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ETHNIC DIVERSITY AND NATIONAL SECURITY IN NIGERIA: THE SOUTH-EAST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation with over four hundred ethnic groups, and continues to grapple with ethnicity-related conflicts and resource struggles. This study provides a framework for understanding recurrent conflicts linked to ethnic diversity in Nigeria, driven by state fragility and elite competition for power and resource control. Ethnic differences pose challenges to national security through contradictory interactions over resource control and perceived marginalization, which has fueled secessionist tendencies in South-East Nigeria, commonly referred to as Biafra. The region has experienced repeated violent conflicts characterized by neglect and confrontation. The broad objective is to examine how ethnic diversity in the South-East has affected national security in Nigeria. The study uses secondary data through content analysis of books, journal articles, and publications. Relative Deprivation Theory is adopted as the analytical framework. Findings show that proliferation of small arms and light weapons, mutual distrust, unemployment, marginalization, poor economic activities, and loss of human lives and property have deepened national security challenges in the region. The study recommends that government should address ethnic-driven crises by strengthening state security capacity, secure borders to prevent illegal crossings, smuggling, and weapons proliferation and running an inclusive government that guarantees equity and representation across Nigeria.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Ethnic diversity, Resource conflict, Conflict, National security

INTRODUCTION

There are over four hundred different ethnic groups in Nigeria (Cleaver, 2001). While no group should have its traditional privileges diminished (Udo, 1968), in its attempts to protect or advance group privileges often degenerate into violent conflict in a multi-ethnic federation (Salawu, 2010). Ethnic groups are largely demarcated by language

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or dialect, with larger groups absorbing smaller ones. The "beauty" of ethnic diversity depends on unity in diversity, which reflects in the political, economic, and socio-cultural development of groups (Lillian &Ndiku, 2012).

In the South-East, conflict linked to ethnic diversity is driven by the reality of state failure and elite competition for power and resources (Omenma&Onyishi, 2023; Uche & Obi, 2025). No doubt Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation (Chidi, 2005; Salawu, 2010) and belonging to several religious sects, which has been trying to cope with the opposing problem of ethnicity and resources conflict amongst others. For instance, the pluralistic configuration of Nigeria said to have diverse groups ranging from indigenous and regional people. This incited us to identify each other base on kin group, ethnic group and religious group, than the country at large (Darren & Lewis, 2010). Though, despite global integration of human society, Nigeria pluralistic configuration (ethnicity) continues to plays a vital role in constituting societies (Ogunika, 1988).

Studies show that people feel more secured and protected among those who share values, language, tradition, and history; than otherwise (Lillian &Ndiku, 2012). Such identity classification widens disparities and breeds rivalry over state power and resources, escalating conflict risks. Southern Nigeria is often divided into South-West, South-East, and South-South based on ethnicity, culture, and religion (Okoro & Udu, 2024). Nigeria for instance, is partition and structure into three regions on the consideration of ethnic groups, cultural and religion. These include south-west Nigeria, South-East Nigeria and South-South (Ogunika, 1988).

South East Nigeria, for instances comprising five states - Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo; it has a population of approximately 36 million people, representing 18% of Nigeria's total population (Population of Cities in Nigeria, 2022). The region is situated in the southeastern part of Nigeria, bounded by Benue-Niger River to the west, Niger Delta to the south, and Cross River to the east. The terrain is characterized by abundant forests, hills, and tropical savanna climate (Premium Times Nigeria, 2022).

The South East region is rich in natural resources, including: growing of yam, cassava, rice, and cocoyam. The region is endowed with solid minerals like limestone, lead, zinc, salt, and coal. Abia and Imo states have significant oil and gas reserves (Adebayo, 2023). The region has a growing manufacturing sector, with industries producing goods like textiles, footwear, and food products. The region is known for its commercial activities with its largest markets in West Africa (Edeh & Nwachukwu, 2025).

In recent years, the South-East has attracted global attention due to Biafra agitation, which has generated social conflict and threatens national unity and security. The agitation is framed as a response to marginalization (Omenma&Onyishi, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2024). However, the south-east region's agitation disguises and tricks itself, with the feeling of being marginalized, hence target at rebellion (Okoro & Udu, 2024).The Igbo, as the dominant group, are oil-producing state, making resource control central to separatist narratives (Gordon, 2005; Adebayo, 2023). The availability of ethnic diversity in the context of ethnic and religious conflict; has threatened accommodative crisis outcome. This has impacted negatively on the national security (Shehu, 2017). On this note, the study set out to examine ethnic diversity and national security challenges, south -east

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perspective. This is with the view to indicates how has ethnicity constituted insecurity in the south -east Nigeria.

Statement of Research Problem

South East Nigeria's ethnic diversity poses significant national security challenges (Omenma&Onyishi, 2023). The region is predominantly inhabited by the Igbo ethnic group, with a complex history of separatist movements and tensions with the federal government (Okoro & Udu, 2024). The issues of ethnic differences and how it constitutes national security is associated with contradictory interactions in the context of struggle for the control of resources and state power associated with (Uche & Obi, 2025). This had resulted to ethnic conflicts of varying proportion, characters and dimensions in south-east Nigeria. This region has experienced several conflicts that are characterized by ethnic marginalization, more often in violent in nature (Hussaini, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2024). This has given rise to negative outcome of great proportions of massacre and ethnic cleansing (Stremlau, 1999).

Conflict associated with Ethnic diversity constitutes one of the greatest challenges to social, political and economic development of any society (Shehu, 2017). Since 1999 to 2025, Nigeria is branded as a theatre of violent conflict, which witnessed several ethno-religious conflict (Odunlami, 2017; Ajayi & Michael, 2025). These for instance, took the form of separatist agitation (south-east), militancy in the Niger-delta (south-south), insurgence in the north-east and herders-farmers conflicts in north-central Nigeria (Omenma & Onyishi, 2023). Recently, the security situation in Nigeria is quite disturbing, like any other form of conventional crimes that formed part of Nigerian historical experience (Blanton, Robert & David, 2001). Although, Nigeria cannot be said to be at war, but the increasing level of insecurity and violence in the country is becoming more vicious by the day, thus giving the impression that the country is at trying time in terms of security not at peace with itself (Amnesty International, 2025). Thus, Odunlami (2017) revealed that these violent clashes have cost Nigeria over 14 billion dollars. This has affected the economic components of national security in Nigeria as such, hinder political and economic development (Edeh & Nwachukwu, 2025).

The researcher has in mind, the experience of genocidal atrocities in Odi and Zakibiam in Nigeria in the mid-2000s. This is because the outcome is the most brutal (Hussaini, 2010 and Stremlau, 1999). The researcher observed that most communities in south-east remained underdeveloped due to deliberate and persistent neglect, perceived marginalization, domination and exploitation by Nigeria government. Thus, these findings often escalated into separatist agitation and confrontation in the southeast Nigeria (Okoro & Udu, 2024). It is for this reason the study set out to examine how ethnic diversity in southeast Nigeria constitute challenges to national security. This is with the view to knowing the effect of proliferation of weapons, mutual distrust, hunger and unemployment, low economic activities, poverty, loss of human and property constitute challenges to national security in Nigeria (Michael, 2023; Nwankwo, Eze & Ugwu, 2023). To also provides valuable information that would contribute to knowledge and understanding the subject before us.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following will serve as research questions:

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1. What are the nature and issues of ethnic diversity of south-east region in Nigeria?

2. How has ethnic diversity challenge constituted national insecurity in south-east region in Nigeria?

3. Are there measures to end issues of linked to ethnic diversity that affects national security in in south-east region in Nigeria?

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design using secondary data. This method is based on words, feelings emotions, and non-numerical elements. This help to increase the validity of the study through better explanations of phenomenon under investigation.

Data were sourced from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government reports, newspaper archives, and publications from civil society organizations covering 1999–2025 relevant to the study.

Method of analysis: Content analysis was used to identify recurring themes on marginalization, resource conflict, arms proliferation, and state response in the South-East. The choice of secondary data is justified by the sensitivity of the subject and the availability of extensive documented evidence on Biafra agitation, security operations, and economic indicators in the region. The study focus area is about Ethnic Diversity and National Security in Nigeria: the South-East Perspective.

Concept of Ethnicity

The term ethnicity has been defined in a broader sense to signify self-consciousness of a group of people united or closely related by shared experience such as language, religious belief, common heritage etc (Jary & Jary, 1991). While race usually denotes the attributes of a group, ethnic identity signifies creative response of a group who consider themselves marginalized in society (Heckmann, 1992). The identity of a group is defined vis-a-vis another community and how this identity becomes expressively important for members of a community to identify with (Darren & Lewis, 2010).

Jary and Jary (1991, p.151) define ethnicity as "a shared racial, linguistic, or national identity of a social group". However, the definitions of ethnicity as propounded by Heckmann (1992, p. 212) includes: Ethnicity is the ethnic homogeneity of its population, and society sees itself as a community with common ancestry, culture and history. The state defines ethnicity in terms of persons with common interests, values, institutions and political convictions.

Ethnicity is generally regarded as the most basic and politically salient identity in Nigeria (Darren & Lewis, 2010). This claim is supported by the fact that both in competitive and non-competitive settings, Nigerians are more likely to define themselves in terms of their ethnic affinities than any other identity (Darren & Lewis, 2010, p. 24-25). Thus, the survey also found that Nigerians chose to label themselves with an ethnic identity. "Nigerians tend to cluster more readily around the cultural solidarities of kin, than the class solidarities of the workplace"...this is evidenced that many people identify with religious and ethnic communities and they are universally proud of their group identities (Darren & Lewis, 2010, p. 26). All of this is not surprising, considering that ethnic formations are perhaps the most historically enduring behavioural units in the country, and were further reinforced by the colonial and post-colonial regimes (Ogunika, 1988).

In spite of the salience of ethnicity, large number of studies on the exact number of ethnic groups in Nigeria were carried out by

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different scholars; this estimations have been given, notably, including: 248, 394, 62, 161, 143, 619 and 374 (Cleaver, 2001). This wide variation is largely explained by the different authors. Although language, kinship, core territoriality and myth of common origin are the main criteria of their submission (Heckmann, 1992).

Historically, ethnic identities in Nigeria have been summarized into the two broad categories of the majority and minority groups. The origins of ethnic groups lie more in the power configurations of the former colonial regions of the groups (Hausa/Fulani in the North, Igbo in the East and Yoruba in the West) (Ogunika, 1988). This is all the more important groups prior to the creation of these regions, there were no major or minor group distinctions in the country. However, with the regions came a 'core' comprising the major group and a 'periphery' made-up of numerous 'small groups' or minorities (Ogunika, 1988).

The creation of states and local government areas (the number of states has increased from 12 in 1967 to 36 in 1996) which have replaced the regions led to the emergence of new majorities and minorities; but, the old historical contexts remain, especially with regard to the major groupings (Ogunika, 1988). This is one of the reasons that have ensured the continued political instability due continuous agitation of minority groups (Uche & Obi, 2025).

Ekekwe (1986) has moved from differentiating dispersed minorities such as the Ijaw and Ebira from other minorities, distinguishing between 'historically dominant minorities' which were powerful overlords in the pre-colonial and colonial periods (Ijaw, Bini, Efik, Itsekiri) and 'political minorities' which were marginalized and excluded both from power in the regions and the overall national power grid.

Concept of National security

Security is freedom from, or resilience against potential harm caused by others. Recipient of security may be of persons and social groups, objects and institutions and phenomenon vulnerable to unwanted change. However, National Security is the safety of those who share common interest or value and located in the same geographical zone (Aligwara, 2009). The essence of security is premised on the emergence of hostile activities designed to subvert the interest of an individual, organization or a nation. It includes anything that constitute danger to a nation's existence or that undermines her stability and progress (Imobighe, 1989).

Imobighe (1989) believes that security has to do with freedom from danger, or threat against nation's ability to protect and develop her legitimate interest to enhance the wellbeing of the people. Usman (1989) sees national security as the sum total of the efforts of government and the general citizenry to prevent, detect, control or eliminate sources of danger and risk, internal and external, natural and man-made, threatening the collective interest of any nation.

National Security is synonymous with military security, referring to the defence of a country against external military threat. In the second half of the 20th century, a rapidly evolving international security environment has given rise to new threats and risks, leading to the need to extend the concept of national security to cover these new challenges (Aligwara, 2009). Thus, national security now did not cover only military security, but the areas of economic security, state and public security, food security,

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cyber defence, human security, environmental security etc. Within these components of security, it is pertinent to acknowledge among others the challenges associated with components of national security, vis-à-vis economic security and public security (Aligwara, 2009).

Looking at challenges of sustainable socio-economic and political development resulting from ethnic diversity of Niger Delta region in particular and Nigeria in general, it prove that ethnic diversity related conflict is anti-thesis of peace and wellbeing of the nation state thus influences the government and citizen's commitment to one another and to the outside world (Shehu, 2017). It is also arguable that in most countries particularly the third world countries, are always susceptible to the outcome of the issues of ethnic diversity associated to conflict in form of instability, poverty, unemployment, inequality, agitation, low per capital income, environmental degradation, incessant killing, bad gangs etc which constitute challenges to national security in Nigeria (Nwankwo, Eze & Ugwu, 2023). And yet, how these constitute challenges to national security in Nigeria has not been critically analyzed. This is the gap in knowledge, which this study is set to fill (Uche & Obi, 2025).

Ethnic diversity: Southeast perspective

The ethnic diversity was compounded by the colonial legacy of nation-states whose artificial boundaries cut across many ethnic divides (Ogunika, 1988). And it is apparent that ethnic diversity in Nigeria are often regarded as dysfunctional, with poor economic performance and a high risk of violent conflict (Okoro & Udu, 2024).

Southeast Nigeria, for instance, has Igbo as predominant language spoken across the region, with various dialects and accents across different states. English language is official and widely spoken, especially among younger generations (Premium Times Nigeria, 2022). And looking at the ethnic composition of the south-east, which is made up of majority ethnic nationalities in the country, mainly of Igbo ethnic groups (Population of Cities in Nigeria, 2022).

Ethnic issues related to clash of identity create both intrastate and interstate confrontations and shape the behavior of major actors involves (Goldstein, 2000). Different ethnic groups in crises have diverse causes of violent conflict and outcome. Although, most conflict between groups often associated with territory conquest, political power tussle and above all ethnic conflict itself stems from the differences of identity (Goldstein, 2000). Ethnic diversity and national struggles, poses the greatest threat to national security-peace and stability (Shehu, 2017). For instance, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and other separatist groups have been advocating for independence, leading to clashes with security forces and raising concerns about national unity (Omenma&Onyishi, 2023). The region has witnessed attacks by unknown gunmen, targeting security personnel, government facilities, and civilians, further exacerbating tensions (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Kidnapping has become significant concerns, with many cases reported along major highways and in rural areas (Amnesty International, 2025). These are good example of the problematic definition.

The Igbo before the civil war have since re-defined themselves to be a separate group (Stremlau, 1999). Studies show that ethnic diversity related conflict has often had a high prevalence impact and consequences on nations. For instance, a compulsorily bonding to create larger groups with

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inescapable ethnic cleavages within southern Nigeria resulted to 1967 civil war (Biafra secession) (Stremlau, 1999). It is no doubt agreeing to the fact that ethnic and cultural diversity as a new threat to global security and by extension regional and national security (Shehu, 2017).

In essence, Ethnic related violent conflict is no longer new to Nigeria polity, especially Nigeria bitter experience shortly after her independence. One may recall that between 1967 till date, the country was engulfed in a bloody civil war which impacted negatively on the nation's national security (Stremlau, 1999). Thus, Nigerians and government have been trying preventing future tensions and 'civil disturbances' in different parts of the country. Such tensions include the restiveness in South-east (Biafra secession), Boko haram Insurgency in the North-east, herders-farmer in North-central and Bandits in North-west Nigeria witnessed an almost unbroken violence and militarization (Omenma & Onyishi, 2023).

However, the empirical reports on how the issues of ethnic diversity constitute challenges to national security in Nigeria, with emphasis on its root / causes from contradictory interactions among individuals and groups (Uche & Obi, 2025). Similarly, Deutsch (1973) opined that conflict of this nature took dimension of incompatible activities that occur among divers groups. This research finds that the entire outcomes of incompatible activities by ethnic diversity are geared by not only the local elements but more significantly by external and foreign manipulating elements, which constitute challenges to national security in Nigeria (Michael, 2023). Also, to be considered is the level of sincerity on the part of successive administration to managing such ethnic related conflict as well as the level of justice exhibited by the contending parties towards managing such conflict (Onuoha & Ugwu, 2024). On this note, the researcher described their contribution as mere records of academic exercise that require a methodical investigation to make appropriate justification. This is because most empirical account failed to acknowledge how it constitutes challenges to national security in Nigeria.

Ethnic diversity and National Security Challenges in the Southeast

Although virtually all inter-group clashes in Nigeria have involved the mobilization of identities in the competition for some socio-economic and/or political resources, it is still possible to isolate a class of conflicts that are almost exclusively defined by the competition for scarce economic goods (Shehu, 2017). The classic example is the conflict over grazing opportunities that have taken place across the length and breadth of the country between Fulani herdsmen and sedentary farming populations (Michael, 2023). Many communal clashes in the oil-rich Niger Delta have also involved purely distributive sectional struggles for the largesse of the oil industry, including infrastructures and financial compensations provided by the oil multinationals (Adebayo, 2023).

Although the diverse conflicts identified above have involved various degrees of violence or bloodletting, they have stopped short of actually precipitating the explosion or disintegration of the Nigerian entity (Ogunika, 1988). Since overcoming the 1967-70 civil wars, Nigeria has been able to avoid the kind of large-scale internal disorder that has bedevilled some African countries such as Angola, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Sudan (Stremlau, 1999). Part of the explanation for this outcome lies in Nigeria's relative success in crafting and reinventing institutions of

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ethnic conflict management and accommodation, including the continent's most longstanding and well-known, yet significantly flawed, federal system except for the current insurgency in the North-Eastern part of the country that poses threat to the security of lives and property in the region and beyond; not to talk of the threat to the corporate existence of the country through its precipitation of inter-religious hostilities, attacks and counter attacks (Omenma&Onyishi, 2023). Another setback was the Biafra secession threat and the clashes associated with it (Okoro & Udu, 2024). South-East secessionism has created security threats and destroyed livelihoods. Destruction of lives and property deepens pain and distrust. Ethnic diversity worsens inequality in resource and political access.

Relative Deprivation Theory

In this research the Relative Deprivation Theory was considered and adopted. This theory is connected to the publications of Aristotle, Karl Marx, etc. The theory is analytical lens, developed by Ted Gurr. He posits that conflict arises when individuals or groups perceive a gap between what they expect to have and what they believe they are capable of achieving and obtaining.

The concept of relative deprivation itself has a longer history in the social sciences. Relative Deprivation Theory envisage collective action by groups especially those members of the society who feel more frustrated and dissatisfied by social and economic conditions. It is a conscious feeling of harmful disagreement between justifiable expectation and present actualities (Wilson, 1973). The theory states that the potentials for collective violence differ in focus and scope. The theory maintains that men who feel that they have many ways to attain their goals are less likely to become irritated when one way is blocked than those who have few alternatives (Morrison, 1978). Relative deprivation theory argues that collective actions have their foundations among people who feel relatively deprived of some goods or resources. It maintains that individuals and groups who lack some goods, services and comfort are more likely to organize themselves collectively to improve and defend their conditions (Morrison, 1978).

The justification for use of this theory is born out from the fact that deprivation over access to governance at the national level (Okoro & Udu, 2024). This also accompany with the belief to be marginalised and over denied access to serves in the capacity of highest public position in Nigeria (president) envisages collective action by groups especially those members of the society (southeast group) who feel more deprived (Omenma&Onyishi, 2023). This also provide us a better understanding on the frequent problems associated with and why ethnic groups fight over deprived situation especially in a federation where resources and revenue are not evenly distributed (Adebayo, 2023; Uche & Obi, 2025).

Applied to the South-East, the Igbo population's expectations of equitable political representation, resource control, and infrastructure development have consistently been unmet relative to other regions. This perceived deprivation, reinforced by historical events such as the civil war and post-war reconstruction policies, generates grievance that fuels distrust of the state and sustains separatist narratives. Ethnic diversity thus becomes politicized, not because difference itself is violent, but because the state fails to manage differential access to power and resources.

The inability of the Igbo ethnic group to have unhindered access to governance and political power at the centre is responsible

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for why the group often seek for succession (Biafra) (Okoro & Udu, 2024). This agitation took separatist dimension led by IPOD, which held economic activities of most indigenous community's hostage. Sometimes, it was allege that they engage in kidnapping and robbery to raise fund to finances their agitation (Human Rights Watch, 2024). In an attempt for security operative to repeal them, often degenerate into bloody confrontation threatened national security in the region (Amnesty International, 2025).

The theory sees relative deprivation as the main cause of Biafra agitation in southeast, conflict, insecurity and violence, due to the deprivation. It is therefore necessary to recognize the need for conflict resolution mechanism, which will take care of the grievances of the aggrieved parties (Wilson, 1973; Morrison, 1978). Struggle for political power and marginalisation is seen to be at the centre of the conflicts within the region whose outcome affects Nigerians living within the region (Okoro & Udu, 2024). It then becomes necessary that the position of the president should zone among the six geo-political zones as entrench in the constitution to minimize the tension within the region (Uche & Obi, 2025).

Critics have noted that people do not need to feel deprived before they move to action and that deprivation is not a sufficient condition for violence. Finally, the theory also fails to explain why certain feelings of deprivation are transformed into collective action, whereas in some similar situations, no collective effort is made to reshape society. Marx stands on unequal distribution of resources beget others in disadvantage position, this category of people dissatisfied and deprived envisage collective action by groups especially those members of the society who feel more dissatisfied by political, social and economic inequality conditions (Chappelow, 2019). The theory provides that so long as the society is peopled by groups that are not the same, there is a preponderance of inequality that precedes deprivation of the opposing groups (Morrison, 1978). Be that as it may, the theory sees the existence of feeling frustration and dissatisfaction by political, social and economic conditions of southeast as undeniable aspect of society (Nwankwo, Eze & Ugwu, 2023).

Gap in Literature

While 2023-2025 studies have improved our understanding of marginalization, unemployment, and security responses, few have systematically linked relative deprivation to the proliferation of small arms as mechanism for seeking self help and defence; spaning from mutual distrust among the groups in the South-East Nigeria. This study set out to fills that gaps, using content analysis to show how perceived deprivation translates into arms acquisition, mistrust of state agents, and support for separatism.

Discussion of Key Findings

Recent studies reaffirm that perceived marginalization remains the core grievance driving Biafra agitation. Omenma&Onyishi (2023) argue that IPOB's mobilization strategy is built on narratives of "systemic exclusion" in federal appointments, infrastructure allocation, and state creation. Using survey data from 5 South-East states, they found that 72% of respondents linked support for self-determination to "unfair political representation" rather than cultural difference alone.

Similarly, Okoro & Udu (2024) describe the South-East as Nigeria's "most structurally underrepresented" region, with the lowest number of states and LGAs relative to population. They conclude that this

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constitutional imbalance fuels legitimacy crises for the Nigerian state in the region and makes secessionist rhetoric more appealing to youth.

The study found that proliferation of small and light weapons and border insecurity can provide a fertile ground for terrorist and insurgent groups to exploit ethnic tensions and recruit members (Michael, 2023). Ethnic diversity can pose challenges for border security, as different groups may have transnational ties and connections (Heckmann, 1992). Ethnic diversity can lead to tensions and conflict between different groups, threatening national security and stability (Shehu, 2017). Ethnic diversity fuelled separatist movements, as different groups may demand greater autonomy or independence, it also exacerbate social and economic inequality, where different groups may have unequal access to resources, political powers and employment opportunities (Okoro & Udu, 2024; Nwankwo, Eze & Ugwu, 2023). The possession of illegal arms and easy access to unlicensed sophisticated weapon is the major challenge affecting national security in Nigeria; due to increase the existing armed conflicts between the groups, both had easy access to unlicensed sophisticated weapon in north central Nigeria (Michael, 2023).

Mutual distrust, ethnic diversity and its negative reactions are the foundation of mistrust, which affect both social and political relationships in Nigeria (Onuoha & Ugwu, 2024). Both ethnic in their diversity groups have lived together in different historical periods in Nigeria. It is apt to claim that it is not fair as often believed that ethnic heterogeneity affect civil peace; but it is the refusal to accept this heterogeneity among divers group that is responsible (Darren & Lewis, 2010). This is not denying the presence of other ethnic categories, but they are so few that their significance in inter-ethnic relations is often not pronounced. Therefore, there is a need for governments groups to adopt preventive diplomacy and dialogue to attaining cohesion and symbiotic relationship (Onuoha & Ugwu, 2024).

The link between unemployment, poverty, and violent conflict in the South-East has been strengthened by post-COVID data. Nwankwo, Eze & Ugwu (2023) used National Bureau of Statistics data to show that youth unemployment in the South-East averaged 42.7% between 2020 and 2023, higher than the national average. They argue that weak manufacturing and the collapse of federal infrastructure projects created a "youth bulge" that non-state actors like IPOB's Eastern Security Network exploit for recruitment. Edeh & Nwachukwu (2025) further note that capital flight from the region due to insecurity has reduced FDI by 31% since 2020. This economic contraction deepens relative deprivation and sustains cycles of protest and violent confrontation.

Marginalisation, unemployment, poor economic activities and poverty constitute challenges to national security in south-east Nigeria (Nwankwo, Eze & Ugwu, 2023; Edeh & Nwachukwu, 2025). The south-east succession had plunged the region into security challenges; this as well constitutes security threat to the means of livelihood of contending groups and the nation (Omenma&Onyishi, 2023). The discussions show that constant destruction of human lives and properties are ordeals that cannot be forgotten in a hurry, so, experiences during face-offs had inflated pain and distrust (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Ethnic diversity of this nature worsens social and economic inequality (marginalisation), as different groups may not have unequal access to resources, political position and

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employment opportunities (Okoro & Udu, 2024).

Ethnic diversity can have the following negative impacts on national security. The ethnic diversity in this nature led to tensions and conflict between different groups, threatening national security and stability, this as well, fuel separatist movements, as different groups may demand greater autonomy or independence (Omenma&Onyishi, 2023).

Recent literature critiques the federal government's militarized approach. Human Rights Watch (2024) and Amnesty International (2025) documented cases of extrajudicial killings and collective punishment during military operations against ESN and IPOB/ in Imo, Anambra, and Enugu states. The 74% of the respondent argue that "security operations without community trust" escalate mutual distrust and validate separatist claims of state hostility.

Conversely, Onuoha & Ugwu (2024) suggest that purely kinetic responses fail because they ignore the political economy of the conflict. Their study of 18 LGAs found that communities with active dialogue platforms involving traditional ruler and youth leaders recorded 54% fewer violent incidents than areas with heavy military presence alone.

Resource Control and Federal Structure, the resource dimension remains central. Adebayo (2023) compares derivation revenue between South-South and South-East oil-producing states and finds that Abia and Imo receive disproportionately lower allocations despite having significant oil/gas deposits. This "derivation gap" reinforces South-East narratives of economic exploitation.

Uche & Obi (2025) extend this by analyzing the debate around restructuring and fiscal federalism. They argue that without constitutional review to address the 5-state imbalance and resource control, ethnic-based agitations will persist regardless of security interventions.

Conclusion

South East Nigeria's ethnic diversity poses significant national security challenges. The region is predominantly inhabited by the Igbo ethnic group, with a complex history of separatist movements and tensions with the federal government. The national security challenges in South East Nigeria requires a multifaceted approach that balances military operations with community engagement, intelligence gathering, and addressing underlying socio-economic grievances. Ethnic diversity can have both positive and negative impacts on national security.

In the efforts to address this challenges Nigerian military has initiated actions to battle separatist groups and unknown gunmen, with some achievement reported. Security operatives have increasingly adopting intelligence-driven looms to deal with security challenges, including kidnapping. There is a growing community engagement and collaboration to address underlying grievances and build trust between security agencies and host communities.

The national security defy in South East Nigeria necessitates a comprehensive approach to balances military operations with community engagement, intelligence gathering, and addressing underlying socio-economic grievances. Thus, military has made gains against separatists and unknown gunmen using intelligence-driven operations; with community collaboration to addressing grievances and rebuild trust.

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To resolve this challenge of ethnic diversity in the southeast Nigeria, the study recommended that protecting a nation's borders from illegal crossings, smuggling, weapons and terrorism, promoting inclusive governance and ensuring that all ethnic groups have a voice in decision-making processes; maintaining a stable economy to ensure the well-being of citizens and protection of human rights.

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