

The Conduct of Foreign Policy as a Pursuit of National Interest: A Focus on President Buhari's Foreign Policy Initiatives 2015 – 2018.

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Abstract

The foreign policy of any sovereign nation is essentially the gamut of her relations with other countries and international organizations aimed at actualizing her national domestic objectives however defined. President Muhammadu Buhari assumed office as an elected civilian President of Nigeria on May 29, 2015 on the promises of restoring internal security that had severely deteriorated particularly in the North Eastern part of the country as a result of the insurgency of Boko Haram; fighting corruption which has almost become a way of life in the country; and revamping the economy that was facing a serious crisis as a result of the fall in the international price of crude oil the nation's economic livewire. This paper examines President Buhari's foreign policy initiatives vis-à-vis his stated domestic objectives in the last three years. To what extent has this foreign policy directives been determined by the domestic environment and how much has it impacted positively on the internal objectives. Using the methodology of content analysis of existing literature, the paper concludes that the administration has achieved some measure of success. However challenges still remain especially in the areas of fighting corruption and revitalising the nation's economy.

Keywords: *Democracy, Domestic Objectives, Foreign Policy, Nigeria*

JEL Classification: O24

1. Introduction

The concept of foreign policy like other social science concepts, defies one universally accepted definition. In the words of Wilkenfeld et al. (1980, 22):

(...) foreign policy may be viewed as those official actions (and reactions) which sovereign states initiate (or receive and subsequently react to) for the purpose of altering or creating a condition (or problem) outside their territorial-sovereign boundaries.

Frankel (1975:9) sees foreign policy as a dynamic process of interaction between the changing domestic demand and supports and the changing external environments. To Chibundu (2004) foreign policy simply implies how a country responds with other countries

beyond its shores or territories. It encompasses diplomacy, the military, trade, the economy, social, cultural, educational, sporting aspects, etc. According to Mbachu (2008), foreign policy is a “set of goals and course of actions a nation wishes to pursue or pursues in respect to the demands or interactions of the internal and external settings as perceived by the decision makers”. To Holsti cited in Olusola, (2015) foreign policy can be viewed as “actions of a state towards external environment and the conditions under which their actions are formulated”. In spite of the various definitions of foreign policy, there is a common recognition that foreign policy is about national goals and the means and ways of propagating and achieving them. It is not only a byproduct of the external force to which it is directed, but it is also as much determined by domestic factors and forces (Birai, 1983:115). This implies that foreign policies are articulated by decision makers or state actors in line with the state’s objectives which are determined by both internal and external factors. In view of the foregoing, foreign policy can be conceived as policies which nation-states pursue in the course of their interaction at the international level to achieve goals or objectives set to advance their national interests which could be political, economic, social, cultural or military.

2. Theoretical Framework

The paper adopts the system level analysis as propounded by Kenneth Waltz (1979) as its theoretical framework. The theory is predicated on the analysis that: if the individual level is the focus, then the personality, perceptions, choices and activities of individual decision makers and individual participants provide the explanation; if the state-level, or domestic, factors are the focus, then the explanation is derived from the characteristics of the state: the type of government, the type of economic system or interest groups; if the international level is the focus, then the explanation rests with the anarchic characteristics of that system or with international and regional organizations and their strengths and weaknesses (Mingst and Arreguin-Toft, 2010).

International politics, to Waltz, is the interplay between personalities and the domestic environment vis-a-vis international politics. The three variables are interloping. To Rosenau (1966), personality is the first and most important factor that dictates foreign policy action. President Muhammadu Buhari is a revered personality locally and in the international scene. He has endeared himself to his people and the world due to his personality as an upright and incorruptible person. He was described by America’s President Barrack Obama as a person with “high integrity” and “a very clear agenda” (Daily Independent, 2015). It is these outstanding qualities and traits of Buhari that informed world leaders to invite him to meetings aimed at charting a new course for Nigeria under his leadership. Buhari enjoys this cooperation and pledges of assistance and investments due to his personality. Nigeria may benefit from this enhanced cooperation and boost its economic potentials using these renewed commitments of world leaders.

At the state level however, the Buhari administration must arrest some of the internal contradictions within. There is an intricate relationship between domestic environment and politics at the international level. At the state level, Nigeria is facing internal challenges, which, to some extent, affect businesses and Nigeria’s corporate existence as one indivisible entity. These contradictions include poverty and unemployment, insecurity, corruption, debt

overhang, the need for strong institutions, especially in fiscal, financial and judicial sectors, and the need for honest leaders and good governance (Okonjo-Iweala, 2011). Bad governance at the domestic level is partly responsible for the massive exodus of Nigerians to other countries in search of greener pastures, who are sometimes caught in wrong doings and giving the country a bad image (Uhomoihbi, 2011). Nigeria cannot attain greater heights in an environment that is characterized by such backward tendencies. The country cannot project its foreign policy goals and this will have a negative effect on the nation's drive for increased Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Investors, both local and international, will not have confidence in an insecure environment. Security, the fight against corruption and economic rejuvenation which aim at attracting FDI are the cardinal agenda of the Buhari administration. The current stance of the government in the fight against corruption and insecurity is a good omen towards making the country investor-friendly. All efforts are geared towards achieving Nigeria's foreign policy goals.

At the international level too, politics is all about power and the pursuit of national interests. The international system is anarchic and characterized by intense competition among nation-states. The Buhari administration should seek for more international cooperation from friendly nations, donor agencies and Nigerians in diaspora. At the international level, Nigeria belongs to several organizations that are both political and economic in nature. Its position as the country with the largest population in Africa and vast mineral deposits in virtually all the states are factors which, if properly utilized by the Buhari administration, could achieve the desired goal considering the support his administration is receiving from other states.

However, Waltz's system level analysis has its own limitations. The theory fails to acknowledge the fact that international politics is anarchic and the level of competition may deprive nations from competing favorably as countries must be endowed with strong leadership and corresponding economy to survive at the international arena. The theory does not also take cognizance of domestic actors and non state actors in the interplay of international politics and the assumption that national interests of state actors are predefined in terms of maximizing power suggest that the level of analysis takes an overtly top down, holistic view (Tamaki, 2015). Waltz's view that international politics is functionally coherent and immune from inherent contradictions is not always not plausible. The international system is plagued by friction among the dominant and weak actors.

3. Nigeria's Foreign Policy Objectives

Nigeria's quest to interact with other states beyond its boundary is defined in what is known as Nigeria's foreign policy objective. Its main thrusts are as follows: self preservation of the country; defense and the maintenance of the country's independence; economic and social wellbeing; defense and the preservation and promotion of democratic values; enhancing Nigeria's stance and status in the world and promotion of world peace (Aluko as cited in Tunde, Sanusi and Omotayo, 2015:62).

4. State of Nigeria's Domestic Environment under the Buhari Administration.

The Buhari administration gained political power during one of the most critical times in Nigeria's history. The government is confronted with challenges built up by decades of mismanagement and maladministration (Omale 2016). Indeed, it appears that 'the chickens

have come home to roost', because at this time, Nigeria is facing perhaps, the most difficult internal security problem in its history, coupled with the challenge of the worst economic recession in twenty-five years (Ishiekwene 2016). Furthermore, the challenges are compounded by limited resources, especially as a result of overdependence on income from the sale of petroleum products which is currently experiencing low prices at the international market. The problems are multiplied by the pressures exerted on the state by various groups; political, economic, religious and ethnic, struggling to attract government's attention. On the basis of these, the Buhari administration had its work cut out for it from the outset. The major thrusts of the administration's domestic policies are; revamping the domestic economy, ensuring protection of lives and properties as a response to the spate of security issues across the country, and lastly, ending corrupt practices (prosecuting corrupt cases and preventing the act of corruption at the highest level).

On assumption of office of the Buhari administration on May 29th, 2015, the Nigerian economy has become the biggest economy in Africa (Vanguard 2016). Despite this accolade though, conditions of the critical sectors of the economy are debilitating, causing untold hardship for generality of the people, who have to face rising inflation, while purchasing power continues to reduce drastically. The Buhari administration has to contend with great external shock induced by the heavy drop in global oil prices. As a result, "the Nigerian government faces a budget deficit of more than \$11 billion" (Scott 2016). This was compounded by the activities of 'economic saboteurs' who disrupt the flow of oil production thereby causing reduction in the daily production of Nigeria's major income earner (crude-oil). With a huge deficit inherited from the Jonathan administration (Tukur 2015), it is no surprise that the Nigerian economy entered into recession for the first time in twenty-five years. Government is unable to meet up with its obligation in terms of recurrent expenditure, while being unable to embark on capital projects. These problems have led to soaring inflation, unemployment and reduction in purchasing power of ordinary Nigerians.

The security challenge of the country has an international dimension. The Boko Haram insurgency in the North-Eastern part of the country brought global attention to Nigeria through both its activities in Nigeria, and other countries within West Africa. Dating back to 2010, the Boko Haram group continues to unleash terror and mayhem on institutions and individuals across the northern part of the country. Prior to the commencement of the Buhari administration, the country was besieged by the criminal activities of the group, among which was the sacking of, and hoisting its flag in Damboa community, the bombing of the Police headquarters in Abuja, the attack on the UN office in Abuja, and other daring bombings of 'soft' targets (Smith 2014). Perhaps the dominant discourse in the activities of the group so far, is the brazen act of insolence with which the group invaded and abducted two hundred and seventy-six secondary school girls in a night at Chibok, Borno state in April, 2014 (BBC News 2016). Despite the global outcry against this action, the group kept majority of the school children in captivity for more than two years after. All attempts by then Nigerian government to rescue the school children failed. This is the unenviable burden inherited by the Buhari administration from the Jonathan administration. Based on its campaign promises, the Buhari administration immediately swung into action to address the Boko Haram menace upon assumption of office. In relative terms, the Buhari

administration's success in the short-term has surpassed whatever was achieved under the Jonathan administration. While majority of the Chibok girls are still in captivity, no fewer than 16,000 Boko Haram hostages have been freed from the terrorists' captivity, including 106 of the Chibok girls abducted in 2014 and 105 of the Dapchi schoolgirls abducted in February, 2018. And there is a drastic reduction in the capacity of the Boko Haram group to wreck havoc. On record, the group has been chased out of its fortress in the Sambisa Forest of the North-East part of Nigeria. Whatever capacity remains for the group is now expended on low-level attacks against 'soft' targets in Nigeria and neighbouring countries (Vandiver 2016).

Aside from the high incidences of kidnapping and other regular challenges of insecurity, the Buhari administration was equally faced with the activities of economic saboteurs from the South-South geo-political zone of the country. The Niger Delta Avengers is the umbrella body of disgruntled elements in the South-South bent on causing government's attention to bear on the economic, environmental and social conditions of the area. The group's method is to disrupt oil production by blowing up pipe-lines that serve as conduit in the production of crude oil for the international market (Hinshaw and Kent 2016). This act of economic sabotage continues to cost Nigeria the much needed revenue, especially at a time when the world is witnessing great reduction in the prices of crude-oil at the international market. Concerned about the negative implications of their activities, the government continually makes efforts to 'pacify' the group by focussing attention on the development of the area. For instance, a reversal of the despoliation of their lands is being undertaken through the 'Ogoniland Clean' project (Alike 2016). As the administration engages the Niger Delta people in solving the problems in the area, there is a noticeable reduction in the negative activities of the Avengers, with direct impact on oil production, and positive implications on revenue accruing to government.

Deriving from the President's publicly declared hatred against acts of corruption, the administration made the fight against corruption a pivotal part of its domestic policy. With a focus on investigation and prosecution of corruption cases, the Buhari government deploys the anti-corruption institutions of state; the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) to handle corrupt cases, while putting machinery in motion for blocking loopholes used for corrupt practices. Remarkably, numerous corrupt practices of government officials under the erstwhile Jonathan administration have been uncovered, and the processes of prosecution are ongoing. These three critical issues; economic revival, provision of adequate security, and the fight against corruption have formed an appreciable part of the basis upon which the Buhari administration has engaged the rest of the world since its inception.

5. Nigeria's Foreign Relations under President Buhari

The Buhari administration was under no illusion that it could solve the multiplicity of problems confronting Nigeria without concrete engagement with the international community. Though not comparable in terms of frequency and number of times as was with President Olusegun Obasanjo in his first term of office, nonetheless President Buhari equally embarked on high-power 'Shuttle Diplomacy' in his first year of assumption of office. The purpose of the shuttles, which have been at both bilateral and multilateral levels

are tied to solving the domestic challenges of economic recovery, insecurity and fight against corruption.

Shortly after assumption of office, the President undertook a tour of member-states of the Lake Chad Basin Commission in West Africa that are equally affected by the activities of Boko Haram. For the purpose, the President also visited France because of France's interest in West Africa, as a result of the close affinities with her former colonies. The visits were meant to seek collaboration, cooperation and assistance of the various governments in tackling the Boko Haram menace. In line with the government's determination, the Boko Haram terror issue featured prominently in the president's discussion with the US authorities on his official visit to America. In the final analysis, the contacts made with various governments yielded result in the mould of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) (Assanvo et al. 2016). At present, the Boko Haram terrorist group has been seriously decimated (Somorin 2016) with its existence hinged only on attacks on 'soft' targets.

In an attempt to tackle Nigeria's economic problems, the president has been visible on the world stage, attempting to sell Nigeria as a haven of business opportunities to governments and corporations around the world. Indeed, the president has left the space wide open by not discriminating against any part of the world, either on the basis of ideology or religion. In the search for FDI, the president has made both bilateral and multilateral visits to Europe (France, Germany, Britain), the US, China, United Arab Emirate, Saudi Arabia, amongst many other countries. Some of the efforts have generated visible results, for instance, "the secured commitments for investments worth \$6billion from the Chinese government and private companies most of whom signed Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) with the Nigerian government as well as private companies" (Akwaya 2016). With the monetary and fiscal policies of government, in addition to the giant strides the government has made in establishing contacts and building the confidence of foreign investors, the government has succeeded in pulling the Nigerian economy out of recession. While the economy is still in a bad shape, there are signals that it is on its way to recovery in a relatively short while.

Finally, in this regard, the Buhari administration aggressively sought for commitment and cooperation of the international community in fighting high-level corruption at home. Specifically, the government continually canvasses and lobbies foreign governments, especially in the West where much monies carted away by Nigerian government officials are stashed. The cooperation of the foreign governments is sought in the area of refusal to provide safe havens for stolen wealth from Africa. Furthermore, the government is on an aggressive campaign of repatriation of stolen wealth that is already stashed abroad. The president's trips abroad are meant to win loyalty of the foreign governments in this regard. One of such shows of support came from the government of the United Arab Emirate as demonstrated in the signing of a bilateral agreement that details the willingness of the UAE to "facilitate the extradition of wanted persons, and seizure of stolen assets among others" (Akwaya 2016). In the quest for a corruption-free Nigeria, the president played a visible role at the London 2016 Anti-Corruption Summit, where emphasis was laid on erecting a strong global coalition against corrupt practices (Wakili 2016).

While the Buhari administration displayed elements of determination and commitment in deploying foreign policy to solve the various challenges at home, the government has equally been alive to its responsibility to the sub-region, in line with the underlying principles of national interest. This is evidenced in the material and technical support provided for the following countries during their elections; Benin Republic, Burkina Faso, Chad and Guinea Conakry. Most recently, the Nigerian government played a significant role as a leading member of ECOWAS to solve an impending political imbroglio in the Gambia. The group ensured that the recalcitrant former President Yahya Jammeh vacated office for the democratically elected President Adama Barrow. From all indications, Nigeria, Senegal, Liberia and Ghana, under the auspices of ECOWAS, would have implemented a forceful removal of Yahya Jammeh from office (Freeman 2016).

Equally important in the foreign policy drive is the extent to which President Buhari is willing to make Nigeria relevant in international politics. In most international forums, the president leads the Nigerian delegation, thereby creating visibility for the office of the President of Nigeria and by extension, enhancing the country's image. In this regard, the President has attended and addressed, the UN General Assembly, the African Union Heads of State and Government meeting, the Heads of State and Government Meeting of ECOWAS, the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, the COP21 Climate Change Summit, the China-Africa Conference, the Nuclear Security Summit, among numerous others (Akwaya 2016).

Despite the commendable efforts so far made on the foreign policy arena, especially as they relate to achieving positive outcomes in the domestic policy pursuits, the Buhari administration is relatively weak in terms of the pursuit of a concrete diplomatic agenda. It is an irrefutable fact that diplomacy is one of the most critical instruments of foreign policy, hence, the need to accord high level of importance to Nigeria's diplomatic practice. A recurring albatross of Nigeria's diplomatic practice is the lack of funds experienced by many of the diplomatic missions in various capitals of the world (Aremu 2016, 534). This unacceptable practice hinders the capacity of the missions to carry out their responsibilities effectively and efficiently, with negative consequences on the efforts made by government from home. The government appears to be addressing the challenge by shutting down some of the diplomatic missions that are considered unviable (Salawu and Echewofun 2016) perhaps so that funds can be made available to the diplomatic missions in capitals presumed to be of strategic importance to Nigeria's national interest. This position may appear logical on the surface, it however impedes government's efforts in taking advantage of opportunities across the globe. With the dynamic nature of globalisation, there is a sense in keeping diplomatic relations with as many state actors as possible, for the possibility of the strategic importance of a state may arise at short notice. Moreover, given the itinerant nature of the average Nigerian, government must be conscious of providing representation in as many countries as possible.

A related development in this regard is the slow pace of appointing Ambassadors and High Commissioners to head the various diplomatic missions. As a critical element of foreign policy pursuit, the diplomatic machinery must be fortified to the highest level. A situation in which appointment of the country's highest representatives take too long to be finalized it

does not bode well for the relationship between Nigeria and the country starved of the highest level representative. It is therefore imperative for both the executive and legislature to harmonize the processes of nominating, confirming, and approving Nigeria's highest ranking representatives abroad.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations.

In conclusion, it is obvious that the President Muhammadu Buhari regime has achieved some level of success in the last three years in pursuing a foreign policy agenda that seeks to address the administration's stated domestic objectives. However, a lot more could have been achieved if the commitments and promises made by the country's international friends and partners had been redeemed and fully actualized. For instance on fight against corruption, it is only a fraction of the country's stolen wealth that was stashed away in foreign lands that have retrieved. The West has been particularly sluggish in co-operating with the regime in returning these monies.

Taking a look at fighting insecurity, while it is true that the 'Boko Haram' insurgents in the North East have been heavily degraded in their deadly and incessant attacks, they still remain a dangerous armed group with capacity to inflict damages on the people and the security agencies. Worse still, insecurity appears to be spreading to other parts of the country especially the North West and North Central. Armed bandits, kidnappers for ransome, cattle rustlers and farmers/herdsmen conflicts have all contributed in escalating the state of insecurity in the country. Unfortunately the assurances of military and intelligence support that the president got from the Western countries have remain largely what they were: promises. Even the reinforcement of the ECOWAS Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) has not succeeded in checkmating the movement of these armed groups across our common borders. In the area of economy, the expected inflow of Foreign Direct Investments FDI, is not forthcoming as much as expected. The heightened state of insecurity in the country coupled with competition from other investment destinations can be said to be responsible for this. The poor state of our infrastructures has equally made the cost of doing business in Nigeria to be high.

For better results in pursuit of her foreign policy objectives, the Muhammadu Buhari regime should shift emphasis away from some of our traditional international friends who only pay lip service in terms of their partnership with Nigeria. So far these relationships have been lopsided against Nigeria. The country should strengthen our relations more with those who are willing to partner with us so that we can develop and improve the living condition of our people. President Buhari should equally focus more attention in making the domestic environment more conducive for doing business. Some efforts at infrastructural development are being made especially with the support from China. Also, Nigeria should strengthen it ties with middle level economic powers like the Asian Tigers, Brazil and countries on the African continent to portend greater benefit for our country. At all times our focus in our dealings with other countries should remain what is in our best interest. After all, in international relations there are no permanent friends nor permanent enemies but permanent interests.

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