

## CONCEPTUALISING NATIONAL INTEREST IN NIGERIAN FOREIGN POLICY: A FOCUS ON ABACHA REGIME

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### ABSTRACT

*National interest is an important concept in the field of International Relations (IR) which scholars pinpoint to examine the action of states within the global system. Such examination, according to IR scholars, takes into cognizance some salient features of a particular state in defining the national interest. As would be expected, all independent states within the international system formulate foreign policies that take care of the domestic and external imperatives and most of the states' action and behaviours within the international system have always been interpreted from the lens of national interest. As it is not practicable to subject all states and governments to empirical details in a study, this research employs the concept of national interest to discern Nigerian foreign policy direction under the most "despotic regime" in Nigeria history, General Sanni Abacha, between 1993 and 1998. This is expedient given the continuous criticism of the regime from both academic and policy quarters in Nigeria and abroad. The regime is recorded to have the worst record in human right abuse and as such put Nigeria under pariah status in the comity of nations. The research is conducted to unravel how Abacha defined and conceptualised Nigeria's national interests and how policies were formulated and implemented to achieved such interests. In such instance, it might be possible to evolve empirical details on why Abacha had chosen to behave the way he did. Thus, in conducting the research the theory of national interest is a guidepost while content and discourse analysis are employed as method of data analysis.*

Keywords: Nigeria, National Interest, Foreign Policy, Abacha, Regime.

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### 1.0 Introduction

National interest is the condiment that adds taste to the execution and implementation of foreign policy of any state. A state without pre-designed national interest is doomed to fall to the intricacies of global politics. Morgenthau asserted that the main sign that assist political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the notion of interest defined in terms of power (Morgenthau, 2006:59). This concept provides a clue to understanding international politics and the facts therein (Arkes, 2015). Therefore, in the framework that Morgenthau elaborated, every political act is seen as directed to keeping, increasing, or demonstrating power. In short, the "animus dominandi", the desire to control, is the social force that controls political activity (Jackson and Sorenson, 2013:75). On the international plane, these behavioural patterns translate into policies of the status quo, imperialism and prestige (Kubalkova, 2001:59: Arkes, 2015). In terms of interpreting these three concepts (status quo, imperialism, and prestige) the first has as its objective in the maintenance of the existing balance of power, the second seeks to acquire more power while the third seeks to show off more strength in order to keep or increase power. Consequently, Morgenthau (1993) claimed that interest was at the level of all politics, while on the international stage it befitted each state to pursue its national interest which is generally defined in term of power. This is clearly elaborated in Hans Morgenthau's book (1993) *The Struggle for Power and Peace*.

Thus, the above introduction lends credence to the notion that national interest of Nigeria is an important signpost that dictated Nigerian foreign policy under Abacha regime. In this manner, whatever the system of governance a state employs, a key factor that governs its affairs and interactions on the global stage is its national interests (Rouke and Boyer, 2004:74: Arkes, 2015). The concept of national interest is used almost universally to argue for or against any given policy. Most political leaders and citizens still argue that it is the paramount lens through which foreign policy of a state can be discerned. Why do governments do the things they do, and not the things they seemingly could do? The answer is usually national interest. Governments follow policies

that they believe protect or enhance their nation's interests. The action of Winston Churchill when he was asked to explain Soviet behaviour explains the primacy of national interest in foreign policy making. He said: "I cannot predict to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle enclosed in a secret inside an enigma; perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest" (Nester, 2001:118).

National interest, therefore, can be said to be the broad goals that all states share- political independence, economic growth, cultural preservation, and peace- and the distinct goals each state pursues on specific goals (Nester, 2001:117). National interests are evoked to justify virtually every action of state, from generosity to genocide. The most obvious national interest is self-preservation, and the greatest threat to that basic interest is an enemy of invasion. Thus, the use of national interest as a cornerstone of foreign policy is a key element of the road more traveled by in world politics. Realists contend that it is a wise basis for foreign policy (Rourke and Boyer, 2004:63). Thus, national interest is a multidimensional hierarchy of objectives, one that is probably changing all the time. At the base of the hierarchy are those purposes and objectives that are central to the security, autonomy, and independence of the political unit, to its political, social, religious, and cultural institutions, and to the basic welfare of its citizens (Holsti, 1995:18). There are three basic categories of national interest. They are: core interests, middle-range interests, and long-range interests.

It is, therefore, naturally expected that Nigerian foreign policy ought to be fundamentally guided by her national interest which should serve to either justify or repudiate the nation's action or inaction in the international relations. During the Abacha's regime, national security cum territorial integrity was the foremost national interest and he executed policies to promote it (Jinadu, 2005:12; Oladimeji and Kirmanj, 2015:691). Closely related to this is the protection of Nigerian economy. It is in the West African affairs that Nigeria has become most active in term of economic development. The most important achievement was the formation and operationalisation of ECOWAS, which embraces all sixteen states in the West African sub-region. With a booming economy after the attainment of independence, Nigeria saw many advantages in the creation of a common market in the region, and bilateral trade agreements were also made with most states in the region from 1960 (Oladimeji and Zaki, 2015:83). Aid was given to several countries in the region, and several joint development projects were undertaken, all in the name of protecting the Nigerian economic interest.

As fallout, this article seeks to examine how national interest of Nigeria was interpreted and pursued under Abacha regime, the most controversial of all Nigeria's past leaders. His controversial regime stemmed from his inability to yield to internal and external pressures in the formulation of Nigeria's foreign policy and he was the sole determinant of the constituents of the Nigeria's national interests. In this manner, the article intends to link the foreign policy with national interest of Nigeria under Abacha. Doing this, it is believed, will highlights how national interest of Nigeria was conceived and to what extent such conception aligned with the realities on ground during the Abacha regime. In achieving the above, therefore, this article is divided into sections. Section one deals with the conceptualization of the twin-term of foreign policy and national interest. Section two intends to elaborate Nigeria's national interest under Abacha and how such individualism dictated the direction of Nigeria's foreign policy under the period of study. Section three defines Nigeria's national interest in terms of security while section four looks at economic dimension to Nigeria's national interest under Abacha. The Last section of the article deals with conclusion as well as suggestions and recommendation.

### 1.1 Foreign Policy And National Interest

Foreign policy and national interest are close concepts in international relations; indeed, the basis of a state's foreign policy is her national interest which in turn directs the course of the foreign policy. Hence, the concept of national interests has continued to play a significant role in the foreign policies of sovereign states. A state's foreign policy is not operated in a vacuum. The central policy instrument in the conduct of foreign policy is always the campaign and pursuit of national interest. Thus, national interest refers to the totality or the aggregate of interest of individuals and groups within a given nation state (Carlsneas and Guzzini, 2011). Viewed from its classical perspective, national interest encompasses the various strategies adopted in the international interactions of states to ensure the preservation of the stated goal of society (Ogwu, 1986).

According to Jackson and Sorenson (2013), "No nation, no matter how lofty it's ideal and how genuine its desire to abide by them can base its foreign policy on any other than its own national interest". These lofty statements suggest that majority of political scientists and political leaders attach considerable significance to the concept. However, some scholars still deny its overriding role in the making of foreign policy. No doubt, National interest is a singularly vague idea; it is exceptionally nebulous and unclear concept. It assumes a variety of unclear meanings in the various contexts in which it is used. National interest many a times can generate conflicts between states. In most cases, it is what the decision makers or leaders say it is. As a matter of fact, the concept of national interest depends on the interpretation and political orientation of a state leader. Thus, the concept has been a subject of manipulation from various state leaders and elites.

Notwithstanding the complexity in defining the concept, there are attempts from scholars to establish what it really portends. Morgenthau (2006) in this case posits that "national interest is determined by the political tradition and the total cultural context within which a nation formulates its foreign policy". He maintains that the main requirement of a nation state is to protect their physical, political and cultural identity against encroachment by other nation States (Morgenthau, 2006). Therefore, in any political discourse, national interest serves two primary purposes- as an analytical tool and as an instrument of political action. These are employed in understanding the Nigerian national interests under Abacha regime.

### 1.2 Methodology

In conducting this research, primary data like interview transcript and speeches are utilised. Secondary source of data like published articles, newspaper and textbooks were also used. Latent content analysis and textual mining are used as a method of data analysis.

### 1.3 Nigeria's National Interests Under Abacha

Nigeria as a nation is a heterogeneous entity which encompasses a multitude of ethnic, social, religious and racial groups. The problem of identification and classification of all the diverse and conflicting interests which clamour for satisfaction in a national society remain an important determinant of national interests. "In order to aggregate all the many contradictory values in the formulation of national interest, one must face the possibility that some of the specific interests carry greater weight than others" (Ogwu, 1986). No matter the diversification of interests among the various groups constituting Nigeria as a state, the major determinant factor for establishing the priority of interest should either be changes in external condition(s) or internal shift or both (Ogwu, 1986). It is against this background that scholars of foreign policy argue that, National interest is what decision makers say it is. This is exactly what obtained under Abacha regime between 1993 and 1998.

The world in which we live today has indeed become a global village in which societies and nations are bound to interact very closely and so people's destiny have inextricably interwoven. The globalisation accords with the feature and nature of Nigerians who have a natural predisposition to travel and adventure. Nigeria's is a vast and populous nation and many sons and daughters of Nigeria can today be found in virtually all corners of the globe. This partly explains the active and responsible involvement in global affairs since Nigeria's emergence as independent and sovereign nations fifty six years ago. It is not surprising, therefore, that the conduct and management of Nigeria's foreign policy and in fact all matters connected with its relations with other states and international organisations generate keen interest among all Nigerians. The choice of this subject is as apt as it is timely for no nation in human history has ever ignored the imperatives of its national interests in the pursuit of external relations without dire consequences. Nigeria has not and will not be an exception to this general rule. According to General Abacha (1996), "...Our desire...is to continue to focus our attention on the protection and projection of our national interests as the matrix of our foreign policy". Here, one needs to ask a pertinent question: what was the main focus of Abacha's foreign policy in defining the national interests of Nigeria? In answering this question, it is important to note that Abacha was concerned more about Nigeria's national security, territorial integrity, and economy than any other aspects (Fawole, 2003). So, Abacha's definition of Nigeria's national interests can be adequately explained under these three interrelated national issues.

### 1.4 National Security Interest Under Abacha Regime

Abacha defined concretely what the Nigerian national interest was all about in terms of security. That could be seen in the way he shunned all appeal from the West and other nations to spare Ken Saro-wiwa and other Ogonis who were environmental activists from the oil producing region of Niger delta (Albert, 2010:203). He defiantly resisted all international appeals and executed the environmental activist and other nine ogonis from the region. From the point of view of national security concern, Abacha saw their writings and protests as threat to Nigeria's national territorial integrity. Abacha was of the conviction that he was not the architect of Nigerian political debacle as most of the problems were inherited from Babangida regime who nullified the General election of 1993, won by the business mogul, Moshood Kashimawo Abiola (Osaghae, 1999:265). Thus, he devised all methods to ensure that international outburst did not affect the disintegration of Nigeria. Besides, all international issues that borders on security was the main foreign policy focus of the regime. In his lecture at Nigerian Institute of International Affairs in Lagos in 1996, he responded to the way some security threats have been removed from international system through the signing in August 1996 of a Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). He opined,

*It is an historic event which brought an end to further qualitative improvement of nuclear weapons. Negotiations for this treaty had been a priority item on the disarmament agenda of the United Nations for several decades. Its adoption therefore marks a significant reduction in the overall level of threats posed by weapons of mass destruction. It is in our view that the most remarkable achievement in recent times in the efforts to rid the world of scourge of nuclear armament (Abacha, 1996).*

Abacha also responded to the way in which Pelindaba Treaty was signed in Cairo in April 1996 to make Africa a nuclear weapons free zone. This treaty, apart from being a collateral disarmament measure, also represents an important contribution to confidence building in Africa. It complements the principled position which Africans have consistently pursued in the interest of peace, stability and security in Africa and the world at large. Abacha in his lecture said,

*Let me seize this opportunity therefore to commend those nuclear weapon states which have signed the protocol to do so without further delay in order that the full objectives of this treaty would be realised. The threat to global peace and security does not only derive from existence of nuclear weapons in the hands of the world dominant powers. Since the end of the cold war, many nations of the world have been preoccupied with the struggle to contain the forces of fragmentation and micro-nationalism. Indeed, some political units have already fragmented while others are threatened by instability and possible disintegration. Unfortunately, our continent, Africa has not been immune from this precarious situation. In Nigeria, our efforts have been to resist these forces in order to ensure that our country, the most populous black nation on earth, remains strong, united and indivisible (Abacha, 1996).*

The quote signifies that Abacha was mindful of the fact that Nigerian security was being threatened from outside. In order to prevent such spillover, he therefore recognised the Pelindaba Treaty as one of the numerous ways to curb inflow of nuclear weapons into Africa and to destroy the existing ones. This may sound moralistic from a regime that was bent on dealing

militarily with anyone who went against his regime overtly or covertly. Nevertheless, Abacha realised that it was of importance to attend and yield to issues that might affect the territorial integrity of Nigeria.

Therefore, it was the national interest that propelled the regime to intervene in regional conflicts, most notably in Liberia and Sierra Leone. One would have expected that a regime with pariah status in international system should maintain its isolationist stance in such case. The need to keep the regional peace and stability at all cost impelled the regime to intervene either overtly or covertly in regional conflict. The more reason for such intervention was to ensure that the spillover effects of the conflict could not be sustained given the presence internal political imbroglio in Nigeria (Abubakar, 2009:179). Thus, the Abacha regime was of the conviction that the refugee exodus from such warring states might complicate more the tension in the domestic political landscape. Equally, the intervention, according some scholars, was to prevent the existence of foreign troops which included national armies and mercenaries from the region (Albert, 2007:168; Ali, 2009:22). Because of the paranoid nature of the regime, Abacha was very keen at keeping all foreign elements at bay both from Nigeria and from West African sub region. It needs to be recalled that the regime had been declared pariah, with various countries severed bilateral and multilateral relations with it. But such pariah status was not effective when Nigeria entered Sierra Leone and Liberia to enforce peace and stability through ECOMOG force (Inamete, 2001:120; Oladimeji and Zaki, 2015: 83). One would have expected that the international actors responded to halt the intervention of Nigeria in such instance. But because of the nature of international political system, which does not always respond swiftly to African issue, Nigerian intervention in that wise was seen as welcoming, not only in Africa but also in the global space. Such conclusion was buttressed by the alliance of UN and ECOMOG forces under the leadership of Nigeria in Mano River region. If Nigeria did not swiftly prevent the seeming political imbroglio in Sierra Leone, such might have degenerated to genocidal war as it happened in Rwanda and Burundi. The lesion of slow response to the Somalia and Rwanda wars from the international community compelled Abacha regime to respond immediately to the regional conflict in order to prevent spillover effect (Laro, 2002). It thus safe to say that the stability in the region, prevention of refugee exodus from conflicts and keeping foreign troops out of the region could adequately serve as national interest of Nigeria to intervene in regional conflicts under Abacha regime.

### 1.5 Economy As National Interest Issue

On the economic scene, the Abacha regime which lasted for five years ensured that the sanctions placed on Nigeria did not jeopardise the national economic interest. Being the principal oil producer and exporter in Africa, the demand for Nigerian oil was not affected as the UK and United States oil companies refused to leave Nigeria for other places (Anyako, 2004:12). The importance of oil in the global economic productivity and transaction did greatly determine the resilience of Nigerian economy despite embargoes and sanctions from various international and state actors. The regime did recognise the importance of the oil to global powers and actors and employed such to create leverage for the regime. In some instances, the regime was forced to court the friendship of African countries and induced them with financial assistance and rescue (Okwuosa, 2009). Some were given oil concessionary while others were allowed to import Nigerian oil on credit. This economic diplomacy greatly allowed Abacha regime to maintain and sustain its diplomatic stance with the West.

Thus, in protecting and promoting national economic interest, the regional economic group was vigorously financed and supported while internal political problem was mitigated by sponsoring groups advocating for regime continuity (Fawole, 2003). Abacha was of the conviction that if the political stalemate was not mitigated such might jeopardise national economy. At international level, most importantly outside West African sub region, Abacha responded to the need to address economic hardship being experienced by developing countries. He said:

*It is disconcerting to note that while the countries of the north are becoming more affluent; those of the south which constitute the majority of the world population are getting more impoverished. The resultsnt deepening crisis of development is compounded by the crippling impacts of external debts, deteriorating terms of trade, increasing barriers to trade, declining investment and financial in-flows as well as capital flight (Abacha, 1996).*

It needs to be stressed that the global economic system has witnessed structural imbalances in the economies of most developing countries manifested in declining standards of living, low productivity, low capacity utilisation and increased levels of unemployment. While international economic cooperation at the global level continued to grapple with the problems of diversity of interests, especially between the developed and the developing countries, activities continued to be intensified within regional economic groupings. The European Union, for example, has made considerable progress towards the emergence of a common European currency, the only obstacle being the reluctance of one of the members to forgo the advantages of the national currency combined with relative weakness of the currencies of the less endowed members of the community. The regime of Abacha recognised the economic meeting held in 1996 among the countries in the Pacific Rim, comprising some of the world's largest and fastest growing economies. Those countries assembled in Manila, Philippines, to map out new strategies to strengthen their collective economies. Participants at that meeting included countries of the Asia Pacific Economic Community (APEC), the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the North Atlantic Free Trade Area (NAFTA) (Abacha, 1996). Apart from the collective decisions taken at that meeting, the US president visited china where he agreed to exchange visits in 1997/1998 with the Chinese president to pursue their bilateral economic interests-the first of such visits in recent times. Abacha lamented thus: "We welcome this development for it clearly demonstrates the supremacy of national interests over considerations of extraneous issues relating to the peculiarities and sensitivities of individual nations" (Abacha, 1996).

In 1995, a new global trade arrangement, otherwise known as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), was set up to oversee an increasingly competitive and liberalised trade regime. As successor to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), it was expected to set the rules for a multilateral trading system in which the developing countries of the world, including Nigeria,

had hoped to enjoy full access to the world market. With such novel development in the history of global commerce, Abacha regime was quick to respond to the functionality of the trade regime in 1996. He was of the view that after the trade regime's first year of existence, the organisation is yet to live up to expectations (Abacha, 1996). Rather, it has developed into a forum, polarised by a dichotomy of interests between the developed and developing nations. In addition, the Abacha regime also recognised that the efforts of these regional groups as well as developments within the WTO have together in the course of year heightened competition and rivalries between and among nations for an equitable share in the resources of the planet. Such developments underscored why the regime redouble its efforts to strengthen commitments to regional and sub-regional integration. It is generally accepted that a nation's foreign policy is a reflection of its domestic circumstances. In this context, Abacha and his team were acutely aware of the fact that the credible role which the country has been able to play in international affairs since independence has been largely a function of the domestic economic strength and policy consistency. Thus, Nigeria under Abacha, despite internal encumbrances, redoubled and intensified efforts to strengthen the country's economic base and sustain the on-going political reform programmes. Abacha affirmed that,

*Nigeria must remain economically strong...to continue to make positive contributions to peace and development in our sub-region, our continent and, indeed the world at large. In our efforts to lay the basis for a sound economy, we have focussed on the establishment of an enabling environment for the full participation of the private sector, both indigenous and foreign, in the realisation of our economic activities (Abacha, 1996).*

Thus, in 1996, policies were sustained to maintain fiscal and budgetary discipline and the banking and financial sector were as well sanitised (Ibn Chamas, 2005). It needs to be stressed that the regime stabilised the national currency in order to attract investors and promote prudent domestic investments. In such vigorous step to revitalise economy, existing public enterprises were either being privatised or commercialised. For the first time in the history of Nigeria, following the successful hosting of the Third Nigerian Economic Summit in September 1996, a long-term socio-economic programme code-named Vision 2010 was launched (Obi, 2009:126). The programme which attracted local and international participants was set out to concretise priorities for achieving integrated growth and development within a specified period of time. The outcome of all these measures was immediate, as all the indices of growth, including growing investor-confidence, began to be manifest in the country. To improve the balance and structure of the federation, and more importantly, to bring government closer to the people, six new states and 182 new Local Governments Areas were created for purpose of economic productivity and efficiency (Abacha, 1996). Thus, national economic interest was an important hallmark in the Abacha's foreign policy decision. This position contradicted most literatures that had been written on the regime which tended to paint it all black. Yes, the regime was notorious but that should not hoodwink one to acknowledge the positive milestone attained by the regime.

### 1.6 Conclusion

The analysis above tends to suggest that Nigeria's foreign policy formulation under Abacha was not that different from what obtained in the earlier administrations. What distinguishes Abacha foreign policy and national interest conceptions from other foreign policy leadership was the isolationist policy and desire to be intransigent to the yearnings of international pleas. He was not open to internal and foreign criticism and such decision greatly affected the constituents of Nigeria's national interest. Beside all this personal aggrandisement, Nigerian foreign policy like other developing countries' foreign policy has always looked like one-man business. It needs to be stressed here that most foreign policy committees and foreign affairs ministries in developing countries are toothless bulldogs that do not have a say in the foreign policy formulation. It is the wishes and aspirations of leader that prevail in the formulation of foreign policy. In effect, Abacha unilaterally used state resources to ensure that national security was not compromised and such dictated the direction of his national interest definition.

As with most developing countries where military regime proliferates, the conception and definition of national interests lie with the incumbent. This was exactly what happened under Abacha regime. It was the leadership of Abacha that dictated what constituted the national interests of Nigeria between 1993 and 1998; and any opposing views were met with stiff resistance. Thus, Abacha regime did not achieve much in term of foreign policy. This was because of the manner he dealt with the domestic civil society. His ruthlessness and unwarranted killings of Ogoni people of Niger Delta region, where oil is being produced, made the regime unpopular in both Africa and the outside world. As such, Abacha's regime was sanctioned by some countries for the atrocities he perpetrated against Ogoni people. The Commonwealth of Nations also suspended the membership of Nigeria for gross violation of human rights (Kolawole, 2005:875). General Abacha perpetrated many atrocities and he was named one of the most corrupt leaders in Africa (Kraxberger, 2004:415). Despite all these, similar to previous regimes, the government of General Abacha also employed the use of multilateral institutions in quelling the tides of conflicts in Africa. It is of interest to note that the pariah status of General Abacha regime within the global system did not affect its utilisation of regional organization to actualize Nigeria's foreign policy interest. This was particularly true of the deployment of troops to neighbouring West African countries under ECOWAS. Abacha reinstated President Tejan Kabbah after the coup of May 25, 1997 by Major Johnny Paul Koroma (Oche, 2006). The ECOWAS Abuja Summit of August 28-29, 1997 was decisive in placing a total embargo on the new military junta. General Abacha was made chairman of ECOWAS on August 6, 1994 and subsequently redrafted to serve ECOWAS from 1996 to 1998, apparently to deal with the persistent sub-regional crises. On the whole, it could be said that Nigeria, despite the encumbrances of its military dictatorships or perhaps because of them, was able to contribute significantly to the consolidation of peace, security in the sub-region. As Okwuosa pointed out, "the peace and security portfolio of ECOWAS has given that organization a pride of place on the continent," to the fact that it is regarded as a model in sub-regional peace-keeping (2009, pp.4-5). He died while in power in 1998 and General Abubakar Abdulsalam was made the president. As soon as the Abubakar resumed office, he was preoccupied with the need to organize election in order to hand over power to a democratically elected president. In the process of doing this the sanction by Commonwealth of Nations was lifted and the Nigerian glory, lost during Abacha regime, was regained.

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