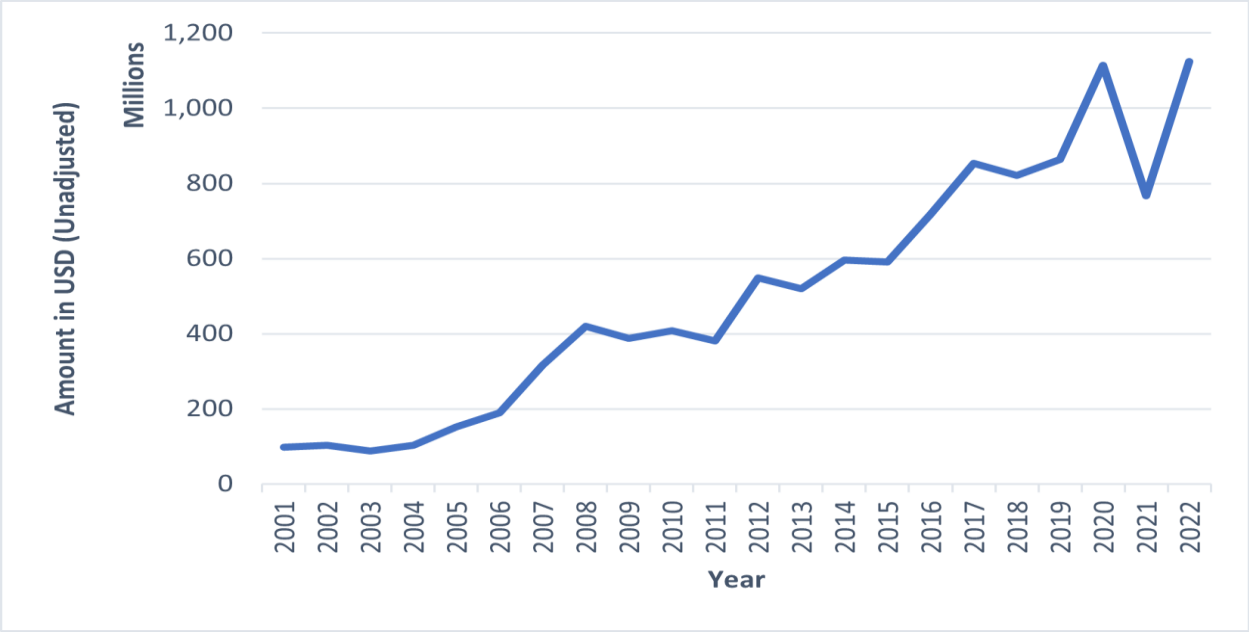
remain a powerful figure and signal it is there for the long run. Additionally, U.S. arms transfers to Nigeria have become larger, increasingly included offensive weapons, and have been institutionalized to some extent. These findings correlate with those by Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper (2016) and exemplify evidence of stronger U.S. support.

Foreign Aid

Nigeria consistently ranks among the top annual recipients of U.S. foreign aid not only in Africa but also globally (Husted, 2022, p. 25). Figure 4 shows the amount of U.S. foreign aid to Nigeria from 2001 to 2022 according to annual reports from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. Department of State.

Figure 4

U.S. Foreign Aid to Nigeria



Source: Data compiled from annual foreign aid figures provided by USAID and the U.S. Department of State, 2001-2022

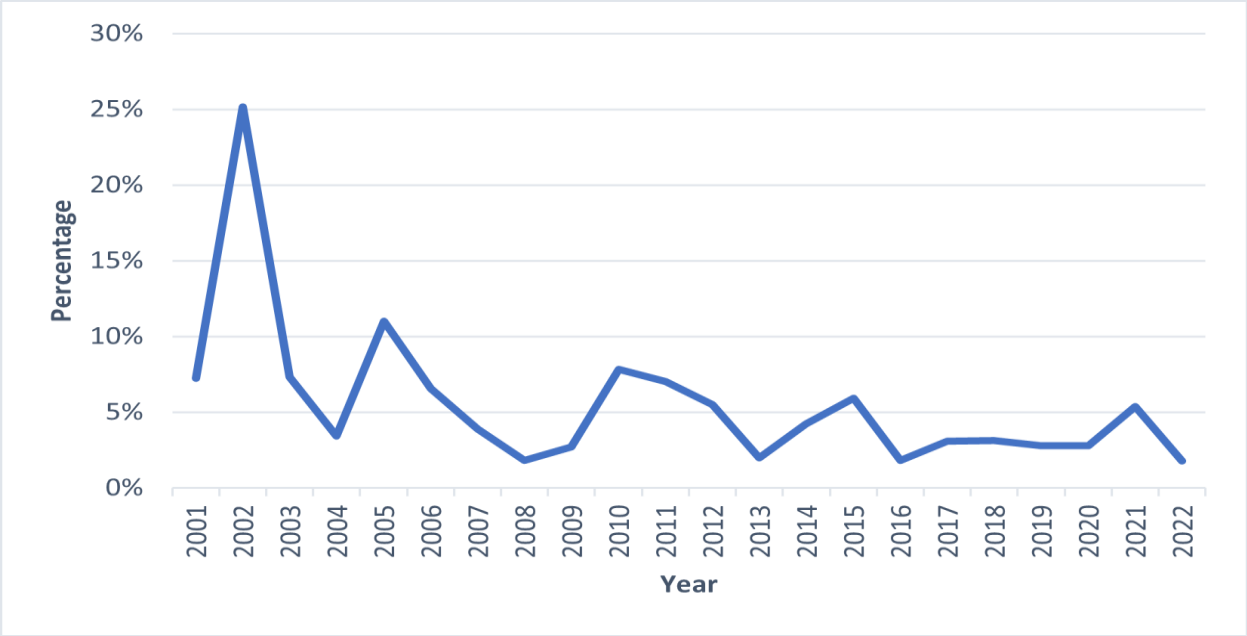
As Figure 4 shows, U.S. foreign aid to Nigeria has increased dramatically over the past two decades and surpassed $1 billion in 2020. Unlike spending for military training and arms transfers (Figures 2 and 3, respectively), which seem to hit highs and then drop again for a few years, U.S. foreign aid has been continually and consistently increasing with only minor dips. Through its generous yet strategic use of foreign aid, the U.S. has been able to construct a solid foundation for future bilateral ties with Nigeria and become a major player in the country. The renewed signing in 2021 of a five-year Development Objectives Assistance Agreement (DOAA) worth $2.1 billion between the two countries signals a continued investment by the U.S. through foreign aid and a continuation of the previous DOAA (Husted, 2022, p. 25).

Health assistance has always been the top sector regarding U.S. foreign aid to Nigeria and has been steadily increasing. One sector that has an alarming downward trend is the one aimed at promoting democracy, human rights, and governance (DRG). Figure 5 shows the percentage of annual Nigerian-bound U.S. foreign aid that is devoted to DRG programs (according to annual reports from USAID and the U.S. Department of State). While the inclusion of DRG programs into recent JMEs shows that democracy and human rights in Nigeria remain important to the U.S., the downward trend of DRG funding relative to overall foreign aid is an interesting revelation worthy of further research.

Nonetheless, the substantial increase in foreign aid to Nigeria appears to show that the role of aid as a geopolitical tool has increased once again, verifying Fleck and Kilby's (2010) findings of a return to Cold War-era aid policy. As was the case during the Cold War, U.S. security interests and the favoring of strategic partners like Nigeria continue to play an essential role in the allocation of foreign aid.

Figure 5

Percentage of U.S. Foreign Aid to Nigeria devoted to Democracy, Human Rights, & Governance



Source: Data compiled from annual foreign aid figures provided by USAID and the U.S. Department of State, 2001-2022

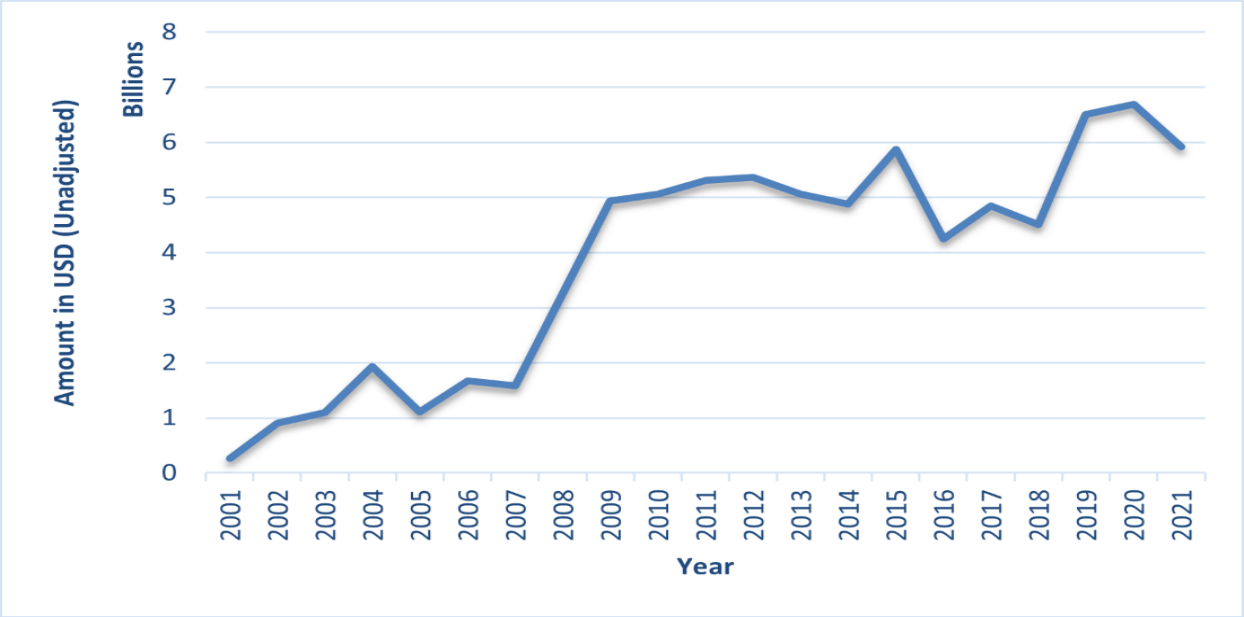
Foreign Direct Investment

U.S. foreign direct investment (FDI) in Nigeria is led by the oil and gas sector, with U.S. energy giants Chevron and ExxonMobil among the largest multinational oil companies active in Nigeria's oil sector (Husted, 2022, p. 23). U.S. FDI has, however, diversified in recent years, with increasing U.S. investment in other sectors. Nigeria is the third-largest destination of U.S. FDI and the U.S.' second-largest trading partner in sub-Saharan Africa (p. 23).

Figure 6 shows the growth of U.S. FDI in Nigeria between 2001 and 2021 according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, while Figure 7 shows Chinese FDI in Nigeria between 2003 and 2021.

Figure 6

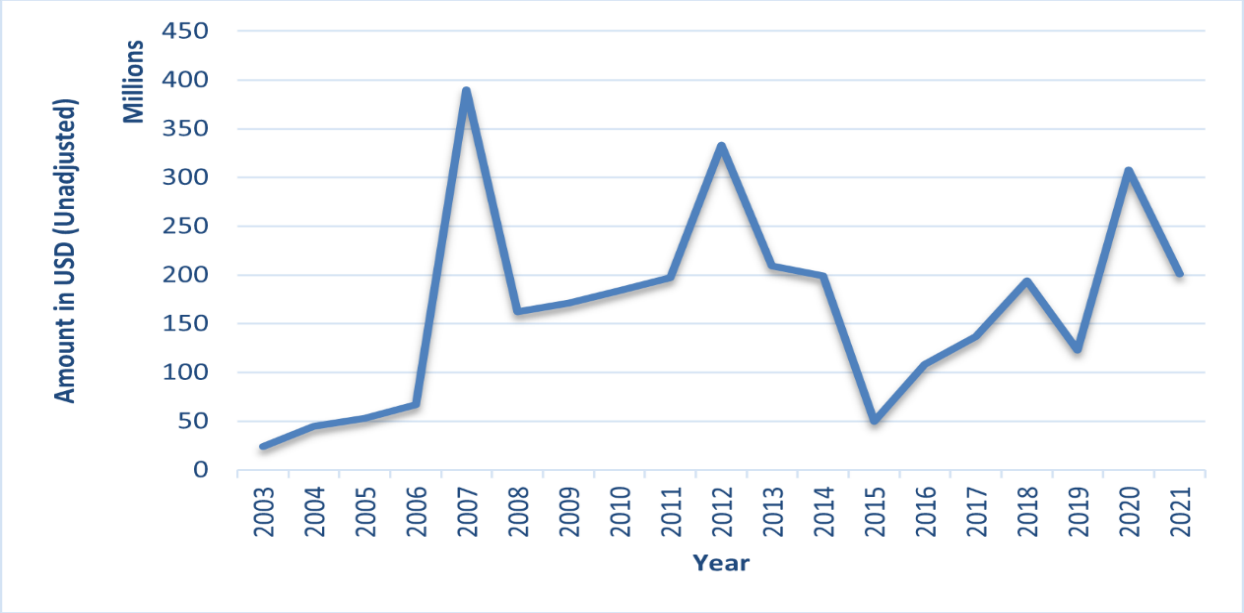
U.S. FDI in Nigeria



Source: Data compiled from annual FDI data provided by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2001-2021

Figure 7

Chinese FDI in Nigeria



Source: Data compiled from Chinese FDI data gathered by the China Africa Research Initiative (CARI) at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), 2003-2021

As shown in Figures 6 and 7, U.S. FDI is substantially larger than Chinese FDI. As Shinn (2017) notes, FDI requires an equity component by the foreign company and is therefore different from the winning of contracts. Chinese companies are regularly awarded multi-billion-dollar infrastructure contracts but only complete the necessary construction and do not acquire equity. Despite the large amount of U.S. FDI in Nigeria signifying the strategic investment by U.S. firms in the country, they are often more risk-averse when investing in Nigeria than their Chinese competitors (Carr, 2020). This has allowed Chinese firms to increase investment beyond the infrastructure sector which has historically been key to Chinese influence in Africa.

Increasing Chinese investment in Nigeria's oil and gas sector is a prime example of this. Over the past decade, declining domestic oil production has furthered Chinese investment in Nigeria's oil and gas industry, with Chinese investment in the industry now totaling $16 billion (Majeed, 2022). China's largest offshore oil and gas producer, CNOOC, runs several oil wells in Nigeria and is Nigeria's largest Chinese investor. Chinese interests are "moving beyond the offshore oilfields into Nigeria's interior, where it is laying down permanent assets" (Taylor, 2014, p. 403). By doing so, the Chinese are outpacing U.S. companies, which are not developing permanent assets and have no plans to do so. And while China does not import a particularly large quantity of Nigerian oil, "it is trying to diversify its suppliers away from the Persian Gulf, so Nigeria's significance is greater than present import volumes would indicate" (Cohen et al., 2023, p. 68).

In contrast, Nigerian oil is becoming less important for the U.S. as the energy revolution in North America reduces the need for foreign oil (Taylor, 2014, p. 400). While Western oil companies remain the largest oil companies in Nigeria, their Chinese counterparts have been making inroads and are clawing away at the market share historically held by U.S. companies.

Furthermore, U.S. energy imports from Nigeria still mainly constitute crude oil while China has been buying more Nigerian gas alongside its regular oil purchases (OEC, 2021). Additionally, unlike Nigeria and China, the U.S. and Nigeria have yet to sign a bilateral investment treaty aimed at promoting and protecting investments made by each country's investors (UNCTAD, n.d.).

In line with the findings of Blanton and Machain (2022), increases in U.S. military aid to Nigeria appear to have helped spur U.S. FDI in Nigeria, signaling U.S. commitment to its strategic interests in the country. But while U.S. FDI in Nigeria is growing and continues to be much higher than Chinese FDI, competition with Chinese companies has been tightening, especially in the oil and gas sector vital to Nigeria's economy.

Leadership Visits and Statements

Despite its strategic importance to the U.S., only 3 sitting U.S. Presidents have ever visited Nigeria: Jimmy Carter in 1978, Bill Clinton in 2000, and George W. Bush in 2003 (Office of the Historian, n.d.). However, Secretaries of State under each administration between 2001 and 2022 have visited Nigeria. Additionally, Nigerian presidents are often among the first African leaders to receive calls from new U.S. presidents (Husted, 2022, p. 24).

During President Bush's 2003 visit, Nigerian President Obasanjo acknowledged the U.S.' position as a key economic, political, and military player, and expressed gratitude to the U.S. for including Africa (and Nigeria in particular) in the U.S.-led emerging world order (Office of the Press Secretary, 2003). President Obama visited Africa twice during his time as President but excluded Nigeria both times. The sidelining of Nigeria was viewed by many as voicing the U.S.'

disapproval of the country's troubling democratic, human rights, and corruption record (Premium Times, 2013).

Secretary Clinton's 2012 visit to Africa and Nigeria aimed to limit China's influence on the continent. During her visit, Clinton contrasted the U.S.' commitment to democracy and human rights with China's focus on exploiting resources and that the U.S. was committed to "a model of sustainable partnership that adds value, rather than extracts it from Africa" (Smith, 2012).

Secretary Kerry's early 2015 visit came days before Nigeria's upcoming presidential election, where he "issued a clear warning that the strength of future U.S. cooperation would be tied to the success of the polls" (Vanguard, 2015). Kerry's visit was seen as a departure from existing U.S. policy disallowing senior officials to visit countries about to hold elections (Premium Times, 2015). Kerry returned months later to attend President Buhari's inauguration and show the Obama administration's willingness to strengthen the relationship that had been strained under the former president (DeYoung, 2015). Kerry's final visit to Nigeria came in 2016, where discussions on anti-corruption and counterterrorism efforts allowed the U.S. to evaluate its ongoing relationship with Nigeria (Akinterinwa, 2016).

In Secretary Blinken's 2021 meetings with Nigeria's president and foreign minister, he emphasized the shared goals of democratic governance, lasting security, and the promotion of economic ties and diversification (Price, 2021). Visiting again later in the year, Blinken "backed a greater leadership role by Nigeria but also encouraged accountability over human rights concerns" (AfricaNews, 2021). Seeking to show U.S. commitment to Nigeria and Africa in the face of a rising China, Blinken conveyed the message that the Biden administration hoped to engage more with Nigeria.

The number of high-level Chinese visits to Nigeria is relatively similar to those of the U.S., as only two Chinese presidents have visited the country (in 2002 and 2006). Chinese foreign ministers have also visited Nigeria several times over the past two decades (Anwar et al., 2022, p. 68). Chinese foreign ministers have, since 1991, always traveled to Africa for their first visits every year, highlighting the special relationship between African nations and China (Ojeme, 2021). Unlike U.S. statements calling for democratic reform and improvements in human rights, Chinese visits are often accompanied by statements of commitment in infrastructure projects and increased economic relationships.

Since Secretary Clinton's visit in 2012, visits to Nigeria by U.S. officials have increasingly promoted the furtherance of democracy in the country and encouraged Nigeria to play a greater role in the region, signifying the increased trust by the U.S. in Nigeria. The U.S. has also solidified its position as a firm ally not afraid to call out the government while also wanting to pursue greater relations. Secretary Kerry's presence at Buhari's inauguration came as the country witnessed its first change of power between two opposing political parties, a historic first that solidified Nigeria's position as a democracy.

Unlike foreign aid, where programs promoting democracy have been shrinking, leadership visits and statements seem to create a solid position of U.S. policy towards the country and cement the U.S. as a democratic alternative to China. Furthermore, in line with the findings of Lebovic and Saunders (2016), economic and security interests continue to be the primary motivations for U.S. diplomatic visits to Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study aimed at identifying if and how the U.S. has attempted to strategically influence Nigeria to counter increased Chinese presence in the country. This was done by analyzing primarily qualitative sources on U.S. joint military exercises, arms transfers, foreign aid, foreign direct investment, and leadership visits and statements. The U.S. has undoubtedly increased the resources it has put towards Nigeria to counter what it considers a Chinese threat to its power in the region. Militarily, the U.S. has increased the sophistication of its JMEs while also dramatically increasing arms transfers. Economically, foreign aid has been continually increasing but funding for democracy promotion has surprisingly decreased. U.S. FDI in Nigeria remains high and unchallenged, but China has been making significant developments in the oil and gas sector. Diplomatically, leadership statements have increasingly focused on promoting democratic advances and good governance while also encouraging Nigeria to play a larger role in the region to challenge the undemocratic nature of China in Africa.

The significant strategic interest of the U.S. in Nigeria's counterterrorism fight makes it hard to conclusively cite China as the sole reason for changes in the five forms of U.S. strategic influence. However, the combination of all five together signifies that the U.S. has indeed attempted to strategically influence Nigeria in the presence of China. What remains unclear is how effective these strategic influence attempts have been for the U.S. (both in the short- and long-term) and how Nigeria has reacted to these attempts. While outside of the scope of this analysis, further research on these questions would create a more robust overall analysis of U.S. strategic influence in Nigeria in response to China. Possible limitations of this analysis include that the five forms of influence analyzed are only the most visible ones. The U.S. undoubtedly engages in types of diplomacy and dealings that are not publicly known, presenting a challenge

to obtaining a complete picture of U.S. response. Additionally, a lack of transparency by the Chinese government on its activities in Africa makes it difficult to accurately access the true range and depth of its influence in Nigeria and the African continent.

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