

Forestlands and National Security in Nigeria: A Threat-Import Analysis

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Abstract

This paper examines the nexus between forestlands and national security in Nigeria from the standpoint of threat-import analysis. By means of qualitative descriptive analysis of secondary data, predicated on the theory of territorial security, the paper explores Nigeria's forestlands as existential threat to national security. The paper argues that Nigeria's forestlands have been poorly managed and secured, which makes them vulnerable to criminal inhabitation and activities. The paper identifies rural banditry, cattle rustling, kidnapping, highway robbery, herdsman militancy, Boko Haram insurgency, and other forms of petty and organized criminality as security threats associated with forestlands in contemporary Nigeria. Based on its findings, the paper submits that forestlands in Nigeria are potentially and existentially a threat to national security. As the way forward, the paper makes a case for a specialized forest policing to deal with the rising security threats in Nigeria's forestlands.

Keywords: *Forestlands, national security, territorial security, existential threat, forest policing.*

1. Introduction

Nigeria is a richly endowed country. Her land and people are blessed with diverse resources that are vital for national growth and development. Besides her naturally gifted geography and demography, Nigeria possesses a variety of bio-physical and geo-physical endowments that are amenable to commercially viable agriculture, mining and quarrying and eco-tourism (Okoli & Uhembe, 2015).

Nigeria's bio-diversity is particularly unique and fascinating. According to a government's report:

Nigeria occupies a unique geographic position in Africa and the variability in climate and geographic features endows her with one of the richest biodiversity in the continent. Its diversity of natural ecosystems ranges from semi-arid to mountain forests, rich seasonal flood plain environments, rainforests, vast freshwater swamp forests and diverse coastal vegetation. Nigeria's Niger Delta contains the largest tract of Mangrove in Africa. The individual components of biodiversity-genes, species and ecosystems provide our society with a wide array of goods and services (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2010:8).

An important attraction in Nigeria's natural endowment is her ebullient forest estate and ecology. This comprises expansive wild-woods and protected forests located in various ecological zones of the country. These forests are rich in diverse flora and fauna, providing a variety of forestial goods to the country. They also provide human settlements with eco-hospitality resorts, thereby supporting their social wellbeing.

Over the years, efficient management of forestlands in Nigeria has increasingly proved problematic. In effect, forestlands in the country have become centers of illicit and criminal activities. This has ranged from illegal exploitation of forest resources to criminal inhabitation and activities. Some of the forests have degenerated into safe havens for criminality, militancy and insurgency (Ladan, 2014).

The use of forestlands as operational base or hideout by criminals in Nigeria points to the fact that forests pose existential threat to the country's national security. This is all the more instructive considering the fact that most of the forests in the country have been poorly managed and secured. It is in the light of the foregoing that this paper seeks to examine the nexus between forestlands and national security in Nigeria from the standpoint of threat-import analysis.

The remainder of the paper is sub-divided into seven sections. Sections two conceptualizes and contextualizes national security as an important frame of reference in the paper. Section three proposes the theory of territorial security as the analytical anchorage of the paper. Section four presents an overview of the Nigerian forest estate underscoring its eco-diversity. Section five situates forestlands as an existential threat to national security, drawing from national and international instances. Section six highlights the contemporary security threats associated with forestlands in Nigeria with a view to establishing the threat-import of forests vis-à-vis Nigeria's national security. Section seven makes a case for the evolution of a specialized forest police system as a means of securing the Nigerian forests from criminal inhabitation and activities. Section eight concludes the paper with a grand submission to the effect that forestlands in Nigeria are potentially and existentially a threat to national security.

2. Conceptualizing and Contextualizing National Security

Extant scholarship on national security recognizes two paradigmatic traditions- the traditionalist and revisionist perspectives (Gambo, 2008). The differences between these perspectives have been exhaustively underscored by scholars (Ibeanu, 2009; Okoli & Ogayi, 2012; Okoli, 2014; Okoli & Okpaleke, 2014). Suffice to note that while the traditionalist perspective conceives of national security from a pro-defence, military-biased and state-centric standpoint, the revisionist perspective views national security from the prism of human and societal wellbeing (Okoli, 2015b). In other words, while the former emphasizes the concerns of state preservation in terms of territoriality, sovereignty and survival, the latter addresses the imperative for human-cum-societal development and sustainability (Mbagwu, 2015). Table 1 situates the general differences between the traditionalist and revisionist perspectives of national security.

Table 1: Traditionalist versus Revisionist Perspectives of National Security

Traditionalist perspective	Revisionist perspective
It emphasizes state security (state-centric)	It emphasizes human security (people-centric)
It is pro-defence	It is pro-development
Its primary concern is military threat	Its concern encompasses military and non-military threats
The state and her agencies are the principal actors	Civil society, local communities, regional and international organizations are also prominent actors

Security is pursued through military build-up and armament	Security is pursued through human and societal empowerment
Security is provided by the state for the people, who are more or less passive beneficiaries	Security is provided by strategic collaboration of the state and the citizenry, who are mutual beneficiaries.

Source: Adapted from Mbagwu (2015:337).

Hence, whereas the focus of the traditionalist perspective is on state security, the focus of the revisionist perspective bears predominantly on human security (Okoli & Agada, 2014). The conception of national security in this paper, however, comprehends the traditionalist and revisionist perspectives. This is because threats arising from ill-managed or poorly secured forestlands in Nigeria hold critical implications for both state security and human security. Thus, this paper maintains a holistic understanding of national security that cuts across the afore-stated paradigmatic divide. National security is, therefore, understood in this paper to mean protection of a country from all forms of social, economic, political, ecological, territorial and socio-economic vulnerabilities. The essence of national security is to guarantee freedom from existential threats and fears in pursuit of national survival and sustainability.

3. Theoretical Framework: Towards a Theory of Territorial Security

This paper proposes a theory of territorial security as its analytical anchorage. The theory is founded on the realist thinking that the state is a territorial authority that exists to preserve itself (McLean & McMillan, 2003). Hence, the theory holds that preservation of territorial integrity of the state is indispensable to its national security and sustainability (Akinbola, 1999; Akinboye, 1999). Territory is herewith understood as ‘a bounded space under the control or jurisdiction of a group of people, most commonly today the state’ (Eden & Williams, 2009:407).

The territory of a state refers to its inclusive geo-spatial domain, including its terrestrial, aerial, and maritime spheres. Aspects of the state territory, therefore, include the land, the waters, the air-space and the borderlines of a country. This encompasses both the inhabited and uninhabited frontiers of a state. Territorial security, therefore, implies the protection of the aforementioned spheres of national territory from all forms of vulnerabilities.

The theory of territorial security presupposes that securing the national territory is fundamental to the preservation of the state. In effect, vulnerability of any aspect of the national territory to any form of existential threats portends jeopardy for national security. It is thus incumbent on the state to ensure proper protection of its territory in order to forestall the erosion of its national security.

The Nigerian forestlands are veritable components of the country’s national territory. Over the years, the forests have been exposed to collateral vulnerabilities arising from poor regulation and policing. They have become safe havens for criminal and treasonable activities, thereby posing a huge existential threat to national security in the country. The use of forests as operational bases for insurgency, militancy and various acts of criminality in Nigeria palpably indicates failure of territorial governance and security in the country (Ibeanu, 2009). As this paper is wont to argue, this trend holds ominous implications for national security in Nigeria.

4. Overview of Nigeria’s Forest Estate and Ecology

Forests are plant communities consisting predominantly of trees and other woody vegetation, which occupy extensive area of land (Ladan, 2014:120). There are two types of forest regime in Nigeria. These are wild-woods and protected forests. Wild-woods are naturally growing forests

that are open to primitive and unregulated exploitation while protected forests are woodlands controlled and regulated by the government (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2010; Imaseun, Oshodi & Onyeobi, 2013).

The Nigerian forest estate is vast and diversified. According to Balogun and Daramola:

The country's forest and woody vegetation include the high forests, woodlands, bush lands, plantations, and trees on farms. Forest reserves occupy about 96,043km² which is about 10% of Nigeria's land area. The forest estate includes about 445 gazette forest reserves distributed over the five main ecological zones (2014:28).

Available data indicate that there are approximately 10 million km² total forested areas that are protected in Nigeria (Imaseun, *et al*, 2013:54). This includes forest reserves, plantations and national parks located in various parts of the country. Table 2 and 3 give some valuable information in that regard.

Table 2: National Parks in Nigeria

Name Of Park	Area (Ha)	Location	Vegetation Type
Kamuku National Park	121,300 ha	Kaduna State	Guinea Savannah
Kainji National Park	532,000 ha	Niger State	Guinea Savannah
Old Oyo National Park	253,000 ha	Oyo State	Dry forest/Guinea Savannah
Okomu National Park	200 ha	Edo State	Lowland rainforest
Cross River National Park (Obem and Okwango Divisions)	400,000 ha	Cross River State	Lowland rainforest
Gashaka Gumti National Park	6,402, 480ha	Taraba State	Guinea Savannah
Chad Basin National Park (Hadeja-Nguru*, Sambisa**, and Chingurme-Duguma** sectors)	230,000 ha	Borno	Sahel Savannah

Source: Federal Republic of Nigeria (2010:9); ** = located in the present Yobe State.

National parks are forested areas dedicated to environmental conservation and eco-tourism. They host a variety of important flora and fauna as well as exotic natural sceneries that are suitable for human recreation and scientific research. National parks combined with the forest reserves and plantations, constitute the substance of the Nigerian protected forestlands. Table 3 sheds light on the Nigerian forest reserves and plantations.

Table 3: Nigeria's Forests Reserves and Plantations by States

State	Area of Forest Reserve (ha)	Area of Plantation (ha)
Abia	8.700	2.051
Adamawa	10.011	2.374
Akwa-Ibom	31.857	25.800
Anambra	32.457	5.332
Bauchi	840.280	432.052

Benue	602.175	2.234
Borno	582.820	432.052
Cross River	610.129	19.000
Delta	78.506	2.000
Edo	482.047	150.000
Enugu	8.524	7.498
Imo	1.525	1.160
Jigawa	92.000	3.000
Kaduna	613.484	6.146
Kano	77.702	2.186
Katsina	245.100	18.900
Kebbi	340.289	17.750
Kogi	540.360	5.000
Kwara	460.350	6.000
Lagos	12.579	2.000
Niger	756.906	4.956
Ogun	273.118	35.000
Ondo	337.336	27.153
Osun	86.057	6.381
Oyo	336.563	8.031
Plateau	402.500	6.800
Rivers	25.500	231
Sokoto	602.631	10.943
Taraba	10.011	1.359

Source: Dada *et al* (2006), cited in Imaseun et al (2013:54). Note: Data for Zamfara is included in Sokoto figures while Yobe is not available.

Ecologically, the Nigeria forest estate has been categorized as freshwater/mangrove forests, Guinea Savana forests and Sudan/Sahel forests (Balogun & Daramola, 2014; Ejidike & Ajayi, 2013). These forests offer wide-ranging livelihood avenues for local communities, providing opportunities for subsistence ‘hunting and gathering’ of wild protein, fruits, medicinal roots and herbs, fuel-wood, cash crops as well as prospects for commercial logging, lumbering and eco-tourism.

5. Forestlands as an Existential Security Threat

Forestlands pose significant existential threats, especially when they are not well managed and policed. According to Ladan:

In general, forests anywhere in the world, by their nature... can be security threats as thieves, criminals, armed groups, rebels, insurgents and terrorists can use them in carrying out their activities in one way or the other (2014:130).

Indeed by their very nature, forests provide a veritable operational base or hideout for a variety of criminal activities. A typical forest consists of a cluster of trees, plant communities and undergrowth vegetation. It is usually isolated from the frontiers of human settlement and often alienated from community and state policing. It is also oftentimes extensive in scale, covering

series of kilometers the countryside. In view of these peculiarities, the forests provide a conducive environment for criminal inhabitation and activities.

The occupation of forestlands by criminals and insurgents in various parts of this world has been informed by a number of strategic calculations, viz:

- i. forests serve as a safe haven for criminal ‘habitation’ and ‘asylum’
- ii. forests provide bases for camping, training and guerilla warfare
- iii. forests provide avenues for illicit economic activities (forest resources exploration) such as logging, charcoal production, poaching, gaming, drug trafficking, and mercantile smuggling activities;
- iv. forests provide sanctuaries for the safe keeping of prisoners of war and abductees;
- v. forests are difficult to police owing to their expansive and often isolated terrains.

Suffice to note that forestlands are potentially and existentially a veritable threat to national security of states. As we shall see in the case of Nigeria shortly, some frontier and country-side forests in the country have been a center for criminality and insurgency, thereby posing a palpable threat to the country’s national security.

During the critical years of the Niger Delta militancy (2000-2009), the militants used the thick mangrove forests, off the shores and creeks of the Delta, as their operational dens and hideouts (Okoli, 2013). Similarly, the oil pipeline vandals in the southeastern and southwestern Nigeria have often taken the advantage of the coastal forests of the regions in perpetrating their criminal franchise (Okoli, 2015a). Furthermore, the perpetrators of mercantile kidnapping, especially in southern Nigeria, have in most cases detained their abductors in the woodlands of the hinterlands (Okoli & Agada, 2014). This is also the case with the activities of ritual killers and cultists, most of which are carried out in the forests.

In northern Nigeria, high-way robbers, rural bandits and cattle rustlers are known to have plotted and executed their criminal activities from their operational bases in the neighbourhood forests (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014; Okoli & Okpaleke, 2014a; Okpaleke, 2014b; Okoli, 2015b). This is also true of the Boko Haram insurgents that have carried out most of their invasions and attacks from the Sahelian forests of the northeast (Okoli & Iortyer, 2014).

The vulnerability of forestlands to criminal inhabitation and/or occupation is a global phenomenon. Table 4 contains insightful and instructive information in this regard.

Table 4: Instances of Occupation of Forests by Criminals in the World

Country	Instance
Colombia	The FARC rebels have their bases in the country’s south eastern region from where they attack government forces; they also use the forests for the purposes of criminal abduction and drug trafficking.
India	There has been a guerilla war going on between the Indian government troops and allied militants in Kashmir since 1989. The militants hiding in Gungerport, Dhami, and Zab forests from where they have launched sporadic attacks on government forces in recent years.
Congo, DR	Various armed groups (militias) have been engaging the government and multinational forces from their various forest bases in the eastern Congo; the militias have often taken over government parks and are engaged in illegal forest exploitation.
Kenya	Gunmen believed to be members of the Al-Shabab launched violent

	attacks on civilian and farmlands from their forest bases in Lamu county in 2014
Nigeria	Boko Haram insurgents have been occupying a substantial part of the Sambisa forest in Northeast Nigeria from where they have launched series of deadly attacks on the Nigerian state.

Source: Adapted from Ladan (2014:131).

6. Contemporary Security Threats in Nigeria’s Forestlands

Forestlands in Nigeria have become centers of criminal activities. Over the year various kinds of criminality and violence have been carried out in or from the forests in Nigeria. In the subsections that follow, an attempt is made to examine the various dimensions to the security threat posed by the Nigerian forests in contemporary times.

6.1 Rural banditry: Rural bandits targeting local communities in North-central and North-Western have often planned and launched their attacks from their camp grounds in the neighborhood hinterlands forests. This phenomenon has manifested in the fashion of village and market raids in states such as Zamfara, Katsina, Plateau, Nasarawa, Kaduna, and Benue (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014; Okoli, 2015a). A recent case in point was the invasion of some villages in Kaura Local Government Area of Kaduna state on 21st March, 2014 wherein over hundred persons were killed (Ladan, 2014).

6.2 Cattle rustling: Cattle rustling is prevalent in the frontier and countryside forests of northern Nigeria (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2014a). The cattle rustlers plot their criminal enterprise and their criminal enterprise in highly syndicated operational camps in the rural forests of the region. Their activities have been most pronounced in the States of Zamfara, Katsina, Kano, Plateau, Benue, Nasarawa, Bauchi, and Taraba. Aided by sophisticated modern weapons, the rustlers have capitalized on their mastery of the forest paths and terrains in raiding cattle herds, which they drive to dedicated underground markets in the forest terminals for sale.

6.3 Herdsmen militancy: Herdsmen militancy is essentially a forest-based violence. The perpetrators of this violence plan their attacks from their improvised camps in the jungle from where they proceed to hit their target communities. This pattern of rural violence has been pervasive in the North-central region of Nigeria with Benue, Nasarawa and Plateau States as veritable critical flash-beds (Okoli & Atelhem 2014; Okoli, 2015a). Contemporary indicators of herdsmen militancy indicate it is fast degenerating into a national emergency that is witnessed in virtually all the geo-political zones of Nigeria. It has led to mass killing and human displacements in places such as Agatu and Guma in Benue state, Obi and Lafia East in Nasarawa state and Barkin Ladi and Wase in Plateau state (Okoli & Ayokhai, 2016).

6.4 Kidnapping: Kidnapping for ransom is a prevalent pattern of violent crime in Nigeria. Perpetrators of the act have resorted to the use of forests as their operational base as well as a sanctuary for safe keeping of their abductees. Mercantile kidnapping has been most prevalent in the southeastern and South-South parts of Nigeria. In these regions, kidnapped persons are often held hostage in the forests by their abductors while ransom negotiations or ‘tactical suspense’ lasts. Many kidnapping victims have been killed by their abductors, or rescued by the security forces, in such forest detention.

6.5 Highway robbery: Highway robbery is a common instance of urban banditry in Nigeria (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2014b). The robbers stage their attacks from their hideouts in the adjoining forests and in turn, make their way into the forests after an operation. The Okene-Lokoja,

Akwanga-Nasarawa Eggon, Benin-Ore and Zaria-Funtua highways have been notorious for such attacks.

6.6 Insurgency: The use of forestlands as operational bases for insurgency was vividly demonstrated by the activities of the Niger Delta militants in the 2000s (Okoli, 2013). The militants adopted the guerilla tactics in their armed confrontation with the military. In that regard, the thick Mangrove forests of the Delta were utilized as strongholds of anti-government militancy. The ongoing Boko Haram insurgency in Northeast Nigeria has also underscored the strategic efficacy of forestlands in advancing the purposes of organized militancy. For instance, Boko Haram insurgents launched an attack on the Bauchi township prison from their hideout in the Balmo forest on 7th July, 2010, freeing 721 inmates (Ladan, 2014). In July 2014, the Nigerian military raided the Balmo forest and discovered among other things, a stockpile of weapons at underground armories (Ladan, 2014).

More recently, the Sambisa forest in Borno state has been the center of Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria. The Boko Haram insurgents had taken over the forest and fortified it as the strongest base of their activities. According to Ladan:

The forest is believed to be the main base of the insurgents as they have well-fortified camps with their food supplies, weapons, motor vehicles, and motor cycles that they use to launch attack on settlement in Yobe, Borno, and Adamawa States. Indeed, the forest has become a notorious den of the insurgents that people dread coming close to it. Most of the villages around the forest have left the area to neighboring Cameroun and Niger Republic due to high rate of insecurity (2014:136).

Since the intensification of counter-insurgency campaign around the Sambisa forest from 2015, the Nigerian military has recovered many weapons and ammunition, operational vehicles and gadgets, as well as human abductees from the insurgents in the forest. Many of the insurgents have also been killed in the military operations.

6.7 Allied criminality: In addition to the afore-mentioned, Nigeria forestlands have equally played host to a number of other criminal occurrences including cult activities, narcotic cropping, drug trafficking, human trafficking, ritual killing, arms proliferation and the like. Street crimes, such as waylaying of residents and passers-by, rape, illicit drug consumption and/ sale as well as cult violence, have all been associated with forest corridors, especially within the urban suburbs and country-side frontiers. Table 5 highlights the various security threats associated with forestlands in selected areas in Nigeria.

Table 5: Security Threats Posed by Selected Forests and Forest Reserves

S/n	Forest/Forest Reserve	Security Threat	Present Status
1.	Balmo Forest	-Base of insurgents used to launch attack -Site for underground armory location	Slightly degraded
2.	Falgore Forest	-Base of armed robbers who attack travelers and traders	Sections of the forest degraded
3.	Idu and Gwagwa Forest Reserves	-Hideouts for thieves who launch attacks especially at night	Part of forest encroached,

			other side burnt
4.	Kabakawa Forest Reserve	-Hideouts for sundry criminals -Security threat to people around it	De-gazetted and land are built up
5.	Kagoro Forest	-Camping site for gunmen -Used by gunmen to as a safe haven	Sections of the forest endangered
6.	Kamuku Forest	-Den of armed robbers who hide in the forest to attack travelers	Partially degraded
7.	Rumah/Kukar Jangarai Forest Reserve	-Camps for thieves, armed robbers and cattle rustlers	Large parts were degraded due to deforestation
8.	Sambisa Forest/ Forest Reserve	-A notorious den; attack-point and hideout for insurgents	Partially degraded

Source: Ladan (2014:132).

7. Securing the Nigerian Forestlands: The Imperative for Forest Policing

The Nigerian forestlands have been grossly under-regulated and under-policed. Apart from the various extant frameworks for forest control, the only existing mechanism for forest policing in Nigeria is the 'forest-guard system' (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2010). The forest guards are para-military personnel trained to oversee the forest reserves. They are expected to ensure that untoward exploitation of the forest reserves is hindered. They are also expected to forestall acts of encroachments within and around the protected areas of the forest reserves. This is in addition to monitoring and controlling human trespasses in the reserves (Oduan *et al*, 2013).

The forest guards are limited in training and resourcing. They are exposed to elementary para-military training and are equipped with more or less 'rudimentary' weapons. Moreover, they are limited in number, compared to the vast expanse of the wild that they are required to police. Given the above, they are only fit for routine conventional policing that does not entail military sophistication.

Contemporary indicators of forest-based criminality in Nigeria indicate that criminals bear sophisticated modern arms and ammunitions (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2014). They also operate with enhanced tactical efficiency, enabled by functional syndication. The traditional forest guards are naturally ill-equipped to deal with this emerging pattern of criminality. This has necessitated an alternative policing framework that would be amenable to the exigencies of the contemporary security challenges in the forestlands in Nigeria.

In the light of the foregoing, this paper makes a case for the establishment of a special forest police to substitute or augment the conventional forest guards. This special force should derive membership from the existing military police and mobile police formations in the country. The personnel should be exposed to specialized training in forest combat, guerilla warfare, anti-robbery campaign and counter-terrorism. They should be equipped with state-of-the-art facilities and weaponry to enable them to excel in their operations. The special force should be organized in 'cells' and 'sectors' with corresponding 'unit' and 'sector' command structures. It should be modeled after the military Joint Task Force (JTF) in North-east Nigeria. The force should be

answerable to the Defence Headquarters which shall wield powers of operational oversight over its activities.

8. Conclusion

Nigeria has vast and versatile forest ecology. This provides her with veritable resources for biodiversity, wild-life, eco-tourism, and other forestial goods. It also provides opportunities for the primitive exploitation of the wild for subsistence, such as hunting, petty lumbering and logging. The Nigerian forestlands are protected forests dedicated to ecological conservation. In addition to providing a harbor for wildlife and eco-tourism, forests offer an avenue for commercial forestry in the country. Over the years, the positive potentials and promises of these forests have been negated by the rising incidence of criminality on and around their corridors.

So, rather than being sites of ecological conservation, forests have incidentally degenerated into hideouts for criminals, militants, cultists and insurgents. In effect, forests have been used as operational bases for the perpetrators of rural banditry, cattle rustling, herder militancy, mercantile smuggling, and Boko Haram insurgency. This trend indicates that forestlands are poorly regulated and secured. It also signifies that forests pose existential threats to national security of Nigeria.

The trajectories of Boko Haram insurgency in Northeast Nigeria adumbrate the fact that unprotected forestlands can provide a fertile ground for terrorist invasion and attacks. This underscores the need for the Nigerian government to devise pragmatic measures towards ensuring effective regulation and security of forestlands in the country. To say the least, the Nigerian government must realize the strategic truism that territorial security is indispensable to national security.

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