

THE ROLE OF THE MULTINATIONAL JOINT TASK FORCE (MNJTF) IN COUNTERING BOKO HARAM INSURGENCY IN THE LAKE CHAD BASIN.

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Abstract

The Boko Haram insurgency has devastated communities across the Lake Chad Basin, displacing over 2.5 million people and destroying livelihoods. In response, Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Benin revitalized the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in 2015 to coordinate cross-border military operations against the group. This study evaluates the effectiveness of the MNJTF, integrating Structural Strain Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory to explain both the persistence of Boko Haram and the dynamics of regional cooperation. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study draws on secondary data, including military communiqués, reports from international organizations, and academic literature. The findings reveal that sector-based operations, such as Operations Lafiya Dole and Gama Aiki, have led to the recapture of key territories, the destruction of over 20 Improvised Explosive Device (IED) facilities, and a significant reduction in Boko Haram's operational capacity. However, persistent challenges, including porous borders, logistical and funding constraints, and underlying socio-economic conditions, continue to undermine long-term stability. The study concludes that while the MNJTF has achieved notable military successes, sustainable peace in the Lake Chad Basin requires a comprehensive approach that combines security interventions with socio-economic development and strengthened regional governance.

Keywords: Boko Haram, Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), Lake Chad Basin, Structural Strain Theory, Regional Security

Introduction

Since its emergence in 2002, Boko Haram has transformed from a fringe religious sect into one of Sub-Saharan Africa's most lethal terrorist organizations (Onuoha, 2014). By early 2015, the group controlled at least 26 local government areas in Northeast Nigeria (an area comparable to the size of Belgium or Cairo), extending its reach into Cameroon, Chad, and Niger (Besheer, 2017). The insurgency has caused mass displacement, with over 2.5 million refugees and internally displaced persons (UNHCR & World Bank, 2016), while also destroying infrastructure across the Lake Chad Basin, deepening poverty and undermining state authority across the region.

In response to the transnational nature of the threat, the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) member states reconstituted the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in October 2014, with formal African Union (AU) endorsement in January 2015 (PSC/AHG/COMM.2(CDLXXXIV), 2015). The Multinational Joint Task Force's (MNJTF's) mandate included securing territories reclaimed from Boko Haram, disrupting

insurgent logistics through blockades and the destruction of Improvised Explosive Device (IED) facilities, preventing the establishment of insurgent sanctuaries in border areas, and facilitating humanitarian access and stabilization efforts.

Despite these coordinated efforts, the persistence of Boko Haram insurgency across the Lake Chad Basin raises critical questions regarding the effectiveness, limitations, and sustainability of regional military cooperation. While existing studies have documented the operational achievements of the MNJTF, there remains insufficient analytical engagement with how and why these efforts have produced mixed outcomes, particularly in relation to underlying socio-economic drivers of insurgency and the complexities of regional security coordination.

Against this backdrop, this study examines the role of the Multinational Joint Task Force in countering Boko Haram insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin. Specifically, the study interrogates the extent to which MNJTF operations have degraded Boko Haram's territorial control and operational capacity, identifies the factors that have shaped its effectiveness, and explores how lessons from the MNJTF experience can inform more integrated security and development strategies in the region.

The study contributes to existing literature by moving beyond descriptive accounts of military operations to provide a theoretically informed analysis that integrates Structural Strain Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory in explaining both the persistence of insurgency and the dynamics of regional counterinsurgency responses. In doing so, it offers a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between military interventions and underlying structural conditions in the Lake Chad Basin.

Theoretical Framework

This study assesses the performance of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) against Boko Haram within the Lake Chad Basin through the application of Structural Strain Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory. These theoretical frameworks provide complementary lenses for understanding both the internal drivers of insurgency and the necessity of coordinated regional responses.

Structural Strain Theory, as advanced by Merton (1938) and further developed by Agnew (1992), explains how socio-economic exclusion, including poverty, youth unemployment, weak governance, and systemic marginalization, generates pressure that can lead individuals and groups toward deviant behavior, including radicalization and violent extremism. In the context of the Lake Chad Basin, this theory is particularly relevant in explaining the emergence and persistence of Boko Haram insurgency. Widespread poverty, limited access to education, and governance deficits in northeastern Nigeria and surrounding areas have created conditions conducive to recruitment and support for insurgent activities. Thus, Structural Strain Theory provides a basis for understanding why military efforts alone may be insufficient in addressing the root causes of the insurgency.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003), posits that states within a particular geographic region are bound by interlinked security

concerns such that the security of one state cannot be understood in isolation from others. This interdependence necessitates collective and coordinated responses to transnational threats. The Boko Haram insurgency, which operates across Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, exemplifies such a regional security complex. The reconstitution of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) reflects an institutional response grounded in this logic, as affected states pool military resources, intelligence, and operational strategies to confront a shared threat.

Beyond their descriptive value, these theories guide the analytical framework of this study. Structural Strain Theory is employed to interpret how underlying socio-economic conditions sustain insurgent recruitment and resilience, while Regional Security Complex Theory is used to analyze the effectiveness and limitations of the MNJTF as a mechanism of regional security cooperation. Together, they enable a more comprehensive evaluation of both the achievements and constraints of the MNJTF, linking empirical findings to broader theoretical insights on insurgency and collective security.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach in order to provide an in-depth analysis of the operations, challenges, and effectiveness of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in countering Boko Haram insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin. A qualitative design is considered appropriate given the complex and multi-dimensional nature of insurgency, regional military cooperation, and socio-political dynamics, which cannot be adequately captured through purely quantitative measures.

The study relies on secondary data covering the period 2015–2025. Data sources include military communiqués and operational reports from the MNJTF and the African Union Peace and Security Council (AU PSC), as well as reports from international organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNICEF, and the World Bank. In addition, relevant academic articles and credible media reports were utilized to provide contextual and analytical depth.

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Specifically, information was coded around key themes, including MNJTF operational strategies (such as blockades, territorial recovery, destruction of Improvised Explosive Device (IED) facilities, and clearance of insurgent hideouts), operational challenges, and the broader socio-economic conditions within the Lake Chad Basin. This approach enabled the identification of patterns and relationships relevant to assessing the effectiveness of the MNJTF.

To enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings, the study adopts a triangulation strategy by drawing on multiple data sources, including official military reports, international organization publications, and scholarly analyses. This helps to minimize bias and ensures a more balanced interpretation of events and outcomes.

However, the study is not without limitations. The reliance on secondary data, particularly military and institutional reports, may introduce issues of selective reporting and bias. Additionally, the temporal scope of the study (2015–2025) may limit the ability to fully capture recent developments in the evolution of Boko Haram and MNJTF

operations in 2026. These limitations are mitigated through the use of diverse data sources and critical interpretation of available evidence.

Findings are interpreted through the analytical lenses of Structural Strain Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory, which guide the examination of both the underlying drivers of insurgency and the dynamics of regional security cooperation.

Conceptual and Analytical Clarifications

Boko Haram, officially known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, is a violent Islamist insurgent group that emerged in northeastern Nigeria in the early 2000s. The group rejects Western education and secular governance, advocating for the establishment of an Islamic state governed by Sharia law. It gained global notoriety for its violent campaigns, including suicide bombings, kidnappings, and attacks on civilians across Nigeria and the wider Lake Chad Basin (Adesoji, 2011; Onuoha, 2014).

The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) is a regional military coalition composed of troops from Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Cameroon, and Benin. Operating under the political framework of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) with support from the African Union (AU), the MNJTF was reconstituted in 2014 to coordinate counter-insurgency operations, reclaim occupied territories, protect civilians, and promote regional stability (Assanvo, Abatan & Sawadogo, 2016).

The Lake Chad Basin, a transboundary region encompassing parts of Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic, serves as both the geographic and strategic theatre of Boko Haram's operations and MNJTF counterinsurgency efforts. The region's vulnerability is exacerbated by environmental degradation, poverty, and weak governance structures (UNHCR & World Bank, 2016).

Boko Haram Insurgency and Regional Security Responses

Boko Haram's ideology, often summarized as "Western education is forbidden," initially resonated within impoverished communities in northern Nigeria (Adesoji, 2011). Under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf and later Abubakar Shekau, the group evolved into a highly violent insurgent movement characterized by suicide bombings, abductions (notably the Chibok schoolgirls), and widespread use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) (Zenn, 2014; Overton, 2017). The collapse of state authority in remote border regions, coupled with the proliferation of small arms, facilitated its expansion across national boundaries (Dawelleng, 2019).

From a Structural Strain perspective, the persistence of Boko Haram can be linked to entrenched socio-economic conditions, including high poverty rates, unemployment, and systemic marginalization, which create fertile ground for recruitment and radicalization (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012; Danjibo, 2011). These structural pressures underscore the limitations of purely military responses in addressing the insurgency.

Initial responses to Boko Haram were largely unilateral and uncoordinated, yielding limited success (Musa, 2013). However, the reactivation of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in 2015 marked a strategic shift toward coordinated, sector-based, cross-

border operations (Assanvo, Abatan, & Sawadogo, 2016). This approach reflects the logic of Regional Security Complex Theory, which emphasizes the interdependence of states within a shared security environment and the necessity of collective responses to transnational threats (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

While scholars acknowledge significant gains, including the recapture of territories, destruction of insurgent camps, and rescue of hostages, persistent challenges remain. These include logistical constraints, political mistrust among member states, and concerns over human rights violations (International Crisis Group, 2016; Transparency International, 2018). These limitations highlight the complexities of translating regional cooperation into sustainable security outcomes.

Findings and Analysis

Blockading Escape Routes and Supply Lines

Operation Crackdown (2016) and subsequent joint patrols across MNJTF sectors (1-4) significantly disrupted Boko Haram's logistical networks by sealing major border crossings and restricting access to food, drugs, ammunition, and fuel (Usman, 2017; Nidcho, 2016). The blockade reportedly compelled insurgents to resort to makeshift fuel production, thereby constraining their operational mobility (Vanguard, 2016).

From a Regional Security Complex perspective, these coordinated cross-border operations demonstrate the effectiveness of collective security arrangements in addressing transnational threats. The ability of MNJTF member states to jointly monitor and control border spaces reflects a practical application of regional interdependence in security management.

Reclaiming Territories

Sector-coordinated offensives, including Operation Lafiya Dole, led to the recapture of 26 local government areas and key towns such as Michika, Monguno, and Baga by 2017 (Besheer, 2017; Omonobi, 2015). MNJTF reports indicate that in 2016 alone, 828 insurgents were killed in action, 615 captured, over 20,500 hostages freed, and 32 camps destroyed.

These outcomes reinforce the argument of Regional Security Complex Theory that collective military action enhances operational effectiveness against shared threats. However, while territorial recovery represents a significant tactical achievement, it does not necessarily translate into long-term stabilization, particularly in areas where underlying structural vulnerabilities remain unaddressed.

Destruction of Improvised Explosive Device (IED) Facilities

Between 2016 and 2017, MNJTF operations, alongside initiatives such as Operation Thunder Strike, resulted in the destruction of over 20 IED production facilities in Baga and Konduga Local Government Areas. Materials such as generators, gas cylinders, communication devices, and explosive precursors were seized (Col. Nwachukwu, 2017).

Additional operations, including Deep Punch II, further targeted insurgent infrastructure within the Sambisa Forest.

The dismantling of these facilities significantly reduced Boko Haram's capacity to deploy asymmetric warfare tactics. However, from a Structural Strain perspective, the persistence of such capabilities suggests that the conditions enabling insurgent adaptation and regeneration remain present, thereby limiting the long-term effectiveness of purely military interventions.

Clearing of Insurgent Hideouts

Operation Gama Aiki, supported by the Nigerian Air Force (NAF), successfully cleared insurgents from key border settlements, including Doran Nairi, Yebi-Tasugia, and Faide-Jimba, neutralizing several fighters and recovering weapons caches (Iroegbu, 2016; Lawal, 2016). Despite these gains, the operations contributed to the displacement of over 100,000 civilians (Besheer, 2017), raising humanitarian concerns.

This dual outcome highlights a critical tension in counterinsurgency operations. While Regional Security Complex Theory explains the necessity of coordinated military action, Structural Strain Theory underscores how such operations, when accompanied by displacement and socio-economic disruption, may inadvertently reproduce the very conditions that sustain insurgency.

Socio-Economic Drivers and Operational Challenges

The persistence of Boko Haram insurgency is closely linked to structural conditions such as extreme poverty, unemployment, and weak governance across the Lake Chad Basin (Agnew, 1992; Sanusi, 2007). These factors continue to facilitate recruitment and local support for insurgent groups, reinforcing the explanatory relevance of Structural Strain Theory.

In addition, operational challenges, including porous borders spanning approximately 4,910 kilometres, logistical constraints, political mistrust among member states, and allegations of human rights abuses by security forces, further complicate stabilization efforts (International Crisis Group, 2016). These limitations reveal the constraints of regional cooperation mechanisms and highlight the gap between tactical military success and sustainable security outcomes.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) has achieved notable success in degrading Boko Haram's territorial control and operational capacity through coordinated regional military efforts. These successes align with the core assumptions of Regional Security Complex Theory, which emphasizes the effectiveness of collective responses to shared security threats.

However, the study also reveals that these gains are undermined by persistent structural conditions that continue to drive insurgency. Structural Strain Theory provides critical

insight into how socio-economic deprivation, governance deficits, and marginalization sustain cycles of violence and limit the long-term impact of military interventions.

Taken together, the analysis suggests that while regional military cooperation is necessary for immediate threat containment, it is insufficient for achieving durable peace. A more holistic approach that integrates security operations with socio-economic development and governance reforms is required to address both the symptoms and root causes of insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has examined the role of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in countering Boko Haram insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin, demonstrating that coordinated regional military operations have yielded significant gains in terms of territorial recovery, disruption of insurgent logistics, and degradation of operational capacity. These outcomes underscore the relevance of Regional Security Complex Theory, particularly in explaining how collective security mechanisms enhance the ability of states to respond to transnational threats.

However, the findings also reveal that these military successes remain constrained by persistent structural conditions, including poverty, unemployment, weak governance, and social marginalization, which continue to sustain insurgent recruitment and resilience. As highlighted by Structural Strain Theory, the failure to address these underlying drivers limits the long-term effectiveness of counterinsurgency efforts and risks the recurrence of violence.

In light of these findings, the study argues that while the MNJTF represents a necessary framework for immediate security stabilization, it is insufficient as a standalone strategy for achieving durable peace in the Lake Chad Basin. A more integrated approach that combines military, socio-economic, and governance interventions is required.

Accordingly, the following recommendations are advanced:

First, there is a need to strengthen intelligence sharing and border management through the establishment of joint intelligence centres and the deployment of modern surveillance technologies to address the challenges posed by porous borders.

Second, regional governments should prioritize socio-economic development initiatives, including targeted poverty alleviation and youth employment programmes, in order to address the structural conditions that facilitate insurgent recruitment.

Third, efforts should be made to deepen regional coordination and institutionalize the MNJTF framework through clearer legal mandates under the African Union and sustained political commitment, including regular high-level defence and security consultations.

Finally, improving human rights compliance and community engagement is critical. This includes enforcing strict codes of conduct for security forces, expanding disarmament,

demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programmes, and strengthening civil-military relations to build trust within affected communities.

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