

# **NIGERIA'S ROLE IN THE LEADERSHIP OF AFRICA: A FOREIGN POLICY PERSPECTIVE**

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## **Abstract**

It is cogent to say that the foundation of Nigeria's foreign policy was laid at the point of her independence. The administration of her foreign policy was conceived prior to her independence in 1957, during which the training of those who paved the way for an independent Nigeria took place. It is pertinent to note here that at this point, Nigeria was only involved in external relations from time to time with the United Kingdom and a few other countries, hence, this paper seeks to examine the role that Nigeria played during this period in the leadership of Africa, all through to the fourth republic, till date. This paper will also make use of conceptual clarifications of the term foreign policy as well as identify the issues Nigeria has faced and is facing in the leadership of Africa from 1960-date and will also attempt a discuss on the issues facing Nigeria in her quest to maintain her leadership position in the African continent.

**Keywords:** Foreign Policy, Leadership, Independence

## **Introduction**

The trends that developed from 1960-date as a result of the changes in the Nigerian Foreign policy resulted in the basic formulations, principles, aims and objectives that were proffered by the then Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa during the in-house discussions on foreign policy (Adebayo 2003:76). In today's contemporary Africa, Nigeria occupies a strategic place in terms of population and abundance in economic resources. These potentials have naturally placed Nigeria in the limelight of a very promising continent of which other countries look up to for financial aid, sustaining political stability and making sure that peace is the order of the day within their domains by sending troops to these countries in their time of need (Alli 1986).

This natural leadership position that Nigeria occupies does not come on a platter of gold as it has faced and is facing some issues that have come in the form of criticisms by various African Countries as well as in the form of trying to maintain that leadership position against all odds (Aluko 1981).

## **Conceptual Clarification- Foreign Policy**

Over the years, several definitions of the concept of foreign policy have been given by various analysts and scholars in this area of specialization. Although, it is not necessary to detain ourselves with the variations in the definition of foreign policy, it is however paramount to provide some definitions in this paper.

To begin, the Penguin Dictionary of International Relations provides the basic definition of foreign policy where it sees it as 'an activity which entails actions, reactions and interactions of state actors. This activity is viewed from a liminal (transitional or initial stage of a process) in the sense that the policy makers exist on frontier between two worlds- the domestic politics of the state in question and its external environment. The main task of these policy makers is to mediate between these two worlds (Evans and Newnham 1999:179).

Hans Morgenthau (1951), the renowned power theorist, more often recognized as the founder of post-World War II realist theory in international relations defines foreign policy within the context of national interest, where he is of the view that it is concerned with the pursuit of national interests by states (Morgenthau 1951).

Holsti K.J. (1970) in his paper on the 'National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy' defines foreign policy as the 'actions of states towards the external environment and the conditions-usually domestic- under which those actions are formulated' (Holsti 1970). Coming back to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, J.M Rolenc (2013:5) defines foreign policy as 'the positioning of the state towards its surroundings, hence, towards other players in the international system

Essentially, the concept of foreign policy presupposes a distinction between inside and outside- the domestic and the external environment these actors face and the type of political relationship brewing between the two.

## **Nigeria's Role in the Leadership of Africa- the Issues Faced (1960-date)**

### **a. The Tafawa Balewa Experience (1960-1966)**

During the first republic, Balewa's conservative background and the non-buoyant economy that had just been handed over to newly independent country manifested in the formation and execution of Nigeria's foreign policy. Whereas Balewa openly professed a policy of non-alignment and fighting for the independence of African countries, he was conscious enough not to offend Great Britain, the United States and other Western Friends, in order to keep the economic bucket of the country ever flowing with the required resources and at the same time maintaining Nigeria's sovereignty and her effort to decolonize African countries. These two objectives posed serious problems to Nigeria (Babawale et al 1996).

First was the criticisms leveled against her for refusing to provide adequate training for the armed forces to aid the Angolan nationalists in their fight against the Portuguese colonialist powers in 1962- the reason being that Nigeria did not believe in the use of force to attain independence. Again, during the Bizerte crisis where the Tunisian government imposed a blockade on the French naval base in Bizerte with the hopes of evacuating the base in 1961 which lasted for three days (Laskier 1994), Balewa sought the advice of the British government before making his statement on the issue.

The conservative position of Nigeria's foreign policy during this time was greatly criticized by African countries who thought that Nigeria would be the voice at the

forefront of liberation movements in Africa, was dictated by several factors which imposed severe limits on possible radical posturing of political and economic alignment of Nigeria. These factors included the success of the First National Development Plan which was heavily dependent on the capital that flowed in from the West and Balewa could not act against Nigeria's major benefactors (Imobighe 1981:10-17).

The implication of Nigeria's conservatism in the actions of her foreign policy on her quest in leading Africa was seen less in the leading role she played in the Organization of African Union (OAU) during this time. As a result of her population which made up 22 percent of Africa's population, Nigeria, on a wide belief, was selected to lead the OAU, in which either a Nigerian emerge as the executive Secretary-General or the then capital of the country, Lagos, be selected as the headquarters of the organization. Unfortunately, at the meeting in Dakar, the then foreign minister, Mr. Jaja Nwachukwu failed to secure either of the above mentioned for Nigeria as Addis Ababa was selected too much ado and Diallo Telli of Guinea as its first executive Secretary-General (Alli 1986)

Notwithstanding, it would be agreed that the response of Nigeria to the rest of the continent's affairs in the first republic was clearly cautious and did not accord with the expectations of the radical elite as was the case with Nigeria's development policy on the question of African Unity, as well as other issues faced by several countries, i.e. the Congo crisis. Indeed, regardless of Nigeria's conservatism in her foreign policy, she did her best to champion the course of leadership in the African continent.

#### **b. The Gowon Experience (1966-1975)**

The foreign policy of Nigeria under the Gowon administration took a dramatic turn as it marked the beginning of Nigeria's involvement in the affairs of Africa. This was affirmed by Gowon himself when he maintained in 1972 that "Africa is the cornerstone of Nigeria's foreign policy, while the question of African Unity had become an article of faith" (Gowon 1977:25).

This vigorous foreign policy, particularly the new orientation towards Africa translated into reality by Nigeria's direct assistance to various liberation movements across Africa and the support in the decolonization of territories in Africa which were still under the colonial powers and thus, Nigeria provided material assistance to the freedom fighters in addition to the assistance provided by the liberation committee of the OAU. This was the period where Gowon also declared that there were no alternative measures to armed struggle and the use of force to liquidate colonialism in Africa as Balewa proposed.

In demonstration of its leadership role, Nigeria provided crude oil to countries that required it at concessionary rates on the basis of two conditions- that each of these countries should have their own refineries and that crude oil must not be re-exported to other third world countries. This initiative was made at the ministerial meeting of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) in 1975. Although this initiative did not meet the immediate action it required as Nigeria could not turn deaf ears to poorer African nations in need.

This further took a great turn as Nigeria's contribution to the African economic cooperation led to the creation of the Economic Community of West African States in order to promote the establishment of a West African Community. The success of creating the ECOWAS against all odds can be said to be laudable as there were three previous attempts to create a platform like the ECOWAS which failed to achieve its purpose, hence, Nigeria is the initiator and developer of ECOWAS (Adebayo 2003:80).

Furthermore, the display of Nigeria's leadership role under this administration procured the oil boom revenue and embarked on spraying diplomacy in which several African nations within the sub region benefited from Nigeria in one way or the other. Gowon made mention here, a famous statement, which has been attributed to the reasons for several changes in the foreign policy over the years that the problem of Nigeria was not money, but how to spend it (Gowon 1977)

### **c. The Murtala/Obasanjo Experience (1975-1979)**

This administration, like the Gowon administration, regarded Africa as the center piece of Nigeria's foreign policy. It demonstrated more commitment as well as tool radical and militant initiatives towards pursuing the principles and objectives of total eradication of colonial influences from Africa as opposed to its predecessor, and thus, placed Nigeria at the forefront of leadership in the African continent (Obiazor 1992).

The Murtala administration provided strong support behind several African countries. Take for instance, the MPLA in Angola, the freedom fighters in South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe, the African National Congress and the Pan-African Congress of South Africa, the Namibian South West African Peoples' Organization (SWAPO) and others were allowed to have offices in the capital of Nigeria in order to show good neighborliness in her leadership role (Garba 1987).

The Obasanjo administration presented Nigeria in the light of its commitment towards the eradication of the Apartheid of South Africa which led to its bold decision to nationalize the British Petroleum (BP) crude oil to the South African regime. This was also done in order to stop the British government from supporting the Muzorewa Tendekayi regime of Zimbabwe-Rhodesia. It was thereby agreed by several African countries that Nigeria was the only country capable of using the threat of nationalization to assist in the decolonization of African countries and on the basis of this, several African countries looked up to Nigeria for support in their major sector areas (Aluko 1981:50-52).

### **d. The Shagari Experience (1979-1983)**

In the effort for the Nigerian Army to hand over to a civilian elected government, the Obasanjo administration handed over power to the Shagari administration with the hopes of restoring the confidence of its citizens in the army as the source of protection and not the attainment of power. The Shagari administration had little success in the area of assisting countries in Africa. For instance, Nigeria gave the Mugabe administration \$5

million grant in demonstration of her leadership role as a result of the victory incurred by Mugabe during the Zimbabwe elections which she saw as a victory for the Third World.

The administration hosted the first OAU summit in Lagos, where she called for a decade of reparation and restitution for Africa as a master plan for the economic recovery of the continent whose resources had been exploited to the benefit of the West. In his acting as the chairman of the OAU Good Offices Committee, Shagari participated in the search for peace between conflicting countries, most especially the conflict in Chad between Goukouni Weddeye and Hissene Habre (Sansani 2000:32)

This administration however suffered some setbacks because Nigeria's economic fortune was quickly depleted as a result of several reasons. One was the forceful expulsion of two million illegal persons from Nigeria in 1983 which led to widespread hostility between neighboring African states and Europe. Thus, limited success attended Shagari's foreign policy which thereby limited Nigeria's leadership role in the continent (Ojo 1990:18-21).

#### **e. The Buhari Experience (1984-1985)**

The Buhari administration was short lived as a result of the coup that took place a few months after and the economic constraints brought over by the previous administration. However, the administration gave continued support to the liberation struggles; for instance, the right of the Namibian people for independence remained strong and unchanging as a result of Nigeria's support and other African countries.

This administration made available the required land for the building of the headquarters of the ECOWAS which had been moved to the new capital of the country- Abuja and it is these contributions during this short period that showed forth Nigeria's leadership role in the African continent (Gambari 1987).

#### **f. The Babangida Experience (1985-1993)**

When the Babangida administration succeeded the previous military administration, a change in the foreign policy of Nigeria was expected. In promotion of her foreign policy objectives in the West African region, Nigeria played a substantial role in the ECOWAS, especially through its peace initiatives in the contribution of billions of dollars to the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in order to restore the peace and promote democracy in conflict prone zones. Also, in demonstration of Nigeria's leadership role, some high ranking military officials were in top positions as commanders within the ECOMOG.

General Babangida served in the capacity of the chairman of the ECOWAS thrice and during that period, the headquarters of the ECOWAS was completed, borders closed by the previous administration were reopened in order to facilitate trade relations in the West African Sub-region and by implication enhance Nigeria's leadership status. Nigeria's South Africa policy during this time demonstrated her consistent and total commitment to the liquidation of Apartheid.

In Africa and globally, the national image of Nigeria was further boosted by the appointment of Nigerians to occupy key international posts such as the appointment of Sir Emeka Anyaoku as the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth. The major foreign policy initiative which greatly promoted Nigeria's leadership was the Technical Aid Corps Scheme (TACS) committed to sending young vibrant Nigerians to serve in various capacities within Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific (ACP) countries. This program provided the required skilled labour and necessary expertise needed in areas of specialization such as Medicine, Law, and Teaching (Babawale 1987:20-22).

#### **g. The Abacha/Abubakar Experience (1993-1999)**

Regardless of the fact that this administration came at a time when the Military had lost its attraction to the world as a result of the coups and hostile takeovers, Nigeria still stood tall as a world leader in the continent. For instance, Nigeria became an active force in the newly created initiative called the D8 (Development 8).

The Abacha administration continued to exert its weight, a large part which can be attributed to Nigeria's traditional influence and material wealth. General Abacha continued Nigeria's commitment to the peacekeeping and peacemaking efforts of the ECOMOG. These efforts were successful and enhanced Nigeria's leadership position in Africa, as domestic political conflicts in several West African states were resolved. Even though Nigeria's moral authority waned considerably during this period, Nigeria enjoyed some measure of esteem in Africa.

The Abubakar administration which came on board immediately after the passing of General Abacha, although short-lived, pursued the peace making agenda of the ECOWAS through the ECOMOG.

#### **h. The Obasanjo Experience (1999-2007)**

With the beginning of the new era in Nigeria, with the change back to a democratically elected government, Nigeria looked forward to playing a very active role in the African continent, and this hope was already showing signs of reality. For instance, Nigeria was a founding member and leader of the G77 (Group of 77), member of the New Economic Partnership for Africa's development (NEPAD) and the African Union (AU formerly OAU).

Undeterred by the fact that the headquarters and chair position of the AU went to South Africa, a situation which many scholars regarded as the beginning of Nigeria's less leading role in the continent, there is no disputing the fact that Nigeria is largely indispensable and her role will continue to be a leading one within the Union.

During this administration, there was a sort of power tussle in the African continent as South Africa, Libya and Nigeria were vying as to who should lead Africa. However, Nigeria, given her enormous resources, will continue to maintain her leadership position within the continent. With this in play, some analysts argued that the fact that Nigeria did not get the headquarters of the AU as well as its chair position is to disabuse the minds of

most African states, especially those of the Francophone speaking countries which view Nigeria as a continental imperialist.

#### **i. The Yar'Adua Experience (2007-2010)**

The seven point agenda proposed by this administration for Nigeria's socio-economic and political transformation did not accord Nigeria's foreign policy any special or significant priority to the last administration (Nuhu-Koko 2008). However, when this administration took over in 2007, Nigeria's hitherto vibrant foreign policy took a back seat as most of the functions performed by the past administration where in no way compared with this administration.

The foreign affairs ministry did not show any significant achievement apart from ceding the Bakassi Peninsular to the republic of Cameroun which shared its borders with Nigeria. The Yar'Adua administration missed a number of golden opportunities to project, protect and defend the foreign policy/ national interests of Nigeria at the United Nations, the African Union and even at the sub regional level of the ECOWAS. Nigeria could not defend the brutal killings of its citizens in South Africa, Thailand and Indonesia. International airlines constantly brutalized Nigerian passengers with impunity and yet scholars asked the question- why continue to pride Nigeria as the 'Giant of Africa'?

What the administration desperately needed was a far-reaching foreign policy establishment that was capable of linking and mainstreaming the administration's domestic agenda with her international and global interests in a way by which Nigerians world over would be proud to be known as Nigerians as this was the era in which globalization had gone leaps and bounds and Nigeria needed to take its rightful place and position in its era.

#### **j. The Jonathan Administration (2010-date)**

As a result of the passing of President Yar'Adua, the Vice-President, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan rose in his stead as the acting president of the country. In his short run, before eventually becoming the democratically elected president in 2011, Dr. Jonathan embarked on a number of diplomatic shuttles as part of an attempt to ensure the world that Nigeria was still standing strong despite the internal political challenges that were ongoing.

Despite the bomb plot that was foiled by the US Department of Homeland Security where a Nigerian was caught with bombs strapped to his body, Nigeria was able to sign the first US-Nigeria Bi-national commission which was aimed to establish diplomatic, economic and security co-operation between the two countries (Alao 2011).

For Dr. Jonathan, Nigeria's foreign policy is to be anchored on the realization of the Transformation Agenda by attracting Foreign Direct Investment into the country. This is again re-iterated by the president where he stated that- 'we believe that foreign policy must be used to support the programmes of the government because the primary responsibility is to ensure that there is peace, progress and economic development in

Africa and we are using our foreign policy today to support all government efforts in that direction (Jonathan 2011).

Partnering with the African Union to achieve these foreign policy initiatives, Nigeria continues to prove its leadership role within the continent, especially in the process of democracy and development. The main focus needed to achieve these foreign policy initiatives are broken down into two points- first, to build a strong economy that will in turn enable lead to the construction of a stable, prosperous and peaceful country where democracy and businesses will flourish and where citizens can live and pursue their dreams and secondly, to promote the culture of democracy across Africa as it is the surest way to achieve true peace and guarantee justice and happiness in the continent (Jonathan 2011).

However, these issues still abound in all spheres, including the key priorities in his transformation agenda, and it is perhaps the reason why scholars have constantly described his vision as a myth (Itua 2011) and over ambitious (Olutokun 2013).

### **Implications of These Issues**

There are indeed several implications arising from the issues facing Nigeria in her pursuit for continental leadership. The economic implications in the short run is that while some Nigerians continue to bask in abject poverty, the government continues to allow her material and human resources deplete on a constant basis. Nigeria's influence in the African continent has created the impression that Nigeria is a continental imperialist.

However, in the long run, Nigeria stands to boost her economic benefit as her assistance in ensuring peace in several African and providing for less economically endowed countries has opened Nigeria to more markets within the continent and outside. In the political front, Nigeria's leadership role has presented Nigeria as the heartbeat of Africa as mentioned in the speech of Joshua Nkomo of Zimbabwe in 1977 during the World Conference for Action Against Apartheid- 'Nigeria is the heartbeat of Africa as Lagos is the heartbeat of Nigeria. Here indeed is Africa's heartbeat. Here, Nigeria is the source of Africa's pulse. Here stands Africa's dynamo' (Oyewumi 2011:16-18).

In order for Nigeria to continue to maintain her leadership role in Africa, she must use not only her oil revenue but other sectors of the economy to diversify her economy. The leadership must also present itself as worthy of emulation in Africa and to crown it all, the present democracy must remain ever strong and sustained; for it is only via this that she can stand to defend her democracy to other countries within Africa and world over.

### **Conclusion**

As the 2015 elections come in a few months, whether it is, President Jonathan, General Buhari or the third candidate, we have been able to realize that Nigeria's leadership role in Africa is one that holds great importance and Nigeria, in the past had lived up to the expectations in championing the course of Africa, going by her financial



and human contributions to the freedom and development of Africa can still do much more for Africa's development. With greater moves towards true democracy, it is important for the next president of Nigeria to ensure that Nigeria will continue to play greater roles in Africa's affairs.

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