

Afro-centrism: A Stale Recipe In Nigeria's Foreign
Policy Relations?

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Abstract

Foreign policy of most nations generally takes the form and shape of internal and external dynamics intended to attend to the national interest of a state. It also ensures a robust engagement of the multifarious stakeholders in the international system in a bid to explore and exploit inherent strategic advantages. In the Nigerian context, foreign policy has been guided by the principle of Afro-centrism, which essentially entails engagement of the international system with the prism of promoting the interest of the African continent by concretely assuming important roles within and outside of the continent. It is in this light that it has shown commitment to the processes of decolonization across the continent including Angola and was at the fore of the fight against apartheid in South Africa. The leading role played in the formation of the defunct OAU, and its successor organization, the AU, as well as the promotion of development within the framework of NEPAD epitomize the principles of Afro-centrism. It however remains contentious that Nigeria seems not to be reaping a commensurate measure of reciprocity from most African countries and the international community on the basis of these. It is against this background that this paper argues for a review of the "Afro-centric" principle in the emergent international system. It argues further that; a rigid adherence to Afro-centrism since Nigeria's independence seems not to be yielding to the vagaries of contemporary international system. The main objective of this study is to attempt a critique of the Afro-centric nature of the Nigerian foreign policy since independence till date. To these effects, data is sourced from secondary sources and researcher reflexivity was adopted for analyses. The study reveals that; despite abundance of human and material resources that have been committed to pursuing and promoting this policy by successive administrations, benefits accruing to the country have been meager when compared to the alternatives foregone in the domestic affairs of the country. The paper concludes that; notwithstanding Nigeria's natural potentials to pursuing a profitable African policy, concrete strategic socio-political and economic benefits must drive international engagement.

Key Words; Foreign policy, Afro-centrism, Decision-makers, Realism

Introduction

Attaining independence on the first of October 1960 marked Nigeria's birth and existence as a sovereign entity. Domestic and foreign affairs of the country became the sole responsibility of the decision-makers of the country. At independence, one of the issues which formed the nucleus of Nigeria's foreign policy was the place of Africa in Nigeria's foreign policy pursuit. In the pursuit of this, Nigeria's Prime Minister, Tafawa Balewa, stated that Africa was going to occupy a prime position in Nigeria's foreign policy. In his opinion, Nigeria belongs to Africa and Africa must claim first attention in our external affairs Bukarambe (2000: 104).

Despite its military background, the Gowon regime continued to place African affairs at the fore of Nigeria's foreign policy formulation and implementation. Successive administrations in the country have pursued this policy vigorously. Foreign policy is believed to be the reflection of a country's domestic interest to be pursued externally. Nigeria's interest in Africa can be understood from the strategic need for good neighborliness and other socio-economic peculiarities that should be harnessed in concert with other African countries. However, when economic accruals are juxtaposed with enormous resources Nigeria commits to this pursuit, the result leaves much to be desired in terms of recognition. This calls to question the need to continue this line of foreign policy. This without credence to the need for African solidarity and therefore cannot be discountenanced in the formulation and implementation of her foreign policy. The classical notion of interstate relations being a bastion of mutually beneficial relationship seems to be eroded when reciprocity fizzles out in interstate relations.

Therefore, a critical reappraisal of Afro centrism as a theme in Nigerian foreign policy in addition to deepening an understanding of the merits, demerits, relevance and national interest motives behind the commitment to it by successive governments in Nigeria. To these ends, answers to cogent reasons behind Afro centrism being a major driver of Nigeria's foreign relations and strategic factors behind its implementation by successive administrations in Nigeria despite their varying political objectives, structure and tenure. It is also imperative to recommend measures for the sustenance and maximization of this foreign policy objective if it has potentials of increasing Nigeria's stature in the comity of nations in Africa global affairs.

Framework of Analysis

Attempting to provide universally acceptable definition of the concept of foreign policy remains a herculean endeavor. Several attempts at offering one have remained contested. This accounts for the several scholarly points of view about the concept. For instance, Northedge, (1968) sees it as the interplay between the outside and the inside. On the other hand, Crabb (1972) perceives foreign policy as consisting national objectives to be achieved and the means of achieving them. To Saliu(2013:167) foreign policy "is the veritable vehicle that a country can use in maximizing the abundant benefits that is inherently available in it and minimize the accompanied risks, costs and limitations that go with the participation in the contemporary global system.

Thus it is obvious that a tenuous and closely knitted relationship exists between domestic and foreign policy. A country's foreign policy usually consists of peculiar strategies chosen by the state to safeguard its interests and to achieve its goals within the international system. It can also be regarded as the aggregate of a country's national interest resulting from the interaction of internal and external forces as perceived by the proximate decision makers. Strategies adopted by each country to realize its objective varies from country to country. It also largely depends on domestic and foreign environmental factors. One of the strategies adopted by Nigeria to pursue her foreign policy is Afro-centrism.

Afro-centrism is therefore conceptualized in this work as national mind-set that presupposes that African affairs and interests would take priority over and above other considerations in Nigeria's relation with other countries of the world. It is also seen as policy which considers the interest of the continent paramount in her relations and dealings with extra continental organizations. Therefore concern for African issues would form a major fulcrum of Nigeria's external relations.

Afro-centrism and Political Realism

The major argument of the theoretical permutation of political realism is that the state is the major factor/actor in the international system which is in itself an anarchical organization. Within the international system, states struggle to attain and maintain power for national interest. The theory assumes that states are led by leaders driven by the axiom of rationality and therefore, would be

persuaded to act in the best national interest of the state. In rehearsing Thucydides, (1972), Karen (1999) observes that political realism has four major theoretical assumptions. One of which is power. Realists believe that power is central and it is a major determinant of the position and influence which a state wields in the international system.

Prior to her independence, considerable hope was invested in Nigeria and was expected by scholars and actors to wield considerable amount of power in the international environment upon attainment of independence. Saliu(2013) averred that in actual fact, Nigeria did not betray this optimism. This is palpable by her roles in African liberation struggles in the continent deploying her abundant human and natural resources. This partly explains the continued retention of Afro-centric posture of successive administrations.

Literature Review

For obvious reasons of colonial background, Nigeria's foreign policy at independence was regarded as a coinage of the interest of her former colonial powers. It is therefore not surprising that little regard was given to issues that are patently African. Her newness in the comity of nations partly explains her hesitant disposition and response to pan-African movement (Gambari: 1980,; 2). Nigeria's action or inaction in the international environment was largely reactive and chiefly dictated by initiatives and pressure mounted by other Africa countries. (Anifowoshe; 1993, 212)

However, events in the domestic political environment largely helped in shaping Nigeria's to developments internationally. Notable amongst these was pressure mounted domestically by interest groups and political parties like Action Group manifested in the change of attitude of the Nigerian government in the first republic (Gambari; 1980, 16). Also, radical ideas spewed among the youths had significant impact on the regime's foreign and domestic policy pursuit. Of significant effect was the experience of Nigeria during the civil war. Nigeria's traditional allies, particularly, the west bloc failed to play significant role in the crisis, rather it was the Organization of African Unity (OAU) that played dominant role before during and even at the end of the war (Anifowoshe; 1993: 212). The performance of this regional body was quite impressive in the ratings of the Nigerian government which necessitated the declaration by the then military Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon that; "Africa would henceforth be the cornerstone of Nigeria's foreign policy". (Anifowoshe: 1993:212) There is no gainsaying that the military junta led by General Yakubu Gowon succeeded in making Africa attract greater attention in Nigeria's foreign policy making and implementation. This is perhaps due to her civil war experience which revealed how unpredictable friends could be.(Anifowoshe: 1993; 212).The Gowon regime had tremendous concern for African affairs in her foreign policy pursuit. It was under this regime that concern for liberation struggle in southern Africa began. Nigeria was seriously opposed to Apartheid regimes such that it threatened sanctions against countries that fraternized with the apartheid regimes in southern Africa. Apart from the abrogation of the Anglo-Nigerian defense pact in 1962, there was no other remarkable measure or policy under the administration that preceded the Gowon administration that put African affairs at the fore of Nigeria's foreign policy compared to the Gowon administration where Africa received greater attention from Nigeria than before, resulting in development of closer ties by the Nigerian head of state and his counterparts in the continent. Also, there was notable increase in the amount of financial and technical assistance Nigeria gave to other African states and there was greater Nigerian involvement in the liberation struggle in Africa(Imobighe: 1983).

The Gowon administration was terminated in 1975 and was succeeded by the Late General Murtala Mohammed. Foreign policy under the Murtala Mohammed administration was adjudged to have enjoyed superlative dynamism and focus. Kolawole (2004) describes the years of the regime as "years of foreign policy alertness". This is because no government before it has brought life, sparkle and content to foreign policy pursuit as did the regime. The administration's passion for Africa was remarkable. This reflected in the tenor of foreign policy it pursued in relations to Africa. The regime was able to match words with action in her dealings with other countries in the international system. This manifested in her financial and moral support for the regional organization (OAU) and the sub-regional organization (ECOWAS). The administration's fight against racism and especially apartheid regime in southern Africa remains the highest point of its commitment to African affairs. Though, apartheid regime did not end in the life of the administration, the seriousness with which the regime confronted the policy laid the foundation for the eventual dismantling of the apartheid regime. The regime's propaganda effectively branded any supporter of apartheid regime as an enemy of Africa.

The post Muritala administration can better be described as a mixture of dynamism and docility. The Buhari regime which claimed to be an off-shoot of the Muritala administration for example took some radical steps which were pragmatic African policy. Apart from paying her dues to the OAU promptly, the regime championed the admission of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) as the fifty-first member of the OAU. The regime also recognized POLISARIO government in Western Sahara against opposition from other African Countries (Oke: 2004). The Shagari regime on the other hand represented a docile period in foreign policy making and implementation. The regime performed better in the area of creating a more conducive atmosphere that enhances fraternity with countries of Europe and Americas.

The Babangida regime went further in the pursuit of Africa-centeredness of Nigeria foreign policy to canvass debt relief or total debt forgiveness for African countries. The administration was of the opinion that debt is a burden which has hampered development of the continent. In addition, the regime vigorously demanded for reparation for Africa, especially from her erstwhile colonial European masters. According to Babangida (1990:12) Africa requires a "marshal plan" to compensate for the centuries of abuse and neglect. At different international forums, the administration called on countries of Europe and Americas to reward "the untold hardship and exploitation" that the continent had been subjected to in the past as a result of African fore-fathers in American plantation.

The quantum of absurdity that characterized the Abacha regime that succeeded the Babangida administration might be a herculean task for this study. This is because of the way and manner the shenanigans of proximate foreign policy makers and executors in the administration earned the country a pariah status in the international system. The regime's foreign policy was described by Omotoso (2004) as;

Area boy diplomacy,' a ranting and raving diplomacy empty in content and lacking in finesse, a diplomacy which is more like a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing.

However, in spite of the regime's obstinacy especially within the Commonwealth, its diplomacy in West Africa, especially in Liberia and Sierra Leone was commendable. Nigeria's role in ECOWAS' Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) brought about the restoration of the ousted democratic regime of Teejan Kabbah of Sierra Leone. The regime also joined other West African leaders to restore constitutional order in Liberia by successfully enthroning democratically elected government in that country. Thus, in a way, the regime had also contributed to making Nigeria play a leadership role in the sub-region.

The Abdulsalam Abubakar regime which succeeded the Abacha regime was pre-occupied with challenges of redeeming Nigeria's battered image under the Abacha regime. This is in addition to the domestic challenge of democratization. The regime obviously had little time for African affairs. However, the regime continued Nigeria's support for the Economic integration of Africa and the West African sub region. The regime also assisted Laurent Kabila's Democratic Republic of Congo to train the country's police force of Nigeria (Oni, J. K & Yahaya, I I; 2005:52). From the above, it can be deduced that, in spite of regime changes, successive regimes made Africa the centre piece of Nigeria's foreign policy. Thus, Africa has continued to enjoy a pride of place in Nigeria foreign policy formulation and implementation.

Nigeria's African Policy under democratic dispensation (1999-till date)

Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999 provided a new vista in the annals of foreign policy making and implementation globally and Africa in particular. The Olusegun Obasanjo led administration identified shuttle diplomacy in addition to enumerating the need to pursue a dynamic foreign policy to promote friendly relations with all nations. It was also determined to playing a constructive role in the United Nations, OAU and other International bodies. This is with a firm resolve to restore Nigeria fully to her previous prestigious position in the comity of nations.

It can be deduced that Nigeria foreign policy under the Obasanjo administration regime may not be significantly different from the regimes before it. The zeal and determination of the regime to ensure that Nigeria bounces back into international reckoning was palpable. The president left no one in doubt as to the fact that in consonance with the global trend, the country attempted to widen the scope of her activities by playing active part in globally acclaimed institutions of the world like the International Monetary Fund, The World Bank and the G 7 Creditor Club in Western Europe and North America that are in the business of allocating and redistributing wealth. (President Olusegun Obasanjo inaugural speech, 1999) Notwithstanding this new focus, Africa still commanded significant attention in the administration's foreign policy. Perhaps the most prominent area where Nigeria has played leadership role in Africa is in her peace-keeping activities within and outside the continent.

The Obasanjo administration also maintained friendly bilateral relations with all African countries, especially with her immediate neighbors-Benin, Niger, Chad and Equatorial Guinea. The country's relations with Cameroon though not in the best of terms, Nigeria handled the issue of the boundary dispute between the two countries with maturity. As a demonstration of this maturity, the Obasanjo administration agreed in line with the international court of justice's verdict to cede the oil-rich peninsula region of Bakassi to Republic of Cameroon in spite of the opposition to this move by the indigenes of the area to move to Cameroon. The restraint exercised by the Obasanjo administration not to retaliate the provocative move of the Cameroon Gendarmes was a show of maturity and display of genuine concern for peace in Africa (Omotola, & Saliu: 2003).

As earlier noted, the immediate concern of Chief Obasanjo's administration was to restore Nigeria to her old glory, yet it also had time for issues affecting Africa. For example the regime was financially committed to the idea of the OAU and the succeeding African union. Nigeria played a significant role in the establishment of the African Union. Omotola and Saliu (2003) assert that the formation of the African Union enjoyed a tremendous patronage from Nigeria to the extent that, "New Partnership for African Development" (NEPAD) which is a corollary of AU has a prominent Nigeria diplomat as the head of its implementation committee. The vision of the African union is the promotion of a viable socio-economic integration of the African countries and peoples (Ajayi: 2004).

As a continental organization, it focuses on the promotion of peace, security and stability in the continent as a prerequisite for the implementation of the development and integration of the Union. African leaders, who are the founders of the African union have also claimed ownership of the new partnership for African development (NEPAD) NEPAD, agreement has however been described by Ogwu (2002) as

the most recent in series of development cooperation Agreements that have been formulated to help elevate Africa from its morass of underdevelopment

It is in this all important agreement to the continent of Africa that Nigeria has collaborated with South Africa to provide the necessary leadership. Apart from this joint effort, the Obasanjo administration also established a new ministry of cooperation and integration in Africa with a cabinet rank minister in charge. Under the same administration, Nigeria restored democratic regime in Sao-Tome after a military intervention. All these efforts and activities leave no one in doubt as to the fact that the Obasanjo administration was sincerely committed to the African-centered policy. Not only has the country shown commitment to this policy by words but it has demonstrated the commitment through financial, logistic, military and diplomatic measures ().

The President Sheu Musa Yar'adua administration and that of President Goodluck Jonathan after it pursued same policy as that of President Olusegun Obasanjo, with slight differences in vigor or lack of it. They christened their policy as 'Citizen Diplomacy'. The basic element of this policy is that Nigerians are the centre piece of Nigerian's foreign policy. In spite of this change in name, Africa still attracts substantial attention from the administrations.

Constraints in Policy Implementation

A cursory look at the review of Nigeria Africa-centered foreign policy since independence shows that a lot of resources, human, material time, etc have been committed. Conversely however, it can also be seen that not much has been realized from the efforts by Nigeria. This is why the question posed by Ikedinachi et al(2015) to the effect that can the nation afford to continue to pursue an African agenda at such a monumental cost without any tangible benefits to the country's national interest becomes pertinent. Though Hassan (2013), argues that Nigeria has benefited from her African policy, but he was quick to assert that the exclusion of Nigeria from Group of 20 Countries championed by USA, the exclusion of Nigeria from BRICS countries are indications that Nigeria's role in the continent is not only not beneficial, but it is not recognized from within and without. To say the least, most scholars appear to agree that the African policy of Nigeria is simply a demonstration of wishes but not backed up by ability to deliver. This view is also reflected in this study. It may be asserted that Nigeria is destined to lead Africa given her human and material resources endowment, however available facts reveal that the African policy has not yielded the expected dividend and the country's effort at advancing the cause of the continent has not been recognized or reciprocated. Perhaps this informs the assertion of Ikedinachi (2015) which this study also shares that '... the concept of Africa as a centre-piece of Nigeria's foreign policy is not grounded in considerations of economic growth and national development but on its philosophical ideation'.

Findings of this study reveal that Nigeria has the potential to play significant role in global politics. But this has been constrained by a number of factors. A very important element of power is the economy of a state. A state with a buoyant economy is a powerful nation in the international system and vice versa. Unfortunately, this study reveals that the excruciating domestic economic condition of Nigeria is one major challenge to Nigeria's leadership position in the continent. Poverty and unemployment are on the increase and the living condition of citizens are daily dwindling and unbearable. Nigerians at home are daily confronted with survival issues which now pre-occupy the focus of the government. This has also lowered the contribution of the government to extra Nigeria affairs. Thus the domestic economy has impacted negatively on the ability of the state to pursue an aggressive foreign policy.

Corruption which has become a common feature of our existence constitutes another major hindrance to Nigeria's ability to pursue a pragmatic foreign policy. Over the years, Nigerian economy has repeatedly been undermined by continued bad governance and generalized theft of state assets. At the same time rampant corruption, poverty and political violence have done very little to lessen Nigeria's attractiveness to international investors and investment.

Another constraint is the high level of domestic crisis in the country. The Boko-haram insurgency, the Niger delta militancy and the herdsmen- farmers' face-off in parts of the country constitute unnecessary distraction for the government as well as disincentive for foreign investment. The consequence of these domestic problems is that more resource and attention have to be devoted to these domestic problems at the expense of concern for what could be termed secondary interest. Similarly they are capable of stalling foreign investment which is a major component of international relations in the contemporary global system.

The image of Nigeria that other African countries have is not complementary to her preoccupation with African affairs, and this constitutes another hindrance. According to Hassan, (2013) many African countries still do not know what Nigeria wants. Because Nigeria has not shown any desire/reason for its roles in the international system, African countries treat Nigeria's contribution to the continent as a 'father Christmas' gift. It thus mean Nigeria does not have a focus/specific objective that is known to other Africa countries.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, one can assert that Nigeria has committed a lot of financial and human resources to the cause of the African continent. However in spite of Nigeria's financial, human and material contribution to Africa, not much was given back to the country. The study also reveal that the country has the potential to lead the continent to greater heights if the identified bottle-necks are removed. This work identified a lot of hindrances that has impeded the country's ability to leave up to her enviable roles in the continent. In view of the new global challenges, we recommend a review of the Nigerian foreign policy along other measures.

Recommendations

.No doubt Nigeria has demonstrated a lot of commitment to Africa in her foreign policy. It is also not in doubt that the country has done this even at the expense of the wellbeing of the citizens at home. In view of this reality it time for Nigeria to take a crucial look at her foreign policy with a view to reviewing it to be in line with what actually is the interest of the country. This fact has been realized since 1999 under president Obasanjo and may have informed the country's adoption of 'Citizens Policy' which still in practice. In line with the suggestion of Akinterinwa (2011:60) that 'Nigeria should make use of the international environment to boost the domestic setting, this study recommends that a combination of both domestic and foreign environment factors can offer best solutions to foreign policy problem of the country. We also believe that if all the identified problems are properly addressed Nigeria has all that it takes to lead Africa in a competitive global system.

The country is blessed with lots of brilliant men and women as experts in international relations. These experts should be commissioned to fashion realistic and practicable foreign policy for the country. In addition, volumes of research output from the Nigeria Institute of International Affairs should also be dusted for review and use. The new policy should be realistic and pursued within the financial, economic and the military capability of the country.

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