

Nigerian Foreign Policy Thrust 1960 – 1979

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Abstract

Since independence, the guiding principle of Nigeria's foreign policy and the pursuit of its national interests, in both its bilateral and its multilateral relations, have remained a reflection of its perception of the international environment. A constant element that has remained central to Nigeria's foreign policy thrust has been Africa, with preoccupations concerning fighting colonialism, apartheid and the discrimination of black peoples in the African continent and elsewhere in the world. Moreover, in all of those endeavors, Nigeria seem to have focused more on its external relations with states and non-state actors alike. However, in 1988, Nigeria officially announced its commitment to economic diplomacy, a result of the lingering economic crisis and structural adjustment program at the time. This essentially led to not only certain shifts in the analysis of Nigeria's foreign policy after 1988, but also a recap that also triggered a review of current policies in the Fourth Republic. The focus of this article, therefore, is "Nigerian foreign policy Thrust 1960 – 1979". Qualitative approach was adopted as method of data collection and the findings manifests dynamism as a central feature of Nigerian foreign policy over time.

Keywords:

Independence,
Nigeria, Foreign
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Interest, Africa

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Background to the Study

The history of Nigerian foreign policy since 1960 has constantly been changing, though the principles guiding its foreign relations remain the same. Nigerian leaders are largely responsible for these unstable external relations. Since Nigeria's foreign policy is deeply rooted in Africa with strategic emphasis on political and economic cooperation, peaceful dispute resolution, and global nonalignment, Nigerian leaders also have their attention fixed on the successful implementation of these principles. However, the influence of personality on Nigeria's relations with other countries cannot be totally ignored as different leaders adopt different styles in conducting external relations.

Examining the personality of the leader both at the theoretical and practical levels is therefore important in understanding Nigeria's foreign policy. Again, analysis of Nigeria's foreign policy shows that her leaders operate within four “concentric circles” of national interest. The innermost circle represents Nigeria's own security, independence and prosperity and is centered on its immediate neighbours – Benin, Cameroon, Chad and Niger; the second circle revolves around Nigeria's relations with organizations, institutions and states outside Africa. With this in mind, each Nigerian head of state or president work to ensure that no single part is defected in pursuing the country's policy.

At independence, Nigeria as a sovereign state began to conduct her foreign relations under the political and governmental leadership of its Prime Minister, the late Alhaji (Sir) Abubakar Tafawa Balewa whose administration emphasized Africa to be centerpiece of Nigeria's foreign policy. His own foreign relation was pro-west particular with Britain, Nigeria's erstwhile colonial master. With the bloody military coup of January 15, 1966, the late Major General J.T.U Aguiyi Ironsi came to power only, to be killed in a counter coup staged six months later. This development brought the General Yakubu Gowon to power. Gowon borrowed a leaf from Balewa by being pro-West in his foreign affairs. He entered into agreement with Britain, the United States and other Europeans countries. However, his administration reluctantly allowed the Soviet Union to open its embassy in Lagos. The Gowon led Federal Military Government was sacked in a bloodless coup which led to the assumption of power by the late General Murtala Ramat Mohammed and the General (now Chief) Olusegun Obasanjo who was his econd in command and Chief of Staff Supreme Headquarters.

A Historical Review of Nigeria's Foreign Policy Thrust 1960 – 1979

Nigeria's foreign policies are conceived and formulated on the basis of the interest the nation desires to satisfy in her relations with other states. As a result of this, the country's foreign policy, concerns as enshrined in Section 19 (1) of the 1999 constitution are: (1) Respect for the Legal Equality, Political independence, Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity of all States; (2) Respect for the Principles of Non-Interference in the Affairs of other States; (3) Multilateralism; (4) Africa as the Centerpiece of Nigeria's Foreign Policy; and (5) Commitment to the Principles of Non-Alignment:

Respect for the Legal Equality, Political Independence, Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity of all States

This principle implies that Nigeria is committed to conducting her external affairs with other states in accordance with international laws. The principle often enables Nigeria to affirm its belief in the United Nations as the legitimate supra-national authority capable of guaranteeing a just world order, through its respect for, and execution of the decisions reached by the United Nations (UN). Therefore, Nigeria believed that abiding by and adhering to the dictates of international law and civilized rules of behavior is vital to guaranteeing the security of the newly independent but relatively weaker states within its sub-region in a world laden with intense competition between the eastern and the Western powers¹⁰. Perhaps another motivating factor was Nigeria's desire to assure its contiguous states (Benin, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon) and other states in Africa that the country would not at any point in time impose its authority on any of its neighbors in Africa. According to Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa: "We shall never impose ourselves upon any other country and shall treat every African territory, big or small, as our equal, because we honestly feel that it is only on that basis that peace can be maintained in our continent."¹¹ Sir Balewa's assurance to Nigeria's neighbors and the rest of Africa appears to have been ostensibly intended to prevent any of these nations from falling into the embrace of the then power blocs and, more importantly, to protect its hard-won independence and that of its contemporaries from the overtures being made by Dr. Kwame Nkrumah through his Pan African movement. Sir Balewa had argued that this idea would lead to a loss of sovereignty and as such return Africa to the pre-colonial age, noting further that "Nigeria was big enough and does not need to join others and that if others wish to join forces with the country; their legal standing and positions would be made clear to them in such a union"¹².

Respect for the Principles of Non-Interference in the Affairs of other States

The non-interference principle shows that Nigeria has respect for the sovereign independence of other states. Nigeria's readiness and desire not to interfere in internal disputes that could arise in other African countries, is in line with Nigeria's resolve to abide by the Charter of the United Nations, and this principle forms part of that charter. It is against the above backdrop that Nigeria in collaboration with other African states pressed for and secured the inclusion of this principle in the Charter of the Organization for African Unity. It must however be stated here that Nigeria's adoption of non-intervention principle has made it difficult for her to interfere in the internal affairs of other African States even when issues of human rights violation, foreign intervention in neighboring African states, and economic warfare by neighbors of Nigeria hurt the country's economy required limited intervention on the part of Nigeria¹³.

Multilateralism

Multilateralism as one of the basic principles of Nigeria's foreign policy portends that the country cannot act alone in the global environment. As a consequence of this principle, Nigeria has since independence demonstrated the spirit of co-operation and friendly relations among the nations, through her commitment to a host of international

organizations, like the United Nations (UN), Common Wealth of Nations, Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), African Union (UN), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to mention but a few. The support for and leadership in the establishment of some these regional organization has been influenced by the fact that for a country like Nigeria her commitment to working with other countries in the world would promote Nigeria's image, guarantee her protection, enable Nigeria pursue its interest and contribute to the common goals of solving global problems through collective actions of states. This explains why successive Nigerian leaders since independence views Africa as the centerpiece of the country's foreign policy. Indeed, in the pursuit of this Afro-centric foreign policy it has assisted liberation movements in various parts of the continent thereby dismantling Economic Community of West African State Monitoring group (ECOMOG) multinational around armed forces employed in the containment and the restoration of peace and order in war torn countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast, Mali, etc. Nigeria's Afro-centric philosophy has been criticized by scholars over the years for her naivety in restricting its foreign policy to Africa as its cornerstone.

Nigeria's commitment to the principles of Non-Alignment

The term 'Non-Alignment' coined by Indian Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in 1954 implied that Nigeria will remain neutral in the ideology warfare between the United States and the former Soviet Union. These rivalries were characterized by hostile propaganda, establishment of foreign military bases and blocs, restrictions on trade, especially raw material, restriction on social, scientific, and intellectual contact between Eastern and Western countries, and the development of destructive weapons such as the atomic and hydrogen bombs. An important aspect of this philosophy is that it emphasized first, that Nigeria must avoid identifying with any of the power blocs in the then-prevailing world system and second, that the country must maintain an independent posture and judgment on all issues brought before the (UN). Contrary to this, the government of Prime Minister Sir Balewa, the progenitor of the idea did little to respect it. Indeed, Prime Minister Sir Balewa, led Nigeria into signing the Anglo-Nigeria Defence Pact on 29th November 1960, which gave the government (an ally America) legal rights to establish military bases in Nigeria. The defense pact was however, abrogated on 22 January, 1962 following opposition mounted by Nigerians.

Nigeria foreign policy in the first Republic (1st October, 1960-15 January, 1966)

On 1st October, 1960, Nigeria attained independence from Britain with Tafawa Balewa as the country's Prime Minister, Nigeria proclaimed itself a federal Republic with Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe, as the country's first President on 1st October, 1963. In the same year the Mid-West Region was carved out of the Western Region bringing the total number of regions in the country to four. A series of events including the 1965 election crisis in Western Nigeria, perceived marginalization of minority ethnic groups and the clamor for state creation, the controversial 1963 national census, federal election as well as general insecurity across the country led to the collapse of Nigeria's first Republic on 15th January, 1966¹⁸.

Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (1 October 1960 – 15 January, 1966)

Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, held sway as Prime Minister and Affairs advocate of Nigeria from 1960 until 1961 when Hon. Jaja Wachuku became, the first sustained Minister of foreign Affairs and commonwealth Relation (later called External Affairs) from 1961 to 1965” the historical antecedent of identified foreign policy owe much to the pioneering effort of prime Minister Sir Balewa which identified African as thrust of Nigeria's foreign policy. This policy marked by a three concentric cycle has Nigeria policy preference for “good-neighborliness”¹⁹ Sir Balewa's regime which marked the foundation of Nigeria foreign policy and as actor in the international system is premised on the country's presence in notable international organization such as United Nations (UN) Organization of African Unity (OAU), and Commonwealth of nations²⁰ Sir Balewa's pursuit conservation foreign policy was dictate by some factors, which imposed server limits on possible radical posturing of Nigeria's political and economic alignment²¹.

A first glimpse of the shape which Nigeria's foreign policy would take was provided by Sir Balewa, on the occasion of the country's admittance as a ember of the UN's. in his acceptance speech, Sir Balewa declare:

It is the desire of Nigeria to remain friendly terms with all the nation and to participate activity in the work of the United Nations Organizations. Nigeria, by virtue of being the most populous country in West African has absolutely no territorial or expansionist ambitions. We are committed to uphold the principles upon which he UN's is founded. Nigeria hopes to work with other principles country for the progress of Africa and to also assist in bringing all African countries to a state of indepdence²².

Therefore, on 1 october, 1960, Sir Balewa upon becoming prime minister pronounced the following as the core principal of Nigeria's foreign policy: (1) Non- Alignment with any of the then existing ideological and military power blocs, especially North Atlantic Treaty organization (NATO) and the Warsaw pact; (2) respect for the legal equality, political impendence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of all state; (3) respect for the doctrine of non-interference in the domestic affair of other states; (4) seeking membership of both continental and global multilateral organizations based on their functional importance to Nigeria; and (5) the recognition of Africa as the centerpiece of Nigeria external relations. These principles were later to be adopted into section 19 of the country's 1960 independence constitution and have been reviewed and sustained over time in the 1999 constitution.

The sir Balewa Regime of 1960-1966 laid the foundation for making of Africa the centerpiece of Nigerian foreign policy. The first of the litany of Nigerians assertion of leadership role in Africa and pro-Africa foreign policy was exemplified in the Congo a few month after Nigerians independence in 1960. Nigeria actively supported for the UN peacekeeping operation financially, materially and provided troops to quell the disturbance in the Katanga province of the Congo. The troops stayed for four years there

from 1960-1964 to ensure that countries like Yugoslavia, Indonesia, UAR, Ghana, Guinea, Morocco and Mali withdrew their troops. Nigeria was one of the three countries that responded positively to the call by the then Secretary General of the United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld, for the increase of troops to fill the vacuum created by the withdrawal of the countries named above.²³

Another foreign policy thrust of Sir Balewa's administration was its membership of and commitment of regional and continental organizations. This buttresses the reason why Nigeria at African Unity since 1963 and Lake Chad Basin supported liberation movements across the continent by contributing substantially to the fund of the OAU liberation movements across the continent by contributing substantially to the fund of the OAU liberation committee. In another vein, the Balewa's administration spearheaded the expulsion of South Africa from the commonwealth in 1961 and the international Olympic Committee (IOC) refusal to extend invitation to South Africa to attend the 1964 Olympic Games held in Tokyo, Japan. The suspensions were intended to increase pressure on the apartheid regime to make reforms in its segregationist policies²⁴. He again offered a non-military assistance through administrative and medical staff training for the Provisional Angolan Independent Government of Holden Robert²⁵. The Sir Balewa government as a demonstration of its commitment to the defense of Africa's interest when in protest she broke diplomatic relations with France in January 1961 for carrying out an atomic bomb test in the Sahara Desert despite opposition of African states to the test.

Arguably, Sir Balewa's foreign policy thrust, had lots of conflicting component elements within the period. For instance, Sir Balewa's foreign policy thrust, had lots of conflicting component elements within the period. For instance, Sir Balewa is accused of failing to attend the maiden conference of the Non-aligned Movement in Belgrade; evasive over the establishment of formal diplomatic ties with the Sino-Soviet bloc until December 1961; acceptance of the Anglo-Nigeria Defence Pact until he was forced to abrogate it by students and the opposition; refusing to train armed militia for Angolan national fighters waging a war against Portuguese colonialists despite Nigeria's avowed resolve to rid the continent of colonialism²⁶.

Furthermore, despite professing his interest in the well-being and freedom of Africa and Africans, Sir Balewa's role in the Congo was criticized on grounds that he ignored the basic problem of neo-colonialism in the Congo only to support the UN in maintaining the colonial *status quo* for the sake of "law and order". Another test was on Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia). Sir Balewa took a conservative stance in the harsh apartheid rule and unilateral declaration of independence of Ian Smith. Generally, the Sir Balewa policy concern was primarily on decolonization of Africa and this brought him to terms with several liberation struggles; one of the focal roles of Nigeria being the support for any movement towards the total liberation of the continent. Sir Balewa is also criticized for negating his commitment to consider Africa wellbeing paramount because Nigeria failed to honour the OAU decision that member-states should break diplomatic relations with Britain for tacitly supporting Smith. In a matter that required revolutionary approach Sir

Balewa was rather cautious preferring to sea OAU and Britain down and settle the rift amicably²⁷.

The fact remains, however, that during the early years of independence, Nigeria was courted by both the US (representing the capitalist world) and the former Soviet Union (representing the communist world) for purely ideological reasons. Thus, the US and Britain were determined to ensure that Nigeria remained in the so-called “free world” as a showpiece of Western-style democracy, while the then USSR was keen on building a socialist society in Nigeria. That was why Nigeria was considered strategically important so much so that the US government set up a considered strategically important so much so that the US government set up a communication satellite tracking station in Kano in 1960, and the former Soviet Union tried to undermine US presence in Nigeria by subtly directing Nigeria's attention to the evils implicit in allowing western capitalists to control the economy. But these did not away Nigeria's position too far away from her pro-West stance²⁸.

Also, the response of the Sir Balewa administration to apartheid in South Africa and colonialism in Africa was generally lukewarm. The administration's efforts towards the eradication of these twin evils, on most occasions, never went beyond mere rhetoric. This was inspite of the fact that other African countries looked up to Nigeria to champion the continent's cause internationally. Yet, Nigeria could not asset herself forcefully even in the African continent despite her abundant human and natural resources. If anything, her much vaunted leadership role was timid and scornful²⁹. Thus, Sir Balewa's government opposed apartheid on the need to avoid, in the government's reasoning, the kind of chaos that attended the granting of independence to the then Congo in June, 1960³⁰. It was the Nigeria's courtship with Great powers, like Britain, the US and France, and Russia that partially paralysed Nigeria's foreign policy in the first Republic. However, Nigeria did criticized France over that country's nuclear tests in the Sahara. She even cut diplomatic relations with France over the incident. Britain was also criticized over its foot-dragging towards the racist government of Ian Smith in the then Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). In addition, Nigeria under Balewa, for security reasons, considered her policy and relations with her immediate neighbours as of utmost priority. That explains the government's role in the establishment of the Chad Basin Commission and the Niger River Commission in 1964. In later years, these gave birth to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)³¹

Indeed, the colonial legacy which restricted the policy options of the immediate post-independence leaders, the relative poverty of the country at the time, the lack of experience in international affairs, the conservative outlook of the Prime Minister, Sir Balewa and other members of his cabinet, and serious domestic divisions which led the regions to open different consulate abroad are some of the reasons that have been advanced for the low-profile foreign policy³².

Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi (29 January, 1966 – 29 July 1966)

Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi who emerged as Head of State and Commander-in-Chief, in the aftermath of 15 January, 1966 abortive *coup d'etat* led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu sustained the Foreign Policy objectives of Prime Minister, Sir Balewa's he inherited. To this end, Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi foreign policy thrust like his predecessor had his attention focused on the liberation of Africa from the last vestiges of colonialism and racial domination, and the development of the different countries and continent in general. The African-centeredness of Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi's regime foreign policy was clearly articulated by him shortly after he came to power:

In the whole sphere of Nigeria's external relations, the government attaché the greatest importance to our African policy. We are aware that because of our population and potentials, the majority opinion in the civilized World looks up to us to provide responsible leadership in Africa; and we realize that we shall be judged, to a very large extent by the degree of success or failure with which we face up to this challenge which this expectation throws on us. We are convinced that whether in the Political, Economic or cultural sphere, our destiny lies in our role in the continent of Africa³⁴.

In promoting a culture of peace and the African spirit of brotherliness, Nigeria's contributions to the UN shortly after independence was the deployment of troops for the peacekeeping operation in Congo. Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi declared the continuation of the country's belief in cordial relationship with other states, non-interference and caution in intervention in African crisis. He assured the country's allies both in Africa and the world that his foreign policy would retain the principles of non-alignment and good neighbourliness. Hence Ray posits that: All that it did in the area of Foreign Policy was largely to reassure all Nations about Nigeria's commitment to all previous international obligations and commitments, plead with foreign investors to continue investing in Nigeria; to close Nigeria's regional offices overseas and to stop the regions from sending economic commissions abroad³⁵.

In spite of Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi cordial relations with western powers, He openly criticized those countries that supported colonial rule and issues bordering on racism in the continent. The significant impact of the regime's foreign policy centered on her aggressive confrontation with the colonial and minority regimes in South Africa. In line with the decision of OAU made in 1963 not to allow Portuguese mission in member states as a result of Portugal's brutal colonial policy in Africa, the Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi regime terminated diplomatic relations with Portugal when she shut down Portuguese mission in Lagos. The regime in addition declared white South Africans and Portuguese illegal immigrants in Nigeria³⁶.

It is worth mentioning that Nigeria role in world affairs can be accessed in its active participation serving as representative on the committees of specialized agencies and a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. In a similar vein, Major

General Aguiyi-Ironsi's regime signed an agreement with the European Economic Community (EEC) formally establishing Nigeria as an associate to the EEC. The agreement placed Nigeria as the 19th and biggest African country and the first English-speaking Commonwealth country to be associated with the EEC. Under Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi, International Organizations like the Commonwealth, the Organization of African Unity, the Non-aligned Movements among other organizations' remained a major channel for the initiatives on liberation, but bilateral material assistance to liberation movements and other diplomatic channels also grew in importance.

One significant development under the leadership of Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi in the field of foreign policy was his convening of the Ambassadors' conference held at Lagos June 1966 aimed at re-examining Nigeria's foreign policy. Nonetheless, the administration's preoccupation with domestic political instability and the transient reign of the regime hindered it from formulating any definite foreign policy country. Undeniably, an objective evaluation of Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi's regime and the socio-political circumstances surrounding his emergence as Head of State and Commander-in-Chief would be best appreciated for the limited performance in the area of foreign policy. Arguably it was Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi's policies which culminated to ethnic animosities that led to his overthrow in July 1966 by largely northern military officers notably Col. Murtala Mohammed, Col. Joe Akahan and Col. T.Y. Danjuma. This second *coup d'etat* established the leadership of Lt. Col. (later General) Yakubu Gowon³⁷ who held power until July 1975.

The brief interregnum that ushered in the regime of Major General Aguiyi Ironsi, following the Nigerian military coup of 15 January, 1966, led by Major Kaduna Nzeogwu, saw his government pursue essentially the same objectives that characterized Nigeria's foreign policy from independence³⁸. This was based on Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi's world view and perception of the hierarchy of Nigeria's interests, in relation to the concepts of solidarity and national interest as the philosophical building blocks of Nigeria's foreign policy. In all, it can be argued that the timid and moderate foreign policy that had become the hallmark of Sir Balewa's administration equally persisted under Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi's regime. Consequently, three main factors led to Nigeria's shift away from a

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