Border Management and Insecurity in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria's vast and porous land and maritime borders pose major challenges to effective border management, significantly contributing to the country's insecurity. The numerous unofficial crossing points, difficult terrains, and limited surveillance systems enable illicit activities such as small arms proliferation, terrorism, human and drug trafficking, cattle rustling, and irregular migration. These transnational crimes worsen internal conflicts and criminal networks. Weaknesses in Nigeria's border governance—stemming from inadequate funding, corruption, poor inter-agency coordination, and weak political commitment—have created opportunities for groups like Boko Haram, bandits, and secessionists to smuggle weapons, recruit fighters, and conduct cross-border attacks. The unchecked movement of people and goods also strains local economies, heightens ethnic tensions, and deepens socio-economic instability in border regions. This study emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to border security that integrates advanced surveillance technologies, intelligence gathering, inter-agency cooperation, regional partnerships, and community engagement. Strengthening the capacity of border personnel and addressing the marginalization of border communities are vital for building trust and enhancing security. Effective border management, therefore, is essential not only for combating insecurity but also for achieving lasting peace and sustainable national development.

Keywords: Border Management, Insecurity, Terrorism, Smuggling, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Borders are essential features of modern states, representing both geographical boundaries and symbolic markers of sovereignty. Effective border management is crucial for maintaining territorial integrity, facilitating legitimate trade, and ensuring national security. In Nigeria, border management has gained prominence due to persistent insecurity challenges, including terrorism, smuggling, arms proliferation, human trafficking, and cross-border crimes that threaten internal stability and economic development (Okumu, 2010). As the most populous country in Africa with over 200 million people, Nigeria's security is not only a domestic concern but also a regional and continental priority. The country's porous borders, shared with neighboring states such as Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Benin, have remained difficult to monitor, thus providing fertile ground for insecurity to thrive (Eze, 2021).

Nigeria's borders are vast, stretching over 4,000 kilometers of land and maritime frontiers, much of which remain poorly demarcated and inadequately policed (Onuoha, 2013). The porous nature of these borders has facilitated the uncontrolled movement of people, goods, and illicit weapons, thereby compounding the country's internal security challenges. In recent decades, terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) have exploited these weaknesses to infiltrate Nigeria and launch deadly attacks. Additionally, smuggling activities, particularly of petroleum products, agricultural goods, small arms, and light weapons, continue to undermine Nigeria's economy and exacerbate violent conflicts (Akinyemi & Omotola, 2019). Consequently, border insecurity has become one of the most pressing national security concerns in Nigeria.

The management of Nigeria's borders is further complicated by structural and institutional challenges. Weak governance, corruption among border officials, inadequate surveillance technology, and limited inter-agency

coordination undermine effective border control (Okolie, 2019). Moreover, the socio-economic realities of border communities, who often depend on informal cross-border trade for survival, create conditions where state regulations are resisted or ignored (Adewumi, 2020). These dynamics point to a complex interplay between security, governance, and livelihoods in border regions, underscoring the need for a comprehensive and balanced approach to border management.

The implications of ineffective border management for Nigeria's national security are profound. The influx of small arms and light weapons has fueled violent crimes, banditry, and communal clashes across the country (Aghedo & Osumah, 2014). Human trafficking and irregular migration not only pose humanitarian concerns but also strain Nigeria's bilateral relations with neighboring countries. Additionally, uncontrolled borders contribute to the persistence of organized crime networks that operate transnationally, challenging the capacity of the Nigerian state to exercise full sovereignty (Oluwatayo, 2021). These realities reinforce the argument that border security is a cornerstone of Nigeria's broader internal security architecture.

In response, the Nigerian government has adopted several measures to improve border management, including the deployment of security agencies such as the Nigeria Immigration Service, Nigeria Customs Service, and the Nigerian Army to border areas. Policies such as the 2019 border closure aimed at curbing smuggling and boosting local production demonstrate the state's recognition of the problem, although such policies have produced mixed results (Adeleke, 2020). Nigeria has also engaged in bilateral and multilateral collaborations with neighboring countries and regional bodies like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to strengthen border security and combat transnational crimes. Despite these initiatives, the persistence of insecurity suggests that existing measures remain insufficient and require re-examination.

Understanding the nexus between border management and insecurity in Nigeria is, therefore, crucial to designing effective policies for peace and stability. As the global security environment continues to evolve with rising transnational threats, Nigeria's border governance must balance security imperatives with economic integration and human security concerns. This calls for a holistic framework that integrates technological innovation, regional cooperation, community engagement, and institutional reforms. This paper, therefore, examines the relationship between border management and insecurity in Nigeria. It interrogates the historical and contemporary challenges of securing Nigeria's borders, highlights the security threats arising from porous borders, and evaluates the responses of the Nigerian state and regional actors. By situating the discussion within broader debates on state sovereignty, security governance, and regional cooperation, the paper contributes to understanding how border management can be reformed to address insecurity more effectively in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Borders have long been central to the study of statehood and international relations, not only as geographical lines but also as political, social, and economic constructs that embody sovereignty, identity, and authority. Traditionally, borders are understood as territorial markers that define the jurisdiction of states and differentiate them from others. They are critical for maintaining order, facilitating legitimate economic activities, and safeguarding national security. Yet, when poorly managed, borders can also become entry points for insecurity, illicit flows, and governance challenges (Newman, 2006).

Border management refers broadly to the policies, institutions, and practices that states employ to regulate and monitor the movement of people, goods, and services across their territorial boundaries. It encompasses legal frameworks, administrative procedures, security operations, and diplomatic engagements designed to balance the imperatives of sovereignty, security, and integration (Andreas, 2003). Scholars emphasize that border management is not merely a security function but a multidimensional process involving economic, political, and social considerations (Okumu, 2010). For instance, while border controls aim to prevent the infiltration of criminal elements, they must also facilitate trade, regional integration, and people-to-people interactions that sustain borderland communities.

Academic discourse on border management draws from different theoretical lenses. From the realist perspective, borders are primarily instruments of sovereignty and territorial control. Realists argue that the survival of the

state depends on the ability to defend its borders from external threats through military and security measures (Wæver, 1995). In contrast, liberal and constructivist perspectives highlight cooperation, institutional frameworks, and shared norms as vital for effective border governance, especially in a globalized world where threats transcend national boundaries (Rumford, 2006). Another strand of scholarship emphasizes the concept of "borderlands" regions adjacent to borders that are often socially and economically integrated despite formal divisions. This perspective highlights that borders are not only lines of separation but also zones of interaction, negotiation, and hybridity (Newman & Paasi, 1998). Consequently, effective border management must incorporate the interests and agency of borderland communities, whose everyday realities often conflict with state-centric security approaches.

Also, scholars generally distinguish between "hard" and "soft" approaches to border management   . Hard strategies focus on coercive measures, including military deployment, policing, the erection of fences and walls, surveillance technologies, and immigration restrictions (Andreas & Biersteker, 2003). Such strategies are rooted in the realist tradition, emphasizing sovereignty and security over integration. Examples include Israel's separation wall, the United States–Mexico border wall, and militarized patrols in conflict-prone areas. In Nigeria, hard border strategies are exemplified by the deployment of the military in the northeast to counter Boko Haram insurgents and the use of joint border patrols to deter smuggling and arms trafficking (Onuoha, 2013).

By contrast, soft strategies emphasize cooperation, information sharing, regional integration, and the promotion of legal trade and people-to-people exchanges as tools of border security (Adewumi, 2020). This approach aligns with liberal theories of international relations, which view interdependence and collaboration as more sustainable means of promoting security. Soft strategies include bilateral agreements, community policing, joint development projects, and frameworks such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Protocol on Free Movement of Persons. In practice, soft border management recognizes that communities on either side of a border often share cultural, linguistic, and economic ties, making cooperative approaches more legitimate and effective than militarization alone (Okolie, 2019).

Globalization has significantly reshaped the conceptualization of border management. While some scholars argue that globalization has eroded the relevance of borders by increasing flows of capital, information, and people, others maintain that borders remain central but have been reconfigured to adapt to new realities (Rumford, 2006). The securitization of migration, the rise of transnational terrorism, and the global illicit economy have underscored the importance of borders as sites of control and regulation (Andreas, 2003).

Border studies and border management continue to be enriched by recent empirical research, especially in Africa, which adds nuance to earlier theoretical debates. For example, Enugu State University of Science and Technology and the National Boundary Commission explored how poverty, corruption and porous borders combine to weaken governmental institutions' capacity for border governance in Nigeria. They argue that weak institutions, limited resources, and poor inter-agency coordination exacerbate insecurity along borderlands. journals.npsa-se.org.ng Similarly, studies on the Nigeria–Niger border show that cross-border crime—including arms trafficking, human smuggling, and drug distribution—is exacerbated by economic disparities and political instability; these factors allow non-state networks to exploit border porosity. journals.covenantuniversity.edu.ng

Public policy analyses also contribute to understanding how specific interventions succeed or fail. For instance, Idoniboye-Obu (2021) examined President Buhari's 2019 land border closure policy, using a human needs framework, to assess its implications. While security aims were cited, the study found mixed results in terms of trade interference, smuggling persistence via unofficial routes, and socio-economic disruption in border communities. Another study of the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol along the Nigeria-Benin border highlights the tension between regional integration and transnational organized crime: though protocols aspire to facilitation of movement, porous borders without adequate facilities or monitoring enable human trafficking and other illicit trade.

On the technological front, a 2025 study examining technology adoption by the Nigeria Immigration Service found that integration of digital systems, biometrics, data management, and modern monitoring tools correlates

positively with improved performance in border control functions. However, challenges of maintenance, staff training, corruption, and infrastructure continue to undermine effectiveness.

The theoretical literature has also been extended. Recent work ("Are Borders a Burden? Debates and Counter-Narratives on Nigeria's National Security") problematises the dominant narrative of "porosity" by showing how internal political patronage, state weakness, and domestic governance failures are often as, or more, important than the physical nature of borders in causing insecurity. This suggests that policies focused solely on sealing borders may overlook deeper drivers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Border management and insecurity are interlinked governance concerns in Nigeria, a state whose territorial integrity and internal cohesion continue to be undermined by porous frontiers, transnational crimes, and violent non-state actors. Nigeria's borders—spanning over 4,000 kilometres of land and 853 kilometres of coastline—connect it with four neighboring countries and the Gulf of Guinea. Yet, these borders are marked by institutional weakness, illicit flows, and security lapses that endanger national stability. To understand these dynamics, the Structural-Functionalist Theory provides a valuable analytical framework. It helps explain how the functions or dysfunctions of state institutions responsible for border management affect the larger social system's equilibrium, thus shaping patterns of insecurity.

Structural Functionalism, rooted in the works of Émile Durkheim (1895/1982) and developed by Talcott Parsons (1951) and Robert Merton (1968), views society as an organized system whose parts (institutions, norms, and roles) work together to maintain stability and social order. According to Parsons, every social structure performs functions that contribute to the survival and integration of the system, summarized by his AGIL schema—Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration, and Latency. When a component fails to perform its function adequately, the system experiences disequilibrium, which may manifest as conflict or insecurity (Parsons, 1951).

In Political Science, Structural Functionalism has been widely adopted as a framework for analyzing political systems, state institutions, and governance structures. Scholars such as Almond and Powell (1966) and Easton (1965) applied functionalist principles to explain how political institutions perform vital roles—such as interest articulation, rule-making, enforcement, and communication—that sustain political stability and legitimacy. Within this perspective, the political system is viewed as a subsystem of the larger social structure, interacting with economic, cultural, and security systems to maintain equilibrium. When political institutions, such as the legislature, executive, judiciary, or security agencies, fail to discharge their expected functions, dysfunctions emerge, resulting in instability, insecurity, or systemic breakdown. Therefore, Structural Functionalism provides an analytical lens through which the performance and interdependence of institutions—such as those managing borders and national security—can be assessed in maintaining political order and stability.

Applying this theory to border management in Nigeria implies seeing border institutions—customs, immigration, military, and intelligence agencies—as functional subsystems that maintain equilibrium between national sovereignty, security, and socio-economic development. Their effectiveness or failure directly influences Nigeria's internal order and international relations.

From a structural-functionalist viewpoint, border management constitutes a subsystem within the broader security and governance structure of the Nigerian state. Its core functions include territorial control, regulation of movement, facilitation of legal trade, and prevention of illicit flows (Andreas, 2003; Okumu, 2010). When these functions are effectively performed, they contribute to systemic stability—ensuring that economic, political, and social institutions operate within a secure environment.

In functionalist terms, border management performs both manifest and latent functions (Merton, 1968). The manifest functions are explicit and intended—such as preventing smuggling, controlling migration, and collecting customs revenue. The latent functions are unintended but consequential, including fostering cross-border cultural exchanges or providing livelihood opportunities for borderland communities. However, when

dysfunctions emerge—corruption among border officials, poor surveillance technology, or lack of inter-agency coordination—they disrupt the equilibrium, leading to insecurity.

Empirical studies reveal that Nigeria's borders have become zones of dysfunction due to systemic weaknesses. The Nigerian Immigration Service and Customs Service often face overlapping jurisdictions, inadequate funding, and bureaucratic inefficiency (Enugu State University of Science and Technology, 2023). These dysfunctions impede their adaptive capacity (Parsons's "A") and goal attainment ("G"), thereby undermining the overall integration ("I") of the national security system. In the Nigerian context, the institutions charged with border management—the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), Nigeria Customs Service (NCS), National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), and the armed forces—represent the structural components performing specific roles toward system stability. Their coordination reflects the interdependence typical of a functionalist system. When functioning optimally, the agencies provide surveillance, enforce trade regulations, and prevent cross-border infiltration by criminal or terrorist groups (Onuoha, 2013).

However, institutional inefficiency and corruption produce dysfunctions that reverberate across the security architecture. Studies show that officers often engage in rent-seeking behavior, allowing smugglers or traffickers to bypass checkpoints (Adewumi, 2020). Such practices undermine the legitimacy of the state and enable the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW), fueling insurgency and banditry in the north (Okolie, 2019). In functionalist terms, the dysfunction of one subsystem triggers strain in others: poor border control enables criminal economies, which in turn threaten political stability and social cohesion.

Parsons's idea of system equilibrium underscores the need for feedback mechanisms—policy reform, capacity building, and community engagement—to restore balance. Without such corrective functions, insecurity proliferates and the system gravitates toward anomie, a condition Durkheim described as normlessness resulting from institutional failure (Durkheim, 1895/1982).

Functionalism also emphasizes interconnectedness among social institutions. Border management in Nigeria does not exist in isolation but interacts with the economy, politics, and social order. For instance, smuggling and human trafficking across the Nigeria–Benin and Nigeria–Niger borders are not merely criminal issues but reflections of structural unemployment, poverty, and weak governance. These socio-economic dysfunctions reinforce insecurity, illustrating Merton's notion of strain—where societal goals (prosperity, stability) become unattainable through legitimate means, prompting deviant alternatives (Merton, 1968).

Economic marginalization of border communities further compounds the problem. Many residents depend on informal cross-border trade for survival. When hard security measures, such as border closures or militarization, restrict livelihoods, they produce latent dysfunctions by pushing communities toward illicit networks (Idoniboye-Obu, 2021). Consequently, rather than enhancing security, rigid enforcement may deepen alienation and resistance—undermining the integration function that sustains societal balance. Moreover, the technological dimension of border management in Nigeria remains underdeveloped. A recent study found that adoption of biometric and digital surveillance systems improved detection capacity but faced maintenance and corruption challenges (African Journal of Business and Management, 2025). From a functionalist lens, technological modernization represents the adaptive function, enabling institutions to adjust to environmental changes. When technological adaptation fails, it signifies systemic rigidity that breeds vulnerability to transnational threats.

Structural Functionalism advocates reform through functional realignment rather than revolutionary overhaul. Therefore, restoring equilibrium in Nigeria's border management system requires aligning institutional roles, reinforcing capacity, and enhancing coordination. The theory suggests that each agency must clearly understand its function within the security architecture to avoid redundancy and conflict.

First, improving inter-agency coordination through joint task forces and centralized data systems would strengthen integration. Second, addressing latent social needs of border communities—such as infrastructure, education, and inclusion in policy formulation—would reduce the appeal of illicit economies and promote community-based intelligence (Lead City University, 2022). Third, Nigeria must deepen regional cooperation within ECOWAS, aligning with the soft-border management model that emphasizes information sharing and

legal trade facilitation (ECOWAS, 2021). These reforms correspond to Parsons's AGIL framework by enhancing adaptability, goal clarity, institutional integration, and legitimacy. Finally, Structural Functionalism underscores the importance of normative consensus. Insecurity flourishes when societal norms are weak or contested. The Nigerian state must therefore promote a shared sense of national identity and legitimacy across its borderlands. A coherent border management policy rooted in transparency, accountability, and community participation would reinforce the collective moral order, thereby reducing the incidence of transnational crime and insurgency.

Historical Context of Border Management in Nigeria

The history of border management in Nigeria cannot be understood without revisiting its colonial roots. Nigeria's borders, like many in Africa, were products of the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, during which European powers partitioned the continent into spheres of influence without regard to pre-existing cultural, ethnic, or political boundaries (Asiwaju, 2001; Nugent, 2002). In this context, Nigeria's boundaries were arbitrarily drawn to serve colonial administrative convenience and economic exploitation rather than indigenous realities. These boundaries divided ethnic groups such as the Yoruba between Nigeria and Benin, the Hausa-Fulani between Nigeria and Niger, the Kanuri between Nigeria and Chad, and the Efik between Nigeria and Cameroon (Miles, 1994). This colonial legacy produced borders that were essentially "artificial" in nature, severing communities that had long histories of social, cultural, and commercial interaction (Herbst, 2000). As a result, border communities often maintained cross-border relations in defiance of imposed colonial demarcations, creating a structural tension between the lived experiences of border peoples and the expectations of the state (Nugent, 2002).

During the colonial period, British administrators introduced rudimentary forms of border control, primarily to secure colonial economic interests. Customs posts and excise duties were established to regulate trade, with the main aim of maximizing revenue rather than enhancing security (Asiwaju, 2001). However, these measures were largely ineffective, as the vast frontiers of Nigeria—stretching over 4,000 kilometers of land borders and a significant coastline—were impossible to police effectively with the limited resources at the disposal of the colonial government (Anene, 1970). Colonial authorities also selectively encouraged cross-border migration to meet labor demands in mining, railway construction, and agriculture. Migrant workers, particularly from Niger and Chad, were allowed into northern Nigeria under regulated conditions (Adepoju, 2005). At the same time, informal and unregulated movements continued across porous borders. Thus, while colonial administrations sought to institutionalize border management, enforcement remained weak, leaving a legacy of porousness and informality that persists today (Okolie, 2019).

At independence in 1960, Nigeria inherited these colonial boundaries and the attendant challenges of managing them. The newly sovereign state was confronted with the task of consolidating national sovereignty while also maintaining cordial relations with its neighbors. However, weak institutional capacity, corruption, and limited technological infrastructure hindered effective border control (Onuoha, 2013). The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) marked a critical moment in the history of border management. The secessionist Republic of Biafra relied heavily on arms smuggling and cross-border support from sympathizers in neighboring countries. The porous borders with Cameroon and other neighbors facilitated clandestine inflows of weapons, food, and humanitarian supplies (Osaghae, 1998). The federal government's inability to completely seal the borders demonstrated both the strategic importance of border security and the limitations of Nigeria's institutional capacity. This period also cemented the idea that national survival and sovereignty were intimately tied to border control (Aghedo & Osumah, 2014).

The oil boom of the 1970s transformed Nigeria into an economic hub, attracting labor migrants from neighboring West African countries such as Niger, Chad, Ghana, and Benin. Migration across porous borders was largely tolerated during the period of economic prosperity, as migrants contributed to Nigeria's labor force (Adepoju, 2005). However, the economic downturn of the early 1980s, coupled with rising unemployment and inflation, triggered resentment against foreign migrants. This culminated in the mass expulsions of undocumented immigrants in 1983 and 1985, during which over two million people—mostly from Ghana and Niger—were expelled from Nigeria (Afolayan, 1988).

These expulsions highlighted the link between border management, economic realities, and national security. Borders became politicized as the state sought to control migration flows during economic crises. At the same time, Nigeria's membership in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), established in 1975, introduced new contradictions. The ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons encouraged regional integration and economic cooperation by permitting freer cross-border movement (Adepoju, 2005). However, while this strengthened economic ties, it also created vulnerabilities by facilitating the exploitation of Nigeria's porous borders for smuggling and other transnational crimes (Okolie, 2019).

The 1990s marked the rise of new threats linked to border insecurity. Following the end of the Cold War, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) across Africa exacerbated instability (Aghedo & Osumah, 2014). Nigeria's borders, especially in the north, became conduits for illicit weapons from conflict zones in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Chad. These arms fueled communal conflicts, armed robbery, and ethnic militias within Nigeria. At the same time, the collapse of state institutions during prolonged military rule undermined border enforcement. Corruption within customs, immigration, and security agencies meant that smugglers and traffickers could operate with impunity (Eze, 2021). Border communities, neglected by successive governments, turned increasingly to informal and illegal cross-border trade as a survival strategy, further entrenching the culture of weak enforcement and complicity between state agents and non-state actors (Okolie, 2019).

The rise of Boko Haram in the 2000s, and its evolution into a transnational insurgency after 2009, brought border management to the center of Nigeria's security agenda. Boko Haram and its splinter group, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), exploited porous borders with Chad, Niger, and Cameroon to establish sanctuaries, smuggle weapons, and conduct cross-border raids (Zenn, 2020). The insurgency demonstrated that border insecurity had moved beyond smuggling and migration issues to become a fundamental threat to state survival. In response, Nigeria collaborated with neighboring states through the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), established under the Lake Chad Basin Commission. This regional initiative underscored the recognition that border insecurity could not be managed unilaterally but required cooperative, multilateral frameworks (Aghedo & Osumah, 2014).

Another defining moment came with Nigeria's unilateral border closure between August 2019 and December 2020. The closure was intended to combat smuggling, particularly of rice and fuel, and to stimulate local agricultural production (Adeleke, 2020). While the policy achieved some short-term gains in reducing smuggling, it also disrupted regional trade, violated ECOWAS free movement protocols, and strained relations with Benin and Niger (Eze, 2021). The episode reflected Nigeria's persistent reliance on ad hoc, securitized approaches to border management, often at the expense of long-term regional cooperation and economic integration.

Therefore, the foregoing historical trajectory of border management in Nigeria highlights enduring challenges rooted in colonial boundary-making, weak institutional frameworks, and socio-economic pressures. From colonial-era customs posts to post-independence expulsions, from the Biafran War to the Boko Haram insurgency, Nigeria's experience demonstrates the centrality of borders in questions of sovereignty, security, and development. Each phase of Nigeria's history has reinforced the reality that border management is not merely a technical or administrative issue, but a deeply political one intertwined with state-building, economic survival, and regional relations.

Contemporary Challenges of Border Management in Nigeria

Nigeria's border management in the contemporary era is confronted with multifaceted challenges that undermine both national security and economic stability. These challenges are rooted in structural, institutional, and transnational factors, making effective border control an elusive goal. With Nigeria's extensive borders stretching over 4,000 kilometers across land and maritime spaces, poor governance capacity and rising transnational crimes have combined to exacerbate insecurity in ways that threaten state authority and sovereignty (Akinyemi & Omotola, 2019). The following subsections highlight the most pressing contemporary challenges of border management in Nigeria.

Porous Borders and Inadequate Infrastructure: One of the most persistent challenges is the porous nature of Nigeria's borders. Large segments of the frontiers with neighboring countries such as Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon remain poorly demarcated and inadequately monitored (Onuoha, 2013). The absence of effective surveillance infrastructure, such as modern scanners, drones, and electronic monitoring systems, means that vast stretches of the borders remain vulnerable to illegal crossings. This problem is compounded by rugged terrains, including forests, deserts, and rivers, which security agencies often lack the resources to effectively patrol (Okolie, 2019). As a result, smugglers, arms traffickers, and insurgent groups exploit these gaps to conduct illicit activities across borders.

A vivid example is the Lake Chad Basin, where Nigeria shares borders with Chad, Niger, and Cameroon. The region has become a hotspot for Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) militants who frequently move across the porous boundaries to evade military operations. The absence of clear demarcation and sustained border surveillance has allowed these groups to establish transnational networks, smuggle weapons, and recruit fighters from neighboring states (Adebajo, 2020). Similarly, along the Nigeria–Benin border, widespread smuggling of petroleum products, rice, and small arms persists despite periodic government crackdowns. These cross-border activities not only deprive Nigeria of significant customs revenue but also undermine national security and contribute to the proliferation of illegal arms and insurgent violence within the country.

Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons: The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) constitutes another major challenge. According to the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa (UNREC, 2016), West Africa hosts millions of illicit weapons, with Nigeria being a principal hub. Weak border management enables the inflow of firearms that fuel violent crimes, communal clashes, banditry, and terrorism (Aghedo & Osumah, 2014). For instance, Boko Haram and bandit groups in the North-East and North-West have acquired much of their weaponry through porous borders with Chad and Niger. The inability of security agencies to stem this flow highlights a systemic failure in arms control at Nigeria's borders.

A clear example is the 2011 United Nations Building bombing in Abuja, where investigations revealed that some of the explosives and assault rifles used by Boko Haram were trafficked through the Niger–Chad corridor. Intelligence reports indicated that these weapons originated from Libyan stockpiles looted after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 and were smuggled into Nigeria through the Sahel (Edeko, 2011). Similarly, in the North-Western states of Zamfara and Katsina, bandit networks have been sustained by steady access to firearms obtained via illegal routes along the Niger border. Local security operatives have repeatedly intercepted smugglers transporting AK-47 rifles, ammunition, and rocket-propelled grenades concealed in trucks and livestock convoys (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). These cases demonstrate how porous borders and weak enforcement mechanisms have allowed non-state actors to acquire sophisticated weapons, thereby escalating the scale and lethality of violence across Nigeria.

Corruption and Institutional Weaknesses: Border management in Nigeria is also undermined by corruption within the security and regulatory agencies. Reports indicate that customs and immigration officers often collude with smugglers and traffickers in exchange for bribes, thereby enabling illicit trade and criminal infiltration (Adewumi, 2020). Institutional rivalries and poor inter-agency cooperation between the Nigeria Immigration Service, Nigeria Customs Service, and military forces further weaken border governance. The duplication of roles and lack of synergy lead to inefficiency, while bureaucratic bottlenecks hinder the deployment of modern management practices (Okolie, 2019). This governance deficit makes border security highly vulnerable to compromise.

A notable example occurred in 2019 along the Seme–Krake border between Nigeria and Benin, where several customs and immigration officers were arrested for facilitating large-scale rice and fuel smuggling operations. Investigations revealed that officials received bribes to overlook contraband shipments, despite the government's border closure policy intended to curb illegal imports and protect local industries (Premium Times, 2019). Such practices not only sabotaged Nigeria's trade and fiscal objectives but also demonstrated how entrenched corruption neutralizes official border enforcement measures.

Another example is the illegal arms importation scandal of 2017, in which security operatives at the Lagos seaports intercepted containers loaded with 661 pump-action rifles. Subsequent investigations by the Department of State Services (DSS) and the Nigeria Customs Service exposed that the shipment had cleared multiple checkpoints with the collusion of senior customs officers (Vanguard, 2017). This incident underscored how institutional compromise and weak oversight mechanisms facilitate the entry of dangerous weapons into the country, thereby exacerbating insecurity and violent crime. These cases collectively reveal that corruption and institutional fragmentation remain central obstacles to effective border management in Nigeria.

Cross-Border Terrorism and Insurgency: Nigeria's border regions have become theaters for cross-border terrorism, particularly in the Lake Chad Basin area. Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) frequently exploit the porous frontiers with Cameroon, Niger, and Chad to move fighters, weapons, and logistics (Eze, 2021). The regional nature of insurgency underscores the limitations of unilateral Nigerian strategies in securing borders. Despite military offensives, the continued cross-border mobility of insurgents reflects a serious weakness in Nigeria's border management architecture, while also highlighting the need for enhanced regional cooperation (Adeleke, 2020).

A prominent example occurred in 2015 during the capture and recapture of Gamboru-Ngala and Damasak—twin border towns in Borno State. Boko Haram militants repeatedly crossed from Nigeria into Cameroon and Niger after military confrontations, regrouped, and then launched renewed attacks on Nigerian territories. The fluidity of movement across the border allowed the insurgents to evade capture and maintain operational resilience (International Crisis Group, 2016). This demonstrated how the lack of coordinated surveillance and joint military operations across frontiers hampers Nigeria's counter-terrorism efforts.

Another striking instance is the 2018 attack on a military base in Metele, Borno State, where ISWAP fighters reportedly advanced from hideouts along the Niger–Chad axis. Intelligence sources confirmed that the attackers had exploited unmonitored border corridors to infiltrate Nigerian territory with heavy weaponry, resulting in the deaths of dozens of soldiers (Campbell, 2019). The ease with which insurgents move through these transnational spaces highlights the inadequacy of Nigeria's border management system and underscores the necessity of sustained collaboration with neighboring states through frameworks such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). These examples reinforce that without integrated regional security strategies, Nigeria's borders will remain vulnerable to terrorist infiltration and cross-border violence.

Smuggling and Economic Sabotage: Smuggling remains one of the most pervasive border challenges, causing both economic and security consequences. Smuggled petroleum products, rice, vehicles, and textiles undermine Nigeria's domestic industries and reduce state revenue through tax evasion (Akinyemi & Omotola, 2019). The closure of Nigeria's land borders in 2019 was partly justified as a response to widespread smuggling, but it also exposed the structural weaknesses of border enforcement. While the closure temporarily curbed the inflow of contraband goods, it disrupted the livelihoods of border communities and strained relations with neighboring states (Adeleke, 2020). This suggests that Nigeria's reliance on ad hoc, protectionist measures is unsustainable without comprehensive reforms in border governance.

A notable example is the persistent smuggling of petroleum products across the Nigeria–Benin border, particularly through the Seme and Idiroko corridors. Subsidized fuel from Nigeria is often diverted and sold at higher prices in neighboring countries, leading to significant economic losses for the Nigerian government. In 2018 alone, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) estimated that over 10 million liters of petrol were illegally exported daily through smuggling networks, aided by corrupt border officials and weak surveillance (NNPC, 2018). Another example is the massive rice smuggling crisis of 2017–2019, which flourished despite Nigeria's import restrictions designed to protect local agriculture. Thousands of bags of foreign parboiled rice entered the country through unofficial routes from Benin Republic, flooding markets in Lagos, Ogun, and Kwara States. The Nigeria Customs Service reported that several seizures of contraband rice were linked to sophisticated syndicates with international supply chains operating through Cotonou Port (Premium Times, 2019). This illicit trade weakened local rice production efforts and undercut the government's agricultural diversification agenda.

A further illustration is the influx of used vehicles and textiles through the Niger border at Jibia and Illela, where smugglers exploit poorly monitored routes and the complicity of customs agents to avoid import duties (Okolie, 2019). These smuggling activities deprive Nigeria of substantial customs revenue while fueling corruption and distorting local markets. Collectively, such examples reveal that smuggling is not merely an economic crime but a multidimensional governance challenge that undermines state authority, regional cooperation, and border security.

Human Trafficking and Irregular Migration: Another pressing issue is human trafficking and irregular migration facilitated through poorly controlled borders. Nigeria is both a source and transit country for trafficking victims, many of whom are smuggled across borders to destinations in North Africa, Europe, and the Middle East (Okumu, 2010). Weak enforcement capacity at border posts and complicity of corrupt officials enable traffickers to operate with relative ease. Beyond the humanitarian crisis, irregular migration also poses regional security concerns, as it intersects with organized crime, human rights abuses, and loss of human capital. A vivid example is the Benin City–Agadez–Libya trafficking corridor, which has become one of the most notorious routes for the movement of Nigerian migrants and trafficking victims. Young women and men are transported from Edo and Delta States through Niger's Agadez region en route to Libya and eventually to Europe. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2018), thousands of Nigerians rescued in Libya reported having been trafficked by organized criminal networks operating freely across Nigeria's northern borders with Niger. Many victims suffered sexual exploitation, forced labor, and abuse in transit camps controlled by militias.

Another example is the Kano–Katsina–Maradi corridor, where human smugglers exploit unguarded crossing points between Nigeria and Niger Republic. Traffickers often disguise their operations as legitimate transport services, collecting money from migrants seeking to reach North Africa. In 2020, the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS) intercepted over 500 migrants along this route, including minors being trafficked to Libya for domestic work and sexual exploitation (NIS, 2020). Despite these interceptions, weak penalties and corruption among border officers have allowed the illicit networks to continue thriving.

A further instance is the Calabar–Cameroon maritime route, which has emerged as a trafficking channel to Central Africa and the Gulf of Guinea. Victims—particularly young women—are transported by boats through the Bakassi Peninsula and onward to Gabon and Equatorial Guinea for forced labor and prostitution. The National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP, 2021) reported several cases involving traffickers colluding with boat operators and immigration officials to facilitate such movements. These examples underscore the complex nexus between weak border governance, corruption, and transnational organized crime, all of which perpetuate Nigeria's human trafficking and irregular migration crisis.

Weak Regional and International Cooperation: Although Nigeria is a member of ECOWAS and has committed to regional agreements on free movement and joint security, cooperation in border management remains weak. Many neighboring states lack the capacity or political will to fully collaborate with Nigeria on intelligence sharing and joint patrols (Okumu, 2010). Furthermore, overlapping mandates between ECOWAS, the Lake Chad Basin Commission, and other regional bodies often create confusion and limit coordinated responses. The gap between policy commitments and practical implementation has hindered Nigeria's ability to tackle transnational border-related threats effectively (Oluwatayo, 2021).

A key example is the limited effectiveness of the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment (1979). While the protocol was designed to promote regional integration and legal migration, it has been exploited by criminal networks who move contraband goods, arms, and trafficking victims across borders under the guise of legitimate travel. For instance, despite Nigeria's efforts to regulate cross-border mobility, smuggling and trafficking continue unchecked through the Seme and Illela borders due to weak cooperation from customs and immigration agencies in Benin and Niger (Eze, 2021). This highlights how the absence of harmonized enforcement mechanisms among ECOWAS member states undermines the protocol's objectives and compromises regional security.

Another example is the limited coordination within the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) operating under

the Lake Chad Basin Commission. Although Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon pledged joint military collaboration to combat Boko Haram and ISWAP, operational disagreements, logistical constraints, and national sovereignty concerns have weakened the alliance. In several instances, insurgents fled Nigerian offensives by retreating into neighboring territories, where partner forces were either slow to respond or lacked capacity to pursue them effectively (International Crisis Group, 2020). These gaps in real-time coordination and intelligence sharing demonstrate the persistent institutional and political obstacles that frustrate regional border governance efforts in West and Central Africa.

Technological Deficiencies and Capacity Gaps: Technological deficiencies represent a significant barrier to effective border governance. Unlike advanced states that deploy biometric systems, satellite surveillance, and artificial intelligence for monitoring, Nigeria continues to rely largely on manual inspection and outdated practices (Okolie, 2019). Security personnel are often undertrained and poorly equipped to deal with contemporary threats. Limited investment in capacity-building and modern technology has created vulnerabilities that criminal groups exploit with increasing sophistication.

For example, the e-border management system launched in 2012 by the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS) with the goal of integrating biometric data collection and electronic surveillance has achieved minimal success. Many border posts, particularly in remote areas of Adamawa, Katsina, and Sokoto States, remain without reliable internet connectivity, power supply, or functional biometric equipment (Adewuyi, 2020). Consequently, the verification of travelers and goods is still conducted manually, allowing illegal migrants, traffickers, and smugglers to cross undetected. The failure to sustain this project underscores the broader problem of weak digital infrastructure and inconsistent policy implementation in Nigeria's security sector.

Another example is the ineffectiveness of the Integrated Customs Information System (ICIS) introduced by the Nigeria Customs Service to automate trade monitoring and reduce smuggling. Despite its design to enhance transparency and data sharing among agencies, poor interconnectivity between customs posts and the absence of real-time data analytics have rendered the system largely inefficient. Criminal networks have taken advantage of these gaps by using forged documents and manipulating entry logs to move contraband goods through land borders and seaports (Abdullahi, 2021). These lapses illustrate how technological backwardness, coupled with bureaucratic inertia, continues to undermine Nigeria's border governance capacity.

Technological Adoption: The inadequate adoption and integration of modern technology in surveillance, data management, and border control operations possess a major problem to border management in Nigeria. Most border posts still rely on manual inspection and outdated communication systems, making it difficult to monitor vast and porous borders effectively. The absence of advanced tools such as biometric scanners, drones, and real-time surveillance cameras limits the ability of security agencies to detect illegal crossings and smuggling activities. For instance, despite Nigeria's membership in the ECOWAS biometric passport system, several border checkpoints still lack the infrastructure to verify such documents digitally, leading to delays and security loopholes that facilitate cross-border crimes.

Training of Border Personnel: Inadequate training of border personnel remains a significant challenge to effective border management in Nigeria. Many officers lack the specialized knowledge required to handle modern surveillance equipment, manage digital databases, or identify sophisticated methods of trafficking and smuggling. This skills gap often results in inefficient screening, corruption, and human rights abuses at border posts. For example, at the Seme border between Nigeria and Benin Republic, poorly trained customs and immigration officers have been reported to mishandle the use of electronic cargo-tracking systems introduced to monitor goods, leading to system failures and persistent revenue leakages.

Coordination among Agencies: Weak coordination and overlapping mandates among various border management agencies hinder operational efficiency in Nigeria. Institutions such as the Nigeria Immigration Service, Nigeria Customs Service, and National Drug Law Enforcement Agency often operate independently, leading to duplication of efforts and inter-agency rivalry. This lack of synergy obstructs intelligence sharing and coordinated responses to cross-border threats. A clear example is the 2019 border closure policy ("Operation Swift Response"), during which conflicting directives from the Customs Service and Immigration Service led to

confusion and inconsistent enforcement across border points, undermining the overall objective of curbing smuggling and enhancing border security.

Arising from the foregoing, it is obvious that the contemporary challenges of border management in Nigeria are deeply interconnected, reflecting weaknesses in state capacity, institutional corruption, regional insecurity, and socio-economic pressures. These challenges have created an environment where smuggling, terrorism, arms trafficking, and human trafficking thrive, further exacerbating insecurity within the Nigerian state. Addressing them requires not only strengthening institutions and technology but also enhancing regional cooperation and adopting holistic approaches that balance security imperatives with economic and social realities.

Strategies for Effective Border Management in Nigeria

The persistent challenges of weak border governance in Nigeria have triggered debates on effective policy responses and strategies. As Africa's most populous state and a regional power, Nigeria's ability to secure its borders has profound implications not only for internal stability but also for the security and integration of West Africa. Addressing border insecurity requires a multidimensional approach that integrates institutional reforms, technological innovation, regional cooperation, and socio-economic interventions (Adeleke, 2020).

Strengthening Institutional and Legal Frameworks

One of the primary strategies for effective border management is the strengthening of Nigeria's institutional and legal frameworks. The Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), Nigeria Customs Service (NCS), and the Armed Forces are central actors in border governance; however, overlapping mandates and bureaucratic inefficiencies often hinder effective coordination (Okolie, 2019). Clear delineation of roles, improved inter-agency collaboration, and enhanced training are essential to improve operational effectiveness.

Legal reforms are equally necessary. Nigeria's current border security legislation is fragmented, with outdated laws that inadequately address contemporary threats such as cybercrime, human trafficking, and terrorism. Updating these laws in line with international standards will enhance accountability and ensure that agencies have the legal authority to confront evolving border challenges (Oche, 2020).

Adoption of Technology and Intelligence-Led Policing

In the digital era, technology plays a critical role in border security. Nigeria's reliance on manpower-intensive border policing has proven ineffective against sophisticated transnational criminal networks. The adoption of surveillance drones, biometric identification systems, satellite monitoring, and electronic databases for tracking migrants and goods would greatly enhance Nigeria's border management capacity (Chidozie, 2019). Intelligence-led policing must complement technological innovation. Enhancing the collection, analysis, and sharing of intelligence among agencies—both domestically and with regional partners—would enable proactive responses to threats rather than reactive measures. For example, the establishment of the National Border Management Strategy (NBMS) emphasizes intelligence-driven operations as a cornerstone of reform (Akinyemi & Omotola, 2019).

Regional and International Cooperation

Given the transnational nature of insecurity, border management cannot be achieved by Nigeria alone. Regional cooperation within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and bilateral agreements with neighboring states are vital. ECOWAS' Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment provides opportunities for legal cross-border trade and migration, but Nigeria must balance openness with the need for security (Adepoju, 2020).

Collaborating with Chad, Cameroon, and Niger in joint border patrols and intelligence sharing has proven effective in the fight against Boko Haram, yet such initiatives need to be institutionalized rather than ad hoc (Onuoha, 2013). At the international level, partnerships with the African Union (AU), the United Nations Office

on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and donor agencies can provide both technical expertise and funding for modern border control initiatives.

Community Engagement and Borderland Development

Border management strategies must also incorporate human security and socio-economic development. Many Nigerian border communities suffer from poverty, marginalization, and neglect, making them vulnerable to criminal recruitment and complicit in smuggling activities (Adewumi, 2020). Effective border security requires winning the trust of these communities through inclusive governance, provision of basic infrastructure, and alternative livelihoods.

Community policing and cross-border community dialogues can strengthen the relationship between local residents and security agencies, thereby reducing hostility and fostering intelligence sharing. As Aghedo and Osumah (2014) argue, securitization without local buy-in often fails, as communities continue to collaborate with smugglers and insurgents to survive. Thus, integrating borderland development with security initiatives is a long-term but necessary strategy.

Addressing Corruption and Capacity Deficits

Another key policy response is the fight against corruption within security and customs agencies. Corruption enables the smuggling of arms, drugs, and people, undermining formal security efforts (Eze, 2021). Transparent recruitment processes, improved welfare for border personnel, and strict enforcement of accountability mechanisms can help reduce the prevalence of corruption. Capacity building is equally vital. Training border personnel in modern surveillance techniques, intelligence gathering, and human rights–compliant practices will enhance professionalism and efficiency. International training programs and exchange missions with countries experienced in advanced border management could provide valuable capacity development for Nigerian security agencies (Okumu, 2010).

Balancing Security with Regional Integration

Finally, strategies for effective border management must balance the dual goals of security and integration. Nigeria's leadership role in West Africa requires it to champion regional economic cooperation while securing its borders against illicit flows. Policies such as selective border closures—like the 2019 closure—undermine trust with neighbors and disrupt legitimate trade (Adeleke, 2020). Instead, smarter border management approaches that separate licit from illicit flows, supported by technology and intelligence, are preferable.

CONCLUSION

Border management remains a fundamental determinant of national security, state sovereignty, and regional stability in Nigeria. The paper has demonstrated that Nigeria's borders—spanning thousands of kilometers across land and maritime boundaries—are porous and weakly managed, which has profound consequences for internal security, economic development, and the preservation of national sovereignty. Beginning with the historical context, it was established that Nigeria inherited artificially drawn colonial borders, which disregarded ethnic, cultural, and economic ties. This legacy has made contemporary border governance more complex, as communities along the frontiers maintain strong cross-border networks that sometimes weaken state authority. The literature further reinforced that border security is not merely a question of territorial defense but one of governance, cooperation, and the balance between security and legitimate movement of people and goods.

The contemporary challenges examined in this paper highlighted the multidimensional nature of border insecurity. Nigeria's borders are characterized by insufficient surveillance, inadequate infrastructure, corruption among security personnel, weak inter-agency coordination, and poor community engagement. These weaknesses have created opportunities for smuggling, human trafficking, arms proliferation, terrorism, and unregulated migration, all of which exacerbate insecurity within the country. Moreover, globalization and regional

integration under frameworks like ECOWAS, while offering economic opportunities, have further complicated Nigeria's ability to regulate cross-border movement. The literature consistently reveals that weak border governance has amplified internal crises such as terrorism, banditry, and organized crime.

The implications of weak border management are far-reaching for Nigeria's security and development. On one hand, the unchecked flow of arms and fighters into the country fuels insurgencies like Boko Haram in the Northeast and banditry in the Northwest. On the other hand, the loss of customs revenue through smuggling undermines economic stability and deprives the state of critical resources. Additionally, the inability to effectively regulate the borders has eroded citizens' trust in the state's capacity to protect them, further straining state–society relations. Ultimately, porous borders are not only a security threat but also a governance deficit, undermining Nigeria's broader efforts at national development and democratic consolidation.

In response to these challenges, Nigeria has developed a range of policies and strategies aimed at strengthening border governance. These include the establishment of agencies like the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS) and Nigeria Customs Service (NCS), increased deployment of joint border patrols, regional collaborations with neighboring states, and initiatives to modernize surveillance through the use of technology such as drones and biometric systems. While these strategies mark important steps, their effectiveness has been constrained by issues of corruption, limited political will, inadequate funding, and overlapping mandates among security institutions. The paper underscores that reforms must therefore go beyond reactive measures to encompass systemic institutional strengthening, community engagement, and international cooperation.

In synthesizing the arguments, a key insight emerges: border management in Nigeria cannot be viewed solely as a military or law enforcement challenge. It requires a holistic governance framework that integrates security, economic, and social dimensions. Addressing border insecurity demands investments in modern technology, professionalization of security agencies, and strong accountability mechanisms to curb corruption. Equally important, border communities must be recognized as stakeholders rather than security risks; fostering local development and building trust will encourage their cooperation in surveillance and intelligence gathering. At the regional level, Nigeria must balance the benefits of ECOWAS free movement protocols with its domestic security imperatives, ensuring that integration does not compromise national sovereignty.

The findings of this paper therefore demonstrates that the persistence of insecurity in Nigeria is deeply tied to weaknesses in border management. Strengthening border governance is therefore not an option but a necessity for national stability, economic prosperity, and democratic sustainability. Nigeria must pursue a comprehensive, coordinated, and forward-looking strategy that combines institutional reform, community partnership, technological modernization, and international collaboration. Only through such an integrated approach can Nigeria transform its borders from spaces of vulnerability into gateways of opportunity, thereby consolidating both security and development in the twenty-first century.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the structural-functionalist analysis of border management and insecurity in Nigeria, the study recommends the strengthening of institutional capacity and functional specialization among border management agencies. The Nigeria Immigration Service, Customs Service, and security agencies should clearly define and coordinate their respective roles to prevent overlap and inefficiency. Investment in modern surveillance technologies—such as drones, biometric systems, and real-time data integration—should be prioritized to enhance adaptive and regulatory functions within Parsons' AGIL framework. Furthermore, the government must ensure adequate funding, staff training, and accountability mechanisms to minimize corruption and improve institutional performance in securing Nigeria's borders.

Secondly, the study recommends a people-centered and community-based approach to border governance. Drawing from functionalist emphasis on social integration, the Nigerian state should recognize border communities as critical actors in national security. Engaging local populations through intelligence sharing, economic empowerment, and inclusive development initiatives can reduce their dependence on illicit cross-

border activities. Socio-economic investments in infrastructure, education, and healthcare will promote trust in state institutions, helping to restore equilibrium between the security apparatus and the social environment in which it operates.

Finally, the study advocates for enhanced inter-agency and regional cooperation to address transnational dimensions of insecurity. Nigeria should strengthen collaboration with neighboring states within the ECOWAS framework to promote information sharing, joint patrols, and harmonized border policies. Functionalist theory underscores the importance of systemic integration; hence, border management reform must be viewed as part of a broader governance restructuring that aligns domestic institutions with regional and international security mechanisms. Effective coordination at national and regional levels will not only improve territorial control but also foster political stability and sustainable development across West Africa.

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