U.S. - Nigeria Relations in Historical Perspective

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Introduction

United States’ relations with Nigeria have alternated between periods of close or special relations and periods of indifference, neglect, and hostility. Major developments in the relationship include a period of cordial relations from 1960 to 1966, strained relations from the first Nigerian coup through the civil war 1966-1970, and a growing rapprochement from 1970 to 1979 due to mutual economic interests and the election of Jimmy Carter. The policies of the Reagan administration caused strains in the relationship. The Nigerian civil war and Angolan independence were events which led to low points in the relationship. In the post-Cold War period, U.S.-Nigeria relations have reached a new low point due to the changed priorities of U.S. foreign policy, the continuing turmoil in Nigeria’s political system, and the deteriorating state of Nigeria’s economy. Because U.S. policy towards Nigeria is an outgrowth of U.S. policy on Africa in general and because Nigeria’s actions towards the U.S. are related to Nigeria’s overall foreign policy goals, the discussion of U.S.-Nigeria relations in each of the time periods considered is preceded by a brief look at the predominant features of Nigerian foreign policy and U.S. Africa policy.


At independence, it was assumed that Nigeria, because of its size, resources, and location, would play an important role in African politics and world affairs. Nigeria’s leaders espoused a commitment to non-intervention in the internal affairs of other African countries, a preference for a gradual, functional approach to African unity based on economic co-operation, and an emphasis on gradual and non-violent
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progress towards African independence. However, the centerpiece of Nigeria’s foreign policy was the commitment to a policy of nonalignment. At the same time, Nigeria would continue to have close economic and other ties to the West, owing to the need for capital and trained manpower to support Nigeria’s economic development. Trade with other African countries was insignificant and ties to the Communist countries were practically nonexistent. In African affairs, Nigeria played a moderate role, supporting UN efforts in the Congo crisis and taking a leadership role in the formation of the Organization of African Unity.

U.S. policy on Africa under the Eisenhower administration combined rhetorical support for African independence with the subordination of decolonization to the needs of anti-Communism. As the colonial powers signaled their intention to grant independence in the late 1950s, the U.S. modified its policy to reflect a more pro-Africa stance, but it did not become actively involved in events in Africa. In 1957, Vice President Richard Nixon represented the U.S. at Ghana’s independence celebration and, in 1958, the Department of State created a separate Bureau of African Affairs. Although strong ties to the West would be encouraged, the U.S. would continue to subordinate its policy to European concerns.

Under Kennedy, the U.S. emphasized integrating newly-independent and nonaligned African states into the non-Communist world largely through the use of economic aid. Additionally, the U.S. supported African aspirations regarding sovereignty and an independent foreign policy and did not engage in coercive diplomacy. With the exception of the Congo, where the U.S. worked to prevent Soviet involvement, there seemed to be no area of Africa under serious threat of Communist infiltration. There were very few specific African issues of interest to the U.S., and it was content to allow the European powers take the lead in most areas of the continent.

U.S.-Nigeria relations in the period from independence to the first military coup were exceptionally friendly. Nigeria’s attractiveness to the U.S. was based on its size, particularly its large population, which indicated that Nigeria was destined to play a leadership role in Africa. Nigeria, on the other hand, recognized the importance of the U.S. to Nigeria’s political and economic development. Soon after independence, Nigeria was admitted to the U.N., and Nigeria chose the U.S. to perform
the symbolically significant role of recommending its membership to the General Assembly. Sir Abubakar Tafewa Balewa, Nigeria’s first prime minister, met with Kennedy during an official visit to the U.S. in July 1961 and addressed a joint session of Congress.

In the Congo crisis of the 1960s, the interests of Nigeria and the U.S. coincided. Both countries supported United Nations efforts to preserve peace, stability, and unity in the Congo. The U.S. and Nigeria also sought to develop strong economic ties during this early period. The U.S. wished to expand trade and encourage investment. Nigeria was hoping to benefit from American economic and technical aid programs.

In the American view, Nigeria was to be the model for other African countries to follow. Reinforced by the nature of its foreign aid, Nigeria’s essentially cautious and conservative foreign policy continued to favor the West. When ethnic conflict erupted, the U.S. hoped that economic development would be the antidote to Nigeria’s political instability and would keep Nigeria from succumbing to radical and Communist influences.

The Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970

Since independence, the major problem which had plagued Nigeria’s leaders had been to maintain Nigeria’s unity in the face of the disintegrative forces set in motion by Nigeria’s multi-ethnic composition. In early 1966, a group of army majors engineered a military take-over which brought Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi to power. Following the July 1966 counter-coup, Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowan assumed the leadership of the military government. The Governor of the Eastern Region, Lieutenant Colonel Odemegwu Ojukwu, refused to recognize Gowan’s authority and declared Biafra an independent state on May 30, 1967.10

Nigeria’s primary goal was to limit the international assistance Biafra received. It tried to convince African governments that it could end the secession quickly and to show the West that it was capable of deliberation and restraint. The OAU supported Nigerian reunification, and Nigeria used this and the support of other members of the international community to prevent further recognition or backing of
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Biafra. Biafra campaigned to involve the world in what was portrayed as a struggle against genocide. The goal was to mobilize international pressure to get Nigeria to accept an unconditional cease-fire. Although four African governments recognized Biafra, Biafra did not succeed in provoking greater international recognition or in persuading Nigeria to agree to a cease-fire. Recognition by other African governments was not forthcoming. When Biafra became the focus of an international relief operation, it was able to prolong the war. Although Biafra tried to make its viability and self-reliance the centerpiece of its foreign policy, it was defeated militarily and was forced to surrender on January 15, 1970.11

Lyndon Johnson did not have John Kennedy’s interest in Africa. His policies did not differ markedly from those of his predecessors and African issues did not have a high priority as the administration’s time and attention were taken up more crucial issues such as Vietnam. Aid to Africa was scaled back.12

American optimism over Nigeria’s future as a unified country playing a leadership role in Africa was shattered by the January 1966 coup. The U.S. hoped the military government could keep Nigeria united. Although Nigeria wanted to buy arms from the U.S., the U.S. declared an arms embargo on both sides on July 10th, 1967. Nigeria accused the U.S. of supporting Biafra. The relationship between the two countries was strained. The U.S. later modified its neutral policy somewhat by authorizing funds for relief, but the U.S. role in the relief effort further strained its relationship with Nigeria.13

The election of Richard Nixon in November 1968 buoyed the hopes of the Biafrans that a change of U.S. policy might occur. Although policy makers explored the option of recognizing Biafra, Nixon and Kissinger decided to expand the relief program instead. The Nigerians were concerned that any shift in U.S. policy would involve the U.S. in political questions. The Biafrans were hoping that Nixon would support a cease-fire. The Nigerians were relieved, therefore, when Nixon announced that there would be no major new U.S. involvement. After the surrender, President Nixon offered Gowon an additional $10 million for relief.14

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Rapprochement and Confrontation, 1970-1976

One of Nigeria’s first initiatives in the aftermath of the civil war was to take steps to develop ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States. Nigeria also sought to play a greater role in African affairs. It reconciled with the four states that recognized Biafra and tried to have a greater role in the OAU.\footnote{15}

In the years following the civil war, Nigeria became more strongly committed to eliminating colonialism and racism. Nigeria advocated an increase in member contributions to the OAU liberation committee and provided direct bilateral assistance to freedom fighters. In relations with countries outside Africa, Nigeria played a prominent role in negotiations with the EEC, clashed with the British government over its policies towards white-minority ruled regimes in Southern Africa, and improved its relations with France. In an effort to strengthen its nonaligned status, Nigeria sought to maintain and expand ties with the Soviet Union and to increase economic ties with other Communist countries.\footnote{16}

During the 1970-1976 period, Nigeria’s ability to exert influence in African affairs was strengthened by its oil boom. As a result of this development, Nigeria’s trading patterns shifted somewhat. While Britain remained Nigeria’s major trading partner, the U.S. became a major foreign market for oil and Nigeria’s main source of foreign exchange.\footnote{17}

In July 1975, a coup in Nigeria ended the regime of Yakubu Gowon and brought to power Brigadier General Murtala Muhammed. The style of Nigeria’s foreign policy became more militant, radical, and nationalistic. More emphasis was placed on the struggle against colonialism, racism, and apartheid, and relations with neighbors were initially downplayed. This approach led Nigeria into intense conflict with the U.S. over Angola. In power only a few months, Muhammed was assassinated in an abortive coup attempt, and Lieutenant General Olusegun Obasanjo took over as head of the Nigerian government. Initially, the Obasanjo government retained the same radical and dynamic style and continued to confront the U.S. on Southern African issues.\footnote{18}

Initially, the Nixon administration viewed Africa as a minor area of interest. The Nixon Doctrine, based on the need for a certain amount of U.S. retrenchment, called for Africa to be an area in which the U.S. would not have to intervene. The U.S. adopted Option 2 of National
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Security Study Memorandum 39 which called for greater communication with South Africa in order to bring about a liberalization of its racial policies. The U.S. showed little interest in other areas, expending few resources, showing indifference towards Rhodesian sanctions, and supporting arms sales to Portugal. Following the Portuguese coup of 1974 and the impending take-over of the Angolan government by the Marxist MPLA, the U.S. decided to support opposition forces. However, the U.S. Congress cut off further military aid for Angola in December 1975, forcing the administration to look for other means of limiting Soviet influence in Africa. In July 1976, Henry Kissinger announced a change in U.S. policy in which the U.S. would support majority rule in Southern Africa, promote Namibian independence, and involve South Africa in negotiations over Namibia and Rhodesia.19

Until the Portuguese coup, U.S.-Nigeria relations were characterized by increasing economic interaction but considerable political indifference. Oil became the major focus of the relationship. As U.S. dependence on Nigerian oil increased, Nigeria considered whether or not to use its newfound wealth and power to try to bring about changes in U.S. policy on Southern Africa. Through 1973, the U.S. did its best not to deal with Nigeria on political questions, especially those concerning Southern Africa.20

Following the Portuguese coup and the U.S. decision to back anti-MPLA forces in Angola in 1975, relations between Nigeria and the U.S. reached a low point. Nigerian troops forcibly occupied the USIS office in Lagos. In October 1975, Nigeria backed the MPLA with $20 million in aid and lobbied other African states to recognize the MPLA government.21 Nigeria viewed U.S. policy on Angola as racist and neo-colonial and charged the U.S. with collaboration with South Africa on the Angolan issue. The situation did not improve when, in January 1976, Gerald Ford sent a message to African heads of state at a meeting of the OAU offering to have South African troops removed from Angola in exchange for the withdrawal of Cuban troops. Nigeria quickly condemned the letter and attacked the U.S. at the OAU summit.

Although the U.S. tried to repair relations with Nigeria, the situation was still one of hostility when Olusegun Obasanjo took over as head of the Nigerian government. Three requests by Henry Kissinger to visit Nigeria were refused. In October 1976, Nigeria rejected British and American proposals for Rhodesia. Despite its hard line stance, Nigeria

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had not been able to affect the course of U.S. policy.22

Obasanjo and Carter, 1976-1980

Under Obasanjo’s leadership, regional cooperation was restored to a high priority in Nigerian foreign policy. While Nigeria’s support for freedom fighters in Southern Africa remained strong, it moved towards occupying the role of peacekeeper or mediator in African conflicts. Relations with Britain were put on a more positive footing, with Nigeria endorsing the Anglo-American peace plan for Rhodesia. Economic ties with the West remained strong. In 1978, the U.S. bought 60% of Nigeria’s oil and provided Nigeria with 54% of its financial resources. Nigeria continued to receive technical assistance from the West, and economic relationships with Communist countries did not expand. As Nigeria prepared for elections in 1979 to return the country to civilian rule, it appeared that a major constraint on the further development of Nigeria’s foreign policy was the need to concentrate on domestic problems. Shehu Shargari was elected president of Nigeria’s Second Republic in October 1979.23

President Carter took more of an interest in African than any president since John F. Kennedy. The U.S. committed itself to support for majority rule, to the promotion of human rights, and to contributing to economic development in order to achieve its goals in Africa. It did not cast African issues in a Cold War context. While the U.S. criticized South Africa and distanced itself from South Africa, it did not enact sanctions against it because the U.S. needed South Africa’s help to solve the crises in Rhodesia and Namibia.24

Early in the administration, officials tried to distance the U.S. from the Mobutu regime in Zaire and declined to involve the U.S. militarily in the conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia. The U.S. rejected an internal settlement negotiated by Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith which would not have resulted in genuine majority rule and participated in the development of an Anglo-American peace plan. On Namibia, the U.S. worked with a group of nations known as the Western Contact Group to bring about a peaceful solution.25

In the latter part of the Carter administration, U.S. policy on Africa changed to one that more closely resembled that of previous
administrations, emphasizing containment of Soviet expansion through military means. The shift was brought about by a series of events including the seizure of American hostages in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and by the continued presence of Cuban troops in Angola and Ethiopia. A second invasion of Zaire in mid-1978 brought a forceful response from the U.S. in support of the Mobutu regime. Relations with South Africa were marked more by cooperation than pressure. The U.S. concluded an agreement with Somalia for the use of military facilities in exchange for economic and security assistance. In general, African issues lost the primacy that they had in the early years of the Carter administration.26

In the changed atmosphere of U.S. policy towards Africa in the first part of the Carter administration, U.S.-Nigeria relations flourished. The U.S. viewed Nigeria as a key player in its Africa policy. On a visit to Nigeria in February 1977, Andrew Young established close ties with Nigeria’s leaders. Nigeria decided to back the Anglo-American plan for peace in Rhodesia in September 1977.27 In October 1977, Obasanjo visited the U.S., the first Nigerian head of state to meet with a U.S. president since Balewa met with Kennedy in 1961. Following a visit to Nigeria in 1978, Carter continued to reject an internal settlement in Rhodesia, and Obasanjo tried to try to get African countries to support the Anglo-American plan.28

Upon the return of a Cold War orientation in U.S. policy, relations between the U.S. and Nigeria cooled. Nigeria was frustrated over the inability of the U.S. to produce concrete results in the movement towards majority rule in Southern Africa. After 1978, Nigeria concentrated on the impending return to civilian rule. Economic ties remained strong. Bilateral talks about agricultural, education, economic development, and technical assistance resulted in a cooperative agreement on agriculture. The U.S. became a major supplier of food to Nigeria in the late 1970s. Nigeria continued to reap tremendous profits from the rising price of oil until 1981, and U.S. dependence on Nigerian oil increased. Despite its wealth from oil, Nigeria found it necessary to resort to extensive foreign borrowing in order to finance its development plans.29
The Reagan Years, 1981-1988

During the regime of Shehu Shagari, Nigeria faced a deteriorating economic and political situation. The oil boom ended in 1981 as oil prices began to drop. Government spending, foreign debt, and corruption increased. Although the government instituted austerity measures, it decided not to accept loans from the IMF for fear of the political consequences of IMF conditions. On the political scene, the government had to contend with disturbances among the Muslim population in the North, student protests, and a teachers' strike.  

Nigeria's ability to play a leadership role in Africa declined under the weight of its economic and political problems. Shagari's policy was considerably more ambiguous and uncertain than Obasanjo's, and his style was more cautious. The goals of Nigeria's foreign policy, as stated in the 1979 constitution, were the promotion of African unity, liberation of Africa, and elimination of racial discrimination. Border clashes with Benin, Chad, and Cameroon were resolved through negotiation. A Nigeria-led multinational African force in Chad failed to secure Libyan withdrawal, demonstrating Nigeria's weakness and undermining the Shagari government. In a crackdown on illegal immigration motivated by deteriorating domestic conditions, Nigeria expelled more than two million foreign workers.  

Corruption and economic chaos led the military to take over once again in December 1983. The regime of Major General Muhammad Buhari tried to reduce corruption and restore the economy. A series of austerity measures were adopted, but negotiation with the IMF for new loans failed. The regime dealt harshly with criticism, jailing journalists, politicians, and other dissenters. Foreign policy activity was minimal. In 1984, Nigeria closed all of its borders for a time in order to control currency trafficking and smuggling, and there was another mass deportation of illegal aliens in 1985.  

In August 1985, Buhari was deposed in a bloodless coup and was replaced by Major General Ibrahim Babangida. The new regime committed itself to the return of civilian rule and began to release journalists, dissidents, and political prisoners. In dealing with Nigeria's pressing economic problems, Babangida rejected the option of an IMF loan, and formulated his own austerity program.  

Nigeria's ability to exercise influence internationally was
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hampered by the weakness of its economy and its political instability. Although relations with African states continued to be the cornerstone of foreign policy, economic diplomacy involving trade, foreign investment, and debt rescheduling had a high priority on the agenda.Outside of the region, Nigeria contributed $20 million to assist SWAPO in the 1989 elections in Namibia and provided forces to the UN operations to monitor the Iran-Iraq cease-fire and the Angola-Namibia Accords. Relations with France improved due to expanding economic ties and common opposition to Libya’s involvement in Chad. Despite the British government’s opposition to sanctions against South Africa, relations between Nigeria and Britain improved.

Under Reagan, U.S. foreign policy returned to a Cold War orientation emphasizing containment of the Soviet Union. In this environment, Africa was not important to the U.S. The major focus of U.S. Africa policy was Southern Africa where pressure on South Africa was considered counter-productive. The U.S. hoped that the policy known as “constructive engagement” would bring not only internal reform in South Africa but secure its help in resolving regional problems. U.S. goals included securing independence for Namibia, the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola, and the removal of the Marxist government in Angola. To obtain the latter, the U.S. supported Jonas Savimbi and the rival UNITA faction in Angola. The U.S. vetoed UN resolutions calling for sanctions against South Africa. South African incursions into Angola and guerrilla attacks in Mozambique were met with only mild criticism. Nonetheless, U.S. negotiators failed to achieve a comprehensive settlement of Southern African problems by the end of Reagan’s first term in 1984.

Elsewhere in Africa, Cold War considerations prevailed. The U.S. supported the Mobutu regime in Zaire because of its value as an anti-Communist ally. Fears of Soviet gains in the Horn of Africa prompted offers of military aid to Somalia. In Reagan’s second term, Chester Crocker achieved agreement among Angola, Cuba, and South Africa on Namibia. Despite a presidential veto, the U.S. Congress imposed sanctions on South Africa. Congress also repealed the Clark Amendment which banned assistance to Angolan guerrillas, and covert aid began to flow to Jonas Savimbi’s forces.

Nigeria’s relations with the U.S. did not flourish in this Cold War environment. The U.S. did not consider relations with Nigeria to be
a high priority, and Nigeria, beset by economic and political problems, had little ability to command U.S. attention. The U.S. saw no role for Nigeria in Southern Africa. Although Nigeria was highly critical of U.S. policy there, its efforts to get the U.S. to change its position were unsuccessful. In 1982, Nigeria refused to support the removal of all foreign troops from Southern Africa and called on the U.S. to implement sanctions against South Africa. Nigeria opposed dialogue with South Africa and the loosening of the arms embargo. Nigeria was unable to change the U.S. position on Namibia or to prevent its support of UNITA.37

In economic matters, Nigeria’s importance to the U.S. also declined. Nigeria’s need for loans and debt rescheduling increased its dependence on the U.S. Nigerians suspected that the U.S. was responsible for the stringent conditions attached to potential IMF loans.38

The Post-Cold War Period

Elections to return Nigeria to civilian rule took place in June 1993, but were later annulled by the Babangida regime. In November 1993, General Sani Abacha seized power. One of a series of summary trials in the fall of 1995 led to the conviction and subsequent execution of nine Ogoni minority rights activists, including author Ken Saro-Wiwa.39

The government announced a three-year timetable to complete the transition to civilian rule. However, human rights abuses, including arbitrary detention, restrictions on freedom of expression and association, and the use of military tribunals continue unabated. In 1997, Nobel Prize winner, Wole Soyinka, and more than a dozen leaders of the National Democratic Coalition of Nigeria (NADECO) were charged with treason.

Nigeria’s economic picture has not improved. Through 1992 the budget deficit increased, and external debt continued to grow until 1993. Although Abacha initially abandoned Babangida’s economic reform program and emphasized state control, in 1995, he announced a series of reforms designed to attract investors and facilitate debt rescheduling. With a GNP per capita of less than $300, Nigeria is considered one of the world’s poorest countries.40

Despite its political and economic problems, Nigeria continues to be a force in the region. Beginning in 1990, Nigeria contributed the
bulk of the forces to the ECOWAS Cease-Fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in Liberia. Nigeria also sent troops to Sierra Leone to try to restore the democratically-elected government. Other regional issues involve long-standing border disputes with Cameroon over the Bakassi Islands and with Chad over islands in Lake Chad. Outside of the region, Nigeria contributed troops to UN peacekeeping operations in Rwanda, Yugoslavia, and Somalia.41

In the wake of the 1993 election annulment, relations with Western powers have been strained. However, no industrialized country has been willing to embargo Nigerian oil in order to force changes in Nigeria’s political system. Despite the emergence of South Africa as the next probable African leader and role model, Nigeria still aspires to exercise a leadership role in Africa and in the world as evidenced in its continuing quest for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.42

U.S. policy on Africa in the post-Cold War era has reflected a concern for promoting democracy and human rights, for encouraging economic reform in African countries, and for the resolution of conflicts. When the Soviets withdrew from Africa at the end of the Cold War, U.S. strategic interests in Africa receded, and U.S. assistance decreased. Observers pondered such questions as whether or not the U.S. would now decrease its support for dictatorial regimes and whether or not U.S. aid should be used to press for political and economic reform.43

The Bush administration came into office pledging to follow Reagan’s policies. It condemned the statist model of economic policy followed by African countries and reaffirmed U.S. support for free market economics. It insisted that it would promote peaceful change in southern Africa but would not support further sanctions against South Africa or withdraw support from Jonas Savimbi and UNITA. By 1992, the Bush administration could claim to have participated in conflict resolution in Angola, Namibia, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Liberia. Thirty million dollars had been allocated for electoral assistance and to promote civil and political rights: More than one billion dollars in official debt to the U.S. had been forgiven for the poorest African countries committed to economic reform. On the basis of South Africa’s progress in dismantling apartheid, the U.S. repealed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act. As the Bush administration prepared to leave office, U.S. troops were sent to Somalia on a humanitarian mission.44
As the Bush administration had done, the Clinton administration took office condemning the statist policies of African governments, corruption, and one-party rule. It pledged that U.S. aid would be used to assist democracies and free market economies and not dictatorial regimes. In 1993, the U.S. recognized Angola. Sam Nujoma of Namibia was the first African head of state to visit the Clinton White House. Recognition was extended to Eritrea following elections in 1993. $1 billion was contributed to drought relief in Southern Africa.

American troops were withdrawn from Somalia in 1994 following the deaths of U.S. soldiers, and, in the wake of the Somali debacle, U.S. involvement in the Rwanda crisis was limited. Although the U.S. encouraged Mobutu of Zaire to negotiate with the opposition, it did not call upon him to step down, nor did it take stronger measures against his regime. The U.S. continued its support of the ECOWAS effort in Liberia.

In response to the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni activists in 1995, the U.S. instituted modest sanctions against Nigeria. It halted direct air travel from the U.S. to Nigeria, suspended foreign aid, and banned the sale of military equipment. U.S. support for World Bank and IMF assistance was withdrawn, and Nigerian officials were banned from traveling to the U.S. In 1997, the U.S. undertook a comprehensive review of its policy towards Nigeria, but the options for changing the U.S. position are limited. There is no support for an oil embargo, and any attempt to improve cooperation seems likely to draw opposition from human rights groups, members of Congress, and Trans-Africa, the African-American pressure group.

In 1997, members of Congress introduced a resolution condemning Nigeria’s behavior towards the U.S. Ambassador and proposed legislation to implement strong economic sanctions against Nigeria. A movement among local government in the U.S. to pass pro-democracy resolutions and impose sanctions against Nigeria grew. In September 1997, Alameda County, California passed a binding selective purchase/divestment resolution which, it is estimated, will cost corporations doing business in or with Nigeria $200 million.

Nigeria has lobbied for a reversal of U.S. policy. Its efforts to blame U.S. Ambassador Walter Carrington for the hostile American attitude were apparently a factor in his recall in August 1997. A farewell party for Carrington organized by human rights and pro-democracy groups was disrupted by Nigerian police causing the U.S. to lodge an

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official protest with the Nigerian government. Despite the troubled diplomatic relationship, economic ties have flourished. The U.S. is still the largest buyer of Nigerian oil, accounting for 40% of Nigeria’s oil sales. In September 1997, Nigeria began exporting liquefied petroleum gas to the U.S. According to William H. Twaddell, the U.S. ambassador-designee, Nigeria is America’s most significant trade and investment partner in Africa. The imposition of tough economic sanctions are seen as damaging to U.S. interests in Nigeria.50

Conclusion

The relationship between the U.S. and Nigeria in the post-Cold war period differs in some significant ways from that which preceded it. The alternations that can be seen in U.S.-Nigeria relations during the Cold War can be ascribed to two equally important factors. First, U.S.-Nigerian relations were obviously affected by the degree to which U.S. policy on Africa operated from a Cold War framework. Relations between the two countries improved when Cold War issues were not the primary focus of U.S. policy on Africa, and they deteriorated when issues of concern to Nigeria were subordinated to the U.S. preoccupation with Soviet designs. This explains the relatively good relations during the Kennedy and Carter years. It is also the reason the U.S.-Nigeria relations reached such a low point over the issue of Angola during the Nixon administration.

Second, U.S.-Nigerian relations were affected by Nigeria’s domestic economic and political situation. Political instability diverted Nigeria’s attention away from foreign policy, jeopardized Nigeria’s claim to leadership status, and caused the U.S. to distance itself from Nigeria. When Nigeria’s leaders were preoccupied with holding the country together during the civil war, or trying to manage a transition from military to civilian rule, or trying to combat corruption, or preoccupied with silencing government critics during times of rapid regime change, their attention to foreign affairs was often diminished. Nigeria’s economy, on the other hand, was a source of strength in the relationship. The economic ties between the U.S. and Nigeria seemed to endure and flourish whatever the nature of their political relationship. This explains why the highest point in the relationship occurred in the late 1970s when,
because of oil, the U.S. looked upon Nigeria as an African power. Also at that time, Cold War considerations were temporarily on the back burner. The deterioration of the economy in the Reagan years, coinciding with the return to a Cold War approach to Africa, contributed to the poor state of the relationship during the 1980s.

In the post-Cold War period, U.S.-Nigeria relations have reached a new low since the advent of the Abacha regime. The end of the Cold War was a mixed blessing for Nigeria. No longer do Cold War considerations dominate the relationship with the U.S., but, in the post-Cold War environment, U.S. interest in Africa has diminished and concern for democratization and economic reform has replaced Cold War issues. Now more than ever, factors internal to Nigeria seem to be the determinants of the relationship with the U.S. America’s renewed interest in Nigeria as a partner in trade and investment, the abiding U.S. interest in oil, and the emphasis in U.S. policy on economic reform in African countries all combine to make Nigeria’s economic situation an important factor in the relationship. American emphasis on democratization comes at a time when Nigeria’s progress towards democracy is just about as slow as it has ever been. U.S.-Nigeria relations do not seem likely to improve in the near future unless the downward spiral of Nigeria’s economy and political system is reversed. If U.S.-Nigeria relations do not improve soon, it may no longer be possible to characterize the relationship as alternating between highs and lows, but rather as being in a state of permanent decline.
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Endnotes


6. Dickson, 6-7. Shepard, 10.


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33. Metz, 221-224, 78-81. Shepard, 149-151.

34. Shepard, 152. Metz, 244-245.

35. Metz, 258-266, 247-250.


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41. Metz, 247, 265-267.


