

Regional Peacekeeping and the Transformation of Nigerian Foreign Policy, 1990-2000: A Perspective

Famoye Abiodun Daniels^{[a],*}

^[a]Lecturer, Department of History and International Studies, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

In the 1990s, Nigeria mobilised West African states to international peacekeeping missions in Liberia and Sierra Leone under the auspices of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). The initiative did not only become a model for other regional organisations across the globe, it also placed Nigeria in a more influential position in international conflict management, especially within Africa. But while the scheme helped Nigeria to score some marks in international conflict management, it, however, left significant impression on the nation's foreign policy. It is on the above premise, therefore, that this article examines how and why Nigeria's participation in conflict resolution within West Africa was influential to its foreign policy perception, goal and strategy between 1990 and 2000. The study is approached through the historical inquiry. While the impact of the regional peacekeeping programme on Nigeria's foreign policy is acknowledged, the paper, however, concludes that the emerging post-Cold War international order and political leadership in Nigeria were the considerable factors, which presented the opportunities for such imprint to be registered.

Key words: Regional peacekeeping; Foreign policy; ECOMOG; National Interest; Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

One of the interesting events that followed the establishment and operations of ECOMOG in the 1990s would be the academic attention it received. The fact that it was the first sub-regional peacekeeping effort and coming from an area that had hitherto substantially depended on international interventions for the resolution of its numerous armed conflicts, made ECOMOG to be keenly watched. For example, there have been attempts to interrogate the rationale behind Nigeria's leadership roles in the operations of the coalition, especially in Liberia. Also, there are efforts to understand the politics involved in the establishment of the regional peacekeeping force, as well as the relevance of the scheme to the present and future management of conflicts in the sub-region. For example, Ogbu (1994), 'Nigeria and the Liberia Imbroglia: An Epitome of Nigerian-led Crisis Resolution in the Sub-Region', examines the intervention of Nigeria in the Liberian crisis, with the aim of justifying the mission. The work sets out by analysing the views of the critics of the mission and the basis for their criticisms. Debunking the claims of the critics, which were described as 'unfortunate observers', the article provides a number of reasons as justifications for the intervention. It is argued, for instance, that the intervention was mainly on moral ground, which was a demonstration of Nigeria's commitment to its principle of 'Africa as the centre-piece' of its foreign policy. It is claimed also that the intervention was motivated by Nigeria's desire to ensure regional security and end the humanitarian catastrophe in Liberia (Ogbu, 1994, pp.195-200).

Adeleke (1995), 'The Politics and Diplomacy of Peacekeeping in West Africa: The ECOWAS Operation in Liberia', traces the history of the Liberian civil war and also engages in a fascinating analysis of the diplomatic playoffs involving Nigeria and her West Africa rivals, such as Cote d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, as they all

struggled for political influence in Liberia. The paper also investigates the specific interests of Nigeria, especially those of her political elite in the crisis and how all of these factors affected the performance of ECOMOG (Adeleke, 1995, pp. 569-593). Similarly, in Chapter Four, Berman and Sams (2000), *Peacekeeping in Africa: Capabilities and Culpabilities*, discusses the changing status of ECOWAS as it transformed from performing purely socio-economic responsibilities to security maintenance within the sub-region. The work analyses the challenges encountered by the attempts to build security framework in the sub-region before the creation of ECOMOG. It also examines the politics of ECOWAS states and the implication for ECOMOG. It interrogates the UN and US approaches to ECOMOG missions in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau, and concludes with an evaluation of the prospects of ECOWAS (Berman & Sams, 2000, pp. 95-105).

In 2002, Adebajo published two books, *Liberia's Civil War: Nigeria, ECOMOG, and Regional Security in West Africa* and *Building Peace in West Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau*. The former examines the intents, roles and contributions of Nigeria, other West African powers, Libya and important non-state actors such as Samuel Doe, Charles Taylor and Yormie Johnson, to the protracted Liberian Civil War (Adebajo, 2000). The latter, however, assesses the relevance of the colonial experiences to the contemporary political and socio-economic development of West Africa countries. It also evaluates the causes, interests and roles of states and non-state actors in the crises in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau. It also analyses the challenges and prospects of ECOWAS in conflict resolution in the sub-region (Adebajo, 2002).

Finally, Osakwe and Audu (2017), 'The Nigeria Led ECOMOG Military Intervention and Interest in the Sierra Leone Crisis: An Overview', is an interrogation of the rationale behind Nigeria's decision to foil a military coup in Sierra Leone. This becomes intriguing mainly because Nigeria itself was at that moment under a military dictatorship headed by Sani Abacha. The article takes into account the criticisms that followed the intervention and how that affected the operation. With the real intention of Abacha's government still largely unknown, it is guessed that the intervention was considerably provoked by Nigeria's desire to outsmart her contemporary West African states by 'scoring quick victory without' without them (Osakwe & Audu, 2017, pp. 107-116).

An implication of the above research trend is that some other critical aspects of the subject-matter have not been given due academic attention. However, this article represents a shift from the usual as it attends to one of such less addressed but equally important issues relating to the subject-matter. Thus, the paper attempts to understand how and why the Nigerian involvement in regional peacekeeping influenced the country's foreign

policy perspective, goal and strategy for a decade following the establishment of ECOMOG. The period has been carefully chosen because, as narrated above, ECOMOG was established and launched its first operation in 1990. However, the establishment of the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) in 1993 brought a major international assistance to ECOMOG and prepared the stage for the eventual takeover of the resolution exercise by the UN. Again in 1997, the regional force under the leadership of Nigeria commenced another mission in Sierra Leone and was solely in charge until 2000, when the UN took charge following the establishment of the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL). This, therefore, ended in the sub-region the tradition of unilateral peacekeeping operations of a Nigerian-led ECOMOG¹. Thus, the article explored primary and secondary source materials, while the historical enquiry was used in interpreting the materials.

1. AN OVERVIEW OF NIGERIA'S PARTICIPATION IN INTERNATIONAL PEACEKEEPING UP TO 1990

There is no doubt that Nigeria, prior to 1990, had made a mark in international conflict management through its participation in international peacekeeping operations. Starting from its maiden appearance in peacekeeping mission in Zaire (now Congo), Nigeria proceeded to participate in several other international missions. For instance, it was involved in the peace missions in India/Pakistan (1960-1964), New Guinea (1962-1963), Lebanon (1975-1979), Chad (1978-1983), Angola (1989-1995) and Namibia (1989-1990) (Amao & Okeke-Uzodike, 2015, p. 81).

However, in 1990, following the emergence of the Liberian crisis, ECOWAS states with the leadership of Nigeria were able to create a regional force, which was saddled with the responsibility of ending the crisis and bringing peace to the West African state. It should be emphasised that ECOMOG was unique for a number of reasons. First, as the first of its kind globally, the regional force had no experience or any related existing system to learn or copy from. Its sudden emergence seemed to have denied it the opportunity of proper pre-operation planning. This explains why most of its earlier strategies were based on trial and error. Second, as a new invention, the global community watched with keen interest what would be the fate of the force. This appeared to have partly put pressure on the initiators, especially Nigeria that was the most significant financier and coordinator of its operations. Third, the establishment of the force was shrouded in diplomatic controversies involving ECOWAS members. For instance, while there were divisions along

¹ *Daily Champion*. (2007, May 20) 'Between ECOMOG AND UNAMSIL: A Score Card', p. 6.

the old pattern of Anglo-Francophone supremacy struggle, there was also dissatisfaction among the Anglophone members. The former had largely hindered the support and participation of the Francophone nations, which saw Nigeria and other Anglophone states as outsmarting them, in the operation. The latter was dissatisfaction among Anglophone members chiefly on Nigeria's domination and rigidity in the control of the affairs of the supposedly coalition force. With this development and no significant assistance from the international community, the financial and logistic responsibilities of the force, therefore, fell almost entirely on Nigeria. And with the international image of Nigeria at stake, it became highly committed to the survival and success of ECOMOG.

2. REGIONAL PEACEKEEPING AND THE IMPLICATION FOR NIGERIA'S FOREIGN POLICY, 1990-2000

As established above, Nigeria had long been involved in international peacekeeping before 1990. However, none of the missions qualified as regional peacekeeping. What seemed close to regional peacekeeping was the bilateral peace operation between Nigeria and Chad. And of course, this was exclusively an agreement between two friendly states, which cannot in anyway be classified as a regional effort. In fact, up to 1990, regional peacekeeping did not appear as an objective or a method of attaining other foreign policy objectives of Nigeria. But, after the introduction of ECOMOG, Nigeria successfully established regional peacekeeping as a cardinal programme of its foreign policy. For instance, between 1990 and 1993, when Babangida left office, Nigeria was firmly in charge of the regional force and its operation in Liberia. Even when the mission was telling on the nation's economy, Babangida constantly justified and reiterated Nigeria's committed to its success². And after he had inherited the peacekeeping mission in Liberia from its predecessors, Abacha's government continued with it and even initiated another peacekeeping mission in Sierra Leone in 1997³. And despite the huge human, material and financial burdens imposed on Nigeria, it still went ahead with the missions⁴. The subsequent administrations, especially Abubakar and Obasanjo, were also indifferent as they sustained the tradition of their predecessors.

It is, however, important to note that the existing political order in Nigeria encouraged the unflinching support for regional peacekeeping. For instance, for most part of the decade, Nigeria was under military

dictators, who were grossly unaccountable to the citizens on their actions and inactions. As such, it was possible for them to expend the nation's resources at will without consequences. This form of approach by the Nigerian leaders partly accounted for why their efforts at resolving those crises were alleged to have been more driven by personal interests. Babangida, for example, was accused of leading ECOMOG to Liberia mainly because of his financial investment in the country and personal relationship with Samuel Doe⁵. Similarly, Abacha was accused of having no justification, except personal reasons, for the intervention in Sierra Leone. The claim seemed to be right especially because aside the fact that Abacha was a despot, who came to power through a coup, he also had successfully carved a niche for himself in coup plotting in Nigeria even before this time⁶.

Thus, in order to properly align with the newly self-imposed responsibility, some adjustments were made to the operations of some national agencies, especially those that were directly involved in the nation's foreign policy or the regional peacekeeping scheme. These included the armed forces, police, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA). For example, as soon as ECOMOG was established, the Nigerian Armed Forces and the police began to give special training to their personnel since they formed the bulk of ECOMOG military and paramilitary personnel. More importantly, since international assistance was not forthcoming as expected, leadership in terms of experience and training of ECOMOG personnel fell on the Nigerian military and police. It is also a matter of interest that the National War College was established in 1992⁷. Although, as the highest military training institution, the main objective of the college was to enhance the skills of officers in their task of defending the nation, a great number of researched publications from the institute were studies focusing on the place of Nigeria in crisis management in West African and Africa at large. This, therefore, appeared more as a deliberate effort to properly document the history, challenges and prospect of Nigeria's approach to crisis management in the sub-region.

On its own, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs continuously facilitated the meetings of ECOWAS foreign affairs ministers to assess the on-going armed conflicts in the sub-region and brainstorm on the success of ECOMOG. For example, in the first half of the decade, there were Nigerian facilitated meetings of foreign affairs ministers of ECOMOG members to discuss Liberia crisis and assess the performance of the regional force. During

² *New Nigeria*. (1992, October 30) 'ECOMOG Operations in Liberia: IBB Says no Going Back', p. 1; National Concord. (1990, November 5) 'Why Nigeria Went into Liberia', p.12.

³ *This Day*. (1998, February 15); *The Sunday Newspaper*. (1998, February 15) 'ECOMOG Resolves the S' Leone Debacle', p. 5.

⁴ *The Nation*. (2011, July, 26).

⁵ *This Day*. (1995, March 31), pp. 1-2; Daily Times, (1996, April, 30), p. 6.

⁶ *African Success*. (2007, November, 20).

⁷ *Tell*, 'A College of War: Babangida Opens the School for top Military Brass, Pleading with the Army not to Rock the Transition Boat', June 29, 1992, p. 26.

the October 1998 and December 1999 conferences, ECOMOG Force Commander was invited to provide updates on Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau missions (ECOWAS, 1990; ECOWAS, 1998; ECOWAS, 1999). While it would appear that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was only carrying out its duty of justifying the government's foreign policy action, the memoranda from these meetings were expected to help ECOMOG. Furthermore, aside the fact that it provided the necessary opportunities, in forms of conferences and workshops, for specialists in the fields of security and international relations to exchange views on the sub-region's peace-building efforts, NIIA's two publications, the *Nigerian Journal of International Affairs* and *Nigerian Forum*, turned out several articles on the same subject-matter during the period (The West African Bulletin, 1995; Moyosore, 1990, pp. 33-40; Browne, 1995, pp. 100-101). In fact, NIIA at a point attracted international grant from the Ford Foundation to study ECOMOG operations⁸. A major assumption that can be made from the above is that, there seemed to be a synergy among the aforementioned national agencies on research, formulation and implementation of policies that would ensure successful outing of Nigeria's baby (ECOMOG).

Recall that right from independence, Nigeria had always argued that Africa was the centrepiece of its foreign policy. This implied that the nation's foreign policy would fundamentally be based and guided by the issues affecting the continent (Africa), as a whole (Ogbu, 1994, p.198). The concern here is that the span of the principle, prior to 1990, seemed to have captured the whole of Africa without preference for any part of the continent. This concept of Africanism was vigorously demonstrated in the campaigns for decolonisation, eradication of apartheid policy and later on economic integrated of African states. In fact, at some points in the history of its foreign policy, Nigeria's belief and passion for the principle had brought her into frictions with some of her most valued Western allies. One can still recollect the cases of the nationalisation of Shell BP (Nig) Ltd and the Barclays Bank in 1979. Shell BP was nationalised for flouting Nigeria's orders not to sell oil to South Africa, while Barclays Bank was nationalised for disregarding Nigeria's directive not to buy South African government's bonds⁹. However, with emerging protracted civil wars and their increasing security threats to Nigeria and the entire sub-region, the country was compelled to prioritise West African issues, although not necessarily at the expense of other sub-regions. While Nigeria still proclaimed the principle, it was, however, obvious that the real centre peace of Nigeria's foreign policy was West Africa. In other words, Nigeria was more drawn to the socio-

political matters within the sub-region than elsewhere in the continent. This consequently marked a shift from the old order, where the concern was swiftly for the whole of the continent. It also, for example, partly explains why the resolution of the crises in Angola, Rwanda and Mozambique in the same decade, did not receive as much attention as West African crises did receive from Nigeria. In fact, an assessment of Nigeria's external financial obligations during the period has clearly shown that most of its spending was on ECOMOG¹⁰.

As a major player in West African politics, regional hegemony had always been a major goal of Nigerian foreign policy right from independence. And arguably, this was well attained more than any other national interests sought within the sub-region during the period under review. In fact, no member of ECOWAS exercised as much influence as Nigeria in the political and socio-economic affairs of the sub-region (Adisa, 1979, p.164). But prior to 1990, Nigeria's attempts toward the attainment and sustenance of this goal had been considerably limited to economic approaches. On several occasions, such economic methods had included but not limited to oil concession, financial and material aid, grants and even economic sanctions (Aluko, 1976, pp. 425-431). For example, the formations and the leadership roles of Nigeria in the Lake Chad Basin Commission in 1964, the River Niger Commission (later renamed Niger Basin Authority) in 1964 and the Economic Community of West African States were strategies that made Nigeria highly influential in the sub-region. However, with the establishment of ECOMOG, Nigeria successfully employed regional peacekeeping as a method of pursuing its hegemony in West Africa.

It should be emphasised that this newly found approach did go a long way in giving Nigeria diplomatic leverage over West African political affairs, especially the security related aspect of it. Recall, for instance, that the UN and major world powers had initially refused to intervene in the Liberia crisis. Even the United States, regardless of the existing historical connections with Liberia, refused to intervene in the crisis¹¹. This, however, was largely not unconnected with emerging international order. Among other factors, the decline of the Cold War tension and the emergence of international liberalism at the close of the 1980s had reduced the position of strategic importance, which Africa had hitherto enjoyed, especially at the peak of the war. The subsequent reduction in economic and military assistance from the global powers

⁸ *National Concord* (1990, December), 'NIIA to Study ECOMOG Operations: Courtesy Ford Foundation', p. 19.

⁹ *News Watch Magazine*. (2010, October 27).

¹⁰ *This Day*. (1997, August 3) 'Nigeria Spends N255bn on ECOMOG: Abacha Calls for Sanctions on Sierra Leone', p. 1; *Tribune*. (1990, May 1) 'Nigeria Spends N328.5 Billion on ECOMOG'.

¹¹ *New Nigeria*, 1997, June 21; Berman, E.G. and Sams, K.E. (2000), *Peacekeeping in Africa: Capabilities and Culpabilities* (United Nations), pp. 95-105; Franke, B., *Security Cooperation in Africa...*, p. 102-105.

to African states was a signal of the new position of Africa in international politics. More importantly, Africa would no longer enjoy automatic international intervention in its armed conflicts (Mortimer, 1996, pp. 293-306; Franke, 2001, pp.102-105; Whiteman & Yates, 2004, pp.360-361). Consequently, the responsibility of resolving African crises would fall almost completely on Africa itself.

When the US finally decided to interfere, it even chose not to relate directly with Nigerian-led ECOMOG, especially since allegations of prejudice had been levelled against Nigeria by the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). As a way of assuring all the contesting blocs of fair play, the US, therefore, encouraged Senegal that had hitherto stayed out of the ECOMOG mission, for some personal reservations, to now intervene. The US provided Senegal with financial and logistic supports. However, it soon turned out that the crisis was more complex than the US and Senegal had envisaged, leading to the withdrawal of Senegalese soldiers. So, when the Senegalese approach failed, the UN, US and the international community had no alternative but to relate directly now with Nigeria on how to resolve the crisis¹². Subsequently, Abuja became a major decision-maker as well as converging point for diplomatic and strategic discourses of West Africa security and political development.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the Nigeria's involvement in regional peacekeeping operations in West Africa and how this had influenced its foreign policy in the last decade of the twentieth century. It is observed that the nation's foreign policy view, goals and mechanism for the attainment of such objectives were considerably influenced by the country's leadership roles in the ECOMOG venture. Nonetheless, the emerging post-Cold War international order that offered Nigeria the opportunities to provide the leadership required for the resolution of the region's armed conflicts and the favourable disposal of its (Nigeria) political leaders towards the scheme were major reasons why such impressions were registered on the nation's foreign policy.

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¹² ECOMOG News Release: 'British, America Envoys Parley with ECOMOG', ECOMOG HQ/SS/CMP10/14/0, September, 1999; See also Resolution 866, UNSC/S/RES/866 (22 September 1993); Resolution 1181, UNSC/S/RES/1181 (July 13 1998).