



Fragile peace in the West African subregion: Implications for Nigeria's national security

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Abstract

This study investigates the implications of fragile peace in the West African subregion for Nigeria's national security, particularly in light of the 2021–2025 regional schisms. As the regional hegemon, Nigeria faces a contagion effect characterised by porous borders, arms proliferation and the influx of foreign insurgent networks such as the Lakurawa groups. Adopting a qualitative research design rooted in secondary data sources of collection, Content Analysis and anchored on the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). This study evaluates how the systemic failures of regional security architectures, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), affect Nigeria. The findings of this study indicate that military intervention is primarily driven by democratic backsliding and constitutional manipulation by leaders seeking to extend their tenures, which fuels public frustration and creates opportunities for the military to seize power. Also, the failure of neighbouring states to police their territorial waters has compromised Nigeria's maritime domain, creating high-risk zones that directly deplete national revenue and threaten economic stability and also the instability in the region is compounded by the ECOWAS free movement framework, which lacks the necessary security synchronisation to prevent the spillover of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) into Nigeria's Northwest. The study concludes that Nigeria's national stability is inextricably linked to its neighbours' security. It recommends a transition from purely kinetic military responses to a peacebuilding effectiveness framework that addresses socio-economic triggers and the institutionalisation of independent funding for the MNJTF.

Keywords: Fragile Peace, MNJTF, National Security, Regional Security Complex Theory

Introduction

The idea of peace has evolved beyond the mere absence of war to include positive peace characterised by social justice, economic equity and stable governance. However, the 21st century is increasingly defined by fragile peace, a precarious state in which systemic vulnerabilities make a society susceptible to relapse into violent conflict (Galtung, 1964; Ibeanu, 2022).

The global security landscape in 2026 is marked by high volatility. According to the *Global Humanitarian Overview 2026*, over 239 million people are in urgent need of protection due to entrenched conflicts that are more violent and enduring than at any time since World War II (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2025). The normalisation of "victory at any cost" and the weakening of

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multilateral institutions have created a global climate of uncertainty (International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], 2025).

In Africa, the narrative of African Solutions to African Problems faces a stern test. The continent hosts a high concentration of fragile states where military coups and unconstitutional transitions undermine decades of democratic gains (ACLED, 2025). This fragility is most acute in the West African subregion. The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger forces from ECOWAS fractured regional security cooperation, leaving a vacuum filled by non-state armed groups (Centre for Democracy and Development [CDD-West Africa], 2025).

In Nigeria, this regional instability is not a distant threat but an immediate national security crisis that requires urgent attention. As the regional hegemon, Nigeria's porous borders serve as conduits for small arms proliferation and the influx of foreign insurgents, such as the Lakurawa network, which emerged as a significant threat in late 2025 (ACAPS, 2025; Council on Foreign Relations [CFR], 2026). This study is motivated by the rapid deterioration of the security architecture in West Africa and its direct contagion effect on Nigeria's national stability.

Objectives of the Study

The following objectives guided this study:

- i. To analyse the drivers of Fragile Peace across the West African subregion.
- ii. To examine the extent to which regional instability impacts Nigeria's National Security.
- iii. To assess the effectiveness of existing regional security frameworks in mitigating conflict spillover into Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification

Fragile Peace

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2016), fragile peace is a combination of exposure to risk and the insufficient capacity of the state, systems, or communities to manage, absorb, or mitigate those risks. In this context, a fragile peace is a state in which the "social contract" is broken because the state is unable to perform its basic functions.

In another prism, Galtung (1964) distinguishes between "negative peace" (the absence of war) and "positive peace." From this perspective, fragile peace is characterised as a "negative peace, where the structural causes of conflict, such as social injustice and economic inequality, remain unaddressed, making society highly susceptible to a relapse into violence.

In the same token, Ibeanu (2006) conceptualises fragile peace as a "process of managing contradictions." He posits that peace is fragile when the institutional mechanisms for resolving social, political and economic disputes are weak, leading to a situation in which peace is maintained through coercion or temporary cessation of hostilities rather than through genuine resolution.

For this study, Ibeanu's (2006) definition of fragile peace was adopted among the three provided. This choice is predicated on his conceptualisation of peace as a process of managing such contradictions. This definition is particularly suited to the contemporary West African landscape, which is currently defined by three critical tensions: the push for democratic consolidation versus the resurgence of military coups (as seen in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger); the drive for regional integration under ECOWAS versus the sudden withdrawal of member states into the Alliance of Sahel States (AES); and the preservation of state sovereignty versus the destabilizing cross-border influence of violent non-state actors.

This study recognises that peace in the subregion is not the total absence of conflict but rather a precarious balance maintained through increasingly fragile institutional mechanisms. This perspective allows for a nuanced analysis of how the failure of these mechanisms, specifically the breakdown of regional Early Warning Systems and the inability of neighbouring armies to secure their borders, creates a security vacuum. Ultimately, these systemic failures in the subregion translate into direct threats to Nigeria's national integrity, manifesting as uncontrolled arms proliferation and the influx of foreign insurgent networks.

National Security

Ochoga (2023) defines national security as a state where a nation's physical integrity, democratic processes, and the general welfare of its citizenry are secured through the optimal synchronisation of political, military, and technological structures. This definition emphasises that security is not merely the absence of external aggression but the optimal functioning of a country's internal governance mechanisms.

Furthermore, Ugwueze and Onuoha (2020) and Okonkwo (2025) argue for a shift toward "informational sovereignty" and strategic communication. They suggest that in the contemporary era, national security must be redefined to include non-kinetic dimensions such as social cohesion and information integrity, where the state's ability to mobilise citizens and foster unity is as critical as its territorial defence. In this view, a nation is only "secure" if its strategic communication systems can effectively counter disinformation and secessionist narratives that threaten national stability.

Also, Berebon (2025) conceptualises national security through the "security-development-stability" nexus. This perspective defines security as a condition in which the survival of citizens and their fundamental freedoms are guaranteed, enabling citizens to trust public institutions and invest in the economy without fear of violence or imminent danger. This study adopts Ochoga's definition, which reinforces the human security model, asserting that as long as the subregional complex remains unstable, Nigeria's developmental aspirations will remain under constant threat, regardless of traditional military expenditures.

Empirical Review

Drivers of Fragile Peace across the West African subregion

Barkindo (2021) examined the resurgence of military interventions in West Africa and their systemic impact on regional peace, utilising a qualitative research methodology based on secondary data and a case-study analysis of Mali and Guinea, anchored in the Frustration-Aggression Theory. The findings reveal that military coups are largely driven by democratic backsliding, where political leaders manipulate constitutions to extend their tenures, leading to popular frustration and military opportunism. The study found that these coups create a governance vacuum that allows insurgent groups to thrive, hence recommending that ECOWAS move beyond mere sanctions to address the root causes of bad governance. Meanwhile, a significant gap in the study is that it focuses primarily on the internal politics of the coup-affected countries, failing to provide specific empirical data on how these political shifts directly diminish the tactical military operations of the Nigerian Armed Forces along the northern borders.

Eji (2023) explored the link between governance failure and the proliferation of non-state armed groups in the Chad Basin. This study employed a descriptive survey design utilising questionnaires and focus group discussions with displaced persons and security experts. Human Security Theory underpinned the study. The findings indicate that jihadist expansion is driven by porous borders and the inability of states to provide local security, which enables groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) to establish shadow governments. The study recommends a shift from a kinetic (military-only) approach to a "non-kinetic" developmental strategy. While the work provides excellent insight into human security, the gap lies in its failure to account for the current geopolitical shift, specifically how the withdrawal of Niger and Mali from ECOWAS has technically invalidated the previous joint border governance models that Nigeria relied upon.

The extent to which Regional Instability Impacts Nigeria's National Security

Adebayo (2020) examined the nexus between the collapse of the Libyan state and the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in Northern Nigeria. Using a qualitative descriptive methodology and drawing on the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). The study revealed that fragile peace in the Sahel acts as a funnel for insurgency, directly fuelling Boko Haram's logistics. The study concluded that Nigeria's borders are too porous to treat domestic security as an isolated variable and recommended, among others, the establishment of a multinational digital border surveillance system. The identified gap is the study's heavy focus on kinetic (military) responses, while neglecting the socio-economic drivers of cross-border recruitment.

Olukotun (2022) investigated the impact of recent military coups in Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso on Nigeria's defence budget and internal stability. Using a mixed-methods approach (content analysis and secondary data trends) and grounded in Hegemonic Stability Theory. The study revealed that, as the regional giant, Nigeria's national security is being depleted by the high cost of leading ECOWAS interventions and managing refugee influxes. The findings suggest that regional democratic backsliding has created a bufferless zone for Nigeria. The study recommends a shift toward smart power and the sharing of regional intelligence over direct military intervention. This gap stems from the lack of primary data on displaced populations fleeing these fragile zones in Nigeria.

Nnam and Okechukwu (2021) explored how instability in the West African sub-region manifests as maritime piracy and its implications for Nigeria's oil-dependent economy. Using a case-study research design and Securitisation Theory, the findings highlight that neighbouring states' inability to police their territorial waters has turned the Nigerian maritime domain into a high-risk zone, thereby impacting national revenue. The study recommends a centralised maritime command under the Yaoundé Architecture. The identified gap is the failure to link maritime insecurity to terrestrial banditry in Nigeria's hinterlands, treating them as separate rather than interconnected regional threats.

Table 1: Trend of Violence in West Africa (2021–2025)

| Year | Recorded Security Incidents | Total Fatalities | Key Drivers |
|------|-----------------------------|------------------|---|
| 2021 | 4,200 | 10,500 | Rise of ISWAP, Mali Coup |
| 2022 | 5,100 | 11,200 | Burkina Faso Coups, Banditry |
| 2023 | 6,800 | 14,000 | Niger Coup, Sahel Expansion |
| 2024 | 8,400 | 18,500 | ECOWAS Schism, Drone Warfare |
| 2025 | 13,000 | 25,000+ | Total Sahel Collapse, Border Incursions |

Source: Triangulated data from *ACLED (2025)* and *CDD-West Africa (2025) Security Trackers*.

Statistics highlight the severity of this fragile peace: in the first half of 2025, West Africa recorded 12,964 conflict-related fatalities, with Nigeria accounting for nearly 44.5% (5,768 deaths) (CDD-West Africa, 2025).

The table below provides details of the violence in the region to validate the arguments made by Adebayo (2020) and Olukotun (2022) regarding the rising costs of managing regional instability.

The data presented in Table 1 reveals a staggering 209% increase in recorded security incidents and a nearly 138% surge in total fatalities between 2021 and 2025. This exponential growth in violence underscores the study's finding that regional democratic backsliding represented by the coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has effectively eliminated the "buffer zones" that previously shielded Nigeria from direct Sahelian instability. The spike to over 25,000 fatalities in 2025 coincides with the emergence of the Lakurawa network and the structural fracturing of ECOWAS, validating the use of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to argue that subregional "negative peace" has evolved into a contagion effect. Consequently, these figures suggest that Nigeria's traditional defence strategies are failing as the state is forced to manage the spillover of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) and the high costs of refugee influxes without the support of previously functional joint border governance models.

Effectiveness of existing regional security frameworks in mitigating the spillover of conflict into Nigeria

Adebayo (2025) conducted a study titled "Evaluating the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in the Lake Chad Basin: A Decade of Collective Security." Using a mixed-methods research design involving secondary data analysis and key informant interviews with military personnel, the study was anchored in Collective Security Theory. The findings revealed that while the MNJTF has significantly degraded Boko Haram's territorial control, the framework remains operationally fragile because of inconsistent funding and the recent withdrawal of key partners, such as Niger. The study recommends institutionalising a sustainable, independent funding mechanism for the MNJTF to reduce reliance on foreign donors. A critical gap identified is the framework's inability to address the digital spillover of conflict, where insurgent groups use regional networks for cyber-recruitment, a variable often ignored in kinetic-heavy regional studies.

Alozie (2022) investigated "ECOWAS and the Challenges of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons and Goods on Nigeria's National Security." This study employed a qualitative descriptive methodology, utilising content analysis of official ECOWAS treaties and Nigerian immigration reports, grounded in Intergovernmentalism Theory. The findings indicate that the existing regional framework for free movement lacks a corresponding security-synchronisation component, thereby facilitating the spillover of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) into Nigeria's Northwest. The study recommends the urgent computerisation of all common borders and the establishment of a centralised regional migration database. The study's gap is its failure to account for how non-state actors (border community leaders) can be integrated into the framework to provide "human intelligence" that official protocols currently lack.

Gbabo et al (2022) examined "Regional Security Architecture and Counter-Insurgency in West Africa." Utilising a case study research design and drawing upon the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). The study found that Nigeria's national security is inextricably linked to the health of its neighbours' security. The findings highlighted that the ECOWAS Early Warning System (ECOWARN) is effective at identification but weak at prevention, leading to a 'reactive' rather than 'proactive' security posture for

Nigeria. The study recommends transitioning from a purely military-centric regional framework to a peacebuilding effectiveness framework that addresses socio-economic drivers in Border States. The identified gap is the lack of empirical focus on the role of Private Security Military Companies (PSMMCs) within regional frameworks, which are becoming increasingly prevalent in the subregion.

Theoretical framework

Regional Security Complex Theory

The theoretical anchor for this study is the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), primarily pioneered by Barry Buzan in his seminal 1983 work and later expanded upon with Ole Wæver in 2003. The fundamental premise of RSCT is that international security is organised into geographically shaped clusters, or "complexes," where the security concerns of a group of states are so deeply intertwined that their national security cannot be realistically considered in isolation (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The theory operates on the basic assumption of security interdependence, suggesting that most threats travel more efficiently over short distances than over long ones, thereby making regional dynamics the primary driver of national stability. Consequently, RSCT posits that the history of friendship and hostility within a region determines the resilience of that region's peace architecture.

A significant strength of RSCT lies in its multilevel analysis, which allows researchers to bridge the gap between domestic vulnerabilities, regional shifts and global pressures. For instance, it provides a lens through which to view how the structural collapse of neighbouring states exacerbates internal agitations within Nigeria. However, the theory is not without its weaknesses; critics often point to its state-centric bias, arguing that it focuses heavily on official government actors while occasionally underestimating the fluid, decentralised power of non-state actors like Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) or (JNIM) (Kirchner & Sperling, 2007). Additionally, in the digital age, the theory's heavy reliance on physical geography can be challenged by cyber threats that transcend physical borders.

Despite these limitations, RSCT is exceptionally well-suited for analysing the fragile peace in the West African subregion and its implications for Nigeria's national security. Within this framework, West Africa is viewed as a distinct "security complex" in which Nigeria serves as the regional hegemon (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The current fragility, evidenced by the "coup contagion," the fracturing of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), is not merely an external neighbouring dispute but also an internal component of Nigeria's security environment (Kohnert, 2024).

This perspective enables the study to argue that as long as the subregional complex remains unstable, Nigeria's territorial integrity and human security will remain under constant threat, regardless of domestic military expenditures, because security problems in such a complex cannot be resolved in isolation (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Idahosa et al., 2023).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, relying on secondary data sources, including triangulated conflict statistics from the Armed Conflict Location Event Data Project (ACLED), the West Africa Security Tracker by the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD-West Africa), and reports from the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). Content analysis was employed as the data analysis method, focusing on identifying trends in conflict fatalities, military coups, and the effectiveness of regional security protocols, such as the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement. This non-empirical approach is justified by the study's goal to synthesise current geopolitical shifts into a holistic national security framework.

Discussion of Findings

i. Drivers of Fragile Peace across the West African subregion

This finding indicates that military intervention is primarily driven by democratic backsliding and constitutional manipulation by leaders seeking to extend their tenures, which fuels public frustration and creates opportunities for the military to seize power. Concurrently, groups like JNIM exploit porous borders and the state's inability to provide localised security to establish shadow governments, effectively filling the vacuum left by fragile national institutions. These align with the work of Barkindo (2021) and Eji (2023).

ii. The extent to which Regional Instability Impacts Nigeria's National Security

This finding identifies that Nigeria's national security is inextricably linked to regional instability, as a "fragile peace" in the Sahel serves as a logistics funnel for groups like Boko Haram. Nigeria's porous borders and the democratic backsliding of neighbouring states have eliminated traditional "buffer zones," forcing the country to shoulder the high financial and operational costs of leading ECOWAS interventions and managing refugee crises. Furthermore, the failure of neighbouring states to police their territorial waters has compromised Nigeria's maritime domain, creating high-risk zones that directly deplete national revenue and threaten economic stability. This is consistent with the studies conducted by Adebayo (2020), Olukotun (2022), Nnam and Okechukwu (2021).

iii. Effectiveness of existing regional security frameworks in mitigating the spillover of conflict into Nigeria

This finding suggests that while the MNJTF has successfully degraded Boko Haram's territorial reach, the force remains operationally fragile due to inconsistent funding and the withdrawal of strategic partners, such as Niger. This instability is compounded by the ECOWAS free movement framework, which lacks the necessary security synchronisation to prevent the spillover of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) into

Nigeria's Northwest. Ultimately, the ECOWAS Early Warning System (ECOWARN) remains trapped in a "reactive" posture, effective at identifying threats but failing to trigger the proactive prevention needed to secure the region. This finding is consistent with studies by Adebayo (2025), Alozie (2022), and Gbabo et al. (2022).

Conclusion

The study concludes that Nigeria's national stability is inextricably linked to the security of its neighbours, as the country cannot achieve internal security in isolation from its regional environment. Within the West African security complex, the transition from "negative peace" to a state of fragile peace has created a contagion effect that directly triggers domestic territorial fragmentation and economic paralysis. This fragility is fundamentally driven by the collapse of the "social contract" and a breakdown of the institutional mechanisms required to manage regional contradictions.

Through the lens of the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS represents more than a political schism; it is a structural failure of the regional security architecture that has invalidated previous joint border governance models. This vacuum has facilitated the influx of foreign insurgent networks, such as the Lakurawa groups, and the proliferation of small arms, proving that threats in this subregion travel efficiently across porous borders. Ultimately, as long as the West African security complex remains unstable and regional institutions remain fractured, Nigeria's military expenditure will yield diminishing returns, as the state remains highly susceptible to the spillover of regional conflicts.

Recommendations

- i. The Federal Government of Nigeria should lead the transition from military-heavy responses to a peacebuilding effectiveness framework that addresses the socioeconomic drivers of radicalisation in border communities.

- ii. The Federal Government of Nigeria should implement a multinational digital border surveillance system and a centralised regional migration database to mitigate risks posed by porous borders.
- iii. The Federal Government of Nigeria should champion the institutionalisation of an independent, sustainable funding mechanism for the MNJTF to ensure operational efficiency and continuity despite partner withdrawals. This recommendation is in line with Adebayo (2025).

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