

National Security in Nigeria since Independence: An Integrated Security Management Perspective

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Abstract

No state that seeks survival can afford to treat security as peripheral. In Nigeria, successive post-independence governments have struggled to provide basic security for citizens, partly because of a narrow, militarist conception of national security that prioritises regime protection over human security. This article examines the evolution of Nigeria's national security challenges from independence in 1960 to the present. Drawing on the Integrated Security Management Theory (ISMT), it analyses the interplay of ethnicity, corruption, resource allocation conflicts, kidnapping, ethno-religious violence, Boko Haram, banditry, and security-sector dysfunction. The study employs a historical approach that combines primary documentary sources with secondary literature. Findings indicate that Nigeria's insecurity is rooted less in military incapacity than in governance failure, inequitable resource distribution, and the absence of purposeful leadership. The article argues that sustainable security requires coordinated action at the micro (citizen participation), macro (equitable resource allocation and leadership), and global (transnational cooperation) levels. It concludes with policy recommendations for comprehensive security-sector reform, true federalism, and value reorientation.

Keywords: National Security, Integrated Security Management Theory, Resource Conflict, Boko Haram, Security Sector Reform

Introduction

When Nigeria attained independence on 1 October 1960, many citizens expected the country to occupy a place commensurate with its abundant human and natural resources. Yet scepticism about the viability of the new state was never entirely absent. No polity has evolved without crisis, but Nigeria's post-independence trajectory has been marked by the progressive intensification of insecurity that now threatens the very foundations of the state (Thompson, 2011).

Insecurity has become a defining feature of contemporary Nigerian life. Daily loss of life, mass displacement, and the collapse of local economies in large parts of the country attest to the failure of successive governments to discharge the most basic function of the state—the protection of lives and property (Achebe, 1984; Oguriosumle, 2011). Among the most visible manifestations of this failure is the epidemic of kidnapping for ransom, which originated in the Niger Delta as a form of resource-related protest and subsequently mutated into a nationwide criminal industry (Akpan, 2010; Madubuko, 2008).

This article provides a historical overview of national security in Nigeria since independence and applies the Integrated Security Management Theory (ISMT) to explain national security in Nigeria from the integrated security management perspective.

Theoretical Framework: Integrated Security Management Theory

The study is anchored on the Integrated Security Management Theory (ISMT), associated with the work of Robert McNamara, Paul Nitze, Charles Barton, and T. A. Imobighe. The theory posits that security is produced through the maintenance of variegated functions in which formal state security agencies constitute only one component (Imobighe, 2001). ISMT operates at three interrelated levels.

Micro Level

At the micro level, ISMT emphasises broad public participation. Citizens become stakeholders in security management through community policing, neighbourhood watch schemes, and traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms. Security is therefore not the exclusive preserve of the state; it is co-produced with society. The proliferation of vigilante groups and ethnic militias across Nigeria reflects both the failure of formal agencies and an unmet demand for community-based security arrangements.

Macro Level

At the macro level, the theory treats judicious resource allocation as a security strategy in its own right. When resources are distributed equitably, the grievances that fuel insurgency and criminality are attenuated. Imobighe (2001) underscores that Nigeria's security problems are rooted in the absence of purposeful leadership capable of raising the level of contentment among citizens. Inequitable revenue allocation formulas, environmental degradation in the Niger Delta, and the systematic neglect of certain regions, therefore, constitute structural drivers of insecurity.

Global Level

At the global level, ISMT recognises that contemporary security threats—transnational terrorism, arms trafficking, cybercrime, and organised crime—transcend national borders. Effective responses require intelligence sharing, diplomatic engagement, and regional cooperation. Nigeria's porous borders, the collapse of state authority in parts of the Sahel, and the transnational linkages of Boko Haram illustrate the necessity of this dimension.

Applied to Nigeria, ISMT demonstrates that insecurity is inseparable from underdevelopment. Sustainable security requires not only the empowerment of security institutions but also the creation of social and economic conditions that foster patriotism and transform every citizen into a stakeholder in collective safety.

ISMT is not without limitations. It presupposes a minimum level of state capacity and elite political will that has often been absent in Nigeria. It also under-specifies the mechanisms through which micro-level participation can be scaled without being captured by local strongmen or ethnic entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, its multi-level architecture remains analytically superior to purely militarist or purely developmental approaches because it forces simultaneous attention to agency, structure, and external context.

Methodology

The study adopts a historical approach that is both critical and descriptive. Primary sources include government documents, contemporary newspaper reports, public enquiries, and official records. Secondary sources comprise scholarly monographs, journal articles, and conference papers. The historical method permits the identification of patterns, continuities, and discontinuities in the state's response to security threats from 1960 to the present, thereby situating contemporary challenges within a longer structural trajectory. The analysis is qualitative and interpretive; it does not claim statistical generalisation but seeks explanatory depth through process tracing across successive regimes.

Literature Review and Analytical Gaps

Scholarship on Nigerian security has expanded considerably since the late 1990s, yet several analytical gaps persist. Much of the literature remains either regionally specialised (Niger Delta, North-East) or threat-specific (Boko Haram, kidnapping, farmer–herder conflict). Comprehensive national overviews that integrate structural, institutional, and transnational dimensions remain relatively scarce.

Nnoli (2006) provides a foundational critique of the militarist conception of African security, arguing that African militaries have often protected regimes by imposing extreme suffering on their own populations. His call for a security doctrine orientated toward early warning, mediation, and post-conflict recovery remains highly relevant. Odum (2012) links youth unemployment and leadership failure to the production of security threats, while Akpan

(2010) and Thom-Otuya (2010) carefully document the evolution of kidnapping from political instrument to commercial enterprise. Idemobi and Obore (2012) demonstrate the economic costs of kidnapping in the South-East.

Adibe (2014) advances the important claim that pervasive kidnapping is a symptom of state failure rather than merely of unemployment or police inefficiency. Oche (2008) documents inter-agency violence, revealing the institutional fragmentation that undermines operational effectiveness. Kayode (2008) and Muhammed (2012) highlight capacity and intelligence deficits within the police and security services.

Despite these contributions, three shortcomings are evident. First, theoretical frameworks are often invoked illustratively rather than systematically applied across historical periods. Second, the literature tends to treat ethnicity, corruption, and resource conflict as discrete variables rather than mutually reinforcing structures. Third, the international dimensions of Nigerian insecurity—arms trafficking, Sahelian state collapse, and transnational jihadist networks—are frequently under-theorised. This article addresses these gaps by applying ISMT as a continuous analytical thread from 1960 to the present and by integrating domestic structural drivers with transnational dynamics.

National Security since Independence: A Historical Overview

Since independence, national security in Nigeria has frequently been subordinated to ethnicity, regime survival, corruption, and religious sentimentality. A periodisation of the post-independence era reveals persistent structural weaknesses that successive regimes have failed to overcome.

The First Republic (1960–1966)

The First Republic was undermined by ethnic competition among the three dominant groups—Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo—each organised into regionally based parties (NPC, AG, and NCNC). The 1962–63 census crisis, the violent Western regional elections of 1965, and the disputed federal election of 1964 demonstrated the state's inability to manage basic administrative functions without ethnic manipulation. These contradictions culminated in the January 1966 coup and the subsequent collapse of civilian rule. The period established a pattern in which regime security was prioritised over citizen security—a pattern that has endured.

Civil War and Aftermath (1966–1970)

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) remains the most catastrophic security crisis in the country's history, with estimates of civilian deaths ranging from one to three million. The federal government's "no victor, no vanquished" policy failed to resolve the underlying grievances over resource control and political inclusion. Post-war centralisation under military rule concentrated power and oil revenues in the federal government, sowing the seeds of future resource conflicts and reinforcing a unitary logic that sits uneasily with Nigeria's ethnic and regional diversity.

Oil Boom and Security Neglect (1970–1983)

The oil boom generated unprecedented revenue yet simultaneously distorted the economy, institutionalised corruption, and politicised the security sector. Security institutions increasingly served regime interests rather than citizen protection. By 1983 the civilian administration of Shehu Shagari had lost the capacity to maintain order, prompting another military intervention. The period illustrates the macro-level failure identified by ISMT: resource abundance without equitable allocation or purposeful leadership produced insecurity rather than stability.

Military Rule and Institutional Decay (1983–1999)

Successive military regimes under Buhari, Babangida, Abacha, and Abubakar deepened a culture of impunity. Structural adjustment programmes exacerbated poverty; the annulment of the 12 June 1993 election triggered nationwide unrest; and Abacha's repression further alienated large sections of the population. By 1999 Nigeria's

security institutions were thoroughly politicised, demoralised, and corrupt. The legacy of military rule continues to constrain civilian oversight and professionalisation.

Democratic Era and Evolving Threats (1999–Present)

The return to civilian rule raised expectations that were only partially realised. The Niger Delta insurgency, the escalation of Boko Haram from 2009, the spread of banditry across the Northwest, farmer–herder conflicts in the Middle Belt, and separatist agitation in the Southeast have produced a multi-dimensional security crisis. The proliferation of small arms, facilitated by state collapse in the Sahel, and the use of digital technologies for recruitment and coordination have further complicated the threat environment. Despite changes in administration, the underlying structural drivers—ethnicity, corruption, resource inequity, and weak institutions—have remained largely intact.

Structural Drivers of Insecurity

Ethnicity

Nnoli (2006) has demonstrated that successive institutional experiments—unitarism, regionalism, state creation, federal character, the National Youth Service Corps, and various revenue-allocation formulas—have failed to neutralise ethnicity as a political force. The indigene–settler dichotomy continues to generate second-class citizenship and violent conflict over land and political office. Ethnicity, therefore, remains a primary cleavage along which insecurity is organised and through which other grievances are mobilised.

Corruption

Political corruption privatises the state, generates extreme income differentials, and erodes public trust (Nnoli, 2006; Olatunji, 2005). Within the security sector itself, bribery, diversion of operational funds, and political interference systematically undermine effectiveness. Corruption is thus both a cause and a consequence of insecurity, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that ISMT’s macro-level analysis helps to illuminate.

Resource Allocation Conflicts

Oil has structured vertical and horizontal conflicts across Nigeria. The Niger Delta crisis of the 1990s and 2000s—embodied by groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND)—illustrated how environmental degradation, economic marginalisation, and political exclusion can produce organised violence. Debates over resource control and revenue allocation remain unresolved and continue to fuel grievances that ISMT identifies as macro-level security threats. Equitable allocation is therefore not merely a developmental imperative; it is a security strategy.

Contemporary Manifestations of Insecurity

Kidnapping for Ransom

Kidnapping originated in the Niger Delta as a tactic of liberation struggle and political bargaining before evolving into a commercial criminal enterprise that now spans the entire federation (Akpan, 2010; Thom-Otuya, 2010). Adibe (2014) correctly situates pervasive kidnapping as a symptom of state failure rather than merely of unemployment or police inefficiency. The phenomenon has crippled business activity, especially in the South-East (Idemobi & Obore, 2012), and has exposed the operational limitations of Nigeria’s security architecture. Its transformation from political instrument to market-driven crime illustrates the failure of both micro-level social control and macro-level governance.

Boko Haram Insurgency

Since 2009, Boko Haram has constituted the most lethal terrorist threat to the Nigerian state. The insurgency has caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, displaced millions, and devastated the Northeast. Although frequently framed in purely religious terms, the phenomenon is better understood as the product of political marginalisation, economic deprivation, and state failure (Thompson, 2011). Military-centric responses have been accompanied by

documented human-rights abuses and have failed to address underlying drivers. The group's transnational linkages further underscore the necessity of ISMT's global level of analysis.

Banditry and Farmer–Herder Conflicts

Armed banditry in the North-West and intensifying farmer–herder conflicts in the Middle Belt have added further layers of violence. These conflicts are frequently ethnicised and religiously framed, yet they are fundamentally competitions over land and water resources intensified by climate change, population pressure, and the collapse of traditional mediation mechanisms. The involvement of political elites in the illicit economy surrounding banditry has rendered purely kinetic solutions inadequate and highlights the capture of the state by predatory interests.

Ethno-Religious Violence and Non-State Armed Groups

From Shagamu to Jos and Kano to Enugu, ethno-religious clashes have produced large-scale killings and new logics of social separation (Gotan, 2008). Parallel to these conflicts, ethnic militias (OPC, Bakassi Boys, and Arewa People's Congress) and campus cults have filled the security vacuum left by the state, often at the cost of further human rights violations and the normalisation of extra-legal violence. These groups simultaneously illustrate the micro-level demand for security and the dangers of unregulated non-state provision.

The Security Sector and the Fight against Insecurity

Nigeria's security sector comprises the police, the armed forces, intelligence agencies (DSS), and numerous paramilitary organisations. Despite substantial budgetary allocations, performance has been chronically inadequate. The Nigeria Police Force remains understaffed, poorly trained, and weakly equipped; the ratio of officers to population far exceeds international norms (Kayode, 2008). Intelligence gathering and inter-agency sharing are deficient (Muhammed, 2012).

Inter-agency rivalry has periodically erupted into open violence. Documented clashes between police and air force personnel in Ikeja (2004) and between soldiers and police in Surulere (2005) illustrate the absence of institutional cohesion (Oche, 2008). Such incidents not only cost lives but also destroy residual public confidence in the state's capacity to protect citizens.

The militarisation of internal security—deploying soldiers to perform essentially policing functions—has produced human rights abuses and further alienation of communities. Civilian oversight remains weak, and the historical legacy of military rule continues to impede the professionalisation of the security apparatus. Without reform at the institutional level, increased funding alone is unlikely to produce lasting improvement.

Impact of Insecurity

The consequences of protracted insecurity are multi-dimensional: mass internal displacement; the geographic segregation of communities along ethno-religious lines; the destruction of family and communal structures; a pervasive climate of fear; the dehumanisation of women and children through sexual violence; the deepening of poverty through the disruption of agriculture and trade; and a generalised crisis of political legitimacy. Collectively these effects undermine the social contract and raise existential questions about the viability of the Nigerian state. They also demonstrate that insecurity is not merely a security-sector problem but a comprehensive developmental and political crisis.

Recommendations

Guided by ISMT, the following policy measures are proposed. They are sequenced to reflect the interdependence of the three levels of analysis.

1. **Comprehensive security-sector reform.** Professionalise the police through improved recruitment, training, remuneration, and civilian oversight. Strengthen intelligence agencies and enforce mandatory inter-agency coordination protocols. Establish an independent police complaints authority with

prosecutorial powers. Funding increases must be accompanied by transparent expenditure tracking and performance metrics.

2. **Address root causes at the micro level.** Invest in education, health, infrastructure, and employment, especially in the North-East, North-West, and Niger Delta. Support community-based conflict resolution mechanisms and carefully regulated community policing partnerships that include traditional institutions and civil society, while guarding against elite capture.
3. **Equitable resource allocation (macro level).** Revise revenue-allocation formulas to increase derivation while protecting horizontal equity. Accelerate environmental remediation and infrastructure investment in oil-producing communities. Treat fiscal federalism as a security strategy rather than merely a technical budgetary exercise.
4. **True federalism and devolution.** Devolve greater fiscal and limited security powers to states and local governments under clear constitutional and accountability frameworks. Reduce zero-sum competition at the centre that fuels ethnic and regional mobilisation.
5. **Value reorientation and civic education.** Promote patriotism, integrity, and respect for the rule of law through formal curricula, public campaigns, and leadership by example. Civic education must address the Indigenous-settler dichotomy and the instrumentalisation of ethnicity.
6. **Justice-system strengthening.** Ensure accountability for perpetrators of violence, including security personnel, and guarantee access to justice for victims. Reform the police, courts, and prisons to reduce impunity and rebuild public trust.
7. **Maritime and border security capacity.** Establish an effective coast guard capability and strengthen border management to reduce arms trafficking and protect offshore assets.
8. **Intelligence cooperation (global level).** Improve domestic inter-agency sharing and deepen collaboration with ECOWAS, the African Union, and international partners against transnational threats, while insisting on reciprocal accountability and respect for human rights.

Conclusion

Nigeria's security challenges since independence are multifaceted and deeply structural. They reflect not merely the activities of criminals or terrorists but enduring problems of governance, inequality, and marginalisation. The Integrated Security Management Theory offers a coherent framework for understanding these challenges and for designing responses that operate simultaneously at the micro, macro, and global levels.

The historical record demonstrates continuity in the subordination of citizen security to regime security, the instrumentalisation of ethnicity, the corrosive effects of corruption, and the failure to convert resource wealth into equitable development. Contemporary manifestations—kidnapping, Boko Haram, banditry, and ethno-religious violence—are therefore not aberrations but the logical outcomes of long-term structural failures.

Sustainable security cannot be achieved through kinetic operations alone. It requires purposeful leadership, equitable resource distribution, genuine federalism, professional and accountable security institutions, and the active participation of citizens. With sustained political will and coordinated action across all three levels of ISMT, Nigeria can begin to reverse the trajectory of insecurity that has defined much of its post-independence history and move toward a more peaceful and prosperous future.

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