

From Isolation to Globalization: Transformation of Nigeria's Foreign Policy from the Abacha Regime to the Obasanjo Administration

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Abstract: Nigeria at Independence in 1960 presented an image of an ideal colonial state transiting to independence with the prospects of an admirable model of Westminster democracy. The hope collapsed soon after, due to a barrage of internally contradictory factors of building a nation out of disperse and diverse states. The intervention of military in the post-colonial government retarded and indeed, aborted the process of democracy. Different military leaders emerged projecting different interests not related to the national interest. This study interrogates the descent of Nigeria to a pariah state under Abacha and her resurgence into global politics under Obasanjo.

Key words: Globalization, transformation, foreign policy, obasanjo administration

INTRODUCTION

There was nothing in the pattern and tradition of Nigerian foreign policy from independence in 1960 to the emergence of Sani Abacha as Head of State in 1993 to suggest that she would become a pariah state in the international system. Even the speech of the Prime Minister, Tafawa Balewa at Independence on October 1, 1960, seemed to indicate that Nigeria was properly focused and her mind-set firmly directed at the goal of her foreign policy. He declared:

- I have confidence that, based on the happy experience of a successful partnership our future relations with the United Kingdom will be more cordial than ever, bound together as we shall be in the Commonwealth by a common allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth who we proudly acclaim as Queen of Nigeria (hence) we are grateful to the British officers whom we have known, first as masters and then as leaders and finally as partners but always as friends^[1].

Immediately after, on October 7 1960, Nigeria registered herself as the 99th member of the United Nations thereby becoming a recognized member of the international community. By her resources and size, Nigeria was expected to be at the front seat of Africa providing with others, the necessary leadership and weapons to fight the clutches of colonialism, neo-colonialism, under-development, poverty, famine and racial discrimination. In fairness, some leaders gave the

nation its right of place. For example, the Gowon administration (1966-1975), jointly with the late President Gnassingbe Eyadema of Togo spearheaded the formation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

In 1975. It was a clear manifestation of how personal relationship could influence inter-state relations as Togo, a Francophone country with Nigeria, an Anglophone country, cooperated in bringing together the diverse countries of the West African sub-region for purposes of economic integration.

Furthermore, the Muhammed/Obasanjo administration (1975-79) pursued a purposeful, focused and positively aggressive foreign policy for Nigeria resulting in an unfettered support for liberation movements in Africa especially the MPLA in Angola. Because of her purposeful diplomatic efforts in relation to de-colonization in Africa and in spite of her geo-political location, she was considered one of the frontline states and Africa became the centre-piece of Nigeria's foreign policy.

The Shagari administration (1979-1983) despite the unfavourable domestic structure was able to sustain Nigeria's anti-apartheid policy in South Africa while maintaining friendly relations with Nigeria's Western allies. The Buhari regime (1984-85), which succeeded it, though lacking a properly articulated domestic policy was able to posit the concept of concentric circle as the modality for the pursuit of the nation's foreign policy.

A scholar of Nigerian foreign policy, Otubanjo^[2] situates the dilemma of the Buhari administration perceptively by noting that:

- The Buhari regime was handicapped by Nigeria's economic landscape, which was strewn with debts and bankruptcies. The economy was, indeed, the motive force of Buhari's foreign policy. This was why in matters of substance rather than declarations, economic relations were the dominant focus of foreign policy in the twenty months of the regime ... Whereas the regime consistently declared its commitment to good neighbourliness, it adopted policies which were decidedly hostile to the interest of her neighbours and prejudicial to peaceful relations.

The Babangida regime (1985-1993), which succeeded Buhari's; created a domestic structure that was conducive to the articulation of foreign policy. He released all the political detainees of the Buhari regime, expanded the scope of participation in governance and he de-regimented the apparatus of governance and allowed Nigerians to have a sense of belonging. His regime played a regional power politics in Africa and even at a point through his External Affairs Minister, propounded the theory of a Concert of Medium Powers. Besides, Nigerian citizens assumed international responsibilities. Alhaji Rilwanu Lukman was at OPEC, late General Joe Garba assumed the Presidency of the General Assembly of the United Nations, Chief Emeka Anyaoku assumed the position of the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth and General Olusegun Obasanjo aspired to become the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Besides, Nigeria formed ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) which was at the heart of resolving the Liberian crisis and whose activity later extended to Sierra Leone. The emergence of General Abacha (1993-98) to the leadership of the country can be labeled appropriately as the dark years of Nigeria's foreign policy as the period witnessed the squandering of all the gains since 1960.

This survey of Nigeria's foreign policy since 1960 showed an established pattern and tradition of commitment by successive regimes to a purposeful foreign policy until the regime of Abacha. Meanwhile, it is necessary to understand the concept of foreign policy as a prelude to understanding the nature of isolation in the Abacha years.

Concept of foreign policy: Holsti^[3] presents foreign policy as the actions of a state toward external environment and the conditions-usually domestic-under which those actions are formulated. This seems to agree with Kissinger's often quoted submission that in foreign

policy analysis, the domestic structure is taken as given; foreign policy begins where domestic policy ends^[4]. This emphasizes the linkage between the domestic environment and foreign policy pursuit. Hence, Kissinger (*Ibid*: 59) asserts that the domestic structure is decisive finally in the elaboration of positive goals Lovell^[5] has rightly noted that foreign policy decision, although made in the name of the nation as a whole, seldom affect all citizens equally (in fact) foreign policy making is a process of politics, not of pure reason. Khan *et al.*^[6] posit, A foreign policy consists of a set of ranked objectives which a government seeks to achieve in its relations with others.

The message is that a nation lives in a comity of nations. Its behavioural pattern is influenced and dictated to by other actors. Even if a nation chooses to pursue a policy of isolation, the factor of globalization in the areas of economy, technology, communication, etc, automatically draws it into the sphere of operational behaviour of others.

The above conceptual insight into foreign policy analysis provides the opportunity to look into the Abacha years of isolation.

Years of isolation, 1993-1998: The emergence of General Sani Abacha into the leadership of the Nigerian nation was not and could not have been, the accident it was presented to be neither was his government the child of circumstance or necessity Nigerians were conditioned to assume it was. Indeed, Abacha's ascendancy to rulership was part of a rigorous design by the military of treating the Nigerian nation as a personal estate. Omoruyi^[7] who was a member of the inner caucus (at least the civilian variant of it) of the Babangida regime presents the case graphically quoting General Babangida:

- Sani (meaning General Sani Abacha) is opposed to a return to civilian rule. Sani cannot stand the idea of Chief Abiola, a Yoruba, becoming his Commander-in-Chief at all; Sani seems to have the ears of the Northern leaders that no Southerner especially from the Southwest should become the President of this country. Sani seems to rally the Northern elders to confront me on the matter. He is winning; the Sultan and the Northern leaders are of this frame of mind. Where do I go from here? They do not trust me. Without Sani, I will not be alive today; without the North, I would not have become an officer in the Nigerian Army and now the President of Nigeria.

This was the crux of the matter. The issue at stake

was no more a subject of national interest consideration but rather personal interest evaluation and sub-ethnic nationalism. It was time for pay-off for past nicety at the expense of grave national issues that could cause the disintegration of the country. This insight provided by Omoruyi is vital in understanding the behaviours of Abacha in power especially in the area of foreign policy decision-making.

The first major act of the regime that drew the ire of the world was the hanging of the environmentalist, Ken Saro-Wiwa. Elsewhere^[8] we have detailed this particular incidence, which earned Nigeria a suspension from the Commonwealth. Instead of rethinking its action and accepting that she (Nigeria) alone, could not be right, while all others were wrong, the regime embarked on politics of isolation.

Holsti^[3] defines the concept of isolationism in international politics thus:

- A strategy of politics and military isolation is indicated by a low level of involvement in most issue areas of the system, a low number of diplomatic or commercial transactions with other political units and societies and attempts to seal off the country against various forms of external penetration.

Except for some few countries in the West African sub-region, Abacha behaved as if Nigeria could exist alone. He was not interested in, neither did he undertake, any major foreign trips. Even the few ones he made to some West African countries were one-day visits, which were only announced after he had gone and returned. The only major country he ever visited as Head of State was South Africa in 1994 at the early stage of his regime.

Although Sani Abacha was taciturn and seldom engaged in any in-depth and meaningful public debate, he was said to be egoistic in private life. Holsti (Ibid. 329) presents the problem in general when he noted, strong ego-involvement tends to reduce consideration of alternatives and condemns the policy maker to stick to a fixed course no matter how ineffective. Abacha equated his personal interest with the national interest hence public rallies were organized and stage-managed to castigate perceived external enemies.

But this reflects the known fact that writers of psychobiography have suggested that in certain circumstances, policy choices may reflect deep personal needs, which are then rationalized in terms of the national interest (*Ibid.*). As Abacha was rallying the country to battle against external enemies, he was busy looting the national treasury. Evidences of the unparalleled looting are within public domain^[14,15].

The Abacha years of isolation compromised all gains of previous governments in the areas of foreign policy. It was a step back to the Dark Age in an era of enlightenment. Apparently, the damages of those years would take quite a while to repair especially as it affects Nigerian citizenship in the eye of the world. Obasanjo himself realizes this, hence his observation that in a shrinking global community where no nation can go it alone, Nigeria had in the recent past found itself isolated from the international community^[16].

The years of restoration, 1999-2003: The re-emergence of General Olusegun Obasanjo as Nigeria's Head of State twenty years after handing over power to a civilian regime was dramatic and surprising. It was dramatic in the sense that it all happened barely a year after he was released from a prison sentence the Abacha regime imposed on him. It was equally surprising as power devolution at the national level to the Southern part of Nigeria was always by accident. It was therefore not imaginable that a Southern former Head of State could have the support of the Northern elite to win a democratically conducted election to the nation's leadership. The geometry and calculus of how this happened is not within the scope of this paper. However, it is necessary to state that those who made the decision realized that to assuage the feelings of Southerners especially as it related to the June 12, 1993 election annulment for the sake of national unity, the devolution of power at that level of government to the Southwest was imperative, sensible and strategic.

And if this had to happen, Obasanjo seemed to be the obvious choice. Akinadewo^[9] presents the issue succinctly by noting that:

- Obasanjo had become one of the most known and acknowledged political figures in Africa. He had built the profile of a world statesman from Africa to such extent that his status could only be rivaled by former South African President Nelson Mandela.

On assumption of office in May 1999, Obasanjo left no one in doubt of his desire to open Nigeria's window to the world and restore the past glory. He embarked on foreign trips on regular basis bordering on obsession. There is no major country in the world, which has not witnessed the visit of the Nigerian president. He seemed bent on taking Nigeria out of the recluse of the Abacha years.

Apart from visits to Britain, President Obasanjo had paid visits to the United States of America to hold bilateral talks with President Clinton and the incumbent President Bush. President Bill Clinton in and out of office has paid visits to Nigeria. This gesture is

unprecedented more so when it is realized that during the regime of Abacha, President Clinton refused to include Nigeria on his itinerary during his visit to Africa.

American-Nigerian relations have been growing in bounds under Obasanjo. There seems to have been a suppression of the hollow arrogance for desirable external assistance for development. For example, Nigeria has signed a memorandum of understanding with Britain and the U.S.A. for military officers from the two countries to help train Nigerian soldiers in peacekeeping and to assist in professionalising the Nigerian army (*The Comet*, 2001: 39). Naturally, this has met with some criticism by the vocal minority in the foreign policy elite group. But it can hardly be denied that the factors of military retardation of the progress of the country in the recent past were due to its unprofessional character. Furthermore, the U.S has also offered to provide specialized training and some facilities to the Nigeria Police to assist it in crime control and prevention. The usually critical *Nigerian Tribune*^[9] in an editorial comment lauded this gesture believing that:

- The offer of the U.S to help in the empowerment of the Nigeria Police is a welcome development ... The offer of the U.S. to help the police in Nigeria may be viewed with suspicion in some quarters, especially since the dust has not quite settled on the involvement of the U.S. army in training officers and men of the Nigerian army. (But) since rhetoric is not too useful an instrument in crime prevention and control, it becomes a reasonable decision to accept help that are adjudged useful.

Nigeria and the U.S. also signed two grants agreement totaling \$18.5 million^[10]. The agreement would help provide funds to help support economic growth, agriculture and educational activities in Nigeria. The then American ambassador to Nigeria, Mr. Howard Jeter used the opportunity to reaffirm America's faith in Nigeria by asking rhetorically if Nigeria does not succeed, which country in Africa can? (*Ibid*; 48). Nigeria remains America's largest trading partner in Africa while the U.S development assistance programme with Nigeria is the biggest in sub-Saharan Africa and America imports 8 per cent of its energy from Nigeria^[11]. Nigeria has been expanding the frontiers of investment with Germany, Italy, France and other European Union countries^[24].

Seeking debt forgiveness: However, one area where Obasanjo has not succeeded is in his advocacy for debt forgiveness. The World Bank has turned down the Nigerian request. The reasoning of the Executive Vice-President of the International Finance Corporation, the

commercial arm of the World Bank group, Mr. Peter Woicke can hardly be faulted when he stated that, Nigeria does not deserve any debt relief because the country is rich enough to pay its debts^[10].

In spite of the reluctance of the creditors to forgive, forget, or reschedule Nigeria's debt, the debt profile is staggering and it is capable of stifling the developmental agenda of any administration. Nigeria presently owes about N30.99 billion to the World Bank, African Development Bank Group, European Investment Bank Group, IFAD, European Bank and ECOWAS Fund^[17]. The breakdown of the debt profile shows the indebtedness to each of the creditors; World Bank \$1.951 billion, AOB Group \$897.57 million, EDB \$119.42 million, EIB \$23.24 million, ECOWAS Fund \$4.46 million and IFAD \$24.89 million (*Ibid*).

The most worrisome aspect is the rate of growth of the debt. It seems no regime feels concerned about the escalating debt profile rather what seems to matter is the convenience to seek foreign loan for the immediate spending relief of a particular regime. The matter is compounded by the fact that it is difficult to point to the developmental projects for which the debts were incurred. A cursory analysis of the seemingly geometric progression of the debt acquisition reveals such concern. Nigeria's external debt stood at only \$0.57 billion in 1970 and rose to \$9 billion in 1980, \$19 billion in 1985, \$33.4 billion in 1990. By 2001, it was \$28.347 billion and by 2002, it had risen to \$30.99 billion (*Ibid*).

The danger is the cumulative debt service payment, which in 1985 was \$1.5 billion, \$10.841 billion in 1990, \$21.905 billion in 1995, \$21.905 billion in 2000 (*Ibid*). The greatest percentage of borrowing which is about 75% of total indebtedness was contracted between 1980 and 1984, which was during the administration of Shugu Shagari and General Muhammadu Buhari. For now, the highest indebtedness which stands at 81.89% is to the Paris club, 9.55% to multilateral agencies, 4.65% to the London club and 3.72% in promissory notes (*Ibid*).

In spite of the apparent hopelessness in securing the confidence of the creditors in debt forgiveness, President Obasanjo is unrelenting in his advocacy for it. It is reasonable to surmise that with the profile of corruption of Nigerian public officials, it would be a Herculean task to win the support and secure the understanding of the external creditors for debt forgiveness. Therefore, what needs to be done is proper renegotiating for reduction in the cumulative debt service payment while embargo is for now, placed on contracting further loan.

In the African continent, the Obasanjo government was contributive to the transformation of the OAU to African Union. The government has sustained the nation's commitment to the Technical Aid Corps for

which the nation has spent a sum of \$22.5 million since it began four years ago^[18]. Also Nigeria has helped in the intensive training of one hundred Congolese policemen^[18]. Besides, the government is also providing the needed leadership in ECOWAS and is very active in the Commonwealth of Nations.

Continental and regional relevance: The truth is that regional powers in the developing world can only effectively influence policies within their environment than they can affect world politics. The problem is compounded by the unipolar nature of the international system that makes the United States more or less, the sole deciding factor of the direction of international politics. The US has successfully engaged in regime changes in Afghanistan and Iraq within a spate of two years. Besides, she has also given signals to tame Iran. She is less concerned whether old allies like Germany and France are prepared to cooperate. The US for now has become a bull in the China shop of world politics. Therefore, any reasonable regional power must limit its influence to a manageable and controllable environment. This seems to be what Nigeria has adapted herself to do.

Sustenance of democracy in the region: Nigeria has been a prime promoter and an unrepentant advocate of democratic rule at least in the West African sub-region. On three instances, the Obasanjo administration resisted regime change through coup d'état. First was in Sao Tome and Principe where the country's President, Frederique de Menezes was in Nigeria to attend the Leon Sullivan Summit. The Nigerian government ensured the return of de Menezes to power and President Obasanjo even accompanied him back to his country.

It is a manifestation of the esteem the foreign policy posture of the country was held that made a leading Nigerian Newspaper *The Comet*^[19] to comment in an editorial that the choice of protagonist – Nigeria – was ill-advised ... Anybody but an inexperienced artillery officer named Manor Fernando Perreira would have known that President Olusegun Obasanjo would not roll over and play dead. The Senegalese President saddled Nigeria with the responsibility of restoring the ousted President to office by noting that I condemn what has happened. I urge ECOWAS and President Olusegun Obasanjo to see what can be done to remedy the situation and I hope we will be able to bring President Frederique de Menezes back to his country (Quoted in *Ibid*).

The second instance was in Guinea-Bissau where the government of Kumba Yala was ousted. Although, Kumba Yala was not seen as a symbol of good leadership for democracy and he himself saw the futility of returning to power, Nigeria and other countries ensured a

commitment to an immediate commencement of a transition programme to civil rule in Guinea-Bissau. Consequently, a transition government not headed by the army chief was immediately installed.

The third is in Togo after the death of President Gnassingbe Eyadema. A seemingly Kangaroo leadership succession arrangement was made for his son, Faure to assume power. In spite of all overtures for Nigerian support for the arrangement, the Nigerian Government worked in concert with other countries for a return to constitutionalism until Faure resigned promising to seek election to the post constitutionally^[20].

The Charles Taylor asylum: Perhaps no foreign policy action of the Obasanjo administration has generated more public interest and condemnation as the decision to grant political asylum to the Liberian warlord, Charles Taylor. The Government's position is that granting Taylor an asylum was not only in the best interest of peace in Liberia but also that it was in the interest of Nigeria which would have further borne the brunt of more Liberian refugees some of whom are quartered in Oru-Ijebu Ode in Ogun State by the Federal Government. The problem of refugees must be understood as going beyond economic maintenance as it is also a social and security problem.

The terms of his asylum include the fact that he cannot travel out of his place of abode without the permission of Government. Also he is responsible for his upkeep and that of his family while in Nigeria, while Nigeria provides him with security and he is not allowed to grant press interviews without the permission of Government^[21].

As stringent as these conditions might seem, some Nigerians are not persuaded that Nigeria needs to bear the responsibility of hosting Charles Taylor in asylum. The views of such critics are adequately represented by a foremost scholar of International Relations and former External Affairs Minister, Professor Bolaji Akinyemi who describes Taylor as a thoroughly discreditable character, a kleptomaniac and a scoundrel who does not deserve the hospitality of the Nigerian nation^[22]. The Sunday Telegraph (London) sees him as a conceited showman and megalomania tyrant who was responsible for the death of an estimated 250,000 people in his country over a period of fourteen years (Reproduced in *Ibid*).

The complexity of foreign policy decision-making may make it difficult to understand the calculus of the Taylor asylum decision but for now, the benefits of the decision are difficult for many Nigerians to fathom.

COJA AND CHOQM

The government successfully hosted the All African Games in 2003. In the modern state, sport has assumed the position of a major instrument of foreign policy. The success of the events labeled, as COJA 2003 is a credit to the foreign policy agenda of the Government.

Furthermore, the Heads of Government of the Commonwealth countries met in Abuja from December 5-8, 2003 with the Queen of England in attendance. The basic issues of discussion at CHOGM 2003 centered on the suspension of Zimbabwe, poverty reduction, world trade and small arms.

In spite of the contentious nature of some of the issues, the Conference was adjudged a success. The Commonwealth Secretary-General concluded that this year's summit was the most difficult meeting but it turned out to be successful due to the deft handling of the affairs by the new chairperson-in-office, President Obasanjo^[23]. The Nigerian Senate sees it as very successful and probably the best in the history of the Commonwealth (*Ibid*). The general expectation is that the summit would be able to open the window of opportunity for foreign investment in Nigeria. The foreign policy restoration agenda of the Obasanjo regime, has met with stiff opposition from some members of the domestic populace. But as the Tell situates the problem, it seems that this is inevitable considering the articulate nature of Nigerian foreign policy elite. Tell^[12] presents the issue:

- The President has been criticized for his frequent trips abroad. Those who frown at this would want him to stay at home to tackle the many problems confronting the country. But the many trips outside the country may already be yielding some dividends. There is renewed hope of confidence in the country within and outside the continent. Most world leaders and investors see the President as one capable of turning the country around and in droves, they have been visiting for one possible relationship or the other.

But Akinyemi^[12] disagrees with this position of Tell. He is of the opinion that it is not

- necessary for a head of state to demonstrate the control of foreign policy or demonstrate the mastership of foreign policy by actually becoming the main implementor of the policy ... It is only when it gets to a critical stage, where for reason of state, they now want to demonstrate a personal involvement of the president before he then embarks on a state visit.

The arguments of the protagonists and antagonists are bound to continue. In the final analysis, the justification of the trips will be judged against the benefits.

CONCLUSIONS

President Obasanjo has so far been able to transform the character and framework of Nigerian foreign policy from isolation to globalization. The restoration agenda is not without cost as it has aroused criticism from a segment of the domestic population. But this is understandable since attempting to right the wrongs of the past would be accompanied by some deprivation.

The positive development is that Nigeria is no longer perceived as a pariah state by the international community and her views on global issues are now sought, considered and respected. Nigeria is therefore once again assuming its leadership position in Africa.

President Obasanjo has been and still remains substantially his own External Affairs Minister in spite of having appointed two ministers, Alhaji Sule Lamido and Ambassador Olu Adeniji since assuming office in 1999. The implication of this is that anyone who accepts and assumes the portfolio of foreign minister under the Obasanjo administration must be prepared to play a second fiddle to the President who seems to relish the post and duties of a foreign minister.

However, in order to keep the domestic structure supportive of the nation's foreign policy, there must be quantitative, qualitative and perceivable dividends in terms of economic improvement in daily life of the citizenry. It is only then that the President's constant trips abroad can have any meaning to the average Nigerian. And, this is the only way the restoration foreign policy agenda of the administration can be meaningful to the generality of the people.

Furthermore, there is the need to democratize the process of foreign policy formulation to benefit from the inputs of members of the domestic environment. In a globalised world, foreign policy decision-making must move away from the purview of the whims and caprices of a ruling elite to the domain of enlarged and enlightened public. This is not a challenge for the Obasanjo administration alone, it is a challenge for the future of Nigerian foreign policy.

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