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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Administrative Re-Organisation of the Native Authority System in Eastern Nigeria: A Case of Agbaja Clan of Udi Division, 1945 – 1960 Alphonsus O. Njoku.	1
History: Facts, Truth or Lies? Ikechukwu Nwakaeze-Ogugua and Ifunanya C. Ogugua.	29
Traditional Rulers and Governance in Nigeria: The Colonial and Post-Colonial Periods Considered Dan O. Chukwu and Chinwe A. Alazor.	52
Nigeria's Involvement in the Non-Aligned Movement, 1960 - 1970. Nwachukwu J. Obiakor.	78
Arab Revolution: A Stride Towards Democratization Leo Nnoli and Emeka Okoye.	91
The Igbo Community and the Economy of Wukari, Taraba State up to 2013 Okonkwo C. Eze and Adihikon Tanko Angyetsokwa.	109
History as a Vehicle for Attainment of National Unity and Integration in Nigeria Evaristus E. Emeghara.	123
From Indigenisation to Nigerianisation: A Look at the Process of Decolonisation of the Nigerian Army, 1948-1965 Ibiang Oden Ewa.	155
The Bamako Initiative of 1987 and the Health Diplomacy in Nigeria Under the Structural Adjustment Programme Benjamin Uchenna Anaemene.	175

NIGERIA'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE NON-ALIGNED MOVEMENT, 1960-1970.

Nwachukwu J. Obiakor

Overview

Post World War II international relations was dominated by two super power blocs; the Eastern bloc comprising of the communist countries of eastern Europe led by the defunct Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the Western bloc comprising of the capitalist countries of Western Europe led by United States of America. This era is known in history as the cold war era. The 'Cold war' is a term used to describe the hostilities, mutual distrust and suspicion that characterized the post world war II international relations, up till 1991. The era saw one time war allies leading different power blocs against each other, with the acquisition and development of weapons of mass destruction. An American diplomat, Bernard Baruch was the first to use the term 'cold war', while Walter Lipmann, a leading journalist popularized it through his work *The Cold War*¹.

International politics was heavily influenced by the intense rivalry between these two power blocs and the political ideologies they represented, nay; 'defense of democracy' and promotion of capitalism in the case of the United States and her allies, and the 'export of Socialism' in the case of the Soviet bloc². The cold war was not like the conventional wars that were fought between the super powers before 1945. It was a global contest and a sort of war, which shared many of the characteristics of modern warfare viz; ideological differences, acquisition of large number of weapons, war plans, operational manuals, covert operations and psychological warfare, the

formation of alliances, economic and trade pressures, and the control of society³.

The history of post World War II international relations and politics is a perplexing saga of the cold war, along with a refreshing saga of non-alignment⁴. The cold war generated mistrust, hatred and arms build-up between the capitalist oriented countries of the west, and the socialist oriented countries of the east; while the non-aligned movement provided an alternative atmosphere of growing good will and cooperation among all countries of the world⁵.

The Non-alignment movement was a loose association of countries that, during the cold war, had no formal commitment to either of the two power blocs in world politics. Accordingly, Kumer observed that non-alignment is one of those phenomena of international politics which appeared on the international scene after World War II and which represented an important force in the shaping of the nature of international relations⁶. In other words, the politics of the cold war beget the Non-alignment.

The movement has as its members, leaders that had recently freed themselves from foreign domination and rejected renewed ties to any super power. Some leaders of the developing countries like Jawaharlal Nehru (India), Marshal Tito (Yugoslavia), Gamal Abder Nasser (Egypt), and the Foreign Ministers of about 20 other countries of Africa, Asia, and Europe with an observer from Brazil had in June 1961 held a meeting in preparation for a conference of the heads of states and governments of their countries⁷. The conference was convened primarily to work out the criteria for membership of the non-aligned movement. This conference known in historical circles as the Belgrade conference of 1961 laid the foundation of the non-aligned movement.

Nigeria on attainment of independence from the British colonial authorities in 1960 decided to stay aloof from both blocs, hence her adoption of her Non-alignment policy. It is in the light of the above that the Prime Minister of Nigeria, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa outlined Nigeria's foreign policy objectives to include, among others, "Non-alignment in her relationship with the super powers⁸." With the above scenario in place, Nigeria like other member countries of the Non-Aligned Movement, as captured by Andrew Heywood, "was meant to abstain from formal political and economic affiliation with either of the power blocs and committed themselves to values such as peaceful co-existence and mutual non-interference⁹."

This paper among other things evaluates Nigeria's applicability of the policy of non-alignment within the first decade of her independence, in the light of her colonial ties with Great Britain, who is a strong force in the Western bloc between 1960 and 1970.

Balewa's Regime and Non-Alignment Policy

Shortly before the attainment of independence, precisely on the 20th day of August, 1960, the Prime Minister of Nigeria Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa at the Federal House of Representatives officially pronounced that the general principles that would guide the post independent Nigeria foreign policy. According to him, "Nigeria would follow an independent policy, which would be founded on Nigeria's interest consistent with the moral and democratic principles on which our constitution is based¹⁰."

On the ideological conflicts between the two super powers, the Prime Minister asserted that, "We consider it wrong for the federal government to associate itself as a matter

of routine with any of the powers blocs... and not blindly follow the lead of any (power)¹¹". This was reiterated by him on the occasion of Nigeria's admission into the United Nations Organisation (UNO). On that day, he addressed the United Nations General Assembly where he professed Nigeria's non-partnership in the East-West ideological conflict and professed the country's freedom of association and action in the international system¹². The policy of non-alignment was well intended in that it was meant to benefit Nigeria politically, economically, and otherwise from both blocs. The adoption of the policy was influenced largely by the country's national interest. Despite Balewa's gospel of non-alignment, the colonial legacies that tied his government to the apron string of Great Britain, his conservatism and sympathy for the West, impeded to a large extent the realization of the non-alignment objective. Balewa's Pro-West stance was obvious. To Balewa, communism was evil, and therefore limited his government's relations with the Eastern bloc¹³. This belief was hinged on his religious belief¹⁴.

On most international issues, Nigeria under the Balewa administration clearly supported the West. Issues like Berlin crises of 1962, the America nuclear test of 1962, the Congo crises, and the Vietnam conflict, clearly showed Balewa's leaning towards the West¹⁵. The only exception was Nigeria's decision to break diplomatic relations with France over the French detonation of three nuclear bombs in the Sahara. Nigeria's action on France was belated, in that other countries like Ghana, Japan, Tunisia, Morocco, United Arab Republic, Sudan and even the Arab League had already protested, before Nigeria reluctantly joined suit. Perhaps one would wonder what would have happened if it were Britain that carried out the tests. Would Nigeria under Balewa have had the temerity

to react the same way against the people Balewa openly poured out appreciations on? He had once stated unabashedly that "We are grateful to the British officials whom we have known first, as masters, and then as leaders and finally as partners, but always as friends"¹⁶.

The Anglo-Nigeria Defence Pact of 1960

This pact was meant to allow Britain operate an air base in Nigeria. The main reason for the pact was to check communist infiltration. The then British Defence Secretary and later, Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, Mr. Duncan Sandy, raised the bogey of communist infiltration and subversion and thus capitalized on Nigerian leader's fear of communism¹⁷. Mr. Mathew Mbu, Nigeria's Minister of State for Navy, justified the pact and quipped thus; "Nigeria could not afford to be neutral in the cold war that her security needed to be protected and this could as well be done within the Western bloc".¹⁸

There is no contention on the above fact that the Anglo-Nigeria Defense Pact practically exposed the pro-west stance of the Balewa administration. The action rubbished the rhetoric of non-alignment being spread by Balewa. In most of his pronouncements, the Prime Minister always assured that Nigeria would not sign any pact with any country. In any exceptional case, a parliamentary approval must be sought and obtained. Unfortunately, Balewa made a *volte face* when he went ahead to sign the pact while the Bill on it was still being debated on in the floor of the House. The pact provided for over flying and landing facilities for the United Kingdom military aircraft; afforded Nigeria training facilities for her military forces in the United Kingdom, and enabled the United Kingdom to continue to test military equipments in Nigeria's

tropical conditions¹⁹. It took strong protests from within and outside Nigeria, including university students to get the agreement abrogated²⁰.

Congo Crises

Immediately after Nigeria got her independence, she was confronted with the Congo crises which had already polarized the United Nations along the East/West lines. Nigeria government under Balewa was sympathetic with the Western capitalist bloc, on the crises. The Eastern bloc at due point during the crises called for the resignation of the UNO Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjold for the way he handled the crises. Nigeria, not minding her non alignment posture stood behind the UNO and the Western bloc. Nigeria insisted that only the United Nations Organization's presence would put the danger of making Africa a battle ground for the cold war to a check²¹. Of the total of 130 resolutions at the UNO on the subject, Nigeria supported 82, opposed 15 and abstained in 28²².

Rhodesian Crises

In 1965 when Ian Smith unilaterally declared independence in Southern Rhodesia, Nigeria rose to discourage other African states from cutting diplomatic ties with Britain, who supported the racist regime. The attitude of Nigeria angered other African countries, especially those that were members of the Commonwealth of Nations. Nigeria in a bid to reiterate her non-aligned stance championed the expulsion of apartheid South Africa from the Commonwealth of Nations in 1962²³.

Belgrade Conference of 1961 and the Birth of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Despite Balewa's adoption of the non-alignment policy, Nigeria was not represented at the conference at Belgrade in Yugoslavia that formally gave birth to the Non-Aligned Movement in September 1961. Prominent among the leaders that attended the conference were Jawaharlal Nehru, Indian Prime Minister; Gamal Abdel Nasser, Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure, Josip Broz Tito, presidents of Egypt, Ghana, Guinea, and Yugoslavia respectively, among others. Nigeria's absence at the conference portrayed her in a bad light in the comity of nations, which saw Nigeria as pro-West, but just paying lip service to non-alignment.

It is pertinent to state that Balewa's pro-west stance was so obvious that of the five diplomatic posts outside Africa after independence three were in the Western capitalist countries, viz, London, Washington and Rome. It was not until late 1961 that the Soviet request to open an embassy in Lagos was approved.

Balewa and Eastern Communist Bloc

Nigeria's relations with the communist bloc during the first republic could best be described as a cold relations lacking in enthusiasm and cordiality on the side of the Nigerian government. The government of Tafawa Balewa remained indifferent to the Soviet bloc. This was witnessed in the belated approval granted the Soviet application for the establishment of embassy in Nigeria. Even with the late approval, the government restricted the number of diplomats to ten in the country²⁴.

Nigeria on her part had no embassy in any of the communist countries up to 1965 except in Moscow. Sadly

enough, during the same period, there were 52 foreign missions in Lagos. Out of which only six belonged to the Eastern communist nations of USSR, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary.

The anti-East posture of the Balewa administration was seen in the restriction on the importation of communist literature into Nigeria, while the government developed cold feet towards allowing Nigerians to schools in USSR. This made it reluctant to take up all the scholarship offered Nigeria students in the Soviet Union.

Balewa's economic development policy clearly did not accommodate the Soviet, despite the latter's willingness to support the Nigerian economy. However, Balewa's pursuit of a conservative foreign policy was influenced by some factors which imposed severe limits on possible radical posturing of Nigeria's political economy of alignment with the capitalist west²⁵. The personal idiosyncrasy of the British in no mean way influenced the execution of Balewa's foreign policy objectives. The Prime Minister (Balewa)'s personal dislike for communism limited his policy choices and options and equally limited the benefits which Nigeria would have got from a true non-aligned policy.

Balewa's regime was succeeded by the short lived J.T.U Aguiyi-Ironsi led regime which was too occupied with internal strife that beleaguered the country at that time. Ironsi had no time to address or take sides with either of the blocs. It can therefore be said that he did not alter the pro-West stance of Balewa's government.

General Yakubu Gowon's Regime and the Non-Aligned Movement

Nigeria's external relations took a dramatic turn under the regime of General Yakubu Gowon. With the outbreak of the Nigeria civil war in 1967, the government solicited for military aid from her 'traditional allies', to enable it prosecute the war against the secessionist Biafra Republic. The refusal by Britain and the United States of America to supply heavy arms to Nigeria forced Gowon out of desperation to turn to the Soviet Union for military assistance, which the latter readily offered²⁶. The Soviets saw that as an opportunity to gain a real foothold, and had no choice than to accept and thus became a 'friend in need' to Nigeria.

It was only when Britain saw the Soviet assistance to Nigeria, that they changed their policy, in the fear that the communists would gain an in-road into Nigeria²⁷. In December 1969, 130 members of the British House of Commons called on the government of USSR to suspend all further arms sales to Nigeria and rather to support ceasefire. The end of the war saw Nigeria having a more non-aligned and open foreign policy. The restrictions on the Soviet diplomatic mission were broken and more Soviet products were imported. The Soviet scholarships which Nigeria was formerly reluctant to take up were fully taken up. In appreciation for her timely intervention, the Nigeria government under Gen. Yakubu Gowon awarded the contract for the construction of the Ajaokuta Steel Company to a Soviet firm.

The Soviet Premier, Alex Kosygin and other Soviet diplomats pledged all forms of support to aid the development of post civil war Nigeria. In March 1969, the Soviet warship paid Nigeria a courtesy visit. The visit was epitomized by the 'Tweed Bank incident'. Tweed Bank was a British merchant

vessel which coincidentally was on its route to Lagos port at the same time with Soviet warship. While the ships were at the port, in Lagos, a Soviet sailor dived into the lagoon and made to the British merchant vessels where he requested for political asylum. It took the quick intervention of the Nigerian police and the Soviet Ambassador to apprehend the sailor. Nigeria by this act showed that the Soviet Union is a good friend and ally. This can also be said to have been to spite her western allies that abandoned her in her time of need.

General Gowon in a bid to strengthen Nigerian-Soviet ties paid a state visit to USSR. This visit opened a new leaf in Nigeria's relations with countries of the Eastern communist bloc. The above notwithstanding, Nigeria still maintained her ties strongly with the Western allies. The Nigeria-Soviet rapprochement which began during the civil war did not flourish as was expected. The USSR soon discovered that despite its massive arms supply to Nigeria, the accruing benefits were minimal. The western powers continued to be Nigeria's largest suppliers and biggest trading partners. The affinity with the West was very strong within the Nigerian political, economic and military elite²⁸. At the end of the war, Gowon declared that the development of the country could only be attained by remaining in the system of world capitalism²⁹. This declaration made USSR thread softly with regard to their relations with Nigeria.

Conclusion

The Non-alignment on the part of Nigeria to either of the world power blocs between 1960 and 1970 was a mere rhetoric. Nigeria, having got her independence in 1960 could not have broken herself so soon from the umbilical cord of her 'mother' (Britain). The colonial rule and the consequent

legacies essentially influenced Balewa's government foreign policy. Also the mode through which Nigeria got emancipated from the British colonial subjugation strengthened Anglo-Nigeria ties. Nigeria's attainment of independence through peaceful process accentuated the relationship between her former colonial 'master' (Britain) and the rest of her western capitalist allies³⁰.

The Gowon regime that made a concrete move to the East only turned to the Eastern bloc for assistance when her age long allies, the US and Great Britain abandoned her in her time of need. On getting what she wanted, she turned her face to the capitalist West. This implied that the Gowon administration that made an attempt towards the East did not do it as a matter of policy or principle, but out of necessity. It would therefore not be prejudiced if this paper submits that the immediate post independence Nigeria relations with the rest of the world was pro-British in particular, and pro-Western capitalist countries in general, non-alignment notwithstanding.

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