

**THE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEMS OF NIGERIA’S EXTERNAL RELATIONS: ASSESSING  
THE HISTORICAL IMPERATIVES**

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**Abstract**

*This paper looks at the fundamental problems of Nigeria’s External Relations, with special emphasis on her historical experience of colonialism. It tried to establish a link between the Nigeria’s colonial experience and the challenges encountered over the years in her foreign policy articulation and implementation. Using the ‘Dependency Theory’, the paper identified ‘The colonial experience’; Structural imbalance in Nigeria’s federal system and the Afro-centric philosophy of Nigerian leaders as the fundamental problems of Nigeria’s foreign policy. The paper argues that alongside the colonial experience which tied Nigeria’s economy to the Western capitalist economy, the inherited structural imbalance in Nigeria exacerbated ethnicity and hampered national cohesion thereby affecting Nigeria’s foreign policy negatively. Also, the paper highlighted the fact that Nigeria has spent more than she has gotten from her Afro-centric foreign policy posture. The paper therefore concludes that restructuring of the Nigerian state to make for changes in the political cum economic equations in such a way as to promote the nation’s core national values is the way to tackle Nigeria’s foreign policy challenges.*

**Keywords:** Dependency, Structural imbalance, Afro-centrism, Foreign policy

**Introduction**

Nigeria’s External Relations are encapsulated in Nigeria’s foreign policies. To appreciate the fundamental problems of Nigeria’s External Relations therefore, one need to have a firm grasp of the concept of foreign policy generally. Also, an understanding of the basic problems of Nigeria’s External Relations requires a good appreciation of the prevailing socio-political cum-economic issues of the time which informed the Nigeria’s Foreign policies as it affect countries of Africa and beyond.

For a start, let us look at the concept of foreign policy globally. Foreign policy is seen as a pre-determined, formal pattern of behavior adopted by a state in relation with both states and non-state actors within the international community. A nation’s ability to interact with other nations is a reflection of its acceptance internationally, and evaluation of its level of civility in terms of behavioural conformity with international legal principles. (Ajayi, 2005). Gamawa (2015) posits that Foreign Policy since time immemorial remains an important aspect of state craft and has often taken the lead in directing the conduct and affairs of states. According to Ayodele, Muyiwa and Chidozie (2015), a country’s foreign policy consists of self-interest strategies chosen by the state to safeguard its national interests and to achieve its goals within the international relations milieu. These scholars explained that foreign policy is the aggregate of a country’s national interests which results from the interaction of internal forces as perceived by the foreign policy decision makers. Foreign policy is a derivative of the domestic policies encapsulated in the national goals. It is the means through which states present their desired images and pursue different goals within the international system. Foreign policy has many facets. These include: political, socio-cultural and economic facets.

Nigeria's foreign policy is believed to be in a state of flux by a number of scholars. Anyaele (2005), posits that one of the most prevailing perspectives of Nigeria's foreign policy is that it is constantly in a state of flux as a result of internal and external dynamics inherent in any given administration or regime. Some other scholars argue however that irrespective of the frequent changes, the substance of Nigeria's foreign policy has remained the same. The later group of scholars maintains that the protection of Nigeria's national interest, which in itself is dynamic, has remained the permanent focus of Nigeria's foreign policy. These scholars contend that what vary between the different regimes are the strategies for the protection of Nigeria's national interest which actually is a function of perception, disposition and global trend.

Notwithstanding the polemics, certain fundamental problems have been identified as major challenges to Nigeria's foreign policy. Some of these problems stem from the Nigeria's colonial history and the attendant structural imperfections of the Nigeria's Federal structure. Scholars have also picked holes with the Afro-centric philosophy of the Nigerian foreign policy. These fundamental problems constitute the focus of this study.

Theoretical Framework: Dependence Theory

Dependency theory is a radical departure from the modernization theory of the early 1950's. The theory actually came as a rebuttal or reaction to the postulations of the modernization theorists on how the developing countries could become developed. Dependency theorists argue that it would be impossible to understand the processes and problems of Africa without considering the wider socio-historical context of Western European expansion and colonialism (Matunhu; 2011). For Rodney (1972), colonialism was not merely a system of exploitation, but one whose essential purpose was to repatriate the profits made in Africa to the so called homeland.

The understanding of this in line with dependency perspective is that through colonialism, surplus values created using African labour and African resources were repatriated to the benefiting European countries, a process which developed Europe at the expense of Africa. Rodney (1972) averred that during colonialism, Europe organized herself, accumulated capital gained from her colonies in Africa, shrewdly invested the surplus in productive economic ventures, steadfastly increasing national wealth and riches for its people. He noted that this created political economic and even socio-cultural dependence as the African countries were yoked in an unequal relationship with their European counterparts.

This theory aptly explains Nigeria's comradeship relationship with the fellow African countries who suffer the same fate of colonial and neo-colonial experience and the 'master - servant' relationship that has continued to exist between Nigeria and the Western capitalist states. Upon independence in the 1960, Nigeria's foreign policy was driven by the desire to end colonialism in the other African countries that were still under direct colonization and to put an end to the apartheid regime in South Africa. This was essentially why it was said that Africa is the centerpiece of Nigeria's foreign policy from independence.

On account of this, Nigerian government got involved deeply in the decolonization struggles in Angola, Mozambique, Namibia and anti-apartheid struggles in South Africa. Also lending credence to this is Nigeria's involvement in the formation of ECOWAS and ECOMOG, which spearheaded the restoration of peace in war torn Liberia and Sierra Leone.

In relation with the Western countries, Nigeria adopted non-alignment in principle. By this policy, Nigeria meant not to take side in the cold war raging between the capitalist Western bloc and the socialist Eastern bloc. In practice however, Nigeria found it extremely difficult to do away with the colonial umbilical cord tying the country with the capitalist Western bloc, thus continued to tilt to the capitalist Western bloc in practice even at the detriment of Nigeria's core national interest. Rodney (1972) summed up as follows: Africa deprived (by Europe) of politics and economic decision power and lacking sustained investment funds trod the reverse path, sinking deeper and deeper into non-development and poverty.

The Fundamental Problems of Nigeria's External Relations

In this work, the fundamental problems of Nigeria's foreign policy is conceived as those factors that hamper or inhibit the use of foreign policy to advance Nigeria's core national interests or values. These include all such factors that affect negatively, Nigerian's common aspirations and desires, be it economical, political and socio-cultural desires that are realizable from the international community. According to Kingibe (2015), our vital interest are those that relate to our core values – our cohesion and collective survival, inviolability of our territorial integrity, the guarantee of our sovereignty, the protection of our citizens and resources, and the defense of our democracy which enables us make independent decisions about our national life. The Nigeria's core national interests/values include all that promotes Nigeria's national pride, sovereignty, security, economic rejuvenation, political stability and protection of the rights of every Nigerian everywhere in the world. It therefore requires interrogating all such

hindrances to Nigeria's national interest and core values dating back to the formative stages of the Nigerian state.

Thus, the fundamental problems of Nigeria's foreign policy can be situated within the following historical realities;

- The Nigeria's Colonial Experience
- Structural Imbalance in Nigeria's federal system.
- Afro-centric philosophy of the Nigeria's foreign policy

Let us look at these problems one after the other

#### A) The Nigeria's Colonial Experience

The fact that Nigeria is a product of colonialism posed a challenge to her foreign policy articulation and implementation mechanism. Like every other country, Nigeria's foreign policy is influenced by domestic factors such as history, economy, size etc (see Oddih; 1997). Nigeria's history of colonialism imposed serious burden on the articulation and implementation of Nigeria's foreign policy for the mere fact that Nigeria evolved not for Nigerians but for the capitalist colonial powers.

The Nigerian state, fresh from colonialism in the 1960 inherited an economy that was structured primarily to support the industrial development of the British capitalist economy. Despite the abundance of natural resources in Nigeria, the Nigerian colonial economy existed only to serve the economic interests of the colonial powers and not to build a strong and self-sustaining national economy in Nigeria. The conditions of the colonial economy helped to reinforce ethnic and regional differences in the country. The import-export structure of the international economic relations of colonialism hampered the economic integration of the various parts of the colony. The patterns of linkages and integrations of the colonial economy were with the metropolis rather than with each other. The regional economic development was fragmented and lacked coherence. The motivation of the colonial masters was purely to exploit the natural resources which must be repatriated to their home country. The pattern of linkages therefore was not meant to connect the different regions/parts of the country but to link the sources of raw materials to the shipping ports. Consequently, the emergent ruling class was fragmented along regional lines. This posed a challenge to articulating a foreign policy that truly serves Nigeria's economic and socio-political interest given the nature of the arising ethnics/regional economic cum political competitions. The economic cum political competitions were generally marred with ethnocentrism. Political power became a tool for ethnic or parochial agenda. This will come out clearer in the other two problems.

#### B) Structural Imbalance in Nigeria's Federal System

Obviously, foreign policy is a product of national interest. Difficulties of national cohesion occasioned by the federal structure deliberately skewed in favour of one section of the country affected the articulation and pursuit of national goals in Nigeria. The point being made here stems from the fact that internal schism and mutual suspicion among the ruling class in Nigeria affected and has continued to affect Nigeria's national goals and core values within the international community. This point is necessary given that a country's foreign policy is driven by some domestic factors. This was clearly stated by Oddih in Ojiakor and Unachukwu (1997:128), "*every foreign policy is influenced by a number of domestic factors such as the history, economy, size of the country, leadership, ethnic, religious, political, cultural, ideological and other social factors*". For Fafowora (2015), Much more importantly, the country should be made to understand that more assertive foreign policy can only be based on a strong economy and domestic stability not on mere wishful thinking.

On the strength of this fact, this study contends that the structural imbalance in the Nigerian state has continued to pose a challenge in the articulation and implementation of the country's foreign policy given that Nigeria's core national values are sacrificed on the alter of ethno-religious sentiments. Foreign policies are articulated based on a country's needs from the international system. These entail careful articulation and tactful implementation of predetermined courses of actions intended to achieve obvious national goals at the international system using structures put in place by the government.

According to Oddih (1997:128), *since foreign policies deal with decisions, actions, thoughts and rules fashioned within the domestic sphere and projected into the international arena for purposes of achieving national interests, foreign policy could be as old as the history of man's communal life.*

Agreeing with this position, Gamawa (2015) points out that even before the treaty of Westphalia that saw the emergence of modern nation states under the principle of 'sovereignty', many principalities in Europe, America as well as certain kingdoms and empires in Africa and other parts of the world have pursued foreign policy in their relations with other principalities, kingdoms or empires.

Nigeria came into being from 1914 when the British colonial administration led by Lord Lugard merged the Northern and Southern Protectorates (which included the colony of Lagos) together. Before then, both protectorates existed as distinct colonial administrations. Ifesinachi, (2006) pointed out that prior to the amalgamation and until 1946 the North and South diverged radically in administration. He explained that the North operated a hierarchical emirate system which was easily amenable to the British policy of indirect rule.

On the other hand, the South had a variety of different forms of traditional administrations and a bunch of vociferous intellectuals all of which are averse to colonial administration. Upon amalgamation, in 1914, the colonial administration deliberately refused to make efforts at integrating the peoples of Nigeria. Rather, conscious efforts were made to develop and sustain schism and emphasize the differences amongst the peoples of Nigeria. Antagonistic rivalries among the different nationalities in Nigeria served the colonial interests better. The major thrust of colonial policy was to keep the colonial people in political subjugation as a way to facilitate easy exploitation of their material and human resources (Okolie, 2005). Unity amongst the different peoples of Nigeria will surely have worked against colonial interests. There are indications that some of these ethnic nationalities had co-existed in relative harmony, though under different political organizations before the colonial administration. (See Ojiakor and Unachukwu; 1997). The colonial administration had ignited and engendered deep seated mistrust amongst the different ethnic groups in Nigeria in the bid to foster her 'divide and rule' policy. According to Nkemdilim (1997:146/7) in Ojiafor and Unachukwu (ed), "*the British colonial administration insisted on segregated residential centers culminating to what we today know as 'Sabon Gari' (Strangers quarters) in the North or 'Ogbe Hausa' in the East*". The scholar explained that this negatively affected inter-ethnic interaction and synergy in the urban cities, bred mutual suspicion and mistrust, and inhibited the spirit to bind together in a communal action against the exploitative colonial rule.

Furthermore, the British colonial administration deliberately obstructed Christian missionaries from evangelizing the Northern Nigeria. According to Ifesinachi (2006), in an attempt to preserve the Islamic purity of the north as an essential ingredient for the policy of 'divide and rule', as well as to insulate the north from southern radicalism, the British colonial administration excluded Christian missionaries from the north. The British colonial administration also limited the introduction of Western education in the northern region. Ifesinachi cited above also pointed out that the relative influences that were transforming the South left the North backward, fearful and resentful and the South scornful of the North. With a background of this nature, coming together to forge a common front which would inform national interest becomes very difficult. This explains why the first military coup in Nigeria (Jan. 1966) was largely perceived as sectionally oriented.

Above all, the Nigerian federal structure is largely perceived as flawed. The federation sits on a tripod of the three major ethnic groups. The federation, being a creation of the British colonial administration, is skewed in favour of the North. Okolie (1998), noted that the Nigerian 'brand' of federalism was consciously constructed, packaged, foisted and hoisted on the polity to ensure the preservation and extension of the imperial interests. This was why one of Nigeria's foremost nationalists, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, (1968) described the British imposed federal structure as "*an abominable heritage*".

Nigerian elites, especially during the first republic, were almost unanimous in acknowledging the fact that national-integration in Nigeria was an uphill task if not impossible. In 1947, Balewa declared that since the amalgamation of Southern and Northern provinces in 1914, Nigeria has existed as one country only on paper (Ifesinachi; 2006). The foremost nationalist averred that the country was still far from being united.

Also, Chief Obafemi Awolowo was quoted as saying that;

*Nigeria is not a nation; it is a mere geographical expression. There are no 'Nigerians' in the sense as there are 'English' or 'Welch' or 'French'; the word Nigerian is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not (Ifesinachi; 2006:8).*

On the Eastern part, the resentment to Nigeria's federal structure degenerated into secession attempt and civil war in the late 1960s. The point being made here is that Nigerians were forcefully yoked together in a union they still find difficult to embrace. An average Nigerian identifies himself from his ethnic background. Political and economic struggles amongst Nigerians are denominated by ethnicity. Nigerians look at the state politics and power in terms of what accrues to the ethnic localities from the centre. Jostles for political power and positions of authority in Nigeria is laced with ethnic sentiments. Those that are in positions of authority use their positions to advance ethnic agenda. Those out of power or

jostling for power use ethno-religious sentiments to bargain. If it is not Niger-Delta militancy, it will be Boko-Haram, or Biafra/IPOD activists or even the OPC. Policies are therefore fashioned by those in authority with serious consideration of the sensitive nature of ethnicity in Nigeria. This hinders objective articulation of core national interests/values for the purposes of foreign policy articulation and implementation.

#### C) Afro-Centric Philosophy

Another problem of Nigeria's foreign policy is its Afro-centric philosophy. Nigeria's foreign policy is largely Afro-centric in orientation. This means that Africa is the centre-piece of Nigeria's foreign policy. Nigeria plays the role of a 'big brother' within the African continent and has variously intervened in the crises/problems affecting other African countries to such an extent that evoked criticism locally.

According to Ayodele et al (2015), it seems that there is apparent disconnect between national interest and Nigeria-African relations. The scholars contend that it is apparent that the nation is doing too much in the African continent without corresponding positive outcome. Obadiah in Ogunseye (1999) posits that the centerpiece of any country's foreign policy ought to be that country itself if it seriously considers itself a rational actor on the world stage. He argued that every single action shall be adjudged by how much it advances our national power and influence and how much it advances our interests, objectives and purposes. For Ukaeje in Machridis (1985), our false generosity abroad and penury at home are proof that we are pretending to be what we are not. He insists that Nigeria has been overstretching herself in her Afro-centric foreign policy. This position was also strengthened by Akinboye (2013) in his '*Beautiful Abroad but Ugly at Home*' thesis. The above views appear in controvertible, given the enormity of funds the nation expends in trying to solve various problems in Africa in the face of very debilitating fund starvation on almost all sectors of Nigeria's national life. Scholars of repute agree that although Nigeria is rich in strategic mineral resources through which the nation earn huge income, the country has spent her resources solving problems of other African countries at the expense of huge domestic demands. The basic infrastructures for advancement are in dire need of fund and the country has continued to sink in debt while spending huge amounts of money on other African countries.

This informs the call for paradigm shift as regards Nigeria's foreign policy. Olukotun, (2013); Akinboye, (2013), all call for a review of the '*afro-centric*' and non-alignment policies that Nigerian leaders have continued to pursue since independence. For Olukotun (2013:13); "*any rethinking and reforming of the Nigeria's foreign policy must begin with an earnest effort to clean up our acts domestically, by creating an exportable Brand Nigeria as well as undertaking a harnessing of our soft power indices*". On account of this, the Nigerian Senate implored the Federal Government to, going forward, imbibe Nigeria's economic interest as vital component of our foreign policy objectives in countries where the nation invested her enormous human and material resources to restore security, peace, stability and democracy (Premium Times; 2015).

#### Conclusion

Foreign policy is a reflection of domestic policies that are externally projected, and predicated on the works of a galaxy of scholars (Chidozie, Ibietan and Ujara; 2014). Obviously, Nigeria's foreign policy from inception was largely informed by the need to join hands with other African states in the fight against the forces of colonialism and apartheid regime. Nigeria secured her independence from the colonial masters in 1960. Even though a number of other African states had gotten their independence before Nigeria, a lot more were yet to have theirs'. Nigeria therefore found it necessary to assist their fellow African states to gain political independence and form a synergy against colonialism. Accordingly, Aluko (1981), observed that in 1960, the principles guiding Nigeria's foreign policy were as follows;

- Respect for sovereignty and equality of other states.
- Non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.
- Commitment to cooperation as a means of promoting African unity.

As a new independent country still struggling to achieve internal cohesion, Nigeria's attempt to build synergy with neighboring African states was really not out of place.

Nigeria's efforts in building a power bloc in Africa at the early stage of her independence was however undermined by internal forces resulting to political instability both in Nigeria and across other African states. The wave of political crises and military coup de'tat across the length and breath of the continent disrupted courses of actions adopted by some state actors and introduced new challenges that shaped the formulation and adoption of new foreign policies. The intense interconnectedness of the global system and its far-reaching implications for the policies of a state, in relation to other states, necessitates the establishment of some degree of strategizing in their interactions with other states for the pursuit of

crucial interests (Lawal and Daiyabu; 2015). Nigerian leaders had to contend with domestic political turbulence most of the times which impacted negatively on the way foreign policies were articulated and implemented. Frequent changes in the ministry of foreign affairs and embassies, occasioned by regime changes disrupted programmes of governments as regards forging a basis of interaction/relationship with other state actors both within Africa and beyond.

This paper therefore conclude that since foreign policy is a product of national interests, Nigeria's foreign policies during the first republic were essentially informed by the desire to play a leading role in the continent given the size and potentials of the country. This however suffered setbacks arising from domestic challenges and instability in government occasioned by Nigeria's colonial history. Colonialism had created deep seated schisms and rivalry between the major ethnic nationalities such that national cohesion becomes problematic in Nigeria. Colonialism had bequeathed on Nigeria an economy that is tied to the global capitalist system. Colonialism also had bequeathed Nigeria with very coercive military and police forces that are totally alienated from the people. The contemporary issues of corruption, bad leadership, prebendalism and so on are all tangential to the colonial hangovers westernized and disoriented emergent ruling class. The colonial experience and neo-colonialism has continued to influence Nigeria's foreign policy to the detriment of Nigeria's core values or national interests.

The solution to Nigeria's foreign policy misadventures must originate from a new Nigeria. According to Adelusi and Oluwashakin (2014:135), "*the linkages between domestic processes and external relations provides a specific context which identifies the extent to which specific issues can positively or negatively exert influence on achievement of a given policy*". This clearly calls for restructuring of the Nigerian state. This restructuring must effect enduring changes in the power equations and military cum security institutions to make for economic rejuvenation and viability and improve national consciousness. This will facilitate articulation of foreign policies that will serve the national core values.

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