

Bilateralism and Inter State Relations between Nigeria and Cameroon

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Abstract

The relationship between Nigeria and Cameroon dates back to pre-colonial times, the peoples in what today constitutes border communities shared common history and affinity. The advent of colonialism consequently infused arbitrary boundaries that did not respect those existing bonds, a fate complicated by the outcomes of the First World War. At Independence a plebiscite was conducted by the United Nations to determine the fate of the trust territories of British Northern Cameroon and Southern Cameroon. Bakassi Peninsular was at that time excluded, because its initial German territorial demarcation was in contention by Nigeria. The relations between both countries were hampered by military skirmishes over disputed territories along shared border areas. The boundary dispute was adjudicated at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and a verdict pronounced on 10 October 2002. It is pertinent to adjudge that most of the skirmishes between the two countries are rooted in the contradictions arising from the imposed boundaries. This initially posed serious challenges for bilateralism and inter-state relations between them with implications for international relations in a dynamic and globalized world. The ICJ verdict led to the constitution of the Nigeria-Cameroon Mixed Commission by the UN in 2002 and the signing of the Greentree Agreement in 2006, the implementation of which has been fraught with some difficulties. The paper set out to appraise bilateralism in the light of economic, security and diplomatic relations between the two countries. Utilising the desk study methodology, it identified the challenges limiting bilateralism and inter-state relations as the Ambazonian crisis, hostile military relations and harassment by security forces. It concluded by proffering strategies for improving relations.

Keywords: *Bilateralism, Crisis, Interstate, Peace, Relations, Strategies*

Introduction

Throughout history international relations have been a complex web with multiple components that are characterized by interfacing changes and continuities, which are instrumental in the dynamic nature of the discipline. For instance, diplomatic relations between states have in the main been categorised, on the basis of states interacting or exerting influence in the relationship in the frame of unilateralism, bilateralism or multilateralism.

In its simplest sense, bilateralism means relations between two countries. The importance of bilateralism is most evident when it comes to the foreign policy of small states. The quality of bilateral relations determines a state's position in both the regional and multilateral arena. States that are surrounded by giant neighbours and those that face enormous pressure in their region can secure a better position with good bilateral relations.

Some scholars have long been interrogating how international relations could be understood by distinguishing diplomatic relations in terms of bilateralism and other forms of international relations such as unilateralism and multilateralism.¹ From the perspective of quantity-based approach, bilateralism needs two states in interactions. However, there are more quality-based

approaches to distinguish the states interactions. Studies on bilateralism in a quality-based approach tends to focus on how two states conduct their foreign policies mutually by neglecting international institutions and legal constraints. In this regard, bilateralism is based on preferentialism and changes its goals and priorities on a case-by-case basis.² The alliance between the United States with different Asian countries can be seen as a product of bilateralism since the terms and agreements vary from one country to another.

In the realm of economic bilateralism, countries have struck bilateral agreements in which they mutually agree to lower their tariffs. This is aimed at encouraging trade between the two sides to their benefits. In diplomatic bilateralism, United States and China for instance, in January 1979 agreed to establish diplomatic relations, and formally established embassies in Washington, DC and Beijing on March 1, 1979.³ The result was a normalization of relations, which had often been turbulent between 1949 and 1972. In security affairs, bilateralism was established between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War following a number of agreements to mutually limit nuclear weapons, such as the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START).⁴

In Africa, Nigeria and Cameroon shared common historical, political and economic institutions as part of British West Africa.⁵ Both countries are located on the West Coast of the Continent of Africa. The area that came to be Nigeria was conquered by Britain, while the League of Nations (LoN) partitioned most of what exists today as the Republic of Cameroon and authorised Britain and France to administer it as Mandated Territories of the LoN following the defeat of Germany in the First World War.⁶ This portion of Cameroon under the British was administered by Nigeria until the plebiscite of 1961 when Northern Cameroons and Southern Cameroons voted for union with Nigeria and Cameroon respectively.

Nigeria with an estimated population of about 200 million covers a land area of 924,630 kilometres (km) extending from the Gulf of Guinea in the South to Niger and Chad Republics in the North.⁷ It shares common borders with the Republic of Benin on the West and the Republic of Cameroon on the East. Cameroon is a smaller country both in land mass and in population. The population of Cameroon is estimated at 25.9 million, occupying an area of 475,442 square kilometres.⁸ Cameroon shares borders with the Republic of Chad to the North, with the Central African Republic on the North-West, with the Republic of Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and the People's Republic of Congo on the South and with Nigeria on the West.

The border between Cameroon and Nigeria extends from Lake Chad in the north to the Gulf of Guinea in the South. The boundary has however been a bone of contention between the two countries. The boundary dispute between the two countries which was precipitated by unclear defined border of 1,680 km could be traced to 1884 when the European powers partitioned the African continent among themselves.⁹ Upon gaining independence from colonial rule, Nigeria and Cameroon began to lay claim to rightful ownership of some border area. The border dispute deepened in the 1980s and 1990s following the discovery of huge hydrocarbon deposits in Bakassi Peninsular. The relation between the two countries was further strained, provocations that occurred led to a series of violent confrontations by the militaries of both countries, lives were lost and properties were destroyed. The violent conflict heightened in 1994 when Nigeria stationed 3000 troops at the peninsula¹⁰

In 1994, Cameroon initiated a case at the International Court of Justice at The Hague for adjudication. After examining the case for 8 years, the Court in 2002, ruled that Cameroon is the rightful owner of the oil-rich Peninsula, and based its argument on the 1913 Anglo-German Treaty which delineated the borders between the two colonial powers.¹¹ Following a request by Cameroon and Nigeria for assistance in implementing the 2002 court ruling, the United Nations (UN) established the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission (CNMC) in 2004. In June 2006,

the United Nations brokered the Green Tree Agreement between the two, thus marking the formal and unconditional transfer of the oil-rich Peninsula to Cameroon.

The border problem between Nigeria and Cameroon has adversely affected bilateral relations between them, particularly in terms of military actions. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to appraise the bilateral relations between Nigeria and Cameroon and proffer strategies for improving relationship between the two countries.

Methodology

This paper is a desk study focusing on the bilateral relations between Nigeria and Cameroon from the pre-independent era to very recent times. Information was obtained from documented secondary sources which include published and unpublished sources. These include reports, papers, journal articles, legal documents and presentations, containing useful information on the subject.

Understanding Bilateralism and Inter-state Relations

Bilateralism generally concerns relations or policies of joint action between two parties or countries. Typically, bilateralism has applications concerning political, economic, diplomatic, cultural and security matters between two states. The term 'bilateralism', however, stands for an organizing principle of bilateral conduct and, as postulated in political science literature, appears to have a more implicit meaning on institutional form than just 'relations involving two states or parties'.¹² For example, as Baumann pointed out in the framework of multilateralism, bilateralism carries two generic senses. The first one connotes the patterns of relations among states in international relations while the second generic sense describes the orientation of a state's foreign policy conduct.¹³

Kiatpongsan observes that there are basically at least two ways to describe international relations terms such as unilateralism, bilateralism, and pluri- and multilateralism.¹⁴ The author called this first way a 'formal' or 'nominal' definition whereby the number of parties appears to be the basic criterion for classification. Kiatpongsan called the second version a 'substantive' or 'qualitative' definition which takes into account the different 'kinds of relations' between any given number of players, stressing the qualitative dimension of institutional principles. The author pointed out that bilateralism is sharply differentiated from multilateralism in the second definition in terms of the operating principles of coordination such as 'specific' versus 'diffuse' reciprocity or 'discriminatory' versus 'non-discriminatory' character.¹⁵ For instance, in contrast to the first version, this definition would not categorize the new wave of the so-called 'coalition of the willing' led by the United States in the Iraq conflicts and the peacekeeping missions that followed under multilateralism.¹⁶

Strakoshia and Petrakos focuses on bilateral trade between, the European Union and China using Econometrics and Game Theory.¹⁷ The game theory approach was used in order to provide critical information regarding the consequences of strategies employed by the parties involved. Using the critical macroeconomic variables, the authors explained the bilateral trade imbalances between the Eurozone and China, which lead to the available payoffs regarding their chosen strategies. Using the payoffs, the authors developed a zero-sum trade game, based on model hypothesis of a trade war between economies and the results pointed out the best strategies that should be followed by the players in order to avoid great losses. In the authors' analysis, the Eurozone should not impose any tariffs on Chinese products and China should not devalue its currency to USD or EURO.¹⁸

On its part, inter-state relations represent the state of the political relationship between countries. For Rummel, “interstate relations are those authoritative actions, understandings, or commitments of the governmental authorities--the leaders--of one state to or with the governmental authorities of another state or its groups or citizens, either bilaterally or through international organizations.¹⁹ For example, this would not only include the obvious international conferences, military aid, state visits, treaties, and the like, but also nationalizations of foreign business, expelling foreign newsmen, arresting a foreign national, applying duties to foreign goods, censoring foreign magazines. Thus, any authoritative actions of a state's governmental elite against any citizen or group or another state is part of interstate relations”.²⁰ To have a distinct category of relations as interstate implies that there are other levels or types of relations in the international system. Rummel identifies other dyadic relations in the context of international relations as inter-societal (groups relating with groups in other states or groups whose memberships cut across state boundaries) and inter-personal relations (citizens in pursuit of their personal interests in another state). In essence, interstate relations are the international relations between states whether in bilateral or multilateral context; its focus being political and occurs along a continuum of cooperative to conflictual, war and peace, conflict and cooperation, one of the key concerns of international relations inquiry. For the purpose of this analysis the context is bilateral interstate relations.

Trend in Inter-state Relations between Nigeria and Cameroon

This examination of the dynamics of inter-state relations between Nigeria-Cameroon is anchored on the 1961 plebiscite, boundary dispute especially the Bakassi Peninsula and International Criminal Court Verdict.

Plebiscite of 1961

The Northern Cameroons, which the Sardauna Local Government Area of Taraba State constitutes a part, was neither a colony nor protectorate of Northern Nigeria, but a mandate of the League of Nations between 1922 and 1945.²¹ It was later transferred to Britain to administer after Germany was defeated by the allied forces in the First and the Second World Wars. At the independence of Nigeria, the British colony, and the Cameroon French colony, in 1960, the political future of the Northern Cameroons was not decided until the plebiscite of 1961 which was conducted under the supervision of the United Nations on February 11 and 12, 1961.²² It was this plebiscite which unlike the 1959 mock plebiscite organised by the Government of Northern Nigeria that gave the people of the then Northern Cameroons the real chance to choose between union with Nigeria or with Cameroon. This time around the people voted substantially in favour of union with Nigeria by a wide margin of 146,296 to 97,659. The North voted to stay as part of Nigeria while in the Southern Cameroons, the Foncha-led group defeated the Endeley-led group to join Cameroon by a very wide margin of 223,571 to 97,741 votes.²³ The North voted for Nigeria because the late Sir Ahmadu Bello-led political party of the then Northern Region, Northern People's Congress (NPC), was said to have accepted and integrated the people of Northern Cameroon rather than discriminate against them. The case was not the same with the Nnamdi Azikiwe-led party, National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC).²⁴ Subsequently, while the people of Bakassi opted to be in Nigeria, the people in the Southern part of Cameroon decided to be with the independent French Cameroon.

Though the plebiscite was said to have been accepted by both countries, the people around the border, rejected it out rightly.

Contentious Boundary Areas

The Bakassi Peninsula is an area which is mainly populated by fishermen of Efik origin located in Nigeria's south east border with Cameroon.²⁵ The exercise of authority of traditional rulers of

the Efik and its ethnic affiliation with Old Calabar Kingdom, point to the settlement as a long-established permanent home of Nigerians. The struggle over the ownership of the Bakassi Peninsula was one of the areas of territorial disputes between Nigeria and Cameroon largely because the indigenous Bakassi populations are predominantly Efik that pay homage to the Obong of Calabar and the peninsula was not clearly demarcated.²⁶ Since independence, the two countries have tried to resolve the problem from a state-centric perspective without success. For instance in 1965, both countries set up a Joint Committee of experts to survey and demarcate the boundary, but the work could not be completed before the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War in 1967.²⁷ Again in 1971, a Commission (later known as Ngoh/Coker Commission) was established after several meetings to draw the maritime boundary between the two countries.²⁸ The result of the Commission was alleged to have been rejected by Nigeria based on economic, security and strategic reasons.²⁹ The stalemate remained up to 1981 when military skirmishes broke out between the two neighbouring countries, which led to military confrontation. As the hostilities continued in the disputed Bakassi Peninsula between the armed forces, Cameroon in 1994 decided to sue Nigeria at the ICJ in The Hague, where she claimed the ownership of the territory. The judgement was passed in her favour on 10th October 2002.

International Criminal Court Verdict

Following the 10th October 2002 verdict of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) regarding the Land and Maritime boundary between Nigeria and Cameroon, and the subsequent Summit Meeting in Geneva on 16 November 2002, between the President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria and Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of both countries, the Nigeria-Cameroon Mixed Commission under the auspices of the United Nations was constituted.³⁰ The inaugural Session of the Mixed Commission was held in Cameroon in December 2002. With the conclusion of negotiations between the two countries over the situation at the Lake Chad, within the framework of the Mixed Commission, the next phase of work of the bilateral arrangement was the delineation of the Bakassi peninsula and then the Maritime boundary.³¹ In June 2006 Nigeria signed the Greentree Agreement, in preparation for the formal transfer of authority in the region to Cameroon, and the Nigerian military partly withdrew from Bakassi.

The major interest of Cameroon is on the putative economic stakes, which she stands to derive from the Bakassi especially in the area of oil exploration.³² Given the security, economic, and strategic interests of both countries in the disputed area, the implementation of the ICJ judgement in respect of the area initially appeared a difficult task for the Nigeria-Cameroon Mixed Commission especially in view of the patriotic sentiments expressed by the population of both countries. The final transfer of territories was concluded in 2008 and Nigeria did not appeal the ICJ verdict within the first decade.

An Assessment of Economic, Security and Diplomatic Inter-State Relations between Nigeria and Cameroon

Economic Relations

On March 29, 2006, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the transnational highway project to facilitate transportation between Cameroon and Nigeria in Yaounde.³³ There is also 443 kilometre long Bamenda-Enugu road being constructed by the two countries. According to the office of the Nigerian High Commissioner in Buea, an estimated population of 4 million Nigerians live in Cameroon. They are mostly business men.³⁴ However, legitimate trade is low between Nigeria and Cameroon due to illegal trafficking in food items and associated essential commodities. Governments' efforts to curtail illegal trade have not yielded positive results. Although commercial and economic activities between Nigeria and Cameroon have appeared to be minimal, available statistics of trade inflows show that the commercial exchange at the official level tends to favour Cameroon to the detriment of Nigeria.³⁵

The only refinery in Cameroon is alleged to be getting the bulk of its crude products illegally from Nigeria. This unfortunate development needs to be addressed by Nigeria and Cameroon in the interest of their economies and good bilateral interstate relations.

Security Relations

Security relations between Nigeria and Cameroon are greatly influenced by historical and geographical factors. Several agreements govern the security relations they include:

The Agreement of Friendship and Cooperation of February 6, 1963; The Agreement on Police Cooperation of March 27, 1972; The Agreement Establishing Cameroon-Nigeria Border Security Committee signed on February 28, 2012 in Abuja; Establishment of Multi National Joint Task Force to fight against Boko Haram insurgency; Joint Maritime Exercise codenamed “Exercise Obangame” to strengthen the interoperability of the maritime forces of the Gulf of Guinea for maritime awareness.

Despite these security agreements, the security relations between the two countries have however been hampered by misunderstandings arising from: the presence of suspected Boko Haram members in Cameroon; The problems inherent in the demarcation of the border (including the lake area, sea and land); The fight to safeguard specific interests (energy resources, wildlife, forest and aquatic); The significant presence of the Nigerians on Cameroonian territory (estimated at 4 million people). In December 2017, Cameroonian troops crossed into Nigeria in pursuit of rebels without seeking authorization from Nigeria, causing a falling-out between the governments.³⁶ The two countries need to work together to tackle the growing insecurity in the region in order to improve their national and regional security.

Diplomatic Relations

Diplomatic relations between Cameroon and Nigeria were established in 1960. Nigeria has two Consulates General in Douala and Buea. It plans to open another one in Garoua. However, diplomatic relations between the two countries have been hampered by misunderstandings arising from some problems inherent in the demarcation of the border. The two countries have long-standing border dispute over the potentially oil-rich Bakassi Peninsula which was resolved in 2002 by the decision of International Court of Justice.³⁷ The Court granted Cameroon ownership of the region and by 2006 Nigeria signed the agreement which led to the withdrawal of Nigerian troops from Bakassi in 2008 and complete administrative control was given to Cameroon in August 2013.

The diplomatic relations between the two countries have been eroded presently as Nigeria often accused Cameroon of not doing enough to fight Boko Haram insurgents even though the terrorist group frequently crosses into Cameroonian territory.³⁸ Cameroon has been attacked several times by Boko Haram. In May 2014, in the wake of the Chibok School girls kidnapping, in a twist of irony, Boko Haram’s atrocities brought Cameroon and Nigeria closer.³⁹ In declaration after declaration, leaders of both countries vowed to destroy the organization. They coordinated surveillance, shared intelligence, and increased patrols of the region. Presidents Buhari and Biya met repeatedly to discuss and coordinate strategies in boosting diplomatic ties. In 2015, at a meeting in Yaoundé, the leaders rededicated themselves to the complete dissolution of Boko Haram. This kind of game theory approach is required moving forward towards enhancing bilateral interstate relations between Nigeria and Cameroon.

Challenges Militating against Bilateralism and Inter-State Relations between Nigeria and Cameroon

The challenges militating against bilateralism and inter-state relations between Nigeria and Cameroon include Ambazonia crisis, harassment by security agents and hostile military relations. The identified challenges are further discussed in subsequent paragraphs.

Ambazonia Crisis

The Ambazonia secessionist threat in the Anglophone regions of Southern Cameroon continues to fuel social tension in Cameroon with untoward impacts on Nigeria-Cameroon bilateral relations.⁴⁰ The crisis in the Anglophone regions (Northwest and Southwest) of Cameroon started in October 2016 with protests by teachers and lawyers. It further escalated into an armed insurrection at the end of 2017 and has since degenerated into a conflict. The conflict has killed at least 1,850 people since September 2017 and several displaced persons from the conflict regions have fled to the West region and Littoral region of Cameroon for safety.⁴¹ It has caused social and humanitarian crises in the Anglophone regions as many schools especially in the rural areas have remained largely shut since the escalation of the conflict; over 170 villages have been destroyed; 530,000 people have been internally displaced and 35,000 have sought refuge in neighbouring Nigeria⁴².

The armed conflict in former British administered Southern Cameroons poses direct threats to Nigeria-Cameroon relations bearing in mind the security and diplomatic implications. Attention has been drawn to the possible radicalisation of border communities in neighbouring Nigeria, cross border movement of separatist fighters from Cameroon, proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) and influx of refugees into the country among others. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, reported that over 30,000 Cameroonians have fled from the crisis into Nigeria, since September, 2017.⁴³ Majority of these refugees are hosted in Akwa-Ibom, Cross-River, Benue and Taraba States. There are also concerns that the Ambazonia crisis would have grave consequences for the region. So far, the Nigerian Government has refrained from supporting the Southern Cameroons pro-Ambazonia struggle for independence bearing in mind the growing rapprochement between both countries.⁴⁴ The Nigerian public opinion is against the increased influence of France and Cameroon in crushing the Ambazonia.

Harassment by Defence and Security Forces

One major issue that is affecting Nigeria-Cameroon bilateral relations is that of harassment of nationals of these countries by security agents. Evidently, the Nigerian people of Bakassi of the Efik, Efut and Ibibio extraction of Cross River and Akwa Ibom States of Nigeria which form 90% of the inhabitants of the Peninsula have been the victims of Cameroonian intimidation, harassment, torture, humiliation and murder.⁴⁵ These people believe that their ill-treatment is predicated on their refusal to be Cameroonian citizens. Cameroon Gendarmes are known to constantly raid the Nigerian areas of the peninsula all the time imposing and collecting illegal taxes from the fishermen in the area and seizing their engine boats.⁴⁶

Hostile Military Relations

Militaries relate through alliance or defence cooperation with a view to helping each other whenever the need arises. This is often achieved through the provision of joint security, joint training/exercises, and exchange of intelligence, students, visits and Defence Attachés (DA). The relations between Nigeria and Cameroon militaries however, have been characterized by hostilities over the disputed Bakassi Peninsula and cooperation to combat the terrorism in the Lake Chad area and maritime threats in the Gulf of Guinea among others.

Way Forward

Keeping Political and Diplomatic Outreach Open

Keeping political and diplomatic outreach open between Nigeria and Cameroon would address the Ambazonia crisis. This is aimed at pursuing political and diplomatic outreach to Cameroon regarding the Ambazonia issue. It also aims at preparing the diplomatic channel for use as last resort so as to resolve the issue amicably between the two countries. This option would not escalate the tension between Cameroon and the Ambazonian agitators.

Introduction of Permanent Residence

Introduction of permanent residence for people from both countries who have settled permanently in their alternate countries could be so accepted and treated as citizens of the affected country. This would lead to the abolition of illegal, harassment by security agents and exorbitant taxation as is the case suffered by the Bakassi fishermen along the Cameroonian border. Where necessary, the level of taxation would be reasonable and affordable and not discriminatory. By this token, Cameroon will continue to offer protection to Nigerians living in the Bakassi Peninsula and in the Lake Chad area now ceded to Cameroon. The same treatment would be meted to the Cameroonians who by the ICJ ruling now find themselves in Nigeria.

Improvement in Security Cooperation

Improvement in security cooperation between Nigeria and Cameroon would assist in reducing tension and engendering bilateralism and inter-state relations. This could be enhanced by the teaching of the French language in military/security establishments in Nigeria and English in Cameroon. It would enable both security and consular officials to effectively educate and interpret government policies to the people. Also, the cooperation would go a long way in reducing border check points and enhance great border development in both countries. Furthermore, security agencies of both countries could improve co-operation in areas of crimes, intelligence gathering, custom duties, and surveillance of territorial waters, control of immigration and a greater patrol of the border due to its porous nature. Additionally, the containment of illegal cross border activities would enhance bilateral relations between Nigeria and Cameroon. This would also assist in ameliorating the problem of cross border activities such as smuggling and piracy which are concentrated on the coastal borders. These illegal activities would be checked if the security cooperation between Nigeria and Cameroon is improved towards enhancing bilateral interstate relations of both countries.

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