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Strategic Adoption of Artificial Intelligence for Cybersecurity in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

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Abstract

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which commenced commercial trading in January 2021 following its 2018 signing in Kigali, represents Africa's most ambitious economic integration initiative, seeking to establish a single continental market of over 1.4 billion people and a combined gross domestic product exceeding three trillion United States dollars. Nigeria, as Africa's largest economy and a historic architect of the continent's regional integration project, occupies a pivotal, if long contested, position within this undertaking, having ratified the AfCFTA Agreement in 2020 after an initially hesitant domestic ratification process. This study examined AfCFTA implementation and its implications for Nigeria's economic integration within Africa. Anchored on New Regionalism Theory, the study reviewed conceptual, theoretical and empirical literature on AfCFTA's institutional architecture, gravity-model and empirical assessments of African trade integration, and Nigeria's specific implementation trajectory, including its 2025 institutional milestones. A qualitative documentary and secondary-data research design was adopted, drawing on academic literature, government implementation reporting and international institutional analysis to assess the extent to which AfCFTA implementation has advanced, or could advance, genuine Nigerian economic integration into African markets. Findings indicate that Nigeria achieved substantial institutional and policy progress in 2025, becoming the first AfCFTA state party to complete and publish a five-year implementation review, gazetting its Provisional Schedule of Tariff Concessions, and ratifying the AfCFTA Digital Trade Protocol, with empirical evidence indicating a positive, if still modest, association between AfCFTA implementation and Nigeria's non-oil export performance, but that structural bottlenecks, including weak transport and logistics infrastructure,

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low industrial capacity and persistent non-tariff barriers, continue to constrain the translation of institutional progress into substantial trade and economic diversification gains. The study recommends sustained infrastructure investment prioritising trade corridors, deeper harmonisation of Nigeria's tariff and regulatory framework with continental commitments, expanded support for export-ready small and medium enterprises, and continued institutional coordination through Nigeria's AfCFTA Coordination Office. The findings extend an emerging literature on the gap between AfCFTA institutional commitment and substantive economic integration outcomes in Africa's largest economy.

Introduction

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) constitutes the most ambitious economic integration project undertaken on the African continent, seeking to establish a single market for goods and services across fifty-four state parties, encompassing over 1.4 billion people and a combined gross domestic product exceeding three trillion United States dollars (African Continental Free Trade Area 2024–2025 Implementation Report, 2026). Concluded in Kigali, Rwanda, on 21 March 2018, and having commenced commercial trading in January 2021, AfCFTA aims to progressively eliminate tariffs, remove non-tariff barriers, and deepen regulatory cooperation among state parties, with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa projecting that full implementation could boost intra-African trade by more than half relative to pre-agreement levels (Regional trade agreements and economic integration in Africa, 2024). Nigeria's relationship with this continental undertaking has been historically significant, if not always straightforward. As the host of foundational continental integration instruments, including the Lagos Plan of Action of 1980 and the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community, known as the Abuja Treaty, of 1991, and as the venue where AfCFTA Agreement negotiations were themselves concluded in 2017, Nigeria has long been positioned as a natural architect of Africa's economic integration project (Nigeria's AfCFTA Strategy: Ambition, Progress and the Challenge of Delivery, 2026). Notwithstanding this historical centrality, Nigeria's own domestic ratification of the AfCFTA Agreement was notably hesitant, with the country signing only in 2019, well after many other state parties, before formally ratifying in 2020, reflecting substantial domestic debate regarding the agreement's implications for Nigeria's manufacturing sector and broader economic sovereignty. Since ratification, and particularly during 2025, Nigeria's AfCFTA implementation trajectory has accelerated markedly. The Federal Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment reported that 2025 marked a genuine turning point in Nigeria's implementation journey, with Nigeria becoming the first AfCFTA state party to complete and publish a five-year implementation review under the framework, gazetting its

Provisional Schedule of Tariff Concessions covering eighty per cent of traded goods in April 2025, submitting its Schedule of Specific Commitments on Trade in Services through the ECOWAS Commission in October 2025, and ratifying the AfCFTA Protocol on Digital Trade in November 2025 (The Giant Is Starting To Move: Nigeria's Big Step Toward Africa's Trade Dream, 2026). A further institutional milestone was the inauguration of Nigeria's AfCFTA Central Coordination Committee, bringing together more than twenty public and private sector stakeholders to strengthen coordinated implementation, alongside Nigeria's appointment as Co-Champion of the AfCFTA Digital Trade Protocol alongside Kenya and South Africa in February 2025 (Nigeria's AfCFTA Strategy: Ambition, Progress and the Challenge of Delivery, 2026).

Notwithstanding this substantial institutional and policy momentum, a persistent and analytically significant question remains only partially resolved within the existing literature: does this accelerating institutional implementation translate into genuine, substantive economic integration gains for Nigeria, measured in terms of actual trade diversification, non-oil export growth and deeper participation in African regional value chains, or does it remain predominantly an institutional and diplomatic achievement whose economic substance continues to be constrained by Nigeria's underlying structural economic weaknesses? Recent empirical assessment of AfCFTA's impact on Nigeria's non-oil exports found a positive but still modest association between AfCFTA implementation and export performance, explicitly attributing the limited magnitude of this effect to structural bottlenecks including weak infrastructure, high transport costs, low industrial capacity and limited export readiness (Uzor, 2026). This finding crystallises the central analytical tension this study seeks to address.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following objectives: (i) to examine the conceptual and theoretical basis on which AfCFTA implementation is understood to contribute to Nigeria's economic integration within Africa; (ii) to assess the documented institutional, policy and trade outcomes of Nigeria's AfCFTA implementation to date; (iii) to identify the principal constraints on AfCFTA implementation translating into substantive Nigerian economic integration gains; and (iv) to proffer recommendations for strengthening Nigeria's AfCFTA-driven economic integration. The corresponding research questions are: What is the theoretical basis for understanding AfCFTA's contribution to Nigeria's economic integration? What institutional, policy and trade outcomes has Nigeria's AfCFTA implementation produced to date? What factors most significantly constrain AfCFTA implementation from translating into substantive Nigerian economic integration? The study is significant in that it consolidates a rapidly evolving literature, spanning academic empirical assessment and official Nigerian government implementation reporting, into a single, theoretically grounded evaluation relevant to scholars of African regional integration, Nigerian trade policymakers and the wider AfCFTA policy community (Boosting Economic Diversification in Nigeria Through AfCFTA, 2025).

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 The Concept of AfCFTA Implementation

AfCFTA implementation refers to the process by which state parties translate their treaty-level commitments under the AfCFTA Agreement into operative domestic policy, regulatory and institutional practice, encompassing tariff liberalisation schedules, non-tariff barrier removal, services trade commitments, and increasingly, protocol-specific commitments addressing investment, competition policy, intellectual property rights and digital trade (African Continental Free Trade Area 2024–2025 Implementation Report, 2026). Nigeria's own implementation architecture is organised through a dedicated National Implementation Platform, the Nigeria AfCFTA Coordination Office, established pursuant to Nigeria's obligations under Article 4(g) of the AfCFTA Agreement, which mandates that state parties establish effective national coordination mechanisms for implementation (Nigeria's AfCFTA Consolidated Implementation Report, 2026).

Nigeria's Consolidated Implementation Report for the 2024 to 2025 period explicitly frames this period as marking the country's transition from foundational preparedness toward demonstrable execution of AfCFTA commitments, a framing that draws an important conceptual distinction between the earlier, largely institutional and preparatory phase of Nigeria's AfCFTA engagement and the more recent phase characterised by concrete policy instruments, including gazetted tariff schedules and ratified protocols, with tangible economic implications (Nigeria's AfCFTA Consolidated Implementation Report, 2026).

2.1.2 The Concept of Economic Integration

Economic integration, within the regional trade literature, is conventionally understood as a graduated process encompassing progressively deeper stages of economic interconnection among participating states, ranging from a free trade area, in which tariffs are eliminated among members while each retains independent external trade policy, through a customs union, common market and, ultimately, full economic union involving harmonised macroeconomic and monetary policy (Stack, 2024). AfCFTA is formally structured as a free trade area at its current stage, though its expanding protocol architecture, spanning trade in goods, trade in services, investment, competition policy, intellectual property rights and digital trade, reflects an ambition toward considerably deeper integration than a conventional free trade area typically encompasses (African Continental Free Trade Area 2024–2025 Implementation Report, 2026).

For a large, historically oil-dependent economy such as Nigeria specifically, economic integration through AfCFTA carries particular significance as a potential vehicle for economic diversification, reducing Nigeria's persistent dependence on crude oil exports through expanded market access for non-oil goods and services across the wider African continent (Uzor, 2026). This diversification-oriented framing situates AfCFTA implementation not merely as a trade policy question but as a component of Nigeria's broader macroeconomic development strategy, a framing explicitly adopted within Nigeria's own official AfCFTA implementation reporting.

2.1.3 Empirical Evidence on AfCFTA and African Economic Integration

Comparative empirical literature applying gravity-model methodology to African trade integration provides an important continental backdrop against which Nigeria's specific implementation experience can be situated. Analysis by the International Monetary Fund found that plausible reductions in tariffs and non-tariff measures under AfCFTA, combined with substantial improvements in the broader trade-enabling environment, including trade infrastructure, financial development and domestic security, would substantially boost intra-African trade in goods and services and support deeper integration into regional value chains, generating large gains in income and living standards across the continent (Trade Integration in Africa: Unleashing the Continent's Potential in a Changing World, 2023). Crucially, this analysis explicitly identifies tariff and non-tariff barrier reduction as necessary but insufficient on its own, emphasising that substantial improvements in the broader trade environment must accompany formal trade liberalisation for AfCFTA's full economic benefits to be realised, a finding with direct relevance to the structural bottlenecks identified within Nigeria's specific implementation experience.

A broader empirical review of African economic integration and trade, applying an augmented gravity-model framework across historical regional trade agreements, found that prior African free trade agreements and partial scope agreements had generally increased extra-African exports without generating meaningful effects on intra-African exports specifically, but identified a positive and statistically significant effect on intra-African exports when free trade agreement participation was combined specifically with AfCFTA membership, in contrast to the more neutral historical effect associated with earlier African regional trade arrangements considered in isolation (Stack, 2024). This finding lends empirical credibility to AfCFTA's distinctive potential to generate genuine intra-African trade growth in a manner that earlier, more geographically fragmented African regional trade agreements had not consistently achieved.

2.1.4 Nigeria's AfCFTA Implementation Environment

Nigeria's specific AfCFTA implementation environment is shaped by a combination of accelerating institutional and policy momentum alongside persistent, well-documented structural constraints. On the institutional and policy side, Nigeria's 2025 milestones, including its status as the first state party to publish a five-year implementation review, its gazetted Provisional Schedule of Tariff Concessions, and its ratification of the AfCFTA Digital Trade Protocol, collectively signal a marked acceleration relative to Nigeria's earlier, more hesitant post-ratification engagement (The Giant Is Starting To Move: Nigeria's Big Step Toward Africa's Trade Dream, 2026). Nigeria has further secured hosting rights for major AfCFTA-related events, including the Intra-African Trade Fair 2027 and the AfCFTA Council of Ministers meeting in 2026, reinforcing its continued diplomatic and institutional centrality to the continental AfCFTA process (FG Accelerates, Strengthens AfCFTA Implementation In 2025, 2026). On the structural constraint side, existing Nigerian empirical literature identifies infrastructure deficits as a particularly acute barrier to translating AfCFTA's institutional progress into substantive trade gains, with Nigeria's road, port and rail network development characterised as suboptimal in a manner that significantly impedes the country's capacity to fully harness AfCFTA's potential, generating logistical costs that diminish the international competitiveness of Nigerian industries relative to regional and continental competitors (Boosting Economic Diversification in Nigeria Through AfCFTA, 2025). Complementary macroeconomic policy assessment of AfCFTA's effects on Nigeria between 2019 and 2023 found that economic diversification and infrastructure development contributed positively to Nigerian economic stability, while oil price volatility continued to exert a negative influence on the country's broader economic resilience, underscoring that AfCFTA's diversification-related benefits remain conditioned by, rather than fully independent of, Nigeria's underlying oil-dependent macroeconomic structure (Boosting Economic Diversification in Nigeria Through AfCFTA, 2025).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on New Regionalism Theory, which conceptualises contemporary regional integration initiatives, such as AfCFTA, as multidimensional projects extending well beyond narrow trade liberalisation to encompass institutional cooperation, regulatory harmonisation, infrastructure development and, increasingly, digital and services-sector integration, in explicit contrast to earlier, narrower conceptions of regional integration confined primarily to tariff reduction among a geographically contiguous group of states. New Regionalism Theory further emphasises that the substantive economic benefits of contemporary regional integration initiatives depend jointly on formal institutional commitment and the underlying structural and infrastructural conditions of participating states, rather than on trade liberalisation commitments alone (Stack, 2024).

New Regionalism Theory is particularly well suited to a study of AfCFTA implementation and Nigeria's economic integration because it directly accommodates the central analytical tension identified throughout the reviewed literature: the distinction between Nigeria's substantial and accelerating institutional and policy commitment to AfCFTA, evidenced by its 2025 milestones, and the more modest, structurally constrained trade and diversification outcomes this commitment has thus far generated. The International Monetary Fund's gravity-model finding that tariff and non-tariff barrier reduction under AfCFTA must be accompanied by substantial improvements in the broader trade-enabling environment for the agreement's full economic benefits to be realised provides direct theoretical and empirical support for New Regionalism Theory's emphasis on the joint, rather than independent, significance of institutional commitment and structural readiness (Trade Integration in Africa: Unleashing the Continent's Potential in a Changing World, 2023).

Applied to the present study, New Regionalism Theory is used to organise the analysis of AfCFTA implementation's contribution to Nigeria's economic integration across two interacting dimensions: the institutional and policy dimension, encompassing Nigeria's formal AfCFTA commitments, coordination mechanisms and protocol ratifications; and the structural and infrastructural dimension, encompassing the transport, logistics, industrial capacity and export-readiness conditions that determine whether Nigerian firms and exporters can practically exploit the market access these institutional commitments formally confer. This dual-dimensional lens allows the study to move beyond a narrow chronicling of Nigeria's AfCFTA institutional milestones toward a more rigorous evaluation of whether, and to what extent, these milestones are translating into genuine Nigerian economic integration within the wider African continental market.

2.3 Empirical Review

A body of Nigerian and continental empirical work has examined AfCFTA implementation's relationship to Nigerian and wider African economic integration outcomes, providing a foundation against which the present study's findings can be situated.

Uzor (2026), examining AfCFTA's impact on Nigeria's non-oil exports using quarterly time-series data spanning 2010 to 2025 and estimating a log-linear regression model in which non-oil exports were explained by AfCFTA implementation alongside macroeconomic variables including exchange rate, inflation, gross domestic product and trade openness, found that AfCFTA implementation is positively associated with Nigeria's non-oil export performance, although the magnitude of this effect remains modest. The study concluded that while AfCFTA is beginning to generate benefits for Nigeria's export sector, these benefits remain constrained by structural bottlenecks, specifically weak infrastructure, high transport costs, low industrial capacity and limited export readiness, and that macroeconomic conditions matter significantly for export performance, reinforcing the view that trade liberalisation alone is insufficient without accompanying domestic economic reform.

The International Monetary Fund's gravity-model analysis of African trade integration found that a reform agenda combining AfCFTA-driven tariff and non-tariff barrier reduction with substantial improvements in the broader trade-enabling environment, encompassing trade infrastructure, financial development and domestic security, has the potential to substantially boost both intra-African and overall African merchandise trade, generating large gains in income and living standards, while also supporting deeper integration into regional and global value chains that would strengthen manufacturing capacity and promote economic diversification across the continent (Trade Integration in Africa: Unleashing the Continent's Potential in a Changing World, 2023). This continental-level finding directly parallels, and lends broader empirical weight to, the Nigeria-specific structural constraints identified by Uzor (2026).

A study of Nigerian economic diversification through AfCFTA, synthesising a substantial body of prior Nigerian empirical literature, found that Nigeria's suboptimal transport, port and rail infrastructure development significantly impedes the country's capacity to optimally harness AfCFTA's potential, generating logistical costs that obstruct trade and diminish the competitive position of Nigerian industries in both continental and international markets (Boosting Economic Diversification in Nigeria Through AfCFTA, 2025). The same study cited complementary macroeconomic policy assessment of AfCFTA's effects on Nigeria across the 2019 to 2023 period, which found that economic diversification and infrastructure development contributed positively to Nigerian economic stability, while oil price volatility continued to negatively affect the country's broader economic resilience, underscoring the interdependence between AfCFTA-driven diversification efforts and Nigeria's underlying macroeconomic structure.

At the continental comparative level, a broader gravity-model assessment of African economic integration and trade found that combining conventional free trade agreement participation specifically with AfCFTA membership introduced a positive and statistically significant effect on intra-African exports, in marked contrast to the historically neutral effect associated with earlier, more fragmented African regional trade agreements considered independently of AfCFTA (Stack, 2024). This finding provides important comparative context for interpreting Nigeria's own modest but positive AfCFTA trade effect, suggesting that AfCFTA's distinctive continental scope and institutional design may generate genuine incremental trade benefits beyond what Nigeria's substantial pre-existing participation in narrower regional trade arrangements, including ECOWAS, had achieved on its own.

Nigeria's own official implementation reporting provides direct evidence of the institutional and policy dimension of the country's AfCFTA engagement, documenting that Nigeria became the first AfCFTA state party to complete and publish a five-year implementation review, gazetted its Provisional Schedule of Tariff Concessions covering eighty per cent of traded goods in April 2025, submitted its Schedule of Specific Commitments on Trade in Services through the ECOWAS Commission in October 2025, and ratified the AfCFTA Protocol on Digital Trade in November 2025, alongside conducting a national mapping of Nigerian digital services firms and inaugurating an export air cargo corridor to East and Southern Africa in partnership with Uganda Airlines and the United Nations Development Programme (Nigeria's AfCFTA Strategy: Ambition, Progress and the Challenge of Delivery, 2026; FG Accelerates, Strengthens AfCFTA Implementation In 2025, 2026).

Collectively, these empirical studies converge on two consistent findings relevant to Nigeria's AfCFTA-driven economic integration: first, that Nigeria has achieved substantial and accelerating institutional and policy implementation progress, particularly during 2025, positioning the country as a genuine leader among AfCFTA state parties in terms of formal implementation milestones; and second, that the translation of this institutional progress into substantive trade diversification and economic integration outcomes remains constrained by persistent structural bottlenecks, particularly infrastructure deficits, low industrial capacity and limited export readiness, such that AfCFTA's measured economic effect on Nigeria to date, while positive, remains considerably more modest than the scale of the country's institutional commitment might, in isolation, appear to suggest.

2.4 Summary of the Literature

The reviewed literature establishes AfCFTA implementation as a substantively significant, well-documented process within Nigeria's broader economic policy landscape, encompassing formal tariff, services and digital trade protocol commitments coordinated through a dedicated national implementation platform (Nigeria's AfCFTA Consolidated Implementation Report, 2026). Conceptually, economic integration is understood as a graduated process whose substantive benefits depend on both formal institutional commitment and the underlying structural readiness of participating economies, a distinction with particular salience for Nigeria's historically oil-dependent economic structure (Uzor, 2026; Stack, 2024). Theoretically, New Regionalism Theory situates AfCFTA's contribution to Nigerian economic integration across these two interacting dimensions, institutional-policy and structural-infrastructural, allowing genuine integration progress to be distinguished from formal institutional commitment alone (Trade Integration in Africa: Unleashing the Continent's Potential in a Changing World, 2023).

Empirically, the reviewed studies converge on a consistent, nuanced conclusion: Nigeria has achieved substantial and internationally recognised institutional and policy progress in AfCFTA implementation, particularly during 2025, while the agreement's measured effect on Nigeria's actual non-oil export performance, though positive, remains modest and constrained by structural bottlenecks including weak infrastructure, high transport costs and low industrial capacity (Uzor, 2026; Boosting Economic Diversification in Nigeria Through AfCFTA, 2025). A clear gap nonetheless persists in the literature: existing studies address either Nigeria's institutional AfCFTA implementation progress or the agreement's econometric trade effects as largely separate bodies of evidence, official government reporting and academic empirical assessment respectively, with comparatively limited direct synthesis explicitly applying a structured theoretical framework to assess the relationship between these two dimensions of Nigeria's AfCFTA engagement. The present study addresses this gap by drawing together the theoretical, conceptual and empirical strands of the literature into a single integrated assessment of AfCFTA implementation and Nigeria's economic integration in Africa.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative documentary and secondary-data research design, appropriate for synthesising and critically evaluating dispersed academic, governmental and international institutional evidence on AfCFTA implementation and Nigeria's economic integration. Given the inherently macro-level, policy-oriented nature of the phenomenon under study, the design did not involve primary survey or interview data collection but instead drew on peer-reviewed academic literature, official Nigerian government implementation reporting, and international institutional analysis as its principal sources of evidence.

Data were derived from three complementary sources: peer-reviewed academic literature addressing AfCFTA's econometric and gravity-model trade effects at both the Nigerian and continental levels, most substantially the empirical studies reviewed above; official Nigerian government implementation documentation, including the Federal Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment's AfCFTA Achievements Report and Nigeria's Consolidated Implementation Report for 2024 to 2025, providing detailed, current documentation of Nigeria's specific institutional and policy milestones; and international institutional analysis, including International Monetary Fund and World Bank assessment of AfCFTA's continental economic implications, situating Nigeria's specific experience within the wider African implementation landscape. Analysis proceeded through a structured narrative synthesis of the reviewed sources, organised around the two dimensions of the New Regionalism Theory framework, institutional-policy and structural-infrastructural, allowing the empirical trade evidence reviewed earlier to be systematically related to Nigeria's documented institutional implementation progress. As a study of a rapidly evolving and still-unfolding implementation process, the analysis reflects the state of publicly available evidence and official reporting at the time of writing, and specific implementation milestones, trade outcomes and institutional developments should be verified against current primary sources prior to any policy application, given the continuing pace of Nigeria's AfCFTA implementation activity.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the study's findings, organised around its three research questions, and discusses them with reference to the literature reviewed above.

4.1 Theoretical Basis for Assessing Nigeria's Economic Integration

The reviewed evidence confirms that Nigeria's AfCFTA-driven economic integration is most rigorously assessed through New Regionalism Theory's distinction between institutional-policy commitment and underlying structural readiness, rather than through either dimension considered in isolation. The consistent empirical finding that AfCFTA's trade effects depend jointly on tariff and non-tariff barrier reduction and on substantial improvements in the broader trade-enabling environment provides the analytical foundation for interpreting Nigeria's accelerating institutional milestones alongside its more modest measured trade outcomes as two genuinely distinct, if related, dimensions of the country's overall integration trajectory (Trade Integration in Africa: Unleashing the Continent's Potential in a Changing World, 2023; Uzor, 2026).

4.2 Documented Institutional, Policy and Trade Outcomes

On the institutional and policy dimension specifically, the documented evidence indicates genuinely substantial and internationally recognised Nigerian progress, with Nigeria's status as the first AfCFTA state party to complete and publish a five-year implementation review, its gazetted tariff concessions schedule, and its ratified Digital Trade Protocol together constituting a credible, verifiable record of accelerating institutional commitment during 2025 specifically (The Giant Is Starting To Move: Nigeria's Big Step Toward Africa's Trade Dream, 2026; Nigeria's AfCFTA Strategy: Ambition, Progress and the Challenge of Delivery, 2026). On the trade and economic outcome dimension, by contrast, the documented evidence indicates a more modest, though still positive, effect, with Uzor's (2026) time-series analysis finding a statistically positive but modest association between AfCFTA implementation and Nigeria's non-oil export performance across the 2010 to 2025 period, an outcome consistent with the continental gravity-model finding that AfCFTA's full trade benefits depend on trade-environment improvements that extend well beyond formal tariff liberalisation alone (Trade Integration in Africa: Unleashing the Continent's Potential in a Changing World, 2023).

4.3 Constraints on Substantive Economic Integration

The reviewed literature identifies a recurring set of structural constraints limiting the translation of Nigeria's institutional AfCFTA progress into substantive economic integration gains. Foremost among these is infrastructure deficiency, with Nigeria's suboptimal road, port and rail network development consistently identified as significantly impeding the country's capacity to fully harness AfCFTA's market access potential, generating logistical costs that diminish Nigerian industries' competitive position relative to regional and continental competitors (Boosting Economic Diversification in Nigeria Through AfCFTA, 2025). Second, low industrial capacity and limited export readiness constitute a further constraint, with Uzor's (2026) empirical findings explicitly identifying these factors, alongside high transport costs, as the specific structural bottlenecks constraining the magnitude of AfCFTA's measured effect on Nigerian non-oil exports. Third, Nigeria's continued macroeconomic exposure to oil price volatility represents a further constraint operating somewhat independently of AfCFTA implementation itself, with empirical assessment finding that oil price volatility continues to negatively affect Nigeria's broader economic resilience even as diversification and infrastructure development efforts, including those associated with AfCFTA, contribute positively to economic stability (Boosting Economic Diversification in Nigeria Through AfCFTA, 2025).

Discussion

Read through New Regionalism Theory, these findings suggest that Nigeria's AfCFTA engagement has achieved considerably more rapid and substantial progress along the institutional-policy dimension than along the structural-infrastructural dimension, a genuinely uneven pattern of progress that is nonetheless consistent with the theory's core proposition that these two dimensions, while interacting, do not necessarily advance in tandem. Nigeria's accelerating 2025 institutional milestones demonstrate strong and credible governmental commitment to AfCFTA as a policy priority, yet the persistence of well-documented infrastructure and industrial capacity constraints indicates that this institutional commitment has not yet been matched by commensurate progress in the underlying structural conditions required for Nigerian firms and exporters to substantially capitalise on the market access these institutional commitments formally confer. The findings also carry a specific implication regarding the appropriate benchmark for evaluating Nigeria's AfCFTA success. Assessing Nigeria's AfCFTA engagement purely against its institutional and policy milestones, as much of Nigeria's own official implementation reporting understandably emphasises, would generate an unduly optimistic assessment relative to the more modest trade and diversification outcomes documented within the independent academic empirical literature (Uzor, 2026). Conversely, assessing Nigeria's AfCFTA engagement purely against current trade outcome data risks understating the genuine significance of Nigeria's institutional leadership among AfCFTA state parties, a leadership position that plausibly represents a necessary, if not independently sufficient, precondition for the deeper structural reforms that continental gravity-model evidence identifies as necessary for AfCFTA's fuller economic benefits to be realised (Trade Integration in Africa: Unleashing the Continent's Potential in a Changing World, 2023). A balanced assessment, consistent with New Regionalism Theory's dual-dimensional framing, therefore characterises Nigeria's current position as one of strong institutional foundation-building whose ultimate economic payoff remains substantially contingent on parallel, and currently less advanced, structural and infrastructural reform.

5.1 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined AfCFTA implementation and its implications for Nigeria's economic integration within Africa, situating the empirical evidence within the conceptual, theoretical and policy-analytical literature reviewed above. The study concludes that Nigeria has achieved substantial and internationally recognised institutional and policy progress in AfCFTA implementation, particularly during 2025, positioning the country as a genuine leader among AfCFTA state parties in formal implementation terms, but that this institutional progress has not yet been matched by commensurate progress in the structural and infrastructural conditions required to translate AfCFTA's market access commitments into substantial Nigerian trade diversification and economic integration gains, with the agreement's measured effect on Nigeria's non-oil exports remaining positive but modest to date.

Arising from these findings, the study recommends, first, that Nigeria sustain and substantially expand infrastructure investment specifically prioritising the trade corridors, ports and logistics networks most directly relevant to AfCFTA-enabled export activity, addressing the infrastructure deficiency identified as the foremost structural constraint across the reviewed literature (Boosting Economic Diversification in Nigeria Through AfCFTA, 2025); second, that Nigeria pursue deeper harmonisation of its domestic tariff, regulatory and customs procedures with its continental AfCFTA commitments, building on the institutional momentum established through the country's 2025 milestones to ensure that formal policy commitments translate more fully into practical trade facilitation; third, that targeted support programmes be expanded for export-ready Nigerian small and medium enterprises, particularly within the non-oil manufacturing and agro-processing sectors identified as holding the greatest AfCFTA-related diversification potential, addressing the export-readiness constraint identified in the empirical literature (Uzor, 2026); fourth, that Nigeria continue to strengthen coordination through its AfCFTA Coordination Office and Central Coordination Committee, sustaining the institutional coherence that has underpinned the country's 2025 implementation progress; and fifth, that further empirical research be commissioned to track AfCFTA's evolving trade and diversification effects on Nigeria over time, given the still-modest and comparatively recent nature of the currently available econometric evidence base.

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary academic, governmental and institutional documentation rather than newly collected primary trade or firm-level survey data, and by the inherently fast-moving nature of Nigeria's AfCFTA implementation process, such that specific institutional milestones and trade outcomes documented here should be verified against current primary sources given the continuing pace of implementation activity. Future research should undertake dedicated primary assessment of Nigerian firm-level AfCFTA engagement and export experience, including sector-specific case studies, to further test and extend the New Regionalism Theory-based analytical framework applied in this review.

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