

## NIGERIA AND ECOWAS: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF REGIONAL LEADERSHIP AND INTEGRATION

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### Abstract

*This paper examines Nigeria's role in the formation, evolution, and consolidation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), with a particular focus on its leadership in promoting regional integration and stability. Established in 1975, ECOWAS has emerged as one of Africa's most prominent regional organizations, largely influenced by Nigeria's political, economic, and military contributions. Using a historical-analytical approach, the study traces Nigeria's leadership trajectory from the post-independence era, through the Cold War, and into the contemporary period. It evaluates Nigeria's contributions to economic integration, peacekeeping, and institutional development, while also interrogating the domestic and external constraints that have shaped its regional ambitions. The paper argues that, although Nigeria has been the backbone of ECOWAS, its leadership has been inconsistent due to internal political instability, economic challenges, and shifting foreign policy priorities. The study contributes to broader debates on regional hegemony, integration, and the role of middle powers in global governance.*

**Keywords:** Nigeria, ECOWAS, regional integration, foreign policy, West Africa, leadership

### 1. Introduction

Regional integration has become an enduring feature of the contemporary international system, particularly in an era defined by globalization, interdependence, and complex transnational challenges. Across the globe, regional organizations have emerged as critical platforms for fostering economic cooperation, political dialogue, and collective security. Institutions such as the European Union (EU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) demonstrate how regional frameworks can enhance trade, promote stability, and strengthen collective bargaining power in global affairs (Hurrell, 1995; Acharya, 2014). These organizations reflect a broader recognition that states, particularly those in the Global South, can better address shared vulnerabilities through cooperative mechanisms rather than isolated national efforts.

In Africa, regional integration has been deeply shaped by the continent's colonial history, post-independence aspirations, and persistent development challenges. Following independence in the mid-twentieth century, African leaders embraced regionalism as a pathway to economic self-reliance, political solidarity, and resistance to neo-colonial influence (Nkrumah, 1963). This vision was institutionalized through the establishment of continental and sub-regional bodies, including the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 and its successor, the African Union (AU), as well as various Regional Economic Communities (RECs). These institutions were designed not only to promote economic integration but also to address issues of peace, security, and governance across the continent (Adedeji, 2002).

Within this broader continental framework, West Africa presents a particularly compelling case of regional cooperation through the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Established in 1975 through the Treaty of Lagos, ECOWAS was initially conceived as an economic bloc aimed at fostering trade liberalization, free movement of persons, and regional development. However, over time, its mandate expanded significantly to include conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and democratic governance. This evolution reflects the region's complex political landscape, characterized by civil wars, military coups, and fragile state institutions (Adebajo, 2002; Hartmann, 2017).

At the center of ECOWAS's development and operational effectiveness is Nigeria, widely regarded as the region's dominant power. Nigeria's leadership role is anchored in its demographic weight as Africa's most populous country, its economic capacity as one of the continent's largest economies, and its strategic geopolitical position in West Africa (Bach, 2003). Since ECOWAS's inception, Nigeria has provided substantial financial resources, diplomatic leadership, and military support, positioning itself as the backbone of the organization. Its proactive

engagement in regional affairs reflects both altruistic commitments to regional stability and strategic calculations aimed at consolidating its influence within West Africa and beyond.

From a global perspective, Nigeria's role in ECOWAS can be understood through the lens of regional power theory and hegemonic stability theory, which suggest that the presence of a dominant state can facilitate cooperation and institutional development within a region (Kindleberger, 1973; Lake, 1993). In this regard, Nigeria has often functioned as a "regional hegemon," underwriting the costs of integration and security while shaping the norms and priorities of ECOWAS. For instance, Nigeria's leadership in the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the 1990s demonstrated its willingness to deploy both material and political resources to maintain regional order (Adebajo, 2002).

Nevertheless, Nigeria's leadership has not been without contestation. At the regional level, smaller ECOWAS member states have occasionally expressed concerns about Nigeria's dominance, perceiving its actions as overly assertive or self-interested (Bach, 2003). At the domestic level, Nigeria's capacity to sustain regional leadership has been constrained by internal challenges, including political instability, economic volatility, corruption, and security crises such as insurgency and communal conflicts. These domestic pressures often divert attention and resources away from regional commitments, thereby affecting the consistency and effectiveness of Nigeria's engagement with ECOWAS (Osaghae, 2018).

Moreover, the changing dynamics of the international system have introduced new complexities into regional integration efforts in West Africa. Globalization, shifting power relations, and the increasing involvement of external actors—including China, the United States, and the European Union—have influenced ECOWAS's policy environment and strategic priorities. In addition, emerging threats such as terrorism, climate change, and irregular migration have expanded the scope of regional cooperation beyond traditional economic concerns, requiring more coordinated and adaptive responses (Williams, 2020).

At the local level, the implications of Nigeria's leadership in ECOWAS are evident in the everyday realities of West African citizens. Policies such as the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement have facilitated cross-border trade, migration, and cultural exchange, particularly in border communities. Similarly, ECOWAS-led peacekeeping and conflict resolution efforts have contributed to stabilizing conflict-affected areas, thereby creating conditions for economic recovery and social cohesion. However, the benefits of regional integration are unevenly distributed, and challenges such as border closures, trade barriers, and weak implementation mechanisms continue to limit their impact.

This paper, therefore, situates Nigeria's role in ECOWAS within a multi-scalar analytical framework that moves from the global to the regional and local levels. It explores the historical evolution of Nigeria's leadership within ECOWAS and critically assesses its contributions to regional integration. By examining both the achievements and limitations of Nigeria's engagement, the study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between national interests and regional responsibilities. The central research questions guiding this study are:

- i. How has Nigeria shaped the development of ECOWAS since 1975?
- ii. What factors have influenced Nigeria's leadership role in the organization?
- iii. To what extent has Nigeria contributed to regional integration in West Africa?

In addressing these questions, the paper contributes to broader debates on regionalism, power dynamics, and institutional development in Africa. It also offers policy-relevant insights into how Nigeria and ECOWAS can strengthen their partnership to address contemporary challenges and advance sustainable regional integration.

## 2. Literature Review

The scholarly literature on Nigeria's role within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is extensive and interdisciplinary, spanning international relations, political economy, security studies, and regional integration theory. At the core of this body of work lies a persistent debate: whether Nigeria can be accurately characterized as a regional hegemon, and if so, how effective that hegemony has been in promoting integration and stability in West Africa.

### 2.1 Nigeria as a Regional Hegemon in ECOWAS: Criticism and Institutional and Structural Challenges

A dominant strand in the literature conceptualizes Nigeria as the *de facto* hegemon within ECOWAS. This perspective is grounded in **hegemonic stability theory (HST)**, which posits that a dominant power provides public goods, such as security, economic coordination, and institutional leadership, that sustain regional order. Empirical studies affirm that Nigeria has consistently fulfilled these roles within West Africa through financial contributions, diplomatic initiatives, and military interventions. For instance, Omo-Ogbebor and Sanusi (2017) demonstrate that Nigeria has played a central role in shaping ECOWAS integration processes, particularly in

economic coordination and regional governance. Their analysis highlights the asymmetrical structure of ECOWAS, where Nigeria's economic weight and foreign policy activism position it as the primary driver of regional initiatives. Similarly, Johnson (2020) argues that Nigeria's oil wealth, demographic size, and military capacity have historically enabled it to impose order and provide leadership in the sub-region, especially during periods of conflict.

Recent scholarship reinforces this hegemonic interpretation by emphasizing Nigeria's security leadership. Studies show that Nigeria's involvement in peacekeeping operations, particularly in Liberia and Sierra Leone, illustrates its willingness to supply regional public goods, consistent with HST expectations. Nigeria's leadership in ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) missions is frequently cited as evidence of its hegemonic responsibility in maintaining regional stability (Efebeh and Ikenga, 2024). These interventions not only stabilized fragile states but also elevated ECOWAS from a primarily economic bloc to a security-oriented regional organization. Moreover, contemporary analyses continue to affirm Nigeria's centrality. Ogele (2025) argues that Nigeria remains indispensable to ECOWAS's pursuit of regional cooperation, noting that its economic and military contributions are critical to the organization's survival and effectiveness. This aligns with earlier works by Adebajo (2002), which framed Nigeria as the "backbone" of ECOWAS, particularly in times of crisis.

Despite widespread recognition of Nigeria's leadership, a substantial body of literature adopts a critical perspective, questioning both the extent and effectiveness of its hegemonic role. These critiques focus on domestic constraints, inconsistency in foreign policy, and declining influence. One major critique is that Nigeria's internal challenges undermine its external leadership capacity. Studies highlight issues such as political instability, corruption, insurgency, and economic volatility as key factors limiting Nigeria's ability to sustain regional commitments. For example, recent analyses indicate that Nigeria's domestic crises, including terrorism and governance challenges, have weakened its influence within ECOWAS and reduced its ability to act decisively in regional affairs (Johnson, 2021).

Similarly, a critical assessment of Nigeria's hegemonic aspirations suggests that while the country possesses the attributes of a regional power, it often "punches below its weight" due to internal and external constraints (Ogunnubi & Okeke-Uzodike, 2016). This argument aligns with earlier scholarship that emphasizes the gap between Nigeria's potential and its actual performance in regional leadership. Another critique concerns the perception of dominance among other ECOWAS member states. Some scholars argue that Nigeria's assertive leadership style can be perceived as unilateral or hegemonic in a negative sense, leading to resistance and reduced cooperation. This dynamic complicates efforts to build consensus and undermines the legitimacy of ECOWAS initiatives.

Beyond criticisms directed specifically at Nigeria, existing scholarship underscores broader institutional and structural weaknesses within ECOWAS that continue to hinder effective regional integration. A central concern is the organization's limited enforcement capacity, which constrains its ability to ensure member state compliance with agreed protocols and policies. Unlike more supranational entities, ECOWAS operates largely through intergovernmental consensus, resulting in weak centralized authority and a heavy reliance on individual member states for policy implementation. This dependence often leads to inconsistencies, delays, and selective adherence to regional commitments.

Furthermore, financial and logistical constraints remain persistent challenges. ECOWAS relies significantly on contributions from member states, many of which face their own economic limitations, thereby affecting the organization's operational efficiency. As noted by Owoye and Ayodeji (2025), the absence of a binding enforcement framework significantly undermines ECOWAS's effectiveness, limiting its capacity to translate regional decisions into concrete outcomes.

In addition, external actors, including global powers and international organizations, play a complex role in shaping ECOWAS's development. While they provide critical funding and technical assistance, their involvement can influence policy directions, potentially undermining regional autonomy and complicating efforts toward self-driven integration.

## 2.2 Economic Integration and Asymmetry in ECOWAS

Beyond security, another major theme in the literature concerns Nigeria's role in **economic integration**. Scholars note that ECOWAS was originally conceived as an economic community, with objectives including trade liberalization, monetary cooperation, and infrastructural development. Nigeria's leadership in these areas has been both enabling and problematic. On one hand, Nigeria's large market and financial contributions have facilitated regional economic initiatives. On the other hand, the **asymmetrical nature of integration**, where one state dominates economically, has generated tensions among member states. Omo-Ogbebor and Sanusi (2017)

highlight that while Nigeria drives integration, smaller states often perceive its dominance as disproportionate, leading to uneven commitment to regional policies.

Recent studies also point to structural weaknesses in ECOWAS's economic framework. Owoeye and Ayodeji (2025) argue that the absence of a strong enforcement mechanism and persistent trade barriers have hindered effective integration. These challenges are compounded by divergent national interests, weak infrastructure, and limited industrial capacity across member states. As a result, Nigeria's leadership, while significant, has not translated into fully realized economic integration.

### **2.3 Emerging Trends and Research Gap in the Literature**

Recent scholarship on ECOWAS and Nigeria's regional leadership increasingly reflects concern over evolving political and security dynamics in West Africa. In particular, the resurgence of military coups in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has intensified debates about the effectiveness of ECOWAS as a mechanism for conflict prevention and democratic enforcement. These developments have exposed the fragility of democratic institutions in the region and raised critical questions regarding the capacity of ECOWAS to respond decisively to unconstitutional changes of government.

Recent empirical studies illustrate the complexity of these challenges. For instance, Solaru and Amodu (2025) analyse ECOWAS's response to the Niger coup and highlight the tension between diplomatic negotiation and the threat of military intervention. Their findings suggest that although ECOWAS remains normatively committed to promoting democratic governance, its enforcement capacity is increasingly constrained by shifting political realities, including domestic support for military regimes and declining regional consensus. This reflects a broader trend in which normative frameworks are confronted by pragmatic limitations.

At the same time, contemporary analyses of Nigeria's foreign policy reveal a pattern of both continuity and adaptation. While Nigeria continues to position itself as a regional leader within ECOWAS, scholars argue that its influence is being moderated by internal economic pressures, governance challenges, and changing global geopolitical alignments (Uvere & Onyendi, 2025). These factors have implications for Nigeria's ability to sustain its traditional leadership role, particularly in financing and coordinating regional initiatives.

Overall, the literature presents a nuanced understanding of Nigeria's engagement with ECOWAS. It consistently recognizes Nigeria as the central actor in driving regional security, diplomacy, and economic integration. However, this hegemonic role is neither uncontested nor absolute; it is shaped and sometimes limited by domestic constraints and resistance from other member states. Additionally, institutional weaknesses within ECOWAS, such as limited enforcement mechanisms and resource dependency, continue to undermine the effectiveness of its interventions.

Despite these valuable insights, significant gaps remain in the literature. Many existing studies adopt narrow analytical lenses, focusing on either security or economic dimensions without adequately integrating these perspectives into a comprehensive framework. Furthermore, there is a tendency toward normative or policy-oriented analyses, often at the expense of historically grounded interpretations.

This study addresses these gaps by offering a multidimensional and historical analysis of Nigeria's role within ECOWAS. By synthesizing political, economic, and security perspectives, it provides a more holistic account of regional leadership and integration. In doing so, it situates contemporary developments within a broader historical trajectory, thereby contributing to ongoing debates on regionalism, hegemony, and governance in West Africa.

### **3. Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative, historical-analytical research design to examine Nigeria's role in regional leadership and integration within ECOWAS. The qualitative approach is particularly suitable for exploring complex political and historical processes, as it allows for an in-depth interpretation of events, policies, and institutional dynamics over time. The historical-analytical method enables the study to trace the evolution of Nigeria's engagement with ECOWAS from its establishment in 1975 to the present, identifying patterns of continuity and change in leadership strategies and regional commitments.

Data for the study were derived primarily from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed academic journals, scholarly books, policy reports, and official publications from ECOWAS institutions. Additional materials were sourced from archival records, communiqués, and treaties relevant to the organization's formation and operations. These sources were critically evaluated to ensure reliability, validity, and relevance to the research objectives. A case study approach was employed to provide detailed insights into key phases of ECOWAS development. Specific cases include the formation of ECOWAS under the Treaty of Lagos, Nigeria's leadership in peacekeeping

missions through ECOMOG in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and efforts toward economic integration such as trade liberalization and free movement protocols. These cases were selected to illustrate Nigeria's multifaceted role in shaping both the security and economic dimensions of regional integration.

#### 4. Historical Evolution of ECOWAS and Nigeria's Foundational Role

The establishment of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975 marked a decisive moment in the history of regional integration in Africa. Signed in Lagos, Nigeria, the Treaty of Lagos brought together fifteen West African states with the shared objective of fostering economic cooperation, reducing trade barriers, and promoting collective self-reliance in the post-colonial era (ECOWAS, 2025). The initiative emerged against the backdrop of fragmented colonial legacies, characterized by linguistic divisions (Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone blocs) and weak inter-state economic linkages. ECOWAS was therefore conceived as a mechanism to transcend these divisions and promote a unified regional identity.

Nigeria played a foundational and strategic role in the creation of ECOWAS. As the most populous country in Africa and one of the largest economies in the region, Nigeria possessed both the capacity and ambition to lead regional integration efforts. Alongside Togo, under President Gnassingbé Eyadéma, Nigeria, led at the time by General Yakubu Gowon, was instrumental in mobilizing political consensus among West African leaders to establish the organization. The choice of Lagos as the venue for signing the treaty symbolized Nigeria's centrality in the regional project and its commitment to leadership in West Africa (*ibid.*).

Nigeria's motivations for championing ECOWAS were multifaceted. First, it sought to promote regional economic cooperation as a pathway to development. The Nigerian leadership recognized that individual West African economies were too small and fragmented to compete effectively in the global economy. By fostering a larger regional market through ECOWAS, Nigeria aimed to enhance trade, industrialization, and economic resilience. The creation of mechanisms such as trade liberalization schemes and the eventual vision of a common market reflected these ambitions (*ibid.*).

Second, Nigeria viewed ECOWAS as a tool for ensuring political stability in neighbouring states. Given its geographic location and porous borders, instability in West Africa posed direct security threats to Nigeria. Consequently, promoting regional peace and cooperation became a strategic priority. Over time, this security dimension became more pronounced, especially with the organization's later involvement in conflict prevention and peacekeeping.

Third, Nigeria pursued ECOWAS as a platform for expanding its geopolitical influence. As a regional power, Nigeria sought to position itself as a leader not only in West Africa but also within the broader African continent. Its active involvement in ECOWAS enabled it to shape regional norms, influence decision-making processes, and project diplomatic leadership. This aspiration aligns with broader theories of regional hegemony, where dominant states provide public goods, such as security and economic support, in exchange for influence.

In the early years of ECOWAS, Nigeria demonstrated its commitment through substantial financial and institutional support. The country contributed significantly to the funding of ECOWAS institutions, including administrative structures and regional programs. This financial leadership was crucial in sustaining the organization during its formative years, particularly at a time when many member states faced economic constraints. Nigeria's contributions also reinforced its position as the *de facto* leader of the bloc, with some analysts noting that it accounts for a substantial share of the region's population and economic output (Africanews, 2024).

Beyond financial support, Nigeria also played a key role in shaping the institutional architecture of ECOWAS. The organization evolved from a primarily economic community into a more comprehensive regional body with mandates in political governance, security, and development. The revision of the ECOWAS Treaty in 1993 expanded its scope to include conflict prevention and political cooperation, reflecting both regional realities and

Nigeria's strategic interests in maintaining stability (*ibid.*).

In sum, the historical evolution of ECOWAS cannot be understood without recognizing Nigeria's foundational role. From its leadership in the creation of the organization to its sustained financial, political, and diplomatic contributions, Nigeria has been central to the ECOWAS project. However, this leadership has also generated expectations and responsibilities that continue to shape the dynamics of regional integration in West Africa.

## 5. Nigeria's Leadership in Peace and Security

One of the most defining dimensions of Nigeria's engagement within ECOWAS has been its leadership in regional peacekeeping and conflict resolution. From the late 1980s onward, Nigeria transformed ECOWAS from a primarily economic bloc into a proactive security actor, particularly through the establishment of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in 1990. This shift reflected the urgent need to address violent intra-state conflicts that threatened regional stability, especially in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Nigeria's role in ECOMOG was both foundational and dominant. Empirical evidence indicates that Nigeria contributed the overwhelming majority of troops, logistics, and financial resources to ECOMOG missions, accounting for approximately 70–75% of personnel and expending over \$10 billion in operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone alone (Akinola, 2024). These interventions were not merely symbolic; Nigerian forces formed the operational backbone of peace enforcement, ceasefire monitoring, and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. In Liberia, for instance, Nigerian troops were central to restoring a semblance of order during the protracted civil war, while in Sierra Leone they played a decisive role in stabilizing the state and facilitating democratic transition (Akinbi & Ogunbunmi, 2024).

Beyond troop deployment, Nigeria demonstrated leadership through sustained financial commitment and logistical coordination. It financed a significant portion of ECOWAS operations at a time when many member states lacked the capacity or political will to contribute meaningfully. This financial burden underscored Nigeria's strategic perception that regional stability is intrinsically linked to its national security and economic prosperity. As such, Nigeria's investments in peacekeeping can be understood within the framework of "regional security interdependence," where instability in neighbouring states poses direct risks to domestic stability.

In addition to military engagement, Nigeria has played a crucial diplomatic role in conflict mediation and peacebuilding. Nigerian leaders have frequently acted as mediators in West African crises, facilitating negotiations, brokering ceasefire agreements, and supporting transitional governance processes. These diplomatic efforts complemented military interventions, reinforcing ECOWAS's legitimacy as both a coercive and consensual security actor. Nigeria's leadership also extended to shaping ECOWAS norms, particularly the principle of collective security and non-indifference to unconstitutional changes of government.

The ECOMOG experience marked a significant institutional turning point for ECOWAS, embedding security governance within its operational mandate. It laid the groundwork for subsequent mechanisms such as the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) and the ECOWAS Standby Force. Nigeria's early leadership thus contributed to the evolution of ECOWAS into one of Africa's most robust regional security architectures. However, Nigeria's leadership has not been without criticism. Scholars and policymakers have pointed to the unilateral nature of some interventions, arguing that Nigeria often acted disproportionately relative to other member states. Concerns have also been raised about the financial sustainability of such operations and the domestic opportunity costs associated with large-scale external engagements. Indeed, Nigeria's extensive commitments abroad have occasionally strained its economy and military capacity.

Recent developments further highlight emerging constraints on Nigeria's peacekeeping leadership. Contemporary security challenges, such as terrorism, insurgency, and transnational organized crime, have complicated traditional peacekeeping models. The rise of groups like Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) has shifted Nigeria's focus inward, limiting its ability to project power regionally (Akinola, 2024). Additionally, financial constraints and evolving geopolitical dynamics have contributed to a relative decline in Nigeria's external peacekeeping engagements.

Despite these challenges, Nigeria remains central to ECOWAS's peace and security agenda. Its historical contributions have not only stabilized conflict-prone regions but also institutionalized collective security mechanisms within West Africa. Ultimately, Nigeria's leadership in peacekeeping underscores both the possibilities and limitations of regional hegemony, highlighting the need for burden-sharing, institutional strengthening, and adaptive strategies in addressing contemporary security threats.

## 6. Economic Integration and Institutional Development in ECOWAS: Nigeria's Role and Persistent Challenges

Nigeria has been central to driving economic integration within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) through key initiatives such as trade liberalization schemes, free movement protocols, and regional infrastructure development. These efforts reflect both the bloc's founding vision of a unified regional market and Nigeria's strategic commitment to sub-regional cooperation. Yet, progress has been uneven, constrained by structural barriers and implementation gaps that limit the realization of deep integration.

### **Trade Liberalization and Market Access**

One of the earliest and most significant instruments of ECOWAS integration is the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme (ETLS), which aims to reduce tariffs and facilitate the free movement of goods produced within member states. Through ETLS, member states agree to exempt qualifying goods from import duties to encourage intra-regional commerce. This scheme has fostered expanded trade opportunities and enabled some West African manufacturers to access neighbouring markets without heavy tariff burdens. However, despite these frameworks, formal intra-ECOWAS trade remains low with an estimate at around 10–15% of total regional trade, far below figures seen in mature regional blocs such as the European Union (News Agency of Nigeria, 2025).

Nigeria, as the region's largest economy and a principal driver of ETLS, contributes significantly to intra-regional commerce. Its dominance in trade, accounting for over 70% of intra-ECOWAS trade flows, reflects both its economic weight and centrality in the sub-region's economic architecture (Ogbole, et al. 2023). Yet this dominance also exposes structural weaknesses: fragmented customs procedures, inconsistent policy implementation, and non-tariff barriers continue to hinder efficient trade. Traders still face numerous checkpoints, bureaucratic red tape, and divergent standards that raise costs and reduce competitiveness (Oshota & Wahab, 2022).

### **Free Movement Protocols and Human Mobility**

The ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Goods, and Services is another cornerstone of integration, designed to ease cross-border movement of citizens and economic actors. Nigeria has participated actively in efforts to operationalize the protocol, including recent high-level engagements along major entry points like the Nigeria–Benin border to improve implementation (ECOWAS, 2025). While the protocol has expanded mobility rights on paper, practical barriers, such as harassment at borders, excessive checkpoints, and uneven enforcement, undermine seamless movement. Experts note that without strengthened institutional enforcement and citizen-focused reforms, the promise of free movement remains only partially fulfilled (Omoyeni, 2023).

### **Regional Infrastructure Development**

Infrastructure is vital for economic integration, and Nigeria's involvement in regional projects has had mixed results. Joint initiatives through ECOWAS aim to improve major transport corridors, energy networks, and telecommunications links that underpin trade and investment. For example, the Trans-West African Coastal Highway and energy interconnection projects have been foregrounded as strategic priorities to reduce trade costs and promote connectivity across West Africa (Adekanbi, 2025). However, poor physical infrastructure, such as dilapidated roads, congested border crossings, and limited rail systems, continues to elevate logistic costs and slow down the flow of goods, dampening the potential gains from regional integration (*Ibid.*).

### **Institutional Constraints and Nigeria's Dual Role**

Nigeria's economic influence has been both an asset and a source of tension within ECOWAS. On the one hand, its economic weight and political leadership have been crucial in sustaining integration initiatives and financing institutional mechanisms. On the other hand, smaller states sometimes perceive Nigeria's dominance as overbearing, leading to concerns about equitable policy benefits and trust among member states. Additionally, Nigeria's domestic implementation gaps, stemming from policy inconsistencies, overlapping regional commitments, and weak enforcement of ECOWAS protocols, limit the bloc's ability to realize deeper integration (Megwalu and Garba, 2024).

In summary, while Nigeria remains a driving force in ECOWAS's economic integration agenda, persistent structural, institutional, and implementation challenges underline why the region's integration remains a work in progress. Addressing these obstacles will require coordinated policy action, strengthened institutional capacity, and enhanced regional solidarity to fully realize the economic potential envisioned at ECOWAS's founding.

## **7. Constraints on Nigeria's Regional Leadership in ECOWAS**

Nigeria's leadership within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has long been central to the bloc's ambitions for regional integration, peace, and security. However, several structural and political constraints have consistently limited Abuja's ability to lead effectively. These constraints are multifaceted and span internal political instability, economic volatility, regional resistance to Nigerian dominance, and external geopolitical influences.

### **1. Domestic Political Instability**

Nigeria's internal political turbulence significantly undermines its capacity for consistent leadership in ECOWAS. Recurrent governance challenges — including electoral disputes, political infighting, and fragmented policymaking — distract national institutions from sustained regional engagement. Nigeria's political landscape is characterized by ethnic and religious divisions, corruption scandals, and policy inconsistency, which erode both

credibility and influence in regional affairs. For example, periods of military rule in Nigerian history have been linked to weakened foreign policy engagement, reducing participation in peacekeeping and diplomatic initiatives across West Africa. Domestic priorities such as insecurity from Boko Haram and insurgencies in the Northeast also consume critical resources that might otherwise support ECOWAS initiatives. These internal divisions dilute Nigeria's regional agenda and raise questions about its ability to balance domestic and international commitments (Udenka, 2024).

## **2. Economic Fluctuations and Oil Dependency**

Nigeria's economic structure has long constrained its leadership within ECOWAS because of an overreliance on oil revenues. With oil accounting for over 90% of export revenues, the Nigerian economy remains highly vulnerable to global price volatility. Periods of depressed oil prices lead to fiscal shortfalls, budget deficits, and reduced capacity to finance regional commitments, including peacekeeping operations and institutional support for ECOWAS. These economic fragilities are compounded by poor economic governance, corruption within the oil sector, and slow economic diversification, further weakening Abuja's ability to lead. Although recent reforms aim to revitalise the oil sector, ongoing challenges in revenue mobilisation and governance mean Nigeria still struggles to fund regional obligations reliably (Ogroh, 2025).

This financial fragility also affects Nigeria's broader foreign policy projection, as diminished economic capacity reduces its ability to provide consistent financial contributions to ECOWAS mechanisms or to leverage economic incentives as tools of diplomatic leadership.

## **3. Regional Resistance and Fragmentation**

Nigeria's dominant position within ECOWAS has sometimes provoked resistance from other member states, particularly smaller countries that perceive Nigerian leadership as hegemonic. Such perceptions have occasionally manifested in friction over decision-making processes and strategic priorities. Recent political developments illustrate this tension: following ECOWAS's punitive response to military coups in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, these states formally withdrew from the bloc to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), challenging the bloc's cohesion and Nigeria's leadership persona (Reuters, 2025).

The departure of these states undermines the regional unity Nigeria has historically sought to cultivate, fracturing collective approaches to security and integration. It also signals a broader divergence of political visions within the region and a growing reluctance by some states to accept ECOWAS protocols perceived as externally driven or dominated by Nigeria's interests. Such fragmentation weakens the bloc's overall capacity and erodes Nigeria's ability to serve as a trusted leader.

## **4. External Influences and Geopolitical Pressures**

External powers and global geopolitical dynamics also shape and sometimes constrain Nigeria's leadership in ECOWAS. The region has become an arena for broader geopolitical contestation, with major powers like Russia and former colonial powers engaging directly with West African states on security, economic, and political fronts. These external engagements can dilute ECOWAS's influence and complicate Nigeria's leadership strategies.

For instance, the AES states have aligned more closely with non-Western partners following their withdrawal from ECOWAS, reflecting how external support networks can embolden regional actors to resist ECOWAS authority. Moreover, Nigeria's foreign policy and economic decisions are often influenced by international financial institutions, foreign investment pressures, and global diplomatic expectations, which at times create tension between national sovereignty and regional obligations (Gnanguênon, Thiam & Aduku, 2025).

In sum, Nigeria's leadership in ECOWAS has been constrained by a complex interplay of domestic political instability, economic dependency on oil revenues, regional resistance, and external geopolitical pressures. These factors have led to inconsistent policymaking, reduced institutional commitment, and a loss of regional cohesion in critical moments. Understanding these constraints is vital for addressing systemic weaknesses within ECOWAS and for formulating strategies that enhance Nigeria's capacity to lead effectively in the pursuit of West African integration, peace, and security.

## **5. Contemporary Dynamics and Future Prospects**

In recent years, Nigeria's leadership within ECOWAS has been tested by profound geopolitical shifts and institutional challenges across West Africa. Central to these dynamics are the political crises in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, where unconstitutional changes of government have increasingly undermined democratic norms. ECOWAS, with Nigeria at the forefront, has responded through sanctions, diplomatic engagement, and threats of military intervention, particularly during the 2023–2024 Niger crisis. However, these responses have exposed both the strengths and limitations of Nigeria's regional leadership.

A defining development has been the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS, which became effective in January 2025 following prolonged tensions with the bloc (Obiezu, 2025). These countries, governed by military juntas, accused ECOWAS of external influence and ineffective security support, leading to the

formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) as an alternative regional framework (Credendo, 2024). This unprecedented exit represents a major setback for regional integration and highlights growing fragmentation within West Africa. It also signals declining confidence in ECOWAS's ability to manage security threats and political transitions effectively.

Nigeria's leadership role in this context has been both pivotal and contested. As the largest economy and most populous country in the region, Nigeria has championed democratic governance and regional stability. Yet, its endorsement of sanctions and coercive diplomacy has generated resistance, particularly among Sahelian states facing severe security crises. The inability of ECOWAS to enforce compliance or prevent withdrawals reflects broader institutional weaknesses, including limited enforcement mechanisms and divergent political interests among member states.

Beyond political instability, terrorism and insurgency continue to pose significant threats to regional security. The Sahel region remains a hotspot for extremist violence, with militant groups exploiting weak state capacity and porous borders. The withdrawal of Niger from regional security arrangements, such as the Multinational Joint Task Force, further complicates coordinated responses to terrorism and undermines collective security efforts (Egbejule, 2025). These developments underscore the urgent need for Nigeria and ECOWAS to recalibrate their security strategies toward more inclusive and cooperative frameworks.

Economic instability also presents a critical challenge to regional integration. The potential disruption of ECOWAS protocols on free movement and trade, following the withdrawal of key member states, threatens decades of progress. Although transitional arrangements have temporarily preserved some integration benefits, long-term fragmentation could weaken intra-regional trade and economic cooperation (Fragomen, 2025). For Nigeria, whose economy is deeply interconnected with the region, this poses both economic and strategic risks.

Looking ahead, the future of Nigeria's leadership in ECOWAS depends on several interrelated factors. First, strengthening domestic governance is essential. Nigeria's credibility as a regional leader is closely tied to its internal political stability, economic resilience, and democratic integrity. Persistent challenges such as corruption, insecurity, and economic volatility risk undermining its influence and moral authority.

Second, enhancing institutional capacity within ECOWAS is critical. The organization must move beyond reactive measures toward more proactive conflict prevention strategies, including early warning systems, preventive diplomacy, and sustained engagement with member states. Institutional reforms that improve decision-making efficiency and enforcement capacity will be vital for restoring confidence in the bloc.

Third, promoting inclusive regional policies is necessary to address perceptions of dominance and marginalization. Nigeria must adopt a more consultative and multilateral approach that accommodates the diverse interests of member states. This includes engaging with dissenting countries, such as those in the AES, to rebuild trust and foster cooperation despite political differences.

In conclusion, while Nigeria remains central to the future of ECOWAS, its leadership must evolve in response to emerging regional realities. The current crisis presents both a challenge and an opportunity for Nigeria to redefine its role, not merely as a hegemonic power, but as a facilitator of inclusive, adaptive, and resilient regional integration.

## 6. Conclusion

Nigeria's role in ECOWAS has been central to the organization's development and effectiveness. As a regional leader, Nigeria has contributed significantly to peacekeeping, economic integration, and institutional development; however, its leadership has been shaped by both internal and external challenges.

This study concludes that, while Nigeria remains indispensable to ECOWAS, the sustainability of its leadership depends on balancing national interests with regional responsibilities. Strengthening ECOWAS requires not only Nigeria's continued commitment but also greater collaboration among member states.

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