

AFROCENTRICITY VERSUS NATIONAL INTEREST: THE IDEOLOGICAL CONTRADICTIONS OF NIGERIA'S 'BIG BROTHER' POLICY

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Abstract

For over six decades, Nigeria anchored its global identity on the messianic doctrine of acting as Africa's "Big Brother," committing immense material resources to frontline liberation movements, regional military interventions under ECOMOG, and the financing of continental institutions like the African Union. However, this study argues that this external altruism was systematically uncoupled from internal socio-economic and political realities, functioning primarily as an elite vanity project that exhausted state revenues while domestic infrastructure, security, and public institutions collapsed. Methodologically, this paper adopts a historical-analytical approach, utilizing a qualitative design built upon chronological tracking and thematic synthesis to evaluate the long-term domestic consequences of Nigeria's external engagements. The research is driven by a comprehensive content analysis of diverse documentation, combining peer-reviewed diplomatic histories, institutional reports, and economic datasets. Specifically, the investigation synthesizes detailed regional security analyses from international research monographs, policy evaluations from global financial institutions, and critical assessments published in leading African political economy journals. By interrogating these secondary and tertiary materials, the paper exposes the deep moral and material contradictions of a foreign policy framework that prioritized external prestige over the economic survival of the domestic populace. Ultimately, the study concludes that Nigeria's path to resilient global leadership requires abandoning sentimental Afrocentricity in favour of a transactional, democratized economic diplomacy model that directly aligns external power projections with internal national development.

Keywords: Big Brother, ECOMOG, African Union, Afrocentricity, Global Leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Since its independence in 1960, Nigeria's foreign policy has been anchored on the concept of Afrocentricity, a doctrine positioning the African continent as the permanent centerpiece of the nation's diplomatic, economic, and military engagements. Driven by an idealistic commitment to pan-African solidarity, decolonization, and racial dignity, successive Nigerian administrations—most notably during the golden era of the 1970s—willingly assumed the mantle of Africa's "Big Brother." From bankrolling liberation movements in Southern Africa to deploying peacekeepers to war-torn regions and bankrolling regional economic integration through ECOWAS, Nigeria consistently spent its blood and treasure to shield and uplift its continental neighbors.

However, this messianic approach to foreign affairs has historically existed in sharp, paradoxical tension with the realist dictates of national interest. While the "Big Brother" policy yielded immense psychological prestige and cemented Nigeria's status as a regional hegemon, it frequently came at a staggering financial and human cost, with little to no tangible domestic return. As Nigeria navigated deep-seated domestic vulnerabilities—including economic recessions, infrastructural deficits, systemic corruption, and volatile ethno-religious insecurity—the divergence between its outward-looking altruism and inward-facing structural decay became impossible to

ignore. This stark contradiction raises a fundamental, enduring question for historians and foreign policy analysts alike: Did Nigeria's romantic attachment to Afrocentricity systematically compromise its core national interests, or was the "Big Brother" posture a calculated vehicle for regional hegemony that ultimately fell short of its promise?

To understand the roots of this ideological friction, one must examine the foundational years of Nigerian diplomacy. Under Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Nigeria established a foreign policy template that rejected narrow chauvinism in favor of continental responsibility. The subsequent oil boom of the 1970s provided the military regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo with the unprecedented financial leverage to operationalize this vision into what became known as "Concert Diplomacy" and aggressive anti-colonialism. Nigeria famously confronted Western powers over the independence of Angola, Zimbabwe, and Namibia, and led the international boycott against apartheid South Africa. During this era, the Nigerian state operated under the conviction that its own security and prosperity were inextricably linked to the total liberation and stability of Africa.

Yet, as the global oil market crashed in the 1980s and domestic economic hardship set in, the cracks in this altruistic framework began to widen. The civilian and military regimes that followed found themselves executing a foreign policy that grew increasingly detached from the immediate economic realities of ordinary citizens. The most glaring manifestation of this contradiction occurred in the 1990s under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). Nigeria single-handedly financed and staffed protracted peacekeeping interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, spending billions of dollars and losing thousands of soldiers to restore order in the sub-region. At the very same time, Nigeria's domestic infrastructure was collapsing, its universities were chronically underfunded, and its citizens were grappling with severe poverty and brutal military dictatorship at home. The state was effectively exporting democracy and stability abroad while systematically denying them to its own populace.

Furthermore, the historical dividend of this "Big Brother" policy has often been characterized by deep diplomatic frustration and unreciprocated goodwill. Decades of financial and political sacrifices have rarely translated into structural alliances or geopolitical deference from beneficiary nations. Instead, Nigeria has frequently faced xenophobic backlash against its migrants in countries like South Africa, economic hostility from its immediate francophone neighbors, and a persistent failure to secure a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council despite its massive continental contributions. From a realist historical perspective, the policy failed the basic test of statecraft: ensuring that foreign expenditures directly fortify domestic power, security, and economic well-being.

In the contemporary era, this historical tension remains highly relevant. As Nigeria grapples with severe internal security crises—such as terrorism in the Northeast and economic instability—the romanticism of 20th-century Afrocentricity feels increasingly unsustainable. Modern statecraft demands a transactional approach to foreign policy, where national interest takes definitive precedence over continental charity. By analyzing the historical trajectory of Nigeria's "Big Brother" policy, this study unpacks the profound ideological contradictions that emerge when a developing nation attempts to shoulder the burdens of an entire continent at the expense of its own internal development, charting the painful evolution from pan-African idealism to the sober realities of national survival.

THE ORIGINS OF AFROCENTRIC FOREIGN POLICY IN NIGERIA, 1960–1985.

Following its independence from British colonial rule on October 1, 1960, Nigeria faced the monumental task of defining its place in the global geopolitical arena. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the nascent state established a foundational foreign policy framework that eschewed narrow, inward-looking nationalism in favor of a grand continental vision. Balewa declared that Nigeria, by virtue of its massive population, demographic weight, and economic potential, possessed a historical obligation to champion the causes of the African continent. This doctrine, which came to be known as Afrocentricity, designated Africa as the permanent centerpiece of Nigerian foreign relations, prioritizing continental liberation, racial equality, and regional cooperation over immediate national material gains.¹

During the early 1960s, this Afrocentric impulse was driven primarily by a moral imperative to eradicate the remaining vestiges of European colonialism and white minority rule. Nigeria actively participated in the formation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963, positioning itself as a moderate yet firm institutional voice for continental unity.² However, the true radicalization and operationalization of this policy

occurred in the 1970s, catalyzed by the termination of the Nigerian Civil War and a historic boom in global oil prices. The military regime of General Yakubu Gowon utilized skyrocketing oil revenues to pivot away from the cautious diplomacy of the independence era toward an assertive, financially backed pan-Africanism.³ Gowon's administration recognized that Nigeria's internal security was inextricably linked to the economic independence of its neighbors, leading to the co-founding of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975 to counter French neo-colonial influence in the sub-region.⁴

The zenith of Nigeria's Afrocentric foreign policy materialized under the subsequent military administration of General Olusegun Obasanjo and his successor, the civilian government of President Shehu Shagari. Armed with "petrodollars," Nigeria boldly assumed the mantle of a "Frontline State" in the struggle against apartheid and white minority rule in Southern Africa, despite being geographically thousands of miles away.⁵ The Nigerian government nationalized British Petroleum (BP) assets and Barclays Bank shares in 1979 to pressure the United Kingdom into granting immediate independence to Zimbabwe.⁶ Furthermore, Nigeria established the South Africa Relief Fund (SARF) in 1976, deploying millions of dollars in state funds and voluntary citizen contributions to finance the liberation struggles of the African National Congress (ANC) and the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO).⁷

By the early 1980s, the economic foundations sustaining this messianic diplomacy began to fracture. The global oil glut of 1981 severely depleted Nigeria's treasury, plunging the country into a severe fiscal crisis that exposed the stark contradictions of its "Big Brother" posturing. When Major General Muhammadu Buhari seized power in a 1983 coup, his administration was forced to confront the harsh reality that outward-facing altruism was hollow without domestic stability.⁸ In a dramatic reversal of pan-African solidarity, the Buhari regime closed Nigeria's borders and expelled over one million undocumented African migrants—mostly Ghanaians—in 1985 under the "Aliens Must Go" decree, citing severe domestic unemployment and internal security threats.⁹ This shift marked a critical historical turning point, signaling the painful transition of Nigerian foreign policy from the idealistic Afrocentric romanticism of the oil-boom era to the rigid, protective demands of national realism.¹⁰

ECOMOG AND THE FIRST TEST OF "BIG BROTHERISM", 1990–1999

Nigeria's foreign policy has long revolved around the concept of "Afrocentrism," casting the nation as a benevolent hegemon or "Big Brother" responsible for continental peace and security.¹¹ The ultimate operational test of this doctrine occurred between 1990 and 1999 through Nigeria's leadership of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG).¹² Originally established as a regional economic bloc, ECOWAS shifted into the realm of military intervention to arrest the collapse of the Liberian state. This intervention served as the foundational crucible for Nigerian "Big Brotherism," revealing the profound friction between regional leadership aspirations and the harsh realities of unilateral financial burdens, complex civil wars, and domestic political instability.

When the First Liberian Civil War erupted in late 1989, Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) rapidly advanced toward Monrovia, threatening a humanitarian catastrophe. Driven by a desire to prevent regional destabilization and secure its status as the West African anchor, Nigeria spearheaded the deployment of ECOMOG in August 1990.¹³ This move marked a radical departure from the traditional West African diplomatic norms of non-interference. Nigeria single-handedly provided over 70 percent of ECOMOG's personnel and shouldered the vast majority of its financial costs.¹⁴ This massive commitment was driven by the military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida, who sought to demonstrate that African nations could solve African problems without overt Western interference.

However, the intervention quickly exposed the severe operational liabilities of playing "Big Brother." ECOMOG landed in Monrovia not as a traditional, neutral United Nations peacekeeping force, but as an active peace-enforcement mission.¹⁵ It lacked a clear mandate from the warring factions, particularly Taylor's NPFL, which viewed Nigeria as an occupying force protecting the embattled Liberian President, Samuel Doe. ECOMOG troops immediately found themselves embroiled in asymmetric urban warfare. Nigerian commanders, who rotated continuously through the leadership of the mission, faced severe logistical deficits, communication barriers with Francophone contingents, and an amorphous front line.¹⁶

The structural contradictions of Nigeria's hegemony became even more pronounced under the regime of General Sani Abacha. While the Abacha dictatorship ruthlessly suppressed democratic dissent at home—drawing international condemnation and isolation—it paradoxically acted as the vanguard of democracy abroad. In 1997, ECOMOG expanded its operational footprint into Sierra Leone following a bloody coup by the Armed Forces

Revolutionary Council (AFRC). Exercising its self-appointed regional police mandate, Nigerian-led ECOMOG forces launched a full-scale assault on Freetown, eventually reinstating the democratically elected government of Ahmad Tejan Kabbah in 1998.¹⁷

While these actions solidified Nigeria's reputation as an indispensable regional power capable of executing complex force projections, the domestic cost of "Big Brotherism" was staggering. The Nigerian public grew deeply resentful of the billions of dollars spent abroad while domestic infrastructure decayed, inflation soared, and poverty deepened. Furthermore, ECOMOG's reputation was severely tarnished by mounting allegations of human rights abuses, heavy-handed collateral damage from Nigerian airstrikes, and institutionalized looting—derogatorily termed "Every Moveable Object Gone" by cynical locals.

By 1999, the structural fatigue of unilateral regional policing culminated in a decisive pivot. The transition to democratic governance under President Olusegun Obasanjo marked the end of uncritical military adventurism. Obasanjo recognized that Nigeria's economic survival required a withdrawal from unsustainable external entanglements. Consequently, Nigerian forces began systematically drawing down their presence, handing over peacekeeping responsibilities in Sierra Leone to a heavily subsidized UN mission.

The decade of ECOMOG interventions between 1990 and 1999 stood as a watershed moment for West African security architectures. It proved that a coalition of developing African states could organize, deploy, and sustain a massive military intervention to stabilize failing neighbors. Yet, for Nigeria, the first true test of "Big Brotherism" yielded a complex legacy. It successfully contained regional conflicts and preserved its status as West Africa's undisputed hegemon. However, it also conclusively demonstrated that without robust institutional frameworks, transparent funding mechanisms, and domestic democratic legitimacy, the burdens of unilateral hegemony will ultimately exhaust the hegemon itself.

DEMOCRACY IN THE FOURTH REPUBLIC AND THE WIDENING GAP, 1999–2023

Nigeria's transition to democratic governance in 1999 was heralded as a dual victory: it promised domestic socioeconomic liberation and revitalized Nigeria's capacity to champion African liberation through its traditional foreign policy of "Afrocentrism."¹⁸ As the Fourth Republic emerged from decades of predatory military dictatorships, the state anchored its global identity on the idea that Nigeria's wealth and democratic stability were prerequisites for continent-wide development.¹⁹ However, the period between 1999 and 2023 exposed a profound, destabilizing paradox. While Nigerian elites aggressively funded and pursued an Afrocentric agenda abroad, they simultaneously presided over a widening economic chasm at home, leaving ordinary citizens trapped in severe, multidimensional poverty.

The structural foundation of this contradiction lies in the divergence between elite capital accumulation and public wealth distribution. Throughout the administrations of Olusegun Obasanjo and Goodluck Jonathan, Nigeria experienced massive macroeconomic growth driven by record-high global oil prices.²⁰ This economic windfall allowed Abuja to position itself as Africa's diplomatic vanguard, financing institutional re-engineering like the transformation of the OAU into the African Union (AU) and spearheading the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).²¹ Yet, this outward projection of continental benevolence was completely uncoupled from domestic realities. The state apparatus functioned primarily as a mechanism for elite enrichment, constructing an extraordinarily expensive governance architecture of exorbitant political salaries, while public education, healthcare, and infrastructure collapsed.²²

By the time the All Progressives Congress (APC) took power under Muhammadu Buhari in 2015, the disconnect between Afrocentric posturing and domestic misery had worsened. Even as Nigeria continued to deploy vast diplomatic resources to mediate regional crises in West Africa, its internal economy fractured under severe mismanagement, currency devaluations, and hyperinflation.²³ The socio-economic gap transformed into a generational crisis, as a highly insulated political class preserved its luxury while pushing millions of ordinary Nigerians into chronic unemployment and extreme poverty.²⁴ This stark inequality directly challenged the ideological core of Afrocentrism. It became impossible to justify Nigeria's role as the "Giant of Africa" abroad when its own democratic institutions were consistently failing to deliver tangible economic dividends to its people.

The widening domestic gap ultimately eroded the legitimacy of both Nigeria's democracy and its regional leadership. The failure of democratic dividends manifested in historic voter apathy, culminating in a record-low voter turnout of less than 27 percent in the 2023 presidential election.²⁵ Citizens increasingly viewed the state's

regional ambitions not as a point of national pride, but as an expensive diversion used by detached rulers to mask structural inequalities at home. Pervasive internal marginalization fueled rampant insecurity, banditry, and secessionist agitations, transforming a nation that aspired to be Africa's ultimate peacekeeper into a fragile state struggling to secure its own borders.²⁶

The trajectory of the Fourth Republic from 1999 to 2023 demonstrates the profound limits of an Afrocentric foreign policy that lacks a equitable domestic foundation. Nigeria successfully institutionalized formal electoral procedures but failed to construct an inclusive economy. The widening chasm between the political elite and the populace stands as a monument to missed developmental opportunities. For Nigeria's democracy and its continental aspirations to survive beyond 2023, the state must pivot inward, recognizing that true regional leadership can only be sustained by closing the destabilizing gap that separates its powerful rulers from its powerless citizens.

ASSESSMENT OF THE BIG BROTHER/AFROCENTRIC POLICY CONTRADICTION

The defining hallmark of Nigeria's foreign policy since independence has been "Afrocentrism"—the foundational belief that the continent's most populous nation holds a manifest destiny to act as Africa's "Big Brother."²⁷ This ideological posture, formally articulated during the First Republic, conceptualized Nigeria as a benevolent hegemon responsible for deradicalizing, defending, and decolonizing the continent. Yet, a historical assessment of Nigeria's performance from 1960 to the present reveals a stark, deeply institutionalized contradiction. While successive military regimes and democratic administrations committed billions of dollars and thousands of lives to secure regional stability and democratic governance abroad, they simultaneously presided over severe socio-economic decay, institutional rot, and systemic human rights violations at home.²⁸ This divergence created a destabilizing disconnect, where external prestige was aggressively purchased at the direct expense of domestic development.

The operationalization of this contradiction became starkly evident during the military regimes of the 1970s and 1980s. Empowered by the 1970s oil boom, Nigeria adopted an assertive, frontline Afrocentric stance, single-handedly bankrolling liberation movements across Southern Africa, notably in Angola, Zimbabwe, and South Africa.²⁹ However, this external financial magnanimity occurred under the shadow of highly authoritarian governance at home. Military regimes ruthlessly suppressed internal democratic dissent, mismanaged national resources, and failed to construct an inclusive economic foundation.³⁰ Nigeria was acting as a continental liberator while its own citizens were systematically denied basic political and economic freedoms.

The friction within this "Big Brother" doctrine reached a critical flashpoint in the 1990s through the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) interventions. Under the military dictatorships of Generals Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha, Nigeria spearheaded bloody peace-enforcement missions in Liberia and Sierra Leone.³¹ Paradoxically, while Nigerian troops were dying to restore constitutional democracy and protect human rights in Freetown and Monrovia, the Abacha regime was executing environmental activists, jailing democratic opposition leaders, and looting billions from the central bank.³² This profound moral and structural hypocrisy deeply alienated the Nigerian public, who grew resentful of a regime that squandered precious state revenues on external policing while domestic infrastructure, schools, and hospitals completely collapsed.

The transition to democratic governance in 1999 under the Fourth Republic did not resolve this core tension; it merely reconfigured it. Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo, Umaru Yar'Adua, and Goodluck Jonathan modernized the Afrocentric doctrine by championing the institutional transformation of the Organization of African Unity into the African Union (AU) and funding continental initiatives like the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).³³ Yet, this outward projection of leadership was completely decoupled from a rapidly deteriorating internal reality. During the high-growth oil years of the 2000s, Nigeria's political elite captured the nation's wealth to construct one of the most expensive governance architectures in the world, while ordinary citizens faced hyperinflation, rising unemployment, and a widening poverty gap.³⁴

By the time the All Progressives Congress (APC) took power in 2015, the structural fatigue of this policy contradiction had thoroughly hollowed out Nigeria's regional influence. The state continued to participate in regional diplomatic mediation, but its internal economic fragility, rampant currency devaluations, and escalating national insecurity exposed the fiction of its hegemony.³⁵ Nigeria could no longer legitimately claim to be the secure anchor of West Africa while it struggled to suppress domestic banditry, ethno-religious conflicts, and secessionist agitations within its own borders.

The historical trajectory of Nigeria's Afrocentric foreign policy demonstrates that external hegemony cannot be sustained on an equitable basis without a robust, prosperous, and democratic domestic foundation. For over six decades, the "Big Brother" doctrine functioned primarily as a vanity project for ruling elites to secure international legitimacy, leaving ordinary Nigerians to bear the heavy costs of unreciprocated continental altruism. For Nigeria to project authentic, sustainable leadership in the modern global arena, it must radically pivot inward—recognizing that its status as the "Giant of Africa" can only be validated when the deep socioeconomic chasm separating its powerful rulers from its powerless citizens is permanently closed.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of Nigeria's foreign policy from 1960 to 2023 exposes a persistent, structural disconnect between the ideological mandate of Afrocentricity and the pragmatic preservation of national interest. For over six decades, successive Nigerian governments—both military and civilian—framed the nation's global identity around a romanticized, messianic responsibility to act as Africa's "Big Brother." This doctrinal commitment manifested in massive material sacrifices. Nigeria bankrolled frontline liberation movements in Southern Africa during the 1970s, unilaterally financed bloody regional peace-enforcement operations under ECOMOG in the 1990s, and heavily funded continental institutions like the African Union and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) in the twenty-first century.

However, a critical historical assessment reveals that this external magnanimity was systematically uncoupled from internal socio-economic and political realities. While ruling elites aggressively pursued international prestige and diplomatic validation abroad, they routinely presided over domestic governance failures, institutional degradation, and collapsing infrastructure at home. The state functioning as a benevolent hegemon externally stood in stark, hypocritical contrast to its internal failure to provide basic security, economic equity, or democratic dividends for its own citizens. By 2023, the severe friction within this policy contradiction culminated in chronic domestic fragility, hyperinflation, cascading regional insecurity, and widespread voter apathy. Historians must conclude that the "Big Brother" policy ultimately functioned as an elite vanity project that exhausted the nation's material resources while hollowing out the very domestic foundations required to sustain authentic, long-term regional hegemony.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To recover its strategic equilibrium and project sustainable global influence beyond the lessons of 1960–2023, Nigeria must systematically realign its foreign policy with tangible domestic national interests. The following historically informed actions are recommended:

Subordinate Afrocentricity to Enlightened National Interest: The sentimentalism of "Africa has come of age" must yield to a rigorous, transactional foreign policy framework. Abuja must explicitly condition its diplomatic, financial, and military interventions on clear, reciprocal economic or strategic benefits that directly serve the Nigerian state and its populace.

Transition to an Economic Diplomacy Blueprint: Nigeria must leverage its regional standing to aggressively champion its own economic development. Foreign policy should focus heavily on opening up intra-African trade corridors, maximizing local advantages within the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and securing favorable terms for domestic industries rather than offering unreciprocated financial aid.

Enforce Institutionalized Cost-Sharing: Nigeria should permanently retire the unsustainable doctrine of unilateral regional policing. Future West African or continental security interventions must be bound by strict, binding cost-and-personnel sharing frameworks among ECOWAS or AU member states, ensuring Nigeria never again bears the exclusive financial and human costs of regional stabilization.

Prioritize Domestic Reconstruction as a Foreign Policy Tool: True global power is an outward projection of domestic strength. Abuja must re-channel substantial revenues away from expansive external commitments and aggressively invest them into fixing its internal structural crises—specifically domestic border security, electrical grids, public education, and industrialization. A secure, wealthy, and stable Nigeria is, by its very existence, the most potent form of African leadership.

Democratize Foreign Policy Formulation: The insular, executive-dominated arena of foreign policy design must be dismantled. The National Assembly, domestic civil society, chambers of commerce, and historical research institutes must be actively integrated into the policy-making process to ensure that external projections directly align with the democratic consent and economic aspirations of the Nigerian public.

Ultimately, history demonstrates that a nation cannot remain a giant abroad while structurally fracturing at home. Nigeria's path to authentic, resilient leadership lies in recognizing that its duty to its own citizens is the ultimate measure of its national interest.

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