

From Diplomacy to Development Fallout: Evaluating the Socioeconomic and Policy Impacts of the U.S. 'Country of Particular Concern' Designation on Nigeria

Ojiako, Ekele U. Phd¹; Ifeanyi, Ugochukwu Sanctus²
Dr.Nwosu, Emmanuel Ndubisi Phd³; Dr.Nwokoro, Athanasius N. Phd⁴

^{1&4}Department of Economics, K.O. Mbadiwe University, Ideato, Nigeria

^{2&3}Department of History and International Studies, K.O. Mbadiwe University, Ideato, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper critically examines the United States' designation of Nigeria as a *Country of Particular Concern* (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act, interrogating its broader diplomatic, socioeconomic, and policy implications through the lens of political economy. While the designation was ostensibly motivated by concerns over religious persecution and attacks on Christians, it operates within a complex web of power asymmetries, international norms, and soft sanctions. Drawing on qualitative descriptive analysis of official documents, policy statements, and international reports, the study situates the CPC designation within historical U.S.–Nigeria relations, exploring how moral diplomacy intersects with economic sovereignty and international image politics. The analysis reveals that beyond its symbolic dimension, the CPC label has subtle yet significant ripple effects: dampening investor confidence, straining bilateral engagements, and compelling Nigeria to recalibrate its internal governance posture. Using Dependency Theory and Constructivism, the study argues that such designations reinforce hierarchical power relations between the Global North and South, where moral authority becomes a tool of geopolitical influence. It further contends that Nigeria's response, oscillating between defensive sovereignty and cautious reform, illustrates the tensions developing states face in balancing domestic pluralism with external expectations. The paper concludes by

recommending proactive diplomacy, institutional strengthening, and regional ownership of human rights narratives to transform external scrutiny into internal development momentum.

Keywords:

Country of Particular Concern, Nigeria–U.S. relations, religious freedom diplomacy, political economy, dependency theory

1. Introduction

In October 2025, the United States formally designated Nigeria as a *Country of Particular Concern* (CPC) under the *International Religious Freedom Act* (IRFA) of 1998, citing "systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom" (USCIRF, 2025a). The designation followed renewed lobbying by the *U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom* (USCIRF) and a public statement by US President, Donald Trump, who alleged widespread persecution of Christians in Nigeria (AP News, 2025). This development marked a diplomatic turning point in U.S.–Nigeria relations, situating Nigeria within a category of states under intense international scrutiny for alleged human rights violations. While such designations are couched in moral and humanitarian language, they often carry strategic, political, and economic undertones that can reshape a country's international image, investment climate, and policy orientation (Ibhawoh, 2020; Akinyemi, 2023).

The *Country of Particular Concern* label is the highest level of censure under the IRFA. It authorizes the U.S. government to impose sanctions or take “commensurate action” against a country found culpable of violating religious freedoms (U.S. Department of State, 2025). In principle, the CPC mechanism seeks to promote global religious tolerance and protect minority rights. In practice, however, its deployment often intersects with broader geopolitical and economic agendas (Haynes, 2021). The 2025 designation of Nigeria thus extends beyond the realm of faith and freedom; it implicates issues of economic diplomacy, state sovereignty, and developmental stability in a country already contending with multidimensional poverty, insurgency, and governance fragility.

Nigeria’s federal government swiftly rejected the designation, calling it “ill-informed, politically motivated, and based on faulty data” (Reuters, 2025). Officials argued that the country’s violence is driven less by religious persecution than by overlapping structural crises: terrorism, banditry, farmer-herder conflicts, and regional inequality; none of which reflect state-sponsored discrimination (ICIR, 2025). Yet, regardless of Nigeria’s rebuttal, the CPC label embeds a reputational cost that can subtly shape economic behaviour. In the contemporary international political economy, where perception often translates into pricing of risk, reputational penalties can manifest through reduced investor confidence, conditional aid flows, and constrained diplomatic leverage (Odukoya & Olatunji, 2022).

From a political economy perspective, the CPC designation functions as a *soft sanction*. Unlike direct economic embargoes, it exerts pressure through normative and institutional channels—altering how donors, multinational corporations, and international agencies engage with the designated country (Keohane & Nye, 2011). For developing economies such as Nigeria, such moralized sanctions can deepen vulnerability to external influence, affecting both policy sovereignty and the trajectory of economic development. This underscores a larger analytical concern: the intersection between moral diplomacy and economic dependency in a global order structured by asymmetric power relations.

Thus, the central problem motivating this study is that designations like the CPC, though framed as human-rights advocacy, may generate broader socioeconomic and policy implications for developing states. Specifically, the CPC designation of Nigeria risks producing a ripple effect across three critical domains:

1. Diplomatic relations – through shifts in Nigeria’s strategic partnership with the United States and its position within international organizations;
2. Economic and developmental outcomes – via potential contraction of foreign direct investment (FDI), disruptions in aid flows, and reputational downgrades; and
3. Domestic policy adjustments – through either reactive compliance (policy reform to appease foreign scrutiny) or assertive resistance (policy insulation to defend sovereignty).

Consequently, this paper seeks to evaluate the *socioeconomic and policy impacts* of the U.S. designation of Nigeria as a CPC, exploring how religious freedom politics intersect with the political economy of development. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- i. What are the socioeconomic consequences of Nigeria’s CPC designation, particularly regarding foreign investment, aid relations, and trade dynamics?
- ii. How does the designation influence Nigeria’s internal policy posture and development priorities?
- iii. In what ways might the CPC label affect Nigeria’s international image, diplomatic capital, and long-term development prospects?

The specific objectives of the study are:

- i. To assess the impact of the CPC designation on Nigeria’s investment climate, aid relationships, and economic performance indicators.
- ii. To examine the policy responses adopted by the Nigerian government in addressing international religious freedom concerns.
- iii. To evaluate the broader diplomatic and developmental implications of the CPC designation for Nigeria’s engagement with the global economy.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it situates a contemporary human-rights controversy within the broader framework of development diplomacy, an area underexplored

in African political economy scholarship. Second, it contributes to the discourse on how *normative power*—expressed through instruments like the CPC label—affects the policy space of developing economies. Third, it provides empirical insights that can guide Nigerian policymakers in balancing international human-rights expectations with national development imperatives. In a global order increasingly defined by moralized governance, understanding the development fallout of religious freedom designations is essential to preserving both sovereignty and progress.

In sum, the CPC designation of Nigeria reveals the complex entanglement between morality and materiality in international relations. It underscores how humanitarian narratives can produce economic externalities, and how the politics of religion can, paradoxically, become the economics of reputation. This study therefore proceeds from a dual analytical lens—economic and political—to interrogate not merely the ethics of the designation, but its consequences for Nigeria's developmental trajectory and policy autonomy.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Conceptual Clarifications

The 'Country of Particular Concern' (CPC) Designation

The term "*Country of Particular Concern*" (CPC) originates from the United States International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998, which empowers the U.S. government to designate countries that engage in or tolerate "particularly severe violations of religious freedom." These violations include systematic, ongoing, and egregious acts such as torture, prolonged detention without charge, disappearance, and other flagrant denials of the right to freedom of religion or belief (United States Department of State, 2023). The designation is both a symbolic and strategic instrument of American foreign policy, signalling to the global community that a state has failed to uphold universal norms of religious liberty.

However, while ostensibly moral and rights-based, the CPC designation functions as a mechanism of diplomatic leverage. It enables the U.S. to impose punitive measures (ranging from

targeted sanctions to trade restrictions) or to negotiate waivers in pursuit of broader strategic interests. In this sense, the CPC list straddles the line between *normative advocacy* and *realpolitik*. Its implications often extend beyond human rights into the domains of economic relations, geopolitical alignment, and domestic political legitimacy within the targeted state.

In the case of Nigeria, being designated a "Country of Particular Concern" by the U.S. has triggered debates about sovereignty, international perception, and the political economy of moral diplomacy. Nigeria's inclusion (and subsequent removal) from the CPC list in 2020 and 2021, respectively, underscores both the volatility and the subjectivity of such international classifications. It also raises questions about the consistency and neutrality of U.S. foreign policy when human rights narratives intersect with security and economic interests (Adeniran, 2022).

Religious Freedom Diplomacy

Religious freedom diplomacy refers to the use of diplomatic instruments such as bilateral negotiations, sanctions, public naming and shaming to promote global adherence to the principle of freedom of religion or belief. This form of diplomacy is grounded in liberal internationalist thought, which presumes that the protection of individual rights contributes to global peace and democratic stability (Hurd, 2015).

In practice, however, religious freedom diplomacy often operates through selective enforcement. While presented as universal, it can reflect the ideological orientations and strategic interests of the promoting state. The United States, for instance, frames religious liberty as a core moral value intertwined with its global leadership identity. Yet, critics argue that its deployment tends to reinforce geopolitical hierarchies and cultural paternalism (Haynes, 2020).

For Nigeria, religious freedom diplomacy intersects with internal fault lines: Christian-Muslim relations, ethno-regional tensions, and insurgency in the North-East. Thus, the CPC label may exacerbate internal divisions by externalizing religious conflicts into international scrutiny, thereby influencing

domestic political narratives and the country's foreign policy posture.

International Image

A nation's *international image* is the aggregate perception formed by the global community regarding its governance, human rights record, and compliance with international norms. In the era of globalization, a country's image affects not only diplomatic recognition but also economic outcomes: investment inflows, tourism, and trade relations (Nye, 2004).

For Nigeria, the CPC designation potentially tarnishes its image as a pluralistic democracy, casting doubts on its capacity to guarantee fundamental freedoms. Such reputational damage can influence credit ratings, investor confidence, and the willingness of international institutions to engage in partnerships. In a world where perception often precedes evidence, symbolic stigmatization through CPC status can impose reputational sanctions as costly as formal economic ones.

Coercive Diplomacy and Sanctions

Coercive diplomacy refers to the strategic use of threats or limited force to influence the behaviour of another state without engaging in full-scale conflict (George, 1991). In contemporary international relations, sanctions serve as the most common instrument of coercive diplomacy intended to compel compliance through economic or political pressure.

CPC designations fit squarely within this paradigm. The threat of sanctions or diplomatic isolation acts as a deterrent, pushing targeted countries to modify their internal policies. Yet, evidence suggests that such measures often have limited success in achieving stated objectives. Instead, they may deepen resentment, entrench authoritarian tendencies, or provoke nationalist resistance (Pape, 1997). For developing states like Nigeria, which depend heavily on external aid and trade with Western economies, the coercive potential of the CPC designation is substantial, posing risks to economic sovereignty and policy autonomy.

Soft Power and Economic Sovereignty

The notion of *soft power*, introduced by Joseph Nye (1990), denotes the ability of a state to shape the preferences and behaviours of others through attraction rather than coercion. It relies on the appeal of culture, political values, and foreign policies perceived as legitimate or morally upright. The CPC mechanism is, therefore, a soft power instrument cloaked in moral authority. Through it, the United States extends influence over domestic governance practices in other countries, framing compliance as a test of civilization and partnership.

However, this intersects uneasily with the concept of *economic sovereignty* (a state's capacity to exercise autonomous control over its economic policies, resources, and development pathways). For many developing nations, economic sovereignty is compromised when external pressures, whether from financial institutions or moral diplomacy, dictate domestic policy choices. The CPC label, by signalling potential economic penalties or conditionalities, can subtly erode policy independence, forcing governments to prioritize international approval over local realities (Moyo, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an eclectic theoretical framework integrating Dependency Theory, Constructivism, and the Political Economy of Human Rights. Each provides a distinct yet complementary lens for understanding how normative foreign policy tools like the CPC designation can produce asymmetric, identity-driven, and economically consequential effects in the Global South.

Dependency Theory

Dependency theory emerged in the 1960s as a critique of modernization theory, emphasizing the structural inequalities inherent in the global capitalist system. Scholars such as Andre Gunder Frank (1966), Samir Amin (1974), and Immanuel Wallerstein (1979) argued that the underdevelopment of the Global South is not an internal deficiency but a product of historical and ongoing economic subordination to the industrialized North.

Applied to the CPC context, dependency theory highlights how moral and normative instruments

can serve as extensions of economic dependency. The designation process reinforces the asymmetrical power relations between the United States (the core) and Nigeria (the periphery). Even when framed as human rights advocacy, the CPC mechanism functions as a form of ideological imperialism (imposing Western liberal standards without due regard to contextual realities). This reinforces what Samir Amin (1976) termed "*peripheral capitalism*": a state of partial integration into the global system that preserves dependency and limits policy autonomy.

Moreover, dependency theorists contend that such mechanisms sustain global inequality by constraining development options. For Nigeria, the fear of economic sanctions or aid withdrawal compels compliance, often at the expense of domestic policy priorities. The CPC designation, therefore, can perpetuate *conditional sovereignty* where the pursuit of international legitimacy overrides endogenous policy formulation.

Constructivism

In contrast to materialist theories, *constructivism* in international relations emphasizes the role of ideas, norms, and identities in shaping state behaviour (Wendt, 1999). It posits that international politics is a socially constructed arena where meanings, rather than mere power, determine interactions.

From a constructivist perspective, the CPC designation is an act of normative labelling (a process through which the United States constructs certain states as "violators" of moral order and others as "upholders" of global norms). This labelling alters not only how the international community perceives Nigeria but also how Nigeria perceives itself within the global order. States respond to such designations not merely to avoid material sanctions but to maintain identity, legitimacy, and status.

Constructivism thus explains the performative dimension of the CPC process. The U.S., as a *norm entrepreneur*, projects religious freedom as a universal standard, while the targeted state engages in either *norm internalization* (policy reform) or *norm contestation* (rejection and resistance). For Nigeria, this dynamic manifests in diplomatic rhetoric that alternates between compliance to preserve global reputation and

defiance to assert sovereignty. The outcome is a complex negotiation between international expectations and domestic political imperatives, mediated by perception and identity.

Political Economy of Human Rights

The *political economy of human rights* provides a critical lens linking human rights discourse to global economic power structures. Pioneered by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman (1979), this framework argues that human rights narratives often serve as ideological tools that justify economic interventions or political conditionalities favourable to dominant states.

Within this framework, the CPC designation can be seen as an instrument of selective moral economy. It legitimizes economic coercion under the guise of promoting universal values. By framing religious freedom violations as a global economic concern, the United States embeds moral judgment within trade, aid, and investment relations. This produces what some scholars describe as a "*humanitarian hierarchy*" where nations are ranked not by development outcomes but by compliance with Western-defined moral codes (Mutua, 2001).

For Nigeria, the political economy of human rights perspective reveals how CPC-related pressures can reshape economic policy orientation. Aid negotiations, trade partnerships, and foreign investments become contingent upon compliance with moral benchmarks. This can create perverse incentives, where governance reforms are pursued to satisfy donors rather than address domestic realities. It also underscores the danger of *normative dependency* where policy legitimacy derives externally rather than internally.

3. Empirical and Contextual Review

Empirical literature: comparative cases and observed patterns

The literature on U.S. *Country of Particular Concern* (CPC) designations and related coercive instruments (naming-and-shaming, targeted sanctions, conditionality) points to heterogeneous outcomes. Comparative evidence across countries such as Myanmar (Burma), Sudan, Pakistan, and China highlights several recurring patterns: (a) diplomatic strain and reputational cost; (b) adjustments to aid and

security cooperation; and (c) mixed or context-dependent development outcomes.

Myanmar (Burma). Myanmar (Burma) is one of the most cited cases where sustained international censure (including sanctions, CPC-style designation, trade restrictions, and asset/arms restrictions) coincided with diplomatic isolation and a deterioration of economic relations with many Western partners (Stratton, 2016; Thein Sein et al., 2016; Vasisht, 2021). During the 1990s and 2000s, these sanctions aimed at the military junta constrained trade and Western investment and reduced certain capital inflows, especially in sectors like garments and export manufacturing, while playing a role in depressing employment in those industries (Vasisht, 2021); they also signalled political costs that increased pressure for reform. However, empirical studies and policy analyses show the limits of these effects: aggregate trade volume increased between 2001 and 2006 despite sanctions, reflecting diversification of export products and trading partners beyond Western markets (Ajmani, Joshi, Kishore, & Roy, 2018). When partial liberalization began in 2011–2016 (as Western sanctions were eased) foreign investment and trade re-engagement occurred, indicating that sanctions' economic effects can be reversible but have limited capacity to engineer durable institutional reform in the absence of domestic political momentum (Oxford Business Group, 2016; Thein Sein et al., 2016).

Sudan. Sudan's long-running CPC designation, alongside broader human-rights pressures, intersected with periods of political transition. After the 2019 removal of Omar al-Bashir and the installation of a transitional government, international signalling (particularly discussions around delisting) coincided with limited re-engagement and conditional aid (U.S. Department of State, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2021). Research indicates that in Sudan the CPC label helped keep religious-freedom concerns visible and modestly strengthened diplomatic leverage during negotiations, yet reforms stemmed primarily from internal political realignment rather than external pressure (Amnesty International, 2020). The designation functioned as one element within a

wider incentive structure rather than a decisive driver of change.

Pakistan. Pakistan's periodic designation for religious-freedom concerns demonstrates the political selectivity embedded in U.S. moral diplomacy. Despite documented issues such as blasphemy laws and violence against minorities (Human Rights Watch, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2022), the practical force of punitive measures has been softened by Pakistan's strategic importance in counterterrorism and regional security (Fair, 2014). Research identifies a resulting paradox: reputational pressure coexists with sustained security cooperation and favourable strategic engagement, attenuating the consequences of CPC-type censure (Curtis, 2016). Such selective enforcement undermines perceptions of neutrality and weakens the broader leverage of human-rights instruments in geopolitically pivotal states.

China. China represents the clearest case where CPC designation has limited practical impact due to the state's economic weight and geopolitical autonomy. Despite extensive documentation of violations involving Uyghur Muslims and other religious groups (Amnesty International, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021), U.S. censure (including CPC status and targeted sanctions) has not materially shifted China's domestic policies. Scholars argue that China's structural power, diversified trade networks, and capacity to absorb reputational costs sharply constrain the leverage of human-rights instruments (Falkner & Buzan, 2019; Economy, 2018). The Chinese case underscores how CPC-type pressure is least effective against states possessing significant economic sovereignty and global influence.

Nigeria's Economic, Diplomatic and Developmental Responses

Nigeria has consistently rejected its CPC designation, framing it as politically motivated and based on flawed assessments of the country's insecurity (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2023; Reuters, 2023). Official statements emphasise that violence stems from terrorism, criminal banditry and resource

conflicts (not state-driven religious persecution). This mirrors patterns noted in the literature: governments listed under CPC often respond with rapid denial, controlled cooperation and appeals to alternative diplomatic partners (Rieffer & Jang, 2010).

Aid and Security Cooperation

Studies of CPC and similar human-rights designations suggest four likely channels of impact for Nigeria. First, human-rights vetting can delay or condition U.S.-funded programmes, slowing technical-assistance disbursement (Farr, 2021). Second, security cooperation may be recalibrated through stricter conditions, selective assistance or Leahy-type restrictions (Pham, 2020). Third, reputational risk may affect investor sentiment (particularly where Western capital is exposed) potentially raising borrowing costs (African Development Bank, 2023). Fourth, states under normative pressure often diversify diplomatically toward non-Western partners, reducing exposure to reputational conditionality (Adebajo, 2022).

Domestic Policy Positioning

Nigeria faces a strategic dilemma between (a) visible reforms that reduce reputational risk and conditionality or (b) defensive insulation that asserts sovereignty but risks deeper diplomatic and economic costs. Early signals (a firm rejection of CPC framing alongside sustained security cooperation) suggest a hybrid strategy similar to other CPC-listed states navigating sovereignty concerns during external scrutiny (Campbell, 2021).

Preliminary Developmental Effects

Current indicators do not isolate a measurable CPC impact, yet literature on reputational shocks cautions that such designations can amplify existing macroeconomic vulnerabilities and donor uncertainty (Kelley, 2017). Subsequent empirical sections of the paper can therefore track changes in aid flows, FDI, credit spreads and U.S. security assistance to estimate any CPC-related effects.

4. Historical Context of U.S.–Nigeria Relations and the CPC Designation

U.S.–Nigeria relations since the 1990s have combined deep cooperation with recurring governance-related friction. Strategically, bilateral ties have rested on three pillars: trade engagement through the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), expansive health and development assistance (most visibly PEPFAR, the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) and security cooperation centred on counterterrorism, intelligence sharing and U.S. advisory support linked to AFRICOM activities (Campbell, 2020; U.S. Department of State, 2023). These areas established a pragmatic relationship in which development financing and military coordination coexisted with periodic normative disputes. Human-rights concerns, ranging from security-force abuses to restrictions on civil liberties, repeatedly generated U.S. criticism and conditionality (Human Rights Watch, 2019). The International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) and the creation of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) institutionalised one channel through which religious-freedom assessments could shape diplomatic and security engagements (Kelley, 2017). Scholars describe the relationship as one of strategic interdependence: cooperation where interests align, friction when governance or rights-based expectations intrude (Adebajo, 2022).

The 2025 CPC episode unfolded along a clear sequence. First, on 31 October 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump announced that Nigeria would be designated a “Country of Particular Concern,” citing attacks on Christians and signalling possible sanctions or policy responses. News reporting highlighted both the severity of the rhetoric and its immediate diplomatic and market reverberations (Associated Press, 2025; Reuters, 2025a). Trump’s warning that the United States would “take action” if Nigeria failed to protect religious minorities was widely interpreted as a signal of willingness to escalate pressure.

Second, USCIRF had throughout 2025 published monitoring updates, hearings and formal recommendations urging CPC designation. Its 3 November 2025 statement welcomed the designation, summarising patterns

of violence and arguing that the decision advanced international religious-freedom goals (USCIRF, 2025). USCIRF's documentation provided the bureaucratic evidence base that complemented the executive branch's political signal.

Third, the Nigerian government rapidly rejected the designation. Officials argued that insecurity is driven by terrorism, banditry and criminality rather than state-sanctioned religious persecution, and criticised the U.S. position as based on faulty inference (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2025; Reuters, 2025b). Nigerian representatives insisted the constitution prohibits religious persecution and defended the country's sovereignty while expressing openness to cooperation that respects territorial integrity.

Finally, domestic and international reactions were mixed. Nigerian Christian groups welcomed external attention; other civic actors warned against externalising security problems. U.S. legislators and advocacy groups supported stronger measures, while some international partners urged caution. Financial markets registered an immediate response: Reuters reported a slip in Nigeria's sovereign bonds following Trump's remarks, reflecting reputational risk transmission before any formal sanctions were enacted (Reuters, 2025a).

Analytically, the episode shows how bureaucratic assessment (USCIRF) combined with executive rhetoric to generate a high-salience signal; how sovereignty-based rebuttals shape Nigeria's policy space; and how reputational shocks can generate measurable market effects even in the absence of material sanctions.

5. Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the socioeconomic and policy implications of the United States' designation of Nigeria as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC). The qualitative approach is appropriate for unpacking the complex interplay between diplomacy, human rights discourse, and economic sovereignty, especially given the political sensitivity and interpretive nature of the subject. The study relies primarily on documentary and secondary

data drawn from official sources, scholarly analyses, and reputable media. Key data sources include reports from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the U.S. Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Reports*, statements from Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and data on foreign direct investment (FDI) and aid inflows from institutions such as the World Bank, UNCTAD, and OECD.

These materials are examined to identify patterns in the language, framing, and justification of the CPC designation, as well as Nigeria's official and policy responses. Press releases, interviews, and news analyses from credible outlets (such as *Reuters*, *BBC*, *Premium Times*, and *Vanguard*) are used to capture the broader public discourse and interpretive narratives around the issue. Through content analysis, the study interprets these documents to uncover recurring themes, policy shifts, and diplomatic signals.

The method emphasises interpretive depth rather than numerical generalization, allowing the researcher to explore how narratives of religious freedom intersect with political economy concerns such as investment confidence, development aid, and international legitimacy. Contextual triangulation is used (cross-verifying official reports with independent commentary and expert analyses) to ensure credibility and validity. The focus is thus on tracing evolving policy discourses and their implications for Nigeria's external relations and domestic policy posture.

By emphasising qualitative interpretation over statistical measurement, this approach reveals how power, perception, and discourse shape Nigeria's engagement with the U.S. and the global human rights regime. The method captures both the symbolic and material consequences of Nigeria's CPC designation, presenting a holistic understanding of how such international classifications can reverberate through diplomacy, governance, and development planning.

6. Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The U.S. designation of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) highlights the uneasy

balance between human-rights advocacy and geopolitical pragmatism. The evidence shows that while the designation was framed as a response to religious-freedom violations, its repercussions extended across diplomacy, socioeconomic stability, and domestic politics. Drawing from realist, constructivist, and dependency perspectives, the CPC episode becomes part of a larger narrative of global power asymmetries and contested norm-setting.

a. Diplomatic Implications

Diplomatically, the designation marked a cooling in Nigeria–U.S. relations. Although both states have long cooperated through AGOA, PEPFAR, and counterterrorism engagements (U.S. State Department, 2021), the CPC label introduced new friction. Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs dismissed the allegations as politically motivated, while U.S. officials insisted the designation followed USCIRF's evidence-based recommendations. This produced a guarded diplomatic climate: U.S. congressional committees increased scrutiny on security-sector abuses, and Nigerian diplomats intensified sovereignty-based rebuttals. Similar trends appear in Pakistan and Myanmar, where CPC designations strained but did not rupture strategic partnerships (USCIRF, 2019). Under the Biden administration, the oscillation between delisting and relisting Nigeria underscored persistent concern in Washington and exposed the political signalling embedded in human-rights diplomacy.

b. Socioeconomic Implications

Socioeconomic implications emerged despite the absence of formal sanctions. Investors and multilateral partners often interpret CPC designations as indicators of governance risk. World Bank and UNCTAD reports from 2020–2023 document Nigeria's stagnant FDI inflows within a broader climate of security and political uncertainty (World Bank, 2023; UNCTAD, 2022). The designation contributed to a reputational drag, with some donors and humanitarian groups temporarily redirecting sensitive programming. Media framing (especially by Western outlets) amplified narratives of sectarian crisis, shaping global investor sentiment. The tourism sector and

diaspora visitation, already weakened by insecurity, were further discouraged by heightened perceptions of religious violence.

c. Domestic Policy Implications and Political & Social Repercussions

Domestically, the CPC label triggered both defensive nationalism and selective reform. While rejecting U.S. accusations, Nigerian authorities expanded interfaith initiatives, launched public messaging on religious tolerance, and emphasized security sector reforms in affected states. At the same time, political elites framed the listing as coercive diplomacy, strengthening nationalist rhetoric. Civil society responses were polarized: Christian groups viewed the CPC decision as validation, whereas some Muslim organizations challenged it as biased. This deepened existing fault lines and fed into partisan contestation.

Collectively, these findings show that the CPC designation functions as a multidimensional instrument of soft power: shaping diplomatic priorities, influencing economic perceptions, and reframing domestic political debates well beyond its formal legal scope.

7. Conclusion

The designation of Nigeria as a *Country of Particular Concern* (CPC) by the United States stands at the intersection of moral diplomacy and geopolitical signalling. While officially grounded in the universalist rhetoric of defending religious freedom, the designation has operated in practice as a form of *soft sanction* (a non-military yet potent mechanism of influence that reverberates through Nigeria's economic, diplomatic, and policy spheres). The evidence suggests that the CPC label has functioned less as a humanitarian safeguard and more as a tool of normative persuasion, subtly reshaping Nigeria's behaviour within the global order.

Diplomatically, the designation redefined Nigeria's relationship with the United States, introducing layers of mutual suspicion and strategic recalibration. It compelled Nigerian policymakers to become more defensive about sovereignty and human rights narratives, while simultaneously nudging the country toward selective reforms to preserve its international credibility. The result has been a delicate

balancing act, maintaining cooperation in security and development while resisting external interference in domestic affairs. This reflects the paradox of postcolonial diplomacy: developing states must often perform compliance to retain legitimacy within an unequal international hierarchy.

Socioeconomically, the CPC label has carried implicit costs. Though not accompanied by formal sanctions, it influenced investor confidence, donor perception, and Nigeria's risk profile. As dependency theorists would note, such moralized designations deepen the structural asymmetry between the Global North (wielding discursive and financial power) and the Global South, which remains economically and reputationally vulnerable. The case of Nigeria demonstrates that reputational capital in international politics can translate directly into developmental outcomes, as perceptions of instability or intolerance discourage investment and aid continuity.

Domestically, the designation triggered both introspection and polarization. Government responses oscillated between reformist gestures and nationalist resistance, reflecting the tension between global image management and internal political calculus. The discourse also amplified religious cleavages within Nigeria's already delicate plural society. For some groups, the CPC label validated grievances of marginalization; for others, it symbolized an external attempt to impose Western norms and interpretations on a complex, multi-ethnic state. The resulting debate (about sovereignty, identity, and accountability) has reawakened old questions about the nature of Nigeria's secularism and the place of human rights in its national development agenda.

Theoretically, the CPC experience illuminates how identity, power, and economic vulnerability intersect in the global political economy. Constructivism explains how perception and labelling shape international behaviour: Nigeria's image as a violator of religious freedom became as consequential as any material sanction. Dependency theory, in turn, exposes the structural inequities embedded in such interactions, where moral judgment by the Global North sustains its leverage over the Global South. Finally, realism offers a sobering

reminder that moral diplomacy is rarely detached from strategic interest; even humanitarian postures serve to preserve influence in key regions such as West Africa.

All in all, the U.S. designation of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern underscores a broader dilemma for developing states: how to navigate international image politics without surrendering autonomy. For Nigeria, the challenge lies in transforming external pressure into constructive domestic reform while asserting its right to define its own developmental and governance trajectory. The CPC episode thus becomes not merely a story about religion or rights, but a case study in the evolving political economy of global influence, where moral claims mask strategic interests, and where sovereignty itself must be constantly negotiated in the theatre of international legitimacy.

8. Policy Recommendations

The findings of this study demonstrate that the U.S. designation of Nigeria as a *Country of Particular Concern* (CPC) transcends moral advocacy to encompass deeper geopolitical and economic implications. To mitigate its adverse consequences and to reposition Nigeria's international standing, a multidimensional policy response is essential: one that addresses both perception and substance. The following recommendations are proposed for Nigeria, the United States and international partners, as well as regional and academic stakeholders:

- i. For Nigeria, the foremost priority should be to strengthen domestic institutions that promote interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance, and human rights monitoring. This entails empowering the National Human Rights Commission, interreligious councils, and civil society coalitions to conduct credible, data-driven monitoring of religious freedom indicators. Such institutional strengthening would demonstrate internal accountability and reduce the legitimacy of external criticisms. Nigeria should also mainstream religious freedom and pluralism into its national security and development planning frameworks. This integration is vital, as many flashpoints of religious tension (whether in Kaduna, Plateau, or

Borno) are deeply rooted in resource competition, governance failures, and socioeconomic deprivation. Addressing these drivers aligns religious peace with national development goals.

ii. Equally critical is the need for proactive public diplomacy. Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs should adopt a strategic communication approach that projects the country's pluralist identity, highlights ongoing reforms, and clarifies misconceptions in international media. This form of narrative management would reposition Nigeria from being a reactive actor to a norm entrepreneur capable of influencing global discourse on religious freedom within developing societies. Regular bilateral dialogues with U.S. agencies, think tanks, and advocacy organizations would also help transform the CPC narrative from punitive oversight into constructive engagement. Furthermore, Nigeria should diversify its external partnerships (strengthening economic and diplomatic ties with the European Union, African Union, and Middle Eastern partners) to avoid overdependence on any single moral arbiter in global politics.

iii. For the United States and the international community, moral advocacy must be balanced with strategic sensitivity. The U.S. should ensure that religious freedom diplomacy avoids the perception of geopolitical selectivity (wherein states of strategic interest are exempt from scrutiny while others are singled out). This selectivity undermines both credibility and cooperation. Instead of relying primarily on naming-and-shaming mechanisms such as CPC listings, Washington and its allies should prioritize *capacity building, preventive diplomacy, and community-based conflict mediation*. Direct support to local peacebuilding initiatives and faith-based education reforms would yield more sustainable outcomes than symbolic blacklisting. International advocacy must therefore evolve from coercive diplomacy to developmental partnership, emphasizing support over sanction.

iv. For regional and academic stakeholders, the CPC episode presents an opportunity for Africa to take ownership of its religious freedom discourse. The African Union and ECOWAS should consider establishing regional frameworks for religious freedom assessment, drawing from contextual realities rather than importing Western metrics. Such frameworks would enhance the continent's collective diplomatic leverage and ensure more balanced narratives in global governance forums. Academic institutions and policy research centres across Africa should also pursue *evidence-based monitoring* of the socioeconomic and political effects of external designations like CPC. Through interdisciplinary research (combining political economy, development studies, and religious sociology) scholars can generate indigenous knowledge to guide policymaking and international negotiation.

Ultimately, the policy goal is not to contest the principle of religious freedom, but to recalibrate how it is pursued and interpreted. For Nigeria, this means internalizing human rights as part of development governance; for the United States, it means practicing universalism without asymmetry; and for the wider international and regional community, it means advancing a model of moral diplomacy rooted in partnership, not dominance. By institutionalizing inclusive governance, strengthening transparency, and cultivating diplomatic agility, Nigeria can transform the CPC experience from a reputational setback into a catalyst for deeper reform and sovereign self-definition.

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