ETHNIC MILITIAS, RESOURCE COMPETITIONAND NATIONAL SECURITY IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Africa's security landscape is increasingly shaped by the emergence of ethnic militias, whose activities are closely linked to competition over natural resources. Despite the continent's vast wealth in oil, minerals, arable land, and water, these resources often exacerbate conflict rather than promote development, particularly in environments of weak governance and historical inequalities. Ethnic militias exploit grievances related to marginalisation, inequitable resource distribution, and political exclusion, transforming local disputes into organised armed violence that challenges state authority and undermines national security. This paper examines the nexus between ethnic militias, resource competition, and national security in Africa, aiming to understand the structural and proximate factors that drive militia mobilisation and their implications for state stability. The paper adopts a qualitative approach. Findings reveal that ethnic militias emerge where resource wealth intersects with weak institutions, politicised identities, and governance failures, creating cycles of violence that erode social cohesion and institutional legitimacy. The paper concludes that addressing these challenges require a comprehensive strategy combining inclusive political systems, transparent resource governance, security sector reform, and socio-economic interventions targeting youth and marginalised communities.

Keywords: Armed groups, Ethnic militias, National security, Natural resources, Resource competition.

Introduction

Africa possesses vast reserves of oil, gas, strategic minerals, arable land, and water resources that, in principle, provide a strong foundation for economic transformation and national development. Yet, across many parts of the continent, these same resources have become focal points of violent contestations rather than engines of inclusive growth. A substantial body of scholarship demonstrates that natural resource abundance, particularly in situations of weak institutions and limited accountability, can increase the risk of armed conflict, distort governance structures, and undermine long-term development (Ross, 2012; Berman, Couttenier, Rohner, &Thoenig, 2017). Rather than fostering stability, resource wealth often intensifies competition over rents among political elites, local communities, and armed actors, thereby deepening political instability and insecurity.

The persistence and proliferation of ethnic militias in resource-rich regions represent one of the most significant manifestations of this problem. Research shows that the presence of valuable natural resources, especially oil and minerals, is associated with a higher likelihood of civil conflict and organised violence, particularly where state capacity is weak and resource revenues are unevenly distributed (Berman et al., 2017; Ross, 2012). In such environments, grievances over marginalisation, environmental degradation, and inequitable revenue allocation are frequently articulated along ethnic lines, enabling identity-based mobilisation. Ethnic militias emerge not only as instruments of economic predation but also as actors claiming to defend communal rights to land, oil fields, grazing areas, or mineral deposits. The intersection of resource competition and ethnic identity thus transforms distributive disputes into organised armed confrontation.

Empirical evidence from across Africa illustrates the severity of this nexus. In Nigeria's Niger Delta, long-standing grievances over oil exploitation, environmental damage, and the centralised control of petroleum revenues have fuelled cycles of militancy and sabotage, disrupting national oil production and challenging state authority (Obi, 2010; Watts, 2010). Similarly, in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), armed groups have embedded themselves within local conflicts over land and mineral wealth, using violence to control extraction sites and trade routes while weakening already fragile state institutions (Vlassenroot&Raeymaekers, 2012; Stearns, 2011). These cases demonstrate how resource-rich territories can become arenas where ethnic militias contest both economic assets and political authority, eroding the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force.

Beyond large-scale extractive conflicts, competition over renewable resources such as land and water has also contribute to communal violence. In regions affected by environmental stress and demographic pressures, disputes between farmers and pastoralists have escalated into ethnically framed confrontations, particularly where governance mechanisms for managing land tenure and resource allocation are ineffective (Benjaminsen, Alinon, Buhaug, & Buseth, 2012). Such conflicts underscore that resource competition in Africa is multidimensional, extending beyond oil and minerals to include access to livelihoods and survival resources, with significant implications for national cohesion and security.

Despite extensive scholarship on the resource curse and civil war, a critical gap persists in understanding how ethnic militias mediate the relationship between resource competition and national security in Africa. Much of the existing literature focuses on macro-level correlations between resource abundance and conflict onset, or on the economic incentives that drive rebellion (Ross, 2012; Berman et al., 2017). Less attention has been devoted to how identity-based militias operationalise resource grievances, reshape local power structures, and systematically undermine national security institutions. Moreover, national security analyses often prioritise territorial integrity and regime survival, overlooking how resource-driven militia activity erodes human security, institutional legitimacy, and social cohesion at subnational levels.

The core problem, therefore, lies in the persistent interaction between weak and exclusionary resource governance, identity-based mobilisation, and the rise of ethnic militias, which collectively threaten national security across Africa. Where resource management systems fail to distribute benefits equitably or resolve disputes transparently, they create incentives for armed mobilisation and alternative authority structures. Without a comprehensive understanding of how resource competition fuels ethnic militias and, in turn, destabilises national security frameworks, policy responses risk addressing symptoms, such as episodic violence, rather than the structural drivers rooted in governance failures and contested access to wealth. Addressing this nexus is essential for developing sustainable strategies that promote secure, inclusive, and accountable resource governance across the continent.

The paper is divided into seven sections. Section one provides the introduction. Section two offers a conceptual analysis of ethnic militias, focusing on their emergence and the key determinants shaping their development in Africa. Section three presents a conceptual clarification of resource competition and examines the main drivers of resource-based conflicts on the continent. Section four explores the relationship between natural resource wealth and the militarisation of ethnic militias in Africa. Section five discusses the concept of national security and considers the implications of ethnic militias and resource competition for national security in Africa. Section six evaluates state responses to ethnic militias and resource conflicts, highlighting the associated challenges. Section seven concludes the paper with final remarks.

Theoretical Framework: Conflict Theory

Conflict Theory was adopted as the theoretical framework for this paper because it provides a comprehensive explanation of the relationship between resource scarcity, power struggles, and social conflict. The theory argues that competition over limited resources often creates tensions among groups, especially where access to those resources is perceived to be unequal. In many African countries, the struggle for control of valuable resources such as oil, minerals, land, and political influence has contributed to the emergence of ethnic militias. These groups frequently mobilize around ethnic identities to pursue economic and political interests, thereby generating conflicts that threaten social stability and national security. Consequently, Conflict Theory offers a suitable lens through which the dynamics of ethnic militancy and resource-based conflicts can be examined.

Conflict Theory is most closely associated with Karl Marx, whose work focused on the struggle between social classes over the control of economic resources. However, scholars such as Max Weber and Ralf Dahrendorf later broadened the theory beyond class relations to include conflicts arising from power, authority, and social status. Marx maintained that society is characterized by continuous competition among groups seeking to acquire and preserve resources and privileges. According to him, social order is often sustained through the dominance of powerful groups rather than through consensus among members of society. As a result, conflict becomes an inevitable feature of social life because individuals and groups

constantly pursue their interests within a context of limited opportunities and unequal access to resources.

The theory rests on several fundamental assumptions. It assumes that resources are scarce, that inequality is inherent in society, and that competition for power and resources is unavoidable. It further assumes that dominant groups attempt to maintain their positions of advantage, while disadvantaged groups seek to challenge and transform existing arrangements. Another important assumption is that conflict is not an abnormal condition but a natural aspect of social interaction. Finally, the theory posits that significant social and political changes often emerge from struggles among competing groups.

One of the major strengths of Conflict Theory is its ability to explain the root causes of social and political conflicts. The theory effectively demonstrates how unequal access to resources and opportunities can generate grievances that may eventually result in violence and instability. It also draws attention to the importance of power relations in shaping social outcomes. Furthermore, Conflict Theory is particularly useful for understanding ethnic violence, separatist movements, and militia activities because it highlights the role of competition and perceived injustice in motivating collective action. The theory additionally provides insight into the processes through which social and political transformations occur.

Despite its usefulness, Conflict Theory has certain limitations. A major criticism is that it places excessive emphasis on conflict and competition while paying limited attention to cooperation, consensus, and social cohesion. In reality, societies often maintain stability through shared values and collective interests rather than constant struggle. Another weakness is its tendency, particularly in Marx's original formulation, to focus heavily on economic factors. This may lead to the neglect of other important variables such as culture, religion, ethnicity, identity, and ideology, which can independently influence social behavior and conflict patterns.

The relevance of Conflict Theory to the study of Ethnic Militias, Resource Competition and National Security in Africa is evident in its explanation of how competition over valuable resources can trigger and sustain violent conflicts. Across many parts of Africa, communities located in resource-rich areas often express dissatisfaction over what they perceive as unfair distribution of resource revenues, environmental degradation, political exclusion, and economic marginalization. Such grievances frequently encourage the formation of ethnic militias that claim to protect the interests of their respective groups. The theory therefore helps to explain why ethnic identities become mobilizing instruments in struggles over resource control. It also clarifies how these struggles can escalate into violent confrontations between rival groups and state authorities. Through attacks on government facilities, disruption of economic activities, destruction of infrastructure, and the displacement of civilian populations, ethnic militias create serious threats to national security. Conflict Theory thus provides a valuable framework for understanding the interconnected relationship between resource competition, ethnic militancy, and security challenges in Africa.

A Conceptual Analysis of Ethnic Militias

Ethnic militias are difficult to define precisely because they are fluid, and shaped by social, political, and economic factors. Different disciplines emphasise different aspects, such as identity mobilisation, armed capacity, or communal protection, while the lines between militias, insurgents, vigilantes, and criminal groups are often blurred. Their scale, motivations, and behaviour can shift over time, and variations in legal frameworks and terminology mean that one group may be classified differently by different scholars. These complexities prevent a universally accepted definition.

Indeed, the concept of ethnic militias has been variously defined in the literature, reflecting differences in disciplinary focus, geographical region, and analytical purpose. For instance, Adejumobi (2002) defines ethnic militias as youth-based groups that use violence to promote the interests of their ethnic group. This definition highlights the demographic composition and the violent nature of these groups, offering a clear link between youth mobilisation and ethnic grievances. Its limitation lies in its narrow focus on age, which may exclude older or more diverse membership structures. Moreover, it assumes that violence is an inherent characteristic of all ethnic militias, potentially overlooking groups that mobilise politically or socially without engaging in armed conflict. Similarly, Falana (2003) conceptualises ethnic militias in Nigeria as militant organisations that protect the interests of a particular nationality. While this definition emphasises the protective function of militias in defending communal or ethno-national interests, it is overly general and conflates militias with other ethnic-based political organisations. It fails to account for the organisational forms, recruitment mechanisms, or tactical behaviours that differentiate ethnic militias from non-violent ethnic associations, leaving the boundaries of the concept somewhat ambiguous.

Sesay(2003) provide a broader operational perspective, describing ethnic militias as irregular, armed civilian groups, some of whom may possess informal military training. This definition is advantageous because it captures both the irregularity and the military capacity of ethnic militias, which are central to understanding their threat to state security. Nonetheless, it risks being overly inclusive, as it could cover a wide range of irregular armed actors, including criminal gangs or partisan militias whose motivations are not ethnically oriented, thereby diluting the ethnic specificity of the concept.Hazen and Horner (2007) return to the youth-based focus, defining ethnic militias as youth groups formed to advance the interests of their specific ethnic communities. Their definition reinforces the importance of age and collective identity in mobilising violence. The weakness, however, is similar to Adejumobi's: by emphasising youth, it potentially excludes broader coalitions or multi-generational ethnic militias. Additionally, it does not sufficiently differentiate between militias and other forms of youth activism that might be politically or socially motivated without recourse to violence.

Gilbert (2010) offers a more contemporary and strategically oriented definition, describing ethnic militias as non-state actors who fight based on ethno-nationalism to defend the interests of

their ethnic group. This definition explicitly links militias to non-state armed activity and ethno-nationalist motivations, providing a clearer framework for analysing their role in conflict dynamics. Its limitation lies in the focus on armed conflict; it may overlook ethnic militias whose activities are primarily political, social, or economic rather than militaristic, thereby restricting the concept to a narrow set of violent actors.

From a comparative perspective, these definitions reveal several recurring features of ethnic militias: they are organised around ethnic identity, they operate outside formal state structures, and they frequently employ, or are capable of employing, violence to defend or advance the perceived interests of their ethnic group. Consequently, ethnic militias can be understood as non-state, identity-based groups that mobilise, often through violence or armed capability, to pursue the political, economic, or social interests of a particular ethnic community.

Ethnic militias are distinguished by several defining characteristics that set them apart from general insurgent groups or criminal networks. Central to their identity is the fact that membership is primarily based on shared ethnicity, culture, or communal ties. This identity-based recruitment ensures that the group's goals, loyalties, and mobilisation strategies are closely aligned with the interests of a specific ethnic community, making them distinct from other armed actors whose motivations may be opportunistic or ideologically driven. Their non-state and irregular nature further differentiate them from formal security institutions. Although these militias often lack formal hierarchies, they retain sufficient organisation to coordinate mobilisation and carry out military operations, as observed in various African conflict settings (Sesay, Ukeje, et al., 2003).

The objectives of ethnic militias are varied and shaped by their specific political, social, and resource environments.Some groups form primarily for defensive purposes, aiming to protect communities from perceived external threats or state neglect, while others pursue offensive strategies, including contesting access to resources, asserting political power, or expanding territorial influence. Their methods of achieving these goals also vary: while many rely on direct violence or coercion, others employ political leverage, threats, or social mobilisation to advance their agendas (Adejumobi, 2002). Organisational structures among ethnic militias are equally flexible, ranging from tightly coordinated groups such as the Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV) in Nigeria to loosely connected self-defence units that operate at the community level.

Ethnic militias employ a broad spectrum of strategies tailored to the challenges and opportunities within their operational environment. Violent contestation is a common approach, including direct attacks on rival ethnic groups, state security forces, or private actors to assert dominance or secure resources (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, ACLED, 2025).In addition to offensive actions, some militias focus on community defence, protecting local populations from perceived threats, whether from state neglect, rival groups, or criminal elements. Beyond physical security, ethnic militias often engage in political mobilisation, exerting pressure on governments to implement policy changes, increase representation, or

deliver benefits to their ethnic group. Resource predation represents another dimension of their activity, with militias sometimes controlling local resources or engaging in illicit activities such as smuggling, kidnapping, or illegal taxation to finance operations (Ikelegbe, 2006). Flexible alliances enable ethnic militias to strengthen their position, as they may form temporary coalitions with other militias, state actors, or criminal networks depending on the immediate strategic or political circumstances.

Emergence and Determinants of Ethnic Militias in Africa

Ethnic militias have emerged as prominent non-state armed actors across Africa, reflecting complex interactions among identity politics, resource competition, governance failures, and historical legacies. Their proliferation is not incidental but rooted in enduring structural and proximate drivers that shape patterns of political mobilisation and violent conflict. Scholars widely argue that ethnic militias tend to emerge where state authority is weak, social cleavages are politicised, and economic incentives for violence exist (Hazen & Horner, 2007; World Bank, 2018). In recent decades, the persistence of fragile governance structures, increasing competition over scarce resources, and the politicisation of identity have reinforced the relevance of ethnic militias in Africa's security landscape.

A foundational driver of ethnic militia emergence is the historical legacy of colonial rule. Colonial administrations institutionalised ethnic divisions through indirect rule, differential access to resources, and politicisation of identity, laying the groundwork for post-colonial ethnic mobilisation (Mamdani, 1996). Post-independence states inherited weak institutions and fragmented societies, enabling ethnic entrepreneurs to mobilise along identity lines. In the African Great Lakes region, ethnicity became a powerful tool for political mobilisation, with local elites exploiting historical grievances to form militias and escalate violence (Vlassenroot&Raeymaekers, 2004). Recent scholarship further shows how colonial-era boundaries and governance structures continue to shape contemporary ethnic mobilisation, with colonial ethnic categorisation influencing post-conflict militia formation in Uganda and entrenched ethnic hierarchies persisting in political mobilisation across the continent (Branch, 2017; Langer, 2015).

Weak governance and limited state capacity remain critical drivers of ethnic militia formation. In many African states, governments struggle to provide security, deliver public services, and manage political competition effectively. This governance vacuum incentivises communities to form self-defence militias and encourages political elites to sponsor armed groups to protect their interests (Hazen & Horner, 2007; World Bank, 2018). In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), weak state presence in mineral-rich Ituri Province facilitated the formation of ethnically aligned militias such as the Union of Congolese Patriots and the Front for Patriotic Resistance in Ituri, mobilised along Hema and Lendu identities (Fahey, 2013). Similarly, in the Central African Republic, the collapse of state authority contributed to the rise of ethnically and religiously aligned militias such as Anti-Balaka and Seleka factions, which

exploited governance vacuums to control territory and resources (Lombard, 2016). In Ethiopia, weak federal control and dynamics associated with ethnic federalism have contributed to the emergence of regional militias in Oromia and Amhara regions, demonstrating how decentralised governance structures can facilitate ethnic armed mobilisation (Abbink, 2018).

Resource competition constitutes a central driver of ethnic militias in Africa, as access to land, minerals, oil, and other valuable resources provides both motivation and financial capacity for armed mobilisation. In Nigeria's Niger Delta, competition over oil rents and environmental degradation spurred the emergence of ethnic militias such as the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force and the Niger Delta Vigilante, which engaged in violent struggles over control of petroleum resources (Ikelegbe, 2006). In the DRC, competition over gold, coltan, and tin intensified conflict between Hema and Lendu communities, contributing to the proliferation of ethnically aligned militias (Vlassenroot&Raeymaekers, 2004). In Mali and Burkina Faso, disputes over land and grazing rights between pastoralist and farming communities have contributed to the emergence of ethnic self-defence militias such as the Dan Na Ambassagou Dogon militia, exacerbating communal violence (Thurston, 2020). Similar dynamics are evident in Kenya's pastoralist regions, where disputes over grazing land and water have contributed to ethnic militia activity among groups such as the Pokot and Turkana (Greiner, 2013).

Ethnic identity and grievances also play a crucial role in the emergence of militias. Political exclusion, marginalisation, and unequal access to power and resources motivate ethnic groups to organise armed movements. In Sudan's Darfur region, government-aligned Arab militias known as the Janjaweed mobilised partly along ethnic lines amid land disputes between pastoralist and farming communities, intensified by political manipulation and environmental stress (De Waal, 2007). In Kenya, ethnic militias such as the Mungiki emerged partly in response to socio-economic marginalisation and political patronage networks, demonstrating how identity-based grievances translate into organised violence (Anderson, 2002). In Cameroon, Anglophone militias have mobilised in response to perceived political and cultural marginalisation by the Francophone-dominated central government, illustrating how identity grievances can evolve into armed mobilisation (International Crisis Group, 2019). In Somalia, clan-based militias have long shaped political and security dynamics, with identity-based grievances contributing to persistent armed mobilisation (Menkhaus, 2014).

Political competition and electoral processes further contribute to the formation and activation of ethnic militias. Political elites often mobilise ethnic groups during elections to intimidate opponents, secure votes, or control territories, thereby institutionalising militia violence. In Kenya, ethnic militias were mobilised during the 1992, 2007, and 2017 elections, contributing to large-scale violence and displacement (Mueller, 2008; Boone et al., 2019). In Nigeria, political actors have sponsored ethnic militias to influence elections and maintain control over local political structures, particularly in the Niger Delta and south-western Nigeria (Ikelegbe, 2006). Similar patterns have been observed in Côte d'Ivoire, where political elites mobilised ethnic militias during the civil war and post-electoral crisis (McGovern, 2011).

External influences and regional dynamics also shape the emergence and persistence of ethnic militias. During the Second Congo War, foreign interventions by Uganda and Rwanda contributed to the proliferation of ethnically aligned militias in eastern DRC, providing arms, training, and political support (Prunier, 2009). Regional conflicts and porous borders facilitate arms trafficking and militia mobilisation, as seen in the Sahel region, where cross-border networks link ethnic militias to jihadist groups and criminal organisations (Raleigh & Dowd, 2013). International corporations involved in extractive industries have been implicated in reinforcing local conflicts by creating economic incentives for armed groups to control resource-rich territories (Le Billon, 2014), while diaspora networks and transnational criminal economies provide funding and logistical support that enable militias to sustain operations beyond local environments.

Socio-economic marginalisation, particularly among youth, constitutes another important driver of ethnic militia formation. High unemployment, poverty, and limited social mobility create a pool of recruits for militia leaders who promise economic benefits, protection, or social recognition (Adejumobi, 2002; World Bank, 2018). Youth-dominated militias such as the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria, the Kamajors in Sierra Leone, and community defence militias in Mali and Burkina Faso illustrate how young men are mobilised into ethnic or community-based armed groups in conditions of economic exclusion (Hazen & Horner, 2007; Thurston, 2020). Recent studies further highlight that demographic pressures, urbanisation, and climate change-induced livelihood stress exacerbate youth vulnerability to militia recruitment, particularly in fragile states across the Sahel and Horn of Africa (United Nations Development Programme, 2023).

Resource Competition: A Conceptual Clarification

Resource competition has no universal definition because it is dynamic, and influenced by multiple actors and disciplines. It can involve natural resources such as land, water, and minerals, or human and institutional resources, and occurs at local, national, and international levels with actors ranging from communities to states. Definitions vary across fields, with environmental science emphasising scarcity, political science highlighting conflict, and economics focusing on rent-seeking behaviours. Competition changes over time due to governance, availability, and social perceptions, and carries political and normative dimensions that shape how it is understood. These factors make a single, widely accepted definition elusive.

One of the earliest influential conceptualisations is offered by Homer-Dixon (1999), who defines resource competition as struggles among individuals or groups over access to scarce environmental resources that can generate social stress and violent conflict. This perspective situates resource competition within environmental security and neo-Malthusian frameworks, emphasising scarcity as a key driver of conflict. Homer-Dixon's approach is valuable for highlighting the role of environmental degradation, population growth, and ecological stress in shaping social tensions. However, its emphasis on scarcity has been criticised for being overly deterministic and for underplaying political, institutional, and economic factors. Critics argue

that scarcity alone does not automatically produce conflict; rather, governance structures and power relations mediate how scarcity is managed and politicised.

Building on political economy approaches, Collier and Hoeffler (2004) conceptualise resource competition as the contest among actors to control valuable natural resources and the rents derived from them, which shape political power and conflict dynamics. This definition shifts the focus from scarcity to abundance and economic incentives, arguing that resource wealth can motivate armed actors and elites to engage in conflict for profit. The strength of this perspective lies in its ability to explain conflicts in resource-rich environments such as oil and diamond-producing regions, where violence is driven by the desire to capture lucrative rents. Nonetheless, this approach has been criticised for its rationalist bias and tendency to reduce complex conflicts to economic motivations. It often overlooks social identities, historical grievances, and normative claims to resources, thereby oversimplifying the motivations behind resource-related conflicts.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2005) offers a more policy-oriented definition, describing resource competition as disputes over access, control, and management of natural resources and the distribution of benefits and burdens associated with their use. This framing broadens the concept beyond violent conflict to include governance, equity, and sustainability dimensions. Its strength lies in recognising that resource competition involves institutional arrangements and distributive justice, making it particularly relevant for development and governance studies. However, the FAO definition is often criticised for being descriptively broad and analytically thin. It lacks a clear theoretical framework for explaining when and why disputes escalate into violence or political instability, limiting its explanatory power in security studies.

Ratner et al. (2014) further refine the concept by defining resource competition as interactions among multiple stakeholders with overlapping claims to shared resources, where competing uses and governance failures may lead to conflict or cooperation. This definition is rooted in commons theory and collective action frameworks, emphasising the relational and governance dimensions of resource competition. Its strength lies in highlighting that competition does not inevitably lead to conflict and that institutional arrangements can foster cooperation and resilience. However, this perspective may underemphasise power asymmetries and coercive dynamics, particularly in situations where armed actors dominate resource governance. By focusing on collective action, it risks underestimating the role of violence, coercion, and political exclusion in shaping resource competition outcomes.

Klare (2008) conceptualises resource competition as the strategic struggle among states and other actors to secure essential natural resources necessary for economic growth, security, and geopolitical influence. This geopolitical perspective situates resource competition within international relations and security studies, highlighting strategic rivalry over energy and strategic minerals. Its strength lies in capturing macro-level dynamics and global power politics,

which are increasingly relevant in discussions of energy security and great power competition. However, this definition tends to privilege state-centric and geopolitical analyses, often neglecting sub-national actors, local communities, and non-state armed groups. As such, it is less suitable for analysing intrastate conflicts and localised resource struggles, which are central to many African security challenges.

From the foregoing, resource competition can be understood as the ongoing struggle among governments, communities, armed groups, corporations, and other actors to gain access to, control, and benefit from valuable natural and strategic resources. These struggles are influenced by both scarcity and abundance and are shaped by political, economic, institutional, and social conditions. Depending on how they are managed, such competitions can lead to cooperation and development, but they can also produce inequality, tension, and violent conflict at local, national, and global levels.

Resource competition can involve several types of resources that vary in nature and significance. Natural resources are the most commonly discussed and include renewable resources such as land, forests, water, and fisheries, as well as non-renewable resources such as oil, gas, diamonds, gold, and rare earth minerals. These resources are often geographically concentrated and highly valuable, which makes them central to political and violent conflicts. Beyond natural resources, competition also occurs over economic and institutional resources such as capital, infrastructure, employment opportunities, political offices, public funds, and state patronage, all of which shape elite politics and struggles over governance and power. Additionally, strategic and geopolitical resources such as energy supplies, strategic minerals, territory, sea lanes, and even cyberspace infrastructure have become critical arenas of competition among states, influencing global power relations and security dynamics.

Drivers of Resource Competition in Africa

Resource competition in Africa is driven by a complex interaction of environmental, economic, political, and social factors that operate at multiple levels and often reinforce one another, creating persistent cycles of contestation, insecurity, and governance challenges across the continent. One major driver is scarcity, which is intensified by rapid population growth, climate change, and environmental degradation. Africa's rapidly growing population has increased pressure on land, water, and food systems, particularly in the Sahel and Horn of Africa, where expanding populations and recurrent droughts have intensified competition between farmers and pastoralists over shrinking arable land and grazing resources, contributing to recurrent communal violence in countries such as Nigeria, Mali, Kenya, and Ethiopia (Raleigh et al., 2015; Ide et al., 2021). Climate change has further exacerbated these pressures by altering rainfall patterns, increasing desertification, and reducing water availability. For instance, the shrinking of Lake Chad has intensified competition among fishing communities, farmers, and pastoralists, contributing to economic hardship and creating fertile ground for recruitment by armed groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP (Onuoha, 2021). Environmental degradation,

including deforestation, soil erosion, and pollution from extractive industries, also reduces the availability of productive resources and fuels grievances among affected communities, as seen in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria (Watts, 2015).

Unexpectedly, resource abundance also drives competition, particularly where valuable resources generate large rents. Oil, diamonds, gold, cobalt, and other minerals have been central to violent conflicts and political struggles across Africa. In Nigeria, competition over oil revenues has fuelled militancy in the Niger Delta, with groups such as the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force and later the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta engaging in violent campaigns over access to oil rents (Ikelegbe, 2016). In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, competition over minerals such as coltan, cobalt, and gold has financed armed groups and sustained prolonged conflict, often involving local militias and foreign actors (Cuvelier et al., 2018). Similarly, in Sierra Leone and Liberia, diamond resources played a significant role in fuelling civil wars, illustrating how high-value commodities can create incentives for armed predation and rent-seeking (Le Billon, 2015). These cases demonstrate that abundance, rather than scarcity alone, can be a powerful driver of conflict and competition.

Weak governance structures significantly intensify resource competition across the continent. Corruption in the extractive sector often allows elites to capture resource rents while local communities bear the environmental and social costs, as evident in oil-producing countries such as Angola and Nigeria, where mismanagement of revenues has contributed to inequality and public distrust in state institutions (Ross, 2015). Poorly defined property rights and land tenure systems further fuel competition, particularly in rural areas, where ambiguous land rights have contributed to inter-communal conflicts and large-scale land acquisitions by domestic and foreign investors, often referred to as "land grabs" (Boone, 2019). Inequitable revenue-sharing arrangements between central governments and producing regions also generate grievances, as seen in the Niger Delta and mineral-rich regions of Ghana and Tanzania, where local communities perceive marginalisation despite contributing significantly to national revenues (Arellano-Yanguas, 2018).

External actors also play a critical role in driving resource competition. Multinational corporations engaged in oil, mining, and agribusiness often operate within weak regulatory frameworks, sometimes exacerbating environmental degradation and social tensions. Large-scale mining operations in Ghana and Zambia, for example, have been linked to land dispossession, environmental pollution, and labour disputes (Campbell, 2019). Foreign states compete for strategic resources, particularly energy and critical minerals needed for technological and green transitions, with China, the United States, and the European Union increasing their engagement in Africa's mining sector, especially in cobalt-rich DRC and lithium projects in Zimbabwe and Namibia, intensifying geopolitical competition (de Graaff et al., 2020). Global commodity markets further influence resource competition, as fluctuations in oil and mineral prices affect state revenues, elite behaviour, and conflict dynamics.

Resource competition in Africa is also deeply intertwined with identity politics and social cleavages. Ethnicity, religion, and regional identities shape perceptions of resource ownership, entitlement, and marginalisation, with resources often becoming symbols of group survival and political power. In Sudan's Darfur region, competition over land and water between pastoralist and farming communities was framed through ethnic identities, contributing to mass violence and displacement (De Waal, 2015). In Nigeria, ethnic and regional identities have shaped debates over oil revenue allocation and resource control, contributing to tensions between the Niger Delta and the federal government. Similarly, in Kenya, ethnic divisions have influenced land disputes and electoral violence, particularly in the Rift Valley (Boone, 2019).

Natural Resource Wealth and the Militarisation of Ethnic Identities in Africa

Natural resource wealth has long been perceived as a potential catalyst for economic development in Africa, yet the continent's historical and contemporary experience reveals a profound paradox in which resource abundance is frequently associated with political instability, violent conflict, and the militarisation of ethnic identities. Rather than functioning as a straightforward driver of prosperity, natural resources have often contributed to patterns of rent-seeking, authoritarian governance, and social fragmentation. This paradox is commonly theorised through the resource curse thesis, which posits that resource-rich states are more likely to exhibit weak institutions, pervasive corruption, distorted economic structures, and an elevated risk of conflict. In the African region, however, the relationship between natural resources and conflict cannot be reduced to institutional or macroeconomic variables alone. Instead, it is deeply embedded in the politicisation of identity and the transformation of ethnic affiliations into militarised political instruments. Resource extraction frequently reshapes identity politics by redistributing power and wealth in highly uneven ways, intensifying perceptions of marginalisation and injustice, and providing both the incentives and the material capacity for ethnic militias, insurgent groups, and armed movements to mobilise. This pattern is evident across diverse African countries, from the oil-rich Niger Delta in Nigeria to the mineral-rich eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, the gas fields of Mozambique, and the gold-producing regions of Sudan and Mali.

Recent empirical research demonstrates that natural resource extraction can directly intensify ethnic identification and reshape political subjectivities. Girard (2023) shows that the exploitation of mineral resources in African ethnic homelands significantly increases the salience of ethnic identities relative to national identities, particularly among marginalised communities and in conflict-prone regions. This finding suggests that resource extraction exacerbates perceived inequalities between ethnic groups, reinforcing identity boundaries and undermining national cohesion. In Nigeria, for example, oil extraction in the Niger Delta has reinforced ethnic mobilisation among Ijaw, Ogoni, and other minority groups, who perceive the federal government and dominant ethnic groups as appropriating oil revenues while local communities endure environmental degradation and poverty. Similarly, in Ghana's gold-mining regions and Tanzania's mining communities, local ethnic groups have mobilised around grievances over land

dispossession and environmental harm. Resource projects often generate displacement, ecological destruction, and social disruption, while economic benefits are captured by central governments, multinational corporations, or local elites. The mechanism driving this process is rooted in relative deprivation. When communities perceive that they bear disproportionate environmental and social costs without receiving corresponding economic or political benefits, ethnic identities become politicised and instrumentalised. In such situations, ethnicity becomes a framework through which grievances are articulated and collective mobilisation is organised. This heightened identity salience is a crucial precursor to militarisation, as it creates collective grievances that can be mobilised by political entrepreneurs, warlords, and armed actors seeking to challenge state authority or renegotiate access to resource rents.

The militarisation of ethnic identities is further facilitated by the material incentives generated by natural resource wealth. Resource rents provide critical financing opportunities for both state and non-state actors, enabling the recruitment, arming, and sustenance of militias and rebel movements. Scholars have long argued that disputes over resource control frequently underpin ethnic conflicts, particularly when politically excluded groups inhabit resource-rich territories and perceive extraction as exploitative (Ross, 2004; Humphreys, 2005). In the Democratic Republic of Congo, armed groups such as the Mai-Mai militias and the M23 rebel movement have exploited ethnic narratives to justify control over coltan, gold, and other minerals, using resource revenues to sustain prolonged conflict. In Sierra Leone and Liberia, diamond wealth fuelled brutal civil wars in which armed factions mobilised ethnic identities while financing violence through resource extraction. Empirical evidence from Angola's Cabinda enclave illustrates how oil wealth, combined with political exclusion and geographic isolation, fuelled separatist aspirations and insurgency, as local ethnic groups believed that independence would grant them direct access to resource revenues (Le Billon, 2001). In Sudan and South Sudan, oil wealth intensified ethnic militarisation between Arab and African communities in Darfur and between Dinka and Nuer groups in the post-independence civil war. Such dynamics reveal that natural resources not only intensify identity-based grievances but also shape strategic calculations about rebellion, autonomy, and secession. In many cases, armed mobilisation is driven by a rational assessment that control over territory equates to control over valuable resources, thereby transforming ethnic identity into a vehicle for political and economic claims.

Contemporary research continues to confirm the link between resource wealth and the probability of conflict in Africa, while also highlighting the conditional nature of this relationship. Recent studies indicate that natural resource rents significantly increase the likelihood of conflict on the continent, although global development frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals may mitigate this risk through institutional strengthening, social investment, and governance reforms (Resource Policy, 2025). Similarly, research shows that inequality moderates the resource–conflict relationship. Natural resources do not automatically cause conflict, but when combined with high income inequality, political exclusion, and weak

governance, they significantly aggravate violence (Ecological Economics, 2025). In Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province, the discovery of offshore gas reserves intensified local grievances among marginalised Muslim communities, contributing to the rise of the insurgent group Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama. In Mali and Burkina Faso, competition over gold mining sites has intersected with ethnic tensions between Fulani pastoralists and other groups, contributing to jihadist insurgencies. These findings underscore that the militarisation of ethnic identities is not an inevitable outcome of resource abundance but rather a contingent process shaped by political institutions, socio-economic structures, and patterns of inclusion and exclusion. In other words, resource wealth becomes politically explosive when embedded within unequal and fragmented social orders.

The militarisation of ethnicity is also closely linked to state militarisation driven by resource revenues. Oil rents, for instance, have been shown to increase military expenditures in Sub-Saharan Africa, reflecting the securitisation of resource-rich regions and the entrenchment of coercive state capacity (Resource Policy, 2025). In Nigeria, oil revenues have financed extensive military operations in the Niger Delta and against insurgent groups, while security forces have often been accused of ethnically biased repression. In Equatorial Guinea and Chad, oil wealth has enabled regimes to build powerful security apparatuses that rely on ethnic patronage networks to maintain control. While some analysts argue that increased military spending may enhance state security and territorial control, in practice it often reinforces authoritarian governance and ethnic patronage networks. Resource-rich regimes frequently distribute military and security positions along ethnic lines, favouring co-ethnics and consolidating power through identity-based loyalty networks. Such practices deepen ethnic divisions and create security dilemmas in which rival groups perceive the state as captured by particular ethnic constituencies and respond by militarising their own identities. The result is a spiral of militarisation in which ethnic identities are transformed into security categories, legitimising violence and repression while undermining prospects for inclusive nation-building.

Critically, the militarisation of ethnic identities in resource-rich African countries is not solely a product of contemporary political economy but is deeply rooted in colonial legacies. Colonial governance institutionalised ethnic categories and politicised identity as a tool of indirect rule, thereby laying the foundations for postcolonial ethnic competition and fragmentation (Mamdani, 1996). Resource extraction during the colonial period was similarly structured along ethnic and regional lines, with certain groups incorporated into extractive economies and others marginalised or dispossessed. In Kenya, for example, colonial land policies favoured certain ethnic groups and regions, creating enduring inequalities that later shaped conflicts over land and resources. In Zimbabwe, colonial mining and land dispossession entrenched ethnic and racial inequalities that continue to influence political conflict. These colonial patterns produced enduring inequalities in political representation, economic opportunities, and access to state power. Postcolonial states inherited these fragmented identities and weak institutions, making them particularly vulnerable to the politicisation of ethnicity in the

environment of resource competition. Thus, contemporary conflicts over resources are embedded within historical trajectories of identity construction and institutional weakness.

However, recent scholarship challenges deterministic interpretations of the resource curse and the inevitability of ethnic militarisation. Some studies argue that strong institutions, inclusive governance structures, and transparent resource management frameworks can mitigate the political effects of resource wealth, enabling countries to avoid authoritarianism and conflict despite high levels of resource dependence (Schmoll & Swenson, 2023). Botswana is often cited as an African exception, where diamond wealth has been managed through relatively strong institutions and inclusive policies, reducing the likelihood of ethnic militarisation. Similarly, Ghana's comparatively transparent oil governance frameworks have helped mitigate violent conflict despite concerns over inequality. Moreover, emerging research on energy transition minerals such as cobalt suggests that government security interventions in strategic resource regions may reduce local conflict by stabilising extraction zones, although such securitisation can simultaneously entrench militarised governance and suppress local dissent (Qi, 2024). These findings complicate simplistic narratives and highlight the importance of context-specific institutional arrangements, political coalitions, and social contracts in shaping the political consequences of resource extraction.

Nevertheless, the African experience demonstrates that natural resource wealth often provides both the motive and the means for the militarisation of ethnic identities. Resource extraction fundamentally reshapes local political economies, creating winners and losers, altering power relations, and generating grievances that are easily framed in ethnic terms. When combined with weak institutions, high levels of inequality, and exclusionary governance practices, these grievances are likely to translate into armed mobilisation. Ethnic militias, rebel movements, and state security forces alike exploit identity narratives to legitimise violence, mobilise support, and secure access to resource rents, as seen in the Niger Delta militancy, Congolese rebel groups, Sudanese militias, and insurgencies in the Sahel and Mozambique.

The Concept of National Security

The concept of national security remains highly contested in academic and policy discourse because it is inherently broad, normative, and shaped by changing political, social, and theoretical perspectives. In other words, national security is a concept that has been defined in diverse ways by scholars, reflecting differences in theoretical orientation, historical background, and the scope of threats considered. These divergent theoretical traditions, evolving threat perceptions, and political interests make it difficult to arrive at a universally accepted definition, resulting in ongoing controversy over what constitutes national security and whose security should be prioritised.

Waltz (1979) presents a state-centric, military-focused definition, emphasising the protection of a state's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence against external military threats. This definition aligns with realist perspectives in international relations, which prioritise

the survival of the state in an anarchic international system. While this approach provides clarity and specificity, it is often criticised for being overly narrow, as it neglects non-military threats such as economic crises, environmental degradation, terrorism, and internal instability, all of which can significantly undermine a state's security.Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde (1998) expand the concept to a multidimensional framework, including military defence, economic stability, political order, and societal cohesion.This broader definition recognises that national security is not solely about defending against external attack but also about maintaining governance and social stability. The strength of this approach lies in its comprehensiveness, integrating multiple sectors of security. However, its breadth can also be a weakness, as it risks diluting the concept, making it difficult to operationalise and measure. Critics argue that including every conceivable threat under the umbrella of national security may lead to conceptual vagueness and policy overstretch.

The United Nations Development Programme (1994) offers a human-centred perspective, defining national security as the protection of the vital core of human lives from critical and pervasive threats, emphasising human well-being rather than just state survival. This approach highlights the importance of economic security, health, and social development, and it broadens the referent object of security from the state to individuals. Its key strength is in prioritising human welfare and reducing the human costs of conflict and insecurity. However, a limitation is that the focus on human security may undermine the traditional state-centric concerns, making it challenging for policymakers to reconcile individual-focused security with state survival, particularly in high-intensity conflict environments.Baldwin (1997) defines national security as the capacity of a state to maintain a stable political system and protect its citizens from both external and internal threats, including insurgency, terrorism, and civil disorder. This definition attempts to bridge state-centric and societal approaches by acknowledging internal threats alongside traditional external ones. Its strength lies in its practical relevance to contemporary security challenges, such as terrorism and civil unrest. Nevertheless, a weakness is that it still presumes a strong state apparatus; in fragile states where institutional capacity is limited, this definition may be difficult to apply, and it may not account for transnational threats that bypass state control.

Booth (2007) offers a normative and evolving definition, describing national security as a contested concept that involves safeguarding a state's interests while balancing civil liberties, economic prosperity, and social development amid global and domestic challenges. This approach reflects constructivist and critical perspectives, acknowledging that security is socially constructed and politically negotiated. Its strength lies in its flexibility and acknowledgment of evolving security dynamics, including human rights and development. However, its contested and broad nature can be a weakness, as it provides limited operational guidance for policymakers and can be interpreted in contradictory ways, potentially leading to selective or politicised applications of national security.

Consequently, national security is the protection of a nation and its people from internal and external threats, including military, political, economic, social, and environmental risks, while ensuring the stability, well-being, and development of society. Actors in national security are diverse and operate at multiple levels, with the state remaining the central and primary actor responsible for safeguarding national interests and public safety. Through government institutions such as the military, intelligence agencies, police forces, judicial systems, and policy-making bodies, the state formulates national security strategies, allocates resources, enacts laws, and coordinates responses to internal and external threats.

However, national security dynamics are not shaped by the state alone; non-state actors also play significant roles. These include ethnic militias, terrorist organisations, private military companies, multinational corporations, and civil society organisations, some of which undermine state authority and stability through violence or illicit activities, while others contribute positively through peacebuilding, advocacy, and community resilience initiatives. In addition, international and regional organisations are critical actors in national security, as they provide frameworks for cooperation, conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and collective security. Institutions such as the United Nations, the African Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, and regional economic communities support states through diplomacy, peace operations, capacity building, and policy coordination, thereby shaping both national and regional security outcomes.

Ethnic Militias and Resource Competition in Africa: Implications for National Security

In this paper, national security is understood as the protection of a nation and its people from internal and external threats, covering military, political, economic, social and environmental risks, while ensuring stability, well-being and sustainable development.In Africa, the rise of ethnic militias driven by competition over natural resources presents a profound challenge to national security because such militias both erode state authority and undermine the conditions for stable governance and inclusive social development. Ethnic militias frequently emerge where struggles over oil, minerals, land and pastoral resources intersect with historically entrenched ethnic identities, producing sustained violence that threatens the territorial integrity of states and the safety of their populations. Competition over resource control embeds identity into violent contestation, providing both the impetus for the formation of armed groups and the economic means for their sustenance, thereby generating multidimensional security threats that extend far beyond narrow military concerns to include political legitimacy, economic resilience, and social cohesion (Alao, 2025; Boulat, 2024; Nassef et al., 2023).

In numerous African states, ethnic militias have crystallised where economic marginalisation and governance failures intersect with valuable resource endowments, weakening national security structures and enabling non-state actors to fill security vacuums. In Nigeria’s Niger Delta, centuries of oil extraction by multinational corporations have generated significant environmental degradation and deep social inequality, triggering violent responses

from local populations. Ethnic militia groups such as the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta emerged out of long-standing grievances over inequitable revenue distribution, environmental damage and political exclusion of local communities, leading to sabotage of oil infrastructure, kidnappings and armed confrontations with state forces. These actions have undermined Nigeria's capacity to ensure internal security and forced the government to divert significant resources away from development priorities towards counter-insurgency operations, exacerbating regional instability (Ibaba&Ikelegbe, 2010; Alao, 2025). Likewise, in Angola's Cabinda enclave, separatist militia movements have mobilised around oil wealth captured by national elites, contributing to a protracted insurgency that strains national defence resources and weakens social cohesion. In Sudan, particularly in the oil-producing regions of South Kordofan and Blue Nile, ethnic militias aligned with either government forces or rebel movements have fought over oil rents while deepening ethnic polarisation, thereby complicating efforts at national peacebuilding (Patey, 2010; Alao, 2025). These examples illustrate that when states fail to govern and manage resource wealth equitably, ethnic militias can exploit these governance lapses, threatening national security in both tangible and structural ways.

In theEastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), competition over valuable mineral resources such as coltan, tin, gold and cobalt have fuelled one of Africa's most complex and enduring security crises, characterised by a proliferation of ethnic militias and armed groups. Militia formations including the March 23 Movement (M23), RaïaMutomboki and various Mai Mai factions derive financial sustenance from controlling access to mining territories, exploiting both local and international trade in minerals to fund their operations and purchase arms. These armed actors manipulate ethnic identities to maintain recruitment bases and to legitimise claims to territory against rival ethnic constituencies and the state, sustaining cycles of violence and displacement that the Congolese government struggles to manage. The fragmentation of armed groups in eastern DRC has weakened the state's capacity to maintain order, while simultaneously destabilising neighbouring states and forcing costly multinational peacekeeping interventions, illustrating the regional security implications when resource competition intersects with ethnic militia mobilisation (IPIS Research, 2023; Boulat, 2024). Moreover, conflicts such as the Batwa–Luba clashes in Tanganyika underscore how resource and land contests between ethnic communities can erupt into episodic militia violence, disrupting agricultural production and undermining social order over extended periods.

Competition for land and pastoral resources has also driven the formation of ethnically defined militia and self-defence groups across West Africa and the Sahel, where declining ecological conditions and weak governance amplify vulnerability to conflict. In Nigeria's Middle Belt, disputes between pastoralist Fulani herders and agrarian communities such as the Tiv, Berom and Jukun over grazing land and water sources have escalated into cycles of violence, with local self-defence militias forming along ethnic lines in response to perceived threats to livelihoods and community security. Scholarly analyses of herder–farmer conflicts emphasise

that competition over land tenure and access to natural resources fuels persistent insecurity, leading to the entrenchment of militia identities that challenge state authority and national cohesion (Nassef et al., 2023; Ioryue, 2024). In Burkina Faso and northern Mali, ethnically associated self-defence groups such as the Mossi-linked Koglweogos have been mobilised nominally to counter banditry or Islamist insurgents, but in many cases they have themselves engaged in violent confrontations with Fulani pastoralist communities over resources, further weakening national security and fragmenting social order. These conflicts illustrate how renewable resource competition over land, water and pasture intersects with ethnic identity to create enduring security challenges that states find difficult to manage without risking further marginalisation of vulnerable communities (International Institute for Environment and Development, 2021;Nassef et al., 2023).

In the Horn of Africa, the Republic of South Sudan provides a stark example of how oil wealth and associated ethnic militia mobilisation can destabilise a young independent state. Competition between Dinka-aligned and Nuer-aligned armed groups over control of oil fields and revenues has been a central driver of the country's prolonged civil war since independence, undermining state institutions and displacing millions of civilians. Studies of resource-based conflict in South Sudan highlight how control over oil and related resources becomes both a strategic objective and a funding source for ethnic militias, thereby weakening national unity and making national security contingent on militia bargains rather than inclusive governance (McCrone, 2021; Ruei, 2018). Interlinked disputes over water and fertile land in South Sudan's borderlands further complicate the security environment, demonstrating that competition for multiple resource types can sustain militia mobilisation and prolong instability.

Beyond these specific theatres of conflict, the broader African experience reveals that ethnic militias aligned with resource competition present multi-layered threats to national security by disrupting economic development, undermining the state's monopoly on legitimate violence and entrenching cycles of violence. Economic disruption occurs when armed actors target critical infrastructure such as oil pipelines, mining corridors or agricultural supply routes, resulting in reduced investment, diminished government revenue and heightened unemployment in regions affected by militia activity. Politically, ethnic militias challenge the state's authority and can provoke demands for autonomy or secession that test the territorial integrity of states, as witnessed in movements in northern Mali where Tuareg-linked armed groups have periodically contested central authority over resource wealth and governance. Social cohesion and national identity are weakened when divisions along ethnic lines harden into mistrust and hostility, complicating the integration of national security forces and limiting effective civil–military cooperation, both of which are essential for robust national security strategies. The proliferation of small arms and the cross-border operations of militia groups further elevate the risk of regional spillover, making it increasingly difficult for individual states to manage insecurity without coordinated regional approaches to security governance (Alao, 2025; Nassef et al., 2023; Cann, 2024).

State Responses to Ethnic Militias and Resource Conflicts in Africa: Challenges and Implications

National governments in Africa face a complex and multi-layered challenge when responding to ethnic militias and conflicts driven by competition over natural resources, with profound implications for national security, which includes protection from internal and external threats across military, political, economic, social and environmental dimensions. Ethnic militias frequently emerge where weak governance, inequitable resource distribution and exclusionary political systems intersect with historical grievances, producing sustained violence that undermines state legitimacy and social cohesion (Alao, 2007; Okumu & Ikelegbe, 2010; Mc Crone, 2021). In Nigeria's Niger Delta, militias such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force illustrate how environmental degradation, exclusion from oil revenues and political marginalisation converge to incentivise armed mobilisation against the state (Tantua, Devine, & Maconachie, 2018; Osaghae, Ikelegbe, & Olarinmoye, 2010; Watts, 2008). These groups have disrupted economic lifelines through sabotage of pipelines, kidnappings and illegal oil bunkering, demonstrating that militia activity directly threatens both economic stability and territorial control (Tantua et al., 2018; Osaghae et al., 2010).

Scholars emphasise that state responses focusing exclusively on military suppression without addressing structural grievances such as inequitable revenue sharing or environmental harm often entrench cycles of violence and deepen mistrust between local populations and government institutions (Tantua et al., 2018; Osaghae et al., 2010; Watts, 2008). Similar patterns are evident in Angola's Cabinda enclave, where the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (FLEC) has historically mobilised around oil revenue disputes and political exclusion, highlighting that resource wealth and marginalisation consistently catalyse militia activity across multiple African settings (Alao, 2007; McCrone, 2021).

In regions where resource competition overlaps with ethnic identity, militarised state responses often reveal the limits of force-centred strategies. In the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), militias such as the March 23 Movement (M23), RaïaMutomboki and Mai-Mai factions sustain operations by controlling artisanal mining territories rich in gold, coltan and tin (Stearns, 2011; Autesserre, 2010). Military interventions, including joint operations with UN peacekeeping forces, have been largely insufficient because they fail to address local grievances, community inclusion deficits and inequitable resource governance (Autesserre, 2010; Stearns, 2011). Analyses of militia dynamics in the Congo emphasise that their resilience is rooted not only in resource revenues but also in historical neglect, political exclusion and ethnic grievances, which fuel recruitment and local support (Autesserre, 2010; Stearns, 2011). These conditions undermine national security by eroding the state's monopoly on violence, complicating reintegration efforts and fragmenting governance structures in resource-rich territories. Furthermore, militia control over strategic mining zones destabilises neighbouring states,

including Rwanda and Uganda, through illicit mineral trade and arms flows, turning a local resource dispute into a regional security challenge (Autesserre, 2010; Stearns, 2011).

The Sahel region presents additional challenges in managing ethnic militias intertwined with land, pastoral resources and climate stressors. Pastoralist–farmer conflicts in Nigeria, Sudan, Burkina Faso and Niger, driven by competition over grazing land, water and arable territory, pose persistent security challenges that are both ethnicised and resource-centred (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2021; McGuirk & Nunn, 2024; Beyene, 2021). Research in Nigeria's Middle Belt and Central Darfur demonstrates that state and local authorities often perpetuate inequities in land and resource access, which empowers non-state actors and facilitates militia mobilisation (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2021; McGuirk & Nunn, 2024). Security interventions, including militarised policing, curfews and forced displacements, can exacerbate tensions when land tenure systems are contested or customary authorities are excluded from governance frameworks (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2021; McGuirk & Nunn, 2024). Similar dynamics are observed in Ethiopia's Benishangul-Gumuz region, where militia activity emerges from farmland disputes, political marginalisation and inter-ethnic tension, showing that environmental stress and governance deficits combine to produce enduring insecurity (Beyene, 2021; Fekadu Beyene et al., 2021). Across these regions, militia activity undermines national security by generating recurrent violence, displacing populations and straining limited state capacity.

Political and diplomatic strategies have been central to African state responses, especially where militia mobilisation intersects with contested resource governance and regional dynamics. In the DRC, government engagement with armed groups over mineral resources through regional mediation and peace processes has sought to integrate militias into broader political frameworks (Stearns, 2011; Autesserre, 2010). Such strategies recognise that militarised interventions alone cannot resolve conflicts embedded in historical marginalisation, local governance deficits and resource disputes. However, political arrangements face challenges including spoilers within militias, elite competition for resource rents and limited enforcement capacity by state authorities, which can undermine compliance and prolong insecurity (Stearns, 2011; Autesserre, 2010). Similarly, in South Sudan, peace agreements have included militia integration into formal security structures, yet ethnic rivalries, disputes over oil-rich territories and mutual distrust continue to challenge state authority, demonstrating that political solutions must be complemented with equitable economic and social policies to reduce incentives for militia mobilisation (Mc Crone, 2021; Okumu & Ikelegbe, 2010).

In West and Central Africa, militias often intersect with community self-defence structures, complicating state interventions. Governments have occasionally co-opted local defence groups to counter jihadist or banditry threats, but securitisation of these actors can legitimise militias, blur accountability and weaken state authority (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2021; Mc Guirk & Nunn, 2024). For example, self-defence militias in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, mobilised ostensibly against jihadist groups or pastoralist conflicts, have sometimes attacked rival communities, illustrating how military and governance interventions that fail to address resource disputes or

ethnic grievances risk entrenching militia influence and undermining social cohesion (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2021; McGuirk & Nunn, 2024; Fekadu Beyene et al., 2021).

Conclusion

Ethnic militias in Africa are not simply the result of poverty, underdevelopment, or opportunistic criminal behaviour. They are rooted in deeper, long-standing struggles over identity, political power, and access to resources. These groups often emerge when communities face structural inequalities, historical grievances, and the politicisation of ethnic or communal identities, which provide both a reason and a structure for mobilisation. In regions rich in land, oil, minerals, or water, these tensions are often intensified, especially where governance is weak, state capacity is limited, and resource management lacks transparency. What might start as a local dispute over land, oil, or other economic benefits can quickly escalate into organised armed conflict, drawing in political elites, community actors, and even external interests, creating cycles of violence that are hard to break.The challenge for African states goes beyond simply using force to suppress these armed groups. It requires tackling the underlying political, economic, and institutional conditions that allow militias to form and persist. This means building inclusive political systems that give all communities a fair voice, strengthen social cohesion, and reduce the sense of marginalisation among minority groups. It also means creating transparent and accountable systems to manage resources, where revenues from land, oil, and minerals are shared fairly and disputes over access are handled through formal channels rather than violence.

A truly effective approach must combine these political and governance reforms with improvements in the security sector, including professionalising state forces, increasing oversight of security operations, and putting in place measures to protect civilians. At the same time, socio-economic interventions such as creating alternative livelihoods, reducing youth unemployment, and expanding opportunities for social mobility are critical to reduce the appeal of joining militias.Only by addressing these issues together can African states reduce the complex security risks posed by ethnic militias. With inclusive governance, fair resource management, and targeted social policies, resource competition can be transformed from a source of conflict into a foundation for sustainable development, stability, and long-term national security.

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