

Cameroon's relations toward Nigeria: a foreign policy of pragmatism*

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ABSTRACT

Existing literature argues that the tactics of Cameroon foreign policy have been conservative, weak and timid. This study refutes that perspective. Based on extensive and previously unused primary sources obtained from Cameroon's Ministry of External Relations and from the nation's archives in Buea and Yaoundé, this study argues that Cameroon's foreign policy was neither timid nor makeshift. Its strategy was one of pragmatism. By examining the nation's policy toward Nigeria in the reunification of Cameroon, the Nigerian civil war, the Bakassi Peninsula crisis and Boko Haram, the study maintains that, while the nation's policy was cautious, its leaders focused on the objectives and as a result scored major victories. The study concludes by suggesting that President Paul Biya invokes the same skills he used in foreign policy to address the ongoing Anglophone problem, a problem that threatens to unravel much of what the country has accomplished.

Keywords: Ahmadou Ahidjo, Paul Biya, Muhammadu Buhari, Secession, Boko Haram.

INTRODUCTION

The historical literature on Cameroon's foreign policy can be placed within three distinct categories: conservative, forward-looking and pragmatic. The goals of Cameroon's foreign policy as created by the nation's founding leader, Ahmadou Ahidjo, and continued by his successor, Paul Biya, were the following: to promote peace; to maintain the nation's stability, unity and sovereignty; to respect international norms, non-alignment, non-intervention and

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non-interference in another nation's affairs; and to abide by agreements from such regional organisations as the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and later the African Union (AU) (Ahidjo 1964: 37, 47–8; Biya 1987: 134). While scholars agree those objectives originated from Ahidjo, they disagree on the effectiveness of the tactics used to implement them.

Writing soon after independence, Victor T. Le Vine noted that Cameroon's foreign policy had few 'specific objectives' and was driven by 'such vague goals as broader economic, social, and political cooperation' (1971: 174). Ndiva Kofele-Kale built on that theme, arguing that Ahidjo's approach to foreign policy was 'conservative,' makeshift, timid and weak (Kofele-Kale 1981: 198–9), that rather than initiate and act, Ahidjo waited and reacted to events. His policy, Kofele-Kale continued, was not informed by any ideology like Kwame Nkrumah's Pan-Africanism, Julius Nyerere's Ujamaa or Léopold Senghor's Négritude. Kofele-Kale's work paved the way for a deeper analysis of the tactics of Cameroon's foreign policy. Thierry Virocoulon and others supported the makeshift theory, arguing that the nation's foreign policy drifted from the beginning because of failures by the president to initiate and lead. Ahidjo, they argued, was a follower, and as a result, he squandered an immense opportunity to move Cameroon to a more important position in the Central and West African region. 'Cameroon has been a sleepy regime with a soft and aging dictator, a nation all but forgotten in a remote corner of the African continent', Virocoulon (2015: 2) wrote.

In contrast to this conservative interpretation is one that sees Cameroon's foreign policy as forward-looking. Peter Ada, Remi Mbida Mbida and others reject the 'sleepy' perspective, claiming that Biya has been a savvy and effective mover in foreign policy: 'The idea that Cameroon is timid and resultantly weak, non-confrontational, and low-profile ... [is to] misunderstand Cameroonian foreign policy objectives ... [and] misstates Cameroon's history of proactivity internationally' (Ada & Mbida Mbida 2018: 354–5). They add that Cameroon's reliance on international organisations to 'shield the nation from economic and security volatility' has yielded results (2018: 355). Those bilateral and multinational agreements catapulted the nation into a position as a major regional player on issues of insecurity, conflict resolution, sovereignty, educational reform and economic development. The nation, they argued, diversified its alliance system, thereby developing stronger ties with Israel, the USA, China, and countries of the Commonwealth and the European Union. Sharing this stance was Mark Bolak Funteh (2015a, 2015b), who used his analysis of the Bakassi crisis and Boko Haram to point to the effectiveness of Cameroon's foreign policy. He wrote that the Bakassi crisis was a reminder of the recklessness and evils of European colonialism but that Cameroon and Nigeria were able to resolve the problems because of their tradition of working together. They are good neighbours, he stated, concluding that a 'historical analysis ... of Cameroon–Nigeria political and economic relationship revealed a considerable level of warmth, cordiality and mutuality of interest and purpose' (Funteh 2015a: 46).

The third school argues that Cameroon's foreign policy has been guided by a strategy of pragmatism. Mélanie Torrent argued that Ahidjo capitalised on the country's dual colonial heritage to gain more leverage and 'instilled a strong sense of realism in Cameroonian diplomacy' (Torrent 2012: 6). Ahidjo, Torrent continued, was aware of the 'constraints that limited resources placed' on his foreign policy actions and as a result remained extremely 'cautious and pragmatic' (2012: 6). Moses Tesi (2017) concurred, arguing that Ahidjo was 'cautious' and 'political' and frequently worked with 'what was possible ... and not desirable'. Tesi concluded that Ahidjo's flexible approach to foreign policy was equally determined by his ability to protect Cameroon's unity (2017: 106, 184, 199).

The current study on Cameroon's relations toward Nigeria sides with the pragmatic perspective; given Cameroon's political, economic and social challenges, Cameroon's flexibility is viewed as a more appropriate approach in foreign policy. Unlike other studies, however, this one is based on extensive and previously unused primary sources. The Ministry of External Relations in Yaoundé and the National Archives in Yaoundé and Buea contain thousands of documents on the nation's policy toward Nigeria, including memos, letters, reports and pamphlets. Those documents are essential to crafting a unique narrative about the behind-the-scenes manoeuvres and the subsequent public pronouncements of the nation's policy. The current study refutes the argument that problems over the Bakassi Peninsula and other areas were an aberration in Cameroon–Nigeria's relations. It argues that Cameroon's relations with Nigeria have historically been characterised by suspicion and unease. It is a point Omolara Akinyemi has noted: 'Nigeria's relations with Cameroon have always been uneasy, difficult and tense because Cameroonians perceive Nigerians as a threat' (Akinyemi 2014: 15). The current study makes a similar argument but for different reasons. Its stance is that in a complex global environment, flexibility must be a crucial foreign policy tool. Finally, given the connections between domestic and foreign policy, the time has come for Biya to employ the same skills in flexibility that he used so effectively in foreign policy to now address his internal problems, especially the ongoing Anglophone problem.

In creating the nation's foreign policy objectives, Ahidjo relied on his authority over the state. He was authoritative and dictatorial, and he tolerated little dissent (Joseph 1978; Le Vine 2003). Jean François Bayart wrote that Ahidjo was 'the source of all power in the state' and ruled in 'an active and personal manner' (Bayart 1978: 66). Similarly, Mbu Etonga likened his government to 'an Imperial Presidency' (Etonga 1980: 133, 135). Torrent saw Ahidjo as the sole determinant of foreign policy with the authority to 'adopt, sign and enforce' (2012: 69) any and all of Cameroon's agreements, thus relegating Parliament to merely play the role of rubber stamp to his policies. He was head of armed forces and chief creator and executioner of foreign policy and of everything which came with it, including approval of treaties and 'accreditation of ambassadors and special envoys, initiating, maintaining and breaking diplomatic relations, negotiating and even ratifying international treaties' (Torrent 2012: 69).

Despite such undemocratic policies, his foreign policy actions earned him stature and respect. In 1971, for example, he was among those charged to negotiate peace in the Middle East. He helped broker peace between Senegal and Guinea; given his suspicion of Sékou Touré, he showed maturity and realism when he initiated conversations that led to the establishment of diplomatic relations between both countries. He stood up to France's Charles de Gaulle when he asked that France hand over to Cameroon complete control of Douala International Airport (Buo 1973: 33). During an official visit to the USA in March 1962, Ahidjo confided to President John F. Kennedy that he wanted more US involvement in Cameroon to help neutralise France's influence there (Memorandum to the President 1962). Moreover, Ahidjo privately promoted business relations with American companies (Amin 1992). He was evaluated as a 'shrewd and skillful politician' (Buo 1973: 32). In a similar fashion, Paul Biya, Ahidjo's successor, continued and built upon the nation's foreign policy objectives.

RESPONSE TO BRITISH SOUTHERN CAMEROONS AND BRITISH NORTHERN CAMEROONS

An early headache of Ahidjo's foreign policy with Nigeria included addressing challenges inherited from colonial rule. Annexed by Germany in 1884, Cameroon remained a German colony until 1916, when Germany was pushed out; in 1922, it was split into two unequal halves and handed to Britain and France. For reasons of administration, Britain split its section into two parts and treated them as two separate territories. While Southern Cameroons was administered by Eastern Nigeria, Northern Cameroons was placed under Northern Nigeria. The Igbos had control of Southern Cameroons and treated locals with contempt (Amaazee 1990: 283; Konings 2005: 280). As Le Vine wrote, British Southern Cameroons was 'something of a backwater for the [British] colonial office' (*Africa Report* January 1961: 5–6). During the colonial era, development policies for British Southern Cameroons came from the government in Eastern Nigeria rather than London. Goods such as tyres and other supplies were shipped to Nigeria, after which officials there determined what to send on to Cameroon.¹

In contrast to British colonial policy in its section of Cameroon, France initiated some development projects in French Cameroon. Though it was a colony, France provided educational and healthcare facilities. Many industries in French Cameroon produced food, aluminium and other products (Benjamin 1980). It was therefore not surprising that during his first visit to British Southern Cameroons, Ahidjo commented on the region's backwardness and underdevelopment. Though the territory was 'less attractive' to him (*Africa Report*, December 1961: 7), he campaigned for the reunification of Cameroon, promising that Anglophones would maintain their cultural heritage in a reunified nation (*Africa Report*, January 1961: 7–8; Nfi 2014). On 11 February 1961, British Southern Cameroons voted 233,571 to 97,471 in favour of

reunification with the Republic of Cameroon, while British Northern Cameroons voted (146,296 to 97,569) to reunify with Nigeria (Ebune 2004: 60).

The jubilation was tempered by sadness because of the vote in Northern Cameroons. While Ahidjo praised John Ngu Foncha and his 'team of architects for success' in British Southern Cameroons, he scorned Britain and Nigeria for their duplicity in Northern Cameroons. Ahidjo blamed the results in the north on 'manoeuvres ... intimidation, open persecution and obstruction of all kinds, to shameless rigging' undertaken by them (1964: 21). He strongly protested the results of the plebiscite and took the matter to the International Court of Justice. He lost. Despite these frustrations, he understood his limitations at the time and moved on, noting in his *Contribution to National Reconstruction*, 'We will see to it that our relations with Nigeria and with Great Britain should be at their best' (Ahidjo 1964: 22).

Though Cameroon and Nigeria established bilateral relations in November 1960, the loss of Northern Cameroons to Nigeria was a blow and shaped the nature of Cameroon's policy towards Nigeria. In short, relations with Nigeria began in a cloud of distrust and suspicion. A realist, Ahidjo understood there was much to be done in relations with Nigeria, so he and Nigeria's Prime Minister, Abubaker Tafawa Balewa, went to work. Topping the list were trade and boundary issues. On 11 October 1965, representatives from both countries met at Ikom, Nigeria, and established a process on how to address some of the problems. However, within two years, Nigeria was engulfed in a civil war, and those conversations were shelved.

Simultaneously, Ahidjo devoted attention to figuring out how to integrate Cameroon's Anglophone minority into the country. West Cameroon's economy was in a sorry state, and the situation was exacerbated when, two years after the plebiscite, Britain terminated the region's Commonwealth preference after 1963. Despite a trip by Ahidjo to England in hopes of convincing Britain that the Commonwealth arrangements be phased out slowly, Britain stood firm.² But Ahidjo had other plans for the region. As he had rejected Cameroon's membership in the French community, he also rejected putting his nation into the Commonwealth. He was determined to leverage support for his nation from both France and England while ensuring that neither country would dominate his country.

Whatever the thinking at the time, Ahidjo implemented policies to curtail Igbo domination in Cameroon. The perception of Igbo domination has been well covered by Victor Bong Amaazee, Anthony Ndi and others. Anti-Igbo policies included the banning of the Igbo Union and the abolition of Igbo cultural celebrations in urban centres in the country. The Igbo Day was scrapped. The Igbo Union Hall in Kumba was torn down (Konings 2005). Residence permits were introduced, and enforcement was left in the hands of the Cameroon gendarmerie, of whom the Igbos were terrified. Nigerians living in Cameroon were obligated to purchase residence permits, and though the price of a permit began at 10,000 Frs. CFA (\$20) in the 1960s,

the cost increased regularly. At a meeting in Bamusso in the Indian Division on 25 October 1975, key officials in the community who attended agreed that residence permits be enforced, requiring that 'fresh entrants from Nigeria pay their fees at the border'.³

THE SPIRIT OF 'DÉTENTE'

Those early measures did not slow down efforts to develop friendly relations. During the Ahidjo era, Cameroon and Nigeria signed several agreements, including an Agreement of Friendship and Cooperation and a Trade Agreement (1963); an Air Services Agreement (1978); a Cooperation Agreement (1972); an Agreement of Police Cooperation (1972); and a Cultural, Social and Technical Agreement (1972). A particularly significant part of Ahidjo's diplomacy was his approach to the Nigerian Civil War. The war was the first major test of the OAU resolutions of non-intervention and non-interference in another country's domestic affairs. Initially, Ahidjo was neutral. He vowed to uphold the OAU Resolution AHG/Res. 16 (1) adopted in Cairo in 1964 (Touray 2016: 63) to accept national boundaries as inherited from colonial nations.

But things soon changed. Five months into the war, Ahidjo acted on the side of Nigeria. The war began on 6 July 1967, and in November, he closed the Cameroonian border with Nigeria and granted General Yakubu 'Jack' Gowon, the head of the Nigerian state at the time, permission to use Jabane in the Bakassi Peninsula to monitor supplies entering the port of Calabar in eastern Nigeria. The Cameroonian Red Cross aided the Nigerian Red Cross. Ahidjo banned shipment of arms, medicine, foodstuffs and other vital supplies to Biafra, prompting the French Ambassador to observe that 'Ahidjo had become more Nigerian than Nigeria' (Torrent 2012: 141). It was a bloody and painful war, and Ahidjo spared no effort to blast those individuals and nations who assisted secessionist Biafra, accusing them of being responsible for all the lives lost daily in the war.

Ahidjo's position in the war put him at odds with some of his staunchest allies, especially France, which was pro-Biafra. Gabon, Ivory Coast, Tanzania and Zambia also weighed in and extended diplomatic recognition to Biafra. But he stood firm, a position that showed his willingness to go it alone even if it meant opposing long-time allies. To him, the war had implications for peace in Cameroon. Cameroon shares boundaries with Nigeria and, as in Nigeria, there were minority groups in Cameroon, some of who were demanding secession. Yet Ahidjo's actions in the war also showed his ability to navigate a complicated global reality, one which meant opposition to France, a country which provided significant economic assistance to Cameroon (Tesi 2017: 53).

After the war, Ahidjo hurried to capitalise on the new directions in Cameroon–Nigeria relations. Clearly, the war had put Cameroon–Nigeria relations on a new footing. In September 1970, Ahidjo visited Gowon in Nigeria, where both leaders re-cemented relations between their countries. Publicly,

Gowon thanked Ahidjo for helping to keep Nigeria united. Two years later, Ahidjo was awarded an honorary degree at the University of Lagos in Nigeria for his contributions to African unity and Nigeria–Cameroon relations. This period was perhaps the finest hour in Ahidjo's relations with Nigeria.

The cordial Cameroon–Nigeria relations were extended to discussions over the Bakassi Peninsula. For a long time, the Bakassi crisis had been a sore point in both nations' relations. Since reunification, Cameroon wrestled with Nigeria over the ownership of the Bakassi Peninsula. Located by the Gulf of Guinea between the Rio del Rey and Cross River State, the peninsula is roughly 826 square kilometres, with both Nigeria and Cameroon laying claim to the territory. Prior to both nations' independence and up to the late 1960s, the peninsula was dismissed as a piece of marshland, and when regarded as such, few people paid attention to it, the thinking being that the territory simply wasn't worth the headache. As Shaibu *et al.* have written, the peninsula was seen as 'a remote area inhabited by people considered to be non-consequential' (2015: 37).

But the story of the ownership of the peninsula, like other parts of Africa, is a lesson in colonial history. Bakassi was tossed from one colonial power to the other without any regard for the needs or opinion of the indigenous people (Udogu 2008; Shaibu *et al.* 2015; Okoi 2016a). The origins of the conflict over the Bakassi can be traced back to the Berlin Conference of 1884 when European nations split the continent among themselves – irrespective of how the division impacted the ethnic groups. In 1890, the British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury captured the nature of colonial arrogance when he noted, 'We have been engaged in drawing lines upon maps where no white man's feet have ever trod; we have been giving away mountains and rivers and lakes to each other, only hindered by the small impediment that we never knew exactly where the mountains and rivers and lakes were' (Akinyemi 2014: 16). Those arbitrarily drawn divisions later became the boundaries of African nations.

After the Berlin Conference, Britain and France moved quickly to establish their zones of influence on the West African coast. In 1886, they agreed that their boundary was to be from the Rio del Rey to Yola. The National Archives in Yaoundé and Buea and the Ministry of External Relations have copies of the various agreements, as well as a useful document titled 'Document on the Bakassi Peninsula Dispute', which documents the sources of the crisis from 1886 to the eve of the case submitted to the International Court of Justice. In 1893, both nations established the boundary between the British Cross River Protectorate and German Kamerun at the right riverbank of the Rio del Rey. Seven months later, in November, the boundary was extended to Lake Chad. In March 1906, another agreement established the Cameroon–Nigeria boundary from Yola to Lake Chad. In October 1909, the London Anglo-German Agreement ratified the border from Yola to the sea. On 11 March 1913, the Anglo-German Agreement between Britain and Germany, signed in London, acknowledged that the Bakassi territory was part of the German Kamerun

Protectorate. After the defeat of Germany in World War I, the region became part of the League of Nations mandate system. A Franco-British Declaration of 10 July 1919 placed the Bakassi region under British Southern Cameroons.⁴ From the end of World War II to the 1961 plebiscite, the region was part of a United Nations (UN) Trusteeship. During the 1961 plebiscite organised by the UN, the people of Bakassi voted 3756 to 2552 in favour of reunification with Cameroon.⁵

In 1962, Nigerian Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa stated in an exchange of diplomatic notes that Bakassi was Cameroonian territory (Shaibu *et al.* 2015: 33). Major General Johnson Thomas Umunnakwe Aguiyi-Ironsi's government followed Balewa's pledge to abide by Nigeria's previous international agreements. Gowon, who succeeded Aguiyi-Ironsi, also promised to abide by Nigeria's agreements entered by the previous government (Shaibu *et al.* 2015: 33). Okoi Arikpo, Nigerian Foreign Minister from 1967 to 1975, concurred, stating Bakassi was Cameroonian territory: 'It is, however, important to emphasize that the German treaty of 1913 already established that the disputed area of Bakassi was situated on Cameroonian territory although fully occupied by Nigerians.'⁶ Cameroon's claim to the Bakassi Peninsula, therefore, was well-founded and based on previous agreements and past practices.

Then, between 1970 and 1975, several initiatives were put in place to resolve the land dispute between both countries. In 1970, Nigeria and Cameroon created a mixed commission to address border problems between both countries. Several meetings took place. While delegates occasionally disagreed on details, the final decision was left up to the heads of state. For example, when the Joint Nigeria/Cameroon Frontier Commission met in Yaoundé from 26 March to 4 April 1971, delegates deliberated, disagreed and adjourned without a final decision. Even though discussions were based on the Yaoundé Declaration of 14 August 1970 and the Lagos Declaration of 23 October 1970, the parties still disagreed over interpretations. However, when Ahidjo and Gowon met, they affirmed that the international boundary line frontier between both states was the 1913 agreement between Germany and Britain.⁷ Because of the Commission's work, several declarations were made: the Yaoundé I Declaration (14 August 1970), the Yaoundé II Declaration (4 April 1971), the Lagos Declaration (21 June 1971), the Kano Declaration (1 September 1974) and the Maroua Declaration on 1 June 1975 (Lukong 2011: 18). Those conversations and agreements adjusted the boundary and recognised that Bakassi Peninsula was part of Cameroonian territory.

But something more must be said about why the Bakassi Peninsula emerged as a defining issue in Cameroon–Nigeria relations. What was at stake was more than a struggle for undeveloped marshland on the borders. For decades, residents of the peninsula went about their business without disturbance. Cameroonians and Nigerians who inhabited the territory co-existed peacefully. Neither government undertook major development projects there; the region lacked infrastructure, schools, medical facilities and other economic investment. Locals in the region lived off fishing and subsistence agriculture.

Things changed, however, when oil was discovered in the region in the 1960s. The peninsula had abundant untapped natural gas, oil and other minerals. It is resource-rich, containing as much as 10% of the world's reserves of oil and gas (Anyu 2007: 41; Shaibu *et al.* 2015: 36–7; Okoi 2016*b*: 42–3). In addition, the peninsula is of immense strategic importance (Okoi 2016*b*: 59). It is not only at the confluence where 'two great ocean currents meet, making conditions very favorable for a large variety of fish and other forms of maritime wildlife', but also a gateway to the 'economic survival' of the port of Calabar (Shaibu *et al.* 2015: 37).

RENEWED BITTERNESS AND BORDER DISPUTES

The period of goodwill was short-lived. On 29 July 1975, less than two months after the signing of the Maroua Declaration, Murtala Mohammed seized power in Nigeria while Gowon was at the OAU summit in Kampala, Uganda. Unlike previous Nigerian leaders, Mohammed rejected the terms of the Declarations made during Gowon's tenure about the Bakassi Peninsula, vowing instead to go to war rather than hand over the territory to Cameroon (Eke & Eke 2007). Once again, Cameroon–Nigerian relations were on a collision course. Mohammed's tenure in office was short-lived. He was assassinated on 13 February 1976, less than a year after taking power. His successor, General Olusegun Obasanjo, continued Mohammed's policy toward the Bakassi Peninsula.⁸ Ahidjo was livid. Accusing the Nigerian leadership of 'bad faith', he refused to negotiate with people he said could not be trusted. He dismissed as patent nonsense the arguments proffered claiming that Gowon's agreements about the Bakassi Peninsula were not ratified by Nigeria's military council.

As politicians and leadership wrestled over issues of demarcation, the Cameroon–Nigeria boundary was anything but peaceful, with theft, illegal crossings, drug dealing, threats and outright violence.⁹ The National Archives in Buea and the Ministry of External Relations in Yaoundé, Cameroon, contain thousands of papers detailing many of the crimes and the government responses to them. Crimes ranged from cow theft, smuggling, prostitution, kidnappings and counterfeiting to murder. As is typical with border disputes, many of those difficulties extended beyond the borderlands. For example, on 20 December 1973, S.N. Ngong, the Chief of Region of National Security in Buea wrote a detailed memo titled 'Catalogue of Recent Incidents at the Border', which listed crimes of scamming, illegal crossings and bribery.¹⁰ In a 1990 memo, Cameroon's Ministry of External Relations informed its Nigerian counterpart in Yaoundé that Mr Uche Ezikike of Nigerian nationality was arrested in Sangmélima in the South Region and 'charged with clandestine immigration and traffic of adolescents'.¹¹ In another memo dated 28 January 1974, Francis Achiri Ade, the Chief District Officer of Idabato in Indian Division, informed senior divisional officers of problems between 'resident fishermen of Jabane and Abana and seasonal fishermen from Nigeria who migrate into Cameroon during the crayfish season and then return to Nigeria

at the end of the season'.¹² Another memo titled 'Influx of Nigerians into Cameroon without Passport/Immigrations', contained complaints that a large number of Nigerians entered the country illegally through Lobe and Ekok; it also contained suggestions that the way to weed them out was by conducting a raid.¹³ Of course during the Ahidjo era, early morning raids were common – surprise visits by military officers to homes of suspects in order to verify whether occupants had residence permits, had paid their taxes, or had other forms of identification. A memo titled 'Activities of Ibibio people in Ekona Mbenge' accused that ethnic group of constant provocation of Cameroonians. Cameroonians, the Ibibio stated, were 'poor because they preferred Re-unification to Integration with Nigeria in the last Plebiscite'.¹⁴

More disturbing for Cameroonian officials was the nature of articles published in Nigerian newspapers, many of which they believed were designed to aggravate the problems in both countries' relations. Cameroonian officials took those articles seriously, monitored things carefully, and made regular reports to their leaders in Yaoundé. Numerous memos and letters at the archives address the subject. Cameroonian officials kept copies of those newspapers and in some cases took extracts from them, sending them on to Yaoundé. For example, in a 26 June 1975, memo titled '*Le Cameroun dans la presse nigériane*', Samuel Libock Mbei, then Cameroon's ambassador to Nigeria, complained of the half-truths and 'exaggerated' stories regularly published in Nigerian newspapers:

Depuis plusieurs mois, la presse nigériane trouve beaucoup de plaisir à accuser le Cameroun de tout, par exemple, la violation du territoire Nigerian, les brimades que nos gendarmes infligent aux nigériens au Cameroun et même dans les villages nigériens frontaliers, le harcèlement des Nigerian par des douaniers camerounais aux frontalières communes, les détentions illégales des nigériens dans des commissariats camerounais construits à la frontière Sud, l'élimination physique des trafiquants et autres hors-la-lois nigériens dès qu'ils sont arrêtés, la dissémination des maladies vénériennes au Nigeria par des filles camerounaises etc. etc. [For several months, the Nigerian press has found great pleasure in accusing Cameroon of everything, for example, the violation of Nigerian territory, the bullying by our gendarmes of Nigerians in Cameroon and even in border Nigerian villages, harassment of Nigerians by Cameroonian customs officials at common borders, illegal detentions of Nigerians in Cameroonian police stations built on the southern border, the physical elimination of traffickers and other Nigerian outlaws as soon as they are arrested, the spread of venereal diseases in Nigeria by Cameroonian girls, etc. etc.]¹⁵

Numerous copies of those fiery articles are found among documents dealing with the Bakassi crisis at the Ministry of External Relations in Yaoundé and the National Archives in Buea. Newspapers such as the *Nigerian Tide* published what officials labelled as exaggerated stories of Cameroon's actions against Nigeria. Two typical titles of those stories included 'Ahidjo imposes Crippling Tax' and 'Cameroon may kick out Nigerians'.¹⁶ The *Sunday Times* published articles under such titles as 'We need a foreign policy shake-up', making claims like this one: 'Cameroon has violated our borders many times and I think we should

not tolerate any more intrusion into our territory. We should defend this with all our might and halt further insults and aggressions.' *The Sunday Tribune* of 12 June 1990 carried an article stating that Cameroon and South Africa reached a secret defence agreement that in case of war, South Africa will join against Nigeria.¹⁷ These articles were designed to mobilise anti-Cameroonian sentiment in Nigeria and to generate opposition to Cameroon's claim of the Bakassi Peninsula. Repeatedly, Cameroon's diplomatic officials in Lagos, then Nigeria's capital, requested evidence. Repeatedly, the request was ignored.

Complaints also came from Cameroonians who travelled to Nigeria for either business purposes or education purposes. In a blunt letter to Cameroon's president through the High Commissioner in Lagos, the Cameroonian community complained about the inhumane treatment they repeatedly received from Nigerian authorities. They noted that while they enjoyed 'mutual understanding and peaceful existence with Nigerian citizens in the towns and villages', they experienced severe problems at the borders: 'Our women have often suffered such humiliating and embarrassing ordeals like having to strip themselves half naked in front of male customs officials in the name of investigating for God knows what. Sometimes we are forced to dole out huge sums of money to have their passports stamped before they enter Nigeria. We condemn entirely this perverse and indecent way of checking and call for your prompt intervention lest that relationship degenerates into a new level.'¹⁸

In January 1981, Nigerian soldiers arrested and detained Cameroonians, including a civil administrator in the region. Within a week, they were released, but tensions mounted (Lukong 2011: 2). Later that year, more conflicts resulted in the deaths of at least five Nigerians. The government in Lagos was furious, and some called for an invasion of Cameroon. But Nigeria understood the complications in a conflict with Cameroon. Even though Cameroon was not part of the French community, it was a vital part of France's post-colonial empire in the region. Its stability was important to the defence of France's interest in West and Central Africa. People in Nigeria blamed France for meddling in the Bakassi affair, arguing that its goal was to reduce the strength of Nigeria in the region (Eke & Eke 2007: 17). Several memos were written about the problem. In one of them, then Cameroon Ambassador Mbei reported to the minister of external relations, '*Les journalistes nigériens depuis un mois, viennent le rencontrer et chaque fois ils critiquent sévèrement le fait que la France ait des Accords de défense avec ses amis francophones et attaquent particulièrement ceux qui lient le Cameroun et la France, ce qui, d'après eux, rendait les Camerounais arrogants, provocateurs etc.*' ['Nigerian journalists have, for a month, come to meet to him and each time they severely criticize the fact that France has defence agreements with its francophone friends and particularly attack those who bind Cameroon and France together, which they say have made Cameroonians arrogant, provocative etc.'] It was, therefore, not surprising that Cameroon's Ministry of External Relations had direct communication with France's embassy in Lagos to monitor developments equally.¹⁹

Things got worse. During the remainder of Ahidjo's term in office, not much happened in Cameroon–Nigeria's relations. Paul Biya thus inherited the burdens and glories of the nation's foreign policy, with Nigeria turning into an early headache. In fact, Bakassi was his most immediate and serious problem with Nigeria. Unlike Ahidjo, Biya showed more patience, and based on documents at the Ministry of External Relations, he showed more determination behind the scenes to stop Nigeria's aggression in the Bakassi Peninsula. While looking for a peaceful solution with Nigeria, Biya was also talking to other nations in case he needed their help against Nigeria. He began conversations with the USA on the subject as noted in the 26 April 1984, US Central Intelligence Agency memo titled 'Cameroon: Biya's Political Challenges', stating, 'Biya may look to the United States to rein in Nigeria if longstanding border disputes flare up again, to take a more active role in Chad if security deteriorates in southern Chad, or to provide additional economic assistance, particularly if Cameroon faces a large influx of Chadian refugees'. The memo recognised Biya as a 'savvy' politician and 'a private person, who does not use oratory and the government-controlled media to its best advantage' (US CIA 1984).

Soon after Biya became president, Nigeria began to reverse previous agreements about Bakassi that had been reached with Cameroon. This attitude was followed by repeated clashes in the region, and finally in 1994, Nigeria invaded Jabane and Diamond in the Bakassi Peninsula. Later, Nigeria launched further incursions with the goal being to conquer the entire area.²⁰ For a moment, it looked as if both nations were at the precipice of an all-out shooting war. Nigeria had fired the first shot and waited for Cameroon's next move. Attempts to reach a settlement with succeeding Nigerian presidents, including General Muhammadu Buhari, General Ibrahim Badamas Babangida and General Sani Abacha, produced limited results.

On 29 March 1994, Biya took decisive action. Cameroon filed suit against Nigeria at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for its invasion of the Bakassi Peninsula and asked for payment of damages for its occupation. On 6 June 1994, Cameroon filed another suit, this one asking the court to certify the Nigeria–Cameroon boundary from Lake Chad to the Atlantic Ocean. The Biya government charged that Nigeria's actions were in violation of International Law and that Nigeria should be asked to leave the occupied areas of the Bakassi Peninsula immediately (Oduntan 2015: 221–3). Nigeria's attempts to get the case dismissed or withdrawn from the court failed. Hilaire de Prince Pokam has written that from the time Nigeria began incursion into the region, France, consistent with its security agreement with Cameroon, brought to Douala military reinforcements and logistical supplies in case of a possible attack from Nigeria. This period of military readiness, Pokam continued, lasted from February 1996 to May 2008 (Pokam 2018: 82, 91). After much legal and diplomatic wrangling, hearings and counter-hearings, motions and counter-motions, the court ruled in favour of Cameroon on 10 October 2002 (Lukong 2011; Egede & Igiehon 2018; Ekaney 2018).

BORDER CLASHES, THE INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE AND
KOFI ANNAN

During the 1980s, frequent border clashes occurred between Nigeria and Cameroon. On 16 May 1981, a Nigerian military patrol attacked a Cameroonian navy boat, and the Cameroonians fought back. In February 1987, Cameroonian villages along Lake Chad were attacked, resulting in the torture of several Cameroonians. In November 1987, the Nigerian army occupied the Cameroonian islands of Faransia, Darak 1 and Darak near Lake Chad, where they lowered the Cameroonian flag and hoisted the Nigerian flag. Other villages were also occupied. On 13 May 1989, Nigerian soldiers seized a Cameroonian fishing boat at Blangoua near Lake Chad. In April 1990, Nigerian police arrested the sub-divisional official of Kombo-Abedimo. Between April 1990 and April 1991, Nigerian soldiers repeatedly replaced the Cameroon flag with theirs at Jabane. On 24 April 1990, Nigerian authorities flew their flag there and placed a plaque reading, 'Mbo Local Government Akwa Ibom'. In July 1992, Nigerian officers disrupted plans by Cameroonian technicians to work at the Jabane area. They took the technicians' equipment back to Nigeria and left behind a plaque, this one reading, 'Welcome to Abana Clan Akpa Buyo Local Government Area Cross River State, Federal Republic of Nigeria'. In addition, they produced an administrative map on which they put the maritime boundary at Rio del Rey, thereby placing most of the Bakassi region in Nigeria. There had been repeated clashes over the island from the early 1980s to the early 1990s.²¹ Often, Nigeria's actions were predicated on notions that those attacks and take-overs were conducted to protect Nigerian lives and businesses. Between 1981 and 1994, several clashes took place, and many fatalities were recorded on both sides. A month before the ICJ's ruling on 5 September 2002, Kofi Annan, then the UN secretary-general, met Obasanjo and Biya in Paris, where they agreed to abide by the court's decision and the steps to implementation. It was also decided that international observers would monitor the withdrawal of all troops from the region after the court's decision. Those agreements were much easier to reach before the court's ruling. After the court's decision, however, the agreements didn't hold.

On 10 October 2002, the court issued its ruling, stating that the Bakassi territory belonged to Cameroon and asking Nigeria to withdraw its troops from the region. Nigeria's response to the court ruling was swift. Nigeria rejected the decision, arguing that the court failed to examine all the evidence. Insults and threats intensified. Chief Bola Ajibola, a Nigerian official on the Permanent Court of Arbitration, assured followers that Bakassi was still part of Nigeria.²² Nigerian residents in the Bakassi region vowed never to abide by the ICJ's ruling, and others threatened to secede from Nigeria if they handed over the peninsula to Cameroon. At that time, Kofi Annan met again with Cameroonian and Nigerian leaders in Geneva on 15 November 2002, to find ways to implement the court's decision. He established the Cameroon–

Nigeria Mixed Commission (CNMC) to negotiate a smooth transfer of the territory to Cameroon.²³ The commission's responsibilities included demarcation of the border between Cameroon and Nigeria; cross-border cooperation; withdrawal of troops; protection of rights of locals; efforts to promote development; and revival of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC).

Yet, as Basesam Okoi has argued, the court's decision, while legal, did not consider the cultural needs of the Bakassi residents. Over 100,000 people, Okoi continued, were displaced from their 'ancestral homeland' and had to relocate either to Nigeria or elsewhere (Okoi 2016a: 79). The United Nations, he concluded, 'failed to put in place a mechanism that would enable the Bakassi people themselves to decide their destiny following transfer of their territory to Cameroon' (Okoi 2016a: 90–1). Whatever the rights and wrongs of the court's decision, Annan worked to ensure that it was implemented peacefully.

On 12 June 2006, Annan met again with leaders of Nigeria and Cameroon at Greentree, New York, to finalise the implementation of the court's decision and established a timeline for transfer of the Bakassi Peninsula. The Greentree Agreement was witnessed by representatives from the USA, France and Britain; CNMC was to monitor the fulfilment of the implementation of the agreement. Nigeria's withdrawal of troops had to be completed by 4 August 2008. In return, Cameroon promised to protect the rights of Nigerian citizens who lived on the peninsula.

After much debate and frequent diplomatic intervention, final handover came on 14 August 2013. It was a good moment for issues dealing with borderlands. Bharat Joshi, then the British High Commissioner to Cameroon referred to the handover as a 'shining' moment in conflict resolution. The CNMC accomplished much. It had mapped out over 95% of the border, and the maritime boundary was completed in 2008. The committee also identified projects such as road construction for connecting both countries to enhance cooperation between them (UNOWAS 2019).

But problems persisted. Indigenous people denounced the agreements. The Bakassi Self-Determination Movement (BSDM) opposed the transfer of the island to Cameroon and vowed to continue with the fight. They declared the independence of the Republic of Bakassi (Wifa *et al.* 2018: 164). Factions such as the Niger Delta Defence and Security Council (NDDSC) and the Bakassi Freedom Fighters (BFF) continued with kidnappings and other violence. As attacks increased, leaders of both countries worked to avoid miscalculation. They exchanged visits and promoted trade between both nations.

On 20 May 2010, President Goodluck Ebele Azikiwe Jonathan of Nigeria and former presidents Gowon and Obasanjo were in Yaoundé for the celebration of Cameroon's 50th anniversary of independence. Less than five months later, Biya and his wife, Chantal Biya, were in Abuja to celebrate Nigeria's 50th anniversary of independence. Those visits showed much-improved Cameroon–Nigerian relations. In 2013, Goodluck Jonathan was in Yaoundé for the Summit of Heads of State and Governments on Maritime Safety and Security

in the Gulf of Guinea. Whatever the shortcomings, Biya's pragmatism and behind-the-scenes manoeuvres made the difference in the resolution of the Bakassi crisis.

IN PURSUIT OF BOKO HARAM

A particularly vexing problem for Cameroon at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century was the problem of Boko Haram. Listed as among the most devastating terrorist organisations to emerge in recent memory, Boko Haram began around 2001 in the north-eastern Nigerian city of Maiduguri, and within ten years it developed a 'transnational dimension', spreading to the neighbouring nations of Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Benin (Solomon 2015: 9). Abu Qaqa, the organisation's then-spokesperson stated, '*Notre objectif est de placer le Nigeria dans une position difficile et même le déstabiliser afin de le remplacer par la Charia*' ['Our objective is to place Nigeria in a difficult position and even destabilize it in order to replace it with Sharia'] (Mane 2016: 13). The group rejects Western civilisation, denouncing Western education as 'destructive' (Mane 2016: 16). It has received endorsement and support from other global jihadist movements. Boko Haram has bombed, maimed, attacked, kidnapped, killed and destroyed communities (Comolli 2015: 1–2; Mane 2016: 26).

In Nigeria, according to Alexander Thurston (2018), Boko Haram was the result of a 'collision between poverty, "poor governance," and economic disparities between northern and southern Nigeria' (2018: 3). In Cameroon, it developed in the Far North region of the country under similar circumstances. The Far North was the most underdeveloped part of Cameroon. It led the country on a misery index with the highest rate of illiteracy; highest unemployment; highest percentage of those living below the poverty line; and highest number of highway robberies, traffickers and petty criminals (International Crisis Group 2016: 1–2). The organisation recruited from the ranks of society's poor, marginalised and uneducated – mostly youths. It 'provided disenfranchised youths seeking a sense of identity with a paid job ... with the promise of higher social status. ... Once recruited, new fighters are re-indoctrinated and drugged with Tramol, and paid only on the success of their operations' (International Crisis Group 2016: 16). In addition, payments were made to families of recruits, and kidnapped girls were given to recruits as wives (ICG 2016: 14). Within a few years of its operations in Cameroon, the organisation, according to the International Crisis Group, 'caused 1,500 deaths and led to 155,000 displaced persons and 73,000 refugees' (ICG 2016: 2; Wassouni 2017: 174–6). The group's activities have led to the destruction of communities and as a result created a major security threat in the region.

Léon Koungou (2014) argued in his *Boko Haram: Le Cameroun à l'épreuve des menaces* that Boko Haram was the most severe challenge to the Biya presidency. When its activities began, Biya was cautious, considering it a 'domestic Nigerian issue' (Varin 2016: 102). Later he likened the organisation to

the *Maquisards*, whom Cameroon crushed in the 1960s, promising to handle them easily. But with mounting atrocities, Biya concluded that Boko Haram was a ‘global threat which required a global response’ (Bahri-Domon 2015).

The organisation soon made war on the Cameroonian leader, conducting raids in several Cameroonian towns, including Fotokol, Kolofata, Mora, Kangueleri, Makary, Dabanga and Kousseri in the Extreme North region (Mane 2016: 60; Pokam 2018: 45). The following year, 2013, Biya’s calculus changed as Boko Haram repeatedly kidnapped foreigners. On 19 February 2013, seven French citizens were kidnapped and shown paraded on a *YouTube* video with threats issued to the Biya government. That same year, the group kidnapped more people on Cameroonian soil from nations such as Canada, Italy and China. They were paid over \$3 million ransom for the release of seven kidnapped French citizens and the wife of Cameroon’s deputy prime minister (BBC News 2013; Frizell 2014; Ngamaleu 2017: 191; Kendhamer & McCain 2018: 95). Later, the organisation issued a direct threat to Biya, warning that it would make Cameroon ‘taste what has befallen Nigeria’ (Varin 2016: 107).

By 2014, Virginia Comolli noted, ‘it became clear that Boko Haram’s infiltration into Cameroon had reached a new high, requiring the deployment of extra military units’ (Comolli 2015: 89). On 2 March 2014, a Cameroonian soldier was killed as a result of a Boko Haram attack. Other attacks followed (Wassouni 2017: 174–5). A month later, in April, Boko Haram attacked a secondary school in Chibok in north-east Nigeria and kidnapped 276 girls ranging in age from 16 to 18 years. There was global outrage. John Maszka (2018: 159) reported that Boko Haram had killed 6644 people by 2014 and that the killing spree has continued.

As the violence intensified, the regional powers moved to coordinate efforts. In March 2014, representatives from Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon and Chad agreed to share intelligence and to monitor border crossing. On 17 May 2014, French President François Hollande invited leaders of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) to a summit in Paris to discuss anti-Boko Haram strategies. Also at the conference were representatives from the USA and the European Union. Boko Haram posed an imminent threat to the interests of those nations, especially France, which had thousands of troops in Mali. At the summit, Biya declared, ‘*Nous sommes ici pour déclarer la guerre à Boko Haram*’ [‘We are here to declare war against Boko Haram’] (Koungou 2014: 9), while Chadian President Idriss Déby called for ‘total war’ against the jihadist organisation. This was an important summit. All sides agreed that Boko Haram posed an imminent threat. Another summit in London on 1 June emphasised more specific details in the mission to destroy Boko Haram. There, countries of the LCBC agreed to create a regional force, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). The force’s responsibility included ‘conducting military operations, achieving coordination at an interstate level, conducting border patrols, finding abducted persons, stopping the flow of

arms, reintegrating insurgents into society and bringing those responsible for the crimes to justice' (Varin 2016: 10; Aning *et al.* 2017: 243). And yet, by 2017, Boko Haram had killed thousands and displaced 170,000 Cameroonians (International Crisis Group 2017; Zenn 2018).

For Biya, there was no turning back. His energy, time and effort were all committed. In 2014, his strategy toward Boko Haram moved from 'containment to confrontation' (Aning *et al.* 2017: 243). He brought in Cameroon's elite force, *Batallion d'Intervention Rapide* (BIR). To prevent copycats and the spread of Boko Haram tactics to other parts of his nation, he signed a terrorism bill to locate and bring to justice suspects. In his new year's message to the nation on 31 December 2014, he thanked the USA, China and Russia for their assistance in the anti-Boko Haram struggle (Biya 2014). Biya thus played an integral part in the new offensive and, along with LCBC colleagues, made the major powers realise the dire threat posed by Boko Haram.

In a twist of irony, Boko Haram's atrocities brought Cameroon and Nigeria closer. In declaration after declaration, leaders of both countries vowed to destroy the organisation. They coordinated surveillance, shared intelligence and increased patrols of the region. Buhari and Biya met repeatedly to discuss and coordinate strategies. In 2015, at a meeting in Yaoundé, the leaders rededicated themselves to the complete dissolution of Boko Haram. Thurston and others, however, have noted that solutions to the Boko Haram crisis must include development of long-term policies because economic and social neglect of those regions was at the foundation of the emergence of the organisation.

Biya has gained stature from the global community for the handling of the Boko Haram crisis. His new policies to develop the economy of the Far North have received praise. He collaborated with the USA, France and others to confront Boko Haram. The war, wrote the International Crisis Group, 'strengthened the president [Biya]. ... Many Cameroonians are satisfied with Biya's response to Boko Haram. He also gained credibility in diplomatic circles' (ICG 2017: 19). His ability to convince member countries of the MNJTF to stay focused even in times of disagreement with and suspicion of each other has been a high point in his diplomacy.

THE WAY FORWARD

Within the last half-century, Cameroon–Nigeria diplomatic relations were shaped by several factors. Both Ahidjo and Biya were flexible and pragmatic in foreign policy. Their actions established the tactics of the nation's foreign policy for generations to come. Their diplomacy was motivated by permanent interests and not permanent friends. During the Nigerian civil war, Ahidjo acted to safeguard the interest of his country. He surprised observers when he stood opposite France in such global events as the Nigerian civil war, the Arab-Israeli conflict and the application of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to the UN for membership. By keeping his country out of organisations

such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, Ahidjo showed discipline, avoiding the type of ‘entangling alliances’ that George Washington, the first president of the USA, warned of in his farewell address. Publicly, Ahidjo showed outrage at China’s support of his political enemies, *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC), and voted against the admission of that country into the UN. He reversed policy after China stopped supporting what he called radical groups in his country. And both Ahidjo and Biya engaged other major powers to become more involved in Cameroon with hopes of neutralising France’s influence in their country. Ahidjo began the process. He tap-danced with that policy, and though initially successful, the French eventually had enough of him, masterminded a plan and forced him out. Whatever the shortcomings of his tactics, he used diplomacy to safeguard the interest of his country.

Biya followed in his predecessor’s footsteps. Largely absent from public view, his tactic of diplomacy was quiet, firm and calculative. This approach forced Nigeria to step away from the brink of a war over the Bakassi Peninsula. Diplomatic successes are measured not by public showmanship but by results. His determined purpose made him reject overtures to solve the Bakassi problem within judicial systems in the continent rather than at the ICJ. Unlike Ahidjo, Biya diversified his sources of strength and friendship. When he realised that his wait-and-see approach to Boko Haram only emboldened the organisation, he mobilised his domestic and foreign policy apparatus to go after the organisation. His ingenuity and commitment, in part, convinced the major powers into recognising that Boko Haram was a global threat and therefore needed their prompt response. When he grew suspicious of France’s intentions towards his leadership and country, he turned to China, where he received enormous support. When Biya took office, Cameroon’s relations with Nigeria were tense, but both nations currently collaborate at all levels to address instability, security, piracy and trade. Yet these new friendly relations did not deter Biya from acting to protect his country. At the height of the 2015 Ebola scare in the region, Biya promptly closed the Cameroon–Nigeria border.

Of course, the world is very different from what it was when Cameroon gained independence. Increasingly, domestic and foreign policy have converged. Despite foreign policy achievements, the ongoing Anglophone problem has become Biya’s Achilles’ heel, threatening to unravel his achievements. A peaceful protest that started in 2016 in the English-speaking region of Cameroon soon turned violent, and the brutality of the war has attracted global attention. Already there have been hearings at the subcommittee level in the US Congress and in the British Parliament. The European Union has asked Biya to stop the bloodshed in his country. The US has curtailed some of its aid to the nation. Then in late 2018, Biya’s prestige was dealt a major blow when the Confederation of African Football stripped Cameroon of its hosting rights for the 2019 Africa Cup of Nations, the continent’s most prestigious sporting event.

Once known as a land of peace, Cameroon is fast becoming a pariah in the global community. The Anglophone crisis has already compromised Biya’s

position and the nation's position within the global community. It is time for him to turn inward, to invoke the tactics of pragmatism and flexibility that previously served him well in foreign policy – tactics that will serve him well in tackling the Anglophone problem. So far, the one-track military solution has not worked. The current Anglophone crisis is monumental, and the response must be equally monumental.

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