

Student Feature - Foreign Policy

Written by Sheriff Folarin

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SHERIFF FOLARIN, DEC 20 2017

Foreign policy is the rational pursuit of a set of national objectives. "Pursuit" suggests action, steps, and roles that will delineate the attitude or behaviour of a state in the external context. Foreign policy may be like a wedding ring with which the domestic context of a nation solemnizes its union with the international community. Such political "marriage" is underlined by the ambitions and desires of state; hence foreign policy is a means to an end for states.

Scholars have described foreign policy as a pattern of behaviour that one state adopts in relation with other states, an idea that other scholars consider as the strategy and tactics employed by the state in its relation with other states in the international system. Foreign policy is thus a plan or programme of actions of a state, which determines the sum-total of the state's objectives in the international system. Put differently, they are the actions of a state toward the external environment and the conditions – usually domestic – under which such actions are formulated. This seems to agree with Henry Kissinger's often quoted submission that in foreign policy analysis, the domestic structure is taken as given, as foreign policy begins where domestic policy ends.

Simply, foreign policy could mean the external attitude of a state. The ultimate goal is to maximize greater advantage for the country. To this end, the foreign policy of a developing country like Nigeria should be geared towards national economic development to get better leverage in international politics.

Foreign Policy Decision-Making

This is the process of making foreign policies. This process includes three stages: foreign policy initiation, formulation and implementation. The initiation stage is when political leaders (more probably the Head of State) and foreign policy bodies led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Department of State conceive of foreign policy ideas: They are premised on national interest, perceptions, preferences, choices, options and capabilities. This is also known as the stage of identification and articulation of roles or the 'role conception' stage. That is, which strategic and practical steps can be taken to realize national interest in international politics. This stage is closely followed by formulation of policies. In a democratic system, formulation requires sending the proposal to parliament for debate, readings and adoption, after which it returns to the executive for approval and ratification.

The third stage is implementation. At this stage, the executive engages the foreign ministry and all other relevant ministries to ensure execution of the policy. The foreign ministry in particular engages the Foreign Service made up political and career diplomats as well envoys and other diplomatic field staff to work on the policy or policies. The implementation stage may also be known as the 'role assumption' stage.

Determinants of Foreign Policy

States' foreign policies are premised on certain domestic and external situations, circumstances and developments, also known as variables. They shape the foreign policies of states. Domestic factors include character of the state, geography, demographics, political system/structure, leadership, economy, military capability, historical values, national interest, media and public opinion, pressure groups, and others. External variables include intentions of other states, consideration regarding immediate neighbours, national security, membership of international institutions, international law, opinions and actions of great powers and so on.

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Internal Variables

The *character of a state* would include its basic features and what obtains in it. The multinational and multicultural nature of state will, for instance, make it more cautious when relating to other states which share cultural or national values or nationalities with it. The United States is one of the most culturally diverse or plural countries in the world, with almost all races and ethnic groups represented. This makes US foreign policy as 'cosmopolitan' as its society and is the very reason the US is ubiquitous and interested in events around the world. Nigeria shares ethnic and cultural values with both immediate and distant African neighbours – the Fulani, Kanuri, Ejagham and Yoruba, who are not limited to the geographical entity called Nigeria; they are part of the indigenous population of countries such as Niger, Chad, Cameroon and Benin respectively. This partly explains Nigeria's foreign policy principle of Afrocentrism and good neighbourliness.

Geography is closely related. The location of a country accounts for its behaviour towards other members of that location. They are the closest neighbours and could be best friends or worst enemies. Besides proximity there is also the possibility of strategic location. The natural frontiers of an island such as Britain for instance provide both natural security and a natural aptitude for mastery of the seas. The availability of natural resources or none is also a factor of geography. Nations with abundant resources of international commercial value are likely going to be important in world politics and ultimately become ambitious.

Demography refers to the population of states. Population has both commercial (market) and political value. The largest populations are good 'markets' for international capitalist investment, which also translates to political influence. The ten largest populations of the world, including China, India, Russia, USA, Brazil and even Nigeria are commercially and politically significant in the world. The military value of demography is that the sheer population size of states could either be intimidating to smaller ones or become veritable for military replenishment in times of war.

Political system and leadership are crucial in the shaping of the foreign policy of a state. Democracies are more likely to be more stable and find one another attractive for alliance. Leadership of a state makes policies and conducts foreign affairs. The strength or weakness of states lies to large extent in political leadership and international movements, including war or peace. *Military capability* refers to the war resources at the disposal of states. A skilful, disciplined and well armed military will not only firmly secure the territorial integrity of a state, but also have the capacity to provide regional and international security. While keeping a robust military for strategic deterrence or offence, the state also depends on *national economic capability* to bankroll a robust or ambitious foreign policy. It is however pertinent to note that *national interest* or the aggregated objective of a state in international politics determines how leadership employs military or economic capability in the conduct of its foreign policy.

The *media, public opinion* and *pressure groups* also influence foreign policy, but they play lesser roles in most cases, particularly in monarchies and autocracies. The three refer to the press, the thinking and expectation of the people of a state and wishes of professional groups, respectively. They are fairly significant in the foreign policy formulation of democratic states .

The Nigerian Civil War – how internal situations/developments impact foreign policy

External Variables

Critical among the external variables are intentions of other states, opinions and actions of great powers, national security and membership of international organizations. *State intentions* are critical to the actions of others. These are considered when policies are formulated or actions are taken. The intention of Russia in the 2016 US elections for instance, which was to break the US internally for Russia to become more influential globally, continues to underlie the attitude of the US in global politics, particularly its disposition towards Kremlin. *Opinions and actions of great powers*, within or outside the UN Security Council, for instance towards nuclear armament and global terror, are the reasons states with the capacity in the international community cannot acquire nuclear arms or seen to be favourably disposed to global terror. It is commonly believed that 'the fear of the super powers is the beginning of political

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wisdom among states'. *National security* is the main reason nations keep armies. Every state, from abundant historical experience, is alive to the critical fear that other states seek what it possesses. National security is the defence of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of state against external aggression. *Membership of international organizations* will naturally limit state sovereignty or, put differently, cut down the excesses of states in relationship with one another. International organizations have founding treaties, charters, covenants, agreements and so forth that bind member-states and guide their actions. This system of *international laws* regulates the behaviour of states, so long as they are contracting partners (*pacta sunt servanda*). Foreign policies are often formulated and implemented within such frameworks.

Leadership and dynamism of Murtala Muhammad, which played out in the external relations of Nigeria between 1975 and 1979

Conclusion

Foreign policy can be as complex as it is interesting. Domestic dynamics and trajectories define foreign policy more than anything else. This is for two reasons: foreign policy itself is the projection of domestic values, strengths (or weaknesses) and interests towards national development. Foreign policy strengthens the internal context from outside.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ieA3BIOyTqs>. US shows its *intentions* about the nuclear power status of North Korea and Iran

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odpcL5WfNXs> Nigeria's address to the UN, demonstrating an Africanist foreign policy and projecting regional leadership

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thihXcZXOsU>. Ghaddafi's anti-Western posture and Pan-African foreign policy as demonstrated at the UNGA years ago

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