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RESEARCH STUDY

BUREAU OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

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NIGERIAN-US RELATIONS: CONTRASTING STYLES REINFORCE NIGERIAN DISTRUST

Policy differences, failures in communication, and other irritations have marred US relations with Nigeria since the end of the Nigerian civil war in January 1970. We examine below the sources and nature of these difficulties and suggest some of their implications for US interests.

ABSTRACT

Nigeria's victory in the civil war with Biafra in 1970 left it with both a renewed sense of destiny as the leader of black Africa and a residue of suspicion against the US. Relations with the US have not recovered the ease of pre-civil-war days.

Contrasting Assumptions and Styles. The Nigerian Government now increasingly sees the US as indifferent or as an impediment to the achievement of objectives which Nigeria considers legitimate. These include economic growth and African political and economic independence. Nigerian foreign policy therefore gives high priority to strengthening ties with fellow-Africans and cooperating with other third-world countries, and lower priority to relations with the US and other developed countries.

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Nigeria wants little from the US and seeks to keep relations with us at a distance.

The US Government tries to minimize differences, and seeks closer contact in order to prevent misunderstandings and overcome bureaucratic or personal obstacles. We often attribute delays and frictions--not without justification--to Nigerian red tape or incompetence, or to individuals antagonistic to us. Our approach tends to reinforce Nigerian suspicion of our intentions.

Initiatives and Responses. US initiatives and pressures for Nigerian support on matters we consider important--e.g., assistance offers, investment guarantee proposals, efforts to establish a regional trade center--often clash with Nigeria's own priorities and offend Nigerian sensitivities. The complexity of US interests and governmental procedures tends to limit the flexibility of our approaches. US officials must often weigh their obligation to press vigorously for US Government positions against the risk that too rigid and persistent approaches may jeopardize not only the immediate objective but broader US-Nigerian relations.

The Nigerians, faced with US pressures on matters they consider of low priority, have taken to derailing American initiatives before they gather force or to switching them to a circuitous bureaucratic track. Redoubled US efforts--attributing lack of response to Nigerian inefficiency--only increase Nigerian irritations.

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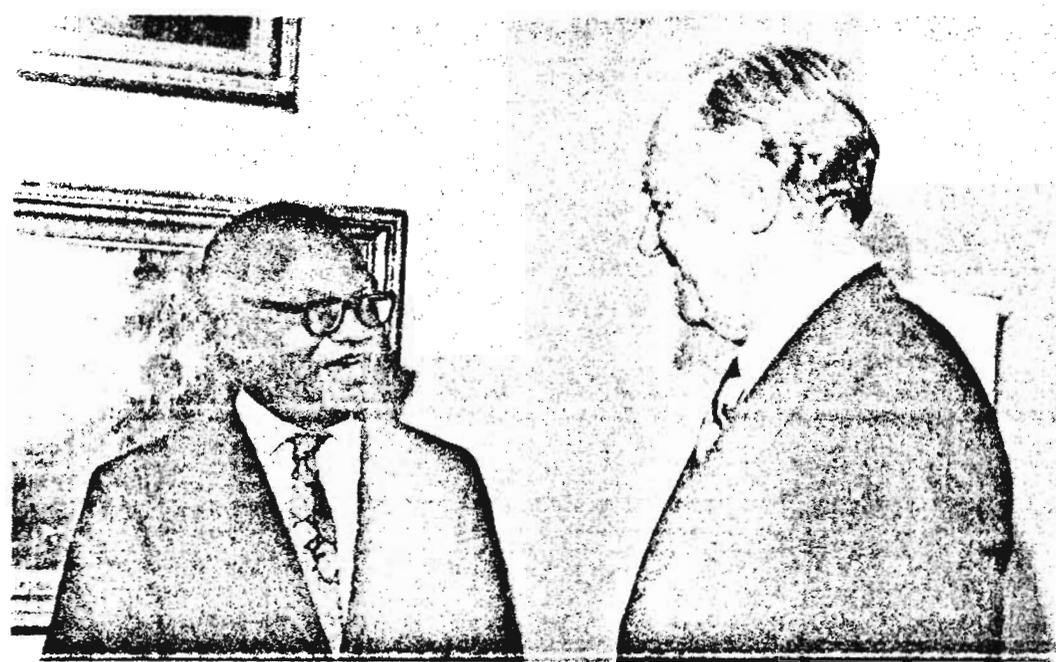
Several Nigerian requests of us in areas they consider of major importance--Biafran exiles, Rhodesian trade, and economic development--have received less favorable responses than they had expected. Even when a Nigerian request is acceptable to the US, our response is apt to be partial, delayed, or seemingly grudging. Some Nigerian officials believe that the US will not focus on issues which trouble Nigeria until Nigeria starts blocking programs which the US wants.

Areas of Policy Conflict. Nigerians see the US as the major power with which they differ over the widest range of substantive issues. Both the US official and unofficial (missionaries, journalists, scholars) presence are sources of irritation to Nigeria. Other areas of disagreement include investment, commodity bargaining, economic assistance, and divergent positions (particularly on southern Africa) in international organizations.

Outlook. The prospect is not necessarily one of unrelieved gloom. Head of State Yakubu Gowon and External Affairs Commissioner Okoi Arikpo want to keep differences in perspective and prevent irritations over lesser issues from degenerating into hostility, just as we do. Small US gestures may be warmly received. US and Nigerian interests may coincide in some areas--e.g., transfer of petroleum technology or opposition to reverse trade preferences. In the long

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Commissioner for External Affairs Okoi Arikpo with Secretary Rogers in New York, October 1972

run, Nigeria's distrust and assertiveness may be replaced by a more relaxed self-confidence, allowing current frictions to cool.

In a sense, how Nigerians perceive the intentions behind US policies and style is more important than whether their judgment is fair and accurate: their perception is the "reality" that counts. The scope for reducing misunderstandings is limited, at least for the foreseeable future, mainly because Nigeria seeks to limit ties between us. Nigerian-US communication at the working level may become even more difficult. The growth of US investments

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and trade interests in Nigeria, together with Nigeria's expanding influence in black Africa, will make any difficulties a heavier burden on us in coming years.

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