



Nigeria's Foreign Relations under Olusegun Obasanjo's Civilian Administration

By

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Abstract: *Foreign policy is essentially about the projection, protection, realization and advancement of the national interest of a state. But has that been the case with Nigeria? This paper examines Nigeria's foreign policy under Olusegun Obsanjo's administration (1999-2007). It focuses on the strength of Nigeria's foreign policy and what the country was able to gain in the period under review. Primary and secondary data, scooped from interviews, books, journals, newspapers, magazines, and internet materials were used. Descriptive-analytical method was engaged in the discourse. Findings show that the administration of Obasanjo used Nigeria's external relations as a platform to cancel Nigeria's external debt, encourage foreign investment, improve the telecommunication sector, and also mediate in conflict areas in Africa. But it is also noted that there was no ideal structure for foreign policy making and implementation. Therefore, it is recommended that for Nigeria to be able to use foreign policy for her benefit, the structures and institutions responsible for foreign policy making and implementation must be strengthened and fertilized to grow, which is largely made possible when structures and institutions are manned by skilled or knowledgeable personnel.*

Keywords: *Foreign Policy, Administration, National Interest, Development*

Introduction

Nigeria's relationship with the outside world started long before independence in 1960, under the colonial government, during which dependent Nigeria had no separate foreign policy outside of the British (Shitta, 2010). During this time, the interest of Her Majesty, the Queen of England was the interest of the colonial Nigeria. The British colonial government, through its Governor-

General administered Nigeria's foreign relations, which manifested in several ways, including the control of international trade, determination of import and export duties for Nigerians, use of British colonial offices in other countries as bases for carrying on with external relations, sending of Nigerian soldiers to fight in the Battle of Burma during the First World War, among other

developments (Idang, 1977; Chibundu, 2009).

On attainment of independence, the first distinct phase of Nigeria's foreign policy was the Balewa era, from October, 1960 to January, 1966. In their stock-taking and analyses of the outlook of Nigeria's foreign policy, King (1998), Fawole (2003), and Saliu (2006) reach a consensus that the basic principles of the country's foreign can be summarized as follows:

1. Non-alignment with any of the then existing ideological and military power blocs, especially NATO and the Warsaw Pact;
2. Respect for the legal equality, political independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states;
3. Respect for the doctrine of non-interference in the domestic affairs of all other states;
4. Seeking membership of both continental and global multilateral organizations for their functional importance to Nigeria; and
5. That Africa would be the cornerstone of the country's external relations.

These principles form the core areas of Nigeria's relations with other countries of the world since independence. King (1998) in particular posits that the continuity of the country's foreign policy is

rooted in the basic principles that have guided its relations with the community of nations. These principles are consistent with the eclectic ideological framework which informs her policy. They are geared towards protecting and advancing Nigeria's national interest. Every head of government or of state has accepted their validity, although the style and vigour with which each pursued them have differed significantly.

King (1998) goes to further assert that, all of these five principles provide a basis for formulating, executing, and justifying specific foreign policy objectives and the actions taken to achieve them. They constitute guidelines that the interested public may use to evaluate particular foreign policy behaviour. In addition, these principles integrate the eclectic ideological influences of nationalism, pan-Africanism, Marxism, and capitalism into an ethical framework that defines the purpose of action and the limits of objectives in foreign affairs. They form the moral fabrics of Nigeria as she interacts with the world. Indeed they are pathways informing the basic currents and the process that shape choices in foreign policy matters (King, 1998).

Based on the foregoing, this paper examines Nigeria's foreign relations under Obasanjo's administration (1999-2007) with emphasis on national development. Both primary and secondary data were used for the analysis of this paper. The primary

data were principally information from a one-on-one interview with former President Olusegun Obasanjo, and the secondary data were from books, journals, monographs, conference papers, newspapers and magazines. This paper comprises four segments. The first part comprises the introduction; part two attempts a theoretical discourse; the third part discusses the political and economic situation of Nigeria and its foreign policy under the Obasanjo government; part four concludes the study.

Theoretical Linkage: The Rational Actor Model

Nigeria's foreign policy during the Fourth Republic was anchored on the national development of the state through the identification of the needs of the state and setting out of goals to achieve them. It has been contended that the era was that in which Nigeria acted intelligently on the global platform and that it was the personal knowledge, experience and charisma of Obasanjo that significantly accounted for the attitude of the Nigerian State during that period (Fawole, 2004). In line with this, the rational-actor model of decision-making theory is being used to discuss in this paper.

According to Adeniran (1983), decision-making focuses on the individual statesman. When individual decision-makers are the focus, their idiosyncrasies, values, motivations and ideals are examined, particularly, as they relate to their leadership style as decision-makers.

Their goals or choice of objectives as well as expectations are analyzed to determine the policies of state. This is because state action is considered to be that which is taken by the decision-makers acting in the name of the state.

Amstutz (1999) posits that the rational-actor model involves identifying interests and goals in making and implementing foreign policy, by developing a strategy for achieving goals and successfully implementing policy. According to this model, states behave in purposeful ways, seeking to maximize short and long-term goals. International relations is not random, unintelligible interactions among states, but are rooted in the goal-oriented choices and actions of political communities. If the foreign relations of states were totally random and irrational, the study of foreign affairs would be impossible. Indeed, because states are assumed to behave in intelligent and purposeful ways, the analysis of foreign policy is possible.

The rational-actor model, according to Amstutz (1999) assumes that states are coherent actors that seek to maximize their interests by rationally weighing the costs and benefits of alternatives. Some of the major elements of the rational-actor model are:

1. Problems are defined thoroughly and accurately.
2. National goals and interests are identical, especially in light of defined problems.

3. National goals and interests are prioritized.
4. Alternative strategies for pursuing goals are identical.
5. Policy alternatives are assessed in light of potential consequences.
6. The optimum strategy is selected in light of anticipated policy outcomes (Amstrutz, 1999).

Amstrutz, (1999) also identifies the following limitations of rational actor model, namely:

1. The model assumes that states behave as coherent actors. Countries are viewed as communities ruled by a cohesive, well organized government in which the decision making process is regarded as a by-product of deliberate and rational assessment. But governmental decision making is not carried out by a single individual or a unified, coherent organization. Rather, it is undertaken by numerous officials, each representing a variety of political and governmental agencies, and representing interests and perspectives that are not necessarily complementary. Indeed, decision making is frequently a slow and cumbersome process because of conflicts among officials, groups, agencies, and governmental institutions involved in the formation of policies.

2. The model assumes that decision making is based on a rational dispassionate assessment of long-term, strategic interests. In effect, it assures that governments pursue the national interest. But decision

makers are seldom motivated solely by the general, future interests of the state. Because governmental decision making is the result of a multitude of agencies and organizations, each with its own particular interests, foreign policy is often the product of limited and short-sighted interests of people and organizations. In effect, government officials do not always pursue public policy with dispassion. Sometimes they place their personal or institutional loyalties above the general interests of the nation.

3. The model assumes that decision makers have adequate time and information on which to make rational choices. Accurate, dispassionate goal setting and goal implementation requires reliable information. It also presupposes time to analyze and prioritize alternative strategies. But governmental decision making is often undertaken with limited information and under severe time constraints. Despite efforts to gain as much information about the interests and capabilities of other states, information about foreign governments is always incomplete. Moreover, decision making is often undertaken under time constraints, especially during international crisis. As a result, foreign policy decision making is generally incomplete.

4. The model does not take into account the role of misperception. Foreign policy decision makers act according to their perceptions, not in light of reality itself. Because people's psychological preconceptions serve as lens for

filtering data, ideological leanings can easily distort reality and this, in turn, can impair governmental decision making. Misperception decreases the availability of accurate information and impairs the analysis of goals and strategies. Thus, when external stimuli are distorted, sound, dispassionate decision making becomes difficult, if not impossible.

Despite the demerits the rational-actor model in explaining this study, it is still very relevant in its analysis of this paper; it focuses on the decision makers identifying the need of the state by setting up goals to achieve them. According to Olusegun Obasanjo (2014) the goals or objectives that the state wants to achieve determines government line of actions and steps to be taken.

Contexts of Nigeria's Foreign Policy in the Fourth Republic

This section will be examining the political and economic situations in Nigeria and foreign policy under the Olusegun Obasanjo administration between 1999 and 2007. This is with the view to determining the premises of Nigeria's foreign policy during the time as well as the foreign policy direction and actions at the time.

Political and Economic Situations in Nigeria

The political and socio-economic situations in Nigeria in the period before civilian administration in 1999 debased Nigeria and the country assumed a pariah status among civilized countries in the world. Incidents such as corruption, mismanagement of public fund, June

1993 elections annulment, hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni activists in November 1995, detention of members of opposition groups and state-sponsored assassination squads, among others, attracted strong international reaction and sanctions. These included Nigeria's suspension from the Commonwealth, imposition of a travel embargo on key officials, cancellation of military contacts and embargo on sale of arms to the country by the western countries (Alao, 2011).

According to Alao (2011:23) the US had also imposed a travel ban and sanctions on the Abacha regime for hanging the Ogoni activists in 1995. These activists and their leader, Ken Saro-Wiwa were hanged because their persistent campaign against social injustice and pollution of the environment was at variance with the interest of oil multinational companies and the Nigerian government. The US ban on the Abacha regime won the support of civil society activists in the country, but brought the regime in clear opposition to the US government. However, the confidence of Nigerian civil society groups in the US suffered when Moshood Abiola, the winner of the annulled June 1993 election, died after a meeting with US officials under circumstances many in Nigeria considered suspicious (Alao: 25).

On the economy, Nwachukwu (cited in Ofose, 2014) has blamed the current economic woes of the

country on the administrations of President Shehu Shagari (1979-1983) and retired General Mohammed Buhari (1983-1985) while seemingly exonerating the Ibrahim Babangida's eight years of administering the country's economy from any wrongdoing.

Nwachukwu (cited in Ofose, 2014) in his words noted,

Nigeria's image attained its lowest ebb during the years of Abacha's misrule. General Abacha's poor and, one could say with the benefit of hindsight, disastrous political decision-making during his leadership between 1993 and 1998, contributed to the production of the most negative image that Nigeria had ever had. By 1995, that Abacha's administration committed its greatest and gravest mistake. After summary trial, Ken Saro-Wiwa and 8 other Ogoni activists were executed. International condemnation soon followed. Many countries, decided to intentionally shy away from interaction with Nigeria. Abacha's Nigeria lost all respect and consideration in international politics, and the severity of the Ogoni activists' execution led to countries' withdrawal of their ambassadors and head of mission and some closed down their diplomatic missions in Nigeria.

However, this position of Nwachukwu has been flawed (Ofose, 2014), with the genesis of corruption and Nigeria's low image in international politics squarely laid on the Babangida administration. According to Osadolor (cited in Ofose, 2014) Nigeria's economic crisis rightly began with the

Babangida administration, and got worse when his regime introduced policies such as Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and other anti-socio-economic policies.

Foreign Policy under Olusegun Obasanjo's Administration (1999-2007)

At the return of democratic rule in 1999, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo emerged as the civilian president and at the onset of this new administration, resuscitation of the economy for the well-being of the Nigerian people was identified as a central platform for sustainable democratic order. It was however, widely acknowledged that to reposition the Nigerian economy for the desired growth, issues such as declining Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), the debt problem and repatriation of ill-gotten wealth must be appropriately addressed (Folarin, 2014).

The desire to balance the domestic and external contexts necessitated an initial foreign policy that required extensive outreach diplomacy during the early years of the Obasanjo administration. Indeed, between May 1999 and mid-August 2002, Obasanjo embarked on 113 foreign trips, spending 340 days out of the country (Akindele, 2003). In explaining his reasons for undertaking the trips, Obasanjo stated:

I have devoted much time and energy journeying virtually all corners of the globe in my personal effort to positively reintegrate our country into the international

community and attract investment. We are happy to report that the results from these trips have been encouraging enough to confirm my personal belief and the advice of marketing experts namely that personal contact is the best way to market your product. And my product is Nigeria (Obasanjo, cited in Akindele, 2003).

President Obasanjo and Alhaji Sule Lamido, the Minister of Foreign Affairs travelled extensively in Africa, Europe, Asia and the Americas to promote Nigeria's bilateral relations, even at the expense of very strong criticisms of the President's "excessive" overseas tours (Chibundu, 2009).

In an extensive oral interview with Obasanjo, an insight into he took stock of his administration's achievements on the external plane. These can be summarized thus:

Conflict Resolution

The administration made attempts to restore confidence and credibility to Nigeria's contribution to the prevention, management and resolution of various conflicts in Africa and elsewhere. At the Algiers Summit of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1999, Obasanjo's proposal that the year 2000 be made the Year of Peace, Security and Solidarity was adopted by the Summit. Also in September 1999, during the fourth extraordinary OAU Summit in Sirte, Libya, Obasanjo's proposal for the convening of a Ministerial Conference on Security, Stability, Development and Cooperation in

Africa (CSSDCA) was adopted. The conference was held in Abuja from 8th - 9th of May, 2000.

The administration worked towards ensuring that the peace process in Sierra Leone, after Nigeria and ECOMOG's ending of the civil war, was being handled by the United Nations, thereby reducing Nigeria's financial commitment. Nigeria also ensured that its military contingents continued to feature prominently in the regional and international peacekeeping missions. These places included Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, Ethiopia/Eritrea, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Western Sahara and the Balkans. In the Mano River area, Nigeria continued to broker peace between Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone in an attempt at ending the cycle of violence. In Sierra Leone for instance, Nigeria is playing a leading role in the task of reconstruction after years of civil war. Nigeria has also contributed the sum of \$100,000 for the take-off of the Special Court to try war criminals (Obasanjo, oral interview, 2014).

Nigeria was also largely responsible for the "thawing of the ice" in the potentially dangerous land crisis in Zimbabwe. The land crisis in that country was rightly identified as a potential flash point for conflict, which could engulf most of Southern Africa, with ramifications reaching far beyond the African continent. Through the instrumentality of the Commonwealth, the Abuja

Agreement was brokered, to break the logjam. To date, this Agreement remains the most creditable mechanism for resolving the Zimbabwean crisis (Obasanjo, 2014).

The administration demonstrated that it was committed to ensuring that peace reigned supreme on the African continent since peace and stability were the minimum conditions for any meaningful development (Obasanjo, 2014).

Consular: Welfare of Nigerians

In this regard, the Obasanjo administration articulated a new consular policy, which would be the guiding framework for Nigerian Missions in dealing with cases of Nigerian citizens abroad, irrespective of the circumstances of their departure from the country or their current immigration status abroad. Nigeria's diplomatic missions abroad emphasized to their host countries that the dignity of Nigerians must be respected; migrant workers of Nigerian origin protected and those trafficked be recognized as victims who must be assisted rather than be dehumanized.

Indeed the policy also sought a share of the international labour market for Nigerian workers in almost all fields of endeavour. In that regard, Nigeria and a number of countries, notable Italy, Ireland and Spain concluded frameworks for cooperation on mutual and bilateral assistance on labour. This would enable Nigeria to provide manual

labour (manpower) to countries that have signed the agreement (Obasanjo, 2014).

Regional Integration

Nigeria's conviction that integration of African economies could be accelerated through the proposed African Union, prompted the active support of the government in facilitating the eventual adoption of the treaty establishing the African Union. It was due to Obasanjo's intervention that the Heads of States adopted the Constitutive Act of the Union, during the Lome Summit in December 2000. Nigeria's support for the African Union was based on the belief that its character, content and form were in consonance with the cherished vision of the founding fathers of the OAU and the aspiration of Africans for the unity and prosperity of their peoples. The OAU was finally transformed into the African Union (AU) as well as the successful conclusion of the Durban Summit. It was Nigeria's belief that if the African Union lived up to its billing of becoming an instrument for political, economic and social transformation of the continent, then the ideals and aspirations of the founding fathers of the OAU of a united, strong and prosperous Africa would have been given vent (Obasanjo, 2014).

The Obasanjo administration spearheaded the 'Fast Track' approach to integration in West Africa. At the 22nd Summit of ECOWAS Authority of Heads of States and Governments in Lome,

Togo, on December 9th, 1999, Nigeria made a landmark proposal for a fast track approach to integration of the sub-region. This process, which originally involved close economic collaborations with Ghana, has now expanded into the creation of a Free Trade Area involving Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Niger and Ghana. It also has resulted in considerable progress made in further integration of our currencies, transport and power systems (Obasanjo, 2014).

What may appear to be the most outstanding achievement of Nigeria during the Obasanjo era in the area of sub-regional cooperation was the successful inauguration of the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC) in Libreville, Gabon in November, 1999. The Gulf of Guinea Commission comprising Nigeria, Cameroon, Gabon, Sao Tome and Principe, Congo, DRC and Angola, has as its principal objective, the strengthening of economic and political cooperation among member states as well as the provision of a forum for cooperation within sub-regional organizations such as ECOWAS and the Central African Economic Community (SEMAC). The final take-off of the GGC, eleven years after it was first proposed by Nigeria, was a major diplomatic victory for the country. The success record was largely due to the new democratic dispensation in the country and Nigeria's acknowledged leadership role in Africa (Obasanjo, 2014).

Obasanjo's effort at cooperation was not limited to the African continent alone as it extended to the Third World through his chairmanship of the G77. As a chairman of the G77, during the year 2000, Nigeria successfully re-energized the group by convening a meeting at a Summit level meeting of the G77 for the first time in its 36 years of existence in Havana, Cuba on 12th April 2000 (Obasanjo, 2014).

As a chairman of the G77 in 2000, Obasanjo, together with former Libyan leader Mouamar Ghaddafi, proposed a South Healthcare Delivery Programme that was adopted at the Havana Summit of the group. The aim is to provide assistance to the Healthcare sector of the needy members of the G77. The Secretariat of the programme is based in Nigeria. The programme formally took off in July 2002 with the first batch of volunteers heading for Chad, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone and Niger. The budget for the programme was estimated at \$21 million and both Nigeria and Libya contributed about 50% of the budget while Cuba supported with thousands of medical staff (Obasanjo, 2014).

Economic Achievements

Perhaps, one of the most significant achievements of the Obasanjo presidency was Nigeria's exit from the foreign debts loop. According to Obasanjo (2014),

when we paid off the debts, we drew a deep breath of satisfaction but we seemed to be on the road to the lender again. The Debt

Management Office, DMO, said we were under-borrowed. Now our debts were 14 percent of the Gross Domestic Product, 16 percent below the internationally accepted threshold. We don't need to reach that threshold or to hold a colloquium on the evils of borrowing. Yes, we can use debts to bridge financial gaps when necessary but as the old saying goes, he who goes a-borrowing goes a-sorrowing, and saddles the future generation with debts it knew nothing about. Besides, debts must be tied to regenerative projects and they must be well managed to avoid corruption. In this country, we are not friendly with figures and I doubt if we ever knew exactly how much we were owing anybody. I am told that at one of the debt reconciliation meetings with the creditors, the Nigerian representative was asked to present his figures. He reportedly said: "let's have your figures because I am sure your figures are more accurate than ours." So, even though some critics thought at the time that Obasanjo was wasting money by paying the debts, I believed, and still believe, it was the right thing to do. Of course, I am not unaware of the fact that the present government is working out new guidelines to limit borrowing by the Federal and State Governments. In spite of that, we must keep the debt profile as low as possible" (Obasanjo, 2014).

In an interview with Obasanjo, he asserted that the objective of what needed to be done determined steps to be taken on any issue while in power. With this assertion, it can be noted that there were no formal institutions immediately consulted in policymaking and implementation as

situation determined what line of action to be taken. According to Akande (2001), the main achievement of the Obasanjo administration was mostly in the foreign affairs where the dented image of the country, caused by the past military governments had been at least taken care of.

Also, in the words of Lamido (2014), "Obasanjo has clearly paid a lot of personal attention to foreign policy in the past as he has always done (if Joe Garba's testimony in this in his book *Diplomatic Soldiering*) is anything to go by".

Obasanjo's Foreign Policy: A Critique

If the foregoing are anything to go by, one would give plaudits to Obasanjo for his foreign policy style, focus and exploits. Indeed, like the era of military rule, when he completed the Murtala Mohammed administration, a period regarded as the golden age of Nigeria's external relations, Obasanjo brought in a lot of experience, wittiness and dynamism into the making and implementation of Nigeria's foreign policy.

However, there were certain drawbacks. A critical area was Obasanjo's seeming unpopular stance about driving foreign policy matters without carrying along the democratic structures and institutions central to it. He has been described as his own foreign affairs minister (Fawole, 2004; Saliu, 2006; Folarin, 2014). In a democracy, this

is not acceptable. The National Assembly for instance bitterly complained about Obasanjo's unilateral act in signing out Bakassi to Cameroon in 2006. These acts, like others, were regarded as a disregard for structures and institutions put in place for foreign policy making and implementation.

Secondly, like Adebajo (2008) identifies, the Obasanjo civilian administration failed to revive the country's dilapidated infrastructure and electricity sector, and the country's oil refineries were producing less when he left office in 2007 than when he was first elected in 1999. These were inimical to the objective of foreign direct investment.

Furthermore, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) was accused of manipulation by Obasanjo to target his political opponents in a selective manner. Also, Obasanjo's unsuccessful and undignified attempt to change the Nigerian constitution in April 2006 to allow him, allegedly, to run for a third presidential term badly dented democratic credentials. Although these were not directly foreign policy issues, they nevertheless affected Nigeria's external image and Obasanjo's international personage as a statesman.

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Conclusion

The Obasanjo era truly resented the second golden age of Nigeria's foreign policy. The first era was during the General Murtala Muhammad administration, which he (Obasanjo) continued after the assassination of the former, in an attempted military coup in 1976. Barring all shortcomings, Nigeria regained a position in global reckoning, enjoyed considerable foreign direct investment, bounced back in African leadership and transited smoothly democratically.

However, for Nigeria's foreign policy to achieve its desired goals, proper institutions must be put in place and roles of the institutions must be properly defined. Skillful personnel should man these institutions and career diplomats alone be appointed for diplomatic missions. These would put the machines of external diplomacy vibrant and effusive. The anticipated results would become realizable.

Although policymaking and implementation with little recourse to multiple institutions and offices have its own merits (which include quick decision making and implementation); but it may not be cost-effective in the long run because of the tendency for unilateral and arbitrary to boomerang.

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