

TRANS-BORDER SECURITY CHALLENGES AND NIGERIA'S RELATIONS WITH HER IMMEDIATE NEIGHBOURS, 1999–2023.

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of transborder security challenges on Nigeria's relations with its immediate neighbours—Benin Republic, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon—from 1999 to 2023. The study employs a qualitative analytical method involving content analysis of relevant documentary sources. A thematic approach is adopted to analyze the data. The findings reveal that Nigeria's border insecurity, particularly in the Lake Chad Basin and along the Benin–Niger frontier, has strained bilateral relations, disrupted trade, and undermined regional cooperation within ECOWAS. Although initiatives such as the Multinational Joint Task Force and the 2019 border closure policy were designed to address these challenges, they also exposed contradictions between national security imperatives and regional integration commitments. The study concludes that Nigeria's security challenges are deeply intertwined with the stability of its neighbours, and that sustainable regional peace requires multidimensional strategies combining security cooperation, socio-economic development, and diplomatic engagement.

Keywords: Trans-border Insecurity; Nigeria; Regional Relations; ECOWAS; Border Management.

Introduction

Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, Nigeria has faced a complex web of trans-border security challenges that have profoundly shaped its relations with its immediate neighbours—Benin Republic, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. The porous nature of Nigeria's borders, stretching over 4,000 kilometres, has created significant vulnerabilities, allowing the free movement of arms, illicit drugs, human traffickers, insurgents, and undocumented migrants across the frontiers.¹ These dynamics have not only heightened insecurity within Nigeria but also complicated her diplomatic relations with neighbouring states. Nigeria's position as the most populous and economically powerful country in West and Central Africa makes her regional security posture central to the stability of the entire sub-region. Consequently, the recurring threats of cross-border banditry, insurgency, smuggling, and refugee flows have compelled successive Nigerian governments to prioritise border security as a key component of national and regional policy.²

The Fourth Republic marked a period of both cooperation and contention in Nigeria's border diplomacy. On the one hand, Nigeria spearheaded regional security initiatives such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) against Boko Haram, which involved collaborative operations with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon.³ On the other hand, the persistence of mutual suspicion and the weak institutional capacity of border management agencies across the region hampered the effectiveness of these initiatives. The Boko Haram insurgency, which originated in northeastern Nigeria but rapidly spread into Chad, Cameroon, and Niger, exemplified how non-state armed groups exploit porous frontiers to sustain their operations. Moreover, smuggling activities across the Seme and Illela borders with Benin and Niger respectively undermined Nigeria's economic security, prompting controversial border closures in 2019—a move that strained bilateral relations with affected countries.⁴

Trans-border insecurity in West and Central Africa is deeply rooted in the colonial legacy of arbitrarily demarcated boundaries that divided ethnic groups and disrupted traditional systems of authority. These artificial frontiers continue to complicate postcolonial state-building and regional cooperation, as communities along the borders often prioritise kinship and economic ties over state loyalties. Nigeria's borders, particularly in the Sahelian and Lake Chad Basin areas, are home to pastoralist and trading communities whose transhumance patterns predate colonial rule. As a result, government attempts to enforce strict border control have frequently clashed with local realities, generating friction between border communities and state authorities. The intersection of these historical, economic, and socio-cultural factors underscores the complexity of Nigeria's trans-border security environment.

Conceptual Clarification and Theoretical Framework

The concept of trans-border security refers to the protection and regulation of activities that occur across or near national frontiers, which have implications for the sovereignty, stability, and territorial integrity of states. In the African context, and particularly in Nigeria, trans-border security encapsulates the state's ability to monitor and control the movement of people, goods, and information across its international boundaries.⁵ However, the artificial nature of most African borders—drawn by colonial powers without regard to ethnic, cultural, or ecological realities—has made border governance a complex and multifaceted issue. Trans-border security challenges in Nigeria include smuggling, human and arms trafficking, terrorism, cross-border banditry, and unregulated migration. These threats are compounded by weak border institutions, corruption among security personnel, and the economic marginalisation of border communities. Additionally, Nigeria's extensive borders with Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon are largely porous and inadequately policed; allowing non-state actors to exploit the gaps for criminal or insurgent activities.⁶ Consequently, the concept of trans-border security in Nigeria is not only a question of physical territorial control but also a matter of governance, development, and diplomacy. It involves balancing national sovereignty with regional cooperation and ensuring that border management does not alienate local populations whose daily livelihoods depend on cross-border trade and mobility. The nexus between internal and external security is also critical, as instability in neighbouring states often spills over into Nigeria, undermining both national and regional peace. Therefore, trans-border security is best understood as a multidimensional construct linking domestic governance, regional politics, and international cooperation.

The theoretical foundation for analysing Nigeria's trans-border security challenges and her relations with neighbouring states can be effectively anchored on Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as propounded by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. The theory posits that the security dynamics of states are best understood not in isolation but as part of regional clusters, where the security concerns of one state are intrinsically linked to those of its neighbours.⁷ In the case of Nigeria, her security threats, such as terrorism, arms trafficking, and smuggling, cannot be detached from developments in neighbouring countries like Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, which face similar vulnerabilities within the Lake Chad Basin. The theory underscores that regional security is interdependent, meaning instability in one country can easily spill over into others, necessitating cooperative security mechanisms.

Historical Overview of Nigeria's Border Relations with Neighbouring States

Nigeria's border relations with her immediate neighbours—Benin Republic, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon—have deep historical roots dating back to the precolonial and colonial eras. Before colonial partition, the territories that now form Nigeria and its neighbours were linked through extensive networks of trade, migration, and kinship. Precolonial polities such as the Sokoto Caliphate, the Kanem-Borno Empire, and various Yoruba kingdoms maintained open frontiers where merchants, pastoralists, and travellers moved freely across vast spaces. The colonial demarcations imposed by Britain, France, and Germany during the late 19th and early 20th centuries disrupted these historical linkages and divided ethnic groups such as the Hausa, Kanuri, and Yoruba between different colonies.⁸ These artificial boundaries were largely determined by European convenience rather than indigenous realities, creating what scholars such as J. Herbst have termed “partitioned communities”.⁹ Consequently, the people on either side of Nigeria's modern borders continued to maintain familial, cultural, and economic ties despite the new territorial lines. The enduring strength of these ties has remained both a source of social cohesion and a challenge to postcolonial state sovereignty, as border communities often prioritise kinship networks over national allegiance. Thus, the origins of Nigeria's trans-border challenges can be traced to the legacies of colonial boundary-making, which created porous and often contested borders.

Following Nigeria's independence in 1960, the new government inherited the colonial boundaries and sought to assert control over them within the framework of international law. Nigeria, like other African states, subscribed to the principle of *uti possidetis juris*, which preserved colonial borders as a means of preventing territorial disputes.¹⁰ However, the practical enforcement of border control proved difficult due to the vastness of Nigeria's frontiers and the weak administrative capacity of its border institutions. Relations with immediate neighbours were generally cordial during the early post-independence years, with Nigeria playing a leadership role within the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in promoting peaceful coexistence. Nonetheless, tensions occasionally arose over cross-border smuggling, illegal migration, and differing colonial legacies—particularly between Anglophone Nigeria and Francophone neighbours like Benin and Niger.¹¹ Border trade continued to flourish informally, driven by disparities in economic policies, such as Nigeria's import restrictions and fuel subsidies, which created lucrative opportunities for smuggling. Although these exchanges contributed to local economies, they also undermined Nigeria's fiscal stability and strained diplomatic relations. Thus, while Nigeria's early foreign policy emphasised good neighbourliness, it was continually tested by the complex realities of managing inherited borders and transnational networks.

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed significant developments in Nigeria's border diplomacy as the country sought to consolidate its regional leadership. Nigeria's oil boom of the 1970s expanded cross-border trade and labour migration, especially into Benin and Niger, where economic opportunities were limited.¹² However, the subsequent economic downturn of the 1980s and the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) by many West African states intensified smuggling and informal cross-border commerce. The closure of Nigeria's borders in 1984 under the Buhari military regime was a response to growing concerns over illegal trade, particularly in petroleum products, but the policy also strained relations with neighbouring countries. During this period, Nigeria's relations with Cameroon were overshadowed by the long-standing territorial dispute over the Bakassi Peninsula, a region rich in oil and fisheries.¹³ Although both countries avoided open conflict, tensions simmered until the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling in 2002, which awarded the peninsula to Cameroon. The case illustrated how colonial boundary legacies continued to define postcolonial interstate relations in the region. Hence, the late 20th century underscored the fragility of Nigeria's border governance and the persistence of disputes rooted in colonial demarcations.

In the Fourth Republic (1999–2023), Nigeria's border relations with her neighbours were increasingly shaped by the interplay between transnational security threats and regional cooperation frameworks. The emergence of Boko Haram in 2009 transformed the Lake Chad Basin into a major security hotspot, as insurgents operated across the borders of Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon.¹⁴ This crisis prompted the revitalisation of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), an initiative that facilitated joint military operations among the affected states under the auspices of the Lake Chad Basin Commission. Despite these efforts, mutual suspicion, poor intelligence sharing, and differing national priorities often hindered effective collaboration. Meanwhile, Nigeria's relations with Benin Republic were strained by persistent smuggling, leading to the unilateral border closure in 2019 as part of efforts to curb illegal trade and boost local agriculture.¹⁵ The decision sparked diplomatic friction, as neighbouring states viewed it as a violation of ECOWAS trade protocols. Nonetheless, Nigeria's subsequent reopening of the borders in 2021 signalled a renewed commitment to regional economic integration. These developments demonstrated how economic and security imperatives have continued to intersect in shaping Nigeria's border diplomacy.

Trans-border Security Challenges in the Fourth Republic (1999–2023)

Since the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1999, Nigeria has grappled with a multiplicity of trans-border security challenges that have tested the strength of its institutions and foreign policy. The return to democratic rule coincided with the liberalisation of trade and movement within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which, while enhancing regional integration, inadvertently facilitated the proliferation of illicit transnational activities. Smuggling became one of the most persistent problems along Nigeria's western borders with Benin Republic, particularly through the Seme and Idiroko corridors. Items such as rice, petroleum products, and used vehicles flowed illegally across the borders, undermining Nigeria's economic policies and depriving the government of vital customs revenue.¹⁶ These smuggling networks were often protected by powerful cartels and corrupt border officials who exploited institutional weaknesses to enrich themselves. The situation was exacerbated by disparities in trade tariffs and the porous nature of Nigeria's borders, which extend for thousands of kilometres with limited surveillance capacity. The resulting economic sabotage prompted the Nigerian government to adopt periodic border closures, most notably in August 2019, under President Muhammadu Buhari, as part of efforts to curb smuggling and protect local industries.¹⁷ Although this decision was justified on security and economic grounds, it strained relations with neighbouring countries and revealed the difficulty of balancing national sovereignty with regional cooperation.

Another major dimension of Nigeria's trans-border insecurity during the Fourth Republic was the emergence and expansion of terrorism, particularly the Boko Haram insurgency. Originating in Borno State in the late 2000s, the group quickly transformed from a local religious sect into a transnational terrorist organisation with operational cells in Niger, Chad, and Cameroon.¹⁸ The porous frontiers of the Lake Chad Basin provided strategic depth for the insurgents, allowing them to conduct cross-border raids, recruit fighters, and smuggle arms. The crisis exposed the limitations of Nigeria's border surveillance mechanisms and the absence of a coherent regional intelligence-sharing framework. The insurgency also triggered a massive humanitarian crisis, displacing millions of people across borders and creating refugee flows into Chad, Niger, and Cameroon.¹⁹ In response, Nigeria and its neighbours revitalised the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), a cooperative security mechanism under the Lake Chad Basin Commission. Despite recorded military successes, such as the recapture of key territories between 2015 and 2018, the insurgency's adaptability and cross-border nature have persisted. This situation underscores the argument of the Regional Security Complex Theory that security threats in one state cannot be isolated from those of its neighbours. Hence, Boko Haram's endurance remains emblematic of the regional interconnectedness of insecurity in West and Central Africa.

In addition to terrorism, cross-border banditry and arms trafficking have emerged as critical security threats in northwestern and north-central Nigeria. Since around 2011, heavily armed criminal gangs—often referred to as bandits—have operated across the borders of Nigeria and Niger, attacking villages, abducting civilians, and engaging in cattle rustling.²⁰ The ready availability of small arms and light weapons in the Sahel, facilitated by porous borders and the aftermath of the 2011 Libyan conflict, has empowered these non-state actors.²¹ The bandits' mobility across the Nigeria–Niger frontier has made it difficult for security forces to contain their activities, while local complicity and weak law enforcement exacerbate the situation. The infiltration of weapons from Chad and Niger has also intensified intercommunal clashes between farmers and herders, particularly in Kaduna, Zamfara, and Katsina States. These dynamics reveal that trans-border insecurity is not limited to insurgency but extends to criminal economies that thrive on weak governance and underdevelopment in border regions. Consequently, the Nigerian government's reliance on military operations without corresponding socio-economic interventions has achieved limited success. The persistence of these security challenges continues to undermine public confidence and cross-border cooperation with neighbouring states.

Human trafficking, irregular migration, and the smuggling of narcotics have also constituted significant trans-border threats during the Fourth Republic. Nigeria's strategic geographic location as a gateway between West and Central Africa has made it a transit and destination country for traffickers. The trafficking of persons—particularly women and children—across borders into countries such as Benin, Niger, and Cameroon, as well as through the trans-Saharan routes to North Africa and Europe, has grown steadily despite legal frameworks like the 2015 Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act. Similarly, the movement of narcotics, counterfeit goods, and other contraband items has flourished due to weak customs enforcement and pervasive corruption. While regional institutions such as ECOWAS and the West African Police Chiefs Committee have sought to harmonise policies against transnational organised crime, their efforts have been hampered by poor funding and weak coordination. Furthermore, the economic desperation caused by unemployment and poverty in border regions has provided fertile ground for recruitment into trafficking and smuggling networks. This nexus between insecurity and economic deprivation underscores the multidimensional nature of Nigeria's trans-border challenges. It also illustrates how security governance cannot be separated from development policy, particularly in the country's peripheral areas.

Impact of Trans-border Insecurity on Nigeria's Bilateral and Regional Relations

Trans-border insecurity has had profound implications for Nigeria's bilateral relations with her immediate neighbours—Benin Republic, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon—between 1999 and 2023. The most visible impact has been the tension between the imperatives of national security and the pursuit of regional integration. Nigeria's frequent border closures, particularly the 2019–2020 episode under President Muhammadu Buhari, exemplify this dilemma. The border closure, ostensibly aimed at curbing smuggling and enhancing food security, significantly disrupted cross-border trade and inflamed relations with Benin and Niger. Benin Republic, whose economy is heavily dependent on re-export trade with Nigeria, suffered considerable losses, leading to diplomatic protests at both bilateral and ECOWAS levels. While Nigeria justified the action as a measure to protect its sovereignty and economy, neighbouring states interpreted it as an affront to regional economic cooperation and the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Goods and Persons.²² The episode exposed the fragility of Nigeria's economic diplomacy and highlighted how internal security concerns could undermine regional solidarity. Moreover, the border closure eroded public trust in Nigeria's commitment to ECOWAS integration objectives, prompting debates about whether the country's hegemonic posture in West Africa is compatible with collective regional interests.²³ In essence, the management of trans-border insecurity has often placed Nigeria in a paradoxical position of being both the guarantor and disruptor of regional stability.

In the northeast, the Boko Haram insurgency has fundamentally reshaped Nigeria's relations with Chad, Niger, and Cameroon. The group's cross-border activities compelled Nigeria to recalibrate its foreign policy from a posture of benign neglect to one of active regional engagement through security cooperation.²⁴ The revitalisation of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) under the Lake Chad Basin Commission marked a turning point in Nigeria's regional diplomacy, reflecting the recognition that no single state could effectively combat transnational terrorism alone.²⁵ Joint military operations, intelligence sharing, and border patrols became hallmarks of Nigeria's security collaboration with its neighbours. However, the implementation of these initiatives has not been without friction. For instance, Nigeria and Cameroon have clashed over cross-border operations and accusations of inadequate coordination, while Chad's occasional withdrawal of troops from joint operations has exposed the fragility of the alliance.²⁶ Despite these challenges, the MNJTF remains a symbol of regional solidarity and has achieved notable successes, including the reduction of Boko Haram's territorial control between 2016 and 2019. Nonetheless, the persistence of insecurity in the Lake Chad Basin underscores the limitations of ad hoc military cooperation and the need for long-term socio-economic stabilisation strategies. Thus, while trans-

border terrorism has fostered unprecedented regional collaboration, it has equally revealed the limits of Nigeria's leadership in managing shared security threats.

Beyond security cooperation, trans-border insecurity has also influenced Nigeria's broader regional leadership and foreign policy reputation within ECOWAS and the African Union. Nigeria has historically projected itself as a regional hegemon, using its economic and military power to promote peace and stability in West Africa. However, the rise of domestic insecurity and porous border management has increasingly constrained this role. The perception of Nigeria as a country unable to control its own borders has weakened its diplomatic credibility and moral authority to lead regional security initiatives. This credibility deficit was evident in ECOWAS deliberations over regional counterterrorism frameworks and migration management, where Nigeria's voice, though influential, was occasionally tempered by its internal vulnerabilities. Moreover, the humanitarian spillover effects of Nigeria's insecurity—especially refugee flows into Niger, Chad, and Cameroon—have strained bilateral relations by imposing additional socio-economic burdens on these states. The resulting friction has sometimes led to mutual recriminations, with neighbouring countries accusing Nigeria of failing to contain the crises that originate within its borders. Consequently, trans-border insecurity has not only destabilised regional economies but also complicated Nigeria's diplomatic engagements and eroded the cooperative spirit that once underpinned its regional leadership.

Trans-border insecurity has further deepened the challenge of balancing domestic political interests with regional obligations. Nigeria's foreign policy since 1999 has often oscillated between idealism and pragmatism, reflecting competing pressures from internal constituencies and regional expectations. On the one hand, Nigeria's policymakers recognise that regional security cooperation is indispensable for national stability; on the other, domestic political actors often prioritise short-term nationalist measures that resonate with local audiences. The border closure, for example, was domestically celebrated as a patriotic stand against economic sabotage, but regionally condemned as protectionist and unilateral. Similarly, Nigeria's occasional reluctance to fully implement ECOWAS migration and customs protocols has stemmed from fears of further insecurity, including the influx of arms and insurgents. These tensions illustrate how trans-border insecurity has forced Nigeria into a delicate balancing act—one that often pits its national interests against its regional commitments. The result has been an inconsistent foreign policy posture that oscillates between cooperation and coercion, thereby diminishing Nigeria's reliability as a regional partner. Ultimately, Nigeria's approach to border management continues to mirror its broader struggle to reconcile domestic governance challenges with its aspirations for continental leadership.

Lastly, the persistence of trans-border insecurity has reinforced the urgency of rethinking Nigeria's regional engagement through a multidimensional lens that transcends military solutions. The proliferation of criminal networks, insurgent movements, and unregulated migration flows demands a more holistic policy approach that integrates security, development, and diplomacy. The Nigerian government's increasing cooperation with international partners, such as the European Union and the African Union Border Programme, represents a growing recognition of this complexity. Moreover, Nigeria's renewed interest in joint border infrastructure projects and the digitisation of border management signals an emerging shift toward modernisation and shared responsibility with neighbouring states. However, the sustainability of these initiatives depends on mutual trust, political will, and the institutionalisation of cooperative frameworks. If Nigeria can successfully harness regional cooperation to address the root causes of insecurity—such as poverty, unemployment, and environmental degradation—it may yet restore its image as a credible leader in West Africa. In sum, trans-border insecurity has served both as a catalyst and a constraint for Nigeria's regional diplomacy, compelling the state to confront the reality that its security is inseparable from that of its neighbours.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the transborder security challenges confronting Nigeria and their implications for the country's relations with its immediate neighbours—Benin Republic, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon—between 1999 and 2023. The objective was to assess how porous borders, smuggling, insurgency, and cross-border criminality have shaped Nigeria's bilateral and regional engagements during the period under review. The study found that Nigeria's borderlands have remained highly vulnerable due to weak institutional control, corruption, and socio-economic marginalisation of border communities. Consequently, these vulnerabilities have provided safe havens for transnational criminal networks, arms traffickers, and insurgents, particularly the Boko Haram group operating in the Lake Chad Basin. The study also revealed that Nigeria's efforts to curb these threats—through border closures, military collaboration under the Multinational Joint Task Force, and engagement in ECOWAS protocols—have produced mixed outcomes. While such measures have occasionally strengthened Nigeria's security posture and regional cooperation, they have also strained relations with neighbouring states and exposed tensions between national sovereignty and regional integration.

The study concludes that transborder insecurity has significantly influenced Nigeria's foreign policy orientation, compelling a gradual shift from passive diplomacy to proactive regional engagement. However, Nigeria's approach has often been reactive and fragmented, undermining its long-term leadership role in West Africa. The persistence of smuggling, terrorism, and illegal migration highlights the inadequacy of purely militarised strategies, instead calling for a holistic framework that integrates border development, intelligence cooperation, and people-centred diplomacy. To consolidate regional stability, the study recommends institutional reforms to enhance border governance, the modernisation of surveillance infrastructure, and the strengthening of multilateral platforms such as ECOWAS and the Lake Chad Basin Commission. By embracing cooperative security and development-oriented diplomacy, Nigeria can transform its borders from conflict zones into corridors of peace and prosperity, thereby reinforcing both national and regional stability.

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