

FOREIGN POLICY AS COUNTERINSURGENCY: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE BUHARI ADMINISTRATION'S EXTERNAL ENGAGEMENTS IN RESPONSE TO NIGERIA'S SECURITY CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

Confronted with a protracted security crisis characterized by large-scale insurgency, Nigeria under President Muhammadu Buhari, who assumed office in May 2015, witnessed a renewed commitment to combating Boko Haram insurgency and related security threats that had severely undermined national stability and tarnished the country's international image. In line with his campaign promises, President Buhari placed counterinsurgency at the core of his foreign policy agenda, actively engaging diplomacy in both bilateral and multilateral levels to secure strategic military partnerships. This was aimed at complementing domestic security operations through intelligence-sharing, logistical support, and capacity-building initiatives. With the completion of his eight-year tenure on May 29, 2023, it becomes imperative to undertake a critical academic assessment of the foreign policy dimensions of Buhari administration and its effectiveness in addressing Nigeria's internal security challenges, particularly in the northern part of the country. This reflection is mostly pertinent in evaluating whether President Buhari fulfilled the expectations set during his 2015 electoral campaign. This study adopted an ex-post facto research design, enabling a critical analysis of events and policies after their occurrence without manipulating variables. It employed the documentary method of data collection, drawing exclusively on secondary sources such as government records, international agreements, policy documents, academic literature, and credible media reports. Data were analysed using content and thematic analysis, allowing for a critical interrogation of the patterns, narratives, and strategic alignments in Nigeria's foreign policy and their impact on counterinsurgency in Nigeria. The study found that the Buhari administration's foreign policy, though initially effective in securing external military support and achieving tactical gains against insurgents, ultimately failed to sustain long-term security due to its largely militarised approach. It concluded that the lack of integrated domestic reforms and adaptive security mechanisms weakened the impact of these foreign engagements. The study recommended a holistic strategy that aligns foreign policy with internal socio-political reforms, regional cooperation, indigenous defence development, and human security priorities.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, Counterinsurgency, Security Crisis, Insurgency, Boko Haram, Internal Security

INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy is a strategic tool by which sovereign states pursue their national interests within the global system. It encompasses diplomatic, economic, and security engagements aimed at promoting a country's image, fostering cooperation, and ensuring internal stability through external support (Ebenezer & Aluko, 2016). In Nigeria's case, its foreign policy has historically been guided by an Afrocentric orientation, championing decolonisation and continental solidarity, particularly during the post-independence era when national resources permitted such external activism (Udeala, 2016). However, as internal challenges, especially economic decline and widespread insecurity, became more pronounced from the 1980s, Nigeria's foreign policy gradually shifted from regional idealism to pragmatic nationalism. This reorientation was meant to align foreign engagements with pressing domestic priorities such as national security, economic recovery, and anti-corruption efforts (Emejuru & Ayotamuno, 2020; Abdulqadir & Abubakar, 2018).

This recalibration was particularly evident during the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023), who sought to utilise foreign policy as an instrument of domestic counterinsurgency. Echoing the themes of his earlier military leadership in the 1980s, Buhari's foreign policy focused on a triadic agenda: combating the

Boko Haram insurgency through bilateral and multilateral military cooperations, recovering looted state funds via diplomatic and legal channels, and reviving Nigeria's economy by securing foreign investment (Pogoson, 2011). Statistically, Buhari's approach, particularly in security yielded some measurable gains, as Boko Haram-related fatalities declined by 92% between 2015 and 2021 (Global Terrorism Index, 2022; State House, 2023). Yet, these isolated successes masked a broader failure to prevent the spread of violent non-state actors. The geographical scope of insecurity widened, with over 3,000 kidnappings in 2022 and hundreds of local government areas under insurgent influence (Ojewale, 2022; Igbinadolor, 2016).

This paradox, between outward foreign policy success and worsening internal security, necessitates a critical assessment of Buhari's external engagements. While the administration projected a robust image abroad, leveraging diplomacy and cooperation for tactical gains, the persistent and evolving nature of domestic violence reveals a fundamental gap in the strategic integration of foreign policy into a holistic national security framework. The failure to translate foreign alliances and counterinsurgency partnerships into long-term, stabilising outcomes within Nigeria raises urgent questions about the coherence, sustainability, and internal alignment of the country's foreign policy. It is this apparent contradiction that forms the crux of this study: to critically assess the extent to which Buhari's foreign policy functioned as a credible counterinsurgency strategy in the face of Nigeria's complex and enduring security crisis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Foreign Policy

The concept of foreign policy has been the subject of extensive academic inquiry within international relations, with varying theoretical traditions offering diverse interpretations. Classical realist scholars such as Morgenthau (1948) conceptualise foreign policy as the rational pursuit of national interest in an anarchic international system, thereby foregrounding power and state survival as primary motivators. Waltz (1979) extends this realist ontology, presenting foreign policy as a function of the international system's structure and power distribution. This systemic-level analysis treats states as unitary actors navigating an environment of perpetual insecurity. In contrast, Keohane and Nye (1977) challenge the dominance of military-centric realism through their theory of complex interdependence, arguing that foreign policy also encompasses economic interconnectivity, transnational cooperation, and the role of international institutions. These competing perspectives underscore the tension between state-centric realism and more pluralist, institutional understandings of global engagement.

Hill (2019), adopting a constructivist lens, interprets foreign policy not merely as strategic action but as a performative discourse that reflects national identity and values. His analysis aligns with the English School's emphasis on the interplay between international society and domestic norms. Complementing this, Hudson and Day (2020) assert that foreign policy is best understood through a micro-level analysis focusing on individual decision-makers, cognitive biases, and bureaucratic politics. Such an approach dismantles the notion of the state as a monolithic actor and introduces psychological and institutional variables as critical explanatory tools. Similarly, Universidad Europea (2022) offers a procedural account of foreign policy, framing it as a dynamic interplay of internal conditions, international realities, and strategic decision-making phases. This multi-level understanding reflects the complex fusion of domestic politics and international imperatives that shape foreign policy formulation.

Contemporary scholarship further situates foreign policy within the broader context of globalisation and interdependence. Senadeera (2023) identifies power, security, and diplomacy as central to foreign policy, but also acknowledges the multiplicity of tools states deploy, ranging from military to economic and diplomatic means, to influence global outcomes. In a complementary vein, Ebenezer and Aluko (2016) argue that technological advancements, transnational threats, and environmental challenges necessitate a more collaborative and adaptive approach to foreign policy. They assert that states must project their domestic agendas onto the international stage, while aligning their foreign policy with internal realities and aspirations. Udeala (2016) reinforces this by identifying national interest, comprising security, prosperity, and reputation, as the guiding compass of foreign policy. However, Abdulqadir and Abubakar (2018) offer a cautionary perspective, noting the potential for national interest to be co-opted by elite agendas. Their case study of Nigeria underscores the role of leadership in shaping the orientation and implementation of foreign policy, pointing to the need for institutional strengthening and diplomatic reform. Collectively, these perspectives highlight foreign policy as both a tool for global engagement and a reflection of internal political dynamics.

Counterinsurgency

The concept of counterinsurgency, often abbreviated as COIN, has evolved to reflect the complexity of modern asymmetric warfare. At its core, counterinsurgency refers to the full spectrum of political, military, economic, and psychological efforts designed to neutralise insurgent threats and stabilise affected regions. NATO (2017) defines

counterinsurgency as comprehensive civilian and military measures taken to defeat insurgents and address the root causes of rebellion. This multidimensional approach recognises that insurgencies are rarely just military phenomena; they often emerge from systemic political grievances, poor governance, or socio-economic inequality. Thus, counterinsurgency entails not only securing the population and dismantling insurgent networks but also instituting long-term reforms in governance and service delivery. In essence, counterinsurgency aims to re-establish state legitimacy and societal order in contested or destabilised regions.

However, the academic discourse on counterinsurgency reveals notable conceptual ambiguities and contested interpretations. Abdulsalam (2023) argues that COIN is often obfuscated by imprecise terminology and is used interchangeably with terms like “internal defence” and “stability operations.” Despite this ambiguity, Abdulsalam outlines a theoretical definition that highlights counterinsurgency as a set of multidimensional state responses to armed rebellions, spanning the military, political, economic, and civic domains. Similarly, the United States Government (2009) emphasises that effective COIN integrates political legitimacy, security provision, and socio-economic reform to reduce insurgent influence and win public support. Yet, this population-centric strategy is both politically contentious and resource-intensive, requiring long-term commitment and the coordinated efforts of multiple state and non-state actors. The key strategic goal remains control, over the populace, the environment, and the narrative of legitimacy.

Further complexity is introduced through the typologies of COIN strategies. Kumar (2020) identifies three distinct approaches: enemy-centric, population-centric, and perception-centric. The enemy-centric model focuses on kinetic military operations to eliminate insurgents, while the population-centric strategy prioritises protecting and winning over civilians. The perception-centric model, meanwhile, involves shaping public opinion to undermine the insurgents’ legitimacy and justify state actions. These approaches are not mutually exclusive and may be combined depending on the specific insurgency dynamics. As Nwanna in Abdulsalam (2023) notes, counterinsurgency also aims to reinforce the legitimacy and capacity of state institutions while rescuing civilian populations from insurgent control. Therefore, counterinsurgency is best understood not as a monolithic strategy but as a fluid, context-specific response to political violence, a political-military campaign intended to restore order by reconsolidating state authority and marginalising insurgent influence through both coercive and persuasive means.

Foreign Policy and Security in Nigeria

Academic literature on foreign policy and counterinsurgency in Nigeria reveals a complex and often contradictory relationship between the country's external engagements and its internal security imperatives. Emejuru and Ayotamuno (2020) critically interrogate Nigeria’s longstanding foreign policy doctrine of Afrocentrism, arguing that the disproportionate allocation of national resources towards continental solidarity has yielded minimal returns for Nigeria. While such policies once contributed to the decolonisation of Africa, the authors contend that these commitments have diverted crucial attention and resources from Nigeria’s own festering internal security issues, such as terrorism, banditry, and separatist violence. Their analysis draws attention to the unintended consequences of porous borders, perpetuated by Nigeria's "Big Brother" stance, which have enabled the transnational flow of arms and fighters, thus intensifying domestic insecurity.

In exploring state-led counterinsurgency strategies, Yusuf (2022) provides an assessment of the Buhari administration's emphasis on regional diplomacy and military realignment in the fight against Boko Haram. Buhari's tenure saw the relocation of military command structures to the conflict zones and increased collaboration with neighbouring countries through the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). Diplomatic overtures to global powers such as the United States and China sought to garner support not only for counterterrorism but also for the recovery of stolen assets and economic revitalisation. However, as Omowubajo (2021) observes, while Nigeria's shift towards bilateral and multilateral diplomacy in response to insurgency reflects a strategic adaptation, such approaches have been undermined by internal challenges and limited cooperation among MNJTF partners. The persistence of insurgency, despite these diplomatic and military efforts, points to the limitations of foreign policy as a standalone solution to deeply rooted socio-economic and structural problems like poverty, youth unemployment, and ethno-religious marginalisation.

Moreover, the works of Mustapha, Musa and Enikanoselu (2020) and others expose the geopolitical undercurrents that restrict Nigeria’s capacity to prosecute the war on terror. These studies argue that the reluctance of key global powers to sell advanced weaponry or provide logistical support to Nigeria is shaped by international politics and mistrust. The security vacuum created by this reluctance has been exploited by terrorist groups, particularly in border areas with Francophone neighbours, thereby complicating Nigeria’s counterinsurgency objectives. Obi (2019) further complicates this discourse by highlighting how Nigeria’s continued engagement in peacekeeping

missions, while driven by strategic interests such as national security and diplomatic influence, may no longer be sustainable given the country's overstretched security apparatus. These works collectively suggest that Nigeria's foreign policy cannot be disentangled from its internal security context. In my view, a recalibration is needed, one that prioritises pragmatic security interests over ideological commitments, recognising that national survival is a prerequisite for meaningful regional leadership.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs Systems Theory as its analytical framework, particularly drawing on its application in international relations, a contribution credited primarily to American political scientist David Easton. In his influential 1953 work, *The Political System: An Inquiry into the State of Political Science*, Easton laid the theoretical groundwork for this approach by conceptualizing politics as a dynamic and adaptive system. He later extended this model to the international sphere, where his ideas were further elaborated by scholars such as Karl W. Deutsch, James N. Rosenau, and Charles A. McClelland. These thinkers enriched the systems perspective by applying it to the complex interrelations among states and other global actors, thereby shaping an enduring theoretical lens for interpreting international dynamics.

At its core, the Systems Theory of International Relations conceptualizes the global arena as a set of interconnected and interdependent entities, where both state and non-state actors interact within a systemic framework defined by inputs, outputs, and feedback loops. This perspective likens the international system to an organic whole, emphasizing the reciprocal influences among its components and the adaptive nature of their interactions. However, despite its analytical utility, Systems Theory has been critiqued for its tendency to abstract and generalize, often at the expense of capturing the realities of global politics. Critics argue that it overlooks power asymmetries, ideological forces, and the socio-historical contexts that shape international behaviour.

The systems theory is particularly relevant to this study as it provides a conceptual framework for understanding the Buhari administration's foreign policy as an integral component of a broader systemic response to Nigeria's internal security crisis. By viewing the state as part of an interconnected international system, the theory enables a critical assessment of how Nigeria's external engagements function as feedback mechanisms aimed at securing strategic inputs, such as military assistance, intelligence cooperation, and diplomatic support, from other actors in the international arena. These external actions are not isolated but are influenced by, and in turn influence, systemic pressures and global political dynamics. Applying systems theory highlights the interdependence between Nigeria's domestic instability and its foreign policy choices, thereby revealing how the administration's counterinsurgency strategies are embedded within, and responsive to, the complex interplay of global political structures, alliances, and normative frameworks.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted an ex-post facto research design, enabling a critical analysis of events and policies after their occurrence without manipulating variables. It employed the documentary method of data collection, drawing exclusively on secondary sources such as government records, international agreements, policy documents, academic literature, and credible media reports. Data were analysed using content and thematic analysis, allowing for a critical interrogation of the patterns, narratives, and strategic alignments in Nigeria's foreign policy and their impact on counterinsurgency in Nigeria.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

One of the central pillars of President Muhammadu Buhari's campaign platform during the 2015 and 2019 general elections was his pledge to address Nigeria's escalating insecurity, which had severely undermined the country's socio-economic stability (Taiwo-Hassan, 2018). Before his ascension to power in 2015, Nigeria was already grappling with the intensifying Boko Haram insurgency, particularly in the North-East geopolitical zone, where the militant group had established significant territorial control. The situation worsened when the group declared an Islamic Caliphate in Gwoza after seizing key towns such as Bama and Gamboru in Borno State, and extended its control to parts of Yobe and Adamawa States, where it appointed local rulers, imposed levies, and hoisted its own flag (Oyeyemi, 2021). The abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls further amplified national and international outrage, symbolizing the depth of Nigeria's security crisis. This section therefore critically explores the Buhari administration's foreign policy strategies, both bilateral and multilateral, deployed in response to these threats, with a particular focus on their role in counterinsurgency.

President Buhari's Bilateral Relations as a Counter-Insurgency Strategy

Upon assuming office in May 2015, President Muhammadu Buhari inherited a deeply deteriorated security situation, most notably the Boko Haram insurgency, which had ravaged Nigeria's North-East and intermittently struck the Federal Capital Territory. The Nigerian Armed Forces, despite their prior achievements in peacekeeping

across West Africa, were under-equipped and demoralised, largely due to systemic corruption and inadequate investment in defence infrastructure during the preceding administration (Stein, 2015). Recognising these constraints, President Buhari adopted a foreign policy approach that emphasised bilateral security cooperation as a critical counter-insurgency strategy. This was aimed at obtaining modern military hardware, training, and intelligence-sharing arrangements to revitalise Nigeria's security apparatus and confront terrorism with greater efficiency. Buhari's external engagements underscored a pragmatic diplomatic orientation, relying on strategic alliances to address domestic security concerns.

One of the most significant bilateral partnerships forged under Buhari's leadership was with the People's Republic of China. China, already an influential partner across the African continent, became a vital source of military equipment for Nigeria's counter-insurgency operations. In 2015, China supplied the Nigerian Air Force with F7Ni supersonic jet fighters to enhance aerial operations in the insurgency-affected regions (Ambali, Salawu, & Jonah, 2020). In November 2016, the Nigerian Navy acquired a military warship from China (International Centre for Investigative Reporting, 2016). This collaboration was deepened in 2019 when Nigeria signed a \$152 million military procurement deal with China North Industries Group Corporation Limited (Igbinalodor, 2023). The deal included VT-4 main battle tanks, ST1 light tanks, SH-5 self-propelled howitzers, armoured personnel carriers, helicopters, and patrol vessels. The first delivery arrived on 8 April 2020 and included 17 military vehicles such as MBTs and tank destroyers (Defence Here, 2022). A second batch, received in March 2021, bolstered the Nigerian military's capabilities in the northeast and northwest regions (Vanguard, 2021). These acquisitions were instrumental in enhancing the operational capacity of the Nigerian military in combating insurgents and criminal banditry.

President Buhari's foreign policy also included substantial military cooperation with the Russian Federation, reflecting Nigeria's diversification of arms suppliers. In October 2015, a landmark contract was signed for the acquisition of 12 Mi-35M attack helicopters (Igbinalodor, 2023). The deliveries began in December 2016, with Nigeria receiving two helicopters equipped with sophisticated navigation and targeting systems, suitable for operations in challenging terrains (Tukur, 2017; Idowu, 2018). Another batch arrived in May 2018 (Idowu, 2018). Further deepening this partnership, in August 2021, Nigeria and Russia entered into an agreement for continued military assistance, training, and supplies (Voice of America, 2021). However, the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 significantly disrupted Russia's capacity to fulfil military contracts in Africa, including with Nigeria (Abdullahi, 2022). Despite these limitations, Russian-Nigerian military ties under Buhari represented an assertive foreign policy recalibration towards securing diversified and sustainable arms sources.

Another critical pillar of Buhari's counter-insurgency diplomacy was the revitalised security partnership with the United States. Historically strained by concerns over human rights violations by Nigerian forces, U.S. military cooperation resumed robustly under Buhari's administration. In 2016, both countries signed an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement allowing exchanges of military support services (US Department of State, 2022). By August 2017, Nigeria procured 12 Super Tucano A-29 surveillance and attack aircraft for \$593 million (Kazeem, 2017; US Department of State, 2022; State House, 2023). The deal, initially blocked by the Obama administration, was greenlit under President Donald Trump, signifying a shift in U.S. policy. In April 2018, Nigeria hosted the African Land Forces Summit in Abuja, reinforcing bilateral and continental security dialogue (State House, 2023). The U.S. further authorised the export of \$1.2 million worth of defence articles to Nigeria in 2020, including firearms and military electronics. In 2022, the Buhari administration completed the purchase of 12 AH-1Z Attack Helicopters from the U.S. valued at \$997 million, enhancing Nigeria's air combat capability (US Department of State, 2022).

Beyond the major global powers, President Buhari's administration also pursued defence relations with regional and non-Western partners, such as Pakistan, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In December 2016, Nigeria purchased 21 warplanes from Pakistan, including four gunship helicopters and ten primary trainers, with delivery expected by early 2017 (Erunke, 2017). This procurement was complemented in May 2021 when three JF-17 Thunder multi-role aircraft were added to the Nigerian Air Force's fleet (Ajibola, 2021). Turkey also became a key military ally, with talks in 2022 leading to acquisitions of drones, helicopters, and infantry systems (Lionel, 2022). Additionally, a 2021 visit to the UAE culminated in a strategic arms deal, resulting in the delivery of a Nigerian Navy warship constructed in Sharjah and 100 Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles in May 2022 (State House, 2023). These engagements expanded Nigeria's options for military sourcing while deepening South-South cooperation in defence diplomacy.

In sum, President Buhari's bilateral security diplomacy marked a decisive shift in Nigeria's counter-insurgency strategy. Faced with an under-resourced military and complex insurgent threats, Buhari strategically leveraged foreign relations to modernise Nigeria's military capabilities through partnerships with China, Russia, the United

States, Pakistan, Turkey, and the UAE. These bilateral arrangements brought in critical hardware, training, and logistical support that bolstered Nigeria's war effort against Boko Haram, ISWAP, and regional banditry. While challenges such as human rights concerns and geopolitical disruptions (notably the Russia-Ukraine conflict) sometimes hindered seamless cooperation, Buhari's external engagements represented a significant recalibration of Nigeria's foreign policy towards security-centric goals. His administration's pragmatic turn to diverse international actors underlined a new form of diplomacy where foreign policy was not just about prestige but a direct instrument for national security transformation.

President Buhari's Multilateral Relations as a Counter-Insurgency Strategy

President Muhammadu Buhari's foreign policy from 2015 to 2023 demonstrates a deliberate strategy to leverage multilateral relations as a mechanism for counterinsurgency, particularly in addressing Nigeria's escalating security crisis. As earlier stated, the Buhari administration inherited a country engulfed in violent insurgency, notably from Boko Haram in the North-East, as well as militant activities in the Niger Delta, which had debilitating effects on national security and the economy. Despite Nigeria's past military successes in international peacekeeping missions, domestic counterinsurgency efforts were largely unsuccessful before Buhari's tenure due to under-equipped forces and systemic corruption (Stein, 2015). In recognising the limitations of unilateral military responses, Buhari actively pursued multilateral diplomatic engagements to enhance regional cooperation and secure foreign assistance. These external engagements, rooted in multilateral diplomacy, form a critical component of Buhari's counterinsurgency framework and reflect a strategic shift in Nigeria's foreign policy posture.

A cornerstone of Buhari's multilateral strategy was revitalising Nigeria's leadership within the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), comprising Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, nations severely affected by Boko Haram's transnational operations. Upon assuming office, Buhari initiated diplomatic visits to Chad, Niger, Benin, and Cameroon to galvanise a collective regional security response (Ewi, 2015). This early initiative bore fruit in the reactivation and funding of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), originally established in 1994 but underutilised in counterterrorism until Buhari's intervention. The MNJTF, comprising 8,700 troops from member states, was significantly strengthened by Nigeria's pledge of \$100 million to bolster operational capacity (Vanguard, 2015). The task force curtailed Boko Haram's mobility and refuge-seeking across borders, degrading its operational capacity (Boye & Ayomola, 2022). The Buhari administration's effective use of multilateral military partnerships marked a departure from inward-looking strategies and highlighted how international and regional cooperation could produce tangible counterinsurgency outcomes.

Beyond military cooperation, Buhari supported and co-led the launch of the Regional Stabilization Strategy (RSS) for the Lake Chad Basin in 2019, co-developed by the LCBC and the African Union. This comprehensive development framework aimed to restore civil authority, foster social cohesion, and build long-term resilience in violence-afflicted communities (Usigbe, 2019). By promoting this approach, Buhari moved beyond the militarisation of security and engaged with broader concepts of human security and post-conflict recovery. With technical and financial backing from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the European Union (EU), and Germany, the RSS demonstrates Buhari's strategic use of multilateral platforms to blend hard and soft security approaches. In addition to combating insurgents directly, the strategy targeted the structural conditions, such as food insecurity and environmental degradation, exacerbated by the shrinking Lake Chad, which had contributed to the radicalisation of youth and the proliferation of violence in the region (UNDP, 2022). This holistic strategy represents a key inflection point in Nigeria's external security diplomacy under Buhari.

Buhari also internationalised Nigeria's security concerns by consistently raising the Lake Chad crisis on global platforms, including the United Nations General Assembly, the G7 Summit, and African Union meetings. In his speeches, he called attention to the humanitarian crisis resulting from the insurgency and sought financial and technical aid from donor countries and international organisations (Tijani, 2016; Usigbe, 2019; Elumoye, 2022; State House, 2023). Of particular concern was the transnational movement of small arms and light weapons, which the president linked to broader global conflicts, including the Russia-Ukraine war. Buhari's advocacy underscored his understanding of the global-local nexus in insecurity and the role of international stakeholders in regional stability. He also emphasised strengthening border control agencies among LCBC countries to curb arms smuggling, further tying multilateralism to tangible counterinsurgency objectives. Buhari's strategy of aligning Nigeria's regional security concerns with global discourses on terrorism and illicit arms flows reinforced the interdependence of national and international security.

Within the broader West African context, Buhari spearheaded collaborative engagements through ECOWAS, where he served as Chair of the Authority of Heads of State and Government. His efforts culminated in the 12th Annual ECOWAS Security Ministers' Forum held on 16 May 2019 in Abuja, where regional leaders collectively

resolved to deepen security cooperation with Nigeria (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2019). Buhari's policy focused not only on conventional threats like terrorism and organised crime but also on non-traditional security threats including environmental degradation, poverty, and poor governance, factors he identified as drivers of instability. He urged regional states to harmonise crime-control mechanisms while balancing security with the ECOWAS Protocol on the free movement of persons and goods. Furthermore, his address in July 2018 at the joint ECCAS-ECOWAS summit reinforced his call for coordinated maritime and border security operations (The Nigerian Tribune, 2018). These initiatives underscore Buhari's commitment to fostering sub-regional institutional synergies as a key plank of his counterinsurgency strategy.

Buhari's Foreign Policy Strategy and Nigeria's Security Concerns

President Muhammadu Buhari's foreign policy approach was framed within a counterinsurgency strategy that sought to leverage international partnerships to address Nigeria's domestic insecurity, particularly the Boko Haram insurgency. Upon assuming office in May 2015, the Buhari administration reoriented Nigeria's foreign policy from its previous Afrocentric and multilateralist emphasis to one grounded in strategic bilateralism, focusing on defence diplomacy, weapons acquisition, and international training of Nigerian forces. Early success was recorded in the North-East and Federal Capital Territory, where coordinated international cooperation helped recapture local governments under insurgent control and halted urban terrorist attacks. These efforts were significantly bolstered by military assistance and intelligence-sharing agreements with the United States, United Kingdom, and France. According to the Global Terrorism Index (2022), fatalities linked to Boko Haram dropped by 92% between 2015 and 2021, declining from 2,131 deaths to just 178 (State House, 2023). This reduction significantly contributed to the broader decrease in terrorism-related deaths across Sub-Saharan Africa. Concurrently, maritime security improved dramatically, with the International Maritime Bureau recording the lowest piracy incidents in Nigerian waters in 27 years as of 2021, a development tied to regional naval cooperation and the deployment of the Deep Blue Project (State House, 2023).

However, this foreign policy success was undermined by the Buhari administration's inability to preempt or contain the mutation of insecurity beyond Boko Haram. While the administration succeeded in reducing Boko Haram's operational capacity, it failed to adapt its foreign policy to the growing threats posed by emerging violent non-state actors, including armed bandits, killer herdsmen, "unknown gunmen," kidnappers, and separatist militias. This lapse allowed insecurity to metastasise nationally. Notable incidents included the 2016 Agatu Massacre in Benue State, which led to massive displacements; the 2017 Ozubulu Church Massacre in Anambra; the 2021 attacks on the Federal College of Forestry Mechanization in Kaduna and the Abuja-Kaduna train; and high-profile breaches such as the 2021 assault on the Nigerian Defence Academy and the 2022 Kuje prison break. The Owo church attack in Ondo State in 2022 further exemplified the decentralised nature of violence (Ojewale, 2022). Despite the initial tactical gains, the state's monopoly on violence eroded due to the decentralisation of insecurity and the lack of a comprehensive foreign policy framework to address the diverse threats beyond the Boko Haram insurgency.

Statistical data reinforce this systemic security regression. According to the Nigeria Security Tracker (NST), 8,388 additional deaths occurred in Buhari's first year (May 2015–May 2016), increasing the cumulative death toll to 43,310. Although fatalities declined by 40% in 2017, they spiked again in 2018, with an additional 5,361 lives lost. By May 2022, the total number of deaths due to violence since 2011 had reached 89,920 (Ojewale, 2022). Between May 2015 and October 2022, non-state actors were responsible for 53,418 deaths. The North-East region, home to Boko Haram and ISWAP, recorded 23,106 deaths, while the North-West, plagued by banditry, saw 13,590 deaths. Other regions fared little better: the North-Central reported 8,593 deaths, the South-South 3,688, and the South-West 2,170 (Baiyewu, Omogbolagun, Odeniyi, Tunji, Tolu-Kolawole, Aina, & Tyopuusu, 2022; Ojewale, 2022). Notably, by 2022, at least 550 of Nigeria's 774 local government areas were under the operational reach of armed groups, with over 3,000 kidnappings recorded that year alone, a nearly 30-fold increase compared to 2016 (Igbinalolor, 2016). This data underscores a profound mismatch between the foreign policy successes of the early Buhari years and the broader, deteriorating domestic security landscape.

The failure to recalibrate foreign policy in response to the evolving threat landscape exposed the limitations of Buhari's counterinsurgency through external engagement. The administration's reliance on militarised foreign policy instruments neglected the necessary diplomacy, regional intelligence integration, and long-term strategic partnerships required to address the complex interplay of criminality, ethno-religious tensions, and political violence. Domestic frustration culminated in a reshuffle of Nigeria's security chiefs on 26 January 2022, in response to mounting public outcry (Campbell, 2021). Furthermore, a significant political backlash occurred in July 2022, when opposition Senators from the Peoples Democratic Party staged a walkout from the National Assembly after Senate President Ahmad Lawan blocked an attempt to commence impeachment proceedings against Buhari over worsening insecurity (Abe, 2023). This political episode reflects the administration's inability

to generate consensus or accountability on security policy. As Abe (2023) later reported, between May 2015 and April 2023, non-state actors were responsible for at least 31,821 additional deaths, further highlighting the failure of foreign policy as a sustainable counterinsurgency mechanism. While the Buhari administration's external engagements yielded tactical victories, they ultimately failed to translate into lasting national security due to the absence of a holistic, adaptive strategy that incorporated both foreign and domestic imperatives.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Buhari administration's foreign policy, framed as a counterinsurgency tool, represented a significant shift from Nigeria's traditional diplomatic posture to a pragmatic, security-driven external engagement strategy. Through bilateral and multilateral alliances with global and regional actors, Buhari successfully secured military equipment, intelligence cooperation, and technical support that contributed to early tactical victories, particularly against Boko Haram in the North-East. However, the administration's overreliance on militarised foreign partnerships without commensurate domestic policy reform or adaptive security frameworks limited the sustainability of these gains. The foreign policy's initial successes were ultimately undermined by its inability to pre-empt or respond to the decentralisation and diversification of insecurity across Nigeria. As such, while Buhari's external engagements delivered notable short-term military dividends, they fell short of producing a sustainable or comprehensive national security transformation.

Therefore, to address the multidimensional security challenges identified in this study, Nigeria must move beyond the narrowly militarised foreign policy framework exemplified by the Buhari administration. First, future administrations should institutionalise a *whole-of-government* approach that synchronises foreign policy with domestic socio-political reforms, including justice sector accountability, decentralised policing, and conflict mediation structures. Second, Nigeria should deepen regional intelligence integration through ECOWAS and the African Union, developing real-time threat-monitoring systems that transcend bilateral arrangements. Third, while foreign military support remains relevant, Nigeria must invest in indigenous defence industries to reduce dependence on external arms supplies and navigate the unpredictability of global politics. Fourth, future counterinsurgency diplomacy must prioritise human security by aligning foreign engagements with poverty alleviation, youth empowerment, and environmental resilience programmes, particularly in vulnerable regions like the Lake Chad Basin. Finally, Nigeria's foreign policy institutions, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its diplomatic missions, must be retooled to proactively anticipate and respond to non-traditional security threats, ensuring that foreign policy becomes a strategic enabler of inclusive national security rather than a reactive military tool.

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