Independence Amidst Entanglements: Nigeria's Defense Agreement with Britain, 1959-1962

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Abstract
The aftermath of World War II fractured the uneasy wartime alliance between the Soviet Union and the United States. Ideological divisions and a struggle for control in Eastern Europe ignited the Cold War, with its ripple effects reaching Africa during the rise of the decolonization movement. This essay focuses on Nigeria's Cold War relations with Britain, examining the period directly before and after independence. It centers on the controversial Anglo-Nigerian defense treaty, exploring how British demands and evolving Nigerian political dynamics shaped the agreement's trajectory. While Nigerian leaders initially sought a pragmatic partnership with their former colonial power, this paper argues that Britain's insistence on imposing the treaty as a precondition for independence ultimately damaged Nigeria's credibility as an independent leader within Africa and the Global South.

Introduction

The aftermath of World War II ignited the fires of the decolonization movement in Africa. Despite Africa's vital contributions to the Allied victory African soldiers on battlefields, agricultural production fueling Europe, and raw materials financing the war effort – these sacrifices didn't bring an end to colonialism. Instead, European powers launched ambitious development schemes rooted in agriculture and social services, attempting to revitalize a system of control at odds with rising demands for self-determination across the Global South. Historians John Lonsdale and David Low termed this paradoxical period the "Second Colonial Occupation," marking a desperate attempt by colonizers to reassert their dominance.[1] Far from an act of postwar benevolence, the influx of metropolitan funds into the colonies during the "Second Colonial Occupation" served as a thinly veiled continuation of European exploitation. In the war's dying embers, British Colonial Secretary Oliver Stanley explicitly linked colonial development to the expectation of increased exports – a clear signal that Africa remained a resource to be tapped for Britain's economic recovery.[2] The allure of a mythical African "El Dorado," bursting with resources to offset Britain's balance of payments woes, drove this renewed investment. This was not about restitution, but rather the reinforcement of an extractive system under the guise of development.

While Africans appreciated the development efforts initiated by Britain, they vehemently demanded a seat at the table to chart their own destinies. No longer content to be infantilized and marginalized by the colonial system, they sought greater political power and autonomy. The series of constitutions enacted in Nigeria between 1946 and 1960 – the Richards, Macpherson, and Lyttleton Constitutions – were not benevolent gifts. Instead, they were hard-won concessions extracted through relentless pressure from Nigerian nationalists who sought greater representation and self-determination. These political shifts reflected the broader decolonization movement sweeping across Africa, a testament to the continent's determined struggle against European exploitation. This struggle culminated in the watershed year of 1960, when seventeen African nations wrested their political independence from colonial powers.[3]

The postwar era marked not only the decline of European empires but also the rise of the United States as a superpower with a keen interest in Africa's political evolution. However, American ideals of self-determination, championed in the context of occupied Europe, did not extend to Africa. Despite initial support for the Marshall Plan's

focus on rebuilding Eastern Europe, the United States ultimately allowed France to divert substantial funds to shore up its crumbling colonial holdings in Africa.[4] This contradiction stemmed from the belief that African nations lacked the maturity for independence. Under this pretext, the US demanded that emerging African states prove their capacity for responsible self-governance by maintaining ties with their former colonizers. Thus, Africa became a new battleground in the Cold War, as the United States and the Soviet Union sought to expand their respective spheres of influence.

Nigeria, with its large population, educated elite, and plentiful natural resources, was a strategic prize coveted by both the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War. This put Nigeria in a unique position, balancing relationships with its former colonizer, Britain, the rising superpower of the United States, the Soviet Union, and fellow African nations. While officially claiming non-alignment, Nigeria's policies leaned pro-Western with underlying distrust of the Soviet Union. However, this essay argues that self-interest, rather than strict ideology, shaped Nigeria's actions. This pragmatism is evident in Nigeria's willingness to accept Soviet military aid during the Civil War and later partnering with them on the Ajaokuta Steel Mill project, despite initial resistance to a Soviet diplomatic presence. This essay examines Nigeria's ties with Britain on the eve of independence, focusing on the contentious Anglo-Nigerian Defense Agreement.

The Suez Canal fiasco proved both humiliating for Britain and damaging to its special relationship with the United States. Harold Macmillan, succeeding Anthony Eden as Prime Minister in January 1957, made strategic recalibration a priority. This involved restoring Anglo-American relations and securing Britain's influence within the evolving Commonwealth. Macmillan recognized the inevitability of decolonization in Africa and sought to negotiate independence for African nations on terms that maintained British leverage within the Commonwealth. Ghana's independence in March 1957 spurred other colonies, like Nigeria, to accelerate their own paths towards sovereignty.[5]

The Conservatives' return to power in 1959 and the appointment of Ian Macleod as Secretary of State for the Colonies marked a further shift. Growing nationalism and unrest across Africa compelled Britain to expedite independence for more colonies. While initial plans focused on West Africa due to the lack of significant white settler populations, continental pressures made wider change essential. In justifying this acceleration, Macleod emphasized pragmatism:"It has been said that after I became Colonial Secretary there was a deliberate speeding up of the movement towards independence. I agree. … we could not possibly have held by force our territories in Africa … The march of men towards freedom can be guided, but not halted. Of course there are risks in moving quickly. But the risks of moving slowly were far greater."[6] Prolonged delay risked sparking costly revolts and permanently damaging post-independence relations. Granting independence, however managed, appeared less destructive than the alternatives – protecting Britain's economic interests and global reputation while minimizing armed conflict.[7]

In January 1960, British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan toured British territories in Africa, delivering a pivotal speech in Ghana. He proclaimed, "The wind of change is blowing right through Africa. This rapid emergence of the countries of Africa gives the continent a new importance in the world."[8] While initially receiving limited attention, the speech gained global significance on February 3rd, 1960, when Macmillan addressed the South African Parliament in Cape Town. Reasserting his now-famous phrase,"The wind of change is blowing through this continent, whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact. We must accept it as a fact"[9] he acknowledged the undeniable force of African nationalism and the inevitability of decolonization.

Macmillan's words were more than a mere observation; they signaled a strategic shift in British policy. While Ghana had charted its path to independence in 1957, South Africa's entrenched apartheid regime served as a stark contrast and potential flashpoint. The Cold War loomed large, as European colonial failures fueled African demands for liberation – creating an opening for Communist powers who were eager to exploit these tensions and gain influence on the continent. While Nigeria's independence had already been negotiated by the time of Macmillan's Accra speech, Britain sought to maintain a defense agreement as a Cold War imperative. This desire stemmed from a post-Suez Canal crisis reassessment of Britain's military strategy. Seeking to reduce reliance on the United States and assert influence in a changing world, Prime Minister Macmillan tasked Defense Secretary Duncan Sandys with crafting cost-effective security measures.[10] Sandys targeted Nigeria due to the strategic value of the Kano airport. It offered a vital trans-African air route for safeguarding British interests in the Indian Ocean and beyond.[11] With this goal in mind, the British cabinet made defense access a non-negotiable condition of Nigerian independence in September 1958.[12] During the October 1958 Constitutional Conference, Nigerian Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and regional leaders agreed to a broad mutual defense pact. This ensured Britain "unrestricted overflying and air staging facilities" along with extensive land leases, guaranteeing their ongoing influence even after independence.[13]

Nigerian leaders initially welcomed the defense agreement with Britain, seeing it as both a gesture of goodwill and a way to protect their territorial integrity against potential threats from French-aligned West African states and Ghana's growing militarization supported by Russia. However, between 1958 and 1960, the intensifying Cold War, the rise of the Non-Aligned Movement, the emerging Asian-African bloc, and Kwame Nkrumah's Pan-Africanist vision pressured Nigeria to reconsider. They sought ways to uphold the agreement without compromising their standing in Africa and the Pan-African movement.[14] Opposition leaders, especially those with Soviet sympathies, accused Nigeria of facilitating a NATO base and compromising its full independence. To counter these attacks, Nigerian politicians began rethinking their stance while aiming to preserve their relationship with Britain. Recognizing these evolving sentiments, Whitehall sought to accommodate their ally Abubakar Balewa (described as "our very good friend"), with Macleod deferring to Abubakar's judgment on what was politically feasible.[15]

Mounting pressure from opposition forces, particularly leftist groups like the Nigerian Youth Congress, led Nigerian leaders to renegotiate the 1958 defense agreement. They withdrew land leases but maintained Britain's overflying and staging rights, with added restrictions on "extraordinary movements" in emergencies.[16] While Prime Minister Macmillan was disappointed, he and his ministers ultimately valued Abubakar Balewa's goodwill over extensive treaty terms.[17] In June 1960, a Nigerian delegation to London requested that Britain cover costs associated with British personnel seconded to the Nigerian military, as well as training Nigerian soldiers in the UK.[18] With an initial estimated cost of £71,000, Defense Secretary Sandys argued the price was justified – emphasizing the need to retain influence in Africa's most populous and potentially powerful emerging nation.[19] This strategic thinking motivated Britain to support Nigerian autonomy and forestall potential Soviet inroads. By accepting Abubakar's terms, Nigeria could better justify the agreement domestically by emphasizing its financial benefits. Ultimately, the Nigerian parliament approved the revised agreement in late November 1960.

The defense agreement proved short-lived, lasting barely a year before Balewa's government was forced to abrogate it. A joint statement issued by the British and Nigerian governments on January 22, 1962 said the decision was made in order to end what was a misunderstanding of the agreement by the

critics. The statement noted that "fears have arisen that in consequence of the Agreement, Nigeria's freedom of action might be impaired and that she might even be drawn into hostilities against her wishes."[20] This was an attempt to frame the decision as an effort to dispel public "misunderstanding" and assuage fears that the agreement compromised Nigeria's autonomy or risked entanglement in unwanted conflicts. While Balewa continued to see value in the agreement, relentless opposition attacks had irrevocably damaged the agreement's standing – and by extension, Nigeria's own image. Critics successfully depicted Nigeria as subservient to Britain, a neocolonial pawn unable to break free from its former master's control. Despite Balewa's defense of the agreement, protests erupted, featuring students carrying placards proclaiming "Keep us out of NATO."[21] Opponents like the Nigerian Youth Congress and figures like Awolowo stoked fears that the agreement was a backdoor into NATO, transforming Nigeria into a Western military outpost.

Chief Obafemi Awolowo, who emerged as the agreement's leading opponent, had not always held this position. As Premier of the Western Region, he was among those who initialed the 1958 draft. However, post-1959 saw a marked shift in his stance. Critics attributed this to personal bitterness after failing to become Nigeria's Prime Minister. During his trial for plotting against the government, Crown prosecutor Mr. Adepide bluntly confronted Awolowo: "When you initialed it, you saw nothing wrong with it, but when you failed to become the prime minister of Nigeria after independence you began to oppose it." This accusation highlights the suggestion that Awolowo's opposition stemmed from personal ambition rather than principled objection. Awolowo countered that he had initialed the agreement only because Britain made it a precondition for Nigerian independence. Moreover, he emphasized that he had repeatedly voiced his objections to the agreement directly to Secretary of State for the Colonies Lennox-Boyd. [23]

Analysis and Conclusion

By insisting on the defense agreement as a prerequisite for independence, Britain strategically blundered, sowing seeds of doubt that ultimately harmed its interests in Nigeria and hampered Nigeria's emergence as an African leader. Even without a pact, favorable post-independence ties were likely, given the pro-British sentiments of figures like Balewa and Azikiwe. However, Britain's heavy-handed tactics fueled mistrust, particularly among leftist groups aligned with the Soviet Union who were quick to seize upon this misstep. They cleverly framed the agreement as proof that Nigeria's independence was illusory, a mere smokescreen for continued Western domination.

With the Cold War raging and the USSR eager to undermine Western positions in Africa, the agreement severely damaged Nigeria's credibility. Its policies appeared dictated by its former colonial master, compromising its ability to lead and its crucial claim to neutrality in the eyes of the Global South. Abrogation became a geopolitical imperative – a clear demonstration of genuine independence both within Africa and the wider world. Despite pragmatic informal arrangements that retained some of the agreement's benefits, the Cold War backdrop and Nigeria's internal needs dictated a symbolic distancing. This marked a pivotal turning point in Anglo-Nigerian relations, redefining their partnership even after the Cold War's end.

Endnotes and references

1This was a concept coined by David Low and John Lonsdale to describe the expansive development policies introduced by the British after World War II. See, D.A. Low and J.M Lonsdale, "Introduction: Towards the New Order, 1945-63," in *History of East Africa vol.3,* eds., D.A. Low and Alison Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

2Bekeh U. Ukelina, *The Second Colonial Occupation: Development Planning, Agriculture, and the Legacies of British Rule in Nigeria* (Lanham: Lexington, 2017), 43.

3The independence of African countries must be qualified with the word "political" because what African states received was the right to elect their political leaders and not the right to manage their economies. Political independence was granted without economic independence, and he who controls the economy also controls politics.

4For example, France signed an agreement with the United States that allowed it to spend about $130 million of the Marshall Aid money it received in its colonies. See, Abou B. Bamba, *African Miracle, African Mirage: Transnational Politics and the Paradox of Modernization in Ivory Coast* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016).

5Ghana was granted self-government by the Winston Churchill's administration and Eden's government made the decision to grant Ghana full independence. See, Dan Horowitz, "Attitudes of British Conservatives towards Decolonization in Africa," *African Affairs* 69 (274) (January, 1970), 9.

6D. A. Low, *Eclipse of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 246.

7Ritchie Ovendale, "Macmillan and the Wind of change in Africa, 1957-1960," *The Historical Journal* 38(2), (1995), 455

8Colin Baker, "Macmillan's 'Wind of Change' tour, 1960," *South African Historical Journal* 38(1) (1998), 181

9Harold Macmillan, "Wind of Change" February 3, 1960. http://www.africanrhetoric.org/pdf/ayor%206.2%205%20 Harold%20MacMillan%20-%20The%20wind%20of%20 change.pdf Accessed April 15, 2020.

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14 Marco Wyss, *A Post-Imperial Cold War Paradox*, 984.

15 TNA: PREM 11/3047, PM (60)27 [Nigerian defence agreement]: minute by Mr Macleod to Mr Macmillan, May 9, 1960.

16 TNA: PREM 11/3047, PM (60)27 [Nigerian defence agreement]: minute by Mr Macleod to Mr Macmillan, May 9, 1960.

17TNA: PREM 11/3047, PM (60)27 [Nigerian defence agreement]: minute by Mr Macleod to Mr Macmillan, May 9, 1960.

18TNA: CO 968/7/15, 'Nigerian defense': minute by Mr. Sandys to Mr. Macmillan on the alteration of the agreement, August 28, 1960.

19TNA: CO 968/7/15, 'Nigerian defense': minute by Mr. Sandys to Mr. Macmillan on the alteration of the agreement, August 28, 1960.

20 House of Commons Debates, February 9, 1962 Vol. 653 cc91-2W.

21Marco Wyss, *A Post-Imperial Cold War Paradox*, 989.

22United States, Central Intelligence Agency, *Daily Report*, Foreign Radio Broadcasts, Issues 73-74. April 16, 1963, 16.

23United States, Central Intelligence Agency, *Daily Report*, Foreign Radio Broadcasts, Issues 73-74. April 16, 1963, 16.