

**PRESIDENT BUHARI'S COUNTER-TERRORISM
STRATEGY AND THE DYNAMICS OF
REGIONAL DIPLOMACY IN THE LAKE CHAD
BENIN (2015–2023)**

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Abstract

The Lake Chad Basin, comprising northeastern Nigeria and neighboring areas of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, has remained a hotspot of insecurity due to the Boko Haram insurgency and its splinter groups. This study investigates the counter-terrorism and regional diplomatic strategies employed by President Muhammadu Buhari from 2015 to 2023. The central

problem addressed is the persistent instability in the region despite intensified military operations and multilateral engagements. The objective is to evaluate Buhari's security approach within the framework of regional cooperation and its effectiveness in mitigating insurgent threats. The research adopts a qualitative methodology, relying on secondary data including policy documents, official communications, academic literature, and regional security reports. The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) guides the theoretical framework, emphasizing how regional interdependence in security threats shapes collective responses among Lake Chad Basin states. Findings reveal that Buhari's administration reinforced the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), enhanced intelligence-sharing, and pursued active diplomatic relations. However, the efforts were constrained by porous borders, humanitarian crises, underfunded military operations, and fragile civil-military relations. The study concludes that while Buhari's policies contributed to regional synergy and occasional tactical victories, long-term peace remains elusive without broader structural reforms. It is recommended that future approaches integrate sustainable development, community-based deradicalization, and stronger regional institutions to address the root causes of extremism and ensure enduring stability in the Lake Chad Basin.

Keywords: Counter-Terrorism, Regional Diplomacy, Insurgency, Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)

Introduction

The Lake Chad Basin has remained a focal point of insecurity in West and Central Africa, primarily due to the emergence and escalation of Boko Haram's insurgency, which began in 2009. The group, originally founded as a religious movement opposing Western education and promoting a strict interpretation of Islam, evolved into a violent extremist organization, launching attacks on civilian populations, military targets, and governmental institutions. By 2015, the security situation had deteriorated drastically. Boko Haram had overrun several towns and villages in northeastern Nigeria, declared a self-styled caliphate, and forced the displacement of millions across Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon¹. The group's operations severely disrupted economic activities, particularly agriculture and cross-border trade, destabilizing the regional economies of the Lake Chad Basin.

When Muhammadu Buhari assumed office in May 2015, he inherited a country grappling with one of the deadliest insurgencies in the world. As a former military general with experience in governance and war-time leadership, Buhari immediately prioritized national security as the centerpiece of his administration. He pledged to combat the Boko Haram menace decisively and restore peace and territorial integrity to the country. His strategy involved a blend of intensified military operations and regional diplomatic initiatives aimed at stabilizing the Lake Chad region.²

Under Buhari's leadership, Nigeria witnessed a renewed commitment to military reforms and operational capacity. His administration improved coordination between various branches of the armed forces, relocated the military command center to Maiduguri—epicenter of the insurgency—and increased defense spending to support combat missions. These efforts were not confined to Nigeria alone. Recognizing the cross-border nature of the threat, Buhari placed high importance on strengthening ties with neighboring countries—Niger, Chad, and Cameroon—as well as engaging multilateral partners. This diplomatic coordination culminated in the revitalization of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which had been established earlier but became largely dormant.³

The MNJTF, under Buhari's tenure, became a more functional regional force, bringing together troops from the Lake Chad Basin countries with the shared goal of countering terrorism, enhancing intelligence sharing, and securing border areas. The task force received logistical and financial support from regional bodies such as the African Union and international partners, including the European Union and the United Nations. It carried out several joint military operations that reclaimed territories from Boko Haram and disrupted its operational networks.

Despite these achievements, the Buhari administration faced challenges in eradicating the insurgency completely. Boko Haram proved resilient, adapting its

tactics to avoid direct confrontation and increasingly relying on asymmetrical warfare, including suicide bombings, abductions, and guerrilla attacks. Moreover, the emergence of a splinter faction—the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)—complicated the security environment. ISWAP adopted a more strategic approach, attempting to win over local populations and focusing on military and governmental targets, thereby sustaining the insurgency in a different form.

Furthermore, while the military pressure yielded tactical gains, the broader strategy lacked adequate focus on non-military aspects of conflict resolution, such as reconstruction, rehabilitation, and addressing the socio-economic root causes of extremism. Communities affected by years of violence continued to suffer from displacement, poverty, lack of infrastructure, and weak governance, all of which contributed to persistent insecurity. The limited progress in these areas revealed the shortcomings in Buhari's approach, which leaned heavily on force rather than on comprehensive peacebuilding and development initiatives.

Therefore, Buhari's tenure brought about significant changes in Nigeria's counter-insurgency landscape, including stronger regional military collaboration and aggressive offensive campaigns. However, the persistence of Boko Haram and ISWAP, and the continued volatility of the Lake Chad Basin, highlighted the need for a more inclusive and sustainable framework for peace. The experience demonstrated that while

military efforts are crucial, they must be complemented by governance reforms, community engagement, economic development, and long-term regional cooperation to achieve lasting security in the Lake Chad Basin.

Conceptual Clarifications Counter-Terrorism

Counter-terrorism refers to the array of strategies, policies, and actions undertaken by states and international actors to detect, prevent, and combat terrorism⁴. These efforts are multidimensional, encompassing military, political, intelligence, legal, and socio-economic approaches. Militarily, counter-terrorism includes deploying armed forces to neutralize terrorist groups, conducting intelligence-led operations, and securing borders to prevent infiltration by extremists. Politically and legally, governments enact anti-terrorism laws, create special judicial frameworks to prosecute suspects, and engage in surveillance to track radical networks.

On the ideological front, counter-terrorism efforts often involve counter-radicalization and de-radicalization programs aimed at dissuading individuals from embracing extremist beliefs. These may include public education, community outreach, and religious engagement to offer alternative narratives to those propagated by terrorist groups. Furthermore, international cooperation plays a vital role in counter-terrorism, especially in intelligence-sharing, harmonizing

legal frameworks, and coordinating cross-border operations. In regions like the Lake Chad Basin, counter-terrorism has become central to national security agendas, given the rise of groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP.

Regional Diplomacy

Regional diplomacy entails the strategic and collaborative interaction among neighboring states to manage common concerns that transcend borders⁵. It is a crucial tool for promoting peace, security, and development in geopolitically sensitive regions. In the context of security threats like terrorism and insurgency, regional diplomacy involves aligning policies, fostering dialogue, and creating joint mechanisms for response and resolution. Effective regional diplomacy can build trust among states, enhance information sharing, and encourage joint military or humanitarian actions.

For example, in the Lake Chad Basin, Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon have employed regional diplomacy to address the threat posed by Boko Haram. Through bilateral and multilateral engagements, these states have coordinated security strategies and mobilized resources to counter the insurgency. Furthermore, regional diplomacy often involves engagement with regional organizations such as the African Union and ECOWAS, which serve as platforms for negotiation, conflict resolution, and coordinated intervention. Beyond security, regional diplomacy also addresses issues like

climate-induced displacement, economic integration, and transboundary resource management.

Insurgency

Insurgency is defined as a protracted and often violent rebellion against a recognized government or authority, usually undertaken by non-state actors using irregular warfare tactics⁶. Insurgents typically seek to undermine or overthrow the existing political order, often with ideological, ethnic, or religious motivations. Unlike conventional warfare, insurgency relies on guerrilla tactics, sabotage, terrorism, and psychological operations to weaken the state and win the support or compliance of local populations.

In the Lake Chad region, Boko Haram represents a classical case of insurgency. The group uses asymmetric warfare to challenge the legitimacy of the Nigerian government and its neighbors. It employs tactics such as hit-and-run attacks, suicide bombings, abductions, and the targeting of soft civilian infrastructure like markets, schools, and places of worship. Insurgencies often thrive in areas where state presence is weak, governance is poor, and local grievances are unaddressed, making counter-insurgency efforts both complex and context-dependent.

Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)

The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) is a regional military initiative established to combat terrorism and transnational crime in the Lake Chad Basin

and it is composed of troops from Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Benin, and operates under the mandate of the Lake Chad Basin Commission with support from the African Union and other international partners.⁷ The MNJTF was revitalized during the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari as part of a broader regional response to the Boko Haram insurgency.

The force's mandate includes conducting joint military operations, facilitating intelligence sharing, securing borders, and restoring stability in affected areas. The MNJTF represents a practical manifestation of both counter-terrorism and regional diplomacy, as it brings together multiple sovereign nations in a cooperative framework to address a common threat. Its operational structure allows for coordinated attacks on insurgent hideouts, patrol of vulnerable zones, and humanitarian support in liberated territories. Despite challenges related to logistics, coordination, and funding, the MNJTF remains a critical component in the ongoing efforts to stabilize the Lake Chad region and dismantle terrorist networks.

Theoretical Framework: Regional Security Complex Theory

This study adopts the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver as its guiding theoretical lens.⁸ RSCT posits that security is primarily organized in regional clusters, where the security concerns of neighboring states are so intricately linked that they cannot realistically be

separated. According to the theory, threats do not exist in isolation within individual states but are shaped by patterns of interdependence and mutual vulnerability in a geographically confined area. This forms a “regional security complex,” where the insecurity of one state inevitably spills over into others, often through shared borders, ethnic linkages, or transnational issues such as terrorism, arms proliferation, and refugee flows.⁸

The Lake Chad Basin region—comprising Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, and Niger—serves as a textbook example of a regional security complex. These countries are bound not only by proximity but also by shared challenges, including terrorism, porous borders, underdevelopment, weak governance, and environmental degradation.⁹ The Boko Haram insurgency, which initially erupted in northeastern Nigeria, rapidly spread into neighboring countries due to these overlapping vulnerabilities. For instance, the inability of one state to effectively police its territory provides operational space for insurgents, enabling them to evade military pressure by crossing borders. This interconnectedness of threats validates RSCT’s assertion that security must be understood within a regional context rather than solely through national lenses.

President Muhammadu Buhari’s counter-terrorism and diplomatic strategies reflected a practical application of RSCT. Recognizing the transboundary nature of the Boko Haram threat, his administration emphasized collective security mechanisms and regional cooperation.

This was evident in Nigeria's reinvigoration of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which brought together military forces from across the Lake Chad Basin to jointly confront the insurgency. In alignment with RSCT, Buhari also pursued closer diplomatic ties with Nigeria's neighbors to promote intelligence-sharing, joint border patrols, and coordinated military campaigns. His administration further engaged multilateral organizations such as the African Union, ECOWAS, and the United Nations to reinforce the regional dimension of the security response.

Beyond military cooperation, RSCT also underscores the significance of non-traditional security threats, such as poverty, climate change, and state fragility, which tend to cluster in specific regions and exacerbate conflict. The Lake Chad Basin epitomizes this complexity. The shrinking of Lake Chad due to climate change has displaced thousands of people and undermined local livelihoods, pushing many into conditions ripe for extremist recruitment. This ecological crisis, combined with governance deficits and socio-economic marginalization, sustains a cycle of instability that cannot be effectively addressed by any single state in isolation. Therefore, RSCT advocates a holistic, multilateral response that tackles root causes and reinforces regional resilience.

Therefore, RSCT provides a robust theoretical foundation for analyzing the security dynamics in the Lake Chad Basin. It highlights the futility of purely

national approaches to security and the necessity of regional cooperation in addressing shared threats. Buhari's approach to counter-insurgency—while not without limitations—aligned with the core tenets of RSCT by acknowledging that peace in Nigeria is inseparable from stability in its immediate neighborhood.

Buhari's Counter-Terrorism Strategy in the Lake Chad Basin

President Muhammadu Buhari's approach to counter-terrorism in the Lake Chad Basin was grounded in a strategic understanding of regional interdependence, consistent with the principles of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as articulated by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. RSCT posits that regional security issues are tightly interlinked among neighboring states, and threats like terrorism transcend national borders to form a web of mutual vulnerability⁸. Thus, Buhari's emphasis on collective action, regional diplomacy, and multilateral cooperation reflects a pragmatic application of RSCT principles to the fight against Boko Haram and related insurgent movements in the Lake Chad Basin⁹.

Military Campaigns and MNJTF Revitalization

Upon assuming office in May 2015, President Buhari took decisive action to reorient Nigeria's military strategy against Boko Haram. One of his first moves was the relocation of the military command center from Abuja to Maiduguri, the epicenter of the insurgency¹⁰. This signaled a shift towards operational proximity and

real-time engagement with battlefield realities. The move also intended to boost morale among troops and foster stronger coordination with local populations.

More significantly, Buhari reactivated and revitalized the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), headquartered in N'Djamena, Chad. This regional force brought together military units from Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, who collectively faced the brunt of Boko Haram's cross-border attacks¹¹. Nigeria emerged as a leading contributor, both in terms of personnel and logistics, ensuring the deployment of over 8,000 troops to joint operations. The MNJTF not only facilitated military offensives but also enabled the pooling of intelligence and coordinated responses to insurgent mobility across porous borders.¹²

In line with RSCT, this approach reflects the recognition that no single state could unilaterally address the insurgency. Boko Haram's ability to exploit ungoverned spaces and escape across boundaries necessitated a regional security framework, wherein the military threat was collectively confronted by a security complex bound by geographic, political, and strategic realities.

Regional and Multilateral Cooperation

Buhari also prioritized security diplomacy by fostering close ties with regional counterparts such as President Idriss Déby of Chad and President Mahamadou Issoufou of Niger¹³. These relationships were instrumental in forging bilateral and multilateral understandings on

intelligence sharing, joint patrols, and coordinated border management. Buhari convened and participated in regular summits of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), where joint strategies were designed to combat terrorism, rehabilitate displaced populations, and rebuild destroyed communities.

Beyond immediate neighbors, Buhari extended cooperation to continental and international actors. Under his administration, Nigeria secured military funding and logistical support from the African Union, ECOWAS, and development partners like the European Union (EU) and the **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)**¹⁴. These engagements enabled capacity-building initiatives, improved equipment supply chains, and advanced stabilization efforts in conflict-affected areas.

This multilateral posture is emblematic of RSCT's emphasis on security interdependence, wherein regional peace cannot be isolated from global governance structures. Buhari's success in garnering international goodwill and financial support for the MNJTF further underscores the embeddedness of regional security within the broader international system.¹⁵

Intelligence and Border Management

Recognizing that Boko Haram's operational resilience stemmed partly from Nigeria's porous and poorly policed borders, Buhari's administration invested in intelligence coordination and technological surveillance

systems.¹⁶ New border security protocols were introduced, including the deployment of aerial drones, satellite monitoring, and digital communication platforms to facilitate real-time data sharing between military units across the Lake Chad Basin.

Despite these advancements, systemic weaknesses such as institutional corruption, underfunded security apparatuses, and bureaucratic inefficiencies remained formidable barriers to effective border control.¹⁷ Local customs and immigration units were often poorly trained and ill-equipped, leading to operational blind spots that insurgent could exploit.

From an RSCT perspective, these institutional shortcomings illustrate how non-military factors—such as governance and infrastructure—can impede collective security in regional complexes. It also reaffirms the theory's claim that enduring security requires not only military cooperation but also institutional harmonization across states.

Civil-Military Relations and Community Engagement

Buhari's strategy also acknowledged the human and societal dimensions of counter-terrorism. His government launched community-centered initiatives aimed at de-radicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration of former insurgents. One prominent program, Operation Safe Corridor, provided vocational training, psycho-social counseling, and reintegration

support for defectors from Boko Haram.¹⁸ These efforts were intended to cut off recruitment pipelines and reintegrate former combatants into society.

Civil-military dialogues were also promoted to rebuild trust between the armed forces and local populations, many of whom had suffered human rights abuses or displacement during military campaigns. However, persistent allegations of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and poor humanitarian coordination by security forces severely undermined these efforts.¹⁹ Human rights organizations frequently criticized the Nigerian military's conduct, which risked alienating the very communities they were tasked with protecting.

RSCT supports the inclusion of such human security considerations in regional security frameworks, arguing that the sustainability of peace depends on societal buy-in and legitimacy, not just the cessation of violence. Buhari's attempt to balance hard power with community engagement reflects an understanding—albeit imperfect—of the multifaceted nature of regional insecurity.

Therefore, President Buhari's counter-terrorism strategy in the Lake Chad Basin was multi-dimensional, blending military force with diplomacy, technology, and community outreach. His administration's initiatives—particularly the revitalization of the MNJTF and strengthening of regional alliances—aligned with the theoretical underpinnings of Regional Security Complex

Theory. While the approach yielded significant gains in degrading Boko Haram's capabilities, it fell short in addressing systemic governance failures and human rights concerns that continue to fuel insecurity. RSCT provides a useful framework for appreciating these dynamics, highlighting both the progress made and the complex, interwoven challenges that define security in the Lake Chad Basin.

Limitations and Continuing Challenges

While President Buhari's counter-terrorism strategy and the revitalization of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) initially yielded measurable gains in pushing back Boko Haram, the persistence and evolution of insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin highlighted the structural and operational limitations of the response. In particular, the emergence and expansion of Boko Haram splinter factions—especially the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)—underscored the adaptive nature of the threat and the insufficiencies of state-led military campaigns.²⁰

Within the framework of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), these limitations point to the inherent difficulty of achieving sustainable peace in a region where states are not only interlinked by geography but also by overlapping vulnerabilities.

The dynamics of regional insecurity are not static; threats mutate, expand, and feed off the systemic weaknesses of neighboring states.

Resilient Insurgency and the Rise of ISWAP

ISWAP's growth in the post-2016 period represented a strategic pivot by jihadist actors in the region. Unlike the Shekau-led Boko Haram faction, ISWAP adopted more sophisticated governance tactics, provided rudimentary services in captured territories, and sought to win over local populations with ideological indoctrination and economic incentives. This shift made ISWAP more embedded within the local context and harder to defeat militarily.

This phenomenon aligns with RSCT's assertion that security threats often reconstitute themselves across borders and within porous state systems. ISWAP, for instance, capitalized on weak state presence, poor infrastructure, and ungoverned spaces in northeastern Nigeria and the broader Lake Chad region to establish footholds, often operating transnationally with minimal resistance.

Coordination and Operational Challenges within MNJTF

Although the MNJTF presented a robust regional mechanism on paper, its implementation suffered from several intergovernmental challenges. Member states—Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon—struggled with coordination difficulties, including mismatched military doctrines, language barriers, differing political priorities, and bureaucratic inefficiencies. These discrepancies often led to delays in intelligence sharing, joint operations, and force mobility across national borders.

Inconsistent funding also undermined MNJTF's sustainability. Donor fatigue, reliance on external financing (especially from the EU and AU), and irregular contributions from member states frequently left the force under-resourced²¹. In practice, this eroded operational effectiveness and created windows of opportunity for insurgent regrouping. From the RSCT lens, this challenge highlights how uneven state capacities within a security complex can weaken collective responses and allow transnational threats to flourish.

Socioeconomic Drivers and Climate Pressures

Beyond the military realm, socioeconomic stressors continued to fuel insurgency. The Lake Chad region has faced severe environmental degradation over the past three decades, particularly due to the shrinking of Lake Chad itself. This phenomenon, largely driven by climate change, has displaced farming and pastoralist communities, leading to climate-induced migration, competition over resources, and deepened poverty²². These conditions created fertile ground for recruitment into insurgent groups, as unemployed and disaffected youth, bereft of state support, were often easy targets for radicalization.

This complex interplay of environmental, economic, and social factors reinforces RSCT's claim that security threats are multidimensional and cannot be addressed through military solutions alone. In a region where human security is fragile and state legitimacy is weak,

environmental pressures become deeply entangled with traditional notions of security.

Conclusion

President Muhammadu Buhari's counter-terrorism strategy in the Lake Chad Basin reflected a multidimensional approach that blended military force, regional diplomacy, and community engagement. His administration achieved significant gains in weakening the operational capacity of Boko Haram's main faction and reasserting control over parts of northeastern Nigeria. The revitalization of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), enhanced cooperation with neighboring states, and partnerships with multilateral bodies underscored a commitment to regional security interdependence consistent with the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT).

However, these gains were tempered by persistent challenges. The rise of splinter groups like the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), institutional corruption, poor humanitarian coordination, and underlying socio-economic grievances—such as youth unemployment, climate-induced displacement, and weak border controls—continued to fuel insecurity. The Buhari administration's reliance on hard power, without sufficient investment in governance reforms and post-conflict reconstruction, limited the sustainability of its efforts.

Ultimately, the Buhari era highlighted a critical lesson for regional security in the Lake Chad Basin: no single state can defeat a transnational threat in isolation, and no military strategy can succeed without complementary political, developmental, and humanitarian measures. The future of security in the Lake Chad Basin demands more holistic, regionally integrated, and people-centered strategy—one that addresses not only the symptoms but also the systemic drivers of violent extremism.

Recommendations

1. **Sustain Regional Collaboration:** Strengthen and fund the MNJTF consistently with support from international partners.
2. **Civilian Oversight:** Increase accountability of military operations to avoid rights violations and win community trust.
3. **Address Root Causes:** Prioritize youth employment, education, and infrastructure in affected regions.
4. **Climate-Security Nexus:** Integrate environmental resilience in security frameworks due to Lake Chad's shrinking and displacement impacts.
5. **Long-term Reintegration Programs:** Expand and monitor deradicalization efforts with strong community reintegration support.

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