

CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS AND COUNTERINSURGENCY: ASSESSING CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS IN NIGERIA'S NORTHEASTERN SECURITY OPERATIONS"

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Abstract

Civil–military relations (CMR) play a decisive role in the effectiveness and legitimacy of counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, particularly in contexts of protracted internal conflict. Since 2009, Nigeria's Northeastern region has experienced sustained insurgency led by Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), resulting in widespread civilian suffering, displacement, and institutional strain. This study critically assesses the challenges and prospects of civil–military relations within Nigeria's counterinsurgency operations in the Northeast. Drawing on a qualitative desk research design, the paper synthesizes academic literature, official government and military reports, human rights documentation, and investigative media sources. Anchored in theories of democratic civilian control of the armed forces and the human security framework, the study identifies persistent challenges including civilian mistrust, human rights abuses, weak accountability mechanisms, coordination failures among security and civilian actors, and limited community engagement. The findings demonstrate that these deficits undermine intelligence gathering, erode legitimacy, and inadvertently sustain insurgent resilience. At the same time, the paper highlights prospects for improving CMR through community-based security initiatives, enhanced human rights training, institutional reforms, non-kinetic interventions, and whole-of-government approaches. The study concludes that sustainable counterinsurgency in Nigeria requires integrating military effectiveness with civilian protection, accountability, and socio-economic governance, offering policy-relevant lessons for Nigeria and comparable insurgency-affected contexts.

Keywords: Civil–Military Relations; Counterinsurgency; Boko Haram; ISWAP; Northeastern Nigeria; Human Security; Civilian Protection; Military Accountability; Community-Based Security; Insurgency

Introduction

1.1. Background to the Study

Since about 2009, Nigeria's Northeastern region has been embroiled in a potent insurgency driven principally by Boko Haram and later by its splinter group, the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). Boko Haram initially emerged from ideologically motivated opposition to Western-style education and secular governance, escalating into a campaign of violence involving bombings, abductions, and mass killings. ISWAP, breaking from Boko Haram, has focused more on military targets, though civilians consistently suffer collateral consequences.

The insurgency has inflicted severe human, material, and political costs: tens of thousands of deaths, widespread population displacement (millions internally displaced persons), and disruption of livelihoods. Socio-economic grievances — poverty, unemployment, weak public services — have not only been exacerbated by the insurgency but have also served as fertile soil for insurgent recruitment and radicalization.

In response, the Nigerian government has deployed military operations, occasionally with international cooperation (e.g., the Multi-National Joint Task Force), complemented by non-military interventions (humanitarian relief, deradicalization, reintegration programs). Despite some tactical gains, insurgent resilience remains high. ISWAP and Boko Haram continue to capture or overrun military bases, expand territorial presence, and shift tactics, such as using suicide bombings, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and hybrid warfare across borders.

In counterinsurgency (COIN) contexts, civil-military relations (CMR) — that is, the relationship between armed forces and the civilian population, including local leaders, institutions, and civilians more broadly — are widely recognized as critical to the success of operations. Effective CMR helps in intelligence gathering, legitimacy-building, early detection of radicalization, and in reducing civilian grievances that insurgents exploit. When civilians trust the military (and the government), cooperation is more likely; conversely, when the military is perceived as abusive, unaccountable, or insensitive to civilian concerns, support erodes.

In the Nigerian Northeast, several scholars have underlined the role of trust building, community outreach, norms of conduct, human rights observance, and transparency in enhancing COIN effectiveness.

Problem Statement

Despite sustained counterinsurgency (COIN) efforts in Northeastern Nigeria, deep-rooted challenges in civil-military relations (CMR) continue to undermine operational effectiveness. Civilians often perceive the military less as a protector and more as a source of harm, pointing to incidents of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, torture, and

collateral damage during operations. Such experiences and perceptions foster mistrust, eroding the very cooperation upon which successful COIN depends.

The conflict has also generated widespread civilian grievances. Millions have faced displacement, loss of property, disrupted livelihoods, and inadequate compensation, while the socio-economic dimensions of the crisis remain largely neglected. Alongside this, persistent human rights concerns—including allegations of rape, sexual violence, and unlawful detentions—have been repeatedly raised in reports by civil society and international watchdogs.

Operational inefficiencies compound these issues. Intelligence gathering remains weak, logistics are often overstretched, coordination between military and civil authorities is poor, and oversight mechanisms are fragile. Corruption within security structures further undermines accountability. These gaps have at times allowed insurgents such as ISWAP to regroup, overrun military bases, and even capture territory. Together, these interlinked problems diminish the legitimacy of operations, render COIN less sustainable, and inadvertently feed the insurgency by alienating the civilian population whose cooperation is indispensable for success.

Research Questions

This study is guided by a set of interrelated questions designed to unpack these challenges:

1. What are the main challenges in civil-military relations that affect counterinsurgency operations in Northeastern Nigeria?
2. In what ways do these challenges impede the effectiveness and legitimacy of COIN efforts in the region?
3. What prospects or strategies exist for strengthening civil-military relations in Northeastern Nigeria's counterinsurgency context?
4. What lessons from this context can inform broader policies for civil-military relations and counterinsurgency in Nigeria and comparable environments?

Objectives of the Study

In line with the above questions, the study pursues four core objectives:

1. To identify and analyze the key challenges in civil-military relations during counterinsurgency operations in Nigeria's Northeast.
2. To assess how these challenges impact the operational effectiveness, legitimacy, and trust in COIN efforts.
3. To explore the prospects, opportunities, and strategies for improving civil-military relations in the region.
4. To draw lessons from Northeastern Nigeria that could guide national or comparative policy on civil-military relations and counterinsurgency.

Significance of the Study

This study carries policy, scholarly, human rights, and practical significance. For policymakers—including the Nigerian Armed Forces, relevant ministries, and security agencies—it provides evidence to design COIN strategies and civil-military engagement frameworks that minimize civilian harm, strengthen trust, and improve overall effectiveness.

For scholarship, it contributes to the relatively underexplored linkage between civil-military relations and counterinsurgency performance in Nigeria. While there is a growing body of work on insurgency tactics and humanitarian impacts, systematic analysis of how CMR dynamics shape operational legitimacy remains limited. This research helps to bridge that gap.

The study also underscores normative concerns. By drawing attention to accountability, respect for human dignity, and human rights compliance, it highlights how these factors not only enhance domestic legitimacy but also align with international law and long-term peacebuilding goals.

Finally, the study has broader applicability: lessons drawn from Northeastern Nigeria could inform responses to insecurity in the Northwest, the Niger Delta, and other African contexts grappling with insurgency, hybrid warfare, or protracted civil conflict.

Structure of the Paper

The paper is structured into seven sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 reviews existing theoretical and empirical literature on civil-military relations, counterinsurgency theory, and Nigeria-specific studies. Section 3 explains the methodology, outlining the research design, data sources, analytical approach, and limitations. Section 4 provides a contextual background of the insurgency in Northeastern Nigeria, tracing the evolution of Boko Haram and ISWAP and situating them within the broader socio-political environment. Section 5 presents the results, organized according to the research objectives. Section 6 discusses these findings in relation to existing scholarship and policy debates, drawing comparative insights from other COIN contexts. Finally, Section 7 concludes with a summary of findings, concrete policy recommendations, and directions for future research.

2.0. Literature review

2.1 Conceptual framework: civil-military relations and counterinsurgency theory

Civil-military relations (CMR) is a core field in political-military studies focusing on the nature of control, interaction, and mutual influence between armed forces and the societies/political authorities they serve. Huntington's classic formulation distinguishes between **objective civilian control** (professionalizing the military and insulating it from politics) and **subjective control** (politicization of the armed forces), arguing that professionalization and clear institutional boundaries are central to healthy CMR (Huntington, 1957). Janowitz complements Huntington by emphasizing the socialization and political role of the modern military as an institution embedded

in society; Janowitz foregrounds the internal social structure and civic responsibilities of the military and highlights the military's role in shaping political outcomes (Janowitz, 1960). These foundational works remain essential for situating debates over legitimacy, oversight, and the military's role in internal security operations.

Counterinsurgency (COIN) theory has long stressed that military action alone cannot defeat insurgencies: winning popular support—by protecting civilians, providing governance and services, and minimizing abuses—is central (Galula, 1964; Kilcullen, 2010). COIN literature distinguishes *population-centric* approaches (securing and winning hearts and minds) from *enemy-centric* (decapitation/direct force) approaches; contemporary policy lessons (e.g., “whole of government” approaches) underline the need for integrated civil-military strategies, robust intelligence from communities, and protections for human rights (Galula, 1964; Kilcullen, 2010; Walker, 2009).

2.2 Historical overview of civil-military relations in Nigeria

Nigeria's CMR trajectory has been shaped by colonial legacies, repeated military interventions in governance, and the return to civilian rule in 1999. The pattern of military intervention and prolonged military influence over state institutions created particular civil-military dynamics: while the post-1999 era restored formal civilian control, vestiges of military autonomy, parallel command cultures, and weak civilian oversight mechanisms persisted (Oyewole, 2020). The state's recourse to the military for internal security—particularly significant in the post-2009 Boko Haram era—has further complicated CMR by thrusting the armed forces into prolonged domestic roles for which they were not institutionally constructed (Oriola, 2023).

Several scholars document that the proliferation of military bases and prolonged deployments in host communities have produced a complex mix of cooperation (security provision, local employment) and friction (land disputes, alleged abuses, resource competition) between the military and civilian populations (Oyewole, 2020). Historical patterns of opaque military governance, weak parliamentary oversight, and politicization of security appointments remain relevant when analyzing current COIN operations in the Northeast (Itodo, 2023).

2.3 Civil-military relations in conflict and counterinsurgency contexts

The COIN literature emphasizes that civilian trust in security forces is pivotal for intelligence flows and legitimacy (Kilcullen, 2010). Where militaries are seen as abusive or indifferent to civilian suffering, communities may either withdraw cooperation or, in worst cases, be pushed towards insurgents. Empirical studies from varied theaters (Iraq, Afghanistan, Sahel) show that patterns of abuse, indiscriminate operations, and weak accountability create feedback loops that sustain insurgency (Walker, 2009; Kilcullen, 2010).

In the Nigerian context, international and local reports have repeatedly raised concerns that some counterinsurgency tactics (including alleged extrajudicial actions, the destruction of villages, and enforced displacement) have worsened civilian vulnerabilities and complicated humanitarian access, undermining broader COIN objectives (The New Humanitarian, 2023; Reuters, 2024). At the same time, research indicates that civilian self-defense groups (e.g., Civilian Joint Task Force) and community-based security initiatives have both supplemented state capacity and introduced governance risks when unregulated (OECD, 2021).

2.4 Empirical studies on CMR in Northeastern Nigeria

A growing body of scholarship investigates the texture of CMR in the Northeast. Oriola (2023), writing in a leading journal on civil-military affairs, introduces the “civilian–military leadership interest convergence thesis,” arguing that convergence (or divergence) of interests between political leaders and military commanders shapes operational priorities and affects how COIN is conducted and perceived by civilians (Oriola, 2023). Empirical evidence shows recurring themes: troop morale and welfare problems; allegations of corruption and cover-ups; and tensions between tactical priorities and civilian protection.

Oyewole’s analysis (2020) focuses on micro-level relations between military bases and host communities and documents both cooperative practices (local sourcing, employment) and sources of conflict (land use, environmental damage, perceived impunity). Field reporting and NGO investigations (The New Humanitarian, 2023) provide vivid testimonies of civilians “trapped between” insurgents and security forces, illuminating the human consequences of contested CMR practices. More recent articles in *Armed Forces & Society* and similar journals examine institutional responses—such as training in human rights and civil affairs—and the limits of those reforms in altering ground behaviour (Aina, 2025; Ajala & Heinecken, 2024).

Regional policy studies (OECD, 2021) highlight the Lake Chad basin’s multi-actor environment, arguing that non-military actors (local NGOs, regional bodies) play essential roles in stabilization and that reliance on military-centric responses yields diminishing returns. Taken together, the empirical record underscores that the Nigerian military’s operational successes have often been tactical and temporary, while persistent CMR problems hinder sustainable COIN outcomes.

2.5 Theoretical framework: democratic control and human security

Two theoretical lenses guide this study. First, **democratic control of the armed forces** — a normative and institutional framework — posits that credible civilian oversight, transparent accountability, and rule-of-law constraints on military actions are prerequisites for legitimacy and sustainable security (Huntington, 1957; Janowitz, 1960). Applied to COIN, democratic control requires mechanisms (parliamentary scrutiny, independent commissions, military justice reforms) that both protect civilians and preserve operational efficacy.

Second, the **human security approach** broadens security beyond state survival to individual safety and socio-economic wellbeing. Human security insists that COIN must address protection, livelihoods, and governance deficits that produce insurgency recruitment (UNDP, 1994; OECD, 2021). In practice, integrating human security into COIN involves prioritizing civilian protection, enabling humanitarian access, and embedding development into stabilization efforts.

2.6. Identified gaps in the literature

Despite substantive contributions, several gaps remain:

1. **Systematic linkage between CMR practices and measurable COIN outcomes:** While many studies document abuses or community friction, fewer analyze, with systematic metrics, how specific CMR variables (e.g., levels of accountability, community engagement practices) predict COIN success or failure over time in the Northeast.
2. **Longitudinal studies of institutional reform:** There is limited longitudinal research on whether reforms (human rights training, civil affairs units) have produced lasting behavioural change in military units deployed in the Northeast.
3. **Comparative micro-level studies:** Comparative work across different host communities, showing variation in civilian attitudes and cooperation and the local drivers of that variation, is thin.
4. **Evaluation of community-based security initiatives:** While literature documents the rise of Civilian JTF and other vigilante actors, rigorous evaluations of their governance implications (accountability, rule of law, integration into formal structures) are limited.
5. **Whole-of-government assessments:** There is a dearth of integrated analyses that simultaneously evaluate military, police, humanitarian, and development interventions and their combined effect on CMR and COIN outcomes in the Northeast.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study adopts a **qualitative desk research design**. Desk research, also called secondary research, involves the systematic review and synthesis of existing data sources—such as scholarly publications, policy documents, official reports, and media analyses—rather than the collection of primary field data (Johnston, 2017). The choice of a qualitative design stems from the study's focus on interpreting the complex socio-political dynamics of civil-military relations (CMR) within counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, where contextual and normative factors are central. Qualitative desk research is appropriate for analyzing phenomena that are well-documented across multiple types of sources but may lack unified interpretation (Snyder, 2019). The insurgency in Northeastern Nigeria and its implications for CMR have generated a large body of academic, governmental, and non-governmental outputs. Synthesizing this evidence allows the study to draw nuanced insights without replicating costly or potentially risky fieldwork in conflict-affected environments.

3.2 Data sources

The study relies on **secondary data** drawn from four main categories:

1. **Official reports:** Nigerian government and military communiqués, reports of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), as well as international and regional organizations such as the United Nations, African Union (AU), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). These documents provide authoritative accounts of policy measures, military strategies, and official positions. For instance, UN reports on Boko Haram and ISWAP offer detailed assessments of humanitarian consequences and state responses (United Nations, 2022).
2. **Academic studies:** Peer-reviewed journal articles and books form the backbone of the literature. Examples include Oriola's (2023) analysis of civilian–military leadership convergence in Nigeria's COIN (published in *Armed Forces & Society*) and Oyewole's (2020) work on community–military relations in *African Security*. These sources provide empirically grounded and theoretically informed perspectives.
3. **Non-governmental and civil society reports:** Outputs from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, International Crisis Group, and local NGOs in Nigeria provide critical documentation of human rights concerns, civilian perspectives, and operational challenges. While not peer-reviewed, these reports are essential for triangulating evidence from official and academic sources.
4. **Media and investigative journalism:** Reputable outlets such as Reuters and *The New Humanitarian* have conducted in-depth investigations into alleged military abuses, civilian grievances, and humanitarian dilemmas. Such reports, though sometimes contested, enrich the data by presenting firsthand testimonies and ground-level perspectives (The New Humanitarian, 2023; Reuters, 2024).

Together, these sources provide a diverse evidentiary base for thematic analysis, balancing state, scholarly, humanitarian, and civilian viewpoints.

3.3 Analytical approach

The study employs **thematic analysis** as its analytical framework. Thematic analysis involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting recurrent patterns (“themes”) across qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is particularly suitable for synthesizing heterogeneous sources, as it enables the researcher to distill convergent insights and explore divergent perspectives.

The analysis followed three iterative steps:

1. **Data immersion and coding:** Key texts (reports, articles, policy papers) were read closely, with attention to recurrent issues relating to CMR and COIN. Initial codes were assigned (e.g., “civilian mistrust,” “human rights abuses,” “intelligence cooperation,” “non-kinetic strategies”).

2. **Theme development:** Codes were grouped into broader themes that aligned with the research objectives, such as challenges in CMR, opportunities for strengthening relations, and lessons for broader policy.
3. **Interpretation and synthesis:** Themes were then analyzed in relation to the conceptual framework (Huntington's professionalization thesis, Janowitz's socialization perspective, and the human security lens). This step ensured theoretical coherence and linked empirical findings to broader debates in the literature.

Thematic analysis has been widely used in security and conflict studies for synthesizing multi-source data (Nowell et al., 2017). Its flexibility and interpretive capacity make it appropriate for this study, which seeks to balance empirical detail with conceptual depth.

3.4 Scope and limitations

The study's scope is delimited both substantively and methodologically.

1. **Substantive scope:** The analysis focuses on CMR within the context of counterinsurgency operations against Boko Haram and ISWAP in Northeastern Nigeria (primarily Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States). While related security challenges exist in the Northwest (banditry) and Niger Delta (militancy), these are excluded except where lessons are transferable. The time frame of analysis is 2009–2024, covering the insurgency's escalation and evolution.
2. **Methodological scope:** By design, the study relies exclusively on secondary data. While this allows comprehensive coverage of diverse sources, it lacks the immediacy and depth of primary field research such as interviews or participant observation. This limitation is mitigated through triangulation, drawing from multiple independent sources to validate findings.

Several limitations must be acknowledged:

1. **Data reliability:** Official reports may understate abuses, while NGO reports may emphasize violations. Media accounts may vary in accuracy. Triangulation across source types reduces but cannot eliminate these biases.
2. **Access constraints:** Due to insecurity in the region, many areas are inaccessible to independent investigators, leading to potential underreporting or reliance on indirect evidence (International Crisis Group, 2021).
3. **Generalizability:** Findings are context-specific to Northeastern Nigeria and may not be directly transferable to other insurgency settings, although theoretical insights have broader applicability.
4. **Temporal dynamics:** The insurgency is evolving, with shifting strategies by Boko Haram, ISWAP, and the Nigerian military. Thus, findings represent a snapshot of a dynamic situation, subject to change with new developments.

Despite these limitations, qualitative desk research remains an appropriate methodology given the study's aims, ethical considerations, and the availability of a rich corpus of secondary data. The approach ensures a systematic and theoretically informed analysis of CMR and COIN in Nigeria's Northeast.

4.0. Contextual Background: Nigeria's Northeastern Insurgency

4.1 Rise of Boko Haram and ISWAP

Boko Haram, officially known as *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* (JAS), was founded in the early 2000s under Muhammad Yusuf in Maiduguri, Borno State. Its ideological opposition to Western education, secular governance, and perceived corruption catalyzed its insurgency in 2009 when violence escalated following government crackdowns (Britannica, 2024a). Over time, the group carried out mass abductions, suicide bombings, attacks on both military and civilian targets, and eventually acquired de facto control over swathes of territory. A notably globally visible event was the 2014 Chibok schoolgirls abduction, when more than 275 girls were kidnapped by Boko Haram, drawing international condemnation and attention. (Britannica, 2024a; Britannica, 2024b)

In 2015, under military pressure and joint operations with neighboring countries, Boko Haram was pushed out of some strongholds. Around that time, the group pledged allegiance to ISIS (Islamic State). However, internal disputes about tactics, especially over indiscriminate violence against Muslim civilians, led to a schism. One faction, led by Abu Musab al-Barnawi, broke away and came to be recognized as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), while the original Boko Haram under Abubakar Shekau continued. ISWAP emphasized focus on military targets, governance in territory under its control, and ideological alignment with ISIS's international jihadist aims (Britannica, 2024a; Britannica, 2024b). Since then, the insurgency has shown resilience despite counter-operations. ISWAP in particular has exploited strategic retreat, use of asymmetric tactics, cross-border mobility (Lake Chad Basin), and disinformation. Shekau's death (reported in 2021) further shifted the internal power dynamics, boosting ISWAP's prominence (Britannica, 2024a).

4.2 Impact on civilians and humanitarian crisis

The insurgency's toll on civilians has been severe and multifaceted. Millions have been displaced internally; for example, reports estimate over **2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs)** in Northeast Nigeria, with many more across the Lake Chad region. The insurgency has also disrupted livelihoods, destroyed infrastructure, disrupted health services, and caused acute food insecurity (UN, 2022; World Bank, 2017). Children have suffered disproportionately: recruitment, abduction, use as suicide bombers, destruction of schools, and severe malnutrition are frequent (UNHCR, 2022; Crisis Group, 2021). For example, reports indicate that 244,000 children in Borno state suffered from acute malnutrition, and the daily death rate among malnourished children at certain times reached alarming levels (Crisis Group, 2021).

Humanitarian agencies consistently warn that millions are in need of assistance. As of mid-2022, over **8 million people** in the Borno, Adamawa and Yobe (often abbreviated as BAY) states needed humanitarian assistance, with around **600,000** facing emergency food insecurity. The lean season (before harvest) and other shocks (climate, flooding) exacerbate the crisis (UN News / OCHA, 2022; UN, 2022).

Vulnerable groups—women, children, older persons—have been especially affected. Older people in IDP camps have been largely “invisible” in assistance programming, lacking tailored care or access to essential medical treatment. (Amnesty International, 2020). Also, abducted women and children, survivors of sexual violence, those forcefully married to insurgents, or those who lost family and property, face long-term physical, psychological, and social trauma (UNFPA Reports).

4.3 Government and military responses

Nigeria’s government has implemented a variety of military operations, policy frameworks, and institutional responses to counter Boko Haram and ISWAP. Key among military operations is Operation Lafiya Dole, launched in 2015 (renaming from earlier operations such as “Operation Zaman Lafiya”) to defeat Boko Haram. The name Lafiya Dole (peace by force) signals a more forceful posture. (Vanguard, 2015)

Over the years, the military has been reorganized, leadership changed, theatres of operations restructured, and efforts made to improve logistics, intelligence capacity, and coordination among branches (army, air force, naval, etc.). For instance, changes in command (e.g., new Theatre Commanders) are periodically announced, aiming to inject renewed energy or better strategy into the counterinsurgency campaign. (NAN reports, e.g., Yahaya’s takeover in 2020). Beyond purely kinetic approaches, the government has also created or supported bodies for recovery, peace building and development in affected states. The **North-East Development Commission (NEDC)** is one such institution, established to rebuild infrastructure, public services, and restore governance in war-affected states (Borno, Adamawa, Yobe, others). Meanwhile, governors and state governments sometimes commission peace groups, provide local administrative support, contribute to community resilience measures, and aid local security initiatives (e.g., State Peace Groups procuring operational vehicles for security forces) (ThisDayLive, 2020).

However, criticisms persist about insufficient transparency, delays in funding, inadequate deployment of non-military components (e.g., civilian protection, development) and occasional human rights violations by security forces in the name of counterinsurgency. The military’s code of conduct and rules of engagement are sometimes promoted (e.g., in public statements or by UN Security Council praise), but their effectiveness on the ground is contested. (Vanguard, 2017; UN Security Council observations)

4.4 Role of international partners

International and regional actors have played significant roles in responses to the insurgency, both in humanitarian and security dimensions.

1. **Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF):** Comprising forces from Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Chad and Benin. This regional military formation engages in cross-border operations in the Lake Chad Basin to counter Boko Haram and ISWAP, aiming to deny insurgents safe havens and stop cross-border movement of fighters and supplies. (World Bank; Vanguard reports)
2. **United Nations and UN agencies:** UN agencies, including OCHA, UNICEF, UNHCR, UNFPA, etc., have provided humanitarian relief, advocacy, protection, and assistance. They document violations (recruitment of children, attacks on schools and aid workers), monitor displacement, coordinate the humanitarian response, and mobilise funding. Examples include pooled funds like the Nigeria Humanitarian Fund, as well as appeals for emergency nutrition assistance and food security (UN News, 2022; World Bank, 2017).
3. **Donor countries and external training / capacity-building:** Countries such as the UK have been involved in military training programmes and specialized support (e.g., Operation Turus, begun in response to Chibok abduction and offering technical assistance) (Operation Turus, UK–Nigeria cooperation). Development finance institutions such as the World Bank also contribute significant funding for reconstruction, livelihood restoration, health, education and stabilization. (World Bank, 2017)
4. **ECOWAS and regional programmes:** The Economic Community of West African States has implemented humanitarian assistance projects in Northern Nigeria (e.g., the ECOWAS stabilization programmes, cooperation with FMHADMSD and the World Food Programme) to assist displaced populations and improve food security. (ECOWAS press release, 2023)
5. **Workshops and regional cooperation on deradicalization, SSR etc.:** For instance, the UN Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee and agencies such as UNODC have co-organized workshops to build cooperation on screening, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of persons associated with Boko Haram/ISWAP in Lake Chad basin countries. (UN, 2022)

4.5. Dynamics of civilian communities in counterinsurgency

Civilian communities in the Northeast are not passive victims; they are active agents in shaping counterinsurgency dynamics and outcomes. Their dynamics include:

1. **Displacement, coping, and resilience:** Many communities have fled their homes, living in camps or informal settlements; others remain in conflict zones under threat. Displaced communities often depend on humanitarian aid, but also engage in informal economic activities, cross-border trade, and local coping strategies (e.g., farming when possible, reliance on remittances). Seasonal changes (rainy season making roads impassable), flooding, and food scarcity further strain these coping capacities. (Crisis Group, 2021; UN News / OCHA, 2022)

2. **Cooperation and pushback:** Some civilians cooperate with security forces—providing intelligence, assistance, or joining local security initiatives like the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF). Others feel alienated due to abuses, neglect, collateral damage, or because military operations hinder their movement or destroy livelihoods. In some places, civilians are trapped between insurgent control and military operations, suffering reprisals or forced recruitment from both sides (Crisis Group, 2021).
3. **Socio-economic marginalization and grievances:** Before and during the insurgency, the Northeast was among Nigeria’s poorest regions, with weak infrastructure, under-investment, limited educational facilities, poor health system, and high poverty. These conditions both amplify the effects of conflict and are exploited by insurgents for recruitment. Local grievances over land, ethnic or religious identity, competition over scarce resources, or perceived exclusion by the central authorities often feed insurgency or distrust of security forces.
4. **Role of local governance, informal authority, and community leadership:** Traditional rulers, religious leaders, community elders, and women’s groups play roles in shaping civilians’ responses or mediating between insurgents and military. They often facilitate negotiation for humanitarian access, mediate local conflicts, or influence how communities perceive military conduct.
5. **Information, narratives and legitimacy:** Civilians’ perceptions of legitimacy of both insurgents and state forces matter. When security forces are seen as protecting civilians, adhering to norms, reducing abuses, their legitimacy increases; where abuses, corruption, or neglect emerge, narratives of betrayal or state failure spread, undermining cooperation.

5.0. Results

This section presents findings organized by the study’s objectives: identifying key challenges to civil-military relations (CMR) in Northeastern Nigeria, assessing prospects and opportunities for strengthening CMR in the region, and exploring lessons for broader national COIN and CMR policy.

5.1. Key challenges affecting civil-military relations during counterinsurgency in Northeastern Nigeria

1. Civilian mistrust due to human rights abuses, extortion, and arbitrary arrests

There is widespread evidence that security forces, including the Nigerian military and forces like the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), are perceived by many civilians as responsible for abuses. Reports document arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, and mistreatment of girls and women who escaped from Boko Haram (e.g. being held for prolonged periods in barracks under suspicion of collaborator status) without due process.

Moreover, in the “Criminality of Counter-Insurgency in North-East Nigeria, 2012-2019,” researchers found that the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) has been implicated in torture, extra-judicial executions, and gender-based violence, feeding mistrust among civilians.

2. **Inadequate communication and lack of community engagement**

The literature shows that many COIN operations in the Northeast are carried out with limited prior community consultation or engagement. Civil communities often report that military operations are opaque, leave little room for civilians to voice concerns, and lack mechanisms for early warning or feedback. For example, studies of CJTF show that although volunteers serve as interfaces, lack of training and resources limit their ability to engage communities formally, and relationships are often informal and ad hoc, undermining trust.

3. **Civilian casualties, collateral damage, and displacement**

Civilian casualties constitute a major source of grievance. One recent study, *Counterinsurgency airstrike mishap, intelligence failure and civilian harm in northern Nigeria – 2014 to 2024*, documents that airstrikes by the Nigerian Air Force (NAF) have led to unintended deaths and property destruction, which erode trust in the military and amplify perceptions of impunity.

Also, the PNAS study “Mortality among populations affected by armed conflict in northeast Nigeria, 2016 to 2019” estimates that hundreds of thousands of excess deaths occurred during the period, many associated not only with direct combat but with displacement, malnutrition, and disruption of health services.

4. **Weak accountability and oversight**

Several studies and reports point to systemic weaknesses in accountability. Court-martials, military justice procedures, and oversight bodies often lack independence, transparency, or follow-through. In many cases, investigations into alleged abuses do not lead to prosecutions or redress. For example, the Nigerian Human Rights Commission (NHRC) probed alleged secret abortions program tied to the military and detained alleged collaborators, but findings have been contested and access to full data limited.

Also, the “Nigerian Military Justice System: The Need for Its Civilianization” study argues that many military justice structures remain under the command control of military authorities, with insufficient civilian oversight.

5. **Coordination problems between military, civilian authorities, and humanitarian actors**

The relationships among military forces, civil administrators, and humanitarian actors are often strained. Coordination around displacement camps, for example, is complicated by the fact that military operations could restrict access, and that humanitarian actors raise alarms about civilian harm while operational security concerns prevent transparency. Studies of CJTF show that sometimes basic tasks (e.g., protecting IDP camps) fall in gaps between civilian authorities and military oversight, or among different agencies without unified command or standard operating procedures.

4.2. Assess the prospects and opportunities for strengthening civil-military relations in the region

1. Establishment of community-based security frameworks (Civilian JTF / CJTF)

The CJTF is repeatedly cited as one of the most promising bridges between communities and formal security forces. Studies show that CJTF volunteers, although informal, have played important roles in intelligence gathering, securing lost or retaken areas, and helping guard checkpoints and protect properties. For example, *The Role of the Civilian Joint Task Force in the Improvement of Security in Borno State* shows that despite limitations in equipment and remuneration, CJTF actions have had real impact in improving local safety.

The “Civilian Joint Task Force and Countering Violent Extremism in the Northeast, Nigeria” (ASRIC, 2024) argues that these frameworks need legal constitutionality to enhance legitimacy and maintain accountability.

2. Improved training on human rights and rules of engagement

There is evidence that increased training and clearer rules of engagement correlate with fewer civilian harm incidents. The airstrike mishap study (Ogbozor, 2025) underscores intelligence failure and lack of strict targeting protocols, recommending more rigorous training in intelligence verification and non-combatant protection protocols. ([Taylor & Francis Online](#)) Also, the study of military professionalism in *African Security Review* shows that where officers are trained to adhere to professional norms and human rights obligations, trust among civilians improves.

3. Expanding civil-military cooperation programs (medical outreaches, infrastructure repair, etc.)

Non-kinetic operations—such as medical outreach, rebuilding schools or health centres, providing clean water—have been noted in several local and NGO reports as ways the military and civil authorities can build legitimacy. While rigorous quantitative studies are fewer, field studies in Borno indicate that when operations include visible benefits to civilian infrastructure, cooperation and confidence increase. For example, in Udegbumam & Akale (2025) the evaluation of Operation Hadin Kai shows some socio-economic development in certain communities when civil society, traditional rulers, and humanitarian actors are included in planning and implementation.

4. Institutional reforms within the Nigerian Armed Forces

Some reforms have been proposed or initiated: better oversight mechanisms, emphasis on human rights in training curricula, reviewing rules of engagement, and improved logistics and intelligence infrastructure. The MNJTF appraisal (Dauda & Ukaeje, 2024) identified that better funding, interoperable equipment, and improved cooperation among troop contributing countries are necessary but also that reforms in internal command structures and joint planning can enhance performance and reduce civilian harm.

Also, military justice reforms (e.g. civilianization proposals) are being discussed in academic and policy circles as a way to make accountability mechanisms more transparent and credible.

5. Opportunities for integrating non-kinetic approaches (dialogue, DDR programs)

Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs have been less prominent in the literature for Boko Haram/ISWAP but are recognized as potential avenues. Dialogue with community and religious leaders, rehabilitation of former fighters or those coerced into insurgent groups, psychosocial support for victims, and reconciliation mechanisms are often cited as missing or underdeveloped. The transitional justice legal framework article (Mai-Lafia, Amupitan & Oyelami, 2025) argues for victim-centered methodologies, reparations, truth commissions, and reconciliation to address grievances.

4.3. Explore lessons from Northeastern Nigeria for broader national counterinsurgency and CMR policy

1. Community-centered approaches are vital for intelligence gathering

Northeastern experience shows that local communities generate much of the actionable intelligence: CJTF volunteers, civilians hiding or reporting sleeper cells, and local leaders are often the first to have knowledge of insurgent movements. Without community trust, intelligence gathering is compromised. The vigilante studies (e.g., Agbiboa, 2020) emphasize that communities willing to work with security forces are essential to early warning and preventing surprise attacks.

Conversely, when military operations harm civilians, intelligence sharing collapses, which allows insurgents safe havens. The airstrike mishap study and others show that civilian harm significantly erodes civilians' willingness to cooperate.

2. Strengthening democratic oversight of the military enhances legitimacy

Oversight through civilian bodies (parliaments, human rights commissions), independent investigations, transparency in conduct of operations, and public accountability have been flagged repeatedly as critical. The military justice reform literature, and the transitional justice article, both argue that legitimate oversight contributes to restoring trust, especially after periods of abuse.

Public perception studies (e.g. Gidado, 2024) show that civilians consider lack of oversight as among the biggest deficits in current CMR: that is, even if military capability is good, if civilians believe the military acts without accountability, legitimacy suffers.

3. Need for inter-agency coordination (military, police, DSS, humanitarian actors)

One lesson is that counterinsurgency cannot be solely a military affair. Coordination with police, intelligence (e.g., the Department of State Services, DSS), local government officials, NGOs/humanitarian actors, and international partners is essential. For example, the MNJTF appraisal found "operational constraints" tied to poor interoperability, lack of shared communication, and divided command among contributing countries and between military and civilian bodies.

Also, humanitarian actors consistently call for better access and communication with military operations to protect civilians and deliver aid without risking security.

4. Reforms in military justice and accountability systems

Lessons include that the military must develop credible, independent mechanisms for investigating allegations of wrongdoing, with consistent enforcement. The push for civilianization of military justice is one manifestation.

Transition justice and legal reforms are also critical: victim-oriented reparation, truth-telling, and legal redress—these are not just moral imperatives but also practical tools for rebuilding state legitimacy and preventing cycles of revenge and insurgency.

5. **Lessons applicable to other conflict-prone areas (Northwest banditry, Niger Delta)**

Although contexts differ, many of the same challenges (civilian harm, weak oversight, policing vs military roles, community cooperation) recur in Northwest Nigeria (banditry, kidnapping) and Niger Delta (militancy and resource conflict). The success (or failure) of CJTF-type community-based security, rule of law, oversight, non-kinetic programs, human rights training etc., in Northeast Nigeria offers models or cautionary tales. For instance, the findings on CJTF show that unregulated community vigilante groups can become predatory (settling scores, extortion) if not integrated or properly supervised.

4.4. **Summary of Key Results**

1. Civil-military relations are hindered by human rights abuses, inadequate engagement, civilian harm, weak accountability, and poor coordination.
2. Opportunities exist, particularly from community-based frameworks and reforms, but these are often under-resourced or under-institutionalized.
3. Broader lessons stress the centrality of legitimacy (informed by oversight and engagement), integrating non-military measures into COIN, and ensuring that military justice reforms and inter-agency cooperation are not peripheral but core to policy design.

6.0. **Discussion**

This discussion interprets the study's findings in light of broader counterinsurgency (COIN) scholarship and comparative experience. It is organized by the study objectives: first interrogating the challenges to civil-military relations (CMR) identified in Section 5, then evaluating the prospects for strengthening CMR, and finally drawing lessons for national COIN policy and governance reform.

6.1. **[Challenge] mistrust, civilian harm, accountability, and coordination**

A recurrent finding of this study is that civilian mistrust — driven by abuses, arbitrary arrests, extortion, and perceived impunity — is central to the fragility of CMR in Nigeria's Northeast. This aligns squarely with a robust body of comparative evidence showing that civilian harm by state forces undermines COIN by destroying the very popular legitimacy and information flows that are essential to defeating insurgents. Quantitative and micro-level analyses from Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate that civilian casualties produced by counterinsurgent actions often produce measurable increases in insurgent violence and reduce civilian cooperation with security forces (Condra & Shapiro, 2010; Lyall, 2019). For example, Condra and Shapiro's analysis of ISAF

operations in Afghanistan found that coalition-inflicted civilian casualties were associated with subsequent increases in insurgent attacks, consistent with revenge and propaganda mechanisms whereby insurgents exploit civilian harm to recruit and mobilize (Condra & Shapiro, 2010). Similarly, Lyall's cross-conflict analysis shows that patterns of indiscriminate violence correlate with reductions in humanitarian assistance and community cooperation, both of which weaken state efforts to stabilize contested areas (Lyall, 2019).

Kalyvas's argument that violence is strategic and that selective versus indiscriminate violence is patterned by control of territory helps explain dynamics in Nigeria's Northeast (Kalyvas, 2006). Where the military's operations produce indiscriminate civilian harm (for instance through poorly controlled airstrikes, checkpoints that facilitate extortion, or arbitrary detentions), civilians are more likely to withdraw cooperation, harbor grievances, or tacitly tolerate insurgent presence. The Nigerian case conforms to this logic: documented incidents of collateral damage and allegations of abuses erode civilians' willingness to inform or collaborate with the military, which in turn degrades intelligence quality and increases operational risk.

Comparative Sahel experiences amplify similar conclusions. Research on counterinsurgency governance in Mali and the broader Sahel demonstrates that militarized responses without parallel governance and protection measures have often backfired—fueling local grievances and creating conditions for jihadist expansion (Charbonneau, 2021; Bertrand, 2024). These studies show that even well-resourced interventions can founder if they fail to maintain civilian protection and to provide credible, accountable institutions. Thus, the problem in Nigeria is not unique but is part of a recurring pattern in COIN theatres: military force without legitimacy-producing governance is strategically self-defeating.

Coordination problems between the military, civilian authorities, and humanitarian actors also emerged as a core challenge. This mirrors findings from Iraq and Afghanistan where inter-agency friction (between military, police, intelligence, and development/humanitarian actors) reduced the capacity to deliver “whole-of-government” responses and undermined civilian trust (Feaver & Kohn, 2012). In Nigeria, restricted humanitarian access during operations, ambiguous lines of authority over IDP protection, and unclear protocols for civilian complaint and redress produce gaps that insurgents can exploit.

Finally, weak accountability and opacity in military justice reinforce perceptions of impunity. The literature on democratic civil-military oversight shows that without transparent, independent mechanisms for investigating abuses, trust cannot be rebuilt (Huntington, 1957; Janowitz, 1960). In practical terms, accountability deficits in Nigeria have functioned as both a normative problem and a strategic liability: they alienate constituencies, become focal points for insurgent propaganda, and impede post-conflict reconciliation.

6.2. [prospect] community engagement, CJTF, and non-kinetic strategies

The results also point to credible prospects for improving CMR—most importantly through community-centred approaches and calibrated integration of community security initiatives. Empirical work on Nigeria’s Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) highlights that these groups can serve as critical sources of local intelligence, area knowledge, and immediate protective capacity (Agbibo, 2021; CIVIC, 2018). Where the CJTF has a constructive relationship with the military and community leaders, it has produced gains in local security, recovery of territory, and early warning. These local vigilante networks’ embeddedness in communities gives them legitimacy and access that regular forces often lack.

However, the CJTF’s benefits must be assessed alongside important risks. Vigilante groups frequently operate with limited formal training, weak oversight, and varying degrees of integration with formal justice systems; scholars warn that without strong regulation, such actors can become predatory, commit abuses, or entrench local power imbalances (Agbibo, 2021; UNIDIR, 2024). The CJTF experience is therefore a cautionary case: community security frameworks can be indispensable for intelligence and protection but must be institutionalized with clear mandates, oversight, remuneration, and pathways for integration into state security or local policing structures to mitigate the risk of militarization and local human rights violations.

This study’s findings also reinforce the empirical lesson that development-focused, non-kinetic interventions—such as infrastructure repair, medical outreach, and livelihood programs—can build legitimacy and reduce the grievances exploited by insurgents (Kilcullen, 2010). Comparative studies from Iraq and Afghanistan show that civil affairs programs, reconstruction and rule-of-law efforts are central to building long-term stability where they are credible and sustained (Kilcullen, 2010; Feaver & Kohn, 2012). In Nigeria, initiatives such as the North-East Development Commission (NEDC) and coordinated humanitarian-development programming represent potential vehicles for such non-kinetic approaches—but these programs must be timely, visible, and closely coordinated with protection efforts to have the intended stabilizing effect (World Bank, 2017; UN OCHA, 2022).

Improved human rights training and clearer rules of engagement are also practical prospects. Evidence from other theatres indicates that professionalization and doctrinal emphasis on minimizing civilian harm reduce incidents and improve civilian cooperation (Lyal, 2019). But reform requires more than training: it needs structural changes in doctrine, incentives, and accountability to ensure that protection of civilians is operationalized in planning, targeting, and post-operation remedies.

6.3. (Lessons): whole-of-society COIN, professionalism, rule of law

The principal lesson from Northeastern Nigeria is that effective COIN must be a **whole-of-society** endeavour—one that combines credible security operations with governance, economic

opportunity, community engagement, and robust accountability. Comparative evidence from the Sahel and Afghanistan shows that narrow reliance on force is insufficient; legitimacy and local buy-in are preconditions for sustainable success (Charbonneau, 2021; Condra & Shapiro, 2010). Military professionalism, anchored in rule-of-law commitments and civilian oversight, emerges as non-negotiable. Where security forces operate under clear, enforceable constraints and are subject to independent scrutiny, legitimacy improves and the propensity for counterproductive abuses diminishes (Huntington, 1957; Janowitz, 1960). For Nigeria, this implies strengthening parliamentary oversight, empowering independent human rights institutions, reforming aspects of military justice, and ensuring transparent investigation and sanctioning of wrongdoing.

The implications for governance and peacebuilding are significant. Rebuilding trust requires transitional justice mechanisms—reparations, truth-telling, and judicial redress—that address victim grievances while demonstrating impartiality and fairness. Moreover, inter-agency coordination must be institutionalised: shared information systems, joint planning cells, and agreed protocols for humanitarian access and civilian protection can reduce friction and better protect civilians (Feaver & Kohn, 2012).

Finally, lessons from the Northeast generalise to other Nigerian contexts—such as the Northwest’s banditry and the Niger Delta’s militancy—where similar dynamics of civilian harm, impunity, and governance deficits are evident. Any national COIN policy should therefore emphasise community engagement, civilian protection, accountability, and development as central pillars rather than peripheral add-ons.

In short, the Northeast’s experience reinforces a core COIN axiom: legitimacy and protection of the population are not epiphenomena; they are operational priorities. Military successes that ignore civilian protection, oversight, and integrated governance risk short-term gains becoming long-term problems. Conversely, institutional reforms that professionalize the military, integrate community actors responsibly, and place human security at the centre of COIN strategy offer the most promising pathway to durable stability.

7.0. Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study examined civil–military relations (CMR) within the counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in Northeastern Nigeria against Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). Three main conclusions emerge. First, the persistence of mistrust between civilians and the military undermines COIN effectiveness. Reports of arbitrary arrests, extortion, extrajudicial killings, and collateral civilian casualties have eroded community trust and discouraged intelligence sharing, replicating patterns observed in other insurgency contexts such as Afghanistan and Iraq (Condra & Shapiro, 2010; Lyall, 2019).

Second, although security forces have achieved tactical victories, weak accountability and coordination gaps with civilian authorities, humanitarian actors, and local communities have reduced operational legitimacy. Without reliable mechanisms for oversight, the military risks perpetuating cycles of abuse and radicalization (Kalyvas, 2006; Charbonneau, 2021).

Third, prospects exist for strengthening CMR through community-based frameworks (e.g., Civilian Joint Task Force [CJTF]), expanded civil-military cooperation programs, and institutional reforms emphasizing professionalism and human rights compliance. However, such initiatives require careful regulation to avoid empowering unaccountable armed actors or reinforcing militarization of society (Agbibo, 2021).

Finally, lessons from the Northeast demonstrate the need for a whole-of-society approach to COIN—one that integrates security, governance, socio-economic development, and human rights protections. Without embedding legitimacy and accountability at the core of operations, Nigeria's response risks reproducing instability across other regions facing violent conflict.

7.2. Policy Recommendations

Based on these findings, several policy recommendations are advanced.

1. Strengthen civil–military dialogue forums

Institutionalized platforms for structured dialogue between security forces, community leaders, civil society, and humanitarian actors should be prioritized. Such forums can help address grievances, reduce misinformation, and facilitate intelligence sharing. Comparative experiences demonstrate that participatory dialogue builds trust and enhances operational legitimacy (Feaver & Kohn, 2012). In Nigeria, forums could be coordinated by state peacebuilding agencies in collaboration with the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to ensure inclusivity.

2. Institutionalize human rights training and accountability mechanisms

Integrating comprehensive human rights and rules of engagement training into military doctrine is essential. Evidence shows that systematic training combined with enforcement reduces the likelihood of civilian harm in COIN environments (Lyll, 2019). Furthermore, accountability must extend beyond training to include independent investigation of abuses, transparent reporting, and accessible complaint mechanisms for civilians. Strengthening military justice systems and parliamentary oversight would bolster public confidence and align Nigeria with international humanitarian standards (Janowitz, 1960; Huntington, 1957).

3. Build integrated security frameworks involving civilians

Community-based security groups such as the CJTF demonstrate the importance of local knowledge and participation. However, integration must be formalized: volunteers should be registered, trained, supervised, and provided with clear mandates under state authority.

Partnerships between military, police, and vetted community actors can improve early warning and reduce insurgent infiltration. At the same time, strict oversight is needed to mitigate risks of abuses and ensure compliance with the rule of law (Agbiboa, 2021; CIVIC, 2018).

4. Develop socio-economic programs addressing root causes

Military operations alone cannot resolve the conflict. Programs that target youth unemployment, poverty, education, and infrastructure deficits are central to addressing the grievances exploited by Boko Haram and ISWAP. Studies show that non-kinetic interventions—such as livelihood support, vocational training, and community development—enhance legitimacy and reduce insurgent recruitment (Kilcullen, 2010; World Bank, 2017). The North-East Development Commission (NEDC) should coordinate with local governments and international donors to ensure that aid and development projects are transparent, inclusive, and conflict-sensitive.

7.3 Directions for Future Research

While this study highlights important dynamics of CMR in Northeastern Nigeria, several areas merit further scholarly attention:

1. Comparative analyses of CMR in Nigeria's Northeast with other African insurgencies (e.g., Mali, Somalia, Mozambique) could generate cross-regional lessons on balancing force and legitimacy.
2. Micro-level studies using surveys and interviews with civilians, military personnel, and CJTF members would provide granular insights into perceptions of trust, legitimacy, and cooperation.
3. Gendered perspectives on CMR remain underexplored; women's experiences of both military protection and abuse in conflict zones deserve systematic analysis.
4. Post-conflict reintegration of vigilante groups and ex-combatants requires closer study, as mishandled demobilization risks future insecurity.
5. Finally, longitudinal studies on the impact of reforms—such as human rights training, accountability mechanisms, and socio-economic interventions—would help assess their effectiveness over time.

7.4 Conclusion

Civil–military relations lie at the heart of Nigeria's counterinsurgency campaign in the Northeast. While significant challenges remain—particularly in the areas of mistrust, accountability, and civilian protection—there are also promising opportunities to recalibrate approaches toward a more people-centered security paradigm. By institutionalizing civil–military dialogue, embedding human rights and accountability into doctrine, integrating civilian actors responsibly, and addressing socio-economic drivers of insurgency, Nigeria can strengthen both its operational effectiveness and its legitimacy.

The broader lesson is clear: counterinsurgency is not won solely through battlefield victories but through the trust, cooperation, and wellbeing of the population. For Nigeria, embedding this

principle into both policy and practice is essential for achieving sustainable peace and national security.

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