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Legislative Oversight of Nigeria's Engagement in the Central Sahel's Security Dynamics

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Executive Summary

Nigeria's security landscape is increasingly influenced by instability in the Central Sahel, specifically, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, which has intensified cross-border threats such as terrorism, arms trafficking, and irregular migration. In response, Nigeria has expanded its regional security engagements and defence spending. However, legislative oversight has remained limited, creating gaps in accountability and strategic coordination. Strengthening oversight is therefore essential to ensure these commitments align with the country's national interests.

Key Recommendations

- **Strengthen Border Security and Surveillance:** Invest in modern border control systems and early warning mechanisms.
- **Recalibrate Regional Security Diplomacy:** Support flexible engagement with both ECOWAS and AES to rebuild cooperation and reduce the burden of fragmented regional responses.
- **Enhance Oversight of Military Engagements:** Monitor deployments, defence spending, and ensure clear objectives and exit strategies.
- **Institutionalize Legislative Oversight:** Establish regular security briefings and periodic reviews for sustained scrutiny.

Background

Over the last decade, the Central Sahel region, specifically Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger has experienced deepened instability occasioned by insurgencies, unconstitutional changes of government, and the proliferation of transnational armed groups, which has significant



implications for Nigeria's national security and regional leadership role.¹ The collapse of state authority in parts of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has intensified cross-border threats, including terrorism, arms trafficking, and irregular migration.² As Africa's largest economy and a frontline state, Nigeria has increasingly found itself drawn into the evolving security architecture of its neighboring states through military, diplomatic, and intelligence engagements aimed at containing regional spillovers.³

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2023), millions of people across Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger require humanitarian assistance due to conflict-related displacement and violence.⁴ Data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (2024) further indicates a sustained rise in the eruption of violent conflicts across these countries in recent years, with militant groups expanding their operational reach toward coastal West Africa.⁵ These trends heighten the strategic role of Nigeria's participation in regional security mechanisms such as the Multinational Joint Task Force, while simultaneously increasing the fiscal and operational commitments undertaken by the Nigerian state.⁶

These dynamics have major governance implications, yet, legislative scrutiny of Nigeria's engagements in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has largely been limited to budgets and occasional

¹ Ofori-Ayeh, D. (2022). Proliferation of Non-State Armed Groups and their impact on state fragility and insecurity in the Sahel Region of Africa.

² Okafor, J. C., Ononogbu, O. A., Ojimba, A. C., & Ani, C. C. (2023). Trans-border mobility and security in the Sahel: Exploring the dynamics of forced migration and population displacements in Burkina Faso and Mali. *Society*, 60(3), 345-358.

³ Liadi, K. O. (2024). Designing a Cross-Border Security Cooperation Model: Nigeria's Foreign Policy Response to Regional Terrorism.

⁴ Golovko, E. (2023). Sahel: Why stabilization efforts should address internal displacement.

⁵ Council on Foreign Relations. (2026, February 18). Violent extremism in the Sahel. Global Conflict Tracker. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel>

⁶ Adogamhe, P. G. (2024). Nigeria in the Region and the World: Diplomatic Challenges in a multipolar World. In *Diplomatic Strategies of Rising Nations in the Global South: The Search for Leadership and Influence* (pp. 243-272). Cham: Springer International Publishing.



hearings⁷. Given the National Assembly's constitutional powers over appropriations, investigations, and regulation of the armed forces, there is a growing need to institutionalize a more proactive and systematic oversight of Nigeria's regional security commitments.

Dynamics of Nigeria's Engagement in the Central Sahel Security Landscape

1. Geographic Spread of Instability:

For Nigeria, which shares extensive land borders with Niger, this instability has translated into heightened cross-border threats, including terrorism, illicit arms flows, and irregular migration. Attacks linked to extremist groups in the country's border regions increased by over 260% in 2025, with northern states experiencing significant fatalities.⁸ The scale and proximity of the crisis elevate the spill-over security threat from a foreign policy concern to a direct national security priority.

2. Strategic Realignments & Division of Regional Architecture:

The wave of military takeovers and shifting alliances in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS to the Alliance of Sahelian States (AES), has significantly disrupted regional security cooperation. The disengagement of these states from established regional security frameworks has weakened collective response mechanisms and undermined coordination in addressing transnational threats. For Nigeria, this fragmentation complicates its traditional reliance on multilateral approaches and imposes greater diplomatic, military, and financial burdens in managing regional instability⁹.

3. Militarization & Expanding Security Commitments:

⁷ Akinola, A. O., & Ramontja, N. (2023). Violent conflict in the Sahel: Causes, dynamics, and actors.

In *Contemporary issues on governance, conflict and security in Africa* (pp. 125-146). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.

⁸ Kareem, A. (2026, February 27). *Report: Terrorist attacks on Nigeria, Benin, Niger borders rose by 262% in 2025. The Guardian Nigeria.* <https://guardian.ng/news/report-terrorist-attacks-on-nigeria-benin-niger-borders-rose-by-262-in-2025/>

⁹ Asante, R., & Bembir, P. (2025). Consolidating or deconsolidating security? Analyses of the security implications of the exit of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali from ECOWAS. *African and Asian Studies*, 24(1-2), 37-57.



Nigeria's engagement in the Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger's security crisis, has induced its participation in the Multinational Joint Task Force, intelligence collaboration, and support for stabilization initiatives under African Union and ECOWAS mandates. However, the evolving threats have led to expanded operational demands, including troop deployments, logistics coordination, and sustained defence expenditure.¹⁰ By implication, Nigeria's 2026 federal budget reflects a sharp increase to 5.41 trillion naira, up from 4.91 trillion naira in 2025 and 3.85 trillion naira in 2024¹¹, of which 3.15 trillion naira was specifically earmarked for the Ministry of Defence to cover personnel, operations, and capital costs. Additionally, 1.50 trillion naira was allocated to the Nigerian Army to bolster its effectiveness in both domestic counter-insurgency and regional security coordination, reflecting significant investment in troop deployments and sustainment.¹²

Recommendations for Legislative Action

Based on the above, the relevant committees of the Senate and House of Representatives are respectfully urged to take the following actions:

i. Strengthen Border Security and Surveillance: Nigeria's borders with Niger face heightened threats from terrorism, illicit arms, and irregular migration. The National Assembly is encouraged to support modern surveillance, integrated border management, and early-warning systems to strengthen security.

ii. Recalibrate Regional Security Diplomacy: The National Assembly should support a flexible diplomatic approach that enables Nigeria to engage both ECOWAS and emerging blocs like the Alliance of Sahelian States (AES), by promoting dialogue, rebuilding cooperation frameworks, and reducing security and financial burden of fragmented regional responses.

¹⁰ Sunjo, E., & Ndzi, N. F. (2025). Counter-insurgency strategies in the Sahel: Efficacy, challenges and lessons for peacebuilding.

¹¹ TVC News. (2026, January 9). *Full list: 2026 budget breakdown for Ministry of Defence*. TVC News. <https://www.tvcnews.tv/full-list-2026-budget-breakdown-for-ministry-of-defence/>

¹² Fadehan, A.-h. (2026, January 9). *Full list: 2026 budget breakdown for Ministry of Defence*. TVC News. <https://www.tvcnews.tv/full-list-2026-budget-breakdown-for-ministry-of-defence/>



iii. Military Engagement: Expanded troop deployments and defence commitments require oversight. The Assembly should monitor budgets, prioritize high-impact operations, invest in regional capacity-building, and set clear objectives and exit benchmarks for overseas missions.

iv. Legislative Oversight: Institutionalize annual security briefings and periodic reviews to enable lawmakers to track evolving threats, guide resource allocation, and safeguard Nigeria's national security.

Conclusion

Nigeria's deepening engagement in the Central Sahel security landscape reflects both a strategic necessity and a growing governance challenge. While proactive military, diplomatic, and intelligence efforts remain essential to contain the spill-over effects of instability in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, these commitments must be matched with robust legislative oversight to ensure accountability, efficiency, and alignment with national interests. By institutionalizing structured oversight mechanisms, strengthening border governance, and clearly defining the scope and objectives of external security engagements, the National Assembly can play a decisive role in safeguarding Nigeria's sovereignty, promoting fiscal responsibility, and reinforcing its leadership within the West African sub-region.

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