

## Africa as the Centre-Piece of Nigeria's Foreign Policy: An Overview

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### Abstract

The paper examines Nigeria's foreign policy in Africa in the context of her afro-centric posture. Afro-centrism has remained an integral part of the country's foreign policy since her independence in 1960. Reasons for the afro-centric nature of the country's foreign policy are advanced in the paper. Essentially, afro-centrism is consistent with the country's leadership role on the continent. This posture has given Nigeria worldwide visibility and recognition as the dominant power in Africa. However, there is a tendency on the part of successive governments of the country to waste a lot of the country's resources on other African countries without any element of reciprocity. This is a disservice to the country particularly the poor masses who cannot afford three good meals a day. The paper recommends a radical review of the country's foreign policy in favour of domestic economic reforms and development. Nigeria's membership of the Security Council on a permanent basis would go a long way in enhancing her image and power in Africa and even beyond. Most importantly, the country's foreign policy should be modified to reflect her national interest as well as the material needs and aspirations of the citizenry in keeping with the saying that "charity begins at home".

### Keywords:

Foreign Policy, Afro-centrism  
Nigerianism,  
Reciprocity in  
Foreign Relation

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### **Background to the Study**

To state that Nigeria is obsessed with the interest and material. Wellbeing of her sister African countries is to state the obvious. This is evident in the country's foreign policy formulations and execution right from the time of her First Republic up to the present time. Nigeria's self-image as more or less the most powerful country in Africa (especially in terms of population size and wealth), and hence the "natural" leader of the continent, has been the most propelling factor for putting herself in the forefront of African affairs since the attainment of her independence in 1960.

Accordingly, Africa has remained the centre-piece of her foreign policy from the inception of her independence to the present day. Nigeria's afro-centric posture can be adequately explained within the context of the power theory as a framework of analysis. The power theory relates to the elements of state power that are used by scholars of international relations to assess and compare the relative powers of states in the international community. Prominent among the elements are level of technological development, population, diplomacy, natural resources and economic power. Compared to other African countries, Nigeria is most blessed with these elements. This explains why Nigeria is widely regarded as the natural leader of Africa.

The possession of the elements of state power by a country does not necessarily imply a leadership position in a region. In view of this, Joseph Way as has warned against the bloated perception of Nigeria as Africa's greatest power on the mere assumption that she is blessed with an abundance of the elements of state power. As he put it:

*And even less true is the notion that such wealth, the object of our euphoria, can alone make for leadership...leadership abroad can never be sustained or .successful unless it is complemented by good leadership at home (Wayas,1979: 21).*

Nonetheless, there is no disputing the fact that Nigeria, despite certain imitations, is recognized even internationally as the dominant power in Africa.

*Thus, Shaw (1989:208) was emphatic when he said that Nigeria has always been primus inter pares in post-colonial Africa but international recognition of her power potential increased dramatically along with the price of oil in the mid 1970s. Overnight Nigeria's image underwent a transformation from one of a sleeping giant to one of OPEC major.*

Indeed, Nigeria's economic power, political will and diplomacy have made it possible for her to play a unique role in African affairs. Nigeria under the umbrellas of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations Organization (UNO) spearheaded the international crusade that paved the way for the independence of Zimbabwe, Angola, and Namibia. She also played a leading role in dismantling the apartheid regime in South Africa. All these are consistent with her afro-centric posture.

In all, Nigeria has been actively involved in helping to resolve both intra-African and extra-African problems, lending credence to the fact that Nigeria is indeed Africa's regional power. Becoming a permanent member of the Security Council is both necessary and desirable since that will put her in a better position to champion the cause of Africa both within Africa and in the international community.

But given the fact that the situation that initially necessitated the adoption of the afro-centric doctrine in the country's foreign policy has been pursued to its logical conclusion with the granting of independence to all colonial territories in Africa, is it not time for Nigeria to substitute afro-centrism with Nigerianism? Or how can the country's foreign policy makers still justify the continuity of afro-centrism in the country's foreign policy drive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? These posers constitute the main problem addressed in the paper.

### **Background of Nigeria's Afro-centric Posture**

Africa is the centre-piece of Nigeria's foreign policy with events making Southern Africa the immediate focus" (Herskovits, 1978: 186)

Herskovits observation about the place of Africa in Nigeria's foreign policy is apt. There can be no gainsaying the fact that African affairs constitute the focal point of Nigeria's foreign policy. This became unequivocally certain and palpable at the end of the country's 30-month civil war in 1970. Prior to that time, the commonwealth of which Nigeria became a full-pledged member on becoming independent in 1960, dominated her foreign policy calculations. It was the commonwealth, the world, and Africa in that order. The re-ordering in the early 1970s was essentially dictated by the lessons of the war. One of the lessons was the OAU's overwhelming support and sympathy for the Federal Government cause on the one hand, and the shocking vacillation of the country's so-called western allies on the other hand at the outbreak of the civil war. As Ofoegou (1978:27) notes:

*It was however the Nigerian civil war which completely removed the commonwealth from the dominating position it had occupied in Nigeria's foreign policy between 1954 and 1967 and replaced it with a new emphasis on Africa, a more realistic posture towards Europe and a genuine cultivation of the friendship of Russia and Eastern Europe*

It is in the pursuance of the afro-centric policy that Nigeria has since the early 1970s, continued to commit a lot of her resources and time to African affairs. Much of these resources had gone into helping to wipe out the remaining colonial vestiges in Southern Africa and the dismantling of the apartheid regime in South Africa. Akinyemi (1979: 63) has given a succinct account of Nigeria's commitment to African affairs during the Mohammed/Obasanjo regime:

*Seventy-five percent of the time and energy of the foreign office staff is consumed by African affairs. Ninety-five percent of the technical and financial assistance during this period was directed at the continent. Over 75% of the policy differences between Nigeria and other industrialized countries revolve around African issues, especially Southern Africa issues.*

Nigeria's afro-centric posture undoubtedly gained greater momentum during the Mohammed/Obasanjo regime (Akinyemi, 1979:154). The regime blazed the trail of its foreign policy activism in Angola (Akinyemi 1979:157). Thenceforth, anti apartheid activism became a major plank of Nigeria's foreign policy. As the then Nigeria's External Affairs Minister. Major General Garba (rtd) (1987:11) observes, "our action in Angola would epitomise this new orientation and emphasis (afrocentrism). Henceforth, Africa would be the centre-piece of our foreign policy...."

There is no doubt that the vigour with which Nigeria has been pursuing her afro-centric policy, particularly since 1975 had contributed in no small measure to the granting of independence to the oppressed peoples of Southern Africa by their respective white supremacist regimes. For example, Nigeria played a leading role in the events that culminated in the granting of independence to Angola, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and Namibia in 1975, 1980 and 1990 respectively. Besides, Nigeria's afro-centric dynamism contributed immensely to the dismantling of the apartheid system and the introduction of a non-racial democracy in the Republic of South Africa in April, 1994.

### **Reasons for Nigeria's Afro-Centric Policy**

Even though there have been some negative reactions at home to the country's apparent over-indulgence in her afro-centric foreign policy, there is a consensus in the academic circles that the policy is justifiable and worth embarking upon by Nigeria. Various reasons have been advanced by different scholars as to why Nigeria has been constrained to adopt the afro-centric posture more or less as an article of faith.

One, Gambari (1984), for example, has asserted that Nigeria accounts for 20% of Africa's total population, providing one out of every six persons in the entire black diaspora. "Therefore, Gambari (1984) argues, making Africa the pivot from which the wheel of our foreign policy radiates is only natural".

Two, Nweke (1985: 19) argues that afro-entrism could help the continent to achieve the ideals of pan-africanism with "a common ideological basis for the advancement both of national independence and collective security" Like Nkrumah of Ghana, Sir Balewa who later became the First Prime Minister of Nigeria had declared that independence for Nigeria would be incomplete without independence for all other African states. Nigeria's attitude in this regard has remained unchanged since her independence up to the present day. For example, General Gowon (rtd) in his days as the Nigerian head of state used to stress the urgent need to free at least one African territory in every three years.

Three, the afro-centric character of Nigeria's foreign policy is partly a response to the call for "the unity of African people in one independent political community, embracing all ethnic and national groups and free from political, economic and racial domination" (Nweke, 1985:19).

Although Balewa had rightly opposed Nkrumah's idea of a pan- African government on the ground that it was “premature” in the early sixties, he nevertheless acceded to the view that pan-Africans could provide a comfortable solution to Africa's problems (Gareau, 1962:480). Accordingly, since independence Nigeria has never wavered in her resolve to place Africa first in her foreign policy drive.

Four, Africa's security could be viewed to be coterminous with Nigeria's national security (Nweke 1985:20). This implies that a threat to the national security of Nigeria or that of any other African country would be a threat to the security of the entire continent as the destinies and solidarity of all African states are inextricably bound up. In view of this, Nkrumah (1961: xi) had argued that the essential fact remains that we are all Africans and have a common interest the independence of Africa. The call for an African High Command (AHC) by Nkrumah and other eminent African statesmen was inspired by the need to find a means for a collective African defence against possible extra-African aggression on the continent. For Nigeria, this point is particularly important since the country lays claims to the leadership of the continent. This then explains why Nigeria has been in the forefront of the African countries that have been brave enough to openly condemn foreign intervention in African affairs. While addressing the Khartoum Summit of the OAU in July 1978, for example, the then Nigeria Military Head of State, General Obasanjo (rtd) (Legum n.d.), warned *inter alia*.

*In the context of foreign intervention in Africa, there are three parties involved. These are the Soviets and other socialist countries, the western powers and we the Africans.... To the Soviets and their friends. I should like to say that having been invited to Africa in order to assist in the struggle and consolidation of national independence, they should not overstay their welcome. Africa is not about to throw off one colonial yoke for another.*

Nigeria's anti-colonial crusade and opposition to extra-African interventions in Africa manifested itself in her active support for the armed confrontations by the liberation movements against the white supremacist regimes in Southern Africa. Nigeria supplied arms, money, and other forms of material assistance to the liberation fighters in Southern Africa. At the continental level, a joint declaration was issued in 1965 to the effect that any act of external subversion would be collectively and firmly opposed by any means by the African states (Brownlie, 1971:17). Thus, afro-centrism as a doctrine could be seen as an integral part of the pan-African philosophy. This philosophy is expected to permeate the foreign policy of every African state. Nigeria's afro-centric posture can therefore be rightly said to conform the ideals of pan-Africanism. That Nigeria's inclination to pan-Africanism is outstanding in Africa is understandable in the sense that Nigeria is the natural leader of the continent. It was with this in mind that Sir Balewa said “Nigeria will have a wonderful opportunity to speak for the continent of Africa” (Ogwu 1986 :101).

Five, arising from the last point is another reason for Nigeria's afro- centric posture. This is that Nigeria's afro-centric posture is aimed at the total liberation of the African

continent (Nweke 1985:21). In this regard, Nigeria hopes to help eliminate all traces of imperialism and neo-colonialism on the continent by holding onto Africa as the corner stone of her foreign policy.

Six, an obvious reason for Nigeria's afro-centric posture is the country's perception of her self as the destined leader of the continent. This perception finds practical expression in the country's leading role in African affairs. This posture has been adopted by successive governments of the country since her independence in 1960, and it is informed by the country's disproportionately large population size and wealth. As Wright (1981:165) observes, "the common perception in the country (Nigeria) is to see Nigeria as Africa's natural leader given its predominant size and wealth". Internationally, Nigeria is indeed acclaimed as the beacon of Africa. For this reason, Herring had said: "from the standpoint of the west, the most acceptable forecast would be: as Nigeria goes so goes Africa" (As quoted in Akinyemi 1987:155).

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Nigeria has over the decades demonstrated beyond doubt an unparalleled determination to lead and speak for Africa. Nigeria sees herself and rightly so, as the country that is mandated by nature to play a leadership role in Africa. This perception hinges on the fact that by using the elements of state power as a yardstick for measuring the relative powers of states, Nigeria is clearly the most powerful country in continental Africa. The adoption of the afro-centric posture in her foreign policy is a clear testimony to the fact that Nigeria attaches paramount importance to what General Garba (rtd) once referred to as the "higher interests of Africa".

Unfortunately, Nigeria's afro-centric policy has yielded little or no benefit to her. Apart from the international recognition of her role and status in Africa, beneficiaries of her largesse, magnanimity and timely interventions in Africa scarcely show any form of appreciation to her. Zimbabwe, Angola, Namibia each of which became independent due partly to the financial and material assistance given to her by Nigeria turned their backs on Nigeria soon after their independence. Similarly, the Republic of South Africa which enjoyed immense material and diplomatic support from Nigeria in her quest for majority rule was one of the countries that spearheaded the campaign that eventually led to the expulsion of Nigeria in 1995 from the Commonwealth of Nations. All these are a source of considerable irritation to the Nigerian masses and government.

Consequently, many patriotic Nigerians have argued vehemently against the continuation of the country's afro-centric posture. For example, Bolaji Akinyemi has suggested the adoption of the doctrine of reciprocity in the country's foreign policy drive. This suggestion is consistent with the principle of *quid pro quo* by which a country's largesse to any country is reciprocated in one way or the other. Curiously enough, this principle is embedded in the foreign policies of the great powers. Thus, the so-called aid or loans often given to poor countries by such countries as the USA, Britain and France have both political and diplomatic implications for the recipients. This should be an eye opener to Nigeria.

By and large, Nigeria's perception or self image as the leading power in Africa is well founded. It is informed by the fact that apart from possessing a disproportionately large population size and wealth, Nigeria has always taken it upon herself to help restore peace to troubled spots in Africa. Besides, records show that Nigeria is a *status quo* mediator in intra-African conflicts. This was amply demonstrated in Liberia and Sierra Leone. These are clear testimonies to the fact that Nigeria demonstrates an unparalleled political will to lead and speak for Africa.

However, the characteristic behaviour of successive Nigerian leaders to get the country involved in virtually all domestic crises in Africa creates the illusion that Nigeria has all it takes to be the policeman of Africa. This is an illusion of *grandeur* for a country that has many domestic problems to contend with.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are pertinent:

1. In view of the critical importance of national interest in the formulation of a country's foreign policy and the increasing need for nation-building as well as economic development and the welfare of the Nigerian citizens, the time has come for the country to give the philosophy "Africa is the centre-piece of Nigeria's Foreign Policy" a hard look. For, a responsible government is known by how much it is able to satisfy the needs and yearnings of the citizens and not by how much it helps citizens of other countries.
2. Nigeria's African policy should proceed from a domestic setting that is in all considerations (national, moral, economic) supportive of the country's greatness and well-being of the citizenry. Enhancing the quality of life of the Nigerian citizens should take the centre stage in the country's foreign policy formulations and executions. This can be pursued effectively without abandoning Africa as the centre-piece of her foreign policy.
3. As Africa's regional power, it is necessary for Nigeria to increase her military capability profile in order to remain relevant in the power equation in Africa. Today, South Africa, Nigeria's archrival in Africa, is a nuclear power. This is a big challenge to Nigeria, and a compelling reason for her to acquire nuclear capability as soon as possible. This will go a long way in enhancing her military capability profile, her hegemonic potentials and status in Africa and the rest of the international community.
4. Nigeria should thrive towards becoming one of Africa's permanent members of the Security Council of the UNO. This will boost her image and capability as Africa's regional power.

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