



Consolidating the Regional Diplomacy of Côte d'Ivoire

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop an evidence-based and coherent foreign policy strategy through the iteration of a 'white paper' process and strengthen the country's diplomatic oversight mechanisms.
- Institute a regular (eg, biannual) conference of ambassadors to evaluate and redirect, if necessary, the country's diplomatic activities.
- Accelerate the implementation of SSR before the presidential elections in 2015.
- Improve the training, development and specialisation of diplomats through an inclusive process in order to enhance national reconciliation.
- Encourage more frequent policy engagement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with local experts such as academia, business and civil society organisations, as well as with other ministries.

ABSTRACT

On every continent, regionalisation or even communitarisation² of foreign relations has become one of the preferred policy approaches by states and other actors in search of synergies that add value to public policies conceptualised and implemented at a geographical group or sub-group level. Côte d'Ivoire is not immune to this trend. After the glory days of its diplomacy under Félix Houphouët-Boigny and the rather more difficult period under Henri Konan Bédié, Robert Gueï and Laurent Gbago (1993–2010), the country has re-entered the international scene. While the relaunch of the regional diplomacy of Côte d'Ivoire is already showing some gains, challenges loom for the 2020 horizon when the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) aims to achieve full economic and political union.

INTRODUCTION

Côte d'Ivoire has gone through two decades of political instability and conflict, leading to the near collapse of many of its government institutions. President Alassane Ouattara's arrival on the political scene in 2011 heralded a renewal of Côte d'Ivoire's foreign policy. The president's determined focus on the region and the increased diplomatic activity associated with his term have ensured that the country has regained its regional leadership position. His approach has been two-pronged: (i) focusing on regional peace and security issues, without (ii) neglecting the pursuit of the country's economic development objectives through active regional diplomacy.

DECISIVE GAINS

It is difficult to qualify, or even quantify, diplomatic gains³ in foreign policy because the variability and uncertainty that characterise relations in the international community often render the positions and advantages gained by states precarious. The 'anarchic' nature of the international arena means that the definition of real diplomatic gains needs to be re-evaluated constantly.

For this reason, a diplomatic gain or advantage is considered a product or a sum of experiences upon which the state can capitalise in pursuit of its interests.

The gains and comparative advantages in Côte d'Ivoire's regional diplomacy can be divided into three broad categories: (i) historical, (ii) political and (iii) economic.

In terms of historical gains, Houphouët-Boigny's legacy remains the main asset, even though it brought with it both advantages and disadvantages. Over the course of several decades Côte d'Ivoire's foreign policy and, specifically, its African policy, was built on the image and personification of the 'wise old sage' Houphouët-Boigny, and the ideals and the positions he defended continue to shape Ivorian diplomacy. His symbolic legacy gives Côte d'Ivoire a certain weight internationally, and for this reason he remains a point of reference in the political imagination of the nation. Moreover, under Houphouët-Boigny, Côte d'Ivoire was an economic powerhouse and 'melting pot' where immigrants from the sub-region coexisted peacefully.

Ouattara, because of his knowledge of global issues and his network of contacts, has brought valuable assets to the political sphere. He previously served as the Governor of the Central Bank of West African States, Prime Minister of Côte d'Ivoire and Director of the Africa Division of the International Monetary Fund. It is therefore no surprise that he emphasises economic issues in the country's approach towards the region.

Finally, and related to the above, in the economic sphere Côte d'Ivoire can claim to play an important role at a regional level, in terms of its role both in the West African Monetary Union (Union économique et monétaire ouest-africaine, or UEMOA) and in ECOWAS. This is because its economic potential can be translated into political influence, which has not always been the case in the country's recent history. In fact, compared with Senegal, Ghana and even Burkina Faso, the political role played by Côte d'Ivoire in West Africa over the past two decades has been modest relative to its economic weight.

MAJOR CHALLENGES

Despite Côte d'Ivoire's modest 'gains' in the region, the country continues to face numerous challenges in terms of improving the 'yield' of its regional diplomacy.

These challenges fall into two categories. The first is to contribute towards the realisation of regional and internal stability favourable to the implementation of the Ivorian government's economic diplomacy.⁴ In Côte d'Ivoire, as elsewhere, external policy, notably its regional approach, has frequently influenced internal policymaking, just as internal policies often dictated the approach adopted in terms of its external engagement.

With regard to recent policy developments in Côte d'Ivoire, it is hoped that the adoption in 2012/13 of the Urban and Rural Property Code and the Nationality Code will contribute to greater regulation of property and citizenship, with significant associated implications for the country's stability. The approach to both these matters in terms of their application and interpretation under past dispensations has had a considerable impact on the geopolitical status and stability of the country. Other important factors that need attention to ensure the credibility of Côte d'Ivoire in the regional and international arena are the ongoing question of achieving national reconciliation, ensuring well-organised elections in 2015, and the better management of migration. Then there is the much needed security sector reform (SSR), which would enable the country to draw on armed forces that are capable and capacitated to play a regional role on a par with the country's economic capacity.

The second challenge is to mobilise, strengthen and harness the internal capacities of the country to bolster and add value to its regional diplomacy. This can be achieved by promoting inter-ministerial synergies and collegiality, carving out a more active role for Parliament in foreign policy, creating special interest groups, engaging civil society organisations and strengthening local media networks. It is also important to enhance the capacity of Côte d'Ivoire's diplomatic corps to focus on its regional economic concerns through

specialisation. This can be achieved through the development of a coherent career path system that supports the acquisition of relevant skills and experience. Evidently, the corrosive effects of war and instability, which lasted for more than a decade, severely eroded the country's capacity to drive active regional diplomacy.

Creating an enabling framework, accompanied by strong institutions, is without doubt the key test facing Côte d'Ivoire in its quest to regain its place as the key interlocutor in francophone Africa's diplomacy. This is particularly relevant in how it engages with the region's premier regional economic community.

2020 HORIZONS FOR CÔTE D'IVOIRE AND ECOWAS

Côte d'Ivoire's mid-term political and overriding economic goal is to qualify as an emerging economy by 2020. While there are no fixed criteria to classify countries as emerging economies, certain characteristics are essential: an emerging economy should experience sustained and strong economic growth (generally greater than 5% over the long term); it should have a large enough population to constitute a considerable domestic market; its socio-economic structure should be characterised by the emergence of a middle class with sufficient buying power for goods and services; and it should have a diversified economy and, above all, political stability. Côte d'Ivoire does not currently enjoy this status.

Nonetheless, Côte d'Ivoire shares ECOWAS's ambition to transform West Africa into a truly integrated and prosperous region. This could be achieved by developing regional community policies that support an inclusive and participatory approach to peace and security as well as the promotion of democracy and good governance, while pursuing the promotion of intra- and extra-regional trade, the growth of competitive industries, the diversification of the economy, and the improved investment attractiveness of the region and its individual members.

Taking due consideration of past regional successes and failures, ECOWAS has developed

a strategic plan based on the above objectives, alongside a communitarian development plan with a vision for the 2020 horizon to move 'from an ECOWAS of states to an ECOWAS of the people'. The final outcome of the Vision 2020 is the creation of a single economic region with a single currency, central bank and a community parliament to legislate on matters of regional interest with a view to fostering peace, the rule of law and good governance.

Sharing these ambitions and already occupying the position of third-largest economic power⁵ in the ECOWAS zone and first position in the UEMOA zone, Côte d'Ivoire is uniquely positioned to both contribute to and benefit from the regional economic dynamic. At the same time, it can serve its own objectives to consolidate its own economy and increase its political influence in the region and further afield. However, to achieve this aim, the country has to invest in a foreign policy and, more specifically, a regional policy that actively and visibly supports the interests and role of the Ivorian state on major regional and international issues, such as sustained dialogue that consolidates the state and internal cohesion within Côte d'Ivoire and promotes investment in the country.

CONCLUSION

Apart from its important economic and political role in ECOWAS, Côte d'Ivoire has also invested in the consolidation of its political and economic relations with its immediate neighbours, namely Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Guinea and Liberia. In addition, it is pursuing policies that support other regional integration and co-operation organisations such as the UEMOA, the Mano River Union and the Conseil de l'Entente.⁶ In all its regional engagements the country's economic aspirations loom large, and it is not hesitant to seek out a real regional and global leadership role that mirrors its ambitions. Therefore, it is imperative that its diplomatic 'apparatus' is transformed into a genuine asset that can serve the pursuit of its national interests.

Houphouët-Boigny's legacy still looms large in Côte d'Ivoire's regional diplomacy. Despite

this, the country is facing increasing competition from other players in the region such as Senegal, Ghana and Burkina Faso that, alongside Nigeria, are playing a strategic role in West Africa. This has largely occurred as a consequence of Côte d'Ivoire's not making full use of its leverage due to political instability. However, along with the gains made by Ouattara during the Ivorian tenure of the presidency of ECOWAS between 2012 and 2014; the continued spirited defence of its national interests; and, finally, the growing influence of the country within its geopolitical sphere (ie, ECOWAS, Africa and the francophone world), a renewed repositioning of the country as a pivotal regional player is taking shape.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Oswald Padonou is a PhD student at Rennes University (France). He is Director of international Co-operation in the Cabinet of the Mediator of the Benin Republic, and an expert consultant in Africa, Europe and North America for various think tanks on defence diplomacy.
- 2 *Communitarisation* in foreign policy refers to the adaptation of national foreign policies to regional institutional demands and pressures, leading to regional organisations becoming avenues that articulate the policy preferences of their member states. Authors such as Brian White, Ben Soetendorp and Michael E Smith use the term extensively.
- 3 The notion of *diplomatic gains* is difficult to define.
- 4 The term *economic diplomacy* is much more than an 'aspect' of foreign policy within the framework of diplomatic representation, dedicated to the interface of national economic operators and of the accreditation state. It is a real shift in perspective from 'traditional' political diplomacy towards a focus on economic matters. This seems to be the position of Côte d'Ivoire. See Revel C (ed.), 'L'âge d'or de la diplomatie économique', *Géoéconomie*, 56, Winter 2010–2011.
- 5 With a gross domestic product of \$30.91 billion in 2013, preceded by Ghana with \$47.93 billion and Nigeria with \$522.6 billion (World Bank statistics).
- 6 The Conseil d'Entent is a regional co-operation forum founded in 1959 by Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Niger and Burkina Faso, with Togo joining in 1966.

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