

## NATO Political Committee's Deliberations on the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970: A Historical Analysis

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### *Abstract*

This study examines discussions of the NATO Political Committee during the Nigerian Civil War. The study relied on primary sources such as archival materials obtained from the British National Archives Kew London, NATO Archives, and secondary sources. The NATO Political Committee discussed the Nigerian Civil War at regular intervals between 1967 and 1969 with top priority on foreign military assistance to Nigeria and Biafra. The author argues that the western restrictive policy on military aid that caused increased communist presence in Nigeria had prompted the response of the Committee to the conflict. While the Committee's Member-States were allergic to external influence capable of endangering pro-western interests in Nigeria, discussing the war was meant to minimize its threat to regional and global security.

**Keywords:** NATO, Political Committee, Nigerian Civil War, Biafra

### *Introduction*

On 1 October 1960, Nigeria gained its independence from British colonial rule.<sup>1</sup> On 6 July 1967, the country was engulfed in a civil war which was fought between the Federal Military Government of Nigeria, led by Major-General Yakubu Gowon and the defunct Republic of Biafra, led by Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu.<sup>2</sup> The Nigerian Civil War was a very crucial international issue in the 1960s. The major feature of the conflict is the intervention of international organizations and external forces such as Britain, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, France, and Portugal in the civil war.<sup>3</sup> The NATO Political Committee (PC) had discussed the civil war at regular intervals with reference to arms supply to Nigeria and Biafra, and the threat of an increasing Soviet military assistance to Nigeria.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nwankwo Arthur Agwuncha and Samuel U. Ifejika, *The Making of a Nation: Biafra* (London: C. Hurst and Company, 1969) 3.

<sup>2</sup> Godfrey B. Warren, Petroleum and the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970. *The Fletcher Forum*. Vol.3 No.2, (2000):66.

<sup>3</sup> Talking Point on the Situation in the Nigeria/Biafra and in Particular the Need for Humanitarian Assistance for the Western European Union Ministerial Meeting Held in Rome on 21-22 October, 1968 Brief No. 4, File No. JWN 2/2/Part A/5A368/West African Dept./Tile: the Nigerian Civil War and Western European Union, 1 January, 1968/31 December, 1969, Foreign and Commonwealth Office Papers 65/240, The National Archives, Kew, London.

<sup>4</sup> Confidential: Minute on the Meeting of NATO Expert Working Group in Paris France No. 20706 from J.C. W. Bushell United Kingdom Delegation to NATO Paris 16e to P.H. Moberly in the West African Department Commonwealth Office London, 31 May, 1967 File No. TX 2/3/6C1068/West and General African Dept./ Title: Nigeria, External, Multilateral, NATO Attitude towards the Nigerian Civil War 30 May, 1967-31 December, 1969, TNA.

This study analyses the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Political Committee's discussions on the Nigerian Civil War especially how the Netherlands questioned the acumen of western policy with regards to arms supplies to Nigeria and whether that policy had allowed Communist influence in Nigeria to escalate. It further examines how Britain and United States used the forum to contend against Soviet military actions in the war as a way of defending their existing policy in the dispute. The research adopted historical narrative approach for data analysis and relied on primary sources such as archival materials obtained from the National Archives Kew London and secondary sources. The author argues that the policy on restrictive military aid at the beginning of the conflict that paved way for increased Soviet Union presence in Nigeria had prompted the response of the NATO Political Committee's discussions on the conflict. While the Committee's Member-States were allergic to external influence capable of endangering pro-western interests in Nigeria, discussing the war was meant to minimize its threat to regional and global security. Even as the NATO PAC meetings on the Nigerian conflict afforded the great powers like Britain the opportunity to defend their interests in the conflict and let other Member-States know the menace of Nigeria's acceptance of Soviet Union military aid, the need to draw a lesson from the Nigerian situation on foreign influence in Africa in terms of arms deliveries caused the Committee to debate the war. The PC discussions on Nigeria was situated within the wider context of foreign military assistance to Africa and identifying suitable ways of carrying out arms and defense control due to perceived communist clandestine activities on the continent at the time.

### ***NATO Political Committee's Deliberations on the Nigerian Civil War***

The Committee of Political Advisers was created to assist the Permanent Representatives and Secretary-General, Manlio Brosio, in discharging their responsibilities for political consultation by undertaking all necessary preparatory work for them.<sup>5</sup> The PC discusses and exchanges information and assessments on political and regional developments of interest to Allies. In the Committee, individual member countries have a key role in proposing topics for the committee's agenda, making experts available to inform the debate and providing food-for-thought papers and political assessments.<sup>6</sup>

Although the main purpose of NATO is to ensure collective defense of its members within the area covered by the Treaty, it was evident that their security and wellbeing can be seriously affected by developments outside that area.<sup>7</sup> Since 1960 the Committee had monitored internal political situation in Nigeria. The coup d'état of January and July 1966 heightened concerns of PC on Nigeria considering that if action was not taken to tackle the issue, the pro-Western stance of the country would suffer. The Alliance had initially established several specialized groups working on specific subjects outside the Atlantic area for better political consultation.<sup>8</sup> Based on this standpoint, the NATO Expert Working Group met in Paris

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<sup>5</sup> Note on The Committee of Political Advisers from Joachim Jaenicke to Professor C.L. Patijn Metting of Rapporteurs Foreign Office Bonn, 20 July 1967, NATO Archives. Retrieved 9 November, 2021 from [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_115938.htl#](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_115938.htl#).

<sup>6</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 2014. Political Committee. Last Updated 11 December, 2014. Retrieved 9 November, 2021 from [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_115938.htl#](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_115938.htl#).

<sup>7</sup> NATO Confidential: Memorandum on Developments in Regions Outside the NATO Area Reference No. F/10748/67/6001 from J.H.O. Insinger Acting Permanent Representative to NATO Secretary-General Manlio Brosio, Paris 5 October 1967, NATO Archives. Retrieved 9 November, 2021 from [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_115938.htl#](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_115938.htl#).

<sup>8</sup> NATO Confidential: Sub-Group 4: Report of Professor Patijn on Developments in Regions outside the NATO Area (No. A) The Role of NATO in World Affairs. Retrieved 9 November, 2021 from [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_115938.htl#](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_115938.htl#).

in April 1967 and recommended that the “alliance should maintain close consultation on political developments in Nigeria.”<sup>9</sup>

The distress of NATO about the Nigerian situation increased following the declaration of the Republic of Biafra by Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu on 30 May, 1967. The Biafran Question was an internal security threat with global implications in the context of East-West relations and their positions in Africa. As W.M Newton rightly said in a letter sent to the Political Advisers, “the breakaway of Biafra was at least as important as the secession of Katanga which excited world interest to a high degree.”<sup>10</sup> For this reason, the PC conveyed series of meetings to consider various aspects of developments in Nigeria and how those would affect the long-term relationship with the country.

Consequently, on 6 June 1967, the PC held its first meeting on Nigeria. The agenda of the focused on the letter the Nigerian Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Major-General Yakubu Gowon, sent to all nations of the world including the NATO Member-States on 30 May 1967 shortly after the Republic of Biafra was declared by Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. Gowon admonished them not to accord recognition to Biafra or have anything to do with Ojukwu’s leadership. In the letter, Gowon declared:

My appeal to you is to refrain from doing anything that will impair the corporate existence, sovereignty, and integrity of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. I hardly need to add that any attempt at the recognition of the Republic of Biafra as a sovereign state will amount to interference in the internal affairs of my country and will be regarded as an unfriendly act...<sup>11</sup>

The Member-states present at the meeting were asked whether they received Gowon’s letter of appeal. While Norway confirmed receiving the communication, the Canadian delegate revealed that they acknowledged an appeal from Gowon asking them not to have anything to do with Biafra. British official, John Bushell told the Member-States that “the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, received a message from Gowon immediately after secession asking us not to recognize the East as a separate state. A short reply was sent, expressing Britain’s sympathy for Nigeria’s difficulties and the hope that these would still be settled peacefully.”<sup>12</sup> Gowon was confident that the majority of NATO countries would not cooperate with Biafra if

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<sup>9</sup> Confidential: Minute on the Meeting of NATO Expert Working Group in Paris France No. 20706 from J.C. W. Bushell United Kingdom Delegation to NATO Paris 16e to P.H. Moberly in the West African Department Commonwealth Office London, 31 May, 1967 File No. TX 2/3/6C1068/West and General African Dept./ Title: Nigeria, External, Multilateral, NATO Attitude towards the Nigerian Civil War 30 May, 1967-31 December, 1969, TNA.

<sup>10</sup> NATO Confidential: Minute on African Interlude from W.M. Newton to ASG Political Advisers Reference No. RS/67/90, 11 July 1967, NATO Archives, Retrieved 9 November, 2021 from [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_115938.html](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_115938.html) .

<sup>11</sup> Text of a Message Sent to all Heads of State and Government by Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon Head of the Federal Military Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 30 May, 1967 File No. TX 3/28/Part A/ 6C1066/ West and General African Dept./Title: Nigeria, Political Affairs, External, Eastern Secession, Recognition by other Countries other than United Kingdom, 30 May, 1967- 31 December, 1969, FCO 38/249, TNA.

<sup>12</sup> Confidential: NATO Discussions on Nigeria Held on 6 June 1967 from R. Thomas in the United Kingdom Delegation to NATO Paris to P.H. Moberly in the West and General African Department and African Political Department in the Commonwealth Office, 6 June, 1967, FCO 38/231, TNA.

they wanted to maintain diplomatic and economic relations with sovereign Nigeria that operated more pro-Western policies than any other country in Africa.

Among issues raised at the meeting were questions about Gowon and Ojukwu's foreign policies. The Canadian delegate commented that both sides were pro-West. But they were under pressure to switch sides by their supporters who tended to be considerably more radical. The British delegate said that both Gowon and Ojukwu were both preoccupied with Nigerian affairs, and their attitude to the outside world was largely conditioned by the attitude of foreign countries to Biafra's secession. However, the Federal government was pro-Western and had always taken a reasonable line at the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly. Ojukwu tended to accept help by anyone willing to recognize and do business with Biafra. For example, he obtained arms from Eastern Europe. In his efforts to secure support from more radical African countries Ojukwu had presented himself as a radical when compared with the Federal Military Government of Nigeria just to bring Biafra more closely to the arena of international politics.<sup>13</sup>

During the deliberation, the Soviet Union was mentioned as a possible alternative backer of the Federal Military Government of Nigeria. The reason was that Moscow and its allies were increasingly active throughout the world including Africa using both overt and covert means to enhance Soviet policies in under-developing countries and to undermine those of Western nations. On the overt side, they capitalized on a vast diplomatic, economic and military presence through exportation of large sum of arms to military and radical regimes. On the covert side, Moscow had a vigorous program of active measures and other clandestine activities which they undertook to influence regimes, support and guide the activities of Communist parties and media organizations. NATO nations feared that the Soviet would exploit the porous and volatile political situation in Nigeria to establish a presence in the country in such a manner that pro-Western interest would be undermine.<sup>14</sup> Arms and communist experts had arrived in Africa at an alarming rate and were supplied to military regimes like Nigeria. By looking at this situation squarely in the face with effective and beneficial realism, NATO vowed never to relent in the efforts to prevent the spread of communism in Africa.<sup>15</sup> Her engagement in the civil war was an opportunity to undertake this task through the instrumentality of the PAC.

The Committee discussed Nigeria again on 19 June 1967. The first point dealt with was how to reply to Gowon's message to NATO Member-States. Nine representatives were aware of such message being received but the methods on how to handle them differed. The Belgian representative said that they received an unsigned and stenciled circular message which seemed to call for no reply. The French representative said that they had received a similar communication; a polite acknowledgement was later sent to Nigeria, but nothing of substance. The Greek representative said that his authorities were considering how to reply to the letter and the German representative thought no reply should be sent because the Nigerian Ambassador in Berlin called on the Foreign Ministry earlier in June 1967 and was told that the Federal Republic of Germany would not recognize Biafra. The Canadian and Italian Representatives thought of sending some reply to Gowon. The US representative said that the United States Government had received a telegram and a letter of 2 June 1967 from Gowon.

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<sup>13</sup> Confidential: NATO Discussions on Nigeria Held on 6 June 1967 from R. Thomas in the United Kingdom Delegation to NATO Paris to P.H. Moberly in the West and General African Department and African Political Department in the Commonwealth Office, 6 June, 1967, FCO 38/231, TNA.

<sup>14</sup> Unclassified: HPSCI Briefing 20 September 1983. Document No. CIA-RDP85B00263R000200170005-9. Central Intelligence Agency Archives (Thereinafter CIAA).

<sup>15</sup> NATO Secret: Memorandum for Director Standing Group/Subject: Situation in Africa-Portuguese Delegation to NATO Reference No. LOM 277/65/from Standing Group Representative Major-General W.W. Stromberg, 5 August 1965, NATO Archives. Retrieved 9 November, 2021 from [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_115938.html#](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_115938.html#).

Brief and non-committal replies were sent to Gowon. He added that the US was not aware that any country in the world had yet recognized Biafra.<sup>16</sup>

Arms policy was an important point at the Committee's meetings. As argued by the US Deputy Permanent Representative in the NATO "deliberations in this Council are highly relevant in the case of the arms race issues."<sup>17</sup> Members voted that arms should subsequently be discussed. The PC's gathering held on 27 June 1967 had arms supply as its principal subject. On arms, the US representative explained the US government's policy in the wake of outbreak of civil war in Nigeria. No US weapons or ammunition were permitted for export to Nigeria. The ban applied to the sale, resale and transfer of arms. The US Government also examined carefully any applications for exports of items that were of even marginal value for war. The German delegate said that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bonn had asked all responsible authorities in Germany to refuse the export of war materials to Nigeria. The French delegate repeated what he said in the previous meeting, and added that a contract for light armoured cars, engine ledgers and Panhards were suspended. The Danish, Dutch and Canadian representatives said that arms exports to Nigeria would be refused. The last of these added that the Nigerian authorities had earlier in 1967 asked Canada for twenty CL 41G jet trainers and that this request was turned down.<sup>18</sup>

Taking the discussion further, British delegate, John Bushell, spoke about the British arms supply policy to Nigeria. Britain was in a different position from other NATO member governments. British traditional links with Nigeria, a fellow member of the Commonwealth imposed obligations on her to render military assistance to Nigeria and was unreasonably expected to refuse to continue delivering the arms and ammunition supplied in the past to the Federal Government of Nigeria simply because the latter was at that moment trying to maintain unity against a secessionist movement.<sup>19</sup> During the civil war, Britain jettisoned a supply of military aircraft to the Nigerian government because of the fear that it would significantly alter the European military balance in Nigeria.

The French delegate said that Nigeria had sought to purchase certain armaments in France and that no deliveries from France were authorized.<sup>20</sup> France had consistently denied her military incursions in the conflict through a supply of arms to Biafra army, despite numerous evidence uncovered by great powers like Britain.

On the diplomatic level, some points were made for the recognition of Biafra. The German delegate said that two Biafra emissaries approached the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bonn to persuade the German government to recognize Biafra but the request was not received. The Canadian diplomat said that Ojukwu sent a letter to the Canadian government which centered on the question of recognition of Biafra but the Canadian government did not intend to acknowledge this communication. The Portuguese delegate said that since his country

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<sup>16</sup> Confidential: Record of Meeting of NATO Political Committee Held on 19 June 1967 in Paris from United Kingdom Delegation to NATO in Paris J.C.W. Bushell to P.H. Moberly in the West and General African Department Commonwealth Office, 20 June, 20 June, 1967, FCO 38/231, TNA.

<sup>17</sup> NATO Unclassified: Memorandum for Director International Military Staff/Subject: Middle-East-Meeting of North Atlantic Council 19 July, 1967/ Reference No. LOM 161/67/LOCOM 8130/IMS Control No. 0472 from Brigadier-General Henry C. Newcomer for the Office of the Military Committee Representative Shape Belgium/MCREP MISC No. 4957, 19 July 1967, NATO Archives. Retrieved 9 November, 2021 from [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_115938.htl#](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_115938.htl#) .

<sup>18</sup> Confidential: Record of Meeting of NATO Political Committee Held on 27 June, 1967 in Paris from J.C.W. Bushell United Kingdom Delegation to NATO in Paris 16e, to P.H. Moberly in the West and General African Department Commonwealth Office, 27 June, 1967, FCO 38/231, TNA.

<sup>19</sup> Talking Point on the Situation in the Nigeria/Biafra and in particular the Need for Humanitarian Assistance for the Western European Union Ministerial Meeting Held in Rome on 21-22 October, 1968 Brief No. 4, TNA.

<sup>20</sup> Confidential: Record of Meeting of NATO Political Committee Held on 19 June 1967 in Paris from United Kingdom Delegation to NATO in Paris J.C.W. Bushell to P.H. Moberly in the West and General African Department Commonwealth Office, 20 June, 20 June, 1967, FCO 38/231, TNA.

had no relations with Nigeria, Portugal had received no communications on the need not to recognize Biafra. However, his government was very much interested in hearing the other governments' views in the Political Committee on the events in Nigeria.<sup>21</sup> Summing up, the Chairman said “on this point that it appeared that no NATO country or indeed any other appeared to have thought of recognizing Biafra. On the other hand, only the Federal Republic of Germany had specifically said that they would not accord recognition to Biafra.”<sup>22</sup>

At its meeting held on 11 July 1967 the PAC exchanged views on various aspects of the Nigerian situation. British delegate informed the Committee that British policy on arms had remained unchanged. He assured the Committee that Britain would not export sophisticated weapons which would add a new military element to the Nigerian Civil War. The statement from the British delegate was noted with some interest and both the US and German representatives confirmed that their governments had banned arms exports to Nigeria.<sup>23</sup>

During the meeting held on 16 November 1967 the UK representative Bushell said that whilst a sudden military breakthrough by one side or the other could not altogether be ruled out, a quick military victory by either side did not look unlikely unless it was triggered off by some kind of internal or political upheaval. The outcome of the fighting was that both sides would become increasingly bogged down from a military point of view. In the long run, the Federal side might be able to gain the upper hand, but the longer the fighting lasted the greater was the risk of loss of civilian lines, of inter-tribal disorders and if things got out of hand.<sup>24</sup>

However, it was difficult to assess the military and political effects of an arms supply from the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia such as military aircraft. These could have a marked psychological effect on the opposing troops if long-term maintenance problems could be overcome and pilots recruited. The Federal authorities seemed to be aware of the dangers of developing a dependent attitude on the Soviet Union and considered that they were able to take care of these dangers. Despite the action of the Soviet Union and Czechs in supplying aircraft to Nigeria, Britain thought that the best policy for the NATO allies was to continue to exercise the greatest possible restraint in the conflict.<sup>25</sup>

The Canadian representative said that the remarkably large Nigerian attendance at the Soviet Embassy on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Soviet October Revolution of 1917, taken with pro-Soviet comments made by Nigerian government officials, suggested that Soviet Union influence had sharply increased in Nigeria at the expense of Western influence. All the enthusiasm for the Soviets was merely a way of saying thank you for their aircraft. Canada offered a ship or aircraft as a form of neutral ground for a meeting between Federal and Biafra representatives. The Dutch representative said that his government felt some concern that the Western restrictive policy on arms had opened the way for an increased communist presence and influence in Nigeria. He suggested that the Political Committee

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<sup>21</sup> J.C.W. Bushell to P.H. Moberly 27 June, 1967, FCO 38/231, TNA.

<sup>22</sup> Confidential: Record of Meeting of NATO Political Committee Held on 27 June, 1967 in Paris from J.C.W. Bushell United Kingdom Delegation to NATO in Paris 16e, to P.H. Moberly in the West and General African Department Commonwealth Office, 27 June, 1967, FCO 38/231, TNA.

<sup>23</sup> Confidential: Record of Meeting of NATO Political Committee Held on 11 July, 1967 in Paris from J.C.W. Bushell United Kingdom Delegation to NATO in Paris 16e, to P.H. Moberly in the West and General African Department Commonwealth Office, 11 July, 1967, FCO 38/231, TNA.

<sup>24</sup> <sup>24</sup> Confidential: Record of Meeting of NATO Political Committee Held on 16 November, 1967 in Paris from J.C.W. Bushell United Kingdom Delegation to NATO in Paris 16e, to P.H. Moberly in the West and General African Department Commonwealth Office, 16 November, 1967, FCO 38/231, TNA.

<sup>25</sup> J.C.W. Bushell to P.H. Moberly 16 November, 1967, FCO 38/231, TNA.

should discuss whether this policy accorded with Western interests and whether any lesson could be learnt for the future.<sup>26</sup>

A very interesting comment was made by the German delegate during the Committee meeting on 21 November 1967. He said that his government's policy on arms remained unchanged. That is, the Federal Republic of Germany would not allow the export of any arms to a crisis area. He observed that a few Germans remained in Nigeria in connection with the training of the Nigerian Air Force, of which the Germans took the initiative some years ago. The German delegate also revealed that a certain number of small arms and ammunition to the found their way to Nigerian authorities. He was reminded that this latest comment appeared to contradict his statement that no exports were allowed to a crisis area, and he confessed himself somewhat puzzled.<sup>27</sup>

At the Committee's discussions held on 5 December 1967, the Canadian delegate opened the meeting with the comment that his government applied a tightly restrictive policy on arms exports. The Canadian policy on arms was understood by top Nigerian officials. The French representative said that while his government was opposed to arms sales to either side in a conflict of this sort, they decided to allow the sale of anti-tank guns to Nigeria which was regarded as not a serious anti-personnel weapon. They had sold no arms to Biafra but they were aware that at least the B26 from French sources reached Biafra and that steps was taken to prevent this sort of trade in arms.<sup>28</sup>

The Italian representative said that it was the policy of his government to avoid introducing sophisticated weapons into an area of conflict and his government refused to endorse contracts offered to Italian companies by the Nigerian government notably in connection with aircraft supply. The Italian government was keen to see this consultation continued in NATO. The Dutch representative commented that the discussion did not provide a satisfactory answer to his question on whether the Western policy concerning arms supplies had been wise and whether NATO member-states have allowed Communist influence to grow dangerously in Nigeria. It would be better if consultation on arms policies had been started at an earlier stage. The Chairman spoke about the possibly of African experts being invited to the next session to conduct a study on arms supplies and the lessons of the Nigerian Civil War; and the Dutch representative agreed to think this over.<sup>29</sup>

During the 19 December 1967 meeting of the Political Committee, there was a further round of discussions on Nigeria. No one had any further hard information on the civil war, but the Portuguese took the opportunity of reading out a sort of denial of virtually everything that was said in the Press or elsewhere about Portuguese involvement in the Biafra affair. The representative said that his authorities considered that the Nigerian conflict was an internal affair. They did not authorize anyone to enlist in the Biafran Armed Forces, did not know of any Portuguese mercenaries in Biafra. They also said they had no idea where the Portuguese arms discovered in a Dutch ship came from and were quite certain that they were not loaded in a Portuguese port. There was no proof of any kind that the crew of a bomber which crashed in Ikoyi Lagos had been Portuguese. The Portuguese delegate went further to admit that aircraft had landed in Portuguese airports en-route for Biafra. All their papers had been in order and

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<sup>26</sup> Confidential: Record of Meeting of NATO Political Committee Held on 16 November, 1967 in Paris from J.C.W. Bushell United Kingdom Delegation to NATO in Paris 16e, to P.H. Moberly in the West and General African Department Commonwealth Office, 16 November, 1967, FCO 38/231, TNA.

<sup>27</sup> Confidential: Record of Meeting of NATO Political Committee Held on 21 November, 1967 in Paris from J.C.W. Bushell United Kingdom Delegation to NATO in Paris 16e, to P.H. Moberly in the West and General African Department Commonwealth Office, 21 November, 1967, FCO 38/231, TNA.

<sup>28</sup> Confidential: Record of Meeting of NATO Political Committee Held on 5 December, 1967 in Paris from J.C.W. Bushell United Kingdom Delegation to NATO in Paris 16e, to O.I. Booth in the West and General African Department Commonwealth Office, 5 December, 1967, FCO 38/231, TNA.

<sup>29</sup> J.C.W. Bushell to O.I. Booth, 5 December, 1967, FCO 38/231, TNA.

the aircraft was owned by non-Portuguese European companies. Portuguese authorities had no legal right to interfere with their cargoes which presumably included arms. The aircraft in question were generally in theory on their way to countries other than Biafra.<sup>30</sup> The West was concerned about the escalating situation in Nigeria in the wake of great power rivalry involving the Soviet Union and some European nations. Thus, discussing the war at the NATO Political Committee gatherings was meant to fashion out ways of not allowing the conflict to degenerate and minimize its threat to regional and global security.

### *NATO Discussions on Arms for Nigeria and its African Contexts*

On 6 February, 1968 the PC members proposed to examine the effect of arms deliveries on the stability of developing countries, particularly in cases where the Soviet Union was involved, taking Nigeria as the model. The Committee was to identify suitable questions to put to the Disarmament Experts to deliberate on the matter.<sup>31</sup>

When the Committee held its meeting on 15 February 1968 the Dutch delegate led off the discussion in general terms. He said that his authorities were not satisfied with the results of previous discussions of this sort with the Alliance. As a result of discussion on 27 June 1967 about arms supply policy to Nigeria, the NATO countries imposed strict ban on themselves for the supply of sophisticated weapons to the combatants in the war. The same consideration applied to the delivery of small arms and ammunition. Consequently, the Nigerians had turned to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to obtain sophisticated weapons. The Nigerian Army had grown too many times its pre-war size, a likelihood which the NATO countries should have realized when hostilities began. They should have responded more fully to the reasonable requests of the Federal authorities. Having in mind the importance of this subject for black Africa as a whole, the Dutch authorities hoped that fuller consultations would take place in future within NATO.<sup>32</sup>

The Canadian delegate pointed out that one reason for the less than fruitful results of earlier consultations was the opposing point of view of some NATO members including Canada. Canadians felt that under-developed countries should use their scanty reserves in a more sensibly manner than in the purpose of arms. Canada was interested from the point of view of a supplier of aid. Officials in Ottawa had calculated that the last conflict between India and Pakistan, for instance, had wasted in the space of time the equivalent of Canadian aid for thirty years. The Canadian view was that military hardware should, as far as possible, be denied to under-developed countries, both from the perspective of aid and in the context of reaching an eventual goal of world disarmament. The British delegate John Bushell to a large extent associated himself with the Canadian statement while recognizing that Britain was presented with a dilemma in the civil war.<sup>33</sup> According to Bushell:

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<sup>30</sup> Confidential: Record of Meeting of NATO Political Committee Held on 20 December, 1967 in Paris from R. Thomas United Kingdom Delegation to NATO in Paris 16e, to O.I. Booth in the West and General African Department Commonwealth Office, 22 December, 1967, FCO 38/231, TNA.

<sup>31</sup> Confidential: Record of Meeting of NATO Political Committee Held on 20 December, 1967 in Paris from R. Thomas United Kingdom Delegation to NATO in Paris 16e, to O.I. Booth in the West and General African Department Commonwealth Office, 22 December, 1967, FCO 38/231, TNA.

<sup>32</sup> Confidential: Record of Meeting of NATO Political Committee Held on February, 1968 in Paris on Arms for Sub-Saharan Africa from J.C.W. United Kingdom Delegation to NATO in Paris 16e, to T.W. Crosthwaite Defence Supply Department in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 15 February, 1968, FCO 38/231, TNA.

<sup>33</sup> Confidential: Record of Meeting of NATO Political Committee Held on February, 1968 in Paris on Arms for Sub-Saharan Africa from J.C.W. United Kingdom Delegation to NATO in Paris 16e, to T.W. Crosthwaite Defence Supply Department in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 15 February, 1968, FCO 38/231, TNA.

We certainly wished to exclude weapons of mass destruction from all-black African countries, but naturally, we had no control over the arms export activities of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, nor of countries such as Sweden and Switzerland, nor potential suppliers such as Japan and India. I agreed with the Dutch point that one result was that the Soviets had got into Nigeria further attested by the arrival of the two IL28s jet aircraft and three fast patrol boats. Nevertheless, one had to remember that the Soviets had problems on their side such as the Middle East in which they had seen so much of their loss of military aid.<sup>34</sup>

The British delegate said that the UK-NATO Mission in Brussels should continue to consult on this subject within NATO, but suggested that the topic might have to be considered on a case by case basis since they admitted that no principles evolved on the supply of arms to under-developed countries. The Chairman of the meeting agreed that the discussion in the Political Committee had in June 1967 been entirely theoretical. He added that Western delivery of arms might result in the Soviet Union delivering even more, and thus starting an arms race. The American delegate agreed that it was American policy to avoid slipping into an East-West Cold War confrontation in Africa to evade an arms race on the continent.

The Dutch representative still felt that 1967 discussions had reached a general conclusion to limit the granting of export licenses to Nigeria. His authorities appreciated the Canadian and British point of view and hoped that NATO countries would keep each other informed about arms deliveries to under-developed countries like Nigeria.<sup>35</sup> This led the Chairman to remind the delegates of the discussion on “Regional Conventional Arms Transfers” for which the Danish representative articulated, circulating copies of a draft United Nations resolutions before the meeting. There followed a procedure discussion as to whether this subject was best dealt with by the Disarmament Experts or the NATO African Experts. It was decided that it would be best to see what came out of the Disarmers discussion before involving other groups.<sup>36</sup> The need to draw a lesson from the Nigerian situation regarding foreign influence in Africa in terms of arms deliveries prompted the discussion of the war by the Committee. The discussions took place within the wider consciousness of foreign military assistance to Africa especially identifying suitable ways of carrying out arms and defense control, given the perceived communist subversion on the continent at the time.

## **Conclusion**

The NATO Political Committee discussed the Nigerian Civil War at regular intervals with reference to arms supply and international recognition of Biafra. The Committee’s discussion of the war created the chance to increase understanding among Member-States of

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<sup>34</sup> Confidential: Record of Meeting of NATO Political Committee Held on February, 1968 in Paris on Arms for Sub-Saharan Africa from J.C.W. United Kingdom Delegation to NATO in Paris 16e, to T.W. Crosthwaite Defence Supply Department in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 15 February, 1968, FCO 38/231, TNA.

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the Nigerian conflict and their attitude towards it. While some member states had regularly questioned the western policy concerning arms supplies to both sides of the conflict and whether the result of that policy had not been to allow Communist influence in Nigeria to grow dangerously, others such as Britain and the United States were highly concerned about the growing dependence of the Nigerian government on the Soviet Union for arms supplies to supplement those available from the United Kingdom and elsewhere, which created a new situation in the war such as the perceived beginning of what might become a major communist penetration in Nigeria and arms race in Africa. In private and discreet contacts at the Committee's meeting, the delegates were opened to persuasion about the common danger to all in Europe and North America of Communist penetration of Nigeria which would continue so long as the war was prolonged. Nigeria was potentially, in African terms, a major regional power. It was in the best interests of NATO Members that Nigeria should be stable, pro-western, prosperous, moderate, and united. This was the main reason NATO Political Committee opted to deliberate on the civil war. NATO's limitation in the conflict was based on the fact that the conflict was regarded as an African affair under the jurisdiction of the Organization of African Unity. Most of its members mainly Britain and the United States believed that the establishment of an OAU Consultative Committee for Nigeria represented the best approach for any Afro-Asian initiative in the war. The OAU support for a solution based on the unity of Nigeria boosted the British and American confidence that any deliberations on the war should be through the OAU. Nevertheless, the NATO Political Committee's discussions of the fighting stemmed from the desirability of the Committee for proper coordination of arms supplies policies of its member-states in the Nigerian conflict. NATO was anxious about the fact that its member states should draw a lesson from the Nigerian situation and foreign influence in Africa in terms of arms deliveries. Hence, her discussions of the military situation in Nigeria had been within the wider context of foreign military assistance to Africa to identifying the suitable ways of carrying out arms and defence control because of the perceived Communist subversion on the continent.