

Review

Nigeria - United States of America (USA) bilateral ties in historical perspective

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This work is the analysis of the bilateral relationship between Nigeria and the United States of America (USA) between 1960 and 2016. It carries-out a historical and systemic analysis of the relationship between the two countries in the cold war and post-cold war period. By using the qualitative research methodology, and a narrative and descriptive style, the work shows how both countries leveraged on this relationship to advance their different foreign policy interests. The use of the qualitative research methodology necessitates extensive and comprehensive collation, organization and interpretation of secondary materials such as textbooks and academic journals. This enables the work to discover that political, economic and social issues defined the relationship between the two from 1960 to 2016. In its conclusion, the paper shows that the bilateral ties, though sometimes acrimonious and conflictual, were to the mutual benefits of the two countries.

Key words: Nigeria, United States, bilateral relations, economic ties, foreign policy.

INTRODUCTION

The United States of America, popularly referred to as USA is one of the huge nations of the world as it is not only a country but a sub-continent with a huge population of over three hundred and fifty million people (350 million) with divergent cultures (Gritzner, 2008). The United States of America is not only a major player in world politics, it is also regarded as the greatest and the only superpower that dominates most of the leading international organisations such as the United Nations Organization (U.N.O), the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Organization of American States (OAS) and indirectly the European Union (EU). In spite of these superlatives, the United States of America was once a colony of the Britain and fought for its independence

between 1775 and 1783 (Grant, 2012:80-84). It got its independence from the British in 1776. The US did not arrive at her present level of greatness in one fell swoop. It took the USA more than 200 years. Just like the United States, Nigeria was colonized by Britain and only got its independence in 1960. It is a heterogenous society with over 250 ethnic groups and a huge population of over 190 million. Moreover, Nigeria is also a continental and regional power and was instrumental in the establishment of such institutions like the African Union (AU), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) created in the 1990s to combat trans-border crimes and terrorism.

Both the U.S. and Nigeria had a history of the establishment of political parties that were based on

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regional lines predicated on regional differences, social institutions and attitudes that were hinged on conflictual scale and dimension.

In 1860 when Abraham Lincoln won the presidential election on the containment of slavery platform of the Republican Party, the slave-owning Southern states seceded (Grant, 2012:137-171). In 1964/65, the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC), the dominant party in Northern Nigeria allied with the Nigerian National Alliance (NNA) to win the election at the centre (Hill, 2012:50-51). There was crisis as some other political parties from the south accused the victors of rigging and a coup eventually occurred which snowballed into a section of Nigeria seceding. Just as the coup of 1966 rigidly divided Nigeria into two camps and further threatened the survival of the new Republic, the disagreement over slavery also rigidly separated America into two camps. If both US and Nigeria were former British colonies until 1776 and 1960 respectively and also shared certain commonalities, did these translate into a robust relationship between the two? What factors and/or motives dictated the relationship between the two? The answers to these questions form the central theme of this chapter.

NIGERIA AND THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA IN THE AGE OF DECOLONISATION

It is a well-known fact of history that the Second World War of 1939 to 1945 accelerated the pace of decolonization all over the world. Although the USA was unequivocally against colonialism, Washington advocated for a cautionary measure in British 'hasty' grant of self-governance to Nigeria. In fact, there was widespread suspicion that Britain's 'welfare' package and colonial development programmes at the end of the War were meant to blunt the stringent calls for independence by Nigeria as well as some other British colonies in the post-World War II period (Faseke, 2009:1-23). As Modupeolu Faseke had argued that, the establishment of the Commonwealth of Nations and the subsequent absorption of all the erstwhile, British colonies into the organisation easily confirmed this suspicion (2009:1-23).

The point had been made earlier that a section of Nigeria seceded and became what was then known as the Republic of Biafra. The secessionists were however defeated by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN), in 1970 (Falode, 2011). During the Civil War, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) with its capital in Moscow was a major ally of Nigeria and supplied the country with arms and ammunitions (Stremlau, 1977). The USA was a strong rival of the USSR and tried to prevent the expansion of Russian communism into Nigeria. Efforts at ensuring that communism did not spread to Nigeria included the American assistance to Nigeria in terms of granting aid under the Economic Co-operation Administration and/or the Mutual Security

Administration Programme (Klieman, 2012). During the period 1948 to 1952, about \$170,000 was given to Nigeria for road development (Klieman, 2012). In addition, the US gave technical assistance to Nigeria in the areas of agriculture and infrastructure as well as in the educational and cultural sectors. The US also increased the level of co-operation with the British colonial administration in the area of exchange of intelligence information.

The United States Consulate in Lagos in conjunction with the US officials in Washington ensured that Nigerian political leaders through their visit to the US were favorably disposed towards the West. In April 1957, the US Consul – General Ralph Hunt met with Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe to emphasise the danger of Communism (Wyss, 2018: 1065-1087). Again, in October 1957, Hunt also met with Chief Obafemi Awolowo on the danger of communism (Wyss, 2018: 1065-1087). These series of meetings with prominent nationalist leaders in Nigeria had the effect of making Nigeria's foreign policy decidedly pro-west at independence. The US had negligible trade with Nigeria even before 1960. However, British interest as the ex-colonial master dominated Nigeria's young political economy.

NIGERIA-US RELATIONS, 1960 TO 1999

Two major issues, non-alignment and how to end colonialism on the African continent, dominated Nigeria's relationship with the USA between 1960 and 1999. In order to achieve their various objectives, the two countries made use of economic, political and military resources. These two issues and the resources used will be analyzed under the following sub-headings: foreign and domestic policies.

Foreign policy

According to M.A. Vogt, the direction of the Nigerian-American relationship is dictated largely by the perception by various American governments of Nigeria as having tremendous capacity to influence the cause of events in Africa (Vogt, 1999:82-83). This is not to suggest that Nigeria would always tow the lines of the communist or capitalist to please USSR or US. When the issue of increasing Soviet penetration of Africa became a source of concern especially with the introduction of Cuban forces into the Angolan conflict, the American Government of Gerald Ford wanted the then Head of Nigerian State, General Murtala Muhammed to rescind his decision to recognize the Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) government of Augustine Neto. The US supported a different faction in the Angolan war, namely the National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA); while the USSR actively supported the MPLA. Ford

needed Nigeria to back its own candidate in order for America to be able to get the backing of other African states. But Murtala Muhammed stuck to the MPLA and in the final analysis the MPLA was supported not only by Nigeria but other well-meaning African States (Ayam, 2008:117-120).

Since Nigeria became independent at the height of the cold war, it tried as much as possible not to allow the two superpowers had undue influence over the country's foreign policy posture. Nigeria played along with the superpowers based on the country's national interest. Not unexpectedly, there were certain irritants in Nigeria-US relations. As pointed out in the first section, the USSR supported Nigeria during the Nigeria civil war of 1967 to 1970 (Osaretin and Ajebon, 2012:55). The strengthening of ties with Russia and the Eastern bloc and American nonchalance attitude to Nigeria's needs during the Civil War made the country to adopt the non-aligned foreign policy posture. Thus, in the country's external relations, Nigeria was ready to seek assistance from wherever such help would come. While Nigeria sought and obtained help from Russia, the country also traded its oil with the United States. As a matter of fact, the US increased her demand for Nigerian oil and the country was able to generate a trade surplus of \$9 billion (Saliu and Aremu, 2007:498-499). Because of the country's non-alignment posture, the US stopped giving aid and Nigeria was now made to pay for the technical services rendered by US firms. The unfriendly attitude and opinion against the US government both by the Nigerian rulers and some elites led to some ugly instances in which the United States Information Service (USIS) in Lagos was occupied by the Nigerian army in 1975. On three occasions, the US Secretary of State was not received by the Nigeria Government.

Between 1977 and 1981, Nigeria- US relations became cordial. The thaw in the relationship was brought about by America's volte-face over the issue of colonialism in South Africa. Prior to this period, the US was not really concerned about the racial injustices perpetrated by the whites on the blacks in South Africa. This was partly due to America's own racial issues with its proportional black population. However, the presidency of Jimmy Carter made the resolution of racial issues in America the centre-piece of his domestic policy. This stance was now exported to America's relations with states in Africa. This new foreign policy posture coincided with the long-held view in Africa that colonialism and its attendant racism had no place on the continent. The new stance naturally predisposed African states, especially Nigeria, to view America favorably. General Olusegun Obasanjo visited the white house in Washington D.C. in October 1977 and on April 1978, President Jimmy Carter visited Nigeria as the first sitting U.S President to make a state visit to Nigeria (Aluko, 1979). The Carter administration placed a premium on Nigeria's good will in its policy in Southern Africa.

Domestic policy

On the domestic front, before 1975, Nigeria- US relations had been strained as a result of the lukewarm attitude of America towards the Civil War in 1967. It is on record that the USA did not assist Nigeria in the defeat of Biafra (Osaretin and Ajebon, 2012). The Federal Military Government of Nigeria led by General Yakubu Gowon was forced to turn to Russia for arms and ammunition.

This American stance during the Civil War understandably worsened the relations between the two. The American Secretary of States, Henry Kissinger, was denied entry into Nigeria after his shuttle diplomacy to Southern Africa in 1976 due to the strained relationship (Adebisi, 2017:88).

However, things improved with the presidency of Jimmy Carter because of several factors: firstly, in 1979 Nigeria adopted the American style of presidential federal system (Awotokun, 2020). Nigeria's cordial relationship with the USA must have contributed to the factors that made Nigeria to adopt the American model of presidential federal system. This impacted positively on Nigeria-America relations. The hitherto strained relations gave way to a robust relationship. America became more interested in Nigeria and Nigeria too was eager to learn from the American style of governance. Secondly, by 1980, the foreign exchange earning of Nigeria that was largely from crude oil export started to decline. Many Nigerians now sought the friendship of the US in order to access loans from the IMF and the World Bank (controlled by US) to finance the short falls that arose from the huge trade and balance of payment deficits of the 1980s (Saliu and Aremu, 2007: 500-516). President Shehu Shagari's government from 1979 did not last long when it was toppled by a coup in 1983 (Falola and Heaton, 2008:212-215). The coup ushered in Major General Muhammadu Buhari's administration. In his less than 24 month tenure as the Head of State, Major General Buhari made vigorous and sustained efforts to persuade the Reagan Administration in the United States to change its flawed policies of constructive engagement with the apartheid regime in South Africa but the efforts did not yield the desired result. Nevertheless, the Buhari's administrative goal of seeking comprehensive and mandatory sanctions against the racist regime in South Africa remained valid.

In August 1985, another coup occurred in which Buhari's administration was ousted and Major General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida (IBB) became the Head of State (Falola and Heaton, 2008: 216-217). Babangida's regime enjoyed some kind of support from the US more so because of his 'transition to civilian rule' programme as well as Better Life Programme of the First Lady, Mrs. Maryam Babangida. The Export-Import Bank of the United States of America engaged in medium-term development projects in Nigeria. The friendship with the United States of America was short-lived as a result of

some aspects of Babangida's transition programme that were allegedly obnoxious and perceived as offensive. Foremost was the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential Election. Babangida himself stepped aside and an interim government of Chief Ernest Shonekan came on the scene. 1993/1994 would go down in Nigeria's history as the most trying period for Nigeria. It was as if Nigeria would collapse. The Interim National Government under Shonekan came to an abrupt end as it was replaced by General Sani Abacha (Falola and Heaton, 2008:229-230). Under him, Nigeria attained a pariah status.

Ostracized by the world community, the regime of General Sani Abacha became more repressive as the administration sentenced Ken Saro Wiwa, a poet and an environmentalist, and eight other Ogoni activists to death. The US responded with a series of sanctions on Nigeria. Not only did US suspend all military and technical assistance to Nigeria, senior Nigerian government officials were banned from travelling to the US. The US envoy was recalled for consultation that lasted for months. Tensions eased off in 1998 when Sani Abacha died and General Abdulsalam Abubakar became the Head of State. Abdulsalam facilitated the return of Nigeria to democratic rule in less than 12 months of his administration. In May 29, 1999 Nigeria returned to democratic rule under President Olusegun Aremu Okikiolu Obasanjo. Did Nigeria-US ties grow stronger or weaker since 1999? This question is addressed in the next section.

NIGERIA-US BILATERAL TIES SINCE 1999 TO 2016

One of the first steps the new President of Nigeria took was to embark on an extensive official tour of some strategic countries of the world, most especially the United States of America. While many citizens vehemently criticized Obasanjo's frequent trips abroad, there were serious minded Nigerians who saw the frequent trips as necessary. If nothing else, it was to declare without mincing words, most especially to American that the democratic regime of Obasanjo would not be like the military regimes in which there were flagrant violations of human rights in Nigeria. Obasanjo not only verbalised it, he went beyond verbalisation to actual demonstration. One of the concrete steps that Obasanjo took was the establishment of the Human Rights Investigation Committee headed by Justice Chuwudifu Oputa to examine cases of human right abuses and recommend appropriate remedies (Nnamani, 2011). Known as the Oputa Panel, it did a great job. Obasanjo's regime also strengthened the Human Rights Investigation Commission (HRIC). Obasanjo established some agencies specifically to show to the United States of America and its Western Allies that the democratic regime would wage a relentless war against corruption.

One of the agencies Obasanjo established was the Bureau for Budget Monitoring and Price Intelligence Unit of the Presidency (also known as the Due Process) (Adejumobi, 2011). Headed by Mrs. Oby Ezekwesili, the Unit was able to reduce drastically the corruption in the process of awarding contract. Another agency set up by the Obasanjo administration was the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) (Falode, 2013:10-11). These measures endeared the regime to Bill Clinton's administration in the US. President Bill Clinton himself visited Nigeria and was warmly received. Little wonder therefore that the long road from the Abuja metropolis to the Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport is named after Bill Clinton. This marked the high point in Nigeria-US bilateral relations.

The other high point is reflected in Nigeria-US economic ties. In the year 2000, Nigeria's export to the US was worth US \$7.9 billion while import amounted to \$514.5 million worth of goods indicating a favourable trade balance of US \$7.42 billion (Odularu, 2008). In the years 2001 and 2002 and in terms of aggregate African export to the US, Nigeria accounted for the largest share of US \$7.3 billion out of a total of US \$617 billion followed by South Africa and Kenya (Odularu, 2008).

President Obasanjo again visited U.S in December 2004. In 2006, there was a follow-up meeting of both Presidents Obasanjo and George Walker Bush in White House. However, when Alhaji Shehu Musa Yar'Adua succeeded Obasanjo as the president of Nigeria, there was a noticeable drop in the country's relationship with the USA. Yar'Adua's failing health greatly affected the tempo and tenor of Nigeria's relations with the USA. President Barak Obama became the president of the USA in 2008 and throughout his 8-year tenure, Obama never visited Nigeria. A lot of factors were responsible for this but the major one was the noticeable drop in Nigeria's democratic credentials. With the 2015 federal elections fast approaching and to help nudge the country on a democratic trajectory, the US secretary of State, John Kerry, visited Nigeria in January to encourage peaceful elections in Nigeria (Blanchard, 2015:1-2). One can safely conclude that the USA played a major role in the peaceful transition from one democratic government to another in Nigeria.

When America introduced African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) in 2000, Nigeria took full advantage of it (Saliu and Aremu, 2007) (Fwatshak, 2007/2008). AGOA is an economic measure specifically designed to encourage the export of goods from developing economies into the US. Nigeria could not fully exploit the opportunities in AGOA because oil was the country's major export to the US.

An examination of Nigeria-US bilateral relations cannot be complete without the examination of the oversized role that terrorism has come to play in the relationship. With the September 11, 2001 terrorists attack on the USA, that

country's foreign policy towards countries with a sizable Muslim population became more restrained. Nigeria has a sizable Muslim population and since those that carried-out the September 11, attack were from a Muslim-dominated society, the fear of radicalization of religious sects in the country was an important yet unspoken concern in their relationship. This concern was brought to the fore in December 2009 when Umar Farouk, a Nigerian citizen, attempted to bomb a Detroit bound plane (El-Said, 2012). This concern was heightened with the emergence of the Boko Haram terrorist group in Nigeria and its subsequent affiliation with Islamic State (IS), a transnational terrorist organization. Boko Haram which in Hausa language literally means 'western education is sin' had bombed some places not only in the northeast of Nigeria but also in Abuja, the country's capital. The whole world was shocked when in April 2014 over 200 secondary school girls were kidnapped by Boko Haram in Chibok (Falode, 2016: 44). Chibok is said to be a Christian town in the well dominated Muslim northeast. The global community condemned this act of barbarism. The activities of Boko Haram are of major concern to the United States of America. This is even more so because the sect is threatening the existence of the entire West African Sub-region. The US helped to train the Nigerian troops and supplied intelligence information in order to assist the country to tackle insurgency and terrorism. To help Nigeria tackle terrorism and insurgency, the US also provided aids, technical assistance and military training and equipment. With the coming of Muhammadu Buhari as the president of Nigeria in 2015, the US had increased its aid and military assistance to the country (CRS, 2020). US military aid package was worth millions with various components. Because of the delicate nature of security, the exact figures may not be known. The US military cooperation with Nigeria was one of the positive results of President Muhammadu Buhari's visit to the US in 2015 (CRS, 2020).

For the sake of objectivity, it must also be stated that the preceding administration before President Muhammadu Buhari, that is of President Dr. Goodluck Jonathan too made effort at forging good relationship with the United States of America. However, Nigeria's foreign policy was more vibrant, more dynamic under President Olusegun Obasanjo than President Goodluck Jonathan. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs under Ambassador Oluyemi Adeniji was more experienced and globalist in orientation than those under the Jonathan administration. Besides, Nigeria again was having the problem of a dented image. Known as one of the most corrupt nations, its reputation was so battered that when President Barack Obama proposed to visit three African countries in 2014, the name of Nigeria was conspicuously missing, a move considered very embarrassing to Nigeria.

Since the coming to power of President Muhammadu Buhari in May 2015, Nigeria – US relations had been on an upward swing. Buhari's determination to fight

corruption in Nigeria endeared him to both Barack Obama as well as his successor, President Donald Trump. The White House invited President Buhari to the United States of America and Trump showered encomiums on the Nigerian president (BBC News, 2018). Nigeria has benefited from the US militarily, economically and culturally. However, the United States of America and indeed the world would want to see how the present administration of President Muhammadu Buhari would live up to his promises of putting an end to corruption in Nigeria in order to raise the standard of living in the most populous black nation in the whole world.

CONCLUSION

This work has shown the nature and issues that defined Nigeria's relationship with the USA between 1960 and 2016. It shows that political, social, economic and security issues were responsible for the fluctuations that were observed in the bilateral relationship. Though, very strong at Nigeria's independence in 1960, the issues of colonialism, racism and of course, the cold war itself, were to strain this bond in the 1960s and 1970s. Due to Washington's commitments to its European allies, and America's domestic politics over segregation, the USA had to tread a fine line over the issues of colonialism and racism. Washington seems reluctance to condemn apartheid in South Africa and America's support for FNLA during the Angolan war pitted the USA against most African states. Nigeria, being the frontline state in the fight against colonialism and racism in Africa used its foreign policy and resources to challenge American policies on the continent. The situation however improved in the 1980s and 2000s. America reassessed its foreign policy in Africa during the presidency of Jimmy Carter and Washington was more forceful in its condemnation of both colonialism and racism on the continent. This is a major factor responsible for the warming of relations between the two. America increased its economic and technical aid packages to Nigeria and Lagos was more receptive to American culture. A series of coups d'etre in Nigeria from the 1980s, coupled with totalitarian military regimes was to later strain the relationship. Into this mix was also added the issue of terrorism and general insecurity in Nigeria. The military's reluctance to return Nigeria to civilian rule and America's pressure to nudge the country back on a democratic trajectory strained the ties between the two.

With the attainment of democratic rule in 1999, there was a marked improvement in the bilateral relations between Nigeria and America. Particularly, economic ties between the two became more entrenched because of America's reliance on Nigerian crude as a key plank of its energy security. AGOA and other economic aid and packages further strengthened bilateral ties between the two. However, the growth of religious extremism in

Nigeria, exemplified by the Boko Haram group, and America's perceived indifference in helping Abuja to tackle this put new stressors on the relationship.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests

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