

## **Africa the Centre-Piece of Nigeria's Foreign Policy: To What End?**

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### **Abstract**

Nigeria since independence, has engaged in relations with other countries. These relations have been guided by a carefully crafted philosophy as encapsulated in its foreign policy. The philosophy upon which Nigeria's foreign policy is anchored is that of Africa as its centerpiece. This philosophy was developed and maintained for the most part of the country's existence as a sovereign entity since 1960. It is against this background that the country has remained forthcoming in coming to the aid of other African Countries faced with challenges of colonial domination, civil wars, financial dilemma and even technical deficiencies. Apart from the Country's contribution in the form of funds mostly to Southern African Countries fighting Colonial Domination, Nigeria has through its peace keeping activities promoted peace and security in the West African Sub-region and other parts of Africa. The technical aid corps initiated by Nigeria has also assisted some African countries with key technical services. This has cost Nigeria billions of dollars. It has also claimed lives of many of its citizens engaged in peace keeping operations. Unfortunately, the Country has no gain to show for its unwavering commitment to African countries. This is why the paper advocates for a rethink of the Africa centerpiece postulation of Nigeria's foreign policy. As an alternative its foreign policy philosophy should be revised to accommodate mainly the interest of Nigeria and Nigerians.

**Key Words:** International Relations, Foreign Policy, Africa Centerpiece, Nigeria, Africa

## **Introduction**

Nigeria like all other countries of the world does not live in a vacuum. It operates within a defined territorial boundary side by side with other countries of the world. The natural tendency of lack of self-sufficiency which necessitates and thus, engenders some form of interaction between and among other political units like Nigeria brought to light the idea of International Relations (Rosamond 2002 cited in Saka, 2012). These relations could be sub-regional (Nigeria and other West African countries), Continental (France with other countries of Europe) or between and among countries from different continents e.g. Cameroon with Argentina.

Central to these relations is the idea of national interest. The desire by countries to maximize the achievement of their needs motivates and guides the nature and pattern of interaction with other countries of the world (Saka, 2012). While there is a general desire by all countries to maintain and promote the territorial integrity and advance their sovereignty, however, there are other non-generic demands which constitute national interest for different countries.

It could be cited for example that while Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari has travelled to many countries of the world with a view to boosting the image of the country and encouraging foreign investment, the memorandum of understanding signed between the Nigerian Government and the China with a view to making available to Nigerians, especially international traders, the Chinese currency to reducing reliance on the American Dollar thereby enhancing the value of the Naira may contrast sharply with the America's interest in ensuring that Nigeria devalues its currency. In this regard, while there is the universality of national interest in the area of peace, territorial integrity and protection of individual country's sovereignty, there are other country-specific issues that may form part of state's national interest.

Accordingly, it must be noted that the pursuit of national interest in the course of interaction between and among countries is conducted via the instrumentality of foreign policy. While foreign policy may be viewed as the opposite of domestic policy, others view it as the extension of the later. In any case, foreign policy provides the framework within which countries pursue their interest at the international level (Omosho, 2015). It is thus, cogent to note that, the attainment of a country's national interest may inadvertently have a direct consequence on how sound its foreign policy is, and the strategy that guides its implementation. It is in this regard that developed countries of the world like the U.S.A and Britain are considered to have developed, over the years, a robust foreign policy agenda which is implemented by very sound and professional diplomats.

In Nigeria, the issue of international relations has been taken seriously by successive governments since its independence in 1960. This could not be divorced from the need to promote the development of the country and to improve the living conditions of its people. However, because of crisis of governance that have confronted the Nigerian state over the years, international relations have been viewed as an exclusive arena that seeks to promote the interest of the ruling elites as against that of its people (Jega, 2010). Nigeria's national interest could simply be regarded as purely the interest of its leaders and as such, the country's foreign policy has been viewed as a device for the promotion of elite interest at the international system. While the veracity of this claim is not within the scope of this paper, some information to be provided in the course of this it may shed more light in this regard.

This paper thus, provides an overview of the Afro-centric focus of Nigeria's foreign policy and its justification. The paper also located the cost of this Africa-Centered Approach of Nigeria's foreign policy. This is captured in five sections into which the paper is divided. The first section

deals with the introduction followed by a conceptual clarification of foreign policy. In addition, the paper shall look at Nigeria's foreign policy before delving into the justification of its African focus. The subsequent section captures the cost of the African Centered nature of Nigeria's foreign policy and it concludes with a way forward.

### **Foreign Policy: A Conceptual Clarification**

It is important to state at the onset, that the concept of foreign policy defies a generally acceptable definition (Omosho, 2015). This is why for example, Fafowora (2011) noted that foreign policy deals with the planned course of action and strategies that are devised by a country's decision makers that seeks to manipulate actors in the international system with the goal of achieving national interest. Foreign Policy is conditioned by environmental or systemic characteristics, actions by others, which impinge on the interest or values of a state or group of states, and domestic social and economic needs (Pine, 2011). Adding to the foregoing, the following quotation may suffice:

Foreign Policy is essentially the instrumentality by which states influence or seek to influence the external world and to attain objectives that are in conformity with their perceived national interest..... In summation, foreign policy is all about formulating, designing and directing state's policy towards achieving its goals and objective realities that cannot be attain within its domestic domain (Omosho, 2015:407).

The above quotation likens foreign policy to a conscious plan by governments of states, crafted to pursue identified goals for the betterment of its people. A country's foreign policy represents the totality of objectives, orientation and actions which influence it in the quest to cope with its

external environment. More comprehensively, Lamido (2012) have this to say about foreign policy:

Foreign policy comprises of the totality of a country's perceptions, attitudes and behavior on issues and towards other states in the international system at any given time. It is also a reflection of the country's past and immediate political, economic, social and cultural circumstances at the domestic level. In other words, what may be defined as the foreign policy of any country at any given time, is the expression of its domestic policies in the international system (Lamido, 2012).

A look at the above quotation reveals an attempt to broaden the understanding of foreign policy. This the author does, by relating it to domestic policy. In this regard, a close look at the domestic policy of a country may provide a clear picture of what it's foreign policy looks like. In general, therefore, while there is no generally conceptualized notion of foreign policy, there is however, a general thrust which sees foreign policy as a set of expectations and a combination of strategies that guides the conduct of states in their interaction with other actors in the international system. The importance of this dimension of a nation's grand strategy is aptly captured by Kurt London, when he asserted that foreign policy may be called the father of all things in International Relations (London, 1965). This perception is corroborates Wallace's (1971) stance on foreign policy, viewed as that critical "area of politics which bridges the all-important boundary between the nation state and its international environment" (Wallace, 1971). Therefore, according to Olusanya & Akindele (1986) the over-riding objective of any country's foreign policy is to promote and protect that "country's national interests in its interaction with the outside world and relationship with specific countries in the international system". This Nigeria and other countries have tried to demonstrate in their external relations

## Foreign Policy in Nigeria

As it is the case with many countries of the world, Nigeria since independence operated its foreign policy with some degree of success at some point, and at other times, its foreign policy has been greeted with failure. It is in this regard, that Nigeria's foreign policy is viewed as the goals and objectives pursued by the government using certain tools to achieve these goals and objectives with regards its relations to primarily other countries and some other actors in the international system (Bola 2004, cited in Omotosho, 2015). Nigeria's foreign Policy has evolved over the years. The Country, over the years, has pursued similar national interest and thus, maintained the same foreign policy safe for some slight modifications and differing strategies of implementation.

From the administration of Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1960 through various military administration and under the present civilian administration, they have all pursued the same national interest which include: The defence of our sovereignty, Independence and territorial integrity; the promotion of equality and self-reliance in Africa and the rest of the developing world; The promotion and defence of human dignity, especially the dignity of the black men, and the defence and promotion of world peace and security (Omotosho, 2015:411).

The recurring nature of Nigeria's foreign policy is captured in its various constitutions from 1960 through to the 1979 and the 1999 constitutions respectively. Section 19 of the 1979 and 1999 constitutions respectively set out the principles of Nigerian Foreign Policy to include – sovereign equality of all states, respect of territorial integrity and independence of other states, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, the principle of non-alignment to any geopolitical power bloc and the commitment to Africa as the corner stone and nerve-center of

Nigeria's foreign policy (Omotosho, 2015). It is around these principles that the successes and failures recorded in the course of implementing Nigeria's foreign policy could be explained. Although currently, there are no indications that Nigeria's foreign policy is doing well, there was an era where it was adjudged as having prospered with accomplishments. "Indeed Nigeria's foreign policy has had a glorious past which gave joy, satisfaction and hope to Nigerians, Africans and Blacks in Diaspora" (Saliu, 2010:210). This could be seen when Nigerians were admired and given red carpet treatment all over the world. Also Nigerians were not subjected to degrading jobs and the value of the naira could compete favourably among other western capitalist currencies, the resources of the country was used to assist needy countries and Nigeria played critical role in the decolonization process of most African Countries. The role of Nigeria in peace keeping operations starting from Congo in the 1960s and down to the peace keeping operations in Liberia, Sierra Leone and many other African countries. This spiraled the image of Nigeria and earned it a place not only as a hero in Africa but also as a strong global force (Garba, 1987). This was due to the commitment of Nigerian leaders at the time and the way and manner Nigeria's foreign policy guided the conduct of the state in international affairs.

However, in the 1980s particularly during the regime General Ibrahim Babangida, Nigeria's image abroad began to plummet and dwindle. This is not unconnected with the flagrant corruption, abuse of human rights and the aborted June 12, 1992 general elections which presented Nigeria to the global community as an unserious country. This was to be made worse after General Sani Abacha took over the reins of power in a palace coup that saw Ernest Shonekan handing over power to the former. Advanced fee fraud, impunity, killings and plans for self-succession among others earned Nigeria a suspension from the common wealth and series of sanctions especially from western capitalist countries. General Abacha responded by

cutting off ties with the west and sought for partners from the East (Saliu, 2010). This was to set the negative foundation for the failure of Nigeria's foreign Policy.

In the wake of this obvious collapse in the image of Nigeria internationally, the return to civil democratic rule in 1999 attempted to remedy the situation by the introduction of popular programmes and policies like the fight against corruption, war against human trafficking and drug trafficking, economic diplomacy, citizen diplomacy among others. These policies did not seem to help the country. This could be as a result of the intensified and bloated corruption perpetrated by different administrations since 1999, the lack of transparency in governance, rigged elections and the elites' dominance of the political space. It is in this regard that Saliu avers:

The major fallout of the declining fortunes of Nigerian foreign policy is the contempt with which the country is being held. It seems that the name Nigeria now invokes anything negative in the international system. At every forum and occasion, American officials now fancy berating Nigeria, especially for fouling attributes. Of recent, Nigeria has received unabated bashing from the USA even on the country's soil. Its either the USA is criticizing Nigeria on governance or economic management (Saliu, 2010:216).

This why Nigeria's foreign policy has been seen to have been engulfed by stress. This stress manifest in terms of low returns on investment, the battered image of Nigeria and the wrong perception and interpretation that often accompany every decision or action taken by Nigerians and Nigeria in international relations. Although the 2015 general elections in Nigeria that saw the introduction and deployment/use of the card reader which assisted in no small measure towards enhancing the credibility of the election and the democratic standing of the country internationally is a plus for Nigeria's image abroad. The emergence of a president from an



opposition party and the goodwill and recognition enjoyed by President Muhammadu Buhari could also count in favour of the country. Nigeria was accepted by the global community as a serious country whose leadership is committed to turning the fortunes of the country around. This has greatly promoted the foreign policy standing of Nigeria. However, events that followed few years of the Buhari's administration has left the international community disturbed and more so Nigerians. The uncharacteristic leap and soaring of protracted challenges mostly in the area of security, corruption, poor governance amidst resource shortages linked to crippling crude oil prices at the international market and the dreaded corona virus has once again dashed the hope of this country. This has attendant consequences on not only policy at the home front but also foreign policy. This is because the Country has lost another opportunity to prove to itself and the international community that it is not only a country with huge prospects but also one capable of asserting itself as a continental leader. Thus, there is still a lot to be done to return Nigeria's foreign policy to its glorious days. The next segment focuses on the African-built foundation of Nigeria's foreign policy.

### **The Africa-Centered Posture of Nigeria's Foreign Policy**

Commenting on the centrality of Africa to Nigeria's foreign Policy Balewa & Epelle (1964) noted that "We Belong to Africa and Africa must claim first attention in our external relations". It is in this regard that Omotosho (2015:409) claims that "Thus, successive governments have had to carve out their foreign policies, basically with focus on Africa making the foreign policy of Nigeria a unique and dynamic one". Referring to Nigeria, Saliu observed that:

The foreign policy is also distinguishable in terms of the commitment shown to the African continent. The country seeks to promote the unity and solidarity of African States and also to promote the

economic well-being of Africans. Nigeria has attempted to do this by committing herself to the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 and the African Union (AU) in 2002. She has also been serving as the spokesperson for Africa at all major Global fora. Notable in this regard, was the goal of securing debt relief for African States, which became a reality in 2005 for some African countries, including Nigeria (Saliu, 2010:209).

Another clear demonstration of the Africa – Centered focus of Nigeria’s foreign policy could be explained in terms of its obvious commitment to the fight against colonialism and the support for liberation struggles in many Africa states.

Nigeria’s foreign Policy profile rose significantly due to its commitment to and assistance to liberation struggles in Southern Africa during this period- in recognition of which it earned membership in the Frontline States as well as chairmanship of the UN Anti-Apartheid Committee (Jega, 2010:4-5).

Explaining further the role of Nigeria in the independence of African states, Saliu (2010) argued that Nigeria was committed to the independence of Africa as a whole and viewed any form of colonial intrusion on any African state as threat to Nigeria. That is why the independence of Guinea Bissau in 1973, Zimbabwe in 1980, Angola in 1975, Namibia in 1990 and South Africa in 1994 among others could not be discussed without identifying the role of Nigeria in it. Biyi Adegboroye in his analysis painted Nigeria’s foreign policy in the following words:

..... Nigeria designed what became the nation’s foreign policy focus for decades. Referred to as the Balewa doctrine, Nigeria’s first Prime Minister, Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa said Africa shall be the corner stone of Nigeria’s foreign policy, and safe for little variations, it has remained so. From the Afro-centricism of Nigeria’s foreign policy of the 1960s, she moved to Africa being the

centerpiece, and after centerpiece came economic diplomacy (Adegboroye, 2011).

Proceeding from the above, there is also the obvious commitment of Nigeria in securing and restoring peace to war ravaged African Countries. From Congo to Tanzania, from Liberia to Sierra Leon, from Togo to Sudan etc. Nigeria has made huge investment in terms of human and material resources in a bid to maintain its foreign policy which placed Africa at the center of it.

Another area that Nigeria had proved its commitment to the development of African countries is in the area of Technical Aid Corps. This initiative was first introduced under the IBB administration where professionals from Nigeria in various sectors like the Military, Academics, Health and Judicial Officers are sent to other African Countries to partake in training and delivery of other key services in those Countries. Nigeria bore the cost of maintaining those staff and ensuring that they deliver on their mandates.

All these efforts and many others have come to Nigeria with huge cost. This cost could be quantified in both material and human resources to which Nigeria expended in the process of facilitating the Africa-Centered approach of its foreign policy. For example, Afaha (2016:12) argued in the following words: “By the time ECOMOG operations came to an end in the early part of 2000, hundreds of soldiers bearing all sorts of physical deformities and injuries which included losing an eye, limb or leg and sundry bullet wounds were still lying in several military hospitals all over the country, with some of them having been in bed for over eight years”. This is in addition to the number of men and officers of the Nigerian army that lost their lives in the process. Men that would have been useful in contributing to the protection of the territorial sovereignty of the country.

In Financial terms however, it has been argued that it is difficult to determine the estimated financial resources expended in prosecuting the peace keeping efforts of Nigeria in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Whatever the case, it is estimated in Billions of Dollars. The following excerpts from Afaha shows this clearly:

All in all, Nigeria is said to have spent in excess of 12bn USD on peace operation since the first ECOMOG operation in Liberia in 1990. In 2001, Olusegun Obasanjo said Nigeria had spent \$13bn on peacekeeping operations over 12 years. Hundreds of Nigerian soldiers were thought to have been killed in operations in Liberia and more than 800 soldiers have been killed and at least 1000 wounded in Sierra Leone, which exposed the country to her “biggest financial burden” (Afaha P. , 2016).

The argument remains that Nigeria has incurred huge cost in financial terms in the area of fight against colonial domination, peace keeping operations and technical aid corps services. This cost if leveraged for domestic development could have improved the living conditions of generations in the country.

The question remains as to how relevant is this position to the attainment of Nigeria’s National interest?

Nigeria has been extraordinarily naïve by restricting its foreign policy to Africa as its corner stone. It was a laudable goal before the 1990s, but its evolution is needed for Nigeria to meet the needs of today’s diplomacy as we move into the next millennium. Africa as the centerpiece of Nigeria’s foreign policy no longer suffices, a broader perspective is necessary (Okpoko, 2013).

There are claims against the failure in Nigeria’s foreign policy. Some of the claims revolve around the Africa Centerpiece thesis of its foreign policy. The is why for example it is believed

in some quotas (Saliu, 2010) that there is a wide disparity between the gains Nigeria has made in international relations and its potentials as a country. For example, Countries that Nigeria committed so much to guarantee their peace and security has always been reluctant in coming to the aid of the country in its times of need. Taking the case of the dreaded Book Haram sect which threatened the peace and security of Nigeria and the West African sub-region, none of these countries has voluntarily extended any form of assistance to Nigeria. In addition, Nigerians have suffered xenophobic attacks and other forms of persecution from African Countries like South Africa despite the enormous assistance Nigeria extended to the former particularly in the fight against colonial domination. Infact, even our West African neighbor- Ghana has in recent times made Nigerian Businesses in Ghana subject to certain strenuous conditions.

All these events accentuate the fact that, there is no reward for Nigeria's efforts in assisting African countries over the years. In addition, its foreign policy premised on Africa as the corner stone is marred by many challenges which call for its review. How can Nigeria's foreign policy challenges be managed?

### **Conclusion: Way Forward**

The paper attempted to provide an insight into Nigeria's foreign policy. In doing this, the idea of foreign policy was explained albeit noting that there is no general acceptable perspective from which it could be explained. The paper also dwelled on Nigeria's foreign policy recognizing its glorious era for the 1960 up until the early 80s. It was also noted that, the military era of General Ibrahim Babangida and that of General Sani Abacha wreaked havoc on Nigeria's foreign policy. The return to civil rule in 1999 did not help much in improving the situation of Nigeria's foreign policy as it continued to subject it to internal and external stress as noted in the paper. It has also

been shown that Nigeria's foreign policy has in the most part been the same from independence to date with emphasis on Africa as its centerpiece.

However, there is need to review its focus as the world has evolved from 1960 to date. There is therefore, need for reevaluating the strategies, contents, priorities, objectives and instruments of Nigeria's foreign policy to embrace global circumstances and antecedents (Jega, 2010 and Saliu, 2010). This review should be seen to include Nigerian Missions abroad and the process of their recruitment and the criteria for same. This is with a view that only graduates and practitioners specializing in diplomacy and international relations are recruited and posted to such foreign missions save for some technical staff that must also be given some form of training in diplomacy.

Nigeria should also commit itself to securing its borders and citizens; improving the welfare of its people and towing the lane of Nigeria First in its foreign policy. This may go a long way in enhancing the achievement of its national interest at the international level. In this regard, Nigerians should be the centerpiece the Country's foreign policy. This will enhance the focus of the country on programs and activities that will improve significantly the conditions of living of its population and promote its development strides. Only then will Nigeria enjoy the recognition and respect it deserves for other African Countries and other global powers.

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