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# Political will and National Interest in the Implementation of *Ecowas Protocol on Free Movement of Persons and Goods between Nigeria and Niger Republic*

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## Abstract

*Article 27 of the ECOWAS Treaty affirms a long-term objective of establishing a Community citizenship that could be acquired automatically by all nationals of the member states. This reinforces the preamble to the treaty that outlined the key objective of removing obstacles to the free movement of goods, capital and people in the sub-region. After many years of signing the Treaty I, establishing the ECOWAS as a regional body, the overall objective of promoting cooperation and integration remains consistently elusive. This paper specifically identified the factors that necessitated the measures taken by the Nigerian government against the ECOWAS protocol on free movement of persons and goods; it also examined the socio-economic implications of the measures on the relationship between Nigeria and Niger Republic. Data for the paper were gathered from both primary and secondary sources. Interview was conducted with former president of Niger who was also a member of ECOWAS task force and some border personnel along Illela-Konni and Katsina-Jibiya borders. The article on ECOWAS protocol for free movement of persons and goods, documents from Niger-Nigeria Joint Commission of Cooperation and other related documents were used as secondary source. The data were analysed thematically using content analysis. The paper revealed that the decision of the Nigerian government to restrict the free movement of goods along Nigeria and Niger Republic border was due to the intention of Buhari regime to avoid illegal entry of re-exported goods on transit, that cross African countries, especially Niger Republic and other socio-economic motives. However, the decision has multiplier effects on the relationship between Nigeria and Niger Republic. The study recommends among others the need for multilateral dialogue, at the sub-regional and regional level for all affected parties to present and iron issues or measures rather than resort to unilateral decision that could breach international protocol that eventually affects regional integration.*

Keywords: Political-will, Ecowas, free movement, persons, goods

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## Introduction

Globally, regional organizations are viewed as major feature of contemporary social and economic systems. One of the basic purposes of such regional bodies is to make use of deliberate efforts to strengthen trade and economic links.

Integration is sacrosanct in making efforts within the context of the forces of globalization, liberalization, economic growth, global security and stability, and more so in the light of the emergence of these forces as critical and fundamental issues that have helped in not only shaping but propelling contemporary global events.

In Africa, the leaders of West Africa recognised in the early 1970s that intra-regional integration could be an important step towards the sub-region's collective integration into the global economy. The possibility, and indeed the necessity, of creating sub-regional economic cooperation and integration organisations in West Africa and in fact in all of Africa was reinforced by the experiences both in developed countries, and in other developing countries (Adepoju, 2002). Hence, a treaty was signed in Lagos on 28 May 1975 to herald the creation of the Economic Community of West African States.

The ECOWAS as a regional organization was therefore rightly established to encourage economic, social and cultural development of the West African sub-region, and it derived its legitimacy from the treaty of Lagos signed by its 16-member pioneer member-states. The ECOWAS Union according to the document sought for; the establishment of a Common Market through the liberalization of trade by the abolition of customs duties levied on imports/exports and the abolition of non-tariff barrier in order to establish a free trade area at the community level; the removal of obstacles to the free movement of persons, goods, service and capital and to the rights of residence etc.

Phase I of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons and the Right of Residence and Establishment of May 1979, which guaranteed free entry of Community citizens without visa for 90 days, was ratified by Member States in 1980 and put into effect forthwith. Prior to the enactment of the ECOWAS Protocol on free movement, people moved from one location to another with no regards for the artificial borders created by the colonial powers. The objectives of the community are to promote cooperation and integration, leading to the establishment of an economic coalition in West Africa, in order to raise the living standards of its peoples, to maintain and enhance economic stability, foster relations among member states and contribute to the progress and development of the African continent (ECOWAS Treaty I, 1975).

Specifically, in the expression of political will, efforts were made through various bi-lateral agreements between Nigeria and Niger to strengthen the protocol for the

free movement of persons and goods signed under ECOWAS. These include agreements on commercial trade signed on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January, 2002, agreements for the creation of Consulate Chamber signed in 2012, the creation of Nigeria and Niger joint commission.

Generally, national interest of a country is a multidimensional hierarchy of objectives, one that is probably changing all the time and cannot be separated from the political will of the leaders in relation to the overall policy objectives of the states. At the base of the hierarchy are those purposes and objectives that are central to the security, autonomy, and independence of the political unit, to its political, social, religious, and cultural institutions, and to the basic welfare of its citizens (Holsti, 1995).

In spite of the visionary efforts of leaders to pursue the objectives of ECOWAS, there has been little to show in terms of genuine integration. Weak political will, political instability and inter-state border disputes and wars, and the reluctance of countries to surrender national sovereignty to a sub-regional organ, render the economic grouping a toothless bulldog. The smaller and economically less prosperous countries such as Niger are often suspicious of the demographic and economic giants like Nigeria. Also, free movements are still hampered by the challenges of logistics such as inadequate surveillance gadgets, ineffective information sharing etc (Umar, 2011).

Also, in spite of the protocol on free movement of persons and goods and the various agreements to foster economic relations, the Buhari administration, especially in 2019-2020 went against the agreement with the closure of border, which has been subjected to strong criticism at home, within and outside the sub-region by scholars, political analysts, the business community and individuals' alike. Nigeria's neighbouring countries such as Benin, Cameroun, Chad and Niger, together with its foreign trade partners, are also not left out among the critics of the protectionist policy of the administration to close the land border in August 2019. Also, the implications of this border closure are far-reaching not only for West African sub-region but also for wider regional integration in the continent. Justifying his government's action, President Muhammad Buhari was recently quoted as saying: "We have saved millions of dollars; we have realised that we don't have to import rice. We have achieved food security-we have

curtailed the importation of drugs and proliferation of small arms which threaten our country” (African Review, 15 February 2020).

The Nigerian government explained that the nation’s land borders were shut in the nation’s overall best interest. According to President Buhari, the main reason for the closure was to curtail the smuggling of goods such as rice and textiles to boost domestic production. The Nigerian government also aims to curb the illegal supply of weapons into the country. Still, there have been questions whether the Nigerian government action, which negatively impacts the economy of her West African neighbours, contradicts the country’s previous popular political mantra that Africa is the centrepiece of Nigeria’s foreign policy and the present “good neighbourliness and friendship” mantra. There have also been suggestions that the border closure signified a radical departure from Nigeria’s traditional care for all African nations.

Therefore, the basic questions are; how has expression of political-will and national interest affected the enforcement of the ECOWAS protocol on free movement of persons and goods along the Nigeria-Niger border? What informed the decision of the Nigerian government in the closure of border to restrict the free movement of persons and goods? What are the socio-economic implications of the measures on the relationship between Nigeria and Niger? Thus, the objective of the paper is in line with the research questions. The study focuses on the measures taken by the Nigerian government under the Buhari regime (2015-to date).

## **Conceptual Clarifications**

### **Political-will**

Political will may be defined as the extent of committed support among key decision makers for a particular policy solution to a particular problem (Post et al, 2010). Political will is commonly defined as the demonstrated credible intent of political actors (Malena, 2009). A more in-depth and operationally-inclined definition of this concept is the commitment of political leaders and bureaucrats to undertake actions to achieve a set of objectives and to sustain the costs of those actions over time (Brinkerhoff, 2000). While this definition seems straightforward, many authors stress the complexity of the concept of political will, which entails many dimensions and reflects a large and multifaceted set of underlying factors. They conclude that thinking about political will as a single,

simple factor underestimates the sheer complexity of what is involved. More specifically, Brinkerhoff (2000) stated that it is assumed that if political will is present, a number of actions will become visible.

Specifically, in this paper, political will is a sense of loyalty, belonging and connection by the government to the achievement of the ECOWAS integration goal. It implies commitment by the government of Nigeria and Niger and their respective agencies through effective funding, provision of gadgets, ensuring that there is no harassment and extortion among the personnel in the enforcement of ECOWAS protocol with particular reference to free movement of persons and goods along the borders of members countries.

### **National Interest**

Just like the concept of political will, the concept of national interest is vague and so it is difficult to give a precise definition of the term. In spite of that, national interest is defined as the general long term and continuing purpose which the states, nation and the government see themselves as serving. The national interest of a state is rooted in the social consciousness and in the cultural identity of a people. In other words, the national interest of a state is a product of social values which the people have. In practice, the national interest of a country is synthesized and checked by political leaders or policy makers. That is why national interest is defined as "what policy makers say it is".

Henderson (2005) cited in Ebegbulem (2019) sees national interest as the collective aspiration of a state on worldwide scale. Generally, national interest is conceived as the goals and aspirations of nation-states in the international system. National interest embraces all the various strategies employed in the international interaction of states in order to ensure the achievement and preservation of the goals and aspirations of such states. Broadly conceived, national interest is a guide to the formulation of foreign policy. What propels a state's foreign policy is its national interest.

Specifically, Babangida (1986) maintained that he would like to think of national interest as national security interest. This is because to him the concept of national interest has become so vague and elastic. It can take subtle forms such as subversion of core values through economic sabotage, counterfeiting, drug

trafficking, espionage, and cultural subversion. These elements can cause havoc on a nation's psyche and survival.

### **ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons and Goods**

This has to do with the provision of Article 27 of the ECOWAS Treaty that affirms a long-term objective of establishing a Community Citizenship that could be acquired automatically by all nationals of the member states. It includes Phase 1 of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons and the Right of Residence and Establishment of May 1979. It also entails the protocol on the provisions for the Re-exportation within ECOWAS of goods imported from third party countries. Also, it is the movement along the border of Nigeria and Niger without unnecessary restriction of any person with required documents. Persons here refer to the citizens of both Nigeria and Niger republic as two of the member countries of ECOWAS. Thus, in a more specific sense, persons in this study are otherwise known as 'citizens' that are legitimate national of a member-state of the ECOWAS, specifically from Nigeria and Niger Republic. Goods on the other hand can be defined as finished products, as intermediate goods used in producing other goods, or as agricultural products and foodstuffs. International trade enables a nation to specialize in those goods it can produce most cheaply and efficiently. These include items such as dates, oil, bed furniture etc.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Realist theory is adopted for this study as a guide. The theory was originally credited to Morgenthau (1904-1980). Realism identifies five propositions that will be useful in analysing the role of national interest in regional integration. First, states are the major actors in world affairs. Second, the international environment severely penalizes states if they fail to protect their vital interests or if they pursue objectives beyond their means; hence, states are 'sensitive to costs' and behave as unitary-rational agents. Third, international anarchy is the principle force shaping the motives and actions of states. Fourth, states in anarchy are preoccupied with power and security, are predisposed toward conflict and competition, and often fail to cooperate even in the face of common interests. Finally, international institutions affect the prospects for cooperation marginally'

Also, Krasner (1992) contends that sovereignty is a political order based on territorial control. The international system is anarchical. It is a self-help system.

There is no higher authority that can constrain or channel the behaviour of states. He argues that sovereign states are rational self-seeking actors resolutely if not exclusively concerned with relative gains because they must function in an anarchical environment in which their security and well-being ultimately rest on their ability to mobilise their own resources against external threats. Senghor notes that empirical studies on African integration have also emphasised the relevance and importance of domestic political developments on the changing positions of local political actors, on the determination of national approaches to integration, and on the scope for government actions in the establishment of strategy. Consequently, policies and actions on cooperation and integration are basically reflective of their perceived implications for domestic political fortunes and of the quest for a monopoly of power in society. Even when the latter is achieved, the domestic consensus based on which government can proceed to negotiate any form of surrender of national sovereignty often is, to a great extent, lacking. Integration means a greater burden than existing political climates can tolerate.

According to Carr (1939), in the international system (ECOWAS in particular) there is no equivalent regulatory system which can enforce compliance on states. There is no binding international law or legal system which can bring states to account for their behaviour. States can 'get way' with whatever their power allows them to achieve. There is no corresponding force which can be invoked to 'reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable clash of interest between nations. Moreover, appeals to the common interests of states were 'illusion', due to the voice of preponderant power, and often at the expense of the weak and disadvantaged.

It has been argued that sovereignty often has tended to provide protective shield for leaders acting ostensibly in the interests of the state, for instance, the decision of Nigeria to close its border in 2019. Realists identify greater uncertainties for states considering cooperation, which among them could achieve the greatest gains, and would un-balanced achievements of gains affect relative capabilities. In addition, realists argue that a state that knows it will not be cheated still confronts another risk that is at least as formidable. For realists, state efforts to cooperate entail dangers plus a much greater risk, for some states, that cooperation might someday result in lost independence and security.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the realist theory unlike other theories such as functionalism and neofunctionalism, does not assume that states interest can be subordinated by functional cooperation in welfare areas. It argues that national interest determines a state willingness to cede sovereignty to regional institutions. This study therefore uses the realist lens to analyse how the expression of the dual factors of political will and national interests have impacted on regional integration in the ECOWAS with specific reference to Nigeria and Niger Republic in protecting the former's (Nigeria) national interest and sovereignty.

### **Methodology**

The paper relies on both primary and secondary data. Interview is used to get first-hand information from the field. The advantage of using interview is due to its flexibility and also it is more in-depth as it facilitates exploration on the issues under discussions. The interview was in form of semi-structured format because responses from the structured questions would elicit other questions that may escape the mind of the researcher but relevant to the study. The questions were on whether Niger and Nigeria have the political will to enforce the agreement; protocol on free movement of persons and goods i.e. the various bilateral agreements between Nigeria and Niger; the creation of the corridors for smooth movement of persons and goods; trade agreement between the two countries and also free trade agreement with the other ECOWAS countries; various personnel at the border to facilitate the movement of persons and goods (immigration and custom officers).

Thus, interview was conducted with the former president of Niger who was also a member of ECOWAS task force and former Director of the ECOWAS from the Nigerian side at the Abuja headquarters. Two management staff of ECOWAS at the Head Office in Abuja, one staff of the Niger-Nigeria Joint Commission, and some official of Customs and Immigration from the two borders of Illella-Konni and Katsina-Jibiya, and four police officers from Niger were also interviewed, giving the total number of 23 respondents that were interviewed. The researcher while conducting the interview was able to record the interaction and later extract the relevant information to the research by putting it in written form. Also, published and unpublished documents are used in gathering secondary data, these include ECOWAS article on the protocol for free movements of persons and goods, documents from Niger-Nigeria joint commission of cooperation etc. The data are analysed thematically and using content analysis.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### *Articles on Free Movement of Persons and Goods and Nigeria-Niger Bilateral Agreements*

The ECOWAS, in order to pursue its objectives in eliminating obstacles restricting the free movement of persons, services and capital between member states came out with guidelines. **Article 2** provides that the community citizens have the right to enter, reside and establish in the territory of Member States; the right of entry, residence and establishment referred to in paragraph 1 above shall be progressively established in the course of a maximum transitional period of fifteen (15) years from the definitive entry into force of this Protocol by abolishing all other obstacles to free movement of persons and to the right of residence and establishment; the right of entry, residence and establishment which shall be established in the course of a transitional period shall be accomplished in three phases, namely: Phase I – Right of Entry and Abolition of Visa; Phase II – Right of Residence and Phase III – Right of Establishment.

However, **Article 3** of the protocol stated that any citizen of the Community who wishes to enter the territory of any other Member State shall be required to possess valid travel document and international health certificate; a citizen of the Community visiting any Member State for a period not exceeding ninety (90) days shall enter the territory of that Member State through the official entry point free of visa requirements. Such citizen shall, however, be required to obtain permission for an extension of stay from the appropriate authority if after such entry that citizen has cause to stay for more than ninety (90) days.

**Article 13** provides that this Protocol shall enter into force provisionally upon signature by Heads of State and Government of Member States and definitively upon ratification by at least seven signatory States in accordance with the constitutional procedures applicable for each signatory State; this Protocol and all the instruments of ratification shall be deposited with the Executive Secretariat which shall transmit certified true copies of this Protocol to all Member States and notify them of the dates of deposits of the instruments of ratification and shall register this Protocol with the Organisation of African Unity, the United Nations and such other organisations as the Council shall determine; this Protocol shall be annexed to and shall form an integral part of the Treaty.

Therefore, in order to achieve the above purposes, **Article 2 (2)** of the Treaty requires Member States to remove all obstacles to free movement in order to provide the foundation upon which a borderless region was to be achieved. The ECOWAS Community envisioned the transformation of the Union into one “massive borderless region, an ECOWAS of peoples, not countries”. When the Protocol on free movement was enacted, therefore, it held great promise for the earlier vision of the founding fathers for a borderless West African region. Hence forth, adjustments were made to the protocols. For instance, 1985 Supplementary Protocol A/SP.1/7/85 on the Code of Conduct for the implementation of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, the Right of Residence and Establishment obliges member states to provide valid travel documents to their citizens (Article 2(1)), establishes additional (to Article 11 of Protocol) requirements for treatment of persons being expelled (Article 4) and enumerates protections for illegal immigrants (Articles 5 and 7).

In addition, the 1986 Supplementary Protocol A/SP.1/7/86 on the Second Phase (Right of Residence) requires states to grant to Community citizens who are nationals of other member states “the right of residence in its territory for the purpose of seeking and carrying out income earning employment” (Article 2); conditions entitlement to residence (and thus seeking and carrying out of income earning employment) on possession of an ECOWAS; residence Card or Permit (Article 5) and harmonisation by member states of rules appertaining to the issuance of such cards/permits (Article 9) and prohibits expulsion in masse (Article 13) and limits grounds for individual expulsion to national security, public order or morality, public health, non-fulfilment of essential condition of residence (Article 14).

Moreover, 1989 Supplementary Protocol A/SP.1/6/89 amending and complementing the provisions of Article 7 of the Protocol on Free Movement, Right of Residence and Establishment amends provisions of Article 7 of Protocol to confirm obligation on signatories to resolve amicably disputes regarding the interpretation and application of the Protocol (Article 2).

In case of Nigeria and Niger, the two countries have signed several bi-lateral agreements to strengthened the enforcement of the protocol on free movement of persons and goods. There was cross-border Initiatives Programme (CIP) launching workshop, held from 19 to 21 September 2007 in Katsina (Nigeria), where three platforms were put forward on which to establish cross-border

cooperation between Niger and Nigeria along the Kano-Katsina-Maradi (abbreviated "K<sup>2</sup>M") corridor. These platforms are: 1° Information on the markets; 2° Cross-border movement of goods; 3° Cross-border movement of capital. Nigerian-Niger joint commission of cooperation (NNJCC) was created to facilitate the various agreements between Nigeria and Niger.

Other specific agreements included strengthening efforts in implementing the agreements on commercial trade that was signed on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January, 2002, agreements for the creation of Consulate Chamber signed in 2012; the most recent development towards this agenda is the December 2014 agreement of ECOWAS members to replace the antiquated ECOWAS Travel Certificate, approved in 1985 for intra-ECOWAS travel in lieu of a passport, with an upgraded biometric travel card called the National Biometric Identity Card (NBIC), effective 2015.

#### *Expression of Political-Will*

Leaderships of nations are also vital to international relations and more especially the topmost leader who usually is most profoundly vested with power and authority for decision-making. The role of the Nigerian state and its leadership at various points and times as exemplified by Gowon, Shehu Shagari, Late Abacha, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, Olusegun Obasanjo and Late Umaru Musa Yar'adua are clearly illustrative (and now Buhari) (Umar, 2011). Again, years after the signing of the TREATY I, establishing the ECOWAS as a regional body, the overall objective of promoting cooperation and integration, in order to create an economic and monetary union for the purpose of stimulating economic growth and development remains consistently elusive. Rightly, the ECOWAS coalition was expected to lead into the formation of a body that would raise the living standards of its people; enhance economic stability and contribute to the progress and development of the African continent (ECOWAS Secretariat Abuja, 1990).

According to Umar (2011), the absence of genuine commitment on the part of the leadership, as key actors within the system, especially with regards to addressing core economic issues such as tariffs and customs related matters, cross-border crimes; constrained movement of goods and persons, etc. are constitutive of a huge set of inhibitive factors colossally debarring effective integration in West Africa.

Political-will in this context is related to the commitment of the leaders of the two countries and their respective border personnel in enforcing the protocol on free movement of persons and goods, enforcing various bilateral agreements signed by the two countries in socio-economic aspects, adequate funding, adequate support in the provision of necessary security gadgets, vehicles, ensuring corrupt free border personnel that respect human dignity (without harassment) etc.

From the data gathered through the interview conducted, on whether the governments of Nigeria and Niger has the political will in enforcing the ECOWAS protocol on free movement of persons and goods, the representative of Niger at the chamber of commerce (ECOWAS) who was in charge of commerce, customs and free movement at the ECOWAS from 2016 to 2018 has this to say: "Yes the government of Niger has the political will in enforcing the ECOWAS protocol on free movement of persons and goods. This is visible in the various initiatives by the two countries to establish appropriate offices to enforce the implementation of the protocol- e.g. ECOWAS unit of the ministry of foreign affairs, customs offices etc." He further stated that the two countries signed also commercial agreement like the one of January 2002 and also the various corridors put in place for the effective implementation of the protocol -corridor Zinder-Daura-Jigawa-Kano, Tahoua-Dosso-Sokoto-Kebbi-Zamfara, and Diffa-Yobe-Borno, the first two are operational and the last one is on the process.

However, Gen Djibo Salou, former ECOWAS task force President has this to say, "yes, the government of Nigeria and Niger expressed the political will to enforce the protocol on free movement of persons and goods. "Indeed, each country has established appropriate offices for the implementation of the protocol. For instance, the ECOWAS unit at the ministry of foreign affairs, customs offices, and the community space transport coordination office at the ministry of transport".

Moreover, the respondents emphasised that the two countries signed bilateral agreements in the following areas under the auspices of the Nigeria-Niger joint cooperation commission: agreement on road transport signed on 18/07/1990, agreement on the establishment of local bilateral committees signed on the 18/07/1990, commercial agreement signed on 25/01/2002, as well as agreements on information between the two countries signed on 25/01/2002 etc.

More so, it was stated that as part of the implementation of these programmes in the ECOWAS member countries, the government of Nigeria and Niger instituted the Nigeria-Niger joint commission to develop the cross border cooperation initiatives on the corridor Kano-Katsina-Maradi K<sup>2</sup>M dedicated to the free movement of persons and goods emphasizing on the promotion of trade and food security-following the successful registrations, the ministerial council decided to replicate the example to cover the entire border areas of Niger and Nigeria, by creating 3 other corridors as follows: Zinder-Daura-Jigawa-Kano (ZDYK); Tahowa-Dosso-Sokoto-Kebbi-Zamfara (TDSKZ) and Diffa-Yobe-Borno (DYB), not yet operational.

On the part of the first three corridors, an institutional framework is put in place through inner caucuses (task teams) that ensure that the principles of the protocol on free movement of persons and goods are complied with. These technical units each have a framework and do a permanent work of information and raising public awareness for the respect of the rules and regulations of the protocol.

On interview conducted with Director of Economic Affairs in Niamey, Niger (Commission Mixte Nigero-Nigeriane Direction Des Affaires Economiques De Cooperation), he believed that efforts were put in place to implement the agreement through the Niger-Nigeria joint commission which took a new dimension with the food crisis that occurred in Niger and Northern part of Nigeria in 2005. The famine according to him created price rise and a drop in livestock prices. It was in that context that the cross-border cooperation between Katsina-Kano-Maradi has been retained. A deep study was conducted by a team that led to installation of the watch programme on food security and cross border trade issues corridors were set up to operate along the borders (Kano-Katsina-Mardi (K<sup>2</sup>M), Zinder-Daura-Jigawa-Kano, Tahoua-Sokoto-Kebbi-Zamfara.

In contrast, the custom officials interviewed in the two borders believed that they don't think the governments of Nigeria and Niger have the political will in enforcing the ECOWAS protocol on free movement of persons and goods. One of the interviewees at the Illella-Konni border stated that the two governments did not put enough efforts to stop the harassment of travellers by the security personnel at the borders. And the "carnet de voyage" ECOWAS travel documents are expensive for Niger citizens that are in Nigeria, and they only have two representatives where they can go and get it in Kano or Abuja. Also, the two

governments are part of the agreements made (multilateral) on the free movement of persons and goods but no monitoring and no consideration for citizens.

On the other side, the crossers interviewed along the two borders (Illella-Konni and Katsina-Jibiya) unanimously stated that they know that there is protocol on free movement of persons and goods among members of ECOWAS but sometimes the staff at the border don't value it and some of them are not even after the travel documents but after money.

### **National Interest: Implications on Nigeria-Niger Relationships**

As stated earlier, every state in the international system, irrespective of size, economic status, ideological orientation or culture, has some form of interests or goals defined as national interest (based on the assumptions of realist theory). Scholars and political analysts have different perceptions of the concept of national interest in line with their understanding of the subject matter.

There is a consensus that there are five core values or ingredients that constitute what can be seen as Nigeria's vital interests. These are "self-preservation or survival, security, economic well-being or prosperity, prestige or honour and peace" (Eminue, 2013:76). Self-preservation or survival is the most fundamental ingredient of any nation's national interest. Self-preservation or survival includes the need for internal unity and political stability. Security is another ingredient because the survival of any nation is at stake whenever its territory is threatened with an imminent attack or is actually attacked. What constitutes national security include the securing of a nation's borders and the maintenance of the nation's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Economic well-being or prosperity is another ingredient that constitutes the vital interests of any nation. In contemporary democratic systems, citizens constantly demand that their economic well-being be incorporated into the national interest of their state by way of providing food, shelter, improved health conditions and other basic needs which guarantee citizens' comfort and happiness. Maintenance of domestic and international peace is another vital national interest which nation-states cherish. According to Eminue (2013:80) "domestic peace and tranquillity presume the prevalence of political stability, economic prosperity, social harmony, and distributive equity/ justice.

Unfortunately, due to national interest, the protocol for free movement of goods was not respected by Nigeria in some years back which would not allow its cereals to be exported while meanwhile importing cereals from Niger. Recently, the Buhari administration violates the ECOWAS protocol with the closure of border in favour of national interest.

### **Socio-Economic Effects of Border Closure**

The measure taken by the Buhari administration in the closure of Nigeria's border with other African countries, Niger republic in particular has both positive and negative effects. The decision violates the ECOWAS protocol on free movement of persons and goods to prioritise on Nigeria's national interest. However, the intention of Buhari is not to block goods fabricated in Niger, Benin Republic and others, the objective is to avoid illegal entry of re-exported goods, that cross Niger and Benin Republic on transit.

According to Oluka (2020) the protectionist policy of the Muhammadu Buhari's administration, particularly the policy that pertains to the closure of Nigeria's land borders, has been subjected to ridicule by scholars, political analysts and individuals from the business community. Critics all over the country have argued that the closure of the country's land boundaries is an anti-human policy and Nigeria's neighbouring countries, together with its foreign trade partners, are also not left out among the critics of the protectionist policy of the administration. Furthermore, the recent decision for border closure by the Nigerian government is unique as it affects all of its neighbours and comes at a crucial time when African countries are trying to remove border restrictions. The implications are far-reaching for wider regional integration on the continent.

On the positive impact, the intention of the government is to promote domestic industries and encourage consumption of local agricultural products such as rice, vegetables, poultry etc. It has also been argued that the policy objective of the government is in tandem with international standards which, in the long run, will be appreciated. But a closer look at this policy agenda shows that the policy has significant prospect that could be achieved in the short-run, particularly in its campaign for investment in the manufacturing sector, and in the production, cultivation and consumption of local grown agricultural produce instead of over reliance or dependence on foreign imports.

According to critics of the measures taken by the Buhari administration, the policy was executed with no palliative measures put in place to cushion its effects on the citizens before its official take off. Others have also discredited the good intentions of the government by tagging it the 'Buharism policy' which, among the locals, signifies total hardship. A host of other Nigerians accused the administration of pursuing unfriendly policies, as well as engaging itself in constitutional summersaults and abuse of the rule of law. Others alleged that the policy was a replicate of Buhari's policy during his short reign as military Head of State and the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federation from 1983 to 1985. Chidozie, Ibietan and Ujara (2014), asserted that the Buhari/Idiagbon military regime had proposed to restore the country's battered image overseas, and that administration promised to retrieve looted finances by politicians, in spite of their promise, the administration only succeeded in promulgating anti-drug and anti-corruption military decrees. In its attempts to avoid a repeat of the Shagari led civil rule over dependence on the international financial institutions through borrowing, the Buhari/Idiagbon regime violated human rights with lots of impunity and disregards for constituted authorities. The administration put forth the argument that "a good image constitutes a country.

However, the claim of the first concern of border closure in August 2019 that has to do with smuggling is weak because Nigeria's land borders are porous with many illegal routes that transcend contiguous communities with a history of trade and social relations that predate the colonial period. Therefore, smuggling occurs through hundreds of illegal routes often in collaboration with corrupt customs officials and other border personnel.

Nevertheless, the Nigerian government being an ECOWAS member has the right to protect its national interest as supported by the realists due to many reasons-security, self-preservation, economic etc. But the closure of border is against the Nigerian foreign policy mantra of good neighbourliness and friendship.

### **Summary of Findings**

The study revealed that both Nigeria and Niger have established appropriate offices and signed various bilateral agreements for the implementation of the protocol on free movement of persons and goods. In spite of the protocol and the bilateral agreements, Nigeria in the pursuit of its national interest closed its border with Niger and other countries in 2019.

It was found out that the decision of the Nigerian government to restrict the free movement of goods along Nigeria and Niger Republic border was informed by the intention of Buhari regime to avoid illegal entry of re-exported goods, that cross especially Niger Republic on transit and other socio-economic motives.

Finally, it was discovered that the socio-economic implications of the measures on the relationship between Nigeria and Niger are in two folds. First, in the case of Nigeria, the socio-economic implication is that, if smuggling and other despicable and reprehensive cross-border activities continues unchecked, it could spell doom for home-based business particularly the SMEs and it will be a big threat to national security. But a unilateral closure of international border for as long as one year against well-known and documented international protocols could trigger diplomatic row between Nigeria and Niger due to the negative implications of the closure on the economy of Niger Republic.

### **Conclusion**

It is concluded from the data analysed that the level of commitment or political-will between Nigeria and Niger has been commendable. But the border closure, irrespective of the rationale and the potential as well as actual advantages and disadvantages was an intricate and complex decision. For instance, a unilateral closure of international border for as long as one year against well-known and documented international protocols such as ECOWAS, GATT (General Agreement for Trade and Tariff) among others, could trigger diplomatic row which if not well managed could further dent or tarnish the image of the nation both within and outside the sub-region (Oluka, 2020). Therefore, the recent border closure is said to be a policy mistake that will produce dismal outcomes for Nigeria that goes against borderless Africa.

However, a nation may be doing herself a great disservice if it watches apparently helplessly while individuals, groups and even nations take undue advantage of international protocols to sabotage her economy and security through smuggling and other nefarious cross border activities. If smuggling and other despicable and reprehensive cross-border activities continues unchecked, this could also spell doom for home-based business particularly the SMEs and a big threat to national security.

Therefore, effort should be intensified in ensuring that the requisite political will is maintained and strengthened (by the state actors as emphasised by the rationalists) to facilitate smooth movement of persons and goods along the borders. And, the governments of the two countries and other ECOWAS nations must fulfil their financial obligations in committing adequate financial resources in order to champion the cause of the regional body. There is dire need in ensuring that the two governments and ECOWAS members 'countries in general facilitate free movement through concrete actions such as setting up joint border posts, border markets, shared health clinics, shared schools, etc. Also, as part of political will, the border personnel of the two countries should show sign of respect for the crossers from both sides, irrespective of language, religion and any other primordial factor.

Finally, the borderless African policy which envisions a single African passport and an unrestricted movement for African citizens that gained widespread support across the continent is a welcome development to strengthening the enforcement of the agreement on free movement of persons and goods. The African continental free Trade Area (AFCFTA), signed by all African countries except Eritrea was to become fully operational on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2020, removing trade barriers and facilitating the free movement of Africans in the region and this is a necessity for the development in this world of globalisation.

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