

Historicizing Nigeria-Benin Republic Border Closure for National Development

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Abstract: *It is historical facts that for obvious reasons nations close their boundaries with either their immediate neighbors or even the entire global community. The central reason for closure has always been to protect the economy, security or cultural entity of the country. Literature on Nigeria's border closure abounds but only few works touched its significance to national development. The recent border closure by the government of Nigeria has aroused many comments from different quarters. Using secondary sources, the paper utilizes desk review of literature to establish the impact on the production and protection of locally initiated products. The research will serve as a contribution to the pool of works on national development and the significance of border closure to an emerging economy. It will provide an insight into why the recent border closure and also assist policy makers to do the needful for the Nigerian state.*

Keywords: National Boundary, border closure, economic protectionism, national interest.

ABSTRAK

Ia adalah fakta sejarah bahawa atas sebab yang jelas negara menutup sempadan mereka sama ada dengan jiran terdekat mereka atau bahkan seluruh masyarakat global. Sebab utama penutupan sentiasa adalah untuk melindungi ekonomi, keselamatan atau entiti budaya negara. Kesusasteraan mengenai penutupan sempadan Nigeria berleluasa tetapi hanya beberapa karya yang membakar kepentingannya kepada pembangunan negara. Penutupan sempadan baru-baru ini oleh kerajaan Nigeria telah membangkitkan banyak komen daripada pelbagai pihak. Menggunakan sumber sekunder, makalah itu menggunakan semakan meja kesusasteraan untuk mewujudkan kesan ke atas pengeluaran dan perlindungan produk yang dimulakan secara tempatan. Penyelidikan itu akan menjadi sumbangan kepada kumpulan kerja mengenai pembangunan negara dan kepentingan penutupan sempadan kepada ekonomi sedang pesat membangun. Ia akan memberikan gambaran tentang sebab penutupan sempadan baru-baru ini dan juga membantu penggubal dasar melakukan perkara yang perlu untuk negara Nigeria.

Kata kunci: Sempadan Negara, penutupan sempadan, perlindungan ekonomi, kepentingan negara.

Introduction

National borders are the geo-spatial limits of a country and corridors of linkage to other nations. Every nation has its boundary with its neighbors which is either or a combination of both land and water or any of the two. National boundaries are as old as the emergence of human societies. They have been among the earliest signs of identifying a people. Historically they served as limit between kingdoms, states and empires. They determine the limit of any political entity in terms of water and landmass. Boundary issues have remained topical among nations especially in the area of international relations, politics and political economy. Where borders are opened free trade takes place and the economy is stimulated. Goods, services and idea are exchanged and the economy of the involved nations is improved.

However, because of such factors as competitive trade, political and security challenges it becomes necessary for the borders between countries to be closed. Closure of border is quite a historical phenomenon. USA/Mexico, Iran/Iraq, Russia/Ukraine, Nigeria/Cameroun and Nigeria/Benin are among the many examples of nations that have closed theirs with each other at certain times.

In recent years Nigeria suffers from economic woes resulting largely from indiscriminate importation of goods and products that are at the detriment of local production and consequently national development. The blanket importation of food items like rice from other parts of the world negates the principles of encouraging local production which necessitate closer of its land border with its

neighbor the Republic of Benin. Benin Republic has become Nigeria's third estate where goods are moved into (Nigeria) it illegally and criminals also maraud.

Nigerian government is entitled to protect and defend its national interest as a sovereign state (1999 Constitution). It is by such doing that the country can economically protect itself and prove its sovereignty. Laissez-faire economists propagated and saw national interest protection (protectionism) as engine of growth (Bhatia, 2009). Therefore, for Nigeria to close its border in the interest of the nation is tantamount to protectionism. Ahearn (2009) see it as ability of countries to advance their own trade status and enhance domestic industries at the expense of others by enacting measures that artificially increase exports or limit imports.

The paper attempts to investigate the significance of the policy and its consequences on national economy. Thus, the recent border closure by the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria was as a result of the challenges posed by its neighbors especially Benin and to some extent Cameroun Republics. The paper utilizes existing literature from both print and electronic media to assemble data for constructive and critical review for the purpose of analysis and that enabled submissions for a proper arrival at findings and conclusions. It employed the historical research method for the conduct of the research interpretation. The paper is of significance as it shed light on the much talked about border closure by the Nigerian government. It illuminate on the history of border closures and its place in the development of the nation's economy. Administrators, policy makers and scholars will find the article useful as it will add to the pool of the existing works.

Conceptual clarifications

National Boundaries

National boundaries are as old as the emergence of human societies. They have been among the earliest signs of identifying a people. Historically they served as limit between kingdoms, states and empires. They determine the limit of any political entity in terms of water and landmass. Border issues therefore have always been central in a nation's life and among the sources of conflict between nations. National border is the corridor through which two or more countries are linked. It is through the established borders (land, space and water) that both human and material resources and intellectual advancements crossbreed among nations.

As noted by Andreas (2000), it is also a historically established point that borders have association with the military defence of national territory from neighboring armies or any form of external aggression. They are also recorded privileged centers of commercial activities and regulation, such as customs and excise. However, in more recent times, borders have become more important than military or economic activities but as places and facilities for the policing of a variety of actors, objects and processes whose common dynamic is their 'mobility' (Adey, 2004),

Neocleous (1999) in a recent study traced the origin of the word 'frontier' which originally refers to the 'vener' or 'front line of the army'. Since the sixteenth century it came to imply boundaries or borders of a particular place associated with state border. Thus modern idea of borders implies an unbroken line separating the territory and sovereignty of the state as it encompasses its domain. It corresponds most closely with the historical spatiality of political power which Agnew calls the 'field of forces': a geopolitical world of 'rigidly defined territorial units in which each state can gain power only at the expense of the others and each has total control over its own territory'.

Border closures as simply put by McCalla (1969) are restrictions, deliberately applied by nations seeking to achieve national objectives-agricultural or otherwise which in any way constitute protectionism. Border closure becomes imperative when we consider the economic, social, security, political and cultural implications. Nations close their borders largely because of perceived economic challenges (sabotage, smuggling and security threat), importation of illegal or unauthorized goods resulting in trade deficit. It is equally pertinent to note that security challenges have over the ages also provided good excuses for the closure of a national boundary. In a situation whereby criminals and terrorists maraud, life and property become endangered and consequently can lead to border closure. Borders are closed also because of political reasons as well as cultural factors.

In the 1980s Nigeria had torrents of migrants from the Republics of Ghana and the Cameroun, a situation that aggravated social ills in the county which led to the repatriation of those nationals to their home countries and temporary closure of the borders (Wikipedia 2021). Recently under the regime of Donald trump, America closed its border with Mexico the reason being national interest as the major driving factor (Stephanie, 2011). National interest is the driving force of every nation to protect its integrity. It is therefore a cardinal duty of every government to protect its national interest in every ramification. The realms of interest may extend from political, economic, cultural, and diplomatic to security.

Economic Protectionism, sometimes referred to as trade protectionism, is the economic policy of restricting imports from other countries through methods such as tariffs on imported goods, import quotas, and a variety of other government regulations(List,

1841). Proponents argue that protectionist policies shield the producers, businesses, and workers of the import-competing sector in the country from foreign competitors; however, they also reduce trade and adversely affect consumers in general (by raising the cost of imported goods), and harm the producers and workers in export sectors, both in the country implementing protectionist policies and in the countries protected against (Wikipedia, 2021). Historically, protectionism was associated with economic theories such as mercantilism (which focused on achieving positive trade balance and accumulating gold), and import substitution. Some scholars argued that history have no record of any key country which has ever successfully industrialized without employing certain amount of economic protection (Mehdi, 1998; Eric, 2007). In the views of Michael and Storer (2004) "historically, free trade is the exception while protectionism the rule".

National interest according to Merriam-Webster online dictionary is the interest of a nation as a whole held to be an independent entity separate from the interests of subordinate areas or groups and also of other nations or supranational groups. It have also been defined as those claims, objectives, goals, demands, interests which a nation always tries to preserve, protect, define and secure in relations to other nations. Morgenthau opined that it is the protection of physical, political and cultural identity against encroachment by other nation-states.

Security challenges are usually threats to the wellbeing and peaceful coexistence to a person, society or nation. Security challenges are evidences of either weakness or failures in the architecture of maintaining law and order in any setting, the result is therefore insecurity. Beland (2005) defined it as the condition of fear and anxiety emanating out of serious or suspected lack of protection. In this situation government was afraid that local farmers were vulnerable to the foreign importers of such commodities as rice. The Nigerian market was no longer safe for both local producers and the consumers as it was heavily flooded with different brands of rice products among other commodities.

Theoretical Underpinning

Economists and other social scientists have vastly written on why nations close their borders either on land or the sea. Some of the earliest theories include the work of Adam Smith (1776), Comparative trade advantage, local/infant industry protection theory (Denzau, 1987) which implies that should free trade be allowed, the emerging local industry will not be able to compete with the foreign counterparts hence local economy will suffer and even employment will be jeopardized. Another popular theoretical argument is the Dumping concept which holds that foreign companies dump products at very cheap prices that local production is ridiculed. Those who argue against protectionism maintained that it is an irrational policy that only brings about loss instead of gain (McGee, 1992). This article settles for the political economic theory which argues that nations necessarily need to protect themselves from external threats so as to provide favorable condition for it to strive (Arye, 2013; Hall and Nelson, 1982). Nigeria found itself in a position that its market was not only flooded with all kinds of foreign rice products but outright neglect of farming despite the natural endowments of the country and various agricultural policies of the government. Thus to save the country from continuous drain in foreign exchange and increase number of unemployment the closure of border with Benin Republic and restrictions placed on some items like rice.

Border Closure in Historical Perspective

During the classical ages trade was one of the major factors that brought nations together, the peoples of the Ancient Kingdoms and empires knew their boundaries with their neighbors and as such guard it jealously. At critical times the borders between Kingdoms were closed either due to famine, insecurity or other factors. For security reasons the border between Ancient Roman Empire and the Barbarians was not just closed but under regular check. Similarly, the Ancient Chinese build the Great Chinese Wall for the purpose of its national interest against nomadic peoples from Eurasia (Wikipedia, 2021).

Medieval Europe, for instance depict boundaries between rival countries and centers of power as largely symbolic or unstructured borderlands, 'marches' and 'controversial lands' of undefined or contested type and the real 'borders' consisted of the fortified walls that surrounded towns and cities, where the authorities could exclude undesirable or unsuited people (Wikipedia, 2021). In that era, as knowledge about the worlds continue to increase and political and economic powers expand, nations protect their economies from the more powerful ones. Mercantilism which means the intervention of government to promote the accumulation of profit (Bullions) so as to secure prosperity and self-sufficiency of the state while the contributors' also profit was the political-economic philosophy of the era became the ideological base for the economist to protect national trade/interest in the form of protectionism (Bhatia, 2009). Since the industrial revolution Britain had enacted several protectionist laws in favor of the state. Between 1815 and 1846, the United Kingdom enacted the Corn Laws which were tariffs and other commercial restrictions on imported food items especially grains (McCalla, 1969). The intension was to keep the prices of grains high in favor of the local producers and that actually was a representation of British mercantilism. The Corn Laws blocked the import of cheap grain, initially by simply forbidding importation below a set price, and later by imposing steep import duties, making it too expensive to import grain from abroad, even when food supplies were short.

At about the same period the French under Napoleon came up with the famous Continental system designed to completely starve Britain which has already been branded as “shop-keepers” nation (Gunner and Sharp, 2015). After defeating most of the neighbors including Prussia, Napoleon inaugurated the continental system by a decree in Berlin in 1806 which ordered the closure of all ports on the continent to British ships and stopped his allies from any trade with England (ibid). In 1882 a systematic attempt at border control was initiated by the United States of America against the Chinese in what was referred to as the ‘Chinese Exclusion Act’. Policy during the thirty years it lasted brought negative consequences to both the Chinese and the Americans particularly on the economy.

Border tight-fisting became only popular since the W.W.I when as a result of the crisis security checks were heightened at national boundaries which previously were irregularly maintained. Decolonization and post colonial developments in many nations has brought neighboring countries into conflicts with each other either due to economic, political or socio-cultural. Within these premises clear examples abound. The case of India, Bangladesh and Pakistani border crisis is a very popular one. India closes her border to these neighbors to check illegal immigration and illicit drug trafficking. In the same vain Iran close its border with Pakistan based on same motive. Similarly, between the United States and Mexico border issues had escalated to such a very high level that President Donald Trump of U.S threatened to build a wall between the two nations.

Lee observed that since 1979 local protectionism has been the hallmark of China’s economic reforms. He maintained that ‘local protectionism or feudal economy’ fundamentally takes the form of employing restrictive economic blockade by China’s government to prevent the outflow of scarce local raw materials and the sale of non-locally produced goods within their areas. In the 1980s protectionist policy of ‘own production, own use and own sale’ was adopted in China. The pursuance of protectionist policy in China led to many trade wars during the decade in Gansu, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Qinghai and Xinjiang in 1985. Following the protectionist policy of the state, prices of such commodities like raw wool sky rocketed by 111.5% from 44% in just the middle of same year.

In 1990 Xinjiang authorities in furtherance of the policy of protectionism limited the inflow of some forty eight (48) commodities to the region. The list of which include; Colored Television set, Bicycles, tyres, soaps, detergents, bulbs and electric batteries. The coastal regions were most hit by the waves of protectionism in Chinese society in particular the Guangdong province. A rice war broke out between her and Hunan in 1988 as a result of shortages in food grain the consequence was Guangdong had to resort to import rice from Thailand.

Reasons for Closure of Nigerian Land Borders

At many times in the history of Nigeria borders have been close to its neighbors even though most times temporarily. The reasons for such actions have always been due to security threat as in the case during the Bakassi peninsula crisis with Cameroun republic in early 2000 AD. At times economic reasons as in February 1984 to February 1986 when Nigeria Benin border was shutdown in an effort to stop smuggling (in and out) of the country such prohibited goods like petroleum, rice, cars and all other items on the prohibition list. In 1996 following disputes between Nigeria’s late head of state General Abacha and Benin’s President Soglo concerning United States military cooperation with Benin that the former saw as threat to his nation and that gave another security reason for the border closure. Similar closure also took place in 2003 following a criminal operation that led to the death of Obasanjos’ niece in the hands of the car snatcher Tijani Hamani of Niger republic (Chap, Stephen and Ahmadou, 2019).

In 2008 Nigerian government went on a heavy crackdown on car smuggling through the Benin border and lastly in view of the down turn in Nigeria’s economy in August 2019 it have to revert back to the old trade protectionism policy by closing its land borders (Ola & Fabuyi, 2020). These reasons at different occasions have been responsible for the closure of Nigeria’s borders with its neighbors. Economic and security factors have been chief behind such action as the neighboring countries take advantage of the extremely porous borders to allow illegal cross-border trade and undertake activities that are inimical to the economy and security of Nigeria. With the closure of the border and stringent trade restriction measures on rice among other commodities Benin, Cameroun and Niger became heavens for the export of the banned commodities. According to Ugwuja and Chukwukere (2021) the directive ignited reactions both within the local consumers of imported rice, and also from neighboring countries –Cameroon, Togo, and the Benin Republic. The ban immediately brought about an astronomical rise in rice smuggling and prices. Thai rice, export increased to Nigeria’s closest neighbors: Benin from 805,765 tons in 2015 to 1,811,164 tons and Cameroon from 449,297 tons to 775,175 tons respectively hence subverting the efforts of Nigerian government to develop itself (Okorie and Enwere, 2020).

Impacts of Nigeria’s border closure

Nigeria is certainly the most desired market in West Africa in particular and Africa in general this is obviously due importantly to its population. It is a historical fact that all the countries that share border with Nigeria in every dimension have been her traditional trading partners. In fact not for the convenience of colonial powers they were all part and parcel of larger pre-colonial Nigerian states

Nigeria was the trade route through which traders and their goods to and fro the forest/coastline and the desert to the outside world pass (Ekundare, 1973; Njoku, 2014)..

After the oil boom Nigeria realized that petrol money has distracted the country from self reliance into an import dependent economy which is not good for the country. Thus, in view of the economic woes protection of the local economy through such measures as trade restrictions and on certain items or goods became eminent. Therefore some items became banned from entry into Nigeria with the intension towards protecting local industries. These items range from agricultural and its allies, weapons of any kind, alcohol and spirit, automobiles, nuclear industrial waste, second hand clothes and a lot more (Export.gov, 2019). It is not surprising that virtually all the items restricted from entry to Nigeria are abundantly available in the country through our various porous borders (Okorie & Enwere, 2020).

Table 1: Nigeria’s import barriers on selected products, import tax rates (%), and import bans, 1995-2018

	1995	2001	2007	2013	2018
Beer	Banned 100		Banned Banned Banned		
Cloth and apparel	Banned 55		Banned Banned 45/Forex ban		
Vegetable oil	Banned				Banned
Poultry meat	Banned 75		Banned Banned Banned		
Rice	100	75	50	100	70
Sugar	10	40	50	60	70
Cigarettes	90	80	50	50	95
Used cars	Banned Banned Banned	banned	Banned/70		

Sources: Ugwuja, Alex Amaechi, and Chimdi Chukwukere. "Trade Protectionism and Border Closure in Nigeria: The Rice Economy in Perspective." UJAH: Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities 22, no. 1 (2021): 78-106.

The protectionist policy of Nigerian government was always undermined by her immediate neighbors as they rather constitute third party entry port for banned goods and corridors for out smuggling of Nigerian preserved products like petroleum. Thus arguing from a political economy perspective, the protectionist policy of Nigerian government at different times on trade restriction and land border closure were expressions of economic nationalism. It is central to national development because unless such measures are taken government effort will remain futile. This is very clear when one study situations that led to August 17, 2019 closure and the efforts by the Bukhari led administration on the nation’s economy first through Agriculture and specifically rice farming. Nigeria has over years been investing heavily on agriculture to ensure food security and self-reliance yet foreign producers in accord with internal compradors regularly overflow internal markets with their products. The situation does not only drain Nigeria of foreign exchange earnings, it also radically kills local initiative and participation thus rendering our lands fallow and people poorer and hungry.

The move at border closure pained not only Nigeria’s immediate neighbors but the entire ECOWAS and A. U. as they interpreted it as a violation to the principles of the regional body and African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) in 2019 (Signe & Van de Ven, 2019).. However, in line with political economy stand, Nigeria need to develop its local industries and enhance employment of its citizen which protectionist philosophy seeks to promote. The closure of our land borders actually impacted on the economy by the visible increase in local production of rice and even some other items on list. Thus In 2020, rice production in rose to 8.17 million tones. This shows an increase in rice production of Nigeria from 388,000 tons in 1971 to 8.17 million tons in 2020 growing at an average annual rate of 8.74% (Knoema. Nigeria-Rice paddy production, 2022).

In the area of employment which some scholars argued that protectionism through border closure and other forms of trade restriction create unemployment as it was mentioned of Nigeria-Benin border area. Much of what takes place across the area is illegal despite the large population involved from both countries and even other nations. Nigeria’s closure of its border rather created a situation of hike in prices of such banned goods which made Nigerians to look inward to produce for themselves such essential commodities like rice as observed above. Many people have turned to farming with most becoming richer by the day. It has been reported that agriculture alone as at the end of 2021 employ 34.66% of the nation’s population which is quite awesome for the nation (Trading economies/Nigeria, 2021). Therefore, the policy of the federal government of Nigeria on border closure for national interest was rewarding.

Another significance of the border closure by Nigeria is in the area of security. Over the years border areas have remained central to the security quagmires of Nigeria. The activities of various militia and terror groups in the country have been blamed on the supply of weapons through the unprotected land borders of country (Shedrack, 2007). Chinonso and Joseph (2019) observed that arms smuggling constitute global and national threat as it negatively impact on political, socioeconomic, and security wellbeing of the country. They went further to point out that it tarnishes the national image, encourage ethnic militarism, youth restiveness, terrorism and other related trans-border crimes. Trade in small and light weapons has become a brisk business and that is why kidnapping is rampant but above all proliferation of arms is indeed a threat to cooperate existence of the country as lives and property have become unsafe (Olayiwola, 2017).

Conclusion

National boundaries are important demarcation lines between nations that provide the entry point into such countries accepted goods and humans. Therefore, the borders are important to the development and security of any nation. Economically the commercial ability of a nation can easily be compromised if care is not properly taken as foreign and better equipped producers of goods will easily put local merchant out of business. The national boundaries again if not well manned is equally an easy corridor for the movement of arms illegally into the country thus providing killing machines used by dangerous people wallowing around.

Government closure of Nigeria-Benin border in the view of this paper is a right step as protectionism at that level of our dependence on foreign rice and other items that can easily be produced in the country were completely neglected becomes the rewarding policy. Local production of rice and even other agricultural items increased seriously, more people became employed especially into the farming sector. During the period of the closure cross-border trafficking of arms was also reduced compared to when it was lifted and the spate at which arms are now used to commit atrocities across the country.

Nigeria government must in favor of national economy and security become more proactive about what comes into the country. All over the world even the so-called developed and liberal still cross examine what pass through their boundaries. Finally, it will do Nigeria good to protect it local industries, foreign exchange and security for the stability and development of the nation.

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