



Wartime Developments in the Nigerian-Biafran War: An Assessment of Diplomatic Policies And Peace Initiatives, 1967-1970



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ABSTRACT

Diplomacy has long served as a primary means of conflict resolution, both before the outbreak of war and during wartime. When Diplomacy fails to sustain peace, war becomes the last resort. In wartime, however, diplomacy often shifts focus toward ceasefires and sustainable peace. This dynamic was evident in Nigeria-Biafra relations: the failure of pre-war peace summits led to open conflict, after which diplomatic efforts intensified in pursuit of a ceasefire. Employing a chronological narrative approach, this paper examines peace summits held before and during the Nigerian-Biafran War, the positions of the belligerents, and the role of international actors. It also analyzes why the peace conferences failed, using Zero-Sum Game Theory as an interpretive framework. The study draws its sources mainly from archival materials, textbooks, journals, magazines, and newspapers. Findings reveal the enormous human and material costs of the conflict and demonstrate that the peace summits failed mainly due to the absence of a neutral mediator, the asymmetric nature of the war, and the unwillingness of the parties to compromise. The paper recommends adopting neutral mediation, confidence-building measures, and inclusive negotiation frameworks to prevent similar outcomes in future conflicts. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on peacebuilding and conflict management in African societies.

Keywords: War, Diplomacy, Nigeria, Biafran, Ceasefire.

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INTRODUCTION

From 1966 to 1970, the Federal Government of Nigeria and the former Eastern Region engaged in a bloody warfare that claimed the lives of millions of people.¹ The human costs of war have not stopped its innumerable reoccurrences in the course of human history in every corner of the globe. Despite its horrible nature, the decision to engage in warfare, nevertheless, is seen as a rational choice. Even though interstate wars may not happen regularly in modern times as they occurred centuries back, the recent Russia-Ukrainian war has proven that interstate wars are difficult to eradicate in human history. The Pact of Paris made in 1928 was an unproductive endeavor to remove the use of war or forceful means in international relations, forbidding the resort to war for the resolution of international disputes.² The desire to engage in warfare – a well-structured use of military forces of one group against another - is among the main characteristics of human existence, regardless of the odious outcome. Clans in different parts of the globe such as the people of the rain forests of New Guinea and Amazonia, clans in Africa,

¹ Ngozi Ojiakor, "Social and Political History of Nigeria 1970-2006" (Enugu: EWANS Press, 2014).

² Paul R. Viotti and Mark V. Kauppi, "International Relations and World Politics: Security, Economy, Identity," (*No Title*), 2009.

and people from other inaccessible regions in Eurasia and Latin America, as well as nations and states in the whole globe, have war as their common traits.³ One of the major attributes of warfare is the effort of a neutral body to initiate diplomatic meetings between the belligerents to resolve the contending issues. In modern days, international organizations, both regional and global organizations such as the United Nations have been the major players in resolving international disputes.

In the diplomatic summits, the belligerents present their best diplomats who can make rational choices and protect the national interest of their leader regardless of many reasons to be skeptical about the speeches of the enemy, and most times allies, leaders, and diplomats conclude discussions about each other's motives. For centuries or even before the record of history, leaders, and diplomats had studied and reacted on some issues that threatened their national interest. Their reactions had been shaped by the content, form, and nature of messages from their allies and foes.⁴ The outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafran war in 1967 was such a reaction by the Nigerian Federal Government to protect her national interest; the sanctity of Nigeria's unity. For the former Eastern Region Government, her decision to engage in warfare with the Nigerian government was to protect her interest which was the lives and property of her citizens. In the event of a face-off between the potential belligerents, diplomatic meetings were always convened before the outbreak of conflict to discuss solutions and ways to avert the imminent danger. Even though going to war no matter how terrible it may be, is a decision of political leaders to protect their national interest, for centuries now, war has been the last option to resort to when diplomatic talks could not resolve the contending issue. At the diplomatic summits, each belligerent presents their best diplomats who use their witty knowledge to project and protect each party's interests and any decision taken aligns with the interest of their political leaders.⁵

Diplomatic meetings are always held in three different phases: before the outbreak of war, during, and after a war. Diplomatic meetings held before the outbreak of war aim to prevent the conflicting parties from using armed conflict to achieve their goals. Sometimes, wars normally break out when any of the parties feel unsatisfied with the agreements reached or breach the terms of the signed agreement. In the event of an outright war, diplomatic meetings are initiated to prevent escalation and the creation of humanitarian corridors. In this phase, diplomats are normally positioned at the forefront of every diplomatic summit and conference to mediate on modalities for a ceasefire. In these peace talks, the willingness of the belligerents to reach a compromise on the conflict issue will determine the possibility of any ceasefire before the defeat of any party on the warfront. In a situation whereby compromise is reached, it is always a win-win game, but if there is a lack of compromise and one party is defeated on the war front, the winner determines the military capabilities and position of the defeated party in their interactions and political leaders and diplomats of the victorious party takes control of the peace meetings. The defeated party would be presented with several terms and conditions to meet and any objection to these terms by leaders and diplomats of the vanquished party is only by pleas without much persuasion. The most prominent example of this phase of diplomatic conference is the Versailles Treaty of 1919 where the victorious power in World War I imposed different conditions on the defeated power.⁶ However, in a situation where the war ended in a stalemate, the belligerents with the help of a third party determine modalities to end the war and ensure long-lasting peace.⁷

These scenarios played out in Nigeria between 1966 to 1970. During the period of political upheaval in Nigeria and constant threat for secessions from Nigeria by the former Eastern Region, a diplomatic conference was convened at Aburi in Ghana to seek for solution to Nigeria's problem.⁸ The failure of the Aburi Accord to satisfy Nigeria's interest promoted the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra war. During the war, there were six peace conferences held to achieve a ceasefire and to stop further destruction of lives and property.⁹ In these diplomatic talks that were centered on a potential ceasefire agreement, both parties had diverged interest in the peace negotiations. For the Nigerian government,

³ Jeffrey W. Knopf, "Doing a Literature Review," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 39, no. 1 (January 13, 2006): 127–32, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096506060264>.

⁴ Robert F. Trager, "The Diplomacy of War and Peace," *Annual Review of Political Science* 19, no. 1 (2016): 205–28.

⁵ Trager, "The Diplomacy of War and Peace."

⁶ David A. Andelman, *A Shattered Peace: Versailles 1919 and the Price We Pay Today* (Turner Publishing Company, 2014).

⁷ Trager, "The Diplomacy of War and Peace."

⁸ Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (London: Penguin, 2012).

⁹ Frederick Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend* (London: Pen and Sword, 2015).

the only condition for a ceasefire was the unconditional surrender of the Biafrans while Biafran leaders insisted that a ceasefire could be reached if the Nigerian government withdrew its troops from Biafra land. The failure of several diplomatic conferences between Nigerian and Biafran leaders and diplomats for a win-win ceasefire finally resulted in the defeat of Biafra. However, this paper assesses the different diplomatic conferences held before and during the Nigerian-Biafran War. It used zero-sum game theory to examine the position of each party in conflict during these conferences to reveal why these peace talks failed to prevent the worst Black-to-Black carnage in modern African history. In doing so, the paper brings to the fore the roles played by external influence in the failure of the peace talks.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Scholars have presented war from different perspectives. According to Palmer and Perkins, “war is a means in which states take to weaken a specific enemy or enemies.”¹⁰ It is made up of a pair of wrestlers and each aims, through physical force to compel the other to do his will; his immediate aim is to throw his opponent to make him incapable of further resistance.¹¹ War is, however, an act of force to compel an enemy to do one’s will. Force, to counter opposing forces, equips itself with the inventions of art and science. Attached to force are certain self-imposed, imperceptible limitations hardly worth mentioning, known as international law and custom. Force, that is, physical force, for moral force has no existence save as expressed in the state and the law, thus the means of war; to impose our will on the enemy is its object. To secure that object one must render the enemy powerless; and that, in theory, is the true aim of warfare. That aim takes the place of the object, discarding it as something not part of war itself.¹² War is such a dangerous business and is like a game in that the mistakes that come from kindness are the very worst. The maximum use of force is in no way incompatible with the simultaneous use of the intellect.¹³ It entails the use of well-structured military forces, equipped with military hardware by two or more groups, each trying to render its opponent powerless to attain irreconcilable goals.

However, Diplomacy, from time immemorial has been a great instrument for the pursuit of national interest, solicitation for military and humanitarian aid, and management of global conflicts. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Contemporary English, diplomacy is “the management of international relations by negotiation, the method by which relations among states are adjusted and managed by ambassadors and envoys.”¹⁴ It encompasses the use of tact, intelligence, and utmost wisdom to reach agreements, compromise, and acceptable settlements with other states in international relations.¹⁵ In other words, diplomacy is a means by which the foreign policy of a nation is carried out with another and its utmost goal is to provide the machinery and the personnel by which government policy is carried out. Diplomacy is not an end but a means, not a purpose but a method. Diplomacy uses tact, conciliation, and the exchange of interest, to stop conflicts arising between sovereign nations. It is the agency through which foreign policy seeks to attain its purpose by agreement rather than by war. However, when agreement becomes impossible diplomacy, which is the instrument of peace, becomes inoperative; and foreign policy, the final sanction of which is war, alone becomes operative.¹⁶ Diplomacy does not end during the war period, at this time, its functions could cover both overt and covert engagement of belligerents to achieve peace or gain support from both local and international state and non-state actors. It is very pertinent to note that, warfare and diplomacy are like bicycle pedals that work together to achieve a common aim, especially during the period of outright war.

This article adopted the game theory to illustrate the rationale behind the uncompromised stance of the Nigerian and Biafran governments during the war. It will focus its analysis mainly on zero-sum theory. Game theory provides analytical tools for examining strategic interactions among two or more participants. Game theory illustrates real-life situations that involve players or decision makers; strategies available to each player; rules governing players behavior; outcomes, each of which is a result

¹⁰ D. Randy Garrison and Norman D. Vaughan, *Blended Learning in Higher Education* (Wiley, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118269558>.

¹¹ Michael Howard and Peter Paret, *On War*, vol. 117 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

¹² Howard and Paret, *On War*.

¹³ Howard and Paret, *On War*.

¹⁴ A. O. Njoku and I.P. Nwafor, “Nigeria’s External Relations” (Enugu: Redeemed Printing and Publishing Company, 2012).

¹⁵ Njoku and Nwafor, “Nigeria’s External Relations.”

¹⁶ Norman Dunbar Palmer and Howard Cecil Perkins, “International Relations: The World Community in Transition,” (*No Title*), 1957.

of choices made by players at any given point in the game; and Payoffs accrued by each player because of each possible outcome. Game theory assumes that each player will pursue strategies that help him or her achieve the most profitable outcome in every situation. A zero-sum game is a situation in which one player's winnings equal the other player's losses.¹⁷ In practical form, the relationship between game theory and warfare and diplomacy is not far-fetched. War and diplomacy involve players who make rational and strategic decisions to maneuver the enemy and achieve outright victory. The Nigeria-Biafran war saw constant maneuvering both on the war front and in diplomatic meetings by both belligerents to outwitty the opponent. The strategic superiority of the Nigerian government determined the outcome of the game which was the defeat and subsequent surrender of Biafra.

Findings on the Wartime Developments and Diplomatic Policies

The outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafran war on the 6th of July 1967, prompted the interventions of third parties to negotiate for a ceasefire and prevent destruction of lives and property. However, before engaging in an in-depth analysis of diplomatic summits during the war, it is pertinent to examine in detail the failure of pre-Nigeria-Biafran war diplomacy. To prevent the deteriorating political condition in Nigeria, a diplomatic summit was convened at Aburi, Ghana by former Ghanaian head of state Gen. J.A. Ankrah on January 4-5, 1967.¹⁸ The diplomatic conference was held to establish a workable solution for Nigeria's political crisis. At the conference were: Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon (The Nigeria Military Head of State, Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu (Military Governor of East), Lt. Col. David Ejoor (Military Governor of Mid-West); Lt. Col. Hassan Katsina (Military Governor North); Col. Robert Adebayo (Military Governor of West); Commodore J. E. A. Wey (Head of the Navy); Major Mobolaji Johnson (Military Administrator of Lagos); Alhaji Kam Salem (Inspector General of Police); Mr. J. Omo-Bare (Deputy Inspector General of Police) and other top government officials.¹⁹ The diplomatic talk was declared open by the Ghanaian Head of State, Lt.Gen. J.A. Ankrah. After a long deliberation by the Nigerian leaders and the mediators concerning the issue of arms and ammunition, the Nigerian Supreme Military Council agreed to adopt a proposed declaration by Ojukwu which stated that all regions should: stop using armed forces, but negotiate in the settlement of national dispute; share information on the number of weapons stored in each region and to share it equitably; and place an embargo on the purchase and importation of weapons until tranquility is restored in the nation.²⁰

This declaration was signed by the Nigerian Supreme military council and as well proposed that the Nigerian Army should be controlled by the Supreme Military Council under the leadership of the commander-in-chief of the Armed forces and Head of the Federal Military government; establishment of area commands to be controlled by area commanders; and the establishment of Lagos garrison. The council also agreed to set up a committee consisting of military personnel to provide accurate data on Federal forces and area commands that required more men.²¹ There was also deliberation on the crisis between Ojukwu and Gowon. Ojukwu maintained that before anyone could claim to be Nigerian Military Head of State, the situation of former military president, Ironsi must be made known to the public. In response, Gowon pointed out the issues surrounding Ironsi's affair that will be made public in due time and regretted the delay. The uncompromised position of Ojukwu concerning Ironsi's situation promoted the members of the Nigerian military council to move into a secret session where they reached an agreement within themselves. Although, how the issue was resolved is not clear to the public, continuous investigation by Ojukwu about the dead Ironsi will not help in achieving the aims of the conference. To the best of our knowledge, Ironsi was among the prominent Igbo leaders killed during the counter coup of July 1966. On the 5th of January 1967, after a long discussion on issues affecting Nigeria's peace, the Aburi peace talk produced the "Aburi communiqué". The following agreements were reached: the army should reorganize with proper control; there should be an appointment and

¹⁷ Anatol Rapoport, *Game Theory as a Theory of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 2 (Springer Science & Business Media, 2012).

¹⁸ Johnson Olaosebikan Aremu and Lateef Oluwafemi Buhari, "Sense and Senselessness of War: Aggregating the Causes, Gains and Losses of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970," *IAFOR Journal of Arts & Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2017): 61-79.

¹⁹ G., Genette, *Narrative Discourse* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980).

²⁰ Enugu National Archive, "Biafra: The Aburi Accord," in *Official Record of the Minutes of the Meeting of Nigeria's Military Leaders Held at Aburi, Ghana on January 4 & 5, 1967* (Enugu National Archive, 1976).

²¹ Enugu National Archive, "Biafra: The Aburi Accord."

promotion of senior officers in the army, police, consular service, diplomatic as well as other senior positions in the federal civil service and the equivalent positions in the federal statutory corporations; a committee should be set up to investigate the issue of rehabilitation and recovery of property owned by displaced persons, especially the Easterners during the political crisis of 1966; the order by Governor of Eastern Region for non-easterners to leave the region should be revoked; government employees and other corporations who left their position during the 1966 riots should go back and their salaries fully paid by the end of March 1967; another meeting to finalize the agreement reached and implementation procedure would be held in Nigeria.²²

Special attention was paid to the matters that concerned reorganization of the army, approval of senior appointment, and use of force. The Nigerian Supreme Military Council agreed that: the military would be controlled by the supreme military council under the chairmanship of the Commander-in-Chief and Head of the Federal Military Government; every region should have a Military Headquarter and Area command with equal representation; the Military Governor were to control the area commands internal security; and issues threatening peace of the nation must be presented to council for appropriate decision.²³ The importance of renouncing the use of force in settling national crises was emphasized. Diplomatic means were adopted as the best way of settling national issues.²⁴ The Aburi communiqué was signed by both Federal and regional government delegates who attended the peace conference. This agreement was discarded by Gowon upon arrival to Nigeria because the whole agreement restructured Nigeria as a confederate nation and as a result, the regional government would have more power than the central government. Also, Gowon saw the agreement as a victory of Ojukwu over the federal government. Suffice it to say that the Nigerian federal government led by Gowon was not satisfied with the agreement and this led to its breakdown. The failure of the Accord and the inherent political crisis caused by ethnic hatred led to the outbreak of the Nigerian-Biafran war that lasted about thirty months. The delegates and host of this diplomatic conference were flexible in their negotiation and demonstrated the spirit of diplomats and their desire to achieve the goal of the peace summit. However, the non-implementation of this concluded agreement made the Accord worthless and cost Nigeria her unity.

When the war broke out in 1970, several diplomatic conferences were initiated to achieve a ceasefire. The first diplomatic meeting between the belligerents was initiated by the secretary general of the commonwealth, Mr. Aronld Smith, in September 1967 by Gen. Gowon's invitation for him to mediate between the warring parties in a framework of one Nigeria.²⁵ This request by Gowon opened the door for wartime diplomacy during the Nigerian-Biafran war. In January 1968, Biafran diplomats led by Michael Okpara met Mr. Smith in Paris and proposed a confederacy which was agreed upon in Aburi. The proposal was adopted on the 18th of February 1968 and Mr. Smith took it as a proposal to Gowon, but it was rejected by Gowon's government on the premise that Nigeria cannot work under a confederate system. In his discussion with Mr. Smith, Gowon drafted out his peace proposal which aimed to achieve a ceasefire while diplomatic talks were ongoing. In his proposal, a peace-keeping force that is made up of troops from commonwealth Nations would be stationed between the belligerents during the negotiating period to protect Biafrans from the killings of the Nigerian soldiers. Gowon believed that this would make the warring parties put down their weapons, and guarantee peace and security in both sides, especially in Biafran territory. By protecting Biafran, their idea of separating from Nigeria would be renounced.²⁶ The protection Gowon proposed was exactly what the easterners requested from the Nigerian government led by Gowon before seceding, but they were denied peace and security in the Nigerian system. This made leaders of Biafra make some reservations about the proposed peace deal. The Biafran leaders were ready to reach a truce and accept a ceasefire, but they wanted an honorable settlement and a neutral mediator. Biafran leaders insisted that they would not reach any ceasefire until Nigerian soldiers were withdrawn from Biafran land.²⁷

²² Enugu National Archive, "Biafra: The Aburi Accord."

²³ Enugu National Archive, "Biafra: The Aburi Accord."

²⁴ Enugu National Archive, "Biafra: The Aburi Accord."

²⁵ John de St Jorre, *The Brothers' War: Biafra and Nigeria* (Faber & Faber, 2012).

²⁶ Enugu National Archive, "The United Republic of Tanzania and Statement on the Republic of Biafra, 1968" , " TIME Magazine, 1968.

²⁷ Enugu National Archive, "The United Republic of Tanzania and Statement on the Republic of Biafra, 1968" ."

Through the diplomatic effort of Mr. Smith, the first diplomatic conference between the belligerents was held at Marlborough House, London. The conference was to serve as a preliminary deliberation that would produce a good framework and venue for effective negotiation on the contending issues. The conference started in London on the 2nd of May 1968. Nigerian diplomats were led by Chief Anthony Enahoro while that of Biafra was headed by Chief Sir Louis Mbanefo. The themes of deliberation were the venue for the main peace negotiation, the chairman of the peace conference and international observers (if any), and the agenda. At the summit, Biafran diplomats were very skeptical about the conference because Britain refused the calls to stop arms supplies to Nigeria, especially during the diplomatic conferences. After a long negotiation between the delegates, Kampala, the capital of Uganda was selected as a venue for the actual diplomatic meeting.

Biafran delegations requested a chairman and other three independent observers, mindful of what played out after the Aburi agreement, needed observers in such an important diplomatic conference. Chief Enahoro was uncomfortable with such presence and suggested that the issue would be ratified at Kampala. To reach a compromise, Enahoro's proposal was accepted by Sir Louis.²⁸ Lastly, the issue of agenda was presented with Sir Louis proposing a two-point agenda that comprises an agreement on a ceasefire and more peace negotiation on the nature of the relationship between the two warring parties after the war (the political solution). Louis' agenda proposal was countered by Enahoro's seven agenda aiming at Biafra's unconditional surrender. As a result, Biafran delegates insisted on the main purpose of the conference which was the agenda on ceasefire negotiations. At the end of the deliberation, Sir Louis' two-point agenda was accepted.²⁹ Attentions were moved to Kampala with the hope of reaching a ceasefire agreement.

The Kampala diplomatic conference began on the 23rd of May 1968. Diplomats of the belligerents were present at the conference and were monitored by the foreign minister of Uganda. From the onset, the conference was like comic opera, this made Col. Ojukwu describe it as 'a grisly farce'.³⁰ Nigerian delegates led by Enahoro refused to convene at the venue of the conference and gave flimsy excuses, especially when one of their secretaries, Mr. Banjo Johnson, was missing. On the 28th of May, Enahoro presented a twelve-point proposal centered on the total surrender of Biafra, disarmament of her military forces, and administration of Biafran territory as well as the fate of the Biafran leadership. Sir Louis quickly reminded him that agenda for discussion was a ceasefire, and Enahoro refused to compromise. At the conference, the news of the fall of Port Harcourt to the Nigerian soldiers, an area of strategic supplies to the Biafrans reached the delegates. The fall of Port Harcourt and constant arms supply to Nigeria by Britain made Nigerian delegates maintain their uncompromised posture and Nigerian leaders feel reluctant to push for diplomatic settlements. However, during this period, three African nations, Ivory Coast, Gabon, and Zambia recognized Biafra. Dr. Julius Nyerere of Tanzania had early accorded diplomatic recognition to Biafra. Nyerere decried British involvement in the war and ridiculed the analogy between the Nigerian and the American civil war.³¹

On May 31, Sir Louis notified the Ugandan president and the media that the position of the Nigerian delegates showed that they only needed a military solution. The Biafran diplomats withdrew from the conference while Sir Louis headed to London to meet British Officials, Mr. Harold Wilson and Lord Shepherd, the minister of State at the commonwealth office who asked Biafran to accept the British proposal. The request was turned down by Sir Louis because British position in the war and the constant arms supply to Nigeria. While in London, Lord Shepherd proposed a ceasefire plan which was in tandem with the Biafran ceasefire plan to Sir Louis. The Proposal was rejected by Gowon on June 13th when Lord Shepherd presented it to him and insisted that the only ceasefire proposal acceptable to him was the total surrender of Biafra.³² It is quite unclear whether Lord Shepherd persuaded Gowon to accept his proposal or if the proposal was acceptable to the British government which had an economic interest in the war and was the major supplier of arms to the Nigerian government since the proposal amounted

²⁸ Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend*.

²⁹ Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend*.

³⁰ Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend*.

³¹ Olajide Oloyede, "Biafra in the Present: Trauma of a Loss," *African Sociological Review* 13, no. 1 (2009): 2–25, <https://doi.org/10.4314/asr.v13i1.57739>.

³² Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend*.

to Biafra victory. This refusal for a ceasefire by the Nigerian government through diplomatic means shows her confidence in a military solution. According to Sir Louis,

Nigeria's refusal to agree to a ceasefire through the peace talks and her insistence on Biafra renouncing her sovereignty before the ceasefire showed she preferred a military and political solution to a problem that is essentially human. While Biafran diplomats made many concessions so that the talks could achieve a meaningful result, Nigeria continued to play the role of military conqueror, imposing upon Biafra her whims and caprices, calculated to annoy the Biafra delegation and to force Biafra out of the talk, or make her act in a way prejudicial to her genuine search for peace. The world watched in surprise as such a peace attempt failed abysmally. Gowon in Lagos reiterated the pre-conditions that caused the war, while Enahoro in London and Kampala repeated the same condition, veiled in catchphrases and diplomatic double talk.³³

Sir Louis pointed out that the Kampala peace conference failed because Nigerian diplomats came to a peace talk unprepared. According to him, "they had to contact Gowon, who contacted the Emir, who contacted David Hunt, who contacted Harold Wilson. And in the process, the talks continued to be delayed."³⁴ The concessions made by Biafra to achieve a ceasefire and to save lives were misinterpreted by Nigeria as signs of capitulation and as a signal to continue making one impossible demand after another.³⁵

During the war, the Nigerian government used an economic blockade as a war strategy to force the unconditional surrender of Biafra. This economic blockade caused a humanitarian crisis in the Biafran enclaves. To prevent dire humanitarian conditions, Pope Paul On the 15th of July 1968 extended his mediation offer to Nigerian and Biafran governments.³⁶ Before this offer, six member nations of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) had initiated a peace plan between the belligerents, and a peace conference was agreed to hold in Niger's capital, Niamey. Pope would have been a neutral mediator and commanded the respect of the belligerents and a potential ceasefire would have been achieved. As we shall see, OAU in her mediation was biased and lacked respect from the warring parties which made ceasefire impossible to achieve through diplomatic means. The Niamey peace conference was chaired by the Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, and leaders of the warring parties were present. Other African leaders present at the conference were the president of Ghana, Liberia, Cameroon, Congo Kinshasa, and Niger Republic. The latter country's president, Hmani Diori was the host.³⁷ The conference began on July 15, 1968, in Niamey and topics of discussion were conditions for a ceasefire and opening of the Mercy corridor, a creation of either land or aircraft or water corridor for relief materials to reach Biafran territory in the face of total economic blockade by the Nigerian government.³⁸

Before the conference, Ojukwu had issued a press conference in Aba where he outlined two means of moving relief materials into Biafran territory to reduce the daring humanitarian crisis in Biafra. These include movement through river and sea routes up the Nigeria River to the Port of Oguta which was under the control of Biafra and the internationalization of Port Harcourt under neutral control. In Niamey, Ojukwu addressed the conference committee before handing over Professor Eni Njoku and left for Ivory Coast to see Houphouet-Boigny. In his speech, Ojukwu maintained his position on the opening of the mercy corridor either by land or sea. The committee three of its members were enemies of Biafra and to the disappointment of Nigerian delegates approved Ojukwu's request. After much negotiation, an agreement was reached on the issue of a relief corridor and Biafran's proposal via river route was accepted because it was achievable and cheaper. When agreements on the implementation procedure were to be reached, the Nigerian delegation reneged its previous position on allowing the opening of a humanitarian corridor. The reasons behind the unexpected change of mind were unexplainable. Leader

³³ Louis Mbanefo, "How Nigeria Broke up Kampala Peace Talks," *Enugu National Archives*, n.d.

³⁴ Mbanefo, "How Nigeria Broke up Kampala Peace Talks."

³⁵ Mbanefo, "How Nigeria Broke up Kampala Peace Talks."

³⁶ Carolina Gonçalves, Catarina Tomás, and Aline Almeida, "Children's Gender Worldviews: Exploring Gender, Diversity, and Participation Through Postmodern Picture Books," *Education Sciences* 15, no. 4 (April 11, 2025): 476, <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15040476>.

³⁷ C. K. Colwell, "Biafra: A Chronology of Developments Attending the Secession of the Eastern Region of Nigeria" (Library of Congress Legislative Reference Service, Washington DC, 1968).

³⁸ Kenneth Chukwuemeka Nwoko, "Counting the Cost: The Politics of Relief Operations in The Nigerian Civil War, a Critical Appraisal," *African Study Monographs* 35, no. 3/4 (2014): 129–48.

of Nigeria delegation, Ayida Allison stated that “starvation is an appropriate weapon of warfare, and Nigeria harbored the intention of using it against her enemy.”³⁹ At this point, Nigeria reiterated her initial position on the issue of the relief corridor. The conference was not with a little success, concessions were later reached because of rising opposition from the world stemming from people protesting in the streets because of the blockade and due to pressure from world leaders.⁴⁰ In Niamey, another peace conference was proposed to be held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. During this period, the agenda for the conference favored Nigeria; political settlement first before the ceasefire agreement.⁴¹

From this moment, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) became a major mediator in the Nigeria-Biafra conflict. The agenda drafted at Niamey was presented at Addis Ababa for proper negotiation. With the Addis Ababa peace talk, the OAU hoped to end the war in 1968 since concessions had been made in in Niamey peace conference. The same expectation was held by world leaders, especially Britain.⁴² Ojukwu would agree on any OAU term only if it did not alter the sovereignty of Biafra. According to *Time Magazine*, “the Biafran Head of State, Ojukwu desired to reach temporary ceasefire agreement respite because his government seriously needed relief in the bitter war.”⁴³ The Addis Ababa peace conference started on 29 July 1968 with Ethiopian President, Emperor Haile Selassie as the chair. Ojukwu was present at the conference while Gowon sent delegations. Gowon’s absence from the conference allowed Ojukwu to have control of the negotiation and solicit for Biafran recognition from OAU member nations.⁴⁴ Gowon’s reason for not attending the conference was published in a regional newspaper, *West Africa* on 24 August 1968. According to the paper, “Gowon’s refusal was because of his conviction that he cannot engage in a peace negotiation on equal terms with a rebel who has only served as a one-term military governor.”⁴⁵ These excuses by Nigerian leaders were tactical delays because of the support and superior military hardware they were getting from major world powers, especially Britain and Russia. They knew that with all these weapons and total economic blockade, the Biafran resistance would not last long.

Ojukwu presented African leaders with a seven-point peace plan in the Addis Ababa conference. These include recognition of Biafra as a sovereign nation; utmost economic cooperation between Biafra and Nigeria; negotiated settlement on the sharing of assets and liabilities; immediate ceasefire and suspension of the economic blockade against Biafra, and the withdrawal of troops to prewar boundaries; policing of the ceasefire by international police force with troops from Ethiopia, Liberia, Ghana, Niger, Cameroon, Congo Kinshasa, Tanzania, Gabon, Ivory Coast, and Zambia; agreement on a plebiscite in the disputed areas inside and outside Biafra to allow people self-determination; and immediate agreement on transportation of relief supplies. Nigerian diplomats rejected the Ojukwu’s peace plan and described it as unrealistic. They maintained that the OAU consultative forum convened the peace conference to seek for lasting solution to preserve the unity and territorial integrity of Nigeria.⁴⁶

Ojukwu after delivering his speech left Addis Ababa, but his speech had much impact on the peace conference. At this time, the negotiation table was shifted to Nigerian and Biafran diplomats led by Chief Enahoro and Professor Eni Njoku respectively. Emperor Selassie and other African leaders present at the conference intensified efforts to ensure that a compromise was reached by the diplomats, but it was a fruitless endeavor.⁴⁷ Both parties lacked compromise, especially on the issue of a ceasefire which is key to achieving success in any peace conference in wartime. Stalemate in the issue of ceasefire sent a signal of failure of the entire peace process. The failure of the Addis Ababa peace conference to achieve a ceasefire was caused by three main factors. First, the biased nature of the majority of OAU

³⁹ Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend*.

⁴⁰ Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend*.

⁴¹ Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend*.

⁴² Lord Walney, “Protecting Our Democracy from Coercion,” House of Commons, 2023, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66473eddf34f9b5a56adc9e3/E03131940_HC_775_Lord_Walney_Review_Accessible.pdf.

⁴³ Claudia Wallis and Sonja Steptoe, “How to Bring Our Schools Out of the 20th Century,” *Time Magazine*, 2006.

⁴⁴ Karen E Smith, *Genocide and the Europeans* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁴⁵ A. Adebayo, “Stereotyping and Interfaith Relations in West Africa: A Case Study of Ghana,” *Journal of African Studies* 24, no. 2 (2015): 115–34.

⁴⁶ Emefiena Ezeani, *Biafra Africa Died: The Diplomatic Plot* (London: Veritas Lumen Publishers, 2014).

⁴⁷ Taiwo Bello, “In Search for Peace in Africa: Organization of African Unity and the Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967-1970,” *Organization* 28 (1974): 352.

members who declared unequivocal support to the Nigerian government because of the organizational charter of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states. Some of the member states had internal dissidents and minority groups agitating for independence, support for Biafra secession would endanger their national security. This made the OAU lack the power to sue for an immediate ceasefire when the Nigerian government maintained its uncompromising position. Second, Nigeria's constant support from London and her military superiority on the battlefield. Finally, the Nigerian government knew that the Game was favoring her and there was no need to concede to the demand of the Biafran government.⁴⁸

However, the Addis Ababa conference was not a total failure. When the ceasefire was not feasible, the conference committee members shifted their attention to the issue of relief materials to save the lives of Biafran who faced starvation because of the economic blockade. The delegations agreed that relief materials including medicine and food should be delivered to the Biafran territories. The issue of a relief corridor, a route where relief materials would pass to reach the designated places generated tension among the diplomats. The Biafran delegation proposed that aid should come directly to Biafran enclaves, but such a proposal was rejected by the Nigerian delegation who suggested that the aid should pass through Nigerian territory before delivering it to Biafrans. Biafran delegation pointed out that agreeing to the Nigerian suggestion was a suicide attempt because the aid might be poisoned by the Nigerian government.⁴⁹ On their side, the Nigerian delegation argued that the Biafran government would use the relief corridor to smuggle weapons. According to Femi Okunnu, "There were indications that some of the flights going to Biafra ostensibly carrying relief materials also carried arms. There were reports of such incidents and so, it was essential that there was an inspection of cargoes."⁵⁰ For Nigerian diplomats, their proposal would be the best for their government to checkmate arms smuggling into the Biafran land and they would do everything to stop arms smuggling to the Biafran territory.

On September 9, 1968, the news of Nigerian troops capturing the city of Aba reached the delegation at the peace conference, immediately, the peace conference ended without a conclusion on the issue of relief corridor. Even though the Addis Ababa peace conference did not achieve its desired goal, the OAU committee members' efforts were commended, particularly in the British Parliament. Despite the failure of the Addis Ababa conference, the OAU organized another peace summit in Algiers to negotiate the conflicting issues.⁵¹ On September 14, 1968, the Algiers peace conference was declared open by the Algiers president, Houari Boumedienne who served as the conference chairman. The summit witnessed the attendance of many African Heads of State and governments. The conference was doomed to fail from the onset because of the constant biased position of African leaders. The host in his opening remark called for the African leaders to uphold Nigeria's territorial integrity.⁵² When negotiation started, the positions of the warring parties remained uncompromised as usual. To reach an agreement, African leaders moved into a voting session to determine whether to support Nigeria or Biafra. The outcome of the voting sent a bad signal to the Biafran delegation and showed the position of OAU in the conflict. Thirty-three countries voted in favor of Nigeria while four voted in favor of Biafra. Rwanda and Botswana votes were undecided.⁵³ The position of the OAU in the conflict shows they were neither ready to look at the root causes of the conflict nor to stop the existing war, but interested in the indivisibility of African nations and maintenance of African borders as it was inherited from the colonial authority.⁵⁴

At the end of the peace summit, the OAU members issued a communiqué that stated that Biafra should cooperate with the Nigerian government to restore peace and stability in the country and maintain

⁴⁸ Sharkdam Wapmuk, "Pan-Africanism in the 21st Century: African Union and the Challenges of Cooperation and Integration in Africa," *Brazilian Journal of International Relations* 10, no. 2 (November 30, 2021): 283–311, <https://doi.org/10.36311/2237-7743.2021.v10n2.p283-311>.

⁴⁹ Walney, "Protecting Our Democracy from Coercion."

⁵⁰ Ademola Orunbon, "Of COVID-19 Lockdowns and Police Extortion," *The Punch Newspaper*, March 12, 2020, <https://punchng.com/of-covid-19-lockdowns-and-police-extortion/>.

⁵¹ Bello, "In Search for Peace in Africa: Organization of African Unity and the Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967-1970."

⁵² Bello, "In Search for Peace in Africa: Organization of African Unity and the Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967-1970."

⁵³ Godfrey Mwakikagile, *Africa 1960-1970: Chronicle and Analysis* (New Africa Press, 2009).

⁵⁴ Anna Sánchez-Caballé, Mercè Gisbert-Cervera, and Francesc Esteve-Mon, "The Digital Competence of University Students: A Systematic Literature Review," *Aloma: Revista de Psicologia, Ciències de l'Educació i de l'Esport* 38, no. 1 (May 19, 2020): 63–74, <https://doi.org/10.51698/aloma.2020.38.1.63-74>.

their intolerance of external intervention to avoid escalation of the conflict. All international bodies, particularly the United Nations and OAU to double their efforts in ensuring peace, and unity in Nigeria and preserve her sovereignty.⁵⁵ The Algiers peace summit was more of a declaration than a peace conference, a pre-arranged and already agreed decision by the OAU member nations to impose their wills on Biafra leaders without looking at the conflicting issues. The organization informed Biafran leaders that the union's position on the conflict remained unchangeable.⁵⁶ The declaration by OAU in the peace summit did not present Biafra as a group fighting for their right to self-determination, but as a rebel that must be crushed.⁵⁷ Biafra leaders and its supporters were disappointed by the OAU's biased position, an organization that was supposed to ensure equity and justice in the continent had taken a side with European powers. Little success the organization made was on the issue of relief material as demonstrated in Niamey and Addis Ababa peace summit. Algeria summit achieved only OAU members' declaration of their support to Nigeria. Biafrans were not moved by the declaration, they were determined to fight till the end and despite the Union's support to Nigeria, the war continued. The unabated nature of the Nigerian-Biafran made the OAU consultative committee arrange for another peace summit in Monrovia, Liberia's capital in 1969.⁵⁸

The Monrovia peace summit lasted from 18 to 19 April 1969.⁵⁹ Arraignment for the peace summit started when Liberian president, William Tubman requested that the Biafran Government send a delegation to Monrovia to negotiate peace without pre-conditions. Biafran diplomats consisting of Sir Louis Mbanefo, Mr Christopher Mojekwu, Chief E. Bassey, and Mr Ignatius Kogbara, were dispatched to Monrovia.⁶⁰ At the conference was a six-member committee of OAU which include Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, Ahmadu Ahidjo of Cameroun, William Tubman of Liberia, Hamani Diori of the Niger Republic, President Joseph Mobutu of the Congo Kinshasa, and Mr Charles Harley of Ghana. The Nigerian delegation was led by Mr Femi Okunu and Mr Allison Ayida.⁶¹

The Monrovia peace summit was conducted in an unusual diplomatic form. After addressing the delegations by the host and emperor of Ethiopia on April 18th, the panel had a closed-door session with the delegation of each party. The speech of the Biafran delegation was delivered by Sir Louis who addressed the panel with a detailed and articulated statement and stated that his government had a proposal to present regarding the issue of ceasefire. When asked by one of the panel members if Biafra was ready to agree on the supervisory force between warring parties? He replied affirmatively if there was peace or ceasefire to supervise. Sir Louis was requested to state the position of Biafra, which he gladly did. Louis pointed out that one of the primary concerns of Biafra's government was the security of her citizens and property. He maintained that Biafrans were ready to embrace one Nigeria, but only desired to know exactly the meaning of the phrase 'One Nigeria'. Both leaders became aware of what Biafrans wanted. President Diori proposed a formula for the peace negotiation. His proposal outlined internal and external security for Biafra with the presence of international forces.⁶² After much deliberation between the committee and Sir Louis, delegations of both sides were called by the panel. On their arrival, Emperor Selassie handed over to Sir Louis a document which was certified by the Nigerian delegation urging Biafra to accept one Nigeria. With this, it was clear to the Biafran delegation that any further discussion would be based on Biafra accepting one Nigeria. The document was rejected by Sir Louis citing that his government was informed that there was no pre-condition for peace negotiation. He informed the panel that his government had seen the proposal before and would not accept it. The summit ended without achieving any of its objectives.⁶³

The Monrovia summit concluded every effort to resolve the conflict through diplomatic means. By late 1969, Biafra started showing signs of collapse in the war front and there were hopes that by 1970, a ceasefire would be achieved. In January 1970, the Nigerian soldiers gained strategic control of

⁵⁵ Mwakikagile, *Africa 1960-1970: Chronicle and Analysis*.

⁵⁶ Ntieyong U Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession, 1966-1970: A Personal Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (Routledge, 2014).

⁵⁷ Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession, 1966-1970: A Personal Account of the Nigerian Civil War*.

⁵⁸ Bello, "In Search for Peace in Africa: Organization of African Unity and the Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967-1970."

⁵⁹ Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend*.

⁶⁰ Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend*.

⁶¹ Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend*.

⁶² Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend*.

⁶³ Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend*.

Biafran territory. The Biafra was decapitated psychologically, militarily, emotionally, and financially. Ojukwu went to the radio to announce to the Biafran to find alternative means for peaceful settlement of the dispute. After his broadcast, he traveled to Ivory Coast one of Biafra's early African supporters, where his longtime friend president Félix Houphouët-Boigny, with French backing, offered him asylum. With the absence of Ojukwu, the chief justice of Biafra, Sir Louis Mbanefo, and Biafra's leading military officer, Gen. Philip Effiong as well as other Biafran officials decided to surrender to the Nigerian government. Effiong went on Biafran radio to announce the submission, urged Biafrans to be calm and encouraged the troops to lay down their arms. He announced that he had initiated negotiations with the federal government of Nigeria and that General Ojukwu had left the nation.⁶⁴ On January 15, 1970, the Biafran officials led by Gen. Effiong, Sir Louis Mbanefo, col. David Ogunewe, M. T. Mbu, and a host of other Biafran military officers, formally surrendered at Dodan Barracks to the Nigerian government. Officials of Nigeria present were, General Yakubu Gowon, Obafemi Awolowo Brigadier Hassan Katsina, etc.⁶⁵ This breakthrough in the conflict was possible because of the Nigerian government's determination that the only solution to the conflict was either Biafran surrender or through military power and Nigeria's continuous arms supplies from the British government and London's determination to sustain and support Lagos to achieve victory over Biafra. Nigeria's victory was meant to be achieved, through starvation of Biafrans if it was impossible to achieve through military means.

The war ended with the quest to implement the Aburi Accord. The accord was aimed at promoting collective responsibility, limiting federal power and ensuring that each regions in Nigeria would have more autonomy. The excessive influence of the Federal government military superiority gained excessive grounds over the Biafran forces. The Nigerian government blockade and starvation of the Biafran people promoted the surrender of the Biafran side. There were many levels of diplomatic initiatives towards peace from the United Kingdom, Soviet Union and the Organisation of African Unity that promoted peaceful settlements. The fall of Enugu to the Nigerian forces, considering its capital status to the Southeast led to the end of the war.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated wartime diplomacy in the context of the Nigerian-Biafran war. War is a game that involves many actors and supporters and any actor who holds a strategic position would not like to lose such a position. Throughout the period of war, all odds favored Nigeria. Most of the mediators were in support of a united Nigeria. OAU was biased in such a way that her prejudiced position caused divisions within the union. Peace summits organized by the union were not aimed to resolve the conflict, but to reiterate their unequivocal support to Nigeria. The union in all her diplomatic summits did not deliberate on the root causes of the conflict to address the grievances of Biafran even if Biafra eventually agreed to be part of one Nigeria. When Sir Louis Mbanefo raised such an important issue at the Monrovia peace summit, it was ignored. Global bodies such as commonwealth of the Nations and the United Nations were neither neutral in the conflict. Major global powers had a strategic interest in the conflict. British interest was purely economical, to keep Nigeria together for her economic ends. Britain became the main source of weapon supplies to the Nigerian government and exerted much influence on third parties, especially the OAU and commonwealth secretary who tried to mediate the conflict. The United States' interest aligned with that of Britain and would not want to jeopardize their relationship. The Soviet Union was not left out. The Soviets supplied Nigeria with military planes and mercenaries. The constant military and diplomatic support from these three strange bedfellows and OAU gave the Nigerian government strategic control of the game. In the diplomatic summits, it was clear that Nigeria did not want to compromise on a win-win situation, even when Biafra diplomats presented a proposal that would achieve a ceasefire. Nigeria's game plan was zero-sum, Biafra must surrender either through diplomatic means or on the battlefield. In all the peace summits, Nigeria delayed, postponed, and made many flimsy excuses, and prolonged the peace conferences because of intensified British arms shipment to Nigeria. Sir Louis pointed out that from the onset, it was obvious that Nigeria was forced by Britain and her allies to enter peace negotiations with Biafra. The objective was to go through the

⁶⁴ Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend*.

⁶⁵ Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend*.

motions of peace summits to delay friendly countries from supporting and recognizing Biafra's sovereignty.⁶⁶ The asymmetrical nature of the entire diplomatic process and lack of neutral power that could command the respect of the belligerents led to the defeat of Biafra on the battlefield.

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⁶⁶ Mbanefo, "How Nigeria Broke up Kampala Peace Talks."

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