

MEASURING DIPLOMATIC IMPACT OF NIGERIA'S ENGAGEMENT IN AFRICA CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA

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Abstract

This study investigates the diplomatic impact of Nigeria's engagement in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), focusing on the country's efforts to influence trade policy, regional dynamics, and economic outcomes. Guided by three research questions and framed within Putnam's Two-Level Game Theory, the study adopts a mixed-method research design combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The study relied on secondary data. Descriptive statistics and content analysis were used to examine Nigeria's negotiation strategies, diplomatic positioning, and trade performance. The study showed that Nigeria played a significant role in shaping the AfCFTA policy framework through strategic delay tactics, stakeholder engagement, and leadership roles such as chairing the AfCFTA Negotiating Forum. Nigeria's diplomatic influence was reinforced through alliances within ECOWAS and the AU, leading to the integration of trade safeguards, rules of origin, and phased liberalization that aligned with its national interests. Despite early successes, the study identifies policy contradictions, such as border closures, and structural challenges including infrastructure deficits, policy incoherence, and limited export diversification, which have hindered the full realization of AfCFTA benefits. Nonetheless, Nigeria's intra-African exports and FDI prospects have shown upward trends, suggesting early economic dividends of its diplomatic engagement. The study concludes that while diplomacy has enabled Nigeria to secure a favorable position within the AfCFTA, sustained benefits will depend on addressing internal economic and institutional limitations. It therefore recommends strategic investment in infrastructure, legal reforms, and the expansion of domestic capacity to ensure competitive participation in the continental trade framework.

Keywords: AfCFTA, Trade policy, Regional diplomacy, Two-level game theory, Economic outcomes, Diplomatic strategy

Introduction

The African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), launched by the African Union in 2018 and got effective from May 2019, aims to deepen economic integration by creating a single

market for goods and services across African nations. By early 2022, 41 countries within Africa had ratified it, with 54 of 55 AU member states signing on. This collective move, as prompted by the fact that AfCFTA supports AU Agenda 2063 through trade liberalization and cooperation in areas like investment, competition policy, and intellectual property (AfCFTA Secretariat, 2023). However, the success of this development depends largely on strong diplomatic efforts among member states. Given Nigeria's economic and demographic significance, this study focuses on assessing its diplomatic role in shaping AfCFTA policies and the resulting trade outcomes.

Diplomacy, and more specifically economic or trade diplomacy, involves the use of dialogue, negotiation, and strategic engagement to advance a nation's economic interests within bilateral or multilateral contexts. In the framework of AfCFTA, diplomacy refers to the established rules, protocols, and institutional mechanisms that guide trade liberalization, cooperation, and dispute resolution across member states. Diplomatic influence, in this context, reflects Nigeria's capacity to shape policy outcomes, form strategic alliances, and lead negotiations in a way that aligns with its national interests, including active participation in drafting protocols and forging coalitions (Eko, 2009). Conversely, trade outcomes refer to the measurable economic impacts resulting from Nigeria's participation in AfCFTA, such as increased export volumes, improved trade balances, welfare enhancements, and expanded market access.

Nigeria's engagement with AfCFTA began cautiously due to domestic apprehensions regarding economic vulnerabilities, such as the risk of dumping, potential revenue loss, and threats to the competitiveness of local industries. Nevertheless, following extensive national consultations and policy assessments, Nigeria signed the agreement in July 2019. As the continent's largest economy, Nigeria's participation was considered indispensable to the legitimacy and success of the agreement. Several studies have projected substantial benefits from Nigeria's involvement in AfCFTA. According to Oyelami (2021), Nigeria could experience a trade increase of USD 145 million and a welfare gain of USD 13 million. Mhonyera and Meyer (2023) project a global net trade gain of USD 2.15 billion, while Fofack et al. (2021) estimate that intra-African trade could rise by 24% under static conditions and even more under dynamic investment growth. More broadly, the World Bank (2020) predicts a 7% income gain across Africa by 2035, potentially lifting 40 million people out of extreme poverty. Beyond economic figures, the agreement is expected to spur industrialization, attract foreign direct investment (FDI), and create employment opportunities, particularly for women and youth (Mbatia&Vilita, 2021; Songwe, 2020), while also delivering environmental benefits such as reduced carbon emissions through shorter intra-African supply chains.

Despite the promising outlook, AfCFTA faces considerable implementation and diplomatic challenges. Issues such as tariff liberalization complexities, weak enforcement of rules of origin, infrastructural deficiencies, limited industrial capacity, and the persistent threat of dumping hinder progress. There is also a critical need for trade remedy mechanisms, robust intellectual property frameworks, and effective enforcement institutions (Parshotam, 2018; Woolfrey, Apiko&Pharatlhathe, 2019). In addition, political and economic interests further complicate liberalization efforts, as some African governments depend on existing trade barriers for revenue and political leverage (Odijie, 2024). Although Nigeria is a pivotal actor within the AfCFTA, there is a dearth of empirical studies that systematically investigate the country's diplomatic strategies and the extent of its influence in shaping AfCFTA policies. Furthermore, the link

between Nigeria's diplomatic involvement and the actual trade or economic gains realized under the agreement remains largely underexplored. Addressing these knowledge gaps is essential for informing both academic understanding and policy formulation.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study is to examine the diplomatic impact of Nigeria's engagement in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Specifically, the study seeks to assess:

1. Nigeria's diplomatic efforts in shaping AfCFTA policies
2. Nigeria's influence among member states in the formulation of AfCFTA policies
3. The relationship between Nigeria's diplomatic engagement and trade outcomes under AfCFTA

Research Questions

In line with the specific objectives, the following research questions are raised to guide the study:

1. How has Nigeria's diplomatic effort contributed to the shaping of AfCFTA policies?
2. To what extent has Nigeria influenced other member states in the formulation of AfCFTA policies?
3. What is the relationship between Nigeria's diplomatic engagement and its trade outcomes under the AfCFTA framework?

Literature Review

Economic Diplomacy

Economic diplomacy is a branch of diplomacy that focuses on economic policy matters and often involves the participation of state representatives in conferences organized by institutions that use economic incentives or sanctions to pursue foreign policy goals (Berridge & James, 2001). It deals with both international and domestic economic concerns, and it regulates economic relationships between states (Ajaebili, 2011). At its core, economic diplomacy is a foreign policy orientation that seeks to advance a country's economic development goals. This is achieved through bilateral or multilateral engagements and by leveraging control over financial and regional trade resources (Madubuegwu et al., 2022).

Overview of Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs) and the AfCFTA

Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs) are established to reduce or eliminate trade barriers among member states. They serve as essential frameworks for promoting market integration and fostering economic cooperation across borders (Mayer & Zignago, 2005). Their relevance has grown significantly since the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995, particularly as alternatives when multilateral trade negotiations face gridlock (WTO, 2017). Among the RTAs, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) stands out. It includes 55 African countries and covers a population of over 1.3 billion, with a combined GDP of US\$3.4 trillion. Its primary goals are to establish a unified continental market for goods and services, enable the free movement of people and capital, and lay the foundation for a

Continental Customs Union (AfCFTA Secretariat, 2023; Mustapha & Adetoye, 2020). The AfCFTA aims to achieve these objectives through mechanisms such as the progressive elimination of tariff and non-tariff barriers. It also seeks to liberalize trade in services and promote cooperation on investment, competition, intellectual property rights, and customs administration.

Historical Context of Nigeria's Diplomatic Engagement in Trade

Nigeria has historically placed Africa at the heart of its foreign policy. It has promoted regional integration through key initiatives like the Lagos Plan of Action (1980) and the Abuja Treaty (1991), both of which emphasized the importance of African self-reliant development (Adebimpe & Badru, 2025; Ogunnubi & Okeke-Uzodike, 2016; Fofack & Mold, 2021). Despite these efforts, Nigeria has been criticized for investing resources in pan-African initiatives without securing adequate economic returns for its own development (Madubuegwu et al., 2022). As part of its regional engagement, Nigeria is an active member of ECOWAS. It supports regional economic integration through mechanisms such as the Common External Tariff (CET) and the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme (ETLS). However, its implementation of these agreements has been inconsistent. Critics argue that Nigeria has shown obstructionist behavior and delayed commitments due to internal opposition from interest groups and concerns about the country's economic vulnerability (WTO, 2017; Hulse, 2016). Similarly, Nigeria's approach to multilateral trade negotiations has been undermined by a lack of policy coherence and transparency. Institutions like the Federal Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment (FMITI) and the Nigerian Office for Trade Negotiations (NOTN) are formally responsible for trade policy and negotiations. Yet, their effectiveness has been limited by political interference, weak institutional capacity, and insufficient stakeholder engagement (Woolfrey et al., 2019; WTO, 2017).

Theoretical framework

Two-level game theory

The Two-Level Game Theory, propounded by Putnam (1988), explains international negotiations as simultaneous processes occurring at both the domestic and international levels. According to the theory, national leaders engage in diplomacy on two fronts: externally, where they negotiate agreements with other states referred to as Level I, and internally, where they seek domestic approval from key stakeholders such as legislators, interest groups, and the public referred to as Level II.

The theory posits that the success of any international agreement depends on the ability of political leaders to strike a balance between international commitments and domestic constraints, with the concept of the "win-set" representing the range of agreements that would be acceptable to domestic actors. The size of this win-set directly influences a state's bargaining power in international negotiations, as a smaller win-set may allow negotiators to extract more concessions by claiming limited flexibility, while a larger win-set offers more room for compromise. In this way, domestic constraints can serve as strategic assets in diplomatic bargaining, and international agreements must be carefully crafted to gain ratification at home. The theory is relevant to the study because, it provides a framework to understand how Nigeria's internal political and economic dynamics have influenced its role in shaping AfCFTA policies. The Two-Level Game Theory offers a lens for analyzing the diplomatic strategies, policy

choices, and negotiation behaviors that have defined Nigeria's engagement in AfCFTA, providing insight into how its internal dynamics and regional diplomacy interact to shape trade outcomes.

Methodology

Research design

This study adopted a mixed-method research design. This design was considered because it enables a comprehensive examination of the research questions by integrating both qualitative and quantitative data. The design allows for an in-depth exploration of Nigeria's diplomatic strategies and regional influence while also quantifying the economic outcomes of its engagement with the AfCFTA. As Sharma et al. (2023) emphasize, mixed-method designs provide a well-rounded understanding of complex phenomena and enhance the credibility and reliability of findings through triangulation.

Method of Data Collection

The study relied entirely on secondary data from a wide range of sources. Macroeconomic indicators were obtained from the World Bank, IMF, and NBS, while sector-specific insights came from CTDi, EY, and AfCFTA reports. Trade data were sourced from UNCTAD, OEC, WITS, and GTAP, complemented by tariff and agreement data from MacMap, TRAINS, WTO, and the World Bank. FDI statistics were drawn from the World Bank Bilateral FDI Database, fDi Markets, and RefinitivEikon. Governance and institutional variables were analyzed using datasets such as WGI, Freedom House, and CEPII's gravity database, among others.

Data analysis

Data collected, were analyzed using both content analysis and descriptive statistical techniques. The qualitative component involved systematically reviewing diplomatic documents, communiqués, policy frameworks, and international reports to identify thematic patterns and trace Nigeria's negotiation strategies, leadership roles, and regional alignments. Quantitative data on the other hand were analyzed using descriptive statistics to interpret trade volumes, growth rates, and economic projections in relation to Nigeria's participation in the agreement. The combination of these methods provided a holistic assessment of how Nigeria's diplomatic efforts translated into both policy influence and measurable economic outcomes within the AfCFTA framework.

Results and Discussions

Assessment of Nigeria's Diplomatic Efforts in Shaping AfCFTA Policies

The study found that Nigeria's diplomatic influence in the AfCFTA process was evident through its significant contributions to the negotiation phases of the agreement. Despite initially withholding its signature, Nigeria maintained a strategic presence at the negotiation table, with its Chief Trade Negotiator chairing the AfCFTA Negotiating Forum and the Trade Minister presiding over ministerial meetings. This high-level involvement enabled Nigeria to shape foundational elements of the agreement, thereby retaining considerable influence prior to formal accession. This observation is consistent with the findings of Woolfrey, Apiko, and Pharatlathe (2019), who described Nigeria's leadership in these roles as pivotal in defining the negotiation agenda and outcomes. Additionally, Nigeria's bid to host the AfCFTA Secretariat although

ultimately unsuccessful further exemplifies its aspiration for continental leadership, as highlighted by Odijie (2024).

Furthermore, the study revealed that Nigeria advocated for a rules-based integration framework, emphasizing equitable trade over liberalization for its own sake. In particular, Nigeria insisted on the incorporation of trade safeguards designed to protect local industries from unfair practices such as dumping. This approach underscores a diplomatic strategy rooted in balancing national economic interests with regional commitments. As Mustapha and Adetoye (2020) affirm, Nigeria's preference for fair trade reflects a cautious but principled stance, shaped by domestic industrial concerns. The strategic posture aligns with the two-level game theory, which posits that international negotiations are often constrained by domestic political and economic pressures.

The study also found that Nigeria maintained consistent and visible engagement in AfCFTA-related diplomatic meetings, including summits, consultations, and negotiation rounds. This participation spanned both political and technical levels, with trade technocrats and policymakers frequently involved in shaping specific trade protocols and operational modalities. Records from the African Union, ECOWAS, and Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicated that Nigeria prioritized its presence in these fora. Such diplomatic consistency demonstrates Nigeria's intent to align regional trade policies with its national development strategies. This observation is corroborated by Woolfrey, Apiko, and Pharatlathe (2019), who note that Nigeria's negotiation team adopted a holistic approach that integrated domestic policy expertise into international dialogue.

Another key finding of the study is Nigeria's initial reluctance to sign the AfCFTA Agreement in 2018, which was widely perceived as controversial across the continent. This delay was not arbitrary but was instead driven by domestic concerns, especially from key stakeholders such as the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN), who warned that premature liberalization could lead to a flood of cheap imports and jeopardize local industries. As Okereocha (2018) and Mustapha and Adetoye (2020) observed, these internal pressures prompted the Nigerian government to adopt a cautious approach. In response, a Presidential Committee was established in October 2018 to assess the potential impacts of the agreement and conduct broad consultations. After several months of analysis and stakeholder engagement, Nigeria eventually signed the AfCFTA in July 2019 and ratified it in November 2020. As noted by Adebimpe and Badru (2025), this process illustrates a calculated diplomatic approach that prioritized national preparedness and policy alignment before making regional commitments.

Following Nigeria's formal accession to the AfCFTA, the government initiated a series of strategic domestic reforms to enhance readiness for effective implementation. For example, the establishment of the National Action Committee in December 2019 marked a coordinated effort to manage and monitor Nigeria's AfCFTA obligations. As reported in the AfCFTA Implementation Strategy (2021), several measures were introduced, such as the classification of goods into liberalized, sensitive, and exclusive categories to protect key sectors; targeted support for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) through capacity-building initiatives; and improvements in trade infrastructure through the introduction of Single Window Systems (SWS), One-Stop Border Posts (OSBPs), and the digitalization of customs processes. Moreover, the

government proposed legal reforms to address unfair trade practices, including the establishment of whistleblowing mechanisms for dumping cases. These domestic interventions shows that Nigeria's diplomatic engagement was reinforced by structural policy actions aimed at ensuring national competitiveness within the regional trade framework.

Despite the notable progress in diplomacy and policy formulation, the study also found contradictions in Nigeria's conduct that raise questions about the consistency of its commitment to regional integration. A prominent example was the 2019 unilateral closure of land borders with Benin, Niger, and Cameroon. An action taken shortly after Nigeria signed the AfCFTA Agreement. Intended to curb smuggling and promote local production, this move was widely interpreted as protectionist and inconsistent with the AfCFTA's core objective of facilitating the free movement of goods across borders. Odijie (2024) argues that this action undermined the spirit of regional integration and cast doubt on Nigeria's reliability as a trade partner. Beyond such policy contradictions, Nigeria continues to grapple with systemic challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, policy inconsistencies, corruption, and a highly informal economy. Which collectively impede its ability to fully capitalize on AfCFTA opportunities. These challenges were extensively documented by Woolfrey, Apiko, and Pharatllhathe (2019) and Mhonyera and Meyer (2023), who underscore the structural limitations constraining Nigeria's regional trade leadership.

The study further found that Nigeria made deliberate efforts to align foreign policy with economic goals through the National Economic Diplomacy Initiative (NEDI), launched in March 2018. This initiative was designed to stimulate exports, attract investment, and promote strategic trade partnerships across Africa. As noted by Madubuegwu et al. (2022), early results were promising owing to the fact that Nigeria reportedly earned \$2.7 billion from intra-African trade in the first quarter of 2020. However, subsequent trade performance revealed persistent structural weaknesses. For instance, in 2021, the country recorded a significant trade deficit, with imports amounting to ₦21.89 trillion, compared to ₦18.89 trillion in exports. These figures highlight a disconnect between Nigeria's diplomatic ambitions and its economic realities, suggesting that while the frameworks for engagement may be in place, effective outcomes are contingent on addressing underlying issues such as productivity, infrastructure, and trade competitiveness.

Assessment of Nigeria's Influence Over member States in the Formulation of AfCFTA Policies

The study revealed that Nigeria's influence within AfCFTA negotiations was significantly bolstered by its ability to form strategic alliances, particularly within ECOWAS and the African Union (AU). By aligning with other West African states, Nigeria succeeded in mobilizing collective bargaining power to advocate for the protection of Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and the integration of safeguarded policies in the trade liberalization process. This finding resonates with Mustapha and Adetoye (2020), who observed that Nigeria rallied ECOWAS members to delay the signing of the agreement until contentious provisions such as rules of origin (RoO) and trade remedies were clarified. These regional coalitions enabled Nigeria to steer the pace and direction of negotiations, ensuring that West African perspectives were adequately integrated into the broader AfCFTA framework. Additionally, Nigeria's insistence on harmonizing AfCFTA provisions with existing ECOWAS trade protocols reflected a leadership role aimed at promoting institutional coherence across regional economic communities.

Another major finding is Nigeria's centrality in the AfCFTA negotiation architecture, particularly through its occupation of high-level leadership roles. Nigeria's Chief Trade Negotiator chaired the AfCFTA Negotiating Forum, while the Trade Minister presided over ministerial-level discussions. These positions placed Nigeria at the heart of the decision-making processes, granting it considerable sway over the content and structure of the agreement. Woolfrey, Apiko, and Pharatlhathe (2019) affirm this observation, noting that Nigeria used these leadership platforms to advocate rules-based trade, safeguards against market distortions, and frameworks that addressed the development asymmetries across member states. Through its leadership in these platforms, Nigeria effectively transitioned from a participant to an architect of the AfCFTA policy landscape.

The study further found that several key AfCFTA policy outcomes, strongly reflected Nigeria's initial proposals, indicating substantive influence on the final content of the agreement. Nigeria's advocacy for strict rules of origin, phased tariff liberalization, and robust trade defense instruments was echoed in the adopted AfCFTA provisions. Supporting this observation, Mustapha and Adetoye (2020), along with the AfCFTA Implementation Strategy (2021), have documented the striking alignment between Nigeria's domestic consultations and the finalized AfCFTA policy features. These outcomes illustrate how Nigeria translated national concerns into continental standards, thereby embedding its policy preferences into the core operational logic of the AfCFTA.

The findings also point to Nigeria's economic size and demographic weight as foundational sources of its influence under the AfCFTA framework. As Africa's largest economy and most populous nation, Nigeria's sheer market potential makes it indispensable to the success of the free trade area. According to Mustapha and Adetoye (2020) and Odijie (2024), Nigeria's economic and demographic profile positions it as a continental anchor. Therefore, its participation was not only desirable but essential for the legitimacy and viability of the agreement. Adebimpe and Badru (2025) further support this view, noting that smaller African economies are more likely to align with Nigeria's preferences due to the asymmetry in economic power and market access. This structural leverage has enabled Nigeria to shape both the narrative and substance of AfCFTA policies from a position of strength.

Relationship between Nigeria's Diplomatic Engagement and Economic/Trade Outcomes under AfCFTA

The study revealed that Nigeria's diplomatic engagement with AfCFTA positioned her to benefit from the agreement's broader economic promise. Economic modeling studies have projected substantial gains for the continent, with Africa's exports expected to increase by \$560 billion due to the AfCFTA framework (Maliszewska et al., 2020). In alignment with this projection, Fofack et al. (2021) estimated that intra-African trade would grow by 24% compared to the baseline scenario, signaling expanded market access for economies like Nigeria. Supporting this outlook, Mhonyera and Meyer (2023) described the agreement as a net trade-creating framework, generating an additional USD 2.15 billion globally in trade flows.

Specifically, Nigeria is projected to gain USD 146.12 million in welfare benefits, positioning it as one of the agreement's prime beneficiaries alongside South Africa, which is expected to gain over USD 1.46 billion (Mhonyera & Meyer, 2023). Further, wage forecasts suggest inclusive

growth potential, with women and unskilled workers in West Africa projected to benefit disproportionately under the deep AfCFTA scenario (World Bank; Maliszewska et al., 2020). These forecasts collectively demonstrate how Nigeria's active diplomatic engagement helped secure a role within a trade framework poised to deliver substantial long-term socioeconomic dividends.

Beyond projections, the study found evidence of actual economic outcomes that correspond with Nigeria's involvement in AfCFTA. Between 2020 and 2023, Nigeria's intra-African exports increased from \$3.71 billion to \$5.63 billion, reflecting an upward trend across successive years with growth rates of 27.89% in 2021, 9.64% in 2022, and 8.18% in 2023. This trade expansion supports the argument that Nigeria's diplomatic commitments have begun translating into tangible trade gains.

Notably, Nigeria's share of total intra-African exports, although modest (ranging between 2.0% and 2.96%), showed a steady improvement, signaling its growing prominence in African trade corridors. Complementing this is the projected rise in inward Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), with Nigeria expected to see an increase of 80.09% under the broad AfCFTA scenario and 107.85% under the deep scenario (World Bank). These indicators validate the notion that Nigeria's active negotiation and early implementation strategies are beginning to yield economic benefits, particularly in enhancing regional connectivity and visibility in continental trade networks.

The findings also affirm that Nigeria's diplomatic posture served as an enabling mechanism for these economic outcomes. By strategically delaying its signing of the AfCFTA until internal assessments were conducted, Nigeria ensured that its national interests especially those of its domestic industries were reflected in the agreement (Mustapha & Adetoye, 2020; Adebimpe & Badru, 2025). Furthermore, Nigeria's advocacy for rules-based integration and inclusion of trade safeguards, helped embed protective mechanisms within the AfCFTA legal framework, safeguarding domestic markets from unfair competition (Mustapha & Adetoye, 2020; AfCFTA Implementation Strategy, 2021). Supporting this perspective, Madubuegwu et al. (2022) noted that initiatives such as the National Economic Diplomacy Initiative (NEDI) and the establishment of a Presidential Steering Committee facilitated the alignment of international commitments with internal economic priorities. These institutional reforms, including export prioritization, MSME development, and support for key services like ICT and creative industries, illustrate how Nigeria leveraged diplomatic channels to create domestic capacity for engaging the AfCFTA competitively.

While Nigeria's diplomatic engagement has laid a foundation for potential benefits, the study found that the full realization of these gains remains constrained by persistent internal challenges. Weak infrastructure, fragmented trade policies, and inconsistent regulatory frameworks continue to undermine competitiveness. As Woolfrey, Apiko, and Pharatlathe (2019) observed, Nigeria's trade policymaking remains largely opaque, lacking a robust legal foundation for implementing trade remedies and addressing non-tariff barriers.

Moreover, Nigeria's economy remains heavily reliant on oil exports, with minimal diversification into value-added sectors a concern echoed by Mhonyera and Meyer (2023), who

emphasized that this economic structure does not align with AfCFTA's goals of industrial development and value chain integration. Despite initiatives like NEDI, Nigeria recorded a trade deficit of ₦1.94 trillion in 2021 (Madubuegwu et al., 2022), further reflecting underlying weaknesses in its trade ecosystem. Additionally, simulations have warned of potential trade diversion effects, whereby Nigeria may substitute non-African imports with African ones without increasing its own exports, leading to uneven benefits (AfCFTA on Industrial Sector, 2019). These findings underscore the argument that diplomacy alone cannot drive sustainable trade transformation without complementary structural and institutional reforms.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Nigeria has played a strategically influential role in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) through its assertive diplomatic engagement, leadership in negotiations, and alignment of regional trade policies with national interests. Nigeria's ability to shape critical aspects of the agreement such as rules-based integration, trade safeguards, and phased liberalization reflects its position as a continental powerbroker. The findings also demonstrate that Nigeria's diplomatic commitments have begun yielding measurable trade benefits, including increased intra-African exports and projected growth in foreign direct investment. However, the realization of AfCFTA's full potential remains conditional upon Nigeria's ability to address internal structural constraints, such as inadequate infrastructure, policy inconsistencies, and limited economic diversification. Thus, while Nigeria's diplomacy has secured a promising platform within AfCFTA, sustained domestic reforms are essential to translating influence into long-term, inclusive economic outcomes.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. To fully leverage the benefits of AfCFTA, the Nigerian government should intensify investment in critical trade-related infrastructure such as transport networks like roads, railways, ports and the digitalization of customs and border operations. Investing in these key infrastructural areas, will strengthen logistics systems that will enhance trade facilitation, reduce transaction costs, and improve Nigeria's competitiveness in intra-African commerce.
2. It is recommended that Nigeria should establish a centralized institutional mechanism for coordinating trade policy across all relevant ministries and agencies. This framework, will promote policy coherence, regulatory transparency, and consistency. Which are factors essential for building investor confidence and effectively implementing AfCFTA obligations
3. To mitigate dependence on oil and maximize AfCFTA opportunities, the government should intensify efforts to diversify the economy by supporting strategic sectors such as manufacturing, agro-processing, and services. This can be achieved through targeted incentives, support for SMEs, and the development of innovation-driven industrial clusters that will enhance value addition and export capacity.

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