

## FOREIGN POLICY AND NATIONAL INTEREST: A Case of Nigeria's Role in Commonwealth of Nations

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### ABSTRACT

*Nigeria has no doubt played and still continues to play eminent role in the Commonwealth of Nations. The paper examines the participatory role of Nigeria in Commonwealth as dictated and guided by her national interest. Analyzing within the framework of Complex interdependence theory with focus on liberal perspective which assumes that states are not the only important actors, social welfare issues share center stage with security issues on the global agenda, and cooperation is as dominant a characteristic of international politics as conflict, the paper observes that Nigeria-Commonwealth relations affect the nation's foreign policy objectives in variety of ways as reflected in decolonization, anti-apartheid struggle, defense, trade and investment, scientific and technological support and research, democratization, human rights, political crises, tackling corruption among others. However, as a peripheral participant with limited independence and autonomy in global politics, Nigeria's role in Commonwealth have not significantly contributed to the realization of her national interest in a manner that maximize the economic, political and social welfare of the citizenry in the face of increasing rate of poverty, youth unemployment, economic recession, internal security threats by Boko Haram insurgency and secessionist agitations, deindustrialization among other numerous challenges. This paper therefore concludes that for Nigeria to manifest and assert her true status in the international system in order to actualize her core national interest, she must be able to harness her numerous human and natural endowments for sustainable development and stability.*

**Keywords:** Foreign Policy, National Interest

### INTRODUCTION

The overriding consideration in foreign policy implementation is always on the concept of national interest. National interest is highly important and central to the corporate existence of a nation. It is crucial to the survival of a nation and the basis for the analysis of foreign policy behavior of states. Every state therefore, seeks to protect and project her national interests in the relationship with other states. Thus, the protection, promotion and pursuit of national interest are the major objectives of every state in its foreign policy posture. Importantly, like any other international commitment, Nigeria's membership of Commonwealth of Nations has been to advance the country's strategic interests which according to Rufa'i (2003) include reaching out and establishing contacts with the rest of the world with a view to achieving the overall objectives of national interests.

In view of the foregoing, this paper examines the interface between Nigeria's role in Commonwealth and her national interest. It interrogates the extent to which Nigeria's membership of the multilateral organization advanced her strategic interests which are the national security (survival) and national welfare that form the image of the nation.

## EVOLUTION, DEVELOPMENT AND STRUCTURE OF COMMONWEALTH

Historically, the Commonwealth of Nations was an evolutionary outgrowth of the British Empire. However, though the evolution of the organization started in 1867 when Canada attained dominion status, it was rather in 1931 when the statute of Westminster was passed that the organization was known as the British Commonwealth of Nations (Osuntokun, 2003: 56). Akinjide clearly posits, however that the modern commonwealth began with the entry of India and Pakistan in 1947 and Sri Lanka (Ceylon) in 1948. In 1949, when India decided to become a republic, the Commonwealth heads of Government agreed to replace allegiance to the British Crown with recognition of the British monarch as Head of the Commonwealth as a condition for membership.

The term 'commonwealth' refers to the association of nations which retain a close connection with the United Kingdom and whose heads of governments meet together frequently to discuss matters of common interest (Ogwukah, 2014).

It is a free association of sovereign states comprising Great Britain and a number of its former dependencies who had chosen to maintain ties of friendship and practical cooperation and who acknowledged the British Monarch as the symbolic head of their association. Thus, the ties that bind the Commonwealth are highly diverse. Blood ties provide sentimental attachments to Britain while common judicial and educational systems as well as the use of the English Language as official language provide strong ties for others. These ties were further cemented and strengthened by trade and investment, currency agreements, population, migrations and sports (Ogwu, 2003:13).

The informal links between the countries of the Commonwealth were further consolidated when in 1965 a Commonwealth Secretariat was established in London and a lean bureaucracy was developed to assist the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth in responding to questions of peace, democracy and development, particularly in the developing member countries in Asia, Pacific, Africa and the Caribbean. Therefore, what began as Great Britain and the white dominions has gradually metamorphosed into a multiracial Commonwealth of fifty-four nations and territories. Nigeria, upon attaining political independence in 1960, automatically and almost naturally acceded to the Commonwealth of Nations, and in 1963 became a republic within the Commonwealth of Nations also (Ogwu, 2003:13).

In terms of structure, the commonwealth has a secretary as the head of administration in its Secretariat which currently is located in Marlborough House, London. Other structures and division within its system include the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGM), meetings of the Finance Ministers, Political Affairs Division, Economic Affairs Division, Human Resources Division, Gender and Youth Affairs Division, the Science and Technology Division and the Cultural and Sports Development Division. The meetings of the Heads of Government are usually private and informal and operate not by voting but by consensus. The emphasis is on consultation and exchange of views for cooperation. Meetings are held every two years in different capitals of member countries (Ugwukah, 2014)

## **NIGERIA'S FOREIGN POLICY OBJECTIVES**

Section 19 of 1979 and 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic had clearly outlined the foreign policy objectives of the Nigerian state thus: The foreign policy shall be:

- Promotion and protection of national interest;
- Promotion of African integration and support of African unity;
- Promotion of international cooperation for consolidation of universal peace and mutual respect among all nations and elimination in all its manifestation;
- Respect for international law and treaty. Obligations as well as the seeking of settlement of international disputes by negotiation, mediation, conciliation, arbitration and adjudication and
- Promotion of a just world economic order.

Based on the above policies as contained in the 1979 and 1999 constitutions, (Anyaele, 2005:2), buttresses the point that "the protection of our national interest has remained the permanent focus of Nigeria's foreign policy, but the strategies for such protection have varied from one regime/ government to another". By this statement, he infers that various governments from independence to date have pursued the same goals and objectives of Nigeria's foreign policy but in deferent ways.

## **WHAT IS NATIONAL INTERESTS?**

The notion of national interest is vague and therefore difficult to ascribe a precise meaning to the term. Agreen (2010) observes that there are two schools of thought on the subject matter of national interest: namely the subjectivists and the objectivists. The objectivists' school argues that "the best interest of a state is a matter of objective reality. The subjectivists contend that what constitutes the national interest of a state depend on the preferences of the leaders, their idiosyncrasies and priorities. This national interest is inextricably wedded to the leadership of a nation. Alkali (2003) sees the term "National Interest" as those

ideals a nation's leadership pursues over time. It is simply what the foreign policy elite makes it to be. He classified the main elements of national interest into four, namely political, economic, military and ideological. In a related note, national interest is defined as the general long-term and continuing purpose which the states, nations and governments see themselves as serving (Lukpata, 2013: 63). The national interest of a state is therefore, seen as a product of social values upheld by the people.

Scholars and policy makers widely believe that the national interest upon which the Nigeria's foreign policy decisions had been directed since independence were the defense of its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity; the restoration of human dignity to black people all over the world; the elimination of colonialism, racism and white minority rule from Africa the creation of relevant and conducive political and economic conditions in Africa and the rest of the world necessary for facilitating national self reliance in African countries; the promotion and sustenance of the economic well-being of Nigerians and the promotion of world peace with justice (Akindele, 1996:136). Nwachuku in Umoden (1992) stated that Nigeria's National interest is defined in the context of her national security and national survival. This obviously covers the political, social, cultural, economic and, of course, military. All these aspects of national interest are interwoven in a self-reinforcing and systematic manner while Aluko (1981) defines Nigeria's national interest as consisting of six important elements in order of priority. These include:

- i. Self-preservation of the country;
- ii. Defense and maintenance of the Country's independence;
- iii. Economic and social well being of the people;
- iv. Defense, preservation and promotion of the ways of its, especially democratic values;
- v. Enhancement of the country's standing and status in the world capitals in Africa, and
- vi. Promotion of world peace.

The first three are the core national interests and they are not compromised irrespective of the administration. One of the most constant national interests of Nigeria's diplomacy is her interest in Africa. This led to the foreign policy orientation of Afro-centrism.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Broadly, contending theories exist in study of international relations and foreign policy. These provide the basis for empirical enquiry as they help to describe, explain and predict political phenomena. The study is therefore, premised on the **theory of complex interdependence** with focus on liberal perspective.

The theory was developed by Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye in the late 1970s. It was a major challenge to fundamental assumption of traditional and structural realism which focused on military and economic capabilities to explain state behavior (Rana, 2015). Interdependence most simply defined, means mutual dependence. In global politics, it refers to situations characterized by reciprocal effects among actors in different countries (Keohane and Nye, 1977). Under this mutual dependence, the relationship between the actors involved, including states as well as other transnational actors, is characterized by both cooperation and competition. Interdependence does not only mean peace and cooperation among actors, but a relationship between actors characterized by cooperation, dependence, and interaction in a number of different areas, and conflict as well. Complex Interdependence is a theory which stresses the complex ways in which as a result of growing ties; the transnational actors become mutually dependent, vulnerable to each other's actions and sensitive to each other's needs (Rana, 2015). It is useful to note that the theory tries to synthesize the realist and liberal perspectives of international politics. It is basically concerned with the concepts of transnational exchange and interactions, security, economic, culture and environment while explaining the continuity and change in world politics in an attempt to demonstrate the reality of interconnection and interdependence in the age of globalization in which all states are closely dependent on each other for mutual gains.

Fundamental assumptions of the theory based on the liberal perspective are:

- i. Multiple channels connecting societies, including all the inter-state, trans-governmental and transnational transactions;
- ii. Absence of hierarchy among issues which means interactions involves multiple issues which are not arranged in clear or consistent hierarchy, and
- iii. Minor role of military force in resolving conflicts or disagreement among members of alliance.

The relevance of the theory to this paper is that it explains the rise of international regimes and institutions and the growing importance of welfare and trade in foreign matters compared to status and security issues. In the case of Nigeria, it will help us understand the country's desire to promote and pursue her national interest through economic diplomacy, shared norms and values as well as multi-lateral relations within the framework of Commonwealth of Nations. However, critics of the Marxist and Dependency schools of thought argued that the liberal assumptions of the theory have apparently failed to explain the prevailing socio-economic and political dynamics of metropolitan and peripheral countries. They contended that most of the developing countries are more still tied to the apron string of their former imperial masters in a more subtle manner than was the case during the period of naked and direct colonialism. Hence, the

benefits of international political and economic relations between the two sets of countries are lopsided in favour of the metropolitan countries. This continued asymmetry in the distribution of benefits forms a basically exploitative relationship between the dominant and dependent states and this explains the existence of the widening gap between rich and poor countries.

### CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF NIGERIA'S ROLE IN COMMONWEALTH AND HER NATIONAL INTEREST: BENEFITS OF NIGERIA'S ROLE IN COMMONWEALTH

There is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria's membership and pre-eminent role in the Commonwealth of Nations have derived and still continue to derive immense benefits from the multi-lateral organization in the context of her national interest. There have been of course a number of constraints in some key areas notwithstanding, Nigeria-Commonwealth relations affects the nation's foreign policy agenda in variety of ways as reflected in decolonization, defense, trade and investment, technical and industrial growth, democratization, human rights, political crises, scientific and technological support and research assistants among others. However, to some, the organization was seen as no more than an epilogue to Empire, and an effort to continue western domination in a different guise (Obasanjo, 2005).

Upon becoming a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, Nigeria raised its voice in 1961 when it vehemently opposed racist South Africa's continued membership in the organization especially after the Sharpeville massacre of that year during which scores of demonstrating Africans were shot in the back and killed by remorseless South African police. Again, when Ian Smith embarked on Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in 1965, Nigeria was one of the first countries to call on the British to bring back to legality the erring colony. This was so because Ian Smith's boldness in Southern Rhodesia presented the Balewa's government with the first major challenge to one of its foreign policy objectives and, by implication, its membership in the Commonwealth. Rising to the occasion, Balewa, on 12 December 1965, invited Commonwealth leaders to a special CHOGM on the Rhodesian crisis. The Conference was held in Lagos in January in 1966 (Ugwukah, 2014). Successive governments in Nigeria remained committed to this noble objective. For instance, Nigeria participated as the chairperson of the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) established at the Nassau Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in 1985, the conclusion of which prepared the final diplomatic onslaught on the apartheid regime (Obasanjo, 2005). Also, during the Babangida years as Umoden (1992) observed, through her membership of Commonwealth Committee of Foreign Ministers on South Africa (CFMSA) which formulated an effective strategy against apartheid, Nigeria successfully enhanced the pressure for change in racist South Africa.

The above indicates that decolonization, particularly in Southern Africa, was a recurring theme in Nigeria's Africa Policy. Nigeria has therefore through the commonwealth arena played significant role in the independence of Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Namibia. The country also demonstrated total commitment towards the dismantlement of apartheid regime and installation of black majority rule in South Africa in May, 1994. In his own contribution, Adeleke (2003) examined Nigeria's relations and connections with the Commonwealth and posited that, on balance, it is impossible to deny that Nigeria's membership in the Commonwealth has been beneficial. According to him, the Commonwealth has offered Nigeria an international platform to pursue some of its foreign policy goals, particularly those revolving around decolonization on the African continent. Furthermore, the writer maintained that as a third world country without the resources to play in the big league of global politics Nigeria has used the Commonwealth platform to exercise influence on a scale clearly impossible either bilaterally or through multilateral channel. In addition, the writer maintained that the Commonwealth offers Nigeria opportunities to interact informally with at least two members of the G8, Britain and Canada. The fact that it shares similar aspirations with these countries, at least as expressed in Commonwealth declarations, provides opportunities to use its Commonwealth connection as leverage in its relations with the G8.

Similarly, being an active member, the Commonwealth of Nations has exerted enormous efforts in promoting political stability, governance and human rights in Nigeria. The organization played mediatory role in the Nigerian Civil War. According to Ugwukah (2014) this was exemplified by its intervention in the Nigeria Civil war of 1967/70 and during the political crisis caused by the annulment of the 1993 General election in Nigeria, when M.K.O. Abiola clearly won an election that was annulled. Similarly, Obasanjo (2005) observed that the Commonwealth was the first international organization to attempt a solution of the crisis. Secretary General, Arnold Smith organized the first ever peace meeting between the Federal Government and the leaders of the secessionist movement in Kampala, Uganda, in 1966. Thereafter, the Commonwealth took a stand to support the maintenance of Nigeria's territorial integrity. The Commonwealth's decision influenced the attitude of other international organizations and leading world powers, which contributed immensely to Nigeria's survival.

Meanwhile, a major development in Nigeria/Commonwealth relations was in the 1990s, following the emergence and leadership of Chief Emeka Anyaoku as Secretary General, the Commonwealth of Nations was redefined as a club of democracies. This redefinition, which followed the end of apartheid and Soviet communism, was to contrast a full democracy with government elected by

racial minorities, with governments which were controlled by the military (Bourne, 2004: 13). And this has actually paid off since there are virtually, today, no Commonwealth states which are lacking in democratic credentials. The Commonwealth Secretariat is now even managing a "Deepening Democracy" programmes, and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association has been running workshops for parliamentarians to educate them in their roles. Nigeria joined the club of democratic nations in 1999. Since then, the country has been making frantic efforts to institutionalize democracy in the country. Nigeria has equally been making efforts to use the enthronement of democracy as a basis not only to improve her profile in the international organization of which it is a member, but to use such to improve the welfare of its citizens.

In pursuance of this lofty goal, the Organization came up with the 1991 Harare Declaration to just and accountable government, the rule of law and fundamental human rights. With this, the Commonwealth has come to be seen, unlike before, as a serious vehicle for the promotion of human rights and democratization. For instance, when in 1995 the Abacha regime, in defiance to international outcry and plea for clemency, ruthlessly executed Ken Saro-Wiwa and other nine Ogoni human right activists, the Commonwealth leaders at their meeting in Auckland, New Zealand, not only suspended Nigeria but also established a standing mechanism within the organization to deal with serious and persistent violations of the Harare principles (Mckinnon, 2003: 19). Moreover, the Commonwealth stood strongly and true to its democratic ideals, in defense of political detainees, including Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, and for a return to democratization during

Gen. Abdussalam Abubakar military regime. Yakubu observes that when General Abubakar became head of state, in trying to reach out to the opposition, especially NADECO and undertook the task of rebuilding the diplomatic ties broken by his predecessor, he invited Kofi Annan, the then UN Secretary General and Chief Emeka Anyaoku then Commonwealth Secretary General to Nigeria for consultation and reconciliatory purposes. As a result, there was a renewed Western interest in Nigeria's democratic process and also there were urgent calls for release of political prisoners. It equally engaged seriously with members of the civil society and other democratic forces in Nigeria particularly during those 'dark years' of military rule. This led to reconciling the people with themselves and with the Nigerian State, and then the Nigerian state with the rest of the international community (Yakubu, 2011). Consequently, the symbolic relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy sought to ease tension at local level with a view to achieving effective coordination both at regional and global levels.

When General Abubakar, consequent upon the demise of General Abacha, acceded to power in 1998, the Commonwealth variously provided technical assistance to Nigeria in support of the transition to democracy. The organization also observed all three stages of the elections that brought about a democratically elected government under President Obasanjo (Osuntokun, 2003: 63). Canada, for instance, contributed \$1.5 million to help strengthen the Nigerian electoral process in 2003, and is continuing support to ensure stronger election processes during the 2007 elections (Nigeria Country Report: March 2006). Nigeria has resumed its role in the organization as a senior member and her foreign minister, in a reversal of roles, sits in Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) to deliberate on compliance with the Harare Declarations by such countries as Zimbabwe and Pakistan (Osuntokun, 2003: 63). Of particular important is that Nigeria played host to the Commonwealth Heads of States and Governments' Meeting (CHOGM) in Abuja from 5th-8th December, 2003. Jibrin (2004) posits that the meeting was adjudged a total success and President Obasanjo subsequently assumed its Chairmanship. These he said were manifest examples of Nigeria's second return to the world scene, a development which has been described as a high point in the foreign policy profile of the administration. In pursuance of Nigeria's national interest in the context of the adopted principles of the Commonwealth of Nations, the event was especially devoted to the issues of democracy, development and prosperity, thus shifting Commonwealth focus from political to economic issues. It is evident, at this juncture, that Commonwealth was not only deeply involved in restoring democracy in Nigeria but is equally committed in institutionalizing and sustaining democratic rule. To this end, it is observed that, the Commonwealth offers ample opportunities for Nigeria to expand its foreign trade.

Reinforcing the above, it is observed that since Nigeria's return to a civilian government, relations between Canada and Nigeria appear to have been positive. Several official visits by respective leaders, in addition to the growing exports to Nigeria attest to this positive relationship. This is true since Nigeria is currently Canada's second largest trading partner in Sub-Saharan Africa, behind South Africa. The Canadian International Development Agency's (CIDA) bilateral program in Nigeria ostensibly focuses on health care, environmental and agricultural initiatives. Health care initiatives include providing basic health care, polio eradication and assisting in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Environmental and agricultural projects include assistance with land and water management to reduce soil degradation and desertification processes (Nigeria Country Report: March 2006). Nigeria has also within the framework of Commonwealth participated in the work of a 10 nation Commonwealth Committee charged with mapping out appropriate strategies for

fostering closer economic and technical cooperation among member countries (Umoden, 1992: 207). In this connection, during Abubakar's regime, Western nations initiated the process of returning Abacha's loot to Nigeria. This way the administration was able to recover about 1.2 billion dollars of stolen public money stashed in foreign banks Yakubu (2012). Since then, successive regimes received tranches of looted funds recovered from the western nations. Moreover, Nigeria in collaboration with other developing countries, in seeking for greater justice in international economic relations, has effectively through the Commonwealth advocated and sought support for debt cancellation for highly indebted poor countries. The country also enjoyed positive relations in educational field, scientific technological support and sporting links. In the heydays, British teachers were seconded to Nigerian schools with a view to solving the problem of shortage of teachers in the country. On her part, Nigeria also supported some indigent Commonwealth countries financially during the regime of Yakubu Gowon. It also increased the number of scholarship available to Commonwealth students in her universities.

Nigeria also had some very successful collaboration with the Commonwealth in developing technical tools and documents and building capacity of important actors in the whole anti-corruption architecture for delivering on their mandate, notably judges and prosecutors (Owasanoye, 2017). In line with her national interest, the Commonwealth is currently supporting, Nigeria, especially in area of technical assistance for the recovery of the proceeds of crime. Commenting on this, Prof. Sagay stated that the Secretariat convened a conference on *Tackling Corruption Together* in 2016. Also, in response to Nigeria's request for assistance, an international workshop in July 2016 on criminal justice administration to strengthen the capacity of judges to tackle systemic corruption was organized. It also held a meeting of high-level stakeholders in the management of recovered stolen assets resulting in the development of a Framework for the Management of recovered stolen assets which Nigeria did not have. The outcome was the production of *Guidance Notes for Judges and Prosecutors* on the recovery of proceeds of corruption through a non-conviction route (The Guardian September, 2017).

## CRITICISM OF NIGERIA-COMMONWEALTH RELATIONS

Critics have argued that the Commonwealth is a colonial relic, a neo-imperial conspiracy and nothing but a collection of every important state brought together by accident of having been colonized by Britain. Thus, notwithstanding the giant strides of Nigeria's role in commonwealth which resulted in some positive results for the country in line with her national interest, perhaps, because of her dependency status, Nigeria has not done much in this arena to improve domestic situations in the areas of governance, reducing mass poverty and

unemployment, tackling corruption and internal security challenges (Boko Haram insurgency, Secessionist agitations and Farmer/Herders clashes etc.), industrialization, economic diversification, to mention just a few. To this end, some believe that Nigeria-Commonwealth relationship is exploitative and that British and Nigeria's interest are opposed to each other. Thus, the two countries cannot honestly be expected to have any wealth in common. It is argued for instance, that by subscribing to the British Commonwealth, Nigeria Post-independence leaders have consented to British continued colonialism of the country. Boge, (2017: 27). The process has ensured Nigeria's integration into the capitalist structure of the international economy. Her dependency on oil revenue was increasingly massive and her focus on agriculture was overturned. In the words of Okafo (2004) Nigeria's continued membership of the British Commonwealth exploits average Nigerians. It serves the selfish interests of the Nigerian rulers and other foreign collaborators in Britain and other Western Centers of power. On the economic front, Britain is accused of using connivance and negligence to facilitate the diversion and stashing of Nigeria's wealth stolen by the country political leaders.

It is further contended that industrialized member-states of the commonwealth that are expected to be in the vanguard of promoting trade and eliminating poverty confronting the developing member nations are the same group of nations sometimes responsible for the unfair trade practices as well as the compulsory imposition of market-driven but highly detrimental economic agendas on poor developing states like Nigeria, many of which are members of the commonwealth (Dominic, 2010). On Nigeria's Civil War, it is stressed that although Britain maintained a pro-Federal government posture during the period of hostilities, public opinions in England were anti-Federal government. British support for the Federal government was thus majorly influenced by factors such as her foreign investment in the country, particularly her economic interest in the Nigeria's oil (William, 1978:39). It must be added that British displayed some questionable posture towards Nigeria during the war, example was its embargo in arms sales to Nigeria in 1968 (Aworawo, 2003). It is also useful to state here that despite enormous commitment and sacrifices Nigeria has made towards the total elimination of apartheid regime in South Africa- also a member of Commonwealth, Nigeria and indeed Nigerians have got very little or nothing in return. As has often been the case, in recent times, South Africans have been hostile to Nigerians, making things fairly difficult for Nigerian nationals in their shores. A case in point is the incessant xenophobic attacks on Nigerians resulting in avoidable lost of lives and destruction of properties of Nigerian citizens.

## CONCLUSION

The paper generally argued that Nigeria has played and still continue to play prominent role in Commonwealth of Nations as dictated and guided by her national interest. This is evident in the number of salient achievements recorded over the years which have resulted in very positive results for the country. The paper however, stressed that, being a developing country, Nigeria's participation and role in the Commonwealth has been with limited autonomy and independence in a way. It is therefore concluded that for Nigeria to manifest and assert her true status in the international system in order to actualize her core national interest, she must be able to harness her numerous potentials for sustainable development and stability. It is believed that no nation would be able to call the shot in the competitive international relations without a solid and secured national economy which must also be diversified

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