

The Challenges Facing Nigeria's Foreign Policy in the Next Millennium

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INTRODUCTION

Since Nigeria became independent in 1960 its foreign policy, like that of most other countries, has witnessed successes and failures. The current debate on President Obasanjo's list of Ambassadorial nominees sent to the Senate for approval provides Nigerian citizens with an opportunity to contribute to the debate on who should be nominated and why. I will leave relating to the "who and why" to observers more concerned with the internal political situation. My contribution will go beyond the internal debate concerning the disrespect of the "federal character" and the purported bias in these nominations. I will focus on the content and objectives of Nigerian foreign policy in the new millenium.

In his article on Obasanjo's foreign policy, Reubin Abati, gives an interesting and complete overview of Nigeria's foreign policy since its independence¹. He rightly points out that Nigeria has been extraordinarily naive by restricting its foreign policy to Africa as its cornerstone. It was a laudable goal before the 1990s, but its evolution is needed for Nigeria to meet the needs of today's diplomacy as we move into the next millennium. Africa as the centerpiece of Nigeria's foreign policy no longer suffices; a broader perspective is necessary. Although Nigeria hasn't got the means and might to have a global foreign policy, it should endeavour to take more into consideration current trends in international relations and diplomacy such as globalization, human rights, and democracy.

In my opinion, successive military dictatorships in Nigeria have used the Africa cornerstone slogan to lure compliant like-minded African regimes to support their unpopular regimes. This was the price Nigeria had to pay for the support of dictatorial African states. Now, we are a democracy and we have to speak out and stand tall within the international community. We no longer have to beg for support from other military dictatorships for limited gains within African diplomatic circles. Africa alone should no longer be the one and only reason for the existence of a foreign policy in Nigeria. None of the important international diplomatic actors, such as the USA, France and Great Britain, build their foreign policy on only one pillar. Nigeria shouldn't be an exception if it wants to play a role in current high level diplomatic circles.

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v3/v3i3a16.pdf>

DOMESTIC DETERMINANTS OF FOREIGN POLICY

Internal political events usually have a lot of impact on foreign policy. Nigeria is no exception as the following discussion will demonstrate. Nigeria should henceforth cultivate the idea, recognise and accept that military *coup d'états* are not solutions to internal political problems. If such were the case, governments in industrialised countries would have been toppled very often because of political crises. The solution is a culture of political dialogue and debate between opponents and Nigerians are up to that task. Encouraging political dialogue as the principal mechanism for the resolution of crisis situations would show the international community that Nigerians are a mature people worthy of a respectable place within the community of nations.

When Rueben Abati mentioned that the Babangida regime gave a lethal blow to Nigeria's image abroad and its foreign policy in particular, he gave as examples the financial waste but omitted human rights abuses and the cancellation of the June 12 election at a time when every country, in particular the G7 and most OECD countries had made democracy, good governance, and human rights essential determining elements in international politics and in their relations with developing countries. It is worth noting that since the famous *La Baule* speech by President Mitterrand of France in 1983, democracy became a determining factor in relations between France and developing countries, in particular, African countries. This applied to other western states also.

Worse still, after its cancellation, no official inside Babangida's government was capable of giving cogent reasons for the annulment of the June 12 elections and accusations concerning human rights violations. The international community, therefore, rightly believed our top military officers were up to something. The aftermath was nothing to write home about. That was the beginning of Nigeria's misunderstanding with the international community – notably the USA, Canada, the Commonwealth countries, and the European Union.

The issue of June 12 had not been resolved when General Sani Abacha pushed the transition president Chief Ernest Shonekan out and took his seat without any agenda on how to improve relations between Nigeria and the international community, outside its traditional African brother countries. That *coup d'état* worsened the international image of Nigeria. No creditworthy transition programme was published; instead General Abacha embarked upon a self-aggrandising effort that led Nigeria to the brink of war because of the most flagrant human rights abuses any military regime had ever committed in the country since independence.

Nigeria became a pariah state with whom none except compliant African countries talked to. It was at this time that experienced diplomatic advice would have saved Nigeria. None was given a chance; instead a select delegation of incredible, though famous Nigerians, was sent abroad to explain the unexplainable to the international community. One such delegations led by Chief Odumegwu Ojukwu visited Europe, but its failure was obvious.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND FOREIGN POLICY

Under General Abacha, foreign policy was crudely mishandled. Records show that Nigeria was like a country without a foreign minister and a foreign policy during that period. No one

person should be blamed for the absence of a foreign policy but someone should explain why there seemed to be no useful policy advice to General Abacha during the time². The questions to be answered include those relating to the aimless intentional tug-of-war declared by the regime against the international community.

Explanations should be given as to why that regime was incapable of foreseeing the devastating effects of the hanging of the "Ogoni nine", including Ken Saro Wiwa, and lastly, why there was no government official capable of making the regime to shift the horrible decision to hang the Ogoni activists until the end of the Commonwealth summit. That regime unjustly imprisoned many people, including the incumbent President Olusegun Obasanjo, and hung Ken Saro Wiwa when all Commonwealth Heads of State and Government were meeting in Australia. These were all terrible acts and diplomatic blunders because they underrated the importance of internal policy including democratic reforms and the place of human rights in international relations and diplomacy.

When we hear some Nigerian's cry wolf today concerning the ambassadorial nominations by President Obasanjo, they should be asked why many ambassadorial positions remained vacant and no diplomats were posted out during Abacha's tenure of office³. Nigeria's diplomacy was grounded during the Babangida-Abacha era. This explains why the current government recalled all ambassadors and designated new ones. In Foreign Minister Lamido's words, it is in recognition of the important roles played by heads of missions that they recalled them to dismantle the "old order"⁴. Also, how would Nigeria have explained the confirmation by a democratically elected government of ambassadors who were apologetic to the military?

The annulment of the June 12 presidential elections and the hanging of the "Ogoni nine" were two lethal blows that those regimes gave to Nigeria's image abroad. Nigeria's bad image has not been repaired and those who contributed toward this should be humble in their utterances against the choices made by a democratically elected government.

NIGERIA'S SHATTERED PUBLIC IMAGE

Despite immense efforts by diplomats and other officials in the Babangida and Abacha years to explain Nigeria's stance to countries outside Africa, their efforts were fruitless because Nigeria maintained an obsolete definition of national sovereignty. They argued that human rights and related issues were Nigerain internal affairs about which outsiders had no say. Yet, gone are the days when any ruler could sit down within the boundaries of his country and treat citizens as he liked without reaction from the international community. In spite of the existing double standards in the field, NATO intervention in Kosovo, former Yugoslavia, is an example. Henceforth, democracy and human rights, which in the recent past were considered in law and international relations as purely internal affairs, are becoming important determinants in foreign policy.

Though the recent crisis in East Timor (Indonesia) gave no pride for the international community, and in particular, the United Nations, the international community has tried various humanitarian and sometimes military rescue operations where there were human rights abuses. In Africa, Rwanda, during the ethnic crisis, was a case in hand. Nigerian policy and decision-makers should henceforth recognise that democracy and human rights are subjects of

international concern and they should therefore inculcate these elements into the decision-making process.

Regarding image building, it was astonishing to observe how Nigerian diplomats and information ministry officials were incapable of formulating a message destined for international consumption to counter the international press campaign against Nigeria. The incapacity of Nigerian officials at the time to explain these decisions to the international public led to the deteriorated image of Nigeria abroad. The effects are very deep-rooted and years will be required to correct the image.

President Obasanjo and Foreign Minister Sule Lamido's task is to bring Nigeria out of this dead end by consolidating democracy at home, respecting fundamental human rights and encouraging liberal economic reforms, good governance and transparency with a view to boosting international economic cooperation with G7 countries as well as the dynamic Asian economies⁵. The task ahead is hectic and the choice of competent officials actors is therefore essential.

FOREIGN POLICY ACTORS

The policy actors in this immense task are both internal and external to the foreign ministry. Although it is primarily a foreign ministry affair, it should be mentioned that internal actors such as the president, the foreign minister, ambassadors and embassies abroad, the press and the business community are all active players in the foreign policy formulation process. The role and place of our embassies should be redefined. A dynamic and performance-oriented foreign policy leaves no room for amateurism like in the past. Our ambassadors and embassies should sit up and live up to national expectations. Nigeria's foreign policy has to produce results for the country and its citizens. The training programme for our diplomats should be reviewed to give them the necessary knowledge to practise the art and science of diplomacy because they are at the frontline of our foreign policy.

Our vital national interests have to be redefined. Does Africa still represent the cornerstone of our foreign policy when we have more respect from other countries than we get from African nations despite our whole-hearted commitment to them? If yes, what are the benefits we get from the choice? If the response is no, then we should reorient our foreign policy towards more profitable ventures like economic, scientific, cultural and technical cooperation with more advanced countries including Asia.

The economic development and well-being of Nigeria should henceforth be the mainstay of our foreign policy. We should revive and reinforce what was termed economic diplomacy by General Ike Nwachukwu. For instance, why would we continue to sit aloof and see Cameroun lay claim on Nigeria's territory? In the name of African unity and good neighbourhood, Nigeria has sacrificed a lot and continues to sacrifice for our continent. That is praiseworthy but most southern African countries have forgotten the sacrifices made by Nigeria to bring them out of their woes. Sierra Leoneans and Liberians have forgotten the loss of lives by Nigerian soldiers in their efforts to defend unity and peace in these countries. Though Africa should not be forgotten, Nigeria's interests should come first in all our foreign policy analysis and decisions. Retired General Danjuma wasn't saying anything different when he said "Right now, we are

becoming the United States of ECOWAS at very great cost to us. We think this is unaffordable to us now"⁶. He further stated that Nigeria's needs are enormous.

Regarding important sensitive internal policy issues that would have effect on our foreign policy, a decision-making forum comprising Presidential Advisers, top-level officials from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defence, Internal Affairs, Justice, Economy and Finance, inter alia, should meet to discuss and address them with a view of defining a coherent policy. Officials from the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies and the National Institute for Advanced Legal Studies should be invited to give expert opinion on such issues in order to avoid the diplomatic blunders of our officials during the Ken Saro Wiwa crisis.

Nigeria should therefore precisely define in policy terms what its cultural policy is and what it aims to achieve outside the country. What does cultural cooperation with foreign countries imply? Does it simply mean encouraging foreign artists to organise tours in Nigeria or foreign countries to establish flourishing cultural and language centres in Lagos, Abuja and elsewhere in the country? Where in the world does Nigeria have a cultural centre worthy of its title? In the field of defence, what is our defence policy? Does it simply mean protecting the external and internal territorial integrity of the Nigeria? Protecting the integrity of the country against who? In short, who are our enemies and who are our friends? What type of relations should we have with all our French-speaking neighbouring countries considering that all of them have over thirty years old defence and military pacts with France, one of the world's leading military and industrial powers?

On Nigeria and its citizens abroad, what does the country intend to do to make them contribute in their own way to the economic, cultural, scientific and technological development of the country? In certain African countries, citizens residing abroad vote and take active part in political activities. What would Nigeria do to encourage its democracy to evolve toward such an objective? Nigerians living abroad should be encouraged to have closer relations with the motherland. Nigeria's foreign policy should include all these actors for a more global approach to policy issues than in the past.

Democratically elected regimes have a wider scope and more leeway in policy decisions than regimes resulting from military *coups d'états* because they are legitimate. In Nigeria's case, we have voluntarily or unconsciously restricted most vital foreign policy decisions or diplomatic initiatives to the African continent since we do not seem capable of going beyond Africa. We should no longer be satisfied with our fictional "giant of Africa" image and watch other African diplomatic "giants" like South Africa and Egypt work hard to get a name and maintain their place within the international arena.

FOREIGN POLICY OBJECTIVES

The scope of Nigeria's foreign policy should no longer be limited to continental affairs. It should be focused world-wide and geared toward the promotion of our cultural heritage, and scientific, economic and technical cooperation with viable partners. Its goal should aim at enhancing our national development, and military arrangements with NATO countries in order to give peace a permanent character in our societal needs and our sub-region. Finally, Nigerian

foreign policy should aim at creating benefits for the betterment of the people. It should no longer focus on Africa without clearly defined policy objectives.

Such a policy shift would mean a very careful choice of external actors. Although I would not advocate dropping Africa, Nigeria needs to make a careful choice of our closest allies based not on the wealth or technological advancement of the partner but on Nigeria's vital national interests in the cultural, economic, political, scientific and technical areas as well as in the military field. A commission comprising diplomats, top-level military officers, university professors and politicians should be set-up to review our foreign policy objectives and to redefine our vital national interests. Its mandate should be short and precise. These interests should be made the fundamental guidelines of all our foreign policy objectives in Africa, the European Union, America - both North and South, Asia and the Pacific. Nigeria's foreign policy objectives should henceforth focus on the benefits of such policy for its people. President Obasanjo's task would be to make the ordinary Nigerian feel the positive effects of the government on his or her life.

At another level, Nigeria's foreign policy should encompass a clear opinion and strategy on major international issues such as the reform of the United Nations, bilateral relations between Nigeria and members of the European Union outside the ACP-EU framework, discussions with the dynamic Asian economies on how best to boost their investment in Nigeria, how to make G7 governments encourage more foreign capital flows to the vital areas of our economy through a liberal foreign investment policy. Lastly, as a representative of Africa at large, Nigeria should campaign strongly to get admitted as a permanent member of the Security Council. These achievements would make the ordinary Nigerian realise the usefulness of the country's foreign policy in real, not abstract terms.

Notes

1. The Guardian, 29/8/99, (See <http://www.nguardiannews.com/editorial/en/59501.htm>).
2. On comments relating to the attitude of Nigeria's authorities, see Bolaji Ogunseye – « In defence of career diplomats; The Guardian. 6th September 1999.
3. P.M. News, Lagos, 25th August 1999, (See <http://www.africanews.org/west/nigeria/stories>).
4. See THISDAY, The Sunday Newspaper, August 8, 1999, p. 10, I will surprise my critics – Lamido.
5. See Pierre Poret, "Liberalising capital flows : Lessons from Asia," The OECD Observer, October/November 1998, pp. 39-40.
6. See Vanguard – August 18, 1999.

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