

A Survey of Nigerian Governments and the Conduct of Foreign Policy, 1960-1993

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Abstract. Nigeria's Foreign Policy over the years has vacillated from the legacy of conservatism inherited from Britain at independence in 1960 to a more dynamic Afrocentric foreign policy posture ushered in after the civil war between 1967 and 1970. The factors that gave rise to this include both internal and external forces that compel the country to change its foreign policy postures over the years. This paper examines the changing trend in Nigeria's foreign policy since independence in 1960. It highlights the major issues and main foreign policy thrusts of various regimes in the country since 1960. The paper identified the major themes in the country's foreign policy with a cursory analysis of the factors that gave rise to them. Drawing from its findings, the paper argued that Nigeria's foreign policy like that of other countries in the international system is dynamic and responsive to internal and external changes. It concluded therefore that the country has come a long way in realising some of the objectives enumerated in its foreign policy thrust since independence in 1960.

1. Introduction

The diplomatic history of Nigeria cannot be said to have started in 1960. In fact, it would be a wrong starting point in the historiography of Nigerian diplomacy to suggest that the diplomatic history of Nigeria started that year. This is because in the geographical entity which composed the contemporary Nigerian state, the various peoples in the area had always had

linkages with the external world long before 1960. In the same vein, it cannot be said with any finality that Nigerian foreign relations started with the birth of Nigeria on January 1, 1914, when the Northern and Southern Protectorates were amalgamated by the colonial authorities. In other words, the evolution of the foreign relations of Nigeria could be traced to the fifteenth century, when long-standing trade and diplomatic relations transpired between kingdoms, chiefdoms and city states that were forced into the British sphere of influence (Nigerian colony), and the states of Europe. Some of the European powers that established relations with the existing mini and mega states of 'Nigeria' were Britain, Holland, Portugal, Spain, France, Germany and Belgium (Ofoegbu, nd).

Initially, the relationship was between sovereign equal entities. But the logic of British commerce and imperialism transformed it into one between unequal entities. Colonialism in this context therefore, meant the destruction of institutions and the subordination of the domestic and foreign policies of the pre-colonial 'African' entities within the 'Niger Area' to British imperial power. Thus, under colonial rule 'Nigeria' lost the power to formulate its 'foreign policy' to imperial Britain (Akinyemi, 1974; 10).

In this regard, the nature of foreign policy is such that new nations in the international system do not necessarily translate into a situation in which the new state would be free from all encumbrances to formulate and execute their foreign policies. And in the specific case at hand, in which Nigeria had to contend with the

fact of a one hundred year old relationship with a colonial power like Britain, it meant that the status-quo forces in the run-up to Nigeria's sovereignty, and even after, also had to contend with quite a number of prejudices and biases. Indeed, what eventually emerged as the Ministry of Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs was largely the creation of the British. In this respect, writer-diplomats like Garba (1981) and Jolaoso (1991) have dwelt extensively on the crucial role which the British played in nursing the then fledgling Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to its present status (Soremekun, 2003; 1).

2. The Balewa Period, 1960-1966:

There were high expectations when Nigeria finally removed the colonial yoke and wore the toga of an independent and sovereign state in 1960. To start with, on October 1, 1960 Nigeria became an independent state and given its size and natural resources, it was rightly assumed that playing a leading role on the African continent should be Nigeria's 'Manifest Destiny'. Surrounded by small and weak states, Nigeria has a total of five international boundaries measuring 4,775 kilometres shared with the republics of Benin, Niger, Chad, Cameroun and the Atlantic Ocean (Fullard, 1971; 34). With economically and politically weak states as her neighbours, Nigeria has little to fear. But what the country was suspicious of has always been the 'French Presence' in the West African sub-region, since her neighbours are all former French colonies (Aderemi, 2001; 15).

In general terms, the consensus among scholars in the humanities and more importantly foreign policy experts and historian is that the Nigerian foreign policy in the period, 1960-1966 was conservative, pro-British and the developed north. This is not surprising because as students of international relations, our decision making theories tell us that decision making cannot be devoid of the background and experience of the leader who has been saddled with the responsibility of committing the nation's resources into decision making, either at economic, political, social or diplomatic level (Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff Jr., 1981; 468-510).

For some reasons, Balewa's foreign policy cannot afford to be anything but conservative and timid. For one thing, it was a period of new beginnings in which almost everything was tentative. Tentative in the sense that Nigeria was launching into the field of contemporary foreign policy for the first time without much of experience to fall back on and therefore, had to be cautious. Besides, the political system was fragile particularly with political party leaders jostling for power. In addition, the constitution which the British gave birth to was not only defective but also lopsided. The parties were in the main, regional in their outlook rather than national. Therefore, the domestic political situation coupled with the economic dependence on the developed north, did not encourage an aggressive, radical and dynamic foreign policy.

Furthermore, the disposition of Nigerian leadership and indeed of majority of the people was pro-west. This position is clear because most of the first republic political leaders were students of the west. It must also be noted that the political party, NPC, that formed the government at the center, was dominated by the conservative north. For example, Jaja Wachukwu, the First Minister of External Affairs (NCNC) under Balewa wielded little power, when compared to that of Nuhu Bamali, a Minister of State (NPC) in foreign policy decisioning. In fact, Bamali was closer to the Prime Minister and wielded stronger influence on the number one citizen. It is not surprising that Wachukwu lost his portfolio to Bamali in 1964 (Obi, 2003; 9). It is against this background that Balewa's foreign policy can be truly understood. Thus, that Balewa and the NPC were conservative and pro-west in their approach could not be otherwise, judging by the prevailing domestic environment.

On the issue of non-alignment, it was clear that Balewa's government could not have remained neutral in the east-west ideological war. Although, the Prime Minister eventually pronounced non-alignment as one of the principles of the Nigerian foreign policy, it was probably to satisfy a section of the coalition government. It was clear from the onset that non-alignment policy was not uppermost on the

minds of the Prime Minister and his ruling NPC. While declaring that Nigeria would pursue a policy of non-alignment in her relationship with the then two blocs (East and the West), he went on to declare that:

We are grateful to the British who we have known as masters, then as leaders, and finally as partners, but always as friends, we shall never forget our friends (Idang, 1973; 49).

These friends obviously were the British and their traditional western allies. As regard non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, excessive attachments to legalism and ignorance made the country's foreign policy a confusing lot. This explains Nigeria's policy towards the Congo crisis in the early 1960s as well as the country's hasty decisions in 1961 (Akinyemi, 1974; Nwolise, 1989; 193) to sever diplomatic ties with France over her atomic bomb test in the Sahara Desert, even though the action was jointly agreed upon by all African countries. The bottom line here is that Nigeria was able to learn a lesson in international politics that morality did not matter as such.

3. The Ironsi Administration

The first republic under the leadership of Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa came to an abrupt end through a military putsch of January 15, 1966. General Aguiyi Ironsi, who was the beneficiary of the *coup d'etat*, therefore became the first military Head of Nigerian Government. His six months stint in governance was just a scratch in the formulation and implementation of Nigeria foreign policy. Although the government was characterized by political crisis, General Ironsi was able to reiterate to the apartheid South African regime that the policy of separate existence, otherwise known as apartheid, was absolutely unacceptable to Nigeria (Oyelakin, 1989; 220-221). While severing economic and other relations with the apartheid South Africa, Ironsi also banned the sale in Nigeria, of all Portuguese goods especially wine until the Lusophone African states were free from the clutches of colonialism. During this period, Angola, Mozambique and other Portuguese African colonies, were still under the brutal rule

of the Portuguese authorities in which liberation movements were usually and constantly brutally suppressed with impunity (Nwolise, 1989; 202).

4. The Gowon Era, 1966-1975

The army mutiny in which General Ironsi was killed led to a counter coup of July 29, 1966. It was the July *coup d'etat* that brought Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon to power. Gowon was confronted with the problem of how to govern the country. This led to disagreements among the top military brass, particularly between Yakubu Gowon and Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, the military governor of the Eastern region. The disagreement led to a state of crisis in which Col. Ojukwu declared Eastern Region as a sovereign state to be known as the Republic of Biafra. The result of all this was a fratricidal war, which never came to an end until January, 1970 (Nwolise, 1974; 21-24).

The Nigerian foreign policy was tested and stretched to its limit during the eighteen months civil war, 1967-1970. Gowon's regime was mainly devoted to the maintenance of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Nigeria. During the crisis, the traditional friends of Nigeria, the western powers, were hesitant, indifferent or downright hostile. Britain was for a long time sitting on the fence, the United States of America remained neutral while France saw the civil war as an opportunity to break up the Nigerian federation which she saw as a threat to her continuing hold on Francophone Africa (Nwolise, 1989; 204-205).

Under Gowon's administration, the bureaucrats in the Ministry of External Affairs gained some leverage, even if he also maintained an image of being a super foreign affairs minister'. It was a period Nigeria diffused its pro-western foreign policy orientation based largely on lessons of the Nigerian civil war (Obi, 2003; 11). Although, Nigeria turned eastwards for arms and ammunition during the war, inviting the Soviet bloc to participate in certain sectors critical to national development after the war, particularly in the development of steel industry, the country was still fundamentally tied to the west. It must however, be stated that Nigeria's survival as one

indivisible nation, was partly due to the shrewd and dynamic nature of Nigeria's foreign policy as well as the support extended to Nigeria by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and her allies (Nwolise, 1989; 204; Falola, 1989; 124). The keeping together of the Nigerian state as one indivisible entity, despite the civil war, was one of the greatest achievements of Gowon's diplomacy. Despite the country's pro-west attitude, the young republic moved substantially forward in the policy of non-alignment. Since the end of the civil war in 1970, Nigeria has been playing responsible and active role in the Non-Aligned Movement. The experience of the civil war therefore, led to a rethinking of the underlying assumptions that had up till then under-pinned Nigerian foreign policy. In the process, Nigeria learnt in a hard-way that in international politics, there is neither permanent friend nor permanent foe. Rather what should be of paramount importance is permanent interest. Thus, the end of the War saw the emergence of a confident Nigeria, ready to take its rightful place in the international community.

The end of the Civil War in 1970 and the era of the 1970s generally were a time of good beginning for Nigeria. It was a period of petrol-dollars as a result of the oil boom. As a result of this the country became a force to be reckoned with in the continent. Nigeria therefore, intensified her policy of good, responsive and responsible neighbourliness (Akinbobola, 2001; 38-53). Nigeria along with Togo and Liberia took active part in the formation of Economic Community of West African States, (ECOWAS) in 1975. The birth of ECOWAS no doubt indicated a clearly well thought out diplomacy on the part of Nigeria, particularly in the face of French government's cold attitude to the desirability of the organization (Onwuka, 1997; 53-88). Still under the government of General Yakubu Gowon, Nigeria played a leading role in the negotiations that led to the signing of the Lome Conventions, which were concluded in 1975, between the European Economic Community (EEC) and the African, Caribbean and the Pacific States (ACP), concerning trade, aid and investments (Adeniji, 1998; 287-355).

5. Murtala – Obasanjo Regime – 1975-79

Just as General Gowon assumed power on July 29, 1966, he was equally removed from power on July 29, 1975. Gowon was away in Kampala the Ugandan Capital attending the Organisation of African Unity Summit, when the then Colonel Joe Garba, Commander of the Brigade of Guards, announced his removal from office. The new dispensation produced General Murtala Ramat Mohammed as the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Nigerian Armed Forces. General Olusegun Obasanjo became the Chief of Staff Supreme Headquarters, an office that made him the second in command to the Head of State. The new regime was able to come up with the political will necessary to face the challenges of nationhood. Actions were taken on matters which General Gowon had for so long vacillated upon. General Mohammed dismissed ineffective and indolent civil servants; corrupt and irresponsible officers were either dismissed or completely retired from the service. The effect of this action on the job security of civil servants remains the topic for another research.

In foreign policy, the Murtala-Obasanjo administration exhibited good and decisive conduct, particularly in the linkage between domestic and external relations. Nigeria had emerged from the two and a half years civil war strong and arguably united. Also the policy of 'no victor and no vanquish' as well as the three Rs – Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction, had to some extent, helped reconcile the 'Biafrans' into the 'union'. Besides, the post-war period was the era of the oil boom, thus providing the country with a sound economic base which was utilized as leverage in foreign policy. General Mohammed, a visionary, dynamic and a determined leader, an African patriot, was absolutely committed to removing the last vestiges of colonialism from Africa. Without mincing words, Murtala showed his hatred for neo-colonialism and the policy of apartheid in South Africa.

General Mohammed expended considerable amount of resources allocated to external relations, on the African project. It was the marriage of a sound economic resource base and

positive action that made the period the golden age of Nigerian foreign policy. This development earned the country considerable respect in the international system. Nigeria played a leading role in the fight against apartheid in South Africa, liberation struggles in Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Nigeria's political and financial support for Movement for the Liberation of the Peoples of Angola (MPLA) helped in rallying other African states to support the movement.

According to Oyelakin:

...the whole world was astounded when General Mohammed recognized MPLA and gave support to its leader, Augustino Neto. As a result, Angola became (absolutely) independent under Neto (Babalola, 2000; 53).

General Murtala Mohammed was murdered in an abortive attempt to violently remove him from power, on the thirteenth of February, 1976. His second in command, General Olusegun Obasanjo, took over the mantle of leadership from his late boss. He shared similar vision with General Mohammed. His foreign policy thrusts greatly enhanced the independence of Zimbabwe (Southern Rhodesia) in 1980. This was made possible by Obasanjo's nationalization of the British Petroleum (BP) assets in 1979. This single action partly forced the British Prime Minister, Mrs. Margaret Thatcher to promptly open negotiations with Robert Mugabe's Patriotic Front (PF) which had previously been stigmatized as a terrorist organization. The slogan, 'Africa as the centre-piece of Nigerian foreign policy' was made popular by the active role of Nigeria in African affairs.

6. The Shagari Era, 1979-1983

On the first of October, 1979, the baton of leadership fell on Alhaji Shehu Shagari. Having won a general election both in and outside the court of law, Alhaji Shagari became the first elected executive president of the sovereign state of Nigeria. He pledged to continue with the dynamic foreign policy thrusts of the Obasanjo regime. As an experienced politician, Shagari had learnt a lot in state-craft. However, in comparative terms, Shagari had to contend with the legislature in decision making, including

foreign policy decision. Therefore, unlike the military regimes, the new democratic dispensation had in-built checks and balances. In other words, Mr. President could not afford to be a dictator. The advantage of course, is that before decisions are taken, particularly at the external relations level, relevant organs of government would have made their input.

Alhaji Shagari maintained the Afro-centric nature of Nigerian foreign policy. But according to Professor Olusanya, '... the period was characterized by indecision, vacillation, lack of initiative and the gains recorded under the previous regime were completely eroded' (Babalola, 2000; 53). The reasons for this position are the apparent lack of clear foreign policy thrusts and the country's excessive pro-west stance. These in no small measures limited Shagari's initiatives in foreign policy.

Under the leadership of Alhaji Shagari, Nigeria could not offer new initiatives to solve the problems, in Chad Republic, the Nigerian-Cameroon border crisis of 1981 and the OAU crisis over the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). However some credit should go to the administration for re-organising the Ministry of External Affairs and dealing effectively with the declining morale of the Foreign Service officers, through better conditions of service.

7. The Buhari Administration, 1983-1985

President Shehu Shagari was removed from power on December 31, 1983, in a military *coup d'état* led by General Mohammed Buhari. The reasons advanced for the change of government included large scale corruption and nepotism among politicians and civil servants. While the civil servants were corrupt and undisciplined, the politicians were busy amassing billions of naira in their foreign accounts. The naira, Nigeria's national currency became valueless in local and international transactions.

Like in the successive administrations, the focus of Nigerian foreign policy, under Buhari's regime, remained Africa. Diplomatic observers believed that Nigeria would operate a dynamic

foreign policy during the period, particularly with the appointment of General Joe Garba as Nigeria's Permanent Representative at the United Nations Organisation (UNO). At the UN, General Garba was appointed the chairman of Anti-Apartheid committee. General Buhari had a disciplined Chief of Staff, in person of General Tunde Idiagbon. General Idiagbon in his address to Nigerian Ambassadors enjoined them to project the right image of Nigeria wherever they were posted to serve. The failed attempt to abduct Alhaji Umaru Dikko, the Transport Minister in Shagari administration and the repatriation of illegal aliens were considered as failures of the administration in its external relations.

Buhari administration however, demonstrated commitments to the OAU (AU), the SADR question, and supported Liberation Struggles in Africa. To demonstrate its support for the struggle against apartheid regime in South Africa and liberation struggle generally in the region, Professor Ibrahim Gambari, the External Affairs Minister, visited the front line states to give them moral support in their struggle against oppression. Realizing that strong economy and good national morale are a part of the elements of power that shape a successful foreign policy, Buhari took steps to rehabilitate the nation's economy and created the War Against Indiscipline Brigade, to instil sound morale into the citizens, but these were not to materialize as he was removed by General Ibrahim Babangida in another military *coup d'état*, on the twenty-eight of August, 1985.

8. The Babangida Era, 1985-1993

The change of leadership from Buhari to General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida on the 28th of August, 1985, was attributed to dwindling fortunes of the nation's economy and poor human rights record of general Buhari's administration, particularly on the question of political detainees. But events after Babangida had consolidated his grips on power showed his regime's human rights records were not better than that of the previous regime. Other reasons advanced by the Babangida group were the poor handling of the import licenses, the servicing of

Nigeria's debt using forty percent of the nation's income, refusal to take the International Monetary Fund loans and the counter trade policy of the old regime.

In foreign policy formulation and implementation, Babangida condemned the Buhari regime, describing its African policy as selective. The Buhari government concentrated more on development in Southern and West Africa. But Babangida was quick to change this posture. As soon as he assumed office as the Military President, the first of its kind in Nigeria political landscape, Babangida visited Kenya and Chad republics to show that Nigeria was ready to translate into more concrete terms her African centered policy.

Other dynamic foreign policy thrusts of the Babangida regime included the Concert of Medium Powers, the Technical Aid Corps Scheme (TACS), and Economic Diplomacy as well as Conflict resolution in the West African region, among others. However, the administration along the line lost steam, became tyrannical and in the process, inflicted very damaging political wounds on the nation by annulling arguably the freest and fairest presidential election in the annals of Nigeria political history. The election has to a large extent been widely acclaimed as free, fair and credible by the outside world and a large section of Nigerians both at home and in the Diaspora. Regrettably, the election reportedly won by Bashorun Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola (MKO) won the election in 1993 was annulled by the military government.

The annulment of the 1993 presidential election plunged the country into serious political logjam and it was one of the reasons General Ibrahim Babangida was forced out of power. Babangida's exit paved the way for the lame-duck Shonekan's Interim National Government (ING). Chief Earnest Shonekan's ING remains just a footnote in the political journals of Nigerian history. A Nigerian foreign policy during the Shonekan led foreign policy was quite uneventful. Little was achieved in terms of making meaningful foreign policy initiative during that period. This is because the interim

government faced serious problem of legitimacy and popular acceptance in the country. Foreign countries were also sceptical about conducting business with the regime hurriedly put together by General Ibrahim Babangida before he left power in August 1993. The demise of the regime eclipsed on November 1993 when General Sanni Abacha took over power in the country.

9. Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has shown the trend in Nigerian foreign policy since independence in 1960 up to 1993. On a general note, Africa remains the centre-piece of the country's foreign policy throughout the period. It is however true, that the country's foreign policy at independence in 1960 was pro-British. The conservative pro-British foreign policy posture of the Balewa regime was radically altered as a result of the Biafra Civil War between 1967 and 1970. The civil war made Nigeria to cultivate friendly relations with her non-traditional friends such as the Soviet Union. In addition to this, Nigeria embraced the policy of good neighbourliness with her neighbouring francophone countries namely, Niger Republic, Benin Republic, Cameroun and Chad. It was within this context that Nigeria diverted the energy to the formation of the Economic Community of West African States in 1975. The collapse of the General Yakubu Gowon's regime in 1975 ushered in an era of dynamism in Nigeria's Foreign policy. To be sure, General Murtala Mohammed reiterated and pursued with vigour the afro-centric philosophy of Nigeria's foreign policy as affirmed in his Africa as come of age speech in Addis Ababa in 1976. The country during this period contributed significantly to liberation struggle in Africa and showed its hatred for neo-colonialism and the repressive policy of apartheid in South Africa. The assassination of General Murtala Mohammed in a failed coup attempt in February 1976 did not deter the regime from pursuing these objectives. General Olusegun Obasanjo that succeeded Murtala continued with the radical posture of the regime up to 1979.

The return to civilian rule in 1979 marked a slight shift in Nigeria's foreign policy. The

Afrocentric posture of the country's foreign policy was maintained, with further tilt towards ideological non-alignment. Nigerian foreign policy during this period was however, said to be characterised by indecision with apparent lack of initiative exhibited by previous regimes.

The military regime that ousted Shagari's regime in 1983 tried to reverse the dwindling trend in the country's foreign policy and project the image of the country positively in the international arena. Unfortunately, the regime collapsed in August 1985. The new regime led by General Ibrahim Babangida, embarked on far reaching internal restructuring that laid the foundation of its foreign policy thrust. Economic diplomacy was evidently emphasised during the Babangida regime. In addition to this, the country embarked on conflict resolution activities in Africa and more importantly within the ECOWAS sub region. The regime established the TAC scheme fashioned after the American Peace Corps Scheme to assist less developed African countries in filling their manpower gap.

It becomes imperative therefore, to conclude that despite domestic frustration and challenges, Nigeria has been able to actualise some of its foreign policy objectives since independence in 1960. The successes recorded in its struggle towards the complete liberation of African countries from the repressive grip of colonial rule testify to this fact. Above all, 'Economic Diplomacy' which is the new policy trust of the country's foreign affairs exemplified radical departure from previous regimes.

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