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From Cooperation to Securitization: U.S. Counterterrorism Policy and Nigeria's Security Governance in the Post-9/11 Era

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Abstract
The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 reshaped international security cooperation and established counterterrorism as a central priority of United States foreign policy. This study critically examines the evolution of U.S. counterterrorism engagement with Nigeria in the post-9/11 era and evaluates its implications for Nigeria's security governance. Guided by two objectives, the study adopts a qualitative documentary research design, drawing on scholarly publications, policy documents, government reports and institutional records. The evidence is interpreted through thematic content analysis and Securitization Theory. The findings indicate that bilateral engagement has supported intelligence sharing, military training and aspects of operational capacity in Nigeria's response to Boko Haram and other violent extremist threats. However, the analysis also identifies a tension between security-oriented institutional strengthening and the requirements of democratic accountability, civilian oversight and broader governance reform. Importantly, the expansion of counterterrorism cooperation does not, by itself, demonstrate that U.S. policy caused Nigeria's wider securitization; domestic political choices and the evolution of insurgent threats also matter. The study argues that operational gains are insufficient measures of long-term security effectiveness where institutional weaknesses and underlying drivers of violence persist. It concludes that future cooperation should integrate accountable security institutions, human security, community engagement and inclusive governance alongside operational assistance.

Keywords: *Counterterrorism; securitization; security governance; United States; Nigeria; Boko Haram*

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1. Introduction

The attacks of 11 September 2001 profoundly reshaped international security priorities, and counterterrorism became a primary concern of United States foreign and security policy. This Global War on Terror has gone beyond the military to intelligence sharing, security sector reform, capacity development, border control, and strategic alliances with countries facing violent extremists. Therefore, counterterrorism became the main framework of the United States' international security cooperation with many developing nations, especially in Africa, as the terror threat became more prominent (Bacon & Warner, 2021; Efebeh, 2021). The escalation of the Boko Haram insurgency made Nigeria one of the significant security partners of the United States in sub-Saharan Africa. The bilateral relations had been centred on democratic governance, economic cooperation, and regional stability, but with the rise of terrorism, American engagement shifted to intelligence sharing, military aid, surveillance support and capacity building for institutions. The move signified a change that began to see security cooperation more as a way of pursuing some counterterrorism goals than as a conventional diplomatic thrust (Owojori et al., 2022; Anzizi, 2025). This development invites examination through the concept of securitization, although the growth of security cooperation alone does not establish that securitization occurred: an attitude that produced a new frame of understanding governance problems, political instability and regional insecurity, all through the lens of the threat of terrorism. Terrorism became a legitimate subject for securitization, which then paved the way for unusual security measures and the extension of the powers of military and intelligence structures in domestic governance. These developments may have improved aspects of operational responses to insurgency, but have also been a point of concern when it comes to democratic accountability, civil

liberties and the increased militarisation of governance (Kaunert & Léonard, 2021; Shepherd, 2021; Njoku, 2021). The literature so far was ambiguous about the developments. However, some of the studies found suggested that the cooperation between the United States and the Nigerian military in the area of counterterrorism has boosted Nigeria's operational capability through training, intelligence sharing, and institutional support (Owojori et al., 2022). Others argued that externally motivated counterterrorism agendas fostered counterterrorism policies and strategies that diverted the focus from governance reforms, institutional strengthening, and other factors that sustained violent extremism (Efebeh, 2021; Obi & Andrews, 2025). These conflicting views posited that the impacts of the United States counterterrorism policy were not only on the military efficacy but on the entire organisation and operations of Nigeria's security governance. Although much has been written on Boko Haram, counterinsurgency and security cooperation between the United States and Nigeria, little attention has been paid on how the shift from strategic cooperation to securitization transformed the security governance of Nigeria as a whole-of-government process. While the majority of the studies examined operational counterterrorism or securitization respectively, there is still a huge gap in the analysis of the governance effects of the policy transformation (Ohwo, 2025; Gana & Bukar, 2023). Addressing this gap, the present study pursued two objectives: first,

1. to critically examine the evolution of United States counterterrorism policy toward Nigeria from strategic cooperation to securitization in the post-9/11 era; and second,
2. to evaluate the implications of this transformation for Nigeria's security governance, particularly in relation to institutional capacity, democratic accountability, and counterinsurgency.

The study argues that bilateral counterterrorism cooperation has contributed to operational capacity while also interacting with a wider securitization of governance. The central analytical question is not whether security assistance is inherently beneficial or harmful, but under what institutional conditions operational improvements can coexist with democratic oversight, civilian protection and durable peace.

2. Review of Literature

Conceptual Review

United States Counterterrorism Policy

On 11 September 2001, the terrorist attacks fundamentally changed the United States foreign and security policy, and made counterterrorism the key organising principle of international engagement. Counterterrorism therefore went beyond military operations, to the area of intelligence cooperation, financial surveillance, security sector reform, border management and institutional capacity building. The nature of bilateral relations with many developing countries changed as well, with more and more security deals focusing on counterterrorism instead of diplomatic and economic interests, especially in those countries facing violent extremism (Ristevska & Prezelj, 2025). Since the emergence of Boko Haram, Nigeria became an important partner within this changing security agenda. As the involvement of the Americans grew, it shifted to military training, sharing of intelligence, provision of logistical support and institutional support for the enhancement of Nigeria's capacity in the fight against terrorism (Owojori et al., 2022). This cooperation was beneficial for making operations ready, but scholars began to doubt the security-only agenda of the American counterterrorism policy. Anzizi (2025) stated that the United States' involvement was part and parcel of the geopolitical considerations where the stability

of the region, strategic interests and foreign policy goals aligned with counterterrorism concerns. Similarly, Ohwo (2025) argued that the success of strategic partnerships should be evaluated based on their ability to bolster domestic institutions and not just on military successes. The perspectives highlighted that counterterrorism policy was not only a reaction to terrorism, but also a tool which could be used to promote strategic influence and international security governance.

Securitization

Securitization is the process of turning ordinary political issues into matters of survival and/or security that demand extraordinary measures from the state. Securitization Theory does not require a threat to be imaginary: it examines how political actors frame an issue as existential and obtain acceptance for exceptional responses. The legitimacy of exceptional measures is accepted by relevant audiences, turning them into legitimate responses to issues that were dealt with in normal political processes. Since 11 September 2001, the discourse on security, both at the domestic and international level, has been dominated by the issue of terrorism. Kaunert and Léonard (2021) noted that ongoing crisis narratives legitimated unusual security activities in "democratic" governance, and Shepherd (2021) suggested that terms such as counterterrorism came to blur the boundaries between internal and external security. In Nigeria this process resulted in a call for further military incursions, security intelligence cooperation, and foreign security cooperation in response to Boko Haram. Njoku (2021) also showed how the securitisation was gradually expanded to include civil society organisations within the conflict affected communities. This wider usage implied that securitization was not just about the security but that it also affected governance; it increased the scope of the powers of security institutions beyond their traditional role in counterterrorism.

Security Governance

Security governance is the institutional mechanisms which coordinate security policies and ensure accountability, legitimacy and effective public administration in a state. Security governance is a security approach that goes beyond military security alone, and involves democratic control, institutional coordination, civilian engagement and cooperation between domestic and international actors. Security governance in Nigeria increasingly picked up cues from the outside in the fight against terrorism. Obi and Andrews (2025) posited that the current security governance was based on a synergy between effectiveness and accountability of institutions, while Ohwo (2025) insisted that sustainable national security in the country needed resilient institutions, not perpetual militarisation. While external support helped build up some aspects of operational capability, it also raised concerns about institutional autonomy, democratic control and institutional dependency on foreign security support. Security governance, thus, was a governance issue and not just the management of security agencies.

For analytical purposes, this study distinguishes three dimensions of security governance: operational effectiveness, institutional accountability and human security. Operational effectiveness concerns the capacity to prevent and respond to attacks; institutional accountability concerns legal authority, legislative scrutiny and civilian oversight; and human security concerns the safety, rights and livelihoods of communities affected by violence. Progress in one dimension should not automatically be treated as progress in the others.

Theoretical Review

The study draws on Securitization Theory as developed by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde (1998). Security threats, the theory argued, were not just objective realities; rather, they were socially produced as a result of political communication. Securitization occurs when key political actors are able to define a problem as a threat to the existence of the political community that calls for extraordinary measures, which are outside the normal political process. The theory was found to have an adequate framework for the analysis of the transformation of the United States and Nigeria security relations after 11 September 2001. Before counterterrorism acquired greater prominence, bilateral relations also focused on democratic governance, economic cooperation and regional diplomacy. The evolution of international counterterrorism placed counterterrorism as the main organizing principle of bilateral relations, which in turn resulted in increased intelligence sharing, military aid, surveillance, and institutional changes. Securitization Theory thus provided an explanation as to how the concept of counterterrorism moved beyond security response to a governance concept which restructured institutional priorities and policy decisions. The theory's core elements are the securitizing actor, the referent object presented as threatened, the audience whose acceptance matters and the extraordinary measures justified by the security claim. Applied to this case, the analysis asks how U.S. and Nigerian officials characterised terrorism, which institutions gained authority or resources and whether counterterrorism priorities displaced or complemented ordinary governance mechanisms. This makes the theory an interpretive framework rather than a substitute for evidence of policy causation.

A limitation of Securitization Theory is its tendency to privilege threat framing and elite discourse over material insecurity, historical inequalities and the everyday experiences of affected populations. In this study, it is therefore used to interpret how

terrorism became a prominent organising concern in bilateral security relations, rather than to imply that Boko Haram threat was merely constructed or that all security responses were exceptional. Its application also requires attention to the actors making security claims, the audiences accepting them and the institutional measures that follow.

Empirical Review

The empirical literature continuously showed that counterterrorism (CT) cooperation between the United States and Nigeria significantly increased with the advent of Boko Haram, but key debates lingered about the governance implications of such cooperation. Many of the publications praised the new military power, but doubted whether this would lead to more capable and responsible security institutions. However, Owojori et al. (2022) contended that bilateral cooperation enhanced the ability to share intelligence, train military personnel, coordinate military operations and institutional capacity. They found that the American help had a positive effect on Nigeria's operational response to violent extremism. Yet in focusing on military effectiveness, the study paid relatively little attention to other governance outcomes, like institutional accountability and democratic oversight.

Anzizi (2025) presented a more nuanced perspective, contending that the provision of counterterrorism aid by the United States was not just about security concerns but was also driven by geopolitical considerations. The research noted the long-term limitations on the effectiveness of external assistance due to institutional weaknesses, inconsistent implementation and competing strategic priorities. This led to a change in analysis away from operational success and towards a focus on the institutional context in which security cooperation took place. This key role was confirmed by comparative studies. He further noted that the Global War on Terror (GWOT) has

been a factor to the militarisation of governance in Africa, because it pushed governments to focus more on coercive measures rather than political and socioeconomic change. Likewise, Nyiayaana (2022) argued that external security involvement in the form of expansionism increased securitisation, and that this led to an increase in the power of military institutions, and not the necessary governance reforms. The results indicated that security support would be insufficient to tackle the structural drivers of violent extremism. In addition, Njoku (2021) showed how securitization was emerging as a significant discourse for the government of Nigeria's relationship with civil society organisations, beyond the insurgent groups, into humanitarian and advocacy organisations. This discovery highlighted how counterterrorism policies impacted not only on the increase of military reaction, but also on governance itself. As a whole, the studies examined showed that scholarship on the topic focused on either operational counterterrorism or securitisation, as discrete fields of study. There was a dearth of research about the impact of the shift from strategic cooperation to securitisation on the wider security governance of Nigeria. The relationship was not resolved and this presented the main analytical gap that the current study sought to fill.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative documentary research design to evaluate the development of United States counterterrorism policy and its impact on the security governance of Nigeria in the post-9/11 world. Because the study does not seek to estimate statistical relationships, but instead aimed to gain an in depth understanding of the policy transformations, institutional dynamics and governance outcomes, the qualitative approach was suitable. Evidence was drawn from secondary sources, namely peer reviewed journal articles, academic books, government publications,

policy documents, and reports issued by relevant international security and counterterrorism organisations on security sector reforms, security governance, and counterterrorism. Special focus was placed on literature pertaining to the security cooperation between the United States and Nigeria, securitization, Boko Haram insurgency, and reforms of governance following 2001. Thematic content analysis was used to interpret the data collected. The selected literature was systematically examined and organised into themes in line with the study objectives namely the evolution of counterterrorism policy of the United States from strategic cooperation to securitization and the implication of this on security governance in Nigeria. The study analysed and contrasted scholars' arguments, their convergence and divergence, and used critical synthesis to assess the governance implications of securitized counterterrorism. This approach links the interpretations to the scholarly debate and the study's theoretical approach and research goals. Documents were interpreted against the study's two objectives, with attention to the provenance, institutional position and substantive claims of each source. The analysis compared accounts of bilateral assistance with scholarship on domestic security governance, and differentiated documented forms of cooperation from interpretations of their wider effects. Because the design is documentary and qualitative, the findings identify plausible patterns and tensions rather than measuring the independent causal effect of U.S. assistance on Nigerian governance outcomes.

4. Results and Discussion

Evolution of United States Counterterrorism Policy from Strategic Cooperation to Securitization

In the thematic analysis, the shift of the United States counterterrorism policy towards Nigeria was identified as more than just an expansion of United States bilateral

security cooperation. Instead, it signaled a gradual shift in strategic thinking from traditional interaction to a securitized partnership where the new organising principle of political, military and institutional relations was terrorism. Earlier areas of cooperation had included on democratic consolidation, economic ties, regional peacekeeping and energy security, ; the later escalation of the Boko Haram insurgency intensified the security dimension of bilateral engagement. The post-9/11 security environment, however, increasingly placed counterterrorism at the centre of security engagement with Nigeria, which consequently changed the nature and focus of bilateral engagement.

Owojori et al. (2022) held that this transformation reinforced intelligence sharing, military training, operation coordination and institutional capacity building. They reported that through the partnership, Nigeria's capacity to quickly and effectively counter a growing insurgent threat had been improved. This interpretation was more positive with respect to actual gains in operational readiness, but the analysis was prone to attributing good military cooperation to good security policy. Such logic ignored the question of whether the growth of security institutions always led to more robust governance structures that could help to ensure peace in the long term. Tactical effectiveness and institutional effectiveness were not necessarily in step. A more critical interpretation came from Anzizi (2025), who pointed out that the involvement of the United States had come to denote interests that went beyond internal security issues in Nigeria. As seen from this angle, counterterrorism collaboration was a part of broader geopolitical considerations of regional influence and stability. This claim fitted in the perception that bilateral cooperation was solely motivated by a common security concern. It stated rather that American involvement was characterised by the strategic importance of Nigeria in West Africa, and the level of the involvement. This

interpretation offered a more fruitful explanation of the growing institutional reach into counterterrorism beyond 'traditional' military aid.

Results also showed that the process of securitization in American policy was in line with the international securitization trends. Bacon & Warner (2021) suggested that parts of Africa had become increasingly significant theatres of jihadist violence and thus garnered more strategic interest from outside actors. This assessment not only clarified the geographic change in counterterrorism priorities, but also how regional security challenges were increasingly framed as a single terrorism narrative. Such framing threatened to narrow down complex issues of governance to issues of military threats that needed mostly coercive answers. This interpretation is consistent with Kaunert and Léonard (2021), who noted that counterterrorism campaigns over the years have led to the acceptance of exceptional security measures in governance. Whilst applied to Nigeria, the insight revealed that bilateral relations had departed from the traditional cooperation to an institutional arrangement in which security concerns were becoming more and more determinant in political decision making, allocation of resources, and administrative priorities. The thematic evidence, thus, indicated that the shift from cooperation to securitization did not only affect the nature of the security operations but has also redefined the logic of United States and Nigeria security relations. A further distinction is necessary between the global post-9/11 shift in U.S. counterterrorism policy and the later intensification of Nigeria-specific cooperation as the Boko Haram insurgency escalated. Treating these developments as separate, although connected, phases avoids implying that Nigeria's security relationship changed instantaneously in 2001. It also recognises that Nigeria's own threat assessments, political institutions and regional commitments shaped the terms of cooperation.

Implications of Securitized Counterterrorism for Nigeria's Security Governance

The analysis also revealed that the securitization of counterterrorism engendered multiple and sometimes paradoxical implications for Nigeria's security governance. External assistance bolstered certain military capacities and intelligence coordination but the evidence indicated that these benefits coexisted with substantial governance concerns going beyond the battlefield. A review of the effectiveness of United States counterterrorism policy based solely on operational results, therefore, offered a partial picture of its overall institutional implications. Njoku (2021) pointed out that security institutions, over time, have been securitising non-violent groups, such as non-governmental civil society organisations, that operate within conflict affected communities. Based on this discovery, the analysis suggests that counterterrorism was an issue that increasingly affected the state and nonstate actors' relationship and the governance model in a more than just security aspects. The idea was that the extraordinary security measures were slowly integrated into the normal processes of governance—with significant effects on democratic accountability and civic involvement. This view disputed the orthodox view that saw the strengthening of security institutions as a positive development toward better governance.

Efebeh (2021) also argued that the Global War on Terror had facilitated the militarisation of governance in some states in Africa. Governments often responded to the underlying causes of insecurity by increasing the coercive bodies, with the help of outside partners, without taking steps to change the structures that had led to insecurity. The literature identifies comparable concerns in Nigeria, with counterterrorism becoming a growing trend in policy responses to challenges of governance, social exclusion and institutional weakness. This finding indicated that there was a need to move beyond the use of militarised security responses to

addressing the drivers of violent extremism. Obi and Andrews (2025) provided a more nuanced perspective, recognizing the ongoing need for security cooperation but also warning against overreliance on militaristic strategies. They highlighted the need for the right balance between effectiveness, accountability and inclusive governance, as all three were essential to ensure sustainable security. This is an important argument as it acknowledged that ‘counterterrorism and democratic governance should support each other, not be at odds'. Likewise, Ohwo (2025) proposed that strategic partnerships should be evaluated based on their ability to foster national institutional resilience and not necessarily on military engagements or battles. Taken together, the documentary evidence suggests that securitized counterterrorism was beneficial for increasing Nigeria's operational capacities, but also created governance challenges that were yet to be resolved in the current policy discourse. The central themes of the core studies always showed that providing military cooperation alone would not solve the systemic gaps in governance related to insecurity. This study thus posited that lasting impact of United States counterterrorism engagement lay less in building security capacity than in building accountable institutions, democratic oversight and governance mechanisms that could address security threats and structural conditions that had fostered violent extremism. The implications are therefore conditional rather than uniform. Intelligence cooperation and professional training may improve coordination and reduce operational gaps, especially when paired with clear rules of engagement and oversight. Conversely, assistance embedded in weak accountability arrangements may reinforce security-first responses without improving public trust. The policy challenge is to evaluate assistance not only by activities delivered but also by whether civilian protection, transparent institutions and sustainable conflict prevention improve over time.

5. Conclusion

This study critically analysed the development of counterterrorism policy in the United States and its impact on Nigeria security governance in the post-9/11 world. The analysis suggests that counterterrorism became increasingly central to a bilateral relationship that had also encompassed diplomacy, development and regional cooperation, where terrorism was the most important principle of organising the bilateral relations. While this led to enhanced intelligence cooperation, military training and institutional capacity, it also shifted governance focus toward security-oriented governance which often took precedence over the broader governance reforms. The results also showed that the success of counterterrorism cooperation is not necessarily to be judged based on the operational capability alone. Although there was external support to Nigeria's counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy against Boko Haram, ongoing insecurity and institutional problems signaled that military operations could not be the only means of providing sustainable security. The study concluded that the growing prominence of securitized responses was associated with a greater influence of security institutions and tensions around democratic accountability, civil liberties and inclusive governance. The study thus found that sustained success of the United States counterterrorism effort in Nigeria required more than just upgrading the military, but governance systems that can tackle the underlying causes of insecurity. A more sustainable approach to security governance combines a combination of counterterrorism and institutional responsibility, along with socioeconomic development, community engagement and the respect of democratic values. This would build Nigeria's ability to withstand violent extremism and ensure that security operations helped to establish sustainable peace, legitimate institutions and national stability, and did not perpetuate a securitized governance mode.

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