

Limitations in Countering Armed Group Conflicts, Tactics and Vulnerable Targets in Nigeria

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Abstract

The activities and the negative consequences of armed groups in Nigeria have been one fundamental crisis facing the country over the past decade. This paper is solicitous of the limitations in tackling armed group conflicts and the vulnerable targets. Using content analytical methods of data gathered from secondary sources, it examines armed groups activities and the country's counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations. The paper argues that though these groups does not have overwhelming firepower or numbers than the state forces but the fundamental constraints in fighting armed groups are in how the military forces can tackle their irregular and unconventional tactics, the challenges of maintaining public supports in the operating environments' (OE) and the problem of harming the vulnerable targets. It further contends that state cohesiveness, the role of ideology and information technology, duration of conflict and the influences of external actors, also contribute to the constraints not only in traditional warfare but in countering armed group conflicts in Nigeria. It concludes that the traditional constraints in warfare tactics are eroded in the armed conflict warfare in the country arising from above stated limitations as such must be adequately considered in the counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations.

Keywords: Armed Group, Vulnerable Target, Tactics, Counterinsurgency, Counterterrorism

Introduction

The presence and proliferation of armed groups such as vigilantes, armed bandits, criminal bands, cultist groups, armed wings of political parties, community, ethnic-national, religious, and regional armies, militias, and Islamist groups now permeate and overwhelmingly influence the day-to-day activities of many countries in Africa, thus raising (in)security concerns in the continent particularly in Nigeria. The history of the challenges faced by national militaries in countering the threat posed by these armed groups to national security dated back to the period of Alexander to Great. Global narrative is filled cases of armed groups-terrorists, insurgents, militias, and criminal groups, that have confronted states, fought against each other, or coalesce with countries to fight against other armed. However, the end of the cold war witnessed three fundamental shifts to the crises of increasing failed or failing

states, globalised travel and trade network, and the advancement in information technology which came with globalization (Dew, 2009:259). All these developments have progressively made the menaces and threat from armed groups one of a fundamental issue in national security discourse. In Nigeria, the activities of armed and rebel groups have risen correspondingly arising from the activities of terrorists, insurgents, militias, and criminal groups, such as the Yan Gurmuzu, Yan Tatsine, Ansarul, Civilian Joint Task Force, Yan Daukar Amarya, Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Herders-Farmers, Niger Delta Volunteer Forces, Movement for Unity and Jihad, Biafra Avengers, and particularly Boko Haram have assumed national concern (Sampson, 2014, 2009; Osaghae and Suberu, 2005).

Several factors and theoretical propositions such as cultural pluralism,

state failure, economic factor, clash of civilisation, identity, globalisation and self-opportunity, including religious identity, state failure, self-opportunism-greed thesis, and other factors that can be categorised under alienation and structural violence theories, frustration, aggression, politics contraption, structural violence, and spill-over effect from other countries have been advanced for the persistent armed group conflicts. In efforts at finding solution to the insecurity concern several efforts including Force-Military Hard Power, Legal / Legislative and Administrative mechanisms have been put in place but are faced with several challenges.

This paper focusing on the constraints in combating armed groups conflicts in Nigeria argues that aside from the threats posed by the proliferation of armed group conflicts, the mechanisms to managing these groups and conflicts is further aggravated by the challenges faced in contending with them. This is not because these armed groups are more powerful than state forces/militaries or they have higher numbers of combats but issues relating to public support in the operating environments (OEs) and at the global level, the unconventional tactics and strategies adopted by armed groups and the protractedness of their operations and the safety of vulnerable groups-unarmed civilians act as constraints to combating armed groups. Also, the role of information technology (IT), the cohesiveness of the nation, the roles of exogenous actor supports and ideology are fundamental constraints to counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations. From the above position and given this context, the fundamental questions that animate this is: given that armed group conflicts in Nigeria have often been bloody and protracted how can the state combat and solve the problem of insecurity in the country?

Conceptual and theoretical Issues

Armed Groups: In this paper, the term 'armed groups' is used to describe insurgents, terrorists, militias, and criminal groups. These groups are often

characterized by their capability and readiness to dispute, disagree and challenge the authority and legitimacy of states including the international system. They also attack within and across boundaries of states including the global system. These groups carry out their operations clandestinely, rely on intelligence and counterintelligence abilities and mask their activities and operations through denial and deception. Armed groups are made possible and enabled by all variants of globalization and technologies by their manipulation of the supposed benefits of globalisation. Globalisation allow armed groups to spread easily because it has aided their operational dynamics to the extent that armed group operations are no longer a local issue as they can now strike from thousands of miles away and cause destruction. This is why Powell (2014) asserts that globalisation has changed the form and nature of armed groups and how the world responds to, and fundamentally should tackle the crisis. At the global level, not only are armed group desirous of acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMD), but they have also been found to be using the Internet and information technology (IT)-a variant of globalisation to motivate and inspire geographically diverse recruitment of new members from their supporters. This has been found to be so in Nigeria amongst the Boko Haram insurgents. Armed groups utilise violence and unconventional, irregular, and increasingly indiscriminate methods; and their operational tactics and strategies are often not controlled or restricted by state or international laws and conventions guiding war. Also, their operations intentionally circumvent the superior military power of states to attack political economic, and symbolic targets (Adeyeye, Akinrinde, and Omodunbi, 2022; Adeyeye, 2017; Dew, 2009:260-261).

Strategy and Tactics

For this discussion, strategy is described as organised plan of action put in place to accomplish specified goal and objective. Insurgent strategy is used here to mean the art of military and non-military operations

and commands within the context of the conduct of violence and warfare by insurgent groups, governments of states in cases of state terrorism and in political, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions. Armed groups strategy is conceived as the planning, synchronization and the overall focus of military and non-military operations to achieve all-round military and non-military objectives of those who disagree with the government of states; its policies and action and those opposing other people within the society and those fighting with the state against other groups. Tactics can be defined as maneuvers or action calculated to achieve specific or general end, that is, military and non-military art used in the achievement of the goals and ends set by strategy, it is maneuvers adopted against an enemy, opposing forces or parties in conflict. It is submitted here that, tactics is the use of set of forces in relation to each other which involves the conscious arrangement and use of troops in war and battle and in operations between opposing forces in violence confrontation (Adeyeye, 2017; Lee, 2008; Bell, 1976; Liddell Hart, 1967).

Securitization theory

The term securitization, but its expression has seemingly become conventional in security lexicon particularly within constructivist studies regarding security. Securitization theorists assert that successfully securitized subjects receive disproportionate amounts of attention and resources compared to unsuccessfully securitized subjects causing more human damage. A common example used by theorists is how armed conflicts, insurgency and terrorism represent top priority in security discussions, even though people casualties and deaths from are much more likely to be killed to be more in road and air accidents or preventable diseases than from armed conflicts-banditry, insurgency, and terrorism. Securitization studies aims to understand "who securitizes (securitizing actor), on what issues (threats), for whom (referent object), why, with what results, and not least, under what conditions

(Waever, 1995 and 1993; Buzan 2011).

At the core of securitisation theory's argument is that national security is not naturally given policy, but that which is cautiously selected by decisionmakers and political elites as constituting political issues and are regarded as ultimate security issues needing to be urgently dealt with particularly when such have been classified as being 'dangerous', 'menacing', 'threatening', and 'alarming' by a 'securitising actors' who has the social and institutional power to move the issue 'beyond politics. So, security issues are not simply 'out there' but rather must be articulated as problems by securitising actors (Waever, 1995 and 1993). Because the issue of armed conflicts reflecting in insurgency, terrorism, militia, and criminal activities has assumed a national concern due to its negative consequences on the socio-economic, political, and corporate existence and unity of the country, and that national security is a fundamental state function, it behooves on the state to actively respond to the menace. This is the reason succeeding governments in Nigeria initiate various counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, and security mechanisms to combat the various armed conflicts across the country, however, the manipulation of ethnic and religious identity, and communal differences by ethnic, religious, and political elites including corruption and weak institutions have made dealing with armed conflicts in the country.

Armed Group Conflict Tactics and Strategies

Evidence at both the state and global levels shows that conflict involving armed groups have been a recurrence decima, governments, policy makers and conventional state forces continue to face challenges in coming to terms on how to tackle these groups due to several limitations. For instance, the cost of armed group conflicts is enormous due to their adoption of attrition tactics. An attrition strategy aims at the 'destruction of the enemy's forces', by means of brute force-

protracted battle with high level doggedness and perseverance even in the face of the various states counterterror and counterinsurgency operations. In grinding wars of attrition there are usually few decisive victories and attaining political goals and objectives is often very difficult especially because as these battle against armed groups assume protracted dimensions, state's ability to maintain domestic support becomes difficult. The problem is further compounded by the skillful usage of IT and international media by armed groups which often put pressure of state's capability to maintain popular support for the counter conflict mechanisms. This situation vulnerability raises the question: why the limitation and constraints on the tactics adopted by armed groups and targets disintegrate? Can countries reassess and adapt counter conflict strategies and policies before they deteriorate?

According to Sun Tzu (1963 and 2005) fighting unconventional war requires knowing one's enemies, their capabilities and other description and concept of warfare and their culture of war and peace. It is the knowledge and understanding of this information that will point to learning how to fight armed groups. Equally, it is fundamental to remember that a lot of these groups emerged out of religious, clan, tribal identities, and division. Therefore, the beginning of approaching armed group conflict/warfare is by developing an understanding of armed their cultural base. This can be realised through the understanding of their values, institutions and their thought pattern that has endured from generations including by understanding how tradition and culture has modified and influenced the ways they think and perceive war and peace. The first fundamental step required in the assessment of, and combating armed group conflicts is by acknowledging that armed group warfare is usually conducted in different ways by different rules from conventional warfare which is bounded by international laws of war and are mostly sent to war to achieve policy goals, but the incentives to

fighting for armed groups equally include a number of personal motivations such as glory, revenge, honour and vendetta.

Armed groups such as Boko Haram use military and non-military strategies and tactics such as hybrid warfare, attrition, manoeuvre, reconnaissance, psychological and guerrilla hit-and-run (Falode, 2016). They adopt terror, guerrilla, and clandestine hit-and-run, raids; ambush-annihilation; harassment; and containment tactics as a strategy and tactics. Specifically, armed groups in Nigeria have diversified their tactics, strategies and targets and repudiate traditional limitations on warfare and have particularly and repeatedly targeted civilian populations, noncombatants, and nonmilitary targets. Their unconventional repertoire to include the usage of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), car bombs (VBIEDs), armoured and motorised operations, mechanised operations, and brutal terror tactics such as beheadings, roadside bombs, kidnappings, suicide bombings, torture, and execution of victims (Adeyeye, 2017; Dew, 2009; Moghadam, 2006). Armed group conflicts are fought in suburban and urban setting and additionally sanctuary represents an important tool in military and non-military strategy/tactic of armed groups. There are different forms of sanctuary and the most feasible example adopted by armed groups is by using a foreign territory as their base, especially areas that are geographically strategic and sympathetic to their goal and purpose. For example, reports show that Boko Haram found sanctuary among the adherents of Salafist doctrine in the neighbouring countries such as Chad and Niger. Specifically, the activities of armed groups in Nigeria operations include placing of explosive charges in public places, assassinations, assaults by small and medium arms on the entire society, taking hostages by abduction and kidnapping, barricade and construction of obstacles/barriers to keep themselves in their sanctuary or closed structures, hijack and forcible seizure of vehicles, airplanes, boats or trucks in order to rob or use them for other purposes, robbery and other

criminal tactics (Adeyeye, 2017; Falode, 2016; Onuoha, 2014).

It is important to equally note that these tactics have been used against military forces-combatants, and noncombatants. To be sure, an important feature of armed group irregular warfare has been the involvement of local populations through active-direct or passive (indirect) support. Not only are women used as human yields since they know that military forces are prohibited from attacking unarmed noncombatants, and children as lookouts. Usually when unarmed noncombatants such as women, children, medics, journalists are attacked and killed they are not accidental victims, such deaths and injuries are results of deliberate strategy of armed groups to target noncombatants.

Women have participated in different capacities-both as military tactics and non-military strategy (support and service)-as supporters; spies for intelligence and information gathering; wives; domestic slaves; procreation to the purpose of having membership in forms of the children produced by women; suicide bomber; as valuable component in prisoner exchanges; as decoys to lure troops into ambushes; and, as porters and cooks. It is not uncommon to see women in combat and leadership; they carry arms and operate sophisticated weapons (Amusan, Adeyeye, and Oyewole, 2019). In spite of the fact that the after-effect of attacks of local populations intrinsically is bloody, very unpleasant and disgusting, the despoliation of the constraints on warfare has a wider tactical implication in that when these armed groups jettisoned conventional constraints on warfare and conflicts-*their own jus in bello*, the conflict potentially assume protractedness, extremely destructive with regards to the damage caused infrastructural facilities, catastrophic to state economy, and extremely schismatic, alienating and divisive, which has the potential to provoke religious, political and ethnic/clan rivalries (Dew, 2006:106-107).

Limitations and Constraints in Combating Armed Group Conflicts in Nigeria

The challenges faced in combating armed group conflicts are not only a problem for local populations that are sucked into the conflict but the entire community and country. Even though opinions differ as to whether armed group conflicts are savagery than conventional conflicts and warfare, what is almost generally accepted as concern is that the use of these tactics and the type of targeting by these groups remarkably erode the ability of state forces to bring peace and stability in the conflict operating environments. Several issues have continue to influence the fight against armed group conflicts in Nigeria. These include: the cohesiveness of the state, exogenous factors and actors, ideological factor-radicalisation of religious and other identities, globalisation- information technological-level at which IT is manipulated during conflicts, and the time scale of the conflicts.

One of the fundamental problems faced by state forces when fighting armed groups particularly in Nigeria is that the prolongation largely increases, and the public perception of the cost fighting is considerably spiral. Often, this impression and consciousness exist within the citizens in the conflict environments that may support and tolerate armed group including neighbouring environment within and beyond the country. The difficulty of how to win and maintain public support is has been convoluted by the way the various activities eventuate. For example, attempting to gather local support and disrupting the support and confidence of the people for state forces, Boko Haram especially operating in Gwoza in the Mandara Mountains on the Nigeria-Cameroun border as parts of its strategy adopts proselytising and preaching Salafist ideology that is premised on core Islamic interpretation of the Taliban and Osama bin Ladin and by providing community service to gather local support and followers (Adeyeye, 2017).

Another issue that contributes to the

limitation and constraint in fighting armed group conflicts is the degree of the cohesiveness of the country and the level to which it can possibly provide security and services for the population both in the conflict zone and the country at large. Fundamentally, the essential function of the state is survival and security, that is, ensuring its survival and ensuring monopoly of legitimate violence within its geographical territory. This is followed closely by finding solution to decision making in respect of distribution of state resources. The level which the country is able and/or unable to achieve and maintain cohesiveness significantly contributes to constraints in combating armed group tactics, and the targets. Specifically, the issue of the distribution of resources has led to resource conflicts perpetrated and heightened armed struggle in the Niger Delta region in Nigeria. And the report of the field report conducted in 2017 reveal that the inability of the governments of Nigeria to maintain cohesiveness is one of rhetoric of the insurgencies in the northeast and other parts of the country (Adeyeye, 2017).

Equally very important element contributing to the erosion of constraints on tactics and targets of armed conflicts in Nigeria is the time scale of conflicts. When the duration of conflict is extensively long like the Boko Haram terrorism activities it has psychological and health implications on the targets making them susceptible to surrendering to the whim of the armed groups and loss of confidence in the state to protect them and leads to devolvement into unrestrained and unrestricted conflicts with its spiral costs and security expenditure which affects other aspects of the economy that incapacitates the state from functioning to provide for the people hence losing the legitimacy of citizen. The country has continued to expend heavily on the war against terror activities for decades. For instance, the economic cost of war on terror in Nigeria in 2019 was 2.4% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). In 2014, Nigeria sought borrowing of \$US1 (one billion US dollars) to add to the budgetary

allocation to fight armed conflict and terrorism (Chuku, Abang and Isip, 2017).

No doubt ideology has played significantly in influencing and limiting the combat of armed conflicts in Nigeria. Specifically, the limit to which armed groups such as Boko Haram are influenced by global radical Islamic ideology associated with al-Qaeda -AQAM has significantly impacted in fighting the group. For instance, evidently, shows that BH had its root and was inspired by the early 1980s Maitasine popular revolts, especially from the points of nature, purpose, and goals, but the organisation, operational plan, struggle, strategy, tactics, and modes of operation of BH are largely related to the Taliban. For instance, in a press statement signed on 9th August 2009, by one Mallam Sanni Umar (acting on behalf of the group (after the death of Mohammed Yusuf in 2009) maintained that “...*Boko Haram is an Islamic revolution..., civilisation is forbidden..., we shall make the country ungovernable, kill and eliminate irresponsible political leadership..., we call on all Northerners in the Islamic states to quit the followership of the wicked political parties leading the country, the corrupt, irresponsible, criminal, murderous political leadership...* (Adeyeye, 2017).

Closely related to the above and which helps to amplify the above element in impacting on combating armed group conflict is information technology-IT. One of the fundamental instruments in the repertoire of armed groups irregular warfare is the use of public information strategies. They use information operations for recruitment and the maintenance of local populations including the usage of deception, deceit, and fabrication of falsehood campaign to undermine for government. To be sure, armed groups and insurgents have been able to manipulate information technology (IT) made possible by globalisation for this purpose in Nigeria. Before now, traditional media such as television, radio, and newspapers were important in playing this media strategic role, but the advent of the Internet has provided a new dimension in the

complexity of IT as sanctuary, enhancing armed warfare and limiting the combating armed group. A confirmation of this is assertion of the former UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon (UNODC, 2012) when he states that, '*the Internet is a prime example of how terrorists can behave in a truly transnational way; in response, States need to think and function in an equally transnational manner*'. For example, in Nigeria cell phones have been the readily available means of communication and Boko Haram insurgents, as part of their strategy, manipulates the medium to downloaded videos and images which they post on YouTube and other online media to attract sympathy and conduct propaganda. Equally, IT aids insurgent's transfer of its radical messages in audio and video tapes to members, sympathisers and for the purpose of recruitment. Also, insurgents manipulate information and communication technologies during combat operations (Adeyeye, 2017; Dew, 2009; Onuoha, 2014; *The Jihadi Website Monitoring Group*, 2010:14). To that extent, technology globalisation has helped transform armed group's organisation, operational capabilities, and operations attacks. Also, cybercrimes have provided funds for insurgents, especially identity theft which according to UNODC is used by criminals to generate \$1 billion every year. The UNODC equally confirms that insurgents exploit the internet to assess bank accounts; private information and to accomplish information on credit cards (UNODC www.unodc.org/tot).

Conclusion

This paper considered the traditional limitations that exist in combatting armed group conflicts that has mitigated against state anti-insurgency and counterterrorism and armed conflicts in Nigeria. The conclusion derivable from the discourse constraints on tactics adopted by armed groups and targets, for instance as not targeting vulnerable groups-children and women; adoption of mediation to resolve bloody violence and vendetta, and not attacking religious centers and hospitals are

often targeted and attacked during armed groups conflicts, insurgency, and terror activities. In general terms, the limitation of constraints on tactics and targets in Nigeria can be explained to a certain extent by a combination of factors such as weak, failing and failed state authority, the interference and invasion of exogenous and transnational actors in the domestic conflicts, the fanaticism, and radicalism of extremist ideology.

The radicalism of Islam Boko Haram and ISWAP in Nigeria and the various Islamist movements demonstration of radical, extreme and fundamental ideologies and the adoption of radical terrorism strategies reflecting in the uniqueness of BH radicalism and violent disposition is unprecedentedly significant, particularly judging by its operations since 2009. Also, the influence of IT in the dissemination such as the increasing dynamics in information technology-IT, that has lowered transportation costs and increased trade and capital flow across states has equally resulted in increase in the technical and general operational improvement in the activities of insurgents and in their strategies and tactics over a long period of time in Nigeria. The duration of armed group conflict has equally been a source of the erosion of constraints on armed group conflicts.

In preparing for, planning and reassessing armed group conflicts in Nigeria, it is important to begin by stating that though the existence of any of the above factors or all of them does not foretell the deterioration, corrosion and decrease of constraints and limitations in armed group warfare, however, they help in assessing the possibilities for armed group conflicts to rapid increase regarding the cost and duration of such conflict. This becomes fundamental in a few ways. Specifically, it assists in intelligence analysis that helps in developing greater extent of accurate assessments of the potential and/or real threats posed by armed groups. Also, it assists intelligence analysts, policy makers and security and military planners develop additional pragmatic and practical

strategies and goals for armed-group conflicts. In the same vein, when the influence of these factors on the ways armed-groups carry out their activities is understood it assist the government and the security forces to discern and recognise accurate time in reassessing and adapting- the real point armed-group conflicts has the potentiality to and/or start to rapidly increase from small, restricted and controllable goals and costs to the state of assuming unlimited and spiralling costs(Dew, 2009: 266).

Surely the benefit of the development of tools which helps to identify the factors that limits combating armed-group conflicts assist the government to develop improved intelligent capabilities, which has been one challenge in fighting insurgent and armed group activities in Nigeria. Conclusively, the understanding of the factors that has the potential to interpret and explain the tactics, targets and the level of violence perpetrated by armed-groups including their will to carry out their violent activities will go a long way in assisting the government and security forces to analyse and reassess armed-group goals and strategies. No doubt, combatting armed-group conflicts, anti-insurgency and counterterrorism have been costly and has faced challenges arising from adequate support from the people in the conflict environments due in part to lack of trust in government and fear of attack from the insurgents and armed-groups. Therefore, the government must develop realistic and workable assessment and strategies that will successfully improve the fifth against armed-groups, insurgents, and terrorists in the country.

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