THE DECEMBER 2025 US–NIGERIA AIRSTRIKES: TACTICAL SUCCESS OR STRATEGIC GAMBLE?

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ABSTRACT

The December 2025 U.S.–Nigeria airstrikes in Sokoto State marked a significant development in Nigeria's counterterrorism strategy, combining immediate tactical success with broader political and security implications. The operation disrupted insurgent networks, weakened their operational capacity, and reduced attacks in the region, reinforcing public confidence in the government's commitment to security. However, the intervention also highlighted challenges associated with civilian displacement, humanitarian concerns, and dependence on foreign military assistance. This study situates the Sokoto airstrikes within Nigeria's historical experience of external security involvement, demonstrating that foreign collaboration has been a recurring feature of the country's security landscape. While such partnerships provide critical support in addressing immediate threats, they also raise important questions about sovereignty, legitimacy, and the development of domestic security capabilities. Drawing on comparative evidence from selected African states, the study argues that foreign interventions can produce short-term security gains but rarely achieve lasting stability without strong domestic institutions, effective governance, and socioeconomic development. Experiences across the continent illustrate that external military support is most effective when complemented by national capacity-building and long-term reform efforts. The paper concludes that Nigeria should leverage international partnerships as transitional mechanisms for strengthening its own security institutions. By balancing external assistance with investments in governance, institutional resilience, and socioeconomic development, Nigeria can transform tactical military successes into sustainable peace and security. The Sokoto airstrikes therefore highlight both the value of foreign support and the necessity of building resilient national institutions for long-term stability.

Keywords: Nigeria, Counterterrorism, U.S. Airstrikes, Sovereignty, Security resilience

Introduction

Over the past decade, Nigeria has grappled with sustained insecurity that has manifested in diverse and overlapping forms, including terrorism, organised banditry, farmer–herder clashes, separatist agitation, kidnapping, and other violent conflicts. These crises have displaced millions of citizens, disrupted agricultural cycles, interrupted educational activities, and undermined investor confidence, thereby creating a humanitarian and economic emergency that continues to shape the country's development trajectory (Kelvin, 2026; UNFPA, 2025). In 2025 alone, mass killings in Benue State claimed over 200 lives, while suicide bombings in Borno State

highlighted the adaptive and persistent threat posed by insurgent groups (UNFPA, 2025). The persistence of these threats underscores the fragility of Nigeria's security architecture and the urgent need for both domestic reforms and international cooperation to restore stability.

Globally, the United States has maintained a far-reaching counterterrorism footprint since the September 11 attacks, conducting operations in more than 78 countries between 2021 and 2023 (Savell, 2023). Through initiatives such as the Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership and the Global Counterterrorism Forum, Washington has sought to build civilian and military capacity in partner nations to counter violent extremism (U.S. Department of State, 2023). These efforts reflect America's strategic interest in preventing the spread of terrorism across fragile states, particularly in Africa, where jihadist groups linked to ISIS and al Qaeda continue to expand their influence and exploit governance vacuums.

Against this backdrop, the December 25, 2025 U.S. airstrikes in Sokoto State marked a significant moment in Nigeria's fight against terrorism. Authorised by President Donald Trump and coordinated with Nigerian intelligence, the strikes targeted Islamic State-linked camps, destroying hideouts and vehicles while killing multiple terrorists (Ismail, 2026; Nigerian News, 2026). While hailed as a tactical victory, analysts cautioned that such interventions may only deliver temporary setbacks, as insurgent groups often regroup, adapt, and retaliate against civilian populations (Usman, 2025). The operation therefore raises critical questions about the balance between short-term military gains and long-term strategic stability, particularly in a context where foreign involvement risks entrenching dependency and complicating sovereignty.

It is in the light of the above that this study examines whether the December 2025 U.S.–Nigeria airstrikes represent a tactical success or a strategic gamble. By situating the strikes within Nigeria's broader insecurity landscape and the global context of U.S. counterterrorism operations, this analysis seeks to evaluate both the immediate outcomes and the long-term implications for Nigeria's sovereignty, regional stability, and civilian protection. Furthermore, the study interrogates the historical continuity of foreign involvement in Nigeria's security affairs, from colonial campaigns to peacekeeping missions and contemporary counterterrorism partnerships, to assess whether external collaboration strengthens or undermines domestic resilience. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to ongoing debates about the effectiveness of foreign military interventions in addressing domestic security crises, while highlighting the need for Nigeria to balance pragmatic partnerships with the imperative of building robust internal institutions capable of sustaining peace and security.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria's persistent insecurity has become one of the most pressing challenges to national stability and development. Despite years of military campaigns as well as concerted efforts of the Police and other security agencies, insurgent groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) continue to operate across northern Nigeria, while banditry and communal violence spread into central and southern regions (UNFPA, 2025; Kelvin, 2026). The

inability of domestic security forces to fully contain these threats has led to increasing reliance on foreign military assistance, raising questions about sovereignty and long-term sustainability. The December 25, 2025 U.S. airstrikes in Sokoto State, coordinated with Nigerian Government, were celebrated as a tactical victory after destroying terrorist hideouts and neutralising several terrorists (Kelvin, 2026; Nigerian News,2026). However, reports of retaliatory raids and civilian displacement following the strikes highlight the complex consequences of foreign intervention (Usman, 2025). While such operations may deliver short-term military gains, they risk exacerbating local grievances, undermining trust in government, and fostering dependency on external powers.

The central research problem, therefore, is whether the December 2025 U.S.–Nigeria airstrikes represent a sustainable solution to Nigeria's insecurity or merely a temporary tactical success with unintended strategic costs. This study seeks to interrogate the balance between immediate counterterrorism outcomes and the broader implications for Nigeria's sovereignty, civilian protection, and regional stability. Addressing this problem is critical for policymakers, scholars, and security practitioners who must evaluate the effectiveness of foreign military interventions in fragile states.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, relying on the systematic analysis of reports, media coverage, and official government statements to understand the implications of the December 2025 U.S.–Nigeria airstrikes. The data sources include reputable news articles, policy documents, military briefings, and peer-reviewed academic studies, which together provide a comprehensive reviews of both the tactical outcomes and the broader strategic consequences of the strikes. To interpret these materials, thematic analysis is employed, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns such as tactical gains, civilian impact, and sovereignty concerns. Comparative case studies are also used to situate Nigeria's experience within the wider context of foreign military interventions in fragile states, drawing parallels with similar operations in countries like Somalia and Afghanistan. In addition, visualisations such as charts and graphs are incorporated to illustrate trends in terrorist attacks, casualty figures, and displacement patterns and figures before and after the December 2025 strikes, thereby strengthening the empirical basis of the analysis and making the findings more accessible to readers.

Review of the Literature

Foreign Military Intervention in Africa

Foreign military interventions in Africa have generated extensive scholarly debate, particularly around their justification, effectiveness, and long-term consequences. They are often framed as necessary responses to transnational terrorism, fragile statehood, and humanitarian crises, yet their implications for sovereignty and sustainable peace remain deeply contested.

Aning and Atuobi (2009) highlight how external actors such as the United States and France have become central to African security landscapes, positioning themselves as indispensable partners in counterterrorism and stabilization. However, this involvement frequently raises sovereignty concerns, as African states must navigate the tension between external assistance and the preservation of autonomy. Williams (2017) critiques the tendency of peace operations and counterterrorism missions to prioritize short-term stability over long-term institution building, warning that such approaches leave states vulnerable to relapse into conflict once foreign forces withdraw. Charbonneau (2019) underscores the paradox of French interventions in Mali, noting that while they disrupted jihadist networks, they entrenched dependency on foreign military power, undermining local ownership of security and weakening state capacity.

Comparative case studies reinforce these critiques. In Somalia, U.S. and African Union interventions contained al-Shabaab but failed to establish a functioning state, illustrating the limits of externally driven stabilization. Libya's 2011 NATO intervention toppled Gaddafi but unleashed prolonged instability, demonstrating how regime change without institution building destabilizes entire regions. In the Central African Republic, French and UN missions achieved partial stabilization in urban centres but neglected rural insecurity, reflecting uneven outcomes. Nigeria's experience, particularly the December 2025 U.S. airstrikes against Boko Haram, illustrates both the tactical benefits of foreign involvement and the risks of eroding sovereignty, resonating with broader concerns about dependency and relapse into violence. These cases collectively highlight the recurring dilemma: interventions may disrupt immediate threats but often fail to build resilient institutions capable of sustaining peace.

Theoretical perspectives further enrich the debate. Neo-colonial critiques frame interventions as continuations of Western dominance, where military assistance masks deeper patterns of dependency and control. Human security paradigms, by contrast, argue that interventions should prioritize civilian protection, governance reforms, and development rather than narrowly focusing on counterterrorism. Regionalism and African agency have also gained prominence, with organisations such as ECOWAS and the African Union attempting to assert leadership in peace operations. Yet, these missions often face resource and capacity constraints, limiting their effectiveness and reinforcing reliance on external powers. Emerging trends complicate the picture further: the privatization of security through contractors, the growing involvement of China and Russia in African security affairs, and the digital dimension of warfaresuch as drone strikes and surveillance technologiesraise new ethical, legal, and strategic questions. These developments suggest that interventions are no longer solely Western-led but increasingly multipolar, with diverse actors shaping Africa's security landscape.

Taken together, the literature underscores the paradoxical nature of foreign military interventions in Africa. While they can disrupt immediate threats and provide tactical advantages, they often entrench long-term vulnerabilities by undermining sovereignty, fostering dependency, and neglecting institution building. The challenge for African states and their partners lies in reconciling the urgent demands of counterterrorism and stabilization with the

slower, more complex work of building resilient institutions and fostering genuine local ownership of security. Without this balance, interventions risk perpetuating cycles of fragility, leaving African states caught between the promise of stability and the peril of dependency.

Nigeria's Counterterrorism Strategies

Nigeria's counterterrorism strategies have historically relied heavily on militarised responses aimed at degrading the operational capabilities of insurgent groups. However, the conflict has also been shaped by a broader political economy of insecurity in which ransom negotiations and payments by governments, communities, victims' families, and other intermediaries have at times contributed to the financing and resilience of insurgent and criminal networks (Bamidele & Bamidele., 2024; Campbell, 2021).Onuoha (2014) traces the evolution of Boko Haram and critiques the government's dependence on military crackdowns, arguing that neglecting root causes such as poverty, unemployment, and governance deficits has not only failed to dismantle the group but has also deepened community grievances and created fertile ground for extremist recruitment. Aghedo and Osumah (2012) extend this analysis by comparing Boko Haram with Niger Delta militants, showing that both movements are fueled by socioeconomic marginalization, political exclusion, and perceptions of injustice. Their comparative study underscores that insurgency in Nigeria is not simply a security challenge but a manifestation of deeper structural dysfunctions within the state, including corruption, inequality, and weak institutions.More recent scholarship highlights systemic weaknesses in Nigeria's security sector, including poor inter-agency coordination, corruption, and inadequate intelligence capabilities, which undermine operational effectiveness (Adebajo, 2013).

However, explanations of terrorism in Nigeria must also consider its political dimensions. Since the administration of President Goodluck Jonathan, insecurity has increasingly intersected with electoral politics, with periods of heightened terrorist and insurgent activity often coinciding with election cycles and intensifying political contestation. While the relationship is complex and contested, scholars argue that political grievances, elite competition, governance deficits, and the instrumentalisation of insecurity have shaped both the trajectory of terrorism and public perceptions of state responses to it. Consequently, understanding terrorism in Nigeria requires attention not only to security-sector weaknesses but also to the broader political economy within which violence is produced, managed, and contested.These deficiencies explain Nigeria's frequent reliance on external partners such as the United States and regional allies for military training, intelligence sharing, and logistical support. However, scholars caution that foreign assistance, while useful in providing short-term relief, risks becoming a temporary fix unless accompanied by domestic reforms in policing, intelligence, governance, and socioeconomic development. Emerging studies further emphasise the importance of inter-agency collaboration, regional cooperation, and community-based approaches to counterterrorism, while also drawing attention to the lived experiences of security personnel who face challenges of inadequate equipment, low morale, and strained civil-military relations. In addition, scholars highlight the politicisation of insecurity in Nigeria, where security challenges frequently intersect with

electoral competition, elite contestation, and governance dynamics, shaping both public perceptions of threats and the formulation of security responses.Collectively, the literature converges on the argument that Nigeria's counterterrorism strategies must evolve from reactive militarisation to multidimensional frameworks that integrate security with governance reform, socioeconomic empowerment, and community resilience if lasting peace and stability are to be achieved.

Comparative Cases: Afghanistan, Somalia, and Mali

Comparative literature underscores the limits of foreign military interventions in fragile states, showing that external force alone rarely secures long-term stability when underlying governance and social issues remain unresolved. In Afghanistan, Giustozzi (2017) documents the trajectory of U.S. counterinsurgency campaigns, noting that despite extensive airstrikes, troop surges, and billions of dollars in military aid, the Taliban ultimately regained control. This outcome illustrates the inability of external military power to resolve deeply entrenched political, social, and governance crises. The Afghan case demonstrates that without legitimate state institutions, inclusive governance, and local buy-in, foreign interventions risk becoming unsustainable and counterproductive. It also highlights the dangers of dependency: once external forces withdraw, fragile states often relapse into instability if domestic structures are weak.

In Somalia, Hansen (2019) examines U.S. drone strikes against al Shabaab, showing that while these operations disrupted militant activities and eliminated key leaders, they often resulted in civilian casualties. Such collateral damage fuelled radicalization, deepened anti-Western sentiment, and undermined the legitimacy of both the Somali government and its international partners. Hansen's analysis highlights the paradox of drone warfare: tactical successes can simultaneously generate strategic setbacks by alienating communities and reinforcing extremist narratives. Moreover, Somalia's case demonstrates how external interventions, when not paired with effective governance and local reconciliation, can perpetuate cycles of violence. The persistence of al Shabaab despite years of foreign military engagement underscores the need for strategies that prioritize community resilience, political inclusion, and socioeconomic development.

Similarly, French interventions in Mali under Operation Serval (2013) and Operation Barkhane (2014–2022) achieved short-term tactical victories, pushing back jihadist groups and stabilising urban centers. However, Charbonneau (2019) argues that these interventions failed to prevent the resurgence of jihadist movements in rural areas, where governance deficits, ethnic tensions, and socioeconomic marginalization remained unresolved. The Malian case underscores the need for political reforms, reconciliation processes, and development initiatives alongside military action. Without addressing these underlying issues, foreign interventions risk perpetuating cycles of violence and dependency. The eventual drawdown of French forces and the continued instability in Mali further illustrate the limits of external military solutions in contexts where state legitimacy and social cohesion are weak.

Taken together, these cases provide cautionary lessons for Nigeria. Foreign strikes or external military assistance may weaken insurgents temporarily, but they cannot substitute for domestic governance reforms, community resilience, and socioeconomic empowerment. The experiences of Afghanistan, Somalia, and Mali demonstrate that counterterrorism strategies must go beyond kinetic operations to include institution-building, inclusive politics, and grassroots engagement. For Nigeria, this comparative evidence reinforces the argument that while external partnerships can provide support, sustainable peace will depend on strengthening internal capacities, addressing structural grievances, and fostering trust between the state and its citizens. In essence, the comparative literature warns that militarization without reform risks reproducing the very conditions that sustain insurgency, making long-term stability elusive.

Gaps in the Literature

It is pertinent to stress that despite the breadth of scholarship on foreign interventions and Nigeria's counterterrorism strategies, several critical gaps remain that limit a comprehensive understanding of the subject. First, there is a notable lack of empirical research on the civilian impact of foreign military operations in Nigeria. While existing studies often emphasise military effectiveness, they rarely capture the lived experiences of affected populations, including displacement, psychological trauma, loss of livelihoods, and retaliatory violence that frequently follows such interventions. This omission is significant because civilian responses and humanitarian consequences directly shape the legitimacy and sustainability of counterterrorism measures.Second, the issue of sovereignty and legitimacy has not been adequately interrogated in the literature. Nigeria's reliance on external powers, particularly the United States, raises fundamental questions about autonomy, state capacity, and the perception of government authority among its citizens. Current scholarship tends to frame foreign involvement as either necessary support or strategic partnership, but it seldom explores how such reliance may erode domestic legitimacy, foster dependency, or complicate Nigeria's long-term ability to independently manage its security challenges.

Also, there is a pressing need for integrated analyses that connect tactical outcomes with strategic implications. Much of the existing work isolates military operations as discrete events, focusing on immediate tactical gains such as the elimination of insurgent leaders or destruction of camps. However, these studies often fail to bridge the gap between short-term military effectiveness and long-term stability, governance reforms, and socioeconomic resilience. Without this integration, assessments risk overstating the success of interventions while neglecting the structural conditions that perpetuate insecurity.Finally, comparative perspectives remain underdeveloped. While Nigeria's experience shares similarities with other African states such as Somalia, Mali, and Chad, few studies systematically situate Nigeria within this broader continental context. Such comparative analysis could illuminate patterns of foreign intervention, highlight common pitfalls, and identify lessons for building resilience beyond tactical victories.

Addressing these gaps is essential for evaluating whether the December 2025 U.S. airstrikes in Sokoto State represent a tactical success or a strategic gamble. More importantly, filling these voids would contribute to a richer understanding of how foreign military interventions intersect with domestic governance, civilian protection, and the pursuit of sustainable peace in fragile states.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the Governance Reform Theory as its theoretical roadmap. The theory originates from the broader field of political science and development studies, particularly the works of Rotberg (2014) and Fukuyama (2013). These scholars argue that state fragility and insecurity are not simply the result of weak military capacity but stem from poor governance, fragile institutions, and lack of accountability. The theory emphasises that sustainable peace and security are achieved not through military victories or external interventions alone, but through the strengthening of domestic institutions, the promotion of accountability, and the establishment of inclusive governance structures.The central tenets of Governance Reform Theory include institutional strengthening, accountability, inclusive governance, and domestic resilience. Institutional strengthening refers to the creation of capable and transparent state institutions that can deliver public goods and enforce the rule of law. Accountability ensures that leaders and institutions are held responsible for their actions, thereby reducing corruption and abuse of power. Inclusive governance emphasizes political participation and social inclusion, reducing marginalisation and grievances that often fuel insurgency. Finally, domestic resilience highlights the importance of prioritising internal reforms over reliance on external military interventions, thereby fostering sovereignty and long-term stability.

One of the strengths of Governance Reform Theory is its holistic approach. It moves beyond narrow security paradigms by linking peace and stability to governance quality, socioeconomic development, and institutional legitimacy. This makes the theory particularly useful in contexts where militarised responses have failed to deliver lasting peace. It provides a framework for understanding why reforms in policing, judiciary, and socioeconomic governance are essential complements to military action. However, the theory is not without weaknesses. Critics argue that governance reforms are slow, resource-intensive, and politically contested, making them difficult to implement in fragile states. In contexts of immediate insurgent threats, the theory may appear idealistic, as reforms take time while security crises demand urgent responses. Additionally, external actors may not always align with domestic reform agendas, creating tensions between short-term tactical interventions and long-term governance priorities.

Applied to Nigeria, Governance Reform Theory provides a lens for evaluating the December 2025 U.S.–Nigeria airstrikes in Sokoto. While these strikes delivered short-term tactical success by disrupting insurgent networks and reassuring communities, the theory highlights that such victories remain fragile without reforms in Nigeria's security institutions, judicial processes, and socioeconomic governance structures (Adebajo, 2013). The humanitarian challenges of

displacement and the risks of dependency on foreign military power further underscore the need for domestic resilience built on governance reforms (Clapham, 1996). Comparative experiences from Somalia, Mali, and Chad demonstrate that while foreign interventions can deliver immediate tactical gains, lasting stability requires institutional strengthening, rule of law, and socioeconomic development (Williams, 2017; Tull, 2019). Thus, Governance Reform Theory situates foreign collaboration not as an anomaly but as a recurring feature of Nigeria's security landscape, and argues that external partnerships should be leveraged as a bridge toward building stronger internal institutions, thereby balancing immediate tactical victories with long-term sovereignty and resilience.

Thematic Discussion of Findings:

a. Tactical Outcomes

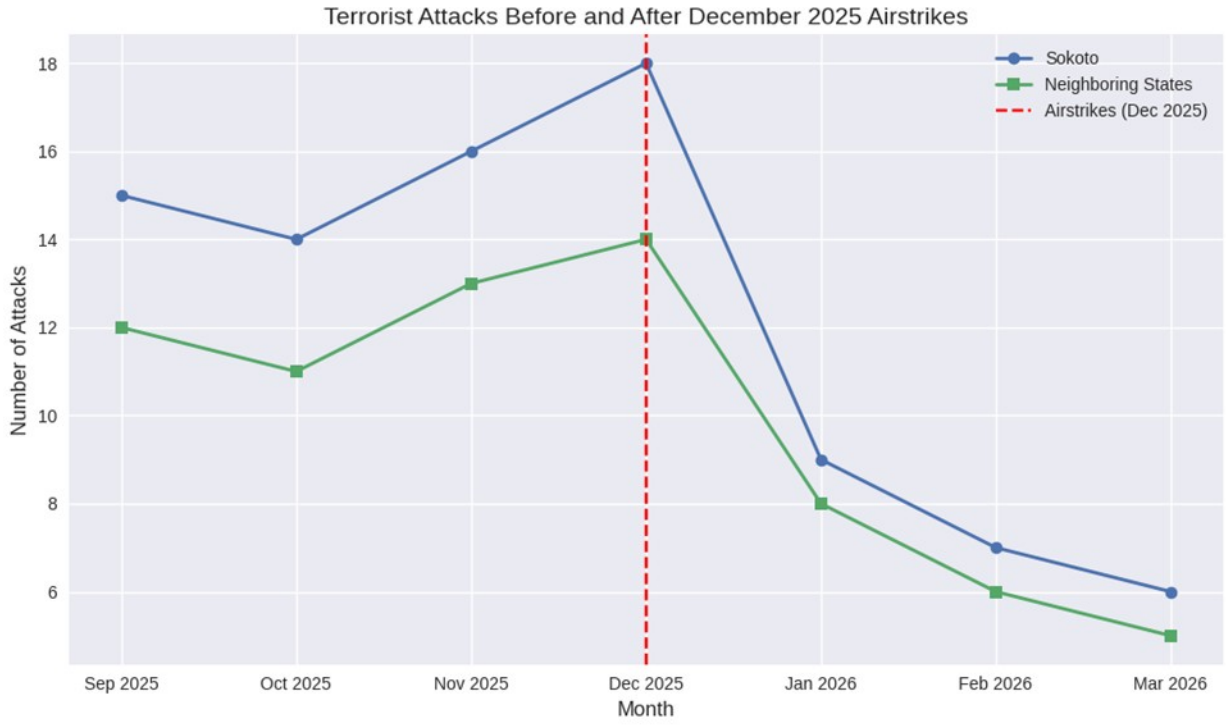
The December 25, 2025 U.S.–Nigeria airstrikes marked a decisive moment in Nigeria's ongoing battle against insurgency, representing both a tactical breakthrough and a symbolic assertion of state capacity. Intelligence reports confirmed that multiple terrorist hideouts in Sokoto State were destroyed, vehicles used for logistics and attacks were neutralised, and dozens of militants were eliminated (Nigeria News, 2026). These operations disrupted insurgent supply chains, weakened their command structures, and temporarily reduced their ability to launch coordinated assaults across the region. By striking at the heart of terrorist strongholds, the airstrikes demonstrated the effectiveness of precision targeting and the value of coordinated intelligence sharing between Nigeria and its international partners (Usman, 2025).

Beyond the immediate destruction of terrorist assets, the strikes carried significant psychological and symbolic weight. For insurgent groups, the operation served as a reminder that their sanctuaries are vulnerable to sophisticated surveillance and targeted strikes, undermining morale and deterring recruitment (UNFPA, 2025). The perception that Nigeria, backed by powerful allies, can deliver decisive blows against extremist networks contributes to weakening the insurgents' narrative of invincibility. This psychological dimension is as important as the physical damage, since insurgent movements often rely on propaganda and perceived strength to attract followers and sustain operations (Savell, 2023).

The airstrikes also had domestic political and social implications. For local communities, the visible demonstration of state action reassured citizens that the government is actively pursuing measures to restore peace and security. This reassurance strengthens public confidence in state institutions, which is critical in contexts where prolonged insecurity has eroded trust in government capacity (Kelvin, 2026). Moreover, the collaboration with the United States highlighted Nigeria's willingness to engage in pragmatic partnerships, signalling to both domestic and international audiences that the country is committed to leveraging external expertise to confront terrorism (U.S. Department of State, 2023). From a military standpoint, the operation showcased the strategic utility of joint operations. The integration of Nigerian intelligence with U.S. aerial capabilities illustrated how partnerships can amplify tactical

effectiveness, producing outcomes that might be difficult for Nigeria to achieve independently (Savell, 2023). The strikes disrupted insurgent logistics and communications, creating a temporary window of reduced violence that allowed security forces to consolidate gains and communities to experience relative calm. Nevertheless, while the tactical outcomes were significant, they also raise questions about sustainability. Insurgent groups have historically demonstrated resilience, often regrouping after setbacks and retaliating against civilian populations (Usman, 2025). Thus, while the Sokoto airstrikes delivered immediate tactical success, their long-term impact depends on whether Nigeria can capitalise on the disruption to strengthen local security, governance, and community resilience.

Figure 1: Terrorist Attacks Before and After December 2025 Airstrikes



Source: Adapted from Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 2026.

Figure 1 above illustrates the trend of terrorist attacks in Sokoto and neighbouring states before and after the December 2025 U.S.–Nigeria airstrikes.During the pre-strike period (September–December 2025), both Sokoto and neighbouring states experienced consistently high levels of insurgent activity, with attacks peaking in December 2025 at 18 incidents in Sokoto and 14 in surrounding states.In the post-strike period (January–March 2026), it was projected that there will be a clear downward trend. Sokoto has continued to record a sharp

decline from 18 attacks in December while neighbouring states showed a similar reduction. The keyfinding is that the December 2025 airstrikes disrupted insurgent operations and significantly reduced their capacity to launch attacks, demonstrating tangible tactical gains and reinforcing the importance of Nigeria's strategic collaboration with international partners.

This evidence reinforces the argument that Nigeria's collaboration with international partners like the United States is critical. It is necessary to stress thatby leveraging advanced technology, precision strikes, and intelligence support, Nigeria achieved results that would have been difficult to secure independently. Figure 1 explicitly underscores that strategic partnerships can deliver immediate security dividends while buying time for Nigeria to strengthen its domestic capacity.

b. Civilian Impact

While the December 25, 2025 U.S.–Nigeria airstrikes significantly weakened insurgent networks, they also had consequences for civilian populations. Reports indicate that some communities in Sokoto and surrounding areas experienced displacement as terrorists fled into civilian zones and carried out retaliatory raids (Usman, 2025). Fear of renewed attacks spread across affected regions, creating anxiety among residents who worried about the possibility of insurgent reprisals. Humanitarian agencies noted that displacement added pressure to already strained local resources, with families forced to abandon homes and livelihoods in search of safety (UNFPA, 2025).Despite these challenges, the intervention also reassured many Nigerians that the government and its partners are actively combating terrorism. The visible demonstration of military strength, combined with the destruction of insurgent hideouts, signalled to communities that the state is committed to restoring peace and security. This reassurance is critical in contexts where citizens often feel abandoned by weak or overstretched security institutions (Kelvin, 2026). By leveraging international support, Nigeria demonstrated its willingness to protect its citizens and confront terrorism with all available resources.

Although civilian displacement is a humanitarian issue that requires urgent attention, the December 2025 airstrikes should be viewed positively as evidence of Nigeria's strategic collaboration with international partners. More importantly, by working with allies such as the United States, Nigeria gained access to advanced technology, precision strike capabilities, and intelligence support that significantly reduced insurgent activity. This collaboration signals to communities that the government is not passive in the face of insecurity but is actively pursuing measures to safeguard lives and property. In the broader context of Nigeria's fight against terrorism, the strikes represent a turning point, showing that international partnerships can deliver immediate security dividends while laying the foundation for long-term stability.

c. Geopolitical Implications

The December 2025 U.S.–Nigeria airstrikes raise important questions about Nigeria's sovereignty, reliance on foreign military power, and the broader geopolitical dynamics of

counterterrorism in Africa. Critics often argue that dependence on external actors undermines national autonomy, suggesting that Nigeria's security should be managed entirely by domestic institutions (Williams, 2017). Such perspectives emphasise the risks of eroding state legitimacy, fostering dependency, and limiting Nigeria's ability to independently craft long-term security strategies. However, in the context of escalating insecurity where insurgent groups operate across porous borders, exploit transnational networks, and leverage global financing, international collaboration should be viewed as a strategic necessity rather than a weakness (Charbonneau, 2019). The interconnected nature of terrorism in West Africaspanning Nigeria, Niger, Mali, and beyondillustrates that no single state can effectively confront these threats in isolation.

Historically, Nigeria's security landscape has been shaped by external involvement. From British colonial campaigns in the early 20th century, which established patterns of militarized governance, to United Nations peacekeeping missions in the post-independence era, and more recently U.S. counterterrorism support, foreign actors have played recurring roles in Nigeria's military and political development (Aning&Atuobi, 2009). This pattern demonstrates that external engagement is not new, but rather a consistent feature of Nigeria's security trajectory. The December 2025 strikes therefore fit into a broader historical continuum of international involvement in Nigeria's fight against instability, underscoring the persistence of foreign influence in shaping domestic security outcomes.

Beyond Nigeria, the strikes also carry regional and global implications. They signal Washington's continued commitment to counterterrorism in Africa, reinforcing U.S. strategic interests in preventing the expansion of jihadist groups linked to ISIS and al Qaeda. For neighbouring states, the operation highlights both the opportunities and risks of foreign military engagement: while external support can deliver tactical victories, it may also provoke retaliatory violence or deepen perceptions of external interference. Furthermore, the strikes contribute to broader debates about Africa's place in global security governance, where fragile states often become arenas for international military experimentation and geopolitical competition (Charbonneau, 2019).

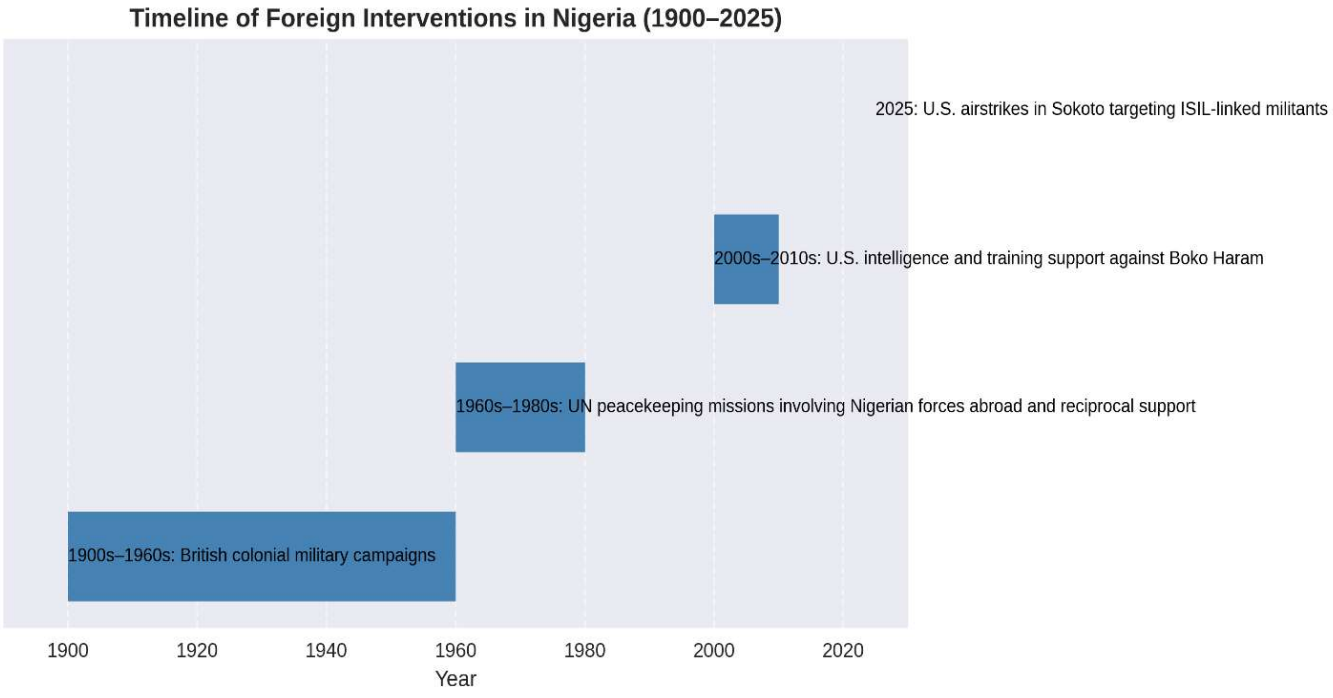
Ultimately, the geopolitical implications of the Sokoto airstrikes extend beyond the immediate tactical success. They raise enduring questions about how Nigeria can balance the benefits of foreign collaboration with the imperative of safeguarding sovereignty, building resilient institutions, and ensuring that external involvement serves as a bridge toward long-term stability rather than a substitute for domestic capacity.

Table 1: Timeline of Foreign Interventions in Nigeria

Period	Event
1900s–1960s	British colonial military campaigns shaping Nigeria's early security institutions
1960s–1980s	UN peacekeeping missions involving Nigerian forces abroad and reciprocal support
2000s–2010s	U.S. intelligence and training support against Boko Haram insurgency
2025	U.S. airstrikes in Sokoto targeting ISIL-linked terrorists

Source: Compiled from United Nations Peacekeeping Records; U.S. Department of Defense Counterterrorism Reports; and Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 2025–2026.

Figure 2: Timeline of Foreign Interventions in Nigeria (1900–2025)

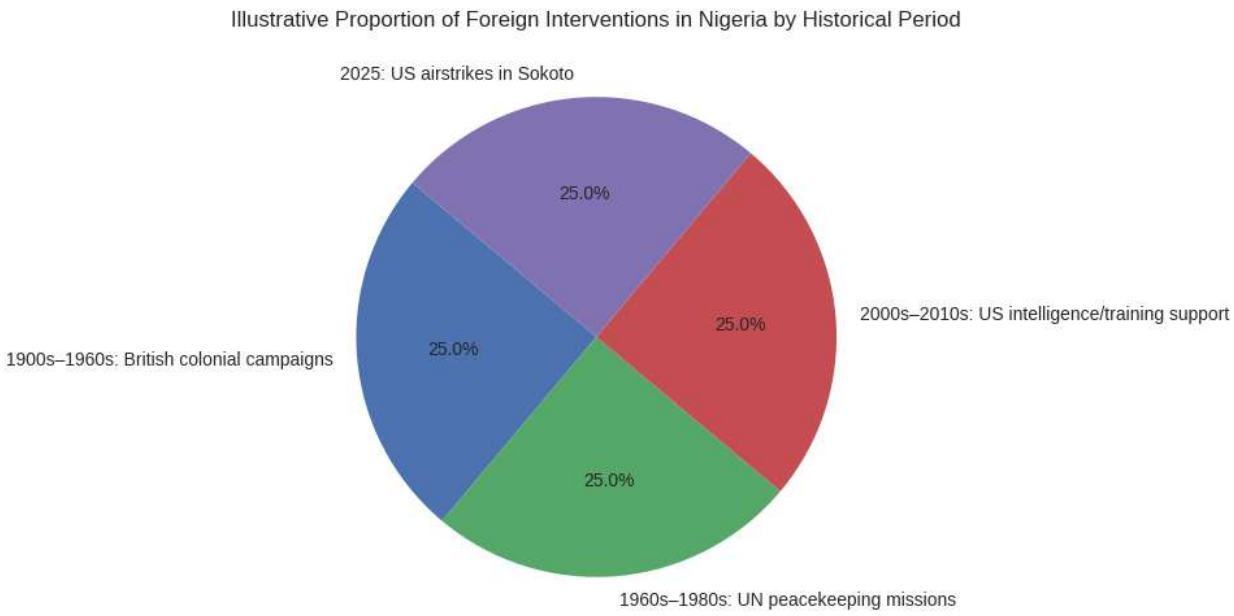


Source: Eyeh, et al (2025). The roles and consequences of foreign involvement in Nigeria's internal violent conflicts. Cogent Arts & Humanities.

Table 1 and Figure 2 above illustrates that Nigeria's security landscape has long been shaped by external involvement, beginning with the British colonial military campaigns of the 1900s–1960s, which laid the foundations of the country's military institutions. In the 1960s–1980s, Nigeria's reciprocal engagement in UN peacekeeping missions reinforced its ties to

global security networks and highlighted the role of international cooperation in maintaining stability. By the 2000s–2010s, the fight against Boko Haram saw Nigeria benefit from U.S. intelligence and training support**,** strengthening its counterterrorism capacity through external assistance. Most recently, in 2025**,** the U.S. airstrikes in Sokoto targeting ISIL-linked militants marked a decisive tactical collaboration, underscoring Nigeria's pragmatic approach to security and its recognition that strategic partnerships with international allies are vital for confronting transnational threats.

Figure 3: Illustrative Proportion of Foreign Interventions in Nigeria by Historical Period



Source: Author's compilation based on historical security and foreign policy records (2025)

Figure 3 illustrates foreign interventions in Nigeria across historical periods shows that external involvement has been a consistent feature of the country's security landscape. From British colonial campaigns (1900s–1960s) to UN peacekeeping missions (1960s–1980s), U.S. intelligence and training support against Boko Haram (2000s–2010s), and the December 2025 U.S. airstrikes in Sokoto, Nigeria has repeatedly engaged with foreign powers in pragmatic collaboration. This visualization underscores that the December 2025 strikes are not an anomaly but part of a long-standing tradition of strategic partnerships. Far from eroding sovereignty, such collaboration strengthens Nigeria's position in global counterterrorism networks and demonstrates its commitment to protecting citizens and restoring peace.

To all intents and purposes therefore, the December 2025 strikes highlight Nigeria's pragmatic approach to security recognizing that partnerships with allies like the United States are vital for addressing transnational threats. Rather than eroding sovereignty, such collaboration

strengthens Nigeria's position in global counterterrorism networks and demonstrates its willingness to act decisively against insurgency. In fact, sovereignty in the modern era is increasingly defined not by isolation, but by the ability to strategically leverage partnerships to protect citizens and secure national interests (Adebajo, 2013).

Consequently, by embracing international collaboration, Nigeria gains access to advanced technology, precision strike capabilities, and intelligence systems that enhance its domestic capacity. This not only disrupts insurgent operations but also signals to both citizens and the international community that Nigeria is committed to restoring peace and stability. In this sense, the December 2025 airstrikes should be interpreted as a positive turning point evidence that Nigeria is willing to engage globally to confront insecurity while simultaneously strengthening its own institutions for long-term resilience.

d. Long-Term Security Prospects

The December 2025 U.S.–Nigeria airstrikes highlight both immediate tactical successes and the broader question of Nigeria's long-term security trajectory. While foreign military support provides short-term relief against insurgent threats, it also raises enduring concerns about dependency on external powers. Overreliance on foreign intervention can weaken domestic capacity, foster complacency within national institutions, and create vulnerabilities if international partners withdraw support. For Nigeria, the challenge lies in balancing the benefits of strategic collaboration with the imperative of building sustainable, home grown security structures.

A critical dimension of long-term security is the development of resilient domestic institutions. Military victories, however decisive, cannot substitute for effective governance, community engagement, and socioeconomic development. Without reforms that strengthen the police, judiciary, and intelligence services, Nigeria risks perpetuating a cycle where external actors repeatedly step in to fill gaps. This dependency undermines sovereignty and erodes public confidence in the state's ability to independently safeguard its citizens.

Equally important is the integration of counterterrorism with broader development strategies. Insurgency thrives in environments marked by poverty, unemployment, and weak governance. Addressing these root causes requires sustained investment in education, infrastructure, and economic opportunities, particularly in marginalised regions such as the North-East and North-West. Long-term stability will depend not only on military strength but also on the ability of the state to deliver tangible improvements in citizens' lives, thereby reducing the appeal of extremist ideologies.

The airstrikes also underscore the need for regional cooperation. Nigeria's security challenges are not confined within its borders; insurgent groups exploit porous frontiers and transnational networks across West Africa. Strengthening collaboration with neighbouring states through intelligence sharing, joint patrols, and coordinated development initiatives will be

essential to prevent the reconstitution of terrorist safe havens. In this sense, Nigeria's long-term security prospects are tied to the resilience of the wider region.

Finally, the sustainability of Nigeria's security trajectory hinges on strategic autonomy. While partnerships with the United States and other allies can provide critical support, Nigeria must ensure that such collaborations serve as transitional bridges rather than permanent crutches. Building indigenous capacitythrough training, technological innovation, and institutional reformwill allow Nigeria to gradually reduce reliance on external actors while maintaining the benefits of international cooperation.

Summarily put, the December 2025 airstrikes represent more than a tactical victory; they are a reminder of the delicate balance Nigeria must strike between leveraging foreign support and cultivating domestic resilience. Long-term security will depend on whether Nigeria can transform immediate gains into lasting stability by prioritizing governance reforms, socioeconomic development, and regional cooperation, thereby ensuring that sovereignty and resilience remain at the core of its counterterrorism strategy.

e. Risks of Dependency on Foreign Powers

Dependency on foreign powers carries several risks that extend beyond the immediate tactical sphere and into the broader domains of sovereignty, legitimacy, and long-term stability. First, it may erode Nigeria's autonomy in decision-making, as external actors often pursue their own geopolitical interests alongside counterterrorism objectives (Williams, 2017). Foreign governments, particularly powerful allies such as the United States, may prioritize regional stability, access to resources, or strategic influence over Nigeria's domestic priorities. This dynamic can create tensions between Nigeria's national interests and the agendas of external partners, ultimately constraining the country's ability to independently shape its security policies.

Second, reliance on foreign technology, intelligence, and operational expertise can limit Nigeria's ability to develop indigenous capacity to respond to evolving threats. While advanced surveillance systems, drones, and precision weaponry enhance tactical effectiveness, they may foster a culture of dependency where Nigerian forces defer to external actors for critical capabilities. This reliance risks leaving Nigeria vulnerable if international partners withdraw support or shift their strategic focus elsewhere. In such scenarios, the absence of robust domestic infrastructure could expose gaps in Nigeria's ability to sustain counterterrorism operations independently.

Third, dependency risks creating a narrative of foreign domination that insurgent groups can exploit to recruit and radicalise local populations. Extremist organisations often frame foreign interventions as neo-imperialism, portraying governments that collaborate with external powers as puppets of Western influence (Charbonneau, 2019). This narrative undermines the legitimacy of the Nigerian state, fuels anti-government sentiment, and provides insurgents with propaganda tools to mobilize disaffected communities. In contexts where historical memories of colonialism

remain strong, such narratives resonate deeply and can exacerbate mistrust between citizens and the state.

Moreover, dependency can weaken Nigeria's institutional resilience by fostering complacency within national institutions. If foreign actors consistently shoulder the burden of counterterrorism, domestic agencies may lack incentives to innovate, reform, or build capacity. This dynamic perpetuates structural weaknesses in governance, intelligence, and military institutions, making Nigeria perpetually reliant on external assistance.

To mitigate these risks, Nigeria must use foreign support as a transitional bridge to strengthen its own military, intelligence, and governance institutions rather than as a permanent solution. This requires deliberate investment in training, technological innovation, and institutional reform, ensuring that external collaboration complements rather than substitutes domestic capacity. By framing foreign involvement as a catalyst for internal resilience, Nigeria can balance the immediate benefits of international support with the long-term imperative of sovereignty and sustainable security.

Comparative Analysis with Other African States

Comparative cases across Africa illustrate both the opportunities and pitfalls of foreign military collaboration:

1. **Somalia:** U.S. drone strikes against al-Shabaab disrupted militant operations but also fuelled resentment due to civilian casualties, showing how external interventions can achieve tactical gains while complicating local legitimacy (Hansen, 2019).
2. **Mali:** French interventions under Operation Serval and Barkhane weakened jihadist groups but failed to prevent their resurgence, highlighting the limits of external military power without parallel political reforms (Charbonneau, 2019).Recent insurgent gains by Tuareg rebel groups against Malian government forces, including deadly attacks targeting military positions and the reported killing of Mali's Minister for Defence through a car bomb attack, further underscore the continuing fragility of the country's security environment despite years of foreign military involvement.
2. **Chad:** Regional coalitions and French support bolstered Chad's fight against Boko Haram, but long-term stability remains tied to governance reforms and internal resilience.

These cases demonstrate that while foreign interventions can deliver immediate tactical victories, they rarely secure lasting peace unless coupled with domestic reforms. Nigeria's situation mirrors these experiences: the December 2025 strikes provided short-term disruption of insurgent networks, but long-term security will depend on Nigeria's ability to build resilient institutions, invest in socioeconomic development, and foster community-based peacebuilding.

From a strategic perspective, the December 2025 airstrikes should be seen as a positive turning point. Nigeria's willingness to collaborate with international partners reflects a pragmatic

recognition that transnational threats require transnational solutions. Rather than undermining sovereignty, such partnerships strengthen Nigeria's role in global counterterrorism networks and provide critical breathing space to reform domestic institutions. If Nigeria leverages these collaborations to build sustainable capacity, the strikes will not only represent tactical success but also lay the foundation for long-term security resilience.

Conclusion

The December 2025 U.S.–Nigeria airstrikes in Sokoto represent more than a tactical victory; they embody the complex interplay between immediate security gains, humanitarian concerns, and long-term geopolitical strategy. The strikes disrupted insurgent operations, reduced the frequency of attacks, and demonstrated the effectiveness of coordinated intelligence and precision targeting. At the same time, they highlighted the persistent risks faced by civilian populations, reminding policymakers that military success must be balanced with humanitarian safeguards and community resilience.

Geopolitically, the intervention underscores Nigeria's pragmatic recognition that transnational threats demand transnational solutions. Far from eroding sovereignty, collaboration with allies such as the United States strengthens Nigeria's position in global counterterrorism networks and provides critical breathing space to reform domestic institutions. Historical patterns of foreign involvementfrom colonial campaigns to UN missions and U.S. counterterrorism supportshow that Nigeria's engagement with external actors is not an anomaly but part of a long-standing tradition of pragmatic collaboration.

Looking ahead, Nigeria's long-term security prospects will depend on its ability to transform short-term tactical victories into sustainable stability. This requires reducing dependency on foreign powers by investing in domestic military capacity, governance reforms, and socioeconomic development, while continuing to leverage international partnerships strategically. Comparative experiences across Africafrom Somalia to Malidemonstrate that external interventions alone cannot secure lasting peace; they must be coupled with internal resilience and inclusive political solutions.Ultimately, the December 2025 strikes should be seen as a turning point, a demonstration of Nigeria's willingness to confront insurgency through both domestic resolve and international collaboration. If Nigeria can harness these partnerships to strengthen its institutions and protect its citizens, the airstrikes will not only mark a tactical success but also lay the foundation for a more secure and stable future.

Recommendations

These recommendations emphasise that Nigeria's collaboration with international partners is not a sign of weakness but a pragmatic strategy.Indeed, by leveraging foreign support while simultaneously strengthening domestic institutions, Nigeria can achieve a balance between immediate tactical success and long-term sovereignty. To this extent, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Strengthen Domestic Security Capacity:** Nigeria should invest in its military and intelligence infrastructure to reduce dependency on foreign powers and ensure sustainable, independent responses to future threats.
2. **Enhance Civilian Protection Measures:** Integrating humanitarian safeguards into counterterrorism operationssuch as safe corridors, early warning systems, and collaboration with aid agencieswill protect communities and undermine insurgent propaganda.
3. **Institutionalise Strategic Partnerships:** Nigeria should formalise long-term agreements with allies like the United States to ensure continuity in intelligence sharing, training, and technology transfer, while safeguarding sovereignty through clearly defined terms.
4. **Deepen Regional Collaboration:** Strengthening cooperation with ECOWAS and the Multinational Joint Task Force will help secure porous borders, pool intelligence, and prevent militants from exploiting cross-border safe havens.
5. **Prioritise Socioeconomic Development:** Military victories must be complemented by initiatives addressing root causes of insurgencysuch as poverty, unemployment, and marginalisationthrough education, infrastructure, and community development.
6. **Learn from Comparative African Experiences:** Nigeria should draw lessons from Somalia, Mali, and Chad, where foreign interventions achieved tactical gains but struggled to secure lasting peace without governance reforms and internal resilience. At the same time, there is a compelling need to interrogate allegations of local political support for insurgency, as well as the apparent low political will among some government actors to decisively confront the problem. This reality raises important questions about the practical limitations of Governance Reform Theory in the Nigerian context, particularly where institutional reforms are undermined by elite interests, weak accountability mechanisms and political complicity in insecurity dynamics.

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