

## **Economic Integration of West Africa: A Study of Nigeria's Contributions and the Foreign Policy Gains**

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### **Abstract**

Nigeria's role in the economic integration of West Africa, particularly through the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), has involved substantial commitments of financial, diplomatic, human, and material resources. Despite these contributions, the extent to which such investments have translated into tangible foreign policy gains for Nigeria remains contested. This study examines Nigeria's contributions to the economic integration of West Africa and evaluates the foreign policy gains derived from its engagement in ECOWAS integration programmes. The study adopts a qualitative research design and draws data from ECOWAS reports, government publications, policy documents, institutional records, and relevant scholarly literature. Data were analysed thematically, while Regional Integration Theory provided the analytical framework for explaining Nigeria's role and the dynamics of sub-regional cooperation. Findings reveal that Nigeria has played a pivotal role in sustaining ECOWAS and advancing major integration objectives, including the promotion of sub-regional trade, the free movement of persons and goods, infrastructural development, peacekeeping support, and broader economic cooperation in West Africa. However, the study finds that these significant contributions have not yielded commensurate economic and strategic benefits for Nigeria. The limited gains are linked to a combination of internal and external constraints, including weak policy coordination, domestic economic challenges, uneven burden-sharing within ECOWAS, and the difficulty of translating regional leadership into concrete national advantages. The study concludes that while Nigeria has remained central to the progress of West African economic integration, its foreign policy gains have been relatively modest compared to its level of commitment. It therefore recommends a more strategic and interest-driven engagement with ECOWAS, anchored on clearer national priorities, improved policy implementation, and stronger mechanisms for converting regional leadership into measurable domestic benefits.

**Keywords:** West Africa, Economic Integration, ECOWAS, Nigeria, Foreign Policy Gains, Regional Relations

## Introduction

Regional economic integration has become one of the most prominent strategies adopted by developing regions to accelerate economic growth, promote political stability, enhance competitiveness, and achieve sustainable development. The theoretical foundations of regional integration are rooted in the works of Balassa (1961), Haas (1958), and Nye (1968), who argue that economic cooperation among neighbouring states facilitates market expansion, economies of scale, policy coordination, and collective development. In Africa, regional integration has been widely regarded as a mechanism for overcoming the structural constraints associated with small domestic markets, weak industrial bases, and dependence on primary commodity exports (Asante, 1997; Hartzenberg, 2011; Draper, 2010). Consequently, African regional organizations have increasingly been viewed as important instruments for achieving economic transformation and strengthening the continent's position within the global economy (UNECA, 2023).

Within West Africa, these aspirations led to the establishment of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975 through the Treaty of Lagos. The organization was founded to promote economic cooperation, facilitate the free movement of persons and goods, eliminate trade barriers, and foster collective self-reliance among member states (ECOWAS, 1975). The adoption of the Revised ECOWAS Treaty in 1993 further expanded the scope of regional integration by emphasizing trade liberalization, monetary cooperation, infrastructural development, harmonization of economic policies, and the creation of a common market (ECOWAS, 1993).

According to Bach (2003), the revised treaty represented a significant shift from a narrow focus on economic cooperation to a broader integration agenda encompassing political and developmental objectives. Similarly, Obadan (2009) argues that ECOWAS has evolved into one of Africa's most ambitious regional organizations, seeking to integrate diverse economies with varying levels of development and institutional capacity.

The pursuit of regional integration in West Africa has been operationalized through several key initiatives, including the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), the Common External Tariff (CET), the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Establishment, and various regional infrastructure programmes (Asante & Nshimyumuremyi, 1997; Ogunkola, 2011). These initiatives are intended to stimulate intra-regional trade, improve labour mobility, reduce transaction costs, and promote economic interdependence among member states. The significance of these measures has become even more pronounced in the context of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which seeks to create a single continental market and deepen regional economic integration across Africa (African Union, 2015; AfCFTA Secretariat, 2023). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of ECOWAS integration efforts depends largely on the commitment, resources, and leadership provided by its member states, particularly Nigeria.

Nigeria occupies a unique position within ECOWAS due to its demographic and economic dominance. With a population exceeding 220 million people and accounting for over 60 percent of the GDP of the ECOWAS region, Nigeria remains the largest economy and market in West

Africa (World Bank, 2024; IMF, 2024). As a founding member of ECOWAS, Nigeria has consistently assumed leadership responsibilities in the pursuit of regional integration and development. Scholars such as Akinyemi (2013), Gambari (1989), and Folarin (2014) contend that Nigeria's foreign policy has historically prioritized African unity and regional cooperation, making ECOWAS a central platform through which the country projects its regional influence. This leadership role is often explained through the concept of regional hegemony, which suggests that dominant states possess both the capacity and responsibility to provide public goods necessary for regional cooperation and institutional development (Kindleberger, 1973; Pedersen, 2002).

Nigeria's contributions to ECOWAS have been particularly evident in the area of financial support. The country has consistently contributed a significant proportion of the ECOWAS budget, financed community programmes, and provided substantial resources for regional institutions and development initiatives (Ali, 2012; Ogbeidi, 2010; Adebajo, 2002). According to Gambari (1989), Nigeria's willingness to shoulder a disproportionate share of regional financial obligations reflects its broader commitment to regional leadership and collective development. Likewise, Fawole (2003) argues that Nigeria's economic diplomacy has often sought to advance both national interests and regional integration objectives through financial assistance, technical cooperation, and market access.

Beyond direct financial support, Nigeria has played a crucial role in promoting regional connectivity through investments in infrastructure. Infrastructure has long been recognized as a critical prerequisite for successful regional integration because

it facilitates trade, reduces transportation costs, enhances mobility, and promotes economic competitiveness (Buys, Deichmann & Wheeler, 2010; African Development Bank, 2023). Nigeria has actively participated in major regional projects such as the Lagos–Abidjan Highway Corridor, the West African Power Pool (WAPP), the Nigeria–Benin electricity interconnection projects, and various border modernization initiatives designed to improve cross-border trade and economic interaction (ECOWAS Commission, 2022; African Development Bank, 2023). These projects are expected to strengthen regional value chains, increase market access, and foster economic integration across West Africa (World Bank, 2020).

Despite these achievements, scholars remain divided regarding the effectiveness of Nigeria's contributions to ECOWAS economic integration. One school of thought argues that Nigeria's financial support, infrastructural investments, and market size have significantly strengthened ECOWAS institutions and enhanced regional cooperation (Akinyemi, 2013; Folarin, 2014; Adebajo, 2002). Another perspective contends that Nigeria's domestic economic priorities frequently undermine regional integration commitments. Hulse (2016) observes that Nigeria has occasionally adopted protectionist measures that conflict with ECOWAS principles of trade liberalization and market openness. The closure of Nigeria's land borders between August 2019 and December 2020, for instance, generated considerable controversy because it disrupted regional trade flows and was widely perceived as inconsistent with ECOWAS integration objectives (International Crisis Group, 2020; Adeniran, 2020). Similarly, Meagher (2016) argues that informal trade

restrictions and regulatory inconsistencies continue to constrain the implementation of regional trade agreements within West Africa.

Debates have also emerged concerning Nigeria's role in implementing the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Establishment. The protocol, adopted in 1979, is widely regarded as one of ECOWAS's most significant achievements because it seeks to facilitate labour mobility and economic interaction across the region (Adepoju, 2007). However, challenges relating to terrorism, transnational crime, irregular

Migration, border insecurity, and economic pressures have complicated its implementation (Ekezie-Joseph, 2021; Okunade & Ogunnubi, 2019). According to Adepoju (2005), while Nigeria has consistently supported regional mobility initiatives, domestic security concerns have occasionally prompted restrictive measures that limit the realization of free movement objectives. This situation highlights the enduring tension between national sovereignty and regional integration, a challenge that continues to characterize many regional organizations worldwide (Malamud & Schmitter, 2011).

Against this background, the integration of West African economies remains one of the most ambitious regional development projects on the African continent. Since the establishment of ECOWAS in 1975, Nigeria has consistently occupied a central position in advancing this objective through its substantial financial contributions, leadership in policy formulation, support for regional infrastructure development, promotion of trade liberalization, and commitment to the free movement of persons and goods (Gambari, 1989; Fawole, 2003; Akinyemi, 2013). As the

largest economy and most populous state in the sub-region, Nigeria has functioned as the principal driver of many ECOWAS integration initiatives aimed at fostering economic interdependence, market expansion, and sustainable development (Obadan, 2009; Hartzenberg, 2011).

Beyond its economic commitments, Nigeria's active participation in regional integration has generated significant foreign policy benefits. Through ECOWAS, Nigeria has enhanced its regional influence, strengthened its diplomatic standing, promoted political and economic stability, expanded markets for Nigerian businesses, and reinforced its long-standing foreign policy objective of African solidarity and cooperation (Adebajo, 2002; Folarin, 2014; Ogwu, 2008). The country's leadership role has also contributed to its image as a regional power and an indispensable actor in West African affairs, thereby increasing its bargaining power within continental and international institutions (Pedersen, 2002; Akinboye, 2013).

Nevertheless, the integration process continues to face significant challenges, including weak implementation of ECOWAS protocols, persistent non-tariff barriers, inadequate infrastructure, political instability, security threats, and disparities in economic development among member states (Ogunkola, 2011; Hulse, 2016; International Crisis Group, 2020; UNECA, 2023). Furthermore, tensions between national economic priorities and regional commitments have occasionally undermined the pace of integration, as demonstrated by protectionist policies and border restrictions adopted by some member states, including Nigeria (Adeniran, 2020; Meagher, 2016).

It is within this context that this study examines Nigeria's participation in the

integration of West African economies and evaluates the foreign policy gains derived from such participation. Specifically, the study assesses Nigeria's contributions to ECOWAS economic integration through financial support, trade promotion, infrastructural development, and regional policy initiatives, while also analyzing the diplomatic, political, and economic benefits accruing to Nigeria from its leadership role within the organization. By doing so, the study contributes to existing scholarship on regional integration, regional leadership, foreign policy, and economic cooperation in West Africa (Haas, 1958; Nye, 1968; Mattli, 1999; Rosamond, 2000).

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research design using the historical-descriptive approach to examine the integration of West African economies, Nigeria's participation, and the foreign policy gains derived from its role in ECOWAS. The study relies on secondary data sourced from textbooks, journal articles, and ECOWAS documents (1975). Treaty of the Economic Community of West African States, policy reports Gambari, I. A. (1989). Theory and reality in foreign policy making: Nigeria after the Second Republic, Hulse, M. (2016). Regional integration in West Africa and the challenge of implementation. African Affairs and other relevant scholarly materials.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved identifying and organizing recurring issues and arguments in the literature into major themes such as regional integration, Nigeria's participation, foreign policy gains, trade liberalization, and security cooperation. This method is suitable because it enables the study to systematically interpret

existing literature and highlight the major patterns and debates relevant to the research objectives.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on the Neo-functionalism Theory developed by Ernst B. Haas (1958) in his seminal work *The Uniting of Europe*. Neo-functionalism emerged as an advancement of earlier integration theories and seeks to explain how cooperation in one sector of economic activity gradually expands into other sectors, resulting in deeper regional integration. Haas (1958) argued that states initially cooperate in specific functional areas where mutual benefits are evident, and such cooperation generates pressures for further integration in related sectors. This process, known as the "spillover effect," creates incentives for member states to transfer certain responsibilities and decision-making powers to regional institutions in pursuit of collective gains.

According to Neo-functionalists, economic integration is driven not only by governments but also by regional institutions, economic actors, and interest groups that benefit from increased cooperation. The theory assumes that once states recognize the advantages of economic collaboration, they become more willing to harmonize policies, remove trade barriers, facilitate the movement of factors of production, and strengthen regional institutions (Lindberg, 1963). Neo-functionalism therefore views regional integration as a gradual and self-sustaining process in which cooperation in one area stimulates integration in other sectors.

A central concept of the theory is functional spillover, which occurs when integration in one sector creates pressures for integration in related sectors. For example, trade liberalization may necessitate

improvements in transportation infrastructure, customs harmonization, financial cooperation, and labour mobility. Another important concept is political spillover, whereby political actors increasingly shift their loyalties and expectations toward regional institutions because such institutions become more effective in addressing collective challenges than individual states acting alone (Schmitter, 1969). Consequently, regional organizations evolve from simple mechanisms of cooperation into more comprehensive structures for economic governance.

Neo-functionalism has been widely applied in the study of regional organizations, including the European Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and African regional economic communities such as ECOWAS. Scholars such as Nye (1968), Rosamond (2000), and Mattli (1999) argue that the theory provides a useful framework for understanding how economic interdependence encourages states to pursue deeper levels of integration and institutional cooperation.

The application of Neo-functionalism Theory provides a useful framework for explaining Nigeria's economic contributions to ECOWAS and its implications for regional economic integration in West Africa. Since the establishment of ECOWAS in 1975, Nigeria has played a leading role in financing regional institutions, supporting trade liberalization initiatives, promoting infrastructural development, and facilitating economic cooperation among member states. These contributions reflect the neo-functionalist assumption that economic cooperation serves as the foundation for broader regional integration.

Nigeria's financial support for ECOWAS institutions demonstrates the theory's

emphasis on the importance of regional institutions in advancing integration. Through its substantial contributions to ECOWAS budgets, development programmes, and community projects, Nigeria has strengthened the institutional capacity required to coordinate regional economic activities and implement integration policies. Such support has enabled ECOWAS to pursue initiatives aimed at creating a common market and enhancing economic cooperation within the sub-region.

The theory is further reflected in Nigeria's involvement in regional infrastructure projects such as the Lagos-Abidjan Highway Corridor, the West African Power Pool, and other cross-border transportation and energy initiatives. These projects illustrate the spillover effect identified by neo-functionalists. Efforts to promote regional trade have generated the need for improved transportation networks, energy connectivity, and policy harmonization, thereby encouraging deeper integration among ECOWAS member states.

Similarly, Nigeria's support for the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), the Common External Tariff (CET), and the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons reflects the theory's argument that economic cooperation naturally expands into other sectors. By facilitating trade, mobility, and economic interaction, these initiatives contribute to increasing interdependence among member states and strengthening the foundations of regional integration.

However, the study also recognizes the limitations identified by critics of Neo-functionalism. Nigeria's periodic border closures, protectionist trade measures, and concerns over national security demonstrate that domestic interests and state sovereignty continue to influence

regional integration processes. These realities suggest that while spillover effects encourage integration, national governments remain important actors capable of slowing or reversing integration efforts when domestic priorities conflict with regional commitments.

Despite these limitations, Neo-functionalism remains the most suitable theoretical framework for this study because it effectively explains how Nigeria's financial, infrastructural, and trade-related contributions to ECOWAS facilitate increasing economic interdependence and promote the gradual realization of regional integration objectives in West Africa.

## **Conceptual Clarifications**

### **West African Economies**

West African economies refer to the interconnected economic systems, production structures, trade relations, and development frameworks of the states within the West African sub-region, especially those under the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Although these economies differ significantly in population, natural resource endowment, institutional capacity, and levels of industrialization, they share common structural challenges such as dependence on primary commodity exports, weak industrial bases, infrastructural deficits, unemployment, poverty, and vulnerability to external economic shocks (Asante, 1997; Hartzenberg, 2011; UNECA, 2023).

A major theme in the literature is the argument that the fragmentation of West Africa into relatively small national markets has constrained industrialization and economic growth. Scholars in this

tradition maintain that regional economic integration offers a solution by enlarging markets, promoting economies of scale, attracting investment, and enhancing competitiveness (Balassa, 1961; Draper, 2010; Hartzenberg, 2011). This logic underpinned the establishment of ECOWAS in 1975 and continues to shape regional initiatives such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), the Common External Tariff (CET), and the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, all of which are intended to promote intra-regional trade, labour mobility, and policy harmonization (Asante & Nshimyumuremyi, 1997; Ogunkola, 2011).

However, another body of scholarship argues that the economic gains of integration in West Africa have remained limited. Despite ECOWAS's institutional achievements, intra-regional trade is still relatively low due to poor infrastructure, non-tariff barriers, weak productive capacity, policy inconsistency, and limited industrial diversification (Meagher, 2016; Hulse, 2016). This has generated a persistent debate between formal integration—the creation of treaties and institutions—and functional integration, which concerns the practical realization of economic transformation.

The literature also highlights a broader debate over West Africa's position in the global economy. Dependency scholars argue that the sub-region remains structurally tied to the global capitalist system as a supplier of raw materials and importer of manufactured goods, thereby reproducing underdevelopment and external dependence (Amin, 1972; Rodney, 1972). In contrast, liberal perspectives contend that openness to trade, foreign direct investment, and global markets can promote growth if supported by strong institutions and sound economic policies.

The central issue, therefore, is whether development should be pursued through deeper global integration or through deliberate structural transformation aimed at reducing dependence on external actors.

Nigeria occupies a central place in this discourse because of its demographic size, market potential, and economic influence within ECOWAS. Many scholars regard Nigeria as the driving force behind regional integration, citing its financial contributions, diplomatic leadership, and support for regional initiatives (Gambari, 1989; Akinyemi, 2013). Yet others caution that Nigeria's dominance may create asymmetrical relationships and unequal distribution of integration benefits, raising concerns about regional hegemony and the balance between leadership and collective ownership (Pedersen, 2002).

More recent studies have expanded the discussion to include globalization, digital transformation, climate change, and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). While AfCFTA is widely seen as a major opportunity for market expansion, industrial growth, and enhanced continental bargaining power, scholars caution that weak infrastructure, low manufacturing capacity, and technological limitations may hinder West African states from fully benefiting from it (UNECA, 2023; AfCFTA Secretariat, 2023).

Overall, the literature suggests that West African economies possess significant development potential due to their natural resources, growing population, and strategic location, but scholars differ on the most effective pathway to sustainable transformation. Nonetheless, there is a broad consensus that meaningful progress in the sub-region requires a combination of regional integration, industrialization, infrastructure development, institutional strengthening, technological advancement,

and effective policy implementation. This perspective provides a strong conceptual basis for examining Nigeria's participation in the integration of West African economies and the foreign policy gains associated with its regional engagement (Hartzenberg, 2011; UNECA, 2023).

### **Integration of West African Economies**

The integration of West African economies refers to the process through which states in the sub-region pursue economic cooperation, market unification, policy coordination, and institutional collaboration to promote development, growth, and collective self-reliance. Rooted in broader regional integration theory, this process is premised on the idea that neighbouring states can improve economic efficiency and development outcomes through trade liberalization, harmonized policies, factor mobility, and common institutions (Balassa, 1961; Haas, 1958; Nye, 1968). In West Africa, this vision has largely been pursued through the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), established in 1975 to deepen economic cooperation and regional transformation.

The literature generally presents regional integration as a strategic response to the structural weaknesses of West African economies, including small domestic markets, weak industrial bases, low productive capacity, poor infrastructure, and limited capital formation. From this perspective, integration is expected to enlarge markets, attract investment, promote specialization, reduce transaction costs, and create economies of scale necessary for industrialization and competitiveness (Asante, 1997; Hartzenberg, 2011). This rationale underpins key ECOWAS initiatives such as

the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), the Common External Tariff (CET), the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, and regional infrastructure programmes, all designed to foster economic interdependence and lay the foundation for a common market (Ogunkola, 2011; ECOWAS Commission, 2022).

However, the literature also reveals substantial scepticism regarding the practical outcomes of integration. Critics argue that despite decades of ECOWAS-led efforts, intra-regional trade remains low and the economic benefits of integration have been constrained by non-tariff barriers, weak implementation of protocols, inadequate infrastructure, unreliable energy systems, policy inconsistencies, and limited industrial diversification (Draper, 2010; Hulse, 2016; Meagher, 2016). This has created a persistent gap between formal integration—the existence of treaties and institutions—and functional integration, meaning the actual realization of regional economic transformation.

A further debate concerns the tension between national sovereignty and regional obligations. Although integration requires states to coordinate policies and cede aspects of decision-making authority to regional institutions, West African states often prioritize domestic political and economic interests over regional commitments (Malamud & Schmitter, 2011). Nigeria's 2019–2020 land border closure is frequently cited as evidence of how national security and domestic economic concerns can override ECOWAS principles of free trade and free movement (Adeniran, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2020).

The role of Nigeria is another central issue in the literature. Many scholars view Nigeria as the principal driver of West

African integration because of its demographic size, market capacity, financial contributions, and diplomatic influence within ECOWAS (Gambari, 1989; Adebajo, 2002). Yet others caution that such dominance may create asymmetrical relations and fears of regional hegemony among smaller member states (Pedersen, 2002). In addition, structuralist and dependency scholars argue that integration cannot yield meaningful development unless it is tied to industrialization, technological advancement, and structural diversification, rather than mere trade liberalization (Amin, 1972; Rodney, 1972).

Recent scholarship further links the future of West African integration to globalization, digital transformation, climate resilience, and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). While AfCFTA is widely seen as a major opportunity to expand markets and promote industrialization, its success in West Africa will depend on improved infrastructure, stronger productive capacity, technological innovation, and more effective institutions (UNECA, 2023; AfCFTA Secretariat, 2023).

Overall, the literature suggests that the integration of West African economies is both an economic and political project shaped by competing development strategies, uneven state commitment, and structural constraints. While regional integration remains vital for market expansion, cooperation, and collective development, its success depends on the effective implementation of ECOWAS protocols, infrastructural development, industrialization, and the ability of member states to reconcile national interests with regional goals. This provides a useful conceptual basis for examining Nigeria's participation in the integration of West

African economies and the foreign policy gains associated with its regional engagements.

### **Nigeria's Participation in the Integration of West African Economies**

Nigeria's participation in the integration of West African economies is widely portrayed in the literature as pivotal to the development and survival of regionalism in West Africa. Owing to its large population, economic strength, diplomatic influence, and sustained commitment to ECOWAS, Nigeria has functioned as a principal actor in advancing regional integration through financial support to ECOWAS institutions, trade liberalization, free movement protocols, and peace and security initiatives that underpin economic cooperation (Okom, 2016; Nebeife, Chinwuba & Onwuanibe, 2022; Saidu, Sulaimon & Saraki, 2026). In this regard, Nigeria's participation is understood as a combination of political, economic, diplomatic, and institutional engagement aimed at fostering a more integrated and interdependent West African economy.

A major strand of scholarship presents Nigeria as the driving force and stabilizing anchor of West African integration. This perspective argues that Nigeria has provided the financial resources, diplomatic leadership, and political legitimacy necessary for sustaining ECOWAS and advancing initiatives such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, customs cooperation, infrastructure development, and the proposed monetary union (Onyia, 2020; Johnson, Babanmma & Luka, 2023; Saidu, Sulaimon & Saraki, 2026). However, an opposing perspective views Nigeria's activism as partly hegemonic and interest-driven, arguing that

its support for integration also serves strategic national interests such as securing regional markets, expanding diplomatic leverage, and preserving its status as the dominant regional power (Moses, 2024; Saidu, Sulaimon & Saraki, 2026).

The literature also debates the effectiveness of Nigeria's participation in producing substantive economic transformation. While Nigeria is widely acknowledged as active in promoting treaty commitments and market integration, several studies contend that persistent non-tariff barriers, weak infrastructure, poor energy systems, and fragmented productive structures have limited the practical gains of integration in terms of intra-regional trade, industrial complementarity, and shared prosperity (Okom, 2016; Okafor & Enyi, 2022; Uwak & Ebong, 2023). Consequently, Nigeria's contribution is often seen as more successful in sustaining the framework of integration than in achieving its full economic substance.

Another major debate concerns policy inconsistency in Nigeria's regional integration posture. Although Nigeria has championed free trade, tariff reduction, and free movement under ECOWAS, it has at times adopted border closures, import restrictions, and unilateral measures that contradict the principles of regional openness (Onyia, 2020; Nebeife, Chinwuba & Onwuanibe, 2022). Scholars interpret this contradiction differently: some see it as evidence of weak commitment to integration, while others argue that it reflects the tension between regional obligations and domestic imperatives such as smuggling, food insecurity, industrial vulnerability, and revenue protection (Uwak & Ebong, 2023; Moses, 2024).

The literature further highlights debate over the costs and benefits of Nigeria's regional role. Some scholars argue that Nigeria has

borne a disproportionate share of the financial and political burden of ECOWAS without receiving equivalent economic returns (Okom, 2016; Saidu, Sulaimon & Saraki, 2026). Others contend that Nigeria's gains should not be measured solely in economic terms, since participation in ECOWAS has also yielded significant foreign policy dividends, including regional legitimacy, diplomatic influence, security leverage, and strategic centrality in West African governance (Moses, 2024; Nebeife, Chinwuba & Onwuanibe, 2022).

The relationship between security and economic integration also features prominently in the literature. Given the region's history of civil wars, insurgencies, coups, and trans-border insecurity, scholars argue that Nigeria's role in peacekeeping and conflict management is inseparable from its contribution to economic integration, as political stability is essential for trade, investment, and mobility within the sub-region (Nebeife, Chinwuba & Onwuanibe, 2022; Saidu, Sulaimon & Saraki, 2026). At the same time, some critics caution that ECOWAS, under Nigeria's influence, has at times become overly securitized, with more attention devoted to conflict management than to deeper economic restructuring and productive transformation (Okom, 2016).

Overall, the literature presents Nigeria's participation in the integration of West African economies as developmental, strategic, and constrained. It is developmental because it seeks to promote regional market integration and collective growth; strategic because it advances Nigeria's foreign policy interests and leadership ambitions; and constrained because domestic weaknesses—such as poor infrastructure, insecurity, weak industrial capacity, governance deficits,

corruption, and policy inconsistency—have limited Nigeria's ability to serve as an effective engine of regional transformation (Okafor & Enyi, 2022; Moses, 2024; Saidu, Sulaimon & Saraki, 2026). Thus, Nigeria emerges as an indispensable but imperfect driver of West African economic integration, central to the sustenance of ECOWAS yet hindered by both domestic contradictions and broader structural limitations within the sub-region (Okom, 2016; Onyia, 2020; Uwak & Ebong, 2023).

### **Nigeria's Foreign Policy Gains from the Integration**

Nigeria's foreign policy gains from regional integration are best understood through its long-standing engagement with ECOWAS and its broader aspiration to maintain a leadership position in West Africa. The literature generally treats regional integration not merely as an economic arrangement but as a strategic instrument of Nigerian foreign policy through which the country pursues diplomatic influence, institutional leverage, economic opportunities, security stabilization, prestige, and continental relevance (Gambari, 1989; Adebajo, 2002; Fawole, 2004). In this sense, Nigeria's gains from integration are both material—such as market access, trade opportunities, and institutional influence—and non-material, including legitimacy, agenda-setting power, symbolic authority, and regional leadership recognition.

A dominant strand of the literature argues that ECOWAS has provided Nigeria with a crucial platform for regional leadership and diplomatic influence. By financing

ECOWAS programmes, promoting free movement and trade liberalization, and sustaining the political relevance of the organization, Nigeria has consolidated its status as the most influential power in West Africa (Akinyemi, 1989; Adebajo, 2002; Moses, 2024). Through this role, Nigeria has acquired agenda-setting power and institutional influence, enabling it to shape regional policies on trade, mobility, infrastructure, and conflict management in ways that often reflect its strategic interests (Bach, 2007; Nebeife, Chinwuba & Onwuanibe, 2022). Thus, integration has served as a mechanism through which Nigeria converts its demographic and economic weight into diplomatic capital, political legitimacy, and regional authority.

The literature also identifies economic gains as an important dimension of Nigeria's foreign policy returns from integration. Participation in West African integration has potentially expanded opportunities for regional trade, investment, market access, and the movement of Nigerian businesses and labour across the sub-region (Ogunkola, 2011; Johnson, Babanmma & Luka, 2023). However, scholars are sharply divided on the scale of these gains. While integration has opened economic space for Nigeria, critics argue that the practical returns have been constrained by weak productive capacity, poor infrastructure, non-tariff barriers, and the inconsistent implementation of ECOWAS protocols, leaving Nigeria with diplomatic and institutional visibility but only modest material economic rewards relative to its substantial commitments (Okom, 2016; Okafor & Enyi, 2022; Uwak & Ebong, 2023). This suggests that Nigeria's foreign policy gains from integration are often stronger in strategic and symbolic terms than in direct economic outcomes.

Another major area of consensus is that regional integration has yielded security gains for Nigeria. Since instability in neighbouring West African states can spill across Nigeria's borders through refugee flows, arms trafficking, insurgency, and economic disruption, ECOWAS has provided Nigeria with a framework for managing regional crises and stabilizing its geopolitical environment (Adebajo, 2002; Fawole, 2004; Nebeife, Chinwuba & Onwuanibe, 2022). In this sense, peacekeeping and conflict management under ECOWAS are seen as strategic investments in Nigeria's own national security. Yet this interpretation is contested by scholars who argue that Nigeria's extensive peacekeeping role has imposed heavy financial, military, and diplomatic burdens, raising questions about whether the costs of leadership outweigh the immediate benefits (Adebajo, 2002; Omede, 2012). The literature therefore presents Nigeria's security engagement as both a burden of leadership and a long-term strategic gain.

The literature further emphasizes prestige, status, and continental relevance as major foreign policy gains from integration. Nigeria's activism in ECOWAS has reinforced its self-image and external image as the "giant of Africa," a champion of African solidarity, peace-building, and regional development (Gambari, 1989; Akinyemi, 2004). This regional leadership role has strengthened Nigeria's diplomatic profile not only within West Africa but also within the African Union and broader international diplomacy, since effective leadership at the sub-regional level enhances a state's credibility in continental and global affairs (Adebajo, 2002; Fawole, 2004). ECOWAS, therefore, functions as a springboard through which Nigeria extends its influence from West Africa to wider African and international arenas.

At the same time, the literature warns that these gains are conditional rather than automatic. Scholars note that Nigeria's regional influence has often been undermined by domestic governance failures, corruption, insecurity, economic volatility, policy inconsistency, and weak institutional capacity (Mustapha, 2008; Moses, 2024). These internal weaknesses limit Nigeria's ability to convert regional activism into sustainable national benefits and sometimes create a contradiction between its external leadership ambitions and its domestic realities. As a result, foreign policy gains from integration are best understood as historically contingent outcomes shaped by the interaction between Nigeria's regional ambitions, ECOWAS institutional effectiveness, domestic capacity, and the broader structural limitations of West African integration.

In summary, the literature presents Nigeria's foreign policy gains from regional integration as strategic, relational, and conditional. They are strategic because ECOWAS enables Nigeria to pursue national interests through regional institutions; relational because such gains depend on Nigeria's interactions with other West African states and regional institutions; and conditional because their sustainability depends on domestic stability, policy coherence, and the effectiveness of regional implementation. Overall, Nigeria has derived substantial foreign policy gains from integration in the areas of regional leadership, diplomatic influence, institutional leverage, security management, prestige, and continental relevance, even though these gains remain constrained by uneven economic outcomes, the high costs of regional leadership, and persistent domestic and sub-regional structural challenges (Gambari, 1989; Adebajo, 2002; Okom, 2016; Moses, 2024)

### **Sub-Regional Relations**

Sub-regional relations in West Africa refer to the network of political, economic, diplomatic, security, and socio-cultural interactions among geographically contiguous states, especially within the framework of ECOWAS. The concept extends beyond the formal existence of regional institutions to include the broader patterns of cooperation, competition, interdependence, and conflict management through which West African states pursue common interests, manage differences, and respond to shared opportunities and threats. In this sense, sub-regional relations encompass trade and market integration, diplomatic consultation, peace and security cooperation, free movement, infrastructural collaboration, and the management of trans-border challenges. They therefore provide the broader institutional and political environment within which Nigeria's participation in ECOWAS and its foreign policy gains from regional integration can be understood (Okolo, 2009; UNECA, 2016).

A major strand of the literature conceptualizes sub-regional relations as a cooperative framework for collective development and integration. From this perspective, ECOWAS was created to help West African states pool resources, harmonize policies, expand markets, and address the structural constraints of underdevelopment through coordinated regional action (Okolo, 2009; Lanre & Fayomi, 2015; Nwosu, 2024). Protocols on free movement, trade liberalization, customs cooperation, and regional infrastructure are therefore seen as institutional expressions of a broader effort to transform fragmented post-colonial sovereignties into a more integrated regional community. However, this

integrationist interpretation is challenged by a more critical body of scholarship, which argues that sub-regional relations are shaped as much by competition, asymmetry, and national self-interest as by cooperation. Border disputes, trade restrictions, divergent macroeconomic priorities, and uneven compliance with ECOWAS rules suggest that member states often approach regionalism through the lens of domestic political economy, regime security, and national advantage rather than collective commitment (Nebeife, Chinwuba & Onwuanibe, 2022; Okafor & Enyi, 2022).

Another major debate concerns whether sub-regional relations in West Africa should be understood mainly through an economic integration lens or through a broader political-security framework. While classical regionalism emphasizes trade liberalization, customs cooperation, and market enlargement, the West African experience demonstrates that regional relations have been deeply shaped by civil wars, coups, insurgencies, terrorism, and trans-border crime. As a result, ECOWAS has evolved into a major actor in peacekeeping, mediation, democracy promotion, and collective security (Adebajo, 2002; Tive, 2014; Nebeife et al., 2022). Some scholars regard this securitization of sub-regional relations as a necessary adaptation to the unstable political environment of West Africa, while others argue that the increasing emphasis on security and crisis management has diverted ECOWAS from its original economic mandate and slowed the deepening of trade and production integration (Okom, 2016; UNECA, 2016). This shows that sub-regional relations in West Africa are multidimensional, lying at the intersection of economic cooperation and security governance.

The literature also highlights the importance of leadership, hegemony, and historical cleavages in shaping sub-regional relations. Nigeria is frequently portrayed as the principal driver of ECOWAS owing to its demographic size, economic weight, diplomatic reach, and military capacity, making it central to regional financing, peacekeeping, and policy direction (Okoko, 2025; Saidu, Sulaimon & Saraki, 2026). Yet this leadership role is contested by scholars who caution that a sub-region structured around a dominant power may generate dependency, asymmetry, and suspicion among smaller states. Relatedly, West African sub-regional relations continue to be shaped by colonial and linguistic cleavages among Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone states, as well as institutional overlaps such as that between ECOWAS and WAEMU/UEMOA. These legacies complicate policy harmonization, weaken trust, and constrain deeper regional integration (Obikaeze, 2026). In this regard, sub-regional relations are not only products of contemporary policy choices but are also deeply conditioned by historical structures of colonial rule and post-colonial state formation.

A further line of scholarship emphasizes that sub-regional relations are shaped by both shared identity and pragmatic state interests. Some scholars link ECOWAS and regional cooperation to Pan-Africanism, anti-colonial solidarity, and pre-colonial networks of interaction, suggesting that regionalism is sustained not only by material interests but also by shared historical consciousness and the normative appeal of African unity (Aminu & Yacob, 2025). Others, however, caution that such identity-based explanations should not obscure the continuing importance of regime survival, national interest, uneven economic capacity, and implementation

deficits. Indeed, the literature repeatedly points to weak compliance with ECOWAS protocols, customs bottlenecks, poor infrastructure, and limited political will as evidence that West African sub-regional relations remain institutionally fragile despite the existence of elaborate regional structures (Lanre & Fayomi, 2015; Okom, 2016; Okafor & Enyi, 2022).

Overall, the literature presents sub-regional relations in West Africa as complex, layered, and contested. They are complex because they combine economic integration, diplomacy, security cooperation, identity formation, and institutional coordination; layered because they operate simultaneously at domestic, interstate, and regional levels; and contested because scholars disagree over

whether their dominant logic is cooperation or competition, integration or sovereignty, leadership or hegemony, and economic transformation or security management. For this study, sub-regional relations are best understood as the totality of structured interactions through which West African states negotiate cooperation, coexistence, and collective survival within a shared regional space. They serve as both an instrument of regional integration through trade, diplomacy, and conflict management and an outcome of the historical, political, and institutional evolution of West Africa, thereby providing the conceptual bridge between Nigeria's role in ECOWAS, its participation in regional economic integration, and the foreign policy gains it derives from such engagement (UNECA, 2016; Nwosu, 2024; Okafor & Enyi, 2022).

### **Analysis of Emerging Themes Using Thematic Analysis in Social Science Qualitative Research on Integration of West African Economies: A Study of Nigeria's Participation and Foreign Policy Gains.**

<b>Research Focus / Variable</b>	<b>Representative Literature Evidence</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Synthesized Theme /Analytical Interpretation</b>
West African Economic Integration	ECOWAS was created to promote trade liberalization, free movement, customs cooperation, and regional development in West Africa (ECOWAS, 1975; Okom, 2016; Ogunkola, 2011).	trade liberalization; free movement; customs cooperation; regional market	Regional Integration Framework	West African integration is primarily conceived as a regional economic cooperation project aimed at market expansion, mobility, and collective development, though implementation remains uneven.

Nature of Sub-regional Relations	Sub-regional relations in West Africa involve not only economic cooperation but also diplomacy, peace and security, conflict management, and institutional coordination (Adebajo, 2002; UNECA, 2016; Lanre & Fayomi, 2015).	cooperation; diplomacy; peacekeeping; institutional coordination	Sub-regional Relations	Sub-regional relations are multi-dimensional, extending beyond trade to include security, diplomacy, and political coordination within ECOWAS.
Nigeria's Participation in ECOWAS Integration	Nigeria has remained a principal financier, political supporter, and diplomatic driver of ECOWAS integration initiatives, including trade, free movement, and regional stability efforts (Nebeife et al., 2022; Moses, 2024; Saidu et al., 2026).	leadership; financing; diplomatic influence; regional commitment	Nigeria's Regional Role	Nigeria emerges as the central actor in ECOWAS integration, providing leadership, financial support, and diplomatic direction for regional cooperation.
Nigeria as Regional Leader vs Hegemon	Some scholars describe Nigeria as the stabilizing leader of ECOWAS, while others see its activism as strategic and hegemonic, aimed at preserving regional dominance (Bach, 2007; Moses, 2024; Okoko, 2025).	leadership; dominance; influence; hegemony; national interest	Leadership Debate	Nigeria's role is contested: it is viewed both as a regional leader and as a state pursuing strategic dominance within West Africa.
Economic Gains from Integration	Nigeria's participation in ECOWAS potentially expands market access, trade opportunities, and regional economic influence, especially through the ETLS and trade liberalization protocols (Johnson et al., 2023; Ogunkola, 2011; Onyia, 2020).	market access; trade expansion; ETLS; economic influence	Economic Gains	Regional integration offers Nigeria economic opportunities, especially in trade and market access, but these gains remain constrained by weak implementation and low intra-regional trade.

Foreign Policy and Diplomatic Gains	Through ECOWAS, Nigeria has gained diplomatic visibility, agenda-setting power, institutional influence, and recognition as a major regional actor (Gambari, 1989; Akinyemi, 2004; Fawole, 2004).	diplomatic leverage; prestige; agenda-setting; regional legitimacy	Foreign Policy Gains	One of Nigeria's biggest gains from integration is foreign policy influence ECOWAS strengthens Nigeria's prestige, legitimacy, and agenda-setting capacity in West Africa and beyond.
Constraints on Integration and Nigeria's Role	Persistent non-tariff barriers, poor infrastructure, weak productive capacity, insecurity, governance deficits, and policy inconsistency continue to weaken both ECOWAS integration and Nigeria's effectiveness within it (Okafor & Enyi, 2022; Uwak & Ebong, 2023; Okom, 2016).	implementation gap; weak infrastructure; insecurity; policy inconsistency	Structural Constraints	The benefits of integration are limited by structural and domestic challenges, making Nigeria's regional leadership important but often less effective in producing deep economic transformation.
Cost-Benefit Debate of Nigeria's Participation	Scholars disagree on whether Nigeria's heavy financial, diplomatic, and military commitments to ECOWAS are matched by proportional economic returns (Moses, 2024; Okoko, 2025; Okom, 2016).	burden-sharing; unequal returns; regional responsibility; strategic cost	Cost-Benefit Debate	Nigeria's participation in integration is viewed as beneficial but costly: while it yields prestige and influence, the economic returns are often seen as lower than the burden Nigeria bears.

1. West African integration is broader than economics

The literature shows that ECOWAS integration is not limited to trade and market cooperation. It also includes peacekeeping, diplomacy, free movement,

and political coordination, making sub-regional relations a wider framework of regional governance rather than a purely economic arrangement (Adebajo, 2002; UNECA, 2016; Okom, 2016).

2. Nigeria is the pivotal actor in the integration process

Across the literature, Nigeria consistently appears as the principal financier, diplomatic driver, and political anchor of ECOWAS. Its participation has been central to trade liberalization, free movement, peace and security, and the institutional survival of ECOWAS (Nebeife et al., 2022; Moses, 2024; Saidu et al., 2026).

3. Nigeria's foreign policy gains are stronger in diplomacy and security than in economics

The literature suggests that Nigeria's greatest gains from regional integration lie in regional leadership, diplomatic leverage, prestige, institutional influence, and security stabilization, rather than in clear and proportional economic returns such as trade expansion or industrial growth (Gambari, 1989; Fawole, 2004; Omede, 2012; Johnson et al., 2023).

4. Nigeria's role is both strategic and contested

While many studies celebrate Nigeria as the leader of West African integration, others argue that its activism is also interest-driven and hegemonic, designed to secure markets, influence ECOWAS decisions, and maintain regional dominance (Bach, 2007; Moses, 2024; Okoko, 2025).

5. Integration outcomes remain constrained by structural and domestic weaknesses

A recurring theme is that the practical gains of ECOWAS integration are undermined by poor infrastructure, insecurity, weak implementation of protocols, non-tariff barriers, and policy inconsistency, both across West Africa and within Nigeria itself (Okafor & Enyi, 2022; Uwak & Ebong, 2023).

The synthesized literature indicates that Nigeria occupies a central but contradictory position in West African integration. On the one hand, it is the principal driver of ECOWAS, using regional integration to expand its diplomatic influence, strategic reach, and regional legitimacy. On the other hand, the actual economic outcomes of integration remain limited by implementation deficits, domestic fragilities, and regional structural constraints. Thus, Nigeria's participation in the integration of West African economies is best understood as simultaneously developmental, strategic, and burdened by institutional and domestic limitations.

## Conclusion

This study examined the integration of West African economies with emphasis on Nigeria's participation and the foreign policy gains derived from its engagement in ECOWAS. The study found that ECOWAS remains the principal framework for regional economic cooperation, trade liberalization, free movement, and collective security in West Africa. Within this framework, Nigeria has played a central role as a financier, diplomatic actor, and security guarantor, making it one of the most important drivers of sub-regional integration.

The study further revealed that Nigeria's participation in West African integration has produced significant foreign policy gains, especially in the areas of regional leadership, diplomatic influence, institutional leverage, prestige, and security management. However, these gains have not been matched by equally strong economic outcomes, as regional integration in West Africa continues to be constrained by weak infrastructure, low intra-regional trade, policy inconsistency, insecurity, and

poor implementation of ECOWAS protocols. The study therefore concludes that Nigeria's role in the integration of West African economies is both strategic and indispensable, but its benefits remain conditional on stronger domestic capacity and more effective regional implementation mechanisms

### Recommendations

Based on the reviewed study, the following six recommendations are made:

Nigeria should maintain a more consistent regional integration policy by aligning its domestic trade and border policies with ECOWAS commitments to avoid contradictions that weaken regional cooperation.

ECOWAS member states should prioritize the implementation of existing protocols on trade liberalization, free movement, and customs cooperation rather than merely expanding treaty commitments.

Nigeria should strengthen its domestic productive capacity and infrastructure to derive greater economic benefits from the regional market and enhance its leadership effectiveness.

Regional peace and security cooperation should be sustained and broadened, since political stability remains essential for trade, investment, and economic integration in West Africa.

ECOWAS should address structural barriers to integration, including non-tariff barriers, poor transport networks, and the institutional divide between Anglophone and Francophone blocs.

Nigeria should pursue a more strategic and result-oriented foreign policy within ECOWAS, ensuring that its regional

commitments translate into measurable diplomatic, economic, and security gains.

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