



**CHALLENGES OF FOREIGN POLICY
MAKING AND IMPLEMENTATION IN
NIGERIA: AN INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE**

A LECTURE PRESENTED BY

Alhaji (Dr) Sule Lamido, CON

**(Foreign Minister of The Federal Republic of
Nigeria, 1999 - 2003)**

Organized by

**Society for International Relations Awareness
(SIRA) in Collaboration with Friedrich Elbert
Stiftung (FES) Nigeria**

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**Protea Hotel, Asokoro, Abuja, Nigeria, on 31st
October, 2012**

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Introduction

Let me begin this presentation by recalling two statements I made after my appointment as Nigeria's Foreign Affairs Minister, which may indicate my understanding and perception of both the concept of foreign policy and the job of a foreign minister. First, for me, *"foreign policy comprises the totality of a country's perceptions, attitudes and behaviour on issues and towards other States in the international system at any given time. It is also a reflection of the country's past and immediate political, economic, social and cultural circumstances at the domestic level. In other words, what may be defined as the foreign policy of any country at any given time, is the expression of its domestic policies in the international system"*.

Secondly, concerning the job of Nigeria's foreign minister, I once said: *"Eighty percent of Nigerians are on the road side. They repair their cars by the road side. They go to the road side clinic, they eat at the roadside*

buka, the schools their children attend are under the Mango trees on the roadside. My job as foreign affairs minister is therefore, to reflect the sensibilities, the fears, the hopes and aspirations of this eighty percent in foreign policy delivery". Thus, as soon as I assumed as foreign minister, I have a fair notion and appreciation of the enormity of the job. I knew the task of foreign minister was to, among other things, present Nigeria; a country that is very richly blessed with enormous human and material resources, with strong culture and tradition and rich history at the international arena. Also, I was to project, protect and defend the interest of the diverse and proud people of Nigeria on the world scene. I knew that all classes of Nigerians, the poor, the weak, as well as the super elite and strong look up me in those four years (1999-2003) to promote and protect their aspirations at the international scene. In other words, foreign policy in our days was anchored on self-dignity and national pride. Accordingly, the task of defending the interest of Nigeria and Nigerians at the international front was given a pride of place under President Obasanjo's-led government.

Specifically, in discussing the challenges of foreign policy making and implementation in Nigeria, it is therefore important to bear in mind that the domestic affairs defines and concretizes the sort of challenges that have to be confronted in the making and implementation of a country's foreign policy. As a former Foreign

Affairs Minister, I have in that vantage position observed how domestic issues define and shape the way we not only articulate our foreign policy within the international space, but also how we go about pursuing the objectives of this policy. The domestic space also determines to a large degree the results that could accrue from the implementation of the foreign policy. A subsidiary point is that the past weigh heavily in determining the shape of the present and future in the foreign policy making. This means that challenges to foreign policy making and implementation are also embedded in the past of a country.

Let me also state that as a Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1999 and 2003, I was privileged to work under a President that is highly experienced and who has a high profile in international politics. He is President Olusegun Obasanjo. Even before becoming Head of State in 1976 he has garnered some experience in international relations and foreign policy. Together with his colleague and bosom friend, General Murtala Muhammed of blessed memory, he participated in the United Nations Peace-Keeping operation in the Congo, in the early days of Nigeria's independence. He was a member of the Governing Board of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA), the Think Tank of Nigeria's Foreign Policy. He became one of Africa's Eminent Personalities and thus, an African statesman, after leaving office as Head of State. No wonder he got involved in foreign

affairs in his first term so much that the public accused him of neglecting Nigeria. It should be understood that before he adjusted himself, he found the domestic environment too small for his attention. This is similar to Chairman Mao of China and Broz Tito of Yugoslavia, who, before the end of their life, considered global issues more of their personal concern than the domestic politics of their respective countries. They had become international statesmen who are more worried about international issues than trivial national politics.

The Context of Our Times

In the context of our subsidiary point, the first specific challenge is to recognize the historic conjecture of our coming into office. Nigeria had just transited from military rule to democracy. “Before the inception of this administration the confidence of the people in good governance had been severely shaken by the trauma of military dictatorship, irresponsible and irresponsive leadership” as I once observed during a briefing to the diplomatic corps in 1999. During that era, and especially in the Abacha days, the country faced diplomatic isolation. In response to this, Abacha shut out our traditional partners. Our most immediate task was therefore to repair the damage that military rule had done to the foreign and international relations of the country. Repairing this damage meant

that lot of time, energy and resources was spent without giving commensurate attention to the long term foreign policy objectives of the country. This was therefore a challenge which at that time made our foreign policy to be driven by short term interests and largely on *ad hoc* basis. At the very onset therefore, one of the key priorities of the administration was to repair the damage that military rule had done to Nigeria's relations with other states and with international platforms such as the Commonwealth, the African Union, *et cetera*. We needed to restore the image of the country as one where human rights were respected, rule of law is the basis of governance and administration was geared towards the improvement of the living conditions of the ordinary citizen. In short, we needed to, while creating a positive image for the country internationally, be able to leverage this new positive image toward rebuilding the confidence of the people in governance through delivering practical benefits to them.

The National Economy and the Debt Burden

Closely related to this diplomatic isolation elicited by military dictatorship was the shape of the economy. This placed constraints on the conduct of our foreign policy in two reinforcing ways. The first was the weakness of the economy. One's foreign rating and influence in a very fundamental sense is a reflection of the health and size of

one's economy. While Nigeria had a large economy, it was in a state of crisis that makes it difficult to realize its full potential. The economy as I observed then was "characterized by mismanagement, neglect and corrupt practices". This was and to this day, still remains a major challenge to our foreign policy. Our economy is still in crisis and has not been robust enough to allow us to play the critical role we crave for especially within the African continent. We could not, on a sustainable basis, provide assistance to sister countries if the economy is in poor shape. Citizens themselves needed to see the practical results of the foreign trips and diplomacy in the material improvement of their lives otherwise they will see no justification for the money spent on these foreign trips.

The second was that we met an economy that was heavily indebted to creditors. The debt burden was such that it was crippling the economy. President Olusegun Obasanjo had serious concern that without dealing with the debt problem, the economy could not be brought back to the path of growth. In his words, "Nigerians rightly expect democracy to yield positive dividends in their lives. Our Administration will however, find the task of meeting this expectation virtually impossible without substantial reduction of our debt burden especially as we call on the same citizens to make sacrifices implicit in the recent measures aimed at prudent management of our national economy". As I said also to a group of

journalists on September 1, 1999, “You cannot carry on board people who are all diseased, hungry and illiterate. You cannot mobilise this kind of citizenry for any useful foreign policy. So there has to be a change. There has to be a caring government in Nigeria and that is why we have to be frank about paying our debts”.

For this reason, the Obasanjo administration took the crusade for debt relief seriously. It used both bilateral and multilateral platforms to demand for debt cancellation from creditors, so as to free resources for improving the material condition of our people. In those early days, debt relief became a key foreign policy objective of the country. To some extent the country was successful in getting a large measure of debt relief. But this in itself might have come with its own consequences. First, a lot of attention and energy was diverted from other policy objectives and this was a real challenge to the making and implementation of foreign policy in the country. Second, negotiating the debt relief turned out to be largely bilateral. This means that negotiating debt relief from key creditor countries might mean that the country had to be sensitive to their own interests.

Part of the consequence of our diplomacy for debt cancellation was that the country had to also be sympathetic or at least not be outrightly antagonistic to the foreign interest of the creditor countries. We also had to engage the leading global financial institutions such

as the World Bank and the IMF. Engaging and dealing with them means that we have to entrench market economy in our country. Unfortunately the market is not always successful in bringing tangible benefits to the ordinary people.

A key economic policy of the country since the return to civil rule in 1999 is to attract foreign investment as a vehicle for economic development. This is simultaneously a foreign and national policy objective, a perfect example of the inter-dependence between domestic and foreign policy making. Various reforms have been and are still being implemented as part of the process of creating the conducive environment for the flow of foreign investments. While in themselves these reform initiatives appear useful and necessary, often their immediate effects on ordinary citizens have not been directly positive. This results in opposition to such reform measures, creating disharmony between government and citizens and thus either truncating the process of the reform or in some cases damning the consequence and going ahead to push the reform to the people. A recent case is the ending of subsidy regime in the nation's petroleum sector. Government has persuasively argued that the subsidy regime was being misused and benefiting only a few people. It therefore sought to end this by raising prices of petroleum products which resulted in mass protests across the country, forcing the government

to back down by conceding to allow for some measure of subsidy in the supply of these products.

As a consequence also, we also had to restore confidence in the economy to both the creditors and to attract direct foreign investment that was needed to turn around the economy. This meant that the government had to put in place a sound management system for the economy and institute reforms that would eliminate corruption. There was a clear link between our successes on both fronts, further reaffirming my position that our foreign policy is a reflection of our domestic policy. The Obasanjo administration instituted several reforms, among which were high profile anti-corruption initiatives that resulted in the setting up of both the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC).

The dynamics of a peculiar federal system

A cardinal principle of the foreign policy of the country especially during my time was that foreign policy should be used to enhance the condition of the citizens. Sometime such direct benefits for citizens are found within bilateral or regional-based platforms. Sometimes these bilateral and or regional platforms might have some coloration such as religion as is the case with any relationship with the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) and the Vatican. Given

our peculiar federalism, relationships like these are often generally viewed with suspicion of some sort of hidden agenda by the other side and most often result in unnecessary and unhealthy controversy in the country. This sort of suspicion has not allowed the country to benefit from the potential of such relationships.

This peculiarity that is the result of our great diversity needs a policy making framework that will allow for identification and ownership of its initiatives by the different interest groups in the Nigeria project. In order to reduce the potentials for misconceptions and misunderstanding of the goals and objectives of foreign policy in such a situation, this policy framework should be participatory, inclusive and accessible to all. Developing such a participatory inclusive and accessible policy making framework remains a key challenge in the foreign policy making and implementation in Nigeria. While developing the framework is a big challenge, even more, its implementation could be a major challenge. This is because, such a framework would be consultative and in the context of the fast and dynamic world of diplomacy it will slow down the conduct of foreign policy activities. But it is a challenge that we need to rise up to.

Again, we should not forget that in a democracy the Legislature is very important. So another challenge that a foreign minister faces is

Legislature-Executive relations. Apart from getting your budget approved by the National Assembly, Ambassadorial nominees also have to be confirmed by the Assembly. And in the routine conduct of foreign affairs you encounter hitches which are in most cases caused by communication gap. For example, in January 2003, some members of the House of Representatives visited Pakistan, apparently seeking to mediate in the dispute over Kashmir, without consulting the Foreign Ministry. We wrote to the Chairman of the Committee, pointing out the risk of such a trip without background knowledge of the delicate balance of alliances. They reacted angrily, saying "...nobody is here as an appendage of Sule Lamido's Ministry. We are not his boys; we are not bound by his whatever foreign policy strategy."

Continental plurality and consensus building

One of the policy objectives of the country is to continue to play a leading role in African affairs. This is why the country is always ready and willing to contribute to defending the territory or keeping the peace in other African countries. It was also in that spirit that the Technical Aid programme has been continued. Actualizing this has not been easy. Recent events at the African continental fora where candidates backed by Nigeria have lost elections indicate that we are far from achieving our objective of playing leading roles in African

affairs. A number of factors relating to the plurality of the African continent have been responsible for this challenge.

- Inter-regional group competition and tension: Often even within the African Union matters are seen from regional perspectives by the different countries. Nigeria being a key member from the ECOWAS group is seen by other regional groupings as merely representing the interest of the West African region. This inter-regional competition sometimes undermines the capacity of the continent to pursue a common agenda.
- Influence of former colonial powers such as France: This is particularly apparent in the West African region where France has been able to create a sub-regional block with which it relates but nevertheless is present in other regions as well. The Francophone countries in West Africa tend to act as a block within ECOWAS and take common stand on initiatives that makes it difficult to reach wider consensus. The slow progress of ECOWAS integration is partly explained by this. France has been very active in pushing common policies in the sub-regional block of its former colonies. United Kingdom's own efforts are masked by the fact that the

Commonwealth organization that groups its former colonies, is spread across several continents and therefore hardly seen as a platform for nurturing relations between the UK on one hand and some group of African countries. But in reality that is what the Commonwealth was meant to achieve.

- Incipient competition between Nigeria and some African countries especially South Africa: There is a seeming competition between Nigeria and some African countries as if leadership was the only thing that matters in the continent. One such obvious result was the way in which after ECOWAS decided to apply pressure to end the impasse in Côte d'Ivoire following the election which Alassane Ouattara won but President Laurent Gbagbo refused to vacate office, South Africa decided to support Gbagbo by stationing military ships on the West African coast.

The Challenge of the War Industry

It was the National Security Adviser to Presidents Obasanjo and Yaradua, General Aliyu Mohammed who once declared that that the main objective of Nigeria foreign policy should be “Peace, security and prosperity through friendship”. I agree with him. Certainly

having a peaceful economy in the country that can result in what he calls “direct benefits to Nigeria” cannot be achieved in the state of conflicts and wars either within or between African countries. Conflicts within the continent have been a key challenge to the foreign policy of the country. There have been too many conflicts in the continent: from Sierra Leone, Liberia, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Sudan, Rwanda and now Mali and several other pockets across the continent, these have been serious strain on the economy of the country. We have our own border conflicts with especially Cameroun which is still nationally to be resolved to the satisfaction of all.

Nigeria has a long history of involvement in peace keeping. Some of the most recent peace keeping efforts include Liberia, Sierra Leone and Sudan. The involvement of the country in mediating to resolve these conflicts is not only a drain in human and material resources but also creates conflicting perceptions among different actors in the conflicts, which are carried along in other forums such as in the African Union as well in international platforms.

In addition to these regional and other conflicts within the African continent, Nigeria itself has its own share of internal conflicts with pockets of communal, ethnic and religious conflicts across the country. This puts the credibility of the country in question in terms

of our weight to intervene successfully to resolve African conflicts when we ourselves are not able to resolve our own internal conflicts.

Reforming the UN System

Nigeria has always supported the reform of the UN system to make it more democratic and accountable to member states. Former President Obasanjo stated this very succinctly when he declared: “My delegation believes that it has never been the purpose of the United Nations Organization to prescribe Democracy and Change for its members and yet make little or no progress in the democratizations of its own organs such as the Security Council. My delegation accordingly urges the General Assembly during this Session, to conclude deliberations and reach agreement on the modalities for the reform and the expansion of the Security Council so that the Millennium Assembly will adopt them next year and not later”. One of the possible fruits of that democratization for Nigeria is the possibility of permanent seats in the Security Council for Africa for which Nigeria is a major candidate. These reforms have been proceeding very slowly and certainly not as Obasanjo would have wished. Today in 2012, more than 12 years since Obasanjo made the speech and 12 years into the new Millennium for which he expected

to have taken off with the reform being implemented, we are still debating the issue. Part of the problem for Nigeria is that its advocacy for democratization of the UN system was weak. Until recently it has elections which were internationally seen as flawed. This internal democracy deficit means that Nigeria cannot be too forceful about its demand for democratization of the UN system, and in any case its voice alone without getting Africa united behind it, and in concert with other continental grouping, could not make much impact.

A part from the obvious weakness of our democratic experience there is the fact that for Nigeria to be able to gather the clout to push for the reform effectively its economy must transform in such a way as to support:

- Countering the economic blackmail of the bigger nations by using development assistance and aid against weaker countries through its own development assistance programmes
- Be able to upscale its contribution to the budget of the UN System which in the current dispensation determines the level of influence of member countries within the UN system
- That its own economic development be less dependent of development assistance from other countries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as it was more than 10 years ago, so it is today, that the key challenges to our foreign policy making have remained basically the same. They centred around four key themes, namely: the economy; difficulties in securing favourable consensus within the African countries; security; and the inability to muster the necessary strength to lead to the logical conclusion the reform of the UN system. As we consolidate our democracy, our voice on democratization, human rights and rule of law is better respected in the international community. Also consequent to our democratization, there is improvement in citizen relationship with elected governments. Citizens have started to enjoy the fruits of democracy and are willing and ready to make sacrifice to support government's efforts at transforming the economy. The economy itself is showing signs of a turn-around. We have enjoyed some steady growth in GDP. Inflation is being tackled. Yet there are still many other challenges. Unemployment for example, is still a serious problem across the country.

We are also making progress in the continent. Democratization is being consolidated across many countries. The continent is also recording progress in advancing gender equity and equality with the election of women as heads of states. There are increasing signs that

the continent will more and more be speaking with one voice, which is very important to the foreign policy aspiration of the country. In all, it can be said that Nigeria has been pursuing its foreign policy objectives within the context and constraints of its resources and circumstances.

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