

IR Theory as Politics, International Politics as Theory: a Nigerian Case Study

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Abstract

This paper assesses mainstream IR theory's utility outside the realm of Great Power politics by examining the international activities of one developing middle power: Nigeria. Admittedly, this West African state is not a global hegemon. And it suffers from many structural weaknesses associated with less developed countries, including internal political divisions and a highly primary commodity dependent economy. Yet, Nigeria also exercises considerable influence in a sub-region that, due to its oil resources, is becoming increasingly important to advanced industrialized, Great Power states. Thus, the paper analyzes the applicability of International Relations theories to the Nigerian situation by highlighting the increasing importance of local hegemonies in international politics.

Introduction

International Relations theory has conventionally told a story of Great Power politics. Authors justify this orientation by arguing that, in order to understand the rules of the game, it is necessary to focus on key players. As a result, the international behaviors of the United States, the former Soviet Union, and Western European states are relatively well researched. However, countries falling outside of the Great Power orbit have been largely ignored in mainstream International Relations (IR) research. This approach is increasingly inadequate for a globalizing world, in which security threats transcend state boundaries and emerging powers such as India and China play increasingly important economic and political roles. Yet, efforts to identify IR's shortcomings and extend the discipline's geographic applicability have been limited, in both ambition and effect. Consequently, the international relations of ninety five percent of the world's states are under-examined.

For practical and normative reasons, IR practitioners and policymakers should know more about Nigeria. But, how much can IR theory tell them? To answer the question, this paper begins by reviewing previous critiques of mainstream IR theory. In addition to outlining authors' arguments, it notes their tendency to inadvertently repeat the same error for which they lambast their objects of criticism: namely, negatively essentializing developing countries. The paper argues that, to overcome this tendency, authors need to move beyond critique and engage in more theory building exercises, using empirical observations from semiperipheral states to identify common patterns of international behavior. The paper's third section provides greater detail on why Nigeria is a suitable subject for the broader application of International Relations theory, highlighting the increasing importance of local hegemonies in international politics. The fourth section presents a brief history of Nigeria's half century of independent foreign policy. The fifth identifies key trends in this political history and discusses how such observations inform broader IR theory.

IR Theory in the "Third World"

Kenneth Waltz (1979), the progenitor of neorealist IR theory, stated that "A general theory of international politics is necessarily based on the great powers." In the thirty years since the

publication of *Theory of International Politics*, mainstream theorists have rarely challenged this assertion. The international relations of states outside of Western Europe, the United States, Russia and Japan have been largely ignored. Nowhere is this omission more stark than for Africa, the region most likely to be omitted from supposedly global IR studies (Lemke, 2003). Within the discipline, Africa has primarily served as a source of cautionary tales. Africa contains “weak” states, “collapsing” states, or “failed” states (Dunn, 2001). Various explanations have been proffered for African countries’ institutional shortcomings, including geography—Jeffrey Herbst (2000) argues that low population density impeded the development of strong, centralized states—and history: the colonial creation of irrational state boundaries compromised later effort to develop national identities (Touval, 1972). Some authors have resorted to culturalist accounts; Robert Kaplan’s “The Coming Anarchy” (1994) presents an African landscape redolent of Joseph Conrad: a dark continent of lawlessness, disease, and violence.

Kaplan’s radical portrayal is an outlier in international studies. However, the tendency to perceive Africa as somehow “different” is commonplace. There is a general consensus amongst IR scholars that conventional theories cannot be applied straightforwardly to the African continent. The rationale for this assertion rests on an observed lack of internal cohesion in African states (Buzan, 1988). One of the foundational assumptions of Neorealist IR is state-centrism: the idea that the primary actors in the international system are unitary states. If leaders’ freedom of foreign policy action is compromised by a lack of national unity, the appropriateness of this assumption is called into question. If there are multiple sources of authority in one state—as is commonly the case in Africa—the assumption collapses.

When domestic groups are actively competing, they also compromise a second foundational principle of Neorealist IR: the distinction between the anarchy of the international system and the hierarchy of domestic affairs. Numerous authors have asserted that, in the African case, the conventional formula is inverted; third world relations are characterized by international hierarchy and domestic anarchy (Neuman, 1998). As a result of these diametrically opposed security environments, developed and developing states should behave in strikingly different ways. The critics assert that this division undermines mainstream IR’s universalist pretensions; Neorealism’s parsimonious theory cannot account for all states’ international behaviors (Holsti, 1998).

In order to extend IR theory’s explanatory value, critics have offered a number of modifications. Some challenge Neorealist IR’s assumption that all states are functionally similar, suggesting that developing states constitute an alternative type of political actor. Robert Jackson (1990) asserts that, in place of conventional sovereignty based on domestic authority and national capabilities, developing nations possess “negative sovereignty”; they survive due to the normative imperatives against international aggression and intervention which have emerged since World War II. These “quasi-states” should not be expected to adhere to the same patterns of behavior exhibited by the conventional, positively sovereign states of Western Europe.

Most proposed modifications to IR theory identify domestic instability as the primary driver of third world states’ divergent foreign policy behavior. Mohammed Ayoob (1998), one of the foremost advocates of IR theory’s extension to the developing world, proposes a “subaltern realism,” which calls into question the clear distinction between domestic and interstate conflict.

Ayoob notes that much of what is now labeled “internal conflict” was historically categorized as “state-making.” By acknowledging the similarities between the two processes, parallels can be drawn between the European experience and current relations within and between developing countries. These commonalities can then be used to explain less developed states’ conflict patterns, including their heightened propensity towards internal conflict and less frequent engagement in international wars.

Stephen David (1991) also examines how internal contention influences developing states’ foreign policy behavior. His theory focuses on the Realist concept of balancing. David argues that, rather than adopting the conventional Realist strategy of balancing against foreign threats, the beleaguered leaders of developing states balance against internal challengers. They accomplish this by allying themselves with foreign governments, even to the point of compromising national sovereign authority. Like Ayoob’s subaltern realism, David’s theoretical intervention explains third world states’ propensity to avoid international conflict, while recognizing and exploring their tendency towards domestic instability.

These modified IR theories provide some explanation for observed variation in developing states’ international behaviors. Yet, the cognitive pathways by which authors arrive at their new theoretical postulates are problematic, methodologically and normatively. Jackson, Ayoob and David claim to be extending IR. But where to, precisely? All authors indicate that their theoretical interventions apply to the “third world.” Yet, this Cold War terminological holdover is never clearly defined. Consequently, their objects of analysis remain opaque. Do authors’ theories apply to all states that are not Great Powers? Or do they concern all countries lacking advanced industrialized economies? On a theoretical level, all three authors’ explanatory claims emphasize the importance of limited governing capacity and domestic discord, which suggests that the scope of their analysis should be limited to divided states or, at a maximum, to countries with weak governance infrastructure, rather than to all developing countries. Without clearly stating their theories’ scope conditions, the authors imply that all third world states share these same negative characteristics. The “third world” becomes synonymous with weak infrastructure and internal conflict; all developing countries are apparently disorderly and dangerous.

While these modified Neorealisms may help explain the international behaviors of some developing states, the new frameworks do not facilitate the integration of the developing world into IR studies. Rather, they reify existing analytic cleavages between third and first world states. Authors claim that the developing world cannot be analyzed using conventional IR theories and, one presumes, these modified, subaltern IRs have limited utility outside of the third world context. This separate but unequal system consigns developing countries to a permanently peripheral status in international studies.

This inadvertent essentialism is also evident in the pure critiques of mainstream IR, which elaborate on the discipline’s limited utility in the developing world, while making little effort to promote an alternative or modified theory. The critics may be correct; mainstream IR does not explain all interstate alignments equally well and ignores many issues that are more significant to developing nations, such as dependency, hierarchy, liberation, and the critical importance of non-state actors (Dunn, 2001; Puchala, 1998). However, in implying that IR has nothing to say about developing states and emphasizing the distinctions between “the west and the rest,” third world

countries inevitably appear to be inferior. They are unexplainable, inconsequential, and weak: unmapped and, perhaps, unmappable. This portrayal reinforces the position of developing states at the margins of the international system and international studies (Brown, 2006).

To raise the profile of developing states' international relations, critics have advocated the inclusion of more third world voices in IR theory (Smith, 2009; Tickner, 2003). Greater inclusivity is certainly desirable, especially given the historical domination of the discipline by Western European and, particularly, North American practitioners (Aydlini & Matthews, 2000). However, the calls for disciplinary diversity are often vague. And ill-formulated efforts to create a new discourse again run the risk of reinforcing disciplinary boundaries. Third world scholars who are presented as "third world scholars" are unlikely to be taken seriously by mainstream IR theorists. At best, they will be pigeonholed as area studies specialists: "Africanists" or "South Asianists." At worst, they will simply be ignored. In attempting to introduce a new language, they may speak past their mainstream colleagues, rather than to or with them.

In order to broaden the discourse, contributors from the developing world need to be figuratively bilingual. They must be well versed in the conventional IR discourse, while also advancing their own perspectives. From a theoretical perspective, it is necessary to cease viewing the developing world as a deviation and as a completely separate and internally homogenous area of study. This requires recognition of the variation amongst developing states and a clearer articulation of the aspects of these states' domestic political structures and international relations that require further study. In the process, we may find that mainstream IR theory is not as useless as previously imagined. We may also discover that "deviations" that were supposedly unique to the third world are also present amongst highly politically and economically developed states (Brown, 2006).

This kind of theory building cannot occur exclusively from the top down, through modifications of mainstream IR theory (Smith, 2009). It must proceed from the ground up, through local knowledge of the international behaviors of developing states. These new empirical stories will be more or less consistent with conventional IR frameworks. The process of telling them will provide a clearer assessment of where IR theory goes astray. It will also allow for more nuanced comparative foreign policy analysis and more ambitious and effective means of moving beyond the conventional study of Great Power politics to a more global IR. The next section of the paper accomplishes this analytic move by examining Nigerian foreign policy. It will explain why IR scholars should be attentive to Nigerian foreign policy and why we should expect IR theory to be quite relevant in the Nigerian context, given the country's status as a sub-regional hegemon with a coherent foreign policy apparatus.

The Leader of West Africa

One in five Africans is Nigerian. The state is the undisputed political leader of its sub-region. Nigeria was the founding force for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and supplies over one third of the organization's budget. In the 1990s, Nigeria initiated multilateral militarized peacekeeping operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone. State leaders aspire to a permanent seat on a reconfigured United Nations Security Council. And, the country sits on sizeable oil and natural gas reserves; it vies with Angola for the title of sub-

Saharan Africa's largest petroleum producer. For all these reasons, Nigeria should attract significant international analysis. Yet, within the IR community, Nigerian foreign policy has garnered limited attention.

IR critics might ascribe this lack of analysis to Nigeria's status as a developing country; it may be an inappropriate object for the application of mainstream IR theory. Like the developing countries described by Ayoob and David, Nigeria is internally divided. The federal state consists of a Muslim north and Christian south. Religious and regional tensions are high; cities such as Kano and Jos have experienced repeated rounds of inter-communal violence. The Delta region has also been a perennial source of instability. In the late 1960s, Biafran efforts to secure greater regional autonomy escalated to a three-year civil war in the southeastern area of the country (1967-70). More recently, oil exploitation in the Delta has prompted local opposition to central government authority. Although the current federal administration has successfully negotiated a ceasefire, it is uncertain how long it will hold. International observers have also expressed concerns over the resilience of the country's relatively new democratic institutions; the most recent transition from authoritarian rule occurred in 1999.

Given this instability and uncertainty, it would seem that Nigeria is a poor fit with conventional IR's unitary, internally hierarchic and orderly state. Yet, since independence in 1960, the state has possessed a competent foreign affairs apparatus, which has consistently remained under the exclusive control of the ruling central authority, in spite of several irregular government and regime transitions. While leaders' foreign policy choices are conditioned by the domestic environment, this constraint is not unique to Nigeria. All governments, including those of developed states, are impacted by domestic political preferences and capabilities. Leaders must be conscious of the domestic consequences of their foreign activities (Fearon, 1994). Although varying in intensity, audience costs are universal, as are considerations of national security priorities and "guns versus butter" tradeoffs. The distinction between Nigeria's capacity to develop and implement foreign policies and the competencies of more "advanced" states is a difference of degree, not kind. The country's federal structure has not significantly constrained leaders' foreign policy actions (Akindele & Oyediran, 1985).

Nigerian attitudes towards international relations are also not widely divergent from those postulated for the traditional Great Powers. The state's leaders have consistently exhibited a Neorealist perception of the international system. They are concerned with personally remaining in power and with national survival: two foundational assumptions of IR analysis. Although Nigeria faces no security threats from its immediate neighbors, apartheid South Africa and France have historically been perceived as causes for concern. Unlike Jackson's quasi-states, Nigeria does not rely solely on negative sovereignty for its survival. Nigerian leaders view international relations as a self-help system. Since the end of the civil war, they have consciously cultivated the state's position as the dominant power in West Africa. Foreign policies are aimed at defending the state against potential international challengers, with limited external assistance.

Nigerians possess a rationalist view of the international system and the capabilities of their foreign policy apparatus differ only quantitatively, not qualitatively, from those of more economically developed and politically consolidated states. Thus, if mainstream IR theories are useful approximations of reality, we should expect them to have explanatory value in the

Nigerian case. Even Neorealism, the object of the most strident third world IR critiques, may be relevant to Nigerian international relations, given the state's status as a sub-regional power. Although Nigeria can never aspire to globally hegemonic status, in West Africa, and perhaps on the continent as a whole, the state has a latent capacity for dominance. For these reasons, Nigeria is a good test case of mainstream IR theory's broader applicability. It enables us to assess whether Great Power IR can scale down. Do regional or sub-regional hegemon behave like superpowers, within their more geographically constrained sphere of influence? And what does hegemonic behavior really look like?

Local hegemon have attracted little attention within IR theory. Their international position and foreign policy preferences render them analytically distinct from traditional "middle powers," a category that usually includes states such as Canada or Sweden: advanced industrialized countries with moderate political clout, which are most prominent internationally on "soft" issues like the environment and human rights. Eduard Jordaan (2003) attempts to distinguish between those middle powers and states like Nigeria, South Africa and Brazil by identifying the latter as "emerging middle powers." In the 1970s, dependency theorists described the same group as "semiperipheral" states (Wallerstein, 1979). Adebajo and Landsberg (2003) call them "aspiring" or "potential" hegemon, while Shaw (1983) labels them "intermediate" states. In a more critical mode, DeLancy (1983) describes some Nigerian foreign behaviors as "sub-imperial."

Regardless of the label, these developing middle powers have become increasingly prominent international actors over the last decade, initially in economic affairs and, increasingly, in political negotiations on issues such as climate change. Understanding their foreign policy preferences and behaviors is vital. In recognition of this fact, the particular political positions of states such as China, India, Brazil and South Africa have begun to attract greater academic attention. Nigeria, in contrast, is under-researched. The state's foreign activities were the subject of considerable analysis in the 1970s and 1980s. However, since the oil glut of the mid 1980s and the end of the Cold War, local and international analyses have dropped off. The next section of the paper will review Nigerian foreign policy in the half century since the state's independence, laying the groundwork for an assessment of its fit with mainstream IR theory.

A Brief History of Nigerian Foreign Policy

In the initial years after independence, the Nigerian government pursued modest foreign policy aims. Leaders were primarily concerned with internal consolidation of the new federal state. Prime Minister Balewa's foreign policy was limited to upholding the principles inscribed in the Organization of African Unity's (OAU) 1963 Charter: non-interference, the legal equality of states, and boundary inviolability (Ogunbadejo, 1979/80). All of these interests were encompassed by the broader Nigerian policy preference for "good-neighborliness." Regionally, the country was overshadowed by Ghana, governed by the charismatic president, Kwame Nkrumah (Ihonvbere, 1991). Nigeria was also resisting French encirclement; all of Nigeria's geographic neighbors are francophone states, which were strongly influenced by their former metropole, even after they achieved formal independence. Nigeria's efforts to secure local influence were limited to the creation of cooperative multilateral governing bodies, such as the Lake Chad Basin Commission and the River Niger Commission (Aluko, 1973).

Increased efforts to achieve a more prominent regional leadership role foundered during the civil war (1967-70). In addition to being challenged by violent domestic separatists, the Nigerian state was actively opposed by France, the Côte d'Ivoire, Portugal and South Africa. The civil war revealed the dangers of continued European involvement on the continent, as well as the importance of securing sub-regional allies. The Federal Government, which, in spite of Nigeria's nominally non-aligned status, had previously demonstrated a solidly pro-western orientation, now began to court more active engagement with the USSR and China (Gambari, 1975). Post-war leaders also went to greater lengths to reduce France's local influence and to reconcile with other states in the sub-region, including civil war enemies, such as Côte d'Ivoire, and earlier rivals, like Ghana (Ihonvbere, 1991). Nigeria needed to be less isolated. Good neighborliness had become a security concern, as well as a normative principle (Aluko, 1981).

Efforts to reconcile with geographic neighbors and achieve a sub-regional leadership role were facilitated by Nigeria's oil boom. The state had struck oil in 1956, near the inland city of Oloibiri. This discovery was soon augmented by large finds in the Delta region. By 1973, Nigeria was the world's ninth largest oil exporter (Aluko, 1973) and the United States' second largest international oil supplier (Gambari, 1975). The petroleum price increases of the early 1970s and the Arab energy embargo of 1973 generated an enormous rise in Nigerian state revenue. At the same time, Nigeria was attracting increased foreign direct investment. The Federal Government used this new income to pursue a more ambitious sub-regional foreign policy. Nigeria provided financial assistance to its neighbors, with the aim of weaning them off dependence on France. In 1974, the state announced that it would sell oil at concessionary prices to its energy-poor neighbors (Aluko, 1981).

Nigeria also used regional economic integration as a means of advancing its leadership and reducing local French influence. The Head of State, General Gowon (1967-75) promoted bilateral trading pacts, the Organization of African Unity's (OAU) economic bodies, and the establishment of a new international institution for regional integration: the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Local francophone states initially hesitated to participate in a Nigerian-led organization. However, Gowon decided to move forward with the scheme by starting with Anglophone states like Togo. He gained greater francophone confidence by leading negotiations for the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries to gain observer status with the European Economic Community (EEC) (Abegunrin, 2003; DeLancy, 1983). The resultant Lomé Convention was signed on February 28, 1975. ECOWAS came into existence three months later.

On July 29, 1975, General Gowon was overthrown in a military coup. His two successors, Murtala Mohammed (1975-76) and Olusegun Obasanjo (1976-79) advanced a more assertive, activist foreign policy. They were less concerned with Nigeria's immediate geographic neighbors. ECOWAS languished, as did Nigerian commitments to the OAU. Instead, Murtala and Obasanjo implemented a more militant pan-African foreign policy that, in particular, aimed to challenge the minority rule regimes of Southern Africa (Aluko, 1976). The new leaders were more verbally anti-Western than their predecessor and more prone to dramatic gestures. Nigeria intervened in the Angolan civil war, supporting the MPLA against the US-supported FNLA and UNITA (Abegunrin, 2003). In 1976, leaders encouraged other African states to boycott the Montreal Olympic games, in order to protest New Zealand's interactions with apartheid South

Africa (DeLancy, 1983). In 1978, the state gained a rotating seat in the United Nations Security Council, giving it another platform for its anti-apartheid sentiment (Bach, 1983). In contrast to Gowon's modest international ambitions, Murtala and Obasanjo wanted Nigeria to obtain a higher profile on the continent, more befitting to the state's new economic power.

Yet, the "golden age" of Nigerian foreign policy was short-lived. Under the democratically elected president, Shagari (1979-83), oil revenue peaked, then dramatically declined (Shaw, 1987). Like Gowon, Shagari pursued a modest foreign policy. Activist aims were abandoned and ECOWAS continued to stumble (Shaw, 1983). In 1980 and 1982, the northern cities of Kano and Kaduna witnessed religious riots. In January 1983, the Nigerian government responded to the economic downturn by expelling illegal immigrants. This was the state's "worst international crisis since the civil war" (Abegunrin, 2003). It antagonized Nigeria's neighbors and further undermined sub-regional integration (Gambari, 1989).

The same malaise continued under Shagari's successor, Buhari (1983-85). He began his military rule with overtures to Nigeria's neighbors. However, after further religious riots in Yola in 1984, he closed the state's boundaries as a means of containing international migration (Gambari, 1989). The protectionist move was lambasted within the sub-region. At an April 1986 All-Nigeria Conference on Foreign Policy (the Kuru Conference), participants averred that they wished to maintain a sub-regional leadership role by promoting development and economic integration, supporting the OAU, and continuing to reduce France's local influence (Akindele & Ate, 1986). However, given the state's dependence on petroleum revenue, as oil prices continued to decline, Nigerian leaders possessed limited means of achieving these foreign policy goals. From 1986-88, Babangida's new government was forced to respond to the economic crisis by implementing a structural adjustment program (Sesay & Ukeje, 1997).

By the end of the 1980s, retrenchment enabled Nigeria to regain a bit of its prior regional standing. In 1990, Nigeria led West Africa's Anglophone states in establishing ECOMOG (the ECOWAS Monitoring Group), which intervened in Liberia following the overthrow of leader Samuel Doe. The move was partly personal—Doe and Babangida were friends—but was also aimed at preventing outside military forces from intervening in the region (Abegunrin, 2003; Yoroms, 1993). This effort was facilitated by a secular decline in French engagement in the area that had occurred by 1990 (Adebajo, 2000). Nonetheless, sub-regional concerns arose over Nigeria's apparent willingness to violate its longstanding principle of non-interference in other African states' internal affairs. Some West African countries suspected that Nigeria was taking advantage of the Liberian conflict to advance a local "Pax Nigeriana" (Saliu, 2000; Yoroms, 1993). Mistrust was exacerbated by Babangida's domestic political ruthlessness and the repeated postponements of Nigeria's transition back to civilian rule (Sesay & Ukeje, 1997).

Nigeria's international reputation degraded further following a major electoral controversy in 1993. After the June 12th victory of popular presidential candidate Moshood Abiola, Babangida annulled the national election results. Nigerians erupted in protest and the EU and US threatened sanctions. These responses were only partially effective. Although Babangida was removed from office, democracy was not restored. Following a brief period of interim governance by Ernest Shonekan, Sani Abacha seized power in another military coup. A month after the regime change, Abacha rattled the region by invading the Bakassi Peninsula, a purportedly oil-rich territory

disputed with Cameroon. In March 1995, Abacha accused a large swath of the policy elite of a coup plot. The courts handed down over thirty death sentences. Following international condemnation and threats of increased sanctions, these were reduced to prison terms (Mahmud, 2001). However, Abacha's clemency was short-lived. In November 1995, he executed nine leaders of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), including Ken Saro-Wiwa.

The US and EU responded to the new provocation by imposing broad sanctions. However, US sanctions did not include oil (Abegunrin, 2003; Mahmud, 2001). This omission weakened the effectiveness of external calls for democratization (Sesay & Ukeje, 1997). In addition, Abacha was somewhat successful in spinning the sanctions locally as an anti-imperial struggle (Mahmud, 2001). Internationally, Nigeria's reputation was marginally rehabilitated in 1998, when Abacha initiated an ECOMOG intervention to restore democracy in Sierra Leone. The Great Powers' failure to intervene effectively in Somalia and Rwanda in the early 1990s had increased the attraction of regional peacekeeping efforts, particular since, after the end of the Cold War, there was little strategic reason for superpower engagement in the region (Adebajo & Landsberg, 2003). Domestically, however, Abacha's democratizing intervention was condemned for its hypocrisy and expense (Adebajo, 2000).

Nigeria's return to democratic rule was finally facilitated by Abacha's death in office in 1998. His successor, Abubakar, oversaw a transitional government before former military leader, Obasanjo again assumed political leadership: this time, through a popular election. Obasanjo's top foreign policy priority was to restore Nigeria's international reputation. Soon after he took power, Nigeria was readmitted to the Commonwealth of Nations. Sanctions were lifted. In 1999, Nigeria began pulling out of Sierra Leone, to cut costs and redirect resources to the Niger Delta, where the local security situation had deteriorated (Adebajo, 2000). In the West African sub-region, Obasanjo presented himself as a peacekeeper. When the International Court of Justice ruled in 2002 that the contested Bakassi Peninsula belonged to Cameroon, Obasanjo contained intense Nigerian opposition to the verdict and initiated implementation efforts (Meierding, 2010). Obasanjo also reiterated Nigeria's support for ECOWAS and his desire to pursue more extensive regional integration (S. Kaplan, 2006).

Obasanjo's affection for economic integration and international institutions attracted some domestic criticism (Adebajo & Landsberg, 2003). His continued engagement of Nigerian troops in multilateral peacekeeping operations in areas such as the Sudan also generated internal resistance. The record of his successor, Yar'Adua, has been mixed. Nigeria continues to rank high on international corruption indexes. A cease-fire has been brokered with the Delta insurgents, but inter-confessional instability had increased in the north. Most recently, Nigeria has appeared on international terrorists watch lists, in the wake of the thwarted 2009 "Christmas Day bombing" in Detroit. Nonetheless, the state's international reputation has improved significantly since the 1990s, in part because of the successful democratic power transition in 2007. The next section of the paper analyzes these five decades of Nigerian foreign policy, identifying recurrent themes and assessing their implications for mainstream IR theory.

A Dependent Hegemon

Nigeria occupies an odd position in the international system. Through most of its independent political history, it has been the leading state in its sub-region and aspired to continental hegemony. Yet, Nigeria is also an economically less developed state, dependent on primary commodity production for the majority of its domestic revenue and almost all of its foreign exchange earnings. Nigeria is not a Great Power, but nor is it precisely a dependent state, especially since the primary commodity it produces, petroleum, is so strongly desired by the developed world and highly geographically concentrated. The United State's demand for Nigerian oil precluded tough sanctioning of the Abacha regime. Yet, Nigeria is also constrained by its petroleum industry. The need for foreign markets limits leaders' ability to wield oil as a political weapon (Ihonvbere, 1991). Nigeria is neither entirely dependent nor entirely autonomous (Shaw, 1983).

Similarly, the state is both empowered and constrained by its military capabilities. Nigeria's population dwarfs that of its immediate neighbors. Its armed forces are also unrivaled; in sub-Saharan Africa, only South Africa stands as a potential challenger to Nigerian military hegemony. Yet, throughout the state's post-independence history, Nigerian leaders have refrained from using the military as a major instrument of foreign policy (Wright, 1983). Nigeria has participated in sub-regional and distant peacekeeping operations. However, with the exception of Abacha's 1993 attack on the Bakassi Peninsula, the Nigerian military has not been engaged in bilateral conflicts. Even the Bakassi dispute failed to spread geographically or develop into an interstate war. Moreover, the aggression was not motivated by expansionist interests; Abacha's primary reason for launching the assault was to divert domestic opposition from his recent coup and the June 1993 election debacle (Meierding, 2010).

Nigeria has exhibited little ability to employ its sizeable latent military capacity to influence neighboring states' domestic politics (Wright, 1983). Nigeria's physical might has also failed to deter boundary violations by its much weaker neighbors. On various occasions, Chad, Benin, and Cameroon have perpetrated minor territorial incursions. Nigeria's failure to respond assertively to these provocations arises partly from France's regional presence; the metropolitan power has defense agreements with many of its former colonies and Nigerian leaders are loath to initiate any action that might encourage European intervention on the continent (Aluko, 1977; Yoroms, 1993). However, the French factor should not be overstated (Garba, 1987). Although the European power possessed historical ties to francophone West African states, it also developed strong economic ties to Nigeria (Ogunbadejo, 1976). France has no wish to endanger its oil companies' access to the region's extensive petroleum reserves.

The primary reason for Nigeria's regional reticence is concern about intimidating weaker West African states. Since the early 1970s, when oil wealth began to elevate Nigeria's continental profile, leaders have recognized that their state's overwhelming economic and military strength might frighten its neighbors (Sesay & Ukeje, 1997). Local fear would undermine Nigeria's sub-regional leadership aspirations. It would provoke resistance to Nigerian-initiated economic or political projects. These concerns were particularly pronounced for the sub-region's francophone states. Different colonial experiences, combined with widely divergent contemporary political systems increased the potential for suspicion, hostility and conflict. Nigeria needed to reassure its neighbors. It had to lead through "quiet diplomacy," rather than military force (Garba, 1987). As

Clement Ison, the governor of Cross Rivers state, asserted in 1981, when Nigeria refrained from responding militarily to a Cameroonian boundary violation: “Nigeria should not be a bully, but a cautious older brother” (Okolo, 1988).

This attitude was both pragmatic and normative. Nigeria’s initial commitment to good-neighborliness, a stance that included respecting the sovereignty independence of all states, emerged from the shared experience of colonization. Nigeria’s post-colonial leaders were determined to avoid the accusation that they were using their power to implement a neo-imperial order in West Africa. Although they wanted to lead, they did not want to dominate. As former Nigerian Foreign Minister Sule Lamindo stated: “It is important that while you are playing Big Brother, you have to recognize that the countries you are dealing with are sovereign nations. You have to know this and recognize this psychological feeling of independence” (Adebajo, 2000). If Nigeria fails to respect other states sovereignty and territorial integrity, “she may scare away other African countries which are smaller, weaker, and poorer in human and natural resources” (Aluko, 1973).

Although aspiring to regional hegemony, Nigeria has historically eschewed territorial expansion as a means of increasing national power. Instead, Nigerian leaders have extended their influence through international institutions. The Lake Chad Basin Commission and River Niger Commission were reactivated in 1972, as Nigeria’s economic power was expanding. Associate status with the EEC held little economic appeal for Nigeria but, as former foreign minister Joseph Garba (1987) observed: “We are told that our participation reassures our Francophone partners in the Economic Community of West African States; if that is true, it may be a worthwhile sacrifice.” ECOWAS itself was aimed at increasing Nigeria’s regional influence in a manner that would not threaten other local states. Most observers agree that Nigeria had little to gain economically from integration (Aluko, 1981; Ojo, 1980). The state’s GNP was greater than those of all other member states combined and regional economies were competitive, not complementary. Nigeria established the organization to consolidate its leadership in a way that reassured neighbors of its benign—or even positive—intentions (Wright, 1983).

In the military realm, Nigeria has endeavored to portray its regional military interventions as multilateral actions: again, to diminish perceptions of regional dominance and aggression (Adebajo & Landsberg, 2003; Saliu, 2000). Multiple Nigerian leaders have proposed the establishment of an OAU dispute settlement mechanism to respond to regional insecurity and violence (Garba, 1987). During his second turn as president, Obasanjo advocated strengthening security partnerships between ECOWAS and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (S. Kaplan, 2006). These framings have not been entirely effective in swaying regional public opinion; local leaders still suspect that Nigeria possesses hegemonic ambitions. However, they are indicative of Nigeria’s continuing concern with its international reputation and of its preference for leading through persuasion, rather than intimidation.

These foreign policy behaviors are highly consistent with one branch of mainstream IR theory: Liberal Institutionalism. Nigeria’s efforts to reassure neighbors of its benign intentions while maintaining a leadership role parallel John Ikenberry’s (2001) description of American behavior following World War II. In that case, the system hegemon was faced with the conundrum of how to maintain its power following a period of international upheaval. The United States could

choose to “dominate” the system, “abandon” its leadership role, or “transform” the old order, using a system of “strategic restraint.” This last and most effective option involved “self-binding” through international institutions. Although the hegemon might not maximize its power in the short run, the order created through this practice would be much more durable in the long run than any system that emerged from the two other approaches; international institutions inspire limited interstate resistance and are difficult to overturn.

Since the end of the civil war, Nigeria has pursued a regional self-binding strategy. Rather than maximizing national power through traditional means, such as greater physical control of territory or material capabilities (Mearsheimer, 2001; Morgenthau, 1967[1948]), leaders have restrained their local ambitions and used international institutions to achieve and reinforce the state’s sub-regional preeminence. This foreign policy strategy has persisted across regime types. It has also prevailed in widely varying domestic conditions. Nigerian leaders have practiced strategic restraint in periods of relative economic weakness and economic strength and during periods of greater and lesser internal cohesion. Although the ambitiousness and intensity of foreign activities decline when the state is economically weak or internally unstable (Shaw, 1987), the overall character has remained a constant.

The significance of domestic factors as a determinant of foreign activity levels suggests an additional affinity between Nigerian international relations and Liberal IR theory. Liberalism ascribes great importance to domestic conditions as causes of international behaviors (Moravcsik, 1997). In the Nigerian case, understanding foreign policy requires consideration of prevailing economic conditions. The state has pursued a far more active foreign policy in periods of prosperity, such as the 1970s, than during recessions, such as in the 1980s (Ogunbadejo, 1979/80). To a lesser degree, IR analysts should also consider the personal preferences of the leader in power. Murtala adopted a far more aggressive approach to international relations than did his predecessor, General Gowon, in spite of both regimes possessing similar economic and governance capacities. Explaining policy variation requires consideration of leaders’ individual characters.

In addition to being conditioned by leaders’ personal preferences and by domestic political circumstances, Nigerian foreign policy has also been consistently influenced by prevailing dynamics in the international system. While Nigeria possesses greater power than its sub-regional peers, it lacks the military might to guarantee deterrence of Great Power aggression. The state’s economic dependence also renders it vulnerable to international punishment. These constraints impact foreign policy decision making. Contrary to the predictions of Neorealism, however, structural imperatives have been limited. Nigeria’s foreign policy was not impacted significantly by the existence and collapse of the US-Soviet superpower rivalry; it has looked similar in bilateral, unilateral, and multilateral systems. Instead, the state’s international activities are more consistent with the theoretical precepts of Constructivism. Nigerian foreign policy has been highly attentive to international norms.

The state’s post-colonial commitment to good-neighborliness is consistent with the internationally recognized “territorial integrity norm,” which discourages infringements on the sovereignty and physical boundaries of independent states (Zacher, 2001). Nigeria’s longstanding reluctance to employ unilateral military force to achieve foreign policy goals aligns

with prevailing norms against international aggression. More recently, the state's willingness to participate in the international judicial process and implement the ICJ's unpopular ruling on the Bakassi Peninsula demonstrates a commitment to international law and peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms. It is difficult to determine whether Nigeria's foreign behaviors reflect internalization and acceptance of these systemic norms or if they are merely a pragmatic performance of the modern, liberal state, aimed at improving Nigeria's reputation and securing international diplomatic and economic support. However, regardless of the causal mechanism at work, norms are influencing Nigerian foreign policy.

Nigerian leaders' possess a Neorealist, rational choice view of the international system. The world is anarchic and states survive through self-help. Countries aspire to hegemonic status, at the global or regional level. Yet Neorealism cannot explain *how* Nigeria has pursued these goals. To be fair, Waltz (1979) acknowledged that Neorealism does not offer a theory of foreign policy. And Neorealists have suggested amendments that would make their theory more consistent with observed Nigerian foreign policy. Some have recognized that rational states will refrain from aggressive international action when the costs are too high (Glaser, 1994/95). Others are willing to accept that states adhere to international norms and legal commitments when it is in their pragmatic interest to do so (Downs, Rojke, & Barsoom, 1996). Realists have even acknowledged the centrality of domestic politics as a determinant of international behavior (Snyder, 1991). If all of these adjustments are made, Nigerian foreign policy is not incompatible with Neorealism. However, given that Liberalism and Constructivism explain Nigeria's behaviors equally well, with fewer caveats, one is forced to ask: what is Neorealism's additional, independent explanatory value?

This theoretical critique is not limited to the particular case of Nigeria. Rather than being a third world anomaly, Nigeria is representative of broader problems with Neorealism. The theory has limited utility in the current international system. The world currently looks more Liberal and Constructivist. States rarely attack their neighbors. They care about norms. They are constrained by domestic conditions and international opinion. Consequently, while states may think like Neorealists, they rarely act like them. This observation holds in the developing and developed worlds. The problems with IR theory are not exclusively its applicability in developing states (Brown, 2006).

In the particular realm of foreign policy, Nigeria, as an interdependent, sub-regional hegemon, is not as different from the Great Powers as previously assumed. Some IR theories' explain the state's foreign behaviors quite effectively. The fact that Neorealism is not among them should not lead us to throw out mainstream IR theory entirely. Rather, future reimaginings of IR should learn from these observations. We should acknowledge that all states with coherent foreign policy apparatuses are likely to share certain common concerns, while, at the same time, we put greater effort into identifying the specific factors that inspire behavioral variation. Instead of constructing a new and separate theory of third world IR, we should consider how the experiences of emerging middle powers like Nigeria can inform existing theoretical debates and suggest more broadly helpful theoretical amendments. Through this process, IR theory will become a more global discipline and a more effective analytic tool.

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