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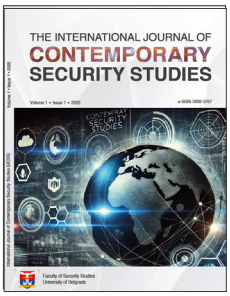

Article

Intelligence Gaps and Inter-Agency Rivalry in the Sahelian Theatre: Evidence from the Lake Chad Basin and Northern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Persistent insurgency in the Sahel-Lake Chad region highlights a paradox: extensive security investment yet limited operational success. This study examines how inter-agency rivalry, lack of information sharing, and institutional mistrust among Nigeria's security and intelligence agencies contribute to the protraction of terrorism in Northern Nigeria. Employing a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design (2009-2023), including secondary data, declassified reports, media investigations, and semi-structured interviews, the study finds that intelligence fragmentation, driven by bureaucratic competition, leads to deliberate withholding and bureaucratic delays, which in turn cause operational failures. Case studies of the Rann airstrike (2017), the Dapchi abduction (2018), the Shiroro ambush (2022), and the Zamfara raids (2021) illustrate these dynamics. Findings are interpreted through the cyclical Intelligence-Trust-Effectiveness (ITE) Framework, showing that insecurity in the Sahelian theatre is sustained not only by militant capacity but also by institutional weakness. Policy recommendations advocate for a mandatory, civilian-led intelligence fusion cell, trust-building mechanisms, and enhanced regional intelligence fusion under ECOWAS and the MNJTF.

KEYWORDS

Intelligence sharing; inter-agency rivalry; counter-insurgency; human security; Lake Chad Basin; Nigeria; Sahel; terrorism.

1. Introduction

For over a decade, Northern Nigeria and the broader Sahelian corridor have been epicentres of Africa's most protracted insurgencies. Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have inflicted sustained violence despite successive military operations and substantial donor-funded security programmes (Akinyemi & Nwokoma, 2022; Onuoha, 2021). Nigeria's defence spending, averaging 0.6% of GDP annually between 2010 and 2022 (World Bank, 2023), has not translated into strategic security gains.

While analyses often focus on poverty, porous borders, and radical ideology, limited attention has been given to internal pathologies within the Nigerian security system, specifically, the absence of effective intelligence coordination. In the complex Sahel-Lake Chad environment, success requires rapid, reliable, and integrated intelligence flows among the military, intelligence, police, and paramilitary agencies. Evidence indicates these flows are fragmented, competitive, and politicised (Omale, 2021).

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Research Question:

How have rivalry, mistrust, and inadequate information sharing between Nigerian security and intelligence agencies contributed to the protraction of terrorism in the Sahelian-Lake Chad region?

Study Contribution:

1. Reframes counter-insurgency effectiveness around institutional trust and coordination rather than mere resource allocation.
2. Links intelligence failures to measurable human and material costs through Nigeria-specific operational case studies using triangulated data.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. Cyclical Intelligence-Trust-Effectiveness (ITE) Framework

The study introduces the ITE Framework to conceptualise the ways in which inter-agency relations affect security outcomes. Drawing on Principal-Agent Theory (Lupia, 2006) and Organisational Learning Theory (Argyris, 1999), the framework posits that the effectiveness of intelligence depends on trust-based collaboration. Declining trust encourages parochial behaviour, information hoarding, and duplication of effort.

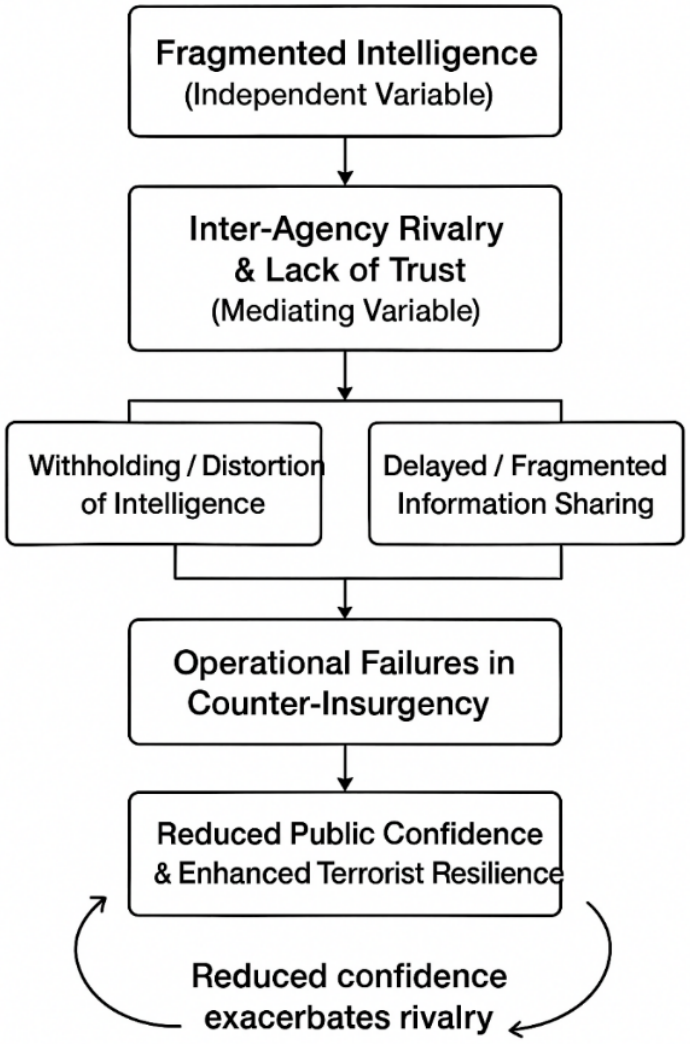

Figure 1. Cyclical Intelligence-Trust-Effectiveness (ITE) Framework. *Source:* Author's synthesis, 2025.

Narrative: This cyclical model demonstrates that operational failures not only stem from intelligence gaps but also reinforce mistrust, perpetuating rivalry, and further weakening counter-insurgency outcomes. Unlike linear models, it captures feedback loops and institutional pathologies that sustain insecurity. The empirical "Cycle of Dysfunction" identified in the findings (see Figure 2) operationalizes this theoretical framework within the Nigerian context.

2.2. Inter-Agency Rivalry and Information Sharing

Nigeria's security sector operates in silos (Aghedo & Osumah, 2014). The Army, DSS, NIA, and Police often prioritise institutional credit over collaboration, exacerbated by unclear mandates and political interference (Ewi, 2020). Intelligence is frequently withheld to protect the agency's reputation (Omale, 2021).

2.3. Consequences of Intelligence Failure

Intelligence fragmentation has led to:

- Mistaken airstrikes on civilian targets (Rann, 2017)
- Ambushes on military patrols (Shiroro, 2022)
- Mass abductions (Dapchi, 2018)
- Inadequate pre-emptive action against bandits (Zamfara, 2021)

Comparative studies from Afghanistan and Mali confirm that inter-agency rivalry exacerbates insurgent adaptability (Williams, 2020).

2.4. Literature Gap

Current scholarship emphasises military tactics and civilian protection but rarely examines the internal politics of intelligence failure. This study addresses this gap through a Nigeria-focused case analysis (2017-2023), using a robust mixed-methods approach to trace the causal mechanisms of failure.

Related Nigerian and regional scholarship also underscores that public safety outcomes depend on cross-institutional coordination in domains such as policing and safe schools, information-resource security, psychosocial support, and wider DRRM-linked social vulnerabilities—yet these insights are rarely integrated into analyses of intelligence fragmentation and inter-agency rivalry in counter-insurgency operations (Dada et al., 2025; Garba & Akaan, 2025; Janković et al., 2025; Metić, 2025; Popović Mančević, 2025)."

Table 1. Key Literature on Intelligence Coordination.

Author(s)	Focus Area	Relevance to Current Study
Aghedo & Osumah (2014)	Security agencies' rivalry in Nigeria's counterterrorism	Shows the historical roots of rivalry and duplication
Ewi (2020)	Regional security cooperation in West Africa	Highlights ECOWAS limits in intelligence sharing
Onuoha (2021)	Boko Haram intelligence failures	Documents communication gaps
Okoli (2022)	Military accountability in Nigeria	Connects blame culture to weak intelligence systems

Source: Author compilation, 2025

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

A qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) was employed, integrating:

1. Documentary analysis of Defence HQ, DSS, National Security Adviser, MNJTF, and Senate reports (2017-2023).
2. Semi-structured interviews with eight anonymized security professionals (retired officers, intelligence analysts, journalists), conducted between January and June 2024, following informed consent protocols.
3. Incident analysis of four emblematic failures in Northern Nigeria.
4. Triangulation with media, NGO, and academic sources to enhance credibility.

3.2. Sampling and Case Selection

Cases were purposively selected to capture air operations, ground patrols, civilian rescue, and counter-banditry.

Table 2. Case Selection Summary.

Case	Incident Type	Relevance
Rann (Borno	2017)	Airstrike on IDP Camp Air-ground intel failure
Dapchi (Yobe	2018)	Schoolgirls abduction Predictive intel failure
Zamfara (2021)	Bandit raids	Jurisdictional rivalry
Shiroro (2022)	Ambush on soldiers	Tactical intel breakdown

Source: Author compilation, 2025

3.3. Data Analysis

- NVivo 12 was used for thematic coding (meta-themes: rivalry, fragmented pipelines, operational consequences).
- Cross-case patterns were mapped to the ITE Framework.
- A process-tracing approach was employed to reconstruct the intelligence flow and identify specific points of failure for each case.

3.4. nterviewee Table (Anonymized)

Code	Background	Role in Study
INT-Army01	Retired Colonel	Interview on Rann & Shiroro
INT-DSS01	Former DSS Analyst	Interview on Dapchi & Zamfara
INT-NAVY01	Retired Navy Officer	Strategic coordination
INT-Journalist01	Security Correspondent	Cross-validation of events
INT-MNJTF01	MNJTF Consultant	Regional intel perspective
INT-Army02	Retired Lt. Colonel	Counter-banditry operations
INT-DSS02	Retired DSS Field Officer	Operational insights
INT-Journalist02	Security Analyst	Media triangulation

Source: Author compilation, 2025

3.5 Validity and Reliability

- Triangulation across interview, documentary, and media sources enhanced internal validity.
- Standardized coding protocols ensured reliability.
- Limitations include potential recall bias in interviews and restricted access to classified data.

4. Findings and Case Analyses

4.1. Rann Airstrike (2017)

17 Jan 2017: NAF mistakenly bombed IDP camp, 120+ deaths (MSF, 2017).

- **Cause:** Unverified coordinates; the DSS had previously flagged the location as a civilian safe zone, but this information was not integrated into the Air Force›s operational picture.
- **Mechanism:** A communication silo between the DSS and the NAF, rooted in a lack of standardized sharing protocols, led directly to the mistaken strike and mass civilian deaths. As INT-DSS02 noted, «We had marked Rann as a humanitarian site, but that database was not linked to the Air Force's targeting cell. They operated on separate, unverified information."

4.2. Dapchi Abduction (2018)

19 Feb 2018: 110 schoolgirls abducted.

- **Cause:** A jurisdictional dispute between the DSS and the Army led to delayed escalation. Intelligence on suspicious movements near Dapchi was not acted upon decisively.
- **Mechanism:** Information hoarding due to inter-agency competition prevented a consolidated threat assessment. This is corroborated by the Nigerian Senate (2019) report and INT-Journalist01, who stated, «There was a standoff about who ‹owned› the Dapchi threat, DSS for internal security or the Army for counter-insurgency. While they debated, the window for prevention closed."

4.3. Zamfara Bandit Raids (2021)

- **Cause:** Multiple agencies (Police, Army, DSS) acted independently on overlapping intelligence; UAV surveillance data collected by one agency was not shared with others on the ground.
- **Mechanism:** Deliberate non-sharing of tactical intelligence, driven by competition for operational credit, led to an avoidable ambush. INT-Army02 explained, «We knew the bandits were massing from our UAV feeds, but that was considered ‹our› asset. The police unit that walked into the ambush didn›t have that real-time picture.»

4.4. Shiroro Ambush (2022)

- **Cause:** Critical human intelligence on insurgent movements was delayed by 48 hours due to a hierarchical verification process between field agents and headquarters.
- **Mechanism:** Bureaucratic delay, compounded by a culture of distrust in intelligence sourced from other services, prevented timely deployment. INT-Army01 confirmed, «The intel was good, but it came through a joint channel and was stuck in ‹verification.› By the time it was deemed credible, our men were already in a kill zone.»

Table 3. Recurrent Intelligence Failure Mechanisms

Mechanism	Manifestation Across Cases
Bureaucratic delay	Rann Shiroro
Information hoarding	Dapchi, Zamfara
Jurisdictional competition	Zamfara, Dapchi

Source: Author compilation, 2025

5. Discussion

5.1. Institutional Rivalry

Agencies function as fiefdoms, influenced by political patronage. The lack of horizontal integration reinforces rivalry (Ewi, 2020), a finding consistently reported by interviewees across agencies (INT-DSS01, INT-Army01).

5.2. Counter-Insurgency Implications

Fragmented intelligence increases vulnerability to ambushes. Militants actively exploit these communication gaps, resulting in repeated operational failures. The empirical data reveal a self-reinforcing cycle.

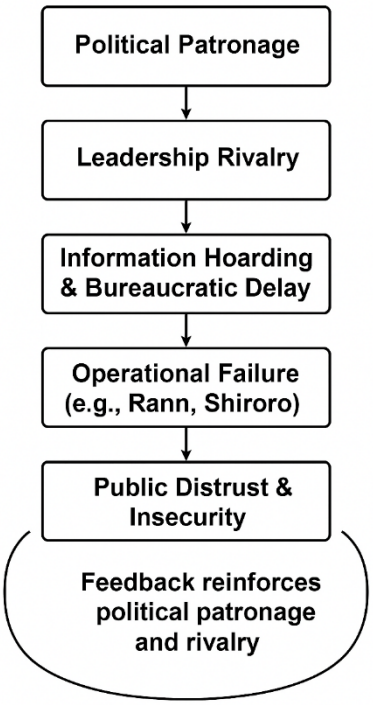

Figure 2. The Cycle of Dysfunction: An Empirical Instantiation of the ITE Framework

This cycle operationalizes the broader ITE Framework, showing how theoretical variables manifest in the Nigerian context, with political patronage acting as a key driver.

5.3. Regional Implications

Domestic intelligence failures have direct spillover effects, compromising the effectiveness of regional bodies. Delayed or fragmented intelligence from Nigeria constrained the MNJTF's coordinated response during critical ISWAP incursions in 2019 (UN, 2020; INT-MNJTF01).

5.4. Policy Recommendations

1. **Establish a National Intelligence Fusion and Coordination Centre (NIFCC):** Mandate a civilian-headed body that reports directly to the National Security Adviser, with the authority to task agencies and integrate all-source intelligence.
2. **Reform the National Security Agencies Act (Cap N74, 2004):** Legally streamline mandates and clarify jurisdictional boundaries to reduce competition.
3. **Implement Joint Training & Rotational Leadership:** Develop a curriculum including table-top exercises based on the emblematic cases studied here to build trust and shared mental models.
4. **Invest in Secure Digital Interoperability:** Fund and deploy shared, secure platforms for real-time intelligence dissemination across all operational commands.
5. **Formalise Civil-Military Liaison:** Institutionalize coordination with humanitarian agencies to prevent tragedies like Rann and improve human security.

Feasibility Note: While resistance from entrenched institutional interests is expected, the recurring and measurable human and strategic costs documented in this study provide a compelling mandate for decisive reform.

6. Conclusion

The endurance of insurgency in the Sahelian theatre is institutionally, not solely militarily, driven. The cases of Rann, Dapchi, Zamfara, and Shiroro, analyzed through triangulated data, illustrate how deep-seated rivalry, mistrust, and bureaucratic inertia systematically convert intelligence potential into operational liability. The cyclical Intelligence-Trust-Effectiveness Framework demonstrates that breaking this cycle requires more than just funding; it demands deliberate structural reform, enhanced transparency, depoliticised leadership, and genuine regional integration to secure the Lake Chad Basin.

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