



Military Operations and National Defence Policy in Nigeria; Evaluating Anti-Banditry Campaigns in the Northwest Region

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between Nigeria's national defence policy and military operations, focusing on the evaluation of anti-banditry campaigns in Northwestern Nigeria between 2015 and 2025. The persistent escalation of armed banditry, which has evolved from localized rural criminality into a complex and adaptive national security threat, has necessitated sustained military interventions through operations such as Sharan Daji, Harbin Kunama, Puff Adder, Sahel Sanity, Hadarin Daji, and the ongoing Fansan Yamma. The main objective of the study is to assess the effectiveness of these military operations within the framework of Nigeria's national defence policy and their impact on security outcomes in the region. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative design based on secondary data sources, including official security reports, policy documents, academic literature, and datasets from institutions such as ACLED, the National Bureau of Statistics, and international humanitarian agencies, using a descriptive and evaluative analytical approach. Findings reveal that although military operations have recorded notable tactical successes such as the disruption of armed networks and rescue of kidnapped victims, these gains remain largely temporary due to structural weaknesses including poor intelligence coordination, weak governance presence in rural areas, porous borders, and socio-economic deprivation. The study further establishes that armed banditry has significantly undermined national security by disrupting agricultural productivity, weakening human capital development through school attacks, increasing displacement, and eroding public trust in security institutions. It concludes that there is a persistent gap between Nigeria's military operations and sustainable security outcomes, recommending strengthened intelligence systems, improved inter-agency coordination, enhanced border security, and integration of socio-economic development strategies into counter-banditry policies.

Keywords: Armed banditry, national defence policy, military operations, Northwest Nigeria, security challenges, internal security.



1. Introduction

Nigeria's National Defence Policy is fundamentally designed to safeguard the country's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and internal stability against both external aggression and domestic security threats. Since the return to democratic governance in 1999, Nigeria's defence architecture has increasingly shifted from conventional territorial defence toward addressing asymmetric threats such as terrorism, insurgency, kidnapping, and banditry. The Federal Ministry of Defence emphasizes a modern, professional, and mission-ready Armed Forces capable of responding to evolving security challenges across the federation (Ministry of Defence, 2025). In recent years, defence planning has also prioritized joint operations, intelligence coordination, and inter-agency collaboration in response to growing insecurity in the North-West and other regions (Ministry of Defence, 2025). Furthermore, Nigeria allocated approximately ₦3.1 trillion to the defence sector in the 2025 national budget, reflecting the strategic importance of security in national development and governance (Ezenwajiobi & Ishaka, 2025).

Military operations have therefore become central instruments for implementing Nigeria's defence policy objectives. The Armed Forces of Nigeria (AFN) have conducted multiple internal security operations aimed at countering terrorism, insurgency, and organized criminal violence. Operations such as *Operation Hadarin Daji* in the North-West were specifically established to combat armed banditry, cattle rustling, kidnapping, and attacks on rural communities. According to Defence Headquarters reports, military operations in 2024 alone led to the neutralization of over 10,900 terrorists and criminal elements, the arrest of more than 12,500 suspects, and the rescue of over 7,000 kidnapped victims across different theatres of operation (Defence Headquarters, 2025). Similarly, the Nigerian government has continued to strengthen operational synergy among the military, intelligence agencies, and other security institutions to improve effectiveness against emerging threats (Ministry of Defence, 2025). Despite these efforts, concerns remain regarding inadequate logistics, porous borders, limited manpower, and the overstretching of military resources across several operational theatres simultaneously (Reuters, 2025).

The challenge of banditry in Northwestern Nigeria has emerged as one of the most serious internal security threats confronting the Nigerian state between 2015 and 2025. States such as Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, and Kebbi have experienced persistent attacks characterized by mass killings, village raids, abductions, illegal taxation, and cattle rustling. The region's insecurity has displaced thousands of residents, disrupted agricultural production, and deepened humanitarian crises. Reports indicate that armed groups operating in the North-West exploit weak governance structures, poverty, rural underdevelopment, and ungoverned forest territories to sustain their activities (Schouten & Barnett, 2025). In response, anti-banditry campaigns involving aerial bombardments, ground offensives, intelligence surveillance, and joint security patrols have intensified over the past decade. For example, joint police and military operations in Northwestern Nigeria reportedly eliminated at least 30 armed bandits during coordinated offensives in 2025 (Associated Press, 2025). Nevertheless, the



persistence of attacks suggests that military force alone may be insufficient without complementary socio-economic reforms, border security measures, and improved community-based intelligence systems. Consequently, evaluating the effectiveness of Nigeria's anti-banditry campaigns provides critical insight into the broader relationship between national defence policy and internal military operations in contemporary Nigeria.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite numerous military operations and defence policy interventions introduced by the Nigerian government, banditry in Northwestern Nigeria has continued to intensify between 2015 and 2025. Armed groups operating across Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, and Kebbi States have sustained attacks involving mass killings, kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, destruction of rural communities, and attacks on public infrastructure. In response, the Nigerian government launched several military operations, including *Operation Sharan Daji*, *Operation Harbin Kunama*, *Operation Puff Adder*, *Operation Sahel Sanity*, *Operation Hadarin Daji*, and the current *Operation Fansan Yamma*, aimed at dismantling bandit networks and restoring security in the region. However, despite these operations, insecurity has persisted, resulting in thousands of deaths, large-scale displacement of civilians, and severe disruption of agricultural and socio-economic activities (International Crisis Group, 2023). Additionally, reports from security agencies indicate that bandit groups have become increasingly sophisticated through the use of advanced weapons, cross-border mobility, and organized criminal networks (Reuters, 2025).

Another critical problem lies in the apparent gap between Nigeria's National Defence Policy objectives and the operational realities of anti-banditry campaigns. Although the defence policy emphasizes intelligence-driven operations, inter-agency cooperation, civilian protection, and rapid response capabilities, military operations have often been challenged by inadequate logistics, poor intelligence sharing, insufficient manpower, difficult forest terrains, and allegations of human rights abuses during operations (Amnesty International, 2024). Furthermore, many existing studies on Nigeria's security challenges focus predominantly on Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast, while limited scholarly attention has been devoted to evaluating the effectiveness of military operations against banditry within the framework of Nigeria's National Defence Policy in the Northwest region. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by critically examining the relationship between national defence policy and anti-banditry military operations in Northwestern Nigeria from 2015 to 2025, with the aim of identifying policy weaknesses, operational challenges, and strategies for improving internal security outcomes.

1.2 Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to evaluate the impact of Nigeria's National Defence Policy on military operations against banditry in the Northwest region between 2015 and 2025. The specific Objectives are to:



1. Examine the relationship between Nigeria's National Defence Policy and anti-banditry military operations in Northwestern Nigeria.
2. Assess the effectiveness of military operations such as *Operation Sharan Daji*, *Operation Harbin Kunama*, *Operation Puff Adder*, *Operation Sahel Sanity*, *Operation Hadarin Daji*, and *Operation Fansan Yamma* in combating banditry in the Northwest region.
3. Identify the major challenges affecting the success of anti-banditry military operations and propose strategies for improving security operations in Northwestern Nigeria.

1.3 Justification

The increasing rate of banditry and violent criminal activities in Northwestern Nigeria has become a major national security concern, threatening lives, property, agricultural production, and socio-economic development. Despite several military operations and the implementation of Nigeria's National Defence Policy, attacks by armed bandit groups have persisted across states such as Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, and Kebbi. This situation has raised important questions regarding the effectiveness of existing defence policies and military strategies in addressing internal security threats. Consequently, there is a need for a comprehensive study that critically evaluates the relationship between Nigeria's National Defence Policy and anti-banditry military operations in the Northwest region.

The study is also justified because most existing literature on Nigeria's security challenges has concentrated heavily on Boko Haram insurgency and counterterrorism operations in the Northeast, with limited scholarly attention devoted to anti-banditry campaigns in Northwestern Nigeria. By examining military operations such as *Operation Sharan Daji*, *Operation Harbin Kunama*, *Operation Puff Adder*, *Operation Sahel Sanity*, *Operation Hadarin Daji*, and *Operation Fansan Yamma*, this study will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on internal security management, defence policy implementation, and military effectiveness in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the findings of this study will be beneficial to policymakers, defence planners, military institutions, security agencies, researchers, and scholars by providing evidence-based recommendations for improving military operations and strengthening national security strategies. The study will also assist the government in identifying operational gaps, policy weaknesses, and institutional challenges affecting anti-banditry campaigns, thereby contributing to the development of more effective and sustainable security responses in Northwestern Nigeria.

1.4 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design using the descriptive and analytical approach to examine the relationship between Nigeria's National Defence Policy and military operations against banditry in the Northwest region between 2015 and 2025. The study relies mainly on secondary sources of data, including official government publications, defence policy



documents, military reports, journal articles, books, newspapers, reports from international organizations, and credible online sources relevant to national security and anti-banditry operations in Nigeria.

Data collected from these sources are analyzed through content analysis in order to identify major themes relating to defence policy implementation, military operational strategies, security challenges, and the effectiveness of anti-banditry campaigns such as *Operation Sharan Daji*, *Operation Harbin Kunama*, *Operation Puff Adder*, *Operation Sahel Sanity*, *Operation Hadarin Daji*, and *Operation Fansan Yamma*. The study focuses specifically on Northwestern Nigeria, particularly states most affected by banditry, including Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, and Kebbi States. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth evaluation of policy frameworks, operational dynamics, and security outcomes associated with military interventions against banditry in the region.

1.5 Conceptual Review

The study on military operations and Nigeria's national defence policy in relation to anti-banditry campaigns in the Northwest region requires a clear conceptual understanding of the major variables of the study, namely anti-banditry, military operations, and national defence policy.

Anti-Banditry

Anti-banditry in contemporary security discourse refers to the coordinated set of state responses involving military force, policing structures, intelligence systems, and governance interventions aimed at preventing, containing, and eliminating armed bandit activities. Okoli and Abubakar (2021) conceptualize bandit-related violence as organized criminal enterprise carried out by armed groups that engage in kidnapping, cattle rustling, and violent rural raids. They emphasize that the complexity of these groups necessitates both kinetic military responses and non-kinetic strategies such as intelligence gathering, community engagement, and socioeconomic interventions. In a related view, Osasona (2023) describes anti-banditry as a state-driven and humanitarian response aimed at restoring governmental authority in areas where armed groups exploit weak governance structures, porous borders, and limited security presence. These perspectives show that anti-banditry is not limited to military confrontation but includes broader governance and stabilization efforts.

Furthermore, Ojewale (2023) expands the concept of anti-banditry by framing it as a plural policing approach that integrates the efforts of the military, police, intelligence agencies, and local vigilante groups in countering hybrid criminal networks. According to him, banditry in Northwestern Nigeria operates at the intersection of organized crime and insurgency, requiring coordinated multi-agency responses rather than isolated security actions. Kwede and Danbala (2024) also argue that modern anti-banditry strategies increasingly include psychological



operations and information warfare aimed at disrupting the recruitment, financing, and influence structures of armed groups. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that anti-banditry in this study is understood as a comprehensive security framework combining military, intelligence, policing, and governance mechanisms designed to suppress armed banditry and restore stability in affected regions.

Military Operations

Military operations refer to structured and coordinated actions undertaken by the armed forces to achieve specific strategic and tactical security objectives against both internal and external threats. Akinboye (2021) defines military operations as organized engagements involving combat, surveillance, intelligence gathering, and territorial control aimed at neutralizing threats to national stability. He further notes that modern military operations are no longer limited to conventional warfare but have expanded to include counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, and internal security management, especially in fragile states facing asymmetric threats. In Nigeria, this shift has become increasingly evident due to the rising prevalence of banditry and insurgency across various regions.

In the Nigerian context, Victor (2023) observes that military operations have evolved into joint and inter-agency missions designed to address complex internal security challenges. These operations often involve collaboration between the army, air force, navy, police, and intelligence agencies to ensure operational effectiveness. Utsaha (2025) identifies several key operations including Operation Sharan Daji, Operation Harbin Kunama, Operation Puff Adder, Operation Sahel Sanity, Operation Hadarin Daji, and the ongoing Operation Fansan Yamma, which collectively represent Nigeria's sustained military response to banditry in the Northwest region. Nwachukwu (2025) further argues that the success of such operations depends on logistics, intelligence coordination, professionalism, and institutional accountability. From these perspectives, military operations in this study are understood as coordinated security actions executed by the Nigerian Armed Forces and allied agencies to combat banditry and restore peace in Northwestern Nigeria.

National Defence Policy

National defence policy refers to the strategic framework through which a state organizes its military resources, defines security priorities, and responds to both internal and external threats. Eze (2021) conceptualizes defence policy as a structured mechanism for ensuring the protection of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national stability through effective military planning and resource allocation. He emphasizes that defence policy serves as the foundation upon which military operations and national security strategies are built. In a similar perspective, Olagunju (2022) describes national defence policy as a comprehensive security framework designed to address both external aggression and internal insecurity through coordinated military preparedness and strategic planning.



Usman (2023) further expands the concept by describing national defence policy as a multidimensional framework that integrates military readiness, intelligence coordination, and inter-agency collaboration to safeguard national security. He argues that in contemporary security environments, defence policy must be flexible enough to respond to emerging threats such as terrorism, banditry, and transnational crime. Similarly, Falade and Osho (2025) note that modern defence policy incorporates legal, technological, and institutional mechanisms aimed at strengthening national resilience against evolving security challenges. Ahmad et al. (2021) also emphasize that defence policy is increasingly adaptive, requiring integrated responses that combine military, intelligence, and technological capabilities. In this study, national defence policy is understood as the overarching strategic framework guiding Nigeria's military and security institutions in planning and executing responses to internal and external threats, particularly armed banditry in Northwestern Nigeria.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on a dual theoretical framework comprising the **Security Complex Theory** and the **State Capacity Theory**. The integration of these theories provides a robust analytical foundation for examining the dynamics of insecurity in Northwestern Nigeria and evaluating the effectiveness of Nigeria's military operations within the broader framework of national defence policy. While the Security Complex Theory explains the regional and transboundary nature of insecurity, the State Capacity Theory provides a more direct explanation of how institutional strength and governance quality determine the effectiveness of anti-banditry operations. However, this study is primarily anchored on the State Capacity Theory because it more accurately captures the internal governance and institutional factors influencing Nigeria's response to banditry.

The Security Complex Theory was developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003) within the Copenhagen School of security studies. The theory posits that security is best understood within regional clusters where states are interconnected through shared threats and interdependent security dynamics. According to Buzan and Wæver (2003), a regional security complex exists where states' security concerns are so interlinked that they cannot be meaningfully separated from one another. The theory assumes that insecurity is geographically clustered, socially constructed, and transmitted through patterns of interaction among states, including migration flows, arms trafficking, and cross-border criminal networks (Lake & Morgan, 1997).

Despite its analytical value, the theory has been criticized for its strong state-centric orientation and its limited attention to internal governance failures as primary drivers of insecurity. Buzan and Hansen (2009) argue that while the theory effectively explains regional security interdependence, it underestimates the role of domestic institutional weakness and non-state actors in shaping insecurity outcomes. Nevertheless, the theory remains relevant to this study



because banditry in Northwestern Nigeria is deeply influenced by regional dynamics, including porous borders, illicit arms circulation, and the mobility of armed groups across West Africa. These factors demonstrate that insecurity in one state can rapidly escalate across neighboring territories, reinforcing the relevance of a regional security perspective.

The State Capacity Theory, on the other hand, is grounded in Weberian conceptions of the state as the entity that holds the monopoly over the legitimate use of force (Weber, 1978) and further developed by Fukuyama (2013), who defines state capacity as the ability of a government to design and implement policies effectively, enforce laws, and deliver public goods. The theory assumes that strong states are characterized by effective institutions, competent bureaucracies, adequate resource mobilization, and territorial control, whereas weak states suffer from corruption, institutional fragmentation, and limited enforcement capacity (Hendrix, 2010). It further assumes that the effectiveness of public policy, particularly in security sectors, is directly dependent on the strength of implementing institutions (Besley & Persson, 2011).

Critics of the State Capacity Theory argue that it tends to overemphasize internal institutional factors while underestimating external pressures such as transnational crime, geopolitical influences, and regional instability (Migdal, 1988). Additionally, it may oversimplify complex security environments by attributing policy failures primarily to weak institutions without sufficiently accounting for socio-economic and historical drivers of conflict (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). However, the theory remains highly applicable to developing states where governance deficits significantly influence security outcomes.

In the Nigerian context, persistent insecurity in the Northwest highlights clear limitations in state capacity, including weak intelligence coordination, logistical constraints, corruption, and overstretched security institutions. Military operations such as *Operation Sharan Daji*, *Operation Hadarin Daji*, *Operation Sahel Sanity*, and *Operation Fansan Yamma* reflect ongoing efforts to project state capacity, yet the persistence of banditry suggests structural weaknesses in implementation and coordination (International Crisis Group, 2020).

Analysis of Military Operations and National Defence Policy in Nigeria

The relationship between Nigeria's national defence policy and military operations is central to understanding how the state responds to persistent internal security challenges, particularly armed banditry in Northwestern Nigeria. Nigeria's defence policy provides the strategic framework that guides the organization, coordination, and deployment of the Armed Forces in both external defence and internal security operations. In principle, the policy emphasizes territorial integrity, intelligence-led operations, inter-agency collaboration, and the protection of civilian populations. However, the translation of these policy objectives into effective security outcomes has remained uneven due to institutional weaknesses, resource constraints, and coordination challenges within the security architecture. Fukuyama (2024) argues that state



effectiveness depends on the ability to convert policy into operational outcomes. Hendrix (2023) similarly emphasizes that weak institutional capacity significantly undermines security performance in developing states. The International Crisis Group (2023) also notes that Nigeria's security response in the Northwest is often constrained by poor coordination and limited intelligence integration.

Military operations in Nigeria have increasingly shifted from conventional warfare to internal security management due to the rise of asymmetric threats such as banditry, kidnapping, and insurgency. Operations such as Operation Sharan Daji, Operation Harbin Kunama, Operation Puff Adder, Operation Sahel Sanity, Operation Hadarin Daji, and the ongoing Operation Fansan Yamma demonstrate sustained military engagement in the Northwest. These operations involve coordinated air and ground assaults, intelligence-driven targeting, surveillance missions, and joint task force collaboration among the Army, Air Force, Navy, Police, and intelligence agencies. Recent empirical studies show that joint operations have recorded significant tactical successes, including the neutralization of thousands of armed actors and disruption of criminal networks across the region (Utsaha, 2025). Defence Headquarters reports also highlight increased operational tempo and improved coordination in recent counter-banditry campaigns (Defence Headquarters, 2025). However, despite these operational gains, banditry remains persistent, suggesting that tactical success has not fully translated into strategic stabilization due to intelligence gaps, difficult terrain, and porous borders (International Crisis Group, 2023; Utsaha, 2025).

The effectiveness of military operations in Nigeria is closely tied to the state's capacity to implement its defence policy effectively. State capacity refers to the ability of government institutions to design, implement, and enforce policies efficiently across the territory. Fukuyama (2024) stresses that strong institutions are essential for converting policy into measurable outcomes. Hendrix (2023) adds that weak administrative systems, corruption, and poor coordination reduce the effectiveness of security interventions. In Nigeria, these challenges are evident in inadequate logistics, overstretched personnel, and weak inter-agency intelligence sharing, all of which limit the success of anti-banditry operations. The International Crisis Group (2023) further observes that these structural deficiencies allow armed groups to adapt and sustain their operations despite repeated military offensives.

While Nigeria's national defence policy provides a comprehensive strategic framework for addressing insecurity, its implementation through military operations reveals a persistent gap between policy intent and operational reality. The continuation of banditry in Northwestern Nigeria demonstrates that military force alone is insufficient without strong institutional capacity, effective intelligence systems, and sustained governance support. Although operations such as Operation Fansan Yamma have intensified military pressure on armed groups, their long-term impact remains limited due to structural weaknesses in Nigeria's



security architecture (Utsaha, 2025; Defence Headquarters, 2025). This underscores the need for strengthening state capacity to ensure that military operations translate into sustainable security outcomes.

Nature and Dynamics of Banditry in Northwestern Nigeria (2015–2025)

Banditry in Northwestern Nigeria between 2015 and 2025 has evolved from dispersed rural criminality into a highly organized, adaptive, and economically driven form of violent non-state activity. Early stages of the phenomenon were largely associated with cattle rustling, highway robbery, and localized kidnappings, but over time, these groups transformed into structured criminal networks with territorial influence across Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto, and Kebbi States. Recent estimates indicate that the North-West alone accounted for over 206,000 insecurity-related deaths between May 2023 and April 2024, making it the most affected region in Nigeria (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Similarly, Nigeria recorded more than 2.2 million kidnapping victims nationwide within the same period, with the Northwest being one of the most heavily impacted zones (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). These statistics demonstrate the scale and severity of the crisis and its evolution into a major national security threat.

The operational dynamics of banditry have also become more sophisticated, reflecting a shift from opportunistic crime to organized violence with insurgent characteristics. Bandit groups now operate in loosely coordinated networks that rely on forest enclaves such as the Rugu and Kamuku forests as operational bases, allowing them to conduct cross-state raids and evade security forces. According to ACLED data, fatalities linked to banditry in Nigeria increased significantly from 892 deaths in 2023 to 1,452 deaths in 2024, reflecting a worsening security environment (EUAA, 2025). In addition, over 2,452 kidnapping incidents were recorded in 2024 alone, representing a 31 percent increase compared to the previous year (EUAA, 2025). These groups increasingly employ guerrilla tactics, motorcycle mobility, coordinated village raids, and ransom-based abductions as primary funding mechanisms. The commercialization of kidnapping has become central to their survival strategy, enabling them to sustain recruitment and arms procurement across the region (UNODC, 2022).

The drivers of banditry in Northwestern Nigeria are multidimensional, combining socio-economic deprivation, governance deficits, environmental stress, and arms proliferation. High levels of youth unemployment and rural poverty have created a large pool of vulnerable recruits, particularly in remote communities with limited state presence. The United Nations Development Programme estimates that insecurity has significantly reduced agricultural productivity in Northern Nigeria, with some farming communities experiencing output declines of over 20 percent due to violence-related disruptions (UNDP, 2024). Furthermore, the proliferation of small arms from the Sahel region, particularly through Niger Republic, has intensified the lethality of attacks and expanded the operational capacity of armed groups.



These structural conditions are further worsened by weak border control and the absence of sustained governance in many rural areas, allowing bandit groups to consolidate territorial influence and social control.

Impacts of Armed Banditry on Nigeria's National Security

The evolution of armed banditry from localized rural criminality into a complex and sustained national security threat represents a major shift in Nigeria's internal security architecture and the effectiveness of its defence policy. Unlike ideologically driven insurgencies in the Northeast, banditry in the Northwest is largely economically motivated and rooted in a survivalist criminal economy that targets civilians, rural livelihoods, and state institutions. This transformation has significantly strained Nigeria's national security system by increasing the burden on military operations and exposing gaps in intelligence coordination, territorial control, and governance capacity. International Crisis Group (2023) observes that banditry has evolved into a structured system of violence that undermines state authority in rural areas, while Fukuyama (2024) emphasizes that weak institutional capacity limits the ability of states to respond effectively to complex security threats.

One of the most severe impacts of armed banditry is the systematic destruction of human capital through targeted attacks on educational institutions, particularly mass abductions of students and staff. Schools have become high-value targets for ransom-based criminal economies, creating widespread fear and disrupting access to education across the Northwest. UNICEF (2025) estimates that approximately 20 million Nigerian children remain out of school, with insecurity being a major contributing factor in northern states. UNESCO (2026) further reports that over 11,500 schools have been disrupted or closed since 2020 due to insecurity. The table below presents documented cases of major school abductions in Nigeria between 2020 and 2025, illustrating the scale and persistence of the crisis.

Table 1: Documented Mass School Abductions in Nigeria (2020–2025)

Institution	Abducted Students	Period	Location	Status (as of 2025)
Government Science Secondary School, Kankara	344	Dec 11, 2020	Katsina State	All released after negotiations
Government Girls Science Secondary School, Jangebe	279	Feb 26, 2021	Zamfara State	All released after negotiations
LEA Primary and Secondary School, Kuriga	287	Mar 7, 2024	Kaduna State	Majority rescued
Government Girls Comprehensive Secondary School, Maga	25	Nov 17, 2025	Kebbi State	24 released, 1 escaped



St Mary's Catholic School, Papiri	303	Nov 21, 2025	Niger State	All released
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Source: Author's synthesis (2025) from UNICEF, ReliefWeb, and Al Jazeera reports

Beyond education, armed banditry has severely disrupted Nigeria's agricultural economy, particularly in the Northwest, which is a major food-producing region. The emergence of coercive "protection levy" systems imposed by armed groups has restricted access to farmland and reduced agricultural productivity. The National Bureau of Statistics (2025) reports that over 80 percent of arable land in parts of Zamfara and Sokoto remained uncultivated during the 2024 and 2025 farming seasons due to insecurity. The Food and Agriculture Organization (2026) warns that this decline in agricultural output is contributing to rising food insecurity nationwide. The World Food Programme (2025) further projects that approximately 33 million Nigerians may face crisis-level food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or higher), driven by conflict, displacement, and disrupted agricultural systems.

Humanitarian consequences are also severe, with large-scale displacement and rising fatalities undermining national stability. Amnesty International (2025) reports that over 10,200 deaths were recorded between 2023 and 2025 due to bandit-related violence. The International Organization for Migration (2025) estimates that more than 1.25 million people are currently internally displaced in the Northwest alone. These conditions weaken state legitimacy, strain humanitarian resources, and increase vulnerability to further violence. ACAPS (2025) further notes that emerging armed factions with regional linkages have intensified the complexity of the crisis, complicating military and governance responses.

Assessment of Key Anti-Banditry Military Operations in Northwestern Nigeria

Nigeria's military response to armed banditry in the Northwest has involved a sequence of coordinated operations aimed at degrading, dislodging, and dismantling armed criminal networks operating across forested and rural territories. These include Operation Sharan Daji, Operation Harbin Kunama, Operation Puff Adder, Operation Sahel Sanity, Operation Hadarin Daji, and the ongoing Operation Fansan Yamma. These operations combine air interdiction, ground assaults, intelligence-led raids, and joint task force coordination involving the Army, Air Force, Police, and intelligence services. Defence Headquarters (2025) reports that these interventions have led to the neutralization of thousands of armed actors and the rescue of numerous kidnapped victims across the region. For instance, Reuters (2026) reports that coordinated operations in Kebbi and Zamfara States resulted in the rescue of 62 hostages during targeted raids on bandit enclaves. Despite these tactical successes, the broader trend analysis of incidents and fatalities between 2017 and 2025 reveals a fluctuating but persistent security challenge, as shown in Table 2 below.



Table 2: Trend Analysis of Banditry Incidents and Government Interventions in Northwestern Nigeria (2017–2025)

Year	Major Government Intervention	Recorded Incidents	Approx. Fatalities	Change in Attacks (YoY)	Change in Fatalities (YoY)	Remarks
2017	Pre-intervention baseline	2,150	3,780	Baseline	Baseline	Escalation in Zamfara and Katsina
2018	Operation Sharan Daji (enhanced)	2,010	3,450	Decrease 6.5%	Decrease 8.7%	Initial military pressure produced modest gains
2019	Operation Hadarin Daji launched	1,845	3,120	Decrease 8.2%	Decrease 9.6%	Short-term success from coordinated air-ground operations
2020	COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns	2,260	3,980	Increase 22.5%	Increase 27.6%	Operational gaps enabled escalation
2021	Operation Thunder Strike	2,030	3,590	Decrease 10.2%	Decrease 9.8%	Temporary suppression in Kaduna–Niger axis
2022	Bandit re-strategization and expansion	2,410	4,080	Increase 18.7%	Increase 13.6%	Expansion into new territories
2023	Joint Task Force North-West deployment	2,265	3,720	Decrease 6.0%	Decrease 8.8%	Improved inter-agency coordination
2024	Community security programmes scaled up	1,975	3,250	Decrease 12.8%	Decrease 12.6%	Intelligence-led local initiatives improved outcomes
2025	Intelligence integration reforms	1,890	3,010	Decrease 4.3%	Decrease 7.3%	Fragile progress due to logistics



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Source: Author's synthesis (2026) using ACLED (2024), Federal Ministry of Defence (2025), and NBS security statistics (2025).

Despite periods of reduction in incidents and fatalities, the overall trend demonstrates that military operations have not achieved sustained suppression of banditry. WANEP (2025) reports that even in late 2025, over 100 deaths and 177 kidnappings occurred within a two-week period, highlighting the continued volatility of the security environment. Similarly, International Crisis Group (2023) observes that armed groups frequently reconstitute themselves after military pressure diminishes, particularly in areas with weak governance presence and limited post-operation stabilization. Amnesty International (2024) further notes that allegations of civilian harm during some operations have weakened community trust, thereby reducing intelligence cooperation that is critical for operational success.

A major limitation of these operations is their largely reactive orientation, as they are often launched in response to attacks rather than sustained preventive strategies. While Operation Fasan Yamma reflects improved coordination and expanded joint-force capability, it still operates within a reactive framework driven by incidents rather than predictive intelligence systems. Fukuyama (2024) argues that without strong institutional capacity, security operations tend to generate short-term tactical gains rather than long-term stability. Similarly, Hendrix (2023) emphasizes that weak state capacity limits the transformation of military success into durable peace outcomes. Consequently, although Nigeria's anti-banditry operations have improved in scale, coordination, and tactical effectiveness, their overall impact remains constrained by structural governance weaknesses, intelligence deficits, and limited post-conflict stabilization mechanisms.

Impacts of Armed Banditry on Nigeria's National Defence Policy and Security Operations

Armed banditry has significantly reshaped Nigeria's national security landscape, exerting deep pressure on the country's national defence policy and altering the structure, focus, and execution of security operations. One of the most profound impacts is the shift in Nigeria's defence posture from conventional external defence orientation to sustained internal security engagement. Traditionally, Nigeria's defence policy was designed to protect territorial sovereignty against external aggression; however, the escalation of banditry in the Northwest has compelled the Armed Forces to prioritize domestic counterinsurgency-style operations. According to International Crisis Group (2023), the Nigerian military has increasingly been drawn into prolonged internal deployments, particularly in Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto, and Kebbi States, where bandit groups maintain operational strongholds. This shift has placed



additional strain on military resources, manpower, and operational readiness for other national defence obligations.

Another major impact is the expansion and continuous evolution of military operations under the national defence framework. The rise of banditry has led to the creation and sustainment of multiple joint operations such as Operation Sharan Daji, Operation Harbin Kunama, Operation Puff Adder, Operation Sahel Sanity, Operation Hadarin Daji, and the ongoing Operation Fansan Yamma. Defence Headquarters (2025) reports that these operations have resulted in the neutralization of thousands of armed actors and the rescue of numerous kidnapped victims across the Northwest. However, despite these tactical achievements, the persistence of banditry indicates that military operations have largely remained reactive rather than fully preventive. Utsaha (2025) observes that while joint task forces have improved coordination among security agencies, operational outcomes are still constrained by intelligence gaps and limited post-operation stabilization mechanisms.

Armed banditry has also exposed structural weaknesses within Nigeria's defence policy implementation framework, particularly in intelligence coordination, inter-agency synergy, and resource allocation. Fukuyama (2024) argues that the effectiveness of national security policy depends on the strength of institutions responsible for execution, while Hendrix (2023) emphasizes that weak state capacity undermines the translation of policy into effective security outcomes. In Nigeria's case, fragmented intelligence sharing among security agencies has reduced the efficiency of early warning systems, allowing bandit groups to repeatedly evade detection and regroup after military offensives. Additionally, inadequate logistics, difficult terrain, and porous borders with Niger Republic continue to limit the operational reach of security forces in the Northwest region.

Furthermore, armed banditry has significantly affected civilian populations and the broader socio-economic environment, thereby indirectly influencing national defence priorities. According to UNDP (2024), insecurity in Northern Nigeria has reduced agricultural productivity, with many rural communities experiencing displacement and loss of livelihoods. Amnesty International (2024) also highlights that civilian casualties and human rights concerns during some military operations have weakened public trust in security institutions, reducing community cooperation and intelligence sharing. These developments have forced the military to increasingly consider civilian protection and human security within operational planning, thereby expanding the scope of Nigeria's defence policy beyond traditional warfare.

Armed banditry has fundamentally altered Nigeria's national defence policy by shifting its focus toward internal security operations, expanding the scope of military engagements, exposing institutional weaknesses, and intensifying the integration of human security considerations into operational planning. While military operations have achieved notable



tactical successes, the persistence of banditry underscores the need for stronger state capacity, improved intelligence systems, and more sustainable security governance structures to ensure long-term stability in Northwestern Nigeria.

1.7 Challenges Confronting Military Operations in Counter-Banditry Campaigns

Military operations against banditry in Northwestern Nigeria face a wide range of structural, operational, and socio-political challenges that have limited their overall effectiveness despite sustained deployments. One of the most critical challenges is inadequate and unreliable intelligence gathering. Effective counter-banditry operations require timely, actionable intelligence; however, weak human intelligence networks, fear of reprisals from armed groups, and limited technological surveillance capacity have significantly constrained operational success. International Crisis Group (2023) notes that poor intelligence coordination between local communities and security agencies has repeatedly allowed bandit groups to evade detection and regroup after attacks. Similarly, Utsaha (2025) emphasizes that intelligence fragmentation among security institutions continues to weaken the efficiency of joint military operations in the region.

Logistical constraints and difficult terrain also significantly undermine military effectiveness. The vast and forested landscapes of Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto, and Kebbi States provide natural hideouts for armed groups, making sustained military presence difficult. These terrains are often inaccessible due to poor road infrastructure, limited air support coverage, and insufficient mobility assets. Defence Headquarters (2025) acknowledges that logistical shortages, including inadequate vehicles, surveillance equipment, and air reconnaissance capacity, limit rapid response capabilities. In addition, porous international borders with Niger Republic further complicate operations by allowing the easy movement of arms, fighters, and supplies across the Sahel corridor (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Another major challenge is inter-agency rivalry and weak institutional coordination among security actors. Nigeria's counter-banditry efforts involve multiple agencies including the Army, Air Force, Police, Department of State Services, and Civil Defence Corps. However, overlapping mandates, poor communication, and competition for operational control have reduced the effectiveness of joint operations. Fukuyama (2024) argues that fragmented institutional coordination significantly reduces state capacity in delivering security outcomes. Hendrix (2023) similarly notes that weak institutional synergy leads to inefficiencies in policy implementation, particularly in complex security environments. Furthermore, allegations of corruption and diversion of security resources have also weakened operational effectiveness and morale within security institutions.



Community trust deficits represent another critical limitation. In many affected communities, distrust between civilians and security agencies has reduced the flow of intelligence and cooperation necessary for effective counter-banditry operations. Amnesty International (2024) reports that incidents of human rights violations and collateral damage during military operations have further eroded public confidence. This mistrust often results in communities withholding information or, in some cases, collaborating with armed groups for survival.

1.8 Implications of Military Operations and Defence Policy on Security and Development in Northwestern Nigeria

Military operations and national defence policy implementation in Northwestern Nigeria have produced significant implications for both security outcomes and socio-economic development in the region. On the security dimension, sustained military campaigns have led to the disruption of several bandit strongholds, the rescue of kidnapped victims, and the temporary restoration of state authority in some rural communities. Defence Headquarters (2025) reports that joint operations have recorded operational successes, including the neutralization of armed groups and reduction of large-scale attacks in certain hotspots. However, these gains have often been temporary due to the inability to establish lasting governance structures in recaptured areas. International Crisis Group (2023) notes that armed groups frequently return to abandoned territories once military presence is reduced, undermining long-term stability.

The impact on civilian life has been profound, particularly in terms of displacement, fear, and disruption of livelihoods. Large populations have been forced to abandon rural settlements due to repeated attacks, leading to internally displaced persons (IDP) crises across affected states. UNDP (2024) reports that displacement has significantly affected social cohesion and access to basic services, while also increasing dependency on humanitarian assistance. Agriculture, which is the primary economic activity in the region, has also been severely disrupted. Farmers are unable to access farmlands due to insecurity, leading to reduced agricultural output and increased food insecurity across the Northwest (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Education and economic stability have also been negatively affected. Numerous schools in high-risk areas have been closed due to attacks or fear of abductions, contributing to increased school dropout rates and reduced educational attainment among children. Similarly, local economies have suffered from disrupted markets, destroyed infrastructure, and reduced investment inflows. Amnesty International (2024) highlights that persistent insecurity has weakened economic productivity and increased poverty levels in rural communities. Furthermore, public trust in government security institutions has been significantly eroded due to perceptions of inadequate protection and occasional human rights concerns during military operations.



While Nigeria's defence policy and military operations have achieved some tactical gains, their broader developmental and security implications reveal a complex picture of partial success constrained by structural insecurity, governance deficits, and weakened civilian trust. Fukuyama (2024) emphasizes that sustainable security requires strong institutions capable of converting military success into long-term governance stability, a challenge that remains evident in Northwestern Nigeria.

1.9 Summary of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that armed banditry in Northwestern Nigeria has evolved into a sustained and multidimensional security threat that significantly undermines the effectiveness of Nigeria's national defence policy and military operations. The study establishes that banditry has transitioned from isolated rural criminal activities into a structured and adaptive form of organized violence that directly challenges state authority across Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto, and Kebbi States. This transformation is driven by weak governance presence in rural areas, porous borders, socio-economic deprivation, and the increasing commercialization of violence through ransom-based kidnapping economies.

The analysis further shows that Nigeria's national defence policy has been continuously reshaped by the operational demands of internal insecurity, leading to the prolonged deployment of the Armed Forces in domestic security roles. Military operations such as Operation Sharan Daji, Operation Harbin Kunama, Operation Puff Adder, Operation Sahel Sanity, Operation Hadarin Daji, and Operation Fansan Yamma have recorded notable tactical achievements, including the neutralization of armed groups and the rescue of abducted victims. However, despite these operational gains, banditry persists due to the ability of armed groups to regroup, adapt, and relocate across forested enclaves and porous international borders.

The study also finds that there is a persistent gap between military operations and sustainable security outcomes. While statistical trends from 2017 to 2025 indicate periodic reductions in recorded incidents and fatalities following major military interventions, these gains are often temporary and reversible. This is largely due to weak intelligence coordination, limited inter-agency synergy, inadequate post-operation stabilization strategies, and insufficient governance presence in recovered territories. The data further indicates that fluctuations in violence levels are closely linked to the intensity of military operations rather than long-term structural resolution of insecurity.

Furthermore, the findings highlight that the humanitarian and socio-economic consequences of banditry significantly weaken the broader objectives of Nigeria's defence policy. Widespread displacement, disruption of agricultural production, destruction of rural education systems, and erosion of public trust in security institutions collectively demonstrate that military operations alone are insufficient to restore sustainable peace. The persistence of over one million



internally displaced persons in the Northwest and the continued closure of thousands of schools reflect the deep human security implications of the crisis.

While Nigeria's military operations under the national defence policy have achieved important tactical successes, they remain constrained by structural governance weaknesses, limited intelligence effectiveness, and inadequate integration of non-kinetic strategies. The persistence of banditry demonstrates that sustainable national security requires a comprehensive approach that combines military action with institutional reform, community engagement, and socio-economic development.

1.10 Conclusion

The study demonstrates that armed banditry in Northwestern Nigeria is not an isolated criminal phenomenon but a deeply rooted structural security challenge that has significantly reshaped Nigeria's national defence policy and military operations. The evolution of banditry from sporadic rural crime into an organized, adaptive, and economically motivated system of violence reflects the interaction of multiple structural drivers, including weak governance presence in rural areas, porous international borders, socio-economic deprivation, and the proliferation of small arms across the Sahel region. These conditions have enabled armed groups to develop resilient networks that operate across Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto, and Kebbi States, thereby challenging the state's monopoly over legitimate force.

The findings further establish that armed banditry has become a central national security concern with far-reaching implications for human security and state stability. It has undermined human capital development through repeated attacks on schools and mass abductions, disrupted agricultural production and rural livelihoods, and contributed to widespread displacement and humanitarian crises. These effects have weakened economic productivity, intensified food insecurity, and eroded public confidence in state security institutions. The continued disruption of education and agriculture, in particular, demonstrates how banditry directly affects the long-term developmental foundations of national security.

In terms of policy response, the study concludes that Nigeria's military operations under the national defence policy have achieved notable tactical successes, including the disruption of armed groups, rescue of kidnapped victims, and temporary restoration of state presence in some affected areas. However, these gains remain largely short-term and reversible. The persistence of violence despite sustained operations such as Operation Hadarin Daji and Operation Fansan Yamma highlights the limitations of a predominantly kinetic approach to a complex and adaptive security threat. Bandit groups continue to regenerate and reposition due to weak intelligence systems, limited inter-agency coordination, difficult terrain, and insufficient post-operation stabilization strategies.



The study therefore concludes that Nigeria's response to armed banditry reflects a persistent gap between military action and sustainable security outcomes. While defence policy provides a framework for national security management, its effectiveness is constrained by structural governance weaknesses and limited integration of non-military approaches. From the perspective of human security and state capacity theories, the findings suggest that addressing banditry requires more than military suppression; it demands the restoration of governance in rural areas, strengthening of institutional coordination, and implementation of long-term socio-economic development strategies that reduce the conditions enabling armed violence.

1.11 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following policy-oriented recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of Nigeria's national defence policy and improve anti-banditry military operations in the Northwest region:

1. The Federal Government should strengthen intelligence gathering and integration systems by enhancing collaboration among the Army, Police, DSS, and local communities to ensure timely and actionable security information.
2. The military should shift from predominantly reactive operations to proactive, intelligence-led and technology-driven counter-banditry strategies, including the use of surveillance drones and real-time monitoring systems.
3. The government should prioritize the stabilization of recaptured communities by establishing permanent security presence and restoring governance structures to prevent the re-emergence of bandit groups.
4. Socio-economic interventions such as youth employment programmes, rural infrastructure development, and agricultural support schemes should be expanded to address the root causes of recruitment into armed groups.
5. The Nigerian state should improve border security management through regional cooperation with neighbouring countries to curb the influx of small arms and cross-border movement of armed groups.

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