

External States in the African Conflicts: A Historization of the Role of European Powers from 1967 to 1970 in the Nigerian Civil War

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Abstract

This article argues that external states – in this case the European powers – are responsible for the exacerbation of the conflicts in Africa. The article uses the Nigerian conflict between 1967 and 1970 as a case study. The conflict got complex, protracted, deadlier and intractable because of the interventions of France, Britain and Russia. The European powers had economic interests in Nigeria and West Africa; they needed oil among other products like cocoa. However, the means that these states used to pursue these interests were detrimental to the conflict. Each of the aforementioned states provided financial and military support to the conflict parties. France supported Biafra while Russia and Britain assisted the Nigerian Federal Government. Additionally, the article finds that the interventions of the three European powers fanned the conflict in Nigerian. This is because the three European states only cared about their interests and not those the Nigerian citizens. This article concluded that unless the role of states is properly understood and addressed, the conflicts in the African continent will continue to prevail. This article recommended that actors in conflict management should deploy diplomatic efforts as a strategy to manage conflicts that involve external states.

Keywords: *External states conflicts, Nigerian civil war, European powers, African conflicts*

1. Introduction

The role of states in the conflicts of other countries cannot be overstated. Nevertheless, the mode of intervention and the intentions of the external states determine how the conflict is manifested. While other states intervene through mediation and peacekeeping, others offer military and financial support to the warring parties. As realists argue, more often than not, states intervene in the conflicts of other states because of their own interest in the outcome of the conflict (Morgenthau, 1962).

The Nigerian civil war lasted for about thirty months between 1967 and 1970. The conflict was a secessionist attempt which could have created the republic of Biafra if it had succeeded. The civil war attracted states from other parts of the world that intervened differently. Several states intervened in Nigeria but the involvement of Britain, France, and Russia featured prominently during the pre and post conflict.

Driven by power politics different states maneuvered to acquire and guard their interests while at the same time thwarting others from realizing theirs. The European powers pursued interests that mainly were of economic in nature. Russia, Britain and France gave support to the warring parties in Nigeria. The support that manifested from the three states included financial and supply of weapons. This article tries to illuminate how the interaction of these states influenced the Nigerian civil war.

2. External States in the African Conflicts

This section presents the general information with reference to Historization of the role of European powers in the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970). The information covered include the following: overview of the state intervention and conflict management in Africa and the role of European powers in the Nigerian conflict

2.1 Overview of the State Intervention and Conflict Management in Africa

State involvement in the conflicts of other states is not a new phenomenon. The incursion of the external states in Korea, Syria, Vietnam, Iraq, as well as several other countries in Africa has been going on in the pre and post-cold war periods. With interests ranging from ideological, economic, strategic and security, states have continued to blatantly pursue them. As Makinda (1982) puts, the Horn of African conflicts during the cold war era was transformed into a platform of East-West competition involving the Soviets Union and the United States (US).

More recently, the involvement of the extra-regional states in the conflicts of Africa continue to be witnessed. The involvement of France in Ivory Coast also provides another evident of involvement of external states in the conflicts of Africa (Sciolino, 2002). It is also pointed that the US was behind the Ethiopian military incursion to Somalia in the year 2006 (Samatar, 2013). This is just to mention a few examples.

State intervention in the affairs of others is motivated by interests. The most basic worry of states is to preserve their core interests, which among others include territorial and political integrity (Krasner, 1978). When states outline their foreign policy, they define it in terms of interest and support it with adequate power (Morgenthau, 1948). In a nut shell, states must always pursue policies that are aligned to their interests (Morgenthau, 1962). Therefore, whatever interest that foreign states may have in host countries, they will strive to intervene to acquire and protect them. The most prevalent interests pursued in the contemporary times apart from territorial integrity, are security, economic and strategic. This is because they all contribute to state wellness and survival.

Paradoxically, despite the existing international legal framework barring states from involving themselves in the affairs of others, nations continue to pursue their interest. This demonstrates that states would contravene international laws and regulations as long as their own interests are

unsecured. For example, UN General Assembly (UNGA) declared that, “every state has the duty to refrain from organizing and encouraging the organization of irregular forces or armed bandits, including mercenaries, for incursion into the territory of another state” (UN General Assembly, Declaration of Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States in Accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, 24th October 1970, the resolution 2625 (XXV))

Interestingly, most of the states’ interventions in other countries have been carried out indirectly. External states use of proxies who are mainly the Non State Armed Groups (NSAGs) to instigate violence in the host countries is widely witnessed all over the world. Salehyan (2007) presents that globally, since 1945, 55% of NSAGs instigating conflicts in host states are supported by the external states. This brings the question, are the so-called civil wars really internal? Karlen (2017a) concedes that most of these civil wars are hardly internal; they are a reflection of a wider international tension. Additionally, although civil wars would seem to imply a domestic issue, they largely have a significant external dimension. (Salehyan et al, 2011).

There are several reasons that make states to carry out indirect interventions in other countries. Indirect intervention in this context is where an external state supports at least one of the warring parties (NSAG or governments) to pursue an agenda. One of the main reasons why states opt for indirect intervention is to avoid legal issues in regards to international laws. When the external state overtly contravenes international laws, they are likely to attract scrutiny and condemnation from the international community (Salehyan, et al, 2011). To avoid legal exposure, external states covertly engage proxies because it is far difficult to be linked with.

Secondly, states prefer the use of covert and indirect interventions because it is less costly in terms of resources, time and troop casualties. The Rwandan and Israeli direct military incursion to Eastern Congo and Lebanon respectfully costed the two states huge amounts of money, casualties and lasted for more than two decades (Salehyan, 2007). This is a venture that Rwanda and Israel would not attempt if they were given the same opportunity again.

The impact of foreign states interventions on the conflict dynamics in the host country is far reaching. When states pursue their own interests in another country, the peacemaking processes are jeopardized. For instance, civil wars where warring parties are supported by the foreign states are more likely to recur than those that do not receive support from outside countries (Karlen, 2017b). Similarly, conflicts whose NSAGs are supported and directed by the foreign states are more difficult to manage and often last longer (Regan, 2002). Moreover, conflicts that get support from foreign states are severe and leads to more fatalities than civil wars that warring parties do not get support from foreign governments (Heger and Salehyan, 2007).

Literature postulates many reasons to justify why the foreign states’ intervention exacerbates conflicts and thwarts conflict management in the host countries. When foreign states support the warring parties, in terms of weaponry, finance, among other things, they increase the fighters’ willingness and the ability to instigate political violence (Regan and Meachum, 2014). Secondly, external states join a conflict with different agendas other than those of the warring parties

(Karlen, 2017a). This complicates the bargaining environment because, in addition to the preferences of the warring parties, the new and different agendas must be settled as well (Cunningham, 2006).

2.2 The Role of European Powers in the Nigerian Conflict

The conduct of the European powers is critically analyzed in this part of the article. Britain which was the former colony of Nigeria had a lot of linkages and ties, in terms of culture and economy with, Lagos. Apart from the British government depending partly on the oil from Nigeria, the Nigerian military is largely trained by the British government. This is coupled by the fact that English is the official language in Nigeria and that most of the Nigerian students study in Britain.

That said and done, the interest of Britain in Nigeria remain prominent. Nigeria produced high quality oil with low sulphuric contents which was preferred by the British government (Audu et. al, 2013). The interest and investment of Britain in as far as oil was concerned was huge enough to determine the British attitudes toward the Nigerian conflict. The biggest oil exploration company in Nigeria, Shell-BP, belonged to Britain. Shell-BP was responsible for the production of 84% of oil in Nigeria (Uche, 2008). Additionally, apart from the British company being the largest producer of oil, Britain was also the biggest importer of the Nigerian oil, with over 40% consumption.

The British interest in as far as oil is concerned reached its apogee in June 1967 when there was a closure of Suez Canal due to the six day war in the Middle East. The closure led to disruption of oil supplies to Britain (Akinbi, 2015b). When the supply of oil from Middle East to Europe was disrupted, Britain solely depended on the Nigerian oil to curb its shortage. Britain was alive to the fact that the civil war could lead to a disrupted oil production and supply to its country. This formed one of the reasons why Britain intervened in Nigeria.

Britain also preferred Nigeria as a united country. This preference was strengthened by the fact that France was championing its split and was readily supplying weapons to the secessionist Biafra. For Britain, the split would be detrimental to its economy. This is because Britain was not sure whether it will manage to do business the French-assisted Republic of Biafra in case there is a successful secession (Audu et. al, 2013). For this matter, Britain took a position and assisted the federal government to fight and crash Biafra.

Apart from the economic gains that Britain expected to benefit from a united Nigeria, it had other moral obligations to ensure that there was no secession. First, Nigeria being a former British colony and a member of commonwealth, Britain had the moral responsibility to ensure its stability (Akinbi, 2015b). Furthermore, Britain was concerned that sympathizing and recognizing of the secessionist as legitimate is likely to cause a ripple effect in the entire Africa (Ugochukwu, 2010). The British administration did not want to be associated with the secessionist demands that are likely to erupt in the entire African continent.

In view of the above developments, the British government had to put everything forward to defend the federal government of Nigeria from being toppled by Biafra. This saw Britain supply of arms and improve the Nigerian military capacity. In this endeavor, Britain did not only strive to meet its interests but also tried to thwart the efforts of France and Russia who were trying to access and benefit economically and strategically from Nigeria at the expense of the its administration (Audu et. al, 2013). This is all the strategist paradigm is about: states shall acquire and preserve their interests while thwarting others for pursuing theirs.

Apart from the role of Britain in the Nigerian civil war, the involvement of France in the conflict was significant. To start with, the relationship between France and Nigeria before the civil war in 1967 was hostile (Akinbi, 2015a). With the position of Nigeria, as the regional economic and military power, France felt threatened (Griffins, 2015). This created the need for France to use any available means to ensure that Nigeria is fragmented and weak. The French fears of the hegemonic potential of Nigeria in the West African region were further exacerbated by the Nigerian proximity to the francophone states. Nigeria had more potential to attract the poor and weak Francophone states because of its proximity as compared to France (Akinbi, 2015b).

To thwart the Nigerian hegemony in West Africa, France provided military and financial support to Biafra. By 1968, before the French intervention in support of Biafra, the rebel group was effectively finished (Akinbi, 2015b). Essentially, if France did not support Biafra, the civil war could have ended in 1968. The French support to Biafra enabled the rebel group to survive, stand and rejuvenate its fight. The support from the external state emboldened the rebel group to fight more fiercely and prolonged the conflict. This is agreement with the argument presented by literature that conflicts whose warring parties receive support from external states are fiercer (Heger and Salehyan, 2007); difficult to manage and often last longer (Regan, 2002)

Consequently, the Nigerian civil war got into the entanglement of the difference between France and Britain. France for a long time had been trying to settle its scores with Britain and when the British government offered support to the Nigerian government to combat Biafra, France found a formidable opportunity to embarrass it by backing the rebel group (Akinbi, 2015a). This situation resulted in a proxy war with each European state supporting a different faction of the conflict.

At the time of the Nigerian civil war, France had economic interest in the outcome of the conflict. By then the French state owned SAFRAN was sustaining 7% of oil business in Nigeria (Uche, 2008). It was in the understanding of the French government that with the successful secession and the establishment of the Republic of Biafra, its oil business is likely to flourish. France would probably lock out other pro-government competitors like England, US and Italy that had interest in the Nigerian oil business. These developments, in line with the strategist paradigm in conflict, sent France to aggressively support Biafra.

Russia on the other hand, saw an opportunity to soften its relationship with Nigeria. Before the civil war, Nigeria had not entertained Russia in any way; it had turned down all its loans despite

being offered at more competitive rates than those from other European states. Russia saw Nigeria as being a strategic state that is important in the penetration of West Africa (Audu et. al, 2013). The importance of Nigeria became real after the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana who was Russia's special contact in West Africa. The overthrow of president Nkrumah led to the Russia's loss of cocoa. Russia's friendship with Nigeria was a great opportunity for the exchange of arms with cocoa (Akinbi, 2015b).

At some point, when Britain was reluctant to supply arms and offer military support to the Federal Government of Nigeria, Russia came in handy to fill the gap. This movement agitated Britain. The actions of Russia made Britain to respond with urgency by supplying arms among other military support (Akinbi, 2015b). Even after an arms embargo was declared against Nigeria, Britain and Russia continued to supply weapons. This development led to the intensification of civil war between the federal government and Biafra

3. Conclusion

The European powers intervened in Nigeria purely because of their own interest. They did not care about the stability of Nigeria or the condition of the civilian victims who bore the biggest brunt of the civil war. The European states did not care of the existing international laws; they violated them and pursued their interest. The main interest of the three European powers was to secure their economic interest through the acquisition of oil and cocoa.

The mode of pursuit of interest by the European powers influenced the dynamics of the conflict in Nigeria. The supply of weapons to the warring parties complicated and prolonged the conflict. As elaborated in the findings, before France offered support to Biafra, the rebel group had effectively weakened to fight the government. The French support gave them a lifeline and it was for this reason that the conflict became deadlier, complicated and protracted. The competition by the external states to thwart each other's pursuit of interest exacerbated the conflict.

The strategist paradigm of conflict clearly manifests itself in the conduct of states in as far as the Nigerian civil war was concerned. The states pursued their interest on the one hand while on the other hand thwarting other states' effort to pursue theirs.

In a nut shell, unless the role of external states in the African conflicts is understood and addressed, civil wars are likely to prevail in the continent. The role of external states requires enhanced policy and academic attention.

The article therefore, recommended that: The actors in conflict management should ensure that proper mapping out of conflict parties is carried out. This would be able to net-in all stakeholders including states that are involved in the perpetration of conflict either by supporting the government or the rebel group. From there conflict management strategies can be crafted; Diplomatic efforts should be embraced whenever external states are involved in the African conflicts. For the Nigerian case, diplomatic negotiations should have been carried out between Britain, Russia and France. This way, the adversity of the conflict could have been arrested.

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