

The Nigerian Civil War as a Domestic Determinant of Nigeria's Foreign Policy 1967-1975

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Abstract

In behaviours external to her, Nigeria over years has been influenced by myriad of factors, some external, some internal. Within the domestic milieu of the Nigerian foreign policy this paper locates and concentrates on the Nigerian civil war. The paper webs a classic retrospection and x-ray of the foreign policy implications of the civil war on Nigeria's external relations between 1967-1975. It concludes on the strength of evidence provided from Nigeria's policies towards Rhodesia, Portugal, USSR, South Africa etc, that the war proved itself an in-negligible determinant of Nigeria's foreign policy within the period under study.

Introduction

The Foreign policy of a state is conditioned by two determinants, namely the domestic and the foreign. There are contending arguments over the primacy of one determinant over the other. Olu Adeniji argues that the external factor i.e. the nature of the international system in which nations operate, primarily determines the foreign policy of especially the developing countries (2000: 34). He maintains, "This is a reality to which African countries have to adjust" (35). But scholars of Sonni Tyoden's kind contend that socio-political domestic milieu is a crucial determinant of foreign policy(1989:58). Apart from the influence of the foreign policy machinery, other domestic factors of crucial importance to foreign policy

formation include the nature and organization of the government itself, political institutions and the ethical basis of the socio-political practice in the society generally. It is within this context that government priorities as reflected in policy, take meaning. The Nigerian civil war is situated in the domestic influence of the Nigerian foreign policy. Rare enough, the war no doubt is one of the test cases of domestic force that explained Nigerian foreign policy between 1967 and 1975, even beyond. Among others, it exerted considerable influence over the policy adopted towards France, Gabon, Gambia and others.

Justification for this study centers on the researcher's desire to address the undermining of the domestic consideration of Nigerian foreign policy and the over-emphasis on external factors in the determination of Nigerian foreign policy. This paper locates the Nigerian civil war within the domestic milieu of the Nigerian policy, and discusses its implications on the Nigeria's external relations 1967-75.

Conceptual Clarification

Universal acceptability still eludes the definition of foreign policy. And doubts are expressed on the possibility of any definition of the discipline ever winning universality in its acceptance (Aluko, 1971:1). Nevertheless, renowned and leading scholars in the field of international relations have in their works, provided helpful and usable clarification of the concept. Olu Adeniji defines it as a projection of the country's national interest into the trans-national arena, and the consequent interaction of one with the other (4). Northedge describes it as interplay between the outside and inside (1968: 15). To Joseph Frankel, foreign policy refers to those decisions and actions, which involve, to an appreciable extent, relations between one state and others (1963:9).

In the international system, every state has interests and aims to pursue. This warrants making policies towards the realization of those interests. It is for this that foreign policy has been conceived in the terms of a set of strategic tactics designed to achieve a country's defined objectives. Sonni Tyoden in line with this thought says that foreign policy means measures consciously designed and put in place by a government

for the attainment of specific goals and objectives in the international system (1989: 59). Chibundu posits that foreign policy is a country's response to the world outside its own frontiers (2001:5). Foreign policy is a state's behavior external to her. It is what states do to each other. It is taken to be action of a state towards another, including also the reactions of these states to actions by states. These actions or response to actions depending on the circumstance may either be friendly or aggressive, simple or complex. Some countries can at different times be friends or enemies within a given short or long period of time. For example, Nigeria broke diplomatic relations with Ivory Coast, Gabon, Tanzania and Zambia during the Nigerian civil war (1967-70). This was because they recognized and traded with 'Biafra', the break away Eastern region of Nigeria.

The Nigerian Civil War

The intention here is not to embark on a detailed analysis of the war, but to provide a base for analyzing how the Nigerian foreign policy was directly affected between the years 1967- 1975. Between the years 1967 and 1970, Nigeria was plunged into a crisis, a civil war. The Eastern secessionists, Biafrans tagged it a war of independence. But to the Federal Government of Nigeria, it was a war of national unity (Akinferiwa, 1999:74). The then Government of the eastern region headed by Colonel Emeka Ojukwu unilaterally proclaimed the independence of the region on May 30, 1967 and renamed the region Republic of Biafra. This Ojukwu's order and Gowon's counter order plunged Nigeria into disorder for about 30 months. The civil war in Nigeria was predicated by a number of complex combinations of factors, among which are located in the socio-political and constitutional reasons. Right from the colonial days, the unity of the country was on a fragile foundation. In Okpeh's word, "there is no contradicting the fact that Nigeria has a problematic existence" (2003:2). Political practices and constitutions were divisive rather than *unitive*. Nigerians identified more with their regions and less with Nigeria.

The Igbo aggressiveness in the pursuit of life's matter, earned him suspicion by other ethnic groups in the country. Before independence, the Nigerian battalions in the Royal West African Frontier Force were

predominantly recruited from the North. But the tide began a change in direction when at independence; Aguyi Ironsi proposed an enlistment based on merit and qualification, which was accepted. Much later, 60 out of the 80 military officers in the country were of Igbo origin (Akinferinwa, 1999:80). The Igbo dominated other important sectors. In the Nigerian Railway Corporation, Igbo occupied 270 out of the 431 senior positions in the organization. They also occupied 73 out of the 104 senior cadre positions in the Nigerian Ports Authority. 75% of the workers in the ministry of External Affairs were also Igbo (Akinferinwa, 1999: 80). The Ibos were not only industrious, but also constituted the major ethnic group from the south resident in the North. This growing influence was to the extent that the Northerners began to fear their eventual domination. This fear was later given expression on January 15, 1966 when the Igbo military officers led the first coup in which Northern leaders were assassinated. Ironsi promulgation of the Decree No 34, which changed Nigeria to a unitary structure was controversial and further aggravated the grief of the North. This was understood by the Northerners who suffered the death of its topmost leaders as an act masterminded to rob the North of its dominant position in politics and governance coupled with the claim that the then Head of State, Aguiyi Ironsi did not punish the authors of the coup. The Northern-led coup of July came therefore, as a retaliatory one.

The July 29 coup, led to the death of Ironsi among others, and saw Gowon to the throne. Ojukwu's refusal to recognize the authority of Gowon, on the claim that Brigadier Ogundipe rather than Gowon, was the next senior officer, due for the throne led to a rift. This rift coupled with the incessant massacre of the Igbo resident in the North, led Ojukwu to declare the Republic of Biafra on 30th May, 1967. Ojukwu's basic propaganda was that Igbo were no longer safe in the commonwealth of Nigeria. The move to halt this rebellion brought Federal Government at a face-to-face clash with the Easterners, hence the war. The whole nation was engrossed in a war that lasted beyond initial expectation, and was much bloodier than anticipated. Over a million civilians and soldiers reportedly died before it ended in January 1970. Shooting and bombing

alone did not take the toll. Hunger, starvation and diseases were supplement (De St. Jorre, 1972:2). The details of the war are well contained in the work of Alexander Madiebo (1980) and Wale Ademoyega (1981).

The Foreign Policy Implication of the Civil War

There is no contradicting the fact that the experience of the civil war substantially influenced the direction of foreign policy in Nigeria in the year under consideration.

Throughout the war, foreign policy was mostly geared towards keeping the country from total disintegration. Nigeria's activities at the OAU and the Commonwealth were also directed at preventing a needless escalation and unwarranted internationalization of the civil war. The civil war sharpened Nigeria's perception of national security and survival, the importance of good neighbours, the need for diversification of external relations and proper non-alignment, the need for economic integration etc.

Nigeria's Soviet Foreign Policy.

One of the greatest lessons the civil war had for Nigeria's foreign policy was the futility of relying almost exclusively on its traditional friends and allies in the west, especially Britain and the US. Right from independence, Nigeria had come to see Britain as an external friend. Nothing encapsulates this notion better than Sir Abubakar's independence speech in which he spoke of the British "whom we know ... always as friends" (Quoted in Fawole 2003: 62).. Nigeria was rapidly Pro-British in its foreign policy orientations. It was with this confidence that the British were "always friends" that the Nigeria Federal authority approached the British for military assistance to prosecute the war. Nigeria's expectation and request was turned down (Fawole 2003:2). Nigeria learnt the first significant lesson that in foreign relations, there are no permanent friends or foes, only permanent interests. In the face of this unbelievable and painful British disappointment, Nigeria's turn to America also proved unproductive.

Embattled at home and betrayed by her traditional friends in the west at a most crucial hour of need, the Federal government had to

approach the Soviets for military assistance (Fawole, 2002: 12). This move was really a significant one compelled by the circumstances of the times. Prior to that time, Nigeria had been fanatically anti-communist, that it banned the importation, sale and circulation of any type of communist literature in Nigeria in the 1960s. When the freedom of movement of British and American diplomats was unfettered, those of the Soviets were monitored (Fawole, 2003:3). This was largely the situation when Nigeria became compelled by the circumstance of the civil war to change her policy towards Soviet. A seller-buyer symbolic relationship immediately developed between the two countries. The supply of weapons was accompanied by deployment of soviet military and other technical personnel to train Nigerians in the handling and the use of these weapons. Consequently, Nigeria landscape began to experience the influx of Soviet nationals. The restrictions on the number of their embassy personnel no longer held and neither could their movement be curtailed anywhere. The old restrictions that punctuated bilateral relations surreptitiously vanished, as the Soviet Union became Nigeria's best friend and ally. Gowon had to visit the Soviet Union shortly after the war. It was speculated that the award of the contract for the construction of Aladja steel plant was of Soviet assistance. Nigeria turned full circle from its old rabid anti-communist days to become Moscow's number one partner on the African continent.

Nigeria's Israel Foreign Policy.

The outbreak and conduct of the war left considerable impact on Nigeria's foreign policy and external relations with Israel. The Biafran propaganda was effective. This did marvelous job of painting Nigeria in the worst colours possibly. The Federal Government was portrayed as conducting a genocidal campaign against the Ibos and Eastern Minorities (Fawole, 2003:57). There is no doubt that the strength of this deadly propaganda and clever manipulation of global sentiment and public opinion caused Nigeria a few friends and allies in the early stages of the war. Fawole notes that Biafra propaganda succeeded in diverting the Israeli public opinion and sentiment in their favour (Fawola, 2003:57). Israel was sympathetic

towards the Igbo and did really help them (Olusola; 1980: 438). On the account of this, though diplomatic relationship was not severed, but Nigerian-Israel relations suffered strains.

The greater commitment to African affair by Nigeria, which was necessitated by the lesson of the civil war, resulted in a tilt in the country's Middle East policy in favour of Egypt. Israeli occupation of Egyptian land was totally unacceptable to Nigeria. By this fact, Nigeria from 1970 became very critical of Israel (Olusola , 1980:438)

Non-Alignment Foreign Policy.

This most basic impact of the war on Nigeria's foreign policy was the need felt by Nigeria to broaden and diversify the base of her external relations to include hitherto, ideologically incompatible nations as well. The futility of reliance on the west had come out in bold relief, and the need to become more non-aligned had been recognized. While the west was not abandoned, the East was for the first time fully embraced and the old ideological biased behavior by Nigerian vanished. Nigeria became as from then, more active in non-alignment movement.

Sub-regional Diplomacy in West Africa.

Nigeria's relations with Africa and especially with West Africa were severally transformed on account of the experiences from the civil war. Once the war ended, Nigeria had learnt no longer to take for granted, matters it used to treat as peripheral. Relations with the West African sub-region benefited from this changed world view. Unlike in the years before the war, the relations with the immediate neighbours took a greater significance for the survival and unity (Fawole, 2003:65). Nigerian leader's recognition of this fact was manifested in the improved and closer relation with countries in the sub-region.

The civil war served the main purpose of exposing Nigeria's security underbelly through its immediate neighbours. The France's intention to get the Francophone states to nation had acquiesced to French command (Fawole, 2003:65). France attempted to use Benin Republic for running guns and supplies to Biafra under the guise of humanitarian assistance,

but this was promptly nipped in the bud once Nigerian government got wind of it (Fawole, 2003: 32). Nigerian was unlucky that the only two Francophone states, Ivory Coast and Gabon that recognized and supported Biafra, were not contiguous neighbours like Cameroon, Chad, Niger Republic and Benin Republic. Fawole contains that at a crucial stage of the war when the table had turned against Biafra on the battle field, France swiftly deployed a large military contingent into Chad (65). The contingent was an elite force of largely trained soldiers and was equipped with modern offensive weapons that made Nigeria very uncomfortable. These incidents made Nigeria to rethink and re-conceptualize its national security to include its neighbours. As Olusanya and Akindele have pointed out, for a big country like Nigeria, its national security boundaries must be defined to be conterminous with its territorial boundaries (1986: 3). Not only did Nigeria take the French troops deployment seriously, Gowon actually summoned his counterpart, President Tombailayeto to a bilateral summit in Maiduguri in 1970.

At the close of the civil war, Gowon paid official visit to all West African states, excluding Ivory Coast. The implications of this was that Nigeria had woken up to the reality that its neighbours were the first line of security, and thus should pay more attention to events and occurrences in the territory of its contiguous states (Fawole :2003,66). It was this sense of security that brought home the idea of establishing a sub-regional grouping which would provide a common platform for all the states in West Africa cooperate and integrated their economies (Olanayan, 1986:27). In addition to whatever security measure put in place to reduce threats to Nigeria, the government of Nigeria embarked on a policy of good neighbourhood towards the surrounding countries. This policy thrust manifested in Nigeria offering economic aid and technical assistance to a number of West African states. Nigeria constructed roads and bridges for Benin. It provides interest free loans and economic assistance to needy states (Olanuyan, 1986:24). Nigeria supplied aid to drought-stricken Niger Republic (Onwuka, 1982:88).

African Liberation, Africa and Cooperation.

During the civil war, a vast majority of African states supported Nigeria and opposed Biafra's secession bid. This was a psychological boost to Nigeria that affected her commitment to the African cause. Nigeria's African diplomacy from the 1970s also benefited tremendously from the change of total worldview that was occasioned by the experiences of the civil war. Though Africa had always remained the central focus of Nigerian's foreign policy right from independence, the civil war provided a renewed emphasis on continental affairs. Policies enunciated to deal with the evils of apartheid and settler colonialism were rather mild in the early 1960s of the Balewa era. The civil war provided opportunity for South Africa, Rhodesia and Portugal to help the dismemberment of Nigeria, by throwing their weight on the side of the secessionist group. They all supported Biafra and provided covert military assistance. This infuriated Nigeria and made her review her policies towards these countries. Nigeria consequently worked to accelerate the collapse of settler colonialism and apartheid (Aluko, 1971:3). Gowon's speeches at the OAU meetings underscored Nigeria's abandonment of the traditional lukewarm attitude to armed struggle for liberation. Nigeria stepped up efforts on liberation recognized when General Gowon was elected OAU chairman in 1973 (Fawole 2003:55). This chair gave Nigeria the vantage position from which it coordinated the African resistance to colonialism and to pursue other African issues that were dear.

Conclusion

Incontestably, the essay with a show of evidence, demonstrated that the experience of the civil war substantially determined the Nigerian foreign policy in the year 1967 to 1975. Among others, Nigeria's policies towards South Africa, Rhodesia and Portugal resulted from their wartime position, which was inimical to Nigeria's interest. The Soviet's military assistance to the Federal Government, optionlessly changed the hitherto anti-communist Nigerian perception of national security. The war sharpened Nigeria's role in perception of national security, the Nigeria's role in the formation of ECOWAS derived its impetus from the civil war experience. Based,

therefore, on this premise, the paper concludes that the Nigerian civil war proved itself in-negligible determinant of Nigerian foreign policy between especially 1967 and 1975.

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