Curbing Insecurity in Nigeria: A Framework for Coordinated Response

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria's security landscape has become increasingly complex, with armed groups operating across multiple regions including Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, and Borno states. Despite significant military expenditures and the deployment of various security agencies, the persistence of banditry, insurgency, and kidnapping-for-ransom suggests that conventional security approaches have been insufficient. This study presents a pragmatic framework for addressing insecurity in Nigeria by integrating public health logic, local governance structures, and coordinated security operations. Drawing lessons from Nigeria's COVID-19 containment architecture, the proposed framework emphasizes synchronized enforcement across federal, state, and local levels, enhanced intelligence-sharing mechanisms, engagement of traditional institutions, aerial surveillance of ungoverned spaces, monitoring of mining activities, and control of porous borders. The framework aims to restrict armed group movement, enhance intelligence capabilities, and reassert state presence in forested and border communities. By adopting a multi-sectoral, coordinated approach, this framework offers a viable pathway for shrinking the operational space of violent actors and improving security outcomes across Nigeria.

Keywords: Insecurity, banditry, coordinated response, intelligence sharing, traditional institutions, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria confronts a multifaceted security crisis that has defied conventional military solutions. Armed groups, including bandits, Boko Haram insurgents, and separatist militants, operate across vast swathes of the country, displacing millions and undermining economic activity. According to official sources, the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons is currently catering for "over a conservative estimate of 6.7 million Nigerians" displaced by conflicts across the country (Adejoro, 2025). These displacements are not primarily the result of natural disasters but stem from man-made conflicts including terrorism, banditry, communal clashes, and other forms of violent unrest.

The geographical spread of insecurity is particularly concerning. As the Aare Onakakanfo of Yorubaland observed, banditry began in Borno State but has since spread across the North-West, the Middle Belt, and into parts of the South-West (Adams, 2025). This diffusion pattern demonstrates how localized security failures can rapidly escalate into national crises. The infiltration of bandits into previously peaceful regions, including Oyo, Ekiti, and Ondo states, underscores the need for a coordinated, multi-layered response that transcends traditional security approaches.

This paper argues that Nigeria's security challenges require a framework that integrates public health logic specifically the coordinated, multi-sectoral approach deployed during the COVID-19 pandemic with local governance structures and modern technology. The COVID-19 Presidential Task Force established by President Muhammadu Buhari on March 9, 2020, provided a model for coordinating multi-sectoral inter-governmental efforts (Presidential Task Force on COVID-19, 2021). That framework successfully synchronized federal, state, and local responses, established clear chains of command, and leveraged community engagement. This study adapts that logic to the security domain, proposing a framework that can restrict armed group movement, enhance intelligence sharing, and reassert state presence in ungoverned spaces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Nature of Nigeria's Security Challenges

Scholars have documented the evolving nature of insecurity in Nigeria, moving from predominantly ethno-religious conflicts to increasingly criminalized violence driven by economic incentives. Banditry in North-West Nigeria, initially characterized as cattle rustling and rural banditry, has evolved into sophisticated kidnapping-for-ransom enterprises with connections to illicit mining and cross-border smuggling networks. The Minister of Defence recently acknowledged the complexity of these operations, noting that dense forest terrains such as Sambisa, Birnin Gwari, Kamuku, and Kainji forests provide natural cover that makes aerial bombardment alone insufficient for dislodging criminal groups (Badaru, 2025).

The Role of Traditional Institutions

Recent scholarship has emphasized the potential role of traditional authorities in security governance. An edited volume by Ehrhardt, Alao, and Umar (2024) offers empirical analysis of how traditional rulers including kings, Ezes, Obas, and Emirs have adapted to governance roles after a dramatic postcolonial downturn. The volume argues that traditional leaders can augment, but not substitute, the state in addressing insecurity. This finding is significant for the present study, which proposes integrating traditional institutions into a coordinated security framework rather than relying on them as standalone solutions.

Traditional rulers possess unique advantages for security work, including intimate knowledge of local terrain, established social networks, and cultural legitimacy. As the Aare Onakakanfo noted, in Ondo State, the Amotekun security outfit benefited significantly from the involvement of traditional leaders who could identify suspicious movements and facilitate intelligence gathering (Adams, 2025). However, the effectiveness of traditional institutions varies considerably across states, with some governors embracing collaboration while others remain resistant.

Border Insecurity and Transnational Dimensions

Nigeria shares over 4,000 kilometers of land borders with four Francophone neighbors: Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. These vast frontiers, stretching across forests, deserts, and waterways, have become critical corridors for transnational crime. A report presented to the House of Representatives revealed that out of the country's 1,978 official entry points, only 84 are currently manned by security personnel (David, 2026). This leaves a vast number of unofficial and illegal routes unmonitored, creating significant security loopholes that armed groups exploit.

Former Chief of Defence Staff General Christopher Musa has repeatedly called for strengthened border surveillance, warning that "if the Sahel falls, it is Nigeria that they are interested in" (Ojeifo, 2025). The porous nature of Nigeria's borders facilitates not only the movement of armed actors but also the flow of illegal arms, ammunition, and other resources that sustain violent groups.

Technology and Intelligence Innovation

Recent developments in geospatial intelligence offer new possibilities for border monitoring and security operations. The Nigeria Customs Service has developed a geospatial intelligence (GEOINT) capability that combines satellite imagery, geographic information systems (GIS), remote sensing, positioning data, and analytics to monitor border activities (Labaran, 2025). This approach addresses persistent border-management problems by allowing authorities to see, measure, and predict events in space and time. The Customs GEOINT platform has been used to detect illicit crossings, monitor transit corridors, and protect natural resources from exploitation.

Similarly, the Defence Intelligence Agency has announced the establishment of a technology centre focused on cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, robotics, machine learning, and data analytics (Ogbaje, 2025). According to the Chief of Defence Intelligence, this centre will enhance Nigeria's intelligence-gathering capacity by

enabling the agency to "target adversary networks, penetrate the deep and dark web, and expose the activities of terrorists and criminal organisations" (Ogbaje, 2025).

The Public Health Security Parallel

The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) has emphasized that public health emergencies such as Ebola, COVID-19, and other emerging infectious diseases often begin at the community level, where response mechanisms are weakest (Adejoro, 2025). The NCDC's Director-General noted that while the national body provides coordination, responses should ideally start at the state and local government levels, adding that "many states still face gaps in infrastructure, financing, and implementation" (Adejoro, 2025). This observation applies equally to security responses: effective counter-insurgency and counter-banditry operations must be mounted at the subnational level, with national coordination providing strategic guidance and resources.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two complementary theoretical perspectives: coordinated disaster management theory and polycentric security governance.

Coordinated Disaster Management Theory

Coordinated disaster management theory emphasizes the importance of multi-level, multi-sectoral synchronization in responding to complex emergencies. The COVID-19 response in Nigeria exemplified this approach through the establishment of the Presidential Task Force, which coordinated federal, state, and local responses while engaging traditional institutions, community leaders, and private sector actors (Presidential Task Force on COVID-19, 2021). Key elements of this approach include clear command structures, standardized operating procedures, real-time data sharing, and flexible adaptation to local contexts.

Polycentric Security Governance

Polycentric security governance, derived from Elinor Ostrom's work on common-pool resource management, suggests that security is most effectively provided through overlapping, nested governance structures rather than centralized state monopoly. This perspective recognizes that traditional institutions, community organizations, and private security actors can complement state security forces, particularly in areas where state presence is weak. The Amotekun security outfit in South-West Nigeria represents an example of polycentric governance, combining state-coordinated security with community-level intelligence and traditional authority engagement (Adams, 2025).

Integrating Public Health Logic into Security

The novel contribution of this study is the explicit application of public health logic to security challenges. Public health responses to epidemics typically involve three phases: detection (surveillance and diagnosis), containment (isolation and contact tracing), and mitigation (treatment and vaccination). This study adapts this logic to security: detection through enhanced intelligence gathering, containment through coordinated enforcement and border control, and mitigation through addressing root causes such as illegal mining and economic marginalization.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a framework development methodology, synthesizing insights from security studies, public health administration, and governance literature. The proposed framework is derived from analysis of successful security interventions in Nigeria and comparable contexts, as well as documented failures that reveal systemic gaps. The framework's components were identified through thematic analysis of security reports, policy documents, and expert interviews drawn from published sources. Each component was evaluated for feasibility, potential impact, and interdependence with other components.

The framework's logic model posits that coordinated action across multiple domains enforcement, intelligence, traditional governance, technology, resource control, and border management will produce synergistic effects that constrain armed group mobility and operational capacity. The framework is designed to be adaptable to regional variations while maintaining national coordination.

The framework comprises six interconnected components, adapted from the COVID-19 containment structure and tailored to Nigeria's security context.

Coordinated Enforcement

The first component establishes a national security operations centre (NSOC) modeled on the COVID-19 Presidential Task Force. The NSOC would coordinate federal, state, and local security efforts, ensuring that operations in different regions are synchronized rather than fragmented. This addresses a critical weakness in current security arrangements, where military, police, and state-level security outfits often operate in silos with limited communication.

The NSOC would be chaired by the National Security Adviser and include representatives from the military, police, Department of State Services, Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps, state governors through rotational representation, and traditional rulers. The centre would establish standardized operating procedures for joint operations, create common communication protocols, and maintain a real-time dashboard of security incidents and responses.

The importance of coordinated command cannot be overstated. As the NCDC's experience demonstrates, effective responses to complex emergencies require "a single set of national strategic objectives" with clear targets and monitoring mechanisms (Adejoro, 2025). The COVID-19 Task Force's functional areas—including epidemiology and surveillance, risk communication, logistics, and points of entry—provide a template that can be adapted to security operations (Presidential Task Force on COVID-19, 2021).

Intelligence Sharing

The second component establishes ICT-backed intelligence hubs at state and zonal levels, with secure channels for civilian reporting. Effective intelligence is the cornerstone of successful security operations, yet Nigeria has historically struggled with intelligence fragmentation. The Defence Intelligence Agency's recent emphasis on "multi-source intelligence innovation" recognizes this gap, with the Chief of Defence Intelligence noting that "insurgency, terrorism, banditry, cybercrime and organised criminal networks continually adapt their tactics," requiring the intelligence community to "match their sophistication through innovation and technology-driven solutions" (Ogbaje, 2025).

The proposed intelligence architecture includes three elements. First, a national intelligence fusion centre would aggregate data from military, police, DSS, and state security outfits, applying analytical tools to identify patterns and predict threat movements. The Customs Service's geospatial intelligence platform provides a model, integrating satellite imagery, GIS, telematics data, and open-source intelligence to create common operating pictures (Labaran, 2025). Second, secure civilian reporting channels including mobile applications, hotlines, and community liaison officers would enable citizens to report suspicious activities without fear of retaliation. The importance of community engagement is well-established; the NCDC's risk communication and community engagement functional area was critical to COVID-19 containment (Presidential Task Force on COVID-19, 2021). Third, traditional rulers would be integrated into intelligence networks as local information hubs. Given their established social positions and community knowledge, traditional authorities are uniquely positioned to identify unusual movements, new faces, and emerging threats (Ehrhardt et al., 2024).

Traditional Institution Engagement

The third component formalizes the role of traditional rulers in security governance. Rather than the ad hoc engagement that currently characterizes traditional-state security relations, this framework proposes structured integration through state-level traditional security councils. These councils would meet regularly with security

commanders, receive intelligence briefings, and coordinate community-level security patrols. Traditional rulers would be empowered to establish community watch programs, verify identities of strangers, and mediate local conflicts before they escalate into broader violence. The Amotekun experience in South-West Nigeria demonstrates the potential of such engagement: in Oyo and Ondo states, where traditional rulers were actively involved, the security outfit achieved greater community acceptance and intelligence flow (Adams, 2025).

However, the framework recognizes that traditional institutions are not monolithic. As Ehrhardt and colleagues (2024) argue, traditional authorities "can augment, but not substitute, the state in addressing insecurity." Therefore, traditional engagement complements rather than replaces formal security structures. The framework also addresses concerns about traditional rulers' potential complicity in illegal activities, particularly mining-related crimes, by establishing oversight mechanisms and performance benchmarks.

Aerial Surveillance

The fourth component addresses the challenge of ungoverned forest spaces that serve as sanctuaries for armed groups. As the Minister of Defence acknowledged, "bomb cannot penetrate the forests"—dense vegetation shields terrorists from drone surveillance and makes aerial strikes imprecise (Badaru, 2025). However, aerial surveillance remains critical for monitoring movement patterns, identifying new encampments, and guiding ground operations.

The proposed framework deploys a layered aerial surveillance system. Satellite imagery provides wide-area monitoring, detecting changes in forest coverage, new tracks, and encampment construction. The Customs Service has successfully used satellite imagery to identify "newly cleared footpaths leading to unofficial crossing points" and confirm illicit movement patterns (Labaran, 2025). Medium-altitude drones conduct regular patrols of high-risk zones, including Sambisa Forest, Kamuku Forest Reserve, and Kainji Lake National Park, equipped with day and night cameras and thermal sensors. Low-altitude tactical drones support ground operations, providing real-time intelligence to troops conducting forest incursions. Critically, aerial surveillance must be integrated with ground intelligence. The Minister of Defence emphasized that "we are studying the situation" and "cannot operate blindly" (Badaru, 2025). The framework therefore pairs surveillance with intelligence from local sources to ensure that aerial observations are properly contextualized and acted upon.

Mining Activity Monitoring

The fifth component addresses the nexus between illegal mining and insecurity. The Aare Onakakanfo identified illegal gold mining as a primary driver of banditry in Zamfara State, noting that "the insurgency spread into the North-West, beginning from Zamfara, largely due to illegal gold mining in the state" (Adams, 2025). Armed groups exploit mineral resources to finance operations, while miners create demand for protection and logistics that criminal networks supply.

The Federal Government has taken initial steps in this direction through the establishment of Mining Marshals within the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps. According to the Minister of Solid Minerals Development, these marshals have been "doing a good job arresting and prosecuting illegal miners," with the aim of "sending a strong message that it can't be business as usual" (Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, 2025). The government has also approved a new satellite monitoring system for mines to further curb malpractices (Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, 2025).

The proposed framework expands on these initiatives by establishing a national registry of legal mining sites with GPS coordinates, deploying surveillance technology including satellite and drone to detect unauthorized mining activity, creating a joint task force of Mining Marshals, DSS, and military personnel to conduct regular inspections, implementing a mineral tracking system to trace extracted resources from mine to market, and prosecuting not only miners but also buyers and financiers of illegally mined minerals. International cooperation is essential for this component, given the cross-border nature of mineral smuggling. The UNODC project on counter-terrorism finance aims to strengthen "the capacity of criminal justice actors in the detection, investigation and prosecution of illicit financial flows associated with conflict financing" in the solid minerals

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sector (Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, 2025). The framework aligns with and supports this initiative.

Ungoverned Space Control

The sixth component addresses the broader challenge of territories where state presence is weak or absent. These include not only forests but also border areas, rural hinterlands, and informal settlements where armed groups operate with impunity. The framework proposes a three-pronged approach. First, mapping using satellite data and ground surveys to identify ungoverned spaces, map their features, and document population patterns. The Customs Service's geospatial intelligence approach—integrating satellite imagery, GIS, and community reports—provides a methodology for this mapping exercise (Labaran, 2025). Second, patrolling through regular schedules for identified ungoverned spaces, with patrols conducted by joint teams of military, police, and state security outfits, supported by aerial surveillance and equipped with satellite communication devices to maintain contact with command centers. Third, graduated state presence: rather than attempting to immediately establish full state control over all ungoverned spaces, the framework proposes graduated intervention. Priority areas those with active armed group presence or strategic importance receive immediate attention, while lower-risk areas are monitored pending resource availability. In all cases, the objective is to progressively expand state presence rather than cede territory to non-state actors.

Border control is a critical subset of this component. Given that only 84 of 1,978 official entry points are currently manned (David, 2026), the framework calls for accelerated implementation of the national e-border system, which currently covers over 60 percent of land borders (David, 2026), deployment of additional personnel to man priority border posts, installation of surveillance technology including cameras and sensors along high-traffic unofficial crossing points, enhanced cooperation with neighboring countries' border security agencies, and consideration of physical fencing along strategic border segments as recommended by former Chief of Defence Staff General Christopher Musa (Ojeifo, 2025).

Implementation Strategy

Successful implementation of this framework requires attention to sequencing, governance, and resource mobilization.

Phased Implementation

The framework should be implemented in three phases. Phase one (zero to six months) involves establishing the National Security Operations Centre, launching the intelligence fusion centre, and beginning mapping of ungoverned spaces. The framework would be piloted in two high-priority states, such as Zamfara and Katsina, to refine approaches before national scaling. Phase two (six to eighteen months) includes deploying aerial surveillance systems, establishing traditional security councils in all states, implementing mining site monitoring, and expanding the framework to all North-West and North-Central states. Phase three (eighteen to thirty-six months) aims to achieve full national coverage, integrate border control systems with neighboring countries, and transition from emergency response to sustainable security governance.

Governance Structure

The framework requires a governance structure with clear accountability. A National Steering Committee chaired by the National Security Adviser, with members including service chiefs, Inspector-General of Police, Director-General of DSS, and representatives of state governors and traditional rulers, would be responsible for strategic direction and resource allocation. Technical Working Groups for each framework component would develop standard operating procedures, training materials, and performance metrics. State Implementation Committees chaired by state governors, with members including state police commissioners, military commanders, traditional council representatives, and civil society organizations, would be responsible for local adaptation and execution. An independent Monitoring and Evaluation Unit would track implementation progress, evaluate outcomes, and recommend adjustments.

Resource Mobilization

The framework's resource requirements are substantial but represent a reallocation rather than necessarily an increase in total security spending. Nigeria already spends significant sums on security with limited results; the framework redirects resources toward coordinated, technology-enabled approaches with clear accountability mechanisms. Potential funding sources include reallocation of existing security budgets toward prioritized framework components, federal government special security intervention funds, state government contributions with federal matching funds as incentive, international development assistance particularly for border control and mining monitoring, and public-private partnerships for technology deployment.

Expected Outcomes

Implementation of this framework is expected to produce several outcomes. First, reduced armed group mobility: coordinated enforcement and aerial surveillance will make it more difficult for armed groups to move between states, access supplies, and evade security forces. The framework aims to fragment bandit networks by restricting their operational freedom. Second, enhanced intelligence capabilities: the intelligence fusion centre and civilian reporting channels will improve the quality and timeliness of threat information, enabling proactive rather than reactive operations. Third, strengthened community engagement: integration of traditional institutions and civilian reporting mechanisms will rebuild trust between security forces and communities, improving intelligence flow and reducing civilian casualties. Fourth, disrupted illicit financing: monitoring of mining activities and border crossings will reduce the financial resources available to armed groups, constraining their ability to purchase weapons, recruit members, and sustain operations. Fifth, reasserted state presence: progressive control of ungoverned spaces will extend state authority into territories currently dominated by non-state actors, creating conditions for economic activity and service delivery. Sixth, improved public confidence: demonstrated progress in reducing insecurity will rebuild public confidence in security agencies, encouraging greater cooperation and reducing incentives for self-help violence.

Challenges and Limitations

The framework faces several challenges that must be acknowledged and addressed. Political will and coordination remain critical: successful implementation requires sustained political commitment from federal and state governments, as well as effective coordination across multiple agencies with historically strained relationships. The COVID-19 response demonstrated that such coordination is possible when leadership prioritizes it, but security responses lack the same level of public visibility and urgency. Resource constraints present another challenge: while the framework emphasizes reallocation, some components, particularly aerial surveillance and border technology, require significant upfront investment. Nigeria's fiscal constraints may limit the pace of implementation.

Traditional institution variability poses a further challenge. As Ehrhardt and colleagues (2024) document, traditional rulers vary considerably in their legitimacy, capacity, and willingness to engage with security forces. Some traditional leaders may be complicit in illegal activities, including mining and kidnapping. The framework's oversight mechanisms must be robust enough to address these variations. Technology limitations also warrant attention: while technology offers significant capabilities, it is not a panacea. As the Minister of Defence noted, forests can defeat even sophisticated surveillance systems (Badaru, 2025). Technology must be paired with ground intelligence and community engagement. Finally, neighboring country cooperation is essential for border control but may be constrained by limited capacity or different priorities among Nigeria's neighbors. Regional diplomatic engagement will be essential.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria's security crisis demands a response as sophisticated and coordinated as the threats it faces. Conventional military approaches have proven insufficient against adaptive, networked armed groups that exploit ungoverned spaces, porous borders, and weak intelligence sharing. This study has presented a framework that integrates public health logic, local governance, and modern technology to address these gaps.

The framework's six components—coordinated enforcement, intelligence sharing, traditional institution engagement, aerial surveillance, mining activity monitoring, and ungoverned space control are designed to work synergistically, each reinforcing the others. The framework adapts the successful coordination model of Nigeria's COVID-19 response to the security domain, recognizing that complex emergencies require multi-level, multi-sectoral responses with clear command structures and accountability mechanisms.

The proposed approach does not promise quick fixes or easy victories. Insecurity in Nigeria is deeply rooted in economic marginalization, governance deficits, and transnational criminal networks. However, the framework offers a pragmatic pathway for shrinking the operational space of violent actors, enhancing intelligence capabilities, and reasserting state presence in territories currently beyond government control.

Ultimately, sustainable security requires not only effective enforcement but also legitimate governance that addresses the grievances and economic desperation that drive individuals toward violence. The framework recognizes this by engaging traditional institutions, protecting communities, and disrupting the illicit economies that sustain armed groups. By integrating these elements into a coordinated response, Nigeria can make meaningful progress toward restoring security and rebuilding public confidence in the state's ability to protect its citizens.

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