The Trajectory of Nigeria's Foreign Policy in the Organisation of African Unity (1960-2002): Democratisation or Decolonisation of Africa?

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Abstract

This paper investigates the trajectory of Nigeria's foreign policy in the Organisation of African Unity from 1960-2002. However, after the attainment of Nigerian independence on October 3 1960, Nigeria immediately sought, directed and positioned its foreign policy objectives in accordance with the OAU's policy objectives. These policy objectives of the OAU include total decolonisation and promotion of socio-economic development of the African continent at that time (1963-2002). Thus, the analysis in this paper draws on Nigeria's foreign policy and its engagement within the Organisation and how these had translated into the actualisation of the OAU's pan-Africanist ideology before its transformation into the AU in 2002. This paper draws on extensive secondary literature from academic, the African Union, and the Organisation of African Unity. The findings in this paper are: Nigeria's efforts in the OAU from 1963 towards the 1990s were directed and targeted to facilitate decolonisation of Africa, and not to promote, or nurture democracy.

Keywords: African Union, Decolonisation, Foreign policy, Independence, Nigeria, Organisation of African Unity, Pan-Africanism.

Introduction

According to Gordon (1973), the primary task of foreign policy is to articulate a country's national interests and to relate these to those of other countries within the global environment. Immediately after Nigeria's independence, the country's foreign policy became focused principally on Africa (5). Successive Nigerian leaders placed Africa as the centre-piece of Nigeria's foreign policy through the instrumentality of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) (Ibeanu, 2010, p. 13). For example, in the diplomatic and nationalistic struggles that led to the formation of the OAU in 1963, Nigeria was one of the strongest advocates and champions of the principles of sovereign equality and non-interference in domestic affairs of states, principles which ultimately formed the bedrock of the OAU. These principles also provided the basis on which Nigeria was able to secure OAU intervention during the Biafran civil war and upon which its African strategic interests were anchored (Mayall, 1976, p. 317) Aluko argued that Nigeria contributed actively and substantially to the founding of the organisation in Addis Ababa in May 1963, and the OAU's Charter was largely drawn upon by that of the Madagascar states of Africa (Aluko, 1973, p. 145; Wilmot, 1989, p. 4). However, Nigerian foreign policy after its independence in October 1960, was largely mirrored to reflect the Pan-Africanist ideologies, which aimed to unite and integrate the people of Africa. Drawing on the ideological foundation of the OAU upon its creations in 1963, Nigeria constantly made the Organisation the instrument of its foreign policy and to pursue its national interests. Also, the OAU was instrumental for Nigeria to proclaim and achieve the Africa objectives in the international community.

Therefore, this paper then examines the character of Nigerian foreign policy in the OAU. Finally, this paper argues that Nigeria did not only use its regional power in the OAU to advance decolonisation of the African continent but also towards facilitating both the economic and political transformation of Africa.

Historical Development of the OAU

The OAU Charter was signed on 25th May 1963, at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia by 32 African Heads of State, to uphold the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (OAU, 1963) and to coordinate and harmonise members' political, economic, educational, diplomatic, welfare, cultural, technical, and scientific and defence policies (OAU/AU, 2003). The OAU maintained the "Africa group" at the United Nations (UN) through which several of its constituted roles at international conferences were channelled. It was instrumental in the formation of African states in the work of the Group of 77, which serves as a network and caucus of developing nations at the United Nations (UN) Conference on Trade and Development (African Union, 2002). By 1999, the membership of OAU had risen from the original 32 to 53. South Sudan joined the AU in 2011 (Edwin, 2013).

After World War II, the quest for political, economic, and cultural emancipation became a flood that the colonial masters could not mitigate; March 6, 1957, the day of Ghana's independence, marked a turning point in Africa's political history (Zweifel, 2006, p. 147). According to Thomas Zweifel (2006), even after many colonies in Africa attained independence, the yoke of colonialism was still a fresh and indelible pain among the peoples and politicians of Africa (147). Against this continuous colonial occupation of sub-Saharan Africa, Kwame Nkrumah, first president of Ghana in 1957, led a group of African extraction in a meeting to discuss the future of Africa as a continent (Uziogwe, 2014: 218). The emergence of the OAU was based on the notion of Pan-Africanism and the nationalistic spirit of the African peoples, which is reflected in the thinking of a range of notable and articulate African nationalists, leaders and thinkers including E.W. Blyden, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, George Padmore and Henry Sylvester Williams who have contended with the notion of African unity, identity and renaissance in the changing circumstances within and outside Africa (CODESRIA, 2008).

Pan-Africanism is described as "a political and cultural experience/phenomenon that regards Africa, Africans and African Descendants abroad/diaspora as a unit (as one)'' (Abegunrin, Olayiwola, 2016, p. 2). The main objectives of Pan-Africanism are to unite Africans and promote a feeling of cohesion and integration among African descendants across the world (Ibid.). This philosophy, however, had the effect of side-lining the drive to democratise the African continent, in favour of facilitating the independence and decolonisation of the African states, but without necessarily nurturing democracy on the continent. That is, military dictatorships have always used external threats as a justification for why the military rule is needed and why democracy cannot happen "now". The more people are focusing on fighting the evils of colonialism, and the more their leaders encourage them to blame outside forces for their unhappiness, the less space they have to be demanding democratic determination. Distinguished thinkers, including Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Obafemi Awolowo of Nigeria among others, championed the creation of a continental organisation (OAU) in May 1963 to achieve these objectives (Adejumobi & Olukoshi, 2008, p. 7).

Nigeria's Foreign Policy and Strategic Engagement in the OAU

One of the cardinal foreign policy objectives of the Nigerian state in the OAU was the need to decolonise the African continent. The country's anti-imperialist and pan-Africanist struggles were more prominent during the military era, particularly under the Gowon regime. Thus, one notable strategic change in Nigeria's strategic engagements within the OAU, was its reassessment of its foreign policy after the recognition of the secessionist Biafra by a group of African states such as Cote d'Ivoire, Gabon, Tanzania and Zambia, South Africa and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and Western states such as France (Gambari, 2008, p. 640). In contrast, the diplomatic alliance with Ethiopia, and of Nigeria's immediate neighbours, Niger and Cameroon, prevented the "Biafrans" from obtaining the logistics and resources needed to prosecute the war (Saideman, 2001, p. 85).

It has been argued that the rationale of the white minority regimes in countries like Rhodesia, South Africa and the Portuguese territories in facilitating the "Biafran" secessionists during the Nigerian civil war was to frustrate and destabilise Nigeria's regional power and influence in the OAU, which was already strongly anti-imperialist. The consequences of the war, therefore, were to show how, at this period, Nigeria's national security depended upon replacing the white supremacist regimes with friendly black (majority) ones.

Nigeria's desired role to liberate Zimbabwe, however, was further motivated by its quest to pursue an active and vigorous African foreign policy, to liberate and transform other African countries that were still under the colonial yoke of the imperial powers (Bishop, 2016, p. 511).

At the end of the Nigerian civil war, therefore, the Nigerian military government was motivated by an even stronger sense of anti-imperialism resulting from the perceived conspiracy and betrayal of Western friends that sided with the secessionist "Biafra" (Ibid.) and this influenced Gowon's later attitude towards the liberation movements in South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, Namibia and Rhodesia. For example, in respect to Zimbabwe's political logjam, Nigeria threatened a diplomatic showdown with Britain should the latter fail to declare independence for Zimbabwe. Consequently, Nigeria in 1966 championed and hosted the first summit ever held outside London to discuss the status of Zimbabwe and Britain's readiness on the resolution of the Rhodesian independence. Following unsuccessful efforts directed towards Britain by the Nigerian military government and the unacceptability of Ian Smith's internal settlement backed up by Britain's conspiracy to grant independence to Rhodesia, however, Nigeria nationalised the British Petroleum company (Ola, 2017, p. 61) on July 31, 1979, on the day before the Commonwealth Summit organised for Lusaka, Zambia (Ibid.).

In terms of conflict resolutions, the role of Nigeria is indispensable. For example, being an advocate of gradual and systematic mediation and a peace broker in the OAU and beyond Africa, the country's clear and uncompromising stand on the Angola conflict underscored Nigeria's commitment to conflict resolution in 1975. General Yakubu Gowon, the military Head of State at the that time, had neither recognised nor taken sides in the Angolan conflict, but rather mediated among three Angolan liberation movements: Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) and the National Union of Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) (Abegunrin, 2003, p. 64). Nigeria had thus helped to sponsor a resolution advocating for a change in the OAU in January 1976, for all the three factional groups to seek the support of the MPLA in Angola (Chan, 1992, p. 79). Nigeria's decision to recognise the MPLA was thus instrumental in swaying the OAU's stand in favour of recognising the MPLA. The diplomatic, financial, and material support of Lagos (then capital of Nigeria) to liberation struggles in Southern Africa further very significantly increased Nigeria's Afrocentric foreign policy and the country was invited to attend diplomatic meetings by the Frontline States (Gambari, 2008, p. 645). Ultimately, Nigeria's uncompromising stance in conflict resolution in the OAU demonstrated its commitment to peace and unity in Africa.

That is said, another significant area that requires attention relates to Nigeria's benign foreign policy with respect to the formal leadership of OAU. For example, at the maiden OAU meeting held at Dakar in August 1963, the Nigerian representative, Jaja Wachukwu, as Foreign Minister, thus opted and canvassed to secure one of the top positions at the administrative headquarters. But he failed: The Council of Ministers had voted for Addis Ababa to be the official headquarters of the OAU, and Diallo Telli of Guinea to be its first administrative Secretary (Aluko, 1973, 145). At another General Secretary Election in June 1972, Nigeria's foreign policy approach at the OAU's bid for leadership representation had changed, as there were no officials of the military government and press suggested to the then-military government to nominate Nigerians for the position. Despite pressure from some Commonwealth African states, Nigeria refused to nominate. Instead, at the meeting in Rabat in 1972, Nigeria decided to nominate one of its neighbours as Secretary-General: a Cameroonian Minister, Nzo Ekangaki, which led to his success as the second OAU General Secretary. Nigeria, after a decade of the OAU's existence, had metamorphosed from a position of vying for the OAU crown to one of being a leader, Africa's spokesperson and a king-maker (Ibid.).

Under the OAU, Nigeria's foreign policy was thus vigorously against non-African interests (Shaw, 1983, p. 38). Accordingly, Nigeria's anti-colonial foreign policy at the OAU and towards the other African countries under colonial and racial rule by the West was not to change the existing international political-economic structure, but strictly to ensure the transfer of power back to the (black) majority. Consistently, Nigeria's stance and political ambivalence have shown little sympathy and support for countries like Tanzania, Algeria, Angola or Mozambique that still found themselves under colonial rule (Bach, 1983, p. 3).

Interestingly, before this period, Nigeria's anti-colonial policy and liberation movements were not carried out militarily. For instance, a diplomatic measure against the apartheid and racist regime in South Africa led Nigeria and other African countries to boycott the 1972 Munich Olympics in West Germany in protest at the participation of South Africa.

In addition, in the quest to rid Africa of colonialism, Nigeria identified with the plight of a fellow African nation such as Egypt by cutting diplomatic relations with Israel in 1973 (Nwanolue & Iwuoha, 2012, p. 37). In the pursuit of its African foreign policy, the General Mohammed regime (8 November 1938 – 13 February 1976), was not deterred from challenging any Western powers whose interests did not align with the OAU principles from which Nigeria's foreign policy objectives derived their foundation. As rightly mentioned by General Mohammed, in a memorable speech to the OAU's extraordinary summit held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, January 1976, he affirmed that Africa had ''Africa had come of age' and did not need foreign counsellors to warn Africans against communism and the alleged Soviet-Cuban threat'' (General Murtala Mohammed, quoted in Gambari, 2008, p. 65).

Apart from anti-imperialist efforts and besides trying to foster and promote economic cooperation among the OAU members, since independence, Nigeria also participated and mediated in many peacekeeping initiatives. These include the peacekeeping operations in Algeria, Congo, Tanganyika (now Tanzania), Lebanon, Chad (twice), Sudan, Sierra Leone (1998) and Liberia (1990-1997). Nigeria's involvement in the Congo peacekeeping operations was very extensive. Nigeria's contribution of troops in the UN peacekeeping in the Congo was the third largest, but that Nigeria had provided all the logistics required to prosecute the war, ranging from food and air bases for transporting the troops to equipment (Osaghae, 1998, p. 58).

Nigeria's Role in the Transformation of the OAU into the African Union

The 29 May 1999 was a turning point and the close of a historical epoch in Nigeria, signalling the end of the military rule. The return to democratically elected government had long been advocated for by both Nigerians and the wider international community for many reasons. First, the need to resurrect Nigeria's damaged reputation following its expulsion from the Commonwealth four years earlier, in 1995. Second, Nigeria's foreign policy actions was in sharp contrast to the golden era of its Afrocentric foreign policy when the country was the toast of Africa and when it championed the struggle of African liberation and was christened as a Frontline State, a status otherwise reserved for Southern African states (Sanda, 2004, p. 269). Third, there was a need for Nigeria to realign itself in the international community because of the sudden transformation of the international political economy from the *bipolar* system that characterised the Cold War era to the more *unipolar* system in which the USA was pre-eminent (Obiozor, 2004, p. 237).

Immediately after the elections of President Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999, and Thabo Mbeki in South Africa, the two leaders articulated grand foreign policy ambitions, with the policy objectives of bringing about stabilisation and democratisation in Africa. The two statesmen became instrumental in creating a continental and Pan-African integrationist institution, the AU, in 2001 (Landsberg, 2008, p. 203). Nigeria was a regional hegemon and, having made Africa the focal point of its foreign policy since the 1960s, Nigeria has contributed crucially to the growth and development of the African continent. Successive Nigerian governments since independence have consistently championed a course aimed at promoting integration and interconnectedness at both regional and continental levels. As part of its foreign policy objectives, the creation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the transformation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) into the AU, the creation of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), its unmatched contribution to peacekeeping within and outside the West African sub-region and its financial contribution to continental integration, can all be highlighted as the achievements of Nigeria (Fagbayobo, 2014, p. 102).

Just as in the process leading to the emergence of the OAU in 1963, where Nigeria played a critical role in ensuring that the Organisation and its Charter reflected inter-governmental co-operation, rather than supranational institutions, Nigeria played a similar role in the transformation of the OAU into the AU (Fagbayobo, 2014, p. 106). For instance, Nigeria was instrumental in mobilisation of support for the adoption of the AU Constitutive Act during the Lomé summit in 2000 and the formal transformation and inauguration of the AU in July 9, 2002, at the Durban summit in South Africa (Alli, 2010, p. 159), a process which might best be termed as a Union or synthesis of three projects, namely a Libyan quest for pan-African unity, a Nigerian project for a Conference on Security, Stability, Development and Cooperation in Africa (CSSDCA), and a South African project for an African Renaissance (Tieku, 2004, p. 249-67).

The establishment of the AU, like its predecessor the OAU, was also fraught with political and realpolitik encumbrances, the clash and accommodation of the strategic self-interests and foreign policies of the major actors within and outside Africa; such as contesting for the AU leadership position and the prominence of sub-regional hegemons like Nigeria, South Africa, Libya and Algeria (Francis, 2006, p. 25). From the Algiers Summit of 1999, which discussed two separate reform strategies for the OAU based on the foreign policy and strategic policy of the two major states, Nigeria and South Africa, the eventual continental union created in Lusaka was a consensus accommodating divergent interests (Ibid.). Accordingly, during the early years of the formation of the AU, Nigeria opposed Muammar Ghaddafi's proposal to form an African Union Government at the 2007 AU Summit in Accra, Ghana (Fagbayobo, 2014, p. 106). The Kampala Movement and Cairo initiatives were captured in the proposed Union towards the latter half of the 1990s. These initiatives thus arose from the vision articulated by Muammar Gaddafi, (and once associated with Nkrumah in the 1960s), and the minimalist vision converging around Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and Obasanjo of Nigeria (Khadiagala, 2010, p. 76).

Nigeria's idea of a CSSDCA came out of the so-called 'Kampala Movement' and was envisioned as an effort to create durable African regional co-operation in line with its new normative regime in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Deng & Zartman, 2002, p. 67). The vision was formulated in the 1991 'Kampala Document', which, inter alia, envisioned a modification of the principle of sovereignty in favour of a shared African responsibility to protect human rights ((Deng & Zartman, 2002, pp. 117-119). This initiative then remained dormant until 1999 when it was resurrected from near oblivion by President Obasanjo and formally endorsed by the OAU in 2000. The CSSDCA was based on a very broad concept of security, including human security, and acknowledged good governance as a pre-requisite of stable peace. To realise these values, it envisaged 'a collective continental architecture for promoting security and inter-African relations' and recommended the signing of non-aggression pacts, a common defence policy for Africa, standby arrangements for peace support operations, police collaboration and the establishment of an early warning mechanism as well as a strengthening of confidence-building measures. Most of these recommendations were formally confirmed and entrenched at the inaugural AU summit in Durban in 2002 (Møller, 2009, p. 8).

Conclusion

This paper has delivered an assessment of the emergence of the OAU/African Union and Nigeria's contribution process in the creation of these organisations. The paper specifically focused on four major areas. Two areas focused on the OAU and Africa's socio-economic and political development and on the other hand, Nigeria's foreign policy in the OAU. The other two areas focused on the emergence of the AU and Nigeria's involvement in the transformation process. Importantly, the OAU and African socio-economic and political perspectives demonstrated a pan-Africanist ideology that rested in the transformation of the African continent at all levels of socio-economic and political lives. The socio-economic dimension of the OAU argued that the OAU was created to promote and advance African socio-economic development. At the political level, it argued that the core objective of the OAU was a political unification and decolonisation of Africa. Also, the paper argued that Nigeria's positioning of its core foreign policy in the OAU was primarily predicated on the post-colonial objectives of the sovereign equality of African states and the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs-either by fellow African states or external powers.

Specifically, the paper noted that between 1960 and 1999, Nigeria's leadership role and national interest in the African affairs were to facilitate both the economic development and decolonisation of the African continent, and the OAU was the platform to play a leading role towards pursuing that objective. The democratisation of the African continent was not the core foreign policy objective of Nigeria, but rather to give a powerful voice and self-rule to the people of Africa attainable through the decolonisation process. For example, Nigeria's anti-imperialist policies in Southern Africa (Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, and the Republic of South Africa) demonstrated its Afrocentric foreign policy posture in the OAU. Furthermore, the chapter revealed the indispensable role of Nigeria in conflict resolution and mediation between different African states.

The paper has also shown how the OAU failed to solve the intractable socio-economic and political challenges confronting the African states after their independence. As a result, Nigeria, having realised and achieved its core foreign policy of the decolonisation and economic development of Africa, particularly after the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa, understood that the OAU had become structurally defective to cope with the challenges in the immediate post-Cold War period from the 1990s to the twenty-first century.

These challenges include socio-economic poverty, intra-state conflicts, undemocratic regimes and the civil wars confronting the African continent. The search for an effective and credible supranational and continental organisation capable of tackling these problems led to the creation of the AU in 2001.

Overall, Nigeria's foreign policy orientation and leadership profile in the OAU between 1960 and 1999 did not appear to be strongly linked to liberal democracy or democratisation processes but rather focused to promote both decolonisation and economic development of Africa.

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