

SECURITY SECTOR REFORMS IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL SECURITY AND STABILITY: 2015 – 2023

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Abstract

Nigeria's security sector faces numerous challenges, including terrorism, insurgency, kidnapping, and communal disputes, which threaten national security and stability. This study examined the connection between security sector reforms (SSR) and national security in Nigeria, highlighting challenges and opportunities. The research was based on a review of existing literature, including policy documents, scholarly articles, and reports from the Nigerian Army and other security agencies. The study explored the historical context of SSR in Nigeria, the current security framework, and the significant SSR initiatives and reforms that have been implemented. The research methodology employed is a mixed-methods approach, focusing on a comprehensive review of existing literature to examine the relationship between security sector reforms and national security in Nigeria. The study adopts a qualitative or mixed-methods approach, combining theoretical analysis with practical applications. It argues that while SSR initiatives are necessary to address security challenges, considerable obstacles remain, including the need for greater accountability, transparency, and effectiveness within the security sector. The findings underscore the importance of local and national ownership, inclusive and participatory methods, and a thorough assessment of the reform context to tackle Nigeria's unique security issues effectively. The study recommends that policymakers and security stakeholders prioritise SSR initiatives that foster accountability, transparency, and effectiveness, addressing root causes of insecurity such as poverty, inequality, and political instability.

Keywords: Security, Terrorism, Security Sector Reform, National Security

Introduction

The origins of conflicts and insecurity can be traced back to ancient human history, primarily caused by conflicting interests, domination, state formation and territorial expansion. In human history, the growth of kingdoms and empires often led to clashes and power struggles resulting from their interactions. Therefore, the establishment of feudalism and knights' ascent to prominence as a ruling class also influenced violence and insecurity, which led to the normalization of violence and the widespread feeling of insecurity in society (Ganshof, 1952). A culture of militarism and aggressiveness resulted from the ongoing threat of war and the necessity for self-defence (Ganshof, 1952). Insecurity grew because of the 14th-century Black Death pandemic, which further worsened social and economic unrest in Europe. Social unrest and economic instability were caused by the significant death toll and the ensuing labour shortages (Cantor, 2001). Communities were more susceptible to banditry, raids, and other violent acts when trade and commerce were interrupted. Security and stability were further undermined by the pandemic's effects on the social and economic structure of medieval civilization (Cantor, 2001).

Within the Nigerian state, insecurity has been a persistent topic of discussion, and some of the issues include terrorism, abduction, banditry, and ethno-religious conflicts, which have been a threat to national security and stability despite the constant increment in security efforts and their agencies (Mohammed, 2023). The major problem of ineffective management and regulation of the security sector is characterized by poor monitoring, corruption and lack of cooperation among agencies, and this is a primary cause of these issues. Nigeria's stubborn security challenges have remained a thorn in the side of the Nigerian government for the past two decades. Terrible security conditions continue to persist in almost all geopolitical zones in the countries. The most common one is that of the northeast, Boko Haram and Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA), who constantly attack the military personnel. Hence, little effort has been made to address the widespread rural banditry and rising communal conflict, especially violence between herders and farmers. (Aluko, 2015). Thus, this work aims to look at security sector reforms and their implications for national stability. Thus, this work pays attention to the questions:

- i. What is the current state of the Security Sector in Nigeria?
- ii. How has the current state of the Security Sector impacted Nigeria's national security?
- iii. What are the major factors contributing to the ineffectiveness of the Security Sector in Nigeria?
- iv. What are the challenges facing the implementation of Security Sector Reforms in Nigeria, and the Nigerian Army in particular?
- v. What are the key reforms and strategies required to strengthen the Security Sector and enhance national security in Nigeria?

Conceptual Review

Security: Security involves the process of mitigating threats to people and their valuable assets. Buzan describes security as freedom from threat and the ability of states to maintain an independent identity and their functional integrity against forces of change, which they see as hostile, while the bottom line is survival (Bodunde et al., 2014). In a nutshell, security can be said to be a feeling of being safe from harm, fear, anxiety, oppression, danger, poverty, defense, protection and preservation of core values and threats to those values.

National Security: The basic definition of national security remains a comprehensive term for the national effort to ensure a nation is safe, secure, and resilient against terrorism and other hazards, allowing American interests, aspirations, and ways of life to thrive. National security is a national effort to prevent terrorist attacks within the country, reduce the vulnerability of the country to terrorism, and minimize the damage from attacks that do occur (US EPA, 2024). Like power, justice, peace, equality, and freedom, security is a complex concept that defies a universally agreed-upon definition (Ekong, 2014). Some people perceive security as almost exclusively the provision of a viable defence force.

Internal Security: Internal security refers to the safety of a state's territory and population, as well as the policies adopted to preserve it. Ebo opines that security is freedom from fear and that fear of hunger and scarcity of other basic needs of life are, for most countries, palpable threats to national security (Ebo, 1997). Adekanye agrees that security is “about helping people to regain their job security, income security, food security and security of life itself” (Adekanye, 1998).

Security Sector Reform: The security sector includes militarized formations other than the regular armed forces. They are paramilitary forces, police, internal security services, and intelligence services. A broad interpretation also includes organizations and institutions such as defense ministries, the judiciary system and private security guards. According to Edmunds (2007), security sector reform (SSR) concerns ‘the provision of security within the state in an effective and efficient manner, and in the framework of democratic civilian control’. There is a trend to accept a direct correlation between security governance and conflict prevention and development. The international donor community is increasingly linking development assistance to security sector reform efforts.

Hanggi expounded on three contexts that constitute the core of the SSR concept: the development of affordable security bodies capable of providing security with operational efficiency and effectiveness, the development of effective oversight mechanisms consistent with democratic norms, and addressing the legacies of past conflicts in post-conflict states (Hendrickson, 1999). These legacies include disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation, reconstruction and reintegration (DDRRR) of former combatants, judicial reform, proliferation of small arms and light weapons. He also enumerated some factors that determine which type of SSR to pursue (Hendrickson, 1999).

National Security and Security Sector Reform

The security sector refers to governmental institutions responsible for maintaining safety and protecting lives and property within a specified geographical area (Williams, 2000). This includes the military, police, intelligence services, paramilitary groups, and insurgent factions (Williams, 2000). Ideally, security sector reform (SSR) addresses the challenge of balancing security services with governance by ensuring civilian oversight or parliamentary control while enhancing operational capabilities (Dehez, 2010). SSR aims to create a well-equipped and well-trained security sector capable of maintaining peace and order while upholding democratic principles (Williams, 2000).

One well-known advocate of the Security Sector Reform (SSR) theoretical framework is Alan Bryden. Bryden (2004) argues that SSR is necessary to guarantee the effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability of the security sector. According to Bryden (2004), SSR involves strengthening and reforming the security sector to enable it to handle both internal and external threats. Another key supporter of the SSR theoretical framework is Heiner Hänggi. Hänggi (2004) states that SSR is vital for promoting the rule of law and democratic governance. According to Hänggi (2004), SSR requires reforming the security sector so that it operates within the boundaries of human rights and the rule of law, and remains accountable to democratic institutions. Mark Sedra (2006), a prominent expert on Security Sector Reform (SSR) and its impact on national security, maintains that SSR is necessary to ensure the security sector can respond effectively to both internal and external threats. Sedra (2006) further contends that SSR involves transforming and enhancing the security sector to make it capable, effective, efficient, and accountable. Nicole Ball (2005) emphasises that SSR is crucial for fostering development and reducing poverty. According to Ball (2005), SSR necessitates restructuring the security sector to guarantee it can address internal and external challenges, operating within a framework of human rights and the rule of law. Advocates of the SSR theoretical framework emphasise the importance of reforming the security sector to make it effective, efficient, and accountable. They argue that SSR is vital for promoting development, democratic governance, and the rule of law, involving strengthening and reforming the security sector to make it capable of addressing both internal and external threats.

In Nigeria, SSR is crucial for several reasons; some include helping to establish a proactive security sector capable of preventing conflicts, fostering trust between civilians and security forces, and creating a safe environment for both local and international investment (DAC Guideline and Reference Series, 2012). The aim of security system reform is to ensure a secure environment conducive to development, poverty reduction, and democracy (DAC Guideline and Reference Series, 2012). Conversely, ongoing ethnic and religious conflicts, such as those involving the Niger Delta and Boko Haram, contribute to the deteriorating security situation in the country (Purvis, 2012).

Nonetheless, SSR remains a relatively new and evolving concept that originally emerged from scholarship on civil-military relations (CMR) (Bruneau & Matei, 2008; Chuter, 2006; Crossley-Frolick & Dursun Özkanca, 2012; Edmunds, 2007). A key component of maintaining stability and peace in any country is the relationship between national security and security sector

reform (SSR). Protecting a country's vital interests, such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, and its citizens, is known as national security (Buzan, 1991). Conversely, SSR is the process of strengthening and reforming the security sector to make it more accountable, effective, and efficient (Hanggi, 2004).

Theoretical Framework

Structural Functionalism Theory

Society can be studied in the same way the human body can be studied by analyzing what specific systems are working or not, diagnosing problems, and devising solutions to restore balance. Socialization, religious involvement, friendship, health care, economic recovery, peace, justice and injustice, population growth or decline, food security, etc., are just a few of the examples of functional processes in our society (Hammond, Cheney & Pear say, 2015). Structural functionalism, as expounded by prominent sociologists like Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons (Durkheim, 1893; Parsons, 1951). Grounded in Durkheim's functional integration perspective, this framework posits that societies aspire to attain equilibrium and stability, wherein each societal component plays a crucial role in the overall functionality of the system (Durkheim, 1893). Building upon Durkheim's foundations, Talcott Parsons further develops this perspective by underscoring the pivotal role of social institutions in upholding social order and equilibrium (Parsons, 1951).

This theoretical framework not only provides a lens through which to understand the complexities in the security sector but also serves as a theoretical scaffold for dissecting the broader socio-economic challenges faced by the Nigerian Army in conducting security activities amid serious insecurity problems in Nigeria. Structural functionalism, as a theoretical framework, rests on the foundational assumptions that provide a comprehensive understanding of societal dynamics. Structural functionalism relies on the following assumptions:

- i. The functional integration of diverse elements within a society, signifying that each component contributes to the overall stability and equilibrium of the system (Crossman, 2020).
- ii. The theory posits a fundamental human inclination towards the pursuit of social order, highlighting the collective efforts to maintain a harmonious and structured society.
- iii. It acknowledges the existence of both manifest and latent functions within social structures, where manifest functions are the intended, visible purposes, and latent functions are the unintended, often hidden consequences (Crossman, 2020).

Security Sector Reforms and National Security in Nigeria

The SSR in Nigeria dates back to the 20th century, when British colonial authorities established control over various regions of Nigeria to extend their influence and power. The Nigeria Police Force was established in 1930, serving primarily as a tool of control for the colonial rulers, who utilized it to maintain law and order within their territories (Tamuno, 1970; Bendix and Stanley, 2008). Although it was created to serve and protect the interests of the colonial authorities, it paid less attention to the welfare, well-being, and safety of the Nigerian population. The force was funded and controlled by the colonialists as a means of maintaining

control and safeguarding the interests of the colonial masters, while some colonial police officers, acting as trainers, supported its operation. Notably, when Nigeria gained independence in 1960, the inherited security structure from the colonial period remained largely unchanged; its operation and management were poorly understood, and the police continued to perform traditional roles of law enforcement (Alemika, 2003; Alao, 2000). The security sector was heavily influenced by military rule, which transformed Nigeria's governance process by introducing military force into national administration. These periods disrupted the developing security framework and rendered some agencies obsolete. The military took a greater role in governance and law enforcement, relegating the police to a secondary position and assuming their duties. The three decades of military rule led to the neglect of fundamental security processes and primarily used force to serve military interests (Osaghae, 1998). During this era, a culture of authoritarianism and impunity became normal within security agencies. Military involvement extended beyond security to influence politics, economics, and other civil matters. The military regime showed little regard for civil authority and diverged from constitutional roles, acting in line with the ambitions of the ruling military leaders (Imobighe, 1990).

This process eroded the professionalism and accountability of the security agencies, as they acted in defiance of the rule of law and with complete disregard for the judiciary and the public (Hills, 2008; Imobighe, 1990). The activities of the military affected all areas of governance and established militarisation as a method of governance. The legacy left by the military today continues to influence the attitudes and methods of current political leaders. The prolonged military presence impacted ordinary citizens to the extent that the use of force and non-compliance with the law became commonplace. Nigerian political structures continue to grapple with these effects, while security agencies face ongoing challenges related to professionalism, accountability, and democratic oversight.

Between 2015 and 2023, Nigeria faced major security issues that revealed weaknesses in its security system. In response, various Security Sector Reforms (SSR) were introduced, with differing degrees of success. These reforms were mainly influenced by Boko Haram insurgency, increasing banditry, farmer-herder conflicts, police brutality, and secessionist movements. The period coincides with the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari, from May 2015 to May 2023. Security deteriorated sharply after 2015, with insurgency and terrorism from Boko Haram and ISWAP in the northeast, banditry and kidnappings in the northwest, ethnic and communal clashes, herder-farmer conflicts in the Middle Belt like Benue, Niger Delta militancy, secessionist violence in the southeast (e. g., IPOB/ESN), and endemic police brutality exemplified by the 2020 EndSARS protests. These threats highlighted the need for security reforms across Nigeria's defence, police, and intelligence agencies. Despite these challenges, efforts such as military restructuring and increased funding under Buhari prioritized defence, with more budgets and new equipment like Super Tucano aircraft, armoured vehicles, and drones. The military high command underwent multiple reshuffles to enhance leadership and operations. Police reform faced criticism due to corruption and brutality, prompting the disbandment of SARS in response to public outrage before and during the October 2020 protests. The Police Act 2020 was also enacted to modernise the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), enhance oversight, transparency, and accountability. Additionally, the 2019 National Security

Strategy (NSS) replaced the 2014 version, adopting a whole-of-government and society approach that considers economic, political, and environmental factors influencing insecurity. At regional levels, security initiatives such as Amotekun in the Southwest and Ebube Agu in the Southeast were established in response to perceived federal inadequacies, sparking debates over the constitutionality of state policing. Although reforms were undertaken, concerns remain about their full implementation, political commitment, weak accountability, ongoing human rights violations, and the unresolved root causes of insecurity, such as poverty, unemployment, and poor governance.

The implications of SSR for Nigeria's security sector are extensive, as SSR aims to promote professionalism among security agencies, accountability, and a responsive approach to citizens' needs (Bryden & Hänggi, 2005). This necessitates essential reforms within security institutions, including the development of policies and procedures that emphasise human rights, accountability, and transparency. SSR also involves shifting from a militarised approach to security towards a more holistic method that includes human security and development (DFID, 2000). This approach recognises that security is not solely about safeguarding the state, but also about protecting citizens and promoting their welfare and well-being. Ultimately, the historical overview of Nigeria's security sector highlights the complex and challenging nature of security governance in the country.

The legacy laid by the colonial masters and the continued effect of military rule on the security institutions. The transition to democracy presented new challenges and opportunities for reform. The SSR program in Nigeria is driven by the need to promote an effective and efficient mode of operation for security agencies, making them accountable and responsive to the concerns of citizens. This situation thus requires a holistic approach with the need to change the fundamentals of the security institutions, development of new policies, erecting and strengthening structures, as well as improving the procedures that will promote human rights, accountability, and transparency (Bah, 2000).

The entire process of the SSR in Nigeria has indeed undergone significant transformation and manipulation, although without much tangible success. This process has evolved from the colonial security focus on protecting British interests in Nigeria to managing certain critical assets related to the security of individuals living in Nigeria, including properties of economic importance and other valuables, through the military government era and into the democratic dispensation. It was further influenced by threats, insecurity, and shifting dynamics in governance, economics, and religion due to global influences. To address security issues, the Nigerian government has undertaken several activities that have altered the security process through reforms to meet the country's new security challenges.

The entire process was targeted at making the security sector more vibrant, accountable and responsive. Due to the complex nature of Nigerian society and the emerging threat, which has hitherto changed the way of life and pattern of doing business, with attendant effects on the political landscape. These reforms were designed to address the areas of security ineffectiveness and underperformance of the security agencies. The main drivers of the SSR

process were the need to combat terrorism, insurgency, kidnapping, farmers and herders' clashes, and the major change compelled by the Boko Haram sect seeking a regime change in the country (Bala and Ouedraogo 2018).

In the same vein, Bakramia (2014) revealed that Nigeria's SSR strengthened due to its history of military rule, coups, and counter-coups, which inadvertently added to the pressure and presented an obvious need to change the entire process of securing the country. The historical background of Nigeria has had a profound impact on the country's prosperity as an independent nation and the development of various actors in Nigeria's security domain. In all these activities toward the SSR, the transition to democratic government in the year 1999 marked a remarkable turning point in Nigeria's security trajectory, which prompted the government of the day to conduct several activities aimed at taking the military out of politics with a view to re-professionalizing the military and getting the military personnel out of politics. The various actions also included other security sectors like the police, civil defence, immigration, customs, and other security agencies (Dehez 2010).

Security Sector Reforms in Nigeria: Implications for National Security and Stability

Between 2015 and 2023, Nigeria's security sector reform proved to be a crucial yet highly complex process. Although there were advances in policy, funding, and regional collaborations, the reforms lacked comprehensiveness, inclusivity, and enforceability, which hindered lasting effects. Consequently, national security remained fragile, with systemic problems such as corruption, institutional divisions, and limited civilian oversight only partly tackled.

Security Sector Reforms (SSR) in Nigeria is a crucial component of efforts to strengthen national security, enhance governance, and promote long-term stability. SSR involves the comprehensive transformation of a country's security institutions—including the military, police, intelligence services, judiciary, and correctional services—to make them more effective, accountable, transparent, and aligned with democratic norms and human rights. In Nigeria, the need for SSR has been driven by ongoing challenges such as terrorism, banditry, ethnic and communal conflicts, police brutality, corruption, and weak institutions. The Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast, increasing kidnapping and banditry in the northwest, and secessionist movements in the southeast have revealed the vulnerabilities of Nigeria's security framework. These issues are worsened by a lack of public trust in security agencies, widespread human rights abuses, and poor cooperation among agencies.

Despite initiatives in Nigeria, the pace and depth of reform remain inadequate as corruption, political interference, lack of political will, insufficient funding, and resistance within the security establishment continue to hinder meaningful progress. The military, for example, is often deployed for internal security operations, blurring the lines between defence and law enforcement, and raising concerns about civil-military relations and human rights violations. Thus, the implications of SSR for national security and stability in Nigeria are profound. Well-implemented reforms can lead to more efficient and accountable institutions that are capable of responding effectively to both internal and external threats. This, in turn, enhances public confidence, promotes the rule of law, and contributes to national cohesion. Improved security governance also creates a conducive environment for economic growth, foreign investment,

and democratic consolidation. Conversely, failure to implement substantive reforms may worsen insecurity, erode state legitimacy, and deepen public disillusionment. Without reforms, security agencies may continue to operate with impunity, exacerbate tensions, and fuel cycles of violence and instability. SSR is therefore not only a technical necessity but also a political and social imperative for Nigeria's long-term peace and development.

Conclusion

The security sector in Nigeria is currently widely seen as underperforming, with a predominantly negative trend that erodes public trust, hampers cooperation, and threatens overall stability. Most people believe the sector lacks the capacity to protect citizens and uphold national security adequately. This aligns with academic critiques that cite issues such as poor funding, corruption, politicisation, and weak accountability systems. Consequently, the security sector's failures worsen insecurity, including terrorism, insurgency, and communal violence, which in turn discourage investment, reduce productivity, and raise the costs of doing business. It also diverts funds from vital sectors, such as health and education. From a Structural Functionalist perspective, ineffective reforms mirror deeper institutional dysfunction and fragmentation, preventing the security sector from fulfilling its societal role. Therefore, Nigeria's underdeveloped security sector has had a negative impact on various aspects of national security. The study concludes that physical security threats—such as terrorism and crime—are the primary concerns, while institutional and structural issues—such as trust and human rights—are secondary but still significant. An ineffective security sector puts both the state and its citizens at risk. Security Sector Reform (SSR) can help address the problems caused by an inefficient and unaccountable security industry. Hence, SSR can enhance the security sector's capacity to deliver both human and state security. Besides being a threat to the state and its people, an inefficient and unaccountable security sector cannot legitimately carry out its roles in public assistance, law enforcement or national defence. Therefore, SSR enhances the security sector's use of public resources more efficiently. This work asserts that addressing Nigeria's security challenges requires urgent Security Sector Reform (SSR). By increasing effectiveness and accountability in security provision, administration, and oversight—within a framework of democratic civilian control, the rule of law, and respect for human rights—SSR aims to enhance both state and human security. This work therefore emphasises the importance of tackling systemic issues, increasing accountability and transparency, and encouraging citizen oversight and participation. To achieve meaningful transformation and reforms, Nigeria must prioritise resource management, capacity building, and foster institutional and participatory changes. By aligning security provision, management, and oversight with principles of good governance, Nigeria can improve the security sector's efficacy and accountability, ultimately promoting peace and prosperity. A careful assessment of the reform environment and a tailored strategy addressing the country's specific security challenges are essential for successful SSR.

Recommendations

In line with the above exposition, this work makes the following recommendations:

- Increase funding for the security sector and ensure effective utilization of resources to address equipment and training needs.
- Establish independent oversight bodies to monitor security agencies and implement transparent accountability systems to prevent corruption and ensure adherence to human rights.
- Strengthening civilian oversight of security institutions and encourage community participation in security decision-making processes.
- Implement reforms to address corruption, political interference, and institutional dysfunction within the security sector.
- Provide regular training and capacity-building programs for security personnel to enhance their skills and professionalism.
- Identify and address legal gaps and strengthen existing laws to support effective security reform.
- Prioritize institutional and participatory reforms, focusing on external checks and balances to ensure meaningful reform.
- Implement community policing initiatives and engage with local communities to build trust and improve police-public relations.

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