

RHETORICS AND REALITIES OF FOREIGN POLICY: NIGERIA-UNITED STATES OF AMERICA RELATIONS UNDER ABACHA RE-EXAMINED

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Abstract

The Nigerian state has been faced with the problem of political instability since independence. Political succession has been more through military coups than through democratic transitions. The net result is that Nigeria has become locked in a vicious circle of increasingly repressive regimes whose goal appears to be that of maintaining themselves in power. To reverse this cycle of seemingly inexorable slide towards chaos and instability with its local and regional consequences, a section of the international community led by the United States of America instituted limited but mandatory unilateral and multi-lateral sanctions to convince the Abacha regime of the need to conform to the universal principles of democracy. This affected Nigerian relations with the United States. This paper takes a critical look at the relations between Nigeria and the USA under Abacha's regime. It argues that two visible dimensions can be seen namely the relations at the level of propaganda and the other which is the concrete reality of their relations. The paper then reveals the hollowness of using only policy statements and propaganda to judge external relations of nation states.

Keywords: Globalization, National interest and Foreign Policy

Nigeria is a country with numerous problems of political, economic, social and military undertones. There are serious problems of identity, coherence and vision in the political leadership and the consequent disarray of civilian politicians has been the pretext for repeated military interventions in political affairs. Her ethnic and religious diversity has made governance a daunting challenge while her oil-dependent economy has become a continual focus of political competition. At the background of all these ills looms the dreadful presence of a military institution that has lost all claims to professionalism due to its excessive politicization (Freedom Watch, 1996:2).

Nigerian has had a fair share of military rule since 1960. There have been several coups against civilian and military regimes alike, as well as frustrated attempts

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to return to democracy. However, this paper is specifically interested in the Abacha's regime.

Amidst controversy arising from the annulment of the June 12 elections, General Babangida stepped aside from power on August 26, 1993 installing an Interim National Government (ING) headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan. The powerlessness of the ING was revealed when General Abacha, Secretary of Defence in the ING forced Chief Shonekan to resign on November 17, 1993 and he assumed power as the head of state and established the Provisional Ruling Council on November 12, 1993.

In response to the reversal of democracy occasioned by the annulment of the June 12 elections, the USA took a number of immediate steps to register her concern and displeasure. She cancelled some assistance for economic and social development in Nigeria, withdrew her military attaches and sent back Nigeria's officers in the USA, and the purchase of military hardware and imposed a visa restriction order on Nigerians who formulate, implement and benefit from policies which hinder Nigeria's transition to democracy, as well as their immediate families (Akpan, 1995:17).

Consequent upon his attaining power in 1993, General Abacha made a number of declarations regarding his regime's intentions. Among other things, he promised an early return to civilian rule, improved economic performance, and curbing the traffic in narcotic drugs. While the results of the efforts in these areas were yet to materialize, developments in the political front created a scenario that resulted, cumulatively in the growing estrangement between Nigeria and the USA.

First, the timetable of the political transition programme of the Abacha junta was projected to span a period of three years 1995-1998. This was seen as too long by many international observers and the USA did not hesitate to openly express her disenchantment with what she considered as delay tactics by General Abacha.

Secondly, in June 1994, Chief Abiola was arrested for declaring himself president. Despite repeated appeals, both local and international, calling for his release, Abiola remained incarcerated and the legal challenge of his detention remained indefinitely suspended. He later died in controversial circumstances. The next explosive development was the trial and subsequent hanging of Ken SaroWiwa and eight other Ogoni minority right activists in November 1995. This act of ruthlessness by General Abacha coupled with the other political issues listed above created a situation that made Nigeria a pariah nation in the international community. The USA and other nations in the West responded with a flurry of sanctions.

The decisive nature of the USA in instituting unilateral, though limited sanctions on Nigeria and the knowledge of the vital role her interest in Nigeria connotes made the General Abacha junta embark on a propaganda exercise by which it hoped to exhort internal support as well as external sympathy (Oladepo, 1995:9).

Conceptual Analysis/Theoretical Framework

International relations as a social science discipline is more than a combination of the studies of foreign affairs of various countries and of international history. As Joseph Frankel posited, it includes also the study of international society as a whole and of its institutions (Frankel, 1964:10).

Based on the foregoing explanation, it can be said that international relations is that social science discipline that is concerned with all issues involved in the relations between states. The concept of globalization is even more recent than all others being discussed and as such, still has a multiplicity of descriptions and definitions. This does not however, reduce the validity of the overall consciousness that attended the development of the concept in recent times. One description that appropriately explains the concept is that put forward by Young. Explaining the reasons behind globalization, he contended thus:

The rapid and continuing developments in a variety of areas such as communications, transportation, military technology have caused an effective shrinking of the world and have led to a situation in which the nation-state and state system are increasingly obsolescent and ineffective structures for the achievement of human security and welfare (Young, 1972:125).

The focus of globalization is quite lucid. Due to developments in scientific, cultural, political, economic and technological realms, earlier barriers created by the existence of state systems have largely been overcome with the result that events in any part of the globe are heard of almost as soon as they are occurring. Further, the growing economic and socio-political intercourse amongst nations has fostered international inter-dependence with the consequence that the actions of any nation in its domestic affairs exact a direct influence on its relations with other states and hence moderates their subsequent reactions.

Many of the goals – political, social, economic, military, technological – which states pursue in the international system cannot be achieved within the territorial confines of the national-state. Most times, states need the active cooperation or assistance of other states to achieve these national objectives. It is the totality of this communication that is commonly referred to as foreign policy. According to Frankel, it “consists of decisions and actions which involve to some appreciable extent, relations between one state and others” (Frankel, 1967:1).

A similar view is that of Legg and Morrison who define foreign policy as:
... a set of explicit objectives with regard to 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 behavior of other states or international organizations (Legg and Morrison, 1971:72).

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Dorothy Pickles supports the position advanced by Legg and Morrison when she posited that foreign policy implies “A stated set of attitudes towards the international environment, an implicit or explicit plan about a country’s relationship with the outside world (Pickles, 1968:187). David Vital disagrees with the last definition. To him, foreign policy implies rather a field of related but distinct actions and issues in which there is neither nor can be foreign policy in general (Vital, 1968:10). According to him, the realities of states behaviour entail decisions and policies being formulated in a disjointed fashion, largely in response to immediate pressure and events in a number of separate structures and issue areas. The contention is that the preceding authors’ definition of foreign policy suggests a greater degree of rational procedure than is often observable in the way states actually try to achieve their objectives.

Sovereignty is one of the most important and popular concepts in contemporary international relations. In general, there are two notions of the concept: domestic and external sovereignty. Domestic sovereignty simply means the absolute authority and perpetual power of a state over its citizens unrestrained by law. The above is improved upon by Fawett for whom domestic sovereignty is merely the power and authority of a state over all persons, things and territory within its reach. “It is also the internal authority of the state, distributed according to certain constitutional arrangements and exercised in fact, by persons holding political power” (Fawett, 1971:37).

External sovereignty is always used synonymously with independence and simply put denotes equality in status of states. This means that all independent states are equal to each other in states since they are all sovereign.

National interest is the key concept in foreign policy and international relations. In essence, it amounts to the sum total of all national values. A commonsense definition of the concept is that it is the general and continuing ends for which the nation acts. It is thus characterized by its non-specific nature, by a degree of continuity and by its connection with political action. National interests can ascribe the aspirations of a state; it can be used operationally in application to the actual policies and programme pursued; it can be used polemically in argument, to explain, rationalize or criticize. This point finds adequate expression in the definition of the concept put forward by Adeniran who postulated that:

When statement and bureaucratic... act in the national interest... they take actions on issues that would improve the political situation, the economic wellbeing, 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 (Adeniran, 1983:191).

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The above definition has clearly established a linkage between foreign policy and national interest of states. This is further developed by Wolfer who posited that “... the makers of national policies are above narrow and special economic interest of parts of the nation to focus their attention on the nation to focus their attention on the more inclusive interests of the whole nation (Wolfer, 1962:23).

Attempting to formulate a theoretical framework for the analysis of the theme of this paper will take into cognizance all these concepts discussed thus far. However, the theory of national interest will be used for the paper. This theory appropriately captures the essence of all other principal concepts operationalized in the paper. It is commonly believed in academic and other circles that national interest is the guiding principle behind all actions and reactions of states in the international system. Nationals are seen not to have permanent friends or permanent foes in the international system but permanent interests.

Frankel argued that the notion of national interest is based upon the values of the national community, values which can be regarded as the products of its culture and as the expression of its sense of cohesion, values which define for men what they believe to be right or just. The relationship between these values is intrinsic and constitutes the focal point of any nation’s actions and reactions in the international community (Frankel, 1964:36).

Based on the above therefore, it is clear that the theory of national interest of states appropriately explains the nature of Nigeria-US relations. It was the U.S. that has dictated the direction and pace of events that characterized the relationship based on her national interest.

Rhetorics in U.S.-Nigeria Relations Under Abacha: An Analysis

Historically and politically, the relationship between Nigeria and the USA commenced on proper footing after the former attained sovereign status from Britain in 1960. At that time, there was the conscious belief in the similarity of the two countries’ leadership role in their respective continents and regions.

The relations between the two countries was mutually beneficial and seen as such for more than a decade, even though slight disruption was noticed during the fall of the First Republic government of Sir Abubakar Balewa in Nigeria (1966) followed shortly after by a 30 month long civil war the U.S. had taken a neutral position in the issue and all her efforts were restricted to the humanitarian angle of giving relief supplied to civilian victims of the war since her policies at the time were dictated by cold war consideration. It had been quite clear that the question of communist infiltration into Nigeria was a remote possibility which made U.S. involvement in the war to be kept to its barest minimum. This consequently resulted in some changes in

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Nigeria-U.S. relations as the regime of General Gowon started scouting for other friends – USSR and Eastern part of the world - as opposed to the earlier close link with the heavy reliance on Western nations, the USA inclusive.

Thus arose uneasiness in the friendship that existed between the two countries. On the part of the USA, this was occasioned by the coming of the military to power in Nigeria, a situation considered as an anomaly by the former. Due to their abhorrence of military rule, the U.S. upheld that soldiers in politics could only be tolerated but never loved or trusted as they were highly authoritarian and sometimes irrational. This became the cause of strain and mistrust that was eventually entrenched in the relations between the USA and Nigeria (Obiozor, 1992:206).

On her part, Nigeria's military regimes have continuously claimed to be nationalist and hence, expressed disgust at the attempts of the U.S. to influence political events in the country so as to guarantee the protection of the latter's national interest as well as investment in Nigeria. The relations between Nigeria and the United States came under great strain during General Abacha's regime in 1993. The spate of international and unilateral sanctions that greeted the arrival of the regime made General Abacha to go on the defensive claiming that it was in protection of Nigeria's national interest. In spite of the fact that these claims lacked merit on account of the General's prominence in the regimes that came before his, it would have been expected that he would try to arrive at a workable compromise with other principal states in the international system. Instead, he chose to further antagonize them, especially the U.S., by perpetrating acts of irresponsibility as in the incarceration of the presumed winner of the June 12, 1993 presidential election, the brutal hanging of the nine Ogoni minority rights activists, the jailing of alleged coup plotters and the repressive attacks launched against human rights groups and pro-democracy associations in the country. The latter acts greatly exacerbated the growing strains in Nigeria-U.S. relations to the extent that the U.S. had to impose unilateral sanctions on her while simultaneously canvassing her allies in the European continent to do same. This departure from her traditional friends in the international community led to severe reverberations in the entire spectrum of Nigeria's socio-economic and political existence.

On the economic front, the country experienced severe hardship as international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the London and Paris Clubs either suspended negotiated loans for development assistance or bluntly refused to review Nigeria's debt burdens so as to grant her relief. Further, certain categories of military technology earlier received from the U.S. were suspended, as the U.S. had a big say in both the financial institutions above and in the policy directions of the other European allies that Nigeria relates with. The diplomatic isolation imposed on Nigeria robbed her of serious political points in the international community.

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In response to these knocks received from within and outside the continent, the Nigerian government sought to ride the storm by sheer bravado and propaganda, claiming that the U.S. was leading her allies with the intention of decolonizing Nigeria. Further, she claimed that the U.S. action of de-certifying Nigeria as a major out-post for the narcotics trade (Fisher-Thompson, 1995:4), the ban on direct flights from Nigeria to the U.S., the stringent immigration procedures instituted against Nigerians and the attempt to get the U.N. pass a resolution against Nigeria on account of alleged human rights abuses, were all blackmail tactics by which the U.S. hopes to isolate Nigeria in the international community, more like giving a dog a bad name in order to hang it.

In further response, the government embarked on what it called ‘handball diplomacy’, a situation under which Nigeria took definite steps to initiate diplomatic ties and military relations with nations in the Eastern bloc such as China, North Korea and other middle powers in the Asian continent. This move was premised on the frosty relationship between Nigeria and the West which placed an embargo on arms supply and training of Nigeria military personnel following the political crisis arising from the annulment of June 12, 1993 election and the execution of the nine Ogoni minority rights activists in 1995. Defending the position of the regime, the Chief of Defense Staff, Major-General Abdusalam Abubakar claimed that Nigeria was ready to make friends with these countries that were ready to make friends with us (Omorah and Coasta, 1997:1).

Realities in U.S.-Nigeria Relations under Abacha: Beneath the War of Words

The relations between the United States of America and Nigeria at the level of official statements tended to give the impression that both countries are far apart. However, the relations between two countries cannot be evaluated based only on propaganda but on vigorous analysis of the economic transactions between nation-states. This is because nation states could say one thing and do another in order to protect their national interest.

The verbal war between United States and Nigeria was not accompanied by much more practical steps in her economic relations with Nigeria. Rather, the U.S. continued to do business with the Nigerian state despite her vehement criticisms of the Nigerian military regime. The tables below are carefully stated and analysed to prove this direction of events.

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Table 1: Import and Export Trade between Nigeria and Other Countries – 1990-1993

Country	1990		1991		1992		1993	
	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports
U.S.A.	3005.7 (64.3%)	5459.0 (95.43%)	4581.4 (64.4%)	62158.3 (95.5%)	12732.3 (71.7%)	105685.1 (95.5%)	17224.5 (71.7%)	112448.9 (95.5%)
Canada	146.9 (3.1%)	213.3 (3.6%)	210.6 (0.4%)	241.9 (3.4%)	612.1 (0.4%)	411.2 (0.4%)	828.1 (3.4%)	437.5 (0.4%)
Brazil	1413.0 (30.2%)	1066.3 (0.4%)	2159.1 (30.4%)	1209.3 (1.9%)	3917.6 (22.1%)	2056.2 (1.9%)	5300.1 (22.1%)	2187.8 (1.9%)
Others	107.9 (3.3%)	1279.4 (2.3%)	158.0 (2.2%)	1451.2 (2.2%)	489.8 (2.8%)	2467.4 (2.2%)	662.7 (2.8%)	2625.3 (2.2%)
Total	4673.5	56018.0	7109.1	65060.7	17751.8	110619.9	24016.4	117699

Source: Review of the Nigerian Economy, 1993, Federal Office of Statistics, Lagos, 1994.

The table above clearly shows Nigeria's economic transaction in terms of import and export trade with the American continent from 1990-1993. In terms of imports, the United States of America carried a major share just as it did in export. In the area of imports, in 1990, the United States had 64.3%, in 1991 64.4%, in 1992 71.7% and in 1993 71.7%. This shows that despite the political problems that the country witnessed under the IBB's administration that culminated in the annulment of the June 12, 1993 elections, the country still had substantial economic transaction with the United States of America. The above is further corroborated from the index on exports. The USA also accounted for a major share in that area. In 1990, it had 95.43%, in 1991, 95.5%, in 1992, 95.5% and in 1993, 95.5%.

Table 2: Import and Export Trade between Nigeria and Other Countries – 1994-1996

Country	1994		1995		1996	
	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports
U.S.A.	7488.8 (80.4%)	56097.0 (89.7%)	40879.9 (76.6%)	257674.4 (86.1%)	483835.6 (85.2%)	285281.6 (90.1%)
Canada	306.8 (3.3%)	3566.4 (5.7%)	3099.4 (5.8%)	25667.0 (8.6%)	2628.9 (0.5%)	8530.4 (2.7%)
Brazil	1389.3 (14.9%)	372.9 (0.6%)	8897.8 (16.7%)	3354.0 (1.1%)	11932.3 (2.1%)	13277.4 (4.2%)
Others	130.0 (1.4%)	2480.4 (3.97%)	470.8 (0.9%)	12586.0 (4.2%)	69442.0 (12.2%)	9461.5 (2.9%)
Total	9314.9	62516.6	53337.0	299281.4	567838.8	316556.9

Source: Review of the Nigerian Economy, 1996, Federal Office of Statistics, Lagos, 1997

The table above clearly shows that there was no substantial deviation from the pattern of economic transaction between Nigeria and the United States despite the diplomatic face-off between the two countries. For example, in the import sector in

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1994, the United States accounted for 80.4%; in the 1995, 76.6% and in 1996, 85.2%. In the export sector in 1994, the United States had 8.7%; in 1995, 86.1% and in 1996, 90.1%. Thus, there was a consistent pattern of U.S. patronage of Nigeria despite the political problems of the country and the consistent United States propaganda against the country.

The above position is further substantiated by the direction of Nigeria's oil export from 1992 to 1996 as shown in the table below.

Country	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
Canada	13.963 (4.3%)	24.894 (8.0%)	12732.3 (71.7%)	-	17224.5 (71.7%)
U.S.A.	290.787 (88.7%)	259.865 (83.9%)	612.1 (0.4%)	-	828.1 (3.4%)
Brazil	-	9.244 (3.0%)	3917.6 (22.1%)	17224.5 (71.7%)	5300.1 (22.1%)
Virgin Island	14.570 (4.4%)	-	-	828.1 (3.4%)	-
Chile	4.856 (1.5%)	15.461 (5.0%)	-	5300.1 (22.1%)	-
Uruguay	3.642 (1.1%)	-	-	-	-
Argentina	-	-	2.473 (0.8%)	-	-
Others	-	-	-	1.886 (0.5%)	-
Total	327.818	309.464	3,062.870	347.046	307.403

Table 3: Nigeria's Oil Export: 1992-1996

Source: Review of the Nigerian Economy, 1996, Federal Office of Statistics, Lagos, 1997:148.

The above table also shows that there was no substantial difference in the direction of Nigeria's oil export to America despite the face-off between the two countries. America still was Nigeria's best oil buyer. In 1992, of Nigeria's oil export to America, the USA had 88.7%; in 1993, 83.9%; 1994, 84%; 1995, 78.3% and in 1996, 82.1%. From all the above tables, it can be seen that propaganda has been and still is in conflict with reality in the relations between Nigeria and the United States of America.

Conclusions

The paper has articulated the remote and immediate causes of the ugly relations between Nigeria and the U.S. under Abacha. It has shown that the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election and the continued incarceration of M.K. Abiola and subsequently his death, the jailing of alleged military and civilian (including journalists) coup plotters in July 1995, the hanging of the nine Ogoni minority rights activists in November 1995, the harassment, detention and torture of human rights activists, the protracted time schedule for transition to civil rule and her generally unrepentant outlook were the issues that stood against Nigeria from the United States point of view.

On the side of the U.S., Nigeria claims that her insistence on democracy, liberalization of the economy, war against narcotic drugs trafficking and international financial fraud were all excuses being advanced so as to interfere in the internal affairs of Nigeria, preparatory to her re-colonization of the country by a new generation of colonialists. She further claimed that accusations of human rights abuses were mere fallacies utilized as weapons with the intent of isolating Nigeria from her avowed course of getting permanent representation in the United Nations Security Council.

All found, Nigeria and U.S. relations was through excruciating times in a manner unprecedented in their histories. The U.S. pursuit and protection of her national interest which is diametrically opposed to Nigeria's position and perception of her own national interest was the reason for the long span of the diplomatic face-off. The experience gained from the developments though harsh and at a point, almost intolerable, will have made Nigeria to know her place in the international system and convince her of the necessity of evolving national values that will guarantee and advance her national interest. More fundamentally, the paper revealed the conflict between policy pronouncement and reality in foreign relations. Nigeria-United States relations in terms of concrete economic transaction remained buoyant despite the seeming quarrel between the two countries.

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