



Global Arms Flows, Border Porosity and Internal Insecurity: Investigating the Roots of Banditry in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper explores the connection between international arms flows, border porosity and domestic insecurity, with a specific focus on the origins and continuation of banditry in Nigeria. It argues that banditry arises not only from internal socio-economic issues but is also heavily supported by transnational networks trafficking illicit small arms and light weapons through Nigeria's easily traversable borders. Grounded in State Fragility Theory, the Political Economy of Armed Violence, and Security Governance Theory, the research illustrates how insufficient border governance, corruption, and weak monitoring systems contribute to the influx and distribution of weapons, thus increasing the destructive potential and organizational strength of bandit factions. Methodologically, the study uses a qualitative research design and relies on documentary analysis of secondary data from scholarly literature, government security reports, policy documents, international organization publications and reliable media reports. To find trends connecting the spread of weapons, poor border control, and domestic insecurity, the data is subjected to thematic content analysis. The results show that uncontrolled arms trafficking and permeable borders combine with internal weaknesses including poor governance, rural marginalization, and lax law enforcement to strengthen banditry and erode state authority. In order to effectively combat banditry in Nigeria, the study's conclusion suggests a multifaceted security strategy that incorporates improved border management institutions, regional weapons control cooperation, and socioeconomic development initiatives.

Keywords: Global Arms Flows, Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs), Border Porosity, Internal Insecurity

1. Introduction

Armed banditry refers to violent crimes committed by non-state actors, which often encompass activities like kidnapping, cattle theft, abductions, and attacks on rural communities. This phenomenon has risen evidently in many parts of the world, especially in areas characterized by porous borders and weak governmental authority (Ojo, Oyewole & Aina, 2023; Ojewale, 2025). It can be argued that in the twenty-first century, two significant threats to national security are the spread of weapons and the instability of national boundaries. While these problems are often viewed as distinct, there exists a crucial link between the worldwide distribution of conventional weapons, borders porosity, and the escalation of armed banditry (Abayomi, 2024).

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Additionally, the end of the Cold War did not diminish the global arms trade; instead, it transformed it, resulting in a more dispersed, commercialized, and intricate market where small arms and light weapons (SALWs) are transported to areas with weak governmental capacity (Brzoska, 2004). At the same time, globalization has amplified the volume of international trade and human movement, overwhelming the monitoring and regulatory abilities of numerous nations, especially in the developing world, and creating what Andreas (2003) describes as "border porosity."

The movement of major conventional weapons between nations, known as global arms flow or international arms transfers. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) describes the global movement of major conventional arms as the exchange of substantial weapon systems (such as fighter aircraft, tanks, and missile systems) among states, encompassing both arms exports and imports over time (SIPRI, 2025). An independent assessment by the Centre for Analysis of World Arms Trade (CAWAT) indicates that the worldwide conventional arms trade reached \$111.6 billion in 2024, marking its highest level since the Cold War ended. To provide some perspective, exports were valued at \$82.9 billion in 2021, \$106.2 billion in 2022, and \$96.9 billion in 2023 (CAWAT, 2024).

The illicit flow of arms has serious consequences, enabling weapons to reach groups with malicious intents, including insurgent factions and armed criminals. This situation intensifies conflict and its associated effects loss of life, insecurity, economic ruin, forced migration, and prolonged political turmoil, among various other difficulties (Adejumo, et. al., 2024; Ehiane & Uwizeyimana, 2018). For example, a large proportion of the arms employed by militant organizations in the Sahel area are thought to have come from Libyan reserves after the collapse of the Gaddafi government in 2011, later smuggled through extensive, lawless border regions (McGregor, 2021).

Nigeria is currently facing a significant internal security challenge characterized by rising incidents of armed banditry, kidnappings, and violence particularly in rural regions. A major factor that is contributing to this problem is the widespread accessibility of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) (HRW, 2021). The current Chief of Defence Staff of Nigeria estimates that more than 500 million illicit small arms and light weapons are present in West Africa, with 40% thought to be in Nigeria or to have crossed into its borders (The Guardian, 2025; Fyanka, 2025). Additionally, the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (NCCSALW) indicates that Nigeria accounts for 70% of the 11 million illegal arms present in West Africa. Approximately 7.7 million of these weapons are reported to be located in Nigeria, predominantly in the hands of non-state actors (People Gazette, 2025). The substantial influx of arms into the civilian population fosters an environment conducive to banditry by enhancing both the availability of weapons and the deadliness of such conflicts.

It is estimated that there are roughly 30,000 bandits distributed among various factions in northwest Nigeria. Each group having a size that ranges from 10 to over 1,000 members. Activities associated with banditry include kidnapping, murder, sexual assault, cattle rustling, and the illegal possession of firearms. The impact of their actions has been severe. As of December 2022, more than 1,087,875 people in rural areas have been forcibly displaced. Furthermore, around 13,485 fatalities have been linked to banditry from 2010 until May 2023 (Ojewale, 2024; Daily Trust, 2019). Furthermore, from January to July 2019, there were 330 incidents involving bandits that led to around 1,460 fatalities marking a significant increase in areas that were previously quite stable. Over the longer term, from 2009 to the present, estimates indicate that approximately

30,000 individuals have lost their lives and 3 million have been displaced as a result of banditry in Nigeria. Similarly, The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) documented that a minimum of 2,266 individuals lost their lives due to bandits or insurgents in the initial six months of 2025 (The Guardian Nigeria, 2025). These statistics reflect not only the human toll but also considerable socio-economic disruption on a large scale. This paper argues that the interplay between international arms trafficking and ineffective border control is a key factor that facilitates banditry, transforming local conflicts into widespread criminal enterprises that undermine state authority and threaten human security (Onuoha, 2022).

2. Research Problem

The available literature on the banditry in Nigeria focus on the causes of banditry such as poverty and unemployment. However, earlier research overlooked the impact of international illegal arms transfers in conjunction with porous borders on the reinforcement or facilitation of banditry. This gap in the literature suggests that there are transnational motivations behind insecurity.

It is on this basis that, this paper focuses to address this analytical void by developing a synthesized framework that explicitly connects global arms circulation and border porousness to the proliferation and sustenance of banditry in Nigeria. In doing so, it seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the crisis and to formulate better-informed, more sustainable security policies designed to tackle these transnational issues.

3. Methodology

The paper adopts qualitative research design and utilizes secondary data sources to identify how international arms flows and permeability of borders become a cause of internal insecurity and banditry in Nigeria. The use of qualitative secondary data design is suitable as it allows a critical reading of relevant empirical evidence, academic works, official materials, and media reports to unravel patterns and relationships between variables and underlying factors associated with complex security challenges (Adegbooye & Dube 2025). Secondary qualitative research gives the study its synthesising capability of published information covering a variety of published information allowing structural, institutional and transnational processes that relate small arms flow to insecurity to be holistically taken into account without the need to generate data. Such an approach has been effectively used in comparable studies on the subject of arms proliferation and border security scenarios (Okoye & Chukwurah, 2022).

The scholarly literature on arms proliferation, border security, and insecurity in Nigeria will provide secondary data that is essential for the data set. These are journal articles discussing porous borders, the illegal flow of arms, and their impacts on national security. These contributions offer a conceptual and theoretical background to help interpret the connections between the transnational movement of arms and banditry in Nigeria (Adegbooye and Dube, 2025; Adewoyin, 2019). Likewise, reports from respected policy groups and civil society organizations present information on current security discussions about arms trafficking and banditry, often combining quantitative patterns with professional observations.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes three theories as its tool of analysis. These theories consist State Fragility Theory, the Political Economy of Armed Violence and Security Governance and Border Theory.

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The integration of these theories creates a robust analytical instrument to comprehend how arms trafficking and porous borders contribute to internal insecurity and the persistence of banditry in Nigeria.

State Fragility Theory

Theory of State Fragility as developed by Joel Migdal (1988), Robert Rotberg (2003) and Barry Buzan (1991) posit that insecurity is attributed to the failure of a state to exercise control over its territory, borders, and monopoly of force. The key characteristics of fragile states include weak institutions, bad governance, lack of control over the borders, and inability to deliver security and state provision. State failure is manifested in porous borders and emergence of armed non-state actors (Rotberg 2003). This theory explains why porous borders and weak institutions create conditions that allowed weapons to smuggle into the country. This situation empowers bandit groups. Arguably, banditry is a sign of structural and institutional weakness rather than isolated crime. Nevertheless, fragility of the states is not sufficient to explain violence in some states such as Nigeria, because it tends to overlook transnational forces (Call, 2011). This paper is a response to that criticism because it utilizes global flows of arms in the argument, thus increasing the coverage of State Fragility Theory.

Political Economy of Armed Violence

The Political Economy of Armed Violence propounds by Paul Collier (2000), David Keen (1998) and Mark Duffield (2001). The theory emphasizes that armed violence occurs not just because of grievances but also due to economic incentives and global supply chains. This view suggests that violence thrives in places where people can easily access weapons, markets, and funding. This situation turns insecurity into a profitable business. Consequently, this theory is essential for understanding how local criminal economies and international arms markets interact, allowing banditry to develop into a lucrative and well-organized operation involving kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, and arms trafficking. The idea guides the analysis of this study by emphasizing how the availability of illegal weapons, which are frequently smuggled across permeable borders, lowers the cost of violence and boosts bandit groups' ability to operate (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004). This essay holds the moderate view that socioeconomic grievances are sustained and exacerbated by banditry as long as illicit weapons are easily accessible to the bandits through international weapons trafficking.

Security Governance and Border Theory

This theory is advocated by Didier Bigo (2002) and Andreas (2003). The theory posits that borders are governance areas formed by political authority, institutional coordination, and enforcement capability rather than just being physical lines. This hypothesis states that poorly managed borders turn into areas where people, weapons, and contraband are transported illegally. This approach is especially helpful for analyzing Nigeria's vast and uncontrolled borders, which allow firearms to be transported from Sahelian war areas into areas vulnerable to banditry. It is predicated on the idea that areas with disjointed and corrupted border governance such as Nigeria's border management system have higher levels of insecurity. The idea directs the interpretation of results by directly connecting border porosity.

Concurrently, these theories describe banditry in Nigeria as a structural security problem shaped by institutional weakness, global arms flows, and porous borders. State Fragility Theory highlights

weak state capacity, the Political Economy of Armed Violence explains how illicit arms sustain violence, and Security Governance Theory underscores the role of borders in facilitating weapons movement. This integrated framework aligns with the study's objectives, guides analysis and interpretation, and situates the research within broader debates on state capacity, transnational insecurity, and arms proliferation, offering a more comprehensive explanation of banditry beyond purely local or criminal perspectives.

5.0 Literature Review

This section reviews the scholarly literature on issues of banditry, porous borders, and the spread of illegal arms in Nigeria. It demonstrates that these issues are interconnected rather than separate incidents; porous borders enable the influx of weapons, which in turn exacerbate the rise of banditry and various other violent offenses.

5.1 Banditry and Internal Insecurity

The rising banditry and internal instability in Nigeria, especially in the northwestern part of the country have significantly impact various sectors such as healthcare, education, and economic stability. The combination of poverty, unregulated areas, and weak military responses worsens the problem, creating a continuous cycle of violence and insecurity. Furthermore, this situation has resulted the shutdown of health facilities and interruptions of medical supply chains. It is equally heightened public health issues such as malnutrition and disease outbreaks (Sani, Muhammed & Musa, 2024). Conversely, growing banditry in Nigeria is associated with elevated poverty rates, unemployment, and a lack of education. This insecurity poses risks to national stability, resulting in immediate outcomes such as loss of lives and property. It is also diminished foreign investment and increasing food costs. (Oladoyin, et al., 2024). Aina and others (2023) argue that armed banditry in Northwest Nigeria has intensified internal security issues, leading to military initiatives such as the Joint Task Force operation *Hadarin Daji*. The military encounters considerable difficulties in tackling this unconventional warfare, which extends the conflict and complicates efficient responses.

Similarly, Kugbayi & Adegbami (2023) argue that the rise of banditry in Nigeria, including kidnapping and armed robbery is linked to areas with ineffective governance. This scenario creates an environment where criminal activities can thrive, even with the presence of numerous security forces. Likewise, the surge in banditry in Northern Nigeria has led to the abduction of many students, resulting in a significant rise in the number of children who are not able to attend school (Emordi & Egbuchulam, 2023). Additionally, banditry in Northwest Nigeria is affected by climate change, as reductions in rainfall and heightened temperatures are associated with a rise in bandit attacks, further exacerbating internal instability and intensifying conflicts between agricultural communities and herders (Ojewale et al., 2024).

Furthermore, Fiase & Gbaden (2024) point out that the factors contributing to banditry and internal insecurity in Benue State include youth unemployment, poverty, a sense of political hopelessness, the proliferation of weapons, and a weak security system, all of which negatively impact development and lead to the loss of lives, property, and infrastructure. In addition, banditry in Nigeria has created a shadow governance system where armed groups impose taxes and manage local activities. The government's inadequate response, influenced by the president's idiosyncrasies, exacerbates domestic insecurity and threatens the safety of the populace. (Bello et

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al., 2022). Conversely, farmers and herders' land disputes have been the primary cause of the increasing banditry in Northwestern Nigeria, which has resulted in a great deal of death and destruction. Since 2014, the situation has gotten worse due to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (Gulbi et al., 2024).

5.2 Border Porosity and Arms Flows

The relationship between the border porosity and trafficking of arms poses a major threat to regional security, particularly in regions like Africa and South Asia. These porous borders facilitate the flourishing of illegal trade involving small arms and light weapons (SALWs). Such weapons are often employed by non-state actors and insurgent groups that amplify violence. In a similar vein, Nigeria's weak border controls permit the free flow of SALWs. This scenario allows smugglers to easily sell these weapons to non-state actors without any limitations. As a result, this escalating insecurity contributes to various criminal activities across the nation, particularly in the northeastern and northwestern regions. (Chukwurah, 2022; Kouiyé, 2023).

Odey & Bassey (2022) argue that the porous border between Nigeria and Benin facilitates the trafficking of small arms and light weapons (SALWs), significantly exacerbating Nigeria's security challenges, particularly in relation to Boko Haram. This issue is further compounded by the lackadaisical attitudes of both governments towards border security. Additionally, the porous nature of the Durand Line results in challenges such as terrorism and smuggling, which may have indirect links to arms trafficking (Hussain et al., 2023). In the Sahel region, unregulated borders permit the illicit trafficking of weapons from Libya due to inadequate oversight and control. The UNSC panel notes that surrounding nations have limited capacity for border enforcement, allowing traffickers to easily bypass official entry points (Marsh, 2016).

Additionally, the "porous nature of borders" simplifies the illegal trade of arms, allowing criminals to acquire weapons with ease. This intensifies conflicts, heightens violence, jeopardizes state security, and is associated with transnational organized crime, corruption, and various other illicit activities such as drug and mineral trafficking (Assembly, 2002). Idris and Tutumlu (2021) posit that the porous nature of the Nigeria–Niger Republic border enables arms trafficking that worsens insecurity. It underscores the necessity to transition from a surveillance strategy to a whistleblowing method, involving border communities to reduce the information gap that traffickers exploit. Furthermore, the porous borders of Somalia enable the unregulated spread of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs), worsening violence and instability. Ineffective governance and a broken national security system obstruct proper management of arms trafficking throughout the region (Mustapha & Yerima, 2021).

Moreover, the "porous nature of borders" facilitates the illegal arms trade, making it easy for criminals to obtain weapons. This exacerbates conflicts, increases violence, threatens state security, and is linked to organized crime across borders, corruption, and various other illegal activities such as drug and mineral trafficking (Assembly, 2002). Idris and Tutumlu (2021) argue that the porous characteristics of the Nigeria–Niger Republic border contribute to arms trafficking, which worsens insecurity. Additionally, the porous borders of Somalia allow for the unchecked proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs), further escalating violence and instability. Ineffective governance and a dysfunctional national security system hinder the effective management of arms trafficking in the region (Mustapha & Yerima, 2021; Okolie-Osemene & Aluko, 2019; Rufus, 20

6.0 The Structural Drivers of Arms Trafficking and Insecurity

Arms trafficking and insecurity stem from deep-seated structural factors that extend beyond just immediate criminal activities or state fragility. These foundational issues encompass ungoverned spaces, socio-economic disparities, political unrest, inadequate governance, porous borders, and weak law enforcement bodies. In several areas, especially in parts of Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East the intersection of poverty, underdevelopment, the marginalization of border communities, and pervasive corruption creates a conducive environment for the spread of illegal arms. These firearms, in turn, exacerbate organized crime, insurgency, and communal violence, eroding state authority and jeopardizing regional stability.

6.1 Ungoverned Spaces

Ungoverned space is an area where the central government lacks a substantial administrative and infrastructure presence, cannot legitimately control the use of force, and is unable to provide basic public services (Rabasa et al., 2007). In Nigeria, these regions are predominantly found in the Northwest and North-Central parts, covering the extensive forests of Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, and Niger States—collectively referred to as the “Kamuku-Kuyambana” forest belt. This creates a governance vacuum that allows non-state entities to emerge and take advantage of the situation (ICG, 2020). For bandit groups, these forested regions provide ideal locations for concealment. A secure refuge for planning attacks, holding prisoners, and evading government security personnel (Ejiofor, 2022).

6.2 Socio-economic Disparities

Nigeria is one of the countries where deep-rooted socio-economic gaps enhance arms trafficking and insecurity. It is Africa's largest economy, boasting a GDP of \$477 billion (World Bank, 2023). However, Nigeria faces profound economic inequality. The richest 0.001% (around 20,000 people) hold more wealth than the poorest 50% of its 223 million citizens (Oxfam, 2023). Furthermore, Nigeria's demographic structure reveals that 42.5% of the population consists of individuals under the age of 15, while 70% are under 30 years old (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Arguably, substantial number of this youth are unemployed. The country's unemployment rate stands at 53.4% as of Q4 2023, with underemployment at 21%. In Northern Nigeria, these figures are even higher, ranging from 65% to 70% (NBS, 2023). This structural inequality motivates people to engage in heinous crimes including illegal arms trafficking and kidnapping.

Ukivo (2017) posits that youth populations who are unemployed and experience extreme deprivation become a potential source for criminal and militant groups, as the prospect of economic survival is more appealing than the dangers of violence. Similarly, in Zamfara and Katsina states kidnappers employ unemployed youth as informants and paying them amounts of money ranging from 20,000 to 50,000 naira (\$25 to \$65) on a monthly basis (ICG Report, 2023).

6.3 Weakness of Law Enforcement Institutions

Nigerian insecurity arises from terrorism, banditry and ethnic conflict that are intricately connected to the uncontrolled proliferation of illicit small arms and light weapons (SALWs). One of the major reasons for the spread of these weapons is the weakness of law enforcement institutions (Danwanzam, Saleh & Stephen, 2019). These institutions are saddled with the responsibility of managing borders and tackling arms trafficking. The presence of these weak agencies, coupled

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with rampant corruption, ineffective coordination, obsolete legal structures and deficient enforcement strategies exacerbating the insecurity crisis. Additionally, law enforcement officials sometimes lack vehicles, communication devices, and other equipment that are crucial for the successful interception of trafficking activities. Similarly, bribery at checkpoints makes it easier for arms convoys to move freely. In 2021, for example, the Nigerian Army was able to apprehend a police escort that was helping gunrunners in Katsina (Premium Times, 2021; Awopeju, 2021). Onuoha (2020) notes that law enforcement corruption systematically undermines arms control efforts. Furthermore, it is estimated that 6.2 million illicit arms are in circulation in Nigeria, with only 586,600 firearms legally registered (SBM Intelligence, 2020). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reports that Nigeria serves as a transit hub and destination for weapons trafficked from Libya and the Sahel.

6.4 Corruption and Complicity

Corruption is the misuse of trusted power for personal gain. It includes bribery, embezzlement, fraud, and collusion between public officials and private individuals. (Rowley & dela Rama, 2017). In arms trafficking, corruption opens up opportunities at several stages, including procurement, storage, transfer, and enforcement. This allows for the illegal movement of weapons and weakens the government's ability to maintain security (Balogun, 2024).

7. Conclusion

This paper examines the complex relationship between international weapons trafficking, border porosity, and domestic insecurity, with particular emphasis on the persistence of banditry in Nigeria. It is observed in the analysis that banditry is not a consequence of local crime or economic distress. It is a security problem that is influenced by bigger international factors and institutional weaknesses. Findings from the reviewed literature and secondary evidence show that Nigeria's porous borders, particularly in the Sahelian corridor, have become key routes for the flow of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) from global and regional conflict zones. Weak border monitoring, limited staff, insufficient technology, and corruption among border officials greatly limit the state's ability to control cross-border movements. These issues are made worse by a lack of coordination among security agencies, which allows arms traffickers and armed groups to take advantage of institutional weaknesses. Furthermore, the paper confirms that the spread of arms worldwide, fueled by conflicts in Libya and the larger Sahel region, has led to more prohibited arms being provided in Nigeria. These weapons empower bandit groups in North-West and parts of North-Central Nigeria. This enhances their ability to carry out mass kidnappings, steal cattle, raid villages, and attack security officials. Consequently, banditry has changed from a typical rural crime into a well-organized and militarized form of violence, undermining state authority and human security.

Based on the preceding conclusions, the study suggests that Nigeria should bolster its border security by implementing advanced surveillance technologies such as drones and biometric systems. Also, it should enhance its border agencies to minimize susceptibility to corruption. These initiatives should be combined with a comprehensive reform of internal arms control, which includes stringent management of stockpiles and the digital tracking of government-owned weapons, as well as transparent anti-corruption measures to eliminate collusion within security institutions. Moreover, to tackle the transnational aspects of the crisis, Nigeria needs to strengthen regional and international collaboration through joint patrols, sharing of intelligence, and enforcing

regional arms-control agreements such as the ECOWAS Convention. Concurrently, these security initiatives should be linked with targeted socio-economic programs in areas prone to banditry to reduce recruitment, backed by improved data collection and research for informed, coordinated policymaking.

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