



# **Impact of Internal Security Threats on Nigeria's Regional Leadership and Foreign Policy: A Case Study of Boko Haram and Banditry Humanitarian Challenges**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses how domestic security threats-in particular, Boko Haram insurgency and banditry-have immensely impacted international relations and foreign policy for Nigeria. Indeed, internal instability in the most populous country in Africa has diligently constrained the diplomatic relations of Nigeria, reduced its leadership roles within the region, and complicated its engagement with global partners. The regional cooperation through military alliances, such as MNJTF, has followed the Boko Haram insurgency, which spilled over to neighbours. This has also created diplomatic tensions, particularly with Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, due to cross-border violations and the refugee crisis. In addition, the fact that Nigeria had to depend on foreign aid and even military intervention to counter these threats itself posed a question of its sovereignty. The issues of corruption, human rights violations, and the protracted conflicts have further damaged the country's international standing. Therefore, this paper examines how these security challenges affects the conduct of Nigeria's foreign policy and indicates good domestic governance as the direction in which Nigeria should proceed to reclaim its regional leadership for an improved standing within the global community.

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## **Introduction**

With a population of about 202 million people, Nigeria is the most populous nation in Africa and one of the largest economies on the continent. Historically, the country has always played a leading role in the political, economic, and diplomatic affairs of the continent. This influence is enormous, both in regional organizations like the African Union and ECOWAS, and even in global forums like the United Nations. However, the persistent internal security challenges have affected Nigeria both internationally and in its foreign policy strategies. Incessant domestic threats-from the Boko Haram insurgency to separatist movements and banditry-have resulted in humanitarian crisis. These has resulted in constant security constraints, therefore making Nigerians poorer and depleting her foreign resources, while detracting attention from imperatives of foreign policy. In addition, Nigeria has not been able to fully play its role as a regional leader, which has implications for its involvement in peacekeeping and conflict resolution in Africa. This paper examines how these internal security concerns shape Nigeria's international relations and its foreign policy formulation in relation to wider ramifications within the region and the world at large.

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## **Background on Boko Haram and Banditry**

Nigeria has been a pivoting force in the political, economic, and diplomatic in Africa for many years, being the most populous nation on the continent and one of its largest economies. The influence of Nigeria is particularly stronger within regional organizations such as ECOWAS and the AU, and on a wider scale through active participation in the United Nations and other global forums (Okeke, 2018). With its large oil reserves, vast population, and strategic location, the country has grown to be a very important partner to international actors like the United States, China, and the European Union. Yet, for all its promise, Nigeria still battles severe internal security challenges that have thus far impinged on its foreign policy and international relations (Adesoji, 2011).

In fact, increasing domestic threats, such as Boko Haram insurgency, widespread banditry, and separatist movements, have caused humanitarian crises within the country and strained its international engagements. These security issues divert attention and resources from Nigeria's foreign policy priorities, thus complicating its role as a regional leader. Moreover, Nigeria's image on the global stage is affected as the government grapples with containing these threats while still attempting to assert itself as a stabilizing force within West Africa (Agbibo, 2013).

Boko Haram was founded in 2002 in north-eastern Nigeria, nowadays, it is one of the most salient security challenges the country faces. The name of this jihadist militant group roughly translates to "Western education is forbidden", it denoted a movement opposing Western influence, especially in the form of education and governance (Zenn, 2020). Following the killing of its leader, Mohammed Yusuf, by Nigerian security forces in 2009, Boko Haram

then graduated into an all-rounder terrorist organization behind murdering attacks under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau. The group is committed to establishing an Islamic state in northern Nigeria and rejects whatsoever Western education and values (Campbell, 2014). Since 2009, Boko Haram had undertaken unaccountable atrocities of bombings, kidnappings, and massacres that brought about over 30,000 deaths and displaced millions internally within Nigeria and the neighbouring countries of Chad, Niger, and Cameroon (Walker, 2016). This has not only created an ongoing humanitarian crisis but also strained Nigeria's relations with its neighbours, who are confronted with the spill over of violence across the border and the influx of refugees (Hansen, 2017).

The Nigerian military launched extensive counterinsurgency efforts against Boko Haram, in support of which regional forces were deployed within the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). However, the group's resilience and ability to adapt its tactics, including aligning with the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP), have made the conflict protracted (Thurston, 2018). The inability of the Nigerian government to defeat Boko Haram decisively has left its international partners worried if the government is capable of maintaining stability within its borders and in the region (Davis, 2016).

Besides the Boko Haram insurgency, banditry remains one of the biggest security challenges facing Nigeria, particularly in north-western and central Nigeria. Armed groups, generally referred to as bandits, have been involved in cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, and village attacks. These bandits operate with relative impunity, taking advantage of weak security infrastructure and governance in far-flung rural areas. These have resulted in the loss of countless lives, properties destroyed, and mass displacement of rural-based populations. Often, whole communities have been traumatized; schools, markets, and farmlands have been abandoned out of fear of attacks (Musa, 2019). Increased banditry has deepened the dimension of security challenges facing Nigeria, as these groups at times operate either in concert with or in complementarity to other criminal and militant networks in further undermining the north (Ikelegbe, 2020).

Cumulatively, all these crises of the Boko Haram insurgency and the widely spread banditry have specifically combined to negatively affect Nigeria's international relations in terms of its foreign policy engagements (Zenn, 2020). First, its failures in the area of domestic security have deconstructed the image of Nigeria as a regional power that can advance peace and stability. From a country that was seen as the leading peacekeeping force in most parts of Africa, Nigeria has become a country that needs foreign assistance to overcome its homegrown insecurities (Adebanwi, 2017). The military resources and attention that might have been utilized in regional peacekeeping expedition engagements are now channelled into domestic counterinsurgencies, which reduce the influence that Nigeria can exert in regional and international conflict resolution processes (Gboyega, 2018).

Secondly, the security crises in Nigeria have also strained its relationship with neighbouring countries, especially since these activities of Boko Haram have crossed over to Chad, Niger, and even Cameroon (Smith, 2019), while it is true that these countries have cooperated with Nigeria by undertaking joint military operations, the cross-border nature has led to diplomatic tensions between Nigeria and the other countries (Olaniyan, 2020). As a result, complaints of inadequate coordination and slow responses to joint security initiatives have arisen, with ill-will between Nigeria and its neighbours emerging as a result (Olaniyan, 2020). Secondly, the pressure of refugees from war-torn territories seeking asylum in neighbouring countries puts additional pressure on the often-strained resources of these countries, with accusations often pitted against Nigeria in particular that more needs to be done to contain this crisis within its borders (Adebayo, 2016).

Lastly, these internal security challenges have impacted Nigeria's broader foreign policy, particularly its relationships with international partners. Countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union have expressed concern over Nigeria's handling of Boko Haram and banditry, with some international actors providing security assistance in the form of training, equipment, and intelligence (Smith, 2019). However, Nigeria's reliance on foreign assistance to address its internal security issues has raised questions about the country's ability to maintain its sovereignty and regional leadership role (Hassan, 2020). Moreover, human rights abuses committed by Nigerian security forces in the fight against Boko Haram have further strained relations with Western partners, leading to calls for greater accountability and reforms (Ojo, 2021).

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## **Impact on International Relations**

### **Regional Cooperation and Tensions**

The Boko Haram insurgency has had wide-reaching implications for Nigeria's relations with its neighbours, especially those sharing a border with the country. The group's activities stretch from Nigeria's northeast through Chad, Niger, and Cameroon; these nations have become involved in active counterinsurgency operations. This results in the Multinational Joint Task Force, made up of military forces from Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Cameroon, and Benin (Adeyemi-Suenu, 2021). The MNJTF has been able to record some levels of success regarding the reoccupation of the many territories hitherto held by Boko Haram. The resilience of the insurgency, however, has actually shown, despite this effort, the limitation that is characteristic everywhere these cooperative military efforts occur, as Ogunnubi & Amao (2020) have noted. While strengthened military collaboration brought the countries closer by linking their diplomacy together in a mutual cause against terrorism, it has not been without friction. Troops of Nigerian forces, while in hot pursuit of Boko Haram militants, have violated the borders of neighbouring countries, leading to incidents that have been considered perturbing to state sovereignty (Onuoha, 2019). Such activities have heightened tensions with Cameroon, Niger, and Chad, particularly when civilian casualties have occurred due to cross-border military action. The economic drain caused by Boko Haram's cross-border actions has even led some regional nations to query whether Nigeria is capable of leading the regional campaign against terror (Aluko, 2017). The protracted conflict and spill over effects of Boko Haram's activities across borders have made some countries, like Chad and Niger, raise certain questions about the effectiveness of Nigeria's counter-insurgency strategies (Adebayo, 2016).

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### Refugee Crisis and Humanitarian Aid

The Boko Haram insurgency has also triggered a large-scale humanitarian crisis, significantly affecting Nigeria's international relations. Millions of people have been displaced internally, while many others have fled to neighboring countries such as Cameroon, Niger, and Chad, creating a massive refugee crisis. International organizations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and non-governmental organizations have played a crucial role in providing humanitarian aid to displaced populations. However, the scale of the displacement has overwhelmed Nigeria's ability to manage the crisis, leading to a heavy reliance on foreign assistance (Ager, 2021). This reliance has affected Nigeria's diplomatic relations with several Western nations and multilateral organizations, as they are the primary donors of humanitarian aid to the region (Ogunnubi & Amao, 2020). Although international assistance has been vital in addressing the immediate needs of refugees and internally displaced persons, Nigeria's neighbours have grown increasingly frustrated with the continuous influx of refugees into their countries. Cameroon and Niger, in particular, have criticized Nigeria for not doing enough to stabilize the domestic situation, which has left them bearing the brunt of the refugee crisis (Aluko, 2017). This friction has the potential to undermine the regional solidarity needed to effectively combat Boko Haram.

### Global Perception and Foreign Aid

The inability of Nigeria to contain the menace of Boko Haram, among other security threats like banditry, has dented the international image of the country, criticism from the global community, most especially western nations, against the Nigerian government for handling these security challenges has underlined issues of corruption, mismanagement of resources, and human rights abuses from Nigerian security forces (International Crisis Group, 2020). This has directly impinged on Nigeria's standing in the world, with various countries struggling to take confidence in Nigeria's bilateral relationship. Some international actors have, however, applauded Nigeria's efforts, even as its failure to score a conclusive victory against Boko Haram diminishes the country's diplomatic leverage (Campbell, 2019). From the humanitarian crisis wrought by Boko Haram, the United States and European Union among other international actors have tended to focus foreign aid on counterterrorism efforts and addressing the humanitarian spill over that is caused, this is often provided with conditions placed on Nigeria to make amends in governance and human rights practices (Ager, 2021). The failure on the part of Nigeria to meet some of these conditions has from time to time delayed the flow of foreign assistance and, by prolonging the domestic crisis, has further weakened the Nigerian diplomatic position. For instance, the US has been slow in fully committing military aid, citing serious concerns about Nigeria's military and its protection of civilians (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

### Counterterrorism and Security Partnerships

The rise of Boko Haram has positioned Nigeria as a key player in global counterterrorism efforts. Countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France have provided logistical support, intelligence, and military training to assist Nigeria in combating the insurgency (Pérouse de Montclos, 2016). However, these partnerships have been complicated by concerns over Nigeria's commitment to human rights. Western nations have expressed reservations about providing advanced military equipment and direct military intervention due to allegations of abuses by Nigerian security forces (Amnesty International, 2019).

Despite these concerns, Nigeria's role in global counterterrorism has bolstered its diplomatic relations with Western powers. The Nigerian government's willingness to collaborate with foreign partners on intelligence sharing and regional security has helped maintain these relationships, even as criticism persists. Nevertheless, the protracted nature of the conflict with Boko Haram and the emergence of new security threats, such as banditry in north-western Nigeria, have raised questions about the effectiveness of these partnerships (Smith, 2019). Nigeria's repeated requests for more substantial military aid, including advanced weaponry, have been met with reluctance by Western countries, particularly due to ongoing concerns about civilian casualties and human rights violations during military operations (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

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## Impact on Foreign Policy

### Shift Toward Multilateralism

The security threats from Boko Haram and banditry have had the greatest influence on the direction of Nigeria's foreign policy toward multilateralism. In trying to address these security challenges, the country has increasingly looked up to regional and international organizations for support of its security concerns. It has actively participated within the AU and ECOWAS in seeking regional support for its counterterrorism efforts (Ogunnubi & Amao, 2020). These bodies have played strategic roles in coordinating regional military responses and also providing diplomatic platforms through which Nigeria had been able to rally support for its security initiatives. At the international level, Nigerian foreign policy shifted toward engaging with multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and the European Union, these two institutions have given financial and logistic support to the initiatives of counterterrorism and humanitarianism of Nigeria, as the contribution has entrenched the country's position of dependence on collective security arrangements (Onuoha, 2019). Therefore, Nigeria's involvement in these international bodies forms part of a wider foreign policy approach that is sensitive to the interlinking of domestic security challenges with those of regional stability (Akinrinade, 2019). By adopting a multilateral approach, Nigeria has sought to address its internal security threats while simultaneously reinforcing its diplomatic relationships with key international actors.

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### Diplomatic Isolation and Sovereignty Concerns

While multilateralism has been a central feature of Nigeria's foreign policy, there have also been the periods of diplomatic isolation with Western nations. The emphasis on Nigerian sovereignty and resistance to forms of foreign intervention, especially touching its counterterrorism strategy, has thus placed

the country in strained relations with key international partners (Akinrinade, 2019). Nigeria has often resisted external pressures for the reform of its military and counterterrorism tactics, particularly in response to allegations of human rights violations, this has brought about diplomatic frictions between the country and nations such as the United States and the United Kingdom, which have been vociferous in their criticism of Nigeria's approach to internal security issues (Amnesty International, 2019). The issue at the root of this diplomatic tension may be said to revolve around Nigeria's accusation of foreign interference in internal affairs. In that respect, the Nigerian government has repeatedly insisted on the principle of sovereignty and disapproved of what it believes is undue influence of external actors in its counterterrorism strategy. This balancing act—asserting national sovereignty while engaging with the international community—has been a defining feature of Nigeria's foreign policy response to domestic security challenges (Campbell, 2019). The tension between international expectations for transparency and accountability and Nigeria's focus on maintaining control over its internal security operations has complicated its relationships with key international partners (Hassan, 2020).

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## Conclusion

Internal security challenges like the Boko Haram insurgency and general banditry have really made a lot of difference in shaping Nigeria's international relations and foreign policy in many ways. Such domestic threats strain resources, weaken Nigeria's position as a regional leader, and complicate its ability to engage on the global stage effectively. The operations of Boko Haram have spilled over into neighbouring countries such as Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, identifying regional cooperation in creating entities such as the Multinational Joint Task Force-MNJTF amid tensions in the forms of violations of sovereignty and burdens in managing flows of refugees.

The humanitarian aspect of the crisis caused by the actions of Boko Haram has glued the attention of great parts of the international community. Foreign aid has grown substantially, coming most of all from great Western nations and from multilateral organizations. Assistance often comes with strings attached, such as appeals for better governance, improved human rights practices, and more transparency in Nigeria's CT operations. The criticism of how Nigeria has handled the insurgency—mostly corruption, besides its military committing human rights violations—beclouds international perception and means a limitation in its diplomatic grip and a slowing of the flow of much-needed aid. The struggle between the retention of national sovereignty and the implementation of international norms of governance and human rights creates a dichotomy that complicates relations between Nigeria and key international partners.

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