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DEMOCRACY BY DESIGN? UNPACKING EU AND US STRATEGIES AND TOOLS IN NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a comparative analysis of the European Union's and the United States' democracy promotion strategies in Nigeria, focusing on the period before the Second Trump administration (1999–2024). Drawing on qualitative desk research, it examines how both actors balance normative democratic ideals with pragmatic geostrategic interests, such as security, migration, and economic cooperation. While both the EU and US employ similar tools – election observation, civil society engagement, and political dialogue – their funding instruments, policy frameworks, and strategic motivations differ significantly. The EU often adopts a multilateral, development-linked approach, while the US tends toward bilateral, security-driven engagement. These differences reflect more profound divergences in how democracy is conceptualised and promoted. Despite their shared objectives, the impact of their efforts is shaped by Nigeria's internal political dynamics, limited financial commitments, and the prioritisation of strategic stability over normative accountability. This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of external democracy promotion in Africa's largest democracy.

Keywords: EU–Nigeria relations, US–Nigeria relations, geostrategic interests, democracy promotion, election observation, civil society organisations

INTRODUCTION

The “Third Wave” of democracy, according to Samuel Huntington, which began in the 1970s, saw a global increase in democracies following the collapse of Soviet communism and the end of the Cold War, resulting in notable democratic transitions across areas including Latin America, Asia–Pacific, Eastern Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa (Huntington 1991; Diamond 1996; Huntington 1997; Saka et al. 2015). However, every wave of democracy is accompanied by a counterwave of democratic backslides (Huntington 1991). Recent literature has paid increasing attention to democratic backsliding following the third wave (Diamond 2008; Waldner and Lust 2018; Akinola 2024). Leininger (2022) argues that the global trend of autocratic regimes is eroding numerous democratic advancements achieved since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The disintegration of the Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany following the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and the progression of democratic principles in Eastern and Central Europe during the 1990s sparked a revitalised fervour for global democratic ideals. Additionally, a significant transformation in the perception of security emerged following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which effectively undermined the previously prevailing hard-power framework focused on military confrontation throughout the 1990s (Amirah-Fernández and Menéndez 2009). This transformation, in conjunction with the rise of neoliberalism, has created an environment that promotes the advancement of democratic principles, which has become a key objective for Western governments, notably the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) (Young 2024).

The initial two waves of global democratisation – the first occurring from 1828 to 1926 and the second from 1943 to 1964 – faced crushing counterwaves of backslides that entrenched autocratic institutions and state actors, along with reverts to parochial and subject political cultures within those societies. In a similar vein, the contemporary phenomenon of democratic backsliding after the third wave has demonstrated from the outset that as the process of democratisation accelerates, authoritarian regimes devise strategies that include manipulating electoral processes, co-opting opposition forces, employing legal repression, controlling media narratives, and limiting civil liberties to maintain their grip on power (Diamond 1996; Young 2024).

In Africa, the third wave process has unfolded in a complex manner, resulting in a confluence of distinct paths, trajectories, and

outcomes. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, countries across Africa, from Ghana in the West to Idi Amin's Uganda in the East, experienced the imposition of military regimes that stifled democratic governance, curtailed freedom of expression, restricted the right to assemble, and undermined private property rights. Over the past three decades, since the civil transition in the 1990s, the advancement of democracy in sub-Saharan Africa has been hindered by new challenges that have emerged under civilian governments (Adejumobi 2010; Omotola 2010; Omotola 2011). These encompass the risks posed by incumbents dismantling constitutional regulations regarding term limits, consolidating additional executive authority, and engaging in electoral misconduct and corruption, all of which are related to the functioning of political institutions. As Diamond suggests, "Political institution building is the most urgent and important challenge of democratic consolidation" (1995, 32).

The problems with democracy in Africa have been widely identified and discussed by researchers, pundits, and organisations that monitor state performance based on key indicators, such as Freedom House, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), the Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU), and the Electoral Integrity Project (EIP). For example, the EIU (2024) indicates that only 6.6% of the global population resides in full democracies; meanwhile, 38.4%, 15.7%, and 39.2% reside in flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian regimes, respectively (EIU 2024). Regionally, across all 44 sub-Saharan Africa countries, a 4 out of 10 score (10 = best form of democracy) was recorded on the democracy index (unchanged in both 2023 and 2024), indicating stagnation (EIU 2024). Sub-Saharan Africa is the only region that outperforms the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, which is considered the least democratic region in the world, but below the world average of 5.17 out of 10. This score has been gradually declining in recent years, driven by violence and insecurity, slow recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, foreign interference, and widening inequalities.

Since Nigeria's return to civilian governance in 1999, the nation has demonstrated potential for democratic development, exemplified by efforts to conduct regular elections (a total of seven), uphold multipartyism, and facilitate the transfer of power between administrations. Nevertheless, challenges persist, including incumbents manipulating oppositions, restrictions on political and civil liberties, interference in judicial processes, and a weakening of the rule of law (Adejumobi 2010; Omotola 2010;

Ajayi and Ojo 2014). Despite initial optimism, Nigeria has proven to be *sui generis* in its democratic experiment (Ajayi and Ojo 2014), further complicated by ethno-religious chauvinism arising from the tragic civil war of 1967–1970, which continues to engender social maladies in the contemporary context.

The development of democracy in the country is hindered by various factors, including its colonial history, deep-rooted ethnic divisions, ineffective leadership, past military interventionists who have refused to relinquish power through a electoral democratic process that is free and fair. Other challenges, such as electoral fraud, widespread poverty, human rights violations, and literacy-level differentials, complicate the issue (Oni 2014; Oladipo 2016). With regular elections that can hardly be considered free and fair, electoral fraud prevails with a definitive nature. As Erameh et al. (2021) put it, electoral fraud exacerbates ethnic conflict, institutional degradation, and political instability. Unlike Ghana, an English-speaking country in West Africa with a total freedom score of 80, reflecting a society marked by liberty, Nigeria is categorised as partly free, with a considerably lower score of 44.¹ All these factors highlight the fragile state of Nigeria's democratic system, which remains weak and insufficiently embedded in the lives of citizens, politicians, and civil servants and is plagued by corruption.

The situation in Nigeria, characterised by violence, corruption, human rights violations, and electoral irregularities during elections, suggests a heightened susceptibility to misconduct within its democratic framework (Obi 2004; Uwazuruike 2020). However, Nigeria stands out as an important actor in West Africa, serving as a notable example of democratic principles within the region. Nigeria's participation in peacekeeping missions across Africa, its role in multilateral negotiations, and the significance of its workforce for global development frequently overshadow the logic behind the corrupt and unscrupulous kakistocracy within the country. The country serves as a significant example for regional nations, demonstrating both effective practices and cautionary lessons.

Lessons learned from Nigeria's experiment with civilian rule provide a clear framework for evaluating foreign donor support and engagement within a tangible aid-recipient environment. Consequently, any observable impact of support for international

¹ Information regarding the ranking of the global freedom index, which includes political rights and civil liberties, and the methodology employed can be found at: Freedom House (n.d.).

democracy in Nigeria, whether beneficial or detrimental, extends beyond its borders, especially in vulnerable or hybrid neighbouring countries that have recently been caught in military coups and constitutional turmoil. The prevention of events like these has underscored democracy promotion by actors such as the EU and the US and justified the critical need to strengthen institutional buffers against the abuse of state institutions and the suppression of democratic processes at the start of the twenty-first century. Both actors have endeavoured to cultivate democratic governance in Nigeria through a multifaceted strategy, utilising various tools to advance the democratic agenda. These include their foreign policies, international agreements, support for civil society organisations (CSOs), projects and programs, political dialogues, and election observation activities.

The existing literature acknowledges the importance of the EU and the US as key donors, particularly in relation to their continuous and often organised involvement in enhancing Nigeria's institutional capacity and public institutions (Nwokedi 1994; Erameh et al. 2021). This is notable given Nigeria's significant role in the geopolitics of foreign powers within the African context (Khakee 2007; Enemuwe 2024a). Nevertheless, the EU and US face a dilemma between maintaining a value-based foreign policy approach and one driven by material geostrategic interests such as security, mineral exploration, trade, and migration.

The literature has frequently overlooked the need for a more systematic and thorough examination of the similarities and differences in these global actors' strategies and approaches to engagement. In fact, this study will represent the first of its kind, considering the pre-Second Trump administration dynamics and politics of EU and US democracy promotion in Nigeria. Investigating the functions of both actors in Nigeria reveals the intricate dynamics between the advancement of democracy and the practicalities of geopolitical interests, while also providing significant insights that may be relevant to other hybrid or fragile democracies across Africa and beyond. This case presents an opportunity to gain context-specific insights and explore broader theoretical implications regarding the effectiveness, conditionality, and legitimacy of foreign democracy promotion.

The study will be conducted in four separate phases. Following this introductory section, the next section will examine the literature on democracy promotion to gain insight into the current state of scholarly discourse. This study does not include a

section on the history of bilateral relations, such as Nigeria–US or Nigeria–EU, or even triangular relations (Nigeria–US–EU), as extensive coverage of these topics is already available in the literature. The third section provides a comparative analysis of the EU and the US in promoting democracy in Nigeria. The fourth section offers some concluding remarks on the study.

STUDY METHODS

The research conducted for this paper was based on extensive qualitative content analysis, otherwise known as a desk review. The desk review method systematically analyses literature, reports, and documents related to a specific topic, enabling researchers to gather insights without requiring primary data collection.

The materials examined comprised policies, reports, and official documents from the US and EU that outlined aspirations for democracy promotion over the past 25 years (1999–2024), leading up to the second Trump administration, during which he terminated the crucial US democracy promotion and development aid agency, United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This timeline is established based on observations made after Nigeria transitioned back to civilian governance in 1999, during which it was noted that the initial two elections faced significant challenges due to the actions of incumbents aimed at consolidating power via serious violations of civil and political rights (Stauss and Tertsakian 2004). Furthermore, the ruling party during that period, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), maintained its dominance at both the federal and local government levels, thereby undermining the multiparty system that has been fundamental to Nigerian politics since its independence. The 2011 general elections marked a significant turning point, as a wave of newly established parties emerged, notably the current ruling party, the All Progressives Congress (APC). This development has contributed to a more competitive electoral landscape, influencing policy choices and critiques within the system.

The selection of secondary-source materials for analysis in this study included peer-reviewed articles on democracy promotion in developing countries, especially in Africa. News reports and internet sources from NGOs were also selected for analysis. The study employs this method to enable a thorough examination of the diverse perspectives and strategies employed by both actors, as well as the varying strategies used by different

EU and US administrations within each actor's political climate, to facilitate an in-depth understanding of their similarities and differences in the Nigerian context.

Nonetheless, the desk review method has certain limitations. It offers a comprehensive and cost-effective synthesis of existing knowledge, enabling the analysis of a wide range of official documents, academic publications, and policy reports to compare democracy promotion strategies in Nigeria. However, its dependence on secondary sources restricts the ability to gather up-to-date, context-specific insights and stakeholder perspectives, potentially diminishing the immediacy and empirical depth of its findings. Future studies could utilise interviews with key informants and experts (both Nigerian and foreign nationals) working with EU and US plenipotentiaries on political relations to uncover stakeholder perspectives on democracy promotion. This study does not focus on elections in Nigeria, even though both the US and EU have become significant players in election observation in Nigeria. The author has previously addressed the issue of US and EU election observation as instruments of democracy promotion in Nigeria (Enemuwe 2024a; Enemuwe 2024b).

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION OF DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

To frame this study analytically, it is necessary to define what is meant by “democracy promotion” in the international context. Democracy promotion encompasses various strategies, forms, and modalities aimed at facilitating the transition to (liberal) democracy. It encompasses both indirect approaches that target the prerequisites of democracy, which may include economic and social factors, and more direct approaches, such as democracy assistance, that focus on political objectives (Burnell 2011).

If democracy promotion entails various strategies, forms, and modalities aimed at facilitating the transition to democracy, what then is democracy? Cyril Obi articulated in his 2008 Claude Ake Memorial Lecture that democracy is “the only game in town”, stemming from the assumption that the proliferation of democracy as a new political game is distinct from the centuries-old game of conquest and total dominion by powerful foreign states or leaders over less-powerful states, groups, or people (Obi 2008b, 7). Thus, it represents a shift from the rule of the gun to the rule of the vote

(Obi 2004). At the same time, the pervasive influence of militarism and winner-takes-all politics remains significant in the political process, exacerbating discontent, inciting violence, and simultaneously fostering new movements for the advancement of societal democratisation (Obi 2004).

The concept of democracy, although rhetorically appealing, is often complex and subject to varying interpretations. There is a broad literature on democracy, ranging from debates on its definition and origin to its various typologies. Research indicates that democracy embodies self-governance in the interest of the people, reflecting a collective sociopolitical identity (Fahner 2017). In this study, democracy generally refers to a governance system where citizens can influence state affairs directly or through elected representatives, emphasising constitutional rights and the public's role (Gillin 1919). This notion asserts that the leaders of a polity must seek consent from the governed, a fundamental aspect of democratic practice, to make public decisions.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL DIMENSIONS OF DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The vast literature on international democracy promotion is instructive about examining the efforts of advanced democracies and international/regional organisations – such as the EU, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Community of Democracies (CoD), the Organization of American States (OAS), primarily in the Global North (or Global North periphery) – to promote democracy in less developed countries in the Global South. Debates surrounding democracy promotion reflect the contentious nature of the concept of democracy, the motivations and desirability of democracy promotion, as well as the obstacles confronting actors seeking to promote democracy (Diamond 1995; Carothers 1999; Diamond 1999; Burnell 2004; Khadiagala and Nganje 2015). However, democracy promotion is not solely the purview of developed nations and intergovernmental organisations as a superficial political gesture towards developing countries in Africa; emerging state/regional actors and organisations such as South Africa (notably during the Nelson Mandela era), the Economic

Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the African Union (AU) have also actively engaged in fostering democracy within their spheres of influence through legal instruments to prevent unconstitutional changes of government (Legler and Tieku 2010; Khadiagala and Nganje 2015; Nyinevi and Fosu 2023). Nonetheless, these efforts have faced constraints arising from internal difficulties linked to the pressures of optimising practical national or regional interests, which at times compromise the democratic principles in areas where the chances for democracy are either almost non-existent or excessively challenging to achieve (Legler and Tieku 2010; Khadiagala and Nganje 2015).

The evidence remains ambiguous regarding the extent to which factors such as political conditionality and incentive structures, such as foreign backing for civil society or funding of elections abroad, influence national political development, particularly in terms of the impact of support on political reforms by altering the incentive structures of elites (Crawford 2001; Ethier 2003; Burnell 2011). For instance, in challenging the notion that democracy is solely a domestic issue, Ethier (2003) contended that the conditional political reforms mandated by the EU for eastern and central European applicant countries have led to significant strides compared to the limited effects of incentives from democratic aid programs provided by donors. Meanwhile, Burnell (2011) argued that the effectiveness of the support for democracy in European nations previously in the Soviet orbit of influence was primarily attributed to those countries' resolve to liberate themselves from Soviet/Russian control – the incentive of freedom.

Nonetheless, a consensus exists among academics, development practitioners, and advocates of global democratic initiatives that the core principle of democracy promotion lies in the realisation of democratic ideals within a framework of liberal internationalism (McFaul 2004; Amirah-Fernández and Menéndez 2009; Burnell 2013). Liberal internationalism, as a foreign policy doctrine, emphasises the importance of a rules-based international order in which states collaborate through institutions and utilise soft power (such as leverage, aid or diplomacy) or hard power (coercive sanctions or threat of invasion) to tackle common challenges or foster specific ideas (such as the myth of global/international peace) and interests (such as trade, migration, or security). Whatever the case, the fundamental emphasis is on advancing liberal democracy and economic interconnectedness, based on the conviction that these factors will enhance international stability and ensure the interests of states. This

framework, developed by influential figures such as John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and Adam Smith, established the foundation for promoting democracy on a global scale by emphasising individual rights, the rule of law, free trade, and the idea of enduring peace through international collaboration, regardless of how effectively these principles are implemented (Moravcsik 1997).

A central focus in the literature on promoting democracy is the assumed positive link between expanding democratic governance and the potential for international peace and stability (Kahl 1998; Gat 2005; Parmar 2013; Layne 2014). Research has shown that widespread global democratic peace is increasingly supported by Western leaders, reaching beyond academic circles (Kahl 1998; Young 2024). The initiatives undertaken by Western donors and state development partners to advance democracy globally underscore the importance of cultivating “international peace” (Placek 2012, 1). This alignment is accomplished by connecting the concept of economic interdependence, which has emerged from globalisation since the end of the Cold War, with the goals of multilateral institutions focused on the diffusion of liberal political and economic norms.

Notwithstanding, the third wave of democracy altered the foreign policy approaches of many developed countries regarding the state of global democracy. In the last three decades, beginning in the 1990s, Western governments, including regional organisations, have increasingly focused on intentionally designing foreign policies that promote democracy globally (Youngs 2001; Gillespie and Youngs 2002; Goldgeier and McFaul 2003; McFaul 2004; Schimmelfennig 2005a; Schimmelfennig 2005b; Khakee 2007; Legler and Tiekue 2010; Khadiagala and Nganje 2015; Saka et al. 2015). These policies have become a central strategy in their approach to development aid directed at developing nations (Diamond 1992; Huntington 1997; Carothers and De Gramont 2013; Mello 2014). As Huntington points out:

The great achievement of the Third Wave has been to ensure the universality of democracy in Western civilisation and to promote its manifestations in other civilisations. If the Third Wave has a future, that future lies in the expansion of democracy in non-Western societies (Huntington 1997, 6).

The appeal of democracy promotion at the multilateral level can be linked to its connection with the necessity for international peace following World War II, as emphasised in the 1945 UN

Charter. The victorious Allies particularly championed this in Article 2(3), which asserts that “All Members shall settle their international disputes by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice, are not endangered.” This provision underscores the enduring significance emphasised by democratic peace theorists, who argue that an increase in the number of democracies will facilitate the resolution of disputes through nonmilitary compromises, ultimately leading to peace (Russett 2019). The implication for promoting democracy internationally suggests that fostering democratic governance globally is perceived as both a normative objective and a strategic political move for improving international peace and stability by reducing the likelihood of violent conflicts between nations and strengthening their relationships. This approach underscores the profound impact that fostering democratic governance can have on the global community.

In addition, the end of the Cold War transformed the approach of key players, such as the US and the EU, towards promoting democracy in their foreign policy, which can be partially linked to the evolving dynamics of the early twenty-first century. This includes important events such as the 9/11 attacks in the US (Gat 2005), the emergence of globalism (Hambleton et al. 2003), the introduction of the internet (Thornton 2001), and a shift in the narrative of global security (Amirah-Fernández and Menéndez 2009). Geopolitical dynamics in a unipolar world, particularly in the context of American hegemonic foreign policy and its impact on international stability since the 1990s, are especially pertinent regarding the promotion of democratic values. However, some scholars have argued that the foundation of democracy promotion and support may be traced to the writings of the famous German philosopher Immanuel Kant rather than originating in the second half of the twentieth century and intensified in the twenty-first century, when we see the proliferation of nascent nation-states trying to democratise. Kant’s essay on *Perpetual Peace* provides a utilitarian explanation for why democracy promotion is essential to achieving peace, a phenomenon often called democratic peace. Democratic peace suggests that as democracy spreads, there will be more peace, since the cost of settling disputes through war is usually high and imposes new responsibilities on the victors toward the vanquished (Kant, 1795). Peace in democracies stems from the behaviour and inherent preference of individuals to coexist peacefully with one another (Mello 2014). Hence, he optimises the idea that in

international relations the most fundamental level of analysis – the individual – holds prominence for democratic development.

Prior to the twenty-first century, scholarly investigation provided limited attention to the conceptualisation of democracy promotion on a global scale, especially concerning its effects on international peace within the developing countries of the Global South. In the late 1980s and 1990s, discussions centred on clarifying the concepts of “democracy” and “peace” in the African context, which was experiencing various forms of civil conflict. The objective was to examine these concepts by investigating how democratic governance can reduce the likelihood of conflict and promote peaceful international relations (Amirah-Fernández and Menéndez 2009).

Other scholars, such as Wolff and Wurm (2011), have highlighted that a critical yet underexplored aspect of international relations is understanding democracy promotion not only as a normative objective but also as a foreign policy instrument, particularly when employed by established democracies. They underscore the need to go beyond domestic political debates by integrating empirical research on democracy promotion into broader theoretical frameworks of global politics. Smith (2000) supports this view by highlighting the absence of a robust international democratic theory, which hampers our understanding of the connections between democracy, democratisation, and global governance. However, any serious theoretical inquiry must consider the underlying mechanisms – such as the logic, targets, and pathways of influence – through which external democracy promotion efforts affect domestic political trajectories in recipient states (Wolff and Wurm 2011). Furthermore, emerging studies have called for a theory that explains the reversal of the new democratic wave, due to the insecurity and socioeconomic plights that accompanied the third wave of democratisation, despite international efforts to consolidate democratic gains (Diamond 1996; Waldner and Lust 2018).

In examining the impact of democracy promotion, scholars have focused on development aid, especially since the early twenty-first century. This period witnessed a shift in development assistance, driven by an emphasis on good governance as recommended in the structural adjustment policies by international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Development agencies consistently recognise the importance of good governance and neoliberal institutions in their operations in developing countries.

At the same time, institutions focused on democratic governance and organisations tackle the challenge of ensuring that democracy meets citizens' socioeconomic needs (Carothers 2010).

Carothers (2009 and 2010) identifies two existing approaches to democratisation: political and developmental. The political strategy, particularly linked to US democracy assistance, is based on a limited understanding of democracy that emphasises elections and political and civil rights. Democratisation is conceptualised as a political struggle wherein democrats strive to surpass nondemocrats within society (Carothers 2009). In contrast, the developmental approach, which is linked primarily to European democracy assistance, adopts a more expansive definition of democracy that takes into context the integral component of development priorities in the emergence, reinforcement, and consolidation of democracy (Gisselquist et al. 2021). This perspective encompasses the relationship between development assistance and the promotion of democratic governance, recognising their growing interdependence. As modernisation theorists who advance the development–democracy nexus argue, democracy is most likely to emerge in societies that have certain sociocultural and economic conditions in place (Inglehart and Welzel 2009). Aside from the EU encouraging a culture of self-expression in foreign countries through its leverage of international NGOs, such as Human Rights Watch, and bilateral engagements, economic statecraft – such as the removal of trade embargoes – would serve to promote economic development and foster social engagement with and other connections to the world. Through the developmental aspect, the EU's promotion of democracy in Nigeria is perceived as a slow, iterative process of transformation that involves a nuanced interaction between political and socioeconomic development. It takes place alongside the debate over which competing priorities should take precedence: the political goals of democracy or the economic aims of development (Young 2003; Carothers 2010).

It is essential to understand that the political and developmental dimensions of democracy promotion in Nigeria employed by the US and EU are not accidental. Two distinct cultural–historical bases guide them. Democracy in the US can be traced to the foundations of the country in its struggle for independence from Britain, guided by the political logic that centralises the inalienable rights of Americans. The US constitutional preamble, which became a fundamental basis for modern state constitutionalism, places individual–collective

political rights on the people by highlighting other personal and social prerogatives, such as unionism, justice, tranquillity, defence, general welfare, and liberty, which are predicated on the conscious awareness of the people's willingness. Politics precedes development. The EU's cultural–historical basis, on the other hand, builds on many years of developmental struggles, such as tax administration and its impact on public administration, and intra- and extraterritorial conflicts that shaped social class and development in Europe. Works by Tilly Charles and Immanuel Wallerstein provide the basis for understanding the developmental trajectory of European states, which is impacting their efforts at both consolidating their internal democracy and promoting democracy beyond their borders.

Despite the promises of democracy promotion, it remains a challenging endeavour in which the geopolitical context is delicately balanced between the interests of the aid-sender and the aid-recipient. One challenge with external democracy promotion is the inability to draw broad conclusions on its exact effect on the receiving countries, even though one of the crucial effects of externalising democracy is to socialise political elites to act utilising the principles of democratic ethos to avoid conflict with one another and achieve peace (Mello 2014; Layne 2014). Nonetheless, scholars have highlighted that democracy promotion is a pivotal international political phenomenon that a state should prioritise (Wolff and Wurm 2011). Priority will depend on the level of demand for democracy or its lack within a receiving state. It echoes not just state influence as progress begins, but also that of foreign nongovernmental organisations (FNGOs), interest groups, and public opinion.

Another challenge is how foreign actors promote democracy in regions entrenched in conflict. In regions where civil conflicts threaten state stability, such as sub-Saharan Africa, research suggests that countries experiencing tumultuous and violent conflicts adopt a minimalist approach during their transition to peace (Watts 2016). An approach to advancing democratic principles in conflict regions can be supported through the peace-building assistance provided by foreign actors to a nation in conflict. This support, characterised by political assistance, may encompass technical assistance in executing electoral processes and formulating a constitution or comparable regulatory documents during the transition to a post-conflict period, in addition to shaping institutional authority and designing inclusive

power-sharing arrangements to promote and maintain enduring peace.

Foreign policymakers often employ the concept of global (or international) peace to divide the world into opposing blocs based on democratic and non-democratic characteristics as part of a hegemonic agenda to promote democracy and create a “safer” global environment (Parmar 2013, 231). A review of the literature on international democracy promotion suggests that policymakers in advanced countries pursue this agenda not only out of ideological commitment but also as a strategic instrument. This often involves applying coercive pressure on countries labelled as “nondemocracies” or “undemocratic” to adopt democratic principles, despite the potential for significant internal challenges (Gisselquist et al. 2021).

The military interventions in Libya and Iraq serve as clear examples supporting this argument. Experiences in the Middle East, acknowledged as the least democratic region worldwide, have negatively influenced the perception of later international initiatives aimed at fostering democracy, as they are frequently viewed as resulting in societal destruction. The profound implications of the rationale behind military interventionism on the promotion of democracy in Libya and Iraq perplex both citizens in donor and recipient countries, along with international political analysts. For instance, research findings show that although the George W. Bush administration highlighted democracy promotion as the rationale for the war in Iraq, perceived as a beneficial shift “to free its people”, i.e., Iraqis, and “restore control of that country to its people” (Office of the Press Secretary 2003, para. 1–6), the disastrous aftermath of the war continues to affect the region.² The policy of regime change in Iraq to promote democracy, find weapons of mass destruction, and provide peace became more contentious on the global stage (Latif and Abbas 2011). The US invasion of Iraq and the accompanying portrayal of removing Saddam Hussein, who was once a Western protégé in the region, as a democratising mission have hindered successful pro-democracy efforts in several countries and raised questions about how democracy promotion can gradually fail (Young 2024).

Connecting the “war on terror” to democracy – which ostensibly supports the exploration of the relationship between democracy, peace, and security – plays a role in the current

² For the full speech of the former US President during the Iraq invasion, see the Operation Iraqi Freedom website: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/iraq/news/20030319-17.html>

debates regarding the challenges to the dominant liberal internationalism spearheaded by the US and EU, and the potential for other countries and organisations to redefine global political landscape (Latif and Abbas 2011; Young 2024). However, the nature of the conduct, strategy, and approach to foreign policy on democracy promotion may differ based on temporal and regime-specific conditions, which is evident in Donald Trump's first term in office, which has been characterised by far less interest in promoting democratic norms abroad than those of the Obama, Clinton, or Bush administrations.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN EU AND US DEMOCRACY PROMOTION STRATEGIES IN NIGERIA

In this section, I argue that the EU and the US share common objectives in their democracy promotion efforts in Nigeria, reflecting a convergence of normative objectives. Their approaches are, to an extent, rhetorically and practically rooted in liberal democratic values, emphasising the importance of free and fair elections, respect for human rights, the rule of law, and accountable governance. In practice, both actors utilise a combination of diplomatic engagement (the use of foreign policies and international agreements), geostrategic interests in key resources, electoral assistance, civil society support, and political dialogue to promote democracy in Nigeria. This section highlights the overlapping priorities and instruments that characterise EU and US democracy promotion strategies within the Nigerian context.

1. THE USE OF FOREIGN POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS

One important similarity in approach is that the EU and the US both prioritised the promotion of democracy as a critical aspect of their foreign policy goals and international agreements with Nigeria. Even though there may be some variations in perception, I contend that the foreign policies and strategies regarding democracy in Nigeria, the US, and the EU reveal more similarities than differences.

In the case of the US, the 2022–2026 US Integrated Country Strategy (ICS) for Nigeria, which builds off the Joint Regional

Strategy (JRS) for Africa, supports this idea through its strategic objectives of enhancing democracy, upholding universal values, and promoting human dignity. The document indicates that the strategies are designed to create strong, accountable, and democratic institutions in Nigeria, motivated by a firm commitment to human rights, to promote peace and minimal development. In the same vein, the 2002 US National Security Strategy suggests a connection between promoting democratic principles abroad and countering global terrorism, particularly to external security threats to US interests (The White House 2002). The George W. Bush administration articulated a narrative emphasising the country's unparalleled military strength, alongside significant economic and political clout, showcasing America's capacity to address terrorism at its origin, as evidenced by the invasion of Afghanistan, framed with the argument that the "path to peace and security is the path of action" (The White House 2002). This assertion became the basis for the subsequent revisions by various administrations of the National Security Strategy, which overwhelmingly posits that the US's strategy for confronting ideological threats posed by terrorists, including their exploitation of technology, involves promoting democratic principles in regions, such as West Africa, where these groups operate actively. Furthermore, this approach aims to weaken the underlying factors of extremism that jeopardise US interests, both in terms of security and trade, on the domestic and international fronts. A policy narrative of this nature emphasises the responsibility of preserving the heritage and principles of global democracy, while also advocating for unilateral advantages for the US through multilateral engagement in global governance, especially in strategic nations such as Nigeria. However, the US tends to adopt a unilateral approach, which is perceived as neocolonial in intent, especially in a country with a colonial past like Nigeria, resulting in a decline in its popularity (Aka 2002; Enemuwe 2024a). Today, more countries and multilateral organisations, such as the AU and the UN, advocate for a multilateral strategy not only in promoting democracy but also in the global governance of transnational issues.

Similarly, in the 2007 Nigeria–EU Joint Way Forward and the 2000 Cotonou Agreement between the EU and the Organization for African Unity (known as the AU since 2002), the EU recognises, akin to the US, that Nigeria and the EU share values and beliefs in peace, security, equality, democracy, and tolerance to promote prosperous and benevolent societies (European Union 2008;

European Union 2000). As the EU's primary institutional framework for managing relationships with sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific (ACP) states, the Cotonou Agreement aimed to create a comprehensive development agenda and regional democratic governance that combines bilateral cooperation with individual ACP states, such as Nigeria, with multilateral collaboration involving the broader African continent through regional and continent-wide communities.

While the agreement did not emanate from the 2020 European Security Strategy, like the ICS in the US case, it is essential to note that some of its components (Article 9) provide a forward-looking approach to the EU's global governance on development assistance, placing normative conditionality on aid. The agreement addresses regional challenges by focusing on socioeconomic development and political cooperation while emphasising political conditionality through democratic principles, human rights, and the rule of law (European Union 2000). Subsection 2 of Article 9 of the Cotonou Agreement asserts that the "Respect for human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law, which underpin the ACP-EU Partnership, shall underpin the domestic and international policies of the Parties and constitute the essential elements of this Agreement" (European Union 2000, 14).

Conversely, the European Security Strategy emphasises the importance of democracy, asserting that security extends beyond personal safety to encompass a regional approach that protects fundamental rights both within and outside EU borders (European Commission 2020). Human security and fundamental political norms are interconnected. The Commission focuses on ensuring that security policy is rooted in shared European values – upholding the rule of law, equality, and fundamental rights – while promoting transparency, accountability, and democratic oversight to establish a strong basis of trust for policies. These principles are central to the EU's democracy promotion efforts in Nigeria, where its electoral assistance and governance support are framed not only as technical interventions but as part of a broader normative agenda that seeks to reinforce democratic institutions and practices in line with the EU's value-based approach to security and development.

2. BALANCING INTERESTS AND VALUES IN US – EU POLICY ON NIGERIA

Democracy promotion by the EU and the US is most evident in the way they negotiate the balance between values and material interests in Nigeria. For the EU, the significance of promoting democracy is apparent in the bloc's readiness to implement stringent measures, including sanctions against unconstitutional governmental changes, exemplified by the regime of Sani Abacha, which was notorious for its human rights abuses. Before the European Development Fund aid destined for Nigeria was suspended in 1995 due to democratic and human rights violations during General Sani Abacha's regime, the allocated funds between 1992 and 1995 amounted to €210.2 million (European Commission 2008). It was significantly reduced thereafter. However, it is worth noting that these measures primarily affected political ties between the EU and Nigeria rather than economic interests (Kenyon 2018), highlighting the dilemma of choosing between interest-based objectives and value-based principles.

Although the US adopted a similar strategy of imposing sanctions during the Sani Abacha regime, it encountered a dilemma: balancing diplomatic and economic benefits against its value-driven principles. This struggle was exemplified by Nigerian diasporans and Black Americans' advocacy for the US government to pursue diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions similar to those used against South Africa's white-minority regime (Lippman 1995; Lopez and Cortright 1996). A report from the *New York Times*, titled "U.S. Seeking Tougher Sanctions to Press Nigeria for Democracy", accurately reflects the challenge faced by Bill Clinton's administration in balancing economic interests with values. It concludes that:

The Administration has ruled out, for the time being, any embargo against Nigeria's oil exports, currently running at about 1.8 million barrels a day, which provide the Government with 90% of its foreign exchange earnings. About 40% of Nigeria's prized low-sulfur crude is bought by American companies. Just yesterday, Royal Dutch/Shell confirmed it had made a potentially significant oil discovery off the Nigerian coast. (Lewis 1996, para. 3)

Another report from *The New York Times* contended that by imposing sanctions on undemocratic regions, international actors

such as the EU would risk losing competitiveness in Nigeria's market, as other countries seldom follow suit with such trade-restrictive actions (Uchitelle 1996). The problem lies in unilateral sanctions imposed on oil-rich countries at the time, including Iran, Libya, and Nigeria. Any trade sanctions enacted would effectively bar American companies; consequently, foreign suppliers would take the place of American ones.

Recently, this development has been illustrated by Washington's response to the Gabon coup, compared to the Niger coup, both of which occurred in 2023. The Biden administration – working alongside its European allies, including the EU and France – called on ECOWAS, led by President Tinubu of Nigeria, to deploy troops to restore the civilian government of President Mohammed Bazoum. Furthermore, the US has shown little concern for Nigeria's democratic situation since the 2023 elections, despite numerous public protests occurring within a few months of the election. Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie penned an open letter expressing her criticism of the election, even as President Biden acknowledged Tinubu's presidency following the assessment of election observers, including the EU Election Observation Mission (EOM), which found the elections unfair.³ It is crucial to recognise that, despite its initial criticisms of the electoral process through its observer mission, the EU took minimal action regarding concrete follow-up, including trade or aid sanctions or diplomatic pressure. The opposite was in fact evident.⁴ A similar conclusion was found when, despite international observers and local election monitors ruling the 2007 general elections in Nigeria to be “deeply flawed,” they were upheld by the government without any international sanctions or reprisals (Obi 2008a, 69). This also reflects both actors' evident focus on policy pragmatism and strategic alliances rather than democratic accountability. The tepid international reaction from these actors, who are recognised for their rhetorical support of liberal internationalism and democratic values, highlights a broader trend of selective engagement, where the dissemination of liberal political and economic norms and values is considered appropriate. It illustrates how geopolitical interests and security alliances – particularly in combating terrorism and instability in the

³ For a look at the letter written by renowned Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie (2023); Additionally, the link to the 2023 EU EOM report can be found in the reference section.

⁴ See: State House of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. (2023).

Sahel – often take precedence over steady support for democratic ideals.

The US has a long-standing tradition of adopting a selective position on numerous critical international issues globally; therefore, its interest-driven approach to Nigeria is not unprecedented. It is noteworthy that the EU, which portrays itself as a normative power, exhibits a similar pattern to the US with regards to Nigeria, wherein the rhetoric issued by its Election Observation Mission does not correspond with the actions undertaken by Brussels concerning political conditionality, as prescribed in the Cotonou Agreement against electoral misconduct in Nigeria. Although one might argue that sanctions or trade restrictions would have represented foreign interference and a violation of Nigeria's sovereignty by the US and EU, I argue that, on the contrary, this would have instead functioned as a form of external accountability mechanism, aimed at encouraging adherence to democratic norms and good governance. Rather than undermining sovereignty, such measures can serve to protect the democratic will of the Nigerian people by deterring democratic backsliding and promoting political reforms in line with international democratic standards.

The US, together with the EU, following the resurgence of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in 2022, integrates its democratic principles with the strategic need for dependable and cost-effective energy, especially from non-Middle Eastern origins. Brussels is on track with the Trans-Saharan Gas Pipeline (TSGP) project (Enemuwe 2024b). As Ayam (2008) noted, US policy towards Nigeria in the Cold War was guided by three key issues: the containment of communist expansion, the provision of aid, and the strengthening of bilateral economic ties. Nonetheless, the events of 9/11 in New York and the subsequent rise of global terrorism prompted a transition towards a more stringent understanding of security and development, as articulated in the 2002 National Security Strategy. In this framework, the promotion of democracy emerged as a geostrategic goal, influencing policymakers in Washington DC, and culminating in military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya (Van Hüllen and Stahn 2009). A series of counterterrorism initiatives included the establishment of military bases, such as the \$110 million base for unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) known as Niger Air Base 201, which operated alongside Air Base 101 before the 2023 coup in Niamey; both served as joint mission sites for US and French forces (Arslan 2023). The troops stationed in N'Djamena are exemplars of the US

conceptual security–democracy discourse in West Africa and, by extension, Nigeria.

In the West African sphere of influence, where Nigeria plays a key role, the US, the collective EU, and EU member states have partnered with Nigeria and other countries, including Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Chad, in the fight against insurgency. A recent debate has emerged over the attraction of the US and France to engage with Nigeria as a potential security partner following their eviction from those countries. Like the strategies employed by the US and EU member states in the Middle East, research and policymakers argue that they seek to address Islamist political movements not as an inherent issue within Islamic culture, but as a result of poor social and economic conditions worsened by prolonged periods of authoritarian rule (Amirah-Fernández and Menéndez 2009; Ploch 2013). However, this geostrategic focus on security, expressed through authoritarian governance language, leads to societal issues that are covertly linked to activities promoting democracy, such as CSOs, election support, monitoring, projects, and initiatives for civil education.

3. POLITICAL DIALOGUE AND DIPLOMACY

Diplomacy and political dialogue play a crucial role in shaping international efforts to promote democracy. They facilitate consensus-building, encourage reforms through persuasion rather than coercion, and foster cooperative relationships that help legitimise democratic norms and practices across borders. Even in the process of implementing political conditionalities or enforcing sanctions, state or multilateral actors employ dialogic communications as a strategic forum for ensuring cohesive commitments. As Rodiles (2017) argues, the interaction between UN sanctions committees and informal arrangements increasingly shapes the design and evolution of UN sanctions. Foreign actors, including the EU and the US, strategically utilise political conditionality in their interactions with ACP nations, such as Nigeria. They engage in top-down high-level summits and political dialogue to influence governance, human rights, and democratic processes (Enemuwe 2024b).

Both the US and the EU emphasise intensified government-to-government political dialogue as a valuable factor in anchoring their relations with Nigeria, highlighting a top-down approach to the question of democracy and democratic governance. Political dialogue and diplomacy are essential elements in both actors'

repertoire for discussing progress and challenges and forging the pathway forward to democracy in their countries. Both actors employ diplomacy and political dialogue to promote democracy in Nigeria by engaging with government officials, civil society, and electoral bodies through high-level visits, diplomatic pressure, election observation missions, and support for institutional reforms – emphasising dialogue over sanctions to encourage adherence to democratic principles and improve electoral transparency (Enemuwe 2024a; Enemuwe 2024b).

On the EU side, the 2008 Nigeria–EU Joint Way Forward guidelines follow the principles and objectives enunciated in the revised Cotonou Agreement and are reiterated in the Joint Africa–EU Strategy (JAES) adopted at the Lisbon Summit in December 2007 (European Union 2008).⁵ The broader development framework utilised by the EU, the Cotonou Agreement, is explicit about the importance of political dialogue and diplomacy.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, the interactions between the EU and African nations, along with regional organisations, experienced a significant transformation in policy negotiations, institutional relationships, and communication, marked by a notable increase in the agency of African actors (European Council 2022; Hastrup et al. 2021). Given the direct involvement of heads of state and senior government officials, these summits are often seen as the pinnacle of modern diplomacy (van Wyk 2020), with the EU using its material resources to reinforce its agenda-setting power in its relations with Africa.

Article 15, which outlines the structural composition of the EU–ACP Council of Ministers, emphasises the importance of political dialogue in Article 9. According to the last paragraph of Article 9, the promotion of human rights, processes of democratisation, consolidation of the rule of law, and good governance represent “an important subject for the political dialogue. In the context of this dialogue, the Parties shall attach particular importance to the changes underway and to the continuity of the progress achieved. This regular assessment shall take into account each country’s economic, social, cultural, and historical context” (European Union 2000).

The US is not so different, as its political engagement with Nigeria is also broadly reflected in its summit-level diplomatic engagement with the continent of Africa, such as the 2022 US–

⁵ The report outlines the modalities of the political dialogue in the Nigeria–EU Joint Way Forward.

Africa Leaders' Summit. However, the US has a special commission with Nigeria, which conducts bilateral meetings between the two countries, known as the US–Nigeria Binational Commission. This commission was established by the Obama administration in 2010 as a premier platform of official engagement between the US and Nigerian governments to expand cooperation and advance shared goals and democratic values (US Department of State 2024).

The use of political dialogue to promote democratic ideals springs from the recognition and self-designation of US and EU ownership of normative ideals as global actors who attempt the socialisation (norm diffusion) of foreign governments that might hold the promise of similar normative ideals or are open to learning and accepting such ideals (Checkel 2005; Schimmelfennig 2005a; Young 2024). Norm diffusion remains significant even within the EU, the US, and their immediate geographical neighbourhoods and spheres of influence, reflecting the ongoing internalisation and contestation of democratic values and practices across varying political contexts. Schimmelfennig (2005b) noted that with the EU, for example, socialisation efforts primarily target governments, providing material rewards such as assistance and the advantages of EU membership contingent upon adherence to liberal democratic norms. If compliance is not achieved, the EU withholds the reward, refraining from imposing additional penalties on noncompliant countries or providing extra assistance to alter their cost–benefit dynamics.

In the context of Nigeria, both the EU and the US appeared to downplay the contentious election outcomes, despite critical assessments from their election observation missions regarding the credibility of the process. Nonetheless, the dynamics of political relations, illustrated by diplomatic engagements (including congratulatory messages and delegations from EU member states and Washington DC present at Bola Ahmed Tinubu's inauguration) persisted without interruption, alongside ongoing aid support. The US approached this with a strategic delegation that included a blend of business, security, and development officials from different sectors of the government (Arise News 2023). In the case of the EU state of France, Chrysoula Zacharopoulou, Minister of State for Development, Francophonie and International Partnerships, attended. This ambivalence reflects a strategic recalibration of US and EU normative agendas to consider and include pressing geostrategic interests, such as development, regional security, trade, and investment. Moreover, such

diplomatic engagement positions Nigeria as a crucial player in influencing political developments within its West African vicinity. This is evidenced by Tinubu's administration, just a month in, warning that they planned to invade Niger, with the encouragement of EU nations such as France, and subsequently the US, with the aim of reinstating democracy following a series of coups in the Sahel region.

4. SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY STAKEHOLDERS

Both in top-down and bottom-up approaches, EU and US institutions such as EOM, USAID, and others offer capacity-building training to Nigerian agencies – including Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the police, legislature, and the judiciary – to facilitate credible elections (Del Biondo 2011; Khakee 2007; European Commission 2023; Leonardo 2023). Government-to-government interaction on political and economic developments, a crucial component of top-down political dialogue (as outlined in Article 8 of the Cotonou Agreement and Section 4 of the US-Nigeria Bi-Commission Framework), is now bolstered by the presence of civil society bodies. The participation of CSOs in discussions on the development of democratic ideals and strategies for addressing governance challenges serves as a critical mechanism for fostering inclusive, accountable, and participatory democracy. It captures the shift at the global level, where more civil society participation is viewed as a panacea for inclusivity within global governance.

On the other hand, from the bottom-up perspective, policymakers commonly believe that democratic assistance should be kept useful to the public but within a limited, definite boundary. It should serve as a symbolic external source of funding, skills, and protection for NGOs operating in Nigeria's challenging domestic environments (Youngs 2001; US Mission Nigeria 2024). As such, the Cotonou Agreement emphasised the importance of civil society and other non-state actors in realising the agreement's objectives, including those in Articles 8 and 9.

The EU's Support to Democratic Governance in Nigeria (EU–SDGN) Phase I program (shown in Table 1) represents a strategic and normative investment in broader stakeholder engagement as a foundational pillar of international democracy promotion. Argumentatively, the rationale behind this stakeholder support approach lies in the recognition that sustainable democracy cannot be externally imposed but must be locally owned, socially

embedded, and driven by credible domestic actors. By adopting a bottom-up model, the EU aims to strengthen the democratic ecosystem through targeted support to electoral bodies, political institutions, civil society, media, and youth leadership – entities that are crucial for deepening democratic resilience in Nigeria.

Table 1. EU Support for Democratic Governance in Nigeria,
Phase I (2016–2021)

Component Area	Key Partners	Amount Allocated	Model
Component 1: Support to the Independent National Electoral Commission	European Centre for Electoral Support (ECES)	€13 million with an additional contribution of €650,000 (5% of the total funding to Component 1) from ECES core funds	Top-down
Component 2: Support to the National Assembly	Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC) and Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth and Advancement (YIAGA)	3 million Euros	Top-down with bottom-up elements
Component 3: Support to Political Parties	Political Party Leadership and Policy Development Centre of the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS)	€2.7 million	Top-down

Component 4: Support to Media	Institute for Media and Society and the International Press Centre	€2.6 million	Bottom-up
Component 5: Support to Civil Society Organisations	BBC Media Action, CLEEN Foundation, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, and the Albino Foundation	€3 million	Bottom-up

Source: European Centre for Electoral Support, n.d.

The EU understands that democracy is not merely about elections, but about the broader participatory infrastructure that enables citizens to influence governance beyond the ballot box. Supporting stakeholders – including CSOs, media, political parties, and the legislature – is a way to institutionalise democratic norms, expand civic spaces, and build the capacity of local actors to demand accountability, transparency, and representation. Such an approach is both pragmatic and strategic as it seeks to mitigate the risk of elite capture and democratic stagnation by cultivating democratic agency at the grassroots level. Furthermore, stakeholder engagement through the SDGN program reflects a strategic hedging against Nigeria’s complex political and security dynamics. By investing in broad-based institutions, the EU is attempting to diversify its democracy promotion instruments and reduce over-reliance on executive cooperation, which can be volatile or politically constrained. This pluralised engagement also aligns with the EU’s self-image as a normative power that favours consensus-building, inclusivity, and multilateralism in contrast to top-down or coercive methods of regime change, mostly articulated in its and US-led efforts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

On the US side, according to USAID (2018), the concentration, while broad, has been to the advantage of empowering CSOs more. Such an approach reflects a strategic emphasis on grassroots democratisation, where bolstering local advocacy, civic engagement, and institutional accountability are seen as critical pathways for promoting democratic norms and

holding government structures to account. This somehow represents a shift in US strategic thinking about how to promote democracy, stemming from its failed experiences in the MENA region. USAID officials have even argued that their assistance has enabled Nigerians to demand accountability from the government during elections, thereby validating the financial and technical support extended by the US government (USAID 2018). An example is the current US Embassy Abuja Public Diplomacy Section (PDS) Annual Program for the 2024 fiscal year. Offering grants of up to \$50,000 each, totalling \$450,000, the fund is focused explicitly on NGOs operating in the Northern Niger Region, with priority given to the states of Adamawa, Jigawa, Katsina, Kebbi, Kogi, Kwara, Niger, Taraba, Yobe, Sokoto, and Zamfara. The primary objectives of this grant are to promote the empowerment of women, girls, and youth; encourage civic participation; and support programs and initiatives of NGOs, such as YIAGA and PLAC, that advocate for good governance, including transparency and accountability in government (US Mission Nigeria 2024).

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN EU AND US DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN NIGERIA

1. FUNDING INSTRUMENTS

Since the EU and the US are actors in their own right in international relations, backed by the principle of sovereignty within international law, it is expected that they will possess distinct resources for achieving their foreign policy objectives in Nigeria. The EU utilises the Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation – Global Europe Instrument (NDICI) along with the European Development Fund, which was previously employed during the Cotonou Agreement, to enhance efforts in promoting democracy in Nigeria. However, the US offers moral and financial support, which is channelled to the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which in turn supports the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) for their election observation work and other related activities in Nigeria. The IRI and the NDI host workshops and press briefings during electoral seasons, and USAID directly funds CSOs.

While the US articulates lofty ideals regarding democracy in Nigeria, the allocation of resources required to substantiate such rhetoric remains markedly insufficient. The Strengthening Advocacy and Civil Engagement (SACE) project represented a substantial investment of \$19.2 million, funded by USAID and executed by Chemonics International from 2014 to 2019 (USAID 2018). The World Bank's population estimate for Nigeria in 2014 was approximately 179.3 million people, indicating that the per capita allocation for the project amounted to just 10.7 cents. Moreover, one would expect some improvement in democracy-related funding in recent years; however, among the top five USAID support sources, the government and civil society receive the least support.⁶ A comparable situation is documented in the EU funding initiative, exemplified by the SDGN phase one, which allocated a mere 13 Euro cents per capita to support democracy projects, calculated based on the 2016 population estimate of 188.6 million individuals. This juxtaposition of lofty rhetoric and diminishing financial resources significantly hampers the potential for substantive democratic advancement, particularly as direct democracy initiatives remain inadequately funded (see Crawford 2005 for the Ghana case study).

2. GEOSTRATEGIC IMPERATIVES

The EU's efforts to enhance democracy and good governance in Nigeria via electoral policy reforms are shaped by multiple factors, including migration and socioeconomic development (Khakee 2007). Its approach sought to address the complex relationships between these issues, recognising the need for comprehensive measures to address the root causes of migration, alleviate socioeconomic decline, and foster improved governance practices in Nigeria. However, the US support for policy reforms in Nigeria has mainly been motivated by different geostrategic interests, specifically aimed at maximising economic benefits and countering terrorist groups (Amirah-Fernández and Menéndez 2009; Aka 2002). Appreciating the significance of Nigeria's role as a regional power and its promising economic prospects, the US

⁶ The USAID's top five sectors funded in Nigeria are humanitarian emergency response (\$327 million), basic health (\$163 million), HIV/AIDS (\$98 million), maternal and child health (\$92 million), and government and civil participation (\$35 million). All the data can be obtained from the USAID result database, available at: <<https://results.usaid.gov/results>>.

prioritised democracy initiatives to enhance economic cooperation and trade relations with Nigeria. In addition, considering the existence of different terrorist organisations in the Sahel, the US placed great importance on assisting Nigeria in combating these dangers and fostering stability in the region.

The linkage between security and democracy is integral to both the US and the EU's strategies, emphasising that security is essential for maintaining democratic norms and vice versa. In the 1990s, Western reform policies, influenced by post-Cold War security theories, incorporated ethical and pragmatic considerations – including political, social, economic, and environmental factors – to address the multifaceted nature of security (Amirah-Fernández and Menéndez 2009). The EU and US international agreements, as well as bilateral policies towards Nigeria, reflect this approach by highlighting the interdependence of democracy and security. However, while they stress collaboration and strategic stability, they differ in their geostrategic concerns in addressing migration and poverty (for the EU) and terrorism and trade (US), issues that drive individuals toward non-state actors and transnational networks that threaten both US and EU interests. Both actors recognise a significant geostrategic alignment in Nigeria that is crucial in advancing democracy, particularly concerning oil and natural gas supply, especially considering the Russo-Ukrainian war and the sanctions hindering oil trade with the Kremlin.

While migration is perceived as one of the utmost security concerns for the EU in promoting democratic norms, since most Nigerians use the Saharan desert route to reach the Mediterranean Sea in northern Africa and the southern border of the EU, US policymakers take a more kinetic approach through increasing military cooperation as an important appendix to support and promote democracy. During a press briefing, US President Joe Biden reiterated his unwavering commitment to Nigeria, emphasising the areas of economic development, security, and human rights protection (The White House 2023). These areas have been recurring areas of importance in US foreign policy over the last two decades (Ploch 2013). This reaffirmation of commitment highlights the enduring nature of the bilateral engagement between the US and Nigeria, in contrast to the more multilateral approach adopted by the EU. The process of securitising democracy through bilateral military arrangements between African and foreign states, also found in the European Security Strategy, involves examining the neorealist perspective on

the competition between state and non-state actors striving for control over Nigerian territory. Power dynamics, both on a global scale and within regional contexts in West Africa, significantly influence the outcomes of democratic success or failure. Terrorism in the northern part of Nigeria, which spreads across the Sahel, is an obvious predicament here. The activities of terrorist groups have threatened Nigeria's democracy. Additionally, the failure to consolidate past democratic dispensations into practical benefits – in terms of good governance that improves the lives of the population – exposes youths to ideologies and recruitment by terrorist groups that threaten the Western geostrategic interests (primarily economic and political) against China and Russia in Africa (Onuoha 2014). The post-9/11 declaration of war on terrorism worldwide reinforced this thinking among US and EU policy stakeholders saddled with the responsibility of monitoring changes in Nigeria and executing policy directions.

Furthermore, policymakers in several European capitals, as demonstrated by the French delegation at the 2023 presidential inauguration in Abuja, believe that improving relations through acknowledging governance in Nigeria is fundamentally linked to increasing development cooperation and addressing issues related to job creation and economic growth – all of which are vital for promoting human rights and embedding democracy. Additionally, recognising and cautiously improving relations without strict sanctions, through cordiality, is beneficial and essential in tackling the underlying factors that contribute to migratory pressures (Van Wyk 2020; Ezemenaka 2019). Moreover, this approach is suggested to strengthen commitment to human rights and democratic values in regions where such commitment is notably weak, while also consolidating the progress already achieved.

Democratic consolidation, human rights, and governance serve as key strategic conditionalities in the EU's policies towards Nigeria. At the same time, the US does not have a clear-cut political conditionality embedded in its bilateral policy and thus remains flexible in its approach. However, it can invoke sanctions to restore democratic governance in the case of a serious breach, as it did in General Ibrahim Babangida's annulment of the 1993 election (Nwokedi 1994). However, this is hard to come by, as civil society bodies and human rights groups have often sounded the alarm to pressure the US government to adopt measures that were counter to its geostrategic interests in continued security, oil, and other economic trades.

Despite claims that the US and EU's influence on development cooperation has diminished in the second Trump administration, Nigeria still values its relationship and shows signs of maintaining aid flow. Some argue that ACP states, such as Nigeria, may prioritise development aid over democratic norms by turning to donors such as China, which have less stringent requirements regarding human rights and democratic governance. However, policymakers in Abuja cannot throw away years of relations with these Western actors.

CONCLUSION

A comparison of EU and US democracy promotion initiatives in Nigeria reveals notable similarities in the strategies and tools employed by both actors. While emphasising the impact of Nigeria's political environment on the progress of these strategies and tools, the geostrategic necessities of migration control, security, trade, and development significantly influence the EU and the US's efforts to design and implement their democracy promotion strategies in Nigeria. Both actors regard promoting democracy as a fundamental objective of foreign policy and international agreements, striking a balance between strategic material goals and value-based ideals. Given the complex challenges of balancing economic and security interests with democratic principles, both the EU and the US, in similar ways, continue to demonstrate their commitment to strengthening Nigeria's democratic frameworks through political rhetoric of their foreign policy positions, political dialogue and diplomacy, support to electoral stakeholders, and efforts to balance material interests with political values.

Nonetheless, this dedication is moderated by a limited guarantee of complete collaboration between both sovereign actors, who work independently due to the divergences in their economic and geostrategic interests in Nigeria. While both the EU and the US promote democracy in Nigeria by linking it to security frameworks, their strategies diverge significantly. The EU emphasises multilateral development cooperation, trade, and migration control through normative and institutional partnerships. In contrast, the US prioritises counterterrorism and economic interests, adopting a more flexible, national security-driven, and strategic approach.

Following the tepid response from Brussels and Washington's hastened congratulatory message after the troubled 2023 elections – despite both actors' election observers expressing doubts regarding the results – the high rhetoric of being normative powers could not balance reality. This is particularly relevant in the case of the EU, as migrants from nations like Nigeria, grappling with socioeconomic and security challenges, are seen as a multifaceted issue that can be managed with a friendly government in Abuja that can navigate and even externalise EU migration policy without diplomatic hiccups. US geopolitical competition with Russia and China over interests in Nigeria's economic and security relations might be the logic that guided its response. Whatever the case, the affirmation by EU and US officials regarding the critical role of robust institutional frameworks, such as electoral governance, in promoting democratic governance in Nigeria is, therefore, questioned, as rhetoric is selectively applied as a form of pragmatism. This reliance on a cautious approach to managing stability in Nigeria, which is divided along ethno-religious cleavages, can lead to the further troubling endorsement of fraudulently elected candidates, driven by geostrategic priorities.

Furthermore, it is crucial to highlight that for democracy promotion to achieve its purpose, domestic agency by Nigerian actors must be central focus of any strategy and tool used. This alignment prompts an inquiry into agency among political stakeholders in Nigeria (ranging from the government to civil society), indicating that the domestic political landscape significantly influences external actors' adoption of cooperative or adversarial strategies. Although both actors – the US and EU – prioritise cooperation with the Nigerian democratic stakeholders, their tactics exhibit subtle variances shaped by their distinct geostrategic priorities and funding mechanisms.

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