NIGERIA’S SECURITY INTEREST IN WEST AFRICA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

IFEDAYO TOLU ELIZABETH

Department of International Relations and Diplomacy
Afe Babalola University, Ekiti State, Nigeria

Abstract

The art of external intervention as a strategy for conflict resolution and crisis management has been prominent since the end of the Cold War period in West Africa. This article examines the nature and impact of Nigeria’s led interventions in the internal affairs of Liberia and Sierra Leone through the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). Particularly, the article assessed Nigeria’s hegemonic role of ECOMOG and concludes with key lessons for the country’s intervention in West Africa. However, it recommends that Nigeria should be circumspective about how its gets involved in the internal affairs of other West African states, especially during crisis situations. It should also take cognizance of her domestic security challenges while trying to maintain peace in the sub-region. Policy makers and executors of Nigeria’s foreign policy should balance the country’s commitment to its external environment with her responsibility to the citizens and inhabitants for improved standard of living.

Introduction

In the contemporary world where inter and intra-state conflicts are a common phenomenon, security issues dominates discuss in West Africa’s sub-region, especially in the 1990s. This is as a result of political and economic instability and incessant military coups d’etat as well as social upheaval in the sub-region. Thus, analyzing Nigeria’s initiatives in stabilizing West Africa since the 1990s is a paramount focus of this article. In West African States, such as Liberia and Sierra Leone there were conditions which almost reduced both countries to graveyard until Nigerian led intervention. The Nigerian government could not also fold its arms where such conflicts could cause political and economic instability in the Nigerian state through the influx or refuges from such war-torn states. Therefore, a compelling reason is to bring about peace, security and order within the West African sub-region.

In a bid to end the civil war or carnage in Liberia, member nations of ECOWAS imposed on themselves the task of halting the killing by sending a multilateral peacekeeping force -- ECOMOG ranked as the most massive assemblage of foreign military hardware and troops in the West Africa cooperation, to the war ravaged Liberia (Vogt 1992). The formation of the ECOWAS Cease Fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) and the sending of this group to Liberia were spearheaded by Nigeria. The country not only donated the biggest contingent of troops, but also made available its military hardware and provided finance for the successful operation of the monitoring group.
The Concept of Peacekeeping Force

Alan James (1991) in his article titled “The Politics of Peace Keeping” looked into what peacekeeping force is, broadly. To start with, the concept of peacekeeping involves the maintenance of international peace and security with the ultimate purpose of reducing tension, diminishing the risk of direct involvement by a large number of countries, saving vast material resources and irreplaceable human lives. According to the International Peace Academy, peacekeeping force is described thus, as internationally organized and directed use of multinational forces of soldiers, police and civilians to remote and maintains peace. Alan James opines that peacekeeping ranges from observer missions to military deployment undertaken by international armies, down to the activities of an individual who has been sent to the field on some political task.

Danfulani (1997) in an article titled “Collective Security, Peacekeeping and Conflict Resolution in Africa: The ECOWAS-ECOMOG example” pointed out that the ECOMOG peacekeeping operations in Liberia is a classical example of a manifest regional effort at not only ensuring that the region assume the responsibility for its internal security, but also a demonstration that in keeping with the chapter VII, articles 52, sub-sections 1, 2, 3 of UN Charter, concerning regional military cooperation, the West Africa Economic Community is willing to limit possible escalation of the Liberian internal crisis.

Gbemiga Ogunleye (2007) posits that granting asylum to Taylor is in order because Nigeria as a major player in the sub-region has a duty to be her brother’s keeper. Also that Nigeria began the process of saving Liberians and Liberia in the 1980s through the leading role in the setting up of a regional peacekeeping force, ECOMOG and capped it up with establishment of a Liberian refugee camp in Nigeria. Therefore, Nigeria should not abandon Liberia now, because it is clear that if Taylor was not granted an asylum he would fight to the last man, with the attendant horrible cost in human lives. In her foreign policy principle, it is stated that Africa would be the cornerstone of the country’s external relations through commitments to functional approach as a means of promoting cooperation and peaceful coexistence in Africa.

More recently, especially in the 1980s, there has been an increasing realization that security issues predominate discuss in Africa, especially in West Africa. This realization arises from the fact that the presence of political instability was recognizes as an obstacle to meaningful economic integration and indeed to sustainable development in the region. Events of civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the coup d’etat in Sao Tome and Guinea Bissau even the revolts in Niger and Mali are evidence of problems that security is an important issues in West Africa.

Nigeria Intervention in West Africa Political Conflicts

Nigeria, the big brother of Africa and the human and financial strength of ECOMOG had always been called upon to intervene in Africa’s conflicts since she was called upon in Sao Tome and Guinea Bissau to intervene in their political crisis when the governments of the countries were toppled in a coup d’ etat. From 1967 under the Gen. Yakubu Gowon regime, Nigeria was faced with political instability and social upheaval. The secession tendency of the Eastern Region from the Nigerian federal structure resulted in a devastating civil war between the federal government and the Biafrans. It was the crash in Cameroon of the aircraft carrying arms and ammunition to the Ojukwu government in Enugu late in 1966 that first aroused the interest of the Federal
leaders in the internal affairs of their neighbours. After making investigations about the aircraft and its content, the Nigerian government also contracted other neighbouring countries, namely Dahomey (Benin Republic), Nigeria, Chad and Togo advising them not to support any attempt at the dismemberment of the country.

In the realm of external relations after the 1970s therefore, the experiences of the civil war were not lost. As a result of the security problems exposed by the war, Nigeria has since 1970 come to regard Africa as the “centerpiece” of her foreign policy and the spirit of good neighborliness was imbibed (Aluko 1989). The Federal Government began to regard the countries nearest to it as its special “area of concentration” in its foreign diplomacy and realized that the security of the country was tied to that of its neighbours. The federal government started to take special interest in the internal affairs of neighbouring countries to ensure that hostile force did not replace governments friendly to Nigeria.

In line with this trend, the Nigerian government started to show deep concern for peace and stability in its neighbouring states and thus, assumed the Big brother status. One of the methods adopted by Nigeria in furthering her African policy and the “Big brother status” was in giving aid to poorer African States (Fulani 1991). As a result of the oil boom, Nigeria became wealthy enough to grant aid for the developmental purposes of these poorer African states.

Nigeria had to be mindful of French capacity for harm and mischief. This is because Nigeria is strategically surrounded on all sides and shares contiguous borders with the Francophone states of Cameroon, Chad, Niger Republic and Benin Republic, in addition to several other Francophone states in West and Central Africa (Akinyemi 1999). Once the war erupted, France saw a golden opportunity to work for the dismemberment of the only Anglophone behemoth that served as a major obstacle to the achievement of its objective of complete and unfettered hegemony in Africa.

Thus France unduly accorded diplomatic recognition to Biafra and went ahead to provide military and material assistance to the rebels. It even attempted to use Nigeria’s contiguous neighbour especially Benin Republic for gun running to Biafra. It tried to persuade other former French colonies to throw in their support for the rebels. But Nigeria was fortunate in the sense that majority of Africa states, with the exception of Ivory Coast, Gabon, Tanzania and Zambia, saw the wisdom in adhering to the doctrine that the borders of African states inherited from colonialism were sacrosanct and thus could not be redrawn by force. Many of them realized that their own fragile multi-ethnic composition could also be threatened should the Biafra experiment be allowed to succeed. The reality is that many of them, operating from enlightened self-interest, pragmatically supported Nigeria’s federal Government. Nigeria learnt the valuable lesson that France, though a non-African nation, was really a power and great foe to content with.

Thus, Nigeria embarked on a policy of good neighborliness and the big brother status towards the surrounding countries. This new policy thrust manifested in Nigeria offering economic aid and technical assistance to a number of these neighbouring countries. Nigeria constructed road and bridges for Benin Republic. It provided interest-free loans and other economic assistance to needy states. It engaged in joint ventures, partnership and investments with Benin, Togo and Guinea. Nigeria supplied aid to drought-stricken Niger Republic and even sold petroleum at reduced process to a few other countries in Africa.
Nigeria’s “Big Brother” Role in the Sub-Region

The ideas behind Nigeria’s championing of ECOWAS demonstrated its concern for sub-regional unity, economic, technical and political cooperation. Ultimately, the aim was to reduce incessant and latent political and boundary problems, guarantee the member states a more respectable place in the international society, encourage a coordinated development and reduce their dependence on foreign powers. Nigeria has been actively playing prominent and outstanding roles by assisting countries within the sub-region and thus assumed a “Big brother” status in the African continent.

The composition of the ECOMOG peace keeping force, its funding and timing revealed Nigeria’s determination to play a crucial role in a crisis within its sphere of diplomatic concentration. The ECOMOG emerged out of Babangida’s political initiative and its operations were made possible largely by his government. However, the institution of ECOMOG and Nigeria’s piloting role in the enterprise became objects of intense public scrutiny. For instance there was that general suspicion that its lofty declaration about military humanitarianism notwithstanding, the objective of the Babangida administration in facilitating ECOMOG was to save his personal friend, Samuel Doe, while Babangida viewed this military adventure as a way to pursue a dynamic foreign policy which has Africa as its centrepiece (Okike 1997). The Liberian peace process was a Nigerian initiative through ECOWAS. It emerged as result of Nigeria’s diplomatic zeal vis-à-vis- her conception of leadership role which she had continued to play, both in terms of military and financial assistance put in place for the realization of the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group objectives. Thus it is certain that a precipitated decision by Nigeria to withdraw from this operation would most certainly lead to its collapse. More so, Nigeria’s dominant role is not tantamount to the presupposition of a Nigerian solution as consultations had continued between the members of the ECOWAS and negotiation had been organized between all the warring factions in Liberia.

The intervention of Nigeria in the Sierra Leonean crisis generated serious debate, there were two opposing view to Nigeria’s role in the crisis. While some people are in support of her role some are not in support. To those that supported, they believed that Nigeria’s role was based on humanitarian intervention because at the time Nigerian troops got into Sierra Leone, there existed no government in the country. Alhaji Tejan Kabbah had been ousted and Koromah was as an illegal head of state (Fawole 1999). Nigeria resolved then, that since she had the role of leadership to play in the continent, she cannot therefore allow the murder of the nascent democracy that was put in place in that country. She cannot afford to be a spectator when events affecting national security are taking place in the sub-region considering her influential status in the sub-region she was in the best position to tame the crisis. Besides, the demands for peace and security challenges in West Africa demanded the aggressive pursuit of Nigeria foreign policy which is consistent with the policy of being “Our brother’s keeper”.

With the overwhelming ECOMOG troops coming from Nigeria the role of the West African expeditionary force became controversial. It was believed by some people that the force was pursuing Nigeria’s agenda; this was due to the unilateral and domineering action of ECOMOG in the crisis. To buttress the points of those who belong to this school of thought, they contested that Nigeria’s military role may not be justified under International Law, because the worldwide condemnation of the coup had its own legal and political consequences. Also, military option should be weighed against diplomatic settlement in any peacekeeping operation, because the eventual outcomes of military intervention usually have an adverse effect on the population in
terms of the economy and material cost to the people. The legacies of Nigeria’s past leaders is been followed in Nigeria’s foreign policy position in the sub-region particularly whenever national interest is at stake and importantly when the integrity of the black man is involved. Her role in Sierra Leone crisis should be considered against this background.

General Abacha inherited the activism of General Babangida’s legacy of dynamic activism that regarded the country as a great nation despite the poor economy (Fawole 1997). The decision of sending Nigerian troops was therefore believed to be consistent with the country’s foreign policy. Nigeria’s role in the West African sub-region is a giant and bold step in her foreign policy. Fortunately enough, Nigeria has been able to restore democracy at last considering the fact that her role in the crisis was blatantly criticized since it started in a military regime, even coming at a time when she had become a pariah nation.

On the issue of granting asylum to Charles Taylor (Akinbobola 2007) of the Department of Political Sciences, University of Lagos, said in an interview with a reporter of The Punch newspaper that Nigeria is a signatory to the Geneva Convention. Nigeria has an abiding commitment, as it were, to be sensitive to the needs of refugees who feel insecure in their countries who are seeking for protection in Nigeria. Even though Charles Taylor has not applied for asylum in Nigeria, but Nigeria had to offer or grant the asylum to Charles Taylor perhaps, as a way of limiting the scope of the expansion of the crisis and war in Liberia. What President Obasanjo did was based on humanitarian consideration and of Nigeria’s security (The Punch 2007). If the situation in Liberia was allowed to persist, it may threaten the existence of peace and stability in the neighbouring countries through the influx of refugees who are mostly young people, some of whom are under fifteen years who had been used to carrying weapons and had been killing people. They may begin to perpetrate all kinds of atrocities in their host country, and this may possibly spread to other countries in the sub-region, including Nigeria, thereby creating a threat to her national security.

The asylum granted Charles Taylor was a decision that went in the right direction, and designed to stop the violence and restore peace in Liberia. It is certain that if Taylor was not granted the asylum, he would fight to the last man. A member of the House of Representative in Imo State stated that though Charles Taylor was never a friend of Nigeria but that it was very crucial that Nigeria played the role she played in granting asylum to the former war lord in order to stop the escalation of the hostilities to other West African countries. And since Nigeria is a force to be reckoned with in the West African sub-region, it was important that she played her big brother role.

Nigeria’s intervention in sub-regional crises can be justified in terms of protecting her national interest. Erstwhile military President Ibrahim Babangida went on to justify the intervention in the Liberian crisis when he said:

> There is no gain saying that when certain events occur in this sub-region, depending on their intensity and magnitude, which are bound to affect Nigeria’s politico-military and socio-economic environment, we should not stand by as helpless and
hapless spectators.

The general belief was that events as they were unfolding in Liberia had the potential to jeopardize sub-regional peace and security but more importantly affect Nigeria’s own national interest as the most prominent state in the Community. This might not have been unconnected with the Libyan involvement in the crisis in Liberia. The Liberian warlord, Charles Taylor, reportedly received military training and considerable military, financial and logistical assistance from Colonel Muammar Gadafﬁ of Libya to launch his offensive against the Samuel Doe government in December 1989 (Vogt 1992). To allow such externally backed insurgency to succeed carried grave consequence for the survival of weak regimes in the sub-regions. Babangida’s explained further:

The whole ideology rests on the fact that if we allowed
a force from outsider to come in and cause instability in
Liberia, chances are that such instability would spread
into other neighbouring countries in the West Africa
region. We the West African leaders said we were not
going to allow such a thing to happen, where anybody
will just walk into the sub-region and take over control,
also the leaders quite rightly decided that in order to
ensure peace and stability in the sub-region,
something has got to be done and this is what motivated
everybody to get into Liberia.

Perhaps what General Babangida was also referring to was the avoidance of a situation where any foreign-backed civilian insurgent group could take up arms to destabilize de facto regimes in West Africa, a scary development that had to be dealt with before it had a chance to become a precedent to be exploited by other disgruntled groups seeking political relevance. There is no doubt that General Babangida and other sub-regional rulers were uncomfortable with the fact that the Taylor rebellion had the military and financial backing of Libya, a country from outside the sub-region (Guraba 1997).

**Conflicts in the Sub-Region: The Implications for Nigeria**

No matter the skepticism surrounding this explanation, there was no doubt that the Liberian crisis had implications for Nigeria. In the first instance, the influx of refugees into Nigeria was a problem that had to be addressed. Nigeria could not pretend that the situations were not graphic
enough to warrant some form of attention. The raging inferno that Liberia was then fast becoming threatened to destabilize the entire sub-region. The very objective of economic integration for which Nigeria had made sacrifices was about to be derailed with the possibility of the Liberian crisis spreading to other states if not arrested on time.

Refuge presence can also be a source of political instability and conflicts in the country. A government that is beset with economic deficiency especially with refugee presence is not bound to be stable. Also the influx of refugees into a host country can be used to launch an insurrection to overthrow the government of the refugee state. Thus, the host country was being exposed to attack (Owoye 1993).

It is further argued that the presence of the refugees in towns, largely unemployed destitute, leads to increase in anti-social activities like drug abuse, crime and outright lawlessness. Since refugees’ movement was caused by internal conflicts, these conflicts are usually continued within the refugee themselves; as a result, this constitutes a threat to the social balance of the host states as they also can be destabilized.

In addition, Nigeria would love to have neighbours that are democratic. It is not going to be safe for Nigeria to be surrounded by nations that are ruled by the military, because a military regime is one that can promote a lot of violence, where civil strife can occur and from where refugees can flock into Nigeria. The more secure Nigeria’s environment is the better for the country. Nigeria cannot also avoid not intervening in Taylor’s case by granting him asylum. His being left in Liberia constituted a headache to Nigeria not only because of his backing of Sankoh but because he had a more elaborate geopolitical design for West Africa, a design that would no doubt pose a direct challenge to Nigeria’s pre-eminence in the sub-region. Taylors is an irritant that Obasanjo cannot afford to ignore because to do so would frustrate his desire for peace, stability and economic integration in West Africa.

**Recommendation**

In view of the foregoing, this paper recommends that Nigeria should be circumspective about how its gets involved in the internal affairs of other West African states, especially during crisis situations; It should also take cognizance of her domestic security challenges while trying to maintain peace in the sub-region. Policy makers and executors of Nigeria’s foreign policy should balance the country’s commitment to its external environment with her responsibility to the citizens and inhabitants for improved standard of living.

In addition, Nigeria needs to promote democracy, economic and social integration in the various independent states of the sub-region. It should intensify the application of diplomacy and related non-coercive approaches to conflict resolution. And finally, ECOWAS should promote efforts geared towards sensitivity to early warning indicators and put in place proactive and problem solving mechanisms for addressing security issues in the sub-region.

**Conclusion**

Over the past two decades, Nigeria has shown herself not only as an important actor within the West African sub-region, but also discharges responsibilities as regional leader. These positions, as well as the commitment underpinning them, have been expressed more forcefully in the
defense of West Africa which in cooperation with other countries within the sub-region and abroad has helped in protecting the social, economic and security sectors of West Africa countries. From her intervention in Chad and the subsequent ones in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, Cote d’voire and Sao Tome and Principe, to its active involvement in Mali recently, Nigeria has demonstrated its will, ability and commitment to maintaining peace across West Africa. The country has also demonstrated its resolve for the promotion of economic, political and diplomatic cohesion in West Africa by helping to secure the sub-region as well as rid it of protracted civil wars through her commitment of oil resources, political and diplomatic tactics.

Nigeria’s commitment of its oil resources, economic aid and military capability to securing the West African region has not only promoted and maintained peace and security regionally, but also confirmed the country’s status as an important actor in African politics. The major concern in this paper, however, is the observable trend of Nigeria’s greater involvement in these laudable foreign policy objectives of political, economic and social security of West Africa region to the neglect of the country’s domestic economic, social and political challenges that are negatively impacting on the human security as a whole. In this regard, the policymakers and executors of Nigeria’s foreign policy should balance the country’s commitment to her external environment with her responsibility to the citizens and inhabitants for improved standard of living and sustenance of human security at the domestic environment.

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