Commitment Capability and Nigeria's Strategic Interest in West Africa: Lessons for Statesmen

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ABSTRACT A state's commitment and strategic interest must necessarily be commensurate to its capability. It is inadequate to embrace grandiose foreign objectives without a formidable military and prosecution ability. It is within the vortex of this strategic logic that Nigeria's strategic interest in West Africa is examined. This paper however concludes that while it is correct to pursue the same in the sub-region, its capability is questioned.

INTRODUCTION

"A country's capabilities inform its role in international politics. Its ability to achieve its foreign objectives flows from how it assembles its variable capabilities. In a situation where its foreign vision and its assumed roles impact negatively on its domestic affairs, its foreign objectives must be re-examined and refocused" (Shoremenkun 1997: 12).

A country's commitment must inexorably be consistent with its capabilities to achieve its foreign objectives on one hand and on the hand be articulated towards a set of desired gains achievable across a country's international boundaries either for national goals or towards a desired role in international politics (Gomswalk 1986: 171). Statesmen assemble their countries' capabilities and weigh the options available in terms of application towards the aimed objectives. It is these capabilities that, more than any other exogenous factors, that condition the role a state assumes in either regional, continental or global politics. It is in this vortex that Akinyemi (2004: 8) once argued that:

It is not in Nigeria's interest for anyone to establish a military and strategic capability in West Africa that will be beyond the capacity of Nigeria to match".

It is in this vein, that Leon (1972: 14) argues that:

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Any military option employed towards a country's strategic objectives must be within the capabilities of its resources to prosecute and achieve its objectives without or with minimum negative consequences, on its domestic social activities.

This paper examines the issue in nation's capabilities, its commitment. It creates a nexus between the two. Fundamentally, it takes a critical look at the consequences when a state allows the commitment to outrun its capabilities, using Nigeria's example in West African sub-region. Should a state allow its external commitment to submerge its domestic responsibilities? Is there a point when the risk of allowing a state's commitment to outrun its capabilities becomes inevitable? Must a state's foreign objectives take cognizance (often) of its capabilities? Should Nigerian state, given its strategic policy in the sub-region continue to embark on a grandiose regional commitment for the sustenance of its hegemonic status and role? These questions underscore the focus of the paper.

This work is however divided into four parts. The first is the introduction while the second part examines the issues of capabilities and state's commitment or responsibilities. The third part examines the validity or otherwise of allowing a state's commitment to outrun its capabilities. It looks at its implication for Nigeria's strategic policy and situational factors that could warrant such. The fourth part is the conclusion.

CAPABILITY, COMMITMENT AND NIGERIA

Capabilities of states in international relations traditionally refer to a state's endowment, in terms of natural and human resources, which strengthens a state to meet its international commitments or responsibilities. There is indeed a fundamental relationship between national power and the foreign policies of nations. This element is sometimes refers to as national power. Thus, the concept of national power concisely referred to the ability and capabilities of states to achieve its desired international objectives. These achievements emphasized are essentially based on the degree of enormity of national power at the disposal of a nation concerned. (Ayo 1995).

The unequal capabilities of states to perform equal role in the international system has been largely a concomitant factor of a state's national power. In fact, "nations of the world do not have similar capabilities, resources and history. As a result, they are categorized into the first world, second world and third world countries" (Adesola 2004: 26).

The above categorization however explains not just the status of nations in the international system but more forcefully, it unveils the capabilities of nations to play certain roles or shoulder certain commitments in the international system. Thus, the commitment of a nation must therefore be commensurate to its strength and capabilities. However, these commitments are often defined in terms of a nation's foreign objectives or policy. Speaking in similar vein, Robert (1992: 141) remarked that:

Nations often define its role in international system based on a number of variables. These variables inform by its capabilities to sufficiently exert influence in the international environment. It is a commitment, which advances the achievements of the strategic objectives of its foreign policy.

This position was cleverly amplified by Ruth (2002: 101) when she convincingly stated that:

…Constantly, a nation and the architects of its foreign policy must interrogate its environments and consider, critically, the issues of capabilities, time and changes in international politics, then define the role of a nation within the identified variables.

This position however strengthens Robert's submission. Its strength however lies in the need for statesmen to critically consider nation's capabilities which he defined in terms of time, resources and changes in international politics. These factors have affected states in international system. For instance, where a nation consider the achievement of a given foreign policy option against country "B" within a limited time, and within the resources already made available for such, but country "A" begins to come to the reality of a prolonged war against country "B", which requires more resources with the attendant problems and its politics. Country "A" strategic options would have to change just as its tactics must change. Not that strategy is completely an illusion (Richard 1980: 21) but fundamentally, the capability of state "A" in this instance to achieve its commitment may be constrained in the light of insufficient resources or incapability to deploy it within the required limited time.

Harold (1997: 201) however differed in view. To him,

While it is unwitty for statesmen to commit their nations to foreign assignments beyond the endowment of such nations, there are however, conditions and situations that may necessitate such decision which statesmen have taken in the past.

This position is however instructive, because it defines the context of condition and situation which could give rise to such deserving risk. These could be possible when a nation has to choose between its national pride and occupation by enemy-states or between its peace and disorder when its hegemonic role, relevance or responsibilities are threatened. This striking departure offered a dimension for critical assessment of the issues in question. The analysis of which we shall soon turn to, in the third aspect of this work. The need to protect higher values might prevent statesmen from embracing national and most objective reasons of capabilities before committing their nations. In June, 1940, Britain under Churchill, considers either to fight on, against Hitler's forces or risk invasion and occupation. This was a war, Britain, in view of all credible reasons knew she could not win but she continued to fight against all odds (Klau 1973, 159), Renolds (1985: 147) while looking at this scenario concluded that:

In 1940, Churchill and his colleagues made the right decision – but they did so for the wrong reasons.

What we are emphasizing here is that this

was a situation where a synergy could not be created between commitment and capabilities and yet the decision on commitment was successful. Thus, in the word of Richard (2002: 23) is another way of saying, "thank you for bad strategy"

We may at this point examine what constitute a nation's capabilities, which enable it to exert influence in international system or shoulder certain responsibilities or commitment as informed by its own strategic policy, or imposed by the international system. These factors are generally agreed upon by scholars to be: population, quality of leadership, military capability, economic capability, resources endowment and management, and diplomacy (Harold 1978: 111). However, while not rejecting the above attributes, scholars such as Ola (1999: 206-219) have also added (1) industrial capacity (2) national morale and (3) geography as part of the attributes to be considered when examining the capabilities of nations to shoulder certain responsibility or rise up to the demands of their strategic policies. These factors are considered as "tangible and intangible variables".

Quality and highly literate population, good and visionary leadership with adequate international clout; sound military complex and weaponry with modern training; a good and supportive economy which informs the material base for a grandiose foreign policy; sufficient natural endowment and prudent management for industrialization; technological dash for the creation of a modern-techno-sonic state, would enable a nation to effectively use diplomacy where and when necessary. Modern industrial complex and geographical positioning with all its positive attributes. All these would work together to sustain the capabilities of nations to achieve their foreign commitments. We must however quickly point out that nations are not equally endowed in terms of the factors above. Thus, the capabilities of states to embark on a given foreign policy and roles they play either at regional, continental and global levels are concomitant variables of objectives and subjective factors. No wonder Mao (1949: 17) remarked that:

Our new Republic is endowed with all important factors not only for our internal development and cohesiveness. We are well-positioned as important nation to play great roles in human civilization; we have enduring values to export to the whole world and to play a prominent role in bringing development and peace to humanity.

This view was probably informed by the vision of Mao, relative to the role he envisaged for China or a normal passionate revolutionary outburst to prepare China for the emerging post World War II international politics. Whatever it is, one fact is clear, it is the articulation of the variables of power, which informs the capabilities of nations to shoulder their commitments and responsibilities. In this wise, Mao did just that relative to his foreign policy vision for China and China's capabilities to do so. A scenario, which the contemporary international politics is fast experiencing. We may at this point examine what strategic policy is and what actually constitutes it.

Strategic policy of a nation is often informed by the core value of its national interest. These are interests, which nations jealously cherish, uphold and give all necessary commitments to realize (Ola 1999: 198). In the context of the Nigerian state, this is appreciated in its afro-centric foreign policy on one hand, and on the other hand, by its national interest of: internal security, political stability and development, which Nigeria realizes it can only be attained within the context of regional peace, harmony and development. This policy of good neighbour-liness, friendly and cordial relationship with its neighbours informs the nature and dimension of Nigeria's strategic policy. In fact, it was the believe of Nigeria's political leaders that it is apparently impossible for a foreign country to stir up resentment and internal squabble within Nigeria except with the cooperation of her immediate neighbours (Garba 1987: 51).

Since Nigeria appears to be the most powerful country in West Africa sub-region, her regional responsibilities and commitments appear very huge. This is largely due to the size of the countries bordering it, their endowments, as well as the status of their economies compared to that of Nigeria. This perhaps partly explains why assistance in the form of importation of technical aid, importation of tractors, fertilizer, insecticides and other forms of assistance has been a constant programme of every Nigerian administration. We must however stress again that Nigeria's strategic policy in West Africa seeks to achieve its national interests which are anchored on national security, national welfare and national prestige. Probably, this thinking informs Adebo's (1968: 287) view that:

Because of the Cold War and its dangerous

prospects for humanity and because of Nigeria's desire to base all considerations of foreign policy on Nigerian's national interest, the makers of Nigeria's foreign policy stressed the necessity for world peace, the main idea being that peace within Nigeria would be strengthened if there were peace in the international system.

This position was re-enforced by Ofoegbu and Chibuzor (1980: 121). To them:

Nigeria's foreign policy makers perceived Nigeria's national interest in terms of values, which could be meaningful and easily understandable to the Nigerian people. These were expected to be related primarily to the political integration, socio-economic advancement and general well-being of the people of Nigeria.

No wonder Nigeria's political leaders preferred to commit Nigeria to a foreign policy which seeks a region pervaded by peace and concord; the variables, they perceived, would enhance national interest than the one of rancuor, anarchy and hopelessness in which world community is at war with it (Adesina 1973: 486). Thus, Nigeria's national interest of domestic peace and regional responsibilities placed heavy commitment on Nigeria. At what cost for Nigeria? Is her national interest constrained? These are germane questions in the assessment of the issues of capabilities and commitment in question. To this exercise we may now turn to.

NIGERIAN STATE, STRATEGIC POLICY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

We have already established above that Nigeria's strategic location, national interest, assumed responsibilities and status in West Africa informed its commitment in the regional politics. These responsibilities have largely been encouraged by its national interest which considered peace as a necessary prerequisite for the achievement of its domestic objectives. For stability and peace in West Africa, Nigeria must at all time rise up whenever occasions and circumstances affecting the achievement of those variables arise. The leadership role conception which Nigerian statesmen outlined for the country has had serious implication for Nigeria's strategic policy in the sub-region.

On one hand, it has been suggested that the role being played by Nigeria in West Africa is actually beyond Nigeria's capabilities and thus,

Nigerians have had untold stories of misery, woes and sorrow to tell rather than triumphs with implications for internal growth and development. Thus, Alade (2000: 36) points out that;

…Sheer size, population and resources do not make a leader. Regional leadership is not only a function of geography and resource endowment, but more importantly, of the capability to convert and utilize them to advantage and command respect of regional peers.

This view aptly represents the position of 'misery-story school' of Nigeria's leadership conception in West Africa. It is in fact a negation of the statesmen's position, who gave unto Nigeria a grandiose regional policy, which drains its development resources but failed to maximize the objectives towards the realization of its strategic policy.

This school perceives the failure of Nigeria's strategic policy within the vortex of economic and industrial development. By extension, the resources needed have been used in the search for regional peace and hegemony. This view has been sheered by most Nigerians who argued against Nigeria's participation in the Liberian and Sierra-Leonean civil wars. The loss of lives, huge resources committed, and battering of Nigeria's image (Adeolu 2002: 181) was identified as reasons for this. Bassey (2001: 101) articulated this view more precisely when he captures the mood and verdict of Nigerians:

…The Nigerian military intervention in Liberia and Sierra-Leone has been the most traumatic and economically wasteful experience in the forth-three years of independence. Against the background of collapsing industrial communication, infrastructure, moribund health delivery system and educational institutions, widespread poverty and rural anomie, cascading debt burden and prostrate manufacturing sectors, many Nigerians have wondered and shouted aloud in the electronic and print media how we got into the cauldron of Liberia and Sierra-Leone.

This view, aside from capturing the mood of those Nigerians and scholars, gives another dimension on a question asking for answer(s) ; "why should Nigeria even take part"? The question we need to raise at this point was whether Nigeria's strategic interest was ever achieved even if the strategy adopted was wrong?

The Nigerian Military is apparently ill-equipped and lacked modern know-how of operational direction in a command position

(Bassey 2004: 113). The poor synergy between military operation, command and political will are all issues in Nigeria's seeming incapabilities in its assumed regional responsibilities (Ronald 2003: 14). This explained the unprofessional conduct exhibited by he Nigerian soldiers (Ronald 2003: 21). No wonder, Nigeria's Chief of Army Staff remarked that:

A nation that is not prepared to sustain its forces in combat has no business in initiating it in the first place as the consequences may be grievous. We may also eschew our nation's penchant to embark on unilateral missions that have implications for enormous human and material resources only to abandon such troops when inducted, without adequate logistics sustenance items (Bassey, 113).

The views expressed above underline the implications of Nigeria's strategic policy for domestic and foreign aspirations. However, it is necessary to say that Nigeria's objective of regional peace is largely achieved despite Nigeria's limited capabilities and negative consequence on domestic development. The development at home should not however be analyzed squarely within the context of Nigeria's strategic policy. It should be seen more as the consequence of the visionless of Nigeria's leadership who failed to articulate and vigorously pursue development objectives in line with internal aspirations and capabilities maximization in international relations which are founded on revolutionary policies, science and technology. In fact, it appears at one length that the peace sought for is within the vision of the self—serving Nigerian leadership for self-image and primitive accumulation and not for transformation. While Nigeria may not have adequate capabilities required of a regional hegemony, we must know that it could achieve both its regional responsibilities and domestic duties with prudent plans and interests' maximization. This is the bane of Nigeria's leadership.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria's example, presents a critical case of a poor statesmanship relative to its strategic policy commitment in West Africa. The problems created by the perceived Nigeria's statesmen's creation of larger than the policy objectives in the West African sub-region impacted negatively on Nigeria's domestic aspiration. The complexity of this probably forces Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal to frustratingly remark that "Nigeria is the problem of West Africa's ascendancy" (Ojo 2000: 11). This must have been necessitated, on one hand, by his perceived Nigeria's misuse of its leadership role to create problems in West Africa for power maintenance at home. This was very common during Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha regimes in Nigeria. On the other hand, it could be the pitfall of over-reliance on Nigeria and possibly, an outcome of a critical assessment of Nigeria's capabilities to sustain it's seemingly leadership pretension other West African states could not easily occupy.

However, Nigeria's strategic policy appears intertwined with its domestic aspirations as we have already identified. Then, it has to play this vital role as an hegemony in the sub-region; the role of peace maintenance and sustenance of power equilibrium in West Africa squarely rest on her. For a proper synergy between its commitment and capabilities, Nigeria must hurriedly solve the following problems.

· Nigeria is technologically backward and no appreciable advancement has been made in this direction. With such contradictions between its commitment as a sub-regional hegemony and its endowed resources, the realization of its policy is constrained. No wonder, development within the Nigerian defense is not balanced (Isaac 1984: 7). Thus, for Nigeria to successfully realize its strategic policy objective and maximize its gains for domestic development, it must undergo a revolution in military affairs. This was exposed in its operation in Sierra-Leone and Liberia.

· Nigeria is endowed with enviable natural economic resources which have not been properly harnessed. Hence, she still lacks a solid economic base (Aminu 1986: 78). This base was absolutely necessary to maintain effective and modern military (Robert 1980: 25) to achieve its strategic objective(s).

After solving these problems and other relevant ones, with the emergence of a stable polity and visionary leadership, Nigeria's commitment will equalize its capabilities. Its strategic policy will be successfully achieved with positive implications for its domestic development politics. For, what is the use of a commitment, role and policy that brings woes, misery and backwardness?

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