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**ANALYSING THREATS AND  
MILITARY CAPABILITIES:  
THE POWER-SECURITY APPROACH**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Threats particularly external military ones are peculiar problems faced by nation states. To combat these threats, leaders around the world expend millions of dollars of their G.N.P. in building-up their military capabilities. This phenomenon of "threats and military capabilities" have been explained in various forms. The study, is referred to as "The power security approach". It is expected that this write-up will provide a simpler way of explaining an albeit difficult and restricted aspect of strategic studies especially in Nigeria.*

**INTRODUCTION**

In analysing threats faced by nation states and the correspondent build-up of military capabilities, one need to proceed on a series of theoretical explanations from which the analysis can have a meaningful impact. The effort by states to improve their military capabilities in response to threats perceived from the activities of other states, leads to what one can refer to as "security dilemma," a situation characterized by feelings of insecurity in international relations.

Significantly, the perception of threat to a state's territorial integrity and sovereignty, coupled with the assessment of the military capabilities of nation-states, as well as the hostile intentions of perceived enemies, are factors to be considered when carrying out decisions about military power (Purnell R. 1973: 123)

Threat therefore, is an inherent feature of an international system populated by states that enjoy substantial military capabilities. Hence, in the threat environment, it is the proposed or potential damage that could be inflicted by a nation's armed forces rather than the actual defeat of an opposing military force, that provides the basis of attaining diplomatic objective.

In reality therefore, nation states in the process of ensuring their security, embark on the improvement of their military capabilities in order to defend their territorial integrity and at the same time balance up the power equilibrium in comparison to those of their nations. It is this situation that is characterized by the phrase "Threats and Military Capabilities".

Basically, the theoretical construct to be employed in this study is the power-security approach. This construct contributes immensely toward our understanding of the nature and types of threats faced by nation-states in their interaction with each other. Consequently, they also enhance our comprehension of the correspondent build-up of the military power capabilities of nation states - the aim of which is the containment of various forms of internal instability, foreign interference and external domination.

**CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION:**

**THE PERCEPTION OF THREAT BY NATION-STATES**

Perception of threat is central to the overall phenomenon of international crisis. Cohen for instance asserted that threat perception is the decisive intervening variable between event and

reaction in international crisis. Accordingly, threat may be perceived even when the supposed opponent possesses no malicious intent. On the other hand, when threat is not perceived, there can hardly be a mobilization of defensive resources. (Cohen R, 1979; 1 & 3)

Threat perception is also an indication of an impending harm, usually military or economic kind to the state. Hence, Cohen's analysis of threat as a perception of danger, a passive outcome rather than an active undertaking. In addition, threat perception can be inferred from more or less definite signals of intent or perception from some state in the environment. (Cohen R, 1979: 4 & 5) Consequently, the predisposition to perceive threat from such sources as distrust, experiences, contingency planning and personal anxiety. (Cohen R, 1979; 6)

Klauss Knorr's work on threat perception is also of great relevance to this study. Knorr in his analysis, draws attention to the actual cognitive process of threat perception. Based on his empirical studies, Knorr came to the conclusion that:

Threat perception rest on estimates of the past and present which are inference from usually fragmentary, opaque and contradictory bits of information ..... these perceptions concern the future which has unreliable information, . . . Threat perception, is a cognitive construct, a device, an hypothesis. (Knorr K. 1976; 7)

Richard Lazarus in his analysis treated threat perception as a state in which the individual anticipates a confrontation with a harmful condition of some sort. Lazarus further explained that the "appraisal of threat is not a simple perception of the elements of the situation, but a judgment, an inference in which data are assimilated to a constellation of ideas and expectations." (Lazarus R. 1966; 25)

Drawing upon our analysis so far, one can therefore say that threat perception is a complex synthesis, a product of subjective appraisal of events selectively viewed by decision-makers within a given domestic context. It therefore refers to an immediate act of recognition which involves the recognition of certain patterns of sense data that are subsumed under the concept of threat." (Cohen R. 1979; 81 - 87)

One must however point out here that the main idea of threat perception and its corollary - military capability, is the fear of powerlessness in the face of imminent attack. Thus, when a nation's security is threatened and when faced with dangers which are possibly avoidable, the state act quickly by building-up its military capabilities in order to avoid becoming powerless. (Cohen R. 1979; 134 - 37)

#### **MILITARY CAPABILITY: A COROLLARY TO THREAT PERCEPTION**

Military capability is a measure of a nation armed force. It depends among others on the manpower, equipment and logistic reach of the Army, Navy and the Air Force. The military capabilities of a nation-state significantly constitute a direct restraint on a state's ability to use force.

In modern times however, because of the important role of force in international relations, the use of the military had become more obtrusive, overt, dramatic and damaging. Consequently, states are continuously flexing their muscles and cleaning their guns before their neighbours

windows. Hence, each state becomes responsible for its own defence and so, unilaterally provides for an armed force whose task is to secure its territorial integrity. (Cohen r. 1979; 176)

Furthermore, the military capability of a nation-state performs an essential security role. John Garnet in his analysis of the subject echoed this view when he opined that "the legally sanctioned instrument of violence which nations use in relation to each other is the use of military might either as a deterrent or as an offensive strategy." (Garnet J. 1981; 3)

From the foregoing, one can again agree with Garnet that military power is a rational technique for pursuing a nation's foreign policy objectives. hence the assertion that:

In sum, military capability of a nation is often judged in terms of complete appraisal and assessment of both geographical situation and capabilities. Hence, in appraising the overall capabilities of a nation state, the following are usually taken into consideration: (Duppy T. N. 1972; 1)

- a. The ability of the state to resort to war.
- b. The ability to threaten potential enemy with the use of military action.
- c. The anticipation by states that another state may proceed to use its military forces in the event of a serious dispute.

#### **THE POWER-SECURITY APPROACH**

Fundamentally, the power-security approach is a multi-dimensional approach to the study of threats and military capabilities of nation-states, and is basically derived from the power politics theory. More important, the approach fuses the element of power politics and the concept of security.

Furthermore, the approach is premised on the view that the constant tension between states creates an atmosphere of insecurity, distrust and the possibility of violence. This situation one can argue, leads to a condition in which states engage in the struggle for power as well as ensuring their security and prosperity. (Little & Smith M. 1981; 5)

More importantly, the power-security approach is in many ways, a conservative and realistic approach to the study and analysis of world politics. Significantly, the approach focuses on political realism which in international relations implied that the sober and rational calculation of interests and power capabilities of nation - states, is a central activity which all states engage in.<sup>1</sup> (Little R. Smith M. 1981; 10)

The power-security approach therefore is deeply rooted in the nature and character of the international system. A system which is characterized by cooperation and conflict. A system where each state is concerned mainly with the pursuit of its national security and the defence of its national interest. A system of insecure community in which war is an: Ever present "contingent liability" and in which the axiom might is right applies. On the whole however, the outcome of the Politics of Power and Security, is an international system which operates according to the power hierarchy, and in which there is a continuing tension between the concerns and the activities of individual states and the demands of the system as a whole. (Little & Smith, 1981; 5 & 6)

The international system described in the preceding paragraph thus require states to acquire power (military and economic) in order to ensure their individual security. By so doing, emphasis is further placed on the importance of force - (the acquisition of the threat to use and the actual deployment of both defensive and offensive weapon systems), as a useful tool in ensuring the continued survival of the nation-state.

Having gone through the background of the power-security approach, we now proceed, to the main component of the major component of the approach namely: Power politics and the concept of

### **POWER POLITICS**

Power in international relations is the capacity of a nation to use its tangible and intangible resources in such a way as to affect the behaviour of other nation states. Power in this study however takes a somewhat military dimension. This is so because "it is the nature of the state to acquire as much power (military armaments) as it can because of the dangerous and anarchic world in which it exists." (Taylor T. (Ed.) 1984; 122)

The quest for power has therefore become a moral justification by nation states in the pursuit of their national interest. It is also used in the accumulation of both economic and particularly military power which is used to protect and secure their vital national interests. (Taylor 1984; 123) A classical example in this regard is the dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon, over the Bakassi Peninsula.

The stationing of Nigerian troops in the Bakassi Peninsula engendered questions about Nigeria's expansionist tendencies in the sub-region. Nigeria's response to the allegation however, hinges on the nation's ability to have "the necessary power" to protect her national interest and security.

The Nigerian experience given above conforms with the power-security approach which perceives of power as not only the ability of the state to maintain its own existence, but also that the state as an institution, has the responsibility to protect its citizens against internal and external dangers. It is in this foregoing that Trevor Taylor argued that "every state in any political situation has a national interest which benefits the whole rather than just part of the state. The national interest is often defined with security because the latter is viewed as a prime goal of foreign policy." (Taylor 1984; 127)

To buttress his point, Taylor argued further:

The realist (power) argument runs basically to the effect that unless a state is secure, it cannot be sure that it will survive, and if it does not survive, it will not be able to fulfil any other goals favouring its citizen's welfare. In addition, since survival is the first law of life, the first duty of nations therefore, is national security. (Taylor 1984; 127)

The explanations of power theory given above cannot be fully appreciated except one understands the assumption behind its practicability those relevant to this study also include:

- a. State have no choice but to maximize their power because of the anarchic international political arena in which they have to operate.
- b. Because the international political system has no central authority to resolve disputes as well as allocate scarce resources, it is up to each member to obtain what it can for itself and to hold on to it. The state has to rely on itself for protection against external threat.
- c. State must seek power because only with it are they able to protect themselves and advance the well-being of their citizens. It is only when a state has abundance of power that it will be well disposed to pursue other goals such as security, prosperity and peace. (Research from various text 1993 - 1998)

Although power politics theory is relevant to the study of threats and the subsequent military capability build-up by nation-states, yet, the approach has been criticized for its conceptual defects. For purpose of clarity however, some of the criticisms are hereby examined.

The Power Politics approach had been criticized as lacking a satisfactory basis for a theory. Consequently, critics argued that the theory of power maximization envisages power as a commodity of which one can have more or less. Accordingly, questions have been raised regarding the use of power. For instance, critics argued that what is powerful depends on a particular circumstance because a player chooses one of the numerous state's powers without knowing his opponent's choice. Hence the question - which of these resources yield the most power? (Taylor T. 1984; 135)

A logical outcome of the preceding argument according to the power-security critics is that the power of a state is essentially an un-quantifiable phenomenon. As such, "all that can be accounted for are those resources which like men under arms seem likely to prove useful in future specific situations". (Ibid. 136) Conclusively therefore, the critics emphasized that power politics is thus basically determinist. Determinism in the sense that the theory can be used to justify almost any policy therefore leaving an ambiguous place for voluntarism. (Ibid. 137).

In spite of the criticisms against power politics, the theory is still widely used in explaining international relations in contemporary times. It remains the best available to date and certainly, power and propositions about it constitute a central feature of International relations. The theory therefore commands a central place in the evolution of international relations thought. (Ibid. 138) For instance, power politics theory is used to explain the different distribution of military power, and so, it represents a positive attempt at minimizing the dangers attached to the existence of great destructive military capabilities.

Finally, power politics theorists do not lay claim that the theory constitutes a general theory of International relations. However, it will not be an illusion nor a figment of our imagination to conclude that, "no other general practical theory of international relations has been produced to replace the intellectual effort of political realism. (Ibid. 138)

### **THE CONCEPT OF SECURITY**

Security is a dynamic condition. It involves the relative ability of states to counter threats to their core values and interests. The security so concerned with by states, is multifarious. It might be military, economic, ideological or cultural. Accordingly, security for any state embodies a notion of order or of the conditions necessary to maintain the smooth functioning and reproduction of an existing society. (McGrew T. 1988; 101)

Positively deriving from the preceding paragraph is the notion that national security as an aspect of the Power - Security approach, has two central pillars. On the one hand, it entails the maintenance and protection of the socio-economic order in the face of internal and external threat. On the other, it entails the promotion of a preferred domestic and international order which minimize the threat to core values and interests. (Ibid 101)

National security in the context of this study therefore implies that a nation's primary responsibility is self-defence, that is, the defence of the country's territorial integrity, its people, its social and political institutions, its economic interest and all else that a predator might destroy or take away from it. (Ibid 104)

From the on-going analysis, it would thus seem a logical progression or not at least an implausible proposition to state that, since the international system places premium on states' ability to defend themselves and protect their core interests if necessary by the use of military force, then military power becomes the currency of national security. This having been said, we can then suggest that the security policy of states include the acquisition, management and deployment of military



capabilities to counter threats to core values and interests, and by so doing, promote an international order conducive to the security of nation-states.

The priority accorded to national security by states, has also generated criticisms just like other approaches employed in the analysis of international relations. In counter point to the power-security approach, there are critics who advance the argument about certain conceptional difficulties in the simple correlation between increased military power and enhanced national security. (Ibid. 101) The argument which follows this criticism is based on the following premise:

First, the scramble for security can lead to "spiral of insecurity" in which efforts to increase or improve existing military capabilities merely result in decreased security for all. Second, threats to national security come in many forms - military, economic, technological, cultural and ideological. As a result of this multidimensional aspects of security, states have sought alternative instruments and mechanisms for achieving national security. (Ibid. 100)

Taking the above criticism into consideration, obviously, our study recognises the multidimensional aspect of the national security concept. Nonetheless, it can still be contended that the military aspect of national security is a fact and not a matter of conjecture. It serves as an instrument and mechanism by which decision makers come to terms with the realities of international politics. Hence, the point must be restated that most governments have by their policies and actions defined security in military - strategic context.

From the fore-going analysis we infer that the military aspect of security is undeniable closely tied to the strength of a nation. This is evidenced in the efforts of states mustering effective military capabilities to deter enemies, defend their states, and more importantly, to mount a counter attack on a potential enemy.

Having examined the contents of national security, one can thus proceed to undertake an analysis of the linkage between national security, threats and military capabilities. In achieving this objective, one must first understand the nature and functions of the military.

The military from a strategic point of view, is the organised and consolidated armed-forces of any nation. They are the guarantors of a country's national security. Since the supreme objective of every government is self preservation, then it falls on the military to maintain a country's security in matters concerning domestic welfare and national survival. (Vagts. A. 1952; 360)

The point must also be made that since the contemporary pursuit of national and global security - "a hardware problem," implies the possession of sufficient weaponry, as well as the military organization to use that weaponry, it then follows that priority be accorded to the nation's survival. This survival one must reiterate, can only be protected and upheld by military capabilities attained through military preparedness. (Goldman R. 1982; 17)

Again, one must also stress that the quest for national security naturally imposes upon states the inescapable need to pursue security at all cost. This need is reflected in the "large investments" devoted to security by the military. In addition, the compulsive urge to pursue national security is inherent in the statement that, the state "should incorporate," according to almond, "the allocation of

resources for the production, deployment and employment of what can be called the coercive facilities which a nation uses in pursuing its interests." (Abdul-Monem a. 1984; 141 - 150) To this end not only do military capabilities act as a defence of a nation's security, they also act as deterrence against the enemy's ability to damage or deprive a nation state from carrying out its "normal" day to day activities. (Murray D. & Voilti P. Eds. 1982; 4 & 5)

As important as the notion of national security may be, the concept also has its own shortcomings. An obvious limitation on the effectiveness and universality of national security as a concept is its variegated nature. National security varies from country to country and from time to time, assuming a particular meaning in a specific historical context.

The different interpretation associated with the concept has resulted in the vagueness and ambiguous quality of the term. This is itself a reflection of the diverse forms of behaviour that are encompassed by the idea of nation security, hence, this equivocality permits every one to label any policy it favours with an attractive and deceptive name - national security. (Abdul - Monem 1984; 141)

The dubitable nature of the concept of national security is further reflected in the insecurity caused by the premium placed on security by nation-states. Generally speaking, states expend a lot of their "needed scarce resources" on defence outlays with the only limit being the defence preparations and the perceived strength of the enemy. National security in this context promotes international insecurity manifested through arms race, conflicts, competition and distrust among nation states. (Goldman R. 1982; 124)

Critics further argued that national security only existed in theory. In reality national security cannot be equated with the will of the total segment of the nation. (Ibid. 312) As such, the concept only reflects the perceptions and interests of the ruling elites of a nation at a given time and is not necessarily for the whole nation at all. Hence, "there is no one permanent all inclusive and universally valid definition of security of any one state over among period of time. (Ibid. 312)

In spite of the deficiencies and weaknesses associated with national security, the concept still ranks as the topmost concern of all nation states. Evidently, the fundamental concern of a nation at any given time is primarily that of national security which connotes self preservation and the right to live as one deems fit. Hence, there can be no absolute security for any state as long as states continue to exist in an anarchic world where only the strongest and the fittest survive. Bearing this in mind, no state can then ignore the problem that confronts it as a result of the existence of other potentially hostile states. (Hartman R. 1968; 13 - 15) consequently

The most constant policy instrumentalities of all nations are policies of national security. This is because security is the primary purpose for the common defence of any nation . . . . it entails that some degree of security is essential to the other purposes of both internal and external policy if that policy is to be effective over the long term.

(Padelford N. J. & Lincoln G. A. 1962; 192 - 235)

Based on the discussion so far, it can thus be said that states view national security as their topmost concern. This concern encompasses fear of external threats, future attack, and the desire to preserve one's interest by one's method. Hence, one cannot but agree with Arnold Wolfers

It is understandable why it should be readily assumed that a quest for security must necessarily translate itself into a quest for coercive power. In view of the fact that security is being sought against external violence . . . it seems plausible at just sight that the response should consist in an accumulation of the same kind of force for the purpose of resisting an attack or of deterring would be attacker . . . . The resort to "power of resistance," has been the rule with nations grappling with the serious threats to their (national) security. (Wolfers A. 1968; 246)

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Having examined the power-security approach, certain relevant facts emerging from such analysis must however be brought into focus. Apparently, the lack of a central authority in regulating the conduct of nations in the international system sharply bring into focus the anarchic and insecure condition in which each state must ultimately rely upon the its own strength in order to survive in a world which places premium upon the use of force.

Second, the preoccupation by nation-states with power and security concerns necessarily dictates the premium placed on the military. Hence, the importance of the military as the "Ultima-Ratio" in international relations. Realistically therefore, the threat to use military force and their occasional commitment to battle, have helped to regulate the relations among states within the international system.

Third, the pursuit of power and security serves as a means of national policy. However, for the policy to be effectively carried out, then, the following questions ought to be addressed by each nation's strategic planners: (Brook D. Ed. 1982; 200)

- a. Is it not only natural for a statesman in this situation of international anarchy and insecurity to seek security through preventing another state form becoming sufficiently strong to enforce its will upon others?
- b. Is the statesman not bound to recognize the urgency of stopping an increase in foreign power it has fairly begun?
- c. Must the statesman not then, at all times be on the alert to check such an increase whether it be by alliance of foreign powers, by conquest of additional land, or by armament?
- d. Is it not necessary to subject all potential enemies (this usually means neighbours) to the closest scrutiny in order to be able to act preventively before measures will be "too little and too late?"

Conclusively, the power-security approach demonstrates that the approach is one of the major principles of statecraft as well as a fundamental law of political life. Hence, the approach enjoins:

Every nation to endeavour to prevent other nations (or a combination of nations) from acquiring a position of political dominance for if it fails to do so, it jeopardizes its own self preservation. Hence, the power security approach signifies the will of the nation to survive and to remain independent.... (Johari J. C: 1988, 231)

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