

"The Thrust of Nigeria's Foreign Policy in the Future"

JIDE OSHUNTOKUN

Nigerian Forum, May-June 1987, Nos 6&5

Foreign policy, if it means anything is the strategy of defending a nation's national interest through diplomacy. When diplomacy fails the same interest may be defended through war and the force of arms. The question then is what constitutes Nigeria's national interests. Our national interests are internal cohesion, national unity, the creation of a happy and egalitarian society, the creation of a state where career is open to talents and where there is employment for those who want to work and where there are the traditional freedoms of speech, political association, religion and equality before the Law, coupled with this is the defense of the humanity and rights of all black men through deliberate action and policies. These to me constitute our national interest. Once we agree about our national interest then it follows that these national interests are worth defending.

Our relations with other countries must be such as would advance our national interests. It is usually stated that Africa should be the focus of our foreign policy. In what ways would an Afro-centric foreign policy favour our national interest? The answer is that since most black people live on the African continent, Nigeria being the largest black nation in the world has continental responsibility to all African peoples particularly the black people South of the Sahara. The emphasis here is our responsibility to the black people of Africa. Africa is the home of the black man and all other races here were originally immigrants. Being on the same continent with some Caucasians like the Arabs and the white South Africans does not mean that we have common interests. I want to stress the point that our interests and those of the Arabs do not necessarily cohere and there are innumerable occasions, in spite of what Islam preaches about the brotherhood of man when the Arabs have pursued policies injurious to our well being and prosperity. The indiscriminate pumping daily of 10 million barrels of crude petroleum by Saudi Arabia with a population of under 8 million underscores the point I am making. This writer also happens to know that even today, there is a point which blacks may not cross in the Sahara without attracting physical injury if not outright liquidation to himself. The Haratin who are descendants of black slaves are openly discriminated against by the Arabs and Arabised berbers in the Maghreb. So where is the community of interests that we share with the Arabs in Africa that must compel automatic response and support of Nigeria wherever and whenever an Arab despot gets into trouble in his confrontation with a world power. While accepting the fact that as a third world people, and believing in Leopold Senghor's categorisation of Arabs, Jews and Blacks as constituting a 'trilogy of suffering people' it is still my belief that Nigeria's foreign policy cannot be anchored on sentiment and geographical accident of sharing a common continent of which we were the original owners, our policy must be based on reality. The reality of what Germans call *Weltpolitik* is that race or the pigmentation of one's skin is the greatest determinant of world politics. It was not only Gobineau and Adolph Hitler alone who recognised that the greatest factor of the 20th C is race; others including even Africans like Edward Wilmot Blyden, and even our own Azikiwe among others realised the importance of the blackness of our skin being the common denominator for the humiliation and persecution of all black peoples all over the world. This is why Nigeria as the biggest black country in the world must be domestically strong and get her act together to confront the problem of black humiliation. Nigeria cannot play a dynamic role in Africa unless it has a strong economy at home as well as political stability. This is why the national and the economic questions must be addressed first. Who is a Nigerian and what are his rights. Does he have rights in every part of Nigeria or is his right circumscribed by his state of origin or his religion? Can he send his child to school in the state where he resides, works and pays his taxes? Can he contest elections in his state of residence where his father was born and died? What is the criterion for state citizenship? Can he aspire to the post to which his ability and merit entitles him? Or is he as a result of Federal character denied what he may have

earned through dint of hard work and excellence? What are the acceptable prices he must pay to keep this Federal Republic going? Must he be like two runners have his legs chained while the other is free to run in the same race? Do his children also have the sins of the father visited on them because of where their father is presumed to have come from? Or in order to get on must he change his religion adopt a non-African name so that he can assume anonymity or be a walking deceit and fraud? Must he abandon his own language and try and cultivate the language of the majority so that he can enter the Nigerian political kingdom? The question of who is a Nigerian and what can he expect from his state and what are his minimum rights and maximum expectation and how do these compare with those who may regard themselves as the chosen group must be seriously addressed because if the Nigerian is not sure of his own rights he can hardly be expected to champion the demand for the rights of other peoples. When the Germans fought for Kaiser Wilham II during the First World War and for Adolph Hitler during the Second they were fighting for a state which provided them and their children Health Insurance, Old age pension, Education, physical and economic security. The same can be said for the English and the Arnericans not to say of the Russians. One's nation must have more meaning than mere geographical expression, a common flag, anthem and pledge. It must mean that one can be whatever God's endowment permit one to be. One is not advocating here an enforced unity or uniformity but within the true Federal structure of Nigeria, the rights of each Federating unit must be guaranteed and the rights of the citizens of the Federal Republic must also be guaranteed collectively and severally. A situation where a minority or even a majority tries to obliterate the rights of others and to concentrate powers into a few hands for crude capital accumulation without due consideration being paid to the legitimate concerns and needsof all is a negation of the purpose of civil society. Once the national question is settled, then we move to the economic question. What kind of economy would be suitable for Nigeria in the year 2,000? Certainly the present lopsided development and faulty industrial policy of importation of raw materials and knocked down second tier assembly plants would have to be abandoned for a policy of indigenously fabricated machineries and equipment. We may need to close our borders to the outside world in other to forge an home bred industrial technology. Certainty the self-inflicted monopolistic rights granted to foreign assembling plants must give way either to open competition or home fabrication. Nigeria must of course be self-reliant in food production, preservation and processing. In our trading relations, we must get away from the present colonial hang over which manifests itself in our lopsided economic relation with Great Britain. It is a known fact that Britain does not have the most up to date technology or know how and yet virtually all our foreign exchange earnings are foolishly spent in Britain instead of in the countries where we get the money from through sale of our primary products. In this way we suffer losses during the process of currency conversion and we reward a country which thinks very little of our well being. This paradox is accounted for by the fact that by and large our foreign policy is still determined by the interests of our educated elite. This elite is used to holidaying and shopping in England and those who were educated there sometimes subordinates national interest to old school ties.

Once we have resolved the problems of economic relations then the question of our internal economic structure would have to be tackled. Do we continue the present system of capitalist rat race and a system that creates overnight millionaires through inflated contracts and through the issuance of import licences which in many cases amount to granting blank cheques to fat cats. It was Julius Nyerere who first pointed out that because resources are finite and demand for resources are finite and since America the greatest capitalist country in the world is already consuming about thirty-five percent of the world's resources while constituting less than 10% of the World's population any country wishing to develop along the capitalist line would have to be satisfied not with full blown capitalism because the resources are just not there. In essence the socialist system is inevitable for developing countries if not the rest of the World. The political forecast therefore is that by the year 2000 Nigeria would be determined by the interest of the working class and not the interest of the present parasitic elite of civil servants, compradore bourgeoisie army and police officers. This is the very class that believes in holy pilgrimage whether of the Islamic or Christian type. I have always found it difficult to support pilgrimage for christians because Our Lord Jesus Christ did not recommend it. Even the Holy Koran enjoins it on those who can afford it and it is not

supposed to be performed at the expense of the state, nor should it be State supported as it is done now. In fact when a state supports the *hajj* it ceases being a religious obligation and one can draw the obvious consequence from this logic. This class is also the class of importers and exporters, the class of beer brewers, Contractors, Commission agents, smugglers, drug peddlars, embezzlers whether in Uniform or Agbada. This is the class that paradoxically owes no allegiance to Nigeria where their money is made. "Property is theft" says Proudhon but the propertied and moneyed class has done more to justify this by carting billions of this country's money to the vault of foreign banks in Switzerland, the United States and their favourite hunting ground Perfidious Albion. We must by necessity dispossess this class of what it has wrongfully aggrandized. How then do we manage the foreign policy of Nigeria to serve this inevitable domestic development. Nigeria right now is a member of that talking shop called the United Nations, she is also a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, The Non-Aligned movement, The O.A.U. and ECOWAS and she maintains embassies in the major centres of the world. All this constitute the arena of our foreign policy. We should continue in the United Nations and help to strengthen it if mankind himself is to be saved. There would have to be rationalisation of our diplomatic representation abroad. It is not necessary to have missions and envoys in every corner of the world. Our foreign representation must be related to our trading pattern and many of our missions in Asia and Latin America would have to be closed down while retaining our foot-hold in such countries as Brazil and India. There is no need for example for relations with Argentina - a racist country or with Australia another fellow racist traveler. Our economic relationship is with Europe and North America, and our flag must follow trade. But our economic ties with these countries must be such as would serve our national interest and not sentimental attachment of which the Commonwealth is a concrete manifestation. Our buying and selling in these countries must be done in such a way as to have effect on the domestic policies of these countries. When necessary we must withdraw from selling and buying in a particular country in order to score political point. There is no reason on earth for example why Nigeria should do business with Great Britain while Britain is busy destroying our economy through indiscriminate flooding of the world oil market. But unfortunately three quarters of our hard earned foreign exchange is still going to be spent in a country which has made the under-mining of our economy and consequently our strength an undisguised mission. Our relations with Europe and America must therefore be solely economic and all other relations must be decided along our own national interest. We must cultivate in the Americas the black constituencies there to serve Nigeria's national interest and the interest of Africa as a whole. The Blacks, even though, they do not and have not been able to muster the same kind of influence as the Jews have in America, the intelligentsia of the black diaspora can still be made to see that their own interest as black human beings lie in the ongoing struggle for black supremacy in Southern Africa. There are indications that American Blacks and Brazilian Blacks are coming to their own and would more and more see the common denominator of all black people as white racism and humiliation. One only hopes they would act accordingly to forge ties with their black brothers in the Home continent. It is when all this has been done through deliberate policies that the *O.A.U.* would become stronger and would be able to fulfill its mission to all African peoples, at Home and in the Diaspora. Africa of course would always remain the focus of our foreign policy but the strategy presently being pursued is the wrong one. Our future, I am afraid to say is not in ECOWAS but in a brand new organisation created around Nigeria and a constellation of surrounding neighbouring States of Benin, Niger, Cameroun and eventually Chad. This is the natural organisation, a kind of co-prosperity area that should have been created instead of the amorphous organisation called ECOWAS. What for example does Nigeria have in common with Mauritania which calls itself an Arab Republic to belong to the same ECOWAS? ECOWAS was formed as a result of sentiment; particularly friendship between Gnassingbe Eyadema and Yakubu Gowon of Togo and Nigeria respectively. It was not a natural organisation of people sharing the same borders, with the same people straddling common frontiers. ECOWAS was a going proposition in the hey-days of economic boom in Nigeria, and the frequent expulsion of ECOWAS citizens from Nigeria is an indication of the artificiality of the organisation. But if we had had the co-prosperity area suggested the story would have been different. This writer personally knows that several millions of our Nigerian people today were in fact aliens in the past from our immediate neighbouring countries and they have been absorbed without much

indigestion. I think what is realistic to do would have been the creation of a Zollverein with our neighbours first before embarking on a grandiose organisation such as ECOWAS. The creation of this co-prosperity area, pardon the use of the phrase would lead to dismantling of our immediate borders which separate related and same people. In fact the most secure border in the world is the undefended border. There were indications in the past that if Nigeria had made the offer Ahidjo of the Camerouns, Hamani Diori of Niger, Felix Maloum of Chad and Kerekou of Benin would have been prepared for a confederation with Nigeria. Justin Ahomadegbe, erstwhile President of the then Dahomey is on record as approaching publicly Nigeria for a federation of the two countries in the 1970s. We should put first things first, a new priority of political and economic relation with our immediate neighbours must be embarked upon, when this has been consolidated then we can think of the entire West African sub-region. This will be a bold departure from the past, but it would not mean abandoning the rest of Black Africa, what it would mean is that there would be a strong base from which to launch a continental policy in aid of progressive forces in Africa. Our policy towards dismantling of apartheid must be unshakeable. Who knows what may happen in the fullness of time, Nigeria may yet aid the black people of South Africa to become independent and if it is true that South Africa has nuclear capability, the new Black government of South Africa would through our effort become the first nuclear power on this black continent with all its concomitant political fall outs. In this regard Nigeria cannot afford to neglect her armed forces. These forces must be mobile so that they could be easily deployed. Therefore the navy and the airforce must have the best we are able to acquire and the best trained men that we can possibly provide. The Nigerian armed forces must re-order its priorities away from conspicuous consumption of alcohol and heavy personal emoluments to a new policy of acquisition of sophisticated weaponry while cutting down its unwieldy size. Gone are the days when there is safety in numbers. In our confrontation with South Africa we would need friends, genuine friends in particular, and as I opined before race is one of the determinants of world politics in this century we cannot really look for friends who will be militantly behind us except among the ranks of the dispossessed non white people of the world in the non-aligned movement; we must strengthen our relations with all the non-white peoples of the world without neglecting our relations with all other progressive forces. Our relations with the Soviet Bloc countries must be based on realism. We should not be under any illusion that the Soviets are not as racist as the Americans, we should be smart enough to use our relation with them to serve our national and Africa's interest by following a policy of positive neutrality and non-alignment.

It therefore follows that executors of our foreign policy must be versed in what we consider to be our national interest. There should be a mix between professionalism and practical politics in diplomatic representation abroad. Politicians are generally more blunt and more effective in saying it as it really is rather than being nice as diplomats are trained to be. Once there is a consensus on our foreign policy and an agreed *modus operandi* is charted out there should be no leak about what we consider our options in given situations because foreign policy cannot be carried out on the pages of Newspapers.

Finally there must be continuity in our foreign policy because governments come and governments go, the national interest remains the same for all times.

In conclusion our foreign policy would be determined largely by politico-economic considerations. The world needs what we produce and we do not need to be friends with those who need the products of our labour. We of course need not antagonise our trading partners also. But our present ways by which we see Britain in particular as our natural ally must give way to realism. Nigeria must wake up from her colonial slumber. We must recognise the principle of *quid pro quo* in International relations. A situation where Niger competes with Nigeria for the same seat on the security council must never be tolerated again and I subscribed to the fact that Africa must demonstrate her friendship to us all the time or else this *Milch* cow would stop producing milk except for her calves. The irony where a country like Niger that is almost totally dependent on us for power, trade, imports and its life line and yet cannot be made to bend to our

will is just too glaring to be acceptable. One is not saying we should assume the role of a bully, but service should have its rewards, and the service we render to our immediate neighbours should attract appropriate positive and favourable response. The ease with which the Republic of Dahomey allowed its territories to be used during the civil war by France to ferry arms and ammunitions to the then Biafra epitomises the levity and lack of respect with which African countries have always treated Nigeria. This writer who in one way or the other has seen diplomacy practised has been impressed and disturbed by the general hostility to our aspirations by sister African countries. One may justify this as normal jealousy, but our ability to absorb this penny pinching hostility ought to be severely limited. A situation where our neighbours such as the Camerouns and Chad attacked us one time or the other without appropriate response except in the case of Chad in 1983 during the time Muhammadu Buhari as G.O.C. Third armoured division nearly got into trouble with the inept civilian leadership of the country because he was accused of taking laws into his hands by ordering full military response is the only time this country has done the right thing when our neighbours had dared us. Nigeria cannot afford to be taken for granted anymore and our policy must be clear and our African neighbours must be made aware what our response would be for those who respond to our friendship with hostility. Such hostile acts as when against International Law the Berlin and Brussels Acts of 1885 and 1890 the government of the Camerouns constructed a dam on the River Benue North of Garua and rendered useless all the efforts of the Benue River Development Authority should never have been tolerated. There is evidence that the military leadership in 1983 wanted to take out this dam, but were stopped by the civilian leadership. The upshot of all this is that because of our weak leadership our neighbour and our African brothers have no respect for us, it therefore follows that we must solve our internal political problems first so that anybody who can say *civis Nigerianus sum* can expect the long arm of the Nigerian State to protect him if not every where at least in the West African sub-region where our primacy must be recognised.