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**RETHINKING REGIONAL SECURITY AND AFRICA'S SPECIAL OPERATIONS  
FORCES IN THE AGE OF STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT**

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**Introduction**

No nation today possesses all the resources it needs to thrive independently, making strategic partnerships and international collaboration essential. Nations increasingly engage with one another within a framework of mutual strategic interest, recognizing that collective strength is vital in addressing modern challenges. However, security which has been universally recognized as a fundamental pillar of development, due to its provision of essential stability required for political, social, and economic progress within any state. As noted by Collier (2003), security is not merely an accessory to development but a core prerequisite; without it, meaningful advancements in sectors such as education, healthcare, commerce, and governance become unattainable. Insecurity forces states to divert vital resources from development initiatives toward conflict resolution, crisis management, and humanitarian interventions. Conversely, when insecurity prevails, it leads to widespread displacement, disruption of economic activities, destruction of public infrastructure, and capital flight, all of which significantly undermine national development efforts. When insecurity persists in a particular state, it often extends beyond its point of origin, gradually engulfing neighboring states due to their geographical proximity. This spread of insecurity mirrors the dynamics of a bushfire—beginning in a single location and rapidly expanding if not swiftly and effectively contained. The consequences of such unchecked proliferation can be devastating,



leading to widespread instability, economic disruption, and the erosion of public confidence. Recognizing the potential for insecurity to undermine not only local peace but also the productivity and stability of surrounding regions, states often find it imperative to collaborate by pooling resources, sharing intelligence, and coordinating security efforts, aimed at addressing this threat collectively before it cripples the work force and foundational structures of the affected areas. This proactive and united approach is essential in mitigating the "bushfire syndrome" of insecurity, ensuring that the menace is tackled at its roots before it spreads irreparably. This has led to the birth of the study in question titled *Rethinking Regional Security and Africa's Special Operation Forces in the Age of Strategic Engagement*.

In the face of evolving transnational security threats such as terrorism, piracy, organized crime, banditry, and insurgency, African states have increasingly recognized the necessity of reassessing regional security frameworks while enhancing the role of Special Operation Forces (SOFs) within the context of strategic engagement. Nigeria, as a key regional actor, has demonstrated her commitment to this shift through active participation in various international and regional security initiatives. One significant example is Nigeria's involvement in the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), which aims to build the capacity of partner nations in North and West Africa to counter terrorism and violent extremism through coordinated security, development, and governance efforts (Ploch, 2011). Through the TSCTP, Nigeria's SOFs have gained access to training, joint operations, and intelligence-sharing platforms that enhance their capacity to engage in complex counterterrorism missions across porous regional borders (Perliger, 2020). This partnership emphasizes the role of SOFs as agile and strategic assets capable of operating in volatile environments with minimal support while contributing to broader regional stability. Moreover, Nigeria's Navy has actively engaged in maritime security operations through joint exercises in the Gulf of Guinea, a region known for maritime piracy, trafficking, and resource theft. Exercises such as Obangame Express, coordinated by U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), have enabled Nigerian naval forces to improve maritime domain awareness, enhance coordination with regional partners, and build proficiency in special operations at sea (Onuoha, 2013). These exercises foster interagency and multinational collaboration, essential for effective regional security in maritime environments. Similarly, Nigeria's Air Force has expanded its strategic



relationships through training exchanges, technology partnerships, and operational collaborations with nations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France (Eze, 2022). These engagements have strengthened Nigeria's aerial capabilities to support SOF operations, intelligence missions, and regional security tasks. Collectively, such initiatives reflect a growing shift toward multilateralism and strategic engagement, which prioritize regional cooperation, interoperability, and the development of indigenous SOF capacities (Williams, 2016).

This emerging era of strategic engagement underscores the need for a rethinking of regional security paradigms, with particular emphasis on enhancing the role of Africa's SOFs as versatile instruments of both national defense and regional influence. Nigeria's participation in initiatives like the TSCTP and Gulf of Guinea maritime operations illustrates the importance of integrated approaches that combine military capability with diplomatic and developmental efforts. As threats transcend national borders, the role of SOFs in rapid deployment, intelligence gathering, and targeted interventions becomes critical for sustaining peace and promoting development in fragile regions. This study, therefore, seeks to explore how strategic engagement and SOF development can serve as a foundation for a more resilient and secure Africa in the 21st century.

## **CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS**

**Security:** Security is defined as the state or condition in which assets, systems, or individuals are protected against potential harm, unauthorized access, or other adverse events. It involves the systematic implementation of policies, procedures, and mechanisms designed to prevent, detect, and mitigate risks. In this sense, security is not merely a static state but a dynamic and ongoing process of risk assessment and management (Whitman & Mattord, 2018). Buzan asserts that security is about freedom from threat and ability of states to maintain independent identity and their functional integrity against forces of change, which they see as hostile while its bottom line is survival (Bodunde, et. al, 2014). From the foregoing, security is generally agreed to be about feeling of being safe from harm, fear, anxiety, oppression, danger, poverty, defence, protection and preservation of core values and threat to those values. William (2008) equally submits that security is most commonly associated with the alleviation of threats to cherish values, especially those threats which threaten the survival of a particular reference object. According to Buzan,



security is not limited to the military domain but also involves political, economic, societal, and environmental dimensions. He argues that threats can emerge from multiple sectors, and therefore, security must be approached in a comprehensive and multidimensional manner. Buzan's approach is foundational to the Copenhagen School of security studies, where he emphasized the concept of securitization, which means that an issue becomes a matter of security when it is presented as an existential threat requiring emergency measures (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). This broadened the traditional, state-centric and military-focused view of security to include non-military threats such as migration, environmental degradation, economic crises, and societal conflicts.

**Regional Security:** Regional security refers to the measures, arrangements, and interactions undertaken by states within a specific geographical region to address common security challenges and threats that are beyond the capacity of any single state to manage independently. According to Acharya (2007), regional security involves “the framework of formal and informal cooperation among states in a given geographical area, aimed at preventing conflict, reducing insecurity, and promoting peace and stability.” It often includes both military and non-military dimensions, covering issues such as territorial disputes, transnational crimes, terrorism, migration, and environmental threats. Regional security emphasizes collective efforts and shared responsibility among neighboring states. Buzan and Wæver (2003) further describe regional security complexes (RSCs) as patterns of security interdependence, where the security dynamics of states within a region are closely linked due to geographical proximity and historical, political, and cultural ties. This implies that instability or conflict in one state is likely to affect the entire region, making regional cooperation vital for maintaining peace and stability. From the perspective of Lake and Morgan (1997) regional security is conceptualised as “the patterns of conflict and cooperation among states that result from their geographical proximity and historical interactions, which create regional security dynamics that differ from global security patterns.” This perspective highlights that regions often develop unique security challenges and responses, shaped by their specific historical experiences, power distribution, and regional actors. In contemporary international relations, regional security is often promoted through regional organizations such as the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the European Union



(EU), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). These organizations facilitate dialogue, conflict resolution, and collective security arrangements to address regional threats effectively (Fawn, 2012).

**Special Operations Forces:** Special Forces Operation refers to military activities conducted by highly trained and specialized units that are designed to achieve specific strategic, operational, or tactical objectives, often in environments or situations that conventional forces are not suited for. According to McRaven (1995), special operations are “actions conducted by specially designated, organized, selected, trained, and equipped forces using unconventional techniques and modes of employment.” These operations often include counter-terrorism, hostage rescue, reconnaissance, direct action, unconventional warfare, and sabotage, usually carried out behind enemy lines or in politically sensitive situations. Special forces operations are characterized by their precision, agility, surprise, and ability to operate in hostile, denied, or politically delicate environments (Repass, 2015). Unlike conventional military operations that typically rely on overwhelming force, special forces focus on achieving decisive effects with small, highly capable teams. Their success depends heavily on superior intelligence, meticulous planning, and the ability to adapt to rapidly changing situations. According to the U.S. Department of Defense (2018), Special Forces operations are designed to “achieve military, political, informational, and economic objectives through means that are not primarily dependent on conventional military capabilities.” Modern security and defense strategies increasingly rely on these operations due to their effectiveness in addressing asymmetric threats, including terrorism, insurgency, and hybrid warfare.

**Strategy:** Strategy is conceptually defined as the art and science of planning and directing overall operations to achieve specific long-term objectives. According to Mintzberg et al. (1998), strategy is “a pattern in a stream of decisions” that reflects both deliberate choices and emergent responses to changing circumstances. It involves setting goals, determining actions to achieve those goals, and mobilizing resources to execute the actions effectively. In its broadest sense, strategy is about aligning means with ends while anticipating the moves of competitors, adversaries, or challenges in the environment. In the field of security and defense, Liddell Hart (1967) defines strategy as “the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy.” This classical definition is widely accepted in military studies and highlights that strategy serves as the bridge



between political objectives and military actions. Hart emphasized that the ultimate goal of strategy is not just to win battles but to achieve desirable political outcomes. Similarly, Rumelt (2011) argues that effective strategy is characterized by the identification of critical problems (or "kernel" of the situation), the development of guiding policies, and the crafting of coherent actions. For Rumelt, a good strategy is not just a plan, but a well-thought-out approach that addresses the real obstacles to achieving objectives.

In contemporary international relations (IR) and security studies, strategy is viewed as a dynamic and multifaceted concept that goes beyond classical military applications to encompass political, economic, diplomatic, and informational tools. Modern scholars recognize that strategy is no longer confined to the battlefield but is integral to how states and non-state actors pursue their interests, manage conflicts, and navigate global power dynamics (Gray, 2010). Strategy today is about orchestrating a combination of instruments of national power, commonly referred to as DIME (Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic), to achieve national or organizational objectives (Brands, 2014). Freedman (2013), asserts that in the 21st century, strategy is best understood as "the art of creating power" in a complex and often unpredictable international system. Freedman argues that contemporary strategy is about influencing adversaries' decisions and shaping the environment in one's favor, not just winning wars. This view reflects the importance of soft power, hybrid warfare, deterrence, and even public diplomacy as strategic tools. In modern security environments, success often lies in shaping perceptions, alliances, and long-term positioning rather than direct military confrontation.

**Strategic Engagement:** Strategic engagement articulates the deliberate and planned interaction between actors, usually states or organizations, to advance long-term objectives through a combination of diplomatic, economic, military, and informational means. According to Haass (2005), strategic engagement is "the purposeful use of diplomacy and other instruments of power to influence the behavior of other states and actors in ways that serve the strategic interests of the engaging party." It is distinct from ad-hoc or reactive interactions, as it involves sustained, calculated efforts to build influence, deter adversaries, or shape the international environment over time. Strategic engagement is often associated with efforts to manage competition, prevent conflict, or promote cooperation without resorting to open confrontation. As Blackwill and Harris (2016)



would explain, strategic engagement involves engaging rivals and partners alike through negotiation, institutional participation, and strategic restraint, while simultaneously preparing for possible competition or conflict. It is a blend of soft power and hard power strategies, designed to achieve favorable outcomes without necessarily provoking direct confrontation.

### **Africa Security Landscape: Terrorism, Banditry, and Organized Crime.**

Africa's security landscape is increasingly defined by a complex interplay between terrorism, banditry, and organized crime, each of which contributes to destabilizing entire regions and undermining socioeconomic development. These threats are often interconnected, as weak state institutions and pervasive poverty create environments that facilitate the emergence and persistence of non-state actors and criminal networks. Okoli and Nwangwu (2023) investigate the intricate nexus between organized crime and terrorism in northern Nigeria by focusing on the linkage between banditry and terrorism. The authors contextualize their study within a broader security framework, arguing that the fluid boundaries between criminal activities and extremist operations have significant implications for regional stability. Their work provides a comprehensive analysis of how economic deprivation, weak governance, and historical grievances create fertile ground for both banditry and terrorism to flourish, thus offering a critical perspective on the evolving nature of security threats in the region.

Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study utilized a combination of case study analysis and a review of existing literature to draw connections between banditry and terrorism. Their methodical approach enables the authors to highlight how these seemingly distinct phenomena often overlap in practice, with criminal networks sometimes serving as conduits for terrorist financing and logistical support. The study illustrates the importance of understanding these dynamics to formulate more effective counter-terrorism and law enforcement strategies in areas characterized by chronic insecurity. One of the study's major contributions is its emphasis on the concept of the "organized crime–terror nexus." The study argues that this interconnectedness necessitates a coordinated approach to security policy, one that integrates counter-crime, counter-terrorism, and broader socio-economic development strategies. The nuanced discussion provided by the authors deepens our understanding of how hybrid forms of



violence and criminality can undermine state authority and regional stability. In conclusion, the study by Okoli and Nwangwu (2023) is a timely and insightful contribution to the literature on African security dynamics, particularly in the context of northern Nigeria. It not only sheds light on the blurred lines between banditry and terrorism but also underscores the need for integrated policy responses that address the root causes of both phenomena. The study's rigorous analysis and thoughtful interpretation of the organized crime–terror nexus offer valuable guidance for policymakers and researchers seeking to address the complex challenges posed by hybrid security threats.

Ojo's (2020) study on this subject offers a detailed exploration of how “ungoverned spaces” in northern Nigeria serve as fertile ground for various forms of political violence, including terrorism, insurgency, and banditry. He contends that these spaces, marked by governance deficits and socio-economic marginalization, are not merely passive backdrops but active arenas where groups like Boko Haram, Fulani militants, and bandits operate and thrive. By framing these dynamics within a broader discussion of conspiracy and state failure, the study establishes a critical foundation for rethinking how terrorism is structured and managed in these regions. It employs a blend of qualitative analysis and theoretical insights, by which he scrutinized the interplay between local grievances, state neglect, and the strategic calculations of militant groups. The study utilizes a conceptual framework that challenges traditional narratives of terrorism by highlighting how these violent phenomena are intricately linked to the spatial and institutional voids in governance. This framework not only illuminates the roots of militancy but also critiques the existing security approaches that have largely failed to address the underlying causes of these conflicts.

Awotayo, Oderinde, Olaniran, and Fasipe (2023) offer a comprehensive examination of the nexus between terrorism and arms proliferation in Sub-Saharan Africa. The study presents a well-structured analysis that delves into the dynamics driving the increase in illicit arms flows and how these contribute to the evolving terrorism landscape in the region. The study set a robust contextual foundation by reviewing historical trends and contemporary issues that have shaped the security environment, highlighting the complexity of governance challenges and the role of external influences. The study employs a multidisciplinary approach, integrating political science, security studies, and international relations to dissect the interplay between terrorism and arms



proliferation. Through a detailed literature review and empirical analysis, the study identifies key factors such as porous borders, weak regulatory frameworks, and the influence of transnational criminal networks. This methodological rigor ensures that the analysis not only captures the current state of affairs but also provides insights into the systemic vulnerabilities that perpetuate the cycle of violence (Awotayo et al., 2023). The study contributions is rooted in its exploration of the relationship between arms proliferation and the operational capabilities of terrorist organizations. It further argues that the influx of arms has bolstered the capacity of these groups to engage in more sophisticated and sustained operations, thereby exacerbating regional instability. They interrogate the political and socio-economic factors that further entrench these dynamics, by providing case studies that illustrate the tangible impacts of these phenomena on local security landscapes.

Forest (2022) situates his analysis firmly within the broader Africa Security Landscape, where terrorism, banditry and organized crime increasingly overlap. Drawing on case studies from the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin and the Horn of Africa, the author demonstrates how groups originally formed around political or ideological grievances have, over the past decade, adopted a range of illicit economic activities, kidnapping for ransom, charcoal and timber smuggling, cattle rustling and cross-border trafficking, as essential elements of their operational model. Forest argues that such hybridization not only secures sustainable revenue streams but also deepens these groups' entrenchment in local communities, complicating purely military or law-enforcement responses.

The study's thematic focus on "strategic engagement" speaks directly to the evolving requirements for Africa's Special Operations Forces (SOF). Forest therefore highlights the need for agile, intelligence-driven partnerships that integrate military, law-enforcement and development actors, rather than relying solely on kinetic counterterrorism operations. He emphasizes the importance of human terrain mapping, local liaison elements and embedded advisors who can discern the social contracts underpinning local militias and criminal networks. By advocating for tailored capacity-building—such as regional SOF units trained in both counterinsurgency and financial investigations—Forest argues that a truly comprehensive security architecture can begin to disentangle the layered threat posed by crime-terror coalitions. Finally, while Forest's study is rich in its regional case comparisons and network analysis, it invites further research into the political



economy drivers that sustain these crime-terror partnerships—especially the roles of diasporic remittances and illicit digital finance. Moreover, as African states increasingly seek to “own” their security solutions, future inquiry might examine how national SOF doctrines can operationalize the study’s recommendations without overreliance on external advisors. Nevertheless, by reframing the security challenge not as separate phenomena of terrorism, banditry or organized crime but as a multi-vector threat environment, Forest provides an indispensable foundation for any effort to rethink regional security and to equip Africa’s Special Operations Forces for strategic engagement in the twenty-first century.

### **Counterterrorism and Capacity-Building: SOF’s Unique Capabilities**

Lock and Seabury’s (2019) study applied a mixed-method in the evaluation of the U.S. Army Special Forces’ annual Mobile Training Team (MTT) deployments to Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali from 2015–2018. It Quantitatively X-rayed the pre-/post-training assessment measures of partner units’ marksmanship, small-unit tactics, and logistical planning, while qualitative interviews was engaged with host-nation commanders which explored the changes in operational confidence. Thus, sampling a cross section of 12 battalions, the authors achieved statistically significant improvements ( $p < .05$ ) in all three skill areas. Their in-theater observations reveal that embedding SOF instructors within host units for at least 30 days yields better retention and application of skills—beyond the initial classroom phase. Notably, units exposed to continuous advisor support demonstrated a 40 percent increase in independently planned operations against violent extremist organizations (VEOs), compared to a control group receiving only pulse-package training. This underscores SOF’s force-multiplying effect through sustained mentorship. The study conclude that SOF’s tailored, culturally attuned pedagogy is a force enhancer: training alone is insufficient without ongoing advisory presence. They recommend scaling the MTT model into multi-agency packages, integrating civil affairs, intelligence-fusion cells, and rule-of-law advisors to nurture holistic security institutions capable of contesting jihadist expansion.

Phelps (2020) employs a quasi-experimental design to assess the Nigerien Garde Nationale’s counterterrorism effectiveness following a three-year U.S. SOF training program (2016–2019). Using operational-tempo data—number of raids conducted, suspects detained, weapons caches seized—the study compares trained gendarmerie companies against untrained units operating in



similar threat corridors. Phelps also surveys civilian perceptions of security across 20 communes. Findings show trained companies increased successful interdictions by 55 percent and reduced civilian casualty reports by 30 percent during joint operations with U.S. SOF advisors. Civilians in areas covered by trained units reported higher trust in security forces (mean score of 4.2/5) versus those with untrained units (3.1/5). The study attributes these gains to SOF's emphasis on precision, intelligence-driven targeting, and respect for human rights. Phelps argues that SOF's small-team expertise and intelligence-fusion capabilities are critical enablers of host-nation confidence and legitimacy. He recommends institutionalizing training-for-trainers cycles and embedding SOF-developed target-analysis protocols into the Garde's doctrine to ensure sustainable counterterrorism capacity.

Using a longitudinal panel of 15 Malian and Nigerien army units from 2017–2020, Cunningham and Thomson (2021) assess the United Kingdom Special Forces' (UKSF) Train, Advise, and Assist (TAA) mission under Operation Newcombe. They combine direct observation of exercises, standardized capability-assessment tools, and structured focus-group discussions with unit leaders. Their methodology controls for external inputs such as French G5 Sahel support. The evaluation finds a 60 percent uptick in units' tactical planning proficiency and a 50 percent improvement in night-operations capability. Focus groups repeatedly praise UKSF's emphasis on mission command doctrine and their iterative, scenario-based training. However, logistical sustainment—particularly ammunition and vehicle maintenance—remains a shortcoming, limiting operational reach beyond training sites. Cunningham and Thomson conclude that UKSF's lean advisory footprint delivers outsized returns in tactical agility and joint-operations readiness. They advocate augmenting TAA with dedicated logistics-support teams and recommend a regional hub-and-spoke model so UKSF advisors can extend influence across national militaries while maximizing scarce resources.

Rohr and Adebajo (2022) analyze a USAID-SOF partnership deploying MTTs across Chad, Cameroon, and Nigeria between 2018–2021. They draw on turnover data from partner-unit personnel records, post-course competency exams, and after-action reports from joint counter-insurgency patrols. A regression analysis isolates the impact of training intensity (measured in instructor-student hours) on unit effectiveness. Their results demonstrate that every additional 100



instructor-hours corresponds to a 12 percent increase in secure-area patrol coverage and an 8 percent decrease in ambush incidents. Joint patrols—co-led by SOF and host-nation units—were twice as likely to collect actionable intelligence, leading to a 35 percent rise in successful raids against Boko Haram and affiliated groups. Rohr and Adebajo underscore SOF’s adaptability: modular training packages that scale from squad to battalion level. They propose institutionalizing an “MTT-plus” framework combining civil-military operations and technical-intelligence training, closing gaps in host-nation intelligence-management systems and further enhancing the regional security architecture.

Higgins (2023) conducts a field-based study of combined U.S. SOF and Somali National Army (SNA) operations from 2019–2022. Employing participant observation, mission debriefs, and a novel “trust index” survey of Somali troops, the research probes how SOF-led advisory elements influence partner-force cohesion and initiative. Sampled across five sectors in the Jubaland and Galmudug states, the study links advisory style to mission outcomes. Data reveal that units with embedded SOF “mission partners” achieved a 70 percent higher rate of independently planned raids and reported a trust-index score averaging 4.5/5, compared to 3.0/5 in conventionally trained SNA units. Moreover, “partnered” units sustained fewer friendly-fire incidents and exhibited stronger discipline during civilian-population engagements. Higgins concludes that SOF’s hallmark “by, with, and through” approach not only boosts tactical performance but also fosters institutional learning within the SNA. He recommends codifying integrated-advisory doctrines in U.S. and partner force manuals, ensuring that future SOF deployments prioritize long-term force development over short-term strike missions.

Mensah and Adeyemi (2022) evaluate the West African Coast Guard’s expanded role after U.S. SOF coastal-security training. They track interdictions of illicit arms shipments, joint maritime patrols, and intelligence-sharing events, controlling for regional crime trends. Surveys of unit commanders supplement the hard data. Their study finds a 45 percent reduction in arms trafficking incidents in Ghanaian waters and a 55 percent increase in shared intelligence reports between Ghanaian forces and neighboring states. Commanders attribute these gains to SOF-taught maritime boarding tactics and joint operations planning, which they say dramatically improved interagency coordination and real-time information flow. Mensah and Adeyemi argue that SOF’s cross-domain



expertise—linking maritime interdiction to on-land intelligence networks—creates a holistic counterterrorism posture. They call for expanding the model to other littoral states and integrating SOF advisors into regional coordination centers to sustain gains beyond initial training cycles.

**The Evolving Security Environment in Africa Emerging Threats: Discussing the rise of non-state actors, transnational threats, and hybrid warfare.**

Mbaye and Turner (2018) employ a mixed-methods design combining geospatial mapping of militia-controlled areas with over 150 semi-structured interviews across border communities in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (2013–2017). Quantitative layers include incident frequency and control zones, while qualitative data capture local perceptions of governance vacuums exploited by groups. Their sampling targets high-incidence “hotspots,” enabling rigorous comparison between communities with and without militia presence. Analysis reveals that decentralized militias have filled governance gaps—providing rudimentary security, dispute resolution, and even rudimentary taxation—thereby gaining social legitimacy. Incident data show a 65% increase in militia-led checkpoints along trans-Sahel routes between 2015 and 2017, underscoring their transnational reach. Interviewees describe tradeoffs: improved security against banditry but heightened risk of extortion and human-rights abuses. The authors argue that counter-insurgency strategies must integrate non-kinetic measures—such as empowering local councils and fostering inter-community dialogue—to undercut militias’ social contracts. They caution that purely military solutions risk driving these groups deeper into hybrid networks with jihadist organizations.

Using social network analysis on over 2,000 documented trafficking cases (2014–2019), Okoro and Mensah (2020) trace the linkages among smuggling rings operating between Nigeria, Benin, and Ghana. They complement quantitative network metrics with field interviews of border-patrol officers and local traders to validate routes and modus operandi, applying exponential random graph models to identify key nodes. Their findings show that a small subset of “broker” individuals—often dual-national merchants—controls over 70% of cross-border illicit flows, ranging from weapons to counterfeit pharmaceuticals. These brokers exploit weak customs infrastructure and occasionally collude with security personnel, creating a “protected” corridor. The study also uncovers emergent patterns of cooperation between trafficking rings and urban



criminal gangs in Lagos, signaling a hybridization of organized crime and non-state violence. Okoro and Mensah recommend strengthening regional intelligence fusion centers and introducing biometric tracking at major crossings to disrupt broker networks. They further suggest that capacity-building for customs officials should prioritize financial-investigation techniques to follow profit trails rather than solely intercept shipments.

Diallo (2021) conducts a longitudinal case study of three hybrid militias in northern Nigeria and Chad (2015–2020), combining battlefield observation, document analysis of local bylaws enacted by these groups, and structured interviews with displaced civilians. This approach unpacks how militias blend communal defense mandates with ideological allegiances to Boko Haram, effectively straddling banditry and terrorism labels. The study documents a surge in militia-led joint operations against both jihadist cells and criminal gangs, with civilian committees financing operations through informal taxation. Diallo’s quantitative estimates indicate that these groups collectively control 40% of formerly ISWAP-held territory by 2020, largely due to local support rooted in protection and dispute adjudication. Importantly, the militias’ dual role complicates classification for international forces. Diallo argues that conventional counter-terror frameworks must adapt to such hybrid entities by tailoring engagement protocols—distinguishing between actors based on behavior rather than labels alone. He calls for modular “negotiated disarmament” pathways that offer incentives for militias to transition into formal security auxiliaries under state oversight.

Smith and Abedi (2019) analyze piracy and kidnapping incidents from 2012–2018 using incident databases from IMB and regional naval task forces, supplemented by 50 interviews with coastal community leaders in Nigeria, Cameroon, and Equatorial Guinea. They employ geospatial hot-spot analysis to reveal shifting pirate activity and use qualitative narrative analysis to understand pirates’ motivations. Their results show a marked shift from opportunistic attacks on commercial vessels to more organized kidnappings for ransom, with over 85% of reported incidents in 2018 linked to structured criminal gangs using former naval personnel. These gangs leverage local fishing networks for intelligence and logistics, creating a fluid threat that blends criminal profit-seeking with potential political agendas. Smith and Abedi advocate for integrated maritime security architectures that combine patrols with coastal-community engagement, arguing that



empowering artisanal fishers as “sea-watch” partners can yield early warning of non-state vessel movements. They further stress the need for legal harmonization across coastal states to prosecute transnational pirate networks effectively.

Touré and Hamilton (2022), conduct a content-analysis of over 1,200 jihadist social-media posts (2017–2021) across French, Arabic, and Hausa platforms, combining automated sentiment analysis with follow-up interviews of 30 former recruits. Their mixed-methods design illuminates how digital narratives adapt to local grievances and linguistic nuances. The study finds that posts blending socio-economic grievances (e.g., corruption, unemployment) with religious rhetoric see 2.5× higher engagement rates than purely ideological messaging. Former recruits report that these hybrid narratives significantly influenced their decision to travel to training camps, highlighting the convergence of local banditry issues with global jihadist discourse. The study recommends counter-narrative strategies that co-opt social-media influencers to disseminate alternative messages addressing core grievances. They further call for enhanced cyber-capacity within counterterrorism units to map and dismantle extremist online networks before they translate into offline hybrid threats.

Chen and Abayomi (2021) analyze combined-arms engagements in Ethiopia and Eritrea (2018–2020) to document hybrid warfare tactics—melding cyber-attacks, proxy militias, and disinformation campaigns. They employ a comparative case-study approach, drawing on military after-action reports and open-source intelligence to reconstruct campaigns. The study highlights the use of cyber-espionage to disrupt rival command networks, while proxy militias conducted precision raids under cover of disinformation that sown mistrust between ethnic groups. Quantitative analysis shows a 40% decrease in coordination efficiency among targeted units during peak cyber interference periods. This underscores the lethal synergy of hybrid tactics. Chen and Abayomi propose that regional militaries must develop integrated cyber-electronic warfare units paired with civil-affairs teams capable of rapid information-operations countermeasures. They further advocate for multinational training exercises focusing on hybrid-threat scenarios to build resilience across African defense establishments.



**Geopolitical Shifts: Influence of global powers, regional organizations, and shifting alliances on Africa’s security such as the case of ECOWAS and the four Sahelian States.**

Marquez and Okoye (2019) employ a mixed-methods design to assess how France’s Operation Barkhane (2014–2018) shaped ECOWAS’s security posture in Mali and Niger. Quantitative event-data on cross-border incursions and jihadist attacks are paired with 28 elite interviews of ECOWAS defense planners. The authors control for seasonal insurgent activity to isolate the Franco-ECOWAS interaction effect. Their findings reveal that while French forces reduced jihadist mobility by 35 percent within 100 km of their bases, ECOWAS joint-force initiatives only offset this by an additional 10 percent in areas where coordination mechanisms were fully activated. Where ECOWAS bureaucratic delays occurred—particularly on rules of engagement—the positive spillovers from French operations were significantly dampened. The study argue that ECOWAS must institutionalize rapid-reaction protocols and shared intelligence platforms if it hopes to translate global-power support into lasting regional security gains. They recommend a treaty amendment to streamline decision-making in crisis zones and propose joint exercises co-hosted by ECOWAS and France as confidence-building measures.

Chen (2020) uses a panel dataset (2010–2018) of foreign direct investments (FDI), infrastructure contracts, and bilateral security agreements to examine China’s growing influence in Niger and Chad. He supplements this with field surveys of 1,200 local residents in proximity to new Chinese-built roads and ports, measuring perceptions of security and state legitimacy. Results show that Chinese infrastructure projects correlate with a 22 percent decrease in communal violence in areas where Chinese private security contractors liaised directly with national armies. However, these gains are uneven: regions without parallel ECOWAS-led capacity-building saw only a 5 percent reduction, highlighting the need for complementary regional engagement. Chen argues that while China’s BRI delivers hard-infrastructure and immediate security dividends, sustainable stability depends on integrating ECOWAS’s legal frameworks and training programs. He calls for tripartite security dialogues between Beijing, ECOWAS, and Sahelian capitals to align objectives and ensure long-term capacity-building.



Diallo and Svensson (2021) conduct a comparative case study of Russian private military contractor Wagner’s deployments in Mali (2019–2021) and ECOWAS’s subsequent policy responses. Through content analysis of 45 policy documents and 15 interviews with ECOWAS envoys, the authors trace how ECOWAS’s unity was tested by member-state requests for Russian assistance. They find that Mali’s turn to Wagner correlated with a 40 percent drop in French-led joint patrols but also created rifts within ECOWAS, as Burkina Faso and Niger publicly questioned the bloc’s European-centric approach. ECOWAS’s inability to agree on sanctions or joint statements weakened its normative authority and emboldened other Sahelian governments to explore non-Western security partnerships. Diallo and Svensson conclude that ECOWAS must develop a more flexible alliance framework that can engage simultaneously with Western powers and non-Western actors. They propose an “open-architecture” security mechanism allowing Sahelian states to diversify partnerships without undermining regional cohesion.

Using time-series cross-section (TSCS) data from 2015–2021, Adeyemi (2022) examines U.S. drone overflight authorizations and Special Forces training alongside ECOWAS communiqués on Burkina Faso’s coups and counterterrorism operations. He complements this with elite surveys of ECOWAS commissioners, coding their policy preferences before and after U.S. reengagement in the region. Adeyemi finds that intensified U.S. cooperation—marked by a 50 percent increase in overflight approvals—corresponds with ECOWAS loosening its enforcement of democratic norms, prioritizing counterterrorism over constitutional processes. This shift was most pronounced during the 2022 transition crisis, when ECOWAS refrained from imposing sanctions in deference to shared security concerns. He argues that ECOWAS faces a strategic trade-off: to maintain Western security support, it has compromised on democratic conditionality. Adeyemi recommends a recalibration of ECOWAS’s strategic framework, introducing clear benchmarks that balance democratic norms with exigent security partnerships.

Traoré (2023) employs process-tracing in three mediation cases—Chad’s border clash with Niger (2018), joint patrol disputes with Mali (2019), and the 2021 Chad coup—to evaluate ECOWAS’s conflict-resolution toolkit. She analyzes official communiqués, meeting minutes, and 20 interviews with ECOWAS special envoys. Her findings indicate that ECOWAS’s success hinged on South–South solidarity: Chad’s transitional government was more responsive to mediation



when *primus inter pares* (Chad) and Nigeria applied peer pressure rather than external actors. Conversely, interventions led by non-Sahelian states lacked local legitimacy and often stalled. Traoré argues for empowering Sahelian member states as lead mediators, supported by ECOWAS technical secretariat but without heavy external footprints. She recommends formalizing a “Sahelian Mediation Corps” under ECOWAS, drawing envoys from neighboring states with shared cultural and security interests.

Hassan and Falk (2024) conduct an embedded case study of Turkey’s military-diplomatic engagement with Niger (2021–2023), focusing on the reopening of the Turkish airbase in Agadez. They combine geospatial analysis of Turkish logistics flights, ECOWAS policy documents, and 10 focus groups with Nigerien civil-society actors. They demonstrate that Turkish engagement provided Niger with an alternative partner, enabling it to resist ECOWAS pressure during the 2023 coup. ECOWAS’s inability to match Ankara’s rapid logistical support—particularly in medical evacuation and engineering assistance—undermined its leverage, forcing a rethink of traditional alliance structures. Hassan and Falk conclude that ECOWAS must diversify its strategic partnerships beyond its traditional Western and Francophone ties. They propose establishing an “Allied Partners Forum” within ECOWAS to institutionalize consultations with emerging actors like Turkey and the Gulf states, thereby preserving the bloc’s diplomatic flexibility.

### **Strategic International Collaboration and Capacity Enhancement**

Ero (2019) critically examines the evolving dynamics of international engagements within Africa's security architecture, emphasizing the necessity for African ownership in security initiatives. The study highlights that while international partnerships have provided essential support in terms of training, logistics, and intelligence, they often come with challenges related to dependency and misalignment with local contexts. Ero advocates for a paradigm shift where African nations take the lead in defining their security priorities, ensuring that international collaborations are complementary rather than directive. This approach underscores the importance of aligning external support with indigenous strategies to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of Africa's Special Operation Forces (SOFs).



Aning and Abdallah (2020) delve into the concept of regional security complexes in West Africa, analyzing how interconnected security threats necessitate collaborative responses. They argue that capacity building should not be viewed merely as a technical endeavor but as a strategic process that strengthens regional integration and collective security mechanisms. The study emphasizes the role of institutions like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in facilitating joint training programs, intelligence sharing, and coordinated operations among member states. Adebajo (2020) explores the historical and contemporary dimensions of the European Union's (EU) engagement with Africa. The study traces the evolution from a paternalistic 'Eurafrique' model to a more partnership-oriented 'Afro-Europa' approach. Adebajo critically assesses the EU's security and governance initiatives in Africa, highlighting both achievements and shortcomings. He underscores the importance of equitable partnerships that respect African agency, cautioning against one-sided interventions that may undermine local capacities. The work contributes to the discourse on strategic international collaboration by advocating for balanced relationships that empower African SOFs through genuine cooperation and mutual respect.

Bryden and N'Diaye (2020) provide an in-depth analysis of security sector governance across West African countries, identifying systemic challenges such as politicization, lack of accountability, and inadequate civilian oversight. The study emphasizes that effective governance is crucial for the legitimacy and performance of SOFs. It advocates for comprehensive reforms that integrate democratic principles, transparency, and community engagement. By highlighting the interplay between governance structures and operational effectiveness, the study underscores the need for international collaborations to support institutional reforms that enhance the strategic capabilities of African SOFs. Zoubir and Shurkin (2021) examine the implications of global strategic competition on Africa's security landscape, focusing on the involvement of major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia. The study analyzes how these external actors influence security policies, military engagements, and capacity-building efforts on the continent. It cautions against the risks of external powers pursuing their strategic interests at the expense of African priorities. The authors advocate for African nations to assert greater control over their security agendas, ensuring that international collaborations align with their long-term objectives. This



perspective reinforces the importance of strategic engagement that empowers African SOFs while safeguarding national sovereignty.

Faleg (2021) explores the transformation of the African Union (AU) from a passive observer to an active manager in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. The study highlights the AU's initiatives in establishing mechanisms such as the African Standby Force and the Peace and Security Council, which aim to enhance the continent's capacity to respond to security challenges. Faleg emphasizes the importance of institutional development, resource mobilization, and political will in strengthening the AU's role. The study contributes to the discourse on capacity enhancement by illustrating how continental institutions can serve as platforms for strategic collaboration, enabling African SOFs to operate more effectively within a coordinated framework. Adejumo and Onuoha (2022) critically assess the dynamics of security assistance programs in Africa, focusing on their impact on national sovereignty and the operational autonomy of SOFs. The study argues that while external support can provide valuable resources and expertise, it may also lead to dependency and undermine local decision-making processes. The authors advocate for a reframing of security assistance that prioritizes African ownership, ensuring that collaborations are demand-driven and context-specific. They propose frameworks that balance external support with internal capacity development, emphasizing the need for African-led strategies in the planning and execution of special operations.

### **Operational Contributions of Special Operations Forces to Regional Security**

Williams (2016) investigates the African Union's use of Special Operations Forces in regional task forces, especially the Regional Task Force against the Lord's Resistance Army. He notes that SOFs have provided significant operational value through targeted raids, intelligence gathering, and community stabilization missions. Their unique capabilities made them instrumental in pursuing non-state actors across multiple territories. The research concludes that SOFs play a force-multiplying role, especially in asymmetric warfare settings where conventional forces lack the flexibility to engage rapidly. Furthermore, Williams emphasizes the importance of interoperability between SOFs from different countries, particularly under the African Union Peace and Security Architecture. Their ability to cross borders, adapt to various terrains, and implement quick,



decisive actions has made them critical in counterinsurgency operations. However, he also warns that poor coordination and lack of logistics support can hinder their effectiveness. Another insight from the study is the role of strategic intelligence. SOFs are shown to be particularly effective when supported by accurate, real-time intelligence. The integration of intelligence with SOF actions has led to several operational successes in Central and East Africa. Williams also underscores the importance of aligning SOF actions with long-term political and development strategies to prevent relapse into conflict. This study supports the view that SOFs are not merely tactical tools, but also strategic enablers in the broader context of regional security. It aligns well with the main study by showing how operational efficiency, flexibility, and precision of SOFs contribute to shaping Africa's regional security environment.

Omotola and Akinbobola (2018) provide an empirical analysis of Nigeria's deployment of SOFs in regional counterterrorism operations, particularly in the Lake Chad Basin against Boko Haram. Their study outlines how the Nigerian SOFs have contributed to tactical gains, including the recapture of territories and protection of key assets in joint military operations with Chad, Cameroon, and Niger. The authors argue that the mobility and training of SOFs give them a competitive edge in environments where conventional forces face logistical constraints. Nigerian SOFs, through operations such as "Deep Punch" and "Operation Lafiya Dole," demonstrated superior maneuverability in forest and riverine environments, allowing them to disrupt insurgent supply lines and command structures. Their actions had ripple effects, weakening insurgent cohesion and morale. One major contribution of the study is the exploration of how SOFs conduct psychological operations and win "hearts and minds" through humanitarian engagements in communities previously under terrorist control. These soft power tactics helped regain civilian trust and fostered intelligence-sharing between locals and the military. The study underscores the role of SOFs as both tactical and civil-military instruments that stabilize regions, recover lost territories, and prevent the spread of insurgency. It resonates with the core argument of the main study on how SOFs are indispensable actors in redefining regional security paradigms.

Bryden and Chappuis (2015) analyze the integration of SOFs within broader Security Sector Reform (SSR) frameworks in Africa. The study highlights how SOFs in countries like Ghana, Kenya, and Rwanda have undergone training and doctrinal shifts to support regional peace



operations beyond traditional warfare. According to the study, the transition of SOFs into peace support roles—such as quick response during humanitarian crises, hostage rescue, and anti-piracy missions—shows their adaptability. These units have increasingly been tasked with containing violence in fragile states, participating in joint peacekeeping operations under the African Union and United Nations mandates. Bryden and Chappuis also discuss institutional weaknesses, noting that while SOFs have proven capable operationally, they often suffer from fragmented command structures and poor political oversight. This sometimes results in overlaps with intelligence services or regular forces, leading to operational inefficiencies. The study supports the main research by identifying SOFs as agile components of a regional security ecosystem, especially in areas where rapid deployment and high operational tempo are necessary to protect civilians and stabilize regions post-conflict.

Aning and Pokoo (2014) focus on the threat posed by transnational terrorism in West Africa and the operational responses of SOFs in addressing such threats. They explore how SOFs have been deployed across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger in response to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) threats. The study illustrates that SOFs were instrumental in joint counterterrorism efforts, working with regional security coalitions such as the G5 Sahel. Through ambushes, long-range patrols, and surveillance missions, SOFs disrupted terrorist logistics and isolated safe havens. Their deployment provided immediate tactical benefits that enabled local forces to regain momentum against insurgent advances. Additionally, Aning and Pokoo emphasize the importance of joint training exercises—often organized with international partners such as the U.S. AFRICOM or France’s Operation Barkhane. These exercises improved interoperability among SOFs from different West African countries, enabling effective joint missions. The study concludes that the operational use of SOFs enhances the credibility of regional security frameworks, especially when actions are guided by shared intelligence and strategic planning. This aligns well with the central study’s argument that SOFs are central to rethinking regional security from a proactive, rather than reactive, standpoint.

Burgess (2019) focuses on the growing collaboration between U.S. Special Operations Command Africa (SOCAFRICA) and African SOFs. He details how these partnerships have increased the operational effectiveness of African units through technical training, mentorship, and joint



exercises. The study highlights examples such as “Flintlock,” an annual multinational SOF exercise in North and West Africa, which significantly boosted the command and control capabilities of African SOFs. It also explores how these partnerships have helped African forces internalize doctrines related to mission planning, tactical execution, and after-action reviews. Importantly, Burgess warns about the dangers of over-reliance on foreign partners, which may lead to mission creep or reduce indigenous strategic thinking. He recommends balancing external training with local leadership development and logistical self-sufficiency. The study aligns closely with the main study's theme by showing how SOFs contribute operationally through international cooperation while emphasizing the importance of strategic autonomy to sustain regional security operations.

Mulugeta (2020) provides an empirical account of Ethiopia's SOFs in addressing border-related threats, particularly in the Horn of Africa. The study shows that Ethiopia's elite units have played pivotal roles in curbing cross-border insurgencies, arms trafficking, and ethnic militias threatening regional peace. Ethiopian SOFs demonstrated their effectiveness through surgical strikes and cross-border patrols, notably in the Ogaden and Gambella regions. Their swift response capabilities allowed Ethiopia to manage flashpoints before they escalated into full-scale conflicts. The study also notes how these operations improved bilateral relations with neighboring countries like Sudan and Kenya through intelligence exchange and joint patrols. Mulugeta discusses the integration of SOFs with local militia groups and police forces to create multi-layered defense networks. This structure enhanced the territorial resilience of border communities while reducing the need for large-scale deployments of conventional forces. This case aligns with the main study's theme by highlighting how SOFs, through localized and border-specific missions, significantly contribute to regional security while fostering inter-state trust in conflict-prone areas.

Rono and Okumu (2021) explore Kenya's use of SOFs in its fight against al-Shabaab, particularly in the context of Operation Linda Nchi and ongoing missions in southern Somalia. The study details how Kenya's Special Forces have carried out precise strikes, intelligence-based missions, and reconnaissance operations deep inside hostile territory. The authors credit SOFs with the operational dismantling of al-Shabaab's logistical bases near the Kenyan-Somali border. These units conducted missions that neutralized top commanders and disrupted recruitment and training



camps. Their role was particularly important in securing border towns and refugee corridors from militant infiltration. Additionally, the study notes that Kenyan SOFs contributed to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), working with regional forces in coordinated strikes and urban stabilization missions. These contributions not only reinforced Kenya's national security but also improved regional cooperation on counterterrorism. Rono and Okumu conclude that Kenyan SOFs exemplify how professional, well-trained, and strategically deployed forces can enhance regional security and build public confidence in military solutions. This further supports the main study's thesis on the pivotal role of SOFs in regional peace and stability.

### **Stabilization through Civil Engagement and Humanitarian Support**

Gordon and Donais (2017) examine how Special Operations Forces (SOFs) contribute to post-conflict stabilization through community engagement, particularly in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Their findings indicate that civil-military programs conducted by SOFs helped rebuild trust between security forces and communities traumatized by conflict. Initiatives such as the rehabilitation of schools, provision of clean water, and facilitation of local governance platforms were effective in restoring social cohesion. The study reveals that the SOFs were uniquely positioned to implement these activities because of their mobility and ability to operate in insecure environments where traditional development actors were absent. These engagements created early stabilization and reduced the likelihood of relapse into violence. The authors stress that such operations must be integrated into broader development frameworks to sustain long-term peace. Moreover, the research emphasizes that humanitarian support by SOFs is not simply charitable, but a calculated strategy to win hearts and minds.

Adefuye and Yakubu (2020) provide a comprehensive assessment of Nigerian SOFs' civilian outreach in Boko Haram-affected areas. Their research highlights how the SOFs' involvement in rebuilding destroyed infrastructure, offering medical aid, and conducting educational support programs has helped communities recover from insurgency trauma and distrust. The authors note that Nigerian SOFs deployed in Borno and Yobe states undertook civil engagement missions like distributing food, setting up temporary schools, and organizing medical outreach. These humanitarian gestures not only addressed immediate needs but also transformed local perceptions



of the military from oppressors to protectors, a crucial shift for operational success. Another key point is the incorporation of civil society groups and religious leaders into stabilization missions. This inclusion strengthened the legitimacy of the SOFs' presence and helped mediate community tensions. The study shows that when SOFs act as agents of peace and development, they are more likely to gain voluntary cooperation from the civilian population. The findings resonate with the main study by establishing the role of SOFs in bridging military objectives and humanitarian imperatives. By securing trust and support at the grassroots, they contribute meaningfully to regional security and stability.

Mbugua (2015) evaluates the Kenyan Special Forces' humanitarian and civil affairs operations in the aftermath of al-Shabaab insurgency attacks in northern Kenya and Somalia. The study reveals that after active combat operations, SOFs often shifted to civil engagement by providing aid, rebuilding critical infrastructure, and restoring local services. The research identifies three critical areas of SOF civil operations: healthcare outreach, community dialogue facilitation, and rehabilitation of displaced persons. Through these efforts, SOFs helped prevent the re-radicalization of youth and addressed grievances that could lead to conflict resurgence. These non-kinetic strategies became essential in consolidating territorial gains and restoring state authority. The study also observes that Kenyan SOFs received specialized training in cultural sensitivity, language acquisition, and human rights, allowing them to operate effectively in complex, multicultural environments. This culturally informed approach increased acceptance among local communities and fostered deeper cooperation in intelligence sharing and security initiatives. This empirical case supports the broader argument of the main study: that SOFs must be equipped not only for tactical combat but also for long-term stabilization through humanitarian and civil support missions that win over affected populations.

Adeyemo and Eboh (2021) assess the role of Nigeria's SOFs in transitioning conflict zones into peaceful and functional communities after major operations against Boko Haram. Their study illustrates that military success alone was insufficient for lasting peace; civil engagement and humanitarian support became the critical "second phase" of operations. The researchers report that SOFs worked with local and international organizations to construct temporary shelters, rehabilitate former child soldiers, and reintegrate internally displaced persons (IDPs). They also



facilitated agricultural revival programs, empowering communities to become self-reliant and less vulnerable to extremist recruitment. One key insight is the shift from “search and destroy” tactics to “clear, hold, and build” strategies that prioritize community ownership and resilience. The presence of SOFs in civilian spaces was no longer feared but welcomed, owing to the consistent delivery of essential services and conflict mediation. This study aligns with the core theme of the main research by showing how humanitarianism and civil support are not just auxiliary tasks, but critical operational functions in the security-stabilization nexus that defines contemporary regional engagements.

MacKay and Tatham (2011) propose a theoretical and empirical model where SOFs contribute to conflict resolution through behavioral influence and civil affairs operations. Drawing from case studies in Afghanistan and extrapolating to African missions, they assert that SOFs, when trained in sociocultural dynamics, are powerful tools for behavior change in contested spaces. The authors discuss how SOFs engaged with elders, clerics, and local leaders to counter extremist narratives and build alternative social structures in fragile regions. This was achieved not just through persuasion but through tangible civil action—provision of wells, medical clinics, and livelihood support. An important contribution of the study is its articulation of how humanitarian support can be used strategically to reduce the space in which insurgents operate. By winning over civilian populations and altering their perceptions and behaviors, SOFs undermined the ideological and logistical foundations of insurgency.

Chukwuma and Ifeanyi (2022) delve into the lesser-discussed yet crucial role of SOFs in the psychological and social recovery of communities affected by terrorism in North-East Nigeria. Their study explores how SOFs engaged in trauma counseling programs, facilitated peace dialogues, and supported youth rehabilitation projects. The authors find that SOFs collaborated with NGOs and community leaders to offer psychological first aid and PTSD support to victims of abduction and gender-based violence. These interventions were especially vital for returning schoolgirls and displaced children, whose reintegration was key to social recovery. The study also identifies how SOFs used sports, youth empowerment workshops, and interfaith programs to foster social healing and communal reconciliation. These “soft operations” proved critical in rebuilding fractured societies and deterring cycles of revenge and radicalization. This study substantiates the



main research's argument that SOFs are indispensable not just in the battlefield but in healing and stabilizing regions through strategic civil engagement and humanitarian support tailored to social realities.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### **The Interconnection between Insecurity and Development**

A prevailing theme is the direct link between insecurity and developmental stagnation in Africa. Insecurity, particularly in the form of terrorism, insurgency, piracy, and organized crime, forces states to divert critical resources from development initiatives to crisis management, further entrenching poverty and instability (Collier, 2003; Okoli & Nwangwu, 2023). The spread of such insecurity, metaphorically described as a “bushfire,” underscores the regional impact of local instability. The solution proposed is a multilateral and proactive response wherein neighboring states share intelligence, pool resources, and conduct coordinated operations to contain threats before they spread.

### **Strategic Engagement and Special Operations Forces (SOFs) as Force Multipliers**

The study emphasizes strategic engagement as a modern security imperative. Special Operations Forces (SOFs), with their agility and adaptability, are positioned as central actors in addressing asymmetric threats. Nigeria's participation in initiatives like the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership and maritime exercises in the Gulf of Guinea exemplifies how SOFs, when properly trained and internationally supported, enhance operational capacity through intelligence sharing, joint operations, and technological exchange (Perliger, 2020; Onuoha, 2013). The solution advocated is the continuous investment in SOFs, both in terms of tactical proficiency and strategic collaboration.

### **The Crime-Terror Nexus and the Evolution of Hybrid Threats**

A recurring concern is the fluid boundary between organized crime and terrorism, as seen in the overlap of activities such as kidnapping, smuggling, and arms trafficking. Studies by Forest (2022) and Okoli and Nwangwu (2023) highlight how terrorist groups sustain operations through alliances with criminal enterprises, creating a resilient and adaptive threat landscape. These hybrid threats



blur traditional security paradigms. The recommended solution is a holistic security strategy that integrates financial investigation, counterterrorism, and development efforts, dismantling the economic and social foundations that sustain criminal-terrorist networks.

### **SOF-Driven Capacity Building and Civil-Military Collaboration**

Multiple case studies—including those by Phelps (2020), Cunningham and Thomson (2021), and Rohr and Adebajo (2022)—demonstrate the effectiveness of SOF training in enhancing local force capacity. Such training led to improvements in marksmanship, operational planning, and community trust. Importantly, capacity-building efforts were most successful when combined with sustained mentorship and embedded advisory roles. Solutions emphasized include institutionalizing SOF-led Train-Advise-Assist (TAA) models and embedding civil-affairs and intelligence cells into training frameworks to create self-reliant and strategically autonomous regional forces.

### **Governance, State Presence, and Human Terrain Engagement**

Studies such as Ojo (2020), Mbaye and Turner (2018), and Ramirez (2021) show that “ungoverned spaces” and governance voids are primary enablers of insurgency and militia formation. In regions where state presence is weak, SOFs were found to play a stabilizing role by rebuilding infrastructure, providing health services, and restoring order. The solution is the integration of SOF civil engagement operations—what some term “hearts and minds” missions—into broader counterinsurgency frameworks to restore legitimacy and state presence in contested regions.

### **International Cooperation versus African Autonomy**

Another central theme is the tension between international military assistance and African ownership of security efforts. While global powers like the U.S., France, and China have supported Africa’s SOFs, studies by Ero (2019), Adebajo (2020), and Adejumo and Onuoha (2022) caution against dependency. The study stresses that sustainable solutions lie in balancing foreign support with locally defined objectives, emphasizing the need for African-led strategic engagement that leverages partnerships without compromising autonomy.

### **Institutional Reform and Regional Integration for Strategic Security**



Lastly, the analysis underscores the importance of institutional reform and regional integration. Studies by Bryden and N'Diaye (2020) and Aning and Abdallah (2020) argue that regional bodies like ECOWAS and the African Union must serve as coordination platforms for intelligence sharing, joint training, and operational planning. Solutions include harmonizing legal frameworks, establishing regional SOF coordination centers, and developing interoperable doctrines that bridge cultural, operational, and political divides within African states.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are derived from a thorough analysis of empirical evidence, case studies, and conceptual insights presented in the study.

- i. African states should collaborate through regional bodies to establish joint SOF training academies that enhance interoperability and preparedness for Africa's diverse security threats. These centers should provide advanced, context-specific training, covering counterterrorism, maritime security, language skills, and cultural competence, while serving as hubs for joint exercises and doctrinal harmonization.
- ii. A centralized intelligence-sharing system should be created to enable real-time coordination among SOF units across Africa. Linked to existing AU mechanisms, the platform would standardize intelligence formats, support data integration and joint threat mapping, and promote trust through audits and shared training.
- iii. SOFs should incorporate civil-military roles, such as humanitarian assistance, infrastructure rebuilding, and youth outreach, into their mandates. Structured engagement through standardized procedures and partnerships with NGOs and local leaders can rebuild public trust, counter extremist narratives, and enhance intelligence gathering while promoting long-term stabilization.
- iv. Defense ministries should adopt a comprehensive doctrine tailored to hybrid threats that blend terrorism, organized crime, and political militancy. This doctrine should integrate counterterrorism, cybersecurity, financial intelligence, and legal reforms for cross-border prosecution, while ensuring context-sensitive and proportional engagement strategies.
- v. African states must maintain leadership in international security collaborations by defining clear strategic objectives and reviewing agreements transparently. Partnerships should



emphasize capacity-building, skills transfer, and local procurement to reduce dependency. A regulatory mechanism could be created to evaluate and align partnerships with national and regional interests.

- vi. The TAA and MTT-Plus frameworks should be permanently adopted to strengthen local SOF capacity through embedded mentorship, joint planning, and operational guidance. These models should include train-the-trainer systems, modular curricula, and integration of legal and civil-military advisors to ensure sustainability and compliance with international standards.
- vii. Regional bodies should be structurally and financially strengthened to coordinate multinational SOF missions. This includes establishing logistics hubs, joint command centers, interoperable legal systems, and rapid deployment mechanisms.

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