

NIGERIA FOREIGN POLICY AND NATIONAL INTEREST

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Abstract

There is no doubt that the national consensus which has emerged in the support of the broad objectives and national interest reflects and underscores in the part the objective national cognitive self perception by the Nigerian foreign policy elite of the position of Nigeria as the most populous black state in the world and of her role as the most powerful and influential state in Black Africa. The specific definition, interpretation, elaboration or amplification of these objectives and interests has, of course, always been the prerogative and responsibility of the government of the day.

Introduction/Background

The priority and issues of Nigerian foreign policy have been constitutently be reinstated by different regimes in Nigeria especially during the military era, and these issues are: the abolition of apartheid in South Africa, the enhancement of Nigeria's relations with member countries of the European Economic Community (EEC) the United States, the Soviet Union, and with other major industrialized countries to increase the flow of foreign investments and capital into Nigeria, and continued support for international organizations, such as the Economic Community of West African State (ECOWAS), the African Union (AU), and non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Relations with other African States constitute the cornerstone of Nigerian foreign policy.

According to Ofogebu (1987) the Ministry of External Affairs was directly responsible for foreign policy formulation and implementation. Because matters were usually left in the hands of the minister and his officials, foreign policy positions could change radically from one minister to another, depending on the ministers orientation. In addition to the minister's immediate staff, there was small foreign policy elite' comprising other government officials, interest group leaders, people from academia, top military officers, religious leaders and journalists. This elite exerted indirect influence through communiqués and press releases, as well as direct pressure on the government. In 1986, a conference was held to which every stratum of this elite was invited to review Nigeria's foreign policy and recommended broad policy frameworks for the 1990s and beyond.

Olusanya and Akindele (1986) opined that several factors conditioned Nigeria's foreign policy positions. First, the ethnic and religious mix of the country required cautious positions on some issues, such as policy towards Israel. Nigeria found it difficult to restore diplomatic ties with Isreal, and when it did, it was reluctantly done because of Muslim opposition and sympathy with the rest of the Arab Muslim world. Second, Nigeria's legacy as an ex-British colony, combined with its energy-producing role in the global economy, predisposed Nigeria to be pro-

western on most issues despite the desire to maintain a nonaligned status to avoid neocolonialism. Several regimes were pro-western which reinforced by Nigeria's economic diplomacy, which involved negotiating trade concessions, attracting foreign investors and rescheduling debt repayment to Western creditors. Third, country's membership in and commitment to several international organizations, such as the United Nations and bodies mentioned earlier, also affected foreign policy positions. Fourth, and most importantly as the most populous country in Africa and the entire black race. Thus, Nigerian external relations have emphasized African issues, which have become the avowed cornerstone of foreign policy.

These factors they maintained have caused certain issues to dominate Nigerian foreign policy across various governments, but each government has had distinctive priorities and style. During the 1950s, and 1960s, Nweke (1986) maintained that foreign policy was aimed at proper behavior in the international system, and British authorities played a major role in Nigerian foreign relations. Consequently, the Balewa government stressed world peace, respected sovereign equality, and maintained nonalignment based on friendship with any country that took a reciprocal position after the fall of the First Republic, critics asserted that the government had been too pro-Western and not strong enough on decolonization or integration, and that the low profile had been embarrassing. Nonetheless, Gowon continued to keep a low profile by operating within the consensus of the AU and by following routes of quiet diplomacy.

Nigeria/Biafra war marked a distinct break in Nigerian foreign policy. The actions of various countries including international bodies during the war increased, awareness of the alignments within Africa and the appreciation of the positive role the AU could play in African affairs. Whereas while-dominated African countries had supported Biafra, the AU sided with the federation by voting for unity. The AU stance proved helpful for Nigerian diplomacy. Nigeria first turned to the Soviet Union for support after the west refused to provide arms to the federation, and after the war, a less pro-Western stance was maintained. At the same time, Africa remained Nigeria's top priority in the mid 1960s to 1970s, attention focused on the liberation of southern Africa, on the integration of ECOWAS, and on the need for complete economic independence throughout Africa. These goals were included in the 1979 and 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (see Section 19 CFRN, 1979 and 1999) promotion economic, social and cultural liberation of Africa, international cooperation, and elimination of racial discrimination.

Objectives of Nigerian Foreign Policy

The principal objective of Nigeria's foreign policy, indeed that of any country, according to Olusanya (1986) is to promote and protect the country's national interests in its interaction with the outside world and relationships with specific countries in the international system. He further stressed that there is a general agreement in Nigeria that these national interests consists of:

- (i) The defense of the country's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity

- (ii) The restoration of human dignity to black men and women all over the world, particularly the eradication of colonialism and white minorities rule from the face of Africa
- (iii) The creation of the relevant political and economic conditions in Africa and the rest of the world which will not only facilitate the preservation of the territorial integrity and security of all African countries but also foster national-self reliance in African countries.
- (iv) The promotion and improvement of the economic well-being of the Nigerian citizens and
- (v) The promotion of world peace with justice.

There is no doubt that national consensus which has emerged in support of these broad objectives which reflects and underscores in the part the objective national cognitive self-perceptive by the Nigerian foreign policy elite of the position of Nigeria as the most populous black state in the world and of her as the most powerful and influential state in Black Africa. Note that the specific definition, interpretation, elaboration or amplification of these objectives and interests has, of course, always been the prerogative and responsibility of the government of the day.

From 1960 to date, Nigeria has had at the national level fourteen different governments led by Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Major-General Aguiyi-Ironsi, General Yakubu Gowon, General Murtala Mohammed, Alhaji Shehu Shagari, Major – General Muhammadu Buhari, General Ibrahim Babangida, Chief Ernest Shonekan, General Sani Abacha, General A. Abubakar, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, Alhaji Umar Musa Ya'adua, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Azikiwe Jonathan. But each and every one of them, the conduct of Nigeria's external relations, has been publicly declared to be guided by the same well-established principles. The first is non-alignment, a foreign policy principle which rejects formal military alliance with and routine political support for the west or the east or any other for that matter.

There is however, hardly any doubt that Sir Abubakar's, government (1960-1966) did not practice the policy of non-alignment it publicly declared. Even though Sir Abubakar bowed down to public pressure and in 1962 abrogated the controversial Anglo-Nigerian Defence pact under which Nigeria granted the United Kingdom "unrestricted over flying and air staging facilities in the Federation" and "landing fees for the use of civil airfields in the Federation" (Idang 1970), pro-Westernism largely characterized Nigeria's foreign policy between 1960 and 1966. (Philips 1964).

Strands in Nigeria's Foreign Policy

Olusanya and Akindele were of the view that Africa has become the cornerstone of Nigeria's foreign policy, and quite rightly so. Over the years, broad strands seem to have emerged in the conduct of the country's diplomacy, the first is support for the AU, arising from the conception of the organization as undisputably the foremost continental machinery for the articulation of African interest, aggregation of African demands, harmonization of African policies and conduct of African diplomacy vis-à-vis the rest of the world. This unflinching support has an

historical base and underpinning which continues to remind successive administrations of the continuing imperative challenge and rewarding table of strengthening and improving on the continents institutional structure for political development, modernization and cooperation whose foundation Sir Abubakar's government played a major role in establishing between 1960 and 1963 (Elias, 1965). Successive Nigerian governments have given political, financial and diplomatic support to the AU, particularly in the aftermath of the strong diplomatic support the organization gave to Nigeria during the latter's domestic war of unity between 1967 – 1970. Consistent with and related to this national cognitive perception of the centrality of the AU in Africa's political and economic milieu has been the building-up of consensus and respectability for the view that solutions to inter-state and intra-state problems in Africa should be sought within the framework of the established principles, processes and machinery of the AU before such problems are referred to the UN. It is not that Nigeria believes that the UA necessarily takes precedence over the UN in her foreign policy agenda and calculation in any case, her view that a regional problem should first of all be referred to a regional organization, where one exists, is expressly endorsed by Article 52 of the UN charter (Akindele 1976)

National Interests vis-à-vis Nigerian Foreign Policy

The definition of what constitute "National Interest" is very problematic because scholars from different backgrounds and orientation had defined it in their own way. It should be noted that national interests of Nigeria are clearly stated in the preamble to the Nigerian constitution. According to Osuntokun (2008) these interests include the building of an egalitarian, democratic, security, self-reliant fair and just society where all enjoy the basic freedoms under democratic governance. These concepts are a carry over from Nigeria's constitutional struggle for independence and development. Nigeria inherited from liberal political heritage of the western world. Added to this is the fact of Nigeria's many tongues, political and cultural plurality. For the republic of Nigeria to endure she must develop a community of interests to bind together all stakeholders in the unity of the country.

Democratic governance, infrastructural modernization and economic opportunities must be vigorously pursued to obviate the angst against the state by unemployed youth and other marginalized elements in the society. Ways must be found to practice fiscal federalism without abandoning the idea of even development. A two party system will however provide the opportunity for full participation in governance based on freedom of choice. Nigeria is not a nation yet but a multinational state. To transform into a nation, Nigeria must build a community of interests between individual interests and national interests, so that citizens can have a sense of nationalism necessary for building the Nigerian nation. All of these according to Osuntokun mean national interest.

On the other hand, Aluko (1981) defines Nigeria's national interest as consisting of six important elements in descending order of priority.

- (i) Self-preservation of the country
- (ii) Defense and maintenance of the country's independence

- (iii) Economic and social well being of the people
- (iv) Defense, preservation and promotion of the ways of life, especially their democratic values,
- (v) Enhancement of the country's standing and status in world capitals, especially in Africa and
- (vi) Promotion of world peace.

He is careful to identify the first three as the 'vital' national interest that can in no circumstances be compromised. More importantly, he is careful to link them to the national capability for achieving these goals, his aim being to demonstrate how the forces generated by the domestic structure and the external and psychological environments can act as constraining or promoting factors.

One of the presuppositions of Nigeria's foreign policy, Nweke (1986) noted, is said to apply to democratic foreign policies generally; but which in Nigeria is carried to the point of naivety, concerns techniques. There seems to be pathological belief among Nigerian foreign policy matters, gleaned from these sources, that relation between countries must always be conducted in international organizations, such as the UN, AU and ECOWAS, which leads the equally pathological tendency to rely solely on diplomacy as a weapon against adversary states.

This orientation finds its most familiar embodiment in what has come to be the characteristically Nigerian refusal to go to war, or intervene in situations, where the vital interest of the country is at stake, and instead to use the diplomatic methods of arbitration, negotiation, and mediation for the resolution of conflicts between her and her adversaries. Bakassi Peninsula debacle is a case in point. The proneness of Nigerian governments to seek moral justification for foreign policy issues that can be justified at a lower level cannot be explained except against the background of this orientation. The use of economic weapon, military strength, or a combination of both, has tendered to be de-emphasized as instruments for foreign policy even when as in conflict with Cameroun, Chad, Libya Benin etc, the situations demanded the use of these options.

Conclusion

Unity has always been our mantra. There is nothing wrong in this. National unity, democracy, fiscal federalism and national unity according to Osuntokun are the bedrock of national interest especially emerging nation like Nigeria. Therefore, national unity is our national interest. It is also in the interest of all black people that the largest concentration of black people under one sovereignty should succeed as their own "Japan" a scenario that convinced Asians that they could compete and beat the white people would suffer the racial slur and slight and we will be seen as being less human and at the bottom of the learning curve.

But in this strive for national unity everybody must be made to feel they have a stake in it. It must not be elite driven. Ordinary people must be cultivated and enlisted in the national movement. The strategy of doing this must include eradication of poverty through massive public works, secondly through creation of wealth by provision of investment friendly environment operating a regime of rule of

law. So it must be a combination of free enterprise and state intervention that would be necessary to create “a people’s Republic” that we can all be providing and that we can all build and nurture together. This “People’s Republic” would not only take care of the present but should endure for the future so that there is no disconnect between the state and the people as well as the next generation.

Once this happens, we will not have to engage in the sterile debate about national unity. The absence of an enduring political and economic edifice will call into question whether individual interests can be harmonized with national interest. A nation is not just the land, but the people. If individual interests cannot be realized within the super structure of the state, then philosophically speaking the state is of no relevance to the people. Our people must not be forced to make choice between individual or group interests and that of the state, there should be no option between what is good for Nigeria and what is good for individuals and groups ethnic groups. Because man in most cases is driven by individual self interest, if he feels this interest can be realized only at the group level rather than at the national level, he will make rational choice.

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