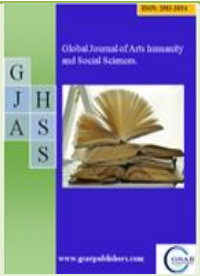


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Forest Governance and Insecurity Complications in the Northeast Geopolitical Zone: Implications for Nigerian External Relations, 2020 - 2025

By

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Abstract

This paper explores how forest-based insecurity has evolved in Northeast Nigeria between 2020 and 2025 and the implications for the country's external relations. Forests such as Sambisa, Mandara, and Alagarno, once primarily ecological and livelihood spaces, have increasingly become arenas of alternative authority, where insurgents, armed bandit groups, and certain pastoralist militias exert control. Drawing on State Failure Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory, the study demonstrates that the rise of these non-state actors is rooted in the Nigerian state's limited presence in these regions, creating governance vacuums that foster both local exploitation and broader transnational security threats. Forest-based governance operates through coercion, informal taxation, and territorial control, shaping local economies and social hierarchies while weakening formal state structures. The paper further examines how this insecurity spills across borders, fueling cross-border raids, refugee movements, arms trafficking, and tensions with neighboring countries such as Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. In response, the Nigerian government has pursued a combination of military action, regional cooperation through the Multinational Joint Task Force, diplomatic engagement to limit arms proliferation, and community-centered humanitarian interventions. Findings highlight that sustainable stabilization in the Northeast requires an integrated approach that balances security operations, development programs, and diplomatic strategies. Ultimately, the study underscores that internal insecurity in strategically sensitive regions is not only a domestic concern but a decisive factor shaping Nigeria's diplomatic credibility, regional influence, and international partnerships.

Keywords: Northeast Nigeria, forest-based insecurity, non-state actors, forest governance, regional diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION

The Northeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria remains one of the most turbulent and analytically significant regions in contemporary African security discourse. While the roots of insecurity in the region can be traced to earlier decades, the period from 2020 to 2025 marks an intensification and transformation of violence into a system of alternative governance driven by armed non-state actors who operate inside forested and remote rural environments. These actors, who include insurgents, bandit groups, pastoralist militias, smuggling networks, and other criminal formations, have taken strategic advantage of dense forest landscapes to build authority structures that operate parallel to and often in direct defiance of the

Nigerian state. Scholars have increasingly described such spaces as ungoverned territories or limited statehood areas that allow armed groups to exercise administrative, economic, and coercive functions (Raleigh, 2020; Akinyetun, 2021).

During this period, forests such as Sambisa, the Mandara mountain region, and various unmonitored bush corridors became sites where the rules of daily life for many communities were no longer set by constitutional institutions, but by heavily armed actors with their own priorities and worldviews. These groups established systems of taxation, resource extraction, dispute settlement, and relocation control in ways that resemble a form of governance even though they lack legitimacy, accountability, or democratic consent



(International Crisis Group, 2022). The experience of these communities humanizes the abstraction of insecurity. For many rural families, insecurity is not simply a matter of violent incidents but a daily negotiation of survival in which decisions about farming, trading, travel, and even access to education depend on the mood and instructions of forest based actors rather than government officials.

This shift from episodic violence to structured forest based authority has deep implications for Nigeria's external relations. The Northeast zone shares significant international boundaries with Niger Republic, Chad, and Cameroon. These borders are historically porous due to shared ethnic ties, overlapping cultural zones, long established trading routes, and the physical difficulty of surveillance in remote terrain (Mustapha and Aiyede, 2022). As forest based armed groups move across these borders to evade military pressure or expand their economic activities, they inadvertently transform internal Nigerian security challenges into regional diplomatic concerns. Cross border raids, refugee flows, trafficking of weapons, and the mobility of insurgent cells have often generated diplomatic tensions between Nigeria and its neighbors, each sometimes suspecting the other of insufficient control or political complicity.

The transformation also influences how global powers, multilateral organizations, and development partners interpret the capacity of the Nigerian state. International actors increasingly use levels of territorial control, humanitarian stability, and cross border surveillance as benchmarks for assessing Nigeria's credibility as a regional leader and a reliable partner in counterterrorism and peacebuilding (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2023). These perceptions shape negotiations related to military support, intelligence cooperation, sanctions risk, economic investment, and humanitarian relief. The human impact of forest based insecurity has international dimensions. Thousands of displaced Nigerians crossed into Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, placing humanitarian and administrative pressure on neighboring governments. Many of these countries requested financial and logistical assistance from international agencies such as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the International Organization for Migration, thereby placing Nigeria's domestic crisis at the center of global humanitarian diplomacy (UNOCHA, 2024). The emotional, psychological, and economic suffering of these displaced populations continues to shape regional attitudes toward Nigeria and influence bilateral and multilateral decision making.

Thus, the insecurity landscape in the Northeast is not merely a domestic issue but a multidimensional challenge that intersects with regional geopolitics, international security cooperation, economic diplomacy, and the global humanitarian system. Understanding the evolution of forest governance and its complications from 2020 to 2025 is therefore critical not only for Nigerian national security policy, but also for analyzing Nigeria's position within West Africa and the wider international community.

Contextualizing Concepts

Forest Governance

The concept of forest governance cannot be boxed into a unilateral definition. Forest governance in the Nigerian context has historically been understood in the framework of environmental management, conservation, and sustainable resource utilization. In conventional scholarship, it refers to the institutions, policies, and norms that regulate access, use, and protection of forest resources, often balancing economic needs, ecological sustainability, and social equity (Ribot 2002; Agrawal and Ribot 2010). However, in the contemporary Northeast geopolitical zone, the term has acquired a more complex and nuanced meaning, reflecting a situation where forests are no longer simply ecological or economic spaces but have become centres of alternative authority and political power.

In this context, forest governance refers to the de facto administration and regulation of forest territories by non state actors, including insurgent groups, armed bandit networks, and certain armed pastoralist formations. These actors exercise authority over human, economic, and territorial activities within forested areas, creating informal systems of taxation, conflict resolution, surveillance, and resource control that operate independently of the Nigerian state (Adewale 2022; Onapajo 2023). Unlike formal governance structures, these systems are characterized by coercion, violence, and the strategic use of fear, yet they function as governance mechanisms because they structure daily life and influence decisions in communities that have little or no access to state services.

Forests such as Sambisa, Mandara, and Alagarno have become the epicentres of these governance networks. Within these spaces, non state actors establish military training camps, command centres, storage depots, and negotiation arenas for ransom or trade. They enforce internal codes of conduct, regulate the flow of goods and livestock, and mediate disputes among captives or coerced residents. These governance structures are fluid, often shifting in response to military operations, resource availability, or intergroup rivalries. Despite their illegitimacy, they exhibit features of political authority, including the ability to influence behaviour, maintain order, and generate revenue.

The phenomenon of forest governance in the Northeast reflects the intersection of governance failure and survival strategies. The Nigerian state's limited presence in remote forested regions creates a vacuum that is quickly filled by actors capable of enforcing authority. Communities within these forests often face difficult choices: comply with non state authorities for survival or risk confrontation. This dynamic is not merely coercive but also relational, as local populations negotiate protection, food access, and movement through informal arrangements with armed groups (Blench 2022). Forest governance is also closely tied to **economic survival and illicit networks**. Armed actors rely on the forests for both concealment and sustenance, but they also generate revenue through activities such as kidnapping for ransom, illegal taxation of farmers and traders, smuggling of goods and livestock, and

extortion of neighbouring communities. These activities create localized economies that further entrench the presence and authority of non state actors, making governance outside state control more resilient (Okoli and Ugwu 2021).

Forest governance in this context carries significant regional and transnational dimensions. The forests in the Northeast often straddle borders with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, facilitating the movement of armed actors, weapons, and resources across national boundaries. This mobility complicates state responses and highlights the role of forests as both ecological and geopolitical spaces. It also underscores the diplomatic implications for Nigeria, as failure to control these spaces generates tensions with neighbouring states and raises questions regarding Nigeria's credibility as a security actor in the region (Mustapha and Aiyede 2022).

In sum, forest governance in the Nigerian Northeast is an emergent form of authority created under conditions of state weakness, socio economic vulnerability, and ecological complexity. It is characterized by a blend of coercion, administration, and survival-based regulation, transforming forests from passive landscapes into active political arenas. Understanding this concept is critical because it frames the nexus between territorial control, insecurity, and international relations, and highlights the ways in which non state actors exploit governance vacuums to consolidate power and influence both local communities and regional diplomacy.

Insecurity

The insecurity in the Northeast is a multidimensional and deeply entrenched crisis. Over the years, it has shifted from a singular insurgency led by Boko Haram in the early 2010s to a complex ecosystem of violence involving ideological insurgents, opportunistic criminal networks, transnational smugglers, and armed pastoral groups (Campbell 2023). From 2020 onward, the insecurity evolved into a system where violent actors coexist, compete, and collaborate depending on the strategic incentives at play.

One of the most persistent drivers of insecurity remains the insurgency conducted by Boko Haram and its splinter faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province. These groups continue to launch attacks on civilians, security bases, markets, and transportation routes. They recruit young people who struggle with poverty and lack of educational opportunities. Their operations thrive because forested areas offer natural protection, concealment, and mobility advantages. These insurgents maintain administrative enclaves, collect illegal taxes from traders, and enforce their own judicial codes in areas under their control (United Nations Development Programme 2022).

Banditry and kidnapping have also emerged as dominant forms of violence. Armed criminal networks abduct travellers, farmers, teachers, humanitarian workers, and government officials, retreating into thick forests where negotiations take place and hostages are held for ransom. This ransom economy has become a profitable industry that sustains the activities of both insurgent and non ideological criminal groups (Okoli and Ugwu 2021). Families

liquidate lifelong savings, communities pay collective levies, and governments sometimes engage indirectly in negotiations, all of which strengthen the financial capacity of violent actors.

Pastoral violence involving armed Fulani groups adds another layer of complexity. While the majority of pastoral communities remain peaceful, certain armed factions exploit the breakdown of security to seize land, exert territorial control, or retaliate against farming communities. They use forests as resting points, grazing corridors, and operational camps. This dynamic has intensified mistrust among ethnic groups and increased the frequency of communal clashes across Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states.

Cross border criminality further complicates the insecurity landscape. The Northeast shares porous borders with Cameroon, Niger, and Chad, which allow the unrestricted movement of arms, fighters, smugglers, and illicit goods. Forest corridors on both sides of these borders serve as transit routes for trafficking networks. This transnational character makes the insecurity not only a Nigerian issue but a regional crisis requiring coordinated diplomatic and military responses.

The consequences of this insecurity are severe and far reaching. Millions of people have been displaced, schools and hospitals have been destroyed or closed, agricultural productivity has declined dramatically, and entire towns have been cut off from the national economy (United Nations Development Programme 2022). Fear has become a dominant psychological condition. Communities live under constant threat, and normal social interactions are distorted by suspicion and trauma. Many households have been impoverished while thousands have lost family members to violence.

The cumulative impact is a breakdown of governance at the local level and a loss of faith in the ability of the state to provide protection and justice. Violent actors exploit this vacuum by offering their own coercive but functional alternatives. This erosion of state presence and authority is precisely what transforms insecurity in the Northeast into not only a domestic challenge but a diplomatic and international concern.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The challenges of forest governance and insecurity in Northeast Nigeria are best understood through theoretical lenses that explain the collapse of state authority and the regionalization of security threats. While multiple frameworks may offer insights, State Failure Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory are the most relevant, as they directly address the causes, manifestations, and transnational consequences of insecurity in forested areas.

State Failure Theory

State Failure Theory posits that when a government loses the ability to provide security, enforce law, and exercise effective control over its territory, non state actors emerge to fill the resulting governance vacuum (Rotberg, 2004). This framework is particularly applicable to the Northeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria, where forested areas such as Sambisa, Mandara, and

Alagarno have become strongholds for insurgents, armed bandits, and certain pastoralist militias.

The theory emphasizes three core components of state failure: loss of monopoly on legitimate violence, inability to provide public goods, and weak institutional authority. In the Nigerian context, the state's inability to sustain a consistent security presence in the Northeast, coupled with underfunded and overstretched military resources, has allowed non state actors to establish alternative governance systems (Campbell, 2023). These actors enforce their own rules, collect revenue, adjudicate disputes, and regulate the daily lives of communities—functions that normally fall within the domain of the state.

State Failure Theory also helps explain the resilience and adaptability of forest governance structures. Non state actors exploit physical geography, social vulnerability, and the lack of administrative reach to maintain territorial control. Forests provide strategic advantages such as concealment, mobility corridors, and natural fortification, which allow insurgents and criminal networks to evade military operations and consolidate authority. The governance provided by these actors, though coercive and illegitimate, satisfies immediate survival and security needs for local populations, creating a paradox where communities rely on violent actors for stability in the absence of state services (Adewale, 2022).

The theory underscores the link between internal insecurity and external perception. A state unable to exercise control over its territory risks losing credibility among neighbouring countries, regional organizations, and international partners. For Nigeria, the presence of alternative governance in forested areas signals weakness and exposes the country to diplomatic pressure, cross border security challenges, and scrutiny regarding human rights and counterterrorism commitments (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2023).

State Failure Theory situates forest governance as a consequence of the state's inability to assert authority, providing a robust explanation for why insurgents and bandits operate effectively in Northeast Nigeria. It captures the dynamics of power vacuum exploitation, alternative governance creation, and the erosion of state legitimacy, which are central to understanding the internal and external ramifications of insecurity.

Regional Security Complex Theory

While State Failure Theory explains why forest governance arises internally, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) contextualizes the regional implications of insecurity in Northeast Nigeria. Developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003), RSCT argues that security in one state is interlinked with the security of neighbouring states, forming a regional security complex. Threats in one state are not isolated but spill over, creating interdependent patterns of insecurity.

The Northeast geopolitical zone shares borders with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, making it a prime example of a regional security complex. Forest-based insurgent and criminal networks move

freely across these borders, exploiting porous boundaries, ethnic networks, and unmonitored forest corridors. These transborder movements complicate diplomatic relations, require coordinated military responses, and affect the allocation of humanitarian assistance. RSCT explains that Nigeria's internal security challenges cannot be analyzed in isolation because they directly influence the stability and security policies of neighbouring countries (Buzan and Wæver, 2003).

RSCT also helps interpret cross border tensions and cooperation. Joint operations like the Multinational Joint Task Force, which involves Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, exemplify efforts to manage shared security threats. However, the presence of forest-based governance and mobile armed groups often produces friction among states, as each government negotiates responsibility, resource allocation, and accountability for attacks or refugee flows. The theory emphasizes that security is a relational concept: what affects Nigeria internally has immediate implications for its neighbours and for the broader diplomatic environment (Adele et al., 2021).

In addition, RSCT captures the international dimension of insecurity. Global powers and multilateral institutions monitor Nigeria's ability to control forest territories as an indicator of regional stability. The perception that Nigeria cannot manage insurgent activity effectively in forested areas influences foreign military assistance, counterterrorism collaborations, investment decisions, and humanitarian interventions (Williams, 2022). RSCT therefore provides a framework for understanding how localized insecurity transforms into a regional and global concern, linking forest governance directly to Nigeria's external relations.

THE EVOLUTION OF FOREST GOVERNANCE IN THE NORTHEAST

The Northeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria has, over the past decade, experienced a dramatic transformation in the ways authority is exercised over forested regions. What were once primarily ecological and economic spaces have increasingly become arenas of contested political authority, controlled by non state actors who operate independently of the Nigerian state. This evolution reflects a broader pattern of governance vacuum exploitation, where armed groups assume roles traditionally reserved for formal institutions. These dynamics have profound implications for local communities, the state, and Nigeria's relations with neighboring countries.

Forests as Political Arenas Beyond State Control

Forests in the Northeast have evolved into political arenas beyond state control, a phenomenon observed in the Sambisa region, the Mandara mountains, and segments of the Lake Chad basin. Scholars such as Raleigh (2020) argue that when states fail to exercise effective authority over remote or difficult-to-govern regions, armed groups often assume roles that mimic governance. In the Northeast, this is evident in the way insurgents, bandits, and other forest-based actors have created functioning, albeit

illegitimate, systems that structure social, economic, and security life.

These systems serve three interlinked purposes. First, they are mechanisms for survival and income generation. Armed groups levy informal taxes, collect ransom payments, confiscate cattle, and seize food supplies from local farmers. Such activities provide resources to sustain their operations while simultaneously undermining the economic stability of surrounding communities (Adewale, 2022). Second, forests serve as sites for control of movement and territorial regulation. Checkpoints, patrols, and informal monitoring allow these groups to regulate who enters or exits the forest, controlling access to strategic locations and economic corridors. Third, these actors cultivate a form of coercive legitimacy. By arbitrating disputes, offering protection for a fee, and distributing resources obtained through force, they create a perception of authority, however contested it may be, which structures local social order (Onapajo, 2023).

The experience of local populations within these forest spaces is deeply human. Many community members live with a mixture of fear, resignation, and pragmatic adaptation. Residents often do not support armed groups ideologically or politically, yet they must comply with rules imposed by these actors to survive. In isolated settlements with minimal state presence, residents navigate a complex moral environment, constantly weighing risk, survival, and limited opportunity (Blench, 2022). These dynamics illustrate how forests have transformed from passive physical spaces into arenas of negotiated power, where state absence allows non state actors to exercise functional, albeit coercive, authority.

Composition of Forest-Based Actors

The governance of forests in Northeast Nigeria is not a monolithic phenomenon. Rather, it is characterized by a multiplicity of actors with diverse motivations, strategies, and operational capacities. Understanding the composition of these actors is essential to grasp the hybridized nature of forest governance.

Insurgent Groups constitute one of the primary actors. Factions of Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province have established semi-permanent camps deep inside forested areas. These camps function not only as launch points for attacks but also as spaces for ideological indoctrination, recruitment, and coordination of regional operations. The insurgents' reach across the Lake Chad basin has been documented extensively by international agencies and the United Nations (UN Security Council, 2023). Their governance strategies combine coercion, propaganda, and limited service provision to sustain authority.

Armed Bandit Networks form another significant component. Originating primarily from Northwest Nigeria, these groups have extended their activities into forest corridors in Taraba and Adamawa states. Their operations are highly organized, encompassing kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, and theft. Bandit networks often operate fluidly, sometimes in collaboration with or in opposition to insurgent groups, creating an unpredictable security environment (Okoli and Ugwu, 2021).

Pastoralist Self-Defense Militias also contribute to forest governance. Certain pastoralist communities, facing long-standing disputes with farming communities over grazing land, water resources, and crop destruction, have formed armed units for protection. Climate-induced pressures such as droughts and desertification exacerbate these tensions, intensifying competition over scarce resources and creating cycles of violence (Blench, 2022). In some cases, these militias operate within forested areas, controlling grazing routes and negotiating their own forms of informal governance.

Finally, local criminal cells and transborder armed entrepreneurs exploit both the terrain and existing trade networks. They facilitate the smuggling of weapons, livestock, and other contraband across national boundaries. Their activities often overlap with insurgent or bandit operations, forming complex, hybridized security ecosystems where allegiances shift according to opportunity, threat perception, and resource competition.

The interactions among these actors generate a fluid and highly unpredictable security landscape. Forests operate simultaneously as sanctuaries, operational bases, and governance arenas where multiple actors exercise authority, often contesting one another's influence. This hybridized system of forest governance complicates state intervention, disrupts traditional community structures, and challenges diplomatic relations, as cross border movement of actors and resources creates international security concerns.

INSECURITY COMPLICATIONS IN THE NORTHEAST AND FROM 2020 TO 2025

The Northeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria has experienced an intensification of insecurity between 2020 and 2025, driven by the proliferation of forest-based armed actors, state incapacity, and the evolving dynamics of regional instability. This insecurity is multidimensional, encompassing transborder movements, the monetization of violence through kidnapping, widespread humanitarian crises, and the erosion of Nigeria's national sovereignty and international credibility. Understanding these complications requires a holistic approach that integrates social, economic, and geopolitical dimensions, revealing both the human and structural consequences of prolonged insecurity.

Transborder Movements and Regional Instability

One of the most consequential aspects of insecurity in the Northeast is the frequent movement of armed groups across Nigeria's borders with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. Forested corridors, shared ecological zones, and longstanding informal trade networks facilitate the mobility of insurgents, bandits, and armed pastoral groups. By exploiting these transborder spaces, armed actors evade military pressure, replenish supplies, and expand their operational reach, often conducting attacks in multiple countries without facing immediate consequences (Adele et al., 2021).

The fluidity of these movements complicates diplomatic and military cooperation among affected states. Each state frequently accuses its neighbours of providing safe havens, either deliberately or through inadequate territorial control. This mutual suspicion can

delay joint military operations, obstruct intelligence sharing, and exacerbate tensions in bilateral relations. Beyond immediate security concerns, the transborder mobility of armed groups underscores the regional nature of the crisis, highlighting how forest-based governance and insecurity in Northeast Nigeria directly influence broader stability across the Lake Chad basin.

For local communities, these movements are deeply destabilizing. Civilians living along border regions are caught in crossfire, displaced multiple times, or subjected to harassment and extortion by actors from different countries. The perception that no government can fully guarantee safety contributes to a pervasive climate of fear, shaping migration patterns, agricultural activity, and local economic participation.

Intensification of Kidnapping and Ransom Economies

Kidnapping has emerged as one of the most visible and economically significant features of forest-based insecurity in the Northeast. From 2020 onwards, abductions became central to the survival strategies of forest actors, providing a reliable stream of revenue that sustains insurgent and bandit operations. Families are forced to raise large sums, often by liquidating assets, selling livestock, borrowing at high interest rates, or pooling resources at the community level. The economic burden is immense, particularly for rural households that rely on subsistence agriculture and have limited access to formal financial institutions (Okoli & Ugwu, 2021).

The human impact of this phenomenon extends far beyond financial loss. Communities experience pervasive anxiety, trauma, and grief, as the fate of abducted individuals is uncertain, and negotiations are prolonged. Children and youth living under the constant threat of abduction experience psychological stress that can disrupt education, social development, and mental health. Women, in particular, bear a disproportionate burden, managing households amid fear and economic strain while coping with the absence of family members. This combination of economic and emotional pressure reinforces the control of forest-based actors, as compliance becomes a matter of survival rather than consent.

Kidnapping as an economic instrument also reshapes local power dynamics. Actors who control forests use the proceeds of abductions to consolidate territorial control, acquire weapons, and expand influence over neighboring areas. In effect, the monetization of violence creates a self-sustaining system of coercion that perpetuates insecurity while undermining state authority.

Humanitarian Crisis and Community Displacement

The insecurity in forested and rural areas has precipitated a humanitarian catastrophe. Millions of individuals have been displaced internally or forced into neighboring countries such as Cameroon and Niger. Displacement often involves protracted stays in camps or informal settlements, where access to food, healthcare, education, and sanitation is limited. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA, 2024) has repeatedly documented the rising humanitarian needs, highlighting

food insecurity, malnutrition, lack of educational continuity, and psychological trauma among displaced populations.

The human costs of displacement are compounded by the disruption of local economies. Agricultural production declines as farms are abandoned, trade networks collapse, and pastoral routes are blocked by armed actors. Vulnerable groups, including children, women, the elderly, and persons with disabilities, bear the heaviest burdens. Beyond material deprivation, displacement erodes social structures and communal resilience, leaving communities highly dependent on external humanitarian assistance and creating long-term challenges for reconstruction and reintegration.

Furthermore, forest-based governance complicates aid delivery. Humanitarian organizations must negotiate access with armed actors controlling forest territories, sometimes paying informal fees or complying with security restrictions to reach affected populations. These constraints slow relief distribution, reduce coverage, and exacerbate human suffering. The crisis demonstrates that insecurity is not merely a matter of violent incidents but a structural challenge that reshapes the social, economic, and psychological landscape of the region.

Erosion of National Sovereignty and International Confidence

The persistence of forest-based insecurity has direct implications for Nigeria's national sovereignty and its international standing. Multilateral institutions and foreign partners increasingly assess Nigeria's security capacity based on its ability to regain and maintain control over forest territories. The continued presence of armed groups within sovereign territory raises doubts about the Nigerian state's effectiveness, influencing decisions regarding security cooperation, foreign military assistance, developmental loans, and counterterrorism partnerships (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2023).

International observers interpret Nigeria's inability to fully assert territorial control as a signal of systemic weakness. This perception complicates diplomatic relations, as neighbouring states demand accountability and robust engagement to prevent spillover. It also affects foreign investment and aid allocation, as external actors weigh the risks associated with a state perceived as unable to guarantee security within its borders. Thus, forest governance and insecurity in the Northeast are not only domestic governance challenges but also strategic issues with regional and global dimensions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NIGERIAN EXTERNAL RELATIONS

The persistent insecurity in Northeast Nigeria between 2020 and 2025 has had profound implications for the country's foreign relations, shaping diplomacy, regional collaboration, and engagement with international security and economic partners. Forest-based armed groups, insurgents, and bandits do not only challenge domestic governance; they create complex transnational effects that influence Nigeria's interactions with neighbouring states, regional organizations, and global actors. These effects are

multifaceted, involving political accountability, humanitarian obligations, economic considerations, and questions of international credibility (Debos, 2021; Adele, Musa, & Ojo, 2021).

The presence of non-state actors in forested territories, operating outside formal governance structures, undermines Nigeria's sovereignty and complicates its external image. Countries observing these developments assess Nigeria's ability to secure its borders and maintain stability, which in turn affects bilateral and multilateral engagements. This situation demonstrates that internal insecurity in strategic regions can no longer be considered purely domestic; it has implications for Nigeria's diplomatic weight, its leadership role in regional security arrangements, and its capacity to participate in international decision-making processes (Debos, 2021).

Relations with Niger Republic

Nigeria's bilateral relations with Niger were particularly strained by the cross-border dimension of Northeast insecurity. Armed groups exploited porous borders, using forest corridors to evade military pressure, smuggle weapons, and conduct raids. These activities directly contributed to refugee movements into Niger and heightened concerns about local security in border communities (International Crisis Group, 2022).

While Nigeria and Niger engaged in joint patrols and intelligence sharing to mitigate these threats, disagreements arose over the delineation of border responsibilities. Incidents in which civilians were attacked or kidnapped in border communities often sparked tension, highlighting the challenge of reconciling national accountability with cooperative security initiatives. For Niger, the influx of refugees and cross-border activities of armed groups increased domestic security pressure, while for Nigeria, these dynamics created international scrutiny and reputational risk (International Crisis Group, 2022).

The human element of these challenges cannot be understated. Communities in border areas experienced fear, economic disruption, and social instability, which complicated efforts by both governments to foster trust and implement joint security measures. These dynamics reveal that border security is not only a technical or military concern; it is deeply intertwined with humanitarian protection and regional confidence-building (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Relations with Chad

Chad has historically been an active partner in addressing insecurity in the Lake Chad Basin, often complementing Nigerian operations against Boko Haram and affiliated groups. The two countries coordinated through joint patrols, intelligence sharing, and operational planning, which were essential in countering insurgent movements (Debos, 2021).

However, political transitions and domestic instability within Chad affected the consistency and effectiveness of these collaborations. Leadership changes sometimes resulted in shifts in priorities or temporary disengagement, which placed additional operational burdens on Nigerian forces. Consequently, Nigeria's capacity to

maintain regional leadership and credibility was closely linked to the stability and cooperation of its neighbor. Any perceived failure in territorial control or operational coordination risked undermining Nigeria's regional reputation and its leverage in multinational security initiatives (Debos, 2021).

This situation illustrates the interconnectedness of internal and regional security. Nigerian domestic instability cannot be divorced from the broader geopolitical context, as regional partners directly evaluate the country's reliability and operational effectiveness. It also demonstrates that military interventions in one state may require diplomatic finesse to sustain trust and avoid political friction.

Relations with Cameroon

The security and humanitarian challenges faced by Cameroon's Far North region further exemplify the external implications of Nigerian forest governance. Attacks on Cameroonian territory often originated from Nigerian forest bases, leading to cross-border displacement of civilians and significant humanitarian pressure (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Nigeria's response to this issue required careful diplomatic negotiation. Cameroon expressed concern over forced repatriation and limited coordination in managing refugee flows, necessitating joint approaches to border control, protection of displaced populations, and resettlement programs. This situation highlights the human dimension of security, where refugee movements, vulnerability, and humanitarian obligations intersect with bilateral diplomacy. It underscores that domestic governance failures have consequences that extend beyond borders, affecting perceptions of responsibility, regional solidarity, and adherence to international humanitarian standards (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Relations with ECOWAS and the African Union

Northeast insecurity also influenced Nigeria's standing within regional organizations. Historically seen as a security guarantor and regional leader, Nigeria found its authority challenged by ongoing insurgency and forest-based governance crises. The rise of political instability and coups in West Africa during this period compounded the pressure, compelling Nigeria to demonstrate both domestic stability and effective leadership to retain influence (Adele, Musa, & Ojo, 2021).

The inability to fully contain armed groups within its borders weakened Nigeria's capacity to set agendas for regional security debates and policy initiatives. Internal security deficits translated directly into reduced authority and credibility in multilateral forums, demonstrating that domestic governance failures carry significant diplomatic costs. Nigeria's experience emphasizes that domestic security, regional influence, and international perception are deeply interconnected, and that internal crises can undermine leadership even when regional cooperation mechanisms are in place (Adele, Musa, & Ojo, 2021).

Relations with International Security Partners

Global partners including the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Germany increasingly conditioned security assistance

on evidence of tangible territorial control, transparency, and compliance with human rights standards (Williams, 2022). Military aid, training programs, intelligence sharing, and arms procurement became dependent on Nigeria demonstrating progress in securing the Northeast.

These conditionalities constrained operational flexibility, as Nigeria had to align domestic counterinsurgency strategies with international expectations. Continued insecurity risked suspension of assistance or redirection of support to other regional priorities. The situation reflects a complex interplay between domestic security, state sovereignty, and international influence, where local failures directly affect bilateral and multilateral engagements (Williams, 2022).

Economic Diplomacy and Foreign Investment

Insecurity in the Northeast had significant consequences for Nigeria's economic diplomacy and ability to attract foreign investment. Investors expressed caution in sectors such as agriculture, energy, infrastructure, and mining due to concerns over workforce safety, transport security, and operational risk (World Bank, 2024).

Disruption of supply chains, limited access to markets, and periodic attacks on commercial operations discouraged investment and slowed project implementation. These dynamics directly affected Nigeria's negotiating leverage in trade and investment agreements, illustrating how internal insecurity can weaken external economic influence. Humanitarian, security, and economic dimensions intersect in these contexts, demonstrating that domestic instability is a central determinant of foreign relations and international economic confidence (World Bank, 2024).

Nigerian State Responses and Diplomatic Adjustments

In response to the escalating insecurity in Northeast Nigeria between 2020 and 2025, the Nigerian state adopted a multifaceted and strategically nuanced approach that combined military operations, regional collaboration, diplomatic initiatives, and humanitarian interventions (Debos, 2021; Williams, 2022). The persistence of forest-based armed groups, insurgents, and bandit networks demonstrated the limitations of relying solely on conventional military action. Consequently, Nigerian policymakers recognized the necessity of integrating governance, human security, and community resilience within broader strategic frameworks. This approach reflected a comprehensive understanding of security as both a political and social enterprise, where the legitimacy of the state is reinforced not only through coercion but also through the protection and empowerment of affected communities.

Regional Collaborative Security Operations

To confront the transnational dimensions of forest-based insecurity, Nigeria significantly strengthened engagement with the Multinational Joint Task Force, a coalition comprising Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Benin, with a mandate to counter insurgents and criminal networks operating in the Lake Chad Basin (Debos, 2021). The coalition facilitated coordinated patrols, joint

intelligence sharing, operational planning, and synchronized military actions across borders.

These operations achieved partial successes, including temporary disruption of insurgent logistics, dismantling of forest encampments, and enhancement of cross-border intelligence coordination. Beyond operational outcomes, these efforts strengthened diplomatic trust and institutional linkages among participating states, demonstrating the strategic value of multilateral collaboration. However, persistent challenges emerged. The mobility of insurgents, logistical constraints, divergent political priorities among partner states, and the porous nature of borders often limited the effectiveness of these interventions. Nevertheless, the engagement highlighted Nigeria's recognition that regional cooperation is indispensable for addressing insecurity that transcends national boundaries and that unilateral approaches are insufficient in a fluid and complex operational environment (Debos, 2021).

Additionally, these collaborative operations had notable human dimensions. Communities residing near border regions experienced increased protection, enhanced confidence in the presence of security actors, and improved communication with state authorities. These social benefits, although temporary in some cases, underscored the interconnectedness of military action, governance legitimacy, and community trust in stabilizing insecure territories.

Military Operations to Reclaim Forest Territories

The Nigerian Armed Forces embarked on extensive military campaigns to dismantle insurgent camps, confiscate illicit arms, and reclaim control over forested regions that had become strongholds for insurgents and armed bandit networks (International Crisis Group, 2022). These operations combined ground troop deployments with aerial support, targeted raids, and strategic encirclement of known insurgent corridors.

While operations recorded tactical successes, including the neutralization of high-value targets and temporary reclamation of forested territories, structural limitations hindered long-term effectiveness. The sheer expanse of the forested areas, limited troop density, challenging terrain, and the insurgents' adaptive tactics resulted in frequent reoccupation of cleared areas. These limitations highlighted that military force alone cannot achieve sustainable territorial control.

The humanitarian consequences of these operations were equally significant. Civilians in affected areas experienced displacement, temporary disruption of livelihoods, limited access to essential services, and increased vulnerability to disease and food insecurity. Such outcomes emphasized the necessity of integrating social, economic, and governance interventions alongside military action. Without complementary strategies that address human needs, military successes risk being undermined by the re-emergence of insurgent influence and community alienation (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Diplomatic Initiatives to Control Arms Proliferation

Recognizing that forest-based armed actors heavily relied on smuggled small arms and light weapons from the Sahel, Libya, and other regions, Nigeria pursued proactive diplomatic engagement with the African Union, the European Union, and neighbouring states to mitigate arms proliferation (Williams, 2022). These initiatives included border monitoring agreements, coordinated intelligence sharing, joint interdiction of illicit arms shipments, and multilateral forums addressing regional arms trafficking.

Diplomatic efforts in this domain strengthened Nigeria's international credibility as a cooperative and responsible regional actor, demonstrating alignment with global security norms and obligations. By targeting the logistical and material foundations of insurgent activity, Nigeria complemented its military operations with preventive strategies designed to reduce the long-term operational capacity of armed actors. Moreover, these measures reinforced regional trust and coordination, signaling that Nigeria is committed to addressing shared security threats collaboratively rather than pursuing unilateral measures that could destabilize neighboring states (Williams, 2022).

Humanitarian Diplomacy and Community Resilience Efforts

Understanding that armed groups derive influence and legitimacy from the absence of state authority, Nigeria integrated humanitarian diplomacy and community resilience initiatives into its broader security strategy (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2024). Collaborating with the United Nations, international non-governmental organizations, and local civil society actors, the government sought to restore essential services, rebuild social infrastructure, and provide livelihoods in communities previously dominated by forest-based actors.

These initiatives included reconstruction of schools, health facilities, markets, and water supply systems, alongside vocational training programs, provision of microcredit for farmers, and support for displaced persons in returning to their communities. By addressing both physical security and human development needs, these efforts mitigated dependence on non-state actors for protection, resource access, and dispute resolution.

Importantly, humanitarian diplomacy also reinforced state legitimacy. By demonstrating responsiveness to community needs, the Nigerian government sought to rebuild trust between citizens and the state, countering narratives promoted by insurgents that the government is absent or ineffective. These interventions highlight a human-centered approach to security, emphasizing that sustainable peace and governance are contingent upon restoring social cohesion, ensuring livelihoods, and embedding state authority within local communities (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2024).

Integrated Lessons and Strategic Insights

The Nigerian response to Northeast insecurity demonstrates a holistic understanding of contemporary security challenges, where military, diplomatic, and humanitarian strategies must operate in tandem. Military operations reclaim territory, but sustained

stability requires international cooperation, arms control, and active engagement with local populations. Human security, community resilience, and state legitimacy are inseparable from efforts to restore political authority in contested territories.

This multifaceted approach reflects a sophisticated recognition that security is not merely the absence of armed actors but the presence of functional governance, social services, and economic opportunity. The Nigerian experience offers lessons for other countries confronting similar forest-based or transnational insurgencies: enduring peace and security are achieved through coordinated, multidimensional strategies that balance force with diplomacy, development, and humanitarian engagement (Debos, 2021; Williams, 2022; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2024).

CONCLUSION/ RECOMMENDATIONS

The study of forest-based insecurity in Northeast Nigeria between 2020 and 2025 shows how internal governance weaknesses, the rise of non-state actors, and regional security challenges are deeply interconnected. Insurgents, bandits, and pastoral militias operating in forests like Sambisa, Mandara, and Alagarno reflect the erosion of state presence, creating spaces where alternative authorities impose control and provide basic services to local communities. These developments do not only threaten domestic stability but also shape Nigeria's relationships with neighboring countries, influence its role in regional organizations such as ECOWAS and the African Union, and affect its credibility with international partners in security and development.

Nigeria's experience demonstrates that military action alone cannot resolve forest-based insecurity. Sustainable solutions require a combination of military, diplomatic, and humanitarian efforts that restore both state authority and community confidence. Cross-border cooperation, intelligence sharing, and multilateral coordination are critical to tackling the transnational aspects of insecurity, while addressing the needs of affected populations fosters trust between citizens and the government.

In essence, the Northeast experience emphasizes that lasting peace and stability come from integrated strategies that combine security measures, diplomatic negotiation, and socio-economic development. Domestic insecurity in strategic regions is inseparable from foreign policy, regional leadership, and international engagement, offering lessons for other countries facing similar forest-based insurgencies.

Based on the findings and analysis of Northeast insecurity, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Strengthen Regional Security Cooperation:** Nigeria should deepen collaboration with neighbors, particularly Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, through joint patrols, intelligence sharing, and coordinated operations. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) must be well-funded, equipped, and supported with clear mechanisms for dispute resolution and rapid response to cross-border threats.

2. **Adopt Integrated Military and Civilian Approaches:** Military efforts should be paired with community engagement, infrastructure rehabilitation, and restoration of essential services such as schools, health facilities, and markets. This approach reinforces state legitimacy and reduces opportunities for insurgents or bandits to exploit governance gaps.
3. **Enhance Arms Control and Border Security:** Border monitoring systems, including drones and surveillance technologies, should be strengthened to limit the flow of small arms. Diplomatic collaboration with ECOWAS, the African Union, and international partners must continue to disrupt arms proliferation networks, while border personnel receive proper training and resources.
4. **Promote Humanitarian and Community Resilience:** Humanitarian programs should address displacement, trauma, and livelihood needs. Collaboration with NGOs, UN agencies, and civil society can rebuild infrastructure, provide vocational training, and create sustainable economic opportunities. Empowered communities are less likely to rely on armed actors for protection and resources.
5. **Expand State Presence in Remote Areas:** Nigeria should strengthen governance in forested and rural territories by establishing local administration centers, community policing, and mobile service units. This ensures essential services are delivered, reduces space for insurgents, and builds trust in state institutions.
6. **Leverage International Partnerships:** Nigeria should continue engaging global partners for technical support, funding, and intelligence-sharing while demonstrating progress in territorial control and human rights compliance. Transparent reporting and adherence to international norms enhance diplomatic credibility, attract development aid, and support long-term cooperation.
7. **Address Socioeconomic Drivers of Insecurity:** Tackling root causes such as poverty, unemployment, limited education, and environmental pressures is key to long-term stability. Programs targeting youth empowerment, education, agriculture, and conflict-sensitive development can reduce recruitment into insurgent and bandit groups, ultimately weakening forest-based governance structures.
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