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ECOWAS FREEDOM OF MOBILITY AND ITS NATIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS FOR NIGERIA

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Introduction

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 through the Treaty of Lagos. This subregional framework was designed to advance economic integration, political cooperation, and sustainable development within the West Africa Subregion. Originally conceived as a regional response to underdevelopment and economic disintegration in West Africa, ECOWAS has over time come to include peace and security, and culminated in protocols encouraging the free movement of persons, goods, services, and capital (ECOWAS Treaty, 1993; Osadolor, 2011). One of the support beams of this agenda of integration is the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, which attempts to reduce physical and legal hurdles among member states as well as promote a single West African space.

While this protocol has advanced the regional integration agenda by promoting mobility, it has equally been faulted for driving security concerns more so in Nigeria, the most economically significant and populous state in the region. Scholars have frequently attributed Nigeria's permeable borders, poor border control, and corruption as an entrenched way of life to being the key enablers of transnational crime and insecurity (Yacubu, 2005; Onuoha, 2013; Aduloju, 2017). These domestic factors have enabled the spread of small arms, human trafficking, drug trade, and illegal migration trends commonly

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traced to the liberal provisions of the Free Movement Protocol. But attributing Nigeria's national security crisis to porous borders and poor-quality domestic institutions is analytically limiting and the danger of oversimplifying a transnational and complex challenge.

This study argues that Nigeria's national security issues cannot be addressed in isolation without reference to the broader international and regional forces that shape the security context of West Africa. Transnational crime syndicates, shifting geopolitical balances, and global demand for illegal commodities as well as the ineffectiveness of multilateral enforcement institutions are all aspects of understanding threats to Nigeria. For instance, availability in Nigeria of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) is often traced to larger West African and Sahelian networks of arms trafficking, which are sustained through wars in countries like Libya and Mali (Bøås & Torheim, 2013; United Nations, 2006). Moreover, the ECOWAS bloc has increasingly become an international narcotics smuggling corridor, with Nigeria as a transit and destination country (Henrik, 2014; Kicinger, 2004). The issue is not merely the movement of humans but the governance of such movements in an environment of low state capacity and transnational criminal economies. Here, ECOWAS' normative tools like the Protocol on Free Movement—articulate a tension between regional aspirations and local enforcement possibilities. The free movement ideal hinges on the assumption of functional border institutions, confidence between member states, and coordinated policy implementation (ECOWAS, 2006). But in practice, implementation has been piecemeal. As fieldwork and interview research in the Nigeria-Benin Seme border point out, corruption and institutional decay have undermined the Protocol (Aduloju, 2017). The lacuna that arises allows state and non-state actors alike to take advantage of loose enforcement and loopholes in law for illegalities.

Theoretically, this study uses the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Functionalism to describe West African interdependence of security as well as integration logic behind protocols such as free movement. While RSCT contends that regional security is very interdependent and that threats to security are most likely to cluster in specific geographic regions (Buzan & Wæver, 2003), Functionalism also claims cooperation in technical and economic aspects as a precursor to political integration and peace (Mitrany, 1943; Rosamond, 2000). Both, however, have their drawbacks in the African context. The assumption of functional institutions or rational regional dynamics is likely to collapse in postcolonial African states, where there is weak sovereignty, artificial borders, and historic suspicion that keeps integration at bay (Dunn & Shaw, 2001; McDonald, 2008). Therefore, while

ECOWAS may appear to be a security complex, it operates in a disintegrative regional environment with asymmetries in capacity and commitment.

It is also important to observe that security and integration are not complimentary in all cases.

The Free Movement Protocol, although aimed at advancing integration, can equally generate security externalities if poorly managed. The Protocol, according to Sofunwa of the Nigerian Immigration Service, has in reality acted as a cloak for criminals and uncontrolled migrants, some of whom pose health and security threats (Interview, 2023). This tension serves to emphasize the integration paradox with inadequate regulation, and the fact that ECOWAS member states cannot establish mutual surveillance and intelligence plans serves to compound this problem.

In total, this paper reexamines the national security implications of Nigeria's ECOWAS' Free Movement Protocol by moving beyond strictly domestic analysis. It instead situates Nigeria's border insecurity within a broader matrix of regional vulnerability, transnational criminal networks, and theoretical disjuncture between integrationist aspiration and enforcement reality. By linking empirical evidence with recent theoretical thinking, the research offers a more nuanced explanation for Nigeria's security crisis and proposes recommendations for improving cross-border governance and sub-regional security cooperation.

ECOWAS and Nigeria: Who Begat Whom?

The history and evolution of ECOWAS cannot be dissociated from Nigeria's hegemonic position and security interests in West Africa. It was born out of an increase in post-independence regionalism, spurred by the imperatives of economic independence, political integration, and collective development among the newly independent African nations (Osadolor, 2011). Though the group was formally initiated by a number of West African states, Nigeria's economic, political and organising influence put it in position to become the group's de facto driving force. Consequently, Nigeria's national interests have often intersected and, quite often, defined the agenda for ECOWAS's sub-regional integration (Obuoforibo, 2011; Fawole, 2003). Even so, it would remain reductionist to say that ECOWAS is a Nigerian creation. Rather, its origin must be seen as a component of the broader dynamics of post-colonial African aspirations, Cold War alignment, and global movement towards regional economic blocs during the 1970s.

As a regional hegemon, Nigeria had seen in ECOWAS both a vehicle

for integration and an antidote to foreign manipulation, and also as a vehicle through which it could project its geopolitical influence. During the Biafran War, Nigeria's borders were exploited by third parties to smuggle weapons, demonstrating vulnerability to internal collapse posed by ungoverned borders. This episode purportedly triggered Nigeria's zeal for a regional order to regulate cross-border affairs (Nwokedi, 1984; Aduloju, 2017). To this end, ECOWAS was a deliberate response to internal vulnerability as well as the need for expansive regional order. Nigeria's commitment to regionalism has generally rested on a twofold logic of idealism and pragmatism. On the one hand, its Pan-Africanist philosophy articulated in support of Kwame Nkrumah's continental integration schemes has provided the grounds for its normative claims to African leadership (Nkrumah, 1965; Ojo, 1974). On the other hand, Nigeria has utilized regional integration as a geopolitical device to challenge Francophone hegemony, specifically post-colonial French hegemony in West Africa. This regionalism corresponds to what analysts refer to as "regional realist integration," whereby the states pursue integration for the sake of increasing sovereignty, not dissolving it (Bach, 2016). Thus, Nigeria's participation in ECOWAS is neither altruistic regionalism nor sheer calculation but, instead, rational calculation to equilibrate regional disparities and maximize its national security through regional security.

The idea of regional integration as an extension of national security became particularly salient after the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol came into force in 1979. Nigeria's pivotal role in bringing this protocol into effect, coupled with its peacekeeping missions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia, is a reflection of its normative self-perception as a regional stabilizer (Aduloju and Pratt, 2014). These actions have, nevertheless, exposed the nation to cross-border threats. Though Nigeria invested in ECOWAS with a view to regional shared governance, the Community's institutional weakness has checkmated its ability to curb illegal migration, trans-border trafficking, and insurgent mobility transgressions which have spilled over into Nigeria's internal security domain (Henrik, 2014; Ochoga et. al., 2025). The final result paradox is that Nigeria's investment in regionalism has, in some cases, produced its national insecurity.

Furthermore, the Nigeria-ECOWAS dynamics must be theorized as a two-way constitution and not a one-way process. Nigeria previously had a leadership and financial role, but ECOWAS now intrudes on Nigeria's policy space, legal requirement, and global standing. For example, Nigeria's use of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and Common External Tariff (CET) has had far-reaching effects on its sub-regional economic matters. Similarly, its participation in regional peace and security initiatives,

like the 2008 ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF), has also rooted it firmly in regional decision-making circles (Aning and Bah, 2009). Institutional embeddedness means that Nigeria cannot dictate and withdraw entirely from ECOWAS even when regional decisions go against national interests. Worthy of mention here is that current scholarship has stressed that regional organizations such as ECOWAS are not only tools of state collaboration but also arenas in which power differentials are negotiated and reproduced (Bischoff, 2021; Hartmann, 2017). Nigeria's dominance in ECOWAS manifested in its unequal financial contribution and deployment of troops has at times bred suspicion and hostility from less powerful member states. This has, at times, narrow consensus and compromised the adoption of protocols, like those on security cooperation and free movement. Thus, while Nigeria might have originated ECOWAS, it has no absolute discretion over its course.

Secondly, the growing convergence of global and regional security challenges such as, climate-induced displacement, terrorism, organized crime, and cyber threats calls for a re-evaluation of Nigeria's ECOWAS policy. The assumption that regional integration automatically enhances security has proven simplistic. Integration, instead, can produce complex security spillovers unless it is supported by institutional control and good governance. The more Nigeria deepens regional integration, the more it must move beyond border-focused thinking to a multi-faceted security paradigm that includes human security, institutional transformation, and transnational cooperation (ISS, 2024; Gawi & Abdullahi, 2024). The question of "Who begat whom?" hides a more complex relational dynamic. Although Nigeria was the pacesetter in founding ECOWAS, the institution has been progressively making its own imprint and has influenced Nigeria's foreign and domestic policy choices. This dialectic is typical of the broader evolution of regionalism on the continent, where regional institutions are forged by hegemonic states but end up disciplining and socializing them in broader normative, economic, and security spaces. Ultimately, ECOWAS and Nigeria have reciprocally given birth to each other in the crucible of regional politics, mutual weaknesses, and common aspirations.

Theoretical Foundations for Understanding Regional Mobility and Security in West Africa

This study uses two principal theoretical frameworks, i.e.; Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Functionalism theories to explore

the academic interface between the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol and Nigeria's national security issues. Though these were developed in the Western epistemological schools, their critical localisation in the African context offers a more context-specific understanding of the institutional, spatial, and security-related imperatives of the West African sub-region. Functionalist theory, founded upon the interwar study of David Mitrany (1933), presumes that integration is the result of the incremental transfer of functional activities to the international level from the national level. As Mitrany articulated, the logic of integration is in the shared technical demands such as transport, communication, trade, and welfare, which create spillover effects to induce cooperation in other than politically sensitive areas. Mitrany's vision assumes that rational calculation and technocratic problem-solving would ultimately erode the salience of state sovereignty at the expense of transnational governance.

This direction acquired fresh meaning in post-colonial Africa, where political elites embraced regional integration both for the economic benefits but also as a device of peace and mutual sovereignty (Okolie, 2006). The ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement adheres to this trend by promoting the progressive harmonisation of migration and mobility regimes across member states. As Rosamond (2000) further elaborates, functionalism has a focus on interdependence and common interests in preference to nationalist interests, predicting that states are likely to have an interest in integration if reciprocally benefiting. Such hopes are contingent upon the supposition of good and uncorrupted institutions, not always present within West African governments. Within Nigeria, for instance, implementation of ECOWAS mobility protocols has been weakened through institutionalized corruption, porous frontiers, and poor surveillance installations (Aduloju, 2017). These realities create an incongruence between functionalism's integrative assumptions and the governance challenges on the ground. As Fayomi (2013) warns, the functionalist assumption that states will not destabilize integrative processes falls apart in scenarios where political instability, illegal economies, and institutional incapacity sabotage regional cooperation.

The argument is corroborated by recent research work. Moses (2024) argues that the ECOWAS integration model fails to identify informal economies and identity politics that generate dissonance for policy harmonization in West Africa. Similarly, Teye and Oucho (2024) explain that even though ECOWAS promotes normative systems of mobility, implementation deficits are actualized through the disconnect between state-centric governance and regional ideals. Functionalism is, as such, the right lens through which to judge the aspirational goals of ECOWAS but is limited when confronted with the

structural and political dysfunctions of postcolonial states. As a complement to functionalism's emphasis on integration, the current research uses the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), conceptualized by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003), to describe the regional security enmeshments Nigeria finds itself within. RSCT argues that security interdependence is strongest between states that are geographically close to one another whose national securities are inextricably linked. In these regions, the security of one state cannot be fully explained independently from the activities and circumstances of others. West Africa is a contextual example of this arrangement.

The sub-region is marked by porous borders, transnational insurgencies, and weak regulatory institutions, all of which make the states extremely susceptible to external shocks. Buzan and Wæver (2003) argue that security complexes are shaped by historical enmities, amities, and securitisation patterns and thereby increase mutual vulnerabilities. To Nigeria, security threats such as terrorism, arms dealing, and smuggling of people are not only events that are localized but are promoted by the fact that neighbouring states are unable to secure their boundaries. McDonald (2008) expands on this in the sense that he underlines securitisation as a discursive process whereby the states identify some events as constituting an existential threat. Nigeria, in securitizing migration and border fluidity, enunciates ECOWAS mobility as a threat to national security, even while it is participating in regional cooperation through foreign policy simultaneously. Such a duality points to the contradictions between normative integrationist rhetoric and hard facts of disaggregated and under-funded state security infrastructures.

Subsequent research highlights that the security environment of West Africa is characterized by the convergence of regional fragility and global geopolitical trends. Ismail (2015) argues that external forces namely arms traffickers, diaspora groups, and foreign insurgents exploit the territory's weak border control, thus rendering it challenging to secure countries like Nigeria. Rega et. al. (2023) also contend that Swahilisation of West African insecurity has created cross-border dynamics that cannot be addressed by national-level policies. RSCT offers a framework through which policymakers can move beyond state-centric analysis and instead observe the relational dynamics of the region. This is critical to understanding why unidirectional efforts by Nigeria to close its borders or block the way are failing to mitigate security threats because insecurity determinants are rooted structurally in the regional configuration. Although both RSCT and functionalism are helpful, scholars have increasingly challenged their unmodified usage in African settings.

Dunn and Shaw (2001) argue that Western theory is inclined to

obscure rather than illuminate political realities in Africa, especially if they do not consider informal power relations, patronage regimes, and colonial inheritances of fragmentation. There is therefore a requirement for a critical hybridization of the theories that locates their findings in the wealth of West African integration's political economy. For example, Walsh (2020) offers a "neo-regionalist" framework that integrates elements of RSCT with African-cantered institutional theory in an attempt to explain the role of non-state actors, informal economies, and hybridized forms of governance. Applying this to the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol would mean that security outcomes are not necessarily a product of policy action, but of broader socio-political environments that act as mediating variables on implementation and enforcement. On the whole, the theoretical framework of this research has a twin foundation. Functionalism illuminates the integrative purpose behind ECOWAS regimes of mobility, while RSCT captures the inter-influencing security impacts that occur in an unstable regional context. But to move from theory to application, these theories must be critically recalibrated urgently to fit the empirical circumstances of West African states such as Nigeria.

Rethinking the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol: Aspirations, Realities, and Regional Security Dilemmas

The Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, signed by the ECOWAS in 1979, is a pillar of the region's broader vision for economic and political integration. Ideationally grounded in the vision of a unified West Africa, the Protocol emerged out of the course of postcolonial efforts to transcend artificial colonial borders and achieve regional development (ECOWAS, 1979; ECOWAS, 1990). This goal is embodied in the broader African integration agenda promoted in Agenda like the African Union's Agenda 2063, which makes priority the free movement of people, goods, and services as the key source of development and security. The ECOWAS Protocol was to be effective in three implementation phases: the right of entry and the elimination of visas (Phase I), the right of residence (Phase II), and the right of establishment (Phase III).By 1992, the three phases were operational, with varying degrees of states' ratification and implementation (ECOWAS, 1990). Ancillary measures, such as the ECOWAS Travel Certificate, joining emigration and immigration forms and providing the ECOWAS passport in 2000, also evidenced political will to create mobility within the region (ECOWAS, 2006). All the legal instruments as mentioned were therefore designed to eliminate barriers to mobility while promoting the spirit of regional citizenship.

However, for all its grand conception, the Protocol has been plagued by ongoing challenges that test basic questions about its efficient enforcement and security implications. At its heart lies a contradiction between normative ideals of free movement and fragile state institutions that control borders. Although legally enforceable, the implementation of the Protocol hinges on national capacities, a number of which are weak due to institutional loopholes, corruption, and inadequate inter-agency collaboration (Henrik, 2014). Nigerian border institutions are more likely to hinder than promote regional protocols primarily due to pervasive corruption and operational absence of synergy among security agencies, noted by Aduloju (2017). More importantly, such a protocol should be questioned when it comes to contemporary transnational security concerns. Although the aim as articulated is economic integration, its entanglement with a subregional security phenomenon of armed non-state actors, networks of smugglers, terrorism, and organized crime cannot be discounted (Yacubu, 2005; Aduloju & Okwechime, 2016). Current studies indicate that the sub-region's security vulnerabilities have become exponentially diverse from the time when the protocol was formulated. The expansion of jihadist networks across the Sahel and their incursions into West African states such as Burkina Faso, Niger, and northern Nigeria indicate the danger of a disorganized system of mobility (Fatokun & Ibitoye, 2019; Garba & Yeboah, 2022; Nsaibia, 2025).

The Protocol's free mobility provisions incidentally establish facilitative conditions under which non-state armed groups and transnational criminals can move around with impunity. It has been argued by scholars that such freedom of movement in the absence of harmonized security policies and mechanisms for intelligence-sharing erodes national security while opening up vulnerable states like Nigeria to external risks (Walsh, 2020; Lindell and Mattsson, 2014). These security gaps are not merely the byproduct of porous borders, but are linked to structural gaps in state capacity across the region, asymmetrical mechanisms of enforcement, and selective enforcement of provisions under protocols. The borderless regionalist vision also assumes that there are effective and cooperative institutions that can address the complex dynamics of mobility and security. But ECOWAS states have unevenly implemented the protocol. For example, Nigeria has alternated between open-door and unilateral shut-downs, citing national security as justification. This paradox reflects what Fawole (2003) described as Nigeria's foreign policy paradox—when desire for regional leadership is at odds with need for internal security.

Moreover, theoretically, the protocol reveals the contradictions between the functionalist discourse of integration and the complex realities

of regional security. Functionalists such as Mitrany and Haas have contended that cooperation in one dimension (e.g., economic integration) would spill over into other dimensions, including political unity and security cooperation. Yet, in West Africa, the lack of consistent institutional integration within the security sector has limited such spillovers to occur. Instead, convergence is substituted with institutional fragmentation where institutional security dimensions of integration remain underdeveloped compared to economic desires (Rosamond, 2000; Fayomi, 2013). In addition, using the lens of Regional Security Complex Theory, ECOWAS mobility protocol must also be examined as not only a legal or economic instrument but as a securitizing space. Since Buzan and Wæver (2003) theorized, security dynamics within a region are highly interconnected, and the actors also tend to externalize regional insecurities as regional frameworks. To that extent, the Nigerian reaction to the Free Movement Protocol as threat reveals more about their failure to create a regional security mechanism which would be in a position to address the effects of heightened mobility than an outright fear or belief of threat.

In essence, the problem is not free movement per se but the regulation of the same. ECOWAS migration, according to Ochoga et. al. (2025), is largely informal and occurs through unregulated channels due to inefficiencies within the bureaucracy as well as corruption at the border posts. The informality thereof complicates monitoring people or accounting for commodities, rendering criminal networks' incursion into the mobility system easier. In these contexts, academics and policymakers increasingly advocate for a modification of the Protocol to balance liberal mobility and proactive regional security cooperation. This would involve the investment in trans-border surveillance centres, harmonizing legal standards in migration and crime, and institution-building co-operation in the region (Ismail, 2015). In addition, as recent regional security summits have highlighted, ECOWAS must move from rhetoric to action in implementing coordinated security task forces that can address the security threats fuelled by mobility. While the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol is a symbol of regional unity and economic integration, it is also a serious security governance challenge. The Nigerian situation brings out the need to reimagine regional mobility not as a pure gain, but as a complex policy landscape that must be based on collective, institutionally rooted, and security-conscious regionalism.

Reassessing the Security Implications of the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol for Nigeria's National Sovereignty

Since gaining independence in 1960, maintaining national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and safeguarding its citizens has been at the center of its statecraft. These have shaped its foreign policy role within the West African sub-region. Its security policy has been described by Fawole (2003) as having multiple dimensions that range from guarding its borders to providing leadership on regional political stability. The integration of sub-regional security into Nigeria's national security agenda is strategic and is an indication of a realization that turmoil in the neighbouring states has deep implications within Nigeria's own borders. Beyond these general goals, however, current security issues in Nigeria have increased in complexity. The country's position as a key actor in ECOWAS, its economic dominance, population, and extensive geography put it at the center of both integration efforts and new transnational threats (Henrik, 2014). This has increasingly placed Nigeria at risk of the unintended consequences of regional integration, most notably under the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment.

The ECOWAS Protocol, intended to provide economic integration and mobility, has generated security externalities that are exacerbated by Nigeria's institutional weakness and regional geopolitics. While the Protocol provides legal basis for West African citizens to move freely across borders, its application has been patchy and often poorly regulated. Studies by Aduloju (2017) and Onuoha (2013) show that Nigeria's borders are still critically open, having more than 1,499 irregular crossing points that are in constant use by traffickers, insurgents, and smugglers. In such a scenario, freedom of movement is a double-edged sword—it increases trade and social integration, while simultaneously empowering the invasion of criminal and terror groups. The paradox is nothing new, nor is it surprising. It is a reflection of what analysts such as Eke (in Ahmed & Chilaka, 2013) recognize as Nigeria's historical involvement in border insecurity. The transnational character of Nigerian insecurity today is not merely a matter of movement but an interdependence between weak enforcement, institutionalized corruption, and geopolitics. For instance, Boko Haram militants and other military forces use these governance vulnerabilities to smuggle weapons, finance, and personnel across the borders of nations (Edeko, 2011). The Nigerian Custom Service, as per field interviews, usually grapples with instances where criminal syndicates exploit the rights accorded by the Protocol to carry out illegal activities under the guise of legal mobility.

Furthermore, the sociopolitical impacts of uncontrolled migration are dire. While the Protocol seeks to enhance economic synergy among ECOWAS member states, its operationalization has seen the influx of unskilled migrants

into Nigeria. These illegal aliens, who mainly comprise illegal immigrants, fight for limited employment opportunities, overwork public amenities, and kindle rising social unrest (Kicinger, 2004; Teye and Oucho, 2024). The lack of a regional credentials verification program or biometric information exchange makes things worse. Throughout some Nigerian towns, heightened xenophobic sentiment has emerged in reaction to mounting crime blamed—accurately or inaccurately—on foreigners. It is necessary, though, to break beyond the overly simple explanation of blame laid against the Protocol itself. As Osita Agwu pointed out during an interview at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, the Protocol "may not necessarily be the cause of heightened security challenges confronting Nigeria; but it could be an additional impulse for criminal actors." This view corresponds with that of Walsh (2020), who posits that insecurity results less from the presence of the Protocol and more from the state's failure to monitor, manage, and enforce the provisions that are assigned to it. That is, the Protocol becomes vulnerable to abuse in scenarios where state institutions lack operational integrity and coherence.

Moreover, the ECOWAS Protocol functions in a broader international environment of threats and regional gaps in governance. The international system of security faces numerous challenges—ranging from climate displacement and pandemics to cybercrime and illicit small arms proliferation. In West Africa, these trends meet national vulnerabilities. Nigeria in particular has been victim to the spillover effects of regional violence in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire, which all contributed to the flow of ex-combatants and arms into its borders (Omede, 2013). Such regionalization of violence is in line with what Buzan and Wæver (2003) have termed "regional security complexes," in which the insecurity of one state automatically influences the security of others. The Nigerian state has sought to respond to these matters in reactive, even diametrical terms. It is illustrative, for instance, how border closure in 2019, allegedly aimed at blocking smuggling and irregular migration, contravened the letter of the ECOWAS Protocol and exacerbated tensions with surrounding nations. As Ismail (2015) argues, these one-sided measures undermine faith in regional initiatives and foretell distrust in collective security measures. They also reveal the limitations of Nigeria's capacity to balance national security and regional obligations. Empirical data from interviews and field observations along the Nigeria-Benin border also further detail the institutional complicity in undermining border management. Officers consistently take bribes to allow undocumented persons and uninspected goods to cross through the border. Despite official ECOWAS documents, the majority of tourists are daunted by officials at borders, who respectively greet

bribe-bidden travellers to be let through regardless of documents (Aduloju, 2017). Such corruption negates the purpose of the Protocol as well as degrades Nigeria's ability for the performance of any substance of viable risk assessment across its borders. Its human cost is even prohibitive. The Protocol, which is meant to protect the rights of migrants, has, in turn, been abused by traffickers who exploit loopholes in the law and administrative failures. It has been established through several studies, including those by Ezeilo (2015), that human trafficking networks often traffic children from Benin, Togo, and Niger into Nigeria for exploitation as laborers, prostitutes, and drug peddlers. The Nigerian security authorities, whose members are themselves accused of being involved in these rackets, make the issue even more complicated. This emphasizes the necessity of reframing national security in terms of including human security aspects, especially because trafficking victims are often not included in state-focused definitions of security. With these human and institutional issues, environmental and health threats are taking on greater prominence. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the forefront the dangers of unregulated cross-border movements in a region with little public health infrastructure. As Fatokun & Ibitoye (2019) argued, the inability to monitor or track cross-border movements during health crises poses existential risks, especially when added to pre-existing governance failure. Indeed, several recent West African epidemics of transnational diseases have been traced back to weak border surveillance mechanisms.

Moreover, the multiplicity of entry points, as Abba Moro highlighted, remains a structural vulnerability. There are more than 25 illegal border crossings in Adamawa State alone, making it practically impossible to manage mobility without the employment of sophisticated surveillance technologies (Onuoha, 2013). The fact that such routes exist allows not only criminals but also terror cells to be found in border communities. The Boko Haram insurgency has consistently demonstrated the strategic worth of such borderlands by utilizing them as arms and movement logistical corridors (Edeko, 2011). In the context of these challenges, it is clear that Nigeria's security crisis under the ECOWAS Protocol needs to be severed from broader issues of state capacity, regional solidarity, and international cooperation. The remedy is not the abandonment of the Protocol, but reconsideration of its operationalisation. As Farrell (2013) suggests, effective regional integration requires "a dual-track approach" building national institutions in addition to cross-border cooperation. All of this collaboration needs to go beyond signature agreements to include intelligence sharing, joint border patrols, and coordination of biometric and migration information systems.

There have indeed been some grassroots efforts to address these

problems. ECOWAS has over recent years set steps for upgrading border control, like the ECOWAS Biometric Identity Card (ECOWAS ID), which is presently being rolled out in an effort to increase traceability and reduce identity fraud. Yet, as Ismail (2015) warns, the success of such an initiative depends on member states' political will and administrative readiness. Nigeria, as the hub of the region, has the responsibility to set the tone for such a cooperative security system. The ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol was conceptualized in consideration of promoting economic integration and regional coherence, its operationalization in Nigeria has been bedevilled by institutional fragility, corruption, and geopolitics. The Protocol itself is not inherently flawed, but it has become entangled in a complicated web of national and transnational vulnerabilities that amplify insecurity. It is a challenge that requires a multi-scalar response—one that links border management to broader issues of institutional change, regional integration, and citizen security. Only through such an integrated approach can Nigeria transform the challenges of free movement into the dividends of sustainable peace and development.

Beyond Borders: Institutional Fragility, External Influences, and the Limits of ECOWAS Security Governance

The above analysis has set the stage for the internal vulnerabilities of the Nigerian state and the localized implications of the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol. However, a better understanding of regional integration's security implications must account for factors that transcend borders and domestic policy. Most importantly, this chapter addresses two interrelated questions that have only been raised in a cursory way by previous sections: the organizational weakness of ECOWAS as a regional security actor, and the international geopolitics shaping insecurity in Nigeria and West Africa at large. Despite decades of functioning, ECOWAS remains a regional organization with significant structural drawbacks. Though it has produced an enormous amount of normative tools ranging from peace and security frameworks to elections and governance guidelines, it is often not endowed with the institutional coherence, compliance structures, and financial autonomy essential for acting purposefully in security crises. As Fawole (2003) observes, ECOWAS is conceptually over-ambitious but uneven in practice, an observation borne out by later assessments that rate the body as rhetorically powerful but operationally weak.

This vulnerability is most evident in the security sector. ECOWAS has a standby force under the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) arrangement,

and has conducted interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and recently in The Gambia. Yet, such interventions have been largely ad hoc, reactive, and highly dependent on Nigerian military and financial leadership. As Ezeilo (2015) confirms, Nigeria has historically been the de facto power behind ECOWAS military operations, a responsibility that creates asymmetrical burdens and causes dependency to precede burden-sharing in the region. The ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement also suffers from the same operational shortfalls. Even though the protocol provides inspirational principles of movement and integration, it is not backed by integrated regional policing or watching out at the border. There is no unified ECOWAS security intelligence database, no uniform biometric system, and no substantive cross-national cooperation between national immigration agencies. As Walsh (2020) argues, this implies that the region lacks regional enforcement capacity though there is policy. Without institutional innovation, ECOWAS protocols will be advisory documents rather than operating guidelines.

No less important, though still not adequately dealt with, is the role of non-African players in shaping the security environment of West Africa. The national security interests of Nigeria are not only the product of domestic or sub-regional factors, but also of international factors. The international market for arms, for instance, has been the main arbiter of the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in West Africa. The majority of the illicit firearms that fuel West Africa's instability are imported from outside the continent through transnational criminal networks that thrive on weak border regimes, a report in 2023 from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Wezeman et. al. 2023). Foreign interventions in Libya following the 2011 overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi by NATO-backed forces further destabilized the Sahel, unleashing arsenals of weapons and battle-tested fighters into bordering states. This has produced profound ripple effects in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and deeper into northern Nigeria. Boko Haram, ISWAP, and other extremist movements have all benefited from such regional fault lines (Garba & Yeboah, 2022; Nsaibia, 2025). The ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol here becomes a facilitator of mobility for actors with networks not strictly limited to West Africa but branching out into global illegal circuits.

Additionally, foreign economic manipulation indirectly feeds insecurity as well. Chinese, European, and American interests in extractive industries—most prominently oil, gas, and mines—heightened competition over national resources. The dynamics tend to politicise local grievances, cause elite capture, and trigger vicious struggle by disgruntled groups. As Oshewolo et. al. (2023) states, West Africa's strategic economic interactions with foreign capital

must be seen as a component of the regional security environment. Another relatively under-researched dimension is the politicization of migration by African and European states. In the past decade, migration has been used as a strategic negotiating tool in Nigeria–EU relations. The European Union's border externalisation policy has resulted in African countries assuming the responsibility of implementing European border management in exchange for aid, technical cooperation, and trade regimes (Oluyemi, 2024). These external drivers of migration management often clash with ECOWAS's internal commitment of mobility that poses conflicting duties to countries like Nigeria.

The securitisation of migration in this international context also risks criminalising movement and undermining the human rights of migrants. As Fayomi (2013) suggests, ECOWAS citizens are entitled to freedom of movement under law, but in practice are themselves branded as security threats, especially when external powers pressure ECOWAS to raise controls. This establishes a mobility hierarchy where resource holders or privileged identities are the only ones who really enjoy the integration dividends. All of these dynamics mean that the ECOWAS security structure needs to be radically transformed. Regional security cannot be addressed merely through enhanced border policing or technological investments. It requires political will for institutional reform in ECOWAS, greater accountability between members, and a clear strategy for bargaining with outside actors on a basis of equality. It requires a reconceptualization of security to include economic justice, political inclusiveness, and ecologically sustainable development. Strategically placed as Nigeria is, it must lead this conversation. It must push ECOWAS away from protocolism where it makes declarations but without the capacity to follow through—and towards working integration. This encompasses harmonization of migration systems, developing combined training for border security officers, the creation of a regional security data centre, and the development of transnational justice mechanisms for prosecuting cross-border crimes.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement and Nigeria's long-standing national security challenges. It did not address the subject in a purely legal or operational manner, but from an interdisciplinary and multilevel approach drawing on international relations theory, empirical field observation, regional political economy, and subnational institutional dynamics. From Functionalism and Regional

Security Complex Theory conceptual frameworks, the current study did research of the promise and contradiction of regional integration in the circumstances of weak institutions, open borders, and regime securitised rule. The observations indicate that while the Free Movement Protocol was originally conceived as a mechanism for regional economic integration and solidarity, its implementation in Nigeria has revealed glaring contradictions. The protocol itself is not necessarily to be faulted for the security issues Nigeria faces. Rather, it is caused by previous vulnerabilities of border management, institutional corruption of enforcement agencies, and a lack of collective security intelligence information sharing among ECOWAS countries. These institutional weaknesses have made it possible for criminal syndicates, rebels, arms traffickers, and human traffickers to exploit legally authorized mobility patterns under the guise of regional integration.

Moreover, the study illuminated the broader geopolitical and transnational forces that shape Nigeria's security environment. These include the diffusion of armed actors from the conflict zones of the Sahel, the spillover effects of the international arms trade, and the externalisation of European migration control agendas, all of which intersect with ECOWAS's internal governance deficits. By integrating such global dynamics into the analysis, the study fills a critical void found in existing literature that overemphasizes localized accounts of insecurity. Through this study, a more advanced understanding has therefore been constructed regarding how regional pacts function within broader power systems of capability and world influence. It calls for reconceptualizing security not only as the absence of violence but also as the presence of good institutions, good leadership, regional stability, and people-cantered development policies.

In order to move ahead, Nigeria must rethink its dual function as regional hegemon and vulnerable state. It must step forward in ECOWAS to set up an integrated border management regional system of biometric surveillance, trans-border patrols, and inter-agency data standardization. Country-level reforms aimed at fighting corruption and instituting institutional congruence are the preconditions for the effective enforcement of regional protocols. The ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol is both a potential benefit and a potential danger. It will function as an integrative tool only when supported by robust national and regional capabilities to manage mobility, address insecurities at their roots, and defend the rights and dignity of citizens across borders. West African future integration is more an issue of political will and institutional readiness of its strongest member states—headed by Nigeria—than of legal frameworks.

Appendix: Interviews

Interview conducted at the Nigerian Immigration Service, Lagos, Nigeria.

Interview conducted at the Nigerian Custom Service, Lagos, Nigeria.

Interview conducted at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Lagos, Nigeria.

Interview conducted at the ECOWAS Commission Headquarters, Abuja, Nigeria.

Interview conducted at the Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abuja, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol on national security in Nigeria in the context of a wider regional and global security landscape. From primary data drawn from structured interviews and fieldwork, combined with secondary sources, the research argues that while the Protocol facilitates regional integration and regional trade, at the same time it interacts with Nigeria's narrow institutional capacity, insecure borders, and corruption and hence amplifies security vulnerabilities. However, blaming insecurity on the porousness of borders in isolation could miss the intricacy of interaction among transnational criminal networks, weak multilateral enforcement institutions, and the inherent gap between the ECOWAS integration vision and domestic enforcement realities. This study employs both functionalism and the regional security complex theory to place Nigeria's national security issues within the frameworks of regional interdependence and international systemic processes. The findings of the study propose that effective security governance in Nigeria requires not just better management of the borders but also regional coordination and institutional reforms to address both internal and external drivers of insecurity.

KEYWORDS

Border Governance, ECOWAS, Nigeria, Free Movement Protocol, Regional Security, Sub-regional Integration, Transnational Crime

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