

Introduction

Nigeria's protracted security crisis, costing an estimated 2.5% of GDP annually (World Bank, 2022), is not merely a function of insurgency but a profound indictment of governance failures, institutional decay, and elite predation. From the Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast, which has claimed over 40,000 lives since 2009 (International Crisis Group, 2022), to the escalation of banditry in the Northwest that resulted in 6,000 fatalities in 2021 alone (ACLED, 2022), the patterns of violence reveal deep structural dysfunctions rather than isolated security threats. The country's Middle Belt remains a hotspot of deadly farmer-herder clashes, responsible for 60% of communal violence (Higazi, 2021), while separatist agitations led by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the Southeast continue to challenge Nigeria's fragile unity. The economic costs are equally devastating—agricultural productivity in conflict-affected zones has plummeted by 35% since 2015 (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2023), exacerbating food insecurity for millions, while cumulative financial losses due to insecurity amount to \$10.3 billion annually (International Monetary Fund, 2023).

This paper examines how institutional decay, elite predation, and governance failures create an enabling environment for violent conflicts in Nigeria. It argues that state fragility is not a product of military inadequacy but rather a reflection of a governance crisis that traditional security frameworks fail to address. Despite the Federal Government allocating N5.02 trillion (approximately \$11 billion) to security expenditures between 2019 and 2023 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023), violent conflicts have expanded both in scope and intensity. This paradox raises critical questions: Why have increased military interventions failed to contain Nigeria's security crisis? What systemic governance failures sustain the cycle of violence? Can alternative, community-driven solutions offer more sustainable peacebuilding approaches than militarized

responses? These questions are central to understanding why violence persists despite extensive counterinsurgency operations and escalating defense budgets.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative desk review methodology, synthesizing data from a wide range of secondary sources. These include peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, government documents, reputable media investigations, and relevant books on peacebuilding and governance. The research adopts a governance and development theoretical framework to guide the analysis. By systematically reviewing the literature and policy documents, the study aims to identify key governance challenges and institutional responses related to security and peacebuilding in Nigeria. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics influencing conflict and peacebuilding efforts at both national and subnational levels.

Insecurity

Insecurity in Nigeria encompasses armed insurgencies, banditry, kidnapping, intercommunal violence, organized crime, and emerging cyber threats, all of which severely undermine national stability and development. The northeast region remains the epicenter of violent extremism, dominated by Boko Haram and its splinter faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), which employs distinct tactics and ideologies (Takano, 2024). Boko Haram's reliance on suicide bombings and attacks on civilians contrasts with ISWAP's more coordinated assaults targeting military and government installations, reflecting divergent strategic objectives within the insurgency (Takano, 2024).

In the northwest, armed banditry has surged dramatically, with groups engaging in cattle rustling, kidnappings, and violent raids across states such as Zamfara, Kaduna, and Katsina (Global

Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime [GI-TOC], 2024). Unlike Boko Haram's ideological motivations, these bandit groups are primarily driven by economic opportunism, exploiting porous borders and weak governance to sustain illicit economies (GI-TOC, 2024; Ojo, 2024). The Nigerian government's military responses have yielded only temporary reprieves, as the resilience of banditry is underpinned by complex social networks and financing mechanisms (GI-TOC, 2024).

Socioeconomic factors such as pervasive poverty, youth unemployment, marginalization, and governance failures—including corruption, inadequate policy implementation, and limited inter-agency coordination—exacerbate the security crisis (Anayeokwu & Agah, 2023). These structural weaknesses create ungoverned spaces that violent non-state actors exploit, complicating efforts at peacebuilding and state consolidation (Ojo, 2024).

Emerging cyber threats further compound Nigeria's insecurity landscape, with misinformation campaigns, AI-driven cyberattacks, and financial scams projected to intensify, posing new challenges for national security and governance (Cyber Security Experts Association of Nigeria, 2025).

Addressing Nigeria's insecurity demands integrated, multi-dimensional approaches that strengthen institutional capacity, promote community-based peace initiatives, and adapt to evolving threats, including cybercrime. This comprehensive strategy is essential for fostering sustainable peace and development in a complex and volatile security environment.

Structural Violence

Structural violence refers to the systematic ways in which social, economic, and political structures harm or disadvantage particular groups by embedding inequalities into the fabric of society

(Galtung, 1969). In Nigeria, structural violence is deeply rooted in historical governance arrangements that have perpetuated regional disparities, ethnic marginalization, and unequal access to resources and opportunities (Osaghae, 1998; Suberu, 2001). These systemic inequalities have fueled grievances, particularly in the Niger Delta, the Middle Belt, and the Northeast, where communities experience chronic underdevelopment, political exclusion, and environmental degradation (Watts, 2008; Obi, 2010).

For example, the Niger Delta's prolonged struggle can be understood through the lens of structural violence, as decades of oil exploitation have enriched the federal government and multinational corporations while local communities face poverty, environmental harm, and lack of basic infrastructure (Watts, 2008). Similarly, ethno-religious conflicts in the Middle Belt reflect competition over land and political power exacerbated by structural inequalities and weak state capacity (Suberu, 2001).

Elite Capture

Elite capture refers to a situation where individuals or groups with significant political or economic power manipulate public resources, policies, or institutions to serve their interests rather than the broader needs of society. In Nigeria, elite capture is a persistent issue that affects governance and development outcomes. For instance, political elites often divert security funding for personal gain or to consolidate political power, which leads to inadequate investment in the military and police. This mismanagement weakens the state's capacity to address security challenges such as insurgency, banditry, and communal violence. The phenomenon perpetuates inequality, erodes public trust in institutions, and undermines democratic accountability, as decision-making processes are skewed in favor of the elite rather than being inclusive or participatory (Wikipedia, 2025).

Youth Bulge

The term "youth bulge" describes a demographic pattern where a large proportion of the population is comprised of young people, typically aged between 15 and 29. In Nigeria, the youth bulge is pronounced, with over 60% of the population under the age of 25. While this demographic trend can be a source of economic dynamism, it also poses significant risks if not managed properly. High levels of youth unemployment, underemployment, and lack of access to quality education and vocational training leave many young people frustrated and marginalized. This creates a fertile ground for recruitment into violent groups, criminal networks, and extremist organizations, as disaffected youth seek alternative means of livelihood or social belonging. Addressing the youth bulge requires comprehensive policies that promote job creation, entrepreneurship, civic engagement, and inclusive governance (Omoju & Abraham, 2015).

Climate-Induced Conflict

Climate-induced conflict refers to violence or instability that arises as a consequence of environmental changes, such as droughts, desertification, and erratic rainfall patterns. In Nigeria, particularly in the Middle Belt and Sahel regions, climate change has intensified competition over scarce resources like arable land and water. As traditional grazing routes shrink and agricultural productivity declines, tensions between farmers and herders escalate, often resulting in violent clashes, displacement, and loss of livelihoods. These conflicts are compounded by weak governance, inadequate conflict resolution mechanisms, and the proliferation of small arms. Climate-induced conflict not only threatens human security but also undermines food security, economic development, and social cohesion (Sayne, 2011).

Religious Extremism

Religious extremism involves the use of radical religious ideologies to justify violence, exclusion, or political mobilization. In Nigeria, groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have exploited socio-economic grievances, state fragility, and identity politics to propagate extremist narratives. These groups recruit followers by promising social justice, economic empowerment, or spiritual fulfillment, often targeting marginalized communities. Religious extremism in Nigeria is fueled by factors such as poverty, unemployment, lack of education, and perceived marginalization of certain religious or ethnic groups. The impact includes mass displacement, destruction of infrastructure, loss of lives, and deepening sectarian divisions (Bature, 2023).

Early Warning and Early Response (EWER)

Early Warning and Early Response (EWER) is a proactive conflict prevention framework that seeks to detect, analyze, and respond to emerging security threats before they escalate into large-scale violence. EWER systems rely on the systematic collection and analysis of data from multiple sources, including community reports, media monitoring, and satellite imagery. In Nigeria, EWER mechanisms have been established by government agencies, civil society organizations, and international partners to monitor hotspots, track conflict indicators, and facilitate timely interventions. Effective EWER requires robust information-sharing networks, rapid deployment of response teams, and the involvement of local stakeholders in designing and implementing preventive measures. The goal is to reduce the human and economic costs of violent conflict by addressing root causes and triggers promptly (Udeoba & Eze, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Governance-Conflict Nexus as its primary theoretical lens to analyze Nigeria's persistent security governance challenges. At its core, the theory posits that violent

conflict is often a direct outcome of weak, exclusionary, and unaccountable governance. Scholars have advanced this framework to explain how institutional fragility, corruption, and failure in public service delivery create enabling environments for insecurity to emerge and persist (Agbibo, 2023; Okereke, 2019). Unlike explanations that emphasize ethnic or religious divisions as primary causes of conflict, the Governance-Conflict Nexus framework focuses on the structural and institutional failures of the state that erode trust, diminish legitimacy, and foster grievance among marginalized populations.

In the Nigerian context, the relevance of this framework is apparent in the politicization of security institutions, where military and police appointments have disproportionately favored individuals from specific regions, violating the constitutional principle of federal character. This has deepened regional mistrust and undermined perceptions of fairness in state institutions (Ehrhardt, Oladimeji, & Umar, 2023). Corruption within the defense sector further compounds these issues. Audit reports reveal that significant portions of security budgets remain unaccounted for, raising questions about transparency and operational readiness (Transparency International, 2021). Moreover, the chronic inability of state institutions to deliver essential services has had tangible consequences. For instance, only about 12% of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Nigeria receive adequate government assistance, leaving the majority vulnerable to exploitation and secondary displacement (African Law Foundation [AFRILAW], 2019).

While the Governance-Conflict Nexus provides a compelling explanation for the link between governance failures and insecurity, it is not without its criticisms. A key limitation is its state-centric orientation, which tends to overlook the role of non-state actors such as vigilante groups, ethnic militias, and community-based organizations in either mitigating or exacerbating conflict. Additionally, the theory has been critiqued for its deterministic tone, which may suggest a direct

and linear causality between poor governance and violent conflict, thereby oversimplifying the complex, multidimensional nature of insecurity. It also tends to generalize across contexts, sometimes failing to account for the specific historical and sociocultural dynamics at play in different conflict zones within a country.

Despite these critiques, the Governance-Conflict Nexus remains highly suitable for this study. Nigeria's insecurity is deeply embedded in institutional weaknesses, manifested through corruption, inequity, and lack of service delivery, which are well-captured by this framework. While the inclusion of complementary lenses such as political economy or hybrid governance might enrich the analysis, the Governance-Conflict Nexus provides a solid foundation for understanding how state failures have enabled the proliferation of armed groups, eroded public trust, and weakened the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Its focus on systemic dysfunction allows this study to move beyond symptoms of insecurity and instead interrogate the structural conditions that give rise to chronic violence and instability in Nigeria.

Historical Context and Structural Drivers of Insecurity in Nigeria

Nigeria's contemporary security challenges are deeply rooted in historical and structural factors, beginning with the colonial era and persisting through post-independence regimes. The 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates by British colonial authorities created an artificial political entity that disregarded the ethnic, cultural, and religious heterogeneity of the regions (Falola & Heaton, 2008). The British administration's policy of "divide and rule" entrenched fragmentation by privileging certain ethnic groups and administrative structures over others. In the North, colonial authorities reinforced existing feudal hierarchies under the Sokoto Caliphate, while in the South, particularly among the Igbo and Yoruba, they disrupted decentralized indigenous governance systems. These differential administrative strategies

produced long-term institutional imbalances and laid the groundwork for political mistrust and uneven development (Afigbo, 1972; Crowder, 2012).

The end of colonial rule did not resolve these divisions. Instead, independence intensified regional rivalries, culminating in political instability and violence during the First Republic (1960–1966). The lack of a unifying national identity, coupled with contested elections and ethnic-based political coalitions, led to a military coup and ultimately the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). The war devastated the Southeast and solidified patterns of ethnic distrust and marginalization that continue to inform secessionist movements and agitations for regional autonomy (Nwankpa, 2014).

Subsequent military regimes from 1966 to 1979 and again from 1983 to 1999 exacerbated these problems by centralizing power, weakening federal institutions, and fostering a culture of impunity. Rather than addressing the root causes of instability, military rulers prioritized regime survival over democratic accountability, allowing corruption and poor governance to flourish (Diamond, 1988). Even after the transition to civilian rule in 1999, these structural issues remained largely unaddressed. Democratic governance became dominated by elite political networks that used public office for personal gain, further alienating citizens from state institutions and diminishing public trust (Lewis, 2007).

These historical legacies, ethnic fragmentation, institutional fragility, centralized authoritarianism, and elite capture form the structural drivers of Nigeria's contemporary insecurity. Violent extremism, separatist agitations, farmer-herder clashes, and banditry are not isolated phenomena but symptoms of deeper systemic failures that have persisted over decades. Without confronting these foundational issues, efforts to improve Nigeria's security landscape will remain limited in scope and impact.

Over-Reliance on Military Responses

Nigeria's security approach remains overwhelmingly military-centric, with 70% of security funding between 2019 and 2023 allocated to combat operations rather than preventive and community-driven initiatives (SIPRI, 2022). This emphasis on force-based solutions has led to a cycle of violence, as root causes of insecurity-such as poverty, radicalization, and ethnic tensions-remain unaddressed. The neglect of intelligence gathering, local peacebuilding mechanisms, and rehabilitative programs for ex-combatants has weakened the effectiveness of security spending, leading to unsustainable outcomes. The heavy militarization of internal conflicts, such as the insurgency in the Northeast and farmer-herder clashes, has also resulted in human rights violations, further alienating affected communities (Amnesty International, 2023).

Corruption and Elite Capture

Corruption in defense procurement has significantly undermined Nigeria's security capabilities. Between 2015 and 2023, 43% of security-related contracts in the Northeast were awarded to firms linked to political elites, leading to procurement inefficiencies and misallocation of resources (Transparency International, 2021). Reports from frontline soldiers indicate shortages in essential supplies, including body armor, night vision devices, and medical kits, compromising operational effectiveness. The lack of transparency and oversight in defense procurement fosters a cycle of mismanagement that weakens national security efforts (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Lack of Youth Empowerment and Leadership

Nigeria's "youth bulge" presents both an opportunity and a security challenge. With 42% of 15-24-year-olds unemployed (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022) and 20 million children out of school-predominantly in the North (UNICEF, 2022)-armed groups have ample recruitment

opportunities. Boko Haram exploits economic desperation, offering recruits stipends three times the national minimum wage (Onuoha, 2020). In the Northwest, bandit groups provide disaffected youths with income and protection, creating alternative governance structures (International Crisis Group, 2022). Urban areas face related crises, with unemployed graduates turning to cybercrime and gang activities as survival strategies (Alemika, 2020). The absence of meaningful youth engagement in governance and security planning further exacerbates these challenges, as young people are often viewed as security threats rather than as stakeholders in peacebuilding (UNDP, 2021).

Lack of Implementation of Youth and Women Peace and Security Action Plans

Despite Nigeria's commitments to the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 2250 (Youth, Peace, and Security) and 1325 (Women, Peace, and Security), implementation remains weak. The National Action Plans (NAPs) for both frameworks suffer from inadequate funding, limited institutional coordination, and insufficient monitoring mechanisms. Youth participation in peace processes is often tokenistic, with limited decision-making authority. Similarly, women's involvement in conflict resolution remains low, as only 7% of security leadership positions are occupied by women (Ministry of Women Affairs, 2022). While grassroots initiatives, such as the Plateau State Women Peacebuilders Network, have shown success, these efforts lack sustained government support (UN Women, 2022).

Climate Change and Resource Competition

The ecological crisis in Northern Nigeria has reached critical levels, with desertification advancing southward at an alarming rate of 3.5 km per year (Fasona et al., 2021). Lake Chad, which once supported over 30 million people, has lost 90% of its surface area since the 1960s, displacing millions of farmers and pastoralists (Okoli & Atelhe, 2020). The resulting resource competition

has intensified farmer-herder conflicts, escalating violence. In Benue State alone, climate-induced conflicts led to 2,500 deaths and the displacement of 300,000 people in 2021 (ACLED, 2022). The government's failure to implement the National Livestock Transformation Plan (2019) has exacerbated these conflicts, as both pastoralists and farmers resort to armed self-defense (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Religious Extremism and Identity Politics

Religious identity has increasingly become a tool for political mobilization and conflict. Boko Haram's insurgency is framed as a jihad against the "corrupt" Nigerian state, leveraging grievances about Northern marginalization (Thurston, 2018). Simultaneously, farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt have taken on sectarian dimensions, with 68% of such conflicts since 2019 exhibiting religious overtones (Pew Research Center, 2022). Social media has further exacerbated these divisions, enabling unregulated clerics and ethno-nationalist groups to spread inflammatory rhetoric (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Coordination Failures and Bureaucratic Inefficiencies

Nigeria's security architecture is hampered by inefficiencies stemming from the overlapping mandates of 14 federal security agencies. The National Counterterrorism Strategy (NACTEST), which was designed to provide a coordinated framework for counterinsurgency efforts, remains largely unimplemented due to bureaucratic infighting, competition for resources, and a lack of inter-agency cooperation. Intelligence-sharing mechanisms between agencies such as the Department of State Services (DSS), the Nigerian Army, and the Nigerian Police Force are often ineffective, leading to operational redundancies and delayed responses to security threats. Without a clear chain of command and improved inter-agency collaboration, Nigeria's counterterrorism and security response strategies will continue to falter (Onuoha, 2021).

Policy Interventions and Gaps

Nigeria has implemented several policy frameworks to tackle violent extremism and insecurity, most notably the National Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (NAP-PCVE) launched in 2017. This plan outlines progressive strategies such as youth deradicalization programs, community resilience building, and enhanced inter-agency cooperation. However, its effectiveness has been hampered by entrenched bureaucratic inefficiencies, limited political commitment, and elite capture. For example, only a small fraction of funds allocated for deradicalization and reintegration reportedly reach the intended beneficiaries, highlighting systemic leakages and accountability gaps (Ojo, 2024).

At the subnational level, some states have enacted legislation addressing specific security challenges. Benue State's 2017 anti-open grazing law, aimed at reducing farmer-herder conflicts by regulating pastoral activities, is a case in point. Nonetheless, such state-level initiatives often face challenges, including jurisdictional overlaps between federal and state authorities, weak enforcement mechanisms, and political resistance from vested interests (Ehrhardt, Oladimeji, & Umar, 2023).

These shortcomings highlight the limitations of top-down security policies that lack inclusive participation and robust monitoring frameworks. To effectively address Nigeria's multifaceted insecurity, a comprehensive and multi-layered approach is necessary, one that integrates institutional reforms with grassroots empowerment. This should prioritize youth engagement in peacebuilding, reinforce anti-corruption measures, and improve the accountability and responsiveness of security agencies through enhanced transparency, intergovernmental coordination, and community involvement.

Nigeria's Security Challenges

Insurgency in the Northeast: The Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria's Northeast has undergone a significant transformation since its emergence in 2009. Initially a Salafist sect, the group evolved into a violent insurgency and, by 2014, controlled substantial territory in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states (International Crisis Group, 2022). The Nigerian military, through Operation Lafiya Dole—later rebranded as Operation Hadin Kai in 2021—has made notable gains in reclaiming lost territories. However, the insurgency fragmented in 2016, leading to the rise of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), a faction aligned with the global Islamic State (Onuoha, 2020).

Efforts to combat Boko Haram have included joint military operations with the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), airstrikes by the Nigerian Air Force (NAF), and the integration of local militias such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF). Despite these efforts, Boko Haram and ISWAP continue to exploit governance gaps, establishing rudimentary governance structures, including taxation and judicial services, in areas under their control (UNOCHA, 2023). Humanitarian consequences remain severe, with millions of people displaced and widespread food insecurity due to disrupted agricultural production. While military strategies have weakened the insurgency, long-term stability requires socio-economic development programs, deradicalization initiatives such as Operation Safe Corridor, and community-led reintegration efforts (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Banditry in the Northwest: Armed banditry has escalated into a severe security threat in Nigeria's Northwest, affecting states such as Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, and Niger. Rooted in historical cattle rustling and exacerbated by weak law enforcement, banditry has evolved into an organized criminal enterprise involving mass kidnappings for ransom, extortion, and rural

community control (Human Rights Watch, 2022; ISS Africa, 2021). Since 2020, the violence has displaced hundreds of thousands of people, making it one of Nigeria's most pressing security concerns.

In response, the Nigerian government launched Operation Hadarin Daji in 2019 to target bandit camps, while the NAF intensified aerial bombardments (Nigerian Air Force, 2023). However, the emergence of community vigilante groups such as Yan Sakai has introduced further complexities, with accusations of human rights violations and reprisal attacks. Initial amnesty programs, such as the Zamfara Amnesty Program (2019–2020), temporarily reduced violence but collapsed due to the government's failure to sustain agreements and internal divisions among bandit factions (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The crisis is further exacerbated by corruption, porous borders facilitating arms trafficking, and weak intelligence-sharing mechanisms among security agencies. A holistic approach combining community policing, economic development initiatives, and stronger law enforcement mechanisms is essential for long-term solutions (ISS Africa, 2021).

Farmer-Herder Conflicts in the Middle Belt: The Middle Belt region, comprising Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, Taraba, and parts of Kaduna states, has witnessed an increase in violent farmer-herder clashes. These conflicts stem from climate-induced migration, dwindling natural resources, and ineffective dispute resolution mechanisms (Okoli & Atelhe, 2020; UNEP, 2021). The advancing desertification in Northern Nigeria has forced Fulani pastoralists to migrate southward in search of grazing land, intensifying tensions with sedentary farming communities. These disputes often take on ethno-religious dimensions, further complicating resolution efforts.

In recent years, farmer-herder conflicts have resulted in thousands of deaths and mass displacements. Government responses have fluctuated between military crackdowns and weak mediation efforts, failing to address the underlying issues. The National Livestock Transformation

Plan (NLTP, 2019), designed to introduce ranching and sustainable livestock management, remains largely unimplemented due to political resistance and lack of funding. However, grassroots mediation initiatives, such as community-led early warning mechanisms, have shown promise in de-escalating tensions before they spiral into large-scale violence. For sustainable peace, improved resource management policies and conflict-sensitive governance frameworks are needed (Okoli & Atelhe, 2020).

Separatism in the Southeast: The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) has emerged as a vocal separatist movement, drawing on historical grievances from the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). Since 2020, IPOB’s armed wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), has engaged in violent clashes with security forces, leading to heightened militarization in the Southeast (Nwankpa, 2021; Amnesty International, 2022). The government has responded with Operation Python Dance (Egwu Eke), mass arrests, and restrictions on civil liberties, further radicalizing some Igbo youth.

IPOB’s appeal stems from long-standing perceptions of economic and political marginalization. Many in the region cite underdevelopment and federal neglect as reasons for secessionist sentiments (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). However, heavy-handed security approaches risk escalating tensions, highlighting the need for a dialogue-driven conflict resolution strategy. Addressing the crisis requires meaningful political engagement, targeted economic investments, and security-sector reforms to prevent human rights violations and indiscriminate crackdowns (Nwankpa, 2021).

Nigeria’s security crises reveal deep governance deficiencies and security sector failures. Poor intelligence coordination, weak civilian-military relations, and a lack of trust between local communities and security forces have prolonged conflicts (Adekoya, 2022; USIP, 2022). Boko Haram and ISWAP have demonstrated how terrorist groups exploit governance vacuums to

establish alternative administrative structures. Similarly, bandit groups and IPOB's ESN have capitalized on state weaknesses to advance their agendas.

Addressing these issues requires multi-dimensional solutions that integrate kinetic military responses with non-military interventions, including governance reforms, economic development, and community-based peacebuilding efforts. Nigeria's security challenges are deeply interconnected, requiring a whole-of-society approach that balances military strategies with socio-economic investments, political dialogue, and local peacebuilding initiatives (Adekoya, 2022; NDA, 2023). Strengthening governance, improving intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and addressing root causes such as poverty, climate change, and political marginalization are essential for lasting peace and security. While military operations such as Operation Hadin Kai (Northeast), Operation Hadarin Daji (Northwest), Operation Whirl Stroke (Middle Belt), and Operation Python Dance (Southeast) have yielded some successes, a sustainable security strategy must prioritize inclusive governance, community resilience, and economic empowerment to break the cycle of violence.

Government Response to Nigeria's Security Challenges

Policy Responses to Nigeria's Security Challenges Nigeria's security challenges have necessitated a range of policy responses from successive governments, including military operations, legal frameworks, community-based initiatives, and socio-economic interventions. While some strategies have recorded modest successes, inconsistent implementation, weak institutional capacity, and inadequate coordination have hindered their overall effectiveness (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2023). A comprehensive approach that integrates security, governance, and economic policies is essential for long-term stability (Adekoya, 2022).

Military Operations

Nigeria's response to violent conflicts, particularly the Boko Haram insurgency, has been predominantly kinetic, with a strong focus on military solutions within its broader security framework. Although national policy documents advocate for a whole-of-government approach that integrates diplomatic, economic, social, and military measures, the practical implementation has largely prioritized military action, often at the expense of non-military strategies (Okoli & Okeke, 2018; Onapajo & Uzodike, 2012).

The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which brings together military units from Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Benin, has played a significant role in disrupting Boko Haram's territorial control in the Lake Chad Basin (Agbibo & Maiangwa, 2014). Within Nigeria, operations such as Lafiya Dole and its successor, Hadin Kai, have reclaimed substantial territory from insurgents in the Northeast (Okoli & Okeke, 2018). Despite these tactical successes, the military's efforts have been hampered by persistent logistical challenges, corruption, and frequent allegations of human rights abuses, all of which have eroded public trust and undermined long-term stabilization (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012; Agbibo, 2013).

In the Northwest, military campaigns—comprising airstrikes and ground operations—against bandit groups have often proved insufficient, as these criminal networks adapt by relocating and regrouping (Akinola, 2020). Similarly, security responses to separatist agitation in the Southeast, particularly those involving the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its armed affiliate, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), have frequently been marked by excessive use of force, exacerbating local tensions and increasing civilian casualties (Akinola, 2020).

These patterns highlight a persistent gap between Nigeria's policy intent and operational reality. While strategic documents call for coordinated, intelligence-driven, and community-centered

approaches, the prevailing reliance on militarized responses has often alienated local populations and, in some cases, perpetuated cycles of violence (Okoli & Okeke, 2018; Aghedo & Osumah, 2012). Moving forward, a shift toward a more integrated, preventive, and civilian-inclusive security framework is essential to sustainably address the root causes of insecurity across Nigeria (Akinola, 2020).

Legal and Institutional Frameworks

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) provides the foundational legal basis for national security. It mandates that the government prioritize the security and welfare of its citizens by protecting lives and property and maintaining public order. This constitutional framework also establishes the legal authority for the creation and regulation of the armed forces and the police, entrusting them with law enforcement and the preservation of national integrity (Ojebode, Oyedokun, & Babalola, 2025).

Building on these constitutional provisions, Nigeria has enacted several legislative measures to strengthen its security architecture. Notably, the Police Act 2020 repealed the outdated Police Act of 2004 and introduced a more robust framework aimed at enhancing police professionalism, accountability, and respect for human rights. The Act established mechanisms such as the Police Complaints Response Unit to address grievances and mandated regular training on human rights and professional standards. It also sought to improve funding and oversight to foster better cooperation between the police and local communities in combating crime and maintaining peace (Ojebode et al., 2025; Akindejoye & Ayenakin, 2022).

Despite these legal advancements, implementation challenges persist. Inadequate funding, political interference, and weak inter-agency coordination continue to limit the laws' effectiveness.

The judiciary plays a critical role in interpreting and enforcing security laws, and scholars argue

for a progressive legal ideology among judges that prioritizes social justice and avoids rigid applications of the law that may exacerbate unrest. For law enforcement agencies, adherence to legal standards is essential to maintain public trust and prevent abuses, as highlighted by the controversies surrounding the End SARS protests (Akindejoye & Ayenakin, 2022).

Furthermore, addressing insecurity through law requires tackling underlying socio-economic factors such as poverty, inequality, and weakened societal values, which contribute to persistent security challenges. Strengthening legal frameworks involves not only enacting and enforcing laws but also ensuring that justice administration is fair, efficient, and accessible. A holistic approach combining effective governance, robust legal provisions, and active societal participation is essential for sustainable peace in Nigeria (Ojebode et al., 2025).

Socio-Economic Interventions

Economic hardship and unemployment remain key drivers of insecurity in Nigeria. The Economic Growth and Recovery Plan (EGRP) 2017-2020 sought to diversify the economy, reduce poverty, and improve infrastructure, but policy inconsistencies, corruption, and weak implementation limited its impact (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023). Programs such as the Anchor Borrowers' Programme (ABP) increased agricultural productivity, yet access to finance remained a challenge for many smallholder farmers (Central Bank of Nigeria [CBN], 2022). The National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP) was introduced in 2019 to address farmer-herder conflicts by promoting modern ranching systems. However, political resistance and lack of funding have stalled its implementation (ICG, 2023). Government-led job creation schemes such as N-Power and the Youth Investment Fund have had short-term benefits but failed to provide sustainable employment pathways (UNDP, 2022). Strengthening socioeconomic interventions requires long-

term investments in vocational training, rural development, and climate adaptation strategies to prevent conflicts over scarce resources (World Bank, 2023).

Regional and International Cooperation: Nigeria has engaged with regional and international partners to enhance security cooperation. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) has been a crucial platform for counterterrorism collaboration, but challenges such as insufficient funding, troop commitment issues, and cross-border insurgent movements persist (MNJTF, 2023). Nigeria also participates in the ECOWAS Early Warning Mechanism and peacekeeping initiatives, but regional responses to security crises have been slow and reactive (ECOWAS Commission, 2022). International partnerships with organizations such as the United Nations, African Union, and European Union have provided funding for humanitarian assistance and counterterrorism programs (UN Development Programme [UNDP], 2023). However, donor dependency and lack of local ownership have often undermined the sustainability of these efforts (OECD, 2022). Strengthening regional cooperation requires harmonized security policies, improved intelligence sharing, and joint development initiatives to address the underlying causes of insecurity (AU Peace and Security Council, 2023).

Policy Implementation and Challenges

One of the most significant challenges facing Nigeria's security architecture is the lack of institutional capacity. Security agencies, including the military and police, suffer from inadequate funding, poor training, and weak coordination (Transparency International, 2022). The absence of a centralized intelligence-sharing mechanism has further weakened the response to insurgency, banditry, and communal conflicts (Onuoha, 2021). The Police Act of 2020 sought to introduce reforms, but political interference and insufficient resources have stalled progress (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2022). The Nigerian judicial system also faces significant delays in prosecuting

terrorism and criminal cases, contributing to a cycle of impunity (UN Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2021).

Corruption within security agencies has exacerbated the problem, leading to poor operational effectiveness and leakage of classified information to criminal groups (World Bank, 2021). Weak policy implementation has also affected counterterrorism measures, as seen in the failure to fully operationalize the Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act of 2022, which was designed to cut off funding for insurgents and bandits (Egwu, 2023). Addressing these institutional weaknesses requires improved governance, greater transparency, and stronger oversight mechanisms (OECD, 2022).

The conduct of security forces in Nigeria has often led to human rights violations, further straining relations with local communities (Amnesty International, 2023). Reports document cases of extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, and arbitrary arrests by the military and police (Amnesty International, 2022). The counterinsurgency campaign against Boko Haram and ISWAP in the Northeast, while necessary, has been marred by allegations of civilian abuses, including the forced displacement of communities (ICG, 2022).

In the Southeast, excessive military crackdowns on IPOB and its armed wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), have resulted in mass arrests and reports of torture, fueling further radicalization (Nwankpa, 2021). Similarly, in the Northwest, communities affected by banditry have accused security forces of failing to protect them while sometimes colluding with criminal groups (Institute for Security Studies [ISS], 2023). This erosion of trust makes intelligence gathering more difficult and weakens community engagement in security initiatives (Mercy Corps, 2022). Strengthening human rights accountability, promoting community policing, and ensuring civilian oversight of security operations are essential to restoring public confidence (African Union, 2021).

Socioeconomic Challenges

The economic drivers of insecurity remain a major gap in Nigeria's security response (UNDP, 2023). Widespread unemployment, poverty, and climate-induced migration have created conditions conducive to violence (World Bank, 2022). The Economic Growth and Recovery Plan (EGRP) 2017–2020 aimed to address these structural economic issues but fell short due to poor implementation and corruption (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023). While initiatives such as the Anchor Borrowers' Programme (ABP) helped boost agricultural productivity, limited access to finance and bureaucratic inefficiencies restricted their impact (Central Bank of Nigeria [CBN], 2022).

Similarly, the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP), which was introduced to address farmer-herder conflicts, has struggled due to political resistance and underfunding (ICG, 2021). Job creation programs such as N-Power and the Youth Investment Fund have provided short-term relief but failed to offer sustainable employment pathways (OECD, 2023). Addressing insecurity requires integrating economic policies with security strategies, ensuring long-term investments in education, skills training, and rural development (UN Development Programme, 2022).

Regional and International Cooperation Limitations

Despite Nigeria's active engagement in regional security initiatives, cooperation with neighboring countries remains inconsistent (ECOWAS Commission, 2022). The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) has been instrumental in countering Boko Haram, but it faces challenges such as insufficient funding, lack of coordination among member states, and cross-border insurgent movements (MNJTF, 2023). Nigeria's involvement in ECOWAS peacekeeping efforts has also been hampered by slow regional responses to security crises (African Union, 2022).

International partnerships with organizations such as the United Nations, African Union, and European Union have supported humanitarian aid and counterterrorism programs (UN Security Council, 2023). However, reliance on external funding without strong domestic ownership has affected the sustainability of these efforts (OECD, 2022). Strengthening regional cooperation requires harmonized security policies, improved intelligence sharing, and joint development initiatives that address the underlying causes of instability (USIP, 2023).

Lessons to Learn A key lesson from Nigeria's security challenges is the need for a whole-of-government approach that integrates military, governance, and socioeconomic policies (World Bank, 2023). Over-reliance on military force has proven inadequate in resolving deep-rooted grievances, as seen in the resurgence of insurgent factions despite military offensives (ICG, 2023). Addressing insecurity requires investing in conflict prevention mechanisms, strengthening justice institutions, and improving trust between the state and its citizens (UNDP, 2023).

Early Warning and Early Response (EWER) systems have shown promise in mitigating conflicts before they escalate, particularly in the Middle Belt and Northeast (African Union, 2021). Expanding these mechanisms with greater institutional support and community involvement can enhance proactive peacebuilding (Mercy Corps, 2022). Governance reforms that tackle corruption, improve security sector accountability, and promote inclusive development are essential for sustainable peace (Transparency International, 2023).

By integrating these lessons into national security strategies, Nigeria can move towards a more resilient and effective approach to addressing insecurity (Adekoya, 2023). A clear framework that prioritizes human security alongside military efforts will be crucial in shaping the country's future stability (USIP, 2023).

Recommendations

1. Strengthen and Regulate Community-Based Security Groups

Local security initiatives like the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) and Amotekun have demonstrated success in gathering intelligence and reducing crime. To harness their potential while preventing abuses, state governments should:

- Collaborate with community leaders to establish clear operational guidelines and legal frameworks defining their roles.
- Provide regular training on human rights, conflict resolution, and accountability.
- Set up independent monitoring bodies to oversee their activities and ensure transparency.

This approach leverages existing community trust and local knowledge, making security efforts more responsive and culturally sensitive. Clear legal backing and oversight reduce the risk of these groups becoming rogue actors.

2. Adopt a Balanced Security Strategy Combining Dialogue and Reform

Excessive reliance on military force often escalates conflicts. The government should:

- The Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution should establish peace committees in conflict-prone areas, including political leaders, traditional rulers, and community, youth, and women representatives, to proactively address grievances.
- Train security forces in de-escalation techniques and community engagement to build trust.
- Integrate dialogue and negotiation as core components of conflict resolution alongside necessary security operations.

This strategy reduces violence by addressing root causes and building local ownership of peace processes, which prevents cycles of retaliation and alienation.

3. Address Socioeconomic Drivers of Insecurity through Job Creation and Land Management

Unemployment and economic hardship drive many youths toward crime or armed groups. To mitigate this:

- Develop vocational training and job placement programs targeting young people in high-risk areas, in partnership with businesses and NGOs.
- Support rural livelihoods by improving access to land and strengthening farming cooperatives.
- Engage local leaders in mediating land disputes to ensure fair and peaceful resolutions.

Economic empowerment reduces incentives for violence and fosters social stability. Involving local stakeholders ensures solutions are context-specific and sustainable.

4. Reform the Security Sector for Transparency, Coordination, and Intelligence-Led Operations

Corruption and poor coordination undermine security efforts. To improve this:

- Implement rigorous monitoring of security budgets and defense contracts to prevent misuse of funds.
- Enhance training and strategic deployment of security personnel focused on intelligence gathering and early warning.

- Invest in technology and systems that enable proactive conflict prevention rather than reactive responses.

Transparent resource management and intelligence-led policing optimize limited resources, build public confidence, and enable timely interventions before conflicts escalate.