FORGING A DIPLOMATIC IDENTITY: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON NIGERIA'S FOREIGN POLICYAT INDEPENDENCE

Amah Maclean Williams
Department of History and International Studies
Akwa Ibom State University
amahwilliams@aksu.edu.ng

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60787/aasd.vol3no1.80

Abstract

The attainment of independence in 1960 marked a defining moment in Nigeria's diplomatic history, laying the foundation for its foreign policy orientation. As the most populous African state and a newly sovereign actor, Nigeria emerged into a world that was deeply divided along ideological lines, hence, the nation was confronted with the dual challenge of crafting a diplomatic identity while navigating Cold War rivalries, regional expectations, and domestic imperatives. This study therefore examines how Nigeria forged its foreign policy identity at independence by providing a historical perspective on the formation of Nigeria's foreign policy at independence, interrogating the underlying principles, strategic choices, and external influences that shaped its early direction. Drawing on archival records, speeches, and contemporary analyses, the paper examines the Balewa doctrine which highlighted the centrality of Afrocentrism, non-alignment, and economic diplomacy as key guiding doctrines. It argues that Nigeria's foreign policy in 1960 was not merely reactive to global pressures but reflected deliberate efforts to project leadership in Africa, safeguard sovereignty, and balance external partnerships with national interests. Furthermore, the study situates these choices within the broader historical context of decolonization, highlighting the influence of Pan-African ideals and the aspiration to resist neocolonial domination. By analyzing the historical making of Nigeria's foreign policy at independence, the paper underscores the enduring relevance of these foundational choices in shaping subsequent diplomatic trajectories. Ultimately, this historical inquiry contributes to the understanding of how newly independent states in the postcolonial era constructed foreign policy identities amidst complex global and regional dynamics.

Keywords: *Nigeria, independence, foreign policy, diplomacy, Afrocentrism, Pan-Africanism, non-alignment, decolonization*

Introduction

The dawn of Nigerian independence in 1960 marked more than the transfer of political authority from colonial Britain to indigenous political leaders. It represented the birth of a sovereign actor in the international system, compelled to define its own identity, interests, and orientation within an increasingly complex world. According to Williams, the challenge of foreign policy formation for Nigeria was not simply technical; it was deeply historical, philosophical, and ideological considering her immense demographic weight, economic potential and symbolic importance in Africa[i]. At independence, Nigerian leaders faced the pressing question of how to reconcile colonial legacies with the aspirations of a liberated nation while also positioning themselves amidst Cold War rivalries, regional expectations, and the demands of national unity[ii].

Olajide Aluko in the work Essays in Nigerian Foreign Policy succinctly posits that the

circumstances of Nigeria's independence created both opportunities and dilemmas. On one hand, the new state enjoyed the prestige of being the most populous African country and a potential leader in the continent's quest for unity and self-determination. On the other hand, its colonial experience left it ill-prepared for the demands of diplomacy[iii]. Also, Akinyemi asserts that the British had deliberately excluded Nigerians from substantive participation in foreign affairs, leaving little institutional or experiential foundation upon which to build[iv]. Yet, independence galvanized Nigeria immediately into the heart of international politics. Within weeks of sovereignty, Nigeria had established diplomatic missions, joined the United Nations, and announced foreign policy principles that would resonate for decades[v].

Central to these principles was the Balewa doctrine which emphasized Afrocentricism, the idea that Nigeria's foreign policy must prioritize African interests. This orientation was not accidental; it consciously forged by Balewa considering Nigeria's sense of responsibility toward anti-colonial struggles in Southern Africa and its role in shaping the future of African regionalism. Closely tied to Afrocentricism was the policy of non-alignment, through which Nigeria sought to maintain neutrality in the Cold War without becoming isolated from either bloc[vi]. Non-alignment championed by a group of nations in the global South like India and others allowed Nigeria to engage with both East and West while protecting its sovereignty and avoiding neocolonial entanglements[vii]. Together, these principles reflected a deliberate attempt to forge a diplomatic identity rooted in independence, solidarity, and pragmatic engagement.

The process of defining Nigeria's foreign policy was also shaped by its internal realities. Nigeria entered independence as a federation marked by deep ethnic, regional and political cleavages. As Dudley puts it, leaders such as Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa believed that foreign policy could serve as a unifying platform, projecting stability abroad even as domestic challenges threatened cohesion[viii]. The tension between projecting African leadership and maintaining domestic unity became a recurring decimal in Nigeria's diplomacy. Similarly, the pursuit of economic diplomacy was motivated by the recognition that political sovereignty required economic strength. Nigerian leaders sought international partnerships to accelerate development, but often found themselves constrained by dependence on former colonial ties and limited bargaining power in the global economy.

This paper therefore interrogates these formative years in Nigeria's diplomacy by placing foreign policy choices within their historical context. It argues that Nigeria's early foreign policy was not simply a set of reactive measures but rather a purposeful and conscious construction of identity, shaped by the necessity of sovereignty, African solidarity, and cautious global engagement. By revisiting the making of Nigeria's foreign policy at independence, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how newly decolonized states navigated the tension between inherited colonial structures and the aspirations of postcolonial self-determination. In doing so, it highlights the enduring relevance of 1960 in explaining both Nigeria's subsequent diplomatic trajectory and the broader challenges of postcolonial inter-state relations in Africa.

Colonial Legacies and the Context of Independence

The story of Nigeria's foreign policy cannot be understood without first considering the

weight of colonial legacies. Like most African countries, Nigeria entered independence carrying institutions, attitudes, and international linkages shaped by colonial rule. For Britain, Nigeria had been less a political community than a collection of territories designed for economic extraction and administrative convenience. Aluko opines those foreign policies, therefore, were never meant to reflect the aspirations of Nigerians but rather to serve the interests of the British Empire. Due to the fact that decisions about trade, diplomacy and war were made in London, with Nigerians rarely consulted or included, Nigeria was left in 1960 with limited institutional experience in international affairs[ix].Indeed, until the late 1950s, only a handful of Nigerians had exposure to the workings of diplomacy. The colonial administration was reluctant to allow Africans into the higher levels of foreign service. Those few who received training, such as Simeon Adebo and other early civil servants, were exceptions rather than the rule[x]. Thus, when independence came, Nigeria inherited a state apparatus with almost no indigenous expertise in diplomacy, a gap that would prove challenging as it sought to establish embassies, negotiate treaties and assert itself in the global community.

At the same time, the situation in the world by 1960 placed Nigeria at the crossroads of history. The Cold War was at its height, with the United States and the Soviet Union struggling for influence across newly independent nations. Africa became one of the key battlegrounds of proxy wars and ideological contest.As Ibrahim Gambari puts it, Nigeria, because of its size and strategic importance, was quickly courted by both sides of the global divide[xi]. However, Nigerian leaders recognized the dangers of being drawn too closely into either camp. Their preference for non-alignment was not Despite these challenges, colonial legacies only a strategic posture but also a way to avoid reproducing patterns of dependency reminiscent of colonialism.

Equally important was the wave of decolonization sweeping across Africa. In 1960 alone, seventeen African countries gained independence, a development often referred to as the “Year of Africa.” Nigeria’s independence was thus part of a continental moment, one that carried with it expectations of solidarity and leadership. Smaller African states, many of them fragile and struggling, looked to Nigeria for moral support and diplomatic backing in international forums. This was particularly true in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa and the liberation wars in Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe[xii]. Nigeria’s foreign policy, therefore, was shaped not only by internal calculations but also by the demands of Pan-Africanism and continental responsibility.

The colonial legacy also left behind deep internal divisions that complicated Nigeria’s approach to diplomacy. Britain’s strategy of indirect rule had reinforced ethnic and regional differences, privileging certain groups and creating uneven levels of political development. At independence, Nigeria was a federation of three dominant regions, North, East, and West, each with distinct political parties and competing visions of the future. Foreign policy decisions, therefore, were not made in a vacuum but were often entangled with domestic rivalries[xiii]. For instance, leaders from the North tended to favour cautious relations with the West, reflecting conservative values and economic dependence on agriculture, while leaders from the South more exposed to Western education and commerce, often advocated more assertive engagement with the wider world[xiv].

were not entirely negative. British

administrative structures, while limiting, did provide some foundations upon which Nigeria could build. Membership in the Commonwealth gave Nigeria immediate entry into an international network of states, offering both recognition and platforms for diplomacy. Similarly, Nigeria's English language heritage allowed it to communicate and negotiate effectively in global forums, positioning it as a bridge between Africa and the wider world. These continuities highlight the paradox of decolonization: while independence was framed as a break from colonialism, it inevitably carried forward many of its legacies[xv].

In sum, the context of Nigeria's independence in 1960 was one of both burden and opportunity. The new state inherited weak diplomatic institutions and deep domestic divisions, yet it also entered the world stage at a moment of continental optimism and global reconfiguration. Nigeria's leaders were aware that their decisions in these formative years would not only shape the nation's destiny but also influence Africa's role in international affairs. The weight of colonial legacies meant they had to navigate between inherited structures and the pressing need to define an authentic Nigerian foreign policy identity. The interplay of these forces, the constraints of the past, the demands of the present, and the aspirations for the future, formed the foundations upon which Nigeria's diplomatic orientation was built.

The Making of Nigeria's Foreign Policy in 1960

The forging of Nigeria's foreign policy in 1960 was inseparable from the personalities and visions of its early leaders. According to Williams et al, unlike in some other African states where liberation movements had cultivated external networks before independence, Nigeria's political class entered statehood with little practical experience in diplomacy[xvi]. Yet, within months of independence, Nigeria had crafted the foundations of its foreign policy, announced its principles to the world, and begun the process of establishing missions abroad. This rapid evolution reflected not only necessity but also the determination of leaders to ensure that independence meant more than constitutional sovereignty, it had to signify a place in the global order. Much of the foundation of what we know as Nigeria's foreign polícy, since independence in 1960 is directly owed to the vision of Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Nigeria's first Prime Minister and head of government, October 1960 to January 1966. As the head of the self-government from the late 1950s,he carefully articulated and enunciated the fundamental principles that would underpin the country's external relations after independence, and established the basis on which Nigeria would relate with all countries, big and small, as well as what would be its attitude towards international organizations. These visions were spelt out in major speeches, especially from 1958 when the date of independence had been set for October 1960. It was from that moment on that the man who would be the country's first head of government had been expressing his views concretely on foreign policy and indicating the direction of his thoughts on diverse issues of world politics. In his first address to the United Nations in October 1960 as quoted in Aluko, he emphasized Nigeria's commitment to peace, cooperation and racial equality, affirming that "Nigeria will stand in full support of the United Nations"[xvii]. Balewa's approach combined humility with a quiet assertion of Nigeria's role as a responsible international actor. He resisted radical postures, preferring instead a pragmatic diplomacy that sought to maintain good relations with the West while avoiding entanglement in Cold War rivalries[xviii].

But even beyond these speeches was the fact that the Prime Minister being the architect of the vision of the newly independent country's foreign policy, effectively dominated its realization after independence. In order to stamp his authority and *persona* on the country's external relations, Sir Abubakar did not see the need to appoint a cabinet minister for the Ministry of External Affairs and Commonwealth Relations for quite some time until 1961[xix].He was, instead, his own foreign affairs minister and ably assisted in the task of shaping foreign policy by Sir Peter Stallard, a Briton inherited from the colonial service.And even when he had appointed foreign affairs minister in the person of Hon. Jaja Wachukwu, his own views continued to loom large.

Alongside Balewa, Governor-General Nnamdi Azikiwe, soon to become Nigeria's first President, brought a more activist vision. Azikiwe, widely celebrated as a Pan-African intellectual and nationalist, had long articulated the idea that Nigeria's destiny was tied to that of Africa. His writings and speeches emphasized continental solidarity, the dismantling of colonialism, and the pursuit of African unity[xx]. Though the ceremonial nature of his office limited his direct control over foreign policy, Azikiwe's presence and reputation gave moral weight to Nigeria's Afrocentric commitments. Together, the contrast between Balewa's cautious pragmatism and Azikiwe's Pan-African enthusiasm produced a delicate balance that defined Nigeria's early diplomacy.

Institutional structures also began to take shape in 1960. The Ministry of External Affairs, created at independence, became the nerve center of Nigeria's foreign relations[xxi]. It was staffed initially by a small cadre of civil servants, many trained hurriedly in the late colonial period, who had to learn statecraft on the job. Men like Simeon Adebo, Matthew T. Mbu, and other pioneer diplomats became instrumental in laying the bureaucratic foundation for Nigeria's international engagement[xxii]. Though inexperienced, their efforts allowed Nigeria to open embassies in key capitals such as London, Washingtonand New York, and to participate actively in the United Nations.

Early debates about foreign policy revolved around the definition of "national interest[xxiii]." For Balewa and his cabinet, Nigeria's interests lay in three interconnected areas: preserving sovereignty, promoting African liberation, and securing economic development. Sovereignty was paramount, especially in the face of subtle pressures from former colonial powers who sought to maintain influence through aid, trade, and military ties. African liberation was a moral commitment that resonated deeply with public opinion, particularly in the fight against apartheid South Africa. Economic development, meanwhile, reflected the recognition that political independence would be hollow without material progress. Nigeria's leaders believed that diplomatic engagement could help attract investment and partnerships to strengthen the fragile economy[xxiv].

The making of Nigeria's foreign policy in 1960 was therefore a blend of vision, pragmatism, and improvisation. Leaders like Balewa and Azikiwe brought differing but

complementary perspectives, one grounded in caution and stability, the other in Pan-African idealism. The Ministry of External Affairs, despite its infancy, gave institutional form to these aspirations, while the larger political context of Cold War tensions and African decolonization pushed Nigeria to define its stance quickly. In this crucible, the principles of Afrocentrism, non-alignment, and economic diplomacy were not abstract doctrines but practical responses to the realities of statehood. They reflected a conscious effort to craft a diplomatic identity that would secure Nigeria's sovereignty, affirm its African leadership, and open space for meaningful participation in the global community.

Foundational Principles of Nigeria's Foreign Policy

When Nigeria attained independence in 1960, its leaders were under immense pressure to articulate clear foreign policy principles. These principles were not written into a single document at the time, but they emerged from speeches, parliamentary debates, and Nigeria's early international engagements. They provided the intellectual and moral compass for the new state and have continued to shape its diplomacy across decades. Four principles stood out prominently in this formative period: Afrocentricism, non-alignment, sovereignty and economic diplomacy[xxv].

Afrocentricism was the cornerstone. From the outset, Nigeria declared that Africa would be the center of its foreign policy. This orientation reflected both moral conviction and strategic necessity. The moral dimension arose from solidarity with other African states still under colonial rule. Nigerian leaders, especially Nnamdi Azikiwe, emphasized that true independence could not be celebrated while much of the continent remained in bondage[xxvi]. Strategically, African issues provided Nigeria with a platform to exercise leadership, particularly within the newly formed Organization of African Unity (OAU) and in the United Nations, where questions of apartheid and decolonization dominated debate[xxvii]. By tying its destiny to Africa, Nigeria sought to project itself as a continental leader and to distinguish its diplomacy from that of its former colonial ruler.

Non-alignment was another guiding principle. In the Cold War context, Nigeria resisted being drawn into the ideological struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa consistently rejected pressures to side with either bloc, insisting instead that Nigeria would judge international issues on their merits[xxviii]. Non-alignment was not neutrality in the strict sense; rather, it was an assertion of independence and an attempt to avoid neocolonial entanglements. For a young state, this policy allowed Nigeria to benefit from aid and cooperation from both East and West without sacrificing its autonomy.Closely tied to these principles was the defense of sovereignty and non-interference. Nigerian leaders were deeply aware of the fragility of postcolonial independence. Having just emerged from colonial domination, they were determined to safeguard sovereignty at all costs. This explains Nigeria's strong support for the principle of territorial integrity in international forums and its careful approach to intervention in the affairs of other states[xxix]. At home, however, this principle also reflected a desire to shield the federation from external meddling, particularly given the deep political and ethnic divisions that threatened national unity.

Finally, economic diplomacy emerged as a pragmatic principle. Nigerian leaders

recognized that independence would be hollow without development. The new state's vast population required jobs, infrastructure, and industrial growth. Diplomacy, therefore, was seen as a tool to attract foreign investment, secure trade partnerships, and gain access to international financial institutions[xxx]. At the same time, Nigeria sought to use its diplomatic voice to advocate for fairer economic relations between developed and developing countries. This emphasis on economic diplomacy reflected the recognition that sovereignty must be underpinned by material strength. Together, these principles were not abstract doctrines but practical responses to Nigeria's unique circumstances at independence. Afrocentricism gave Nigeria a sense of mission; non-alignment protected its autonomy in a divided world; sovereignty affirmed its hard-won freedom; and economic diplomacy addressed the urgent needs of its people[xxxi]. These principles, though sometimes tested by contradictions, gave Nigeria a coherent framework through which to navigate the turbulent early years of statehood. More importantly, they laid the foundations of a diplomatic identity that has endured, even as the world and Nigeria itself have changed.

Regional and Global Engagements

Nigeria's foreign policy at independence was not only about setting principles; it was also about putting those principles into practice. Almost immediately, the young nation was drawn into regional and global arenas where it had to demonstrate leadership, defend sovereignty, and balance competing international interests. Nigeria's engagements in the early 1960s reflected both its Afrocentric commitments and its determination to be recognized as a responsible actor in world affairs.At the regional level, Nigeria quickly assumed an important role in African diplomacy. The early 1960s were marked by the ideological split within the continent between the Casablanca and Monrovia groups. The Casablanca bloc, led by radical states like Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah, advocated for immediate continental unity, while the Monrovia group favored a more gradualist approach that respected national sovereignty. Nigeria aligned with the Monrovia camp, reflecting Prime Minister Balewa's cautious and pragmatic style. This positioning allowed Nigeria to play a moderating role in the debates that eventually led to the creation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963[xxxii]. By supporting gradual integration, Nigeria helped to establish a framework of cooperation that balanced Pan-African ideals with the realities of diverse national interests.

Nigeria also projected its influence through active support for anti-colonial and liberation struggles. Though less radical than Ghana or Tanzania, Nigeria consistently condemned apartheid in South Africa and Portuguese colonialism in Angola and Mozambique. In the United Nations, Nigeria used its platform to call for sanctions against Pretoria and to demand self-determination for remaining colonies[xxxiii]. This stance reflected the Afrocentric principle that African freedom was incomplete until all forms of colonial rule were dismantled. Nigeria's contributions to peacekeeping missions, such as its participation in the UN operation in the Congo in the early 1960s, further demonstrated its willingness to translate principle into action[xxxiv].

Nigeria's global engagements were equally significant. Its membership in the Commonwealth provided a ready-made network of diplomatic relationships. While some critics saw this as a continuation of colonial influence, Nigerian leaders regarded the Commonwealth as a useful

platform for economic cooperation and international visibility. Balewa, in particular, maintained strong ties with Britain, emphasizing continuity even as Nigeria sought to define its independent path[xxxv].

At the same time, Nigeria established relations with the United States and Western Europe, motivated largely by the need for economic partnerships. Western aid and investment were viewed as essential for development, though Nigeria remained wary of dependency. Relations with the West were more cautious. While Nigeria did not close the door to engagement with socialist states, its leadership, concerned about communist influence in domestic politics, kept such ties

In these regional and global engagements, Nigeria's foreign policy demonstrated both ambition and restraint. It sought leadership in Africa, but without alienating other states; it maintained ties with the West, but without closing itself off to the East; it embraced multilateralism, but without surrendering

Challenges and Contradictions

While Nigeria's foreign policy at independence projected confidence and principle, it was not without its contradictions. The reality of governing a newly independent, diverse, and fragile federation often collided with the ideals articulated on the international stage. These tensions revealed both the promise and the limits of Nigeria's early diplomacy.

One of the most pressing challenges was domestic political instability. The federation inherited from Britain in 1960 was marked by deep ethnic and regional divisions, with

Another contradiction lay in Nigeria's commitment to Pan-Africanism versus the

limited in the early years[xxxvi]. This balancing act was consistent with the principle of non-alignment, allowing Nigeria to maintain autonomy while benefiting from interactions with both sides of the Cold War divide. Nigeria also embraced multilateralism as a cornerstone of its diplomacy. The United Nations offered a global stage where the new nation could assert its voice. Nigeria's early speeches at the UN emphasized peace, racial equality, and support for collective security. Participation in the UN not only enhanced Nigeria's international legitimacy but also allowed it to advocate on issues directly tied to its African commitments, including decolonization and economic justice[xxxvii].

sovereignty. These carefully balanced choices reflected the realities of a new state seeking recognition and respect in a complex international order. More importantly, they laid the groundwork for Nigeria's reputation as both a continental leader and a committed participant in global diplomacy.

political parties organized largely along ethnic lines. Although leaders like Tafawa Balewa sought to present Nigeria as a united and stable country abroad, at home the cracks were already showing. Disputes between the Northern People's Congress, the Action Group in the West, and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens in the East created an atmosphere of mistrust and competition[xxxviii]. This fragility constrained Nigeria's ability to pursue bold or consistent foreign policy initiatives, since the government was often preoccupied with balancing internal politics. The crisis in the Western Region in 1962 and growing electoral tensions further distracted attention from external commitments.

realities of national interest. While Nigerian leaders spoke passionately about African

solidarity and liberation, their policies sometimes reflected caution or hesitation. For example, Nigeria supported the liberation movements rhetorically, but was slower than some of its neighbours like Ghana or Tanzania, to provide direct material assistance[xxxix]. This was partly due to Nigeria's conservative leadership, which feared being drawn into conflicts beyond its capacity, and partly due to economic and administrative limitations. The tension between idealism and pragmatism was a recurring feature of Nigeria's diplomacy in the early years.

Resource constraints also limited Nigeria's international ambitions. Despite its size and potential, Nigeria was still a developing country with a largely agrarian economy at independence. Building embassies, funding peacekeeping missions, and maintaining an active diplomatic presence required resources the state often struggled to provide. The Ministry of External Affairs, though symbolically important, was underfunded and short-staffed in its early years[xl]. Diplomats were expected to cover vast portfolios with minimal training or support, making it difficult to match Nigeria's rhetoric with sustained action.

Nigeria's policy of non-alignment also faced challenges in practice. While leaders insisted that Nigeria would not be tied to either the Western or Eastern bloc, in reality, the country leaned more heavily toward the West. This was not only due to colonial legacies, such as membership in the Commonwealth and economic ties to Britain, but also because the ruling elite, particularly in the North, feared the spread of communist ideology[xli]. Critics argued that Nigeria's non-alignment was more rhetorical than substantive, raising questions about the authenticity of its independence in foreign policy.

Finally, Nigeria struggled with the contradiction between sovereignty and intervention. On one hand, the country strongly defended the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs, largely to protect itself from external scrutiny of its own fragile federation. On the other hand, Nigeria's involvement in the Congo peacekeeping mission in 1960–64 showed a willingness to engage in the internal affairs of another African state[xlii]. While justified as a contribution to collective security, this action highlighted the tension between Nigeria's principles and the demands of real *politik*. These contradictions did not erase Nigeria's achievements in diplomacy, but they underscored the difficulties of translating lofty ideals into practice. Independence had given Nigeria a voice, but not unlimited power. The state had to constantly navigate between aspiration and limitation, balancing domestic fragility, economic weakness, and global pressures. These challenges revealed the complex reality of postcolonial foreign policy: a mixture of principle, pragmatism, and compromise.

Legacy and Historical Significance

The foreign policy foundations laid in 1960 have continued to shape Nigeria's diplomacy long after independence. Though subsequent governments, military and civilian alike, introduced new emphases and strategies, the core principles of Afrocentrism, non-alignment, sovereignty, and economic diplomacy have endured. They provided Nigeria with a framework for navigating the uncertainties of the postcolonial world and continue to influence its approach to international affairs today. One of the most enduring legacies is Nigeria's commitment to African leadership. From independence, Nigeria positioned

itself as a defender of African interests, a role it deepened in the decades that followed. Its support for liberation movements in Southern Africa grew more robust in the 1970s, and its funding of the OAU made it one of the most influential

The policy of non-alignment also left a long shadow. Although critics dismissed Nigeria's early non-alignment as rhetorical, the principle helped the country maintain a measure of autonomy in its international dealings. Nigeria consistently avoided formal alliances with either superpower bloc, allowing it to engage flexibly with diverse partners. In the post–Cold War era, this legacy has evolved into a form of "multi-alignment," where Nigeria balances relationships with Western powers, China, and regional actors[xliv]. The persistence of this strategy demonstrates how the logic of independence-era diplomacy continues to inform Nigeria's place in a multi-polar world. Equally significant is the enduring emphasis on sovereignty and territorial integrity. Nigeria's strong defense of sovereignty at independence was not only self-protective; it also established the principle that has guided its responses to African conflicts. Even when Nigeria intervened militarily in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s, it framed its actions as defending sovereignty against collapse rather than undermining it[xlv]. This careful balance between non-interference and regional responsibility reflects the dilemma first confronted in 1960 during the Congo crisis.

The focus on economic diplomacy, too, has remained central. From independence, Nigerian leaders understood that political sovereignty was insufficient without economic strength. While the strategy was limited by weak resources in the 1960s, it anticipated later efforts to use oil wealth as a tool of

diplomacy in the 1970s. More recently, voices on the continent[xliii]. This trajectory reflects the continuity of the Afrocentric orientation first articulated in 1960, even if its expression became more assertive under later leaders like Murtala Muhammed and Olusegun Obasanjo.

Nigeria has continued to advocate for fairer trade relations, South-South cooperation, and reform of global economic institutions[xlvi]. The seeds of these initiatives can be traced back to the emphasis on development and partnership voiced at independence.

Perhaps the most profound historical significance of 1960 lies in how it framed Nigeria's identity as a state in the international system. Independence was not simply the end of colonial rule; it was the moment Nigeria declared itself as a diplomatic actor with its own voice. The foreign policy principles articulated then reflected both Nigeria's domestic realities and its aspirations for Africa and the wider world. They also created expectations, among Nigerians and internationally, that Nigeria would lead, protect African interests, and uphold the dignity of the postcolonial state. While Nigeria has sometimes struggled to meet these expectations, the identity forged in 1960 continues to shape how the country is perceived and how it perceives itself. In short, the making of foreign policy at independence was not a fleeting moment but a foundational episode. The principles and choices of 1960 remain woven into the fabric of Nigeria's diplomacy, providing continuity even amid change. They remind us that the challenges and contradictions of early independence did not weaken Nigeria's foreign policy identity; rather, they gave it a character that has endured across decades of political transformation.

Conclusion

Nigeria's foreign policy at independence in 1960 was more than a set of diplomatic statements; it was a declaration of identity. In the fragile moment of statehood, Nigerian leaders sought to position their country as a principled, confident, and responsible actor on the world stage. They anchored their diplomacy on four interlinked pillars; Afrocentricism, non-alignment, sovereignty, and economic development, each reflecting both the hopes of a newly independent nation and the realities of a divided, resource-constrained federation. Yet, as the preceding discussion shows, the lofty ideals of 1960 were accompanied by contradictions. Nigeria's domestic fragility often undercut its external ambitions, and the balance between rhetoric and practice was not always easy to sustain. Non-alignment leaned toward the West, Pan-Africanism was tempered by caution, and economic diplomacy was hampered by limited capacity. These tensions revealed the complexity of forging a coherent foreign policy in the immediate aftermath of colonial rule.

Despite these challenges, the significance of 1960, lies not in its limitations but in its lasting legacy. The principles articulated then provided a durable foundation, shaping Nigeria's diplomacy across decades of political transitions. From peacekeeping missions to liberation support, from OPEC activism to regional leadership in ECOWAS, Nigeria's later achievements cannot be separated from the identity it forged at independence. Even today, as Nigeria navigates globalization, regional insecurity, and multi-polar competition, echoes of 1960 remain audible in its foreign policy choices. In this sense, the making of Nigeria's foreign policy at independence was not simply an episode in the past; it was the beginning of an ongoing journey. It reminds us that diplomacy is never static; it is shaped by memory, identity, and the continual negotiation between aspiration and reality. For Nigeria, 1960 marked the moment of stepping into history as a sovereign actor, with a voice that, despite its struggles, has never ceased to matter in Africa and beyond.

Endnotes

[i] *Williams, A. M., and E. K. Egemba. "Culture and bilateral diplomacy: A study of Nigeria-Saudi relations." Ibom Journal of Social Issues 11.1 (2022): 29-29.*

[ii] *Williams, A. M., and E. K. Egemba. "Culture and bilateral diplomacy: A study of Nigeria-Saudi relations." Ibom Journal of Social Issues 11.1 (2022): p.36.*

[iii] *Aluko, Olajide. Essays in Nigerian Foreign Policy. George Allen & Unwin, 1981.*

[iv] *Akinyemi, Bolaji. Nigerian Foreign Policy: The Search for a New Role. Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, 1989.*

[v] *Williams, Amah M. "The Aburi Accord and its Role in the Nigerian Civil War." Journal of History and Military Studies 3.2 (2017): 27-38.*

[vi] *Gambari, Ibrahim. Theory and Reality in Foreign Policy Making: Nigeria after the Second Republic. Humanities Press, 1989.*

[vii] *Williams, Amah Maclean, and Peter Sunday Ekwere. "NIGERIA-INDIA RELATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY COOPERATION: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS." AKWA IBOM STATE UNIVERSITY JOURNAL OF ARTS 5.2 (2024).*

[viii] Dudley, Billy. An Introduction to Nigerian Government and Politics. Macmillan, 1982.

[ix] Aluko, Olajide. Essays in Nigerian Foreign Policy. George Allen & Unwin, 1981.

[x] Akinyemi, Bolaji. Nigerian Foreign Policy: The Search for a New Role. Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, 1989.

[xi] Gambari, Ibrahim. Theory and Reality in Foreign Policy Making: Nigeria after the Second Republic. Humanities Press, 1989.

[xii] Adebajo, Adekeye. Nigeria and South Africa: The Contest for Leadership in Africa. Zed Books, 2007.

[xiii] Ngonso, Blessed, et al. "Media complexity in the mirroring of Nigerian political system: A historical appraisal." (2023).

[xiv] Dudley, Billy. An Introduction to Nigerian Government and Politics. Macmillan, 1982.

[xv] Osaghae, Eghosa. Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence. Indiana UP, 1998.

[xvi] Williams, AMAH MACLEAN, NSIDIBE AKPAN Usoro, and ESTHER KINGSLEY Egemba. "DEMOCRATIC CULTURE AND GOOD GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE." International Journal of Education and Science Development 1.1 (2022): 55-70.

[xvii] Aluko, Olajide. Essays in Nigerian Foreign Policy. George Allen & Unwin, 1981.

[xviii] Utin, Inwang B., and C. Izeoma Chinda. "Restructuring Of The Nigerian Political System: Issues And Challenges." AKSU Annals of Sustainable Development 2.2 (2024): 106-113.

[xix] Utin, Inwang. "Historicing The Maritime Domain and Security in the Gulf of Guinea (1435-2025)." AKSU Annals of Sustainable Development 3.1 (2025): 125-133.

[xx] Adebajo, Adekeye. Nigeria and South Africa: The Contest for Leadership in Africa. Zed Books, 2007.

[xxi] Utin, Inwang Benson. "Political systems and underdevelopment in Africa (1957-2010)." AFRREV IJAH: An International Journal of Arts and Humanities 7.2 (2018): 8-15.

[xxii] Akinyemi, Bolaji. Nigerian Foreign Policy: The Search for a New Role. Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, 1989.

[xxiii] Williams, Amah. "International Sanctions As A Tool Of Diplomacy: A Historical Examination of their Deterrent Effect." AKSU Annals of Sustainable Development 3.1 (2025): 112-114.

[xxiv] Aluko, Olajide. Essays in Nigerian Foreign Policy. George Allen & Unwin, 1981.

[xxv] Utin, Inwang B., and C. Izeoma Chinda. "Restructuring Of The Nigerian Political System: Issues And Challenges." AKSU Annals of Sustainable Development 2.2 (2024): 106-113

[xxvi] Adebajo, Adekeye. Nigeria and South Africa: The Contest for Leadership in Africa. Zed Books, 2007.

[xxvii] Aluko, Olajide. Essays in Nigerian Foreign Policy. George Allen & Unwin, 1981.

[xxviii] Gambari, Ibrahim. Theory and Reality in Foreign Policy Making: Nigeria after the Second Republic. Humanities Press, 1989.

[xxix] Osaghae, Eghosa. Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence. Indiana UP, 1998.

[xxx] Utin, Inwang B., and C. Izeoma Chinda. "Restructuring Of The Nigerian Political System: Issues And Challenges." AKSU Annals of Sustainable Development 2.2 (2024): 106-113

[xxxi] Williams, A. M., and E. K. Egemba. "Culture and bilateral diplomacy: A study of Nigeria-Saudi relations." Ibom Journal of Social Issues 11.1 (2022): 28.

[xxxii] Utin, Inwang Benson. "Political systems and underdevelopment in Africa (1957-2010)." AFRREV IJAH: An International Journal of Arts and Humanities 7.2 (2018): 8-15.

[xxxiii] Adebajo, Adekeye. Nigeria and South Africa: The Contest for Leadership in Africa. Zed Books, 2007.

[xxxiv] Gambari, Ibrahim. Theory and Reality in Foreign Policy Making: Nigeria after the Second Republic. Humanities Press, 1989.

[xxxv] Dudley, Billy. An Introduction to Nigerian Government and Politics. Macmillan, 1982

[xxxvi] Osaghae, Eghosa. Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence. Indiana UP, 1998.

[xxxvii] Aluko, Olajide. Essays in Nigerian Foreign Policy. George Allen & Unwin, 1981.

[xxxviii] Osaghae, Eghosa. Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence. Indiana UP, 1998.

[xxxix] Adebajo, Adekeye. Nigeria and South Africa: The Contest for Leadership in Africa. Zed Books, 2007.

[xl] Aluko, Olajide. Essays in Nigerian Foreign Policy. George Allen & Unwin, 1981.

[xli] Gambari, Ibrahim. Theory and Reality in Foreign Policy Making: Nigeria after the Second Republic. Humanities Press, 1989.

[xlii] Dudley, Billy. An Introduction to Nigerian Government and Politics. Macmillan, 1982.

[xliii] Adebajo, Adekeye. Nigeria and South Africa: The Contest for Leadership in Africa. Zed Books, 2007.

[xliv] Osaghae, Eghosa. Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence. Indiana UP, 1998.

[xlv] Aluko, Olajide. Essays in Nigerian Foreign Policy. George Allen & Unwin, 1981.

[xlvi] Gambari, Ibrahim. Theory and Reality in Foreign Policy Making: Nigeria after the Second Republic. Humanities Press, 1989.