

# Commentary on the Akinyemi Doctrine

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

What is the limit to Nigeria's demonstration of solidarity with other African countries, especially in the context of outright extra-regional aggression against the sovereignty, territorial integrity and security of such countries? Should there be a 'prudent' limit to Nigeria's solidarity in such circumstances? Should our solidarity with fellow OAU members be circumscribed by other considerations especially given a background of Nigeria's recurrent assertions that Africa is the "centre-piece" of its foreign policy?

Since April 1986, informed public opinion on this crucial matter has tended to cluster around two extreme points of view. At one extreme is the viewpoint which holds, that solidarity with other African countries, above all, in circumstances such as depicted above, ought indeed to be a fundamental tenet of Nigerian foreign policy. The logic of this policy precept derives from the premise of the "African-centredness" of foreign policy of successive Nigerian regimes. It is recalled, according to this perspective, that the recurrent affirmation of the idea that Africa should remain the centre-piece of Nigeria's foreign policy since the Gowon regime is itself rooted in the experience gained by the Federal side in the Nigerian civil war.

First, the Nigerian people and government on the Federal side learnt the lesson that in times of direct national emergencies, the solidarity of other African peoples and governments could become a sine qua non of collective survival. It was in fact the enduring solidarity exhibited by the members of the OAU with the Federal cause in the civil war which, more than any other factor, deterred non-African governments from recognizing the secession of Biafra in spite of the machinations of France and South Africa. From this specific lesson, it is considered imperative by observers that Nigeria should, at all times, champion essentially African causes by demonstrating regional leadership which is anchored on solidarity. The second lesson was that Africa, and the OAU, is potentially a viable vehicle of Nigerian foreign policy: That a proper mobilization of the OAU could be functional in advancing Nigerian political goals in the continent and also globally. The possibility of success in this regard was amplified by the outcome of the country's diplomacy in the decolonization politics of Angola in early 1976. Thirdly, that adverse developments in the form of acts of external aggression and intervention particularly in West-Central Africa have a potential impact on national and sub-regional security and independence. The value of solidarity engendered by this lesson gives weight to the proposition, that 'Nigeria must stand firmly by other African countries, for in doing so it also guarantees its own security and independence'.

The other extreme viewpoint maintains that Nigeria's solidarity with Africa should be conditional. The "Akinyemi doctrine" seeks to portray and propagate this point of view. What Professor Akinyemi aims to do through his new formulation is in essence to restrict the scope of Nigeria's leadership role in Africa to issues that are non-controversial and which, more importantly, are apparently in consonance with a particular perception of national interest. But we will come back to this later.

The timing of the enunciation of what foreign affairs commentators have called the Akinyemi doctrine was the first U.S. military confrontation with Libya in the gulf of Sirte in 1986. The Nigerian government did not, contrary to expectation, join some other African governments in condemning the American attack against a fellow OAU member. But the Nigerian Press and most observers of Nigeria's African policy did so. Since the government did not react at all to the conflict, especially for a regime which claims mantle to the dynamic foreign policy of the Murtala-obasanjo era, the general conclusion was that it was not in sympathy with Libya's cause; worse, that the decision not to act amounted to anti-Libyanism and pro-

Americanism. This commentary is not concerned with the merits or otherwise of the position of the essential parties - the USA and Libya - to the conflict, but squarely with the underlying motivations of Nigeria's inaction, the basis of that posture and what it portends for Nigeria's Africa policy (as well as bilateral relations with the U.S.) in the rest of the Babangida administration.

Professor Akinyemi, the foreign Minister, eventually explained to a perplexed public why the government chose to maintain a stoic silence over the incident. He argued or implied that because Libya had not previously consulted Nigeria in its ongoing quarrel with the United States of America, it (Libya) should not have expected Nigeria to be dragged into that quarrel when it broke into an open conflict. It is important at this point to dismiss as inconsequential the suspicion in certain quarters that Akinyemi was motivated in his nonchalant attitude to Libya in the latter's moment of national emergency by a kind of ideological anti-Arabism (and presumably pro-Zionism). Those who know Akinyemi at close range understand that he subscribes, almost as a doctrine, to a certain idea of 'reciprocity' in private as well as in public affairs. He tends to believe and acts largely according to that belief, that inter-personal as well as inter-state relations can function to mutual satisfaction if the rule of reciprocity is adhered to.

In the application of the above to the conflict in question Akinyemi, it was earlier indicated, seemed to take issue with Libya because of its non-consultation with Nigeria prior to the outbreak of the conflict with the United States. He made this as clear as possible in his welcome address to the Kuru conference on Foreign Policy in April 1986:

[We] have responsibilities to Africa ... [just as] Africa has responsibilities to Nigeria ... [If] we owe a responsibility to stand up for and respond to Africa, we are owed an obligation to be *CONSULTED* (for emphasis) when the situation allows for consultation, and a lot of situations allow for consultation ... [We] must not and cannot allow states which of their own free will adopt policies that lead to crisis to assume that Nigeria will automatically be dragged into that crisis. That is not a position of leadership that is a position of subservience.

By, however, stating the problem in this fashion at Kuru, Akinyemi exposed himself to the charge of basing Nigeria's decision on a frivolous premise. 'Consultation' and 'reciprocity' were posed as symbolic object of foreign policy, as ends in themselves without substantive content, unrelated to any concrete national interest. For, in essence, what the Minister was saying was that if the action of the United States against Libya violated Nigeria's vital national interest, we would not have condemned that action because Libya had failed to consult us prior to the conflict. Thus, the impression was given that Nigeria was pursuing mere shadows of aggrandizement and self-respect in its relations with fellow African States. This, however, was an unfortunate public perception, for the real basis of Nigeria's position in this affair was quite unrelated to what Akinyemi said in public.

To the more discerning observers, it was clear that the invocation of the principle of reciprocity on this occasion was a smokescreen; underneath was a more profound justification for Nigeria's inaction. Professor Akinyemi, no doubt, cherishes his doctrine of reciprocity but he knows also, as an astute student of foreign affairs, that tenacious adherence to dogmas is capable of hampering real success in foreign policy (President Ronald Reagan has since learnt this lesson). He is aware that prudence and realism, coated with well-tailored idealism, are the essential conditions of successful foreign policy, especially for a relatively weak and underdeveloped state such as ours. A well calculated consideration of national interest - as perceived by the Foreign Ministry and government - was the anchor of Nigeria's inaction in that conflict between Libya and the United States.

National interests in foreign relations are mainly of two categories: material and abstract or symbolic. Policy makers must weigh delicately, especially in times of crisis, the balance between material and

symbolic interests. For Nigeria, the two were in contention on the occasion of the Libyan-U.S. conflict. The symbolic interest consisted of the need to sustain Nigeria's prestige and leadership status in Africa, and would have necessitated an immediate condemnation of American aggression against Libya, an African state and OAU member. But our material interest was implicit in the role of the United States and our other Western partners in supporting the ongoing national economic recovery programme. The Nigerian government was at the time wooing the United States to sympathize with its debt rescheduling efforts and loan requests involving the Western creditors, the World Bank and IMF. In these circumstances, government was disposed to sacrificing Nigeria's symbolic regional interest in favour of its material interests embedded in its bilateral relations with the U.S. The timing was hardly auspicious for the Babangida administration to rail against American imperialism and aggression in Africa.

At the time it was enunciated, the Akinyemi doctrine was a conceptual contrivance. It was designed, first, to assuage a cynical public that government was not timidly sacrificing the country's prestige and leadership responsibility; and secondly, to camouflage the Foreign Minister's pursuit of real politik. He has, instructively since admitted to this in his Eko Holiday Inn lecture.