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Nigeria's Relations with its Immediate Neighbours, 1993-1998

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Introduction

Since the 1980's, several studies have described Nigeria's relations with its -immediate neighbours as being marked by "good neighbourliness,"[1] and heavily influenced by historical, politico-" strategic and geographical factors[2]. Focusing on the political aspect of Nigeria's relations with its Francophone neighbours, Nwokedi,[3] describes it as "oscillating between co-operation, competition and conflict". However, in the 1990's, particularly since 1993, it has been possible to discern a new trend in such relations with emphasis on co-operation, and a Nigerian-led response to the regional imperatives of economic integration, and security. In this paper, a critical examination of the dimensions and ramification of the new trends in Nigeria's relations with its immediate (Francophone) neighbours is undertaken. As such, Nigeria's relations with Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon form the fulcrum of this study. The choice of the year 1993 is significant in several respects, but perhaps most fundamental of all is the fact that the new trends had their roots in certain far-reaching developments in Nigeria in that year, which were to have wide ramifications within the country, and for the immediate sub-region.

Some immediate factors marked 1993 as the cut-off point for this analysis. First were the tumultuous events and crisis that followed the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections in Nigeria by the Babangida junta. Then was the forced exit of the Babangida junta in August 1993 through a combination of internal pressures by pro-democracy groups - - strikes, demonstrations, court suits and civil disobedience, and external pressures: worldwide condemnation of the annulment of the presidential elections, imposition of sanctions on the Nigerian junta, and support for pro-democracy and human rights groups within Nigeria. Others included the collapse of the illegal Interim National Government (ING) headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan, foisted upon Nigeria by the hurriedly disengaging Babangida junta, and the seizure of power in November 1993 by the General Sanni Abacha-led junta. The consequences of the traumatic paroxysms which Nigeria went through in 1993 were not lost on its immediate neighbours who were no doubt affected by the upheavals within "their large and potentially powerful neighbour" .

The events preceding the advent of the Abacha junta greatly influenced its internal policy as well as external relations. The regime adopted a new economic policy direction, which was apparently populist, designed to reverse the socially harsh consequences of structural adjustment and gain the acceptance of Nigerians. Its other concern was with security and its hold on power in the face of internal dissent and civil disobedience from pro-democracy and pro-June 12 groups. There was growing international condemnation of its authoritarianism and poor human rights record.[5] The latter more than the former impelled the Abacha junta to embark on a more vigorous drive to court Nigeria's immediate neighbours as the bulwarks against external invasion, or the provision of a staging post for the subversion of the junta by pro-democracy forces or their supporters. It was equally important for the security of the junta, that its neighbours did not provide succour for political exiles, or provide escape routes for dissidents fleeing persecution within Nigeria. In Nigeria's new sub-imperial regional push, defined in its immediacy with the concern for the security of the nation's borders, and the regime itself, and in the long term with regional security and economic integration, it had to come to terms with France, long perceived as Nigeria greatest rival hi the sub-region. The hostility of the European Union (EU), of which France was a member, towards Nigeria on account of its poor human rights records and its refusal to reverse the annulment of the June 12 1993 elections, and the conflicting interpretations within Nigeria of the new French policy towards Africa[6] further compounded this consideration. Yet, the imperatives of the Abacha regime's survival, and its need to respond to strong global pressures for democratization and economic reform, have dictated the course of Nigeria's relations with its immediate neighbours. In the rest of this paper, the dimensions of this trend are fully explored.

In setting about its task, this paper is divided into four broad sections: the background to the 1993 Nigerian crisis, relations since 1993 - an overview and economic dimensions, and the emerging trends in political and security co-operation between Nigeria and its immediate neighbours. The final section sums up the current state of relations and the prospects for the future.

Background to the 1993 Nigerian Crisis

There are two dimensions to the 1993 Nigerian crisis: the external and the internal. While the internal is directly relevant to the analysis, the external in more ways than one, influenced the intensity of the internal triggers of the Nigerian crisis. This section will the treat the wider external background issues, before zeroing in on the internal dimensions of the 1993 Nigerian crisis.

The External Dimensions

The external dimension of the Nigerian crisis can be operationalised at two levels: the global and the regional. At the global level, the emerging post-cold war world order signified by the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe and the USSR, the dismemberment of the USSR and the emergence on a global state of new struggles for self-determination, globalization, and the rise of political unipolarity led by-the United States provided a new context for international relations. The capitalist recession- at the global level, which was refracted into Africa's dependent economies as a full-blown crisis, added yet another element to the global dimension - the imposition of market-based economic reforms through the IMF and the World Bank on ailing African economies. Thus, the external dimension in the emerging world order,sought to promote a liberal model of multi-party democracy alongside market-based economic reforms in line with the hegemonic ideology of the United States and the West.

African countries, from the late 1980's, had to democratize under conditions of intense social and economic crises. Weary of military/one party regimes, which had mismanaged their economies and firmly excluded the people from governance, Africans found the pro-democracy global environment a fertile context for challenging the despots on the continent. The African pro-democracy groups found support in some Western governments led by the US, the EU, international organizations such as the United Nations and the Commonwealth, human rights groups, and ironically, some hither-to apolitical organizations such as the IMF/World Bank which now insisted on "pro-democracy political conditionalities,"[7] before countries could qualify for economic reform packages. As such, African countries from the late 1980's, could not escape being influenced by the new international environment defined by a hegemonic global agenda of neo-liberal democratization and economic reform. These were to affect internal developments within African countries, intra-African relations, as well as the relations between African states and the West.

In the immediate context, the main issue is how developments in our sub-region fit into the global picture as well as define Nigeria's relations with its neighbours. Two considerations are fundamental to any discussion of developments in the sub-region: the deepening of economic crisis in most states in West Africa since the 1970's in spite of the adoption of market-based economic reform packages and the movement towards multi-party democracy arising from internal popular pressures. In Francophone West Africa, starting from Benin, Togo and, later, Niger, there was a push to force erstwhile dictators out of power

Table 1: Some Western Sanctions against Nigeria in the wake of the Annulment of the 1993 Presidential Election

Country	Sanctions
USA	Suspension of $450,000 aid for military training, visa restrictions, targeted against the military, and senior government officials, embargo on posting of a new US defence attache to Nigeria, severance of air links, expulsion of five Nigerian military officers studying in the US under the International Military Education and Training Programme.
Britain	Withdrawal of military advisers and military assistance to Nigeria. Aid Freeze, Suspension of EU development assistance worth N9.6 billion and visa restrictions targeted against the military.

Source: Nigerian Newspapers, 1993 and 1994.

through sovereign national conferences organized by the forces of civil society to oversee the transition to multi-party democracy. While this 'model' succeeded in forcing President Kerekou out of power in Benin, and partly succeeded in Niger, it failed elsewhere in the sub-region where incumbent heads of state managed the transition process to multi-party democracy without actually loosing power themselves. In Anglophone West Africa, the pattern of transitions-from-above prevailed, or was reversed through military coups as in the cases of Sierra Leone and Gambia, civil war as in the case of Liberia, or annulment as in the Nigerian case. What is most important to note is that of all the transitions, the derailment of the process in Nigeria had far-reaching implications for its relations with the West: US, EU, and Canada, with its immediate neighbours, and in some cases, influenced the fortunes of the transition processes in those countries themselves.

The reaction of the West to the 1993 annulment in Nigeria in the form of sanctions and the suspension of aid (see Table 1) led to the deterioration of Nigeria-West relations. This was further worsened with the attendant deepening of the political and economic dimensions of the Nigerian crisis. It is within Nigeria's responses to international hostility and isolation that we then locate an added impetus to the fostering of closer ties with the countries of the immediate sub-region.

The Internal Dimension

In 1993, Nigeria passed through the hands of three un-elected governments! This encapsulates the depth of the trauma that the country experienced, resulting in the virtual collapse of its economy and the plunging of all aspects of social life into chaos and uncertainty. It all started when the convoluted and tightly controlled political transition programme of the Babangida regime came to an inglorious end following the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections widely believed to be one of the freest and fairest ever held in Nigeria. A lot of pressure in the form of civil disobedience, strikes and demonstrations by pro-democracy and human rights groups in Nigeria, as well as international pressures and selective sanctions targeted at the Nigerian military, was put on the Babangida-led junta to reverse the annulment and surrender power to the elected (but undeclared) winner of the 1993 presidential elections. In spite of the pressure and the crisis the annulment had plunged the country into, the junta, when forced to leave power in August, handed over to an un-elected, handpicked Interim National Government (ING) made up largely of loyalists, bureaucrats and some members of the political class. The ING bereft of legitimacy and a clear-cut constituency and Ernest Shonekan a former Chief Executive of the Nigerian subsidiary of the British multi-national - the United African Company (UAC), headed mandate. The ING however was short-lived as it was buffeted from all sides by pressures from domestic pro-democracy forces and the international community. Internal pressures came in the form of strikes, demonstrations, and civil disobedience by wide sections of the populace intent on proving that the ING was an unpopular imposition. Worse still, were the crippling nation-wide strikes by the oil workers unions, which brought the entire economy to a virtual halt. In November 1993, the final blow came, when the ING was declared illegal by the ruling of a Lagos High Court. A few days later, the minister of defence, General Abacha, overthrew the ING. Although the new junta sought to justify its intervention on the need to fill the power vacuum, and prevent an imminent catastrophe in the country, the pro-democracy and human rights groups denounced it as yet another attempt by the military to subvert the will of the Nigerian people, openly and willingly expressed in the 1993 elections. The dissolution of all elected bodies by the Abacha regime further deepened the conflict between the pro-democracy groups and the junta. At the same time, individual Western nations such as the United States, Canada, and Britain, condemned the coup. International organizations and human rights groups were not left out of the campaign against the return of the military.

Thus, Nigeria’s foreign policy between 1993 and 1998 was spawned in a context of international hostility, national crisis, and perceived threats to the national interest of Nigeria as defined by the Abacha administration. Short of friends, and facing the growing hostility of its ‘traditional partners’, Nigeria’s foreign policy was directed towards containing and neutralizing the looming image crisis, seeking new friends and alliances outside its traditional orbit, and reinforcing the security of its immediate sub-region through whatever means it considered expedient. From 1994, limited sanctions were imposed on Nigeria by the European Union, and some Western nations, and by 1995, Nigeria was suspended from the Commonwealth, and condemned at the United

Nations for its poor human rights record and its execution of nine Ogoni activists despite worldwide appeals for clemency. The regime became an international pariah also on the grounds of its alleged blockage of the march to democracy in Nigeria. Within this context, since the end of 1993 till Abacha's sudden demise in June 1998, Nigeria turned to its neighbours for succour and security. With the exception of Cameroon, Nigeria maintained broadly cordial relations with Benin, Niger and Chad. Equally significant were the very close ties between the ex-military rulers now transformed into democratic presidents of Benin, Chad and Niger, and the Nigerian military head of state. Yet, despite these close ties as borne out by Nigeria's support for the transitions in Niger and Chad, and the return of Kerekou to power in Benin, it was still possible to discern the largely uncoordinated new tempo of cooperation across the borders. This engendered ad-hoc measures, lingering suspicion of Nigeria's intentions, and obsession with possible threats to Nigeria's security or that of its neighbours from the sub-region.

Nigeria's Relations with its Immediate Neigbours, 1993-1998: An Overview

From the external and internal dimensions of the 1993 Nigerian crisis, it is possible to argue that the crisis arose from the dissonance between developments in Nigeria and global trends towards democracy. This set the stage for a new trend in which Nigeria sought to forcefully break out of the web spun by Western hostility and isolation, by consolidating its leadership status in its immediate sub-region. The successes and limitations of this new policy thrust formed the main concern of the following sections.

While Nigeria was not indifferent to political and economic developments in the neighbouring states especially the possible consequences of such developments on Nigeria, the neighbouring states were themselves quite concerned with developments within Nigeria. Either way, Nigeria's relations with its neighbours between

1993-1998 exposed the complex dimensions of the contradiction between political cooperation and the non-coordination of economic ties across borders. The former led to fresh debates on the extent to which Nigeria's leadership role in the sub-region, especially as it related to issues of democracy and regional security *vis-a-vis* changes in France's African policy in the 1990's. The latter brought to the fore the urgent need for Nigeria and the countries of the sub-region to address the burning issues of monetary,and economic disparities across borders which tended to benefit informal cross-border trading networks, while impoverishing the states themselves.

The Economic Dimension of Nigeria's Relations with its Immediate Neighbours 1993-1998

Perhaps most significant for Nigeria's relations with her, neighbours on the economic front was the reversal in January 1994 of Nigeria's economic policy direction. In the budget for 1994, the Nigerian government announced policy shifts, which struck at the heart of the orthodox IMF/World Bank Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) introduced into the country by the Babangida regime in 1986. This marked a departure from the global trend towards economic liberalization and market-based economic reforms. Specifically, the government fixed the exchange rate of the naira at 22:1 USD, and pegged the interest rates (which had soared above 45 per cent), at 21 per cent. Although this action was economic, it had some political connotations.[8] As argued elsewhere, the shift was mainly driven by the desire to maximize domestic power considerations based on the regime's reading of the mood of the Nigerian people. It was also designed to tap the widespread disenchantment of Nigerians with structural adjustment and the deepening of economic crisis to provide legitimization for the regime under a nationalist cover. Yet, its action was not firmly rooted in a domestic political base and ran against the global trend towards economic deregulation or liberalization. The new policy direction of the Abacha junta based on the regulation of the economy, affected the economies of neighbouring countries, and attracted some hostility from the IMF/World Bank, the donor community and the West. Massive capital flight and disinvestments from Nigeria reached a peak, while the fragile manufacturing sector suffered. In spite of the optimism inherent in the 1994 budget, it didn't lift Nigeria out of the economic doldrums. As observed elsewhere:

> *Inflationary pressures continued to mount, the government like its predecessor, accumulated a massive deficit... and there was ample evidence that it printed money both to buy political support and to buy off some members of the opposition; the naira continued to collapse on the parallel market which not only thrived but proved understandably difficult to suppress in the face of the -acute foreign exchange crisis afflicting the state, manufacturing output, already low was further disrupted as the foreign exchange that was available was insufficient to meet the needs of industry and was supplied too erratically and piece-meal.*[9]

How did the shift in policy direction and the economic downturn in Nigeria affect its relations with the neighbouring states? To grasp the importance of events in Nigeria in relation to developments within its sub.-.region, it is necessary to draw attention to the fifty percent devaluation of the CFA in January 1994 in relation to the French Franc.[10] One of the reasons for the devaluation was pressure on the francophone countries from France, the IMF and the World Bank to adopt a market-based approach to resolving their recurring debt and economic crises. The other reason was the desire to restore the competitiveness of the economies of the Francophone countries *vis-a-vis* Nigeria and Ghana where repeated currency devaluations had been at the heart of their donor-inspired quest for economic recovery.[11] Within Nigeria, the 1994 devaluation of the CFA franc was widely interpreted as a sign of the loosening of the neo-colonial bonds between France and its former colonies in Africa. Some optimists even hoped that it would provide a big boost to a Nigerian-led market integration of the West African sub-region. On the francophone side, it was hoped that the devaluation would lead to a reversal of heavy trade flows from Nigeria, and correct CFA franc zone countries' trade imbalance vis-a-vis Nigeria. As it turned out, the devaluation of the CFA franc largely failed to reverse the competitiveness of naira-priced Nigerian manufactured goods and re-exports, because the naira exchange rate too was falling in the parallel market. Thus, Nigeria's economic and trade relations with its neighbours remained at a relatively low level, safe for the thriving cross-border trade by informal networks. This, as had been argued elsewhere was due to the lack of coordination and non-harmonization of economic policies between Nigeria and its neighbouring francophone states.

As noted earlier, the economic policies introduced in 1994 in Nigeria failed to stimulate increased economic relations with its neighbours at the official level. Neither did the devaluation of the CFA franc enable the neighbouring states to take full advantage of the large Nigerian market. As such, the continued flooding of Nigerian-made goods and re-exports into the markets of neighbouring states continued to foster the impression within the sub-region that the Nigerian economy was growing at the expense of its neighbours. Yet, all evidence in Nigeria revealed that the country remained in the throes of economic crisis and was not benefiting from the thriving informal cross border trade.[12] By the end of 1994, it became clear that the new economic policy direction had failed to stabilize the economy or stimulate domestic production. Thus in 1995, the government tried to stimulate growth through the introduction of new incentives, tight monetary control and the guided deregulation of interest rates and the foreign exchange market through the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN). The adoption of a two-tier exchange rate by the CBN (official transactions - N22 to USD 1.00, Autonomous market - N82.00 –

USD 1.00), created some problems for the manufacturers and other end-users who found it exceedingly difficult to source their foreign exchange needs at the high rate of N82.00 to USD 1.00. Thus, as production costs escalated, coupled with inflation and depressed demand, the manufacturing sector remained in crisis, with capacity utilization stagnating at a low 27 per cent. In 1996, government decided to clean up the financial sector through the Failed Banks Decree designed to recover depositors' monies stolen by corrupt banking officials, and ensure that confidence was restored to the banking sector. The National Economic Intelligence Committee (NEIC) was also set up to monitor government spending, put an end to deficit financing system, curb excess liquidity and inflation, and participate in the liquidation of "failed banks".

In the 1997 budget geared towards stimulating growth in the real sector, a lot of emphasis was placed on tariff changes, increase in the list of VAT exempt goods, the scrapping of excise duties on locally manufactured textiles among others. These policies directed at jump-starting the real sector of the Nigerian economy largely failed to have the desired impact. The first is the retention of the two-tier exchange rate: the official and the autonomous rates compounded the problem of how manufacturers could source foreign exchange at the high AFEM rates.

Some of the problems confronting the manufacturing sector were highlighted in a pre-budget memorandum submitted to the government by the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN) in October 1996. It noted the large stock of unsold finished products worth over N6 billion as a result of depressed domestic demand, and a capacity utilization of about 31.02 per cent.[14] In its recommendations to the framers of the 1997 budget on how best to address the problems facing the economy and the manufacturing sector, it noted, that:

> *In this regard the budget should address the continuing problem of low industrial capacity utilization, high profile*

of unsold inventories owing to weak demand and lack of new investment in industry. [15]

Thus, in spite of the macro-economic stability achieved in Nigeria since 1996, the domestic economy which would have propelled the integration efforts in the eastern part of the West African sub-region, and constituted the nucleus or growth core of Nigeria's external economic relations with its immediate neighbours, has been very weak. On the other hand, the devaluation of the CFA franc failed to bring about any economic recovery in Nigeria's Francophone neighbours, nor provided any leverage for the increased competitiveness of their products in the Nigerian market. In the absence of strong economic linkages, the old vertical linkages integrating the economies of the sub-region with those of the advanced market economy countries established since the turn of the century have persisted. This remai'ned so, even in Nigeria whose relationship with the West, and creditor institutions such as the IMF, World Bank and the Paris and London Clubs, was at the lowest ebb. Thus, very little integration of markets took place outside the informal sector. The lack of policy harmonization across borders partly fuelled by the fear of Nigeria's large and potentially hegemonic profile by its smaller neighbours has further worsened the prospects for economic cooperation and integration. Other problems militated against the evolution of strong economic ties between Nigeria and its neighbours. These included poor communication and transportation, low level of information about investment opportunities within the sub-region, non-convertibility of the Nigerian naira, obsession with political issues, retention of a dual exchange rate system in Nigeria as an incentive to the parallel market, and general weakness of will at official levels to aggressively promote formal cross-border trade.

The economic dimension of Nigeria's relations with its neighbours between 1993 and 1998 shows that the political and economic crises in Nigeria and the resultant shifts in economic policy on both sides of the border neither benefited the countries of the sub-region nor enabled them to pool their resources to solve their difficult economic problems. Rather, the traders from both sides who exploited these crises and policy disparities for their own narrow gains, at the expense of their countries.

Trends in Political and Security Co-operation Between Nigeria and its Immediate Neighbours

If much progress has not been recorded in the realm of economics, the areas of political co-operation, regional security and geo-strategic calculations have received much more attention. As noted at the beginning, Abacha's regime was borne out of crisis, and its policies attracted a lot of international (especially Western) hostility which made it very sensitive to the defence of its interests, and hold on to power in Nigeria. Apart from its pioneering and leadership role in the ECOMOG peace keeping efforts in Liberia, and assistance to security forces in Gambia and Sierra Leone, the administration bolstered efforts at securing Nigeria's borders from external aggression, illicit acts such as smuggling of contraband and drugs, armed robbery and gun-running. It was also very interested in ensuring that it maintained very good relations based on political co-operation with the governments in neighbouring states. There was also the geo-strategic concern with the option of checkmating French influence, while at the same time seeking to exploit the French in building a new regional alliance directed at counter-balancing perceived British hostility and lack of understanding towards the military authorities in Nigeria. This perhaps partly explained the Nigerian Head of State's presence at the 1996 Franco-African Summit at Burkina Faso, and the campaign in Nigeria to promote the French language in official circles.

Nigeria also supported transitions to civil rule in neighbouring states: Benin, Niger, and Chad, in order to promote peace, stability and the orderly transfer of power within its immediate environment. This was guided by the constant assumption that Nigeria's security is tied to the security of its immediate neighbours/[6] and as such, Nigeria in the pursuit of its national interest, is bound to have a stake in maintaining stability in its neighbouring states. In terms of its geo-strategic calculations, apart from the conflict with Cameroon over the ownership of the oil-rich Bakassi peninsular, Nigeria's relations with its neighbours were guided by respect for one another's territorial integrity. It was however, also underlined by several considerations: forming a sub-regional bulwark against perceived Western hostility, continued anxiety over the role of France within the sub-region, and Nigeria's support for neighbouring Heads of state, all of which, with the exception of one, Paul Biya, were retired army officers.

The move towards the formation of a Nigerian-led bulwark against Western hostility lies in events in Nigeria since 'the 1 993 coup, which brought the Abacha junta to power. From 1994 to 1995, several events in Nigeria and certain measures taken by the regime increased Western hostility towards it. These included: its refusal to reverse the annulment of the June 1993 election; dissolution of all the democratic institutions that had been in place before its ascension to power, arrest and detention of the presumed winner of the election on charges of treason, conviction and subsequent jailing of suspected coup plotters, among them, journalists, a prominent human rights activist, and the internationally respected former Nigerian Head of state, General Olusegun Obasanjo. The conviction, of nine Ogoni activists in November 1995 by a special tribunal, and their execution by hanging despite worldwide appeals for clemency, clearly brought matters to a head. The international community swiftly condemned the executions and extended existing sanctions against Nigeria. Nigeria was immediately suspended from the Commonwealth, while the European Union, the United States and Canada announced fresh sanctions against Nigeria, and the situation in Nigeria was brought to the attention of the United Nations. The details of the EU sanctions covered an embargo on arms sales, a ban on all top-level government contacts and the suspension of European Development Fund-financed projects in Nigeria, worth about N22, billion.[17]

However the actions of the West against the Abacha junta was perceived in Abuja as a flagrant interference in Nigeria's domestic affairs and a threat to Nigeria's sovereignty. Those fears and anxieties of the military junta were compounded by growing internal pressures for the respect of human rights and the verdict of the .people given on June 12, 1993. Apart from the campaign of civil disobedience and pro-democracy strikes, which were eventually repressed, other violent acts took place in the context of the struggle against the junta. Some of these included: the hijacking of an Abuja-bound Nigerian Airbus A310 on October 25 1993, bomb blasts in Kano and Kaduna in January 1996, and a bomb explosion in Ilorin on May 31, 1995 at a stadium during the launch of a government sponsored Family Support Programme (FSP). Between 1996 and 1997, several bombs allegedly targeted at the military exploded in Lagos and Ibadan. The other dimensions of the internal threat to security include the discovery of a planned coup, arms smuggling across the Benin-Nigeria border, banditry and rebel incursions from Chad, the transfer of stolen goods and vehicles across borders, armed robbery, and the smuggling of petroleum products to neighbouring countries.[18] Also related to this was the information that opponents of the regime such as the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) had either escaped into exile through the border, or were operating from across the border.

In the face of growing internal security threats and international isolation arising from its authoritarianism and poor human rights record, Nigeria between 1993 and 1998, adopted a foreign policy armed at protecting itself from further isolation by emphasizing its regional leadership status, and seeking new friends outside the Western orbit. There was a marked concern for the security of the immediate sub-region in order to prevent its destabilization or infiltration by elements hostile to the government at Abuja.

How did the Abuja-Cotonou, Abuja-Niamey, Abuja-N'djamena and Abuja-Yaounde axis fit into the preceding scenario? It did so in terms of the clearly marked profile of relations between the Heads of State of these countries (except Cameroon) and the Nigerian Head of State, their frequent visits to Abuja for consultations and Nigeria's moral support and material contribution to the governments of neighbouring states. In particular, Debry of Chad and Mainasara Bare of Niger both at the receiving end of international condemnation for poor human rights records,[19] turned out to be very close to Nigeria. Mainasara who succeeded himself after a coup and elections he supervised while repressing the opposition groups in his country, attracted United States' sanctions against Niger. The second return of Kerekou as President of Benin through elections was viewed favourably in Abuja, against the background of some actions of the former President Soglo, perceived as not being fully in support of its military junta in Abuja.

Thus, in the calculus of Nigeria, countries of the immediate sub-region which were being criticized and punished by international human rights groups and the West, had to come together to prevent any external threat aided by local opposition groups.[20] From the frequency of visits to Abuja, pronouncements of leading government spokespersons, and evidence of Nigerian support to, and leadership of the sub-region, there was little doubt that the Nigerian-led project to build a bulwark against Western hostility was on course and enjoyed the support of its neighbours. Nigeria continued to show a strong commitment to the security of the sub-region. Apart from its role in Liberia, Gambia and Sierra Leone, it was instrumental in dealing with rebel incursions from across Lake Chad. Nigerian security forces tracked down and captured such Chadian rebels operating in Nigerian territory and handed them over to the authorities in N'djamena.[21] It would seem that Nigeria's neighbours were now comfortable with the support of, 'and closer political ties with their large and powerful neighbour, Nigeria.

Anxiety over the Role of France in the Sub-Region

While there were few doubts about France's commitment to its former colonies in Africa, there was growing anxiety over the extent to which such support could translate into material terms. This was especially so at a time when France had little cash to spare, facing a serious socio-economic crisis alongside the strains of the integration of the European market, and growing opinion within France itself that the country needed to prioritize its domestic commitments far above those of its "African Empire." On the Nigerian side, the fear of French imperial designs in the sub-region had always been regarded as the beginning of wisdom, more so against the background of French support for the Biafran secessionists during the Nigerian civil war, and alleged plots by France to reduce Nigeria's size which posed a threat to her interests in ex-French colonies in Africa. This suspicion of France to some extent was transferred to her ex-colonies, which in turn viewed most actions of Nigeria in terms of a sub-regional imperial role to be resisted. However, the debt and economic crises which ravaged West Africa in the 1980's and 1990's, changes in the global environment and French refusal to continue to prop up the CFA franc by allowing for its devaluation in 1994, sent signals that France was adopting a new approach to its relationship with its Francophone ex-colonies. Without resorting to sanctions, France had made it clear that it would no longer covertly support African despots; such were advised to join the worldwide movements towards multi-party democracy.

The deepening of economic crises in neighbouring states due to the devaluation of the CFA franc, and the growing tendency of France to deal with her own problems first, while seeking new ways of consolidating its huge investments in Nigeria estimated at over $10 billion, [22] led to increasing willingness of neighbouring Francophone states to explore closer ties with Nigeria. With the pervasiveness of informal of cross-border trade, Nigeria had become strategic to the food security, survival, and market needs of neighbouring states. This is most pronounced in the landlocked states of Niger and Chad, which are virtually dependent on Nigeria for all imports and exports. In their bid to get out of the economic doldrums. Benin, Niger, Chad, and even Cameroon no longer seemed to doubt the economic gains that would accrue from closer co-operation with Nigeria as the nucleus or growth core of the sub-region. Nigeria on the other hand seemed to be increasingly comfortable with France, and even officially sought to make the study of French compulsory in secondary schools.

Yet it is important to caution that between 1993 and 1998, anxiety about France and Nigeria did remain a delicate matter within the sub-region, the apparent warmth in relations notwithstanding. The prospects for the future would depend on the extent to which France is willing to shift its economic commitments in Nigeria's vicinity to Nigeria, and Nigeria's capacity to take on these responsibilities without arousing long-held fears of Nigerian domination of its smaller and (mainly Francophone) less-endowed neighbours.

Nigeria's Support for Neighbouring Heads of State

There is no doubt, as noted earlier, that Nigeria between 1993 and 1998 provided support for neighbouring Heads of State. What is unique is that these Heads of State were mostly retired army officers. Some reports also claim that Nigeria paid the salaries of civil servants in Niger, Chad, and Benin[3] and contributed to the presidential campaign and eventual victories of General Mainasara Bare of Niger and Colonel Idris Debry of Chad at the presidential polls of their countries.[24] This raised fears in certain quarters, of the possible implications of Nigerian "support and encouragement to military dictators across the sub-region to manipulate their ways into the democratic toga".[25] Apart from providing some justification for the head of the Nigerian junta to follow the example of his (ex-military) peers within the sub-region, it posed a risk to the project of democratic consolidation across West Africa.

Nigerian-Cameroon Relations Between 1993 and 1998

Nigerian-Cameroon relations have been problematic. Part of the reasons for this is historical, linked to the impact of economic crisis in both countries in seeking glory abroad, and struggling for control over the oil-rich territory of the Bakassi peninsular. The story of the Bakassi conflict has its roots in the Anglo-Franco-German delineations of the Nigerian-Cameroon border, and the disagreement between post-colonial Nigeria and Cameroon over the exact location of the borders and under whose territory the oil-rich peninsular falls. Although when General Gowon and Ahmadu Ahidjo were the Heads of State of both countries, an attempt was made to resolve the dispute, in 1975 but by the 1980's, it had reared its head again leading to violent attacks and reprisals in the territory involving Cameroonian gendarmes and Nigerian soldiers. Since 1994, there have been frequent skirmishes involving both forces, resulting in some civilian casualties. Such clashes continued in 1995 and 1996,[25] in spite of the fact that the matter had been taken to the International Court of Justice at The Hague. Now, there is a truce, which is largely holding, while diplomatic channels are being explored to see if an amicable settlement can be reached.

Yet, in spite of the dispute over Bakassi, both countries continued to maintain diplomatic relations, and had each other's nationals living peacefully in both countries. Indeed, it was reported that General Abacha supported Cameroon's application for membership of the Commonwealth.

It is perhaps with regards to Bakassi, that Nigeria remained cautious about the role of France. Reports of French presence in an area considered to be part of Nigeria's South Atlantic security zone, and within which the country's strategic offshore and coastal oil installations are located, as well as its proximity to the volatile Niger delta region area, caused a lot of concern in Abuja. Yet, outside the considerations of national prestige and interest in the oil resources in the Bakassi peninsula, very little suggested that both countries would go to war,[26] nor would relations deteriorate beyond the existing level.

Prospects for the Future

While Nigeria's Francophone neighbours seem to share an organic unity by their membership of the CFA franc zone and their links to France, there is no doubt that during the Abacha years, they were greatly influenced by developments in Nigeria. During those years, they continued to forge closer political ties with Nigeria. The main challenge that faced Nigeria was how best to protect its national interest and sovereignty as well as its leadership role and promotion of regional integration without arousing the suspicion of its sister West African countries.[27] For its neighbours who depended on the Nigerian informal sector, the challenge remained how to tap the Nigerian market, and at the same time ensure that sudden policy shifts, or crises transmitted from Nigeria did not upset their fragile economies and polities.

What the trends-especially the close political ties between Nigeria and its immediate neighbours portend in the long-term is not very clear, but it is obvious that it has not sufficiently addressed the issues of the reconstruction of the badly damaged economies of the sub-region, the harmonization of economic and monetary policies, the issue of the inconvertible naira, and the slow pace of current efforts at regional economic integration.

The lesson or significance of a growing trend of ex-military Heads of State, transforming themselves by elections they conducted, into civilian Heads of State/ President should not be lost on the prospects of relations, as well as its grim possibilities for peace, political stability and security in the sub-region. The imperative, at least in the short term, is for Nigeria to democratize, and resolve its differences with the international community. Except this is done, the future of Nigeria's relations with its immediate neighbours would continue to be dominated by ad-hoc responses to perceived acts of international hostility and domestic subversion, and the predominance of security and politics over other concerns.

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