

FEDERALISM AND NATIONAL SECURITY IN NIGERIA

Brendan Ikechukwu OHAEGBU,

PhD, Political Science Department, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Abuja, Nigeria

iykecore@gmail.com

Abstract

Nigeria's federal structure, shaped by colonial legacies, ethnic pluralism, and decades of military rule, centralizes security under federal authority through Section 214 of the 1999 Constitution. While this arrangement was intended to preserve unity and prevent secession, it has proven inadequate in addressing complex and localized threats such as Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast, banditry in the northwest, militancy in the Niger Delta, and separatist violence in the southeast. This paper interrogates the nexus between federalism and national security, raising two key questions: how centralized security control has affected responses to insecurity, and to what extent restructuring the federal system could enhance security without undermining political stability and rule of law. The study is anchored on Marxist theory, which explains security centralization as an instrument of elite domination, preserving access to resources and power at the expense of marginalized groups. Methodologically, it relies on secondary data, drawing on existing literature, policy reports, journal articles, and official documents to analyse the interplay between constitutional design, fiscal federalism, and security outcomes. The findings revealed that while centralized control ensures national cohesion, it fails to provide timely, context-sensitive responses to local threats, thereby fueling the rise of vigilantes and community self-help measures. The paper concluded that sustainable stability requires hybrid reforms that devolve policing under strict constitutional safeguards, ensure predictable fiscal transfers, and embed strong civilian oversight. The paper recommended that the National Assembly, Nigeria Police Force, National Human Rights Commission, and fiscal authorities should balance security responsiveness with democratic accountability.

Keywords: *Federalism, National Security, Centralized Security, State Policing, Political Stability, Rule of Law.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's federal structure, shaped by colonial legacies, ethnic diversity, and repeated military interventions, concentrates constitutional control of security in the centre while distributing political authority across states. Section 214 of the 1999 Constitution places the Nigeria Police Force and the armed forces under federal authority, a design intended originally to prevent

secessionist breakaways and to preserve territorial integrity after the 1967–1970 civil war. Over time, however, that centralised security architecture has strained under rising localised threats and sharp regional inequalities, producing tensions between the need for nationwide coordination and demands for local control over security.

From the late 2000s onwards Nigeria has faced a widening security landscape: Islamist insurgency in the northeast (Boko Haram/ISWAP), large-scale banditry and cattle-rustling in the northwest and north-central, oil-related militancy and criminality in the Niger Delta, and separatist agitation and “unknown gunmen” violence in the southeast. These overlapping threats expose gaps in responsiveness and local legitimacy: federal forces are often overstretched, while state and community actors lack formal authority and resources to mount sustained, lawful responses. Recent attacks on military bases and persistent insurgent operations show that national armed capabilities alone do not guarantee security on the ground (Udeh, 2024).

Political contestation over fiscal transfers and resource control further complicates national security. Regions that perceive economic exclusion or environmental harms, most notably parts of the Niger Delta and the southeast, have at times turned to violent or coercive strategies to press claims. Such grievances are interpreted by many scholars and practitioners as rooted in the current pattern of fiscal federalism and elite capture, which can make violence an attractive form of political bargaining for marginalised groups. Calls for “restructuring” or fiscal decentralisation therefore carry security implications: better revenue-sharing or local powers may reduce incentives for violence, but poorly managed decentralisation risks empowering local strongmen or militias (Mahdavi, 2020).

A central debate now is whether and how to devolve policing or create state/regional security formations without undermining human rights or creating competing armed actors. Proposals for state police recur frequently in legislative and civil society discourse; proponents argue state forces would improve local intelligence and accountability, while opponents warn of politicised policing and fragmentation. Some states already experiment with supplementary local security mechanisms (security trusts, community watches), but these operate in legal grey areas and vary widely in practice and oversight. The national conversation about security-sector reform hinges on finding constitutional, fiscal, and accountability mechanisms that permit local responsiveness while preserving the rule of law (Jonas, & Moio, 2018).

In short, Nigeria's federalism both shapes and is shaped by security challenges. The centralised legal monopoly on force has proved necessary for national cohesion but insufficient for the multi-dimensional threats that now stress the federation. Any sustainable path will require careful legal reform, a clearer division of responsibilities, predictable funding for local policing and social services, and strong civilian oversight to prevent abuse as security powers are adjusted. Recent incidents and legislative initiatives make this one of the most urgent policy debates in contemporary Nigeria.

It is based on this that the study raises the following research questions

1. How has the centralized control of security under Nigeria's federal structure affected the effectiveness of responses to insurgency, banditry, and separatist violence across different regions of the country?
2. To what extent can restructuring Nigeria's federal system enhanced national security without undermining political stability and rule of law?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Fiscal Federalism

Fiscal federalism denotes a classification of federalism. This arises from federalism, pertaining to the distribution of governmental duties and the financial interactions among different tiers of government. It is located inside a political framework known as federalism. Kapucu (2020) defines fiscal federalism as the financial exchanges among various levels of government within a federation. The notion was introduced by German-American economist Richard Musgrave in 1959. Arowolo (2011) contends that federalism serves as a governance structure delineating the distribution of tasks across several governmental tiers, together with suitable fiscal instruments for its implementation.

Arowolo (2011) contends that fiscal federalism allocates responsibility to the individual states. Nonetheless, these functions pertain to the financial resources available to each federating unit. Khemani (2001) examines this issue of the effective provision of public services within a federal structure. Jacob and Akintola (2016) assert that fiscal federalism significantly influences economic progress. Jacob and Akintola (2012) assert that appropriate fiscal arrangements among various government tiers in a federation will enhance economic development at each level and elevate individual well-being. The research presently examines several topics pertaining to national development within the context of fiscal federalism.

Federalism

Federalism is a political system employed by forty percent of the global population (Anderson, 2010). This governance approach is employed by democracies marked by extensive territory, substantial populations, and varied ethnic compositions (Jacob and Akintola, 2016). Fiscal federalism is a byproduct of federalism. Federalism is a political system that distributes governing authority between national and subnational entities, resulting in a federation (Olulu and Udeorah, 2018). It is a politically unique perspective that is ecologically varied and aggressively executed. Federalism posits that each level of government operates in a coordinated yet independent fashion within its specified jurisdiction and must possess sufficient taxing authority to utilise its own revenue streams. Federalism flourishes within an institutional framework defined by two characteristics that promote intergovernmental relations among the constituent states.

The military's participation in Nigerian administration significantly influenced the concept of federalism. Muhammad (2007) contends that "Nigeria's adoption of the federal system was not intended to address pre-independence challenges but, rather, as a sustainable strategy to mitigate a substantial threat to the future political stability of an independent Nigeria." This persistent strategy is based on a cooperative concept of federalism created through geopolitical restructuring. The transition from a three-regional framework to a twelve-state configuration, subsequently to a twenty-nine-state arrangement, and ultimately to the current thirty-six state structure, alongside ongoing demands for additional restructuring, renders the Nigerian federal system a notable subject in geopolitical history. Furthermore, it has been noted that many 'balancing acts' have been implemented over time to address the 'national question.' The history of federalism in Nigeria is characterised by numerous efforts to address the national question through state creation, constitutional amendments, conferences, fiscal federalism reviews, and various income allocation formulae (Ozohu-Suleiman and Ibori, 2020).

National Security

National security relates to the ability for self-defence. Chukwuemeka and Ernest (2025) claim that national security cannot be comprehended exclusively in military terms. The socio-economic and cultural dimensions of development, modernisation, and national integration are intrinsically connected to national security. Okoli and Ochim (2016) contend that national security encompasses the safeguarding of a political entity against diverse threats, including

political, social, economic, military, psychological, and technological elements. Akinyetun (2021) asserts that national security encompasses political resilience, human capital, economic frameworks, technological proficiency, industrial capacity, resource accessibility, and military strength. Holmes (1964) defines national security as the all-encompassing safeguarding of the state. The core tenet of national security is safeguarding the state against adversarial threats. It entails the deployment of military forces to defend the state against external threats and to secure state secrets. National security include national defence and the safeguarding of diverse interests, including economic and geopolitical considerations. This study defines national security as a state's provision of fundamental circumstances that ensure economic prosperity and safeguard human and state security from internal and external threats. Threats manifest in several forms of attacks, encompassing economic, political, religious, and technological dimensions, including cybercrime. A direct assault on individuals and entities, both governmental and private, aimed at diminishing their ability to attain economic success potentially afforded by the state, is a national security issue (Chukwuemeka, Alhassan & Kenchuks, 2025).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper adopted the Marxist theory as the theoretical framework. The theory, first advanced in the nineteenth century by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, offers a critical framework for examining the intersection between federalism and national security in Nigeria. Marxism emphasizes the centrality of economic relations and class struggles in shaping political institutions and state structures. Applied to Nigeria, Marxist analysis reveals that federalism and security policies are not merely neutral instruments for governance but are deeply embedded in struggles over economic resources, power, and class domination (Umearokwu, & Musa, 2025).

Nigeria's federal system evolved in response to ethnic and regional demands for autonomy, but Marxist scholars argue that the structure serves the interests of dominant political and economic elites rather than the ordinary population. The centralization of security powers in the federal government can be interpreted as a mechanism through which ruling elites maintain control over the means of coercion, ensuring the preservation of existing class and regional hierarchies. This becomes apparent in the deployment of federal security forces during crises in the Niger Delta, the northeast, or the southeast, where state violence often protects elite

economic interests, particularly oil revenues, rather than addressing the grievances of marginalized communities.

Umearokwu, & Musa, (2025), argued that, the recurrent insecurity in Nigeria reflects contradictions between a ruling class that benefits from centralized economic and political power, and marginalized groups whose material conditions foster discontent. Insurgency in the northeast, militancy in the Niger Delta, and separatist agitation in the southeast can be interpreted as resistance movements against structural exploitation, underdevelopment, and exclusion perpetuated by elite-controlled federalism. The national security challenges are thus rooted not simply in institutional weakness but in the inequitable distribution of resources and power within the federation.

The relevance of Marxist theory to this study lies in its capacity to expose the economic underpinnings of Nigeria's federalism and security dynamics. By focusing on class and material inequalities, Marxist analysis shifts the discussion from purely administrative reforms to structural questions of economic justice, resource control, and redistribution. It underscores why reforms such as state policing or decentralization may fail if they do not address deeper economic exploitation and elite capture of security institutions. In this way, Marxist theory provides a lens through which federalism and national security in Nigeria can be critically assessed, showing that meaningful stability requires confronting entrenched inequalities and transforming the socio-economic foundations of the state.

4. CENTRALIZED SECURITY CONTROL AND THE EFFECTIVENESS OF RESPONSES TO INSURGENCY, BANDITRY, AND SEPARATIST VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA'S FEDERAL SYSTEM

Nigeria's post-colonial federal architecture vests the constitutional monopoly of force at the centre, a design rooted in the memory of the 1967–1970 civil war and intended to protect territorial integrity. Scholars and policy analysts argue this centralization shapes how the state detects, prevents and responds to violent challenges, often producing a one-size-fits-all approach that struggles to address varied local dynamics. Debates over decentralizing policing including proposals for state police, repeatedly surface in the literature as a response to perceived federal shortcomings (Suleiman, 2015).

Azama, (2017) studies of the Boko Haram insurgency show the limits of central command in asymmetric warfare: federal military operations have regained territory at times but have not

fully neutralized insurgent capacity, and retaken areas often suffer from weak hold and poor civil-military coordination. Analysts emphasise that national deployments without calibrated local intelligence, reconstruction and community engagement leave vacuums that insurgents or criminal networks re-exploit. This pattern has driven calls for more granular, locally informed security arrangements.

Banditry and large-scale cattle-rustling in the northwest and north-central zones illustrate the problems of stretched federal responses and the rise of informal security actors. Recent studies document how state inability to provide persistent, accountable protection has incentivized communities to form vigilante groups and civilian task forces. These actors sometimes succeed in short-term deterrence but also risk human-rights abuses and long-term fragmentation of authority unless properly regulated and integrated into lawful policing frameworks. The literature therefore highlights a tension: local security capacity improves responsiveness but can produce parallel coercive structures if legal and fiscal oversight are absent (Chukwueme, Phionos & Agaba, 2019).

The Niger Delta case historically demonstrates how centralised control over oil revenues and security produced cycles of militant agitation and heavy-handed federal countermeasures. Research finds that militarised responses focused on repression rather than addressing structural economic grievances fuelled insurgent narratives and periodic escalation, while negotiated amnesties and development investments have had mixed success where governance deficits persist. This body of work frames resource politics as central to understanding why federal security responses may fail to achieve sustainable peace.

Separatist and “unknown gunmen” violence in the southeast reinforces the complexity facing a centralized security model. Human rights organisations and recent field studies record episodes where federal operations have been criticized for rights violations and for conflating peaceful political activism with criminality, moves that can deepen alienation and radicalise segments of the population. Scholars thus caution that any reform to policing or federal security must pair operational change with guarantees for civilian oversight, judicial accountability, and political dialogue.

Across these literatures a consistent conclusion emerges: centralised security control in Nigeria offers advantages for national cohesion and resource coordination but is insufficiently adaptive to localized threats. The literature converges on two policy implications: (1) strengthen

accountable local security capacity (including rigorous frameworks for any state policing) and (2) address political-economic grievances that drive mobilization. Future empirical work, the literature argues, should evaluate hybrid models that combine federal standards and resources with devolved operational authority under strict oversight.

5. RESTRUCTURING NIGERIA'S FEDERAL SYSTEM: BALANCING NATIONAL SECURITY, POLITICAL STABILITY, AND THE RULE OF LAW

Restructuring Nigeria's federal system to enhance security while protecting political stability and the rule of law has generated a rich and contested literature. Matta, & Bolli, (2022) argued that the country's over-centralized security architecture, rooted in the post-civil-war constitution and decades of military rule, has produced slow, sometimes blunt responses to locally specific threats. According to Jatau, (2025), that national deployments can win battles of terrain without resolving the local political, economic, and social grievances that regenerate violence; this recurring pattern has driven renewed calls for devolved security responsibilities, including proposals for state policing.

Proponents of restructuring stress that decentralizing operational control over policing and strengthening state-level security institutions would improve responsiveness, local intelligence, and democratic accountability. Recent policy commentary and legislative activity reflect that argument: the National Assembly and civil society have actively debated bills and frameworks that would permit state police, and proponents argue such reform would reduce dependence on overstretched federal forces and help prevent the proliferation of informal vigilante groups. Case studies of banditry and community self-defence in the northwest and north-central regions illustrate how local capacity, when properly regulated, can provide quicker, context-sensitive deterrence than distant federal units.

Critics, however, warn that devolving coercive power carries clear risks to political stability and rule of law. A substantial body of literature highlights the danger that state-controlled forces will be captured by local elites, used to suppress opposition, or become fragmented along ethnic and partisan lines, outcomes that could institutionalize impunity rather than reduce it. Nigeria's recent use of federal emergency powers in oil-producing Rivers State and the continuing parliamentary debates over restrictive security legislation (for example, counter-subversion proposals and related laws perceived to curb dissent) are cited by scholars as illustrations of how security lawmaking can tilt toward centralization or authoritarian drift

when political competition is intense. These dynamics underline the need for constitutional safeguards, independent oversight, and professionalization if any decentralization is to avoid backsliding.

Comparative and theoretical works in the literature recommend hybrid models: preserve federal standards for training, equipment, and human-rights compliance while granting states operational autonomy under clear legal frameworks and predictable fiscal transfers. Jatau, (2025) contended that that success depends on four interlinked reforms constitutional clarity on responsibilities, fiscal arrangements to fund local policing, robust civilian oversight mechanisms, and transitional measures to integrate informal security actors into accountable structures. Recent scholarship and policy reports also emphasize political inclusion and development interventions as complementary pillars; without addressing drivers such as economic marginalization and resource capture, institutional restructuring alone is unlikely to deliver sustainable security gains.

6. CONCLUSION

Nigeria's centralized security control has revealed both strengths and weaknesses in managing diverse threats such as insurgency, banditry, militancy, and separatist violence. While federal command has preserved national unity and coordinated large-scale operations, it has often failed to provide timely, context-sensitive responses to localized crises. Communities frequently experience a disconnect between federal forces and their specific security needs, leading to the growth of vigilante groups and informal security actors. The debate on restructuring reflects the urgent need for reforms that balance national cohesion with local responsiveness. However, such reforms must avoid fragmenting security structures or empowering elites to misuse force. Achieving stability requires an integrated approach that embeds accountability, strengthens rule of law, and addresses the socio-economic roots of insecurity.

Recommendations

1. National Assembly of Nigeria should enact constitutional amendments to establish state police, clearly defining operational boundaries, funding mechanisms, and oversight responsibilities.

2. Nigeria Police Force (NPF) and Ministry of Police Affairs should develop standardized training modules, emphasizing human rights and community policing, to ensure uniformity across federal and state security agencies.
3. National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and civil society organisations (CSOs) should be empowered to independently monitor security agencies, investigate abuses, and provide annual public reports to strengthen accountability.
4. Federal Ministry of Finance, Budget, and National Planning, working with Revenue Mobilisation Allocation and Fiscal Commission (RMAFC), should design equitable fiscal transfers to state security agencies, ensuring transparency and reducing over-dependence on federal disbursements.

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