

The Concert of Medium Powers: its Origin, Composition and Objectives

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Abstract

The Concert of Medium Powers' or the 'Lagos forum' was Nigeria's novel idea directed at consolidation Nigeria's leadership role as a regional power in Africa and a force to be reckoned with in international affairs. The membership of the forum are Algeria, Argentina, Austria, Zimbabwe, Brazil, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, Senegal, Sweden, Switzerland, Venezuela, Yugoslavia, and Nigeria the host country. The aims and objectives of the forum as identified in the paper includes the consolidation of international peace and security through the process of confidence building among states especially the medium powers. In addition to this, the Lagos forum came about as a result of the need to fill the gap created by the stalemate in the conduct of international relations occasioned largely by the dominance of two major powers namely the United States and the Soviet Union.

Keywords: Composition, Lagos Forum, Nigeria, Objectives, Power

I. Introduction

It is an undeniable fact that the emergence of new states in world politics after 1945 coupled with the intensification of the cold war politics brought about further polarization of the world into various power blocs. Within this context, India spearheaded the formation of the Non-Aligned movement as a countervailing force against the dominance of the United States and the Soviet Union and their various allies in World Affairs. The 'Concert of Medium Powers' also known as the 'Lagos Forum' was Nigeria's novel idea in this direction. It was an idea initiated and nurtured in Nigeria by Professor Bolaji Akinyemi (Nigeria's Foreign Affairs Minister during General Ibrahim Babangida's regime), to project and consolidate the country's leadership role as a regional power in Africa and a force to be reckoned with in international affairs. Although the 'Concert' took off as envisaged, it also eclipsed almost immediately after it was inaugurated due to some compelling domestic and external factors. Nevertheless, the paper examines the origin, composition and objectives of the concept (Concert of Medium Powers) within the context of Nigeria's foreign policy initiatives.

II. Origin of the Concert

The dramatic change that swept through Nigerian foreign policy in 1975, when the military government of General Yakubu Gowon was removed from power by General Murtala Ramat Mohammed, sent a clear message to observers and practitioners of the country's external relations that everything was being reviewed and that nothing was too sacrosanct to be changed. It was indeed a radical departure from the timid traditions of the country's foreign relations.

On the international scene, Nigeria threw its weight behind the Angolans in their liberation struggle against the United States backed Jonas Savimbi's National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and South African incursions into Angolan territory. The unilateral support for the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), at the time the OAU¹ could not make up its mind, showed Nigeria's determination to break with the tradition of waiting for OAU to take a position on African issues. That is, the tradition of waiting for a consensus was replaced by an early unilateral and public declaration of its foreign policy backed by intensive diplomatic efforts to get the OAU to endorse the policy. Also, Nigerian government demonstrated its departure from holding at arm's length radical liberation movements in Africa by backing the MPLA. The effect of this was that Nigeria came face-to-face with opposition from Anglo-Saxon superpower, the United States. It was also the first time that, in a basic

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Cold-war relationship between the United States and the now defunct Soviet Union, Nigeria and the Soviet Union took the same position on a global issue.²

Therefore, since 1975, when Nigerian foreign policy became dynamic, Bolaji Akinyemi, the champion of the Concert of Medium Powers initiative, had been following with keen interest, issues in the country's foreign policy. As an advocate of aggressive and result oriented foreign policy and Director General of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, (NIIA), Akinyemi, early in 1976, under the umbrella of the NIIA, convened a conference of fifty Nigerian scholars, public servants and other think-tanks, to discuss Nigeria's foreign policy, in view of the wind of change blowing within the machinery of Nigerian government. At the conference, which took place between January 25 and January 30, 1976, almost all participants agreed that Nigeria possessed all the necessary qualities to become a power on the international scene, but opinion varied on what constituted greatness.

Three views, however, emerged at the conference. These were the idealist, reformist and realist views. The idealist group wanted Nigeria to put its house in order, develop home grown technology, lessen dependence on foreign experts and foreign goods, and tackle socio-economic problems; the reformists advocated modernization and revamping of the Nigerian socio-economic system in order to meet the challenges which would be posed by its emergence as a regional power in Africa, while the realist approach proffered that Nigerian energy should not be focused solely on the domestic scene. It believed that though, in terms of the domestic and foreign problems ratio, Nigeria's position is especially low in the international system, this should not disturb its aspiration to becoming a regional power.³ And as Bolaji Akinyemi puts it:

... Nigeria can no longer afford to be timid in the articulation of its foreign policy objectives and that the little resources at its disposal could still be utilized to pursue such objectives.⁴

However, two groups, the reformist and the realist, became dominant in the analysis of Nigerian foreign policy.

Meanwhile, Bolaji Akinyemi identified himself with the realist school of thought and worked hard to promote its idea, particularly during his tenure as the Director General of NIIA. Henceforth, his name seemed more central to Nigerian contemporary foreign policy output. Therefore, in 1985, when he became Nigeria's External Affairs Minister, under the military government of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (IBB), most Nigerians saw his appointment as a round-peg in a round-hole. As soon as he took over the mantle of leadership at the Nigeria's External Affairs Ministry, he came up with what is today known as 'Akinyemi Doctrine' and the concept of 'Concentric Circles' in Nigerian foreign policy.

Akinyemi's Doctrine was anchored on the logic that 'responsibility entails privileges' and that solidarity expectations from Nigeria should be predicated on earlier consultations and her assent. The doctrine also has to do with the fact that the valuable position Nigeria had earned internationally should not be lent freely and unquestioningly to courses that did not effectively seek her interest.⁵ The concept of 'concentric circles' was a systematic exposition on the need for Nigeria to progressively depart a little from its traditional foreign policy objectives to secure increased effectiveness and that Africa as the center-piece of Nigeria's foreign policy ought to be de-emphasised in favour of Nigeria's sub-regional interest, particularly in ECOWAS.⁶ Therefore, Nigerian foreign policy would be ensconced in ECOWAS, forming the first concentric ring, Africa, the second and the other, international organizations, forming the third. Part of the actualization of the Akinyemi's long years of conceptualization, was the 1987 initiative on the Concert of Medium Powers.

The Concert of Medium Powers therefore, was one of the foreign policy initiatives articulated by the military administration of IBB in 1987, for meeting the objectives of giving a new burst of creativity to inform the definition and articulation of Nigeria's role in the world. It was also partly a response to the then increasing resort to threats by the super powers and unilateral use of force to settle geo-political issues.

III. Composition of the Lagos Forum

Our discourse on the origin of the Concert of Medium Powers and its incorporation into the Nigerian foreign policy profile is an important aspect of this study. But equally germane to our effort is the composition of the concert, which was christened the Lagos Forum at the consultative meeting of March 16-18, 1987. It was agreed at the meeting that:

... in order that our motives be not misconstrued by those who cannot be part of this initiative, and as a mark of respect and appreciation for Nigeria as the initiator of the venture, the terminology of the 'Lagos forum' should be substituted for that of the Concert of Medium Powers.⁷

The Lagos forum was an idea that sought to explore with a number of countries, the concept of a concert of medium powers as a new approach, designed to restore confidence in the international peace process, and to complement on-going efforts at international cooperation.⁸

Meanwhile, before the Lagos exploratory meeting between March 16 and 18, 1987, there had been consultations for about one year, both at the bilateral and multilateral levels.⁹ For instance, informal ministerial meetings of a number of countries were held in New York, during the 41st session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), in September, 1986. It was at the level of some of these consultations that countries of 'like ideas' were identified and subsequently were invited to Lagos. Thus, the Lagos meeting of senior officials from Algeria, Argentina, Austria, Zimbabwe, Brazil, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, Senegal, Sweden, Switzerland, Venezuela, Yugoslavia, and Nigeria, the host, was just another of such consultations.¹⁰ It was only different from others in the sense that it was to set up a framework for the formal operations of the Lagos Forum.

At the first meeting, it was agreed that the membership of the forum be expanded. In doing this, the forum was conscious of not losing its manageability. It was the belief of the members also that the consultative role of the group would be enhanced if the membership reflected, as much as possible, the various tendencies and orientations. Therefore, it was felt that the criterion of non-membership of military alliance should not be rigidly applied in deciding what countries should be a member of the Lagos Forum.¹¹ The forum, by consensus, therefore agreed to extend invitation to Hungary, Australia, Pakistan, Peru, and Canada. All the invitees except Ethiopia attended the second meeting of 1-3 September, 1987.¹² Zimbabwe which had attended the first meeting withdrew from the group, claiming that 'a small country just coming out of armed struggles that led to independence in 1980, could not be in the league of medium power states'.¹³

At the initial stage, the limitation of the number of invited countries to fifteen was to build a forum of manageable size. In this regard, attention was paid to 'geographical spread' and 'regional balance'. For example, Egypt, Algeria, Senegal, and Zimbabwe represented Africa, India, Indonesia and Malaysia came from Asia, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina and Venezuela stood in for Latin America, while Sweden, Yugoslavia, Austria, and Switzerland were invited from Europe. The composition of the forum at conception was meant to straddle traditional cleavages, such as those of the North- South dichotomy and of the East- West conflict. The interpretation of this is that countries which are militarily aligned with either block of the Cold War or steeped in any of the major regional conflicts bedeviling the international system, were deliberately kept out of the group, to allow for 'effective performance'. To put it in the words of the advocate of the initiative:

... we have sought the participation of developed as well as developing countries, we have put emphasis in those which have tended to pursue a neutralist or non-aligned and therefore, by extension, independent foreign policy. We have further sought, not only the participation of some of the founding member countries of the Non-Aligned Movement, but also some of those Third World countries which are not members of the non-aligned fraternity.¹⁴

Meanwhile, during one of the exploratory meetings, consensus prevailed as it was agreed that an expansion of the group was necessary to take care of possible misunderstandings from other members of the international community, who may not be members of the group.⁴² However, a careful study of the criteria for becoming a member of the fraternity would reveal a kind of political power play on the part of the initiator of the Lagos Forum. For instance, the most significant criterion, namely, that the country be 'committed to non-aligned or neutrality in international affairs', could hardly be applied, except with hypocrisy, to many of the states represented in Lagos. In fact, the swing of political affiliation seems clearly towards the west, to which most of the supposed member countries are economically and military aligned. This actually made the choice of member states a political issue as usual. Membership did not even follow from the rule of the thumb, because almost all members clearly belonged to one ideological camp. Therefore, membership did not reflect the empirical reality of the world politics, which, until the collapse of the Soviet Union, was made up of bipolarity of ideological camps.

Furthermore, the composition of the member-states that attended the first Lagos meeting, in March, 1987, gave an indication that the Lagos Forum was afraid to seat Pakistan and India together, same for Libya and Egypt and Iran-Iraq with Saudi Arabia.¹⁵ Even after the expansion of membership, conscious efforts were made to exclude the revolutionary members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), like Cuba, Libya, Ghana, etc, which had fought imperialism with bare hands. These countries had demonstrated more powers in the international system than most of the invited countries. For instance, Cuba had affected the balance of power in African geo-politics consistently for about fifteen years because of its mobilized military strength, which was specifically felt in Southern African region. Libya has also consistently challenged the hegemony of the United States and has affected the distribution of world politics. Equally, Ghana as in the glorious days of Kwame Nkrumah was much more independent, as a sovereign state than Nigeria. In effect these countries had demonstrated superior powers in quality and substance than Nigeria, Sweden or Venezuela that were seated at the forum.

Moreover, if the criteria for being a member of the forum explained the non-inclusion of countries like Libya in preference to Algeria, as a power in the Maghreb bloc, it did not convincingly explain the inclusion of Egypt and India, both of which were founding members of the NAM, but whose status as a positive force in the movement had been vitiated over the years. The implication of Egypt's geographical position and America's strategic interest in the Middle East, is a common knowledge, a relationship which had been enhanced by the operation 'Bright Star' military exercise, held jointly by Egypt and the US almost every year, since the Camp David Accord was signed in 1978. Like Egypt, India's non-alignment had been criticized, though for a different reason. The Indians, for instance, became too friendly with the Soviets during this period and this manifested in the voting pattern in the UN. Even at the Lagos meeting of the Forum, India and Yugoslavia almost became stumbling blocks on a number of issues, particularly on what role the Concert should assume in international system.¹⁶ What was more, while Hungary vacillated on whether to drop its socialist toga for a capitalist robe, other European states that also attended the forum were much more tilted to the west in orientation, and therefore can be easily influenced. The tendency therefore, for these countries, was to feel less committed to the Nigerian initiative.

The inclusion of Senegal also raised the fundamental issue of independence. It is common knowledge that none of the Franco-phone West African States are truly independent in making official policies. In fact, Senegal has French citizens as highly placed officials and advisers in various departments of government particularly in the area of defense. Like any other French West African nation, more than half of Senegal's defense policies are decided in France. For Australia, Canada, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and Peru, the western powers must as a matter of tradition, take the lead in international diplomacy. It is therefore, not surprising that all the meetings held ended without being able to draft the legal framework that may have informed the emergent initiative. However, despite the inability of the forum to draft a charter, certain aims and objectives were still discernable.

IV. Lagos Forum: Aims and Objectives

The Nigerian initiative of the Concert of Medium Powers was motivated by a deep concern at the lack of progress in the resolution of pressing global economic and political issues. Put differently, it was to find solutions that would stabilize the deteriorating international environment on which action had been largely stalemated and paralyzed. This had been largely possible because of a marked reluctance by states to adhere to many of the rules, principles and objectives which were negotiated in the early post war years, to regulate international interaction and behaviour. Member states of the international community persistently advanced not too plausible excuses, for their inability to work for genuine solutions to such burning global issues as the continuing arms race, the increasing militarisation of outer-space, the persistence of apartheid in South Africa during the period and the economic problems of many member states of the United Nations.¹⁷

These tendencies had brought about the marginalisation of small and medium powers in world politics. They had generated new fears and uncertainties in international interactions and impaired the ability of multilateral institutions, particularly the United Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement, to resolve fundamental global problems and crisis situations. The attendant stalemate in the conduct of international relations indeed, created a very wide gulf in the world political and economic systems.

It was in the attempt to fill such gaps created by the stalemate in the conduct of inter-state relations that the Lagos Forum was convened. In effect, the Concert of Medium Powers was a new approach designed to restore confidence in the international peace process and complement efforts at international cooperation. Therefore, the Forum was to

advance international dialogue and cooperation, as to be able to contribute positively in shaping the course of international relations, by acting as a bridge-builder across the various divides. Akinyemi himself puts the expected role of the forum straight when he said:

... we believe that they (Medium Powers) can assist in consolidating international peace and security through the process of confidence-building among states and thereby, help to strengthen the bases of genuine and systematic international cooperation; we believe that they can act as an effective antidote to the bipolarity of world politics; and we believe that they can operate as a voice of reason in a discordant world, where might is often mistakenly regarded as synonymous with right.¹⁸

The Lagos Forum, no doubt, was meant to be a response to some of the international issues that we have identified so far. Therefore, the reasons adduced for formation of the group and its expected role in the international relations, appeared convincing and genuine. Indeed, a cursory glance at the performance of the moribund NAM lent credence to Bolaji Akinyemi's argument. The increasing relegation of the movement into the limbo of irrelevance in international politics and consistent manifestations of its inability to bring about peaceful solutions to the remaining pockets of violence in some Third World countries could be more than enough argument to justify the creation of the Lagos Forum. It was in such issues as East-West conflict that the UN, NAM and other international and regional organizations were naturally expected to have acted as medium and positive forces. But they seem not to have found their feet on global struggle for supremacy.

Looking at the potentials of Nigeria, the country is eminently qualified to be in the medium power club and by extension, could aspire to be recognized as a strong force in international politics. But to achieve that, the country must, as a matter of fact, get certain things right, particularly as regards its economic development. Within twenty-seven years of post-independence experience in the UN's diplomatic arena, the country had been exposed to the high level of politics of decision-making in the UNSC. Apart from the fact that in the same year of the initiative, Nigeria was appointed to serve as a non-permanent member of the UNSC, it had also served in the same capacity between 1966 and 1967.¹⁹ Nigeria's exposure and participation in such strategic organ of the UN, had been a productive experience. The country at different occasions had joined the UN to implement and secure its overall objective of restoring international peace and security in the world. Since independence in 1960 it had participated in most UN peace-keeping operations and peace observer missions, starting with the United Nations Operations in the Congo (ONUC).²⁰ Also as far as 'good behaviour' as an indication of commitment to the principles of obligations of the UN charter is concerned, Nigeria has consistently garnered good international image.

History would attest to the fact that Nigeria sought to make a major break from its tradition of reticent regional and international leadership, particularly when we consider some of the bold and decisive decisions taken by the country during the period of our study. For instance, Nigeria led thirty other Commonwealth nations to boycott the Edinburgh Commonwealth Games in 1986. Such giant steps included the Nigerian proposal at the Harare Summit of the NAM in 1986, for the creation of a solidarity fund for the Frontline States. This led to the inauguration of the African Fund of the NAM in India in 1987.²¹

As a regional leader, Nigeria is the pre-eminent military and political power in the sub-Saharan Africa. It is the largest African country and by the World Bank report of 1987, its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was 74 billion United States dollars. This figure surpasses that of every African country save South Africa, and is double that of every other African country except Algeria. In the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) sub-region, Nigeria's GDP is twice that of all other countries combined. In addition, Nigeria had the second largest army in Africa, after Egypt.²² Therefore, as far as Africa is concerned; Nigeria had the qualities of a regional power.

In economic terms, Nigeria is the world's seventh largest producer of oil, a commodity which, in spite of international price vacillations remains of strategic significance to the country. The country is also very rich in primary commodities like Cocoa, hides and skins, groundnuts, palm oil, etc.²³

The diplomatic, political and economic objectives of the Lagos Forum identified so far, are quite logical, sound and may probably look flawless, particularly to a blind optimist. However, most of the indices adopted for our argument remains in the realm of potentials. If Nigeria must aspire to raise the standard of its diplomacy on the world stage, the first step in that direction is to harness all the vast resources abound, to build a strong virile, and enduring economy that would be respected all over the world. With Nigeria's energetic and enterprising population, the country's

confused, corrupt and indolent leadership can be challenged to actualise the country's political, economic and diplomatic potentials. In fact, the world is afraid of Nigeria and the day the country gets its act together and thinks rightly, the world would have the greatest and most powerful black power to contend with. This is a fact and the western powers are not oblivious of this.

V. Conclusion

Put together, therefore, an evaluation of the idea that informed the formation of the Lagos Forum would reveal that despite the obvious lack of capacities and capabilities of various international organizations to positively mediate in the world conflict, the creation of a new organization or movement was not the solution. This is because in all ramifications, the objectives of the Lagos Forum duplicated in some areas and conflicted in others with the objectives of the NAM, to which nearly all the Third World countries belong. The role of the NAM from Belgrade, through Sri-Lanka to India, is to act as a third force in the then bipolar international system.²⁴ In such situation, therefore, it would have been pretty difficult for the Lagos Forum to implement its objectives in a multipolar world system. More importantly, with her weak economic foundation and fragile political base, Nigeria was ill-equipped and poorly positioned to pioneer such an expensive adventure. In other words, with economic backwardness and grinding poverty, such a sensitive initiative was ill-timed. The idea of a Lagos Forum was also a luxury Nigeria could not afford because it neglected the then prevailing world power relations and exaggerated beyond merit, the influence of the chosen disciples of the forum. Thus, poor timing, poor economic base of the country, underestimation of the prevailing world power relations, coupled with other internal and external variables combined to make the Lagos Forum a still-birth initiative.

Endnotes

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5. Akin Osuntokun, 'Akinyemi's Diplomacy', *The Punch*, April 2, 1987, p. 11.
6. Akin Osuntokun, *Ibid*.11
7. Address by H. E. Professor Bolaji Akinyemi, Honourable Minister of External Affairs, Federal Republic of Nigeria, to members of the Diplomatic Corps, Lagos, March, 31, 1987, p. 7.
8. 'The Lagos Forum and the National Interest' Annex II to CM (87), Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) Papers, p. 2.
9. 'Concert of Medium Powers': Notes taken at the meeting of Nigerian delegation with Yugoslav officials, February 11, 1987.
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21. 'Lagos Forum and National Interest...', p. 3.
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23. Ibid, p.6
24. P.Braillard and M. Djalili, (eds.) *The Third World and International Relations*, (London: Frances Pinter, 1984) pp. 90-157. Also see R.A. Mortimer, *The Third World Coalitions in International Politics*, (New York: Praeger, 1980), Pp. 6-23, cf 'Non-Alignment: from Bandung to Belgrade', in *The Third World Guide, 1991-92* (Montevideo Uruguay, 1991), pp. 128-133.

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