

From Confrontation to Cooperation: Evaluating the Green Tree Agreement between Nigeria and Cameroun as a Model for Conflict Resolution in Africa.

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Abstract

This paper investigates the transition of the Bakassi Peninsula dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon from a protracted military confrontation to a landmark diplomatic resolution. Centered on the 2006 Green Tree Agreement (GTA), the research evaluates the efficacy of international legal frameworks and mediated diplomacy in resolving territorial conflicts within the African post-colonial context. The study begins by analyzing the 2002 International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling, which awarded sovereignty to Cameroon, and examines the subsequent "compliance crisis" that threatened regional stability. The core of the paper focuses on the GTA as a bespoke implementation mechanism that bridged the gap between a rigid legal judgment and the complex political realities on the ground. Utilizing primary diplomatic documents, ICJ proceedings, and secondary geopolitical analysis, the paper Assessed the influence of the United Nations and "witness states" (USA, UK, France, and Germany) in providing the political guarantees necessary for Nigeria's phased withdrawal. Evaluating the protection of the rights of displaced and resident populations, and how the GTA addressed the humanitarian dimensions of territorial transfer. The findings suggest that while the GTA successfully averted a full-scale war and established a "legalistic peace," it faced significant challenges regarding local populations' "belonging" and internal political backlash. Ultimately, this thesis argues that the Green Tree Agreement serves as a pivotal model for the African Union's "silencing the guns" initiative. It concludes that the success of the Bakassi model rests not merely on legal finality, but on a commitment to incremental transition, international oversight, and the prioritization of regional economic integration over narrow territorial nationalism.

Keywords: Conflict Resolution Confrontation, Cooperation, Greentree Agreement and Model

Introduction

The map of modern Africa is often described as a mosaic of "colonial accidents"—territories carved out during the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 with little regard for ethnic, linguistic, or historical realities. For decades, the African Union (formerly the OAU) has clung to the doctrine of *uti possidetis juris* (as you possess under law)

as a desperate bulwark against continental fragmentation. (Indicate source) Yet, few cases have tested the fragility of this doctrine, and the resilience of international law, as severely as the dispute over the Bakassi Peninsula.

Located at the intersection of the Gulf of Guinea, the Bakassi Peninsula is more than a 1,000-square-kilometer mangrove swamp; it is a strategic gateway, rich in hydrocarbon reserves and teeming with artisanal fisheries. (Indicate source) For Nigeria and Cameroon, Bakassi became a crucible of national identity. By the early 1990s, conflicts over the ownership of Bakassi Peninsula was no longer a mere border skirmish. It had evolved into a high-stakes military standoff between the two countries, that threatened to destabilize the volatile West and Central African sub-regions, pitting two of the continent's most significant powers against one another. (Indicate source)

The resolution of this conflict did not come through the barrel of a gun, nor through a simple handshake. It required a decade of rigorous litigation at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), followed by a groundbreaking diplomatic instrument: the 2006 Green Tree Agreement (GTA). Signed under the canopy of the United Nations in Manhasset, New York, the GTA represented a departure from traditional African conflict resolution. It was not a peace treaty born of exhaustion, but a "legalistic roadmap" designed to operationalize a court ruling that many Nigerians viewed as a national humiliation (Ebobrah, 2009).

Nigeria-Cameroon Border Conflicts in Historical Perspective

The roots of border crises between Nigeria and Cameroon lies deep in history. The border between Nigeria and Cameroon, stretching approximately 2,100 kilometres from the sahelian waters of Lake Chad to the mangrove swamps of the Gulf of Guinea, is one of the most complex geopolitical fault lines in Africa. The conflict originated from the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, where European powers partitioned Africa with more interest in latitude and longitude than in ethnic or historical boundaries. The specific dispute over the Bakassi Peninsula and the wider border was birthed from a series of competing colonial interests between Great Britain (Nigeria) and Germany (Cameroun) (Asiwaju, 93). The definitive "problem" was created by the 1913 Anglo-German Treaty. This agreement sought to define the boundary from Yola to the sea. Crucially, the British ceded the Bakassi Peninsula to Germany in exchange for

German concessions regarding the navigation of the Cross River. At the time, this was a minor administrative swap; however, for the Efik and other indigenous populations living in Bakassi, it was a "paper transfer" that ignored their historical allegiance to the Obong (King) of Calabar and the British protectorate (Mbuh, 2004).

Following Germany's defeat in World War I, the League of Nations divided German Cameroun into British and French Mandates. This era added a layer of administrative confusion: British Camerouns (Northern and Southern) were administered as part of Nigeria. For decades, the border effectively "disappeared" because both sides were under British oversight. The crisis re-emerged during the decolonisation process. In the 1961 Plebiscite, Northern Camerouns voted to join Nigeria, while Southern Camerouns voted to join the newly independent Republic of Cameroon. This created a jigsaw puzzle of territorial claims. Nigeria argued that Bakassi had always been part of the Calabar administration, while Cameroon pointed to the 1913 treaty as the basis of their sovereignty over the land (Nyar Nsan, 2015). In the early 1970s, during the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War, General Yakubu Gowon (Nigeria) and President Ahmadou Ahidjo (Cameroun) attempted to settle the maritime boundary to facilitate oil exploration. The resulting Maroua Declaration (1975) saw Gowon conceding significant maritime territory, including Bakassi, to Cameroon. However, Gowon was soon overthrown, and the Nigerian military hierarchy—along with the subsequent civilian government—refused to ratify the declaration, claiming it was an "illegal gift" made by a military dictator without legislative consent (Akindele, 2007). This lack of ratification became the bone of contention that haunted bilateral relations for thirty years. Throughout the 1980s, these skirmishes were characterized by armed clashes between Nigerian forces and Camerounian gendarmes. The killing of five Nigerian soldiers by Cameroun security forces in 1981 triggered high tension that nearly resulted in full scale war (Mbuh, 2004).

By the 1990s, the border skirmishes between the two countries had snowballed into a full-scale confrontation. (Recast: too sensational/exaggeration) In 1993 and 1994, Nigeria moved significant military assets into the Bakassi Peninsula, citing the need to protect Nigerian citizens from "harassment" by Cameroonian gendarmes. The conflict reached a tipping point when Cameroun, realizing it could not win a conventional war against the Nigeria, took the dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 1994. For eight years, the two nations engaged in a "war of documents," debating the validity of 19th-century treaties, the effectiveness of "colonial occupation," and the maps of long-dead European explorers (Baye, 2010).

On October 10, 2002, the ICJ delivered its landmark judgment. Based strictly on the 1913 Anglo-German Treaty, the Court awarded sovereignty of the Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon. The ruling sent shockwaves through Nigeria. Public opinion was incandescent with rage; the Nigerian government faced a choice between a humiliating withdrawal or a defiant war. The history of the conflict seemed destined for a bloody final chapter until the intervention of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who facilitated the diplomatic pivot that led to the Green Tree Agreement (GTA).

While the Green Tree Agreement settled the *legal* dispute, the *historical* friction remains. The current Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon and the displacement of Bakassi returnees in Nigeria are the latest echoes of a border that was never meant to be a wall, but was forced to become one by the accidents of history. The transition from confrontation to cooperation was not just a legal victory; it was a rare moment where modern African states chose to heal a colonial wound rather than let it fester into a regional catastrophe.

While colonial-era maps provided the legal basis for the border dispute, the discovery of oil in the 1970s transformed it from a minor administrative concern into a volatile national security crisis. Oil served as the primary catalyst for the conflict in several critical ways.

CRUDE OIL DISCOVERY AND RENEWED INTEREST IN BAKASSI

Before the 1970s, the Bakassi Peninsula was viewed largely as a desolate 1,000-square-kilometer mangrove swamp inhabited by seasonal fishermen. The 1970s oil boom, which saw Nigerian crude prices rise from \$3.22 to nearly \$40 per barrel by 1980, radically increased the value of the peninsula's sub-surface hydrocarbon reserves. This transformed the territory into a "billions of dollars" asset that neither nation felt they could afford to lose. In 1975, General Yakubu Gowon of Nigeria and President Ahmadou Ahidjo (Cameroun) signed the Maroua Declaration to extend their maritime boundary in the Gulf of Guinea to facilitate oil exploration. Both leaders sought a stable environment for multinational oil companies to begin offshore drilling (Akindele, 2007).

Subsequent Nigerian regimes refused to ratify the agreement, claiming Gowon had "gifted" oil-rich territory to Cameroon without constitutional authority. This legal rejection by Nigeria, fueled by the desire to retain oil revenues, became a central point of contention for decades.

By the late 1970s, oil accounted for approximately 98% of Nigeria's export earnings, making the country a mono-economy. Facing potential economic collapse from oil price volatility in the 1980s, Nigeria became increasingly assertive about its claims to Bakassi to supplement existing reserves. As a smaller economy with fewer reserves, Cameroun viewed the Bakassi oil fields as a critical path to national development, leading to more aggressive patrolling by its security forces (gendarmes) to protect its prospecting rights.

The "harmonious relations" that existed after independence shattered in 1981, exactly when potential huge hydrocarbon deposits were first confirmed in the peninsula's waters. This led to military skirmishes between the two neighbouring countries. The first major military clash occurred in May 1981, directly linked to competition over the area's resource potential. Both nations began prospecting clandestinely in the same zones, leading to mutual accusations of illegal entry and harassment of oil company personnel. The 1970s oil discovery shifted the dispute's focus from cartography (lines on a map) to rent-seeking (revenue from resources) (Mabogunje, 1989). It provided the "motivating factor" that drove Cameroun to the ICJ in 1994 and kept Nigeria's military stationed in the peninsula for over a decade.

International Court of Justice Ruling and Reactions from Nigeria and Cameroun.

The 2002 International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling in the case concerning Land and Maritime Boundary between Cameroon and Nigeria stands as one of the most significant territorial adjudications in modern African history. The judgment, delivered on October 10, 2002, ended a decades-long dispute over the Bakassi Peninsula, an 1,100-square-kilometer area rich in oil, gas, and fisheries. The ICJ's decision hinged primarily on the hierarchy of international legal principles: treaty law versus "historical consolidation" (effective occupation).

Nigeria argued that the peninsula was historically part of the Old Calabar Kingdom. They claimed that the 1884 Treaty of Protection between Great Britain and the Chiefs of Old Calabar did not empower Britain to cede the territory. Nigeria also invoked "effectivités"—the fact that Nigerian citizens lived there, paid taxes to Nigeria, and were governed by Nigerian administrative structures for decades. Cameroon relied on the Anglo-German Agreement of 11 March 1913. This treaty clearly defined the boundary between the British and German spheres of influence, placing Bakassi under German (and subsequently Cameroonian) jurisdiction. The Court ruled in favor of Cameroun by a vote of 14 to 3. The judges held that the 1913 Anglo-German Agreement was valid and binding. The ICJ rejected Nigeria's "historical consolidation" argument on the basis that sovereign title derived from a treaty outweighs administrative presence. The Court noted that Britain, as the protecting power in 1913, had the legal authority to enter into border agreements that were internationally recognized, regardless of the internal understanding of the Calabar chiefs (Njar Nsan, 2015).

The ruling was comprehensive, covering the entire 2,100km border from Lake Chad to the Atlantic. The Court followed the 1931 Thompson-Marchand Declaration, awarding several villages in the Lake Chad region to Cameroon and others to Nigeria. The Court used various colonial-era instruments to fix the boundary, resulting in a "give-and-take" scenario where both nations gained and lost specific parcels of land. The Court extended the maritime border (the "Equidistant Line"), which significantly impacted the ownership of offshore hydrocarbon deposits.

A critical, often overlooked aspect of the ruling was the Court's directive on the inhabitants. Recognizing that thousands of Nigerians lived in the ceded territory, the ICJ explicitly mandated that Cameroon must protect the rights of these residents. This specific instruction laid the groundwork for the Greentree Agreement (2006), which ensured that Nigerians in Bakassi would not be forced to change their nationality or face immediate displacement (CNMC, 2023).

The Bakassi ruling is often cited as a triumph of international law over military might. Despite being the regional superpower with a superior military, Nigeria eventually chose to comply with the ruling (via the Greentree process) rather than risk international pariah status. It remains a landmark case in the African Union's push to settle border disputes through legal frameworks rather than conflict.

The 2002 International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling sparked different reactions in Nigeria and Cameroun, ranging from nationalistic outrage to cautious celebration, while the local inhabitants of the peninsula faced a profound "identity crisis." In Nigeria, the ruling was widely viewed as a "betrayal" of national sovereignty and a disregard for the self-determination of the peninsula's inhabitants (Bisong, 2012). High-ranking officials and legal experts, such as former Attorney-General Chief Richard Akinjide, described the verdict as "politically motivated" and a "total disaster". Major newspapers like *The Guardian* characterized the judgment as a "rape" of Nigeria's territorial integrity and a "Western ploy" to foment trouble in Africa. In southeastern Cross River State, some leaders initially expressed a preference for war over ceding the territory. There were reports of Nigeria reinforcing military positions immediately following the verdict.

Despite the outcry, prominent figures like then-Governor Bola Tinubu advocated for respecting the court's decision to maintain Nigeria's standing as a "civilized member of the world body".

While the ruling was a major legal and diplomatic victory for Cameroun, the reaction on the ground was more complex. The government viewed the ruling as a vindication of its long-standing legal position based on colonial-era treaties. Some political opposition groups in Cameroon were less enthusiastic, viewing the victory as a result of French "meddling" in Cameroonian politics rather than a purely judicial outcome. As Cameroonian authorities attempted to establish administration, they faced significant pushback from the local population. Some officials reported that residents viewed them as "colonizers," with instances of vandalism against new public buildings and open defiance of Cameroonian law. The approximately 150,000 to 300,000 residents of the Bakassi Peninsula—predominantly Efik and Ibibio-speaking Nigerians—faced the most direct impact. Following the 2006 Greentree Agreement, some locals felt betrayed by the Nigerian government and began to arm themselves to resist the handover (Adamu, 2020).

Residents were forced to choose between becoming Cameroonian citizens, staying as "foreigners" with limited rights, or relocating to resettlement camps in Nigeria. Many chose relocations but faced inadequate housing and lack of infrastructure in new settlements like "New Bakassi". The change in sovereignty altered traditional fishing rights, which were the primary livelihood for the local population. The ruling remains a sensitive topic today, with some Nigerian groups still advocating for a referendum or judicial review to address the "nationality question" of the Bakassi people. (Provide a fitting linkage between this section and the next)

The Establishment of Nigeria Cameroun Mixed Commission

Fearing that the ICJ's final ruling would serve as a trigger for a full-scale war, the international community, led by the UN, sought a preventive diplomacy framework to manage the transition (Dawodu, 2020). This led to the establishment of Cameroun Nigeria Mixed Commission (CNMC). The commission was established at the specific request of President Olusegun Obasanjo (Nigeria) and President Paul Biya (Cameroon) during a series of meetings. Weeks before the judgment, they met in Paris on

September 5, 2002, agreeing to respect and implement the decision through a joint mechanism supported by the UN (Akinterinwa, 2018). The creation of the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission (CNMC) was informed by the urgent need for a peaceful, diplomatic mechanism to implement the October 10, 2002, International Court of Justice (ICJ) judgment while preventing a potential military conflict. The CNMC was informed by the need to protect the fundamental rights of people in affected villages. Develop socio-economic projects to build mutual trust and cross-border cooperation. (Provide a fitting linkage between this section and the next)

The Greentree Agreement (GTA): Implementation Challenges and Impact

The Greentree Agreement (GTA) was a bilateral agreement between the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the Republic of Cameroon. The Greentree Agreement, signed on June 12, 2006, was the formal framework used to implement the 2002 International Court of Justice ruling regarding the Bakassi Peninsula. It was a formal treaty that resolved the long-standing and often violent border dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon over the oil- and natural gas-rich Bakassi Peninsula. Mediated by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan at the Greentree estate in Manhasset, New York, the accord served as the implementation framework for the 2002 International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling, which had awarded sovereignty of the territory to Cameroon based on a 1913 Anglo-German treaty (Bisong, 2012). The Greentree Agreement was viewed as a "necessary evil" by Nigerian authorities to ensure peaceful co-existence and uphold international law, despite significant domestic outcry. The agreement established a phased transition of authority to avoid sudden displacement and conflict. Nigeria agreed to withdraw all armed forces from the peninsula within 60 days of signing, with a possible 30-day extension. Nigeria was permitted to maintain its civil administration and police force for a non-renewable two-year period to maintain order. Authority was formally transferred in 2008, and a special transitional regime concluded in August 2013, marking the end of the formal handover process. A monitoring committee was formed, including representatives from the UN, Germany, the US, France, and the UK (UNSC, S/PRST/2013/12).

The only two parties to the treaty were Nigeria (represented by President Olusegun Obasanjo) and Cameroon (represented by President Paul Biya). The UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, facilitated the negotiations and signed as a witness, but the UN was not a primary party to the agreement itself. Representatives from Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States also attended the ceremony as witnesses and endorsed the implementation through a monitoring committee. A central pillar of the agreement (Article 3) focused on protecting the rights of the estimated 90% Nigerian majority living in Bakassi. Cameroon committed to guaranteeing fundamental rights and freedoms as defined by international law. Refraining from forcing relocation or mandatory changes in nationality for Nigerian residents. Respecting local culture, language, and customary land and fishing rights. Prohibiting discriminatory taxes or levies on Nigerian nationals (CNMC, 2023).

Despite its success in preventing a full-scale war, the Greentree Agreement faced deep criticism regarding the

"abandonment" of the indigenous Efik, Efut, and Ibibio peoples. Critics argue that the inhabitants were never consulted via a plebiscite to determine their own allegiance. There's been reports of harassment and illegal levies imposed by Cameroonian gendarmes, leading to significant displacement and a "nationality crisis" for those who feel marginalized by both states. Furthermore, the loss of the peninsula turned Nigeria's Cross River State into a non-littoral state, leading to the loss of its maritime natural resources (Egenti, 2010).

The GTA offers a scalable, replicable model for the dozens of other maritime and land boundary disputes currently simmering across the continent. In an era where "strongman" politics and territorial revisionism are resurging globally, the Bakassi case stands as a testament to the power of structured, mediated cooperation over the destructive impulse of confrontation. The GTA was a landmark in the history of international relations for its sheer audacity. It achieved what was rarely seen in geopolitics: the voluntary ceding of territory by a regional hegemon (Nigeria) to a smaller neighbor (Cameroon) in total deference to the "Rule of Law." However, the transition from confrontation to cooperation was not seamless. It raised profound questions about the nature of citizenship, the limits of state sovereignty, and the moral obligations of governments toward populations caught in the crosshairs of cartography. (Provide a fitting linkage between this section and the next)

Challenges and Lessons for Africa

The GTA was not perfect. Many local Bakassi residents felt betrayed by the Nigerian government, leading to minor insurgencies and displacement issues that persist today. Furthermore, the "top-down" nature of the agreement meant that grassroots reconciliation lagged behind diplomatic signatures. However, the broader lesson for the African Union (AU) is clear: Boundaries are sacrosanct, but they must be managed through institutions rather than infantry. The GTA proved that the principle of *uti possidetis* (respecting colonial borders) can be upheld through peaceful legal instruments if supported by robust international monitoring.

The Green Tree Agreement transformed a zero-sum territorial struggle into a win-win diplomatic achievement. It shifted the definition of "victory" from the occupation of land to the establishment of stability. While the specific conditions of Bakassi were unique, the framework of phased transition, human rights guarantee, and international witnessing provides a scalable blueprint for resolving the many "frozen" border disputes across the African continent. While the Green Tree Agreement (GTA) is often lauded as a success, there is a lack of critical evaluation regarding whether it truly resolved the underlying tensions or merely suppressed them through elite-level diplomacy.

Furthermore, the question remains, can the GTA framework be replicated in other African border flashpoints, or was its success dependent on a unique set of geopolitical variables? The GTA proved to be a viable mechanism to solve the "implementation problem" in international law, it provided a sustainable template for transforming zero-sum territorial conflicts into cooperative regional frameworks. The resolution of this conflict did not come through the barrel of a gun, nor through a simple handshake. It required a decade of

rigorous litigation at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), followed by a groundbreaking diplomatic instrument: the 2006 Green Tree Agreement (GTA), signed under the canopy of the United Nations in Manhasset, New York, the GTA represented a departure from traditional African conflict resolution. As noted by Akinterinwa (2012), the GTA was not a peace treaty born of exhaustion, but a "legalistic roadmap" designed to operationalize a court ruling that many Nigerians viewed as a national humiliation.

The GTA is a landmark in the history of international relations for its sheer audacity. It sought to achieve what is rarely seen in geopolitics the voluntary ceding of territory by a regional hegemony (Nigeria) to a smaller neighbor (Cameroon) in total deference to the "Rule of Law." However, the transition from confrontation to cooperation was not seamless. It raised profound questions about the nature of citizenship, the limits of state sovereignty, and the moral obligations of governments toward populations caught in the crosshairs of cartography.

Conclusion

The history of the Nigeria-Cameroon border conflict is a testament to the enduring power of colonial legacies. It illustrates how an ink-line drawn in a European office in 1913 can dictate the lives of millions a century later. The resolution of the Bakassi Peninsula dispute stands as one of the most significant diplomatic achievements in post-colonial African history. The Green Tree Agreement (GTA) was not merely a legal settlement, but a transformative model that redirected two regional giants from the precipice of war toward a framework of structured cooperation. The Bakassi case proves that even the most volatile territorial disputes can be resolved when states prioritize long-term regional stability over short-term populist gains. The GTA successfully bridged the "compliance gap" between a rigid ICJ judgment and the messy realities of sovereign withdrawal. The success of this model was contingent upon the "witness" role of the United Nations and the international community. By providing a neutral platform and technical expertise, the UN allowed Nigeria to execute a "dignified retreat" and Cameroon to achieve a "secure acquisition," ensuring that the finality of the border was respected by both parties. While the GTA was a masterpiece of state-to-state diplomacy, its implementation revealed a "human security deficit." The lingering reports of harassment, the disenfranchisement of the Bakassi people, and the challenges of resettlement highlight that territorial peace does not automatically translate into social peace. For any future application of this model, the protection of civilian rights must be elevated from a secondary diplomatic clause to a primary operational mandate.

The Green Tree Agreement is not a "plug-and-play" solution; its success relied on the rare alignment of political will between Presidents Obasanjo and Biya and sustained international pressure. However, it offers a robust blueprint for the African Union's "Silencing the Guns" initiative. It demonstrates that the principles of *uti possidetis* can be upheld through a blend of legal adjudication, phased transition, and technical cooperation.

As Africa continues to navigate hundreds of un-demarcated boundaries and the rising threats of cross-border insurgency, the Bakassi model serves as a beacon

of hope. It reminds the continent that while colonial history may have drawn the lines of confrontation, African states possess the diplomatic agency to redraw them as lines of cooperation. The "Green Tree" may have been planted in the soil of a specific swamp, but its shadows provide a sheltering framework for peace across the entire continent. The GTA represents a rare triumph of international law over nationalistic fervour. It serves as a sophisticated case study in how sovereign states can move from the brink of war to a structured, legalistic cooperation

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