

The Prelude to Babangida Regime's Foreign Policy Initiatives

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Abstract

General Ibrahim Babangida introduced far reaching foreign policy initiatives in Nigeria between 1985 and 1993. Some of these initiatives left an enduring legacy on Nigeria's diplomatic history ever since. This paper therefore explores the prelude to these initiatives with the view to establish the linkage between the domestic and external factors that influenced the regime's foreign policy initiatives during the period under review. Drawing from its findings, the paper argued that the need to reposition and revamp the battered economy in addition to the restoration of the country's leadership position in Africa and the world formed the background to General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida's (IBB) foreign policy initiatives.

1. Introduction

Reminiscent of the short-lived regime of General Murtala Ramat Mohammed (July 1975-February 1976), General Ibrahim Babangida's administration (1985-1993) also injected certain degree of dynamism into Nigeria's foreign policy. Several important diplomatic activities characterised the foreign policy initiatives of the regime since August 1985 when it came into power in Nigeria. During that period, the regime introduced certain foreign policy initiatives that were unique in the country's foreign policy history. Among the notable foreign policy initiatives of the regime between 1985 and 1993 included the constitution of the Concert of Medium Powers (otherwise known as the Lagos Forum), introduction of the Technical Aid Corps programme and the realignment of Nigeria's foreign policy focus from political to Economic Diplomacy. In addition to this, the regime also strengthened the Afro-centric doctrine of Nigeria's foreign policy and embarked on greater involvement in African Affairs. In similar development, the regime strongly condemned the Apartheid regime in South Africa. It also played greater role in regional conflict resolution under the instrument of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). These initiatives were largely driven by the domestic situation in Nigeria and changes at the global level.

This paper examines the prelude to these foreign policy initiatives with particular emphasis on the domestic and external factors that influenced the regime's foreign policies between August 1985 and August 1993. With this in mind, the paper intends to identify the compelling factors that were responsible for the regimes postures and the rationale behind the aforementioned initiatives among others.

2. Background to Babangida's Foreign Policy Initiatives

The period between August 1985 and January 1987 could be regarded as the gestation period of Babangida's far reaching foreign policy initiatives in Nigeria. Within this period, several unresolved domestic and external issues during the Buhari regime (1984-1985) created the premise upon which the Babangida administration contrived its foreign policy agenda. The domestic situation in the country during this period could be gleaned from the socio-economic situation in Nigeria during the Buhari led administration between 1984 and August 1985. The country's economy was critically distressed due to the glut in supply which resulted in the collapse of the price of crude oil at the international market in the early 1980s. The country's oil production dropped from its peak of 2.4 million barrels per day (b/d) in 1980 to 1.3 million barrels per day in 1983. As a result of this, the Nigerian government was unable to generate sufficient revenue to meet up its statutory financial obligations. This is because crude oil revenue accounts for more than 90 percent to the nation's foreign exchange earnings and substantial part of government revenue in the 1980s. The economic crisis by extension, also affected other sectors of the country's economy. Several manufacturing companies closed down due to lack of raw materials and the huge cost of operations. In addition to this, there was massive corruption in the country. General Muhammed Buhari therefore inherited a battered economy when it assumed office via a *coup de tat* on

December 31, 1983. The situation made Nigerians heaved a sigh of relive and went into joyous mood on January 1, 1984 when the news of the military putsch on the dawn of the New Year spread throughout the nation (Obe, 1984).

General Sani Abacha while announcing the coup on January 1, 1984 claimed that the military took over because of the "... grave economic predicament and uncertainty which an inept and corrupt leadership has imposed on our beloved nation for the past four years". Although the economy was virtually on the verge of collapse when the military took power in 1984, the Buhari regime nevertheless, was unable to resolve the economic crisis after about twenty months in power, (Omokhodion, 1985). In fact, the Buhari regime contemplated the idea of securing a bailout package from the IMF before it was toppled in August 1985, by General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida.

There were other lingering issues such as Nigeria's membership of the Organisation of Islamic Countries-OIC, which the Buhari regime was unable to venture (Olojede, 1986). The strained relationship between Nigeria and Britain over the Umaru Dikko kidnap affair also created an avenue for the Babangida regime to re-order the foreign policy priority of the country in 1986. But more importantly, the closure of Nigeria's borders in April 1984 (Ndibe, 1985) and the expulsion of about a million illegal aliens from Nigeria in May 1985 (Obasi, 1985) by the Buhari led military government also created genuine avenues for the Babangida regime to articulate its 'big brother Africa' foreign policy posture in 1986. Another thorny issue unresolved by the Buhari regime which the Babangida government took ample advantage was the South African question.

The aforementioned issues apparently, formed the prelude to IBB foreign policy initiatives from the inception of the regime in August 1985. During his first major speech to the Nation in August 1985, President Ibrahim Babangida berated the foreign policy of the General Mohamadu Buhari led regime and gave clues as to the direction of his administration's foreign policy. In his speech, he remarked among other things that:

Nigeria's foreign policy in the last 20 months has been characterised by inconsistency and incoherence. It has lacked the clarity to make us know where we stood on matters of international concern to enable other countries relate to us with seriousness. Our role as Africa's spokesman has diminished because we have been unable to maintain the respect of African countries. The ousted military government conducted our external relations by a policy of retaliatory reactions. Nigeria became a country that has reacted to given situations, rather than taking the initiative as it should and always been done. More so, vengeful considerations must not be the basis of our diplomacy (Babangida, 1995).

Babangida stated further that:

African problems and their solutions should constitute the premise of our foreign policy. The realisation of the Organisation of African Unity of the Lagos Plan of Action for self-sufficiency and constructive co-operation in Africa shall be our primary pursuit... Our membership of the United Nations Organisation will be made more practical and meaningful... call for a new International Economic Order which lost its momentum in the face of the debt crisis will be made once again. Nigeria hereby makes a renewed request to the Non-Aligned Movement to regroup and reinvigorate its determination to restructure the global economic system, while we appeal to the industrialized nations to positively consider the debt plight of the developing countries and assist in dealing with the dangers that face us.

Within the first few months of the administration, Nigeria embarked on deft diplomatic moves to reposition itself and reclaim the country's leadership role in Africa. On February 28, 1986, (Ojidoh, 1986) the Nigerian government re-opened the country's borders that were closed by the Buhari administration in April 1984 (Akinriande, 1986a). In another development, Nigeria made the move in January 1986 to normalise diplomatic relations with Britain (Odum, 1986). Diplomatic relations between the two countries went sour over the Umaru Dikko kidnap affair of July 4, 1984 (Soyinka, 1986). Alhaji Umaru Dikko was the Minister of Transport under the Alhaji Shehu Shagari civilian administration between October 1979 and January 1984. He was among the most wanted fugitives by the Buhari administration (Akinriande, 1985). Dikko and other members of the Shagari government were charged with allegations of corruption and declared wanted by the Buhari regime in 1984. But Alhaji Dikko managed to escape from the country and to asylum in the United Kingdom after the coup in January 1984. The failed kidnap attempt which the Nigerian government under Buhari denied any involvement resulted in the conviction of three Israelis and a Nigerian sentenced to different jail terms in the United Kingdom in 1985. The Umaru Dikko affair led to the expulsion of Major Halidu Hananiya, the then Nigeria's High Commissioner to Britain. Nigeria retaliated by expelling the British High Commissioner also from Lagos (Akinriande, 1985). Efforts by the Nigerian government to secure the extradition of Alhaji Dikko and other fugitives from the United Kingdom during the Buhari regime were also unsuccessful. This was the state of affairs between Nigeria and Britain when the Babangida regime came to power in August 1985.

Development within Africa and the international arena also influenced the foreign policy initiatives of the regime. In

response to this, the Babangida administration launched the novel policy of economic diplomacy, humanitarian interventionism and the regional model of conflict resolution mechanism. In all of these therefore, it is important to underscore some of the identified foreign policy dynamics of the Babangida regime. These are the Concert of Medium Powers, otherwise known as the Lagos Forum: the Technical Aid Corps programme; the Economic Diplomacy and Nigeria's involvement in regional conflict resolution, under the instrument of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). What is of utmost importance in this part of article is to briefly highlight the fillip to each of the stated foreign policy thrusts. In October 1986 while giving the account of his stewardship, General Babangida maintained that within one year of his administration, 'balance, credibility, clarity and consistency has been re-injected into Nigeria's foreign policy' (Eluemunor, 1986).

Professor Bolaji Akinyemi was the brain box of Babangida's foreign policy thrusts. Akinyemi's tenure as the Foreign Affairs Minister was a remarkable one in Nigeria's foreign policy history. The duo of General Ibrahim Babangida and Professor Bolaji Akinyemi wanted to re-enact the activism of the second half of the 1970s to make a statement to the international community. The very first bold initiative that was launched by the administration in 1987 was the Concert of the Medium Powers. The principle behind the concert was to create a concert of medium power countries to act as a counter force to the ideological dominance of the then great powers in the global system. Therefore, as a foreign policy initiative, the Concert of Medium Powers, was articulated by the military administration in 1987, for meeting the objectives of giving a new burst of creativity to inform the definition and articulation of Nigeria's role in the global village (Akinyemi, 1987).

The establishment of the Technical Aid Corp Scheme (TACS) by the Babangida administration marked a new fervour in official development assistance in Nigerian foreign policy. It equally represented an innovative trend in the country's drive towards the efficient institutionalization of aid or assistance to needy sister African countries as well as the Africans in the Diaspora (Adeniji, 2004). The programme allows young Nigerian professionals particularly in such fields as medicine, nursing, veterinary medicine, engineering, law, agriculture, surveying, education, etc, to be sent to work in Africa, Caribbean and the Pacific countries (ACP), for two years to assist the host countries in their development needs. The provision of technical assistance by Nigeria to other countries especially on the continent of Africa was not a new phenomenon. Indeed, in the past, technical experts had been sent to some recipient countries. Precisely, between 1960 and 1966, Nigeria had entered into secondment agreement with a number of African countries (Okochi, 1990; Akinbobola, 2001). What was new about Babangida's TACS programme was the fact that the federal government of Nigeria pays the complete salary of the technicopers. Unlike the 1960s assistance programmes, TACS placed less financial burden on the recipient countries.

It is therefore, quite in order to assert that Nigeria's foreign assistance efforts coincided with the advent of its political independence. In the past, technical assistance was an objective programme in the defence of Nigeria's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, especially in the area of pursuit of good and responsible neighbourliness. It was also a manifestation of the principle of restoration of human dignity to black people all over the world. This position was given practical expression in the sustained military assistance to liberate sister African countries. The Congo and the Tanzanian missions among others are the examples that readily come to mind.

There were also assistance of various grants, investments, donations and transfers of manpower, under financial, technical, economic, bilateral and multilateral understanding. This development is derived from the principle of:

creation of relevant political and economic conditions in Africa and the rest of the world, which will not only facilitate the preservation of the territorial integrity of all African countries but also foster national self reliance in African countries (Olusanya and Akindele, 1986).

However, TACS shared the general spirit of assistance as an instrument of Nigerian foreign policy since independence. TACS therefore, in particular was a response to prevailing domestic and external imperatives. At the domestic level, it responded partly to the need to cut down on monetary and material assistance to other countries, when Nigeria itself was immersed in serious economic crisis. It was also designed to address, in some degree, the problems of graduate unemployment in Nigeria by providing highly qualified Nigerian professionals with opportunities for gainful employment abroad (Adeniji, 2004).

At the external level, the TACS filled well into the context of south-south cooperation as a strategy for promoting African and Third World Development. This was especially important considering the economic crisis that was sweeping across Africa, and the need for these countries to design an African alternative to externally imposed programmes of economic reform. The TACS was also expected to promote the image of Nigeria abroad, particularly in the face of consistent campaign of calumny against Nigeria by the western press (Adeniji, 2004; Alabi, 1988).

The foreign policy thrust in the area of economic development and foreign direct investment was anchored on 'economic diplomacy'. The administration's 'economic diplomacy' was designed primarily to articulate the improved investment climate in Nigeria and abroad and to explain the numerous incentives Nigeria has put in place to encourage and induce the flow of capital to Nigeria for bankable and profitable investment (MEA, 1989). Although one of the guiding goals and objectives of Nigerian foreign policy since independence had been to contribute towards efforts at achieving national economic development and redressing the existing disequilibrium in the international political and economic system, the case has been that foreign policy emphasis weighted heavily in favour of political matters such as decolonisation, apartheid, non-alignment, arms race and related Cold War issues (MFA, 1992).

The period, 1985-1993, therefore changed the orientation of Nigerian foreign policy from political emphasis to economic issues. Thus, as for most dynamic foreign policy thrusts of the period, the revenue from oil has been one of the greatest catalysts that inspired economic self-confidence which eventually provided a useful plank for the country's 'economic diplomacy'. Other catalysts were the prevailing economic problems in the country which brought with it high rate of unemployment, leading to all kinds of social and economic vices like armed robbery incidents, economic and other financial crimes, which further soiled Nigeria's image among its global friends and enemies alike. It is in the attempt to confront such real and identified vices that the administration sought to operate a progressive and dynamic foreign policy.

But one of the major concerns of scholars in the field of Nigeria's international economic relations, particularly before 1986, has been the absence of a conscious policy to attract foreign investments. Therefore, the revitalization and rejuvenation of Nigerian foreign policy in our period was basically to achieve the desired economic developments. For this reason, it became necessary that the new thrust of the country's international economic relations be anchored on the policy of 'economic diplomacy', with the basic objectives of fostering greater inflow of desired Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and expansion of foreign trade (Badejo, 1990).

Nigeria's resolve to assert her position in the international community did not stop with the Concert of Medium powers. The country in earnest also started a policy of constructive engagement in peace making and peace building particularly at the regional level. The policy of constructive engagement manifested in Nigeria's involvement in peacemaking efforts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, both sister countries in the Mano-River Union. Nigeria's role in bringing to an end the crisis in both countries is in consonance with the promise of modernization and democracy, which the country made at independence in October, 1960. Historically, before the crisis in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Nigeria had participated in various forms of military assistance programmes. This involvement can be divided into three major categories (Vogt and Ekoko, 1993). These included the United Nations organized peace keeping missions, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) (now the African Union – AU) organized peace-keeping and lastly military assistance between Nigeria and some African countries.

The differences are that the former is global in nature, while the latter is regional in character. The last is absolutely bilateral. This historical excursion is a confirmation of the fact that peace-building and peace-keeping to achieve peaceful coexistence both within and outside Africa is not a new phenomenon to Nigeria and its military machine. Therefore, Nigeria's involvement in both Liberian and Sierra-Leonean crises is a manifestation of the country's beliefs in keeping with the African tradition of 'our brothers' keeper' because the security of our neighbour is also our security. Successive Nigerian governments have since taken this principle as a challenge and the leaders of government had behaved to type.

3. Conclusion

Whatever the type of government, military autocracy or civilian democracy, Nigerians have never wavered from the conception of a natural right to lead Africa. It is clear that there may be disagreement on means and methods of achieving such set goals, but like the Americans in the western hemisphere, Nigerians see it as the country's 'manifest destiny' to lead Africa in all ramifications. It is in this respect that Nigeria as the arrow-head, led other West African nations like Ghana, Gambia, Guinea, Senegal, etc to the Mano River region to stop the carnage that was tearing apart the once peaceful region.

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