

An Evaluation of Nigeria's Foreign Policy and National Interest since Independence

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Abstract

The main focus of this research is an evaluation of Nigeria's foreign policy and national interest since independence. This essay therefore, is another contribution of the debates about national interest being a content of Nigeria's foreign policy. This paper surveyed the foreign policies of successive administrations or regimes in Nigeria with a view of establishing if Nigeria's foreign policies of these regimes reflect national interest. The principles of good neighbourliness and Afrocentricism have dominated Nigeria's foreign policy objectives which have a number of benefits to the country. The friendly relations Nigeria enjoys with her neighbours will boost or guarantee national security for the country. National prestige is equally a national interest that Nigeria foreign policy targets. The essay therefore argued that, Nigeria's foreign policy objectives from independence to date as pursued by each regime show no compromise or negation of objectives of national interest, but rather the desire and efforts to fulfill them. The paper also suggested that, national interest should guide the formulation and execution of foreign policy of any state, as foreign policy is seen as the domestic objectives projected to the external environment. The paper primarily made use of secondary and tertiary sources of generating data. The paper adopted the realist theory as the framework for the analysis in this discourse.

Introduction

Views have emerged that are challenging the conventional knowledge that Nigeria's foreign Policy is a reflection of its national interest. Perhaps, such views draw strength from perceptions that have stereotyped the concept of national interest. The concept itself is deeply embroiled in much controversy about what it exactly means. It means different things to different analysts and practitioners. The intellectual engagement of this essay is another contribution to the raging debate about national interest being a content of Nigeria's foreign policy. To make progress in this direction, it is logical to; first and foremost, highlight the conceptual architecture that underpins a deeper appreciation of "national interest" and "foreign policy" as concepts in international relations. For analytical purpose, it is expedient to anchor this discussion on a theoretical base using the Realist theory. The analysis also attempts overview of Nigeria's foreign policy from independence to date. This is done with a view to demonstrate whether or not Nigeria's foreign policy has national interest content.

Conceptual Clarifications

National Interest

In order to understand whether Nigeria's foreign policy has a national interest or not the concept has to first be examined. National interest as a concept has been given series of definitions. Despite the diverse views of this concept, national interest is frequently used and understood as a guide to understanding the foreign policy of a particular country or state. For Hans Morgenthau "no nation can have true guide as to what it must do and what it needs to do in foreign policy without accepting national interest as that guide."¹ Owing to this, Adeniran argues that the term national interest is "used to explain what a nation is doing or about to do as foreign policy in her external relations."²

National interest is a concept in international relations that is perhaps soiled in intriguing controversies. Several factors are responsible for this situation. Ojo and Sesay identify the following as the factors: first, they argue that national interest has continued to be a subject of various interpretations and misinterpretation by both analyst and practitioners. Second, the concept has suffered much abuse particularly by politicians and decision- makers world over. Third, they contend that national interest "is not easily susceptible to rigorous academic analysis."³ finally, they believe that the controversy surrounding the concept of national interest arises from "the fact that there is yet no universally accepted single definition of what constitutes the national interest of a state."⁴ As such, they concluded that national interest means things to different analysts and practitioners. To skeptics, national interest is a bogus and nebulous concept. To them, it represents nothing more than what the elite class in a state wants at a given point in time.

Rosenau⁵ views national interest as "the key to any explanation of goal-seeking behaviour... that states pursue in their international relations." The concept is also understood by other scholars as "a short-hand expression of the sum total of the objectives and goals of a nation-state."⁶ In other perspectives, national

interest is conceptualized as “a goal,” as “a method of reaching a goal,” as “a means to an end,” as “the basic motivations for foreign policy formulation and execution,” as “a guide to policy makers,” as “an organizing concept for scholars,” and “as criterion of judgment for the citizenry.”⁷ This has further exposed the disagreement among scholars and practitioners about the definition of national interest as a concept in contemporary international relations. The only point of convergence for these analysts and practitioners is the view that national interest is the most important motivating factor of foreign policy. In fact, Adeniran succinctly argues that “foreign policy is something pursued for the sake of the national interest.”⁸

Joseph Frankel attempts a conceptualization of national interest from three analytical perspectives which include the aspiration, the operational and the polemic. According to him, at the aspiration level, national interest refers to the “vision of the good life, to some ideal set of goals, which the state would like to realize if these were possible.”⁹ Aspiration goals might be short and long term. At the operational level, he argues that the concept means the “sum total of interests and policies actually pursued” by a given state. Going by this definition, national interest encompasses every form of policy and interest pursued by a state at both domestic and external levels. While the polemic according to J. Frankel refers to “the use of the concept in political arguments in real life, to explain, evaluate, rationalize or criticize international behaviour. It is useless to describe or prescribe than to prove one’s self-right and one’s opponent wrong.” Arnold Wolfers maintains that when people talk about reflection of national interest in the nation’s policy, “what they have in mind essentially is that they desire to see the makers of national policy rise above the narrow and special economic interest of parts of the nation to focus their attention on the more inclusive interest of the whole.”¹⁰ This view underscores the abuse or misuse of national interest by political leaders.

To this end, Adeniran argues that:

When statesmen and bureaucrats are expected or are required to act in the national interest... what is meant is that they are being called upon to take action on issues that would improve the political situation, the economic and social well-being, the health and culture of the people as well as their political survival. They are being urged to take action that will improve the lot of the people rather than pursue policies that will subject the people to domination by other countries... policies which are likely to make them unable to stand among other nations.”¹¹

National interest has been thought to be the simplest means of understanding or explaining “how and why nations do what they do when they engage in international action... in order to satisfy their interest...”¹² He argued further that “no list of problems involved in analyzing foreign policy goals would be complete without the mention of those which inevitably attempt the use of the concept of national interest.”¹³

From the various conceptualizations of national interest considered in the foregoing, it can be deduced that every state has a set of objectives or goals in its foreign policy, which it aspires to promote in relations to those of other states in the international system. Industrialization, technological advancement and protection of citizens may form part of such objectives, for instance. Second, the identifiable goals of a country must reflect or form a major part of its foreign policy. The success or failure of the foreign policy of a country is measured against attainment or otherwise of its set objectives. For instance, it could be argued that Nigeria's foreign policy in Chad between 1979 and 1982 was a failure on account of the fact that the peace and order that Nigeria set out to achieve between warring factions in Chad met its Waterloo. However, Abuja's policy in Liberia was a huge success as it ended the civil war ravaging the country and installed a popular government headed by Charles Taylor. A third deduction from the explanations of national interest given above is that national interest must be government or individual policies that would guarantee the greatest happiness and good of the greatest number of the citizens. However, national interest can be perverted or misused by those in power. Ojo and Sesay have argued that "such perversion or abuse would take several forms, i.e., when the decision-makers try to enhance the economic interest of a tiny minority of the national society... and when a government legislates that certain important commodity or certain individuals in the country could only provide certain services in the country."¹⁴

States make their set objectives and goals that they seek to promote and defend in the international system irrespective of their power and capabilities. According to Eminiue¹⁵ "capability, analysis usually involves such factors as national resources, productive capacity, scientific inventiveness, technological know-how, diplomatic skills, quality of leadership, governmental efficiency and stability, cohesiveness, confidence, ideological commitment and morale." The interest or objectives that a particular state seeks to define or promote at any time vis-à-vis those of other states in the international system could be grouped into several categories. Hartman¹⁶ has identified three major main categories of national interest, to include vital and core interest, secondary or variable interest and general and complimentary interests. Hartman refers to the vital or core interests as the things that the state already possesses. These include national survival, i.e., protection of the territorial integrity of the state and the lives of all its citizens against external aggression. It also involves protection of the political, economic, religious and social institutions of the state. Wolfers¹⁷ refers to this set of interests as national self preservation, which he points out as maintenance, protection or defence of the existing distribution of values usually called the status-quo. Defence of territorial integrity and the lives of citizens is a goal for which states are prepared to go to war with other states. For instance, Nigeria in 1967 went to war with the secessionist to preserve the integrity of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

The secondary or variable interests are very dynamic and less permanent. These involve the protection of a state's citizens living abroad or provision of consular services to its citizens in Diaspora. This task is usually done by the country's mission or embassy. The general or complimentary interests are those

“which a state can apply to a larger geographical area, to a large number of nations, or in several specific fields.¹⁸ Such specific fields cut across economics, trade, disarmament, or drug trafficking. These are long-term objectives that could prove quite difficult for any state to achieve alone. Therefore, states usually synergize with others in attempts to achieve their complimentary interest.

According to Adeniran,¹⁹ the national interest of a state (big or small, weak or strong, poor or rich) comprises, first, self-preservation, i.e. national security and stability of the system. Second, a state’s national interest, according to him, involves “economic well-being, economic stability, and the fight against inflation, the fight against unemployment, against exploitation and against unfavourable trade relations with other states”. Third, prestige and power forms another class of national interests. Adeniran²⁰ argues that “every country no matter how weak or poor wants to have some degree of prestige among the comity of nations.” That is, each state is interested or aspires to have some measure of prestige, some dignity and respect from other states.

Foreign Policy

Keith R. Legg and J. Morrison define foreign policy as “a set of explicit objectives with the world beyond the borders of a given social unit and a set of strategies and tactics designed to achieve those objectives. It implies the perception of a need to influence the behaviour of other states or international organizations.²¹ Foreign policy is seen here as a set of objectives that a given state hopes to achieve in the interaction with others in the international environment. Such objectives are adjudged to be of national interest. Frankel asserts that foreign policy consist of decisions and actions which involve to some appreciable extent, relations between one state and others.”²² According to Adeniran,²³ foreign policy / consists of three elements. The first element, according to him, is “the overall orientation and policy intentions of a particular country towards another. The second element is the objective that, a country seeks to achieve in her relations or dealings with other countries. The third element of foreign policy is the means for achieving that particular goal or objective.” Saliu refers to foreign policy as the calculated steps taken by a state which are intended to maximize the opportunities that are available outside its geographical boundaries, while at the same time minimizing the perils that abound.²⁴ He went further to conceptualize foreign policy as “the deliberate and conscious decisions taken by a state in coping with its external environment.”²⁵

For Akimboye and Ottoh,²⁶ foreign policy is seen as a type of policy that transcends the boundaries of a given state. It is the type of action a state embarks upon in its interactions with other member-states in the international environment, in the process of striving to attain its (national) objectives and goals.” Conceptualizing foreign policy, the authors argued that it is a “set of principles that define the objectives - a given state pursue in the international arena in the process of its interactions with other international actors.” These objectives are meant to be in the service of national interest. It is rare and almost impossible for any nation to formulate her foreign policy without taking cognizance of the domestic

needs and aspirations. Her interaction with member-states in the international arena, be it economic, political, social, and cultural or religious, is informed by the need to certain home demands and necessities.

Theoretical Framework

Realism according to scholars like Dunne, Schmidt, Heywood²⁷ is the dominate theory in the field of international relations despite other theories like liberalism, constructivism etc. To them, the practice of international politics today is done in accordance with the principles of realism. That is, state actors, power competition, national interest, self help strategy, the world disorder remain the vital aspects of international politics. Leading proponents of this realist theory therefore have argued that the theory remains central or cardinal to international politics both practically and theoretically.²⁸

The realist theory emerged as a criticism of the idealist theory which focused much attention or emphasis to the understanding of the causes of war so as to find solutions for its existence.²⁹ They further argue that every state prefers to live in peaceful coexistence as well as to cooperate with others in order to pursue their common interests.³⁰

Morgenthau who is a prominent proponent of realism in his book "politics of Nations" explained international politics on the basis of the so-called "objective law or law-like regularities, not moral aspects or abstract ideas."³¹

For the realists, states are always involved in power competition so as to survive and dominate other countries. Power is the most important thing to states. As such, international politics is centred on power and every state strives to become great powers which makes them more powerful or supreme than other states.³² Corroborating this view, Sutch and Elias put it that with the acquisition of the great power, states can effectively pursue their national interests.³³ This however generates competitiveness and conflicts among states, and this could possibly lead or result to international anarchy or world disorder. This therefore explains why states pursue the balance of power in order to preclude the domination of other nation-states.³⁴

The realism theory therefore underscores the preponderance of human nature in international politics which shows that human nature ignite states to take certain actions which are inherently self-interested, and this gives the tendency or propensity to crisis or skirmishes.³⁵

However, neo-realists like Waltz argues that the most important or cardinal thing to states is not power, but rather security.³⁶ Thus, nation-states are not power maximizers, but rather they are security maximizers which ultimately translates to the ultimate goal of the state to pursue security rather than power. To Waltz therefore, competition and conflicts among states are not just the result of human nature, but coming from the absence of supreme authority beyond states and the problem of power distribution among states.³⁷

Realists agree that foreign policy is only to serve national interest in the realm of international politics. Thus, foreign policy and national interest are seen in terms of the struggle for power and the survival of states.³⁸ As a result, the

relationship among states tends to be adversarial than cooperative. It makes states to be involved in international conflicts before looking for cooperation only to make alliance to face common enemies.

The realist theory therefore demonstrates its relevance and applicability to the analysis in this discourse through its emphasis on survival of the state which form a core objective of its national interest. Most nations articulate their foreign policy objectives in such a way that portrays the main target as attainment of nations' interest, whose core value is the survival and security of the state. The realist theory is therefore adopted as the framework for the analysis in this discourse.

Nigeria's Foreign Policy since Independence: Analysis of its National Interest

Having taken a bird's eye view of what constitutes national interest, and how different analysts and practitioners view national interest differently, it is imperative to do a brief survey of Nigeria's foreign policies from independence to date, with the aim of locating, if any, what has been identified as a major or core value of Nigeria's national interest. We have asserted earlier that a country with no foreign policy reflecting national interest is like a rudderless ship trying to navigate turbulent waters, which certainly heads for its doom. Recall, also, that somewhere in this discourse we asserted that national interest guides the formulation and execution of foreign policy of a state. Foreign policy could be viewed as domestic objectives projected as domestic objectives projected to the external environment.

The primary objective of this section of this paper is an examination of Nigeria's foreign policy across regimes from independence in order to ascertain whether or not they reflect national interest of the country.

Nigeria has had foreign policies spread across the different regimes it has experienced. Both military dictatorship and democratic regimes have pursued different objectives contained in the foreign policy documents that each had adopted. It is quite obvious that such policies and their pursuit were targeted at achieving the national interest outlined in them.

At independence in 1960, a civilian regime headed by the first Prime Minister and the Head of Government, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, was inaugurated. His vision has laid the foundation of what is known today as Nigeria's foreign policy. Abubakar's foreign policy thrust was contained in his address rather than policy document. His three major foreign policy addresses revealed amongst others the following foreign policy objectives:

- i. Maintenance of peaceful and cordial relationship with all states, big and small;
- ii. Championing of burning African issues such as continental unity, opposition to racism and apartheid, decolonization, etc;
- iii. Commitment to speedy economic and technological development of the African continent as a political priority, etc.

A careful study of the foreign policy thrust and the fundamental principles of Nigeria's foremost foreign policy championed by Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa would reveal, perhaps, negation of the core values of the national interest. National

security and survival as well as protection of the lives of citizens and property were somewhat sidelined or de-emphasized. Abubakar's foreign policy thrust was more concerned with issues that affected Africa and Africans. It makes the origin of Nigeria's Africa policy often referred to as Afro-centricism, which has become one indisputable feature and focal point of Nigeria's foreign policy.³⁸ Though more externally-oriented, Abubakar's foreign policy could not on this account be said to be bereft of national interest. This is because in our examination of national interest, we indicated that the image of a state (prestige and honour) also forms part of national interest. Regional and continental unity and freedom that Abubakar pursued frontally was equally in the best interest of the country at the time. Although, Nigeria's first Republic foreign policy had its faults and weaknesses such as being dominated by external issues, it cannot be dismissed completely as lacking national interest.

By 1966, the military made their first intrusion into the nation's civil governance through coup d'état. As a result, Major General Aguiyi Ironsi assumed office as the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. In terms of foreign policy, Ironsi's administration preferred to maintain the status-quo. This was made clear in his declaration that "his administration's foreign policy would continue to be based on non-alignment, good neighbourliness and active participation in world affairs."⁴⁰ However, Ironsi's administration was encumbered by domestic issues and had no significant impact on foreign policy before it was ousted in a counter coup on July 28, 1966.

General Yakubu Gowon was the next in line of serial military interventions in Nigeria's political scene. The point worthy of note in any attempt at analyzing Nigeria's foreign policy is that for want of developed institutions which could be expected to make significant input in policy making, the personality, orientation and subjective perceptions of political leaders will continue to influence policy choices in Nigeria.

Gowon ascended to power through a bloody military putsch in 1966. Highlights of his foreign policy include upholding of the prevailing principle of good neighbourliness, defence of territorial integrity by squashing secession attempt by Biafra under Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu in 1967, to ensure domestic stability, sub-regional diplomacy in West Africa, active participation in African liberation, African unity and cooperation as well as relations with greater powers. In a nutshell, Gowon's administration made the first ever attempt at propagating a foreign policy that truly reflected the core or vital interest of the nation. The regime also had its own undoing that dealt a blow to citizens' welfare. For instance, the regime's economic policies had adverse effect on the overall economic development of the nation. Also, Gowon's diplomatic blunders in his less tactful assertions and posturing militated against the overall success of his regime. As a result, it was toppled in 1975.

Following the overthrow of Gowon's regime in a military coup d'état in 1975, Murtala Mohammed became the Head of the new military dictatorship that was established. Murtala Mohammed was courageous and patriotic. He pursued a more dynamic and activist foreign policy that also upheld the principle of the Afro-

centricism in Nigeria's foreign policy. The regime made an open declaration that Africa was the centre-piece of Nigeria's foreign policy. The Murtala's administration also invoked the manifest destiny which credited Nigeria with the leadership role in Africa. Murtala played a credible and respectable role in African affairs. Following his unfortunate death or assassination, Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo (who was Murtala's second-in-command) took over to complete the regime. New foreign policy objectives were formulated under Obasanjo as the Head of State. These included amongst others

- i. the defence of Nigeria's sovereignty and territorial integrity;
- ii. the creation of the necessary political and economic conditions in Africa and the world that will facilitate the defence of the independence and territorial integrity of all African countries while fostering national self-reliance and rapid economic development;
- iii. promotion and defence of justice and respect for human dignity especially of the blackman;
- iv. defence and promotion of world peace.

The Murtala/Obasanjo also nationalized the assets British petroleum. In fact, in order to scale down governance cost which was of interest to the nation at that time, Gen. Murtala announced the postponement of the state visit by the British Monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, as well as the hosting of the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC). A study of the foreign policy objectives of the Murtala/Obasanjo regime would reveal that most of objectives reflected the country's national interest.

The Shagari's era, which began in 1979, is said to have "failed to pursue dynamic and purposeful foreign policy... due to internal (domestic) problems and the oil glut as well as economic recessions."⁴¹ Other factors that negatively affected this regime included corruption and economic mismanagement. Shagari expelled African nationals, took loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, all of which brought contempt and hardship on Nigeria, and to Nigerians. His foreign policy was perceived as "vague, poorly articulated, lacking vigour and direction."⁴² According to Otubanjo, Nigeria's foreign policy under Shagari "remained at the level of routine observance of existing relations and obligations."⁴³ As a result of these ills, Nigeria lost its assertiveness in its external relations. However, Afro-centredness was upheld in the interest of the nation

Despite Gen. Buhari's regime (1984-1985) being described as ultra-nationalistic and xenophobic, leading Nigeria to global isolation,⁴⁴ he "stroved to give clearer form to the country's foreign policy orientation."⁴⁵ Africa was still his primary concern. Again, Buhari's foreign policy emphasized Nigeria's national security and economic well-being as well as regional security and stability; irrespective of "serious diplomatic rupture caused by the closure of Nigeria's land borders and the mass expulsion of illegal aliens..."⁴⁶ Buhari's introduction of counter-trade was intended to bail out the economy which had declined significantly.

External issues and Afro-centricism also dominated Gen. Babangida's foreign policy. Highlights of his regime's foreign policy initiatives included amongst others

“acceptance and implementation of the IMF – prescribed Structural Adjustment Programme, improvement of relations with great powers, Nigeria’s membership of the OIC, Nigeria participation in the Economic community Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) intervention in Liberia...”⁴⁷ He pursued economic recovery programs, emphasized economic diplomacy “whose primary objectives was to woo foreign investors to Nigeria and enhance the country’s economic development.”⁴⁸ The Babangida’s administration also had a foreign policy that reflected attempt at resolving issues of national interest.

For Fawole, Gen. Sani Abacha was indubitable, a diplomatic disaster... (because) he dragged Nigeria down from its otherwise exalted position of being Africa’s foremost nation and turned it into an international pariah.”⁴⁹ Under Abacha, Nigeria was ignominiously suspended from the commonwealth, investigated by the United Nations (UN), sanctioned by the European Union (EU) and divided by other democratic nations, all due to his “insensate and abusive style.”⁵⁰ In spite of the diplomatic blunders, extra-judicial executions, and other arbitrariness of the Abacha regime, which led to the “descent of the iron curtain” on Nigeria, his foreign policy never compromised the territorial integrity and self-preservation of Nigeria. It was in the best interest of Nigeria that the contentious Bakassi Peninsula was not ceded to or annexed by the Republic of Cameroon, even if at dagger’s draw. Thus, Abacha successfully defended the country against external aggression and encroachment.

Abdulsalami Abubakar ascended the throne following the death of General Sani Abacha in 1998. Abubakar tried to bring an end to Nigeria’s pariah status and returned the country to a new beginning. His transition to civil rule, and the reintegration of Nigeria into the comity of nations at the time that the clamour for democracy was high-sounding in all quarters. At the time, military rule had become obsolescent domestically and internationally. Abubakar’s foreign policy could thus not be said to be destitute of national interest.

Abubakar led the efforts that returned Nigeria to democratic rule in 1999. Since then, the country has been enjoying smooth and hitch-free transition from civilian to civilian regimes. The foreign policies of these civilian or democratic regimes have pursued political, economic, social and diplomatic policies that serve the country’s interest. Most of the policies and decisions of these regimes have the intention of rebuilding the economy, ensuring transfer of technology, establishment and boosting trade relations with developed countries of the world, enhancing military capability and fighting corruption. All these policies and decisions are intended to serve domestic needs and demands. Social security has seen an improvement irrespective of prevailing insurgent activities and ethnic hostilities. Domestic peace and stability, protection of human rights and freedoms, defence of territorial integrity and security of lives and property of citizens are cardinal objectives of the various democratic regimes since 1999, these are of national interest and form a major part of Nigeria’s foreign policy objectives.

Conclusion

National interest encompasses a range of both internal and external needs and demands of a state. These needs are categorized into primary, secondary, variable, complimentary and general interests. The core or vital interest of any nation is self-preservation and defence of territorial integrity as well as economic well-being of its citizens. If national interest is thus viewed, and not stereotyped, it would be argued to be prominent feature of Nigeria's foreign policy. This is because of the fundamental principles and objectives of Nigeria's foreign policy are a reflection of national interest. The principle of good neighbourliness and Afro-centricism dominating our foreign policy objectives has a number of benefits for the nation. For instance, friendly relations with Nigeria's immediate neighbours will boost or guarantee national security for the country. Otherwise, the neighbouring countries could engage in subversive activities or become launch pad for subversion by enemy state. So also it is the crucial role of regional stability and continental unity.

In determining foreign policy objectives, elite interests cannot be wished away. It forms part of the overall national interest. National prestige is equally an objective that most foreign policies target. This involves certain aspirations that a state may have and the pursuit of goals outside its domain, which cynics may consider unnecessary.

National interest is therefore not only about the interest of groups and individuals in a given country. It also involves the needs and wills of political leaders as well as what they deem to be of interest to the country. However, national interest could be perverted. It has suffered perversion in Nigeria over time. Perversion is not tantamount to absence.

Therefore, the argument that Nigeria's foreign policy is bereft of national interest is needless or null and void. This is because Nigeria's foreign policy objectives from independence to date as pursued by each regime show no compromise or negation of objectives of national interest, but rather the desire and efforts to fulfill them.

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