

The Nigerian Military and Internal Security in the Country

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Introduction

The history of Nigeria has been littered with the use of the military to complement the regular police in maintain law and order s but the experience in since the country transited to democracy on May 29, 1999, has been enmeshed with complex internal security challenges ranging from militancy, restiveness, insurgency, banditry, communal violence and kidnapping (Kalama & Fada, 2019). The share scale of disorder resulting from the multi-pronged insecurity besetting the country, overwhelms the capacity of regular police, thereby necessitating the deployment of the military, a force traditionally trained for external defense but has increasingly assumed a central role in internal security operations (Gabriel, 2019). This shift reflects the evolving nature of Nigeria's security landscape and the limitations of conventional policing in the country. Again, the long use of the military in internal security operations and extended exposure into civil matters, has altered the role of the military, immersing the institution deep into the challenges confronting the country (Siolun, 2021). Yet, while the military's involvement has yielded both commendable victories and sharp criticism, its effectiveness, legitimacy, and long-term role remain subjects of national debate (Siolun, 2021).

This article examines contemporary insecurity in Nigeria and the use of military to tackle the different manifestations of insecurity It examined the impact of extended and long deployment on the military and the implication for civil-military relations

Expanding Role of the Military in Nigeria's internal Security

In Nigeria and many other parts of the world, the police is the security agent of the state mandated to ensure internal peace and order (Akuul, 2021). Right from the precolonial era the military has always been used in civil security, including the Aba women's riot of 1929. Also, the colonial industrial welfare dispute of 1945 in the country, witnessed the use of the military. So, in the history of the making of Nigerian state, the military have always engaged in internal security operations in the interest of national peace and security (Azinge, 2013).

So historically, the Nigeria Police Force has not been effective, necessitating the need to call the armed forces the quell riots, communal strives or other disturbances that overwhelms the capacity of the police force (Peterside, 2014).vey early in 1965 just five years after the country got independence, the military was deployed in the western region to quell the civil disturbances called 'operation wetie' over 1965 election result dispute in the Western region (Kalama & Paul, 2019).The civil war or Nigeria-Biafran war that followed the intervention of the military in Nigerian politics, January 1966 led to massive increase in the number of military men deployed to force the seceded Eastern region back to Nigeria. But that conflict was between two countries as the Eastern Region of Nigeria which broke away from Nigeria to form Biafra Republic had international recognition (Onuoha, 2018). The immediate post-war Nigeria, was relatively peaceful. However, the 1980s, marked the rise of Islamic militancy in the north. Its peak at the time, was the Maitasine movement, of which the government deployed military to quell the disturbance (Isichei, 1987). Since that time, there

has been occasional deployment of the military in places like Zango-Kataf (1992), ife-modakeke (1997), Zakibiam (2001) among few other places in Nigeria (Abe, 2025).

The annulment of June 12 presidential elections in 1993, led to intermittent riots, strikes and shutdowns in the southwest that led to deployment of the military to assist the police (Tribune, 2019). There was also restiveness in the Niger Delta following the execution of the environmental activists Mr. Ken Saro Wiwa who mobilised Ogoni youths in the Niger Delta against shell and continued production of crude oil in the region.

However, insecurity degenerated in Nigeria following the return to democratic rule in 1999, starting from the Niger Delta region when the Ogoni activism against environmental degradation escalated to the creeks where most of the oil wells are located. The militancy was spearheaded by the movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), who were blowing oil pipelines, flow stations and kidnapping of oil workers. That was the time the government responded by deploying the Nigerian military to protect oil infrastructure in the region (Oluyemi, 2020).

However, the most challenging for the Nigerian state is the emergence of the Boko Haram Islamic group in the northeast of Nigeria in 2009 (Adegbulu, 2013). Since that time the Nigerian state has been grappling with taken out the group which assumed the nature of insurgency and terrorism resulting in many indigenous peoples of the region fleeing their ancestral homes and living in Internally Displaced Peoples (IDP) camps (Roberts &Lawanson, 2023).

The emergence of Boko Haram, opened the floodgate for other terror groups such as Islamic State of West African Province (ISWAP) and Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa known as Ansaru all of which are breakaway from Boko Haram, operating in the northeast and northwest region of the country with the agenda of establishing an Islamic state in Nigeria.

In the northcentral region, it is banditry, Farmer-Herder clashes and Fulani jihadists groups. A new group that recently ravaging the northcentral is called Mahmudah (Victor, 2025), and northwest region is called Lakuruwa (Mohammed, 2024).

In the southern part, the militancy in the Niger Delta and oil bunkering and separatist agitation in the southeast spearheaded by Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is creating insecurity for the government

Internal Security Operations in Nigeria

The widespread of insecurity in the country, has led to massive deployment of the military to tackle the problem. Below are military operations currently running in Nigeria. Some are permanent, while other are periodic.

Table 1: Lists of concurrent military operations in Nigeria

S/N	Operation Name	Launch Year	Region/Focus Area	Objective
1	Operation Lafiya Dole	2015	North East (Borno, Yobe, Adamawa)	Defeat Boko Haram and reclaim territories
2	Operation Hadin Kai	2021	North East	Continuation and rebranding of Operation Lafiya Dole
3	Operation Safe Haven	2010	Plateau, Bauchi, Kaduna (North Central)	Address ethno-religious conflicts and insecurity

S/N	Operation Name	Launch Year	Region/Focus Area	Objective
4	Operation Whirl Stroke	2018	Benue, Nasarawa, Taraba, and parts of Kogi	Counter herdsmen/farmer clashes and militia activities
5	Operation Whirl Punch	2017	Niger, Kaduna, Kogi	Combat banditry and kidnapping in the North Central
6	Operation Python Dance I–III	2016–2018	South East	Tackle criminal activities and separatist threats
7	Operation Crocodile Smile	2016	South-South and South-West	Address militancy and oil pipeline vandalism
8	Operation Delta Safe	2016	Niger Delta	Protect oil facilities, counter militancy and piracy
9	Operation Thunder Strike	2019	Kaduna–Abuja highway	Curb highway kidnapping and banditry
10	Operation Harbin Kunama I–III	2016–2019	Zamfara, Sokoto, Katsina	Fight armed banditry and cattle rustling
11	Operation Accord	2020	North West and North Central	Joint operation to neutralize bandits and criminals
12	Operation Awatse	2016	Lagos and Ogun (South West)	Counter pipeline vandalism and militant activities
13	Operation Golden Dawn	2021	South East	Enhance security during the ember months
14	Operation Tura Takaibango	2021	Borno State	Intensify attacks against Boko Haram/ISWAP
15	Operation Forest Sanity	2022	Kaduna, Niger, Zamfara	Flush out bandits from forests

Source: Compilation by author

By these operations, the military is widely deployed across the country, soldiers patrol highways, guard checkpoints, and launch joint operations that involves combat from the land, air and sea as a way of returning law and order in the country. It is reported that a significant number of the Nigerian security personnel are involve in active operations (Akinwale, 2019). The number of operations is justified because of the dimension of insecurity in the country Boko Haram and armed bandits occupied territories, planted their flags and imposed taxes on the indigenes of those communities. A number of local government areas in the northeast of the country became no-go-areas, including places such as Bama, Gwoza, Askira-Uba, Dikwa, Ngala, Monguno, Kukawa, Damboa, Konduga forcing resident to flee to safer places as internally IDPs.

One target of the terrorist groups in the north is ferocious attacks on schools. The kidnap of over 289 school girls at Chibok, Borno state sparked an outrage that attracted international attention forcing the government go declare a state of emergency in the northeast region.

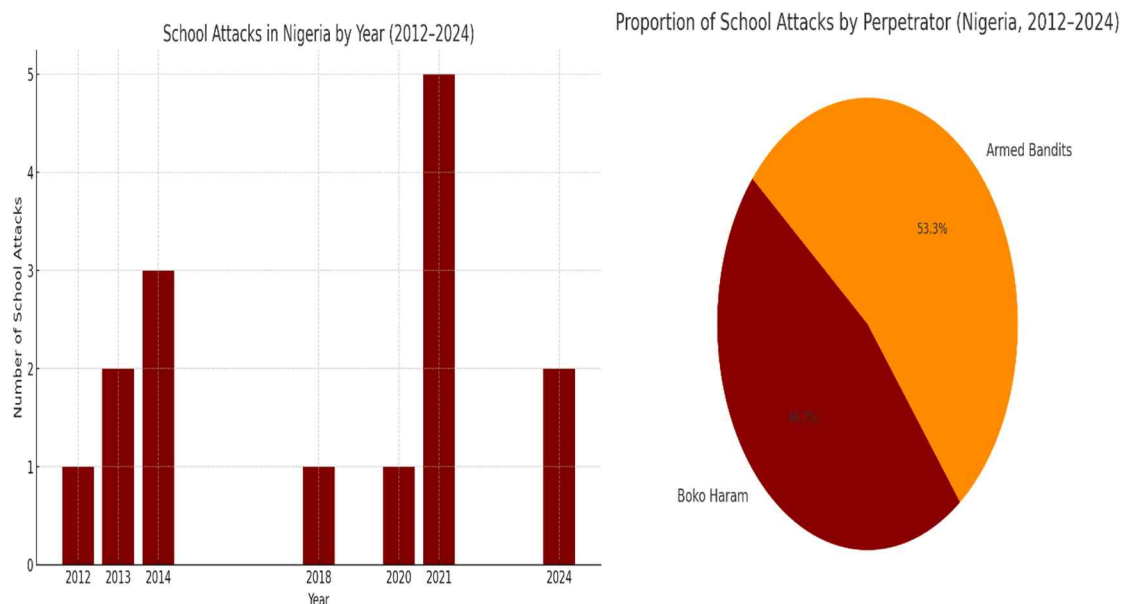


Figure 1: School Attacks in Nigeria (Source:author)

The attacks on school alone from 2012 to 2024 indicates that a total of 167 were killed, while 1,276 were abducted and the government and relatives forced to pay ransom to the bandits (Onochie, Nwakanma & Okoro, 2024)

Challenges of military operations in Nigeria

The military is not trained to provide policing services but the prolonged use of the Nigerian military has attracted criticism from the public and civil society organisations that over sights the military. One of the major criticisms against the Nigerian military is its repeated violation of human rights. Organisations like Amnesty International have consistently criticised the military in its annual reports. For instance, in 2015 the organisation reported that at least 7,000 people died in military custody between 2011 and 2015. The use of excessive force, torture, and extrajudicial killings has been documented in the North East, South East, and Niger Delta (Ogbaje, 2021). The October 20, 2020, Lekki Tollgate incident, where soldiers reportedly opened fire on unarmed protesters during the #EndSARS demonstrations, remains one of the most debated episodes. Despite denials, several eyewitnesses and video footages support claims of a military crackdown (Busari et al, 2020)

Table 2: Incidents of Collateral Damages in Military Operations:

S/N	Date	Location	Incident Summary
1	Oct 20–24, 2001	Zaki Biam, Benue State	Army reprisal attack killed over 200 civilians after 19 soldiers were killed.
2	April 2013	Baga, Borno State	Clashes with Boko Haram led to 37–200+ civilian deaths; known as Baga massacre.
3	Dec 12, 2015	Zaria, Kaduna State	Army clashed with IMN; at least 348 civilians killed (Zaria massacre).
4	Jan 17, 2017	Rann, Borno State	Mistaken airstrike on IDP camp killed at least 115 people (Rann bombing).
5	Oct 20, 2020	Lekki Tollgate, Lagos	Soldiers fired on #EndSARS protesters; at least 12 killed (Lekki shooting).

S/N	Date	Location	Incident Summary
6	Dec 18, 2022	Metunji, Zamfara State	Airstrike on bandits mistakenly killed 64 civilians.
7	Dec 3, 2023	Tudum Biri, Kaduna State	Drone strike hit religious gathering; 88–120+ civilians killed.
8	Dec 25, 2024	Gidan Sama & Rumtuwa, Sokoto	Airstrike killed 10 civilians due to secondary explosions.
9	Feb 18, 2025	Yauni, Katsina State	Airstrike during terrorist attack killed 6 civilians, including 3 children.

Source: Compilation by Author

Another fact stemming from the prolonged use of the military, in civil security is fatigue, morale issues, and role confusion which has undermined effectiveness, leading to heavy casualties on the part of the military. Between 2021-2023 over 965 security men were killed by these non-state actors (Balarabe, 2023). Table 3, indicated the number of soldiers that have been killed since January 2025. The extended deployments strain military resources and morale. Analysts argue that such overstretch erodes the military's readiness for external defense roles. The frequency military casualties speak to the unsuitability of military-led security without complementary investments in intelligence, policing, and local engagement.

Table 3: Military Casualties in 2025

A/N	Date	No. of Deaths	Place/Incident	Perpetrator
1	Jan. 5	6	Damboa, Borno	Boko Haram
2	Jan 17	9	Baga, Borno, clash	Boko Haram
3	Jan 26	27	Malam-Fatori, Borno, suicide bomb	ISWAP
4	Feb 15	3	Isige, Gwoza, Borno attack	Boko Haram
5	Mar 25	4	Wulge, Borno, military base attack	ISWAP/Boko Haram
6	Apr 28	48	Adamawa/Borno State drone attack on military outposts	ISWAP
7	May, 4	11	Buni Gari, Yobe State raid on military base	ISWAP
9	May 10	4	Marte, Borno, attack	Boko Haram

Source: Compilation by Author

Despite the huge budgetary provisions on defence budget since 2008, analysts worry about the inability of the military to defeat the insurgents (FEF, 2020). The budget for defence has continued to increase over the years (Terzungwe et al, 2024). Though, we have had progressive increment in military budget over the years, it has not reflected in welfare of the rank-and-file soldiers in the field (Abbey, 2025). These affects the morale of the troops and a times leads to sabotage of the counter-terrorism operations. The effect on sustainability is the difficulty military authorities are facing in recruiting young Nigerian to join the military (Utman, 2024)

Conclusion

The Nigerian military has played and continues to play a critical role in securing the nation from threats that transcend conventional warfare. From confronting Boko Haram in the northeast to suppressing banditry in the northwest and responding to civil unrest nationwide, the armed forces have demonstrated resilience and commitment to ensure peace and order in the country. Yet, internal security is ultimately a civilian mandate, that should not rely excessively on the military because it carries risks to democratic institutions, human rights and long-term peace. The prolonged exposure of the military to civil security has dented the reputation of the institution in the eye of the civilian population

There is an urgent need for Nigeria to rethink its security architecture. A balanced approach that empowers civil institutions, fosters community resilience, and reserves the military for strategic and emergency roles is essential. The goal should be not just to win battles, but to build a just, peaceful, and united nation.

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