

THE NIGERIAN ENVIRONMENT, “UNGOVERNED SPACES,” AND NATIONAL SECURITY CONSIDERATIONS: 1999 – 2022.

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Abstract

Nigerian environment like every other nation-state is multifaceted –amongst it are business, socio-politics and geographical locations. The latter covers areas identified as ungoverned spaces which affect its national security. Going by the National Security Strategy in 2019, Nigeria recognizes ungoverned spaces as areas around the nation’s external boundaries, border communities and forest which provide a fertile ground for criminal activities. The height of these crimes is the acts of terrorism by Boko Haram which were at their peak in 2014, though, has been “technically defeated”. An existential threat that has almost brought Nigeria’s national security to its knees. (Ukwuoma, Oke and Nimfel, 2020); argue that the federal government has restrained its state control from reaching these spaces; an action proffering haven for extreme criminals. However, non-physical spaces such as the internet and global finance which are not in the total ambit of the Nigerian state could pose a danger to its national security, (Clunan, 2008). Adopting an array of relevant secondary data, the securitization theory explains the government’s failure to secure these places which the criminal elements took advantage of to hatch their dangerous plans against national security. The researcher recommends that it is high time the federal government refrained from its lackadaisical attitude to national security towards securing these hot spots once and for all. Hence, deploy and harness the energies of the many domestic security agencies through their complementary services towards securing these places.

Keywords: Nigerian environment, Ungoverned spaces, Terrorism, National security

Introduction

The Nigerian environment like every other nation-state is multifaceted –amongst it are business, socio-politics and geographical locations. This study focuses on the latter, which measures its area size totaling 923,768 sq km –that is, the land is put at 910,768 km sq including a total forest area of 110, 890 km sq (12.18 percent of the landmass), while 13,000 km sq is covered by water (FAO, 2019 and 2023 CIA World Factbook). Nigeria's terrain varies significantly across the country. The southern part of Nigeria is characterized by low-lying coastal plains, mangrove swamps, and river deltas, such as the Niger Delta. Moving northwards, the terrain becomes more undulating, with plateaus and highlands dominating the central region. In the far northeast, the landscape transitions into semi-arid savannas and the Sahel region. Nigeria's climate varies from equatorial in the south to tropical in the central region and semi-arid in the north. The southern regions experience high temperatures and humidity with heavy rainfall, especially during the wet season, which typically lasts from April to October. The central region has a more pronounced dry season from November to March. The northern regions, particularly the northeast, experience a more arid climate with

less rainfall and hotter temperatures. Nigeria is home to several major rivers, including the Niger River, which is one of Africa's longest rivers, and the Benue River, its main tributary. These rivers are vital for transportation, irrigation, and hydroelectric power generation. Nigeria's vegetation varies according to its climatic zones. The southern regions are covered by tropical rainforests and mangrove swamps, which are rich in biodiversity. Moving northwards, the vegetation transitions into savannas dominated by grasses and scattered trees. In the northernmost parts, particularly in the Sahel region, vegetation is sparse, characterized by thorny shrubs and acacia trees. Nigeria boasts a rich array of plant and animal species, including numerous endemic species found nowhere else in the world. However, rapid urbanization, deforestation, and habitat destruction pose significant threats to Nigeria's biodiversity. Nigeria faces various environmental challenges, including deforestation, soil degradation, and desertification in the north, pollution of water bodies due to oil spills and industrial waste, and loss of biodiversity. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts in environmental conservation, sustainable land management, and pollution control measures. Nigeria has more than 200 miles of coastal waters that stretch out into the Atlantic Ocean with 530 miles of coastline that is confined in the borders of Benin Republic in the west, and the border of Cameroon in the south. Meanwhile, the coastline include many sandy beaches that are attractive to tourists. The major source of water in Nigeria is the Niger River, which is the third biggest river in Africa. The river enters the territory of Nigeria in the Northwest then finds its way to the southeast. In the North central, it meets the Benue River and dramatically maintains its course to the coast. Along its route, the river feeds a range of water reservoirs and 13 lakes. Apart from Lake Chad, other lakes and water reservoirs are constructed in such manner to store fresh water. However, most part of the region is occupied with plateaus that are quite high compared to lowlands.

Interestingly, the number of species of both animals and vegetation grows southwards. The central part of Nigeria gives a perfect idea of the wilderness *via* the local national park. This reserve saves the wild nature of savanna and a range of wild animal species that make this place the best national park in Nigeria. The area of mountains stretches towards Cameroon and crosses the border. This is the tallest region of the country with the Chappal Waddi height of 7,936 feet. Nigeria has a tropical climate with average temperatures of 26-29 degrees Celsius on the coast, and between 23 and 33 degrees in the northern parts, while it goes from 21 to 26 degrees in Central Plateau. Normally, the raining season lasts between April and November in the southern regions, while in the northern region, the rains fall from May to November. During the season of drought, dry hot harmattan blows all the time from the Sahara desert and brings with it millions of particles of dust and sand. Sometimes, the mist caused by harmattan can obscure the sun for several days like fog. The dramatic climate of the country allows not only animal rearing and fish farming but grows a range of agricultural species of vegetation not limited to yam, cocoa beans, and palm trees that are good for the production of kernel oil.

More to that is that, it is from its environment that Nigeria derives its endowed diverse natural treasures which include ancient crystalline rocks contain ores of precious and rare metals like uranium, gold, and silver. Others not limited to limestone, coal, gas and oil which has become the mainstay of the economy since 1973 oil boom. At present, there are more than 300 discovered natural deposits of oil within the country. It is at this instance that the commercialization of these deposits yields 80% of the country's incomes, a doyen in the physical geographic profile of Nigeria and its important role in the global market. Unfortunately, most of these deposits are not appropriately estimated or accounted for by the federal government itself due to lack of transparency as a major hindrance (Aderinokun,

2010). For the agriculture which has its activities in the environment, engages over 70 percent of Nigerian farmers at a subsistence level. In 2021, the agriculture contributed to 22.35 percent of the total Gross Domestic Product. (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1165865/contribution-of-oil-sector-to-gdp-in-nigeria/>).

Apparently, there are locations within and around Nigerian environment that have little or no human activities such as agricultural farming and government institutions, which have become redundant and abandoned, thereby taken over by extreme criminals serving as their recoiled base for criminal activities.

Theoretical Base

The theoretical foundation of this study is centered on securitization theory which explains that national security is not given but carefully designed by the concerned stakeholders. The stakeholders, including politicians, have to agree on what is of an extreme security concern or what they see as “threatening” to the existence of a state that needs to be dealt with urgently beyond politics (Eroukhmanoff, 2017). This further posits that the “ungoverned spaces” which are in the confinement of the Nigerian environment have to be secured by the said politicians who are the actors of the government in protecting the lives and property of the citizens while safeguarding the environment for national security.

Many studies have divergent interpretations of what constitutes “ungoverned spaces.” Ejiofor (2022), posits that failure on the part of Nigeria to impose order on its territory leaves much room for loosely organized vicious armed groups to wreak havoc on local communities in the northwest region. More to that is that banditry owes not so much to “ungoverned spaces” but to the ethnic *cum* material grievances of some pastoralists who have taken to criminality for survival and who pinpoint discrepancies between what they had, what they have, and what they think they should have. Meanwhile, Chukwuma (2022), argues that due to Nigeria’s counter-terrorism strategy, a political activity, which gives a geographical identity to places like border communities in north-eastern Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin as “ungoverned spaces”. Another author, Idehen (2016), examines the context of ungoverned spaces in the Sahel region, specifically focusing on the Sambisa Forest in northeastern Nigeria, which has been exploited by criminal syndicates and terrorist organizations like Boko Haram. This has a strategic link to national security.

In fact, this paper observes that each existing literature lacks holistic coverage on the study of the areas recognized as “ungoverned Spaces”. The first reveals that “ungoverned spaces” are found only in Northwest Nigeria because banditry has held sway as a result of the failure on the part of the government to extend its monopoly of power in the region that has been taken over by the criminals. Also, it fails to show the tendencies that “ungoverned spaces” have on national security. The second and third have similar views that “ungoverned spaces”, this time, are located in the northeast and its border communities, which are limited to the zone, though, fail to identify other regions, if possible. On the contrary, this researcher safely affirms that “ungoverned spaces” are encompassing in every region of the country, not limited to northeast and northeast regions alone. The ungoverned spaces such as deep forests are found in almost the 36 states of the federation. Therefore, this paper delves into studying “ungoverned spaces,” their impact on national security, and how government must manage these places, effectively to foster security in a bid to counter all forms of insurgencies.

Conceptualizing “Ungoverned Spaces”

The phrase “Ungoverned Spaces” is a common cliché within the parlance of security practitioners especially those proposing strategies for counterinsurgencies in the 21st century. Among an array of meanings adduces to it, for example, Whelan (2006) defines ungoverned space as a physical or nonphysical landmass where there is non-existence of state’s presence and lack of capacity to control the space. Another definition that comes handy is credited to Dataphyte, a media and research organization that focuses on data analytics, defines “Ungoverned Spaces” as zones that lay beyond the reach of government which pose a significant threat to security and stability of a state. Similarly, Nigeria’s National Security Strategy (NSS), a framework in 2019 by the federal government aimed at enhancing the social security of Nigerians, defines “Ungoverned Spaces” as areas around the nation’s external boundaries, border communities and forests which provide a fertile ground for criminal activities. The height of these crimes is the acts of terrorism by Boko Haram which were at their peak in 2015, though, has been “technically defeated”. However, Nigeria’s counter-terrorism strategy also contributes to the construction of “ungoverned spaces” through the designation of certain regions as "ungoverned". The Strategy considers a number of factors namely from historical tensions, economic marginalization to weak state institutions that has questioned lack of effective governance, and importantly, the challenge in controlling porous borders amongst others –all have contributed to the perception of certain regions as difficult to govern.

In overview, this paper argues in contrary to the concept of “ungoverned spaces” as it relates to the “absence of government” in these places and/or reckless abandon by the government of the said places under review. That is to say, the absence of government activities and other forms of human endeavours -such as inhabitations in far-distant-from-the-urban locations - do not translate that these places are ungoverned by the federal authorities. In other words, even if there are no government institutions found in the aforementioned locations, that do not mean they are not in the control of government. In short, the basis of conceptualizing “ungoverned spaces” is central to studying their impacts on Nigeria’s national security.

However, the concept of National Security has a plethora of interpretations. Segun Osisanya, on UN chronicle, defines national security as “the ability of a state to cater for the protection and defense of its citizenry. Nigeria, understanding the concept of national security is derived from the statutory function of the Armed Forces of Nigeria (AFN) –that is, the defence of the people and territory of Nigeria from both external aggression and internal insurrection. This paper justifies to structure Nigerian national security in three strata namely; internal, sub-regional and global spheres. The internal threats are peculiar to domestic security challenges such as banditry, terrorism and insurrection which most likely caused by bad governance. The sub-regional threats (arms-running, drugs trafficking, and illegal migration amongst others) are the ones emanating from the West African region which is important to Nigeria’s national security interests. The states in this region have cultural affinities and historical linkages implying that crisis in one country can easily be transmitted to another, and if not contained, may spill-over to Nigeria. Also, several countries in the region manifest political and socio-economic frailties indicative of ongoing conflicts and environmental disasters such as drought and famine in some states. These weaknesses have been exploited by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), ISWAP and their various affiliates to spread terrorism in the region (National Security Strategy, 2019). From the impacts of globalization, dangerous

internet activities and global finance could pose serious threats to Nigeria's national security (Clunan, 2008).

The Impacts of “Ungoverned Spaces” on Nigeria’s National Security

The nexus between ungoverned spaces and national security within the Nigerian environment gives the basis for this paper. The Nigerian environment which inhabits these ungoverned spaces with deep historical roots, has been facing, recently, with national security threats. These spaces have emerged due to a variety of factors such as geographical remoteness, political instability and uneven government presence in the aforementioned places. This can be traced to the country's colonial past had created a culture of uneven distribution of resources, and ineffective governance that have reined in government authorities to these remote areas, which have allowed ungoverned spaces to flourish. Since these places known as ungoverned spaces are mostly found in the forests and borderline regions, they provide a safe haven and breeding grounds for all sorts of criminalities including terrorism and banditry. By so doing, the heinous criminals turn these places into indoctrination and training grounds for their new converts following recruitments. Apart from extremist activities, the ungoverned spaces aid in making other transnational criminalities such as drug-peddling, human and arms trafficking, and illegal mining of mineral resources, easier. Additionally, non-physical spaces such as the internet and global finance, a technology which the criminals operate with, are not in the total ambit of the Nigerian state could pose danger to its national security, (Clunan, 2008). However, these hotbeds have been turned into recoiled bases by the extreme elements from which to unleash a number of organized crimes, namely, livestock rustling, kidnapping, banditry, and of course, the deadliest, terrorism by Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria and other counterpart regions in the country. All of these have culminated in an existential threat that has almost brought Nigeria's national security to its knees. (Ukwuoma, Oke and Nimfel, 2020); argue that the federal government has restrained its state control from reaching these spaces with the absence of structural development.

However, these ungoverned territories often suffer from the absence of conducive human habitation that necessitates basic social amenities. In other words, the absence of government services and the prevalence of insecurity discourage investment, hampering economic growth and perpetuating the cycle of underdevelopment in the areas. In Nigeria, a number of regions have experienced the emergence of such areas, posing significant challenges to the government's ability to extend its development to these places. The said spots have become breeding grounds for various illicit activities, including insurgency, terrorism, piracy, kidnapping and others. Moreover, the government's reckless abandonment of these places hampers necessary development, leaving them occupied by notorious gangs. For example, Boko Haram, an extremist group, has established a stronghold in northeastern Nigeria, particularly in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states. The group's activities include attacks on security forces, abductions, and suicide bombings, resulting in the displacement of more than 60,000 people who were forcibly evicted from their homes, (Amnesty International, Nigeria 2022.) Counting the losses, the insurgencies of this group have caused \$9 billion in damages since 2011, a revelation credited to Africanews, 2016.

Niger Delta region has witnessed the emergence of various militant groups, demanded a fair share of the region's oil wealth and protesting against environmental degradation. These groups engage in acts of sabotage/pipeline vandalism, kidnapping, and oil thefts, severely affecting oil production, the mainstay of Nigeria's economy. These ill-activities are being hatched in various ungoverned locations especially in the thick forests of the region. Nevertheless, the herder-farmer conflict zones, primarily in central Nigeria as well as in the

South west and South East respectively, have experienced frequent clashes between pastoralists and farmers over land and resources. These conflicts have led to numerous deaths, displacements, and destruction, exacerbating ethnic tensions and straining communal relations. Needless to say the aforementioned herders usually recoil to their covens inside the deep forests that have been identified as “ungoverned spaces” after they might have carried out their evil agenda at the targeted time.

More so in the South East between 2021 and 2023, the activities of Eastern Security Network (ESN), a “security outfit” of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), the proscribed separatist group by the Buhari government, are carried out from their bases in the thick forests across the region especially in Imo state. This has contributed to the increase in fatalities recorded after the launching of ESN in December 2020. The Cable.ng reports that between January and March, the first 3 months of 2021, the violent attacks and deaths spiked from 34 and 50 to 54 and 222 respectively, that is, by 59 percent.

The proliferation of “ungoverned spaces” implies that they have been taken over at some times by Niger Delta militants in South-South, Boko Haram terrorists in the northeast, bandits in the northwest, and IPOB separatists in the southeast (who were eventually proscribed as a terrorist organization by the federal government in 2017). This allows them to plan and launch attacks against government facilities and civilians. The dreadful activities of these Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) have resulted in widespread violence, displacements, and loss of lives. For Boko Haram effects alone have claimed, between 2009 and 2022, an estimated 50,000 deaths, leaving 2.5 million people displaced, according to the US National Counterterrorism Center’s Counter Terrorism Guide Website. The lack of effective government control of border-regions by ways of collusion and corruption by customs personnel enables criminal networks to thrive, engaging in activities such as arms-running. No doubt, these security lapses pose a strategic danger to national security. By so doing, the resultant insecurity has hampered socio-economic development in the country, otherwise, security is considered a pillar for achieving and sustaining meaningful development for Nigerians.

This researcher asserts that the negative impacts of “ungoverned spaces” and the degree of security threats they pose to national security cannot be measured exhaustively by this paper. Although, the highlighted happenings above have given reason, though not enough, for Sackflame and Omitola (2022) to arrogate the criminalities of non-state actors (NSAs) including terrorists that are worsened by “ungoverned spaces”, as “Alternative Sovereignty”, which means constituting a parallel government within a state. The argument is that the NSAs and their activities are merely threats to national security but not “alternative sovereignty” in any shade. Therefore, they do not possess the wherewithal that matches the composite of power of a state like Nigeria. This is proven by the ability and enablement of the Nigerian government, despite recent terrorism and banditry, to wield its state control over national security.

Managing the “Ungoverned Spaces”

Having analysed that the “ungoverned spaces” serve as strategic hotbeds for extreme criminality, it is also crucial to understand the indirect negative impacts they have on national security. Hence, containing these spaces also falls within the strategic calculation of counter-terrorism strategies by the government. To address “ungoverned spaces” or prevent its spread, a proactive but integrated approach needs to be adopted, where the larger society plays very important roles

It is instructive that the Nigerian government has been actively involved in military operations and counterinsurgency efforts to tackle ungoverned spaces. This includes the deployment of troops to areas affected by insurgency and terrorism. For example, the governments of Jonathan and Buhari, respectively, had deployed military forces in the build-up of counterinsurgency to ransack Boko Haram terrorists in their hideouts in Sambisa forests between 2012 and 2019. The challenge is the navigation of topography and terrain of the “ungoverned spaces” ranging from dense forests to vast swamps presents significant obstacles in combing the territories.

International cooperation in managing ungoverned spaces in Nigeria has been observed primarily through supports from United States and international organizations such as the African Union (AU), the United Nations (UN), and various international development agencies. One significant area of focus has been counterterrorism efforts, particularly in regions affected by groups like Boko Haram and other insurgent organizations. Nigeria has received support from international partners, including the United States, European Union, and neighboring countries in the Lake Chad Basin region, to combat these threats. This cooperation often includes intelligence sharing, capacity building for security forces, and sometimes direct military assistance

Overcoming these challenges requires innovative strategies, coordination between various stakeholders, and specialized training for security personnel. It is unimaginable that the security forces tasked with addressing ungoverned spaces often face significant challenges and vulnerabilities. These include inadequate training, limited resources, and poor coordination among different agencies. It is on record that the lethal hardware or weaponry used by terrorists were more sophisticated than that of the Nigerian forces with AK-47. A military negligence many have argued to be a suicide mission, which demoralizes the soldiers on the battle fields. Another challenge is corruption and political complexities or lack of political will have hindered efforts to tackle ungoverned spaces. These issues erode trust in the foreign technical assistance coming from the international bodies. This hampers resource allocation and undermine the effectiveness of counterinsurgency efforts in general. For instance, Transparency International reported in 2017 that Nigerian senior military officers, politicians and other unclassified elites had been accused of diverting funds meant for the welfare of their combatants fighting terrorists (VOAnews, 2017.)

A Way Forward and Recommendations:

Overhauling security capacities and intelligence gathering is instrumental to effectively manage the “ungoverned spaces.” Nigeria needs to overhaul the capacities of its security sector. This includes the ongoing reforms that cater for equipping the forces with modern technologies and confidential intelligence mechanisms, periodic training and robust remuneration packages for all the security forces who have laid their lives to safeguarding the country’s territorial integrity. By investing in the capabilities of security forces, and harnessing the energies of the many domestic security agencies through their complementary services, the Ministry of Defence through its National Counter-Terrorism Centre can better respond head-on to all emerging security threats coming from Nigeria’s borders and other strategic regions.

This researcher affirms the ideas of the duo, Ukwuoma, Oke and Nimfel (2020) and Bernard and Daful (2021) that the need for advanced technology be adopted which would make use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Earth observations such as Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) in monitoring these critical areas that pose threats to national security. This

will facilitate a seamless, though, high-altitude monitoring, and sustainable intervention strategy for the government and its security agencies to monitor all these ungoverned spaces used by miscreants to launch attacks.

Also, to manage “ungoverned spaces” effectively, the government must extend its state control and presence to these areas. This includes urbanizing the neglected areas with the necessary infrastructure to the taste of a city. In the delivery of these services, it is the responsibility of the federal government to prevent corruption from thriving by holding all the stakeholders accountable for every resource appropriated to every agency. The Nigerian government needs to harness the resources in its forests for use. Most of the forests in the country are unused, creating a lacuna for the advantage of criminals to take over the places to hatch their evil deeds. Meanwhile, the forests are endowed with multifarious ecosystems and diverse biodiversity, which could be utilised to achieve sustainable livelihood, industrial raw materials, food security, and reduce poverty and hunger in the land.

Most importantly, addressing the root causes of “ungoverned spaces” is crucial for long-term stability. Nigeria must address unemployment among the teeming Nigerian youths, socio-economic disparities/poverty, especially in the core north, and marginalization in Southeast and south-south that have resulted in Islamist terrorism, agitation and militancy that contribute to unrest in these areas. Also, by investing in education, job creation, and inclusive development, the government can help address the underlying grievances that have led the youths to seek succour in criminal activities. Commendably, international development organizations, including the World Bank and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), have been involved in projects focused on promoting economic development, improving access to education and healthcare, and strengthening governance structures at the local level.

Conclusion

In conclusion, taking a study on the impacts of “ungoverned spaces” on national security within the Nigerian context is timely. This is so because the current internal security challenges bedeviling the peace and development in the country have been worsening by the criminal activities of bandits and Islamist terrorists who have, at one time or the other, taken control of these critical locations as their havens. The government must acknowledge these critical places, and take the responsibility to secure them from the hands of armed non-state actors. The 2019 National Security Strategy (NSS) birthed by the 2014 review, is the latest framework that contains addressing security prejudices including “ungoverned spaces” in the state. What is to be worried about are also the flimsy challenges surrounding the government’s strategic responses, such as a lack of political will and vested interests in countering terrorism. This, arguably, indicts the Nigerian leaders of playing to the gallery on issues capable of bringing Nigeria’s national security to its knees. Where would this lead the country to, when self-interests and sentiments are placed above national interest? In a nutshell, it is high time the federal government refrained from its lackadaisical attitude to national security towards managing the “ungoverned spaces,” effectively. It is urged to implement the suggestive ideas, and harness the energies of the many domestic security agencies through their complementary services towards sustaining national security.

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