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Nigeria's Role in West African Regional Integration: A Case Study of ECOWAS (2022–2023)

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Abstract

This study examines Nigeria's role in the regional integration of West Africa, focusing on its engagement with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) between 2022 and 2023. Nigeria's Afrocentric foreign policy doctrine positions the country as a regional leader, emphasizing collective security, economic cooperation, and political stability. Despite significant financial, military, and diplomatic contributions, measurable integration outcomes, such as trade connectivity, institutional harmonization, and industrial diversification, remain limited, highlighting a disconnect between Nigeria's ambitions and regional results. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study combines qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with key policymakers, ECOWAS officials, foreign affairs experts, and academics, alongside quantitative analysis of Nigeria's contributions and integration metrics. The research applies national role theory and hegemonic stability theory to interpret Nigeria's foreign policy posture and leadership behavior in West Africa. Findings indicate that while Nigeria retains hegemonic influence through institutional and financial mechanisms, structural, political, and economic constraints hinder the translation of commitment into substantive integration outcomes. This underscores the importance of aligning national policy instruments with regional objectives to enhance effectiveness. The study provides empirical and theoretical insights into the dynamics of Nigerian leadership in ECOWAS, offering a nuanced understanding of the interplay between foreign policy ambition and regional integration performance.

Introduction

Globally, institutions of government have become very crucial in the process of policymaking and enforcement. In all states, to a greater or lesser degree, foreign policy emerges out of an institutional process, and in most cases, it is extremely rare for foreign policy decision-making to be the responsibility of a single individual or a small group. Nigeria's foreign policy is Afrocentric in nature. The idea of collective security spearheaded by Nigeria in the West Africa sub-region is to maintain peace and stability, which is key to achieving fruitful regional integration. Several scholarly articles have indicated that Nigeria shouldered the burden of ECOMOG in West Africa (Agbo, 2021). Nigeria championed the initiative and timely intervention of crisis in Liberia using the ECOMOG platform. Regional collective security is predicated on contiguity and propinquity.

The framework of Nigerian foreign policy formed the basic perception of how it sees the world from ideological, political, economic, and religious standpoints. These factors decide its foreign policy response to both sub-regional and regional affairs.

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Nigeria is a key player in West Africa sub-region, Africa, and to some extent, the global stage, especially in the activities of the regional inter-governmental organization, ECOWAS. Nigerian foreign policy approach towards ECOWAS agenda is based on her Afrocentric foreign policy doctrine which is the premise of its foreign policy direction after attaining independence to support the cause of African countries struggling for independence in the 1960s. Nigerian Afrocentric foreign policy doctrine was effective at the regional level which was directed at its West African neighbors because Nigeria sees the West African region as its natural territory hence her drive to positively integrate the region.

The Afrocentric foreign policy doctrine has been the cardinal point of Nigerian foreign policy direction over the years. According to Akintola, Nigeria has maintained a relatively consistent foreign policy because the country had experienced varied forms of government within this period. Right from independence Africa was the centerpiece of Nigeria's foreign policy with emphasis on the emancipation, development, and unity of Africans both within and outside the continent (Akintola, 2022).

The enormous contribution of Nigeria to regional development and integration coincided with the emergence of the Economic Community of West African State (ECOWAS) in 1975 as an inter-governmental regional organization. The effort was aimed at economic integration and growth of the West African region which Nigeria sees as her primary responsibility. The end of the bipolar world in the 2022s allowed regional state actors to play more active role in regional affairs, which also gave rise to Nigerian influence in West African regional affairs. In the assessment of Otunbajo, Nigeria could play a leadership role in Africa because of the dwindled strategic significance of major external powers (Otunbajo, 2021). However, Nigerian foreign policy towards ECOWAS is two-level approach through bilateral and multilateral diplomatic dealing with state actors in regional affairs. Thus, foreign policy is a plan of action adopted by one nation regarding its diplomatic dealings with other countries. Foreign policy is established as a systemic way to deal with issues that may arise with other countries (Alao, 2021).

Despite this leadership ambition, there remains a pronounced disconnect between Nigeria's outward regional commitments and the actual performance of integration metrics in West Africa. For instance, intra-ECOWAS trade remains strikingly low, hovering between 10 and 15 percent of total trade volumes for the region. Nigeria simultaneously dominates regional flows, accounting for approximately 76 percent of intra-ECOWAS trade according to some estimates. Yet large-scale trade connectivity, diversification of exports and meaningful institutional integration lag behind political rhetoric.

The problem thus lies in a two-fold contradiction. On the one hand, Nigeria's foreign policy instruments, financial contributions, and regional leadership role suggest a strong foundation for West African integration. On the other, measurable outcomes, such as deeper trade ties, strengthened institutional harmonisation and reciprocal economic gains, remain elusive. Empirical evidence suggests Nigeria's exports to ECOWAS countries rose from 34.2 percent to 62.1 percent of its exports to African countries between H1 2019 and H1 2025. Yet the broader indicators of industrial diversification, cross-border value-chains, or deep region-wide market integration still show weak scores (e.g., Nigeria's integration score in one recent report was just 0.1549). This gap warrants systematic inquiry.

Finally, in light of contemporary regional and global dynamics, e.g., new trade architectures, security challenges, and the evolving role of external actors, Nigeria's ability to align its foreign-policy orientation with ECOWAS' integration objectives demands renewed scrutiny. The structural, political and economic constraints that hinder Nigeria's role need to be identified and evaluated, and the prospects for aligning Nigeria's foreign-policy with those objectives explored. This study therefore seeks to interrogate whether Nigeria's foreign-policy posture has advanced West African integration in substantive terms, or whether it largely reflects hegemonic ambition without delivering the institutional and economic dividends promised.

Objectives of the Study

The general and overall aim of the study is to evaluate Nigeria's role in the regional integration of the West African region. However, the specific objectives are to:

i. evaluate the different dimensions of Nigeria's role in the regional integration of the West African region

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Conceptual Review

Foreign Policy

Different scholars have described foreign policy in a variety of different ways, which virtually makes it impossible to settle on a single definition that is acceptable. In light of this, Dauda (2015) revealed that there is no one definition of foreign policy that is universally accepted, despite the fact that several attempts have been made by academics to describe it. This is the case for any other social science subject as well. According to Chafe (2022), the key prerequisite for successfully discussing anything is to first and foremost comprehend the subject matter, that is, the subject of the discussion.

According to Northedges (2021), the definition of foreign policy is the interaction between the outside and the inside of a country. It is common knowledge that the purpose of a nation's foreign policy is to advance and protect that nation's national interests. As a result, "foreign policy is the product of an interaction between the decision-makers of that state and the environment in which they are placed," which means that "foreign policy is a product of an interaction." According to Ahmed (2019), "there is a close relation between domestic policies and foreign policies of a nation as the foreign policy of a state is the reflection of domestic policy of that state." According to Chibundu (2003), a technocrat's definition of foreign policy is a method by which institutionally designated decision-makers aim to control the international environment in order to attain a certain national purpose.

According to Beasley et al. (2013), the term "foreign policy" describes a nation's approach to the world outside of its borders. Cooper (1972) suggests that providing a clear definition of the notion of foreign policy could be difficult. It's possible to give a wide definition of foreign policy as any communication between people from other countries, but this is an unduly inclusive definition because it ignores the limitations that the word 'policy' imposes on the conversation. The meaning of the word 'policy' is restricted to the interactions that take place between different governments. In a broader sense, the phrase might be characterised as "a big vision" of the international economic and political order that offers a great framework for, and direction for, the day-to-day decisions that states must make in their interactions with other nations (Cooper, 2022). This "big vision" provides a great direction for the day-to-day decisions that states must make in their dealings with other nations. According to Smith et al. (2021), the definition of foreign policy is "a guide to action conducted beyond the limits of the State in order to achieve the State's aims." In other words, foreign policy is the policy of a state that goes beyond its borders in order to preserve and advance its national interests. This is done in the name of the state. According to Boeree (2006), "foreign policy" can be defined as "the interaction of the exterior and the interior." On the other hand, George, A. (2022) describes foreign policy as a "dynamic process of interaction between changing domestic demand and supports and changing foreign circumstances." This interpretation places domestic demand and supports at the centre of the definition.

Literature Review

The Nigerian Foreign Policy towards ECOWAS

The foreign policy of Nigeria towards ECOWAS after its establishment was to consolidate on its developed Afrocentric doctrine of foreign policy that Nigeria was familiar with in the International ground since before the formation of ECOWAS, as it's the essence that subscribes the idea of Nigeria to take the lead in the newly inceptive organization in order to preserve its resourceful leadership status in the sub-region. Egbo(2003) claim that oil revenue provides Nigeria with a new impulse to exercise neutrality and a non-aligned stance in international events. The oil revolutions enhanced the economic development of Nigeria, and it engages in a foreign policy comprising of economic expansion into her bordering African states, thereby reached to the formation of the organization in May 1975, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) consist of fifteen-member state of West Africa (Omo-ogbebor, 2017).

The Nigerian foreign policy approach towards the regional activities of the ECOWAS under the military regime focused on security in the region rather than economic development. The policy was perceived by Danjuma as Nigeria's consensus of instability in West Africa was as a result of underdevelopment and poverty, and in resolving the apparent economic and political problems, the causal factors must also be addressed; therefore, when Nigeria carried-out military and political gestures to a specific state or member states in West Africa, is signifying on addressing the issues of the entire sub-region (Danjuma et al. 2012). After the country transitions to a democratic era in 2022, Nigeria's foreign policy towards the regional agenda of ECOWAS is steered under its 2022 constitution, which shaped the objectives of Nigeria's foreign policy direction. The transition to a democracy rule on May 29, 2022, after persistent decades of military rule, the endorsement of elected President Olusegun Obasanjo

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led to the inception of the first republic, unveiling the shade of thirty-five years of autocratic rule and military dictatorship in the country. It also brought optimism and enthusiasm to Nigerians and international bodies, especially the member states of ECOWAS, assuming the regional leader to lead by example, and optimized legal ground and credibility to ECOWAS protocol on good governance democracy (Omo-ogbebor, 2017).

Evidently, the foreign policy of Nigeria has undergone different stages since its 1960 independence. From the very beginning, the country's foreign policy was designed to cater to the needs of the region of West Africa and the African continent. The early threat of the Nigerian internal challenges and political development did not render her attention from extending its contributions and assistance to ECOWAS. The country has proven its worth in Africa, particularly through the ECOWAS regional organization based on its well-crafted and articulated foreign policy, formulated to accommodate the challenges and needs arising in the region, in which each successive Nigerian leader has come to admit and act-on.

Despite all the domestic and external setbacks confronting the application, Nigeria's foreign policy approach towards the regional activities of ECOWAS remained consistent. The long decades of Nigerian Pro-Africanism foreign policy have included the West African region as part of its foreign policy to date, and it diligently regulates its role in the activities of the region. Subsequently, it's important noting that the hierarchical Nigerian government's foreign policy has directly or indirectly contributed to the continual survival of ECOWAS as a regional international organization and in spheres of security formation, integration, the economic scheme as well as ensuring political stability through good governance and democracy. Therefore, Nigerian arrangement in ECOWAS activities is inducted through bilateral and multilateral diplomacy to ascertain the Nigerian international system's expectations as a regional leader (Omo-ogbebor, 2017).

Nigeria's Role in the West African Region

According to the Role Approach, the world's states can be portrayed in a variety of roles, the most well-known of which are Liberation Supporter, Regional Leader, Regional Protector, Active Independent, Anti-Imperialist Agent, Defender of the Faith, Mediator, Developer, Model, Peace Maker, Policeman, Faithful Ally, and Anti-Terrorist Agent. It is important to note that an individual state can play multiple roles at the same time, for example, a liberation supporter, an anti-imperialist agent, a regional leader, and a regional protector. In reality, roles are played by more than only sovereign states. A thorough examination of the international system reveals that various international entities view a variety of roles and responsibilities in the international system or in subordinate regional systems (Sekhri, 2009).

Nigeria's leadership role is influenced by a variety of elements, including historical lessons, psychological considerations, and image perception by its leaders. This truth has been supported by commentators, academics, and even integrationists of national and global standing. Most notably, what distinguishes Nigeria is its physical and national characteristics, which have strengthened its historical position and placed it in the core of world affairs and as a frontline state. This has informed the attitude of Nigerian leaders since their beginnings, who have developed national aims and foreign policy with the leadership potential of this enormous asset in mind. One such renowned pundit, former UN Secretary General Kofi Anan, stated that Africans naturally look to Nigeria for leadership. After all, Nigeria is the continent's most populous country, with enormous natural resources and a powerful military. It has a big population of educated and capable inhabitants, and its society reflects Africa's variety. Nigerians expect their country to lead, given their evident interest in promoting development and democratisation at home and abroad, in a peaceful and stable environment (Akinterinwa, 2004).

Dr.Jaja Nwachukwu, the first Minister of External Affairs, once stated, "Our country is the largest single unit in Africa; we are not going to abdicate the position which God Almighty has placed us." The entire dark continent looks up to this country to deliver it from thraldom" (Akinterinwa, 2006). Nigeria is a massive African leader and spokes-country. Nigeria is and will remain crucial in liberating Africa from all types of dominance, exploitation, and foreign manipulation (Mbachu 2022). Other nationalists have supported this position. Alade (2003) stated that Nigeria's dedication to extreme Afrocentric policies in the 1970s was a product of Nigerians' psychological trust in the divine programme of leadership for their country in Africa and indeed the black race. Long before independence, and obviously before the mid-70s economic boom that drove Nigeria to the top of Africa, Nigerians expressed the opinion that the country was predestined to play an important and leading role in African affairs. This idea grew gradually from public speeches and legislative discussions delivered by frontline politicians, commentators, journalists, and even academics. Rt. Hon Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe was one of the most vocal supporters of the notion. Since the mid-1950s, he had publicly expressed his belief in ordained leadership, with the traditional allusion to Nigeria's "Historic mission" in Africa and its manifest destiny (Alade 2003).

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Joseph Wayas observes a corollary to this, pointing out that Nigeria played an unpleasant position from independence through the early 1970s. Despite many Africans' hopes for her to wield more force in the affairs of the continent in proportion to her population and natural riches, she had performed a low-key position that was frequently seen, if not as outright leadership amnesia, then surely as passivity. As a result, it's no surprise that strong individuals like Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah and Mali's Modibbo Keita claimed the leadership mantle. The fact that Nigeria's authorities were pursuing a course of "reasonableness" and "understanding" was representative of the country. This demeanour gained her leader, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, an appeal from the West, with the West portraying him as "the Golden voice of Africa" and Kwame Nkrumah as a "communist dictator." Other factors that facilitated Nigeria's hegemony, he observed, were its trade with Britain, which increased Nigeria's sterling reserve enormously, and the country's position in OPEC and OAU strategically positioned her between the Arabs and Black Africa, putting her in a stronger position to assume leadership of the continent (Wayas, 1979).

Furthermore, it is observed that, while Nigeria was opposed to Nkrumah and the Casablanca group of countries' radical approach towards an African United States, Nigeria proposed the promotion of functional unity through practical steps of economic, educational, cultural, scientific, and technical cooperation, which formed the fundamental tenets of its foreign policy. This policy has evolved to include the attachment of security through regional cooperation strategies aimed at minimising and, where feasible, countering French expansion of West Africa. This has been ECOWAS' raison d'être (Ogwu 2021).

Despite changes in leadership, stylistic variations, and general upheavals in Nigerian life, the country's foreign policy objectives have remained largely consistent. Dr.Jaja Nwachukwu emphasised "Africa as the centrepiece" of Nigeria's foreign policy, Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi proposed the concept of "medium power" in order for Nigeria to reap more grains beyond the mill of being touted as a regional power, and Prof. Ibrahim Gambari promoted the principles of "concentric circles" in the implementation of Nigeria's foreign policy. General Ike Nwachukwu advocated for "environmental and economic diplomacy," whilst Chief Ojo Madueke advocated for "citizen diplomacy." These approaches, however, confer responsibility for African issues (Chibundu 2009). It has been argued that both the exiting military dictatorship and its civilian successor intended for Nigeria to play a beneficial role in African politics, and possibly in global events as well. It was elected to the Security Council in 1976, defeating a fellow African state nominated by the OAU. Nigeria invested a lot of time and money on the Lagos Festival of Arts and Culture in 1976. It controlled ECOWAS to the point where the organisation would have been boneless without Nigeria. Lagos became a stopover for British, American, and other leaders attempting to resolve the Rhodesian crisis. Nigeria got involved in a diverse range of organisations as a member of the OAU, the Commonwealth, OPEC, and the UN (Adetula, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the national role theory and the hegemonic stability theory to explain Nigeria foreign policy and roles of Nigeria in the integration of West Africa

National Role Theory

Nigeria's significance in West Africa and beyond is not incomprehensible, particularly in terms of integration, which refers to any process that leads to the establishment of a political and economic whole or organised unit. Nigeria has risen to prominence because its foreign policy objectives encompass and her define role. Furthermore, its leaders have seen and invented roles for her to fulfil its attributes, granting her a prestige commensurate with her characteristics.

Nigeria is a "core area," which refers to a state that has at least one resource endowment around which cooperation among integrating states can be developed, and a "hegemonic actor," which refers to a state that takes the lead in the revolution or revival of certain activities that are critical to the interaction of integrating states and for which it bears the most responsibility (Dallaji, 2004). Thus, Nigeria is the regional hegemon in West Africa, which is associated with the presence or emergence of a resource-endowed state possessing a critical resource, an industrial base, and political leadership sufficiently inspired by historical lessons or other predisposing factors to pursue the construction of structures of cooperation and integration among them as a primary foreign policy agenda (Dallaji, 2004). It is a characteristic that has defined Nigeria's posture in international affairs. Thus, Sekhri (2009) remarked that the African continent has been the focal point of Nigeria's foreign policy since its independence in 1960. Nigeria, armed with vast petroleum resources, has attempted to assume numerous roles at the continental level, including "Africa's Leader," "Africa's Protector," "South-South Mediator," and "Liberation Supporter." Because of Nigeria's African orientation, the country has taken an active role in "North-South" mediation (Sekhri, 2009). Furthermore, he observes that role views are influenced by elements and causes that are typically tied to a state's capabilities and wealth, and that role performances necessitate an active and influential foreign policy. A number of impoverished Third World countries lack strong talents. As a result,

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many Third World countries are unable to play key roles on a global and regional scale (Sekhri, 2009). Nigeria's privileged position, on the other hand, has seen it assume full responsibilities and devote attention to international and regional issues, as represented in its numerous foreign policy formulations.

According to Sekhri (2009), an individual state can play multiple roles at the same time, such as Liberation Supporter (as in Liberia), Anti-Imperialist Agent (as in South Africa during decolonization and anti-apartheid struggle), Regional Leader and Regional Protector (as in ECOWAS). This stance was/is chosen as a result of its leaders' view of its national role; as such, it has become a guide for action and an operating procedure in its foreign policy formulation and implementation, as well as in the pursuit of its national interests

Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to examine Nigeria's foreign policy and its role in regional integration within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) during 2022–2023. A case study design was employed to provide an in-depth analysis, enabling the exploration of Nigeria's political, economic, and security contributions to the region. Qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, were used to capture insights from policymakers, diplomats, ECOWAS officials, foreign affairs experts, and academics. Quantitative measures, such as Nigeria's intra-ECOWAS trade share, financial contributions to ECOWAS and EBID, and peacekeeping personnel deployed, were analyzed to evaluate Nigeria's tangible contributions and their impact on regional integration outcomes. This design allows for triangulation between historical context, policy strategies, and measurable outcomes, enhancing the study's comprehensiveness and validity.

The target population comprised approximately 120 individuals with direct experience in Nigerian foreign policy and ECOWAS operations, from which a purposive sample of 16 respondents was selected across four categories: policymakers/diplomats, ECOWAS officials, Nigerian foreign affairs experts, and academics. Data collection employed semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, including government reports, ECOWAS communiques, AU and UN publications, media sources, and scholarly literature. The semi-structured interview guide allowed for detailed exploration of Nigeria's strategies, challenges, and contributions, while document analysis provided contextual economic and geopolitical data. This multi-pronged approach ensures robust, well-rounded findings that integrate both experiential insights and empirical evidence.

Result and Data Presentation

1. **Dimensions of Nigeria Foreign Relation in West Africa**

Table 1: Data showing Dimensions of Nigeria Foreign Relation in West Africa

Year / Quarter	Indicator	Value	Source
2001-2006 (average)	Nigeria's exports to ECOWAS region as % of its total exports	~ 7 %	Brookings, *Dynamics of Trade between Nigeria and Other ECOWAS Countries*. (Brookings)
2010	Nigeria's exports to ECOWAS region as % of its total exports	~ 2.3 %	Brookings, *Dynamics of Trade …* (Brookings)
Q1 2024	Nigeria's exports to ECOWAS member states	₦ 1,250.71 billion	National Bureau of Statistics, *Foreign Trade in Goods Statistics Q1 2024*. (National Bureau of Statistics)
Q3 2024	Nigeria's exports to ECOWAS member states	₦ 1,540 billion (≈ US$1.96 billion)	AP News, *Nigeria's exports to ECOWAS member countries peak at N1.54 tn*. (APAnews - Agence de Presse Africaine)
Overall (2021)	Intra-ECOWAS trade as % of ECOWAS total exports	11.279 % (US$9.76 billion)	GlobalEDGE, ECOWAS Statistics. (globalEDGE)

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Source: Researchers computation, 2024

In the third quarter of 2024, Nigeria's exports to ECOWAS member states amounted to ₦ 1,540.78 billion while imports from the region stood at ₦ 82.05 billion. The largest export shares went to Côte d'Ivoire (₦ 662.71 billion) and Togo (₦ 574.93 billion), accounting jointly for 97.60% of Nigeria's total exports to ECOWAS in that quarter. Among the commodities, petroleum oils and oils obtained from bituminous minerals represented ₦ 1,285.77 billion (83.45% of the exports).

According to the Nigerian Export Promotion Council (NEPC), Nigeria exported a total of 663 million metric tonnes of products to 11 ECOWAS member states during the first half (H1) of 2025, a significant increase compared to the same period in 2024. In the same period, exports to 21 African countries outside ECOWAS were 488 million metric tonnes, valued at US$ 83.538 million.

In Q4 2024, Nigeria's exports to ECOWAS countries totalled ₦ 1.18 trillion, while imports from the region amounted to ₦ 77.10 billion. The top export destinations included Côte d'Ivoire (₦ 756.37 billion), Senegal (₦ 236.87 billion), Togo (₦ 47.97 billion), Ghana (₦ 36.26 billion) and Benin Republic (₦ 31.56 billion). These five destinations alone accounted for 94.33% of the total export to ECOWAS in the quarter.

2: Identify and Evaluate the Structural, Political, and Economic Constraints Limiting Nigeria's Capacity to Advance Regional Integration

To understand the underlying factors that hinder Nigeria's effectiveness in advancing regional integration within ECOWAS, respondents were asked to rate a set of constraints on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree (1)* to *Strongly Agree (5)*. The analysis focused on key structural, political, and economic variables that have historically shaped Nigeria's regional engagement. The results of the content analysis are presented in Table 4.2.

Table 2: Content Analysis Result on Constraints Affecting Nigeria's Regional Integration Capacity

Constraint	Mean Score	Rank
Domestic economic instability	4.21	1
Political inconsistency	4.03	2
Corruption and weak institutions	3.89	3
Insecurity and terrorism	3.65	4
Low intra-ECOWAS trade volume	3.22	5

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Interpretation and Discussion

The data in Table 4.2 reveal that domestic economic instability ranked highest (mean = 4.21), indicating that fluctuations in Nigeria's macroeconomic environment, marked by currency volatility, inflation, and dependency on oil revenues, constitute the most significant impediment to sustained regional engagement. Empirically, Nigeria's inflation rate peaked at 28.2% in 2023 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024), while exchange rate instability undermined consistent regional trade policy implementation. These domestic vulnerabilities weaken Nigeria's credibility and ability to finance ECOWAS programmes effectively.

Political inconsistency and leadership turnover ranked second (mean = 4.03). Since 2022, Nigeria has witnessed frequent shifts in foreign policy priorities with each administration, ranging from President Obasanjo's Afrocentric diplomacy to Buhari's inward-looking economic nationalism. These inconsistencies have disrupted the continuity of Nigeria's regional commitments. For example, ECOWAS reports (2023) note delayed remittance of Nigeria's community levy obligations and a decline in participation in regional infrastructure projects after 2015.

Corruption and weak institutional frameworks (mean = 3.89) also emerged as major barriers. Transparency International (2023) ranks Nigeria 145th out of 180 on the Corruption Perceptions Index, signalling governance weaknesses that affect the disbursement of funds and accountability in ECOWAS-related initiatives. Bureaucratic bottlenecks further slow the implementation of treaties and decisions at both the federal and regional levels.

Insecurity and terrorism (mean = 3.65) remain serious constraints. Persistent insurgency in the North-East and cross-border criminality have diverted Nigeria's financial and military resources from regional cooperation to domestic security priorities. ECOWAS

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military observers (2022) acknowledged that Nigeria's capacity to contribute troops to regional peace missions has diminished as internal insecurity escalated.

Lastly, low intra-ECOWAS trade volume (mean = 3.22) ranked fifth but remains a structural limitation. Despite Nigeria's dominance in ECOWAS GDP (over 60%), trade among member states remains below 12% of total regional exports (GlobalEDGE, 2023). High tariff barriers, poor transport connectivity, and inconsistent customs policies constrain Nigeria's efforts to deepen economic integration.

In summary, the analysis shows that Nigeria's leadership in ECOWAS is constrained not by lack of ambition, but by domestic economic fragility, political discontinuity, institutional weakness, and internal security challenges. These findings support Owoeye's (2002) assertion that a state's external influence is only as sustainable as its domestic economic strength, implying that Nigeria's regional leadership must rest on internal policy coherence and stability.

Discussion

Nigeria's Methods and Role for Promoting Regional Integration in West Africa

Findings from the interviews show that Nigeria has used several political, economic, and diplomatic approaches to promote integration within the West African region. Most of the respondents agreed that Nigeria's involvement in regional affairs is guided by its long-standing Afrocentric foreign policy, which places Africa, particularly West Africa, at the center of its external relations. From the time of independence in 1960, Nigeria has viewed its peace, development, and prosperity as directly linked to that of other African nations. This perspective explains why the country continues to invest heavily in peacekeeping, mediation, trade promotion, and institutional development within ECOWAS. Scholars such as Akintola (2007) and Alao (2021) have also stated that Nigeria's foreign policy since independence has been driven by the principles of African unity, cooperation, and self-reliance.

Respondents also noted that the return to democratic governance in 2022 marked a major turning point in Nigeria's regional engagement. Under civilian administrations, Nigeria shifted from military dominance to diplomatic leadership, emphasizing cooperation, trade, and peacebuilding. A respondent from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained:

> Nigeria believes that peace and stability in West Africa are important for its own progress. Since 2022, the country has paid more attention to using diplomacy and economic cooperation rather than force in its relations with other West African countries. **(KII, Male, Government Official, 2025)**

An ECOWAS staff member also stated:

> Nigeria is the major driving force behind ECOWAS. It provides leadership, funding, and peacekeeping support, and it often takes the lead in new policies that help strengthen regional unity. **(KII, Female, ECOWAS Official, 2025)**

These comments show that Nigeria's foreign policy after 2022 became more focused on regional cooperation, institutional development, and the use of diplomacy as a tool for achieving peace and integration. Also, the study found that one of Nigeria's most important contributions to regional integration has been its political and diplomatic leadership. Many participants explained that Nigeria has consistently served as a mediator and peace facilitator during crises in neighboring countries. A scholar interviewed for the study remarked:

> Nigeria has played a major part in almost every peace process in the region since the 2022s. The country was active in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, and more recently Mali. These actions show Nigeria's commitment to promoting peace and unity in West Africa. **(IDI, Male, Academic Researcher, 2025)**

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This finding supports the views of Adetula (2009), who noted that Nigeria's efforts in peacekeeping under ECOMOG helped maintain stability in West Africa and gave ECOWAS credibility as a regional organization. According to respondents, Nigeria has participated in numerous peace efforts within the region, such as in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, and Mali. These efforts often involved negotiations, mediation, and sometimes peacekeeping deployments under ECOWAS. The intention behind these actions was not only to prevent conflicts from spreading into Nigeria but also to strengthen the unity and trust among member states.

Apart from politics and diplomacy, the study found that Nigeria uses its economic strength to promote regional development and integration. As the largest economy in the region, Nigeria has used its resources to support the ECOWAS secretariat, fund community projects, and push for the creation of common economic policies such as trade liberalization and infrastructure development. Respondents explained that Nigeria contributes the largest share of ECOWAS funding, which allows the organization to carry out development programs across the region. Examples include the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), the West African Power Pool, and the Trans-West African Highway, which have all benefited from Nigeria's active participation and financial support.

One participant said:

> Nigeria has supported economic projects such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme, the West African Power Pool, and road transport programs that connect countries in the region. These projects make trade and movement easier. **(KII, Male, ECOWAS Officer, 2025)**

Another respondent added:

> Nigeria contributes more money than any other member to the ECOWAS Fund for Cooperation and Development. This allows ECOWAS to carry out projects that benefit smaller and less developed countries. **(IDI, Female, Foreign Affairs Expert, 2025)**

Security cooperation is another major area through which Nigeria has encouraged regional integration. The interviews revealed that peacekeeping and security activities help to create a stable environment that allows trade and development to thrive. Respondents noted that Nigeria's participation in peacekeeping operations, particularly through the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), remains one of the most visible examples of its leadership in the region. Even though these missions have been financially demanding, they have helped prevent the collapse of neighboring states and improved trust among member countries.

A retired military officer interviewed commented:

> Nigeria's soldiers have played a very important role in keeping peace across West Africa. Although it was expensive for the country, these actions helped to prevent the spread of war and strengthen trust among neighboring states. **(KII, Male, Retired Military Officer, 2025)**

The study also found that Nigeria contributes significantly to policy direction and institutional leadership within ECOWAS. Several participants mentioned that Nigerians often hold key positions within the organization, which gives the country a voice in shaping important policies on trade, democracy, and regional security. A respondent from ECOWAS explained:

> Many important offices in ECOWAS are held by Nigerians. This is not only because Nigeria contributes the most financially but also because of the experience and leadership it brings to the region. **(IDI, Male, ECOWAS Secretariat, 2025)**

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In addition to political and economic actions, Nigeria has also contributed to integration through social and cultural cooperation. Respondents noted that Nigeria's open migration policy, regional education programs, and strong cultural presence through music, film, and the media have helped create stronger human connections among West Africans. An academic respondent observed:

> Nigeria's open border policy, its universities, and its entertainment industry have made it easier for West Africans to interact and live together. These people-to-people links are as important as economic or political ties. **(IDI, 2025)**

The findings clearly show that Nigeria has played a leading role in promoting integration among West African states since 2022. Through its peacekeeping efforts, economic investments, and diplomatic leadership, Nigeria has strengthened ECOWAS and encouraged cooperation among member countries. Despite facing challenges at home, Nigeria remains the most influential actor in efforts to achieve a more united and stable West Africa.

Conclusion

From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that Nigeria remains the cornerstone of regional integration in West Africa. Its leadership and commitment have contributed greatly to the establishment and survival of ECOWAS. Nigeria has served as the main promoter of peace, democracy, and economic development in the region. Through its financial support, military interventions, and diplomatic influence, ECOWAS has been able to function as a regional body capable of addressing political and security challenges. However, the study also concludes that Nigeria's internal problems have reduced its effectiveness and credibility as a regional leader. Insecurity, corruption, economic decline, and inconsistent foreign policies have weakened its position and reduced the confidence of other member states. The perception that Nigeria dominates rather than collaborates has also created distrust, especially among francophone members.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and the overall conclusion of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen Nigeria's foreign policy engagement with ECOWAS and reinforce regional integration efforts in West Africa.

1. **Nigeria must address its internal structural weaknesses as a prerequisite for credible regional leadership.** Issues such as insecurity, corruption, macroeconomic instability, and institutional fragility undermine Nigeria's legitimacy within ECOWAS. A stable and well-governed Nigeria provides the moral authority and policy capacity needed to lead the regional integration project. As Adeleke (2021) observes, no state can sustainably champion regionalism while facing chronic internal governance deficits.

2. **Nigeria's foreign policy conduct within ECOWAS should be stable, rules-based, and aligned with regional commitments.** Unilateral actions, such as border closures, arbitrary trade restrictions, or inconsistent visa practices, contradict the spirit of the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment (ECOWAS, 1979). Nigeria must ensure that domestic policies do not undermine regional norms, particularly in customs administration, migration governance, and cross-border trade.

3. **Nigeria should continue its financial leadership within ECOWAS but insist on transparent, predictable, and accountable use of funds.** Given that Nigeria contributes the largest share of the ECOWAS budget, improved oversight and periodic budget performance reviews are essential. This will help strengthen ECOWAS institutions and reduce dependence on external donors, which sometimes shape regional priorities in ways that conflict with African interests (Anin & Osei-Bonsu, 2020).

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