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Banditry and Africa's Stability Question

Al Chukwuma Okoli, PhD

Department of Political Science, Federal
University of Lafia, Nigeria
okochu007@yahoo.com

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Chigozie Joseph Nebeife

Department of Political Science
Federal University Wukari,
Nigeriacjnebeife@gmail.com

Abstract

This article is a commentary on the threat-import of banditry as a destabilizing phenomenon in Africa against the backdrop of the rising incidence of banditry-related violence in the continent, which threatens national and regional security. The article posits that armed banditry is a cause as well as a consequence of Africa's state fragility syndrome; and that its incidence follows the logic of conflict-crime-terror opportunism in the context of a chronically dysfunctional state.

Introduction

Africa's contemporary security situation has been rightly described as one of 'complex threats'. This is in view of the complexity and interconnectedness of actors and factors in many instances of the contemporary security challenges in the continent. The complex threat scenario in the rapidly changing security landscape is such that existing challenges have prevailed amid a mosaic of new and emergent threats. Africa's complex and dynamic security malaise occurs within the context of fragile states whose functionality and legitimacy have been vigorously negotiated, contested, and compromised by anti-state elements. Among these forces are organized militia, criminal, and insurgent groups which engage in subversive acts that negate the stability of the affected states. Oftentimes, these anti-state elements have operated in a tacit synergy to bring about systematic destabilization within a state or a region. Such a pragmatic synergy has been espoused in the conflict-crime-terror nexus narrative.

This article is a commentary on the threat-import of banditry as a destabilizing phenomenon in Africa against the backdrop of the rising incidence of banditry-related violence in parts of the continent, which threatens national and regional stability. The article posits that banditry is a cause as well as a consequence of Africa's state fragility syndrome; and that its incidence follows the logic of conflict-crime-terror opportunism in the context of a chronically dysfunctional state

Situating Africa's Banditry Crisis: A Conflict-Crime-Terror Nexus

The conflict-crime-terror nexus highlights the opportunistic dynamics of violence in a fragile state characterized by marked governance deficits and legitimacy crisis. The thrust of the nexus is that: Organized crime, armed conflict and violent extremism are all becoming increasingly intertwined. Fragility, weak institutions and conflicts provide an attractive environment and breeding ground for illicit networks and extremist organizations and these connected groups can seriously impede peace-building efforts and threaten human security. Organized crime, conflict, and violent extremism all thrive when any state is weak or its structure is absent. Where there is a lack of security, a want of access to justice, and poor service provision, then organized crime often fills the void by taking over certain functions of the state.

Banditry adds to the other dimensions of armed violence in Africa to reproduce conditions for instability. One of such conditions is the incidence of arms proliferation, which has been a critical driver and force multiplier of violence in the Sahel and the Great Lake regions. Arms proliferation puts small arms and light weapons in the hands of subversive non-state actors, some of whom must have gained some combat expertise in the context of existing conflicts. The involvement of bandits in arms trafficking has been reported in Kenya's North Rift area, Nigeria's northwestern borderlines with Niger Republic, as well as Mali-Burkina Faso frontier.

Existing conflicts in parts of Africa have been implicated in the continent's banditry crisis. In Mali, there is a thriving mutual infiltration and cooption between jihadists and militant herders. This is in addition to the defection of some of the herders into routine criminality such as armed robbery, cattle rustling and localized raids. In North West Nigeria, the banditry crisis originated amid local contestations between settled native farmers and migrant herders in Zamfara State in the early 2010s. Today, bandits in the region maintain pockets of societized criminal fiefdoms where they enforce illicit governance on their captive population. Such communes are also used as safe havens for other organized crimes such as drug and arms trafficking, smuggling, kidnapping, and cattle rustling.

The banditry crisis in Central Nigeria has fed into the existing conflict fault lines in states like Plateau, Benue, Niger, and Nasarawa. Bandits have been hired by local nomads to fight for them in the various episodes of farmer-herder conflicts in the region. The bandits have also been involved as mercenary fighters in other instances of communal conflicts in Central Nigeria and beyond. The most troubling trajectory of the banditry crisis, however, is its nebulous intersection with jihadism, which has been observed in Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and Niger. This convolution is at the core of the prevailing complex security scenario in the Wider Sahel.

The criminal opportunism associated with the 'Unknown Gunmen' in South East Nigeria depicts a new trajectory in Africa's banditry crisis. The Gunmen represent disparate gangs of brigands that indulge in armed robbery, mercenary militancy, kidnapping, hire assassination, drug trafficking, ritual violence and cult idolism. Some of them maintain pragmatic and instrumental relations with the neo-Biafra militants and agitators in the region. The 'Unknown Gunmen' phenomenon has its parallels in the clans of marauding militia that operate in the coasts and mainland of Congo DR.

The prevalence of armed banditry in Africa is essentially reflects the logic of conflict-crime-terror nexus. Besides, it is symptomatic of the continent's acute governability and legitimacy crisis. In some parts of the continent, there exist swathes of scarcely guarded hinterlands, forestlands, borderlands, and international frontiers where criminals such as bandits have stamped their stranglehold. For instance, the creeks of the Niger Delta, as well as the maritime domains of the Gulf of Guinea, have been under the competitive control of militants, pirates, and allied organized criminals. Same is also true of the vast borderlands of the Lake Chad frontier where insurgents and other subversive non-state elements have been orchestrating treasonable violence.

Implications for Africa's Stability

Banditry has been associated with dire consequences that undermine not only human security but also national and regional security of Africa. The various attacks orchestrated by bandits have often precipitated an atmosphere of siege. Oftentimes, such attacks have been misconceived and reprised as a communal threat. For instance, incidents of cattle rustling in Central Nigeria have sometimes been blamed erroneously on the settled farming natives and their vigilantes. Such a pretext has often been capitalized upon by the herders to launch reprisal attacks on innocent communities, leading to mortal consequences.

The criminal economy that undergirds armed banditry has produced and reproduced a vicious circle of violence. Apart from material and non-material losses associated with bandit attacks, communitarian peace and coexistence is undermined as a consequence. Proceeds from armed banditry have been linked to insurgency/ terrorism financing. There are palpable indications of subterranean jihadist infiltration of rural banditry in northern Nigeria as well as the Wider Sahel. The banditry crisis has also promoted inter-communal hostilities and antipathies in Africa. For instance, there is a growing widespread resentment against the Fulani whose kinsmen are believed to be involved in the bandit violence. In Zamfara and Katsina states of Nigeria, there is a rising Hausa/Fulani tension which bears the potential to escalate into a homicidal inter-communal feud.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed Africa's stability question against the backdrop of the spiraling threat of armed banditry. The article situates its discourse within the continent's complex security-cum-governance challenges, with the conflict-crime-terror nexus as its analytic anchor. Arising from the foregoing analysis is can be submitted that the incidence of armed banditry in Africa is a cause as well as a symptom of the state fragility syndrome in the continent. The declining coercive competences and legitimacy of the average African state bolster the proliferation of anti-state elements which contest the authority of the state. This has aggravated the fragility of the state and the vulnerability of its population. There is, therefore, a need to reinvent and reinvigorate the African state so as to enhance its coercive, regulatory and affective capabilities.