

Boko Haram Insurgency and Its Effects on Nigeria'S External Image

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Abstract

The Boko Haram insurgency, initiated around 2009, represents the most devastating internal security challenge facing Nigeria since the civil war. This qualitative study examines how the protracted conflict and the Nigerian state's response have severely eroded Nigeria's external image and strained its diplomatic and economic standing in the international community. The activities of the group, which opposes Western education and seeks to establish an Islamic state, have resulted in immense humanitarian and socio-economic crises, including the loss of over lives and the displacement of people. The theory adopted is the linkage theory that explains the relevance between the domestic dynamics of a country and its external relations. Findings across the literature consistently show that the insurgency has severely tarnished Nigeria's global reputation, exposing security vulnerabilities and governance failures. Specific actions such as the high-profile kidnappings of schoolgirls in Chibok and Dapchi, and the group's ties to transnational terror networks, drew negative global scrutiny, solidifying the perception of Nigeria as a country where terrorism thrives. This negative image has directly undermined foreign policy goals, discouraged Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and necessitated embarrassing appeals for international assistance, casting doubt on Nigeria's traditional role as the "Giant of Africa". The paper concludes that merely projecting a positive image through foreign policy rhetoric ("image-polishing") is insufficient; genuine reform addressing domestic insecurity, corruption, and inadequate governance is required to restore Nigeria's credibility.

Keywords: Boko Haram; Insurgency; External Image; Terrorist Cells; Humanitarian Crisis; Refugee Crisis

Introduction

Nigeria has long been regarded as the "Giant of Africa," often demonstrating commitment and vigor in regional peacekeeping and stability efforts. A country's standing in the international system, and consequently the success of its foreign policy, is highly dependent upon its perceived external image. The protection and promotion of national interest, including national security and the maintenance of national reputation, constitute the major objective of foreign policy. However, following the return to democratic rule, Nigeria has experienced a significant increase in violent activities, including the rise of the Boko Haram insurgency, which has taken center stage in national discourse due to its links with economic, social, political, and governance challenges. The group, formally known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, derives its common name, Boko Haram, from the Hausa phrase meaning "(Western) Education is forbidden" or sinful. Emerging around 2009, the sect is powered by an ideology that seeks to establish a theocratic

government guided by the principles of radical Islam. This bloody socio-political clash has profoundly influenced Nigeria, leading to a crisis that has become one of the most significant security challenges facing the state.

The scale of the Boko Haram insurgency has been devastating, resulting in the loss of lives, the destruction of property, and immense damage to physical infrastructure and household assets, particularly in the North-East region, including the states of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe. The violence has led to the displacement of people and the loss of sources of livelihood, with approximately 244,000 people or more seeking refuge in neighboring countries. Furthermore, the activities of the sect extended towards the Lake Chad Basin, constituting security risks for Niger, Chad, and Cameroon (Michelle & Haruna cited in Akowe, 2024). The international community officially recognized the gravity of the threat when the United States Department of State labeled Boko Haram and its splinter group, Ansaru, as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) in November 2013. High-profile incidents, such as the abduction of 276 students from the Government Secondary School in Chibok, garnered global media scrutiny, amplifying the perception of insecurity.

The protracted activities of Boko Haram have served as a critical catalyst in severely denting Nigeria's external image. The continuation of such internal conflicts fundamentally exposes the nature and dynamics of Nigeria's security problems to the world. The prevalence of banditry and other forms of insecurity has caused Nigeria to continually rank low in the Global Peace Index. This situation highlights that corruption, radical Islam, and poor governance have played salient roles in the development of the sect and the worsening security environment. The resulting decline in Nigeria's image, coupled with the need for effective strategies to combat the complex, international dimensions of the insurgency, necessitates a thorough examination of the mechanisms through which Boko Haram's operations have undermined Nigeria's standing within the international community. Consequently, this paper investigates the adverse effects of the Boko Haram insurgency on Nigeria's external image and analyzes the implications for the nation's diplomatic and economic relations.

Insurgency

The concept of insurgency is frequently characterized as ambiguous, suffering from the absence of a universal definition among political scholars (Olanrewaju, Folarin, & Folarin, 2017). Generally, insurgency finds expression as a form of political violence and rebellion against a constituted authority (Oghuvbu, 2021). The United States Department of Defense (DOD, 2007) defines it as an organized movement aimed at overthrowing a government or constituted authority through the use of subversion and armed conflict. Similarly, the US Government Counterinsurgency Guide (2009) views it as the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region. According to Lammers (2017), insurgency involves the instrumentalization of violence by an individual or group against constituted authority to generate political change. Reinforcing this political dimension, Brooker (2010), drawing on the Clausewitzian definition of warfare, explains insurgency as the pursuit of political goals through organized violence. Ewa (2018) encapsulates this by defining insurgency as a direct rebellion against legitimate political authorities. The pursuit of these goals can be political, religious, social, or ideological in nature.

Despite the frequent interchangeable use of terms such as revolution, insurrection, and terrorism with insurgency, core conceptual differences exist. For instance, not all rebellions are considered insurgencies; a movement develops into an insurgency only when the group establishes control of territories against a sovereign state (Ugah, Ortserga, & Degarr, 2022). The designation of "insurgency" specifically acknowledges the socio-political motivation of the participants, differentiating it from acts of "brigandry," which implies no political force (Morris, 2005; Goldstein, 2003 cited in Akowe, 2024). Furthermore, scholars like Curta (2006) and Liolio (2014) argue that insurgency is distinct from subversion, guerrilla warfare, or conventional war. However, the difficulty in drawing clear lines persists because terrorism has become the main commonly adopted strategy by insurgent groups (Hassan, 2014). Terrorism is the use of force and fear against non-combatants to achieve ideological goals, and insurgents frequently employ tactics like bombing, guerrilla warfare, kidnapping, and abduction as a strategy to pursue their political objectives.

Various typologies of insurgency illustrate the diverse grievances and objectives driving these movements. The central nature across all variants, however, remains a rebellion against constituted authority. Spiritual or religious insurgency involves revolts against spiritual authorities or states with dominant spiritual ideologies, often stemming from political alienation and searching for justice for a wrong done previously (Lauder, 2009). In Nigeria, groups like Boko Haram are driven by such an ideology, seeking to establish a theocratic government in line with radical Islam. Another form is commercial insurgency, which emerges in societies plagued by widespread unemployment and poverty, allowing entities to capitalize on the lack of material possessions to embark on acts of rebellion. Lastly, there are forms related to national aspirations: liberation insurgency, which aims for freedom or independence from a dominating foreign power, and separatist insurgency, where insurgents battle indigenous governments to achieve self-determination for an ethnic group.

External Image

The concept of national image is central to the effectiveness of a sovereign nation in the contemporary international system, playing a fundamental role in the drive to actualize stated objectives and national aspirations (Salawu, 2024). It is defined as a psychological objective of foreign policy (Eseoghene & Efanodor, 2016). A country's image is intrinsically linked to its identity, values, practices, and internal actions and inactions (Salawu, 2024). Within the broader theoretical framework of international relations (IR), image theory posits that IR is governed by an interplay of images that guide strategic decision-making and policy selection (Ametbek, 2017 cited in David, 2021). Furthermore, image can be understood as an actor's internal view of itself and its universe (Herrmann et al., 1997 cited in David, 2021). The credible direction of foreign policy intentions is built on broadly established principles that help shape a country's profile in the international system (Omobuwajo, 2021). Correspondingly, the major objective of foreign policy goals is the protection of national interest, which includes the maintenance of national reputation (Udeala, 2016 cited in Omobuwajo, 2021).

The composition of a nation's image is complex, influenced by its standing in the international system, the manner in which it conducts its relations, and the behavior of its citizens at home and abroad (Zimako, 2009). The importance of this image lies in its tangible consequences: a positive perception is a significant gauge for judging a country's standing in the international political

system, leading to respect, influence, and prestige in the comity of nations (Eseoghene & Efanodor, 2016; Salawu, 2024). A good image is highly advantageous, serving as a source of goodwill and patronage for a country (Chidozie et al., 2014 cited in Salawu, 2024). Economically, prospective investors largely consider a favorable image when determining where to direct investment funds. Conversely, a bad or negative perception of a country's image signifies a loss of respect, influence, and prestige (Eseoghene & Efanodor, 2016; Salawu, 2024). This negative cognitive representation affects the success of a country's businesses, trade, tourism, and diplomatic relations. Furthermore, national image can suffer due to internal factors, such as successive regimes employing bad policies or practices, or external factors, like participation in foreign missions.

Given its critical importance, states actively engage in image-making as an essential feature of foreign policy (Salawu, 2024). This effort, often referred to as perception management (Elsbach cited in David, 2021), involves deliberate efforts to protect and manage a positive reputation (David, 2021). When an image is damaged, a government employs image-polishing policy through foreign policy to repair its external reputation or create a favorable external perception (David, 2021). The focus on perception is crucial because external perceptions determine relations with the external world (David, 2021). In line with perception theory, Jervis (1976) argues that a state's policies cannot be explained solely by interests, as actions are often guided by beliefs and value systems. Boulding (1959) famously asserted that a state's behavior is immediately determined by its image, not the truth of the situation, thus necessitating deliberate efforts to construct a positive international image.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the linkage theory.

Linkage Theory

Linkage theory, as developed from systems analysis (Frankel, 1972), emphasizes the interconnectedness of various issues in international relations. Joseph Frankel, in *Contemporary International Theory and Behaviour of State* (1972), explained that the linkage approach stems from systems thinking, viewing global politics as a network of interdependent components. Proponents of the theory argue that linking different policy domains enhances understanding and management of global affairs by recognizing how political, economic, and social issues intersect. This perspective underscores the idea that effective foreign policy requires considering how actions in one area may influence outcomes in another.

A major contribution of linkage theory is its holistic and integrative approach to global challenges (Haas, 1970; Keohane & Nye, 1977). By connecting diverse issues such as climate change, terrorism, and economic inequality, policymakers can design coordinated strategies that promote stability and cooperation. Linkages can also serve as diplomatic tools, allowing states to use incentives and trade-offs to resolve conflicts or build alliances (Krasner, 1983; Waltz, 1979). For instance, offering economic aid in exchange for security cooperation can foster mutual trust and peace. This multidimensional framework enhances international negotiation and problem-solving, making it particularly valuable in an era of complex interdependence.

Furthermore, linkage theory expands the focus of international relations beyond state actors to include non-state entities like multinational corporations, NGOs, and civil society groups

(Keohane & Nye, 2000; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). These actors often operate across multiple issue areas, serving as catalysts in linking domestic and international agendas. The theory also promotes adaptability and strategic foresight, helping states respond to evolving global realities (Snyder, 1960; Wendt, 1992). In this sense, linkages between internal security and external image are critical, as domestic stability shapes a nation's international reputation and influence, while external perceptions can, in turn, affect internal cohesion and security. Understanding these interconnections is vital for safeguarding national interests in an interconnected world.

Linkage Theory explains how the Boko Haram insurgency, a domestic security crisis, has generated significant external consequences, particularly concerning the country's international reputation. The violent campaign waged by Boko Haram since 2009 has not only destabilized Nigeria's northeastern region but also captured the attention of the global community. The continuous reports of terrorist attacks, abductions, and humanitarian crises in the media have shaped foreign perceptions of Nigeria as an insecure and unstable country. This linkage between domestic insecurity and external perception illustrates Rosenau's assertion that internal conditions create "linkages" that influence foreign policy orientation and the behavior of external actors toward the state.

Moreover, the Boko Haram insurgency has produced negative diplomatic and economic linkages. Many foreign governments have issued travel advisories and security warnings against visiting Nigeria, citing terrorism and insurgency as major threats. These actions directly affect tourism, foreign direct investment, and diplomatic engagements. Investors perceive Nigeria as a high-risk environment, leading to capital flight and reduced inflows of foreign investment. Similarly, Nigeria's participation in regional and international organizations has been influenced by its domestic insecurity, as the state is often portrayed as a regional security concern rather than a stabilizing force. Linkage Theory thus provides a useful lens to understand how the insurgency has created both perceptual and practical external challenges for Nigeria's international standing.

The theory also highlights that external reactions can, in turn, affect domestic policies—creating a cyclical interaction between the internal and external environments. Nigeria's counterterrorism partnerships with foreign actors such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and neighboring countries under the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) demonstrate how international involvement is shaped by domestic insecurity. However, while these linkages bring assistance and cooperation, they also reinforce the global narrative that Nigeria requires external support to manage its internal crises. This perception contributes to the erosion of Nigeria's image as a sovereign and capable regional power. Hence, the linkage between domestic insecurity and external dependence has complex implications for the country's reputation and diplomatic leverage.

In essence, the Linkage Theory helps to situate the Boko Haram insurgency within a broader framework of international relations by demonstrating that Nigeria's internal conflict has transcended its borders to affect its external image, diplomatic relations, and economic prospects. The theory underscores the interconnectedness of domestic politics and foreign policy outcomes, suggesting that Nigeria's international perception cannot be detached from the realities of its internal governance and security challenges. Consequently, improving Nigeria's external image requires addressing the root causes of domestic insecurity, strengthening governance structures, and projecting stability through both policy and public diplomacy.

The Internationalization of Boko Haram and Global Perception

The perception of a state in the international arena is crucial as it determines the level of respect and relevance it commands among other nations and global actors (Abodunrin, Adeyeye, & Oloye, 2021). The Boko Haram insurgency has profoundly damaged Nigeria's external image by demonstrating the international dimensions and transnational reach of the threat.

The Boko Haram insurgency quickly transformed from a localized phenomenon into one with distinct international dimensions, profoundly damaging Nigeria's external image and national reputation (Adeyemi-Suenu, 2015; Ugah, Ortserga, and Degarr, 2022). The insurgency began to assume a transnational outlook from 2013 onward (Olanrewaju, Folarin, and Folarin, 2017). The group extended its destructive activities towards the Lake Chad Basin, thereby creating security risks for neighboring countries, including Niger, Chad, and Cameroon (Oghuvbu, 2022). The cross-border nature of its operations is often facilitated by porous borders, which aid the insurgents in movement and logistics (Foyou, Ngwafu, Santoyo, and Ortiz, 2018). Boko Haram cemented its international status through formal affiliations, notably pledging allegiance to the Islamic State (ISWAP) in March 2015 (Akowe, 2024). The group has also maintained ties with other global extremist organizations, such as Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which provided essential elements like funding, training, and strategic knowledge for planning and tactical operations (Gilbert, 2014 cited in Akowe, 2024; Omobuwajo, 2021). Furthermore, the formation of the sect has been traced back to funding provided by Osama Bin Laden's al Qaeda, according to Lake (2018) and Gourley (2012). Funding was also reportedly linked to the UK-based Al-Muntada Trust Fund (Brigaglia, 2012 cited in Thurston, 2016).

This escalation in capability and global reach was dramatically highlighted by high-profile attacks on symbols of international presence in Nigeria. A pivotal incident was the suicide bombing attack on the United Nations (UN) headquarters in Abuja in August 2011, an event that attracted worldwide attention and provided the militants with a global profile similar to Al-Qaeda (Akowe, 2024). Humanitarian crises resulting from the group's actions also drew intense international media scrutiny; specifically, the mass abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in 2014 generated global outrage and amplified the perception of Nigeria's insecurity (Abodunrin, Adeyeye, and Oloye, 2021; Zenn, 2014). Consequently, the United States Department of State officially labeled Boko Haram and its splinter group, Ansaru, as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) in November 2013, with Canada following suit (Eseoghene and Efanodor, 2016). This formal designation immediately cast Nigeria in the international arena as a nation where terrorism thrives.

The consequence of this negative global perception is a significantly battered image, fundamentally challenging Nigeria's traditional role as the "Giant of Africa." The sheer volatility and chronic insecurity led the United States of America to deem Nigeria unsafe and prompted a reduction in its Mission's staff presence (Adeyemi-Suenu, 2015). Moreover, the security fragility has caused foreign governments to frequently issue travel warnings, advising their nationals to desist from traveling, particularly to the North East region (Igbashangev and Tion, 2022). Nigerian nationals traveling abroad also faced practical consequences, including increased suspicion and intense scrutiny at international airports following the FTO designation (Eseoghene and Efanodor, 2016). Most detrimental to the perception of state sovereignty was the period in 2014 and early 2015 when Boko Haram was able to seize and successfully control Nigerian territory—including roughly 20 local government areas—an act which severely infringed upon Nigeria's sovereignty

(Oghuvbu, 2021; Oghuvbu, 2022). The protracted insurgency and the state's apparent inability to contain it caused Nigeria to continually rank low in the Global Peace Index (Onota, Ogbonna, and Alfred-Igbokwe, 2024). Furthermore, the necessity for Nigeria to appeal to the global community for aid to combat the insurgency is generally interpreted as a "global vote of no confidence" in the Nigerian state's independent capacity to secure its territory.

Iconic Attacks and Global Media Scrutiny

The Boko Haram insurgency successfully utilized high-profile, spectacular attacks to draw intense international media coverage, severely damaging Nigeria's external image (Akowe, 2024). One pivotal event that demonstrated the sect's transition to a transnational threat and garnered worldwide attention was the suicide bombing attack on the United Nations (UN) headquarters in Abuja in August 2011 (Akowe, 2024; Omobuwajo, 2021; Eseoghene & Efanodor, 2016). This attack, which resulted in the deaths of at least 23 people, marked a significant departure from the group's prior focus, providing the militant group with a global face akin to that of Al-Qaeda (Ogbonnaya & Ehigiamusoe, cited in Olanrewaju, Folarin, & Folarin, 2017). Furthermore, the sect carried out other high-casualty attacks that intensified global alarm. For instance, Boko Haram claimed responsibility for Christmas Day bombs in Nigeria in December 2011, killing dozens (Onuah & Eboh, 2011 cited in Oghuvbu, 2022; *The Telegraph*, 2011 cited in Thurston, 2016), and claimed responsibility for Nigeria church bombings in June 2012 (CNN, 2012 cited in Thurston, 2016). In 2013, the Boko Haram group was also blamed for a raid on a college dormitory in Gujba, Yobe State, resulting in the massacre of students (Aljazeera, 2013 cited in Muhammad, Hussain, & Suleiman, 2020).

The most internationally recognized and damaging attacks involved the targeting of school children, which thrust the crisis fully into the international spotlight. The abduction of 276 schoolgirls from the Government Secondary School in Chibok in 2014 drew massive global media scrutiny (Abodunrin, Adeyeye, & Oloye, 2021; Zenn, 2014 cited in David, Asuelime, & Onapajo, 2015). This tragedy spurred the launch of the global "Bring Back our Girls" (BBOG) campaign, which demonstrated the international community's profound concern over the state of security and governance in Nigeria (Abodunrin, Adeyeye, & Oloye, 2021). Another similar high-profile incident occurred later in February 2018, when more than one hundred girls were abducted following an invasion of the Government Girls Technical College in Dapchi, Yobe State (Ibrahim & Bala, 2018). These spectacular and devastating humanitarian crises amplified the negative perception of the Nigerian state, casting Nigeria as a country incapable of securing its own citizens. The attacks on educational facilities are especially relevant given the sect's anti-Western education ideology, which is a core part of its religious and political worldview.

Impairment of Sovereignty and Governance Legitimacy

The nature of the Boko Haram insurgency has fundamentally questioned the capacity and legitimacy of the Nigerian state, thereby undermining its sovereignty and portraying it as weak and incompetent.

Sovereignty and Territorial Control

The foundation of the state system, established by the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, rests on the principles of territoriality and sovereignty (Olanrewaju, Folarin, & Folarin, 2021). Boko Haram

directly infringed upon this sovereignty, particularly in 2014 and early 2015, when the insurgency group seized and controlled Nigerian territory, including approximately 20 local government areas (Oghuvbu, 2021; Oghuvbu, 2022). The continued attacks and the inability of the government to curtail the menace led many to conclude that Nigeria was not "on top of the crisis," leading to further negative international image. Boko Haram's aim, in part, has been to humiliate the Nigerian state.

Perception of Weak Security Apparatus

The successes of Boko Haram have generated a powerful perception internationally and domestically that Nigerian security agencies are inept, weak, poorly trained, and susceptible to corruption. Reports of alleged misconduct, such as human rights abuses by the Nigerian Armed Forces during counter-insurgency measures, led to condemnation from other countries and human rights organizations (Olugbenga & Ayooluwa, 2017). This perception suggests a fundamental failure in governance.

The prevalence of issues like poor governance, institutional corruption (including instances like "Dasukigate"), and high unemployment have played significant roles in the development of the sect and exacerbated the overall security situation (Oghuvbu, 2022). This combination of internal fragility and external violence paints Nigeria "in bad light in the realm of international politics, making her look laughable and vulnerable".

Foreign Investment and Trade

The climate of chronic insecurity makes Nigeria's economy unattractive to foreign investors (Salawu, 2024). The activities of the sect have resulted in a depression of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) (Obiekwe, 2018, cited in Muhammad, Hussain, & Suleiman, 2020). Some Multinational Corporations (MNCs) have reportedly relocated from the country due to the unguaranteed security (Omobuwajo, 2021). The violence has depleted Nigeria's ability to achieve its developmental aspirations, such as the Nigeria Vision 20:20:20 goal of becoming a global economic giant by 2020 (Muhammad, Hussain, & Suleiman, 2020).

Diplomatic Relations and Travel Warnings

The proliferation of attacks against foreign interests and international institutions has strained political relations with foreign powers (Adeyemi-Suenu, 2015; Oghuvbu, 2022). Countries frequently issue travel advisories against visiting Nigeria, especially the North-East region (Muhammad, Hussain, & Suleiman, 2020; Ugah, Ortserga, & Degarr, 2022). The United States of America, for instance, deemed Nigeria unsafe and reduced its Mission staff presence. Furthermore, Nigerians traveling abroad are sometimes subjected to increased scrutiny at international airports following the designation of Boko Haram and Ansaru as FTOs.

The necessity for Nigeria to appeal to the global community for assistance in combating the insurgency is interpreted as a "global vote of no confidence" in the Nigerian state's ability to handle the crisis independently.

Foreign Policy Responses and the Challenge of Image Repair

The emergence of the Boko Haram insurgency around 2009, and its subsequent escalation, made international terrorism a major concern for Nigeria, necessitating strategic foreign policy responses from the government (Omobuwajo, 2021). The primary objective of foreign policy is the promotion and protection of a country's national interest, which includes national security, protection, and maintaining the state's prosperity and national reputation (Omobuwajo, 2021; Udeala, 2016). Nigeria's diplomatic efforts have been heavily influenced by the need to combat Boko Haram, which had established bases in neighboring countries like Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, thereby assuming international dimensions (Akowe, 2024). Consequently, the governments of Presidents Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari were compelled to engage in negotiations, dialogues, shuttle diplomacy, and the use of other foreign relations tools with these contiguous countries.

Nigeria employed bilateral and multilateral approaches to secure the backing and support of its neighbors and foreign powers, including France, the United States of America, China, Israel, and Great Britain (Salawu, 2024). The Buhari administration, in particular, directed its foreign policy agenda toward wooing regional cooperation in the fight against the Boko Haram hazard. Buhari's early diplomatic moves were seen as a major success, especially in engaging Francophone countries (Chad, Niger, and Cameroon) that traditionally align more closely with Paris, leading to the establishment of a Joint Commission to tackle the insurgency (Abdullahi, 2023). This diplomatic push also led to the resuscitation and invigoration of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which had initially been established in 1993 by the Lake Chad Basin Commission. Additionally, the government launched programs like Operation Safe Corridor in 2016 to facilitate the de-radicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration of former Boko Haram members. The need for foreign assistance underscores the blow to Nigeria's external image, as appealing to the global community for aid is often interpreted as a "global vote of no confidence" in the Nigerian state's ability to handle the crisis independently.

Despite these concerted foreign policy and security initiatives, the insurgency has often lingered. The ineffectiveness is partly attributed to the sect exploiting local factors such as the Hausa linguistic relationship and common Kanuri customs in neighboring countries to recruit fighters, alongside pervasive issues like poverty, joblessness, and porous borders (Omobuwajo, 2021). Scholars suggest that solely focusing on military solutions against determined fighters who view their struggle as a jihad is ineffective (Agbiboa, 2014 cited in Olanrewaju, Folarin, & Folarin, 2017). The Nigerian government's response has historically alternated between lethal action, negotiation, appeasement, and amnesty (Akowe, 2024). For instance, an amnesty-oriented body established by the Jonathan administration failed when the Boko Haram leader, Shekau, rejected the offer, stating that his fighters were not offenders seeking forgiveness and that the jihad would only end when Nigeria became an Islamic state under Sharia law. Failures in the counter-insurgency effort have often been compounded by insufficient cooperation among countries forming the MNJTF.

Nigeria's pursuit of a positive external image since its return to civil rule in 1999 has been characterized by "image-polishing"—rhetorical efforts designed to salvage a reputation battered by decades of military rule (David, 2021). However, external perception of Nigeria has not improved significantly despite two decades of such foreign policy thrust. Successive leaders, including President Obasanjo and President Buhari, have used their inaugural speeches and diplomatic engagements to promote themes like the fight against corruption and addressing human

rights issues, hoping to change the way Nigeria is perceived internationally. For example, President Buhari campaigned on assurances that he possessed the capacity to deal with the insurgency. Yet, foreign perception remains low, suggesting that mere statements of reassurance are inadequate for image restoration. According to Anholt (2008), countries are judged by "what they do and not by what they say", demonstrating that a lack of constructive engagement with deep-rooted domestic problems, such as corruption and human rights, undermines image-polishing foreign policy. True image repair requires political will to back up policy statements with tangible action. Therefore, comprehensive strategies that incorporate economic programs to reduce poverty and stronger border controls are advocated to address the underlying vulnerabilities that fuel the insurgency.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Boko Haram insurgency has served as a critical catalyst, significantly denting Nigeria's external image as a regional leader and exposing fundamental weaknesses in its internal security, governance structure, and sovereignty. The spectacular violence, affiliation with international terrorist organizations, and inability to safeguard citizens—epitomized by the schoolgirl kidnappings—have shifted global perception toward viewing Nigeria as a fragile state riddled with insecurity and corruption. The ensuing damage has negatively impacted trade, diminished FDI, and strained diplomatic relations.

To effectively counter the negative external image, Nigeria must move beyond symbolic diplomatic gestures (David, 2021) and prioritize comprehensive domestic reforms (Omobuwajo, 2021). Recommendations based on the source material include:

1. **Enhancing Security Capabilities and Intelligence:** Intensifying intelligence-gathering efforts to identify financial and political sponsors of the sect and disrupt the flow of arms and funds. Furthermore, investing in modern technologies for security agencies to deter unlawful entry across porous borders.
2. **Addressing Root Causes and Governance:** Tackling corruption, unemployment, poverty, and economic inequality, which fuel the insurgency. The government must enhance infrastructure and provision of basic amenities to address the plight and vulnerability of the people.
3. **Promoting Accountability:** Impartially and thoroughly investigating allegations of gross human rights violations committed by the military and prosecuting those found guilty.
4. **Strengthening Regional Cooperation:** Ensuring sustained collaboration and commitment among member countries of the MNJTF to defeat the insurgency across the Lake Chad region.

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