NIGERIA – RUSSIA RELATIONS: Assessing the Historical Dialectics

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Abstract
This paper examines Nigeria – Russia relations with a view to ascertaining the prospects and areas of strength so as to advance the national interests of both countries. The Nigerian foreign policy has obviously been pro-west over the years. The reasons for this primarily stem from Nigeria’s colonial history which yoked the Nigerian political economy to the Western Capitalist economic system. As an independent nation, Nigeria professed non-alignment as a foreign policy choice. This places Nigeria in a position of neutrality and insulates her from being part of the bi-polar alliances which was dividing the world into two ideological blocs. In practical terms however, Nigeria maintained stronger relationship with Western countries despite an apparent more favourable disposition of the Russian State. Russia has over time proven to be a dependable Nigerian ally in the most challenging times in the history of the country. This paper therefore argues that Nigeria - Russia relations deserves a re-examination with a view to ascertaining the possibility of a more robust bilateral engagements which will better serve the interests of both countries. The paper briefly traced the historical bilateral dialectics of Nigeria and Russia since 1960. The paper found that Nigeria has a lot to gain partnering with Russia and concludes that Nigeria should not hesitate to key into the opportunities her interaction with Russia offers.

Keywords: Non-alignment, Western-bloc, Eastern-bloc

Introduction
Nigeria, being a former colony of the ‘West’ (Britain), had hiccups relating freely with the defunct USSR owing to the then cold war regime. Even though Nigeria professed non-alignment as a foreign policy, her political cum economic actions and inactions had always betrayed Nigeria’s pro-western disposition. This is clearly manifest in the foreign policy action under Tafawa Belawa when he signed an Anglo-defense pact that generated serious controversies heading to its abrogation in Jan. 22, 1962.

Aguiyi Ironsi, who succeeded Tafawa Belewa, sequel to the January, 1966 Coup could not stabilize his government before another coup consumed him in June, 1966. Gowon, who succeeded Ironsi in the aftermath of the second coup borrowed a leaf from Tafawa Belwa as far as Nigeria’s pro-western disposition is concerned. However, the outbreak of Nigeria’s civil war opened a new vistas for Nigeria – Russia relations. While the West were still cautious in coming to aid Nigeria prosecute the civil war, USSR (with Russia being the leading part) promptly took sides with the Nigerian federal government against the Biafran side. USSR, led by Russia provided Nigeria with logistics and mercenaries with which the Biafran secessionists were over-powered. This marked a new beginning in Nigeria - Russia (USSR) relations.
Nonetheless, many of subsequent Nigerian governments, looked the direction of the ‘West’ rather than the ‘East’ thereafter, so as not to incur the wrath of the ‘West’ whose economy already has strong linkages with the Nigerian economy. Besides, the Nigerian economy had difficult times at about the same time the Russian economy was passing through serious difficulties owing to the challenges of the then Soviet ideological orientation and the attendant reforms. The eventual collapse/disintegration of the USSR and the circumstances leading to the rebirth of the Russia federation all affected Nigeria - Russia relations. This paper therefore examines the Nigeria - Russia relations from the historical dialectics so as to determine the potentials and directions that could possibly advance Nigeria’s and Russian interests.

The Russian Historical Dialectics

The Russian state which emerged as a dominant force in the globe evolved through conquests and annexation of neighbouring territories. From time immemorial, the Russian state had all the trappings of an authoritarian regime. The state operated absolute monarchy and high concentration of power in the hands of the Tzar until the Bolsheviks revolution of 1917. “The doctrines that rulers should be accountable to the ruled and that sovereignty resides in the will of the people were alien to Russian State tradition” (Almond, G. et al; 2014:370). The Bolshevik revolution instituted a socialist state in Russia. Under the newly enthroned government of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the state owned and controlled all the important economic assets. The Communist party controlled all levels of government. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin who became the leader of the Communist Party, was the Head of the Soviet Union’s government until his death in 1924.

Joseph Stalin who succeeded Lenin, move further to alienate the people from their government as he struggled to strengthen his grip on power. This gradually bred frustration and corruption within the system. Almond et al (2004) succinctly argues that the problem was that vast as the Soviet state’s power were, they were frustrated by bureaucratic inflexibility. The scholars went on to explain that as in any organization, over-centralization undermine actual power, through distortions of information flow, tacit resistance to the center’s order by officials at lower levels, and the force of inertia. The Soviet economy suffered great decline on account of these. Almond et al (2004) also observes that by the early 1980s, the economy had stopped growing and the country found itself unable to compete militarily or economically with the advanced countries of the West.

Seeing all these, Mikhail Gorbachev, when elected the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1985, took advantage of the powers of his position to effect some reforms to open up the system – glasnost. Gorbachev projected such issues as the relevance of market relations, pragmatism of state economic policies, and openness in government as essentials for state’s economic development and improved standard of living. Gorbachev’s reforms legalized private ownership and control of important means of production, thereby reversing the very fundamental ideas upon which the Soviet state was based under the socialist era. He also advocated for constitutionalism in the state. This catalyzed a lot of political cum economic changes and set the stage for the new Russian federation within the international community.

Nigeria – Russia Relations: Historical Background

Nigeria-Russia relations dates back to 1961 when Russia opened its embassy in Lagos shortly after Nigeria’s independence. Nigeria reciprocated this gesture by opening her own embassy in Moscow in 1962 with Ambassador C.O Ifeagwu as the Head (Abimbola; 2016). The establishment of these embassies by the two countries marked the beginning of a bilateral relationship between Nigeria and Russia. This also coheres with the Nigeria’s non-alignment posture given that it marked an establishment of a formal relationship with the Eastern bloc. By virtue of Nigeria’s colonial history, it already had political cum economic ties with the Western bloc. As at the time of Nigeria’s independence, the world was divided along ideological lines. While the Western bloc known as the ‘North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)’ propagated capitalism as a political cum economic system, the Eastern bloc under the auspices of the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) advocated socialism. Nigeria, among some other countries opted for non-alignment as a policy guiding international politics. This essentially implies neutrality and freedom to relate with countries from either side of the divide.

However, the cordial relationship that started with these opening of diplomatic relations between USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republic) now regarded as Russia and Nigeria shortly after Nigeria’s independence in 1961 and 1962
continued till date but not without some challenges. The cordial relationship between Russia and Nigeria was manifest early in Nigeria’s efforts to exterminate colonialism and apartheid regime in Africa.

Beyond Nigeria, the involvement in Africa of the Soviet Union for which Russia is the principal successor state came on the heels of the continents political independence. During the ‘60s and ‘70s, the Soviet Union was a critical partner to Africa, especially in giving drift to the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid rule in the continent (Obasekola; 2011:1).

The scholar explained that even though that not all the freedom-fighters of the continent shared the soviet communist ideology, the material and political support of the USSR contributed in no small way to the eventual collapse of colonialism in the continent. Despite professing non-alignment as a policy framework guiding international politics, Nigeria was undoubtedly pro-west in her external relations At the early stage of Nigeria’s independence, between 1960 and 1966, Nigeria’s foreign policy was manifestly designed to protect the interests of the Western Capitalist countries led by Britain (the Colonial Master) and America. Nigeria limited the size of the Soviet mission and was reluctant to accept aid from the Soviet side (Abimbola; 2016). Even as some of Nigeria’s political elites and organized labour were agitating for closer tie with Russia, Nigeria’s ruling elites were mostly anti-Soviets. Communist literatures were banned and no Nigerian students were cleared to study in Russia except those who found their ways to Soviet Union by passing through Nigeria’s neighbouring countries (Eze, 2002; Abimbola; 2016).

In the wake of the political crises that shook the foundation of Nigeria, Russia took side with the Federal government of Nigeria against the Ojukwu led secessionist Eastern Region. The eventual civil war that ensued between the Nigeria’s federal forces led by Gowon and the Biafran forces (ie Eastern Region Secessionist Side) led by Ojukwu forced the Nigeria’s federal government to establish a stronger diplomatic ties with Russia. “While the civil war rages, col. Gowon sent a special envoy to Kremlin to explain government’s position on the unraveling crisis and to inform the Soviet leadership of his administration’s desire to maintain and develop a friendly relation with the USSR” (Abimbola; 2016:327). Obasekola, (2011) explains that during the visit, a practical discussion based on increased trade between the two administrations during these period yielded a remarkable improvement in relationship of the two countries.

The civil war that broke out in Nigeria more-so offered Moscow an opportunity to become a primary arms supplier to Nigeria throughout the conflict. According to Abimbola (2016:327) “Nigeria needed Russia’s diplomatic and military support in its war efforts to defeat the secessionists”. Abimbola (2016) points out that Russia’s involvement on the side of the Federalists, introduced another momentum to the conflict, afforded Nigeria the opportunity to cultivate and widen diplomatic ties with the Eastern bloc, thereby giving impetus to her avowed non-alignment posture. Obasekola (2011), argues however that during the civil war, France and China took side with the Biafra (ie the separatist forces), while Britain and USSR backed the Nigerian Federal government. United States assumed cautions neutrality. It is pertinent to state that the assistance rendered by the Russian state during this war period obviously gave a new impetus to the Nigeria-Russia relationship. By the end of the civil war, with Nigeria emerging victorious, the Nigeria-Russia relations became more promising. Nigeria - Russia trade relations improved. Soviet made machines and equipment like cars, agricultural implements, home appliances and so on found their place in the Nigerian markets (Abimbola, 2016). Aerosflit Airlines (A Russian brand) started to operate constant commercial flight to Lagos. Obasekola (2011) noted that Russians became respectable expatriates in Nigeria for their scientific achievements which earned them successes in space technology and ammunitions.

This led to the signing of the following bilateral agreements between Russia and Nigeria: Agreement on air communication (1967); Agreement on economic, scientific and technical cooperation (1968); Agreement on cultural and scientific cooperation and exchanges (1970), Protocol on the equivalence of scientific degrees, diplomas and certificates issued and awarded by the educational institutions of the parties (1973), Agreement on economic and technical cooperation in the construction of a new metallurgical enterprise in Nigeria (1976), Trade agreement (1987), Agreement on the establishment of inter-governmental commission on trade, economic and scientific and technical cooperation (1989), Protocol on political consultations (1990), and Agreement on cooperation against illegal drugs and Psychotropic substances (1999). Reflecting on these, Abimbola (2016) observes that these agreements have led to different degrees of Soviet (Russian) involvement in Nigeria’s metallurgical development, Petroleum industry, geological surveys, public health
services and personnel training. Accordingly, two systems of oil pipelines of 920km with total output of 18.7 million tons per year were constructed by the USSR in 1977-1982 on conditions of general contract in Nigeria (Obasekola; 2011).

Also, the Russian technical assistance was sought by Nigeria in the geological survey works on metallurgical raw material (iron ore, coal, and non-metallic raw material) which was carried out between 1971-1983. This resulted to the establishment of a metallurgical complex including technical school for 652 pupils and the Technical Training College for an iron and steel industry for 1325 pupils in Warri, Delta State of Nigeria. In addition to this, a group of Russian medical doctors worked in cities across Nigeria between 1971 and 1980. Nigerians received education in USSR’s educational institutions from this period. Nonetheless, Abimbola (2016) observes that Soviet involvement in Nigeria, just like in many other African countries diminished greatly in the wake of Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika (reconstruction) of the middle 80s. According to the scholar, with the cold war waning and the soviet economy in shambles, the USSR had little incentive to continue its active presence in Africa.

Nigeria-Russia Relations in the New World Order

The period being referred to as the New World Order started with the end of cold war and characterized by unipolar system in the international politics. Russia, being a major player in the cold war, had to re-design her foreign policy in line with the New World Order. This implies that Nigeria-Russia relations beginning from this period may need to be re-shaped to reflect the contemporary realities. To concretize the period in question, here, we shall be looking at Nigeria-Russia Relations from the collapse of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) in 1991 till date.

The Soviet state, marked throughout its brief but tumultuous history by great achievement and terrible suffering, died today after a long and painful decline, it was 74 years old, conceived in utopian promise and born in the violent upheavals of the “Great October Revolution of 1917”, the union heaved its last in the dreary darkness of late December 1991, (The New York Times, December 26, 1991).

For Abimbola (2016), the collapse of the Soviet Union was a great blow to the hopes and aspirations of the revolutionaries, the union came to an end in December 1991 following years of efforts to manage the growing domestic challenges of communist autonomous enclaves with the pragmatic program of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (reconstruction). Obviously, this period was largely characterized by economic upheavals occasioned by the challenges of integration into the global capitalist system. The domestic challenges faced by Russia adversely impacted on their foreign relations.

Russia therefore, basking in devastating economic quagmire and striped of its essential ideological disposition, had no choice but to reshape its foreign policies in line with the prevailing global trend. Agreeing to this, Agubamah (2014) posits that the disintegration of Soviet Union led to the collapse of the world socialist system, the Warsaw pact and the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA). Abimbola (2016) therefore summed that the collapse of the Soviet Union led to crises of a new world order, and eventually what many considered the triumph of capitalism and a new phase of capitalist development generally referred to as globalization.

The new Russia, given the far-reaching economic and political changes needed to re-create itself to remain relevant in the international system. In doing this, Russia has to redesign and re-focus its relationship with countries of the world which includes Nigeria considered to be a regional power in Africa. Nigeria, with an estimated population of 186 million (World Bank, 2017) and a landmass of 923,768km² with rich endowment of so many viable and untapped natural resources, presents an attractive partnership to a highly technologically advanced Russian federation. In the light of these, the few subsisting bilateral agreements between Nigeria and Russia were dusted. These include, Protocol on Political Consultations (1990), Agreement on Cooperation against illegal drugs and psychotropic substances (1999) and Agreement in the establishment of intergovernmental commission on trade, economic and scientific and technical cooperation (1989). According to Abimbola, (2016), these agreements have led to different degrees of Soviet (Russian) involvement in Nigeria’s metallurgy, petroleum industry, geological surveys, public health services and personnel training. Also part of the fallouts of this renewed Nigeria - Russia relations is the location of the ‘Renaissance capital’, a Russian financial-investment consultancy Group, in Lagos-

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Further, on Jan. 15, 2007, the Nigerian Russian Business Council was officially established with an aim to promote cooperation, collaboration and improvement of trade (The Nation News Paper; 2007). Before this time, the then Nigerian Minister for Foreign Affairs- Ojo Maduekwe visited Russia as a representative of the Nigerian federation and had a meeting with the then Russian Foreign Affairs Minister (Lavroy) with the Russia then president (Medvedev). Both reached agreements on pursuing the realization of the potentials of both countries in the trade and economic spheres, including execution of projects in infrastructures, ferrous and non-ferrous metals industry, electric power generation, and nuclear energy (Sputnik news: 2008). On June 24th, 2010 President Dmitry Medvedev of Russia visited Nigeria and had meetings with his Nigerian counterpart-President Umaru Musa Yar’A’dua (now late). The meeting between these two leaders, which actually was the first of its kind, produced six bilateral agreements (Abimbola; 2016). According to BBC news (2010), among the agreements are ‘Investment Promotion and Protection of Agreement (IPPA); Cooperation in the Field of Nuclear Energy for Peaceful Purposes.

Abimbola (2016) also points out that the Goodluck Jonathan Administration in Nigeria pitched tent with the Russian government to help Nigeria in the fight against terrorism when the administration noticed the cold-feet exhibited by the American government. This led to the signing of a memorandum on the interaction and cooperation between their security councils (The Herald; 2014). According to the scholar, Russia and Nigeria are cooperating in a joint gas reserves. He noted that Russia’s state-owned Gazprom has signed a $2.5bn (€1.53bn) deal with Nigeria’s state operated NNPC, to invest in a new joint venture to develop, extract and transport gas from Nigeria’s fields. Abimbola (2016) also notes that there is a memorandum of understanding between Russian Space Agency and Nigeria’s National Space Research and Development Agency (NASRDA). He explained that under the agreement, Russia will provide the human capacity building for Nigeria to achieve her plan to launch the first satellite outer space between 2015 and 2018. All these speak volume of the euphoria with which both countries reposition themselves in pursuit of their national interests.

The Prospects of Nigeria-Russia Relations

Apparently, Nigeria-Russia relations received renewed vigor between 1991 and 2017. This is manifest in the barrage of agreements entered into by the two countries. However, the extent to which these agreements have translated into visible or measurable benefits to the Nigerian state is a concern of this work. The paper therefore makes efforts to underpin the visible or measurable impacts of the Nigeria-Russia relations in the socio-political cum economic spheres of Nigeria. These would be underscored by examining the Nigeria - Russia relations as it affects education and capacity building; infrastructural development; Security; Science and Technology, and Trade.

In the area of education and capacity building, Nigerians benefited from the Bilateral Education Agreement (BEA) with Russia. A Nigerian, Ifesinachi Nelson Ezeh, made history when he completed his master’s degree in Agronomy at Saint Petersburg State Agrarian University in Russia by graduating with a Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) of 5.0, the highest the country has ever recorded (The Nationsonline.ng.net). The above mentioned source has it that Nelson arrived Russia for an undergraduate degree in 2008 with forty (40) other Nigerians who passed the federal scholarship exams as beneficiaries of the Bilateral Education Agreement (BEA) between Nigeria and Russia. Under this agreement, Russia pays the tuition fees while Nigeria takes care of the living costs for the students with a monthly stipend of $500 dollars. The paper reported that up to (350) three hundred and fifty Nigerians have benefited from this scholarship scheme from the thirty-six (36) states of the Nigerian federation. This clearly helps to build capacity of Nigerians to contribute positively to the development of the state.

In the area of security, Russian federation has been of immense support in Nigeria’s fight against Boko-Haram. According to Atuma (2017), Mr. Geoffrey Onyeama, Nigeria’s Foreign Affairs Minister, disclosed that Russia will deliver some helicopters and military equipment to Nigeria to aid the fight against Boko-Haram during his working visit in Moscow on the 2nd of June, 2017. It is pertinent to note that the Russian Federation came to Nigeria’s aid in her fight against this Boko-Haram insurgency even when Nigeria’s Western allies were hesitant to support her fight against insurgency. For Opurum (2017), Russia was the only available country to render the much needed assistance to Nigeria as she grapples with the fight against Boko-Haram, by selling arms, tanks, and helicopters to Nigeria when the so called allies abandoned her to her fate. Atuma (2017) of Sunnewsonline also reported that apart from providing assistance with military equipment, Russia
pledges to assist Nigeria in nuclear technology as part of the agreement signed in June 2017 in Moscow. According to Leadership News paper of July 13, 2017, Udovichenko said that his country would build a strong economic relationship with Nigeria while receiving the Managing Director, News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), Mr. Bayo Onanuga at the embassy. Udovichenko stated that Russia was ready to partner with Nigeria in its efforts to rebuild its economy.

To buttress his point, the Russian envoy pointed out that Russian major Oil Company - Gazprom, had entered into a joint venture partnership with the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) to exploit abundant gas resources in the country. The Russian envoy also noted that Russia is seriously mindful of the agreement signed between the two countries for the setting up of a nuclear research center in Nigeria which would eventually lead to the building of a nuclear plant within the next seven years. Leadership Newspaper also reported that Russian investment in Nigeria covers such areas as energy, iron and steel and hydrocarbon. The paper also reported that over the years, the diplomatic relationship between the two countries have witnessed the establishment of Russian – Nigerian Business Council (RNBC) which oversees economic activities between the two countries.

Conclusion

Nigeria – Russia relations hold great prospects. Nigeria’s partnership with Russia will generally advance Nigeria’s interest in the areas of technological advancement, security, energy and gas, infrastructural development and general capacity building. These areas are indeed central to the core values of the Nigerian state. The Nigeria -Russia relations will also benefit the Russian Federation immensely given Nigeria’s strategic political cum economic position in Africa. Russia has actually earned Nigeria’s confidence over the years, being the only super-power that readily comes to Nigeria’s aid during the critical times of need in the history of Nigeria. This was first manifested during the Nigerian civil war shortly after her independence from Britain. It was Russia that supported Nigeria with mercenaries, arms and ammunition even when the former colonial master (Britain) was reluctant. This scenario also played out again very recently. While Britain and America were hesitant in assisting Nigeria to combat the menacing Boko Haram insurgency, Russia provided the much needed supplies which enabled Nigeria to reasonably degrade the Boko Haram insurgency.

The Nigeria –Russia relations has seen Nigeria benefit in the areas of investment/partnership in Nigeria’s energy and gas sector. This holds a lot of promises for both countries. The Nigeria – Russia relations holds opportunities in the development of science and technology, and capacity building in Nigeria. This serves the interests of both countries as regional leaders and bolster the economies of both countries by contributing to the growth of the Gross Domestic Products (GDP) in the two countries. Nigeria has shown interest in building nuclear power plants, petroleum pipelines, railways, other infrastructure and agriculture. Both countries are also richly endowed with minerals which could form additional basis of commerce. These are special area that holds the potentials of advancing both countries national interests and economic growth.

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