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Hybrid Security Orders, Non-State Violence, and the Political Economy of Insecurity in Nigeria's Conflict Ecosystem

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary Nigerian security landscape is characterized by the coexistence of state institutions, armed non-state actors, community militias, criminal syndicates, religious movements, and transnational terrorist networks, all embedded within a deeply contested political economy. This article develops a theoretically grounded and empirically informed interpretation of Nigeria's evolving conflict ecosystem by situating it within broader debates on hybrid political orders, non-state actors in international relations, and the global transformation of warfare. Drawing on the analytical frameworks of new wars theory, hybrid governance, and transnational activism, the study demonstrates how Boko Haram, rural banditry, Niger Delta militancy, and inter-religious violence are not isolated pathologies but structurally interlinked outcomes of state fragility, elite competition, and globalized security dynamics (Kaldor, 2006; Boege et al., 2009; Reno, 2011).

The article further integrates strategic assessments of global and regional security environments provided by contemporary intelligence analysis to contextualize Nigeria's conflicts within wider geopolitical and ideological currents (National Intelligence Council, 2023). By doing so, it challenges conventional state-centric interpretations of Nigerian insecurity and instead advances a relational model in which state and non-state actors continuously renegotiate authority, legitimacy, and control. Drawing extensively on the literature on Boko Haram, the Niger Delta, and rural banditry, the study reveals how violence functions simultaneously as a political instrument, an economic strategy, and a form of social ordering (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012; Comolli, 2015; Ikelegbe, 2006; Okoli & Ugwu, 2019).

Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative, interpretivist research design based on intensive textual analysis of scholarly literature, policy reports, and international security assessments. This allows for a nuanced reconstruction of the discursive, material, and institutional dimensions of Nigerian conflict. The results demonstrate that Nigeria's insecurity cannot be meaningfully addressed through militarized counterterrorism or state-building alone, because violence is embedded in hybrid governance arrangements that link local actors to global networks of finance, ideology, and power (Lake, 2010; Sikkink, 1998).

The discussion situates Nigeria's conflicts within broader debates about sovereignty, non-state power, and global order, arguing that Nigeria exemplifies a post-Westphalian security environment in which authority is fragmented and contested across multiple levels (Waltz, 1979; Kant, 1795). The article concludes by proposing that sustainable peace in Nigeria requires not the restoration of a mythical centralized state monopoly of violence, but the construction of inclusive, negotiated, and accountable hybrid political orders that recognize the realities of non-state authority while embedding them within normative frameworks of peace and human security (Olojo, 2021; Mercy Corps, 2016).

Keywords: Nigeria, non-state actors, hybrid political orders, Boko Haram, political economy of violence, insecurity, global terrorism.

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian state occupies a paradoxical position in contemporary international politics. On one hand, it is Africa's most populous country and one of its largest economies, endowed with vast natural resources and a vibrant civil society. On the other hand, Nigeria has become one of the world's most complex theaters of violent non-state activity, hosting jihadist insurgencies, oil-driven militancy, criminal banditry, inter-religious conflict, and youth-based armed movements that challenge the authority, legitimacy, and capacity of the

state (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012; Ikelegbe, 2006; Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). This coexistence of formal state sovereignty with pervasive non-state violence places Nigeria at the heart of global debates about the transformation of warfare, the decline of traditional state monopolies over violence, and the emergence of hybrid political orders in the Global South (Kaldor, 2006; Boege et al., 2009; Reno, 2011).

Conventional international relations theory, particularly the realist tradition articulated by Waltz (1979), treats the state as the primary unit of analysis and assumes that security threats are generated mainly by other states. Within this framework, domestic insurgencies and criminal violence are viewed as internal problems rather than as phenomena that reshape global order. Yet Nigeria's experience directly challenges this assumption. Boko Haram, for example, is not merely a domestic insurgency; it is a transnational jihadist movement embedded within global ideological, financial, and recruitment networks that connect Nigeria to the wider Sahel, the Middle East, and the global war on terror (Comolli, 2015; Thurston, 2017). Similarly, Niger Delta militancy is not only a local struggle over oil rents but also a manifestation of how global energy markets, multinational corporations, and international environmental politics shape local grievances and violent mobilization (Obi, 2009; Alao, 2013).

These realities have been increasingly recognized in strategic intelligence assessments that portray the contemporary world as one in which state and non-state actors interact within fluid and contested security environments (National Intelligence Council, 2023). Such assessments argue that global instability is increasingly driven by non-state armed groups, criminal networks, and ideological movements that operate across borders and exploit weak governance structures. Nigeria exemplifies this pattern, as its internal conflicts have regional spillover effects across West and Central Africa, contributing to migration, arms trafficking, and transnational terrorism (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2021).

The concept of hybrid political orders provides a powerful lens through which to interpret this complexity. Boege and colleagues argue that many postcolonial states are not fragile deviations from a Western norm of statehood, but rather hybrid systems in which formal institutions coexist and interact with customary authorities, religious leaders, armed groups, and informal economies (Boege et al., 2009). In Nigeria, traditional rulers, vigilante groups, religious movements, and militant organizations all exercise forms of governance, often filling gaps left by the state while simultaneously undermining its authority (Reno, 2011). This hybridity is not merely a symptom of state weakness but a historically rooted mode of political organization shaped by colonial legacies, economic inequalities, and global power relations (Ikelegbe, 2006; Obi, 2009).

Despite a growing body of scholarship on Boko Haram, Niger Delta militancy, and rural banditry, much of the existing literature remains fragmented along regional or thematic lines. Studies of Islamist insurgency often ignore the political economy of oil and environmental degradation in the south, while analyses of Niger Delta conflict rarely engage with the ideological and transnational dimensions of northern jihadism (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012; Comolli, 2015; Ikelegbe, 2006). Moreover, mainstream international relations theory still struggles to integrate non-state violence into its understanding of global order, even though scholars have long emphasized the growing importance of non-state actors in diplomacy, advocacy, and conflict (Lake, 2010; Sikkink, 1998; Longley, 2022).

This article addresses this gap by developing a holistic, theoretically integrated analysis of Nigeria's conflict ecosystem. Rather than treating Boko Haram, banditry, and militancy as separate crises, it conceptualizes them as interconnected manifestations of a single hybrid security order in which violence, governance, and economic survival are deeply intertwined. By drawing on new wars theory, hybrid political orders, and global security analysis, the study demonstrates that Nigeria's insecurity is not an aberration but a structural outcome of contemporary global capitalism, postcolonial state formation, and transnational ideological mobilization (Kaldor, 2006; Boege et al., 2009; National Intelligence Council, 2023).

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond Nigeria. As Kant's vision of perpetual peace presupposed a world of sovereign, law-bound states, today's security environment is increasingly shaped by actors that do not fit this model, from jihadist movements to global advocacy networks (Kant, 1795; Sikkink, 1998). Nigeria thus offers a critical case for understanding how non-state violence reshapes sovereignty, diplomacy, and international order. By situating Nigerian conflicts within this broader theoretical and geopolitical context, the article contributes to ongoing debates about how peace and security can be conceptualized and pursued in an era of fragmented authority and hybrid governance (Berridge, 2015; Lake, 2010).

In methodological terms, this study adopts an interpretivist and critical approach, emphasizing the construction of meaning, legitimacy, and power in Nigerian conflict narratives. This is consistent with the view that social reality, including war and peace, is not merely given but socially produced through discourse, institutions, and practices (Bryman, 2016; Garth Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006). The remainder of the article develops this argument through an extensive methodological discussion, a detailed presentation of interpretive results, and a theoretically rich discussion that engages with both classical and contemporary scholarship.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological architecture of this study is rooted in qualitative interpretivism and critical political economy, reflecting the complex, multi-layered nature of Nigeria's conflict environment. Quantitative indicators such as attack counts or casualty figures, while valuable, cannot adequately capture the social meanings, power relations, and institutional dynamics that structure violence and governance in hybrid political orders (Bryman, 2016; Institute for Economics and Peace, 2021). Consequently, this research relies on intensive textual analysis of academic literature, policy reports, and strategic intelligence assessments, including global security analyses that situate Nigeria within broader geopolitical trends (National Intelligence Council, 2023).

The first pillar of the methodology is a comprehensive literature review that draws on political science, international relations, African studies, and security studies. Core texts on Boko Haram, Niger Delta militancy, and rural banditry provide empirical grounding for the analysis (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012; Comolli, 2015; Ikelegbe, 2006; Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). These are supplemented by theoretical works on new wars, hybrid political orders, and non-state actors, which offer interpretive frameworks for understanding how violence and governance are organized (Kaldor, 2006; Boege et al., 2009; Lake, 2010). Classical international relations theory and political philosophy are also incorporated to illuminate the normative and conceptual foundations of sovereignty, peace, and global order (Waltz, 1979; Kant, 1795).

The second methodological component involves critical discourse analysis. This approach treats policy documents, scholarly texts, and intelligence reports not merely as neutral descriptions of reality but as discursive constructions that shape how problems are understood and addressed (Garth Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006; Olojo, 2021). For example, the framing of Boko Haram as a purely terrorist threat can obscure its roots in socio-economic marginalization and state violence, while portraying Niger Delta militants as criminals may depoliticize their environmental and distributive grievances (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012; Obi, 2009). By examining how different actors narrate Nigerian conflicts, the study reveals how power, legitimacy, and responsibility are negotiated.

A third element of the methodology is historical contextualization. Nigeria's current insecurity cannot be understood without reference to colonial legacies, post-independence political struggles, and the long-term dynamics of oil exploitation and regional inequality (Ikelegbe, 2006; Alao, 2013). Historical analysis allows the research to trace how patterns of governance, resistance, and violence have evolved over time, producing the hybrid security order observed today (Reno, 2011).

The use of strategic intelligence assessments, particularly global forecasts and threat analyses, introduces a macro-level perspective that connects Nigerian conflicts to wider international dynamics (National Intelligence Council, 2023). Such documents synthesize information from multiple regions and provide insights into how non-state actors, technological change, and geopolitical competition interact. While intelligence assessments are not without biases, their inclusion allows the study to situate Nigeria within a global security architecture that shapes funding, military intervention, and diplomatic priorities (Lake, 2010).

Several limitations accompany this methodological approach. First, reliance on secondary sources means that the study cannot provide original field data on local experiences of violence. However, the depth and breadth of existing scholarship on Nigeria mitigate this limitation by offering richly detailed empirical accounts (Comolli, 2015; Thurston, 2017). Second, interpretive analysis is inherently subjective, as it depends on the researcher's theoretical and normative commitments. This risk is addressed by engaging multiple scholarly perspectives and explicitly acknowledging debates and disagreements within the literature (Bryman, 2016; Reno, 2011).

Finally, the complexity of Nigeria's conflict environment means that no single framework can capture all its dimensions. By integrating political economy, security studies, and international relations theory, this study aims not to produce a totalizing explanation but to offer a coherent and analytically powerful interpretation of how non-state violence, state authority, and global forces intersect (Kaldor, 2006; Boege et al., 2009; National Intelligence Council, 2023).

RESULTS

The interpretive analysis of Nigeria's conflict ecosystem reveals several interrelated patterns that redefine conventional understandings of insecurity, sovereignty, and governance. First, the Nigerian state does not simply confront non-state actors from a position of autonomous authority; rather, it is deeply enmeshed in a web of informal alliances, economic dependencies, and political bargains that blur the boundary between state and non-state power (Reno, 2011; Boege et al., 2009). In the Niger Delta, for example, militant groups have historically negotiated with federal authorities and oil companies, sometimes receiving amnesties, contracts, or political recognition in exchange for ceasing hostilities (Ikelegbe, 2006; Obi, 2009). These arrangements demonstrate that violence functions as a bargaining tool within a hybrid political economy rather than as a purely oppositional force.

Second, Boko Haram's evolution illustrates how ideological insurgency is intertwined with local grievances and global narratives of jihad (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012; Comolli, 2015). Far from being a monolithic terrorist

organization, Boko Haram has fragmented into factions that pursue different strategies, from territorial control to criminal predation. This fragmentation reflects both internal ideological disputes and external pressures from military campaigns and regional counterterrorism initiatives, themselves shaped by international security agendas (Thurston, 2017; National Intelligence Council, 2023). The result is a fluid insurgent landscape in which violence is constantly reconfigured in response to political and economic incentives.

Third, rural banditry in northern Nigeria reveals how criminal violence emerges from the collapse of traditional livelihoods, environmental degradation, and the erosion of customary authority (Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2016; Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). Bandit groups engage in cattle rustling, kidnapping, and extortion, but they also provide forms of protection and redistribution in areas where the state is absent or predatory. This dual role challenges simplistic distinctions between crime and governance, reinforcing the idea of hybrid security orders (Boege et al., 2009; Reno, 2011).

Fourth, youth emerge as both victims and agents of violence, shaped by unemployment, social exclusion, and political manipulation (Mercy Corps, 2016). Young men in particular are recruited into militant, bandit, or vigilante groups that offer income, identity, and a sense of belonging. This dynamic is not unique to Nigeria but reflects broader global trends in which marginalized youth become key actors in new wars and non-state violence (Kaldor, 2006; Institute for Economics and Peace, 2021).

At a macro level, these patterns confirm that Nigeria's conflicts are embedded in a global security environment characterized by the diffusion of power away from states toward networks of armed groups, corporations, and transnational movements (Lake, 2010; Longley, 2022). Intelligence assessments emphasize that such environments are likely to persist, as technological change, climate stress, and geopolitical competition create new opportunities for non-state actors to mobilize and operate across borders (National Intelligence Council, 2023). Nigeria thus represents not an outlier but a paradigmatic case of how contemporary insecurity is produced and managed.

DISCUSSION

The Nigerian case compels a fundamental rethinking of how violence, sovereignty, and political order are conceptualized in both African studies and international relations. Traditional realist theory, as articulated by Waltz (1979), assumes that the state possesses a monopoly on legitimate violence and that international politics is primarily a struggle among such units. Yet Nigeria's hybrid security order reveals that authority is fragmented across a multiplicity of actors whose legitimacy derives from economic control, religious authority, community protection, and transnational connections rather than from formal legal sovereignty (Boege et al., 2009; Reno, 2011).

From the perspective of new wars theory, Nigeria exemplifies how contemporary conflicts blur the boundaries between war, crime, and politics (Kaldor, 2006). Boko Haram's use of kidnapping for ransom, banditry's reliance on extortion, and Niger Delta militancy's engagement with oil theft all demonstrate that violence is embedded in economic networks that sustain armed groups while linking them to global markets (Comolli, 2015; Ikelegbe, 2006; Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). These dynamics challenge the notion that peace can be achieved simply by defeating insurgents militarily, because violence is structurally integrated into livelihoods and governance.

The role of non-state actors in Nigeria also resonates with broader debates about global civil society and transnational activism (Sikkink, 1998). Religious organizations, humanitarian groups, and advocacy networks operate alongside armed groups, sometimes mitigating violence and sometimes becoming entangled in it. Olojo (2021) shows how Nigeria's Inter-Religious Council seeks to build peace through dialogue, illustrating that non-state actors are not inherently destabilizing but can also be agents of reconciliation. This ambivalence underscores the need to move beyond binary distinctions between state and non-state, violent and peaceful.

Strategic intelligence assessments reinforce this interpretation by highlighting how global trends such as climate change, demographic pressure, and technological diffusion intensify local conflicts and empower non-state actors (National Intelligence Council, 2023). In Nigeria, desertification and competition over land exacerbate farmer-herder conflicts, while social media facilitates the spread of extremist narratives and the coordination of criminal networks (Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2016; Institute for Economics and Peace, 2021). These processes illustrate how local violence is inseparable from global structural forces.

Normatively, Nigeria's hybrid security order raises profound questions about peace and justice. Kant's vision of perpetual peace presupposed rational states bound by law, yet Nigeria's reality is one of overlapping legal, customary, and coercive authorities (Kant, 1795; Boege et al., 2009). Pursuing peace in such a context requires engaging with non-state actors not merely as enemies to be eliminated but as stakeholders in a negotiated political settlement (Lake, 2010; Berridge, 2015). This does not imply legitimizing violence but recognizing that sustainable peace must address the economic and social functions that armed groups currently fulfill (Mercy Corps, 2016; Reno, 2011).

The Nigerian case thus contributes to a broader reorientation of international relations theory toward a

post-Westphalian understanding of global order. In such an order, sovereignty is not a fixed attribute but a contested practice, constantly renegotiated among states, non-state actors, and international institutions (Lake, 2010; Sikkink, 1998). Nigeria's conflicts, situated within this global context, reveal both the dangers and the possibilities of hybridity: while fragmented authority fuels violence, it also creates spaces for innovative forms of governance and peacebuilding (Olojo, 2021; Boege et al., 2009).

CONCLUSION

Nigeria's multifaceted conflicts demonstrate that contemporary insecurity cannot be reduced to failures of state capacity or to the pathology of extremist groups. Rather, they reflect the emergence of hybrid political orders in which violence, governance, and economic survival are deeply intertwined within a globalized security environment (Kaldor, 2006; Boege et al., 2009; National Intelligence Council, 2023). By integrating insights from African studies, international relations, and strategic intelligence analysis, this article has shown that Boko Haram, Niger Delta militancy, and rural banditry are interconnected manifestations of a single, complex conflict ecosystem.

Understanding this ecosystem requires moving beyond state-centric and militarized approaches toward more inclusive and negotiated forms of governance that recognize the realities of non-state authority while embedding them within frameworks of accountability and peace (Reno, 2011; Olojo, 2021). Nigeria's experience thus offers critical lessons for global security, illustrating how the future of peace will be shaped not by the restoration of an idealized state monopoly on violence, but by the capacity to manage and transform hybridity in ways that promote human security and social justice (Mercy Corps, 2016; Lake, 2010).

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