Research Article

Rethinking Nigeria's Approach to Countering Terrorism, Banditry, and Ethnic Violence: A Comprehensive Analysis of National Security Strategies

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About Article

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this investigation is to conduct a comprehensive examination of Nigeria's most pressing security challenges, such as terrorism, banditry, and violence between ethnic groups. The study assesses the effectiveness of the Nigerian government's responses to these challenges and examines the broader implications for national security and development. A qualitative research design was implemented, which included semi-structured interviews with primary stakeholders and secondary data obtained from academic literature and governmental publications. The data was analysed using thematic analysis to identify the primary patterns and insights. Interviews revealed that local communities perceive military campaigns as disruptive; leading to displacement, property destruction, and human rights violations; while failing to address the root socio-economic and governance issues driving insecurity. The primary conclusions of the investigation indicate that Nigeria's security strategy has been inadequate. Military interventions have only offered temporary relief and have not addressed the fundamental causes of insecurity. The stability of the nation continues to be significantly threatened by the Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, and ethnic violence. Relocation, human rights violations, and intensifying animosity between the government and affected populations have been the consequences of reliance on military force, insufficient socio-economic reforms, and weak political remedies. The report concludes that Nigeria requires a comprehensive security strategy that encompasses military action, improved governance, socio-economic development, and efforts to address the underlying causes of violence. A comprehensive, integrated approach is necessary to restore national security, promote stability, and ensure that development is sustainable throughout the nation.

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1. INTRODUCTION
1.1. Background
For a decade, Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, has struggled with security. One of Nigeria's largest security problems is Boko Haram. From a political militia fighting political persecution, the organisation became a violent extremist group against the Nigerian government. Boko Haram's 2014 kidnapping of 276 Chibok schoolgirls drew widespread condemnation and response. Some girls have been released, while others are missing, symbolising the country's security dilemma and terrorism battle (Adegbola & Okunloye, 2022).

Nigeria has various security risks than insurgency. Recent years have seen more northwest and central banditry and ethnic unrest. Kidnappings for ransom, communal violence, and resource conflicts cause instability. Ethnic violence has escalated in the Middle Belt and south due to competition for resources, political power, and social grievances. The Chibok schoolgirls' kidnapping exposed Nigeria's security shortcomings. Nigeria has seen terrorism, banditry, and ethnic bloodshed despite military and counterterrorism efforts. Conflict threatens Nigeria's economy, security, and international standing (The Question of Definition, 2023).

1.2. Problem statement
Nigeria's security is threatened by rising terrorism, banditry, and ethnic conflict. After joining ISIS in West Africa, Boko Haram expanded outside the northeast. Increased banditry and inter-ethnic violence have caused instability, displacement, and government weakness. The government has failed to establish a counterterrorism framework by alternating between military action, discussions, and appeasing rebel groups.

Security issues have ruined economies, dislocated communities, and made residents fear abductions and attacks. National divisions and ethnic and religious conflicts have increased due to ethnic violence. These issues undermine Nigeria's stability, governance, and economy if the government does nothing.

This study will examine these security issues, their cumulative impact on national security, and the government's inability to respond rationally.

1.3. Objectives of the study
This study aims to:

i. Examine how the Nigerian government handles terrorism, banditry, and ethnic violence: This study will examine the military's role, policy responses, and peaceful methods like amnesty and insurgent talks.

ii. Assess the National Security Framework's Effectiveness: The research will assess Nigeria's security framework's ability to meet changing security threats. The national security architecture, operational challenges, and capabilities to address the root causes of terrorism, banditry, and ethnic strife are assessed.

1.4. Contribution to existing literature
There is a lot of writing on Nigeria's security problems, such as Boko Haram, ethnic violence, and banditry. However, not much is known about how the government feels about them. This paper addresses the deficiency by conducting a comprehensive analysis of Nigeria's national security strategy, emphasising the government's evolving strategies and their efficacy in navigating the intricate security environment. The paper will also look at how these security issues affect Nigeria's political stability, economic growth, and national unity on a bigger scale, which hasn't been fully covered in the literature.

This study contributes to the conversation on conflict resolution and national security in sub-Saharan Africa by examining the strengths and weaknesses of Nigeria's security response, offering insights for policy development and security interventions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1. Theoretical framework
National security, traditionally viewed through the lens of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, has been analyzed using various theoretical models. Hobbes' concept of the Leviathan (1651) emphasized that the primary duty of the state is to secure its citizens from both internal and external threats. According to Hobbes, without a strong central authority, societies would descend into chaos and violence, a concept that remains relevant in understanding Nigeria's government response to terrorism, banditry, and ethnic violence.

In contrast, the human security model, as defined by the UNDP (1994), places emphasis on individual safety, security, and the provision of basic needs, such as economic and political stability. This theory posits that issues like poverty, inequality, and lack of basic services often lead to instability and violence, which are key drivers of insurgency and banditry in Nigeria. By failing to address these underlying socio-economic issues, the Nigerian government has inadvertently facilitated the growth of insurgent groups and criminal activities (Ojo *et al.*, 2023; National Security, 2025).

An alternative national security ideology is human security, which puts people above states. The 1994 UNDP strategy includes economic, health, environmental, personal, and political security. It focusses addressing poverty, injustice, and lack of essential amenities to address security beyond military force. Human security theory holds that Nigeria's government's failure to provide basic services and address socioeconomic inequalities encourages insurgency and banditry (Ojo *et al.*, 2023).

2.2. Security challenges in nigeria
The origins of Nigeria's security challenges can be traced back to a combination of historical, socio-political, and economic factors. The Boko Haram insurgency emerged in 2002, originating from a radicalized Islamic sect in northeastern Nigeria. Its founder, Mohammed Yusuf, initially campaigned against perceived injustices but gradually evolved into a violent extremist group, particularly after his death in 2009. Boko Haram's transformation from a political militia to a terrorist group culminated in its 2014 kidnapping of the Chibok schoolgirls, which brought international attention to the growing threat (Ajala & Murphy, 2025).

In addition to terrorism, banditry has become a growing security concern, particularly in Nigeria's northwest and central regions. These criminal gangs, motivated by resource

competition, socio-political grievances, and lawlessness, engage in activities such as kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, and village raids. Banditry has intensified as political instability and poor governance have provided fertile ground for these criminal groups to flourish (Organised Banditry, ISS Africa, n.d.).

Ethnic violence, particularly between farmers and herders, has its roots in longstanding land and resource disputes, exacerbated by Nigeria's demographic pressures. These conflicts, especially in the Middle Belt and southern regions, have escalated in recent years, fueled by ethnic, religious, and political factors. As ethnic groups fight for political representation, economic power, and access to resources, the cycle of violence deepens (Tijani & Eugene, 2011; Udeh, 2024).

2.3. Challenges with nigeria's security architecture
2.3.1. Gaps in nigeria's security strategy
The dynamics of these groups have evolved over time, shaped by both internal and external factors. Boko Haram's shift towards ISIS West Africa (ISWAP) in 2015 marked a significant evolution, broadening its reach and increasing the sophistication of its attacks. The group now operates across a broader swath of territory in the Lake Chad Basin, collaborating with other extremist groups and employing more advanced tactics to achieve its objectives (National Counterterrorism Center, n.d.-a).

Bandit groups, initially fragmented and regionally focused, have become more organized, moving beyond simple criminality to more complex forms of insurgency. These groups often cooperate with political actors or ethnic militias, further complicating the security landscape (National Counterterrorism Center, n.d.-b). Similarly, ethnic violence has become increasingly deadly, with groups using violence to assert political power or resist perceived marginalization. These dynamics have been influenced by the broader regional instability in the Sahel and the spillover effects from conflicts in neighboring countries (Eji, 2016).

2.4. Government responses and challenges
The Nigerian government's responses to these evolving threats have been inconsistent, oscillating between military force, negotiations, and amnesty programs. The government's reliance on military power has been criticized for its lack of long-term strategy, resulting in temporary gains that fail to address the root causes of insecurity. Scholars such as Ewetan and Urhie (2021) have pointed out that the military-centric approach has led to a breakdown in communication between security agencies and local communities, further alienating the very populations that the government aims to protect.

Inconsistent policies, such as alternating between dialogue with insurgents and military action, have contributed to the persistence of violence. Bandits and insurgents have adapted to military operations, regrouping and launching new attacks in the aftermath of military victories. This pattern has been particularly evident in the case of Boko Haram, where military operations have often failed to stem the insurgency's growth and territorial control (Brown, 1982).

2.5. Gaps in the security framework
There are significant gaps in Nigeria's security strategy, including the lack of coordination among the military, police, and intelligence agencies. The fragmentation of the security sector and political interference have hindered effective action against insurgency and banditry (Nweke, 2011). Additionally, the government's failure to address socio-economic factors—such as poverty, unemployment, and corruption—has perpetuated violence and instability. As noted by Tijani & Eugene (2011), a holistic security strategy that integrates military power with socio-political reforms is necessary for long-term peace and stability in Nigeria.

The evolving nature of terrorism, banditry, and ethnic violence in Nigeria underscores the need for a comprehensive and integrated security strategy. Academic literature has highlighted the failure of military-centric responses, calling for greater focus on addressing the socio-economic conditions that fuel these conflicts. Moving forward, Nigeria's security approach must evolve to incorporate political, economic, and governance reforms alongside military action. Only through a balanced and sustainable strategy can Nigeria hope to restore peace, stability, and national unity.

3. METHODOLOGY
3.1. Research design
This study employed a qualitative research design to assess Nigeria's counterterrorism policies, specifically in relation to terrorism, banditry, and ethnic violence. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in national security, including policymakers, Nigerian military personnel, law enforcement officers, and civil society representatives. These stakeholders were selected to provide a comprehensive view of Nigeria's security challenges from both governmental and civil perspectives.

3.2. Participants
A total of 25 participants were interviewed for this study. These participants were selected based on their expertise and direct involvement in Nigeria's security efforts, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives. The participants included:

• 10 policymakers from the Nigerian government,

• 7 members of the Nigerian military,

• 5 representatives from non-governmental organizations working on peacebuilding and security,

• 3 law enforcement officers who have worked in regions affected by terrorism, banditry, and ethnic violence.

3.3. Key questions
The interviews were designed to explore participants' perspectives on Nigeria's current security strategy and its effectiveness in addressing terrorism, banditry, and ethnic violence. The key questions asked during the interviews included:

• How would you assess the effectiveness of Nigeria's current security response to Boko Haram, banditry, and ethnic violence?

• What are the underlying socio-political or economic factors that contribute to the persistence of these security challenges?

• What strategies, in your opinion, should the government adopt to address the root causes of insecurity in Nigeria?

• How do you evaluate the government's use of military force versus other methods, such as negotiations or community involvement?

• What are the main challenges in coordinating efforts between the military, police, and other security agencies?

3.4. Interview process and data collection

The interviews were conducted in person and through secure video conferencing platforms to ensure accessibility for participants located in different regions of Nigeria. Each interview lasted between 45 to 90 minutes, depending on the availability and willingness of the participants to provide detailed insights.

3.5. Recording and transcription

The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. This approach ensured that the nuances of each participant's responses were accurately captured. The recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis. In addition to the audio recordings, field notes were taken to capture any non-verbal cues and contextual information that could enhance the interpretation of the data.

To maintain confidentiality, all personal identifiers were removed from the transcripts. The transcripts were then coded thematically to identify key patterns and insights relevant to the research questions.

3.6. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts. The process involved reading through the transcripts to identify recurring themes and patterns related to Nigeria's security strategy, the role of military forces, the socio-political conditions driving violence, and the effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts. Key themes were classified and analyzed, focusing on the governmental responses to insurgency and their impact on national security.

3.7. Limitations

Several limitations were noted during the research:

• *Stakeholder Access:* Limited access to some high-ranking government officials and military personnel reduced the breadth of perspectives gathered.

• *Secondary Data Bias:* Cross-referencing sources helped mitigate potential bias in official reports and media publications used in the analysis.

• *Geographical Scope:* The study's national focus may have overlooked regional nuances, though local leaders were included to provide insights from affected areas.

• *Complexity of Security Issues:* The multi-dimensional nature of Nigeria's security challenges made it difficult to pinpoint singular causes for violence, though thematic analysis helped identify key trends.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a thorough examination of Nigeria's national security strategies and provides valuable insights into the evolving security landscape.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
4.1. Findings

The interviews with key stakeholders provided valuable insights into Nigeria's national security challenges, specifically regarding terrorism, banditry, and ethnic violence. Participants highlighted several key themes that illuminate the complexity of the security situation and the government's response.

Key Findings:

• *Inadequacy of Military Responses:* A consistent view across the interviews was that the Nigerian military's operations, while often successful in regaining territory, have been insufficient in addressing the root causes of insurgency and banditry. Military victories have often been short-lived, with Boko Haram and bandit groups regrouping and reasserting control in previously cleared areas.

• *Socio-Economic Drivers of Violence:* Many participants pointed out that socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of education contribute significantly to the persistence of terrorism and banditry. These factors provide fertile ground for insurgent and criminal groups to recruit new members, further exacerbating the insecurity.

• *Governance and Coordination Gaps:* There was widespread concern about the lack of coordination between security agencies, as well as the failure to implement consistent, long-term policies that go beyond military interventions. The fragmented nature of Nigeria's security apparatus was cited as a major obstacle in effectively combating the nation's security threats.

• *Local Perceptions of the Government's Approach:* The interviews revealed a growing sense of distrust between the government and local populations, especially in areas heavily affected by violence. Participants noted that the use of military force has often alienated local communities, making it harder to build the necessary partnerships to counter insurgency and banditry.

4.2. Analysis and nuanced insights

The data collected from the interviews allows us to connect the findings to existing literature, providing a more nuanced understanding of Nigeria's security challenges.

i. Military-Centric Approach: The finding that Nigeria's military strategy has been insufficient in addressing the underlying causes of violence aligns with the work of Ewetan and Urhie (2021), who argue that Nigeria's over-reliance on military power without addressing socio-political factors has led to temporary victories rather than long-term solutions. The interviewees noted that military operations alone cannot eliminate the grievances that fuel insurgency and banditry. As Brown (1982) and McNamara (1968) emphasize, insurgency requires more than military might—it necessitates socio-economic development and political stability.

ii. Socio-Economic Factors: The identification of poverty and unemployment as key drivers of violence supports the human security paradigm proposed by Ojo *et al.* (2023), which highlights how a lack of basic services and economic opportunities contributes to insecurity. This view resonates with the idea that addressing poverty and inequality is essential for preventing extremism and criminality. Many interviewees

stressed the need for a more integrated approach that includes economic growth, education, and healthcare, which has been largely overlooked by the Nigerian government.

iii. Governance and Coordination Gaps: The lack of coordination between Nigeria's security agencies is a theme echoed in the literature. Nweke (2011) and Tijani & Eugene (2011) have both pointed out that the fragmentation of the security sector exacerbated by political interference and corruption has weakened Nigeria's ability to implement a cohesive counterterrorism strategy. The interviews revealed that many local security forces operate in silos, with limited communication between the military, police, and intelligence services. This fragmentation hampers effective coordination and weakens the overall response to security threats.

iv. Local Perceptions of Government Policies: The growing distrust between the government and local populations, as revealed in the interviews, echoes the work of Azubuike and Dorathy (2024), who discuss how the Nigerian government's inconsistency in its approach to insurgent groups has eroded its credibility. Many participants in the study noted that the government's heavy-handed military tactics have often alienated local communities, leading to increased recruitment by insurgent groups. This aligns with the findings of Ewetan and Urhie (2021), who emphasize that the lack of a clear strategy for community engagement has been a critical failure in Nigeria's counterinsurgency efforts.

4.3. Connecting findings to literature

The findings from the interviews demonstrate that Nigeria's security response is still heavily military-centric and has largely ignored the socio-economic and political factors that drive terrorism, banditry, and ethnic violence. This reflects the critique of Nigeria's security architecture found in existing literature, which argues that a holistic approach is necessary to address the root causes of insecurity (Nweke, 2011). The interview data enriches this argument by offering concrete examples of how local communities feel disenfranchised and alienated by the government's current strategy.

Moreover, the emphasis on poverty, unemployment, and governance as key drivers of violence aligns with the human security framework (Ojo *et al.*, 2023). The interviews further illustrate how addressing these factors, through investment in education, infrastructure, and community policing, can provide a more sustainable solution to Nigeria's security challenges.

4.4. Implications for policy

The insights gathered from the interviews suggest that Nigeria's security framework must evolve beyond its military-heavy approach. To build a more stable and secure nation, Nigeria must implement policies that focus on:

• *Enhanced coordination:* Improving communication and cooperation between security agencies to ensure a more integrated and efficient response to violence.

• *Socio-economic development:* Addressing the socio-economic root causes of violence by investing in education, job creation, and infrastructure, particularly in regions most affected by insecurity.

• *Community engagement:* Rebuilding trust between the government and local populations through more inclusive and community-driven security strategies. This involves prioritizing human security and engaging communities in efforts to counter violence.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the effectiveness of Nigeria's national security strategies in responding to terrorism, banditry, and ethnic violence. Through interviews with key stakeholders; including policymakers, military personnel, law enforcement officers, and civil society representatives—this research has uncovered critical insights into the challenges and shortcomings of Nigeria's security framework.

5.1. Key findings and their implications

i. Military-centric approach: The research confirmed that while military operations have provided temporary relief in some areas, they have not addressed the root causes of insecurity. This military-heavy approach has often alienated local communities, making it difficult to establish sustainable peace. The data highlighted that the government's use of military power has failed to prevent the regrouping of insurgent groups and criminal gangs, further destabilizing affected regions.

ii. Socio-economic drivers of violence: The interviews underscored the importance of addressing underlying socio-economic factors—such as poverty, unemployment, and inadequate access to education—which contribute significantly to the persistence of terrorism and banditry. Local communities expressed frustration with the government's failure to provide essential services, thereby increasing the appeal of insurgent and criminal groups.

iii. Coordination and governance gaps: One of the most significant findings was the lack of coordination between Nigeria's security agencies. Fragmentation and political interference were identified as key barriers to effective action. The failure to implement consistent and long-term strategies has led to an ineffective national security response.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing directly from the study's findings, the following tailored recommendations are proposed:

i. Develop a more integrated security strategy: The data from the interviews show that Nigeria's security strategy is fragmented, with poor coordination between the military, police, and other security agencies. To address this, a more integrated security framework is essential. This framework should focus on improving intelligence-sharing, streamlining operations between agencies, and fostering collaboration at all levels of government.

ii. Focus on socio-economic development as a core strategy: The research findings indicate that addressing socio-economic inequality is crucial to reducing violence. As many interviewees highlighted, insurgency and banditry thrive in areas with high poverty and unemployment. Thus, the government must prioritize economic investments in the most affected regions. This includes expanding access to education, job creation, healthcare, and infrastructure, which will help mitigate the root causes of violence.

iii. Engage local communities and build trust: The study highlighted that military action has alienated local populations, making it harder to build the necessary trust between the government and communities. To counter this, the Nigerian government must adopt a more community-focused approach, engaging local leaders and communities in peacebuilding efforts. By prioritizing human security—through the provision of basic services and political inclusion—the government can help reduce resentment and build resilience against insurgent recruitment.

iv. Establish clear and consistent policies for counterterrorism: The lack of a coherent, long-term counterterrorism strategy emerged as a significant finding in the interviews. To prevent the recurrence of insurgent activities, the Nigerian government must develop a clear and consistent policy that combines military, diplomatic, and socio-economic measures. This policy should be flexible enough to address the evolving nature of threats like Boko Haram, banditry, and ethnic violence.

In conclusion, this study underscores the need for a paradigm shift in Nigeria's security strategy. By integrating military power with socio-economic development, improving coordination among security agencies, and fostering local community engagement, Nigeria can begin to address its security challenges in a more sustainable and inclusive manner. These recommendations, rooted in the empirical findings of this study, offer a pathway to restoring stability, fostering national unity, and ensuring long-term peace.

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