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Security Cooperation and Local Instability: Implications of the U.S. Counter-Terrorism Strike on Banditry and Terrorist Networks in Northwestern Nigeria



Background

Nigeria confronts a myriad of security threats driven by political, economic, social, and regional factors. Key challenges include terrorism and insurgency, particularly from Boko Haram and ISWAP in the Northeast; widespread banditry, kidnapping, and criminal violence across the Northwest and central regions; and farmer–herder conflicts linked to resource competition and

climate pressures. Separatist tensions, oil theft, piracy in the Niger Delta, cybercrime, and urban crime also contribute to the national security profile. Amidst these complexities, Nigeria deals with transnational security threats from its immediate neighbours. Despite this condition, weak governance, porous borders, corruption, youth unemployment, and slow justice systems worsen the situation.

Insecurity in Nigeria's neighbouring states significantly shapes its own security environment, as instability easily spills across porous borders. In Niger and Chad, political instability, coups, and weak state control have enabled armed groups to operate freely, while economic hardship and limited governance capacity make these areas fertile ground for recruitment by extremist networks. Regional insecurity across Cameroon's Far North, the wider Sahel, and Benin fuels cross-border insurgency, arms trafficking, organised crime, and maritime threats, thereby intensifying Nigeria's internal vulnerabilities and complicating effective national and regional security cooperation. The resurgence of coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has weakened democratic governance, created power vacuums exploited by armed groups, and undermined regional cooperation mechanisms like ECOWAS, thereby complicating coordinated security responses. Simultaneously, intensified geopolitical competition among global powers has turned West Africa into a strategic battleground of competing security partnerships and interests, further fragmenting regional consensus and heightening insecurity in ways that directly and indirectly threaten Nigeria's national security.

In 2025, President Donald Trump accused Nigeria of failing to protect Christians, threatened possible U.S. military intervention, and linked the country to alleged religious persecution, which triggered diplomatic tension and international controversy. Nigeria rejected the claims, stressed that its insecurity affects all religious groups rather than constituting a targeted genocide, and insisted that any external support must respect its sovereignty. In late December 2025, coordinated U.S. airstrikes against Islamic State-linked militants in northwest Nigeria had taken place with Nigerian support, marking a shift to limited military collaboration against shared extremist threats. This commentary, therefore, sets out to identify the major objectives of the US airstrike on terrorist positions in Sokoto and the implications of the campaign for Nigeria's national security.

Objective Evaluation of the US Airstrike in Sokoto Strike

Between December 25–26, 2025, the United States carried out precision airstrikes in Sokoto State, northwest Nigeria. The attack was directed at suspected Islamic State-linked militant encampments, particularly groups affiliated with the Islamic State Sahel Province and local factions like Lakurawa operating near the Tangaza Local Government Area in Sokoto state, near Nigeria's border with Niger. The operation involved precision-guided munitions launched by U.S.

Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) drone assets in coordination with Nigerian intelligence and military authorities, reportedly conducted with Nigerian presidential approval. Nigerian officials confirmed that there were no civilian casualties and the strikes hit targeted militant hideouts and transit routes.

The stated objectives focused on degrading the operational capacity of extremist networks operating in the northwest, disrupting planning, logistics, and movement corridors used by ISIS-linked fighters that pose a threat to Nigeria's security. The strikes were part of the counter-terrorism cooperation between the U.S. and Nigeria, involving intelligence sharing, surveillance, and precision targeting to neutralise militants and prevent planned attacks on communities during the festive season. While the Trump administration publicly framed the action partly around allegations of violence against Christians, Nigerian and U.S. military sources emphasized the strategic goal of weakening transnational terrorist activity and reinforcing Nigeria's counter-terrorism efforts along porous borders with the Sahel.

Banditry and Terrorism in the Post-US Airstrike in Nigeria

After the strikes, Nigeria's Defence Headquarters (DHQ) confirmed that the Nigerian military, working with U.S. counterparts, deployed specialized ordnance and battle damage assessment teams to survey the strike sites and evaluate the effects of the operation. However, events after the airstrikes have seen an escalation of terrorist attacks in Nigeria. Armed groups, including bandits and Islamist militants such as Boko Haram and ISWAP, reportedly stepped up violence across several northern states and parts of the southwest. At least 47 people were killed and about 35 abducted in multiple attacks in states like Adamawa, Zamfara, Kwara, Kano, and Plateau between December 25 and January 5. From December 29 onward, there were kidnappings in Kaduna State. Fulani militia groups attacked rural communities in Kaduna, killing two people and abducting at least 24 victims. In Borno state, an ambush by terrorists targeted a Nigerian army convoy near Bindundul village in Borno State, killing at least nine soldiers and injuring others on January 5 2026. Mass attack in were reported in Niger State between January 3 – 4, 2026. Gunmen raided Kasuwan-Daji village and markets in Niger State, killing at least 30 – 40 villagers, abducting others, and burning property in what authorities described as a terrorist/bandit attack by armed gangs hiding in nearby forests.

Besides the increased attacks in the north, on January 6 2026, suspected bandits also attacked the Old Oyo National Park Service office in Oloka village, Orire Local Government Area of Oyo State, killing at least five National Park Service forest guards or personnel and injuring others in a violent nighttime assault that has raised serious security concerns in the South-West. Security agencies described the incident as a cross-border bandit attack and began investigations. Residents in several parts of Nigeria continue to fear further violence and disruptions to social

and economic life in the country. The surge in violence reflects continued activity by Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) branches, and organised bandit-militia groups across Nigeria, yet threatens peace and stability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Nigeria's experience reveals that security cooperation, while essential in confronting banditry, terrorism, and other asymmetric threats, cannot by itself guarantee stability. External partnerships and joint operations provide critical capabilities, intelligence support, and deterrence value, but they must be balanced with strong domestic governance, institutional reform, accountability, and community-centred security approaches. Sustainable peace ultimately depends on aligning international assistance with Nigeria's local realities, addressing socio-economic drivers of violence, strengthening trust between citizens and security institutions, and ensuring that interventions enhance, rather than unintentionally deepen, local insecurity. Effective cooperation is therefore not merely about force projection; it is about building resilient systems that promote long-term stability and human security in Nigeria.

Several analysts have voiced concerns over Nigeria's security partnership with the United States, over the direct impacts of foreign military action, and the long-term implications for Nigeria's sovereignty and safety. There are also fears that U.S. military operations could leave behind unexploded ordnance (UXO), creating persistent hazards for civilians and raising suspicions that Washington might offload old or defective munitions on Nigerian soil, especially amid shifts in U.S. foreign aid and weapons-disposal policies that have disrupted demining efforts elsewhere. There are also apprehensions on whether the US will abide by the principles of necessity, proportionality and collateral damage in their operations in Nigeria. Coupled with these is anxiety over the broader pattern of U.S. assertiveness under President Trump, highlighted by high-profile interventions such as the recent military operation in Venezuela that captured its president, along with provocative rhetoric about other states like Greenland that has alarmed allies. Having also withdrawn from numerous multilateral frameworks, critics argue that closer security ties at this juncture risk entangling Nigeria in an unpredictable U.S. strategy of unilateral action rather than cooperative global engagement, potentially exposing the country to spillover instability rather than the stability such cooperation is meant to enhance.

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