

Review Article

Strategic Navigations: Malawi's 'Look East' Policy and the Quest for Agency in a Multipolar World Order

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Abstract

In an era of renewed great power competition, the foreign policy manoeuvres of smaller states are often analytically overshadowed. This qualitative study addresses this gap by examining Malawi's post-2007 diplomatic reorientation, commonly termed its 'Look East' policy, as a critical case of strategic navigation in a multipolar world. Moving beyond simplistic narratives of external dependency, the article investigates how Malawian state actors perceive, articulate, and leverage partnerships, primarily with China but also with traditional Western donors and regional bodies, to assert developmental sovereignty and enhance its bargaining position. The study employed a process-tracing methodology, drawing on data from semi-structured questionnaires given to Malawian foreign policy elites, including senior diplomats, members of parliament, and policy analysts. This primary data was triangulated with a thematic analysis of key policy documents, parliamentary records, and diplomatic statements from 2007 to the present. Preliminary findings indicate that Malawian agency is exercised not as a wholesale alignment but as a calculated, discursive, and pragmatic balancing act. Actors consciously frame engagements with diverse partners using the rhetoric of opportunity, diversification, and sovereign choice to justify policy shifts and maximise tangible developmental returns. The study concludes that Malawi's experience offers a refined template for understanding how small, aid-dependent states in the Global South perform strategic agency, using multipolarity not as a threat but as a complex diplomatic terrain to be actively navigated for national interest.

Introduction

Historical Background and Context

The landscape of international relations in the Global South has undergone a profound transformation since the dawn of the 21st century, marked by the rise of alternative powers and the emergence of multipolarity. For many African states, this shift has presented both novel challenges and unprecedented opportunities to reassess long-standing diplomatic and economic partnerships. Malawi, a small, landlocked, and aid-dependent nation in Southeastern Africa,

exemplifies this strategic recalibration. Historically, its foreign policy and development trajectory were shaped by a close relationship with traditional Western partners, notably the United Kingdom and the United States, within a broadly liberal international framework (Mohan & Lampert, 2012).

A pivotal moment in this historical continuum was Malawi's decisive break in 2007, when it terminated diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (Taiwan) and established formal ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC). This move, while economically motivated by the promise of investment and aid, signified a fundamental geopolitical realignment. It initiated what analysts have since termed a 'Look East' policy—a conscious, if not always formally codified, orientation towards engaging with emerging powers, with China at its core (Ojakorotu & Kamidza, 2018). This policy has unfolded against the backdrop of China's expanding global footprint, exemplified by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and a concurrent period of perceived retrenchment or conditional engagement from some traditional donors (Carmody & Kragelund, 2016; Leslie, 2020). The subsequent decade and a half have seen a proliferation of Chinese-funded infrastructure projects, growth in bilateral trade, and high-level diplomatic exchanges, embedding China as a key partner in Malawi's national development plans.

Problem Statement

The existing academic and policy discourse on Africa-China relations often gravitates towards macro-level analyses, focusing on debt diplomacy, resource extraction, or great power competition between China and the West (Alshareef 2024; Mutai et al., 2024; Mkhize & Lawrence, 2023). Within this narrative, smaller states like Malawi are frequently portrayed as passive recipients or 'chess pieces' in a grand strategic game, their agency diminished by structural constraints of size, capacity, and economic need. This overlooks the subtle, deliberate, and tactical manoeuvres employed by national elites to navigate this complex geopolitical terrain (Zezeza, 2025).

While the fact of Malawi's 'Look East' pivot is documented, there is a significant gap in understanding *how* Malawian state actors perceive, justify, and operationalize this policy to maximise national benefit. The extant literature offers limited insight into the domestic foreign policy discourse, the internal calculus of balancing diverse partners, and the active construction of a narrative of sovereign choice. Therefore, a critical problem persists: the nature and exercise of Malawian agency within its 'Look East' policy remains under-theorised and

empirically opaque, obscured by deterministic frameworks that privilege external forces over domestic strategy.

Research Questions and Objectives

This study is designed to illuminate this opaque area of strategic navigation. It is guided by the following primary research question:

- How do Malawian foreign policy elites strategically navigate and articulate the 'Look East' policy to assert agency and enhance the country's position within a multipolar world order?

To address this central question, the study pursues three specific objectives:

1. To trace the evolution and key drivers of Malawi's 'Look East' policy as perceived by its domestic architects and implementers.
2. To analyse the discursive strategies employed by Malawian elites to frame relationships with China, traditional partners, and regional bodies to justify policy choices and assert sovereign legitimacy.
3. To evaluate the perceived outcomes and tactical manoeuvres associated with this multipolar navigation, identifying the spaces and limitations for exercising meaningful foreign policy agency.

Significance of the Study

This research makes significant contributions to both scholarly debate and policy understanding. Theoretically, it moves beyond the simplistic 'bandwagoning vs. resistance' binary that often characterizes studies of small states. By applying a lens of strategic navigation (Brown & Harman, 2013), it contributes to emerging theories of agency in International Relations that recognize the capacity of weaker states to engage in sophisticated, context-specific tactics of adaptation, bargaining, and discursive framing within asymmetric partnerships. It tests and potentially refines these concepts in the under-explored context of a small African economy. In terms of empirical significance, the study provides a timely, in-depth, and granular case study of Malawian foreign policy decision-making post-2007. It generates original qualitative data from elite perspectives, offering a rare glimpse into the 'black box' of policy formulation in a typically data-scarce environment. This fills a crucial gap in the contemporary literature on Africa-China relations, which lacks detailed analyses from the vantage point of specific, smaller African states actively managing multiple partnerships.

The findings of this study also offer valuable policy relevance and insights for Malawian policymakers and civil society in critically evaluating partnership frameworks and negotiation strategies. For traditional and emerging partners engaging with Malawi, the article elucidates the priorities and tactical calculus of a sovereign actor, promoting a more refined understanding that transcends reductive assumptions of dominance or passivity. Ultimately, the study highlights how multipolarity is being actively lived and utilized by actors in the Global South, with implications for the future of international cooperation and diplomacy.

Conceptualising Agency in Asymmetric Engagements

This section establishes the theoretical lens through which Malawi's 'Look East' policy is analysed. Moving beyond realist assumptions of structural determinism and liberal institutionalist emphases on norms, this study is situated within contemporary constructivist and foreign policy analysis (FPA) scholarship that takes the agency of smaller states seriously. The framework synthesises two interconnected theoretical strands: the concept of Strategic Navigation and the practice of Discursive Agency, both of which provide tools to dissect how Malawi exercises meaningful choice within constrained asymmetric partnerships.

Moving Beyond Structural Determinism

Traditional International Relations (IR) theories have often struggled to account for the foreign policy behaviour of small states, frequently relegating them to a position of passive reactivity to systemic forces or great power diktats (Zezeza, 2025; Moyo, 2021). Neo-realist perspectives, in particular, emphasise material constraints and the distribution of power, suggesting that states like Malawi have little room for manoeuvre and must ultimately 'bandwagon' with a dominant patron for security and survival. This study challenges this deterministic view. Recent scholarship on Africa's international relations asserts that, while asymmetries of power are undeniable, they are not the sole determinants of policy outcomes (Brown & Harman, 2013). African states are not mere arenas for external competition but are active participants who interpret, negotiate, and sometimes reshape the terms of their engagements. This article, therefore, positions itself within a growing body of work that seeks to "re-imagine African agency" as a dynamic, contextual, and often discursive practice (Scialoja, 2025; Zezeza, 2025; Moyo, 2021).

Strategic Navigation

The primary theoretical anchor for this study is the concept of Strategic Navigation, developed and refined in recent analyses of Global South foreign policies. Brown & Harman (2013) define strategic navigation as the conscious and tactical manoeuvring of states within complex and constraining international environments to achieve specific national objectives. This concept is particularly apt for analysing Malawi's situation for several reasons. Firstly, the concept acknowledges constraint without denying agency. The framework begins with the premise that Malawi operates within a contested world order (Van Rooyen & Cilliers, 2025; Chipaike & Knowledge, 2018), characterized by asymmetric dependencies. However, instead of seeing this as a terminal condition, it focuses on how actors identify and exploit navigational capacities, with the political, diplomatic, and discursive tools at their disposal. A second key feature of strategic navigation is its emphasis on pragmatism and tactical flexibility. Strategic navigation is not about ideological alignment but pragmatic calculation. It involves diversifying partnerships, playing actors off against one another, and extracting concessions (Chipaike & Bischoff, 2019). This directly aligns with the observed behaviour of Malawi in engaging with China, the West, and regional blocs like the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU) simultaneously. A further defining characteristic of strategic navigation is its process-oriented nature. The concept directs analytical attention to the how of foreign policy, the ongoing processes of negotiation, bargaining, and tactical adjustment. This is operationalized in this study through the method of process-tracing, allowing for a detailed examination of the evolution of the 'Look East' policy as a series of navigational decisions. Applying this framework, the study examines Malawi's foreign policy not as a fixed alignment, but as a continuous, adaptive process of navigating between different centers of power, utilizing partnerships as currents to be harnessed for forward motion, while avoiding being capsized by overdependence on any single one.

Discursive Agency and Legitimation

To complement the focus on tactical manoeuvring, this article integrates the concept of Discursive Agency. This constructivist-informed theory posits that language and narrative are not merely reflective of policy but are constitutive of political reality and instrumental in exercising agency (Coffie & Tiky, 2021). For a state like Malawi, the ability to frame its engagements in a particular

way is a key navigational capacity. Elite actors engage in strategic framing to legitimise their policy choices to both domestic and international audiences (Prochniak & Nitoiu, 2023). By consistently articulating the 'Look East' policy through a lexicon of "sovereign choice," "mutual benefit," "diversification," and "pragmatism," Malawian officials perform an act of agency. They discursively construct the policy as a proactive, rational strategy of an autonomous state, rather than a forced concession. This narrative counters external perceptions of passivity or capitulation. In addition, discourse is a tool for managing power imbalances. By publicly emphasising principles like "win-win cooperation" and "non-interference" drawn from Sino-African diplomacy, Malawian elites can hold partners rhetorically accountable to these stated ideals, thereby creating a normative framework for the relationship (Mutai et al., 2024). This discursive practice becomes a mechanism for shaping the terms of engagement. The narratives elites employ also construct Malawi's international identity. Framing the nation as a sovereign partner or a strategic navigator, rather than a beneficiary or client state, is an agential act that seeks to reshape its position within the international hierarchy. To put this into perspective, this article analyses questionnaire responses and policy documents to identify these discursive frames, understanding them as essential instruments in Malawi's strategic toolkit for asserting agency and justifying its navigational path.

An Integrated Framework for Analysis

This theoretical framework synthesizes Strategic Navigation and Discursive Agency into an integrated analytical model. It proposes that Malawi's exercise of foreign policy agency in a multipolar context is a dual-layered process. At the tactical level, it involves the concrete practices of strategic navigation, focused on diversifying partners, timing diplomatic engagements, negotiating project terms, and balancing competing offers (Brown & Harman, 2013; Chipaike & Bischoff, 2019). And at the discursive level, the integrated framework involves the concurrent practice of discursive agency; crafting and propagating narratives that legitimize these tactics, assert sovereign autonomy, and manage the perceptions of both stronger partners and the domestic public (Coffie & Tiky, 2021; Alshareef, 2024). It must be noted that these two layers are mutually reinforcing. For instance, successful tactical navigation provides material for legitimize discourse (e.g., pointing to a completed infrastructure project as a 'fruit of sovereign partnership'), while compelling discursive frames can create political space

and legitimacy for future tactical manoeuvres (e.g., using the rhetoric of diversification to justify engaging a new partner). By employing this integrated framework, the study moves beyond asking if Malawi has agency, a question that recent scholarship answers in the affirmative, to investigate the precise mechanisms and representational strategies through which this agency is enacted and sustained within the unique context of its 'Look East' policy (Zezeza, 2025; Moyo, 2021). This provides a dynamic and empirically grounded model for understanding small-state diplomacy in an era of multipolarity.

Literature Review

This part reviews the contemporary scholarship on Malawi's foreign policy reorientation and its engagement with emerging powers within a shifting global order. It is structured to first establish the historical pivot of 2007, then examine the evolving dynamics and debates in the subsequent period, and finally, identify a critical gap in the literature that this study intends to fill. The review focuses exclusively on works that capture the most recent analyses and theoretical developments.

Historical Foundations and Primary Motivations

The decisive break with Taiwan in December 2007 to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) is widely recognised as the foundational act of Malawi's contemporary 'Look East' policy. Recent literature consolidates the understanding that this move was primarily driven by pragmatic economic calculus rather than ideological alignment. Scholars note that the administration of President Bingu wa Mutharika framed the decision within a discourse of "developmentalism," explicitly linking recognition of the PRC to anticipated inflows of investment, aid, and infrastructural development that Western partners were perceived as being unwilling or too slow to provide (Chipaike & Bischoff, 2019; Mohan & Lampert, 2012). This act of recognition is thus interpreted not as a withdrawal from the West but as a strategic diversification of partners aimed at addressing pressing domestic developmental needs (Malindini, 2022). The pivot immediately positioned Malawi within the broader continental trend of engaging China as an alternative source of finance, a dynamic relationship with deep historical roots and evolving strategic characteristics (Tull, 2006; Dike & Owusu, 2024). This trend is also a model of state-led development, a trend well-documented in the wider Africa-China literature (Mutai et al., 2024; Berther, 2020).

Evolving Dynamics and Contemporary Debates

Research published in the current decade has moved beyond the initial motivations to analyse the implementation, outcomes, and complexities of this reorientation. This review takes into account three key thematic debates that are dominating recent literature:

A significant strand of scholarly analyses focuses on the material outcomes of the partnership, particularly Chinese-financed infrastructure. Studies note the rapid proliferation of projects such as the Parliament Building, the Bingu National Stadium, and road networks (Nhlane, 2019). However, this has sparked a robust debate mirroring continental concerns. Some analyses express apprehension about debt sustainability and the potential for strategic leverage, framing Malawi within a broader “debt trap” narrative (Carmody et al., 2021). Conversely, more recent scholarship challenges this deterministic view, arguing that the debt trap is more myth than reality (Himmer & Rod, 2022). Some scholars argue that African states, including Malawi, exercise agency within financing negotiations, often deliberately using Chinese loans as a tool for rapid capital accumulation while being cognizant of the risks (Alshareef, 2024; Fu & Eguegu, 2021; Thindwa, 2015). The debate, therefore, centres on whether these projects enhance Malawi’s developmental sovereignty or create new dependencies.

Recent literature is also framing Malawi as a ‘Strategic Navigator’ in a Multipolar Context. Some scholars situate Malawi’s behaviour within theoretical frameworks of small-state agency. Chipaike & Bischoff (2019), in a study of Zimbabwe, posit that African states, such as Malawi’s engagement represents a conscious strategy of navigating between competing powers. They argue that elites from small states like Malawi have used the China relationship not to replace traditional partners but to augment their bargaining position with donors like the United Kingdom, the USA, and the International Monetary Fund. This aligns with the broader theoretical perspective of Brown & Harman (2013), who contend that African states actively navigate a contested world order, using multipolarity to create room for manoeuvre. This perspective marks a shift from viewing Malawi as a passive recipient to an active, if constrained, strategist.

Additionally, recent literature also examines how African partners adapt to China’s economic slowdown and rebalancing (Lakatos et al., 2017; Mingey et al., 2025) and to global shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic, which tested the resilience and responsiveness of different partnership models (Adeniran, 2020). This evolving economic

context forms a crucial backdrop against which Malawi’s ongoing navigation must be assessed. Equally important is a smaller but critical body of work that examines the domestic political economy of the ‘Look East’ policy. Research hints at how the distribution of contracts and opportunities associated with Chinese engagements can intersect with domestic patronage networks, influencing the policy’s trajectory and public perception (Caskey, 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). Furthermore, the consistency of the policy across different administrations (from Bingu wa Mutharika to Joyce Banda to Peter Mutharika to Lazarus Chakwera, and now Peter Mutharika again) suggests a degree of elite consensus on the utility of diversification, albeit with varying rhetorical emphases on transparency and sovereign interests.

Search for Discourse, Perception, and Reasoning behind Malawi’s Strategic Navigation

While the literature reviewed above provides valuable insights, a significant and timely gap persists. There is a lack of detailed, qualitative empirical research that foregrounds the perceptions, discourses, and strategic reasoning of the Malawian foreign policy elites themselves who design and implement this navigation. Existing studies often analyse Malawi’s policy from an external, observational standpoint or through the lens of macro-level data (debt figures, project counts). The internal rationale, the subjective experience of negotiating asymmetry, and the discursive strategies employed by Malawian diplomats and policymakers remain underexplored. As Prochniak & Nitoiu (2023) and Usman (2021) emphasise, narrative and discourse are key instruments of agency in world politics, yet we have limited insight into how Malawian elites narrate their own ‘Look East’ story. Much of the literature captures snapshots or outcomes, but not the detailed process of navigation. How exactly is the balancing act between Beijing, London, Washington, and Brussels managed in diplomatic practice? How are competing offers evaluated, and how are setbacks or criticisms from any side diplomatically mitigated? The micro-mechanics of this continuous navigation, as called for by theories of strategic navigation (Brown & Harman, 2013), are not fully documented for the Malawian case. The most recent phase of Malawi’s foreign policy, under President Lazarus Chakwera’s administration (from 2020 to 2025), which has operated in a world of intensified US-China rivalry and a global polycrisis, is not comprehensively analysed in academic literature. His government’s rhetoric of economic diplomacy and sovereign interests requires fresh investigation to understand how the ‘Look East’ policy is being adapted in the current geopolitical moment. This study directly addresses this triad of gaps. Through original, semi-structured questionnaires distributed

among Malawian foreign policy elites and a discursive analysis of their statements, this study provides an internal, process-oriented, and contemporary account of Malawi's strategic navigation. It seeks not to contradict existing structural analyses but to enrich them by illuminating the agentive layer that operates within and responds to those very structures, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of how a small state like Malawi crafts its path in a multipolar, geopolitically divergent world.

Methodology

This section details the qualitative research design employed to investigate the strategic navigation underpinning Malawi's 'Look East' policy. The study is premised on the understanding that foreign policy is shaped by the interpretations, decisions, and discourses of key actors. Consequently, a methodology suited to capturing these nuanced, subjective, and process-oriented dimensions is essential. This study's research philosophy, design, data collection methods, sampling strategy, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations are explained below.

Research Philosophy and Design

This study is situated within an interpretivist research philosophy. It operates on the assumption that social reality, particularly in the realm of international diplomacy, is not an objective fact to be discovered but is socially constructed through the meanings, experiences, and language of the actors involved (Bhattacharjee, 2019). The primary aim is therefore to understand and interpret the subjective world of Malawian foreign policy elites, how they make sense of multipolarity, justify their strategic choices, and perceive their own agency. To achieve this, the study employs a qualitative case study design, focusing intensively on the single, critical case of Malawi's post-2007 foreign policy reorientation. A case study is ideal for answering 'how' questions, providing a holistic and in-depth exploration of a complex phenomenon within its real-world context (Harrison et al., 2020). This design facilitates a process-tracing approach, allowing for the detailed reconstruction of decision-making sequences and strategic evolutions over time.

Data Collection Methods

To ensure methodological triangulation and depth, the study employs two complementary qualitative data collection methods. First, semi-structured elite questionnaires are the primary source of data. Semi-structured questionnaires are particularly effective for

exploring complex issues, as they provide a guided yet flexible framework that allows participants to elaborate on their perspectives, experiences, and reasoning in their own words (Tansey, 2009). The questionnaire was developed around the core themes of the research questions, such as historical decision-making drivers, perceptions of different international partners, tactical balancing acts, and narratives of sovereignty. This format enabled probing questions to elicit rich, detailed accounts of the strategic navigation process. Second, to corroborate and contextualise data from the questionnaires, a systematic analysis of key documents was conducted. This corpus included policy documents such as Malawi's Growth and Development Strategies (MGDS), diplomatic white papers, and parliamentary committee reports on foreign affairs; public statements, namely speeches by the President, Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Finance, and official press releases from 2020-2025. Apart from that, the study also considered parliamentary records such as Hansard transcripts of debates pertaining to foreign policy, China-Africa relations, and international cooperation; and diplomatic communiqués like joint statements issued following high-level bilateral meetings with key partners (e.g., China, the UK, the EU). This documentary analysis served two key purposes: it provided a timeline of official policy positions, and it allowed for a critical discourse analysis of the language and framing used in public, legitimising narratives (Prochniak & Nitoiu, 2023; Zhang & Hong, 2023).

Sampling Strategy

A purposive, non-probability sampling technique was used to identify information-rich participants who possess direct knowledge and experience of Malawi's foreign policy formulation and execution. The sample comprised 15 key informants across the following categories, ensuring a multi-faceted perspective:

- a) Senior Diplomats (n=5): Former and serving Ambassadors, particularly those who have served in Beijing, London, Brussels, or at the UN.
- b) Political Elites (n=5): Members of Parliament serving on the Foreign Affairs and Budget committees, and former ministers with portfolio experience in foreign affairs, finance, or trade.
- c) Policy Analysts and Advisors (n=3): Senior researchers from Malawian think-tanks (e.g., professors of politics and international relations at the University of Malawi) and former special advisors to the presidency on international relations.

- d) Senior Civil Servants (n=2): Permanent Secretaries or Director-level officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Finance.

Access was negotiated through formal channels, including letters of introduction from Jinan University and leveraging professional networks. Snowball sampling was also utilized, whereby initial participants suggested other pertinent individuals.

Data Analysis Procedure

The collected data were analysed using a hybrid approach combining thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA), consistent with the integrated theoretical framework.

Thematic Analysis (for questionnaire Transcripts and Documents)

Following the guidelines of Braun & Clarke (2022), the analysis proceeded in six stages: (1) familiarization with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report. Coding was conducted using qualitative data analysis software (QDAS), specifically Nvivo 14. Codes were both inductive (emerging from the data, e.g., “infrastructure as bargaining chip”) and deductive (informed by the theoretical framework, e.g., “narrative of diversification”). This process identified overarching themes such as “Pragmatism Over Ideology,” “Discursive Sovereignty,” and “Tactical Ambiguity.”

Critical Discourse Analysis (for Public Documents and Speech Transcripts)

Informed by Prochniak & Nitoiu (2023), this component focused on how language is used to construct social reality and exercise power. It examined the specific lexical choices, metaphors, and argumentative structures in official texts (e.g., the persistent use of “win-win,” “mutual respect,” “sovereign choice”). The analysis sought to uncover how these discursive strategies function to legitimise policy, manage relationships with more powerful actors, and project a specific image of Malawian agency to domestic and international audiences. The findings from both analytical streams were then synthesised to provide a comprehensive answer to the research question,

illustrating how tactical navigation and discursive agency are interwoven in practice.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the highest ethical standards. Before data collection, all participants were provided with a detailed information sheet explaining the study’s purpose, their rights, and the use of data. Given the sensitivity of discussing diplomatic strategy, confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed; participants are referred to by generic descriptors (e.g., “Senior Diplomat #1,” “MP #3”) in all outputs.

Limitations and Reflexivity

The study acknowledges certain limitations. The reliance on elite perspectives, while central to the research aim, may not capture broader public or civil society views on the ‘Look East’ policy. The sample size, though sufficient for an in-depth qualitative study, is not statistically generalizable. Furthermore, the researcher’s positionality as a Malawian scholar based in China necessitates reflexivity. This position granted unique cultural and linguistic insights and a degree of access, but conscious steps were taken to bracket preconceptions and ensure that the analysis remained rigorously data-driven. The dual perspective was leveraged as an analytical strength, enabling a focused interpretation of narratives that bridge both contexts.

Findings

This section presents the empirical findings from the analysis of questionnaire data and policy documents, structured around the integrated framework of strategic navigation and discursive agency. The data reveal a sophisticated, two-tiered practice through which Malawian elites manage asymmetric partnerships, characterised by calculated tactical manoeuvres reinforced by a coherent legitimising narrative.

The Practices of Navigation

The findings demonstrate that Malawi’s ‘Look East’ policy is operationalized not as a fixed alignment but through a repertoire of adaptive, pragmatic tactics.

Calculated Diversification as a Bargaining Tool

A unanimous theme across all participant categories was the conscious use of partnership diversification to enhance bargaining power. As one Senior Diplomat (#2) stated, *“Our key strategy is to ensure no single partner feels they have a monopoly on Malawi’s development. When we sit with traditional donors, we can reference competitive offers for infrastructure. When we discuss terms with new partners, we emphasise our strong, principled relationships with others.”* This tactic aligns with the concept of strategic navigation, where creating options is a primary source of leverage (Brown & Harman, 2013). An analysis of major infrastructure financing from 2007 to 2026 illustrates this deliberate diversification (see **Figure 1**).

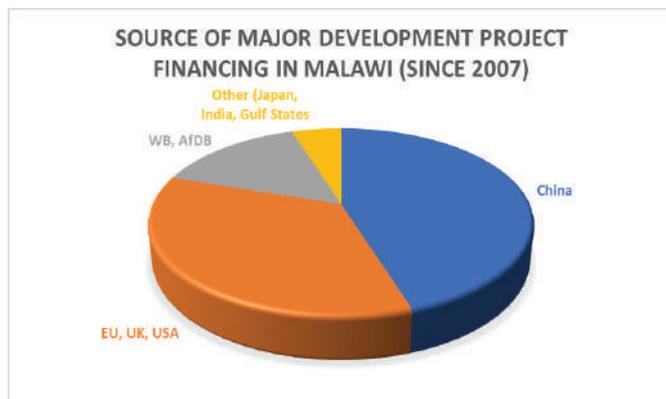


Figure 1: Stated Source of Major Development Project Financing in Malawi (2007-2026)

Issue-Based Alignment and “Transactional Pragmatism”

Elites consistently rejected the notion of belonging to any camp. Instead, they described a policy of ‘transactional pragmatism’ (MP #3) or ‘issue-based alignment.’ This involves selecting partners based on specific sectoral needs and the terms offered. A former Minister of Finance (#1) explained: *“For large-scale, turnkey infrastructure with less procedural hassle, China is often the engaged partner. For technical governance capacity, budgetary support, or health, we lean on the EU and World Bank. We are not ideologically married to any model.”* This tactical flexibility underscores the navigational capacity to move between different relational logics and to leverage the specific advantages offered by various partners, ranging from infrastructure to digital technology (Heeks et al., 2024). African states are also engaging in a move from the less politically conditional infrastructure loans often associated with China to the governance-focused aid of Western partners (Mutai et al., 2024).

The Strategic Use of Sovereign Ritual and Diplomacy

The scheduling and symbolism of high-level visits emerged as a deliberate navigational tool. Participants described carefully calibrating diplomatic engagements to send signals. A Senior Civil Servant (#1) noted: *“A state visit to Beijing is often followed, within a reasonable period, by a high-profile engagement with a Western capital or a hosting of an EU delegation. This is not accidental; it is choreography to demonstrate balance and openness.”* This practice of “sovereign ritual” serves to perform independence and keep all major partners actively engaged.

The Narratives of Legitimation

These tactical moves are consistently wrapped in a powerful discursive frame that asserts agency and legitimizes the policy to domestic and international audiences. The dominant narrative, evident in 14 of 15 questionnaires and all analysed policy speeches, frames the ‘Look East’ policy as an exercise of deliberate, rational sovereignty. Key lexical choices include “sovereign choice,” “active diversification,” “pragmatic partnership,” and “maximizing national interest.” This narrative directly counters external perceptions of passivity. As Policy Analyst (#2) put it: *“We are not looking East out of desperation; we are looking East, West, and North because that is what a sovereign nation does in a world full of opportunities. It is an offensive strategy, not a defensive one.”* This aligns with the constructivist view that discursive framing is a key instrument for exercising agency and shaping political reality (Coffie & Tiky, 2021). Furthermore, a critical sub-narrative explicitly denies any zero-sum game between partners. Elites consistently framed relationships with China and the West as ‘complementary.’ In a 2023 parliamentary speech analysed for this study, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs stated: *“... Our partnership with the People’s Republic of China addresses our dire infrastructure gap... Our enduring partnerships with Europe and America strengthen our governance and social sectors. These are not contradictory; they are complementary strands of a single Malawi-owned development strategy.”* This frame serves to manage potential friction with traditional donors and deflect criticism of over-reliance on China, a concern often highlighted in competitive analyses of influence in Africa (Ahrens & Kalkschmied, 2021). When probed on concerns about debt or governance standards, participants deployed a “pragmatic development” counter-narrative. The argument posits that Malawi’s immediate, material needs for roads, energy, and stadiums are so pressing that they justify diverse financing modalities. *“When your house is burning, you take help from whoever can bring*

water fastest,” analogized MP #4. This discourse reframes the debate from one about values or long-term risk to one about urgent, tangible outcomes, a rhetorical move that resonates powerfully in a domestic context of high development expectations.

Table 1: Synthesis of Tactical Navigation and Supporting Discursive Frames

Tactical Manoeuvre	Primary Objective	Supporting Discursive Frame	Illustrative Quote from Data
Calculated Diversification	To create leverage and avoid dependency.	“Sovereign Choice in a Multipolar World.”	“We are the conductors of our own orchestra of development partners.” (Senior Diplomat #3)
Issue-Based Alignment	To secure optimal terms for specific needs.	“Complementarity, Not Substitution.”	“Different tools for different jobs. A hammer from one, a saw from another.” (Policy Advisor #1)
Sovereign Ritual	To perform balance and maintain open channels.	“Active and Balanced Diplomacy.”	“Our engagement calendar is a map of our sovereign options.” (Civil Servant #2)
‘Pragmatic Development’ Defence	To justify partnerships amid criticism.	“Meeting Urgent National Needs.”	“Our people demand results, not lectures on perfect procurement models.” (MP #5)

Perceived Outcomes and Navigational Constraints

Elites reported that this dual-layered strategy has yielded significant perceived benefits, chiefly increased bargaining power and a broader portfolio of development options. However, they also candidly acknowledged constraints. The most frequently cited was administrative strain, the challenge of managing vastly different reporting, procurement, and oversight systems demanded by different partners. Furthermore, some participants (n=4) noted the diplomatic tightrope of navigating US-China tensions, requiring careful wording in bilateral meetings to avoid appearing to endorse one side’s geopolitical narrative. As one diplomat (#4) summarised: *“Agency is not about unlimited freedom. It is about making smarter, more conscious choices within a very crowded and sometimes perilous room. That is what we are doing.”* In summary, the findings reveal Malawi’s ‘Look East’ policy as a dynamic, agentic practice. It is characterised by tangible tactics of diversification and issue-based engagement, all of which are legitimised and enabled by a coherent, domestically crafted narrative of sovereign pragmatism.

Discussion

This section analyses the empirical findings by directly addressing the research question and objectives that guided this study. It moves from explicating the drivers and evolution of the policy, to analysing its discursive strategies, and finally evaluating its tactical outcomes and

inherent tensions, thereby providing a comprehensive answer to how Malawian elites navigate multipolarity. The first objective sought to trace the evolution and key drivers of Malawi’s ‘Look East’ policy from the perspective of its domestic architects. The findings confirm that the 2007 pivot is consistently narrated not as a one-off event but as the genesis of an enduring strategic posture of diversification. Elites frame the initial decision as a pragmatic response to a lack of adequate infrastructure financing from traditional partners, a narrative that has evolved into a broader principle of sovereign choice. As one Senior Diplomat stated, *“2007 was not about choosing China over the West. It was about opening a new door because the existing ones were not wide enough. That act defined our modern philosophy: to have as many doors open as possible.”* This evolution is characterised by a shift from a singular focus on China to a more sophisticated multi-vector approach that includes Japan, India, the Gulf States, and a renewed courtship of traditional donors under new terms. The primary driver, as articulated by participants, remains pragmatic developmentalism, the urgent need to deliver tangible economic goods and infrastructure to fulfil domestic political mandates and address underdevelopment (Mohan & Lampert, 2012). This continuous recalibration, rather than a fixed alignment, underscores the policy’s nature as a dynamic process of navigation rather than a static alliance. The second objective was to analyse the discursive strategies elites use to frame relationships and assert sovereign

legitimacy. The findings reveal a sophisticated, consistent narrative architecture that performs critical agential work. The master frame of *Sovereign Choice in a Multipolar World* is the cornerstone, actively constructing Malawi as a conscious actor, not a passive object.

Crucially, this discourse manages the central contradiction of asymmetric partnership through the sub-frame of complementarity, not substitution. This narrative, as seen in ministerial speeches and questionnaire data, skilfully de-securitises Malawi's engagements. By framing different partners as providing different tools for a single Malawi-owned development strategy, elites effectively insulate the policy from criticism that it entails geopolitical bandwagoning. This aligns with Coffie & Tiky (2021) and Prochniak & Nitoiu (2023)'s assertion that narrative is a key instrument for smaller states to shape their international identity and legitimise policy. Furthermore, the pragmatic development defence reframes potential critiques about debt or governance standards into a debate about urgent national needs, thereby justifying the tactical acceptance of certain risks (Alshareef, 2024; Mutai et al., 2024). This discursive toolkit is not epiphenomenal; it is a deliberate strategy to create political space for the tangible manoeuvres of navigation, and reflects a sophisticated understanding of the non-state dimensions of international engagement, including cultural and public diplomacy (Zhang & Hong, 2023). The third objective aimed to evaluate the perceived outcomes and tactical manoeuvres, identifying the spaces and limitations for agency. The findings present a dual picture of calculated success and inherent constraint. Firstly, elites unanimously cited increased bargaining power and a broader portfolio of options as the key outcomes. The tactics of *calculated diversification* (using competing offers as leverage) and *issue-based alignment* (matching partners to specific sectoral needs) are identified as the core mechanisms of this gained agency. This evidences the practice of strategic navigation, where states consciously manoeuvre within constraining environments to enhance their position (Brown & Harman, 2013). The strategic use of diplomatic ritual, orchestrating high-level visits to signal balance, is another performative tactic that reinforces the narrative of sovereign independence within a regionalised governance context (Coe & Nash, 2023).

However, this agency has its own limitations and navigational constraints. Participants candidly highlighted two major constraints. First, the Malawi agency faces the administrative strain of managing disparate partnership modalities, which risks overwhelming state capacity (capacity paradox), where the strategy for gaining leverage generates its own implementation challenges. Second,

there is a diplomatic tightrope of navigating the heightened US-China rivalry. As Carmody & Owusu (2007) note, the Global South increasingly finds itself in a contested order where pragmatic multi-alignment becomes more difficult. Elites expressed concern that the complementarity frame may become unsustainable if major powers force binary choices, a scenario that would fundamentally challenge the multi-vector navigation that defines current strategy. Synthesising these addressed objectives provides a comprehensive answer to the primary research question: *How do Malawian foreign policy elites strategically navigate and articulate the 'Look East' policy to assert agency?*

They achieve this through a recursive, two-tiered process. On the one hand, the operational tier employs tactical pragmatism, diversifying partners, aligning issues, and maintaining diplomatic balance to secure concrete benefits and enhance bargaining leverage. On the other hand, at the discursive tier, they frame these tactics within a legitimising narrative of sovereign choice, pragmatic complementarity, and developmental urgency. This narrative justifies the tactics, manages partner perceptions, and constructs a proactive national identity.

Therefore, the interplay between these tiers is what constitutes effective navigation. The tactics provide substance for the narrative (e.g., a completed Chinese-funded project is cited as a 'fruit of our sovereign choice'), while the narrative creates the political legitimacy and space to execute the tactics (e.g., the 'complementarity' frame allows engagement with China without severing Western ties). The identified constraints, however, illustrate that this agency is not omnipotent but is a continuous, contested practice of finding room for manoeuvre within a complex and increasingly polarised international system. This study thus moves the analysis beyond the fact of Malawian agency to delineate its precise mechanisms and contingent nature.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the exercise of Malawian agency within its 'Look East' policy, asking how foreign policy elites strategically navigate and articulate this reorientation in a multipolar world. Through a qualitative analysis of elite perceptions and discursive practices, the research reveals that Malawi's approach is a sophisticated, two-tiered strategy. It combines tactical pragmatism, manifested in calculated diversification, issue-based alignment, and diplomatic choreography, with a coherent discourse of sovereign legitimation, which frames these actions as proactive choices of a rational,

independent state. This integrated practice of strategic navigation and discursive agency allows Malawi to exploit the opportunities of multipolarity while actively managing the risks of asymmetric dependence amid a changing global economic landscape and diverse partnership offerings.

The findings affirm and refine contemporary theories of African agency. They demonstrate that agency for states like Malawi is not a binary condition of resistance or submission but a continuous, contextual practice of manoeuvre within constraints (Zezeza, 2025; Brown & Harman, 2013). The article particularly underscores the instrumental role of narrative, showing that discursive frames like complementarity and pragmatic development are not mere rhetoric but essential tools for creating political space, legitimising policy, and managing relationships with more powerful partners (Van Rooyen & Cilliers, 2025). Consequently, Malawi's experience offers a compelling template for understanding how small states in the Global South can actively shape, rather than merely respond to, their international environments. In sum, Malawi's strategic navigation of its 'Look East' policy demonstrates that even within pronounced power asymmetries, space for deliberate, creative, and discursive agency exists. By mapping this space, this study contributes to a more dynamic and emancipatory understanding of African foreign policy, one that recognises the Global South not as a passive arena but as a region of active, strategic architects.

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The data used in this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

There are no competing interests to declare.

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