



Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation in Nigeria: A Diplomatic and National Security Perspective

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Received: 25.07.2026 | Accepted: 20.08.2026 | Published: 27.08.2026

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.22122313](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22122313)

Abstract

Original Research Article

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) has remained one of the most significant threats to Nigeria's national security, socio-economic development, and regional stability since the post-independence era. This article examines the historical evolution of SALW proliferation in Nigeria from a diplomatic and national security perspective. Using a historical and qualitative research approach, the study draws on, government publications, international treaties, policy documents, reports of regional and international organizations, and existing scholarly literature. It explores the domestic and transnational drivers of illicit arms trafficking, the role of porous borders and regional conflicts, and the effectiveness of Nigeria's diplomatic engagements in addressing the challenge through bilateral, regional, continental, and global security frameworks. Particular attention is given to Nigeria's participation in the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, the African Union's arms control initiatives, the United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons, the Arms Trade Treaty, and intelligence-sharing mechanisms for transnational crime prevention. The article argues that while Nigeria has demonstrated considerable diplomatic commitment to international arms control and regional security cooperation, weak institutional coordination, inadequate border management, corruption, and limited implementation of existing legal frameworks have constrained policy effectiveness. It concludes that sustainable control of illicit arms proliferation requires stronger security diplomacy, enhanced intelligence cooperation, integrated border governance, effective arms-tracing mechanisms, and deeper collaboration with regional and international partners. The study contributes to the growing scholarship on the intersection of diplomacy, arms control, and national security in Africa by demonstrating that diplomatic engagement is indispensable to addressing the transnational dimensions of SALW proliferation.

Keywords: Small Arms and Light Weapons; Arms Control Diplomacy; Nigeria's Foreign Policy; National Security; Transnational Crime.

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Introduction

The level of insecurity in Nigeria has been on the increase. It has in fact worsened in the past two and

a half decades. This situation is further worsened by the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) which emerged as one of the most persistent and complex security challenges confronting Nigeria



since the mid-1960s¹. Nigeria continues to be a thriving destination for small arms and light weapons (SALW) proliferation due to the inordinate quest by individuals, groups, communities, militants, cultists, as well as some ethnic based terror groups to procure and utilize SALW for the prosecution of their evil agenda in the country. Although small arms are designed primarily for individual use and light weapons for operation by small crews, their widespread availability outside lawful state control has contributed significantly to violent conflicts, insurgency, organized crime, political instability, communal clashes, and cross-border criminal activities. Unlike conventional weapons systems, SALW are inexpensive, durable, easy to transport, and capable of remaining in circulation for decades, thereby making them the preferred weapons for insurgents, criminal syndicates, militias, terrorists, and other non-state actors².

The historical trajectory of SALW proliferation in Nigeria can be traced to the political crises preceding the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). The war witnessed the large-scale importation and distribution of arms by both the Federal Military Government and the secessionist Republic of Biafra. Although hostilities ended in 1970, thousands of weapons remained outside official control, creating the foundation for an illicit arms market that gradually expanded over subsequent decades³. Also, since 2000s, the country has witnessed activities of militant and separatist groups in its southern parts. It has as well seen the destructive insurgency waged by Boko Haram group in the north eastern part of Nigeria, especially Borno and Yobe states and of course parts of Northern Adamawa State. Currently, the country is enmeshed into deadly acts of banditry and kidnaping for ransom in north western, north

central and parts of south western Nigeria. Some states in Nigeria, especially in the Niger Delta area are still having issues of piracy in the waterways, kidnappings/abductions, States such as Cross River and Ebonyi in the south are active areas for communal land and boundary disputes. These dangerous activities mentioned above are actively carried out prosecuted through the use of illicit arms which are proliferated through the porous boundaries of the country.

The challenge of SALW proliferation in Nigeria is inseparable from broader regional dynamics. West Africa has experienced recurring civil wars, unconstitutional changes of government, violent extremism, and transnational organized crime, all of which have facilitated the movement of illicit arms across porous borders⁴. The collapse of state institutions in parts of the Sahel and North Africa, particularly following the Libyan crisis in 2011, further accelerated the influx of sophisticated weapons into the sub-region. Nigeria's extensive land and maritime borders, stretching across four neighbouring countries and the Gulf of Guinea, have made effective border control increasingly difficult, allowing traffickers to exploit weak surveillance systems and institutional deficiencies. These developments underscore the transnational character of SALW proliferation and demonstrate that domestic security measures alone are insufficient to address the problem⁵.

Because illicit arms trafficking transcends national boundaries, diplomacy has become an indispensable instrument in Nigeria's response to the SALW challenge. Contemporary security threats increasingly require cooperative rather than unilateral approaches, making bilateral, regional, continental, and multilateral diplomacy central to

¹ Waziri Rabi Adamu, et al, "Human Security Under Threat: The Proliferation of Small Arms in Nigeria" Bayero University Kano, Journal of Humanities and social sciences, 23, no 3, 2018. p.56.

² Federal Republic of Nigeria, *National Security Strategy* (Abuja: Office of the National Security Adviser, various editions).

³ Alimba, C.N., *Controlling The Proliferation Of Small Arms in Nigeria: Emerging issues and Challenges*, Yola, Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Science,

5.10, 2017. pp.53-64

⁴ Equere, Peter, Inwang Utin, and Amah Williams. "United States and The Fight Against Terrorism in Africa: A Case Study of Africom (2007-2025)." *AKSU Annals of Sustainable Development* 4, no. 1 (2026): 64-71.

⁵ Williams, Amah Maclean. "Nigerian India Relations And Technology Cooperation Challenges And Prospects." *Akwa Ibom State University Journal of Arts* (2025). pp.30-45

national security policy. Nigeria has consistently employed diplomatic engagement to promote collective security through participation in regional and international arms control regimes, intelligence-sharing arrangements, joint border patrols, and peace support operations⁶. Its leadership role within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been particularly significant in advancing regional mechanisms aimed at preventing, combating, and eradicating the illicit manufacture, transfer, and circulation of small arms and light weapons. The adoption of the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons in 2006 represented a major milestone in the institutionalization of regional arms control and reflected the recognition that sustainable peace in West Africa depends upon collective action against illicit weapons proliferation⁷.

Nigeria's diplomatic engagement has equally extended to global arms control initiatives. The country has actively supported the United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons, the International Tracing Instrument, and the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), all of which seek to strengthen international standards governing the transfer, marking, tracing, and control of conventional arms⁸. Nigeria's ratification of the Arms Trade Treaty and its collaboration with international partners in intelligence exchange, border management, and capacity building demonstrate an increasing recognition that effective national security is closely linked to international cooperation and adherence to global norms of arms control. Nevertheless, persistent challenges including weak institutional coordination, corruption, inadequate border surveillance, insufficient technological capacity, and inconsistent implementation of legal frameworks continue to undermine the effectiveness of these diplomatic commitments.

From a foreign policy perspective, the proliferation of SALW has expanded the scope of Nigeria's security diplomacy. Beyond protecting territorial integrity, Nigerian diplomacy increasingly encompasses conflict prevention, counterterrorism, transnational crime prevention, peacekeeping, maritime security, and regional stabilization⁹. These responsibilities have reinforced Nigeria's leadership within ECOWAS, the African Union, and the United Nations while simultaneously exposing the limitations of conventional security responses to contemporary threats. Consequently, the control of illicit arms has become not merely a domestic law enforcement issue but a strategic foreign policy priority requiring sustained diplomatic engagement and regional cooperation.

This article examines the historical evolution of small arms and light weapons proliferation in Nigeria from a diplomatic and national security perspective. It interrogates the domestic and transnational factors driving illicit arms circulation, evaluates Nigeria's diplomatic initiatives within regional and international arms control frameworks, and assesses the implications of SALW proliferation for national security and foreign policy. The article argues that although military operations and domestic law enforcement remain essential, durable solutions to illicit arms proliferation depend upon effective security diplomacy, stronger regional cooperation, enhanced intelligence sharing, robust border governance, and the faithful implementation of international and regional arms control commitments. By integrating historical analysis with diplomatic and security perspectives, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between arms proliferation, foreign policy, and national security in contemporary Nigeria.

⁶ Williams, Amah Maclean. "Forging A Diplomatic Identity: Historical Perspectives On Nigeria's Foreign Policy at Independence." *Aksu Annals of Sustainable Development* 3, no. 1 (2025). pp.86.

⁷ Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), *ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related*

Materials (Abuja: ECOWAS Commission, 2006).

⁸ United Nations, *Arms Trade Treaty* (New York: United Nations, 2013).

⁹ Federal Republic of Nigeria, *National Security Strategy* (Abuja: Office of the National Security Adviser, various editions).

Conceptual Clarifications

Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW)

The concept of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) occupies a central position in contemporary security studies, international relations, and arms control discourse. The widespread circulation of these weapons has become one of the greatest impediments to peace, stability, and sustainable development, particularly in conflict-prone regions of Africa¹⁰. Although the terms "small arms" and "light weapons" are often used interchangeably, international organizations distinguish between the two based on their design, operation, and intended use.

The United Nations defines **small arms** as weapons designed for individual use, including revolvers, self-loading pistols, rifles, carbines, assault rifles, sub-machine guns, and light machine guns¹¹. **Light weapons**, on the other hand, are weapons intended for use by two or more persons serving as a crew, although they may be transported by a single individual. They include heavy machine guns, portable grenade launchers, anti-tank weapons, recoilless rifles, portable anti-aircraft missile systems, mortars of less than 100 millimetres, and man-portable air defence systems¹².

The distinction between these categories is important because it determines the scope of international legal regulation and national arms control policies. Nevertheless, both categories are generally grouped under the acronym SALW because they share similar characteristics. They are relatively inexpensive, highly portable, durable, easy to conceal, and capable

of remaining functional for decades with minimal maintenance. These attributes make them attractive to both state and non-state actors, including terrorists, insurgents, criminal organizations, separatist movements, militias, pirates, and armed vigilante groups¹³.

Unlike heavy conventional weapons, SALW are easily smuggled across international borders through illegal trafficking networks. Their portability enables traffickers to transport them by road, sea, air, and even on foot through poorly monitored border routes. Consequently, the illicit trade in SALW has become a transnational security challenge requiring extensive regional and international cooperation. According to the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, the uncontrolled circulation of these weapons contributes significantly to armed conflict, terrorism, organized crime, displacement of populations, and violations of international humanitarian law¹⁴.

In Nigeria, the proliferation of SALW has been associated with virtually every major internal security challenge since the late 1960s. Weapons circulating after the Nigerian Civil War found their way into criminal networks and communal militias, while subsequent political violence, militancy in the Niger Delta, Boko Haram terrorism, banditry in the North-West, separatist agitations in the South-East, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, and farmer-herder conflicts have further increased the demand for illicit weapons. The National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons estimates that millions of illicit firearms remain in civilian possession across Nigeria, posing a serious threat to national security and effective governance¹⁵.

¹⁰ Ibu, Richard. "ARMED CONFLICT IN RWANDA, USING THE GREED AND GRIEVANCE THEORIES." *AKSU Journal Of History & Global Studies* 4, no. 1 (2023): 76-96.

¹¹ United Nations. 1997. *Report of the Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms*. New York: United Nations.

¹² United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA). 2020. *Securing Our Common Future: An Agenda for Disarmament*. New York: United Nations.

¹³ Florquin, Nicolas, and Jonah Leff. 2014. *Monitoring Illicit Weapons: Small Arms Survey 2014*. Geneva: Small Arms Survey

¹⁴ Greene, Owen, and Nicholas Marsh. 2012. *Small Arms, Crime and Conflict*. London: Routledge

¹⁵ John, Odoh Nathaniel, Ibu Richard, Yilritmwa Irene Goyol, and Asanebi Daupamowei Henry. "The Nigerian Civil War: Historicising the Battle for Onitsha 1967-1970."

Arms Proliferation

Arms proliferation refers to the rapid increase, spread, transfer, accumulation, or unauthorized circulation of weapons within and across national borders. In security studies, the concept extends beyond the mere possession of weapons to encompass their production, acquisition, trafficking, distribution, diversion, and illegal transfer among state and non-state actors. Although proliferation may involve all categories of conventional weapons, scholarly attention has increasingly focused on SALW because they account for the overwhelming majority of casualties in contemporary armed conflicts¹⁶.

Arms proliferation may occur through legal or illegal channels. Legal proliferation arises from authorized government procurement for national defence and law enforcement purposes, whereas illicit proliferation involves unauthorized manufacturing, smuggling, theft from government armouries, diversion from legal stockpiles, black-market transactions, and cross-border trafficking. The latter has become a significant challenge in West Africa owing to weak border controls, political instability, corruption, and prolonged armed conflicts in neighbouring states¹⁷.

The proliferation of illicit arms undermines state monopoly over the legitimate use of force, fuels violent conflicts, encourages organized crime, weakens democratic governance, discourages foreign investment, and complicates peacebuilding initiatives. Consequently, controlling arms proliferation has become an important component of national security policy and international diplomacy.

National Security

Buzan et.al views National security traditionally as the protection of a state's sovereignty, territorial integrity, political independence, and core national interests against internal and external threats. Classical realist scholars viewed national security primarily from a military perspective, emphasizing defence against external aggression. Contemporary scholarship, however, adopts a broader understanding that incorporates political, economic, environmental, societal, cyber, and human security dimensions¹⁸.

In Nigeria, national security encompasses the protection of citizens, democratic institutions, critical infrastructure, economic resources, and constitutional order from terrorism, insurgency, armed banditry, kidnapping, piracy, cybercrime, communal conflicts, and transnational organized crime. The proliferation of SALW significantly undermines these objectives by empowering violent non-state actors and increasing the lethality of domestic conflicts.

The Nigerian National Security Strategy recognizes that effective national security requires integrated approaches combining military capability, intelligence gathering, diplomacy, law enforcement, border management, economic development, and international cooperation¹⁹.

Security Diplomacy

According to Amah Williams, security diplomacy refers to the use of diplomatic instruments and international engagement to prevent conflict, manage security threats, build confidence among states, and strengthen cooperative security arrangements²⁰. It extends beyond traditional

¹⁶ Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde. 1998. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

¹⁷ Florquin, Nicolas, and Jonah Leff. 2014. *Monitoring Illicit Weapons: Small Arms Survey 2014*. Geneva: Small Arms Survey

¹⁸ Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde. 1998.

Security: A New Framework for Analysis. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

¹⁹ National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons. 2022. *Annual Report*. Abuja

²⁰ Williams, Amah. "International Sanctions As A Tool Of Diplomacy: A Historical Examination of their Deterrent Effect." *AKSU Annals of Sustainable Development* 3, no. 1 (2025): 112-114.

diplomacy by emphasizing defence cooperation, intelligence sharing, arms control negotiations, military exchanges, conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and multilateral security partnerships.

In the context of SALW proliferation, security diplomacy involves bilateral and multilateral efforts to prevent illicit arms trafficking through treaties, conventions, information sharing, joint border patrols, customs cooperation, intelligence exchange, and coordinated law enforcement operations. For Nigeria, security diplomacy has become increasingly important because most illicit weapons originate outside its borders and enter through transnational trafficking routes. Nigeria has therefore strengthened diplomatic engagement through ECOWAS, the African Union, the Lake Chad Basin Commission, the Multinational Joint Task Force, the United Nations, and bilateral partnerships with countries such as the United States, France, and the United Kingdom to combat terrorism and illicit arms trafficking.

Arms Control

Arms control refers to policies, legal instruments, treaties, and cooperative arrangements designed to regulate the production, transfer, possession, stockpiling, and use of weapons in order to reduce the risks of armed conflict and promote international peace and security. Unlike disarmament, which seeks the complete elimination of weapons, arms control accepts the continued existence of arms but seeks to regulate them through mutually agreed legal frameworks²¹.

International arms control has increasingly focused on SALW because these weapons account for the majority of deaths in modern conflicts. Global initiatives such as the United Nations Programme of Action on SALW (2001), the International Tracing Instrument (2005), and the Arms Trade Treaty

(2013) provide legal and policy frameworks for combating illicit arms transfers and improving international cooperation. Nigeria has domesticated several of these commitments through the establishment of the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons and through active participation in ECOWAS arms control mechanisms²².

Regional Security Cooperation

Regional security cooperation refers to collaborative efforts among neighbouring states to address common security threats that transcend national boundaries. Such cooperation includes intelligence sharing, joint military operations, harmonization of legal frameworks, coordinated border management, peacekeeping, and collective responses to terrorism, piracy, organized crime, and arms trafficking²³.

For Nigeria, regional security cooperation is indispensable because illicit arms trafficking is largely transnational. The ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, the African Union's "Silencing the Guns" initiative, and joint operations under the Multinational Joint Task Force demonstrate how diplomacy and regional institutions have become essential tools in addressing the proliferation of illicit weapons across West Africa.

Border Security

Border security refers to the measures adopted by states to regulate and monitor the movement of people, goods, and weapons across international frontiers while preventing illegal cross-border activities that threaten national security. These measures include surveillance, customs enforcement, immigration control, intelligence gathering, joint border patrols, and technological monitoring systems²⁴.

²¹ Goldblat, Jozef. 2002. *Arms Control: A Guide to Negotiations and Agreements*. London: SAGE

²² Otoabasi Akpan, et.al, "Resource Curse" and "Resource Wars" and the Proliferation of Small Arms in Africa, in Usman A. Tar, and Charles P. Onwurah, eds, The Palgrave Handbook of Small Arms and Conflicts in

Africa, Switzerland, Springer Nature, 2021, chapter 12, p 252.

²³ Aning, Kwesi, and Alhaji M. S. Bah. 2009. *ECOWAS and Conflict Prevention in West Africa*. New York: International Peace Institute

²⁴ Andreas, Peter. 2003. *Redrawing the Line: Borders*

Nigeria shares approximately 4,047 kilometres of land borders with Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, in addition to an extensive maritime boundary along the Gulf of Guinea²⁵. The porosity of these borders has facilitated the trafficking of SALW, narcotics, and other contraband. Consequently, strengthening border security has become a central objective of Nigeria's foreign policy, security diplomacy, and national security strategy.

Historical Evolution of Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation in Nigeria

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in Nigeria dates back to the pre – colonial times. Studies have shown that British imperialism in West Africa especially in Nigeria during the period of slave and legitimate trades involved the use of firearms. Gunboat diplomacy was popularly employed by the British to compel African chiefs to enter into various treaties with them.²⁶ These arms were used in violent suppression of local resistance to their incursion, conquest and eventual colonialism. In doing this, a lot of small arms were deployed to prosecute the British imperial interests in Nigeria. As time goes on, some of these small arms that were used during the period possibly found their way to the hands of Nigerian natives during the period of colonialism. It is also contended that some of these arms became tools in native traditions and hunting in the rural communities. And in time, guns became a symbol of strength and power and were later transformed into ceremonial weapons that were displayed during funeral ceremonies and customary festival among the natives.²⁷ Scholars have observed

that this factor among others were basically responsible to the enactment of the 1959 Firearms Act with the view to check the increase of small arms in Nigeria towards independence.

In post independent Nigeria, at the end of the Nigerian civil war, the failure of the Nigerian government to execute a comprehensive and thorough disarmament and arms destruction programmes exacerbated the proliferation of guns and illicit arms trafficking.²⁸ Studies and various reports have shown that as at 2002, the number of small arms and light weapons in Nigeria were estimated at one to three million²⁹. These reports included arms in lawful possession of members of the Armed Forces, the police and other paramilitary agencies, but the majority were in the hands of civilians. Some of these illicit small arms and light weapons in the hands of civilians were used in armed violence such as ethno-religious conflicts, communal clashes, sectarian violence, cultism, political violence, electoral violence, vigilantism, militancy and other criminalities.³⁰ Empirical evidences have shown that Nigeria as a country had witnessed enormous use of illicit small arms in the 21st century. At the wake of the century, it heralded this civilian political dispensation in Nigeria. The political landscape since this period has undoubtedly been replete with violence that in some-cases, the use of small arms and light weapons by criminals and other violent non-state actors were employed.

This period in Nigeria's history has specifically seen the proliferation of ethnic based militias and cult groups such as Odua People's Congress (OPC), Bakassi Boys, Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta People's

and Security in the Twenty-First Century. New York: Routledge

²⁵ Federal Republic of Nigeria. 2019. *National Security Strategy*. Abuja: Office of the National Security Adviser.

²⁶ Samuel. I. Odoh, and Oliver U. Nwankwo, "Arms Proliferation and Democratization In Nigeria, Ebonyi State University", *International Journal of African and Asian Studies*, .9, 2015. pp.34.

²⁷ Stephen O. Soetan, "Proliferation Of Arms And Security Challenges In Nigeria", Ado-Ekiti,

International Journal Of History And Cultural Studies. 3. Issue3, 2017. pp.67-88.

²⁸ Williams, Amah M. "The Aburi Accord and its Role in the Nigerian Civil War." *Journal of History and Military Studies* 3, no. 2 (2017): 27-38.

²⁹ Small Arms Survey. *Small Arms Survey 2023: Weapons and the World*. Geneva: Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies. 2023. P67.

³⁰ Federal Republic of Nigeria. 2019. *National Security Strategy*. Abuja: Office of the National Security Adviser

Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Niger Delta Peoples Vigilante Group (NDPVG), Dey Well Cult, Dey Gbam Cult, Bakassi Strike Force (BSF), Indigenous People of Biafra/ Eastern Security Network (IPOB/ESN) and many other militia, cult, piracy and kidnapping groups across the country. This period has as well witnessed a fair share of these non-state violent actor's existence in the Northern part of Nigeria. The activities of Boko Haram Terrorist (BHT) group in their conduct of insurgency in North eastern Nigeria and rampaging Fulani militias and bandits in Northwest, North-central and South-western parts of Nigeria are major reference points of the use of illicit small arms.

There are also Fulani herders/farmers clashes, recurring Tiv/Jukun crises in Benue and Taraba States, cattle rustlings, ethno-religious conflicts in Jos, Kaduna, Zaria, Kano and other cities and towns of the north. The nation in her 66th independence anniversary was terribly torn apart by the overwhelming phenomenon of small arms and light weapons proliferation. A situation that has made the security of lives and properties and the safeguard of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Nigeria very difficult. It has made the governments at the national and subnational level to grapple with how to bring to an end and to put up concrete measures that will contain, curb or reduce the flow of illicit small arms and light weapons to the hands of people that are not meant to use it. This is a herculean task as there are a whole lot of odds against the Nigerian state because Nigeria's problems which aids the flow of SALW are many. The problems of porous borders, ethno-religious conflicts, discovery of resources, unhealthy political rivalries and proliferation of cult groups are challenges that this paper will address as some major drivers of SALW proliferation in Nigeria since independence, especially after the Nigerian Civil war.

Drivers of Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation

Porous Borders

In contemporary Nigeria, an issue that has been responsible for the proliferation of SALW is the porous nature of the country's border. The porosity of the border areas with Nigeria's neighbours of Niger Republic, Chad, Cameroun and Benin Republic are major sources of security concern. In terms of the size, Nigeria has about 771 kilometres of shared borderline with Niger republic in the north, 1700 kilometres with Cameroun to the east, 90 kilometres with the republic of Chad to the northeast and 850 kilometres of maritime borderline on the Atlantic Ocean,³¹ Cumulatively, the stretch of the country's land and sea borderline goes up to 4,910 kilometers. Policing of these borderlines effectively has not been achieved which made it easy for SALW to be smuggled through the border area, especially the unofficial entry and exit points.

Ethno – Religious Conflicts

Another factor that drives the flow of SALW in Nigeria is ethno – religious conflicts. Nigerian history is replete with the above-mentioned type of conflicts. In the 1980s, Maitatsine crisis led by Mohammed Marwa erupted in cities like Kano, Kaduna, Yola and Gombe. Locally fabricated firearms and other dangerous weapons were used by Maitatsine members to wreak havoc. Government security forces were also deployed with heavy use of firearms with the view to quell the crisis. The recurring Tiv/Jukun crises, Jos crises especially between 2001 to 2010 and up date, Zango-kataf crisis in Kaduna State, Boko Haram insurgency and the ongoing rampaging of terrorists in the North central among other militia activities across the country were issues of concern. All of these involved the use of small arms to kill, kidnap and maim victims³².

³¹ Bashir Malam, "Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation and Its Implication To West African Regional Security", *Gombe International Journal Of Humanities And Social Science*, Vol.4, No.8, 2014. Pp34-50.

³² Equere, P. S., Richard Ibu, "Violence In The Name Of the Faith: A Study in Religious Extremism from 1992-2002." *Akwa Ibom State University Journal of Arts* 4, no. 1 (2023).

Discovery of Resources

The discovery of mineral resources in many countries and particularly in Nigeria has shown to be problem. History had repeatedly shown this state of affair has been the cause for conflicts. For instance, the mining of gold and other solid minerals in some areas of Zamfara, Sokoto and other northern States has been associated with the proliferation of bandits. Reports have shown the vicious act of these groups' bandit in these areas to the locals and other innocent Nigerians who traverses these locations for their daily life activities. Kidnappings and abductions for ransom are recurring crimes in the above-mentioned areas. In the Niger Delta, militancy, oil theft/bunkering activities and pipeline vandalism are also common due to the oil exploration activities in the region. In many cases, militants and oil thieves utilizes small arms in their possession to further their criminal interests. In the above regard, Akpan, et.al, noted that "resource wars are straightforwardly wars on account of resources by combatants who may be government agents or merchants of violence for the control of locations, production, distribution, and marketing of natural resources".³³ He further noted that resources wars are unique in that they involve the control of natural resources by armed groups.

Political Violence and Electoral Conflicts

Another stimulant for the flow of small arms and light weapons in Nigeria is election violence. Every election circle in Nigeria's political history since independence comes with one form of violence or the other. In 1965 the Western Region House of Assembly election was associated with violence. Many people were killed by the ensued infamous "wetie" crisis. Although the use of petrol was a major weapon used by both members of Nigeria National Democratic Party (NNDP) led Samuel Akintola and Action Group/ United Progressive Grand Alliance (AG/UPGA) led by Obafemi Awolowo in dousing

political opponents and properties to set them ablaze³⁴. But there was also the use of locally made guns and some imported pistols and rifles. Adding to this use of firearms during crisis were the ones used by the Nigerian police and the Army to suppress the riot. The general elections from 2003 were evident that the goals of political violence have shifted from the mere use of crude instruments such as machete, clubs, knives, daggers etc, to small arms such as locally fabricated and illegally imported or acquired pistols and a range of assault rifles. The sea of unemployed youths are then recruited as thugs by politicians. These thugs organised themselves in some cases as cult groups. They use the umbrella of cultism to intimidate, maim, hijack election materials and even kill political opponents of their sponsors as well as other innocent Nigerians during elections.

In River State, during 2003 and 2007 general elections, many cult and militant groups were used as thugs by politicians to serve their political interest. Small arms were procured for them by the political leaders in the state which were used in perpetrating electoral violence. The complicity of some Nigerian political elites in arming the youths with small arms and other dangerous weapons during elections there has been a setback to peaceful conduct of elections in Nigeria, a situation that has continued to enhance small arms proliferation in Nigeria. It has shown no sign of abating in the near future as politics in Nigeria has been reduced to or considered as a zero-sum-game. The idea of being a zero-sum-game usually prompt the desire of politicians and candidates in an electoral contest to ensure that they get victory at all cost.

Proliferation of Cult Groups

The proliferation of cult groups in Nigeria constitutes one of the most significant manifestations of the country's growing insecurity and is closely intertwined with the widespread circulation of Small

³³ Otoabasi Akpan and Ubong E. Umoh, "Resource Curse" and "Resource Wars" and the Proliferation of Small Arms in Africa", in Usman A. Tar, and Charles P. Onwurah, eds, *The Palgrave Handbook of Small Arms and Conflicts in Africa*, Switzerland, Springer Nature, 2021. pp. 251-252.

³⁴ Uwa, O.G. and Anthony, A.B., *Small Arms And Light Weapons Proliferation And Problem Of National Security In Nigeria*, Achievers University Ondo State, Journal of International Affairs and Global Strategy, Vol.29, 2015

Arms and Light Weapons (SALW). Originally established as university-based fraternities with social and ideological objectives, many cult groups have transformed into violent criminal organizations operating within and beyond educational institutions. Their evolution from campus confraternities into organized armed gangs has been facilitated largely by easy access to illicit firearms, thereby contributing to violent crime, political instability, communal conflicts, and transnational organized crime.

The transition of cult groups from campus organizations to organized criminal networks has significantly increased the demand for illicit small arms. Modern cult groups no longer rely solely on crude weapons such as knives or machetes; instead, they increasingly possess pistols, assault rifles, pump-action guns, and locally fabricated firearms. The availability of these weapons has transformed cult rivalries into highly lethal confrontations, particularly in the South-South and South-East geopolitical zones, where clashes between rival groups frequently result in multiple fatalities and widespread destruction of property. Research has consistently shown that the proliferation of SALW has enhanced the operational capabilities of cult groups by increasing both the frequency and lethality of their violent activities³⁵.

Political actors have also contributed to the militarization of cult groups. Since Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, politicians have frequently recruited cult members as political thugs to intimidate opponents, disrupt elections, manipulate voting processes, and provide private security during electoral campaigns. In exchange, these groups receive financial rewards, political protection, and access to sophisticated firearms. After elections, many of the weapons distributed to political thugs are neither recovered nor surrendered, allowing cult members to retain them for criminal activities. This cycle has strengthened the nexus between political violence, organized crime, and

SALW proliferation while undermining democratic governance and public security. Evidence from several Nigerian states demonstrates that cult groups have been mobilized during elections and subsequently evolved into heavily armed criminal organizations³⁶.

The Niger Delta provides perhaps the clearest illustration of the relationship between cultism and illicit arms proliferation. During the period of militant agitation in the early 2000s, several cult organizations developed close operational links with militant groups engaged in attacks on oil infrastructure, illegal oil bunkering, piracy, and kidnapping for ransom. Weapons acquired through militant networks subsequently filtered into local cult groups, thereby increasing the intensity of cult supremacy battles and urban violence. In Rivers State, for example, rival cult groups such as the Icelanders, Greenlanders, and Deybam have repeatedly engaged in armed confrontations using automatic weapons, causing significant civilian casualties and destabilizing local communities³⁷.

In Nigeria, cult activities are now mainly in the communities, not just in the university campuses. Their activities which include violent intimidations, killings, armed robbery, kidnapping for ransom, attack on government security agents are usually being conducted with small arms and other dangerous weapons. As the general elections draws closer, their presence and use by political leaders will be obvious as they are major tools for electoral violence, elections materials snatching and even political assassinations.

Regional Armed Conflicts

Regional armed conflicts have been a major driver of the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in Nigeria. The porous nature of Nigeria's

³⁵ Soetan, S.O., *Proliferation of Arms and Security Challenges In Nigeria*, International Journal of History And Cultural Studies, Vol.3, Issue3, 2017.

³⁶ Odoh, S.I. and Nwankwo, O.U., *Arms Proliferation and Democratisation In Nigeria, Ebonyi State*

University, International Journal of African and Asian Studies, Vol.9, 2015.

³⁷ Odoh, S.I. and Nwankwo, O.U., *Arms Proliferation and Democratisation In Nigeria..*

borders with Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, coupled with prolonged instability in neighbouring countries, has facilitated the movement of illicit weapons into the country. Conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Sudan, and more recently Libya and the Sahel have generated large stockpiles of surplus weapons that have found their way into West Africa's illicit arms markets³⁸. The easy availability of these weapons has strengthened the operational capabilities of terrorist groups, armed bandits, ethnic militias, kidnappers, and criminal gangs operating across Nigeria.

Regional armed conflicts have therefore transformed SALW proliferation from a domestic security issue into a transnational challenge requiring coordinated diplomatic and security responses. Nigeria has responded through active participation in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), the Lake Chad Basin Commission, and intelligence-sharing arrangements with neighbouring states. These regional initiatives seek to strengthen border security, disrupt illicit trafficking networks, harmonize arms control legislation, and enhance collective responses to terrorism and organized crime. In sum, regional armed conflicts have significantly increased the circulation of illicit SALW in Nigeria by creating surplus weapons, expanding trafficking routes, and weakening border governance. Addressing this challenge requires not only effective domestic arms control policies but also sustained regional diplomacy, enhanced intelligence cooperation, coordinated border management, and stronger implementation of regional and international arms control agreements.

Diplomatic Dimensions of SALW Control

Nigeria has consistently employed diplomacy as a strategic instrument to combat the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW). Through active participation in regional and international arms control initiatives, the country has sought to strengthen legal frameworks, promote responsible arms transfers, and reduce illicit trafficking. Nigeria played a leading role in the negotiation and adoption of the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons and has also ratified the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), demonstrating its commitment to global arms control norms³⁹.

Also, Nigeria has strengthened bilateral security cooperation with countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Cameroon, Niger, and Chad to address illicit arms trafficking and terrorism. These partnerships focus on intelligence sharing, border security, military training, and technical assistance aimed at disrupting transnational arms trafficking networks. Bilateral agreements have also enhanced Nigeria's capacity to combat terrorism, particularly in the North-East and the Lake Chad Basin⁴⁰.

As a leading member of ECOWAS, Nigeria has also promoted regional cooperation in controlling SALW proliferation. The ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons provides a legal framework for regulating arms transfers, improving stockpile management, strengthening border controls, and facilitating information sharing among member states. Nigeria has consistently supported ECOWAS initiatives on conflict prevention and collective security because illicit arms trafficking transcends national boundaries⁴¹.

At the continental level, Nigeria actively supports the African Union's peace and security architecture through participation in continental arms control and conflict prevention programmes. The African

³⁸ Florquin, Nicolas, and Jonah Leff. *Small Arms Survey 2014: Women and Guns*. Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2014.

³⁹ ECOWAS Commission. *ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related Materials*. ECOWAS Commission, 2006.

⁴⁰ Williams, A. M., and E. K. Egemba. "Culture and

bilateral diplomacy: A study of Nigeria-Saudi relations." *Ibom Journal of Social Issues* 11, no. 1 (2022): 29-29.

⁴¹ ECOWAS Commission. *ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related Materials*. ECOWAS Commission, 2006.

Union's **Silencing the Guns** initiative encourages member states to reduce illicit arms circulation, strengthen border governance, and improve institutional capacity to combat organized crime and terrorism. Nigeria's involvement reflects its commitment to promoting peace and stability across Africa⁴².

On the global stage, Nigeria is a participant in several United Nations arms control mechanisms, including the United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons (UNPoA), the International Tracing Instrument (ITI), and the Arms Trade Treaty. These frameworks encourage states to improve arms marking, record keeping, tracing systems, export controls, and international cooperation in preventing illicit arms transfers. Nigeria's participation has strengthened its domestic legal and institutional framework for SALW control⁴³.

Also, Intelligence sharing has become an important diplomatic tool in addressing SALW proliferation. Nigeria collaborates with regional and international intelligence agencies to track arms trafficking routes, identify criminal networks, and intercept illicit weapons before they reach non-state actors. Cooperation through organizations such as INTERPOL, ECOWAS, and the Multinational Joint Task Force has enhanced Nigeria's ability to respond to cross-border security threats⁴⁴.

Given the transnational nature of illicit arms trafficking, Nigeria also adopted joint border security operations with neighbouring countries. Through the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) involving Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Benin, coordinated military patrols and intelligence exchanges have disrupted terrorist logistics and illegal arms movements around the Lake Chad

Basin. These collaborative efforts demonstrate that effective SALW control depends on sustained diplomatic engagement and regional security cooperation⁴⁵.

Implications for Nigeria's National Security

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) has significantly strengthened the operational capabilities of terrorist groups and insurgents in Nigeria. Organizations such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have relied heavily on illicit firearms to carry out attacks against civilians, military installations, and public infrastructure. The availability of these weapons has prolonged insurgency in the North-East and complicated counterterrorism operations⁴⁶.

SALW proliferation has also fueled the rise of armed banditry and kidnapping, particularly in Nigeria's North-West and North-Central regions. Criminal groups equipped with assault rifles and other sophisticated firearms frequently attack rural communities, highways, and schools for ransom. The widespread availability of illicit weapons has increased the frequency and lethality of these crimes, thereby undermined public safety and weakened citizens' confidence in the state's ability to provide security⁴⁷.

The easy accessibility of SALW has intensified communal and ethno-religious conflicts across Nigeria. Farmer-herder clashes, boundary disputes, and inter-communal violence have become more destructive because disputing groups increasingly possess automatic weapons instead of traditional implements. Consequently, local conflicts that were

⁴² African Union. *Master Roadmap of Practical Steps to Silence the Guns in Africa by Year 2030*. African Union Commission, 2020.

⁴³ United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs. *Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects*. United Nations, 2001

⁴⁴ INTERPOL. *INTERPOL Firearms Programme*. INTERPOL, www.interpol.int.

⁴⁵ Lake Chad Basin Commission. *Multinational Joint Task Force Strategy Documents*. Lake Chad Basin Commission

⁴⁶ Albert, Isaac Olawale. *Security Dynamics in Nigeria*. John Archers, 2012.

⁴⁷ Albert, Isaac Olawale. *Security Dynamics in Nigeria*. John Archers, 2012

once manageable now result in mass casualties, displacement, and destruction of property⁴⁸.

The proliferation of illicit firearms has also contributed to electoral violence and political instability. Politicians often recruit armed youths, cult groups, and militias to intimidate opponents and manipulate electoral outcomes. Many of the weapons distributed during election periods are retained after elections and later used for robbery, kidnapping, and other criminal activities, thereby perpetuating insecurity.

SALW proliferation has enhanced the activities of organized criminal groups, including cult organizations, armed robbery syndicates, and human trafficking networks. Armed cult groups, particularly in the South-South and South-East, increasingly use sophisticated firearms in territorial disputes, extortion, illegal oil bunkering, and political violence. The availability of illicit weapons has transformed many cult groups into well-organized criminal enterprises that pose serious threats to public order⁴⁹.

Nigeria's porous borders have facilitated the movement of illicit firearms across West and Central Africa. Arms traffickers exploit weak border controls to transport weapons alongside narcotics, counterfeit goods, and human trafficking victims. These transnational criminal activities undermine border security and expose Nigeria to regional instability, requiring enhanced cooperation with neighbouring states through ECOWAS and other regional security mechanisms⁵⁰.

In terms of economics, the proliferation of SALW has imposed substantial economic costs on Nigeria. According to a World Bank report on Nigeria's development, persistent insecurity discourages domestic and foreign investment, disrupts agricultural production, destroys infrastructure, and diverts public resources from development to

security operations. Government expenditure on military operations, humanitarian assistance, and reconstruction continues to increase as violence escalates, thereby slowing economic growth and national development⁵¹.

On the humanitarian perspective, the widespread use of illicit firearms has generated severe humanitarian challenges, including loss of lives, internal displacement, refugee flows, and destruction of livelihoods. Communities affected by armed violence experience declining access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Women and children remain particularly vulnerable to the effects of armed conflict, including sexual violence, forced displacement, and food insecurity.

The proliferation of SALW undermines the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force by empowering non-state actors to challenge government authority. Armed groups frequently establish parallel systems of control in areas where state presence is weak, reducing public confidence in security institutions and the rule of law. This erosion of state authority threatens Nigeria's sovereignty, democratic governance, and long-term political stability⁵².

The proliferation of SALW poses multidimensional threats to Nigeria's national security by fueling terrorism, insurgency, banditry, communal conflicts, organized crime, and political violence. Beyond its immediate security consequences, it undermines economic development, weakens governance, and exacerbates humanitarian crises. Addressing these challenges requires stronger arms control policies, enhanced intelligence gathering, effective border management, regional security cooperation, and sustained diplomatic engagement to combat the transnational networks that sustain illicit arms trafficking.

⁴⁸ Aning, Kwesi, and Alhaji M. S. Bah. *ECOWAS and Conflict Prevention in West Africa*. International Peace Institute, 2009

⁴⁹ CLEEN Foundation. *Arms Proliferation and Violence in Nigeria*. CLEEN Foundation, 2019

⁵⁰ ECOWAS Commission. *ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and*

Other Related Materials. ECOWAS Commission, 2006

⁵¹ World Bank. *Nigeria Development Update: Charting a New Course*. World Bank, 2023

⁵² Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Lynne Rienner, 1998

Conclusion

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) remains one of the most formidable threats to Nigeria's national security and regional stability. As this study has demonstrated, the widespread availability of illicit firearms has contributed significantly to the escalation of terrorism, insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, communal conflicts, electoral violence, cultism, and transnational organized crime. Since the mid-1960s, the circulation of SALW has evolved from a consequence of the Nigerian Civil War into a multidimensional security challenge driven by porous borders, regional armed conflicts, weak institutional controls, political patronage, corruption, and the activities of transnational criminal networks. The persistence of these factors has continued to undermine state authority, public safety, economic development, and social cohesion.

The study further establishes that SALW proliferation is not merely a domestic security issue but a transnational challenge that demands coordinated diplomatic responses. Nigeria's strategic location within West Africa and its extensive land and maritime borders make unilateral approaches inadequate for combating illicit arms trafficking. Consequently, diplomacy has become an indispensable instrument in Nigeria's national security architecture. Through active participation in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union (AU), the United Nations (UN), the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), and other bilateral and multilateral security arrangements, Nigeria has sought to strengthen regional cooperation, intelligence sharing, border management, and arms control mechanisms. These initiatives have reinforced the understanding that effective security in the contemporary international system depends increasingly on collective action and cooperative security rather than isolated national responses.

Despite these diplomatic efforts, the implementation of arms control policies has remained constrained by institutional weaknesses, inadequate intelligence coordination, corruption, porous borders, insufficient technological capacity, and inconsistent enforcement

of existing legal frameworks. These shortcomings have allowed illicit weapons to continue flowing into the country, thereby sustaining violent non-state actors and prolonging insecurity. The effectiveness of Nigeria's diplomatic commitments will therefore depend on stronger domestic institutions capable of translating international obligations into practical national security outcomes.

This article argues that sustainable control of SALW proliferation requires an integrated strategy that combines robust domestic governance with proactive security diplomacy. Strengthening border surveillance, modernizing intelligence capabilities, enhancing inter-agency collaboration, improving arms marking and tracing systems, dismantling illicit trafficking networks, and deepening cooperation with neighbouring states and international partners are essential to addressing the transnational dimensions of the problem. Equally important is the need to address the underlying socio-economic and political conditions that facilitate the recruitment of individuals into violent groups and sustain the illicit arms economy.

Ultimately, Nigeria's experience demonstrates that diplomacy and national security are mutually reinforcing in the fight against illicit arms proliferation. As threats become increasingly transnational and interconnected, effective diplomacy must complement military and law enforcement efforts through stronger regional integration, adherence to international arms control regimes, and sustained collaboration among states. By consolidating its diplomatic leadership in West Africa while strengthening domestic security institutions, Nigeria will be better positioned to curb the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, promote regional peace, and safeguard its long-term national security interests. The lessons drawn from this study also contribute to broader debates on arms control, security governance, and the role of diplomacy in addressing emerging security challenges in Africa.

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