

## The Nigerian State and the African Union in Perspective

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### Abstract

The relationship between the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the African Union (AU) is a critical dynamic in understanding Pan-Africanism and continental governance. Since the era of its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), Nigeria has positioned itself as a pivotal actor, often championing the principles of self-determination, regional stability, and economic cooperation. This abstract examines this nexus, arguing that Nigeria's role is characterized by a complex duality of hegemonic ambition and constrained capacity. Historically, Nigeria has been a primary financial and military contributor to AU peacekeeping missions and institutions, leveraging its "Giant of Africa" status to shape continental agendas on issues like counter-terrorism and development. However, this influential role is increasingly challenged by significant internal contradictions. Endemic domestic issues including pervasive insecurity, political instability, economic volatility, and infrastructural deficits undermine its credibility and strategic focus. Consequently, a palpable gap emerges between Nigeria's continental aspirations and its domestic realities. This analysis concludes that for Nigeria to sustainably lead the AU in addressing 21st-century challenges, it must first recalibrate its approach by decisively strengthening internal governance and security. The future of this pivotal relationship hinges on Nigeria's ability to reconcile its national frailties with its Pan-African obligations, a balance crucial for both its own prosperity and the efficacy of the African Union project.

**Keywords:** Nigerian State, African Union, Pan-Africanism, Continental Governance, Hegemony.

### Introduction

The relationship between the Nigerian state and the African Union (AU) represents a critical nexus in understanding the dynamics of Pan-Africanism, regional hegemony, and the pursuit of continental integration. Since its emergence as an independent nation in 1960, Nigeria, by virtue of its demographic weight, economic potential, and diplomatic clout, has consistently projected itself as a "giant of Africa." This self-concept and external expectation have deeply shaped its interactions with, and contributions to, the continental body, from its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), to the AU established in 2002. Examining this relationship in perspective reveals a complex interplay of ambitious foreign policy, substantial material contributions, and often contentious domestic politics, positioning Nigeria as a pivotal, yet sometimes paradoxical, actor in the African project.

Nigeria's role was foundational to the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid ethos of the OAU. As a front-line state in the struggle against white minority regimes in Southern Africa, it provided significant financial and diplomatic support, cementing its status as a continental leader (Gambari, 2008). This legacy of "Afro-centric" foreign policy, a doctrine famously articulated by General Yakubu Gowon and sustained by various civilian and military

administrations, positioned Nigeria's national interest as inextricably linked to the liberation and stability of the African continent (Ogwu, 1986). The transition from the OAU to the AU marked a significant shift in continental priorities, from the principle of non-interference to a new doctrine of non-indifference, encapsulated in the AU's Constitutive Act which enshrines the right to intervene in grave circumstances.

Nigeria was instrumental in this paradigmatic shift, championing a move towards greater political and economic integration and promoting norms related to democracy and good governance through bodies like the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and its associated Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) (Bach, 2007). As the largest financial contributor to the AU's peace and security agenda, Nigeria has been the backbone of multiple peacekeeping and enforcement missions, from Liberia and Sierra Leone to more recent operations in Mali and the Lake Chad Basin against Boko Haram (Adebajo, 2010). However, a critical perspective must also acknowledge the persistent tensions and contradictions in this relationship. Nigeria's capacity to sustain its continental leadership is frequently undermined by profound internal challenges, including pervasive insecurity, political instability, and economic underperformance a phenomenon often described as the "hegemon on life support" (Campbell, 2011). This disconnects between its international aspirations and domestic realities often fuels domestic criticism that the country over-extends itself on the continental stage while neglecting pressing internal issues (Aluko, 2021).

### **Nigeria: Domestic sources and relevance in continental integration**

Nigeria's role in the African Union (AU) and the broader project of continental integration is paradoxical. It is often described as a "giant" with "feet of clay" a nation possessing immense potential for continental leadership yet frequently constrained by profound internal challenges. Understanding this dynamic requires an examination of the domestic sources that both fuel and frustrate Nigeria's Pan-African ambitions. These sources can be categorized into geopolitical weight, economic capacity, foreign policy doctrine, and socio-political stability. With a population exceeding 200 million, Nigeria is Africa's most populous country.

This provides a massive market, a significant pool of human resources, and substantial voting power in international fore. As the de facto representative of West Africa and a major voice for the continent, Nigeria's stance on AU issues carries inherent weight. This demographic power translates directly into AU influence. For instance, Nigeria's large population contributes significantly to the AU's budget, granting it a substantial voice. As noted by Eze (2010), Nigeria's "material capabilities, especially its population and economy, have been the bedrock of its claim to leadership in Africa" (p. 15). This sheer size forces the AU to consider Nigerian interests in its integration agendas, from the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to peace and security architectures.

As a major oil and gas producer, Nigeria possesses the economic base to fund ambitious foreign policies. During oil boom periods, it has bankrolled peacekeeping missions, provided financial aid to sister nations, and contributed heavily to AU institutions. The famous Chequebook Diplomacy of the 1970s, underlining its commitment to liberating Southern Africa, was funded by oil revenue (Ogwu, 1999). However, the economy's reliance on hydrocarbons makes it vulnerable to global price shocks. During bust periods, funding for foreign policy and AU contributions shrinks, undermining its consistency and credibility. The domestic pressures to address internal poverty, unemployment, and infrastructure deficits

often force a retreat from continental commitments. Oyebade (2008) argues that Nigeria's internal economic woes have repeatedly "hamstrung its ability to play a more decisive and sustained leadership role in the continent." The struggle to diversify the economy domestically directly impacts its capacity to be a reliable economic engine for continental integration.

A crucial domestic source of Nigeria's continental role is its long-standing foreign policy doctrine of Afrocentrism the prioritization of Africa as the centrepiece of its international relations. This doctrine, articulated since independence, places Nigeria's national interests at the centre, surrounded by concentric circles of priority: West Africa, the rest of Africa, and then the global community. This makes engagement with the AU not just an option, but a foundational imperative. This principle is deeply embedded in the works of Nigerian foreign policy intellectuals.

Ogunsanwo (1974), in his seminal study, detailed how Nigeria's leadership role in Africa was a conscious choice, driven by a sense of historical destiny and obligation. This doctrine has been invoked to justify immense sacrifices, such as the financial and human cost of the ECOMOG missions in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s, which were crucial for regional stability a key prerequisite for AU integration. This ideological commitment ensures that, regardless of the government in power, a baseline of engagement with the AU is maintained. It is a domestic intellectual and policy consensus that fuels continental integration.

**Political Instability and Governance:** Decades of military rule eroded institutions and created a legacy of corruption and weak governance. Even in the current democratic dispensation, issues like electoral violence, corruption, and poor governance divert attention and resources inward. A country struggling to manage its own internal cohesion finds it difficult to project consistent and legitimate leadership abroad. Sarooshi (2007) notes that the legitimacy of a regional hegemon is crucial; domestic governance can severely damage a state's credibility to lead others. The on-going threats from Boko Haram in the Northeast, farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt, and separatist agitations in the Southeast create a pervasive sense of insecurity. These crises not only consume a vast portion of the national budget but also project an image of a state that cannot secure its own territory, thereby weakening its moral authority to champion peace and security within the AU framework. As Mbaku (2018) contends, "a state that is unable to provide its citizens with adequate and cost-effective public safety cannot effectively provide regional public goods such as peace and security.

### **African State's**

All 54 are member states of the African Union (AU). 2 De Facto States (non-UN members). There are two territories that declared independence but are not widely recognized as sovereign by the international community, Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (Western Sahara). A member of the African Union, but its status is disputed, with most of the territory controlled by Morocco. Somaliland, stable, self-declared state that broke away from Somalia in 1991. It is not recognized by any UN member state. Therefore, while the definitive answer is 54, the complex political realities on the ground add nuance to this count. The relationship between Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and largest economy, and the African Union (AU) is a complex narrative of ambition, leadership, and constraint. From the pan-African idealism of its founding to its contemporary role as a reluctant hegemony, Nigeria's engagement with the continental body provides a critical lens through which to understand

the dynamics of African international relations. This relationship is characterized by Nigeria's substantial financial, military, and diplomatic contributions, often juxtaposed with the limitations imposed by its own internal socio-political and economic challenges. Nigeria was a central actor in the decolonization ethos of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). Its leadership, particularly under General Yakubu Gowon, was instrumental in mediating and building consensus for the creation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975, which itself became a building block for broader African integration (Adebajo, 2008).

However, Nigeria's most profound impact on the continental architecture came with the transition from the OAU to the AU. The drive for a new, more proactive organization was significantly championed by Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo. Alongside South Africa's Thabo Mbeki and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, Obasanjo was a key architect of the AU Constitutive Act, which came into force in 2002. As highlighted by Tiekou (2004), "the new African leaders, particularly Obasanjo of Nigeria, Mbeki of South Africa, and Bouteflika of Algeria, used their political capital and diplomatic skills to persuade other African leaders to adopt the constitutive act that established the African Union" (p. 261).

Prior to the AU's formal establishment, Nigeria, under the ECOWAS banner, spearheaded the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). It bore the bulk of the financial cost (an estimated \$8 billion) and human casualties to end brutal civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. This established Nigeria as the region's primary security provider. According to Adebajo (2008), "Nigeria provided over 80 percent of the troops and funding for ECOMOG, a clear demonstration of its hegemonic role in West Africa. This intervention, though costly, was crucial in shaping the norm of regional security intervention that the AU would later adopt". Nigeria has been a major troop-contributing country to AU-mandated missions, including in Sudan (Darfur), Mali, and Somalia (AMISOM).

Its police and military officers form a significant part of these operations, demonstrating a commitment to continental stability that exceeds that of many other African states. Nigeria has leveraged its diplomatic weight to influence AU agendas and resolve conflicts. A prime example is its role in securing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). As the largest market in Africa, Nigeria's initial hesitation caused significant delay. Its eventual decision to sign and ratify the agreement in 2020 was a pivotal moment for the success of the AfCFTA, underscoring its veto power over major continental initiatives. As Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike (2016) argue, "Nigeria's hegemonic credentials have been significantly undermined by its inability to effectively manage its own domestic security challenges... a credible regional hegemon must first be seen to possess a stable and secure domestic environment" (p. 80).

### **The Powers of the African Union**

The AU's powers are derived from its Constitutive Act and subsequent protocols and frameworks. Article 4(h) of the Constitutive Act explicitly grants the Union "the right to intervene in a Member State pursuant to a decision of the Assembly in respect of grave circumstances, namely: war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity. This power represents a fundamental redefinition of sovereignty in Africa. As Dersso (2012) argues, Article 4(h) "signifies a departure from the traditional understanding of sovereignty as a shield against external interference... it establishes that the primary responsibility for the protection of populations lies with the Union where the state in question is manifestly failing

to do so" (p. 12). Nigeria has been a critical enabler of this power. Its leadership and substantial troop contributions to AU-mandated missions in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Darfur (under the UN/AU Hybrid operation) demonstrate a willingness to back this normative power with action.

Nigeria's foreign policy often aligns with this principle, viewing stability in the region as essential for its own national security and economic interests. Lecoutre (2017) notes that the AU's practice of suspension for unconstitutional changes of government has become a consistent and "relatively effective tool," creating a continental norm against coups. However, its effectiveness is sometimes hampered by political considerations and the lack of robust follow-up measures beyond suspension. Nigeria's diplomatic weight is often crucial in making these sanctions stick. For instance, Nigeria played a leading role in the AU's swift suspension and condemnation of the coups in Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), and Burkina Faso (2022).

By leveraging its economic and political influence in West Africa (through ECOWAS, which often acts in concert with the AU), Nigeria helps to isolate juntas and pressure them for a return to civilian rule. Tiekou (2019) describes the AU as a "governance actor" that promotes liberal norms through its frameworks on democracy, human rights, and economic integration. It creates "soft power" by establishing the standards to which African governments are expected to adhere. Williams (2020) points out that while the AU has the legal mandate and political will to intervene in many conflicts, it remains critically dependent on external partners for funding and logistical support for its missions, which can limit its autonomy. Adeosun and Moyo (2021) argue that the success of the AfCFTA will depend on the AU's ability to move from a political project to an effective regulatory body that can harmonize policies, settle disputes, and ensure compliance from powerful member states.

### **The Core Challenge a Dual Integration Crisis**

A weak sense of national identity and cohesion among its diverse ethnic and religious groups, despite its size and influence, Nigeria has not fully leveraged the AU framework for its own development or maximized its leadership potential for continental integration. A nation that is not integrated at home cannot be a credible force for integration abroad. Nigeria's internal fissures are its primary obstacle. Move away from the current overly centralized system. Grant more fiscal and political autonomy to states, allowing them to control more of their resources and develop at their own pace. This would address feelings of marginalization in many regions.

The current centralized police force is ineffective in addressing local security challenges. Creating state police, within a national regulatory framework, would improve security and make governance more responsive. While controversial, a more formalized and equitable power-sharing arrangement at the highest levels could help manage the "winner-takes-all" politics that fuels ethno-regional tension. Break the "Oil Curse" by incentivizing agriculture, manufacturing, and technology in all regions. This creates shared economic stakes beyond oil revenue distribution. Build and maintain railways, highways, and power grids that physically connect the country. Seamless movement of goods and people is a powerful integrator (e.g., the Lagos-Kano rail line). Implement a robust social investment program focused on youth employment. Desperate, unemployed youths are easily manipulated into ethnic and religious bigotry.

The "National Orientation Agency" should be revitalized to promote a "Nigerian First" identity over sub-national identities. This should be championed by the President and state governors. The educational curriculum, from primary school to university, must emphasize shared Nigerian history, values, and civic responsibilities alongside local histories. It should teach conflict resolution and national unity. Reinforce the importance of national symbols (flag, anthem, pledge). Consider a mandatory National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) reform to make it more impactful in fostering genuine interaction and community development.

Nigeria should move beyond initial hesitations and become the AfCFTA's biggest advocate. Nigerian companies (Dangote, BUA, Flutterwave, Jumia) have the potential to be continental champions. Champion the AU's financial institutions, such as the African Central Bank and African Investment Bank, which are slated to be hosted in Nigeria. This requires Nigeria to get its own economic house in order to provide credibility. Align its national infrastructure projects with the AU's Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA). For example, the Lagos-Abidjan corridor should be a top priority, linking the economic powerhouses of West Africa. Instead of reacting to crises (e.g., coups in ECOWAS), Nigeria should lead a sustained diplomatic effort on preventive diplomacy and institutional strengthening across the continent. Nigeria's Nollywood and Afrobeats are immense tools of integration.

The government should strategically support these industries to promote a positive, unified African identity and foster people-to-people connections. Nigerian intellectuals, think tanks, and universities should be encouraged and funded to engage with AU institutions, setting the continental agenda on policy, research, and development. Nigeria is a major troop contributor. It should lead in training and providing well-equipped, professional peacekeeping forces for AU missions, setting a high standard for continental security. Champion the AU's Anti-Coup Norms. Nigeria must be the continent's most consistent voice against unconstitutional changes of government. Its credibility in this regard, however, is directly tied to the quality of its own democracy and governance.

### **The Perspective of Continental Integration**

Nigeria sees itself as a pivotal, indispensable leader in the African integration project, leveraging its demographic, economic, and political weight to shape the AU's agenda. However, this leadership is often constrained by its own domestic challenges, a complex continental political landscape, and the structural limitations of the AU itself. Nigeria's foreign policy has historically been anchored on "Afro-centrism," a principle that places Africa at the core of its international engagements. This translates directly into its approach to continental integration. Nigeria has consistently acted as a "big brother" in Africa, providing financial, military, and diplomatic resources to advance continental peace and unity. This was evident in its costly leadership in the struggle against apartheid in Southern Africa and its significant contributions to ECOWAS and AU peacekeeping missions (e.g., in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Darfur).

This role grants it significant, though not absolute, influence within the AU. Nigeria, under President Olusegun Obasanjo, was a key architect in the transition from the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to the African Union in 2002. The OAU was criticized for its principle of non-interference, which protected abusive regimes. The AU, with its Constitutive Act, embraced a more interventionist stance, including the right to intervene in a member state in cases of war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity (Article 4(h)). Tiekou identifies

Nigeria, alongside South Africa and Libya, as one of the "big three" that drove the AU's formation. Nigeria pushed for a union that was more people-centered, focused on socio-economic development, and capable of promoting good governance a clear evolution from the state-centric OAU. Adebajo argues that Nigeria's leadership in ECOWAS, particularly through its military and diplomatic interventions, has been crucial for regional stability and security architecture. This sub-regional dominance is a primary source of Nigeria's influence in the AU.

Nigeria's domestic vulnerabilities often undermine its international credibility and capacity. Endemic corruption, internal security crises (Boko Haram, farmer-herder conflicts), and a mono-economy dependent on oil revenues limit the resources and political capital it can dedicate to continental affairs. Campbell posits that Nigeria's internal frailties prevent it from exercising consistent and effective leadership. A state struggling to provide basic security and governance for its own citizens finds it difficult to project an unassailable model of leadership for the continent. The Nigeria-South Africa rivalry, often framed as a competition between "Afro-centric" Nigeria and "Globalist" South Africa, shapes many AU decisions.

From vying for a permanent UN Security Council seat for Africa to differing approaches on issues like Côte d'Ivoire and Libya, this rivalry can both spur action and create gridlock within the AU. Like many African states, Nigeria exhibits a deep-seated attachment to national sovereignty. While it championed the AU's move away from strict non-interference, it remains wary of any supranational authority that could infringe upon its domestic affairs. Nigeria's support for interventions is often situational. It may support intervention in a neighbouring state but resist any AU mechanism that could be used to scrutinize its own internal governance or human rights record, reflecting the enduring tension between integration and sovereignty.

### **The AU's Preparedness: Institutional and Policy Frameworks**

The AU has made significant strides in creating the architecture for integration, but implementation remains the primary challenge. The adoption of the AfCFTA in 2018 is the most potent symbol of preparedness. It aims to create a single market for goods and services across 55 countries. The AU has also championed key protocols like the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons (2018), which, if ratified, would dismantle significant barriers to integration (AU, 2018). This 50-year framework provides a coherent, long-term vision that moves beyond the state-centric model of its predecessor, the OAU. It explicitly links peace, security, governance, and economic development as pillars of integration (AU Commission, 2015). The principle of non-interference remains deeply entrenched. Member states are often reluctant to cede sovereignty to AU institutions. Adebajo (2021) argues, the AU remains a "trade union of presidents," where the interests of incumbent leaders often trump continental ambitions. This undermines the authority of bodies like the Pan-African Parliament. The AU is critically dependent on external donor funding for a significant portion of its program budget. This dependency compromises its autonomy and ability to set and execute a purely African agenda.

### **The Nigerian State A Pivotal but Paradoxical Actor**

Nigeria's preparedness is a microcosm of the continent's broader challenges. Its size and economy make it indispensable, but its internal weaknesses make it an unpredictable driver of integration. As Africa's largest economy and most populous nation, Nigeria is the theoretical

engine of the AfCFTA. Its market is crucial for the success of the free trade area. Nigerian entrepreneurs and corporations (e.g., Dangote, MTN, banks) are already pan-African in their operations, creating de facto integration. Nigeria was a founding force behind the OAU and AU and has been a major financial contributor and provider of peacekeeping troops. This gives it significant diplomatic clout to shape the continental agenda (Adebajo, 2021). The country is grappling with multiple internal security challenges: Boko Haram insurgency, farmer-herder conflicts, banditry, and separatist agitations.

As Nwangwu et al. (2021) posit, a state preoccupied with "stateless" problems maintaining its own territorial integrity and internal order lacks the political bandwidth and resources to consistently lead complex external integration projects. Nigeria's initial hesitation to sign the AfCFTA was rooted in fears that its nascent industries would be crushed by imports. This reflects a broader pattern of economic protectionism and unpredictable policy shifts that deter cross-border investment and trade. The closure of land borders from 2019 to 2022, while partly for security, sent a contradictory signal about its commitment to free movement (Oshodi, 2020). Nigeria's own infrastructure from its ports to its roads is inefficient and costly. This undermines the country's ability to benefit from or drive integration. Changes in government often lead to shifts in foreign policy priorities. While there is a broad consensus on Africa as the "cornerstone" of Nigerian foreign policy, the tactical approach to integration can change, creating uncertainty for its partners.

### **The Overarching Bottlenecks: An African Union Perspective**

The AU's vision for integration, as outlined in its Agenda 2063, is ambitious. However, its implementation is hampered by several structural and political challenges. The AU, like its predecessor the OAU, is built on the principle of non-interference and the sovereign equality of member states (Article 3(b) of the Constitutive Act of the AU). This often clashes with the need for supranational authority to enforce integration policies. Tieku (2012) argues that the AU's institutional architecture is "sovereignty-bound," meaning that powerful states can easily veto or ignore collective decisions that they perceive as threatening their national interests.

The UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) consistently highlights that "poor infrastructure remains a major constraint to Africa's integration and development." This deficit increases transaction costs and makes intra-African trade uncompetitive compared to trade with Europe or Asia. Conflict and political fragility in several member states create an environment of uncertainty that is anathema to investment and cross-border cooperation. The AU's peace and security architecture is often underfunded and reactive. Engel and Porto (2010) note that "the proliferation of conflict complexes... poses a direct threat to regional economic communities and the AU's integration project," as it disrupts supply chains and diverts scarce resources from development to security. The existence of multiple, often overlapping, RECs (e.g., ECOWAS, SADC, EAC) with different, sometimes conflicting, rules of origin and trade protocols creates a "spaghetti bowl" effect. This complicates, rather than simplifies, trade for businesses operating across regions. Draper et al. (2007) discuss how the "multi-membership of African countries in different RECs with different agendas and timelines for integration" is a major stumbling block to achieving a continent-wide customs union.

## **The Nigerian Bottleneck: A Key Player's Domestic Challenges**

As Africa's largest economy and most populous nation, Nigeria's effective participation is crucial for the success of the AfCFTA and continental integration. However, internal bottlenecks make Nigeria a hesitant and sometimes obstructive giant.

**Economic Structure and Dependence on Oil:** Nigeria's economy remains mono-cultural, reliant on crude oil exports for over 80% of its foreign exchange earnings and a significant portion of its budget. This makes it vulnerable to global price shocks and reduces the perceived urgency to diversify through intra-African trade. Okonjo-Iweala (2012) extensively documents how the "resource curse" has led to Dutch Disease in Nigeria, crowding out the non-oil manufacturing and agricultural sectors that are essential for benefiting from a free trade area.

**Weak and Uncompetitive Manufacturing Base:** Due to decades of infrastructural decay (especially power), policy inconsistency, and an unfavourable business environment, Nigeria's local industries are largely uncompetitive. There is a pervasive fear that opening borders under the AfCFTA would lead to a flood of cheaper imports from more industrialized African nations like South Africa and Egypt, reindustrializing Nigeria further. A study by the Nigerian Office for Trade Negotiations highlighted concerns from the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN) that "many sectors of the economy are not ready for the intense competition that the AfCFTA will bring."

**Insecurity and Its Transnational Impact:** The Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast, farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt, and widespread banditry have crippled domestic agricultural production and cross-border trade in the Lake Chad region. This not only harms Nigeria's economy but also destabilizes neighbouring countries like Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, undermining regional integration efforts within ECOWAS. Onuoha (2012) argues that the Boko Haram insurgency has "severed economic links and disrupted the historical cross-border trade that characterized the Lake Chad Basin," demonstrating how national security issues directly impede continental integration.

**Policy Inconsistency and Institutional Weakness:** Nigeria's history of sudden policy shifts (e.g., the closure of land borders in 2019) creates uncertainty for its neighbours and partners. This unilateralism contradicts the spirit of multilateralism required for integration. Furthermore, weak institutions struggle to implement necessary reforms and build the capacity needed to navigate complex trade agreements. Lewis (2020) posits that "Nigeria's political economy is characterized by patronage and rent-seeking, which often trumps long-term strategic planning for regional integration." This leads to a reactive, rather than proactive, foreign policy.

### **Can Africa and African be Free?**

Freedom" in this context can be understood in three key dimensions:

1. **Sovereign Freedom:** Freedom from external domination, neo-colonial influence, and coercive international power politics.
2. **Political Freedom:** Freedom from internal tyranny, corruption, and poor governance; the establishment of democratic institutions, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights.

3. **Developmental Freedom:** Freedom from poverty, economic dependency, and underdevelopment; the capacity for self-sustaining economic growth that improves the welfare of the populace.

### **The Nigerian State: A Microcosm of the African Struggle for Freedom**

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and largest economy, embodies both the potential for and the obstacles to freedom on the continent.

#### **Sovereign Freedom: Formal vs. Effective Sovereignty**

**Neo-Colonial Economic Structures:** Nigeria's economy remains heavily dependent on the export of crude oil, a primary commodity subject to volatile global prices. This dependency creates what scholars call "extraversion" a state where elites maintain power by managing relationships with the external world rather than by fostering internal production and legitimacy (Bayart, 2000). The economy is not free; it is tethered to the global capitalist system on highly unequal terms.

**Debt and the Bretton Woods Institutions:** The structural adjustment programs (SAPs) imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank in the 1980s and 1990s are widely cited as eroding national sovereignty. As noted by political economist Thandika Mkandawire (2005), these policies often forced African states to shrink social services, devalue currencies, and liberalize economies prematurely, undermining their capacity for autonomous policy-making. Nigeria is still grappling with the legacy of these policies and continues to negotiate with these institutions, ceding a degree of policy sovereignty.

#### **Political Freedom: The Crisis of Governance**

The failure to achieve meaningful political freedom for its citizens is Nigeria's most significant internal challenge.

**The "Shadow State":** William Reno, in his seminal work *Warlord Politics and African States* (1999), describes how in states like Nigeria, formal institutions of government are often bypassed by informal networks of patronage and personal rule. Power is exercised not for public good but for private gain. This system fuels massive corruption, which the EFCC (Economic and Financial Crimes Commission) has fought with limited success.

**The Democratic Deficit:** Despite regular elections, Nigeria's democracy remains fragile. Elections are often marred by violence, vote-buying, and allegations of fraud. The state struggles to maintain a monopoly on legitimate violence, as seen in the Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast, farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt, and separatist agitations in the Southeast. This reflects a failure of the social contract, where the state cannot guarantee security or basic services, leaving citizens "unfree" within their own borders (Ake, 1996).

#### **Developmental Freedom: The Resource Curse**

Nigeria is a textbook case of the "resource curse," where abundant natural resources lead to economic stagnation, corruption, and conflict.

**The Paradox of Plenty:** Terry Lynn Karl's *The Paradox of Plenty* (1997) explains how oil wealth can distort an economy, killing other productive sectors like agriculture and manufacturing (a phenomenon known as "Dutch Disease"). Nigeria imports most of what it consumes because its oil revenues have not been translated into diversified industrial capacity. This is a profound lack of economic freedom.

**Elite Capture and Poverty:** The vast oil wealth is captured by a small political and business elite, leading to one of the world's highest levels of inequality. The majority of Nigerians live in poverty, lacking freedom from want. As Claude Ake (1996) argued, the struggle for democracy in Africa is meaningless if it does not translate into development that benefits the masses.

## Conclusion

The Nigerian state and the African Union are inextricably linked. For the AU to succeed in its goal of "an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa," it requires a stable, prosperous, and engaged Nigeria. Conversely, for Nigeria to achieve its national potential and security, it needs a peaceful and integrated Africa. For Nigeria, the path forward requires building a more legitimate, secure, and economically inclusive state. For the African Union, the imperative is to translate its ambitious normative frameworks into tangible results for African citizens. The success of each is inextricably linked to the other, requiring courageous leadership and a renewed commitment to the principles of good governance and Pan-African solidarity. The bottlenecks to continental integration are deeply intertwined. The AU's institutional weaknesses are a reflection of the collective sovereignty-consciousness of its members, including Nigeria. Conversely, Nigeria's domestic challenges its oil dependency, manufacturing weakness, and internal insecurity prevent it from playing the confident, leadership role that the continental project requires.

The African Union is institutionally prepared but practically constrained. It has successfully built the legal and policy frameworks for continental integration, most notably with the AfCFTA. However, its preparedness is severely undermined by the lack of political will from member states to cede sovereignty, chronic funding issues, and pervasive insecurity. The Nigerian state, in perspective, is both the greatest hope and a significant bottleneck. Its economic potential and diplomatic history mark it as a natural leader. Yet, its profound internal vulnerabilities from security crises to economic protectionism render it unprepared to consistently champion and leverage the integration process. Until Nigeria can robustly address its domestic challenges, its capacity to be the engine of the AU's ambitious Agenda 2063 will remain limited. Ultimately, the preparedness of the AU is inextricably linked to the internal stability and political will of its most powerful members, with Nigeria being the most critical case.

## Recommendations

To strengthen both Nigeria's role and the AU's effectiveness, the following actions are recommended:

- i. **Strengthen Democracy:** Consolidate democratic institutions, ensure credible elections, and uphold the rule of law. A stable, democratic Nigeria is a more credible continental leader.

- ii. **Address Internal Security:** Decisively tackle internal security threats (Boko Haram, banditry, farmer-herder conflicts). Success at home is the foundation for effective peacekeeping abroad.
- iii. **Diversify the Economy:** Reduce reliance on oil. A robust, diversified economy will provide a stable base for financial contributions to the AU and make Nigeria a more attractive trade partner under the AfCFTA.
- iv. **Move Beyond "Check book Diplomacy":** Shift from merely being a major financial contributor to being the leading intellectual and policy hub for Africa. Invest in think tanks, academic exchanges, and technical assistance programs for other African nations.
- v. **Champion AfCFTA Implementation:** As the largest market, Nigeria should be the most vocal and active proponent of the free trade area. Streamline its customs, promote its industries, and help shape the trade rules.
- vi. **Focus on "Soft Power":** Leverage its massive cultural influence (Nollywood, Afrobeats, literature) to build a positive image and foster Pan-African cultural unity.
- vii. **Create a Clear Framework for Leadership:** The AU should move beyond ad-hoc reliance on Nigeria. Develop a formal mechanism for engaging with regional "anchors" like Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt, etc., defining their roles, responsibilities, and rewards.
- viii. **Improve Financial Governance:** Assure Nigeria and other major contributors that their funds are being managed transparently and efficiently. This will encourage timely payment of dues and voluntary contributions.
- ix. **Peace and Security:** While continuing to rely on Nigerian troops, the AU should work with Nigeria to professionalize and better equip its armed forces for hybrid threats (terrorism, cyber warfare). Nigeria should be a core partner in operationalizing the African Standby Force.
- x. **Economic Integration:** Place Nigerian experts in key positions within the AfCFTA Secretariat and other economic bodies to ensure practicality and buy-in from the largest economy.
- xi. **Engage with Africa Through its Anchors:** Recognize Nigeria's central role and engage with it as a key partner for addressing continental issues, from climate change to security.
- xii. **Support AU Reform Efforts:** Provide technical and financial support for the AU's institutional reform agenda, which Nigeria champions. This strengthens the overall architecture within which Nigeria operates.

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