



Research Article

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Received: 07 July 2026 / Accepted: 31 August 2026 / Published: September 2026

Strategic Partnership or Strategic Dependence? A Critical Analysis of United States-Nigeria Military Cooperation in the 21st Century

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36941/mjss-2026-0139>

Abstract

The rise in security threats in Nigeria, like banditry, terrorism, and even claims of Christian genocide, has led to a deeper military partnership between the United States and Nigeria in the 21st century. This study, therefore, investigated whether United States-Nigeria military cooperation in the 21st century represented a genuine strategic partnership or a pattern of strategic dependence. Grounded in Realist theory, the study viewed bilateral military relations as instruments through which states achieve their national interests, enhance security, and project power. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study relied on thematic content analysis of secondary data from defense agreements, policy documents, official communications, security reports, and relevant scholarly literature. The study found that while military cooperation has enhanced Nigeria's operational capacity against insurgency and transnational crime, it simultaneously reinforces structural dependence through aid conditionalities, technology gaps, and reliance on foreign military hardware and intelligence. Additionally, the study found that the U.S. focuses on regional stability, counterterrorism, and geopolitical influence, while Nigeria is more concerned with regime security and internal stability. The study concluded that the relationship reflects a pragmatic but asymmetrical strategic arrangement. It recommended strengthening indigenous defense production, institutional reforms, and diversified partnerships to mitigate dependence and promote a more balanced security cooperation framework.

Keywords: Strategic partnership, strategic dependence, military cooperation, security, national security.

1. Introduction

Nigeria's security landscape in the 21st century has been marked by ongoing threats such as terrorism, insurgency, banditry, and communal strife. These issues, especially the actions of armed Fulani herdsmen, bandits, Boko Haram, and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), have put immense strain on Nigeria's military and security forces. In light of this, Nigeria has turned to external partnerships to bolster its counterterrorism efforts, with the United States becoming a key ally. The military collaboration between the U.S. and Nigeria has included sharing intelligence, providing

counterterrorism training, logistical support, and supplying military equipment to enhance Nigeria's ability to tackle insurgent groups (Nwankwo & Okafor, 2025; Ogunnoiki, 2023; Okeke & Eme, 2024).

While this partnership has helped improve Nigeria's counterinsurgency operations, experts have voiced concerns about the implications of Nigeria's increasing dependence on foreign military aid. Reliance on external intelligence systems, advanced surveillance technologies, and specialized training could expose vulnerabilities within Nigeria's defense framework and might compromise the country's strategic independence. It is also noteworthy that heavy reliance on foreign security support could hinder Nigeria's capacity to independently craft and execute sustainable national security strategies, raising doubts about whether this relationship is a true partnership or a sign of growing strategic dependence.

To the U.S., there is a renewed focus on the alleged violence against Christian communities in Nigeria, especially among political figures linked to former President Donald Trump. This has led to calls for the U.S. to take stronger action against what some are calling "Christian persecution." Meanwhile, the Nigerian government argues that the security crisis impacts both Christians and Muslims and is largely fueled by terrorism and criminal activity. However, these narratives have influenced how the international community views the situation and shaped policy discussions on the growing external pressure related to humanitarian or religious issues, and the increase in foreign influence over Nigeria's internal security management. It is against this backdrop that this study critically analyzed whether military cooperation between the U.S. and Nigeria in the 21st century is a mutually beneficial strategic partnership or if it is evolving into a pattern of dependence that could impact Nigeria's sovereignty, defense autonomy, and long-term security strategy.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Concept of Strategic Partnership

The concept of a strategic partnership involves forming a long-term, cooperative relationship between countries that share similar political, economic, or security goals. These partnerships often lead to coordinated policies, military collaboration, intelligence sharing, and joint security efforts aimed at tackling common threats (Williams, 2021). In contemporary international relations, countries frequently forge such partnerships to address transnational security issues like terrorism, insurgency, and organized crime.

In Africa, Nigeria holds a crucial position due to its large population, economic power, and involvement in regional peacekeeping missions. As a result, the United States views Nigeria as a vital ally in fostering regional stability and combating terrorism in West Africa (Adebajo, 2020). This partnership has been solidified through various initiatives, including training programs, intelligence sharing, arms transfers, and joint military exercises organized by the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM).

2.2 Concept of Strategic Dependence

Strategic dependence describes a situation where one state relies excessively on another for essential security resources such as military technology, intelligence, logistics, or financial support. Scholars note that when there is an imbalance of power between states, it often produces a dependency pattern whereby the weaker state relies heavily on its stronger counterpart for defense capabilities (Aning & Pokoo, 2014). In these circumstances, the more powerful state can subtly influence the security policies or strategic choices of the dependent state. In examining U.S.-Nigeria relations, some experts suggest that Nigeria's dependence on American intelligence systems, military training, and security support in combating insurgency could foster a sense of strategic dependence.

2.3 Concept of Military Cooperation

Military cooperation refers to the process by which countries work together to strengthen their defense capabilities and address common security challenges. This cooperation covers areas such as arms transfers, intelligence exchanges, joint military exercises, and the provision of military training. In the 21st century, Nigeria has intensified its military collaboration with the United States, largely in response to the growing threat of terrorism, banditry, and herdsmen attacks, particularly from groups such as Boko Haram and other extremist factions.

The U.S. has assisted Nigeria through various capacity-building programs, intelligence sharing, and the supply of military equipment to bolster counterterrorism efforts (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2020). However, despite these collaborative initiatives, Nigeria continues to grapple with significant insecurity, prompting important discussions about the effectiveness of this partnership and its implications for the future. While some scholars view this relationship as a mutually beneficial strategic alliance, others caution that it may lead Nigeria toward increasing dependence on outside security support. This ongoing debate underscores the necessity of critically assessing whether military cooperation between the United States and Nigeria constitutes a genuine strategic partnership or is instead setting the stage for a pattern of strategic reliance.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the theory of Realism, which is widely used in international relations to explain how countries pursue power, security, and national interests within a world lacking a central governing authority. Realism posits that because there is no overarching authority to regulate interactions among states, states must depend on their own strengths and form strategic alliances to ensure their survival and security (Waltz, 1979). Scholars such as Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz have further developed this theory, emphasizing that international politics is essentially about the competition for power and influence.

According to Realism, states cooperate primarily to advance their own national interests rather than out of goodwill. This explains why military alliances and security partnerships are often established as tactical responses to perceived threats and geopolitical factors (Mearsheimer, 2014). In this light, the military collaboration between the United States and Nigeria can be understood as a strategic move motivated by the security needs of both nations. For the United States, working with Nigeria aligns with broader objectives such as combating terrorism, ensuring stability in West Africa, and safeguarding its strategic interests in the region.

Nigeria, in turn, seeks military support, intelligence sharing, and training to strengthen its capacity to address security challenges such as insurgency and violent extremism (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2020). Realism also acknowledges the power imbalances that exist in international relations. Given the notable disparities in military strength and technological resources between the two countries, their relationship may embody both a strategic partnership and elements of dependence. Realism therefore serves as a valuable lens for examining the motivations, power dynamics, and implications of military cooperation between the United States and Nigeria in the twenty-first century.

4. Research Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research design to examine the nature and implications of United States-Nigeria military cooperation in the twenty-first century. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focuses on policies, strategic relations, and security cooperation that require interpretative analysis rather than numerical data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study relied on secondary sources such as academic books, journal articles, policy documents, government publications, and reports from international organizations. Additional materials from research institutions and credible media sources were also used to capture recent developments in the

relationship.

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify key themes relating to strategic interests, forms of military assistance, and implications for Nigeria's security autonomy. This approach enabled the study to assess whether the cooperation represents a strategic partnership or an emerging pattern of strategic dependence.

5. Analysis and Discussion of Findings

5.1 Strategic Interests Driving U.S.-Nigeria Military Cooperation

Table 1: Strategic Interests Driving U.S.-Nigeria Military Cooperation.

Strategic Interest	U.S. Motivation	Nigeria's Motivation
Counterterrorism	Prevent expansion of global terrorist networks	Strengthen capacity to defeat Boko Haram and ISWAP
Regional stability	Maintain security in West Africa and the Sahel	Preserve Nigeria's leadership role in regional security
Military modernization	Expand defense partnerships and interoperability	Acquire advanced military equipment and training
Economic security	Protect energy interests and maritime trade routes	Secure national infrastructure and economic assets
Humanitarian and political concerns	Address international concerns about violence and religious conflict	Gain diplomatic and military support to address insecurity

Source: Compiled by the Researcher, 2026.

Table 1 revealed that military cooperation between the U.S. and Nigeria is shaped by both shared and distinct strategic interests. While Nigeria seeks external support to strengthen its military capabilities against insurgency and insecurity, the United States is focused on broader geopolitical goals, including counterterrorism, regional stability, and the expansion of its influence in Africa. Discussions around Trump's rhetoric on intervention illustrate how humanitarian concerns, such as the alleged violence faced by Christians, can intertwine with security partnerships and shape the nature of military relations between the two countries. This partnership therefore reflects a complex blend of security, political, and economic interests that continue to shape U.S.-Nigeria military cooperation in the 21st century.

The findings further revealed that the military partnership between the United States and Nigeria is driven by a mix of strategic interests, including counterterrorism, regional stability, the safeguarding of economic interests, and the enhancement of geopolitical influence in West Africa. Both nations derive benefits from this collaboration, although each partner's motivations often reflect different national priorities.

The evolving security landscape in Nigeria, particularly due to the activities of Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province, has played a central role in shaping this alliance. A key factor driving cooperation is the emphasis on counterterrorism and the stabilization of regional security. Nigeria occupies a pivotal role in West Africa and has confronted sustained insurgent violence since the emergence of Boko Haram in 2009. The United States has been instrumental in providing intelligence sharing, surveillance technologies, financial aid, and military training to strengthen Nigeria's counterinsurgency efforts (Anzizi, 2025), enhancing the Nigerian military's capacity to conduct targeted operations against terrorist groups and disrupt insurgent networks (Adeyeye et al., 2023).

Closely related to this objective is the U.S. strategic interest in curbing the spread of transnational

terrorism across the Sahel and Gulf of Guinea regions. Instability in Nigeria carries wider implications for security in West Africa, as extremist groups frequently operate across borders (Ohwo, 2025). As the most populous nation in Africa and a key regional player, Nigeria is vital to maintaining stability in the area, and U.S. military collaboration is therefore partly aimed at strengthening the regional security framework. Another key strategic interest concerns defense cooperation and military modernization, with the United States providing Nigeria advanced military hardware and training, including the sale of A-29 Super Tucano aircraft and AH-1Z attack helicopters (Transparency International Defence & Security, 2025), designed to enhance Nigeria's aerial surveillance and counterinsurgency capacity while strengthening U.S. defense partnerships across Africa.

Recent geopolitical shifts have significantly affected the strategic dynamics of this cooperation. In 2025 and 2026, Nigeria's security crisis gained renewed international attention following claims from Donald Trump's administration that extremist groups were responsible for widespread killings of Christians in the country. These assertions sparked calls within the U.S. for stronger intervention to address what some policymakers labeled as Christian persecution.

While Nigerian officials maintained that the violence affects both Christians and Muslims, the controversy heightened diplomatic engagement and security collaboration between the two nations, illustrating how humanitarian and religious narratives can intertwine with broader strategic interests to shape military cooperation (Egbuta, 2025; Codesria Bulletin, 2025). Economic and geopolitical factors also play a crucial role, as Nigeria's stability, given its status as a leading African economy and key energy producer, is regarded as vital for global economic and energy security, particularly in combating piracy and safeguarding maritime trade routes in the Gulf of Guinea.

5.2 U.S.-Nigeria Military Cooperation and Nigeria's Sovereignty

Table 2: Perceived Impact of U.S.-Nigeria Military Cooperation on Nigeria's Sovereignty.

Dimension	Positive Impact	Sovereignty Concern
Military capability	Improved counterterrorism training and operational capacity	Dependence on foreign military technology
Intelligence operations	Enhanced surveillance and intelligence sharing	External influence in security planning
Strategic policy	Strengthened bilateral security partnership	Possible pressure on Nigeria's security decisions
International relations	Increased global support for counterterrorism efforts	Risk of external intervention narratives

Source: Compiled by the Researcher, 2026.

Table 2 shows that military cooperation between the U.S. and Nigeria has strengthened Nigeria's capacity to combat terrorism, while simultaneously raising important questions about the country's strategic autonomy and sovereignty. Although the collaboration has enhanced Nigeria's military capabilities, the surrounding international political dynamics, particularly ongoing discussions about religious violence in the country, highlight the fragile balance between beneficial strategic partnership and the risk of excessive dependence. The evidence indicates that while U.S.-Nigeria military cooperation is primarily collaborative in nature, over-reliance on external support could have lasting effects on Nigeria's sovereignty and its ability to shape its own security policies.

Military cooperation between the U.S. and Nigeria in the 21st century has generated both strategic benefits and concerns regarding Nigeria's sovereignty. This partnership, involving intelligence sharing, counterterrorism training, military equipment transfers, and operational support, has considerably strengthened Nigeria's ability to confront insurgency and terrorism. U.S. military aid has improved

Nigeria's counterinsurgency efforts, particularly through surveillance technology, intelligence sharing, and specialized training for Nigerian security forces (Ogunnoiki, 2023; Okeke & Eme, 2024), resulting in improved operational effectiveness against extremist groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province. At the same time, growing reliance on external military support raises questions about Nigeria's sovereignty and strategic independence, as dependence on foreign intelligence systems and advanced military technologies could hinder the country's ability to develop and execute independent national security strategies (Akinyemi & Ajayi, 2022). Nwankwo and Okafor (2025) similarly contended that while foreign military partnerships can enhance tactical capabilities, over-reliance on outside support might gradually undermine local defense institutions and foster a pattern of strategic dependence.

The geopolitical landscape of 2025 and 2026, particularly with the resurgence of former President Donald Trump, brought renewed attention to alleged violence against Christian communities in Nigeria and generated calls for a stronger U.S. role in addressing the country's security challenges. While the Nigerian government maintains that the violence stems primarily from terrorism, banditry, and crime affecting both Christians and Muslims, these external narratives have reignited debates about the potential for foreign intervention in Nigeria's internal security matters (Eze & Adeniyi, 2024). Ibrahim and Salihu (2026) note that the increasing politicization of Nigeria's security challenges on the global stage could intensify external pressure on the Nigerian government and enhance foreign influence over domestic security management.

Nevertheless, evidence indicates that the Nigerian government has retained formal control over security operations conducted in collaboration with the United States, with most U.S. military activities in Nigeria, including training programs and intelligence support, taking place with the approval and involvement of Nigerian authorities (Ogunnoiki, 2023). Even so, some analysts contend that the broader strategic context, including international pressure related to humanitarian and religious issues, may subtly influence Nigeria's security policy choices (Ibrahim & Salihu, 2026).

5.3 Nigeria's Reliance on U.S. Military Support as a Pattern of Strategic Dependence

Table 3: Indicators of Strategic Dependence in U.S.-Nigeria Military Cooperation.

Indicator	Evidence from Empirical Studies	Implication
Military training programmes	Nigerian officers trained through IMET and other U.S. programmes (Iwuoha, 2019)	Reliance on foreign military training
Acquisition of military technology	Purchase of A-29 Super Tucano aircraft and other equipment (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2020)	Dependence on external defence technology
Intelligence cooperation	U.S. support in surveillance and intelligence gathering (Onuoha, 2020)	Reliance on foreign intelligence capacity
Counterterrorism operations	Joint security initiatives against Boko Haram (Iwuoha, 2019)	External support shaping security operations
Persistent security challenges	Continued insurgency and insecurity (Onuoha, 2020)	Limits of foreign assistance

Source: Compiled by the Researcher, 2026.

Table 3 revealed that Nigeria's reliance on U.S. military support reflects elements of strategic dependence, particularly in the areas of military technology, intelligence cooperation, and training, even as Nigeria retains formal sovereignty over its security policies and defense

decisions. The relationship between both countries can therefore best be understood as a strategic partnership with emerging patterns of security dependence, in which cooperation strengthens Nigeria's military capacity while also creating certain structural dependencies within its security framework.

Table 4: Indicators of Strategic Partnership and Strategic Dependence in U.S.-Nigeria Military Cooperation.

Dimension	Evidence of Strategic Partnership	Evidence of Strategic Dependence
Counterterrorism operations	Joint intelligence sharing and military training	Dependence on U.S. surveillance and intelligence systems
Military technology	Access to advanced weapons and equipment	Limited development of indigenous defense capacity
Operational support	Collaborative operations against extremist groups	External influence in security planning
International politics	Diplomatic and security cooperation	Risk of intervention pressures linked to humanitarian narratives

Source: Compiled by the Researcher, 2026.

Table 4 revealed that Nigeria's reliance on U.S. military support reflects a hybrid relationship characterized by both partnership and dependence. While U.S. assistance has significantly strengthened Nigeria's ability to address security threats, the increasing involvement of external actors, particularly in the context of Trump's intervention rhetoric regarding alleged Christian persecution, demonstrates how foreign security assistance can influence domestic security discourse and strategic decision-making. Consequently, Nigeria's continued reliance on U.S. military support may gradually produce elements of strategic dependence unless accompanied by sustained investment in domestic defense capacity and institutional reforms.

The findings further revealed that Nigeria's reliance on United States military assistance reflects certain elements of strategic dependence, although the bilateral relationship is often officially described as a strategic partnership. Strategic dependence occurs when a state increasingly relies on external actors for critical security resources such as military equipment, intelligence, training, and operational support, which may limit its capacity for independent security decision-making (Akinola, 2021). In Nigeria's case, empirical evidence suggests that the country has increasingly depended on U.S. military support to confront major security threats such as Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, and transnational terrorism in the 21st century.

Empirical studies indicate that the United States has provided extensive military assistance to Nigeria through programmes such as the International Military Education and Training programme, the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, and Foreign Military Sales arrangements (Iwuoha, 2019). These initiatives have enabled the training of Nigerian military personnel, the transfer of military technology, and the strengthening of intelligence cooperation between both countries, playing a significant role in enhancing Nigeria's counterterrorism capacity, particularly in intelligence gathering, surveillance operations, and strategic military planning (Iwuoha, 2019).

Furthermore, Nigeria's acquisition of advanced military hardware from the United States, including the purchase of A-29 Super Tucano aircraft and other sophisticated weapons systems, has strengthened its aerial combat capabilities and counterinsurgency operations (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2020), improving Nigeria's ability to conduct precision airstrikes against insurgent targets and to monitor remote areas affected by terrorist activities (Onuoha, 2020). These developments suggest that U.S. military support has become an important component of Nigeria's contemporary security

architecture. However, while this cooperation has improved Nigeria's military capacity, several scholars argue that it also reveals patterns of strategic dependence. Onapajo and Uzodike (2020) observe that many African states, including Nigeria, rely heavily on external military assistance due to limited domestic technological capacity and inadequate defense infrastructure, while Akinola (2021) notes that persistent reliance on foreign military equipment and intelligence systems may constrain the long-term development of indigenous defense capabilities.

Moreover, empirical evidence shows that despite increased military assistance from the United States, Nigeria continues to experience serious security challenges such as insurgency, terrorism, and rural banditry (Onuoha, 2020), suggesting that external military support alone cannot fully address the structural causes of insecurity, including weak governance institutions, corruption, and socio-economic inequalities. Consequently, reliance on foreign assistance without corresponding domestic reforms may reinforce a cycle of dependence rather than sustainable security capacity (Iwuoha, 2019).

6. Conclusion

This study examined U.S.-Nigeria military cooperation in the 21st century and found that it is largely driven by shared security concerns such as terrorism and insurgency, with U.S. assistance improving Nigeria's counterterrorism capacity.

However, the study concludes that Nigeria's reliance on U.S. military technology, intelligence, and logistics indicates elements of strategic dependence that may affect its security autonomy. Despite this support, persistent insecurity shows that foreign assistance alone cannot resolve Nigeria's security challenges.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were put forward:

1. The Nigerian government should prioritize the development of indigenous military technology and defense production to reduce excessive reliance on foreign military equipment and enhance national strategic autonomy.
2. Comprehensive reforms should be implemented within Nigeria's security institutions to improve transparency, accountability, and operational efficiency, thereby maximizing the effectiveness of international military assistance.
3. Nigerian security agencies should strengthen internal intelligence-sharing mechanisms and coordination among military, police, and intelligence services to improve the effectiveness of counterterrorism operations.
4. The Nigerian government should complement military strategies with policies that address poverty, unemployment, and social marginalization, which are major drivers of insurgency and violent extremism.

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