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From Import Dependency to Strategic Autonomy: A Critical Appraisal of Nigeria's Defence Industrialisation (DICON) and Local Content Policy

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Abstract

For decades, the national security architecture in Nigeria has been characterized by debilitating over-reliance on foreign military equipment, a factor which has had significant implications for the nation's strategic autonomy and financial stability. It is within this context that the Defence Industries Corporation of Nigeria (DICON) was founded in 1964 to address the over-reliance on foreign equipment, since its inception, the organization has been struggling to evolve into a vibrant industrial base to address the complex security needs of the nation. This study is a critical appraisal of the defense industrialization efforts in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on the operational capabilities of DICON and the effectiveness of the Local Content Policy in the defense sector. The study identified the major hurdles, including technology, bureaucracy, and funding, which have hindered the nation's progress towards self-reliance. This study is premised on the dependency theory. The study asserts that the legislative framework, including the Local Content Policy, is critical in providing the roadmap towards self-reliance, but its implementation has been hindered by the absence of political will to drive the process, coupled with the failure to engage the private sector. The study asserts that the key to self-reliance is the paradigm shift from mere assembling to intrinsic manufacturing, which requires significant investments in research and development, coupled with strategic foreign collaborations to access technology. Overall, the study finds that defense industrialization is not only critical to the security of the nation but also to its sovereignty, given the geopolitics of the contemporary world.

Keywords: Defence Industrialisation, DICON, Strategic Autonomy, Local Content Policy, Nigeria, National Security.

Introduction

The relationship between industrial capacity and national security is one of the most studied paradigms in international relations and strategic studies. Historically, the rise of great powers has been inextricably linked to their ability to domesticate the production of the means of violence. In the modern era, defence industrialisation serves as the bedrock of strategic autonomy which is the ability of a state to make independent security decisions without the crippling fear of external sanction or

supply chain disruption (Krause, 2018). For developing nations, the transition from being mere consumers of defence technology to producers is not merely an economic ambition but a survival imperative in an increasingly volatile geopolitical landscape. Without a viable domestic defence industrial base, states remain susceptible to the manipulations of more powerful nations, a phenomenon often described as the "security dependency trap" (Ayoob, 2018).

The history of defense in Nigeria is a perfect case study on this dependence. From the year 1960, when Nigeria gained its independence, up to the present day, the nation has largely depended on the importation of defense materials to equip its armed forces. This is because, since the colonial days, the colonial powers were responsible for providing the security equipment to the colonies. Even after gaining their independence, the governments of Nigeria have largely remained dependent on the Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) of the UK, the Soviet Union, the USA, and China, as cited in Ebo (2021).

The urgency for the quest for autonomy in the defense sector by the Nigerian government is heightened by the deteriorating security situation in the nation. For the last ten years, the nation has been facing a complex security challenge, ranging from the activities of the Boko Haram sect in the Northeast, banditry, and kidnapping in the Northwest, separatist movements in the Southeast, to the activities of the Niger Delta militants in the Delta region, as cited in Onuoha (2022). These security issues have overstretched the Nigerian armed forces, exposing the critical shortage in the replenishment of their equipment, especially the difficulties experienced by foreign nations in meeting the security requirements of the nation, especially in the war against the insurgents, as cited in Baker (2018).

One turning point, which brought into sharp focus the danger of relying on foreign military hardware, was the period between 2014 and 2017. The United States, citing the Leahy Laws on human rights violations, refused to sell the Nigerian military Cobra attack helicopters to combat the Boko Haram menace in the north-east. The refusal forced the Nigerian military to procure the hardware from the black and gray markets, with the sellers charging exorbitant fees and offering poor after-sales service (Dunne & Surry, 2020). The political class has had to confront the reality of the situation and realize that the country's security can never be outsourced.

In the face of these challenges, the Nigerian Federal Government has had to re-evaluate its options and has come to realize the importance of the country's defense

industrialization and the need to ensure local content in the country's defense procurement. The linchpin in this quest for defense industrialization in the country has been the Defense Industries Corporation of Nigeria (DICON). Founded in 1964 to manufacture arms and ammunition for the Nigerian military and other defense agencies, DICON has been the country's biggest attempt at indigenization in the defense sector (Omenma, 2019). In the early years, the organization produced the basic ammunition and small arms for the Nigerian military. However, today, after sixty years of existence, the organization has failed to grow into a full-scale military-industrial complex to manufacture heavy military hardware, tanks, and surveillance equipment, among others (Azike, 2020). The organization has been accused of poor funding, technological stagnation, and the lack of a proper government policy to drive its development.

To this end, the Nigerian government, in its quest to energize the sector, has in the last few years sought to integrate DICON into the overarching Local Content Policy. This is to leverage the large economy and high technology potential to build a self-sustaining defense sector. The Local Content Policy in the Nigerian defense sector is predicated on the notion that the utilization of local materials, labour, and services in the procurement process for the defense sector will catalyze technology transfer, job creation, and lay the foundation for the local production of arms. Executive Order 5 is also predicated on this notion, where the government is pushing to ensure local content is utilized in science, engineering, and technology, thereby limiting the importation of foreign materials where local alternatives are available.

In theory, the partnership between DICON and the Local Content Policy could provide the foundation for the country to attain the coveted "Military Industrial Complex." This is because the import substitution component, coupled with the requirement for foreign firms to partner with local firms or provide local content, could provide the much-needed stimulus to the currently dormant local defense industry. For instance, the recent forays into the manufacture of armored personnel carriers and patrol boats by private sector firms such as Proforce and Innoson Vehicle Manufacturing indicate the growing desire to manufacture local content. However, the key issue is how to effectively integrate these private sector initiatives with the DICON to build the elusive "Military Industrial Complex."

Yet, the chasm between the lofty policy documents and the rhetoric, on one hand, and the stark realities on the ground, on the other, still remains wide. Indeed, the nation

remains one of the biggest importers of defense equipment, spending billions on foreign-made equipment every year, while its internal capabilities lie idle. According to the literature, the main obstacles to the implementation of the Local Content Policy in the defense sector are the prevalence of corruption, the low funding of R&D activities, and the military's bias towards foreign-made equipment over local ones (Ebo, 2021).

The problem, therefore, which this study sets out to address, is not simply the acknowledgment of the history of importation, but rather the examination of the inefficiencies which have prevented the nation from making the transition from dependence to strategic autonomy, despite the existence of DICON and the Local Content Policy. Within the context of the worsening security environment, the history of failed industrialization, and the recent policy changes, this study critically evaluates the defense industrialization process in Nigeria. It also questions whether the link between DICON and the Local Content Policy is capable of providing the much-needed strategic autonomy to the nation or whether these mechanisms are simply political rhetoric devoid of industrial content.

Literature Review

There is a consensus in the literature that the high level of foreign defense imports in Nigeria has created a strategic liability for the country. Adebajo (2020), for instance, states that the military institutions inherited by post-colonial states in Africa, including Nigeria, were geared toward external defense, thus making them incapable of coping with the new reality of internal security challenges. The structural mismatch thus forced the country to adopt foreign defense technology, which, in many instances, is usually accompanied by political strings.

According to Omenka (2018), the high level of import dependence has resulted in a "paralysis of sovereignty" in the country. He argues that, in times of crises, such as the Civil War and the recent Boko Haram uprising, the country has experienced either an outright embargo or bureaucratic delays in the procurement of defense materials. The high level of import dependence, besides draining the country's foreign exchange, has made the country vulnerable to the whims and caprices of the foreign states from which it sources its defense materials. The literature shows that without an indigenous defense industry, the country's national security has been and will continue to be in perpetual danger (Etebet, 2019).

The literature reveals a disconnect between the supposed purpose of DICON and the actual purpose. In the past, Agbu (2015) reveals that DICON was supposed to manufacture simple ordnance in its early days but was plagued by a “technological freeze” as government support for the company was not sustained. Isyaku (2021) adds to the debate with a critical tone, asserting that the company now essentially assembles semi-knock-down parts rather than producing sophisticated and complete weapon systems. The paper reveals the company does not possess cutting-edge metallurgical or engineering skills to manufacture sophisticated weapon technologies. Contributing to the debate, Danjuma (2019) also criticizes the company for its twin objectives of producing military hardware as well as other civilian products such as furniture and metal doors. He reveals that although diversification might be financially required, the focus of the company detracts from the high-tech manufacturing required for the industrialisation drive.

The defense content policy is in its infancy stage, and studies indicate that the defense local content policy in Nigeria is intended to ensure that local firms are prioritized in the procurement of non-lethal and auxiliary defense equipment (Muhammad, 2022). Ogwu (2020) asserts that for the local content policy to work, there is a need to ensure that there is an intentional framework that connects the military with the private sector and universities—a Military-Industrial-Academic Complex in practice. However, according to Nnoli (2019), which critically reviewed the policy, it is not being implemented properly. For instance, the author asserts that the Nigerian defense forces ignore the local fabricators and instead prefer to procure even simple equipment such as uniforms and boots from other countries due to quality control issues. As such, the defense sector’s local content policy is yet to ignite a value chain that is similar to that in the oil and gas industry.

Onuoha (2018), among other researchers, has also studied the defense collaborations between Nigeria and other countries such as China, Pakistan, and Russia. These collaborations have resulted in some achievements, such as the EZUGWU MRAP vehicle, but according to the author, such collaborations are merely technology transfer in paper form and not in practice. One of the issues that are constantly raised in the literature is that of merely assembling and producing the required equipment. For instance, Abdul (2020) asserts that even when the DICON is merely assembling equipment, it is not independent, and the only form of independence is in mastering the technology involved and even being able to source raw materials from within the

country. The literature indicates that without an effective National STI policy, DICON will always rely on foreign technical expatriates.

However, a recurring thread in the discourse on Nigeria's defense industrialization process has been the issue of political will. According to Ekuase (2021), the lack of a long-term defense industrial plan points to the failure of the country's political leadership. The constant changes in government have been a recipe for policy changes, which have a direct effect on the funding of DICON. In terms of economic benefits, the defense industrialization process in Nigeria has been viewed as a potential booster for the country's industrialization process. The spin-off theory of defense industrialization has been a potential boon for the country. According to the theory, defense technologies have the potential for spin-off benefits for the country. However, Audu (2019) has noted that the country has failed to tap into the potential benefits of the spin-off theory. The defense industry in Nigeria has remained in an enclave with few linkages to the broader industry.

In conclusion, the different authors in the literature have all agreed on the validity of the defense industrialization process in Nigeria. However, the current process in Nigeria has been noted to be inadequate. The DICON in Nigeria has remained under-capacitated. The Local Content Policy has remained unimplemented in the defense industry. The study aims to contribute to the field of inquiry.

Theoretical Framework

In order to fully analyze Nigeria's transition from being an importer to a nation seeking strategic autonomy, this study will use two theoretical foundations: Dependency Theory and Institutional Theory. These two theories will give a two-pronged analysis of the external pressures of the global arms market and the internal mechanisms of Nigeria's defense bureaucracy.

Dependency Theory has its roots in Latin American thought, from authors such as Andre Gunder Frank and Raúl Prebisch. However, the theory was further developed by African intellectuals such as Samir Amin. The theory simply implies the flow of resources from a less-developed "periphery," which is underdeveloped, to a more-developed "core," enriching the latter at the expense of the former (Amin, 1976). The theory further implies that the integration of the less-developed periphery into the global capitalist system will only keep them underdeveloped, rather than elevating them to a higher level of development. This is because the core of the system has the

technology and production capabilities, whereas the periphery only has the ability to consume finished products.

In this study, Dependency Theory is used as a framework for analysis in understanding Nigeria's struggle in attaining a self-reliant defense industry. Dependency Theory outlines how Nigeria (the periphery) has a structural relationship with core nations like the US, Russia, China, and Europe. Nigeria's overreliance on foreign defense equipment is not just a matter of choice but rather a reflection of a dependent economy where core nations maintain a technology gap for them to retain their political and economic superiority (Krause, 2018).

In this light, the establishment of DICON and the Local Content Policy may be seen as Nigeria's attempts at breaking free from this exploitative relationship. Dependency Theory posits that for a nation to be strategically independent in defense matters, it must first break free from core nations' control over high-tech defense equipment. Thus, in this study, Dependency Theory is used in analyzing how successful local content policies really are in helping Nigeria break free from this relationship or if they are just cosmetic measures that do not really address the core problems (Onuoha, 2022).

Where Dependency Theory discusses external forces that affect nations in their relations with core nations in the world stage, Institutional Theory is used in analyzing internal operational problems in Nigeria's defense sector. Institutional Theory is a theory that studies how social, political, and legal institutions both formal and informal that influence human behavior. This theory posits that institutions are not just efficient means for attaining set goals but rather malleable entities that are subject to "path dependence," where history significantly influences current and future decisions (Hall & Taylor, 1996).

If we use this perspective to view DICON and the Ministry of Defence, Institutional Theory can help explain the existence of bureaucratic bottlenecks in the country. It contends that the problem with defence industrialization is not merely about money and technology; it is more fundamental than that. It is embedded in the institutional culture of the Nigerian public sector, which is characterised by corruption, red tape, and risk aversion (Ebo, 2021). This theory allows us to analyze how informal institutions, like the preference for foreign goods because of kickbacks, undermine formal institutions like the Local Content Act. This study is an application of both theories because it not only examines how the country's position in the world

hierarchy limits its options but also how internal institutional problems have hindered the implementation of policies that can solve its problems in the external world.

Structural Impediments to Nigeria's Defence Industrialisation

The transformation from being solely reliant on imports to acquiring strategic autonomy in defence production has been hindered by structural barriers. This is so since Nigeria's Defence Industries Corporation (DICON) has not been able to evolve from a self-sustaining military-industrial complex over the past five decades. The main problem is that Nigeria is technologically backward. Unlike other countries in the Global South, such as Brazil and South Africa, which have used technology-sharing agreements to localize the production of armoured vehicles and aerospace technology, Nigeria is only able to manufacture basic small arms and ammunition. This is largely because there is a complete absence of a culture of R&D. The DICON has always relied on ageing technology from the 1960s and 1970s and has not been able to modernize. It is not possible to have value-added manufacturing and to reverse-engineer defence technology if there is no culture of R&D.

The biggest challenge facing the public sector in Nigeria is the bureaucratic red tape, which makes all processes very slow. In the case of defense procurement, the process is slowed down by inefficiency, corruption, and a lack of transparency. The fact that the procurement process is centralized, with the majority of the process handled by the Ministry of Defense, without adequate technical input from DICON, has created a situation in which there is a growing disconnect between the military's needs and the capabilities of the local industries (Ebo, 2021). The civil military bureaucracy's tendency to seek short-term gains by purchasing foreign equipment, as opposed to building domestic capabilities in the long term, has also been a challenge in the procurement process. The tendency to purchase foreign equipment is driven by the desire to have the latest and greatest in military technology, as well as the bribes and kickbacks associated with the procurement of these foreign arms, as opposed to the much lower bribes and kickbacks associated with domestic procurement (Azike, 2020). DICON is often marginalized in the procurement process and serves as a maintenance and repair center.

However, the biggest challenge, yet again, has been the issue of funding. The development of Nigeria's defense industry requires huge capital, which will take a long time before it starts bearing fruit. However, the allocation to DICON from the defense budget has been small and inconsistent, usually less than 1% of the total

budget (Dunne & Surry, 2020). The inconsistent funding of DICON has made it difficult for the organization to plan for the future. In times of economic recession, the budget for the production of defense hardware in the country has always been the first to be cut. The inconsistent funding of DICON shows a lack of seriousness in the government's intention to industrialize the country, thus leading DICON to rely on occasional government funding. The inconsistent funding has led to a 'poverty trap,' where a lack of funding has led to a situation where the organization can only operate at a low level of productivity (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2018).

The Local Content Policy: A Roadmap Undermined by Implementation Gaps

Nigeria's Local Content Policy was designed to be a comprehensive, legal framework for the reduction of dependence on imported products. The policy aims to secure the use of local materials, labor, and services in defense contracts. This would provide a protected environment for emerging sectors in Nigeria. In turn, this would fuel economic growth and self-sufficiency. The Nigerian Defence Industry Policy (NDIP) and Executive Order 5 provide the legal framework for the enforcement of the policy. The laws provide the legal framework for the enforcement of the policy. They provide a pathway for self-sufficiency in defense production, modeled after the successful templates of the oil and gas industry. If fully implemented, the laws would require the military to buy from local companies. This would provide the market support necessary for DICON and other defense companies to realize economies of scale.

However, the effectiveness of the laws has been undermined by the lack of political will. The government has been vocal about its intention to "buy Nigerian," but its actions have been different. The government has consistently shown a lack of will in the enforcement of the policy. The government, in addition to the top brass in the military, has consistently found ways to evade the enforcement of the Local Content Policy. The government has consistently cited national security situations to evade the policy. In addition, the government has consistently shown a lack of will in the enforcement of the policy. The government has consistently cited the superiority of foreign-made arms to evade the policy. The lack of will has undermined the effectiveness of the Local Content Policy. In addition, the government has consistently shown a lack of will in the enforcement of the policy. The government has consistently cited the superiority of foreign-made arms to evade the policy. The lack of will has undermined the effectiveness of the Local Content Policy. The

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However, the biggest constraint in the quest for strategic autonomy in Nigeria has been the small role played by the private sector in the defense domain. In the defense sectors of advanced economies such as the US or Israel, the private defense industry is the driving force for innovation, with the government being the main customer or regulator. However, in the Nigerian defense industry, the private defense industry is in an embryonic state and has been largely ignored. For instance, the Nigerian private defense companies, such as Proforce and Innoson Vehicle Manufacturing, have been able to manufacture armored personnel carriers and patrol boats. However, the private defense industry in Nigeria has remained at the periphery of the defense domain (Ebo, 2021). The government has failed to create a symbiotic environment in which the ingenuity of the private defense industry can feed into the defense of the nation. The private defense industry in Nigeria has been characterized by high barriers to entry, where capital access and government patronage have been difficult. In summary, the Local Content Policy in Nigeria has laudable objectives, but its implementation has been shallow. The structural barriers in the defense industry in Nigeria, such as stagnation, bureaucracy, and funding, have been a hostile environment for the defense industry. However, without a new-found political will and the integration of the private defense industry to bridge the gap between policy and implementation, the quest for strategic autonomy in Nigeria will remain a mirage.

Conclusion

This study is a no-holds-barred examination of the Nigerian quest for a defense industrial base, with a focus on how well the Defence Industries Corporation of Nigeria (DICON) is performing and the effectiveness of the Local Content Policy. The findings show that, on one hand, the government understands the importance of strategic autonomy as a requirement for its own security, but on the other, the journey to this destination is blocked by serious structural impediments. The high level of import dependency is not just about the government's spending habits; it is a structural

vulnerability made worse by the slow pace of technology, bureaucratic delays, and funding inconsistencies. When assessing the performance of DICON, it becomes apparent that the company has yet to evolve beyond the manufacture of basic ammunition and, as such, is woefully unprepared to meet the more complex demands of modern internal security. In the case of the Local Content Policy, the existence of a very solid body of legislation in the direction of self-reliance has had very little impact. The disconnect between the intent of the legislation and its actual implementation can largely be attributed to the lack of political will and the failure to incorporate the dynamic private sector into the defense value chain. In conclusion, the quest for strategic autonomy remains an unattainable dream, with the country forced to continue relying on external actors to meet its critical security needs. The evidence is very clear: the passing of legislation will not in itself trigger the defense industrialization process. A new paradigm shift in the manner in which research and development are funded and in the manner in which the defense sector is organized, with the active participation of the private sector, is required to break the cycle of dependency. A new defense industrial base requires more than words; it requires a complete overhaul of the military-industrial complex.

Recommendations

Based on the hindrances to Nigeria's defense industrialization, the following recommendations can be proffered:

1. To remedy the problem of inconsistent funding, the Federal Government of Nigeria can establish a Defense Industry Trust Fund that is made up of a percentage of the country's defense budget allocation, duties on imported arms and ammunition, and contributions from the oil and gas industry.
2. DICON can be transformed from an ordinary government parastatal to a limited liability company under the Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA). This will empower the organization to be able to manage itself in such a way that it can quickly make decisions like any other company.
3. The government of Nigeria can move from rhetoric to enforcement of the laws in place. The National Assembly can strengthen the Local Content Act to impose stern penalties on procurement officers in the defense industry that ignore local content in favor of foreign products without any cogent reason to do so.
4. There is an urgent need to bridge the gap that exists between the formal defense industry and private industry. A Public-Private Partnership can be established to

enable local companies like Proforce and Innoson to compete favorably with foreign companies for defense contracts in Nigeria.

5. Nigeria can shift from assembly to manufacturing in the defense industry. A large percentage of the defense budget can be allocated to research and development to develop indigenous defense technologies that can be tailored to the country's security situation.

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