

# **Nigeria's Armed Forces and Foreign Policy Challenges: Revisiting The Problems Of Loss of Internal Cohesion and Poor Public Image.**

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## **Abstract**

*In spite of the commendable achievements of the military in Nigeria's foreign policy process, beginning from 1960, only their peace-keeping efforts of the early years of independence enjoyed public applause whilst other peace keeping efforts from 1966 never enjoyed commensurate domestic public acceptance and commendation. The involvement of the Armed Forces in the sub-regional peace keeping mission in Liberia and Sierra-Leone attracted more public criticisms than commendation. This paper attempts to identify the reasons for the shift in public perception of Nigeria's Armed Forces in the foreign policy process since 1966. This becomes necessary against the backdrop of Nigeria's fledgling democracy where public opinion will continue to dominate. An attempt to project the possible role for the country's Armed Forces in the emergent democracy is undertaken with a view to restoring their respect, credibility and domestic acceptance. The concept of civil-military relations, which, constitutes an important aspect of national security policy.*

## **Introduction**

The history of Nigeria's Armed Forces comprising of the Army, Navy and Air Force, is indeed a chequered one. Beginning as Armed Forces of national unity; highly disciplined and professional, they regressed into the fiefdom of politics thus assailing their entire fabric with dire consequences. Ironically, the Armed Forces have continued to be a potent instrument in the attainment of Nigeria's foreign policy objectives.

In spite of the commendable achievements of the military in Nigeria's foreign policy process, beginning from 1960, only their peace-keeping efforts of the early years of independence enjoyed public applause whilst other peace keeping efforts from 1966 never enjoyed commensurate domestic public acceptance and commendation. The involvement of the Armed Forces in the sub-regional peace keeping mission in Liberia and Sierra-Leone attracted more public criticisms than commendation. This was not the case during their intervention in the Congo between 1960 and 1964 when they were commended for their gallantry. What this portends is that there is a fundamental disconnect between the military and the civil populace with implications for a potent and virile civil-military relations.

This paper attempts to identify the reasons for the shift in public perception of Nigeria's Armed Forces in the foreign policy process since 1966. This becomes necessary against the backdrop of Nigeria's fledging democracy where public opinion will continue to dominate. An attempt to project the possible role for the country's Armed Forces in the emergent democracy is undertaken with a view to restoring their respect, credibility and domestic acceptance. The content of this piece approximates the rejuvenation of the often-discussed concept of civil-military relations, which, Huntington (2001:1) describes as an important aspect of national security policy. We subdivide this piece into six sections. The forgoing introduces the issue in discourse. Section two establishes the link between armed forces and foreign policy. Section three highlights specific involvements of the armed forces in Nigeria's foreign policy. Section four identifies the two major setbacks to the credibility of the Forces. Section five highlights the potential role of the country's Armed Forces in the fledging democracy while we conclude in section six.

## **Armed Forces and Foreign Policy: Any Link?**

The significance of a nation's Armed Forces either in war or peace time is yet to be repudiated by any study. The relevance of the Armed Forces ranges from the protection of a nation's sovereignty to being a symbol of national pride and unity. This explains why nations accord useful attention to the development of the Armed Forces as the quality of these Forces is crucial to the life of a nation. Indeed, the military capability of any nation rests on the quality of her Armed Forces. The quality of Armed Forces is equally determined by a number of factors amongst which are the level of training, degree of cohesion amongst the officer, availability or otherwise of modern instrument of warfare and ultimately, their level of adherence to their constitutional responsibilities.

The Armed Forces of any nation fulfill two essential roles, which are classifiable as internal and external. Their internal roles include suppressing insurrection and acting in aid of civil authorities to restore order when called upon to do so. The external functions of the Armed Forces constitute their major role. These include the defense of the nation from external aggression and maintaining the territory integrity and securing the borders of a nation from violation on land, sea and air. The external role of the Armed Forces is an essential component of

a nation's defense policy, which forms part of the totality of policies aimed at securing national interest.

Foreign policy constitutes a sub-set of defence policy. In the words of Millar (1969:57) "Foreign policy is presumably something less than the sum of all policies which have an effect upon a national government's relations with other national government". Holsti (1967:107-108) conceived it as "actions or ideas designed by policy makers to solve a problem or promote some changes in the international environment." The influence from this is that foreign policy involves the process of interaction between and among States with a view to attaining a goal. Hence, Plano and Offon (1982:7) submitted that beneath the foreign policy of every nation is the desire for the attainment of national interest.

In the formulation of a nation's foreign policy, a number of factors are usually considered. Prominent amongst which is the military capability of such nation. Obiozo (1987:325) noted that, "military preparedness is a condition for a successful diplomacy and military preparedness requires a military establishment capable of supporting the foreign policies pursued by a nation." Nigeria's foreign policy is indeed an integral part of its defence policy under which the Armed Forces found its existence. It is therefore ascertainable that there is a symbiotic relationship between the role of Nigeria's Armed Forces and the country's foreign policy.

### **Nigerian's Armed Forces in Foreign Policy**

In spite of the chequered history of Nigeria's Armed Forces, arising from their incursion into the political process, there are few commendable evidences of their past support to Nigeria's foreign policy. All these took place within the ambit of Nigeria's avowed foreign policy principles and objectives. Indeed, Nigeria's foreign policy principles emphasise good neighbourliness and affirm Africa as its center piece. It is within the broad framework of its Afrocentricism that troops were deployed to crisis regions in Africa. In this regard, Akindele (2000:96) observed that, Nigeria's Armed Forces were deployed beyond Nigeria's border on a number of times. The assignment range from regional peace keeping to assisting the UN in peace building. Between 1960 and 1964, Nigeria's Armed Forces participated in United Nation Peace Keeping Operations in the Congo (Adeniran, 1986:75). Again in 1964, when the Tanzanian army revolted against the government, the government of Tanzania invited the Nigerian army to assist in suppressing the mutiny.

Similarly, in 1978, Nigeria's armed Forces were deployed to Chad. In pursuit of Nigeria's commitment to the decolonization processes in Africa, Peter and Aminu (1986:95) noted that the Nigeria Air Force was "actively involved in the evacuation of refugees back to Zimbabwe from various frontline States where they had gone on exile during the run-up to the first Zimbabwean election to enable them participate in it". Other deployments include Nigeria's Armed Forces participation in the United Nations Operation in Mozambique (UNOMOZ, 1992-95), the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR, 1993), and the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG).

The Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) spearheaded by Nigeria played crucial roles in ending the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra-Leone. The Liberian crisis was precipitated by the invasion of Liberia in December 1989, by the Charles Taylor led rebel National Patriotic Front of Liberia. The invasion later degenerated into civil war. When the elected President of Sierra Leone, Tejan Kabbah was illegally

overthrown, the Nigerian Armed Forces in conjunction with troops from other West African troops under the auspices of ECOMOG went to Sierra Leone, to quell the rebellion and reinstated Tejan Kabbah.

The brevity of Nigeria's Armed Forces in the aforementioned peace making enforcement operations though commendable, have not attracted commensurate level of esteem from the Nigerian public, especially beginning from 1966 when the first coup detat was hatched. In fact, the respect and confidence that the public nurtured for the Armed Forces virtually disappeared during their years of incursion into Nigeria's political process. Their incursion into politics had in turn produced two problems amongst other numerous problems. These are the problems of (1) loss of internal cohesion (Obiozor, 1987:328) and (2) poor public image (Aminu, 1987:81). Ironically, internal cohesion and good public image are crucial to the success of any nation's Armed Forces in the foreign policy process.

### **Crucial Set-Backs to Nigeria's Armed Forces in the Foreign Policy Process**

One major setback to Nigeria's Armed Forces in their direct involvement in the political process through coup detats. This certainly constitutes a direct abdication of their constitutional responsibilities, a phenomenon that had in turn brought about dire consequences for both the military and the polity. Scholars have identified a number of problems arising from military incursion into politics in Nigeria and in fact the general problems confronting Nigeria's military establishment. The problems include indiscipline, lack of functional defence industry, poor weapon procurement. Procedure, poor image and sheer loss of internal cohesion. While these problems are indeed typical of Nigeria's Armed Forces, quite a number of them are not direct consequences of military's involvement in the nation's political process. For example, the lack of functional defence industry as a problems transcends military involvement in politics. This is one of the problems of Nigeria' social formation, which neglects the commitment to research and development. The disappearance of internal cohesion and poor public image thus constitute two major consequences of Nigeria's Armed Forces involvement in politics.

The importance of internal cohesion in the Armed Forces cannot be overstressed. Often regarded as spirit de corps, it is the bedrock on which discipline that sustains the Forces rests. Internal cohesion reinforces mutual trust, whilst promoting sense of direction and purpose. It is an important ingredient of military capability of a nation hence; its disappearance reduces an Army to mere militia. As rightly observed by Obiozor (1987:328), the series of coup and counter coup brought to the Nigeria Armed Forces problems of internal cohesion and lack of shared national objectives. A brief insight into how these occurred becomes relevant here.

From 1966 when the first coup was hatched the Nigerian Armed Forces has been assailed by the problem of loss of internal cohesion. In the first coup for example, a number of officers from the Northern part of the country were killed. And since officers mainly from the Southern part of the country championed the coup, the Northern military officers embarked on a bloody retaliatory counter coup in July 1966, which culminated in the killing of General Aguiyi Ironsi and many promising Igbo officers in the Armed Forces. From that point onward, the Nigerian Armed Forces lost its Pan-Nigerian outlook and got split along ethnic divide. The inability of the Forces to manage the crisis resulted in the civil war, which lasted, from 1967 to 1970. The lessons of the civil war experience seemed lost on the nation's Armed Forces as evident in the subsequent coup of 1975 and the countercoup of 1976. It is ascertainable that indeed, the nation's military, in the first two decades of Nigeria's independence lost more

officers through incidences of coup than the Forces ever lost in the pursuit of their constitutional responsibilities. Gen. Babangida in 1987 described the phenomenon thus:

*...military cohesion exhibited cracks due to ethnic, religions, political and class leanings.*

One significant fallout from the distrust that the phenomenon of coup brought to the country's Armed Forces is the complete ethnicisation of the military. This was why Major Gideon Orkar, in a coup announcement in April 1990, indicated the intention of the coup plotters to delist five States in the Northern Region from Nigeria.

The politicization of an otherwise apolitical organization again heralded a new dimension to the already eroded cohesion in Nigeria's Armed Forces. Beginning from the Gowon regime, military officers were withdrawn from military posting and deployed to various political offices at both Federal and State levels. This consequently exposed the officers to the vagaries of politics with its attendant woes. The discipline characteristic of the military disappeared and officers were further divided along political opinions. Added to this was the supremacy of the officers on political posting over those in pure military posting as the former exercises influence through their wealth. There thus began the formation of alliances and the declaration of allegiance not to the Nigerian nation or the military command but to specific highly placed military officers with political influence. General Babangida reiterated this thus:

*discipline is diluted by godfatherism... military sense of nationalism and patriotism get deeply truncated and diluted by sectional or parochial loyalties... political leadership began to assume more political flavor than military.*

The trend continued with succeeding regimes and became more pronounced during the General Babangida's regime, from 1985 to 1993, officers on political appointments exploited the resources of their respective offices for personal advantage to the extent of being able to constitute themselves as institutions within the military institution. Formation of alliances on the basis of allegiance to powerful commanders in the military became prominent. For example, there were the so-called IBB boys during the Babangida regime and we later came to hear of the Abacha boys during the Abacha regime. By 1999, the officer's corps was indeed heavily politicized, ethnically divided, factionalized and held with it the ruthless inertia of destruction of esprit de corps. The destruction of internal cohesion in the military resulted in a number of consequences. While indiscipline reigned supreme within the officers corps, the image of the Forces suffered some major setback.

Yet, good public perception of a nation's Armed Forces promotes a sense of nationhood. However, the Armed Force of any given country are products of the society where they exist hence, while different events both internal and external exist to condition the existence of the armed forces, good public image is vital. Aminu, (1987:81) noted that good public image is needed by the Armed Forces in the discharge of their role. He however concluded that the public image of Nigeria's Armed Forces is bad.

The poor public image of Nigeria's Armed Forces began with their first incursion into the murky waters of politics. In the process, they brought to bear the inadvertent superimposition of their culture on the civil society. Yet, as Musa (1994:10). argued, 'the basic norms and values of the military run counter to the norms and values of the civil society because the military is 'essential commandist in structure and paternalistic in orientation'. Awolowo (1981:153) substantiated this view when he argued that the military, by their training, have neither the

temper nor the organization for mobilizing the people with a view to evoking from them the required voluntary involvement'. Consequently, the continued enforcement of military culture on the civil populace brought about the enforcement of policies by sheer brute force. This in turn led to the emergence of various task forces on sundry matters thus precipitating serious abuses of human rights, through arbitrary arrests, torture detention and open harassment.

In one of the reports of the Amnesty International, Nigeria was listed as one of the twenty three countries in the Commonwealth of Nations where human rights are systematically violated (Agbese, 1988:10). The summit of external reaction of Nigeria's military regime's violation of human rights came when Nigeria was suspended from the Commonwealth in November 1995 due to the hanging of nine Ogoni activists of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni people (MOSOP). This was followed by other sanctions against the Armed Forces as the European Union recalled all its Ambassadors from Nigeria. Visa restrictions were also placed on members of the Armed Forces and their families in addition to the cancellation of all courses for Nigeria Military personnel and suspension of all Military cooperation with the EU. The series of human rights abuse associated with the Armed Forces' attempt to regiment the civil society precipitated a systematic public loathing of the military thus resulting in its bad image.

The failure of the Nigeria's Armed Forces to actualize their self-imposed reformatory role significantly contributed to their poor image. The common trend in coup and counter coup announcements in Nigeria is the promise to bring about national unity, economic stability and stamp out corruption. Nwankwo (1999:1) succinctly captured this when he submitted that "From January 15, 1966 when the first coup d'état was executed by Major General Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, what has emerged is a pattern of empty promises and deceit of raised and shattered hopes". This implies that none of the self-imposed roles of the Armed Forces was ever achieved. Rather than promote national unity, the ethnicisation of the armed forces amplified the potentials of disunity while corruption assumed geometric progression. Ironically, the military at various times recognized the enormity of corruption by setting up various tribunals. In spite of the discoveries of these various tribunals, no attempt was ever made to implement the decision on corrupt officials. Awolowo (1981:155) for instance, observed that during the Gowon regime, none of the courses of action contained in the white papers was followed. He concluded that "because of the notorious and unabashed inaction of the Federal Military Government in applying the various salutary, correctively and deterrent sanctions recommended by the Tribunals and accepted by the Government, corruption not only flourished, but also had almost become an accepted way of life while those who attempted to expose them were ruthlessly suppressed and punished. Awolowo later admonished the Armed Forces to "very quickly repair the enormous damage which military regime had done to its own image by appearing only to condone corruption in high and medium places". Fawole (1995:109) captured this when he argued that "the military especially the officer corps, consequent upon their political over-exposure and control of the instruments of coercion to intimidate the society have become a distinct sybaritic elite group, whose combination of sybaritic indulgence and the attendant fear of possible retribution under a civilian administration make them unwilling or reluctant to surrender power".

The incidence of corruption by military officers in Nigeria assumed another dimension from 1973. The Arab-Israeli face-off of 1973 that led to the quadrupling of oil price in the international oil market significantly increased Nigeria's revenue. It is in fact ascertainable that this period marked the beginning of profligacy by military regimes in Nigeria. Similarly, was the boom in oil price during war in 1993 when the United States and the Allied Forces went to

dislodge Iraqi troops from the occupied territory of Kuwait. It is on record that the increase in the nation's revenue merely surreptitiously moved from the Federation Account to the foreign accounts of the major actors of the Babangida regime.

The inference from this is that there is positive correlation between the magnitude of revenue accruing to Nigeria, largely from the sale of crude oil and the incidences of corruption. The increase in revenue is thus correlated with the incidence of underdevelopment during the period of military rule in Nigeria due to the magnitude of corruption by the various military regimes. Hence, in spite of increase in revenue, there was a consistent alarming decline in provision of social infrastructures, while the existing culminated in serious economic crisis in Nigeria in the mid-1980s such that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had to prescribe the structural adjustment policy measures aimed at revamping Nigeria's economy and prevent it from imminent collapse.

However, the adoption of SAP in 1986 crystallised in the realignment of social classes. As Bankole (1995:309) noted, "the Babangida economic policy (SAP) totally wiped out the idea of the middle class amongst the Nigeria social class." The sudden disappearance of the middle class; a class whose income is barely adequate for its needs, led to the emergence of two classes—the upper class (novel rich) and the lowest class (poor). The upper class consists of serving senior military officers and some top technocrats alongside their civilian contractors. On the other hand, the lowest class consists of junior public servants, factory workers including professionals and academics, a class that constituted over seventy percent of Nigeria's workforce. Yet, the bulk of the redesigned social class constitutes the vanguard of opinion in the urban as well as rural areas. Again, the frustration of the democratic expression of the populace in June 23, 1993, when Babangida annulled the election and suspended the National Electoral Commission earned the military additional poor image. The mass discontent that followed the annulment manifested in strikes, violent street protests etc. for the first time in the history of military rule in Nigeria, the Babangida regime bowed to civil induced pressure. In August 1993, he put together an interim National Government (ING) and finally stepped aside.

The populace who were desirous of an immediate return to civil rule poorly perceived the General Abacha ING, which began in November 17, 1993. Abacha's entrenchment of draconian rule simply gave impetus to the bad image of the Armed Forces both internally and externally. Expectedly, the Abacha regime witnessed a groundswell of attack from pro-democracy groups and the international community. Some reactions of the international community have been highlighted earlier in this paper. Suffice to emphasize that Nigeria regressed to a pariah status during the Abacha regime. Incidentally, the regime was adjudged one of the most corrupt especially in terms of the crudity with which the major actors stole public funds. The regime attempted to crackdown on pro-democracy groups, while prominent pro-democracy campaigners like Alhaja Kudirat Abiola, Pa Alfred Rewane, and so many others were assassinated. Many others were also incarcerated on false charges.

The Abdulsalami regime further worsened the image of the Armed Forces with the sudden death of Chief M.K.O. Abiola, the detained winner of the June 12 election. The Abubakar regime was unable to satisfactorily explain the circumstances of the death of Chief Abiola who died in the custody of the regime.

While one is conscious of the internal role of the Armed Forces as stipulated by section 217(c) of the 1999 constitution, such could not be said to have been professionally carried out. The use to which the forces were put by the ruling government especially in elections since 1999 has further raised more questions about their image. In 2007 elections for example, soldiers were

deployed in Ondo State to aid the ruling party. They did this by arresting, incarcerating, and attempting to implicate opposition parties in the State. Such abuses were also recorded in Oyo and Osun States. In the case of Ondo and Osun States, the roles of the Armed Forces was as reprehensible as violating basic human rights. Notable opposition leaders were also arrested, chained, and paraded by soldier as hoodlums in Ondo State. Worse still, such leaders remained in incarceration in military barracks and were only released after entire elections despite express court orders evoking their releases.

### **Possible Roles for Nigeria Armed Forces in Foreign Policy in the Unfolding Democracy.**

Nigeria's democratic process is on course. It is expected that institutional changes will continue to occur until true democracy is attained. However, two major aspects of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 may well survive and remain crucial in the unfolding democracy. Section 217 which deals with the establishment and composition of the Armed Forces of the Federation states that there shall be Armed Forces for the Federation which shall consist of an Army, Navy, an Air force and such other branches of the Armed Forces of the Federation as may be established by an act of the National Assembly. Section 217 (2) outlines the roles of the Armed forces as (a) defending Nigeria from external aggression (b) maintaining its territorial integrity and securing its borders from violation on land, sea or air (c) suppressing insurrection and acting in aid of civil authorities to restore order when called upon to do so by the President, but subject to such conditions as may be prescribed by an Act of the National Assembly (d) performing such other functions as may be prescribed by an act of the National Assembly.

Second is section 19, which provides the foreign policy objectives of Nigeria. These objectives are outlined as (a) promotion and protection of the national interest (b) promotion of African integration and support for African unity (c) promotion of international cooperation for the consolidation of universal peace and mutual respect among all nations and elimination of discrimination in all its manifestation (d) respect for international law and treaty well as the seeking of settlement of international disputes by negotiation, mediation, conciliation, arbitration and adjudication (e) promotion of a just world economic order.

A look at the outlined constitutional role of Nigeria's Armed Forces suggests that they are basically meant to support the prosecution of Nigeria foreign policy objectives with a view to achieving its national interest. One major role that relates to internal security interest of Nigeria is that which expects the Armed Forces to, when called upon to do so by the President, suppress insurrection and acting in aid of civil authorities to restore order. Nigeria's armed forces will more often than not perform this role because, in spite of the democratization process, the series of internal contradiction inherent in the nature of Nigeria's federalism as manifested in ethnic nationalism, resources control, minority rights agitations, inter and intra party skirmishes and religion crisis will persist until they are resolved.

However, the Armed Forces involvement in Odi community of Bayelsa State suggests that they are to recognize the pricelessness of public image as evident in their brutality. Regarding the foreign policy objectives, Nigeria's Armed Forces will continue to be relevant in the task stipulated in section 19 of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999. At the Afrocentric level, the Armed Forces may at various times be deployed in a sub-regional arrangement such as ECOMOG to enforce peace in the conflict prone countries. Beyond West Africa, the insurgency in Democratic Republic of Congo, the ethnic carnage in Rwanda and Burundi the collapse of law and order in Somalia and the Darfur crisis in Sudan,

in addition to many other ones may require the participation of Nigeria's Armed Forces. The emergence of the Africa Union on July 9, 2002 makes this imperative.

Nigeria's Armed Forces role in internal security must be brought in tandem with acceptable practices in a democracy. This involves respect for fundamental human rights and a complete political disposition to national issues. While not foreclosing the possibilities of the skirmishes with the immediate neighbors, a major war against any of the major powers is not contemplatable because Nigeria's Armed Forces do not stand in the least of any strategic relevance considering the weapon and technology of warfare of the major powers. In any case such war is unlikely given the subsisting world order occasioned by the extinction of the East/West tension. It is equally doubtful if Nigeria will be able to attain the level of the military capability of the major powers in the next decade as suggested by its socio-economic and political realities. Nigeria's Armed Forces therefore, will continue to find relevance in sub-regional and multilateral military arrangements mainly for peace enforcement, peace keeping and observer missions. The involvement of the Armed Forces in these engagements will invariably demand a great deal of internal cohesion and enhanced image.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The outline of the possible roles for the Nigeria's Armed Forces in the next decade calls for an urgent reorientation. First is the need for the military to realize that the new world order abhor dictatorship. The wind of democratization is fast sweeping away dictatorial regimes across the globe.

Incidentally, the general understanding in the new African Union is that those who assume power through military coups will no longer be admitted into body. This implies that military regimes will no longer find any relevance in Africa. It is therefore instructive that Nigeria Armed Forces concentrate on their basic constitutional duties of the defence of the territorial integrity of Nigeria.

In upholding their constitutional responsibilities, the Armed Forces should as matter of urgency re-inject cohesion into the troops through discipline. This can be done by depoliticizing such traditional issues as appointment, posting and promotion. These are certainly internal processes that could only be activated by the military. The decision of former President Olusegun Obasanjo to retire military officers who had held one form of political appointment or the other is a crucial step in the right direction, as this will enhance professionalism in the military.

On the issue of poor image, the Armed Forces complete withdrawal from the nation's political landscape will gradually lead to the depletion of their poor public perception. It is certain that without their involvement in politics, they will be most unlikely be associated with such incidences of human right abuses, corruption etc. that earned them their poor public image. As they keep to their constitutional responsibilities in the emergent democracy, it is expected that the injuries inflicted on the Nigerian nation through their misrule will gradually heal.

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