

Ihafa: A Journal of African Studies 8: 2
December 2016, 1-16

Nigeria and ECOWAS since 1999: Continuity and Change in Multilateralism and Conflict Resolution

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Abstract

Nigeria, the West African local hegemon, has been actively involved in the integration process and stability of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) sub-regional arrangement since 1975 when the organization was established. Though motivated by national interests in line with her foreign policy objectives, Nigeria's role in ECOWAS was even more profound particularly in her genuine, benevolent, hegemonic peacekeeping and peace-enforcement operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone. However, since the beginning of the Fourth Republic in 1999, the country's position, especially on commitment towards peacekeeping and enforcement operations as a strategy for the resolution of West African armed conflict, has been passive. It is against this background that this article interrogates continuity and changes in Nigeria-ECOWAS relations since the democratic dispensation of the Fourth Republic. The study upholds the fact that a fundamental issue, which has influenced Nigeria's unwillingness and unenthusiastic stance in the use of force and huge financial contributions in ECOWAS intervention in West Africa

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armed conflicts, is because majority of Nigerians back home consider such adventure as wasteful for a country that lacks critical infrastructure and basic amenities. Closely related to this is the fact that democratic and civilian regimes are more vulnerable to pressure from public opinion, parliament, and the press. This brings to bear the nexus between foreign policy, public opinion, and domestic politics. The study concludes that Nigeria government must improve domestic situation in order to enjoy popular support for her ECOWAS objective of regional stability.

Keywords: ECOWAS; hegemon; foreign policy; peace-enforcement; conflict resolution.

1. Introduction

Since 1999, Nigeria has been actively involved in the promotion of West African sub-regional cooperation through the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS). The unending hostile international system as well as the struggle over scarce and finite resources compelled countries to interact in line with their national interests through multilateralism. This readily explains Nigeria's participation in West African sub-regional integration. The success of a sub-regional organization such as ECOWAS also requires the tremendous support from the local sub-regional hegemon, Nigeria, to actualize its objectives. This paper therefore examines the dynamic nature and changing pattern of interactions between Nigeria and the ECOWAS since the Fourth Republic. The essay also explored some historical antecedents, which have influenced the intensity, changing pattern as well as Nigeria's commitment towards the ECOWAS.

2. Nigeria and the formation of ECOWAS

Nigeria was very actively involved in the formation of the ECOWAS on 28 May 1975. This was motivated by certain imperatives that govern the conceptualisation and conduct of the country's foreign policy towards her regional neighbours. These

imperatives include; defence and protection of Nigeria's territorial integrity and sovereignty from both internal and external aggression. In addition, peaceful co-existence and maintenance of good neighbourliness and friendship with countries it shares contiguous boundaries (be it land, air or waters); and concerns about stability as well as economic integration in the West African sub-region (Bassey and Nyonge 2012:271-290). These obviously interlocking and coterminous elements, coupled with the ever-growing population of the country, defined the behaviour and realistic analysis of Nigeria's role in the regional integration process in the sub-region.

Equally important was Nigeria's quest for a sub-regional security and stability. The Nigerian Civil War opened the country's leaders to the precariousness and vulnerability of the country to its immediate Francophone countries, which are greatly influenced by France. In the course of the war, Cote d'Ivoire, a Francophone country, recognised the state of Biafra, while Benin Republic and Chad under the influence of France gave secret support to the secessionist Biafra state. Apart from Cote d'Ivoire, the French government assisted the Biafra forces through her former Francophone colonies. Thus, after the war, the Gowon administration, aware of the security threat Nigeria's immediate neighbours posed to the country's existence in addition to France's influence over the countries, initiated a platform that would unite Nigeria and countries in the sub-region, and thereby reduced France influence over its former colonies. Negotiations thereafter culminated in the formation of the ECOWAS in 1975 (Asiwaju 1984:33-34).

As previously mentioned, several reasons necessitated Nigeria's commitment to the ECOWAS and its member states. These range from its experience during the civil war (1967-1970) when France used Cote d'Ivoire in an attempt to break Nigeria via provision of support to the Biafra secessionists, economic factor and the desire to increase and enhance its unity

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and bargaining profile with the rest of the world. Former Nigerian military leader, Gen. Ibrahim Babangida, also adduced the factor of complex and interlocking security boundaries with West African countries, which makes Nigeria vulnerable to crisis that jeopardize the stability and prosperity of the country (Obuoforibo 2011:73-74).

It was these same reasons that prompted Nigeria to mobilize ECOWAS member states to invoke the 1981 Protocol on Mutual Assistance in Defense (originally designed to deal with external threats and aggression in the light of Cold War realities) to intervene in the Liberian Civil War and other subsequent interventions in Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire just to mention but a few.

With its huge population and resources, Nigeria's domestic market makes it a regional economic super power. It has also made the selling of oil at concessionary prices to poor ECOWAS member states to cushion the hardship precipitated by the global energy crisis of the early 1970s; thus, enhancing the country's position and influence in its efforts towards achieving sub-regional integration (Nwoke 2005:135-137). Nigeria has also made this same overture to Cote d'Ivoire a few years ago in its desperate fight against the phenomenon of illegal oil bunkering in which the latter was alleged to have stolen from Nigeria.

3. Nigeria's commitment to ECOWAS objective

Different political administrations and leadership in Nigeria have committed to the ECOWAS objectives with varying degrees. One of such leader was General Olusegun Obasanjo, whose tenure as a military of Head of State spanned between 1976 and 1979. In the words of Abutudu, General Olusegun Obasanjo, then Nigerian military head of state, "with pronounced nationalist fervor", threw aside the long-term goals and spirit of sacrifice that the Gowon administration had shown

in the integration project and began to press for immediate benefits for Nigeria (Nwachukwu 1991:33-36).

First, General Obasanjo raised objections to a situation whereby Nigeria was contributing over 35 percent of the organization's annual budget. The proportion of Nigeria's contribution was thereafter reduced to 25 percent. Moreover, the Obasanjo government emphasized the need for commensurate benefits with the burden borne by Nigeria through its enormous commitment to ECOWAS. Concerning where the sub-regional body's headquarters would be located, the then Head of State demanded that it should be located in Nigeria, despite earlier agreement between General Gowon and Eyadema for the organization to be located in Togo. For Obasanjo, whatever policy Nigeria is pursuing in ECOWAS and the sub-region must be benefit-driven for the country and its peoples (Jinadu 2005:17-19). Furthermore, Obasanjo formulated new and more stringent criteria for providing foreign aid to West African countries. The new criteria were as follows:

- a. Promotion of national interest (45%)
- b. Taking into account high and middle level manpower in Nigeria (20%);
- c. Contributing to national economy and creating productive capacity for Nigeria (25%); and
- d. Providing relief during disasters and national emergencies in the recipient country (10%) (Bolarinwa 2005:211-216).

In sum, the spirit of sacrifice and selflessness, which characterized Gowon's orientation for the ECOWAS project was completely absent in Obasanjo's military regime. The indifferent posture from the Obasanjo's military regime continued into the President Shehu Shagari civilian administration as well as the General Muhammad Buhari military government. President Shagari embarked on a mass

expulsion of a large number of West Africans, described as “illegal aliens”, in response to the fundamental structural crisis in which Nigeria was enmeshed by 1983. The anti-regionalism stance was given a military flavour when, in April 1984, Buhari closed all of Nigeria’s land borders. The borders remained closed for about two years and the measure was justified in terms of the exercise of changing the national currency, which was an ongoing and anti-smuggling policy, and response to other criminal practices that were sabotaging the Nigerian economy (Dauda 2013).

Nigeria also banned food exports to ECOWAS member states. The impact of this was seriously felt among Nigeria’s neighbours to the West such as Benin, Togo, and Ghana. Nigeria’s trade relations with these countries were virtually brought to a halt. This situation was further aggravated in May 1985 when the Buhari administration embarked on a mass expulsion of about one million “illegal aliens” mostly of Ghanaian origin. Interestingly, this was done just about two months to the crucial ECOWAS Summit where arrangements for the second stage of the ECOWAS Free Movement policy were to be finalized. The actions of Shagari and Buhari were later re-visited by the Babangida regime on 25th August 1986 and thereafter relapsed.

However, despite the ambivalence of some Nigerian leaders towards ECOWAS some years back, what is not in question is that ECOWAS provides the Nigerian government the platform to promote the country’s socio-cultural, economic, and political interests. Nigeria’s leadership role in the sub-region had enabled ECOWAS to respond effectively to intra-state conflict in West Africa. The formation of ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), through the initiative of Nigeria’s Head State, General Ibrahim Babangida, in 1990 was instrumental to addressing intra-state conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone. The

same pattern continued under Abacha and Abdulsalami administrations, respectively.

4. Continuity and change in Nigeria-ECOWAS relations since 1999

It is truism in International Politics that foreign policy is an extension of domestic politics (Osuntokun 2015:353). This assertion is true because the impact of domestic politics in the years shortly after 1999 has tremendously influenced the ways and manner Nigeria conducts her external affairs with ECOWAS. The reality is that democratic and civilian regimes are more vulnerable to pressure from public opinion, parliament, and the press.

Hence, unlike the military juntas of Bangagida, Abacha, and Abudsalami when Nigeria bore the burden of ECOWAS particularly with military interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the country's approach toward similar development from 1999 has been markedly different under President Olusegun Obasabjo, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, and Goodluck Ebele Jonathan administrations (Aworawo 2011:386-404). Indeed, Nigeria was actively involved in attempt to find lasting solution to the crisis and disagreements that engulfed Cote d' Ivoire shortly after Gbagbo refused to hand over power to Alassane Ouattara after the latter's electoral victory in November 2011.

The three successive administrations of Obasanjo, Yar'Adua and Jonathan explored the multilateral channel of ECOWAS to help in the resolution of the crisis. Accordingly, Obasanjo worked with his Ghanaian counterpart, President John Kuffor, in reaching a peace agreement that was later abandoned by parties to the conflict. Thus, Nigeria's involvement in the resolution of the Ivorian conflict through ECOWAS was limited to diplomatic approach during Obasanjo era. As a result, when the Sub-regional organization decided to send a one-thousand-five-hundred-strong force to join the French peacekeepers in Cote

d'Ivoire, Nigeria declined to participate in the operation in January 2003. Consequently, ECOWAS troops came only from Benin, Gambia, Niger, Ghana and Togo.

In a related development, Nigeria equally declined to feed her forces in ECOWAS-led military operation in Guinea-Bissau. Instead, the country chose a diplomatic approach. The absence of the regional local hegemon, Nigeria, from ECOMOG forces, which involved the smaller countries was responsible for the premature termination of the operation just after four months (Osuntokun 2008:141-150).

The approach was very different from the position the Nigerian government took when the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone broke out in the late 1980s and during the 1990s (Sanda 2012:411-413). In those instances, Nigeria took the lead and sent by far the largest contingent in addition to bearing more than three-quarters of the cost of the operations (Adebajo 2008:178-180). The stance maintained by Obasanjo towards the Ivorian crisis was continued under the Umaru Yar'Adua and Goodluck Jonathan administrations from 2007 to 2015. For one thing, Yar'Adua and Jonathan experienced different problems before securing the presidency and they were first preoccupied with establishing their legitimacy and promoting national stability. Yar'Adua had become president after a very controversial election, which many believed was rigged and Jonathan assumed Nigeria's leadership first as Acting President after the sickness and death of Yar'Adua and the controversies it created (Aworawo 2011:23-27).

In addition to all these, Nigeria has been confronted with varieties of problems of its own, particularly the Boko Haram insurgency which these leaders struggled to solve, with very modest success. Under these circumstances, the logical option by the Nigerian leaders was to follow the approach of minimal involvement in the Ivorian crisis that Obasanjo had adopted. Some analysts of Nigeria's foreign relations have expressed the view that Nigeria's position on, and involvement in the

resolution of the Crisis in Cote d'Ivoire was less than impressive, especially under the Obasanjo presidency during which period much of the fighting in the country took place.

One aspect that has been emphasized is the fact that, apart from Nigeria's nonmilitary involvement, the country did not play its usual leadership role even in the diplomatic aspect as well. For instance, it was France that helped to negotiate the Linas-Marcoussis Accord (LCLMA) in January 2003, while Ghana took the initiative in the negotiations leading to the signing of the Accra III Agreement in July 2003. As the Ivorian crisis lingered, South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki took the lead in organizing an AU-sponsored peace talks among Ivorian leaders leading to the signing of the Pretoria Agreement in April 2005. Even much less-powerful African states such as Burkina Faso seized the initiative at some point and Burkinabe President, Blaise Compaoré did organize negotiations leading to the conclusion of the Ouagadougou Agreement in March 2007, just as the Togolese leader Gnassingbe Eyadema had done in 2001. None of the negotiations were arranged by Nigerian leaders, except under the auspices of the ECOWAS or the AU. This has led to the conclusion by some that Nigeria's policy towards West Africa changed from the period of the Obasanjo government, considering the fact that in 1999, just a few months after taking office, President Obsanjo also declined to send troops to support peace-keeping in Guinea-Bissau. And it was also during this period that many Nigerian soldiers were withdrawn from Sierra Leone.

Attempts have been made to explain Nigeria's attitude towards involvement in the Ivorian crisis. According to Aworawo (2011:22-26), the difficulties encountered by Nigeria's involvement in the crises in Liberia and Sierra Leone and negative attitude to such extensive involvement by a large section of the Nigeria society were the dominant influences. In fact, such intervention was unpopular with the Nigerian public.

That coupled with the failure to achieve swift success in Liberia and Sierra Leone had major deficiencies within the military. Against the backdrop of experiences from Liberia and Sierra Leone, Obasanjo refused to commit Nigeria's soldiers. In other words, Nigeria had become peace-keeping-wearied and the policy adopted by the government was in line with popular feelings and public opinion in Nigeria.

Some others have contended that the Nigerian government carefully considered all the issues and the complexities of the Ivorian crisis and concluded that military intervention would not be the right option. The Nigerian authorities reckoned that apart from the huge financial and human costs, which the country could not afford at the time, military intervention would have been interpreted by parties to the conflict to mean support for one group against the other. In addition, considering the large number of Nigerians in Cote d'Ivoire, intervention would spell disaster, as Nigerians in the country would surely be targeted for attack by one or more of the rebel groups.

The fact that France was already deeply involved in the resolution of the crisis in both military and diplomatic forms, the attitude of Cote d'Ivoire towards Nigeria during the Nigerian Civil War, and the fact that Cote d'Ivoire does not occupy a particularly important strategic calculations, would have been other reasons. Be that as it may, what is beyond dispute is that Nigeria's position on the Ivorian crisis was a reflection of the changing pattern of Nigeria's policy towards West Africa since the early 2000s. Nigeria's response to a similar crisis in Guinea-Bissau in 1999 confirms this.

As already noted, the Yar'adua and Jonathan administrations maintained a similar policy up to 2015. It is nevertheless gratifying to note that bilateral relations between Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire remained cordial all through the period of the Ivorian Civil War. While some may accuse Nigeria of not doing enough, hardly can anyone accuse the Nigerian government of

doing anything to worsen the already complex crisis. It is also important to stress that Nigeria took some positions on the Ivorian crisis that reflected commitment to high ideals by insistence on a government that would be democratically elected by Ivorians and on a government that would be committed to the rule of law.

Thus, the Nigerian government condemned Guei's military coup in 1999 and the attempt to truncate the democratic process in 2000. A similar position was maintained in 2010 when Laurent Gbagbo, who had benefited from a popular democratic uprising in 2000, which brought him to power, refused to hand over power to Alassane Ouattara that had been declared winner by the electoral commission.

Indeed, President Jonathan along with other ECOWAS leaders threatened to use military force to remove Gbagbo to bring to an end the Ivorian crisis in March 2011 (*The Nation*, 2011:60). Nigeria's consistency in sticking to ideals rather than supporting individuals in the Ivorian crisis has endeared her to many in political and diplomatic circles not only in Cote d'Ivoire but across Africa. This should promote even closer ties.

Intra-regional trade is yet another area of interactions between Nigeria and ECOWAS since the beginning of the Fourth Republic. Nigeria has the largest trade volume within the sub-region. Nigeria's major trading commodity to the international market is crude oil. Yet all the ECOWAS member states cannot consume up to 10% of total oil production from Nigeria. This has accounted for very little trade between Nigeria and ECOWAS since 1999. For instance, in 2000, only about 6% of Nigeria's exports (mainly oil) was traded with ECOWAS members. Most of the oil went to Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire. On the other hand, less than 2% imported goods (mainly from Benin, Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire) came from ECOWAS to Nigeria. This has accounted for very little trade between Nigeria and ECOWAS since 1999. Though there is a lot of informal

trade in smuggled goods from Benin to Nigeria. In terms of formal trade, imported goods such as cars, manufactured goods, machinery, chemicals, beverages, tobacco and cereals to Benin are thereafter re-exports to Nigeria (Oche and Charles 2003:366-371).

However, Nigeria's export to the ECOWAS region, which averaged about 7 percent of its total exports between 2001 and 2006, plummeted to 2.3 percent in 2010. The share of other ECOWAS countries in Nigeria's imports also dropped from 4.4 percent in 2009 to less than 0.5 percent in 2010 (Nwokoma 2010:225-227). In addition, only 2% of total Nigeria exports and 3% of total imports are within the region. This, however, makes it difficult for Nigeria to use ECOWAS market as a catalyst for economic development.

A major factor hindering the Nigerian government from exploiting the ECOWAS economic potentials has to do with non-tariff barriers. Non-tariff barriers constitute the most significant hindrances to integration and trade in West Africa. They include government instruments, such as, import prohibition and quota restrictions. Non-trade barriers are divided into official (operationalized by the government) and unofficial barriers. Government motivated by non-tariff barriers have been maintained by more than half of ECOWAS states as an instrument for trade control. Import prohibitions and quota restrictions have featured regularly in the trade policy processes of West African countries, a contradiction to the principles on which ECOWAS was established. For instance, Nigeria still maintains import prohibitions on some products, including those originating from ECOWAS member states (Ogaba 2010:186).

In terms of sectorial coverage, Nigeria import prohibitions have included agricultural products such as fruits, vegetables, grains, meat and fish in addition to rubber, wood, textiles and various chemicals. Unofficial non-tariff barriers, which directly impede trade facilitation, include bureaucracy, corruption in

customs processes, slow port operations, poor roads and communication infrastructures, just to mention but a few. The ills associated with the unofficial non-tariffs barriers had over the years constituted a major predicament hindering some business organisations and individuals as well as some government agency involved in promoting economic development in Nigeria from the sub-region.

In the area of telecommunication, Nigeria had, since the dawn of the new millennium, benefited from investment cutting across the sub-region. Nigeria's private-owned telecomm company namely Globalcom not only provides telecomm services to Nigeria but also, in some West African countries such as Benin Republic and Ghana (Aribisala 2015:2). The economic advantages of ECOWAS for Nigeria's economic development are enormous. However, the absence of basic infrastructure that would galvanize domestic economic development in the sub-region had made it difficult, if not impossible for Nigeria to achieve this goal. Indeed, Nigeria possesses all that is required to be an economic powerhouse in the sub-region. However, the country's leaders are yet to show commitment to the actualization using the ECOWAS as an extension of Nigeria's economic development.

The inherent weakness of the Nigerian domestic economic environment, which focuses primarily on crude oil as the mainstay of the Nigerian economy, has in many ways hindered the country from asserting herself economically in the sub-region. Furthermore, the absence of stable power has been one of the major banes indicating why Nigeria is struggling economically to assert herself in the sub-region. By the time all these issues are addressed, the Nigerian state, her citizenry, and business organisations will benefit maximally from the sub-region, by exploring ECOWAS as a springboard for economic development.

5. Conclusion

This paper has dispassionately examined the changing patterns of Nigeria's sub-regional cooperation through ECOWAS since 1999. It explored how the country's internal politics has shaped its interaction with ECOWAS. It concluded that Nigeria's approach since the beginning of the Fourth Republic has been more of diplomacy conducted through ECOWAS as opposed to the era of military intervention. In essence, and in many respects, the leadership style and public opinion have shaped continuity and change in Nigeria-ECOWAS relations since 1999.

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