

National Interest as a Key Concept of Foreign Policy Designs: Understanding the Weaknesses of African States South of the Sahara in International Politics

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Abstract: *If we accept the centrality of National Interest as an explanatory concept of states involvement in international politics and the idea that foreign policy is designed for the interest of a country, the weak presence of these states in international politics may be explained partly from the lack of strategic thinking in the use of means to achieve ends (National Interest). Though previous literature establishes the importance of national interest in international relations, this research seeks to establish the correlation between national interest and the weak presence of these states in international politics, that is can the lack of a well-conceived national interest influence the international activities of states? This outcome, primarily caused by a lack of well nurtured national interest, is influenced by both endogenous and exogenous factors related to the nature and characteristics of these states. Therefore, analysis here will not be guided by the fact that these countries do not possess a national interest, rather it will focus on their invisibility in international politics and where they do exist conceived interest is either outdated or framed out of the context of contemporary international politics.*

Keywords: national interest, strategic thinking, end, means

INTRODUCTION

The concept of national interest has always taken and will continue to take centre stage in the foreign policy designs of sovereign and independent states. That is, the strength or weakness of a

state in international politics depends on the importance attached by such a state in the understanding and conceptualization of a national interest. However, there is no degree of certainty as to the definition of what national interest is and no consensus among statesmen, scholars and practitioners of international politics as to the nature and constitution of the national interest of a state¹.

The factors of national interest vary from nation to nation, as different criteria are used to determine what constitutes the national interests of a country. There is no fixed and independent variable as it is a term that can be occupied by various ideological positions². In short national interest is a floating signifier; it does not have a fixed and independent content³. The question of what defines the national interest of a nation has always come up when scholars try to analyse approaches to foreign policy formulation vis-a-vis national interest. Often it is determined by the interest of the dominant class who control the state's government machinery⁴. The conception of national interest therefore is a dynamic and complex process, given that this category reflects the entire social reality that involves the common needs and aspiration of all members in a given society; that is the aspiration of a nation whose intention is to occupy an important place on the world political chase board. A place that corresponds to its historical, economic, cultural, and political traditions.

Furthermore it is an objective-subjective category that encompasses imperishable as well as perishable purposes⁵ designed by the ruling elite in accordance with their immediate, medium and long term strategic options. Being the DNA of Foreign policy, it is the face a nation wears to the world and the minimal motive for a state to engage in international politics⁶. Even when states are morally obliged to act in international politics, no nation should be trusted farther than it is bound by national interest⁷. For example while international organization's regulations are instituted to check realpolitik, these institutions are invariably governed to meet the interest of powerful and influential countries⁸. This implies that even when there is a reason to defend a global common⁹, the value and interest of a country remains national in scope since the necessary energy required for its protection can only be done by that country itself. National interest therefore is simply what is good for the nation in international politics as oppose to what is good for the nation in domestic

¹Dyke, V. (1957) *International Politics*. New York: Meredith Corporation and Morgenthau, H. (1972) *politics Among Nations: the Struggle for power and peace*. New York: Alfred Knopf.

² Patrice Wangen, (23 April 2019). *Framing National Interest How Media Discourses Influence Western Policy Agendas Towards Foreign Armed Conflicts*, Thesis submitted for assessment with a view to obtaining the degree of Doctor of Political and Social Sciences of the European University Institute, pp 7 and 8

³ Laclau, Ernesto. (1996c), "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics", *In Emancipation(s)*. Verso pp. 36–46.

⁴ Alade, C.A. (1997) *Theory, Concept and Principles in the study of International Relations*. Lagos: Elmi Educational Limited.

⁵Juc, V., & Dodu-Savca, C. (2014). L'interet national - facteur determinant des priorités stratégiques de la République de Moldova. *Studii Europene*, 2, 105-121.

⁶Maurice A. East et al (eds) (1978), *Why nations act: theoretical perspectives for comparative foreign policy studies*, sage publications, Beverly Hills.

⁷There are neither permanent friends nor permanent enemies in international politics; we have permanent interests. (Lord Palmerstone)

⁸ Robert E. Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations* (1953), Chicago.

⁹Ostrom, Elinor (1990), *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University press

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politics (public interest)¹⁰. It is the core of every strategic and diplomatic thinking, its guides the formulation of a national strategy and the calculation of the power necessary to support the strategy.

Moreover, the participation of a state in international politics is a kind of respond to a specific national interest which more often than not is greatly affected by internal and external factors. Nations therefore formulate their foreign policy in a way that they take into consideration how such policies will affect their national interest. That is before a foreign policy is formulated, a state must have an idea of what her national interest should be. Consequently, nation states conceive their foreign policies and act in the international system in such a way that their national interests are not jeopardized¹¹. Considering this, it is important to note that, whatever political leaders consider to be the best for their country is never a direct reflection or stable perspectives on the economy, security, or normative duties of a state. Rather, it is a function of a highly dynamic political struggle over the interpretation of the national interest in a given situation. Its conception largely depends on historical specificities as well as on the need to constantly re-interpret it meaning in the light of contemporary events¹².

Therefore, if we accept the centrality of national interest as an explanatory concept of states involvement in international politics¹³ and the idea that foreign politics is designed for the interest of a country, the conception and realisation of most if not all state policies geared toward international relations must take into consideration the notion of national interest. Whether this policy is domestic or foreign, interest¹⁴ should be the guiding principle underlining the orientation of such policy. Any state or country that lacks adherence to this fundamental principle cannot claim its existence or even think of any long term sustainable development.

Additionally, the sluggish attitude of these African countries in the arena of international politics can be justified partly by the fact that they do not have what it takes to direct their footsteps in their foreign political adventure. The lack of real strategic discussions among political actors particularly by the national leadership who instead prefer to focus on far less appropriate discussions such as the survival of their regimes and the consolidation of their power by all means, inhibits the development of a comprehensive and effective overarching vision. Moreover, this lack of strategic foresight is not surprising if we consider their colonial heritage which has become endemic to these countries' foreign policy since independence¹⁵. These factors both internal and external coupled with the nature and characteristics of these states have greatly influenced the formulation and interpretation of a real national interests, thus affecting their effective involvement in international politics.

¹⁰Michael G. Roskin. (1994), *National Interest: From abstraction to Strategy*, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College.

¹¹ Tunde A. (1993)". Introduction to International Relations Macmillan, 1983 - 225 pages

¹² Henry S.C. and Milton C., (1988) (Eds.). *Documents of American History*, Vol. I, 10th Eds., Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, p. 174.

¹³Robert K., (1984). *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton University Press.

¹⁴ National and public interest

¹⁵ France-Afrique summit for example

The poor Categorisation of what national interest

The determination of what is a national interest is in itself a challenge. It demands the willingness of a state to uphold its morals and national values with the commitment of its blood, treasure, time and energy to achieve something specific¹⁶. Most often, the multiple variances in ideology and context (though variably understood that national tradition or cultural standards can make right in one place what is wrong in some other places) interact to create an often contentious process when attempting to identify what really can be termed or categorized as national interest. Thus while determining national interest, it is important to always know the criteria that are used in defining a nation's interest vis-a-vis its relation with other states. Some analysts believe that economic criterion should be used as the determinant of national interest¹⁷, while others believe that the predominant criterion is the ideological criterion which is often used by most nations to justify both their legitimacy and policy. Another prominent criterion is the military factor as it is generally believed and considered by most states in international relations as the natural and minimum determinant of their national interest.

Whatever criteria used by states, the type of government a nation has plays a prominent role in determining the focus of that nation's national interests. While government with liberal democratic tendencies often take into account the wishes and desires of various interest groups that wield domestic political power, governments with dictatorial leanings determine their national interest without views and inputs from democratic interest groups. In other words, poor leadership and misplaced priorities understandably makes achieving consensus regarding a comprehensive national interest difficult at best. Moreover, failure to identify consensual parameters of discussion or state the rules of the game up front most probably due to corruption and personal interest is further compounded by inability to determine what actually is of interest in these countries.

The inability in the prioritization of vital interest

Prima facie the criterion that establishes a particular intensity of interest is certainly very challenging. It is often believed that there is an irreducible core of national interest for any state at any given time. Thus the vital interest of a country generally depends on what the country in question wants to protect in international politics. When the vital interest of a country is not defined, its conception will largely depend on historical specificities as well as on the need to constantly re-interpret national interest in the light of contemporary events. African countries especially those south of the Sahara arguably lack anchored political philosophies and thoughts on which some policy references may be attached. The cradle of most if not all African Political thoughts lie in the political philosophy of the west to the extent that one can comfortably claim that African political philosophy is a tributary of western political philosophy flowing in a different channel. Consequently, it is hard for Africa especially Africa South of the Sahara to defend any form of interest without imitating the West because their thoughts and political orientation are

¹⁶ P. H. Liotta, (2004), "To Die For: National Interests and Strategic Uncertainties," in *Strategy and Force Planning*, Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, p. 114.

¹⁷ Alade, C.A. (1997) *Theory, Concept and Principles in the study of International Relations*. Lagos: Elmi Educational Limited.

obsessed by the desire to catch up with Europe. In other words, conceptualising a real national interest policy requires these countries (given their historical past) to develop their ideas outside of Europe's beaten tracks. During the cold war for example and without a clear focus or understanding of the stakes, these countries made choices on where to belong depending principally on their historical past. Without a clear and well define international relation policy some opted for none alignment, a policy which was either shaped or oriented by the current events of the world at the time. That is when a country is not ready to engage in international affairs, the interpretation of their interest and goals are guided by the perspectives of states with well-defined policies.

Vital interest therefore is that values which is so dear to a state and if necessary a state is prepared to engage her army. In other words vital interest is one which is so important to a state to the point that it is normally willing to go to war immediately or ultimately in order to safeguard that interest. Moreover the vital interest of a country is supposed to be so basic that it is often regarded as permanent. It must be that primary to the point that all other aspects of the national interest remain subordinated. Furthermore the vital character of national interest invariably has an emotional appeal to the people. Such vital interests include for all states as a minimum, the protection and preservation of their sovereignty and territorial integrity. Whatever the case, the vital aspect of national interest changes under the impact of various factors. Sometimes, a change in the values of the leadership or people brings about a change in the concept of the vital national interest. That is an interest, which may not have any intrinsic importance may become vital if it assumes symbolic value or if it involves the question of national prestige. As earlier noted each nation has its own national interest connected with the peculiarities of its history, geographical location, economic development, culture, education, leadership and time. Consequently an understanding of national interest therefore, as well as the requirements necessary for achieving the international ambitions of a state cannot be done without a link to the specific nature of a state through the prism of national consciousness.

In one of his papers, the political scientist Donald Neuchterlein¹⁸ developed a template that offered four versions of national interest depending on relative intensity. According to him Specific interests are prioritized from highest to lowest. Robert Osgood on his part placed the national survival or self-preservation at the head of the list; to him everything else would clearly depend on the achievement of this goal. He defined survival or self-preservation in terms of territorial integrity, political independence, and maintenance of fundamental governmental institutions¹⁹. Charles Beard is of the opinion that territory and commerce are fundamental aspects of national interest²⁰. Morgenthau defined vital interest as “the survival of a political unit... in its identity”²¹. However, since the Second World War, it has been noticed that the economic, psychological, and

¹⁸Donald Neuchterlein, (1983), “National Interests and National Strategy,” in Terry L. Heyns, Eds. *Understanding U.S. Strategy: A Reader*, Washington, DC: National Defense University, p. 38.

¹⁹ Robert E. Osgood, Op. Cit, footnote 4, pp.5- 6

²⁰ Charles A. Beard, Op.Cit, foot note 14 p. 26;

²¹ Hans Morgenthau, (1952) “Another Great Debate: The National Interest of the United States,” *The American Political Science Review* (Washington), December, p. 973.

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ideological aspects gained importance in the determination of what a vital national interest may be.

From this analysis, the line demarcating vital from other forms of interests is more often than not blurred. Assessing whether an issue is important or not to be considered as a national interest is a crucial step to determine the level of interest that should be attached to it. Equally crucial is determining if a concomitant commitment of the country forces is required to protect such interests. This is to evaluate the degree at which means should be employed to govern such form of interest. In reality ends are governed greatly by the degree of interest as well as by the means available to accomplish them. This reality reinforces the position of those advocating for the categorization of national interest as either being vital or not, so that the available limited resources not dedicated for vital interest should be redirected for the pursuit of other specific national objectives, for example, domestic social programs. Ultimately, the public's willingness to commit resources often depends on the degree of interpretation attached to a given national interest. It is also important to note that, the effectiveness of the political leadership to convince their constituents in one way or the other in relation to the use of limited resources in the achievement of a particular interest can be the determining factor in moving a particular interest from a vital interest to other categories or vice versa. The manner in which national leadership attaches importance in a particular issue is perhaps the single most important element in the overall determination of a vital interest²².

In all and notwithstanding other schools of thought the use of military force is unquestionably advanced to determine what a vital interest is to the state, that is where serious harm to the nation occurs unless dealt with using strong measures and the use of force. In essence the vital interest of the state is easily identified when the state has strong institutions and whose sovereignty suffers no wrong.

Weak States with Quasi Sovereignities

African states south of the Sahara are amongst the weakest states in the world. State institutions and organizations are less developed than in any other part of the world; political instability with unconstitutional change of power through military coups and plots, internal wars and similar forms of violence has been prevalent since independence. In most of these states political stability is equated to the longevity of a single individual in power while individuals tend to be stronger than state institutions. Additionally, most of the national government exercise only tenuous control over the people, institutions and activities within their territorial jurisdiction. In almost all of these countries, their populations are divided along ethnic lines with threats of political disorder stemming from such balkanizations. In some countries this has deteriorated into civil warfare²³. Some governments have periodically ceased from controlling substantial segments of their

²² Dennis M. Drew and Donald M. Snow, (2006), *Making Twenty-First Century Strategy: An Introduction to Modern National Security Processes and Problems*, Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, p.13.

²³ The 1994 genocide in Rwanda just to mention this

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country's territory and population²⁴. There have been times when Cameroon, Angola, Zaire Chad, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Sudan and Uganda ceased to be 'States' empirically; their central government lost control of important areas in their jurisdiction over struggles with rival internal factions²⁵.

These characteristics justifies Weber's *de facto* definition of statehood were concurrent monopolies cannot claim control over one territory and population and in a situation where one of the several rival factions is unable to establish permanent control over a contested territory, Weber believes it is more appropriate to talk of statelessness²⁶. With this empirical definition most African states south of the Sahara at least not all the time would not qualify as states because they cannot always claim full monopoly over their territorial jurisdiction. If the existence of a state is purely the result of empirical statehood for example, a good number of these states will simply not exist. As a matter of fact their existence most often than not in international politics is purely *de jure*, thus making their presence as a kind of legal formalism²⁷ where undue emphasis on the abstract rule of the state leads to the neglect of concrete behaviors like the pursuit of a national interest²⁸. Research have proven that most African states south of the Sahara lack these empirical characteristics of the state or when such characteristics are present they tend to be highly variable, while the juridical properties are constant²⁹. Consequently, for a state to exist in international politics and effectively pursue her national interest such a state must be a sovereign stable community with a permanent population in association with territory as well as an effective government with organized administrative and legislative organs.

Another most arching point that affects the participation of these states in international politics is the point that contemporary African politics is characterized by the opposition of most African governments to competitive party politics rather than the international society. Their preference for political monopoly and a centralize form of state has driven away hopes of nationalism, federalism and political liberties which are salient factor in the development of a real national interest. To make matters worse there is a conspicuous lack of an effective government capable of defining what a national interest maybe or whenever it is such governments are extraverted. This is coupled with the fact that the capacity of most government in Africa south of the Sahara is marred by an unstable economy, a weak domestic apparatus of power and authority. Political authority in nearly all of these states tends to be personal rather than institutional. Independent constitutional and institutional offices which lay down rules of law or define what national interest should be are substituted by the cult of personality of the rulers who cannot see beyond their personal interest. Most state offices and institutions are dominated by ambitious individuals whose ideas of collective interest (National Interest) cannot go beyond their stomachs.

²⁴ Goma in north kivu in the DRC, captured by the rebels of M23 in late 2012

²⁵ Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg, (1992), "Why Africa's weak states persist: the empirical and the juridical in statehood", *John Hopkins university press*, world politics, vol. 35, no 1, pp 1-2.

²⁶ Max Weber, (1964), *The theory of social and economic organisation*, Eds, by Talcott Parsons, New York, free press, p 156.

²⁷ Harry Eckstein, on the science of critique, in the state, *Daedalus*, vol.108, fall 1978, pp 1-20

²⁸ Brownlie, principles of public international law, 3rd ed. Oxford, clarendon press, 1979 pp 73-76

²⁹ Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg, (1992), *Op. Cit.* foot note 24, pp. 1-24

These weak apprehension of sovereignty by African states south of the Sahara can be understood from the fact that the form of sovereignty achieved by the Western developed states through a difficult historical development process, was simply transferred to the former colonial states in Africa through the recognition of their independence by the United Nations in 1950s and 60s. In other words, sovereignty in most of these African states was achieved not by the result of a gradual process of nationalization, but through an artificial legal recognition from the international society. The concept of state sovereignty it should be noted is linked to a body of values, powers and procedures based on the discourse of intimate connections between legal authority, political power and community³⁰; it is not subjected to any internal or external authority. From these analyses it should be understood that African states south of the Sahara are juridical artefacts endowed by a highly accommodating regime of international law which is an expression of a twentieth-century colonial ideology of self-determination³¹. They are a kind of quasi-state with uncompleted sovereignties that is states that possess juridical statehood but are severely deficient in empirical statehood³². Furthermore, Donald Neuchterlein is of the opinion that national interest is the perceived needs and desires of a sovereign state in relation to other sovereign states comprising the external environment³³. This definition deals with fully independent sovereign states, not with international organizations or dependent territories as well as it makes allusions to the fact that national interest is the interest of the nation-state as a whole and not that of a private group's bureaucracy or political organizations. Sovereignty as an interest therefore is that vital interest of the state that cannot be compromised and to which the state is ready to engage her military for its protection. This vital interest constitute the core of the Westphalia school of thought and clearly commands for the independence of the state over its defense, economy, prestige and ideology within and outside her sphere of influence. It does not give room for any form of dependence.

Unfortunately most African states which are consequently the debris of colonialism³⁴ were formatted at independence with the concept of nation building or self-determination; concepts that are void of the basic principles of international affairs (sovereignty). The weak presence of these states in international affairs today can only be obvious because the foundation of political independence based on self-determination and national unity inherited from colonization was a misleading concept of international legitimacy for these states. Despite the fact that these former colonies were formally leveled into constitutional categories known as sovereigns and internationally enfranchised to seemingly possess the same external right as all other sovereign states, most of them still lack real features of statehood in providing public goods for their citizens³⁵. In essence these states whose international politics is rooted in western egalitarianism are somehow international protectorates that lack established and constraining institutions. In

³⁰ Dyson, K. H. F. (1980), *The State Tradition in Western Europe: A Study of an Idea and an Institution*, ECPR Press, Colchester, UK. Pp 206-207

³¹ Robert Jackson, R. and Carl Rosberg (1992), Op. Cit foot 24

³² Roberts Jackson, (1993), *Quasi-states: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World*, Cambridge University Press, Vol. 12, P, 21

³³ Donald E Neuchterlein (Oct. 1976), "National interest and foreign policy: a conceptual framework for analysis and decision making", *British Journal of International studies*, vol.2, no 3 p 247

³⁴ Martin wright, (1979), *Power politics*, penguin books, p 61

³⁵ Roberts Jackson, (1993), Op.Cit foot note 31.

short, they were molded from the debris of colonialism and integrated into an expanding international society through independence without canvassing or actually checking whether they were ready for freedom.

Consequently, a typical African country south of the Sahara is essentially a European artifact whose jurisdiction and identity in their vast majority has remained unchanged since colonial times³⁶. They are sprawling conglomerate of diverse tribes and religions assembled pragmatically by western imperialist. Governed differently for a long period to satisfy the needs of the core and virtually devoid of a common indigenous political substance. That is African countries south of the Sahara are instances of territorial rather than cultural entities³⁷. They are empirically void of statehood and sovereignty; the salient characteristics which gives them the capacity to design their national interest and participate in international politics.

The incapacity to transform means into ends

African countries south of the Sahara are rich in terms of natural resources but are generally considered to be underdeveloped in relation to their stock of resources and the deployment of these resources. In proportion to their territories and populations, these countries typically have a smaller stock of finances and their staffs are less experienced and reliable. This situation is further exacerbated by overly ambitious plans and policies that are prepared on assumptions, since they are underdeveloped in terms of foreign policy orientation and almost all of them are far from being an instrument that galvanise foreign policy³⁸. Obviously the greatest problem of these African governments and administrations is the questionable reliability of staffs who are generally incompetent³⁹. These governments are characterised by ineffectiveness, swollen bureaucracies, administrative lethargy, selective justice as well as bribery and corruption that has become a structural fact assuming the form of economic mugging⁴⁰.

Beyond these factors, a state that claim it has the capacity to protect its national interest, must be capable to possess and control its sovereignty and destiny. It should through the different variables of power be it hard or soft⁴¹, poses some degree of control and authority over state institutions. Therefore the accumulation of natural resources or factors of power by a country, it should be noted does not necessarily make the country in question a strong nation. There is no doubt however that powerful countries in the world are countries that are endowed with a rich sub soil, a large

³⁶ Robert Robinson, (1963), "Autochthony and the transfer of power", in k Robinson and f madden(Eds), *Essays in imperial governments* presented to Margery Perham , oxford, pp249-287

³⁷For example in 1947 a leading Nigerian politician declared; Nigeria is not a nation, it is a mere geographical expression see Obafemi Awolowo,(1947), *Paths to Nigerian freedom*, London, p. 47

³⁸Jon R. Moris, (1970), "The Transferability of Western Management Concepts and Programs, An East African Perspective" in Lawrence D. Stifel, James S. Coleman, and Joseph E. Black, Eds., *Education and Training for Public Sector Management in Developing Countries*, Special Report from the Rockefeller Foundation, pp. 73-83.

³⁹Julius Nyerere, (1977), *The Arusha Declaration Ten Years After*, Dar es Salaam: Government Printer, chap. 3, "Our Mistakes and Failures," pp. 27-48.

⁴⁰Ghislain C. Kabwit, (1979) "Zaire: The Roots of the Continuing Crisis," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. xvii, No. 3, pp. 397-98.

⁴¹Joseph Nye (1990), *Bound to lead: the changing nature of American power*. New York: basic Books

population and territory. Nevertheless, the transformation of these resources and factors of power into real power requires that the said country possess the necessary financial and human capacity. That is using what you have to obtain what you want demands a well-crafted and thought out strategy which can only be done when the necessary human and financial capital is available. Unfortunately, African countries south of the Sahara are affluent in natural resources but lack the necessary capacity to transform these factor into real power resources.

Understandably, the military capacity or strength of a nation is an important element in the protection and promotion of its national interest. This refers to the ability of the armed forces to deter aggression, defend the sovereignty of the nation and the lives and properties of its citizens against the threat of physical violence directed from another state or externally inspired threat to its system of government. Alternatively, it implies the capability of a nation to enforce its policy choices by use of military force. Taking into consideration this analysis and as already mentioned, the inefficiency of African governments extends as well to the strength of her military. As in the case of civilian poor administration, military ineffectiveness stems from socio-political as well as technical-material factors; the size and firepower point of the armed forces cannot be used as a means to achieve national interest goals. Typically, military forces in African countries are weak, unprofessional, poorly equipped and small in relation to the size of the population of the state. Over the past two decades for example, the size and equipment of African armies especially those of Africa south of the Sahara has increased primarily as a source of employment and an instrument of self-preservation in power for corrupt leaders rather than as an instrument of internal and external security⁴². In practice, most African armies are less like military organizations and more like political establishments: they are infected by corruption, factionalism, and patterns of authority based not only on rank, role, or function, but also on personal and ethnic loyalties⁴³.

Furthermore, the economic capacity of these African countries is wanting. Economic capacity refers to the capability of a state to enhance the nation-states economic well-being in relation with other states. Beyond political instability, corruption, terrorist insurrections and civil wars, one of the greatest factors that affect African countries south of the Sahara effective participation in international affairs is their economic capability. The economic situations of these countries is characterised by poor planning and programs. This is further compounded by a small size of skilled work force, thus placing these African economies among the poorest and weakest in the world. Out of the 27 countries in the world currently ranked by the World Bank as low income countries, 23 are from Africa south of the Sahara. These countries have the lowest worldwide growth rate of per capita GNP some of these countries like Central African Republic and Burundi fall below 300 dollars⁴⁴. Amongst the world's poorest countries with per capita incomes below 1500 dollars, about 20 are found in Africa South of the Sahara with the lowest projected growth rates⁴⁵. In many of these countries, absolute poverty is in the increase while birth rates continue to exceed economic

⁴² Richard Booth and William Gutteridge, (1970) "The Armed Forces of African States: Introduction" *Adelphi Papers*, vol. 10, No. 67, p. 4.

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ World development indicator, world bank 2011-2020

⁴⁵ IMF, GDP per capita, April 2021

growth rates⁴⁶. To make matters worse these countries are highly dependent on foreign aid and a few primary exports for their foreign exchange earnings. In essence they are vulnerable to uncontrollable fluctuations in world commodity prices and in the case of agricultural commodities, unpredictable changes in weather conditions and harvest returns. Countries without petroleum resources have had to face dramatic increase in prices of oil imports products, leading to very poor balance of payments. In some of these countries, about 60 percent of scarce foreign exchange is used to pay for imports. Moreover, most of these countries have shortfalls in their production of food and cash crops forcing them to import food, which has resulted in a further drain of scarce foreign exchange.

With a poor industrial and manufacturing sectors and a highly dependent rate on imports, most of these African countries are caught with the problem of satisfying the cost of their demand for foreign goods and the incapacity to earn the foreign exchange for the payments of these goods especially as they are obliged to use either the Dollar or Euro in their foreign exchanges. In nearly all of these countries with inflated and consumption-oriented leadership, the rate of inflation weighs down the already overburdened and sluggish economies. It has been estimated that about 65 percent of the annual national budgets of these countries are misappropriated by the governing elite⁴⁷. In short the economy is simply oriented to support the ruling political class and hopes for any strategic planning in view of the substantial transformation of the economy have long been eroded. It is evident that economic capacity as a prerequisite for any substantial international engagement is greatly lacking in most of these states and to an extent explains the absence of these states in international politics.

Poor Strategic planning

There is an old adage that says if you do not know where you are going, then any road will get you there. Strategy in simple terms means optimizing the use of available assets in order to achieve a desired objective. In other words, a national strategy must be capable of adding value and strength to the state. Thus in any action knowing how to recognize an opportunity and how to seize it is very important and better than anything else⁴⁸. From this perspective, the weak presence of African countries south of the Sahara in the recent history of international politics is not surprising considering that these nations often have difficulties in executing coordinated and focused strategies in order to achieve real participation. If we consider that no nation should be judge beyond her interest in international politics, then no country should get involved without first of all being clear in strategy, of what they intend to achieve by their action and how they intend to conduct it⁴⁹. This is very important because in strategic planning it is vital to know what to do and what not to. Therefor the framing of a national interest should be guided not only by a rightful understanding of what is truly vital to the nation as a whole, but also by what the nation is capable of and can practically expect the government to do and not to do. Embracing everything without

⁴⁶ World bank development indicator data base

⁴⁷ Transparency international report, 2020

⁴⁸Niccolo Machiavelli, (2003), *The Art of War*, ed., trans., and with commentary by Christopher Lynch, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 158.

⁴⁹See Carl von Clausewitz, (1976), *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. and trans., Princeton University Press, p. 579.

specification in the pursuit of national interest only lead to confusion, waste, distractions, and possibly state failure as the government is asked to do things that are either beyond its capacity or worse, peripheral to the real mission of promoting the country's participation in international politics.

State participation in international politics usually is for the promotion of a series of geopolitical, economic, and other interests, it entails a well-conceived and state driven strategy based on the availability of means. The successes of any national interest strategy in this case should rely on a sound calculation and coordination of the end means⁵⁰. Understandably strategy is defined as a “complex decision making process that connects the ends sought with the ways and means of achieving those ends.”⁵¹ Strategy relates means to ends and encompasses the process by which the means, expressed as instruments of national power are employed to accomplish stated ends that are expressed as the national interests. In other words, strategy represents the blend between “the things one wants to achieve, the means at hand, and the circumstances.”⁵² In its formulation, therefore national interest and strategic planning should be seen as important aspect of state participation in international politics and not as trade-offs in the conception of foreign policy. In Africa south of the Sahara and because of poor planning, strategic considerations are often neglected and decision taken in relation to this are often based not on the realities of contemporary international stakes but on fatuous comparisons or incoherent and tendentious concepts.

Beyond this perspective one of the hardest thing in strategic thinking is not only the lack of means to achieve a design national interest but also the balance between having a strategic plan and sticking to it. Whether in the domestic or foreign policy arena, these countries have issues of consistency in actually sticking with a policy as it goes along. It is common in Africa to always have a much more minor political imperative coming along to change the priorities. In effect, national interest strategies must remain on a higher level, maintaining clear lines of sight with policy and operational strategy. Strategic planning must be broader than subjective political imperative and not subject to minor departmental silos. By its very nature, the national strategic level must also be long-term, preeminently and concerned with matters beyond the power of any individual to control. Unfortunately, the art of confusing the lower operational level with the higher level of strategy as well as failure to grasp the special subject matter of national interest is what must of these countries repeatedly are facing in the pursuit of foreign policy. It is important to note that national interest cannot simply be affirmed or published in an official gazette for it to be valid. It should not simply be believed that national interest is about determining objectives and setting out the steps by which they can be achieved. It is more than a science; it is the application of science to practical affairs; it is carrying through an originally conceived plan under a constantly shifting set of circumstances. It must be a dynamic and adaptable strategy fit with the kind of world in which we are living⁵³.

⁵⁰ See B. H. Liddell Hart, (1967) *Strategy*, London: Faber & Faber Ltd.

⁵¹ Dennis M. Drew and Donald M. Snow, (2006) *Making Twenty-First Century Strategy: An Introduction to Modern National Security Processes and Problems*, Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, p.13.

⁵² Angelo Codevilla and Paul Seabury, (2006), *War: Ends and Means*, Washington, DC: Potomac Books, Inc. p. 91.

⁵³ See Hughes Daniel, (1993), *Moltke on the art of war: selected writings*. Novato, California.

Obviously more than 60 years after independence, Africa strategic thinking is still embedded in her pre and postcolonial conception of international politics. Certainly, not in the best interests of these states to commit strategic means and resources toward the attainment of post-colonial objectives in an arena that has completely metamorphose into that of the protection of stated interests. In effect, forced to grant independence, the western powers derived other methods to replace their colonial projects. If the colonial project before then was aimed at putting under control the territory, the population and resources through *remote-control* elites, the new project after independence was to transform the former colonial spheres (the periphery) which have become independent to serve at their best the interest of the West (the Core)⁵⁴. Within the perspective of the core and periphery, analyses have proven that strategies to extricate these countries out of these comfort zones of thinking have been overlooked or at least are obscured where they exist due to the extraverted mind set of the leaders and the nature of these states⁵⁵.

Amidst these uncoordinated and unfocused strategies is perhaps the absence of the most fundamental element of strategic planning itself, which is the stated desired ends or national interest goals in the orientation and or definition of the international relation policies in these states. It is remarkably noticed across these countries that it is difficult to identify a sustainable short, medium and long term strategic policy designs oriented toward the achievement of a national interest. Here, the arguments is not on the fact that these countries are not in international politics, but on the fact that they are invisible and where they do exist the national interest is either outdated or framed out of the context of contemporary international politics. For African states to meet their expectations in international politics, their respective government policies need to promote and institutionalize a culture of strategic thinking as well as recruit a cadre of civil servants, servicemen and politicians with integrity and the ability to think critically⁵⁶.

CONCLUSION

The international action or say diplomatic action of any country in international politics *ipso facto* is guided by their national interest which is the aggregation of interests and objectives that a state seeks to achieve in her dealings and interactions with other states. It is a key element in the formulation of foreign policy as well as a means or device for analyzing fundamental objectives of the foreign policy of a state. International politics is therefore predicated on national interests. Any foreign policy that fails to reflect the country's national interest is dead in international politics. A country's national interest should serve either to justify or repudiate her actions or inactions in international politics. No nation can pretend to have a true guide in relation to what it

⁵⁴ Alain Fogue, (2018), *Cameroun, sortir le renseignement du maintien de l'ordre politique : en faire un outil stratégique*, édition du sahel, Yaoundé, P. 21 also see from the same author, *Enjeux géostratégiques et conflit Politique en Afrique noire*, harmattan, paris, 2008.

⁵⁵Bertrand Badie, (1992), *L'Etat Importé : Essai sur l'Occidentalisation de l'ordre politique*, Paris, fayard

⁵⁶ For further reading see State's Policy Planning's mission statement: <https://www.state.gov/s/p/>, accessed on Tuesday, 16th August 2022 at 20:30 PM.

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should do and what it need not to do in international politics without accepting national interest as the guiding principle⁵⁷.

However important this analysis may be, it should be noted that the weak presence of these African states in international affairs is not synonymous to the absence of foreign policy designs in these countries. Neither should it be understood as the complete or total absence of these states in international affairs. Rather it should be understood as the incapacity of these states to design a strategy that will permit them to effectively participate in international politics. Therefore, every state within the international community, irrespective of size, economic status, ideological orientation or culture has some form of goals defined as national interest.

In essence, the lack of true strategic discussion among political actors with a corrupt and extroversive mind sets particularly the national leadership who instead prefer to focus on far less appropriate discussions such as the consolidation of their power, inhibits the development of a comprehensive and effective overarching vision. This lack of strategic foresight is not surprising if we consider their colonial heritage which has become endemic to their foreign policy since independence. However, this extroversive characteristic of today's Africa south of the Sahara which has become a credible argument of their weak presence should act as an advantage rather than a disadvantage in a world characterized by cultural diversity and globalization. Consequently, for African states South of the Sahara to meet their expectations in international politics, the relationship between national interests, ends and strategic means required to construct a cohesive and effective vision for commitment should be ameliorated. That is clear and obtainable goals must be articulated by national leadership prior to any international engagement to ensure that such engagements are actually representative of appropriate and corresponding means to achieve those goals. That is to say national interest is crucial toward the development of a national vision, particularly when determining whether ones involvement in this or that international event is mandatory or not.

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