

Nigeria: Candidate for Political Destabilization and “Regime Change”?

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It is worth reminding, if such reminder is at all necessary, how even in the contemporary circumstances of an omnipresent international security system represented by the United Nations which promotes the ideals of mutual security and co-existence, the conduct of the relations of nations continues to assuredly reflect the elementally brutal and atavistic nature of man.

For it is the case that among the panoply of strategies employed in the exercise of statecraft, the stealthily managed policy of fracturing or otherwise, engineering the ‘rolling back’ of certain countries in order to obtain geo-strategic advantage remains a vital and ongoing cog in the wheel of the foreign policy of those nations possessing the necessary guile, power and resources.

Destabilisation has a long and a markedly bloody history. It may be facilitated by a catalogue of diplomatic intrigues, instigating covert operations or by stimulating proxy wars which may be fought internally or against external foes. But the end game is to achieve a re-alignment in loyalty through regime change or the dismemberment of the subject nation and the consequent re-drawing of the map.

The rationale for one nation seeking to destabilise another is clear: to acquire economic benefit or to achieve security or both. The mechanics of achieving these goals are multifaceted and are often complicated.

Nonetheless, those countries which may be more susceptible to the pressures applied with the intention to destabilise tend to be those for whom nationhood has not been achieved through a lengthy evolutionary process. The aggressor nation will apply pressure where for instance there are weak bonds of national solidarity; manifested usually in tribal, ethnic or religious rivalries through which festering grievances may be exploited.

Those fractious countries which are held together by authoritarian or totalitarian regimes under the auspices of a ‘strongman’ or a ‘charismatic leader’ but which are ultimately devoid of strongly developed institutions and a substantive political culture are particularly susceptible to manoeuvres aimed at weakening the powerbase of a successor ruler. Such was arguably the case in Yugoslavia in the aftermath of the death of Josip Broz Tito.

Yet, there is evidence that the break up and subsequent dismemberment of Yugoslavia was not an inevitability and was only achieved through the meddlesome efforts of the Western world in stimulating internecine friction because it did not wish to have a large and potentially powerful nation-state straddling the West and East of the post-Cold War European continent.

The words uttered in the public arena by certain nations actively engaged in the pursuit of the destabilisation of others may be 'correct' and couched in the subtle niceties of diplomatic speak, but camouflage the underlying basis of their foreign policies.

The United States, for one, has had an unceasing policy in terms of destabilising nations in order to effect changes in government to suit its geo-strategic interests. The State of Israel also has had a longstanding agenda geared towards destabilising its neighbours.

The former, at one time while vying with the Soviet Union for global influence, is now the sole world superpower which is ever watchful; even fearful of China's growing economic and military power and the competition it offers in terms of securing favourable terms of access to raw materials, while the latter, the Zionist state, seeks to consolidate its survival; having entrenched itself among hostile Arab states which surround its borders.

The United States has under the auspices of NATO in the era of the so-called War on Terror and Arab Spring, succeeded in overthrowing the governments of two key countries which it had for long targeted for destabilisation: Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi's Libya. It is currently seeking to do the same to Syria, which is in the midst of a civil war, and Iran, which is the subject of vigorously applied sanctions.

The break up Iraq and Syria were long-established Israeli policy goals articulated respectively in the Yinon Plan for the 1980s, and the 'Securing the Realm' document produced in the 1990s. They both tally with the New Revisionist-stance of Ze'ev Jabotinsky, which argued that the surrounding Arab states needed to be weakened and effectively neutralised in order to assure the survival of a nascent Zionist state.

A plan along these lines which pinpointed the Christian-Muslim divide in the Lebanon as a means through which Israel could acquire regional influence by dismantling that nation, and even achieve some measure of territorial expansion, was devised in the 1950s by David Ben Gurion and applied with devastatingly tragic results in subsequent decades.

The United States, and, to a lesser extent, Israel, have geo-strategic interests which extend to the African continent. The Israeli outlook as identified in the aforementioned Yinon Plan is said to be that of encouraging the severing of Black Africa from the Arab world, a view that was given credence by the support given by Israel to the South Sudanese Liberation Army in its quest to be free of the Arab north.

The United States itself was not an uninterested party in the eventual severance of the south from north Sudan, not only because of the latter being continually identified as one of a core of enemy nations in successive influential policy documents such as that by the Project for the New American Century, but also due to the favourable oil trading agreements it had reached with China.

Africa the continent has not escaped the attentions of international powers competing for access to its riches in raw materials. This in the final analysis is the crux of the matter, whether the continent is serving as the battleground between the forces of religion or ideology.

Centuries ago, beginning with the Portuguese, when the first European maritime powers were circumnavigating the globe, the Pope issued an instruction that the southward advance of Islam from the northern part of the continent be checked by Christendom.

But the conversion of what were viewed as 'heathen souls' to the Christian faith also served as a means of extending economic rights and entitlements among the city-states and empires the Europeans encountered first on the coastal areas and then in the interior.

Today, the nations of African continent just as the Arab lands, by virtue of their multi-ethnic composition within artificially created borders, remain vulnerable to efforts geared toward national destabilisation.

As a prelude to the age of imperialism, Africa was carved up between the European powers of the day with little regard to indigenously evolved borders much in the manner that the British and the French helped themselves to the Arab lands forfeited by the defeated Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War.

With the emerging China ravenous for raw materials and making inroads into African markets, the consequent nervousness felt by the older colonial powers of France and Britain as well as the United States of America portends ominously to a second 'Scramble for Africa'.

From the mineral-rich Maghreb region of West Africa to the abundant resources in the Great Lakes area of East Africa; and from the Congo area to the oil rich Niger Delta, Africa remains the most endowed continent so far as raw materials are concerned.

The taking down of the Gaddafi regime to some extent and the division of Sudan into two to a greater degree may be symptoms of such a scramble. The ruses which would necessitate intervention will likely change depending on the targeted region or country.

For instance, the hype surrounding the Ugandan political renegade and bandit, Joseph Kony in 2012, was seen in certain quarters as a contrived news item designed to pave the way for the militarisation of the Great Lakes area by the United States.

The War on Terror, which history will surely need to re-reassess in terms of its genuineness as a phenomenon, remains the most likely avenue for the external application of the techniques of destabilisation and foreign intervention.

The complexities associated with determining historical and contemporary issues of cause and effect notwithstanding, the recent French intervention in Mali, a nation which is part of the Maghreb, is significant not only for the averred aim of pushing back al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, but also because it enables the French to station troops in a resource rich area.

Where do the circumstances of today leave Nigeria; Africa's most populous nation? The answer must surely be one which unambiguously places it in a category of clear and present danger of being subjected to manipulations geared towards weakening the authority of its government and its eventual dissolution as a nation.

Back in 2006, the United States National Intelligence Council (NIC) which distils the medium to long term strategic thinking of the American Intelligence Community for the benefit of the policymakers of that nation predicted that Nigeria would disintegrate by 2015.

This was and still is taken by many Nigerians to be the officially sanctioned view of the government of the United States. Although not strictly true, the role of America and the application of the devices of its intelligence services and military command structure will

likely have some bearing on the nation's future.

Nigeria, as is the case with most African countries, is a conglomerate nation; an artificial construction put together by imperial draughtsmen. With an estimate of well over 200 different ethnicities and a roughly even division between Christian and Moslems, it has proved to be a combustible arrangement of convenience designed under the aegis of the British Empire.

It has, in the five decades of its existence as an independent entity endured a series of crises. Most notably the civil war fought between the federation and the secessionist Republic of Biafra between 1967 and 1970.

Communal violence which for the most part had previously taken the form of temporary outbursts of sectarian rioting has recently transmogrified into a sustained and sophisticated campaign of terror waged by an Islamist sect with the official title of "Jama'atu ahlis sunna lidda'awarti wal-jihad" translated as meaning, "People committed to the propagation of the prophet's teachings and jihad."

The group is better known by the name 'Boko Haram' or 'No to Western education.'

While the oil rich but economically neglected Niger Delta area was plagued for years by militant groups committing acts of terror, kidnapping and sabotage as a demand for a greater slice of the national cake; the crimes of Boko Haram surpass this by great measure. Their avowed aim is to drive Christians out of the mainly Muslim north and declare a modern Islamic caliphate modelled on the pre-colonial one of Sokoto created by the scholar and revolutionary, Usman dan Fodio.

It could be argued thus that the logical conclusion given Nigeria's historically shaky foundations, propensity for internal strife and institutionalised corruption would be that it is ripe for disintegration due to its inherited mass of contradictions and such eventuality would not require the covert manipulation by external powers.

It could further be argued that any insinuations that the United States could aid in the destabilising and destroying of Nigeria as a corporate entity is tantamount to a libel.

A closer reading of the historical attitude of the United States to Nigeria, as well as the statement of intent posed to the future of Nigeria and Africa as a whole by the establishment of the US created African High Command or AFRICOM is essential in understanding an alternate, more cynical reading of the realities of the situation.

Nigeria is considered by American intelligence reports and the decided opinion of its policymakers to be of great strategic interest. It is after all the fourth major supplier of oil to the United States after Canada, Saudi Arabia and Mexico. Also, companies such as Chevron, Exxon Mobil, Shell and Total envisage increasing their output there in the next few years by up to fifty per cent.

But although Nigeria has developed into an ally of sorts with military joint exercises and training given to its Special Forces, the United States has viewed Nigerian leadership within Africa and the West African sub-region as a threat.

An analysis of the imperial mentality which has governed American foreign policy since its

ascension to world power status is instructive. Regional powers who act independently are stamped upon and put in line. The United States hegemon needs a minor power that it can control and influence and not one which it deals with on equal terms or which effectively is a rival.

And despite a national tendency towards dysfunctionality and deprecations couched in terms of its being 'big for nothing', Nigeria has provided instances of substantive and decisive leadership in the past. In the 1970s for instance, Nigeria used its weight within the then Organisation of African Unity (O.A.U.) to persuade African nations to support the Marxist MPLA faction in the Angolan Civil War.

It was a major player in opposing White minority rule in South Africa and provided financial and material aid to those nations which were designated as the "Front Line States". It also flexed its muscles against Western interests to the extent of nationalising British Petroleum assets in the country because it supplied oil to apartheid-era South Africa.

But what is particularly striking and revealing about the philosophy behind American foreign policy was the reaction of the United States to Nigeria's successful efforts in policing the West African region and effecting a peace settlement in the Liberian Civil War in the 1990s.

The Central Intelligence Agency commissioned reports made by the Brookings Institute and the Africa-American Institute both of which advised that the success of its peace mission in Liberia threatened to eclipse both Britain and France, the former colonial powers of West Africa in terms of influence.

An element of a sense of aggrievement on the part of the United States at the Nigerian success in its peace mission, may have been based on the fact that America was historically the creator of the state of Liberia.

The reaction of the United States under the administration of George W. Bush was the creation of the Africa Crises Response Initiative (ACRI) which was intended to serve as a counterweight to the Nigerian-led ECOMOG, the monitoring group of the Economic Community of West African States. It was a blatant attempt aimed at diluting or even negating Nigerian influence in the region.

AFRICOM, established on October 1st 2008, provides concrete evidence of the United States vision of serving as continental policeman and enforcer with the cooperation of African states, most of whom remain wary of its ultimate purpose and potential usages.

The Bush Doctrine at the outset of the War on Terror, that which espoused the an "either you are with us or you are against us" policy, may not be put as crudely by the Obama administration, but as the configuration of NATO as well as other military alliances America has entered into suggests, the United States is the undisputed leader; the dominant shareholder in the endeavour.

In international relations the cynical adage that "nations have no permanent friends or allies, only permanent interests", still holds sway, and it is with this backdrop that American intentions towards Nigeria's future should be judged.

After all, the United States and its European allies reneged on a rapprochement with the Gaddafi regime and seized the opportunity to aid the rebels who overthrew his government.

There are allegations that Boko Haram is now conducting its terroristic operations under the direction of foreign concerns. There appears to have been, from what can be discerned, a distinct evolution in the capacities of the group.

The first phase of the sect under its founder Mohammed Yusuf, who was killed by the Nigerian authorities in 2009, is often characterised as being of a kind of low intensity terrorism of a decidedly limited scope. Drive-by shootings, lighted fuel cans tossed from motor scooters and even the use of bows and poison-tipped arrows were the order of the day.

The second coming of the group, on the other hand, is marked by an increased level of sophistication in its methods of deployment and capacity for destruction in its operations. For instance, in August of 2011, a bombing mission claimed by the group, was directed at the United Nations headquarters in the Nigerian capital city of Abuja. Twenty four lives were lost.

There have been massacres directed at churches situated in the North of the country, including, most provocatively, on Christmas Day, while the sheer murderousness such as the slaughter of 25 students and staff in a dormitory in October of 2012 upped the ante in the terror stakes.

What these 'new phase' waves of attacks may suggest is a 'strategy of tension' directed from an internal source or externally or both.

For instance, the sense of insecurity is arguably been exploited by unscrupulous profiteers, both Nigerian and foreign, who are making huge sums of money in the sale of various technologies of security equipment.

The attacks also serve the purpose of undermining the power of the federal government which in looking helpless at protecting the lives and properties of its citizens, will become 'delegitimized' and thus potentially pave the way for some form of foreign intervention in which the Christians of Nigeria can serve as the Western media's focal point as a bastion of Christian defiance against an aggressive Jihadist alliance of al-Qaeda of the Sahara and Sahel endeavouring to complete what the Pope's injunction centuries earlier had prevented: the euphemistic triumphant dipping of the Koran into the Atlantic Ocean.

There are those within and outside of Nigeria who claim that Boko Haram are under the direction of the CIA in a covert intelligence operation being conducted with the express aim of destabilising Nigeria and breaking the country, like the Sudan, into two distinct halves; one largely Christian and the other largely Moslem with the United States primed to gain from influencing the southern, Christian half in which the oil wealth would be located.

Such a theory for the most part appears to be based on speculation rather than on concrete facts. Nonetheless, there are interesting justifications used to buttress such arguments.

For instance, much of the strength of Boko Haram lies in the north eastern part of Nigeria, a region in which President Goodluck Jonathan has recently imposed a state of emergency.

It is argued that since this area borders the Lake Chad Basin where the French-speaking nations of Niger, Chad and Cameroon are situated, the rat trails of supplies of arms and ammunition and non-Nigerian terrorists would not go unnoticed by French Special Forces personnel who are deployed in those countries as indeed they tend to be in much of

francophone Africa.

If Boko Haram is serving as a CIA sponsored proxy for American interests, it would not be the first time that the United States has aided an Islamist sect. America after all lent support to the Afghan Mujahedeen, among whose ranks was the young Osama Bin Laden, in their war against the 'godless' communist invading army of the Soviet Union.

The United States gave backing to the Islamist Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) in the uprising which led to the destruction of Colonel Gaddafi's regime. Further, is the fact that the so-called Free Syrian Army, even if separated from the al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat Al Nusra Front brigades, is composed of Islamist, sectarian-minded Sunnis who have received covert support from US intelligence through Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The strategy of feeding sectarian hatreds as a means towards achieving an end is one which was used by US military intelligence in defeating the Sunni-led insurgency in Iraq and forms the bedrock of the unstated aim of breaking Syria up as a nation-state.

It is not beyond the realms of possibility that a Western intelligence agency such as the CIA can infiltrate and train a group like Boko Haram through Middle Eastern intermediaries.

The espionage rulebook allows for groups to be unknowingly infiltrated and be enabled to do the bidding of an infiltrating government through 'steers' who enable the group to act under direction without realising that they are being directed.

It was in this manner in the 1970s that Left-wing terrorist groups in Western Europe such as the German Baader-Meinhoff and the Italian Brigade Rosse were allegedly infiltrated and effectively controlled by government intelligence agencies who used terrorist events to serve the governments' purpose of discrediting the political Left.

Such infiltrations were completed and acted upon in new phases of the groups when the original members were either dead or in prison. The studied 'facelessness' of the second phase Boko Haram by which is meant the virtually non-existent public knowledge of who its spiritual head is or whom its captains are, has lent a measure of credence to the supposition of those who argue that this bears the hallmarks of a group which has been penetrated by an unseen guiding hand.

The report by the United States NIC opining that Nigeria would likely disintegrate by 2015 does not automatically vest such opinion maker with an unerring or formidable level of percipience. Such predictions have been idly tossed around for decades.

As mentioned earlier, many Nigerians have chosen to believe it to be a cunningly deployed piece of information which was made public in order to serve as a form of 'psychological warfare'. This has been denied by American officials including the current US ambassador to Nigeria, Terence McCulley.

Ultimately, the destiny of the nation is in the hands of its people. The mass of people may choose to be resigned to a fate of inevitable disintegration. Or they may be spurred to a resolution to resist and withstand the provocations of Boko Haram as well as the possible manipulations of an outside power.

There are some unpromising aspects in regard to achieving the latter goal, given the level of corruption in the nation's leadership.

There are questions also as to whether the intelligence services of the country, both the domestic State Security Service (SSS) as well as the intelligence service of the military are up to the task of figuring out this newly fashioned opposition which presents a challenge far greater than that posed by the followers of the Muslim cleric Maitastine in the early 1980s or the first phase Boko Haram which were put down by the application of brute force.

And even if the national intelligence bodies are capable, they are likely being undermined from within. Rather as is the case with the Pakistani SIS, the existence of dual loyalties is somewhat inevitable.

Boko Haram has received the tacit support and backing of a number of legislators and businessmen. Among the early opinions cultivated in the South of the country as to its rise in activity is the belief that the group is sponsored by leaders from the country's North who are disgruntled at being deprived of the powers of central government, a position they maintained continuously through civilian and military rulers from the time of independence to the reestablishment of democratic rule in 1999.

Nigeria, a nation which for decades has seemingly lurched from one crisis to another, has, against the odds, held together. Oil, most will proffer, is the reason –the only reason- for a continued grudging co-existence.

Calls for a national sovereign conference to determine its future as a looser federation or a voluntary dissolution into smaller polities have been incessant but have not come to fruition.

The issue of the division of the national cake is one which has been addressed only in piecemeal fashion and the creation of states, first undertaken by the military regime of the then Colonel Yakubu Gowon in 1967, while succeeding initially in allaying fears of domination by the old Northern Region has not solved the core issues of states' rights.

The terribly bloody civil war fought against mainly ethnic Igbo rebels in the 1960s, whatever the mismanagements and ulterior motives on the part of certain protagonists, was prosecuted for a supremely logical rationale: as Gowon warned at the time, allowing the secession of one region at that moment would have led to the fragmenting of Nigeria into a number of warring armed camps; each backed by its own foreign sponsor.

This haunting spectre, that of the disorganised balkanisation of Nigeria into warring factions akin to that experienced by the Lebanon in the 1970s or even of the nature as presently endured by Somalia, is one which should be treated seriously with or without the threat of Boko Haram.

Their artificially constructions notwithstanding, the splitting of nation states on the African continent has been rarer than would have been imagined. This was because of the firmly held OAU policy that one tool which would afford independent African nations the opportunity to develop in stable conditions was for all its members to accept the borders they had inherited from their colonial masters.

This arguably played a key part in promoting the federal cause of maintaining a united Nigeria during the civil war. However, the carving out of South Sudan from the north has succeeded in giving some secessionist movements such as Tuaregs seeking an independent state of Azawad, renewed hope that the borders drawn by the quills of the imperial European powers need no longer be considered sacrosanct or inviolable.

The precedent of South Sudan is presumably a development from which Nigerian Islamists are also taking hope.

Ironically, the country was taken from the brink of this happening back in 1966. The savage reprisals against mainly Igbo army officers during the July mutiny against the government of Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi was led by Northern military figures in what they called 'Operation Arewa'.

Translated from the Hausa language, 'Arewa', "let us part", was an unambiguous reference to the objective of splitting the country into northern and southern components. However, officials from the British and American embassies succeeded in convincing the North to remain in the country and to subsequently prosecute a war against the Eastern Region which wished to break away.

A foreign-backed campaign of destabilisation did occur prior to this. The government of the overthrown and subsequently assassinated Ironsi faced violent protests in the North which reacted with alarm to his decree which altered Nigeria's federal system to that of a unitary state.

The North which had seen its leaders dislodged from power in the first mutiny of 1966, suspected Ironsi's move to be a prelude to establishing the domination of his southern Christian kinsmen over the nation.

And the British who had effectively installed the North as the political leaders of the nation on the eve of its independence appeared to have a hand in stirring up protests against Ironsi's move through the activism of certain members of its expatriate community.

Later, the troubles in the Niger Delta brought allegations that multi-national oil companies were giving financial backing to government death squads against those locals who were resisting the exploitation and despoliation of their land. Now the rise of an Islamist sect bent on secession, it is alleged, presents an avenue for foreign powers to exploit to their ends.

Could Nigeria be the subject of a diabolical covert operation undertaken by the intelligence services of the United States to weaken and possibly dismember it for reasons of gaining greater access to and more favourable rights over the nation's resources?

The historical and contemporary record demonstrates that this cannot be discounted. American sponsored actions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya while ostensibly undertaken respectively under the banners of eliminating terrorist bases, neutralising weapons of mass destruction and the humanitarian protection of civilians in danger of being massacred by an unforgiving despot, were each accomplished to secure some form of geo-strategic advantage.

But what should be of paramount clarity to all concerned is the willingness of the United States, a nation at the helm of an expanded military empire named NATO, to act ruthlessly and decisively in the affairs of other nations when its perceived vital interests are at stake.

It would be wise to take note of the words of General Carter Ham, formerly a top commander with AFRICOM, who in August of 2011 informed the Associated Press that the stated intent by Boko Haram and al-Qaeda in the Maghreb to synchronise their efforts would be the "most dangerous thing to happen" to the interests of the United States in Africa.

Nigeria should be concerned not only about whether foreign intelligence services have increased covert operations within its realm, it should be aware of the opportunities which may present the United States, embarked since September 11th 2001 on a course of militarism, to intervene in its internal affairs under the umbrella of AFRICOM which sits, fingers poised on the trigger, in the small Red Sea state of Djibouti.

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