

National Interest in Foreign Policy Making in the Fourth Republic: Nigeria as a Focal Point

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines national interest in foreign policy making in the fourth republic: Nigeria as a focal point. The essence of interactions among government functionaries and policy makers in Nigeria as well as other advanced nations of the world is largely to promote their respective national interest through a well-defined foreign policy objectives. However, the definition of national interest differs from one nation to another, political leaders invoke the word to justify their actions as a means of promoting their national interest, but in most cases, this is not true, they tend to promote personal interest rather than national interest. Moreover, there is no explicit definition of the concept of national interest by world leaders and policy makers, but the importance of national interest cannot be underestimated especially when considering foreign policy making in Nigeria. This paper therefore examines national interest in foreign policy decision making in Nigeria, with a focus on the fourth republic. The research design adopted is chronological and explorative. The secondary source of data collection were employed in the study. Findings from the study revealed that although the concept of national interest is equivocal, scholars of international relations agreed to a large extent that national interest refers to the interests that are paramount to states and are encapsulated in economic, political, and socio-cultural as well as security of lives and properties of the citizens. The study therefore recommended that the government of Nigeria should promote her national interest especially in the area of foreign policy.

Keywords: National Interest, Foreign Policy, Nigeria, Decision making, Government.

INTRODUCTION

The significance of national interest in foreign policy making cannot be underestimated especially when considering the premium placed on it in the study of Political Science and International Relations. The concept is important to state and non- state actors. However, the concept lacks clarity because of differing perception of it, sometimes political leaders describes it to justify their actions. National interest is considered paramount to nations because it is considered as the foremost interest states seek to promote in their relations with one another. The concept is equivocal and lacks a clear definition because what constitutes national interest for one state differ from the other. World leaders justify their actions of protecting their national interest irrespective of how offensive these actions may be to the citizens of other nations.

National interest is central in foreign policy making because despite the ambiguity that surrounds it, it remains of great importance in any attempt to describe, explain, predict or prescribe international behavior. Throughout history, individuals and group have appealed to the national interest to justify the policies they preferred. Alcibiades claimed he was acting in the interest of ancient Athens when he recommended the Sicilian expedition during the Peloponnesian War. Napoleon acted in French national interest when he launched the disastrous Russian campaign and sought to conquer Europe. Hitler justified his multifront war invoking a mindless extermination of about six million Jews in the name of national interest. (Asobie, 2002).

The ambiguities that surround the concept of national interest relates to attaining a precise and widely acceptable definition of what constitutes the national interest. Inevitably, different analysts give varying opinions about how national interest should be determined. Osita (2010) perceive economic criteria as the basic yardstick for determining the national interest. Any policy that enhances a state's economic position is deemed as being in the national interest. Improving a nation's balance of trade, strengthening the industrial base or guaranteeing access to mineral resources may be conceived as being a state's national interest

The inclusion of economic wellbeing as a core area of national interest is common to all states, but generally third world countries prioritize economic development than do already developed states. Nigeria leaders since the attainment of flag independence in 1960 have sought various ways to promote the national's national interests, but to what extent have they been able to accomplish this purpose form the crux of this exploration. Again the relationship between national interest and foreign policy making is also crucial to states because foreign policy deals with the pursuit of a state's national interest in relations with one another. (Ibrahim, 2014)

National Interest: Conceptual Clarification

Since the commencement of the first Republic led by the administration of Alhaji Tarawa Balewa, the objectives of Nigeria's foreign policy have remained the same. Nigeria National Interest amongst others include: (1) the strengthening of African solidarity done both bilaterally and through continental and regional organization such as the organization of African Unity now African Union and the Economic Community of West African States. (2) The promotion of peace and stability as well as security of the African continent.(3) Active participation in and support for International Organization such as the United Nations (4) Support for the rights of peoples to self-determination and freedom from colonial and foreign subjugation and for all liberation movements in their legitimate struggle for national independence (5) Furtherance of Nigeria's economic interest by the active promotion of trade and investments both bilaterally and multilaterally(6) Strengthening of regional economic cooperation which has to do with the support for the Economic Community of West African States, as well as other sub-regional groupings such as the Chad Basin Commission and the River Niger Authority (6) Promotion of regional solutions to regional conflicts, which has found expression in the often stated preferences for finding African solutions to African problems (Akinyemi, 2006).

Foreign Policy: Conceptual Clarification

Foreign policy is a crucial aspect of International Relations that seeks to explore how a state acts, and interacts with other states and non-state actors in the international community. These interactions bother on economic, political and social cultural relations amongst states in the international arena.

Statement of the Problem

The concept of national interest has been misconstrued and treated with levity in the politics of the Nigeria state. The pursuit of a vibrant foreign policy is impossible without consideration of national interest. National interest is supposed to bring national progress to every citizen in the nation. National interest sum up economic, political, cultural and security to mention but a few. What is seen today is that political leaders tend to promote selfish interests without giving priority to the national interest.

This explains why there are so many conflicts in Nigeria. Since the creation of the Nigeria states, the leadership has not welcomed the uniformity of purpose, leaders' hijacked power and come up with policies geared towards the promotion of selfish interests. When there is a transition in power, policies are abandoned without continuity of the vision of the predecessor.

This has caused retrogression in national development and has continued to hinder economic as well as political development. National interest is one of the determinants of Nigeria's foreign policy; however Nigeria has not been able to record success in her foreign policy pursuit.

Research Questions

1. Why does the concept of national interest lacks clear definitions?
2. Has Nigeria successfully defined her national interest?
3. Is there a relationship between national interest and foreign policy making?

Research Objectives

In order to respond to the above research questions, some objectives have been formulated as stated below

1. To investigate why the concept of national interest lacks clear definition
2. To ascertain if Nigeria has successfully define her national interest
3. To verify the relationship between national interest and foreign policy making?

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopted a chronological and explorative research design. The secondary source of data collection was adopted in the study. Journals and textbooks were consulted in the course of carrying out this research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several texts have amassed highlighting the significance of national interest in the study of international relations. Adeniran (2007) perceived national interest as that interest that is paramount to a state ranging from political, economic and socio-cultural interest that citizens of nations benefit from their Government or nations, their elucidation of the concepts stems from their understanding of the political variables affecting each societies and what they perceived as national interest. Akinyemi (2006), and Ottoh (2007) described the concept of national interest as ambiguous and stated that political leaders often invoke the concepts to justify their actions. Leaders often invoke it repeatedly to justify actions ranging from the most vital to the most trivial. In human history, individuals and groups have appealed to the national interest to justify the policies they preferred.

Ani (2013) stated that there is a connectivity between foreign policy and national interest and advised the government to take the issue of national interest seriously. Asobie (2002) also stated explicitly the importance of diplomacy and foreign policy when addressing the issue of national interest in Nigeria.

Folarin (2010) believes that national leaders should be proactive when addressing the issues bothering on national interest. What this mean is that leaders should take action on issues that would improve the political situation and economic, social well-being, health and culture of the people as well as their political survival. They are urged to take action that will improve the lives of the people rather than pursue policies that will subject the people to domination by other countries. Policies which are likely to make them unable to stand among other nations” national interest is paramount to the survival of citizens of nations.

Hassan (2010) in his work on Diplomacy, Governance and International Relations provided a more elaborate definition of national interest when he reiterated that there exist connectivity between diplomacy and national interest when addressing the issue of governance in the country. The concept refers to the vision of the good life to some ideal set of goals which the state would like to realize. The target goal could be a long term objective such as the unification of the state into a nation or it rapid economic and technological development. The operational level has to do with the sum total of interest and policies actually pursued by a particular state. National interest refers to the use of concepts in political arguments in real life situation to explain, evaluate, rationalize or criticize international behaviour.

Ibrahim (2014) in his work on “National Interest and Foreign Policy Options for Nigeria in the Central African Sub-region” believes that leaders in Africa vigorously pursue and protect the national interest of the citizens in their countries. However, in contemporary times one can observe that the whole notion of national interest has been misinterpreted by political leaders or actors who sit in the helms of affairs. Nigeria is a typical example of nation that seems to have lost direction in this regards. Since the attainment of flag independence in 1960, the government of Nigeria has oscillated from one policy to the other. Nigeria government has initiated policies and road maps for national development. However, Policies such as War against indiscipline (WAI), Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), The Seven Point Agenda did not live to see the light of the day after transition of power from one government to the other. Admittedly, these policies were domestic policies but they had implications in the area of the nation’s foreign policy thrust.

Adeniran (1983) and Ibrahim (2014) have reflected on the concept of national interest and believe that that when people sometimes assert that a state policy should reflect the national interest, what they have in mind essentially is that they desired to see the makers of national policy rise above the narrow and special economic interest of the nations to focus on the more inclusive interest of the nation. The interest of the nation is paramount to the general wellbeing of the citizens therefore the Government should be responsible in the area of protecting the national interest of the entire nation (Nwanolue, 2015; Lukpata, 2013).

Foreign Policy is also very paramount to states in the pursuit of their respective national interest. In the pursuit of national interest and foreign policy decision making, national leaders are expected to make rational decision for the wellbeing of their citizens. When rational and informed decision making are made by the leaders of states there are bound to be progress for the collectivity of the people, however when wrong decisions are made, it invariably affect the progress of a state. Foreign policy decision making enables nation to engage in trade relations, diplomacy and international economic relations. In contemporary period, a tree does not make a forest therefore nations need to engage in foreign relations with one another to foster their economic as well as political progress.

Furthermore, the need to make rational decision in the furtherance of foreign policy making is paramount to the overall progress of a state in their interaction with one another. Rational decision making in the area of foreign policy is important to the progress of a state in its interaction with another state. Nigeria has made blunders in the area of policy making in the military era. In a democratic setting, the need to make more vibrant policies has become very essential.

Theoretical Framework

National interest deals with the objectives and ambitions of a sovereign stat’s, it in clude economic, military and cultural goals of a nation. It was first used by the Italian diplomat and political thinker, Niccolo Machiavelli, and later championed by other political thinkers such as Giovanni Della Casa in 1547 and Giovanni Botero in 1580. The national interest model was adopted to explain the importance of national interest in foreign policy decision making. Scholars of international relations to a large extent believe that national interest sum is the totality of interest accruing to the citizens of the state for their collective wellbeing. These interests could be in the area of economic development, political stability, cultural ties and creativity etc. The national interest model attempts to provide reasons why office holders should articulate, project and promote national interest for the general wellbeing of the society. One of the strength of the theory is that it creates the awareness of the citizens to be abreast of what their country stands for and the benefits every citizen is expected to enjoy, while the weakness is that leaders invoke the concept to justify their selfish interest. This theory was applied to the study because of its important in the discussion under investigation in Nigeria.

The theory of national interest is crucial to this study because it describe the meaning of the concept and the relationship it has with foreign policy-making. Since foreign policy is the pursuit of a country’s national interest, there is a relationship between national interest and foreign policy.

The Role of Nigeria Government in the Formulation and Interpretation of National Interest and Foreign Policy Objectives in the Fourth Republic

Nigeria fourth republic stated with the swearing in of president Olusegun Obasanjo in the month of May, 1999, he left office in 2007, Umaru Yar' Adua became president on May, 2007 and pass away, shortly after his demise, his successor, president Goodluck Jonathan resumed office in the month of May, 2010 and left office in 2015, Muhammadu Buhari became president in 2015 and left office in 2023 while Bola Ahmed Tinubu became president on May 29, 2023.(<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/>).

In the fourth republic the above mentioned presidents have made considerable efforts to pilot the affairs of the nation and promote Nigeria's national interests, but no significant success has been made in the promotion of these interests. There fore there is a need for the current administration of President Ahmed Tinubu to promote the national interest of the nation when making foreign policy decisions; this will help to create national integrity in the eyes of the international community. The determinants of Nigeria's foreign policy have been perceived by Nigeria leaders as economic and political stability, including the promotion of national interests as determinants of Nigeria foreign policy, yet Nigeria leaders are not doing enough to promote national interests. The military regimes especially in the era of late President Sanni Abacha practiced a totalitarian regime, when he killed Ken Saro-wiwa an environmentalist in the Niger delta region of Nigeria and despite the plea for mercy by Nelson Mandela of South Africa, Ken Saro-wiwa was executed, and for the first time, Nigeria was excommunicated from the Commonwealth of Nations.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The discussion of this paper focuses on national interest in foreign policy making in Nigeria. The problem identified in the study borders on leadership ineptitude and insensitivity to the issue of national interest as it affect the general wellbeing of Nigerians in the 21st-century. What is obvious is the egoistic and self-centeredness of political leaders who only think of themselves and their immediate families. In the area of foreign policy this has negative implications for the image of the country.

When huge capital is borrowed from great financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, such funds are not used judiciously to promote and project the development of the country they are lavished by politicians for their selfish interests. It is amazing how politicians steal public funds, use exotic cars and live in affluence while their citizens live in abject poverty. In Nigeria the image of the nation is vilified and censured, these misdemeanors displayed by political leaders have created a lacuna between the elites and the impoverished citizens of the Nigeria state. In response to the research questions earlier presented in this study which are as follows: why is the concept of national interest ambiguous?

The study discovered that what constitute national interest for nations differ from one another hence there is no universal definition of the concept. To the second question which is Has Nigeria successfully defined her national interest? The study revealed that since the first republic Nigeria has been able to define the concept in theory, however in practice the leaders have not been able to project and promote the objectives as stated in the constitution. To the third question which is there a relationship between national interest and foreign policy making? The study revealed that there is a significant relationship between national interest and foreign policy making.

SUMMARY

The study explained the importance of national interest in foreign policy decision making. The research revealed that Nigerian leaders have not been able to promote their national interests properly in the pursuit of foreign policy. National interest plays a tremendous role in the overall development of a nation-state. Since the attainment of independence, the Nigerian leadership has formulated several policy objectives. One of these objectives is to promote the national interest of the nation. However, the greed and corruption of some politicians have led to the neglect of the promotion of national interest. Rational decision making has been ignored hence the nation has continued to experience stagnation in every facet of development. The study proffers solutions that the Nigerian Government under the current administration to chart a new policy thrust for the nation, while helping to promote national interest above other interests.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Some recommendations has been provided as follows

1. Scholars of International Relations should provide a detailed explanation of the concept of national interest.
2. Leaders in Nigeria should promote national interest rather than personal interest
3. Nigeria national interest was not fully promoted in the fourth republic, the administration of president Tinubu should be more proactive when promoting national interest in the nation.
4. leadership ineptitude and insensitivity should be abolished when considering the issue of national interest in Nigeria

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