

# National Interest: Nigeria's Definition of its National Interest Part 2

- It appears difficult to identify Nigeria's conception of national interest since its independence.
- According to Idumange John Agreen, "while it is difficult to define the national interest of Nigeria, it is even more difficult to redefine it because of the variegated diplomatic permutations and ideologies Nigeria adopted over the years. Some foreign policy experts believe that Nigeria has no clear cut political ideology and national interest. Part of the policy facilitations is attributable to the fact that foreign policy is inextricably linked to its domestic policy" (cited in Eze, 2010,p.81).
- The seeming reason for the foregoing observation is that since independence, Nigeria's national interest has more often than not, been defined by the executive arm of government dominated by petty bourgeoisie in alliance with comprador elite.

- Generally, the process of the formulation and/or conduct of Nigeria's foreign policy is dominated by the prime minister/president or the Head of State relying on the advice of the foreign affairs ministry and other relevant arms of the federal bureaucracy.
- Essentially, the trends in Nigeria's foreign policy indicating its national interest have not been very stable over time, nevertheless, it has always assumed the minimal core elements of national interest viz: protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity and the security of the country.
- Since Nigeria's independence, it was only on three occasions that members of NGOs, International Relations experts and representatives of the organized private sector were formally involved in the process of defining Nigeria's national interest.
- They were so involved in 1961, 1986 and 1988.

- These attempts to get individuals and groups outside the bureaucratic system in the process of determining Nigeria's national interest revealed a wide gap between the perspective of the ruling class and that of the masses.
- Historically, the definition of Nigeria's national interest has primarily reflected the realist perspective. It has also occasionally mirrored the behavioural and Marxist political economy paradigms.
- In the early 1960s, under the first civilian administration of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Nigeria oscillated between realism and idealism.
- The four principal foreign policy goals of Nigeria then were
  - i) Decolonization;
  - ii) Pan-Africanism or Pan-African solidarity;
  - iii) National economic development;
  - iv) World peace

- As far as the Balewa administration was concerned, four major challenges coinciding with the four foreign policy goals confronted Nigeria.
- The first challenge was the nature and methods of African unity.
- The subsets of this challenge could be framed in questions such as, “how can we bring the peoples of Africa together to achieve the feeling of oneness?” “Should we tackle our problems in Africa sub-regionally or continentally:”; “Do we aim at achieving immediate political union of all African states or do we start from economic and cultural relations?”
- The second challenge was on the issue of decolonization. The questions centred on issues such as how to assist the remaining dependent territories in Africa to attain full independence within the shortest possible time; and how to tackle the problems of territories where minority European settlers lived.

- The third challenge bordered on the strategy for economic development. The questions were the strategies to tackle the shortage of capital and technical skills needed for economic development, especially to be free from the contending ideological blocs then.
- The fourth challenge concerned world peace. The central issue was what Nigeria could do to contribute to world peace.

- **Attempts to Formulate Nigeria's National Interest**
- 1) In 1961, the Balewa administration convoked an *All Nigeria's Peoples Conference* to formulate Nigeria's response to the challenges earlier outlined.
- The 300 participants were drawn from among Nigerians in and out of government representing the various shades of political beliefs in the country.
- Although the outcome of the conference was mired in controversy between governmental and non-governmental representatives, there were areas of minimum agreement.
- On African unity, the conference recommended that Nigeria should accept in principle the imperative of the political union of African states and to this end explore the possibility of an African Defence Force.

- Further, the Nigerian government should work for the merger of the Casablanca and Monrovia blocs so as to create a common institutional framework for the solution of African problems.
- On the question of decolonization, the conference urged that aid should be given to African nationalists struggling for the independence of their countries.
- On development, the conference proposed that Nigeria should accept economic aid from both the East and West in the global ideological divide and pursue a strategy of sub-regional integration, starting with liberalization of Nigeria's immigration laws to accommodate the inflow of citizens of neighbouring countries.
- And on world peace, the conference urged that Nigeria should pursue a policy of non-alignment, to this end, the Anglo-Nigeria Defence pact should be abrogated.



- The military regimes of Gen. Johnson Aguiyi Ironsi (Jan. – July 1966) and Gen. Yakubu Gowon (1966-1975) did not organize any public debate or a national conference on Nigeria's foreign policy.
- However, in the process of drawing up the 2<sup>nd</sup> National Development Plan (1970-1974), which involved a conference in 1969, an attempt was made to redefine Nigeria's national interest.
- Between 1967 and 1970 which was the period of Nigerian civil war, Nigeria's preoccupation centred on national unity.
- In this connection, the central diplomatic challenge was how to mobilize external political, moral and military support for the federal side in order to defeat the secessionist Biafra and keep Nigeria as one unified political entity.

- 2) The second National Development Plan (1970-74) and Nigeria's National Interest.
- In the immediate post-civil war years, that is, 1970-75, the Nigerian government was preoccupied with the task of restructuring the economy and accelerating the pace of import-substitution industrialization.
- The second National Development Plan conceived foreign policy as an integral part of national programme for social and economic development.
- The Plan described Nigeria as the “largest concentration of natural and human resources” in the African continent, “the most attractive single market in Africa” and “one of the most stable political structures and viable administrative frameworks in the African continent”.
- On the basis of this thinking, the Plan committed Nigeria to the pursuit of the policy of national self-reliance.

- The idea of national self-reliance was anchored on Nigeria's rich national endowments and the possibility of harnessing same to achieve economic independence.
- The overall goal was to use economic independence to defeat the neo-colonial forces in Africa.
- The Plan also committed the country to the pursuit of non-alignment.
- On the basis of this Plan, the elements of national interest were seen as political unity, economic growth, national security as well as the promotion of interests of Africa and the third world.
- The Plan also supported the Afrocentric thrust of Nigeria's foreign policy and designated West Africa as the "domain of immediate relevance".
- As Humphrey Asisi Asobie (2001) has observed, "what was new was the realization of the authors of the Plan that the interests of foreign nations could not always be expected to coincide with those of

- Nigeria, and that a policy of national self-reliance, which would involve the mobilization of the total energy of the nation, for the task of building an economically strong, politically united and militarily powerful state, was only what could provide the basis for an effective foreign policy”.
- Thus, the proportion of foreign capital input for the prosecution of the Plan was reduced from the threshold of 50 percent in the First Development to 25 percent in the Second Development Plan.
- 3) The 1979 Constitution and Nigeria’s National Interest.
- The Murtala Mohammed/Olusegun Obasanjo regime didn’t organize a public forum for the redefinition of Nigeria’s national interest.
- However, it set up an ad hoc committee headed by Adebayo Adedeji to undertake a comprehensive review of Nigeria’s Foreign policy.

- The recommendations of the Adedeji Committee was a reaffirmation of the then existing foreign policy thrust of Nigeria.
- It recommended:
  - i) Africa would remain the centrepiece of Nigeria's foreign policy, but with a caveat that the pursuit of Pan-Africanist objectives would not be made at the expense of Nigeria's national interest;
  - ii) Nigeria would take the fight for the liberation of dependent territories in Africa much more seriously than before.
  - What underpinned this resolution was the thinking that Nigeria could not consider itself truly independent while African peoples were still subjected to colonialism.
  - iii) The fight for the elimination of racism and apartheid in southern Africa would also be intensified.

- The Obasanjo regime inaugurated a Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) which was to prepare the 1979 Constitution.
- The CDC's subgroup on Fundamental Objectives recommended the following foreign policy objectives for Nigeria in the 1980s:
  - i) Resistance to racial discrimination as well as all forms of foreign domination and exploitation;
  - ii) Fostering the development of Pan-Africanism defined as African unity, independence and total political and economic liberation of Africa;
  - iii) the promotion of all other forms of international cooperation conducive to the consolidation of peace and the strengthening of mutual respect and friendship among peoples and states.

- The result of all these efforts was the enshrinement of the thrust of Nigeria's foreign policy in the 1979 Constitution.
- Under section 19 of the 1979 Constitution the foreign policy objectives were defined thus,
- “The state shall promote African unity as well as total political, economic, social and cultural liberation of Africa and all other forms of international cooperation conducive to the consolidation of universal peace and mutual respect and friendship among all peoples and states, and shall combat racial discrimination in all its ramifications”
- Nigeria was also interested in economic independence.
- In this regard it hosted the extraordinary OAU Summit that was held in Lagos in 1980 which produced the Lagos Plan of Action.

- 4) The All-Nigeria Conference on Foreign Policy (1986) and Nigeria's National Interest.
- The military coup of December 1983 truncated the democratic system that was installed in 1979. The coup of 1985 which ousted Muhammadu Buhari and enthroned Ibrahim Babangida provided the platform for the reassessment of every aspect of the Nigerian state.
- Apart from the conference on Nigeria's foreign policy, the Babangida administration organized several conferences including one on Nigeria's economic policy in general and Nigeria's relations with IMF and another on viable and people-oriented political system for Nigeria.
- The All-Nigeria Conference on Foreign Policy had over 300 participants and held at Kuru, Plateau State between April 7-13, 1986.



- At the conference, the then Nigerian president, Ibrahim Babangida defined national interest in terms national security.
- National security was defined to include self-preservation, self-defence or survival and promotion of ultimate values such as individual liberty and human welfare.
- The participants at the Kuru Conference proposed the redefinition of Nigeria's national interest in line with that embodied in the second National Development Plan.
- The Political Committee lamented the failure of Nigeria's ruling class to transform the political and economic structures met at independence from a colonial-oriented position to a self-reliant one.
- It attributed this failure to the inability of Nigeria to pursue independent foreign policy and combat Anglo-French imperialism especially in West Africa.

- The committee recommended socialism as the only viable path to Nigeria's survival and development.
- The Economic committee on its part condemned the dependent nature of the Nigerian economy.
- It also recommended:
  - A fundamental re-evaluation of Nigeria's economic policy to provide a viable basis for an effective foreign policy;
  - A harmonization and integration of domestic and foreign policies;
  - A reduction of Nigeria's external dependence; and,
  - A simultaneous movement towards a self-reliant economy in a manner that would help to sustain a dynamic foreign policy up to the year 2000.
- The government set aside the outcome of the conference.

- 5) Workshop on Nigeria's National Interest and Values
- The workshop was organized under the auspices of the Ministry of Defence between 11 and 15 April 1988.
- Attendance was strictly by invitation. And those invited were mainly those known to be adherents of the realist perspective.
- According to Asobie (2001), out of the fifteen papers presented in the workshop, eleven identified national security as the foremost national interest of Nigeria.
- The Workshop worked in committees and a plenary session. At the plenary, the voices of the realists were less strident and their arguments less compelling than those of the political economists.
- The dominance of political economists affected the manner in which the government perceived the outcome of the workshop.
- Obviously, the outcome of the Workshop was unacceptable to the government.

- A demonstration of this was that a month after the Workshop, Babangida's regime pronounced a new foreign policy strategy which originated from the recommendations of the presidential committee on the debate on the IMF loan held in 1985 and not those of the Workshop.
- The central theme of those recommendations was the adoption of the strategy of economic diplomacy defined as the diplomacy of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP).
- 6) The 1999 Constitution and Nigeria's National Interest.
- The 1999 constitution (as amended) does not explicitly define what Nigeria's national interest is or should be.
- It only included the "promotion and protection of the national interest" as part of Nigeria's foreign policy objectives without defining what Nigeria's national interest *really* is.

- As has been seen, several attempts have been made to redefine Nigeria's national interest. Some of these attempts involved the participation of selected elite.
- Interestingly, the outcome of such national consultations hardly made an impact in re-directing Nigeria's foreign policy or re-formulating Nigeria's national interest.
- The reason is that national interest is not shaped in the course of seminars and debates.
- Rather, national interest emerges in the process of contestations among contending socio-economic groups, with divergent interests, struggling for dominance in the economy and society for the control of state power.
- Thus, what is described as the national interest of a country is more often than not (although not exclusively) the interest of the dominant socio-economic group.