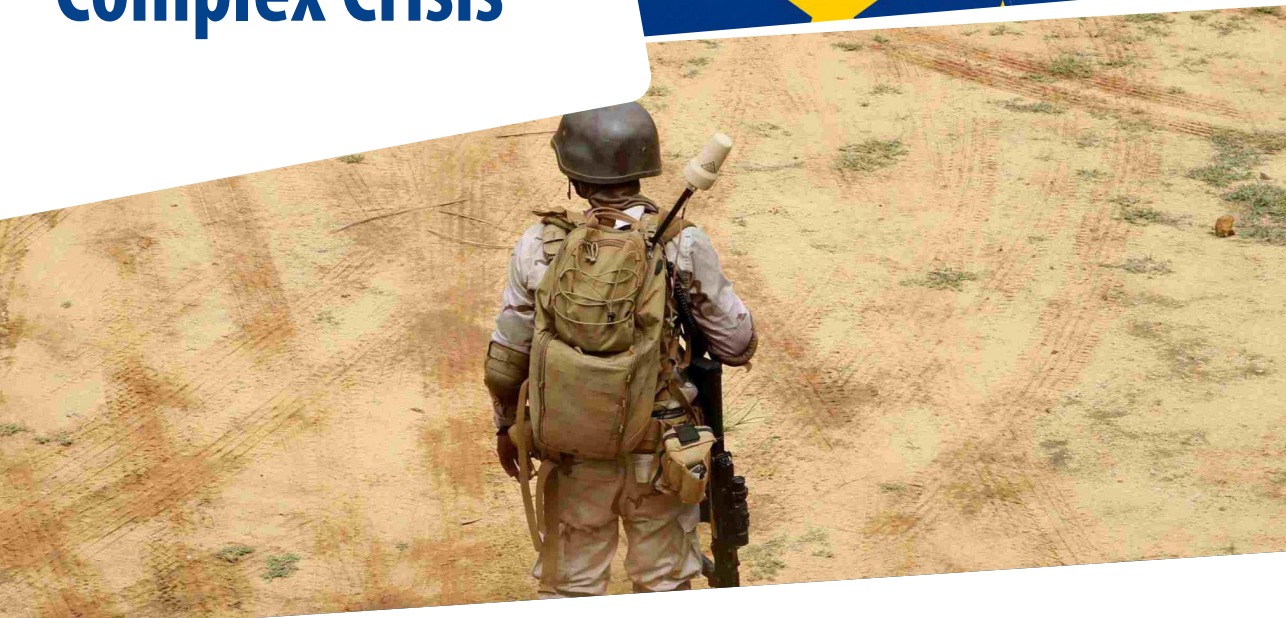




# What NATO Can Learn from Nigeria's Complex Crisis



by Luca Cinciripini and Chiara Scissa



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## Introduction

Over the past five years, NATO has made significant changes to respond to the current threat environment – all while navigating geopolitical uncertainty, limited national budgets, and the accelerating climate crisis. Since 2020, NATO has pivoted decisively in the face of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It has activated joint Response Forces,<sup>1</sup> deployed extra units for the first collective defence exercise under Article 4,<sup>2</sup> supported more coordinated defence procurement efforts, adding a new member,<sup>3</sup> and most recently, solidifying a landmark 5 per cent GDP defence spending target by 2035,<sup>4</sup> split into 3.5 per cent core defence and 1.5 per cent for resilience and infrastructure. Overall, NATO has looked to transform from a deterrence alliance into a robust, future-fit defence coalition capable of projecting strength across multiple domains.

However, the first six months of 2025 have thrust the Alliance into yet another new geopolitical moment. As humanitarian needs, food insecurity, extreme weather events, and global inequality continue to spike, multilateral institutions

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<sup>1</sup> NATO, *NATO Response Force (2002-2024)*, updated 3 April 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/nato-response-force-2002-2024>.

<sup>2</sup> Nemeth, Bence, "Ukraine Invasion: Why Eight NATO Members Triggered Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty", in *The Conversation*, 1 March 2022, <https://theconversation.com/ukraine-invasion-why-eight-nato-members-triggered-article-4-of-the-north-atlantic-treaty-178054>.

<sup>3</sup> NATO, *Finland Joins NATO as 31st Ally*, 4 April 2023, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2023/04/04/finland-joins-nato-as-31st-ally>.

<sup>4</sup> Gray, Andrew et al., "NATO Commits to Spending Hike Sought by Trump, and to Mutual Defence", in *Reuters*, 24 June 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/nato-leaders-set-back-trump-defence-spending-goal-hague-summit-2025-06-24>.

are underfunded<sup>5</sup> and understaffed<sup>6</sup> – largely due to the United States’ dismantling of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and significant foreign aid cuts, but also years-long trends towards hard security, with Allies slashing development budgets – and support for addressing non-traditional security challenges – along the way. This has put pressure on NATO and its member states to do more with less, investing more in traditional defence capabilities, continuing to dedicate resources towards ‘resilience’ and navigating an increasingly hostile geopolitical environment. At the same time, the climate crisis has evolved from a long-term pacing challenge into a more and more urgent threat for the Alliance, making it more expensive to operate, fuelling regional instability, and damaging the internal resilience (and budgetary flexibility) of its member states.<sup>7</sup>

NATO therefore faces a test of its traditional defence-oriented missions, contending with cross-cutting risks that fall outside conventional military domains, but are nevertheless affecting their core mission set. Climate change is the most prominent of these risks, impacting resource availability, displacing populations, fuelling regional instability, and threatening critical military infrastructure. At the same time, it’s also multiplying other security threats like terrorism, transnational crime, food security, all which impact both global stability and NATO’s security interests. Considering the development funding void, disparities among member states and regional partners are set to grow even more visible, potentially threatening Alliance cohesion or security dynamics along its southern and Middle Eastern borders – such as the convergence of famine, drought and conflict that drove thousands across borders in Somalia in 2011.<sup>8</sup> Finally, while migration in the context of climate change remains largely

<sup>5</sup> Nichols, Michelle, “U.N. Aid Chief Says to Cut 20% of Staff Due to Funding Shortfall”, in *Reuters*, 11 April 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/un-aid-chief-says-cut-20-staff-due-funding-shortfall-2025-04-11>.

<sup>6</sup> Mersie, Ayenat, “Exclusive: WFP to Cut up to 30% of Staff amid Aid Shortfalls”, in *Devex*, 25 April 2025, <https://www.devex.com/news/109932>.

<sup>7</sup> NATO, *NATO Releases 2024 Climate Change and Security Impact Assessment Report*, 9 July 2024, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2024/07/09/nato-releases-2024-climate-change-and-security-impact-assessment-report>.

<sup>8</sup> Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit, *FSNAU Evidence for Updated Famine Declaration*, Nairobi, 2011. For an analysis of how drought intersected with conflicts and other emergencies in Somalia causing cross-border movements, please see Scissa, Chiara, “Conflict, Health Emergencies, and Disasters in Somalia: What Role Can the 1951 Refugee Convention Play?”, in S. Irudaya Rajan (ed.), *Handbook of Research on Migration, COVID-19 and Cities*, Cheltenham/Northampton, Edward Elgar, 2025, p. 357-372.

internal, well-documented experiences of cross-border migration have been observed within and across world's regions, raising questions about how more widespread human mobility will impact the Alliance's security interests – and its political cohesion given the strong anti-migration sentiment across many of its member states.<sup>9</sup>

Overall, NATO's role in the world and non-military crises is at an inflection point. As humanitarian crises intensify due to climate-induced famine, migration, or pandemics, should the Alliance expand its remit to encompass civil protection, climate resilience, and development support, or focus narrowly on deterrence and defence? As the geopolitical focus shifts to the Global South and China, how should the Alliance respond – particularly when its traditional political bellwether is so unpredictable? And critically, how can the Alliance cover a broader mission set when its resources and political bandwidth is so limited?

In this context, it's worthwhile to take stock if more emphasis on human and climate security can help NATO better address the challenges of its future – and serve as a force multiplier for the more development and diplomatic-focused mandate of its peer institution: the European Union. This paper begins to build the evidence base for such a realignment and the connective tissue between climate security challenges beyond European borders and its core interests.

Nigeria has been selected as a case study for three key reasons: 1) its position as an emerging – but not yet intractable – complex crisis where climate change, migration, food, terrorism, and governance challenges intersect; 2) the existence of potentially complementary investments and policy approaches in the country from peer institutions like the EU; 3) the clear potential for Nigeria's security challenges to reverberate beyond borders and extend northwards to NATO's priority theater.

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<sup>9</sup> Among many others, Cantor, David James, *Cross-Border Displacement, Climate Change Disasters: Latin America and the Caribbean*, UNHCR, July 2018, <https://www.unhcr.org/media/38044>; Scissa, Chiara et al., "Legal and Judicial Responses to Disaster Displacement in Italy, Austria and Sweden", in *Völkerrechtsblog*, 19 October 2022, <https://voelkerrechtsblog.org/?p=18495>; Wood, Tamara, *Protection and Disasters in the Horn of Africa: Norms and Practice for Addressing Cross-Border Displacement in Disaster Contexts*, The Nansen Initiative, January 2013, [https://disasterdisplacement.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/190215\\_Technical\\_Paper\\_Tamara\\_Wood.pdf](https://disasterdisplacement.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/190215_Technical_Paper_Tamara_Wood.pdf).

# 1. Defining the context

Before examining how NATO – and its partner countries – can better frame their understanding of overlapping security challenges in this context, it's important to define buzzwords like “climate security”, “human security” and “the nexus”.

First and foremost, human security has already been defined by NATO itself as a “multi-sectoral approach to security that gives primacy to people”.<sup>10</sup> At the doctrine level, the Alliance’s Human Security Approach and Guiding Principles set the scope of NATO’s human security work, including “combatting trafficking in human beings; protection of children in armed conflict; preventing and responding to conflict-related sexual violence; protection of civilians; and cultural property protection”. This concept of human security, if applied more broadly, can act as an umbrella framing for a more expansive mandate to address nexus challenges like food security, climate migration, and more.

Climate security is another framework through which to understand these challenges, recognising that a changing climate serves as a threat multiplier and exacerbates existing security challenges that span extremist recruitment to famine. NATO has been a leader in the climate security community for years, adopting an ambitious Climate Change and Security Action Plan to mainstream climate change considerations in 2021, including climate change as a “defining challenge of our time, with a profound impact on Allied security” as part of NATO’s 2022 Strategic Concept, and establishing a Centre of Excellence on Climate Change and Security in 2023.<sup>11</sup> While it’s worth acknowledging that recent political shifts have limited NATO’s climate security work in 2025, two underlying truths remain: 1) That climate change will continue to impact Allied security, particularly as Europe remains the fastest-warming continent on earth and funding cuts limit adaptation efforts beyond its borders; and 2) That the foundational doctrine and policy structure remains in place for NATO to serve as a climate security leader, should its political leadership choose to do so.

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<sup>10</sup> NATO, *Human Security*, updated 30 August 2024, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/wider-activities/human-security>.

<sup>11</sup> NATO, *Environment, Climate Change and Security*, updated 18 July 2024, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/wider-activities/environment-climate-change-and-security>.

Finally, “nexus thinking” in the multilateral space can be defined as an integrated or cross-sectoral approach to addressing complex challenges. It recognises that efforts of international institutions have historically been siloed, failing to capture the interconnected nature of today’s crises – such as climate change, food insecurity, conflict, and migration. Therefore, so-called “nexus thinking” promotes alignment among actors and sectors, encouraging better overlap between short-term emergency response and long-term development goals with the ultimate objective of fostering resilience and sustainability, rather than repeated cycles of crisis and aid. In the multilateral arena, institutions like the United Nations and multilateral development banks have increasingly embraced what has been termed the “triple nexus” approach – humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus – as a guiding framework. This approach is relatively new; while the links between relief and development date back to the 1980s, peace wasn’t explicitly integrated into the discussion until the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit.<sup>12</sup> While triple nexus approach has become a core part of the international development lexicon at the headquarters level, it remains less adopted among local partners and not included by NATO at the doctrinal and operational level – though it’s worth noting that much of its institutional thinking demonstrates and implicit recognition of interrelated challenges.

Regardless, the growing practice of nexus thinking in the United Nations and development spaces could have relevance for NATO as well, particularly in thinking more expansively about climate and human security risks. By breaking down institutional silos and promoting shared analysis and planning, nexus thinking strengthens the ability of organisations to respond to global crises in a more strategic and sustainable manner. This includes a more holistic approach to strategic foresight and resilience planning across multiple domains, a more complementary relationship between civilians and military actors, more operational ability to integrate diverse risk factors, and even more efficient uses of limited funding. Despite NATO’s recent focus on defence spending and military acquisitions, nexus thinking is relevant in areas of hard security as well, helping operators understand unique conflict dynamics, identifying risks to existing acquisition processes (such as the effect of extreme heat on

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<sup>12</sup> Brown, Summer et al., “The Peace Dilemma in the Triple Nexus: Challenges and Opportunities for the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Approach”, in *Development in Practice*, Vol. 34, No. 5 (2024), p. 568-584, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2024.2334774>.

operational readiness), and identifying ways in which NATO can complement – not duplicate – the efforts of other actors in the field. While elements of nexus thinking already occur at the policy level in Brussels, the level to which this thinking has been mainstreamed – or replicated within influential national capitals – has been limited.

The case study below will demonstrate how integrating climate and human security – or nexus thinking helps actors understand complex security challenges – and offer a pathway to improve and expand partnerships.

## **2. Case study: Dynamics of Nigeria's complex crisis**

Although the security implications of climate change have been at the centre of international debate for an extended period, the accelerating pace at which these phenomena are manifesting, and the severity of their consequences are compelling international actors to fundamentally reconsider their approaches and deploy an unprecedented array of multilevel instruments. This dynamic is particularly pronounced in Africa, where the security repercussions have more of an immediate spillover to European interests.

Nigeria demonstrates such links between multifaceted challenges – including conflict, violence and climate change – as well as the impact of such a complex nexus on migration movements. Nigeria is torn by multilayered conflicts, whose sources range from terrorism to internal conflicts motivated by resource scarcity and ethno-religious characteristics. Notably, climate change plays a relevant role in exacerbating existing tensions by intensifying the frequency and intensity of disasters as well as by diminishing the already-scarce natural resources. Man-made disasters continue to cause irreparable environmental harm, compelling households and entire communities to move. Climate change therefore has relevant security implications in the country and – along with conflicts, violence and economic constraints – is already driving migration within and beyond Nigeria. The following sections will examine the unique dynamics of each of these factors – and how their spillover effects could have relevance for transatlantic security interests.

## 2.1 Terrorism and extremist recruitment

For over 15 years, the northern regions of Nigeria have been affected by terrorist attacks and despite counter measures, extremist organisations maintain a presence in the country and in the neighbourhood. Terrorism in Nigeria has emerged and proliferated due to a combination of an intertwined set of economic, social and political factors including, most prominently, corruption, excessive use of force by national authorities, and deep discrimination on, inter alia, religious and ethnic grounds.<sup>13</sup>

Terrorism in northern Nigeria is rooted in Islamic fundamentalism, where most of the population is Muslim. According to Nigerian fundamentalists, the preservation of Islam in its 'pure' form would allegedly help solve the social, economic and political problems of modern Nigeria.<sup>14</sup> Since the late 1980s, tensions between the Muslim northern regions and the Christian southern regions have escalated, particularly after the first decade of the 2000s, when the Islamist organisation Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal-Jihad (Boko Haram) came to the forefront of the religious and political confrontation between the Muslim North and the Christian South.

Boko Haram was founded in 2002 with the goal of supporting Islamic education and establishing an Islamic state in Nigeria. However, in 2009, it evolved from a religious insurgency into a powerful terrorist organisation that threatens the national security of not only Nigeria, but also the Sahel and West and Central Africa. Boko Haram's stated aim is to overthrow the Nigerian Government and replace it with a regime based on Islamic law. In 2009, the group carried out a series of attacks on police stations and other government buildings in Maiduguri, which resulted in violent repression and in the killing of Boko Haram's leader. In May 2014, the UN designated Boko Haram as a terrorist

<sup>13</sup> Onuoha, Freedom C., "The Islamist Challenge: Nigeria's Boko Haram Crisis Explained", in *African Security Review*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2010), p. 54-67, DOI 10.1080/10246029.2010.503061; Uzodike, Ufo Okeke and Benjamin Maiangwa, "Boko Haram Terrorism in Nigeria: Causal Factors and Central Problematic", in *African Renaissance*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2012), p. 91-118.

<sup>14</sup> Thurston, Alex, "The Disease Is Unbelief: Boko Haram's Religious and Political Worldview", in *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World Analysis Papers*, No. 22 (January 2016), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-disease-is-unbelief-boko-harams-religious-and-political-worldview>.

organisation.<sup>15</sup> In 2015, it considerably lost territories and power because of the concerted actions of the Multinational Joint Task Force, which included military forces of Benin, Cameroon, Niger, Nigeria and Chad. Yet, the group re-organised and in the following years it regained and even expanded its presence.

As a result, from 2009 to 2019, more than 7.1 million people needed humanitarian assistance, 2.4 million were displaced especially in Borno state, and about 232,000 people fled cross-border to seek protection from the conflict between Boko Haram and national forces.<sup>16</sup> In the second half of the 2010s, Boko Haram became the world's deadliest terrorist organisation, with estimated 30,000 victims. In 2015, the new leader of Boko Haram pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). However, due to internal divisions, the leader's opponents left the group and founded a secessionist splinter with the name of Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) in 2016. ISWAP is a Sunni Islamic extremist group currently made of 5000 fighters operating in north-eastern regions, although it is now increasingly present in southern Nigeria as well. ISWAP is an officially recognised affiliate of, and ideologically aligned with, ISIS. It discredits national borders, and its aim is to replace the government with an ISIS-style state. In February 2020, ISWAP was put on the UN sanctions list as an organisation associated with the Islamic State or al-Qaeda.

Once separated, both ISWAP and Boko Haram expanded their contacts with the global terrorist network, primarily with groups operating in the Sahel and North Africa. After 2016, Boko Haram turned from a national Nigerian organisation into an international one, spreading its activities to Cameroon, Chad, Niger and several other countries of West and Central Africa.<sup>17</sup> International alliances provided Boko Haram with weapons and training of militants in various camps scattered across the Sahel zone. At the same time, ISWAP developed partnerships with regional movements associated with ISIS and operating in

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<sup>15</sup> Boko Haram was listed on 22 May 2014 pursuant to paragraphs 2 and 3 of Resolution 2083 (2012) as being associated with Al-Qaida for "participating in the financing, planning, facilitating, preparing, or perpetrating of acts or activities by, in conjunction with, under the name of, on behalf of, or in support of" Al-Qaida and the Organization of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb.

<sup>16</sup> Amao, Olumuyiwa Babatunde, "A Decade of Terror: Revisiting Nigeria's Interminable Boko", in *Security Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2020), p. 357-375, DOI 10.1057/s41284-020-00232-8.

<sup>17</sup> Kostelyanets, Sergey V. and Tatyana S. Denisova, "Terrorism in Nigeria: National Peculiarities and International Linkages", in János Besenyő et al. (eds), *Terrorism and Political Contention. New Perspectives on North Africa and the Sahel Region*, Cham, Springer, 2024, p. 287-300.

northern Mali, Niger, and Libya. In 2020, the Nigerian armed forces repeatedly tried to combat both terrorist organisations but suffered heavy losses and did not achieve any success. Today, violence, executions, rapes, mutilations, kidnappings and killings are commonly perpetrated by both groups against civilians.<sup>18</sup>

The growing role of ISWAP, Boko Haram, and other terrorist groups have a clear security risk for NATO, which has an interest in combatting transnational violence, limiting their direct involvement in government, and mitigating the spillover effects of their power like migration, displacement and insecurity. As outlined below, when terrorism and extremist recruitment are laid over existing national challenges like land-related conflicts, oil violence, and migration, a complex security crisis emerges.

## 2.2 Land-related conflicts

Climate change is set to exacerbate existing economic inequalities and resource competition, especially in developing countries highly reliant on economic sectors dependent on climatic conditions. This is the case in Nigeria, where Fulani herders from semi-arid regions in the North have traditionally engaged in seasonal migration to the South in search of grazing fields in order to adapt to climate change and to cope with demographic pressure and inequality.<sup>19</sup> In the past, conflicts were not violent and legal remediation was often used to solve disputes among herders and farmers, especially when herders trespassed on agricultural lands, damaging crops. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Events Database (ACLED), out of the 2,533 pastoral conflicts occurred in Nigeria between 1997 to 2022, only 3 per cent of them were violent in nature before 2010.<sup>20</sup>

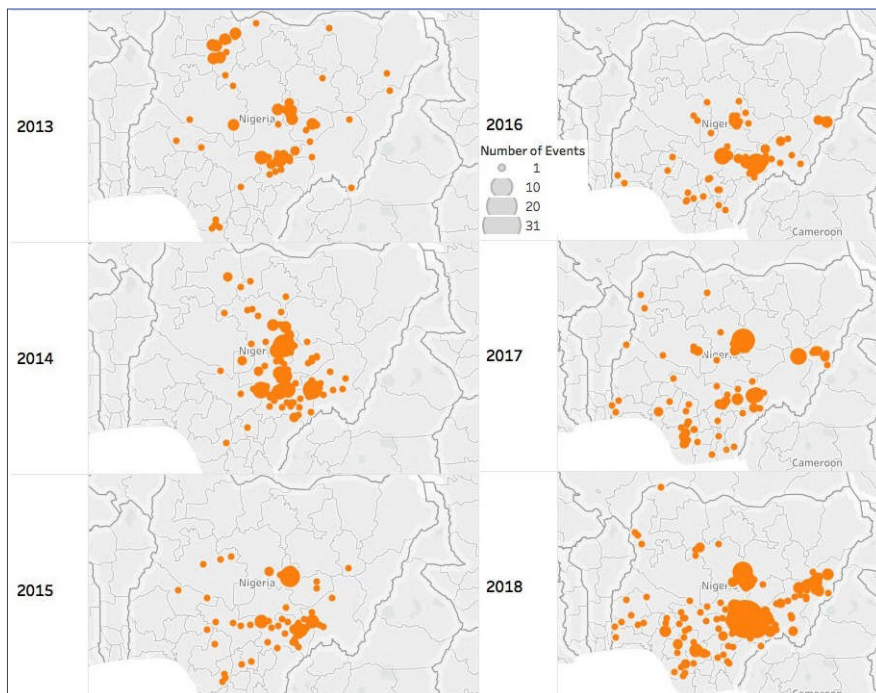
<sup>18</sup> Amao, Olumuyiwa Babatunde, "A Decade of Terror: Revisiting Nigeria's Interminable Boko", cit.

<sup>19</sup> Roger Blench, *A Trophic Cascade in Nigerian Vegetation and Its Implications for Herder-Farmer Conflict*, 2019, <http://web.archive.org/web/20240706170211/https://rogerblench.info/Pastoralism/PastAf/Nigeria/Trophic%20cascade%202019.pdf>. A source of inequality is given by the limited nomads' rights to resources – including the right to land, water, wood or forage, as pastoralists only need seasonal access to resources. Similarly, land use decisions are often made when pastoralists are not present, effectively excluding them from the process. Even though laws exist to protect pastoral resource rights, they tend to go unheeded at the local level. Nomads' land rights are therefore often treated as secondary to those of farmers something that has ignited tensions among the two groups.

<sup>20</sup> Raleigh, Clionadh et al., "Introducing ACLED: An Armed Conflict Location and Event Data", in *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 47, No. 5 (2010), p. 651-660, DOI 10.1177/0022343310378914.

However, contemporary conflicts are now characterised by the frequent use of violence, increasingly causing loss of lives and livelihoods, food insecurity, and displacement. Between 2001 and 2018, about 60,000 people were killed and more than 300,000 were displaced, especially in the states of Plateau, Benue, and Kaduna because of severe conflicts between herders and farmers.<sup>21</sup> In 2018 alone, severe violence has been estimated to cost Nigeria a sum of 14 billion US dollars annually.<sup>22</sup>

**Figure 1** | Map of violent events involving Fulani ethnic militias by year (1 January 2013-29 September 2018)



Source: Matfess, Hilary, *Fulani Militias in Nigeria: Declining Violence Not a Sign of Lasting Peace*, ACLED, 5 October 2018, p. 4, <https://reliefweb.int/node/2817314>.

<sup>21</sup> Fadeyi, Taofiq James and Abdulrahman Adamu, "Causes and Effects of Farmers Herders' Conflict in North Central Nigeria: A Study of Benue and Plateau States", in *Journal of Political Discourse*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (2023), p. 44-54, <https://jopd.com.ng/index.php/jopdz/article/view/23>.

<sup>22</sup> Efobi, Uchenna et al., "Climate Change and the Farmer-Pastoralist's Violent Conflict: Experimental Evidence from Nigeria", in *Ecological Economics*, Vol. 228 (2025), Article 108449, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2024.108449>.

The role of Boko Haram and other terrorist organisations has elevated low-level disputes into actual conflict between the two groups. For example, since 2010 Boko Haram attacks in the North have caused the displacement of nomadic herders from their primary grazing areas, forcing them to migrate to safer areas in the South.<sup>23</sup> This has led to increased competition for land and water resources in host communities, which in turn increased conflicts. The Boko Haram insurgency has led to the proliferation of small and light weapons, leading to a militarisation of nomadic herders – who now carry arms to protect themselves against potential attacks. The advent of the Boko Haram insurgency ushered Nigeria into a new phase of climate-related violence. Scholars have also highlighted the tendency for pastoralists, who are primarily Christians, to associate nomadic Fulani herders, who are Muslim, with Boko Haram insurgents.<sup>24</sup> This has turned a dispute over land resources into an ethno-religious conflict.

This convergence of farmer-herder violence, climate-threatened land resources and insurgent groups has relevance for NATO's planning and engagements, demonstrating that a localised conflict – when combined with other converging risks – can rapidly escalate in ways that provide fertile ground for recruitment and arms proliferation, and drive further mobility.

## 2.3 Oil-related violence

Oil is Nigeria's main source of revenue as well as a major cause of irreparable environmental harm and violence. Nigeria is the 15th largest oil producer worldwide, and the oil industry accounts for 5.5 per cent of GDP and for 92 per cent of all exports. However, Nigeria is disproportionately affected by oil spillage and gas flaring associated with oil extraction. Between January 2019 and April 2021, 674 of 881 (or 77 per cent) oil spills in Nigeria occurred in Rivers State (352), Delta State (233), and Bayelsa.<sup>25</sup> In 2023, 571 oil spill incidents were

<sup>23</sup> Ojo, John Sunday, "Governing 'Ungoverned Spaces' in the Foliage of Conspiracy: Toward (Re) Ordering Terrorism, from Boko Haram Insurgency, Fulani Militancy to Banditry in Northern Nigeria", in *African Security*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2020), p. 77-110, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2020.1731109>.

<sup>24</sup> Tuki, Daniel, "Is There a Religious Dimension to Concern about Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Nigeria?", in *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 69, No. 3 (2025), Article sqaf061, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaf061>.

<sup>25</sup> Akinpelu, Yusuf, "77% of Oil Spills in Nigeria Occurred in Only Three States", in *Premium Times*, 15 May 2021, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/?p=461635>.

reported, 59 per cent of which were due to sabotage.<sup>26</sup>

Decades of oil extraction and depletion have irreversibly contaminated their water, soil and air.<sup>27</sup> Because of severe pollution, farming and fishing have been decimated. Plus, gas flaring has severely affected health conditions and heightened the frequency and severity of respiratory illnesses, such as asthma, and lung cancer.<sup>28</sup> These environmental factors further exacerbate the effects of climate change.

At the same time, oil has driven both spikes in state violence and inter-community violence. In the late 1990s and again in 2003 and 2004, thousands of people died in mass killings when conflict erupted over control of oil.<sup>29</sup> Oil is also a common target of paramilitary and terrorist organisations, who often seek to control these resources and gain influence against the government. Even after decades, local communities are still affected in the Niger Delta and no compensation for environmental damage has been accorded to them. Similarly, the abundance of oil resources in the region has not translated into alleviated energy poverty. Still, local communities are deprived of clean and affordable energy, while regular access to energy and electricity is not ensured.<sup>30</sup> Oil violence in Nigeria may become increasingly relevant for NATO as political instability, violence and environmental damage may fuel security challenges directly relevant to NATO's own security interests – or their

<sup>26</sup> Scissa, Chiara, "Environmental Crimes and Forced Migration: An Overlooked Nexus", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 24|66 (November 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/19121>.

<sup>27</sup> Nwokoma, Uchenna Bartholomew et al., "Swamped with Poverty and Agony: Oil Exploration and Unemployment of the Natives in the Niger Delta", in *University of Nigeria Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2022), p. 136-149, <https://www.unjpe.com/index.php/UNJPE/article/view/187>; UNEP, *Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland*, 2011, <https://wedocs.unep.org/handle/20.500.11822/7947>; Donnelly-Saalfeld, James, "Irreparable Harms: How the Devastating Effects of Oil Extraction in Nigeria Have Not Been Remedied by Nigerian Courts, the African Commission, or U.S. Courts", in *West Northwest*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2009), p. 371-420, [https://repository.uclawsf.edu/hastings\\_environmental\\_law\\_journal/vol15/iss2/11](https://repository.uclawsf.edu/hastings_environmental_law_journal/vol15/iss2/11).

<sup>28</sup> Oluduro, Olubayo, "Oil Exploitation and Human Rights Violations in Nigeria's Oil Producing Communities", in *Afrika Focus*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2012), p. 160-166, <https://doi.org/10.21825/af.v25i2.4959>.

<sup>29</sup> Ojatorotu, Victor, "The Internationalization of Oil Violence in the Niger Delta of Nigeria", in *Alternatives*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2008), p. 92-118, <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/alternatives/article/21071>.

<sup>30</sup> Igwe, Uche, "The Lingering Energy Poverty in Niger Delta Is Reversible", in *Sun-Connect*, 28 June 2024, <http://web.archive.org/web/20240723122438/https://sun-connect.org/the-lingering-energy-poverty-in-niger-delta-is-reversible>; Elisha, Otekenari David, "Niger Delta Is Rich in Resources, But Environmental Destruction Is Pushing People into Poverty", in *The Conversation*, 30 October 2023, <https://theconversation.com/niger-delta-is-rich-in-resources-but-environmental-destruction-is-pushing-people-into-poverty-214598>.

continued dependence on oil as an energy source.

## 2.4 Migration

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Increasing temperature worldwide has resulted in more frequent and intense heatwaves and floods in Nigeria, negatively affecting their agriculture, water resources, and human health. Broadly, Lake Chad has diminished by 90 per cent since the 1960s, primarily due to climate change and unsustainable water management. This has not only led to a loss of livelihoods but led to conflict over scarce resources, resulting in the displacement of over 2.3 million people living nearby the Lake Chad Basin.

Conflict, violence, and climate change are among the main factors characterising different migration patterns in Nigeria, whereby 2.4 million people were displaced because of disasters in 2023 and around 3.3 million people are now living in internal displacement because of conflict and violence. The World Bank notes that 9.4 million Nigerians could become internal climate migrants by 2050, the second highest number among West African countries after Niger.<sup>31</sup> In addition, climate change is projected to reduce crop yields by 20-30 per cent in the coming years, in turn declining the productivity of livestock with adverse consequences on livelihoods and food security.<sup>32</sup> Altered rainfall patterns and increasingly frequent extreme weather events will make livestock production even more challenging, exacerbating some of the land-related conflicts described above.

Finally, climate change has led to worsening economic disparities in Nigeria, a key factor in the country's rising insecurity. Extreme weather events are destroying farmland and livelihoods, in turn worsening already severe food insecurity and exacerbating tensions between farmers and herders.<sup>33</sup> The

<sup>31</sup> By "internal climate migrants" the World Bank means people who move within their own countries due to the sudden or progressive environmental changes caused by climate change, such as droughts, failing crops, rising sea levels and storm surges. See: Rigaud, Kanta Kumari et al., *Groundswell Africa. Deep Dive into Internal Climate Migration in Nigeria*, Washington, World Bank, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1596/36448>.

<sup>32</sup> Cervigni, Raffaello et al. (eds), *Toward Climate-Resilient Development in Nigeria*, Washington, World Bank; 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-0-8213-9923-1>.

<sup>33</sup> Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, *North East Nigeria Acute Malnutrition Analysis*, 23

lack of economic opportunities and the impacts of climate change contribute to young people's decision to move abroad in search of better employment opportunities. At the same time, unemployment, this lack of resources and poverty have been exploited by Boko Haram, which has targeted those facing lack of livelihoods to recruit fighters.<sup>34</sup> Floods are further weakening security infrastructure, undermining defences against terrorist organisations.<sup>35</sup>

Like the above, this convergence of climate, violence, and migration has downstream implications for NATO, both in the emergence of further instability domestically when populations move in Nigeria or the surrounding region, or even internationally, when more migrants are pushed to the EU – and NATO's – southern border.

### 3. Operationalising the climate-security nexus: EU policy in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region

At an institutional level, the EU has increasingly recognised climate change as a critical security concern through a series of high-level policy documents and strategic frameworks that explicitly acknowledge the interconnection between environmental degradation and geopolitical stability. This formal recognition represents a significant evolution in EU strategic thinking, moving beyond traditional security paradigms to embrace climate considerations as integral components of foreign policy and defence planning.

The most comprehensive articulation of this approach is found in the Joint Communication from the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy titled *A New Outlook on the Climate and Security Nexus*, adopted in 2023.<sup>36</sup> This document establishes a comprehensive

June 2022, <https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1155709/?iso3=NGA>.

<sup>34</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2023*, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2023>.

<sup>35</sup> International Crisis Group, "Rethinking Resettlement and Return in Nigeria's Northeast", in *Crisis Group Africa Briefings*, No. 184 (January 2023), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/20156>.

<sup>36</sup> European Commission, *EU Proposes Comprehensive New Outlook on Threats of Climate Change*

framework for understanding how climate change and environmental degradation pose direct risks to international peace and security, explicitly identifying extreme weather events, rising temperatures, sea-level rise, desertification, and water scarcity as threats to human well-being and regional stability.

The European Council has further reinforced this approach through a series of conclusions that progressively embed climate considerations into EU external action. The Council conclusions on Green Diplomacy adopted in March 2024 reaffirm the EU's commitment to working closely with international partners to accelerate a global, just, and inclusive green transition, while supporting the transition away from fossil fuels in a fair, orderly, and equitable manner.<sup>37</sup>

The EU's engagement with Nigeria exemplifies the complex interplay between climate change and conflict dynamics that characterises contemporary security challenges in sub-Saharan Africa. Nigeria holds significant relevance for the EU for multiple reasons. First, it stands as one of the EU's most relevant trading partners on the African continent.<sup>38</sup> Second, due to its geographical position at the crossroads of multiple crises and its economic and demographic weight within Africa, Nigeria is a pivotal actor for regional stability. Any destabilisation of the country, including those triggered by the security implications of climate change, could therefore affect several dimensions of Europe's security sphere – from economic stability and counterterrorism efforts to the management of migratory flows towards Mediterranean ports.

As described above, Nigeria's vulnerability to climate-induced security threats stems from its position as a nation where environmental degradation intersects with existing socio-political tensions, creating what has been labelled as "climate-security-resource nexus" that demands nuanced policy responses.<sup>39</sup>

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and *Environmental Degradation on Peace, Security and Defence*, 28 June 2023, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_23\\_3492](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3492).

<sup>37</sup> Council of the EU, *Council Conclusions on Green Diplomacy*, 18 March 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/70777/st07865-en24.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> EU Mission to the WTO, *EU Statement at the Trade Policy Review of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*, 13 November 2024, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/447243\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/447243_en).

<sup>39</sup> Wakdok, Samuel Stephen and Raimund Bleischwitz, "Climate Change, Security, and the Resource Nexus: Case Study of Northern Nigeria and Lake Chad", in *Sustainability*, Vol. 13, No. 19 (2021), Article 10734, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su131910734>.

The EU's approach to addressing this nexus therefore reflects an attempt to move from traditional development aid toward more integrated climate-security strategies, recognising that climate change acts as a threat multiplier that exacerbates existing vulnerabilities in conflict-affected societies by adding stress to livelihoods and negatively impacting food, water, and energy security.<sup>40</sup> This is particularly evident in Nigeria's northeastern regions, where the intersection of climate-induced resource scarcity, pastoral-farmer conflicts, and insurgency activities creates a complex security landscape that defies conventional sectoral approaches.

The EU's response to Nigeria's climate-conflict challenges has been operationalised through substantial financial commitments and strategic partnerships aimed at addressing the climate-security nexus. In this context, Brussels constitutes one of the primary contributors in delivering humanitarian assistance to Nigeria to alleviate the consequences arising from the convergence of multiple crises. In 2025, the EU has allocated 35.1 million euros for humanitarian assistance so far. In 2024, the EU allocated 48.7 million euros. EU funding primarily targets interventions in food aid, clean water access, basic primary healthcare, and education.<sup>41</sup>

The complexity posed by the climate-conflict nexus, however, necessitates that various stakeholders move beyond simple humanitarian aid to pursue long-term solutions capable of strengthening local actors' capacities. To this end, in recent years the EU has attempted to ensure a holistic approach to these challenges by reinforcing partnerships with regional and Nigerian institutions, promoting the green and digital economy, strengthening governance, peace and migration, and fostering human development with an overall focus on job creation, investment and growth.<sup>42</sup> The EU has allocated 731 million euros in grant funding for the partnership in 2021-27, with Nigeria also benefiting from the 10.2 billion euros regional programme for Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Daher, Bassel et al., "Security, Climate Change, and the Resource Nexus", in Raimund Bleischwitz et al. (eds), *Routledge Handbook of the Resource Nexus*, London/New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 45-63.

<sup>41</sup> European Commission DG ECHO website: *Nigeria*, [https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/node/42\\_en](https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/node/42_en).

<sup>42</sup> Economic Community of West African States, *ECOWAS and EU Strengthen Strategic Dialogue on Regional Peace, Security and Development*, 7 June 2025, <https://www.ecowas.int/?p=116353>.

<sup>43</sup> European Commission DG for International Partnerships website: *Nigeria*, [https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/node/93\\_en](https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/node/93_en).

This funding architecture reflects an attempt by the EU to address the challenges that arise where climate change, conflict, and democratic governance intersect in ways that require integrated policy responses rather than fragmented approaches. In the Nigerian context, these resources are channelled through multiple pathways including building a sustainable agricultural sector, boosting Nigeria's renewable energy capacity and fostering digital technologies for economic growth, while supporting stability and security through democratic governance.<sup>44</sup> As a matter of fact, climate change and conflict are closely intertwined with broader challenges of governance and democratic resilience. Weak institutional capacities and political fragility often exacerbate the impact of environmental stressors, while at the same time limiting the scope for inclusive and accountable responses. In this regard, the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus has provided a useful framework, seeking to bridge traditionally siloed interventions to foster coherence across humanitarian relief, long-term development, and peacebuilding efforts.<sup>45</sup>

The transnational character of climatic phenomena and the cross-cutting nature of the principal crisis factors in the regional context (presence of criminal and terrorist groups, weak governance structures, and economic underdevelopment) ensure that the convergence of crises is not limited to a specific national context but extends regionally. For this reason, even in relation to the Nigerian security context, the EU has been involved in financing projects aimed at alleviating severe humanitarian situations in surrounding countries, particularly concerning the Lake Chad basin. In this regard, especially in Northern Nigeria and the Lake Chad region, climate change impacts have necessitated a deeper understanding of how environmental stressors translate into security challenges. The EU's programmatic response has included partnerships with Nigerian civil society organisations (as well as those in other affected countries) and local institutions through humanitarian aid designed to assist vulnerable communities, including through community-level climate adaptation and resilience initiatives.<sup>46</sup> More broadly, EU-Africa partnership on

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<sup>44</sup> European External Action Service, *Seventh Nigeria-EU Ministerial Dialogue Joint Communiqué*, 18 November 2020, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/88909\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/88909_en).

<sup>45</sup> UN Development Programme website: *Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus Approaches*, <https://www.undp.org/node/475241>.

<sup>46</sup> European Commission DG ECHO, *EU Pledges €102.5 Million in Humanitarian Funding for Africa's Lake*

climate and energy diplomacy further illustrates this integrated approach,<sup>47</sup> where climate action is positioned not merely as an environmental imperative but as a fundamental component of conflict prevention and peacebuilding strategies.<sup>48</sup>

Although these concrete interventions recognise how environmental change, structural violence, and competition over access to resources serve as core conflict drivers, issues over the EU's capacity to address the interconnected nature of these crises remain. Despite significant diplomatic efforts and resources deployed toward countries most affected by climate-conflict nexus consequences (including Nigeria), Brussels' interventions rarely target the coexistence of climate and conflict crises or their overlaps. While the EU allocates substantial funding to tackle crises in countries like Nigeria, these investments are only modestly directed toward integrated, comprehensive strategies addressing nexus dynamics and fragility root causes.<sup>49</sup> Despite the EU's formal commitment to implementing a unified approach towards the interconnection of multiple crises in Nigeria, its funding architecture remains highly fragmented. Development assistance, climate adaptation, security cooperation, and humanitarian support continue to operate through distinct channels, which hinders the emergence of integrated programming. Although efforts such as the Recovery and Peacebuilding Assessment (2016) and contributions to the UNDP's Regional Stabilisation Facility constitute early attempts to bridge sectors, these remain isolated examples rather than evidence of a consistent, unified approach.<sup>50</sup>

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*Chad Region*, 23 January 2023, [https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/node/1441\\_en](https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/node/1441_en).

<sup>47</sup> The Council of the European Union defined Climate and Energy diplomacy as the engagement "to implement the Paris Agreement; to limit the global temperature increase to 1.5°C compared to pre-industrial levels; to support the most vulnerable, in particular in least developed countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDSs), in adapting to climate change effects; and to increase collective climate finance. The EU will also continue to support just transitions towards climate neutral and resilient economies and societies, in line with the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on development finance." See Council of the EU, *Council Conclusions on Climate and Energy Diplomacy*, 9 March 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/62942/st07248-en23.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> Knaepen Hanne and Koen Dekeyser, "EU Climate Adaptation Diplomacy: Searching for Common Ground with Africa", in *ECDPM Discussion Papers*, No. 346 (June 2023), <https://ecdpm.org/work/africa-eu-climate-and-energy-diplomacy-times-geopolitical-crisis>.

<sup>49</sup> Youngs, Richard et al., "The EU's Triple-Nexus Challenge: Climate, Conflict, Democracy", in *Carnegie Papers*, November 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/11/the-eus-triple-nexus-challenge-climate-conflict-democracy>.

<sup>50</sup> Veron, Pauline and Volker Hauck, "Connecting the Pieces of the Puzzle: EU Implementation of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus", in *ECDPM Discussion Papers*, No. 301 (June 2021), <https://>

Even if the EU acknowledges the importance of moving beyond short-term responses and addressing the root causes of crises, the picture of multilateral cooperation is bleak. Over the last decade, humanitarian aid has increasingly overtaken development assistance in fragile contexts. In 2020, humanitarian aid comprised approximately 25 per cent of total Official Development Assistance (ODA) to fragile contexts, while development assistance accounted for 63 per cent, and peace-related funding represented only 12 per cent; conflict prevention received a mere 4 per cent of total ODA. At a global level, by 2023, humanitarian assistance reached record highs, especially in contexts of high and extreme fragility, where humanitarian aid constituted 50 per cent of ODA, while funding for peacebuilding remained at historic lows.<sup>51</sup> This shift reflects both political dynamics – humanitarian aid is perceived as more “neutral” and politically palatable – and internal fragmentation: humanitarian, development, and peace instruments are managed by different directorates and frameworks, with limited coordination.<sup>52</sup>

In Nigeria, this trend materialises in substantial humanitarian funding but comparatively limited investment in medium- to long-term development, peacebuilding, or conflict-sensitive climate adaptation. These resources are essential for addressing immediate needs amid widespread displacement and nutritional crises, yet they are not matched by equally robust support for integrated, nexus-informed interventions that address the underlying drivers of conflict and vulnerability. This element can be observed also in other essential instruments adopted by the EU for the African continent. For example, the Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF) for Africa was structured around three regional windows (Sahel and Lake Chad, Horn of Africa and North Africa)<sup>53</sup> and its largest single-country recipients were places such as Somalia, Libya, Ethiopia, Niger and Mali, reflecting EU priorities tied to migration transit and instability.<sup>54</sup> While Nigeria features in EUTF project lists (for example, support to the Borno, Adamawa, Yobe regions),<sup>55</sup> it has not been among the principal

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[ecdpn.org/work/connecting-the-pieces-of-the-puzzle-the-eus-implementation-of-the-humanitarian-development-peace-nexus](https://ecdpn.org/work/connecting-the-pieces-of-the-puzzle-the-eus-implementation-of-the-humanitarian-development-peace-nexus).

<sup>51</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *States of Fragility 2025*, February 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1787/81982370-en>.

<sup>52</sup> Youngs, Richard et al., “The EU’s Triple-Nexus Challenge”, cit.

<sup>53</sup> See the official website: [https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/index\\_en](https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/index_en).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> EUTF, *Sahel and Lake Chad: Strategic Objective 2 (SO2) Output Indicators as of June 2023*, January

beneficiaries of the largest EUTF envelopes, demonstrating a preference for countries positioned along key migration routes to Europe.<sup>56</sup> The EUTF's successor instrument, NDICI-Global Europe, has maintained similar geographic and thematic priorities, though with expanded scope and increased financial resources. The NDICI-Global Europe architecture now provides Nigeria with a formal country allocation, yet recent mid-term reviews and policy analysis show that allocations under Global Europe remain subject to political prioritisation and transparency concerns.<sup>57</sup>

Consequently, while the EU continues to deliver critical short-term relief, its operational frameworks in Nigeria have yet to embody a coherent, unitary approach and, while Nigeria formally participates in EU funding mechanisms, the scale and nature of engagement remain substantially lower compared to countries perceived as critical for European border security objectives. Nevertheless, climate action should remain central to EU foreign policy in the region, including Nigeria, to address social tensions and local instability that stem not from singular crisis factors but from multiple interconnected dynamics. This centrality becomes even more necessary given the EU's limited Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) presence in contexts experiencing acute crisis,<sup>58</sup> and considering the United States global disengagement on these fronts, which simultaneously places greater responsibility on the EU while potentially opening new avenues for collaboration with Africa. The failure to integrate climate considerations as a foundational element of security policy risks perpetuating fragmented responses to inherently systemic challenges, where environmental degradation, conflict dynamics, and governance deficits operate as mutually reinforcing phenomena requiring comprehensive strategic frameworks rather than sectoral interventions. These gaps offer a space for NATO to step in and play a complementary role.

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2024, [https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/system/files/2024-01/EUTF\\_SLC-SO2\\_2023%201st%20sem..pdf](https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/system/files/2024-01/EUTF_SLC-SO2_2023%201st%20sem..pdf).

<sup>56</sup> Openpolis, "How Was EUTF Money Used?", in *EDJNet*, 4 May 2022, <https://www.europeandatajournalism.eu/?p=5076>.

<sup>57</sup> Van Damme, Philippe, "NDICI – Global Europe mid-term review exercise: Sub-Saharan Africa lessons for the future", in *ECDPM Briefing Notes*, No. 192 (April 2025), <https://ecdpm.org/work/ndici-global-europe-mid-term-review-exercise-sub-saharan-africa-lessons-future>.

<sup>58</sup> Youngs, Richard et al., "The EU's Triple-Nexus Challenge", cit.

## 4. NATO's climate security framework and the Nigerian climate-conflict nexus

At the same time, NATO's conceptualisation of climate change as a "threat multiplier" provides a crucial analytical framework for understanding the complex security dynamics unfolding in Nigeria, where environmental degradation intersects with multiple conflict drivers creating cascading instability. NATO's 2021 Climate Change and Security Action Plan explicitly recognises that climate-related environmental changes amplify existing tensions and create new security challenges, particularly in regions experiencing demographic pressures, resource scarcity, and weak governance structures.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, the 2022 Strategic Concept stated that "conflict, fragility and instability in Africa and the Middle East directly affect our security and the security of our partners".<sup>60</sup>

More recently, NATO has confirmed the relevance of this broader understanding of security through its 2024 report dedicated to the impact of climate change on the security sphere, which recognises the Alliance's need to adapt its defence posture in light of climatic factors, thereby reaffirming an interest already established in previous years.<sup>61</sup> This development follows an increasingly close cooperation with the African Union, as confirmed by the cooperation agreement signed in 2019 to strengthen their political and practical partnership.<sup>62</sup> This confirms that NATO is aware that events occurring beyond its borders have potential consequences for transatlantic security, making it entirely necessary to apply a perspective that extends beyond traditional hard security considerations.

<sup>59</sup> NATO, *NATO Climate Change and Security Action Plan: Compendium of Best Practice*, 2023, [https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/legacy-wcm/media\\_pdf/2023/7/pdf/230710-climate-change-best-practices.pdf](https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/legacy-wcm/media_pdf/2023/7/pdf/230710-climate-change-best-practices.pdf).

<sup>60</sup> NATO, *NATO Climate Change and Security Impact Assessment*. Third Edition, 2024, p. 7, [https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/legacy-wcm/media\\_pdf/2024/7/pdf/240709-Climate-Security-Impact.pdf](https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/legacy-wcm/media_pdf/2024/7/pdf/240709-Climate-Security-Impact.pdf).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> NATO, *NATO Helps to Boost Scientific Cooperation on the Security Implications of Climate Change in the Southern Neighbourhood*, 22 November 2024, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2024/11/22/nato-helps-to-boost-scientific-cooperation-on-the-security-implications-of-climate-change-in-the-southern-neighbourhood>.

As aforementioned, Nigeria's security crisis involves multiple actors in conflicts and human rights violations. Beyond criminality, the main violence source, key drivers include Islamist attacks, counter-insurgency operations, separatist movements, and farmer-herder conflicts, with banditry and kidnapping adding to overall instability.<sup>63</sup> The intersection between climate and security issues manifests most clearly in the abovementioned protracted farmer-herder conflicts, where declining precipitation patterns and desertification have forced pastoral communities to migrate southward into agricultural zones, creating resource competition that has claimed thousands of lives annually.<sup>64</sup>

Unlike the EU, NATO possesses fewer institutional mechanisms to assume a prominent role within the climate-conflict nexus in the Nigerian context. This limitation stems primarily from Nigeria's non-membership status within the Alliance and NATO's absence of direct operational presence in the country, despite several Alliance members maintaining strategic interests in the wider region. Particularly, the US and the United Kingdom, have implemented security assistance programmes that implicitly recognise the climate-security nexus through their emphasis on building resilient institutions capable of addressing both traditional security threats and environmental challenges.<sup>65</sup>

The debate concerning NATO's potential or appropriate role in the Sahel and West Africa has persisted for a considerable time.<sup>66</sup> On one hand, the Alliance's fundamentally geographic character appears to preclude substantive engagement, particularly considering the diminished enthusiasm for out-of-area operations following the early 2000s and the renewed strategic focus on the eastern flank following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Nevertheless, the entire

<sup>63</sup> EU Agency for Asylum (EAAA), "Nigeria – Country Focus", in *COI Reports*, July 2024, <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/node/24378>.

<sup>64</sup> Tharif, Kheira, "Climate Change and Security in West Africa: Regional Perspectives on Addressing Climate-related Security Risks", in *FES Policy Briefs*, March 2023, <https://www.sipri.org/node/6195>.

<sup>65</sup> US Africa Command, *Symposium Focuses on Practical Solutions for Climate Security Challenges*, 3 July 2023, <https://www.africom.mil/pressrelease/35237>. UK Government, *UK Government Launches Climate Programme in Nigeria to Reach 4 Million People*, 3 August 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-government-launches-climate-programme-in-nigeria-to-reach-4-million-people>.

<sup>66</sup> Singh, Priyal, "NATO and G7: Global Powers Fractures that Africa Must Watch", in *ISS Today*, 21 May 2025, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/nato-and-the-g7-global-power-fractures-that-africa-must-watch>; Wilén, Nina and Jack Watling, "The Collapse of Western Influence in West Africa Points to Wider Problems", in *RUSI Commentaries*, 8 November 2023, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/collapse-western-influence-west-africa-points-wider-problems>.

West African region now experiences unprecedented geopolitical competition while remaining a regional security complex whose stability dynamics possess the potential to affect continental European security and stability.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, Sahel and West African stabilisation remains paramount for numerous NATO member states, and current political, security, and diplomatic impasses may intensify in the future pressure on Western actors to reconsider their regional approach. Some observers contend that NATO might pursue extremely limited engagement within this context, specifically monitoring activities designed to intercept potential security spillovers toward North Africa and the Mediterranean basin but that the primary challenge confronting this African continental segment involves preventing West African coastal state destabilisation while supporting humanitarian and monitoring initiatives throughout the Sahel.<sup>68</sup>

The role of climate change as a threat multiplier becomes particularly pronounced along NATO's southern flank, within the Mediterranean context where climate change impacts are significantly more manifest than in other regional settings, generating specific threats that are intrinsically linked to African scenarios.<sup>69</sup> This development is prompting the Alliance to intensify efforts in monitoring and analysing these phenomena throughout the Euro-Mediterranean region,<sup>70</sup> and this growing attention to climate change security implications may nonetheless prove decisive in evaluating potential increased Alliance involvement in Nigerian and broader African dynamics. Within this context, the legacy of previous interventions such as Libya continues to influence perceptions, alongside pronounced anti-Western sentiment amplified by Chinese and Russian influence, which leads younger generations to regard NATO with suspicion, if not overt hostility.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Marangio, Rossella, "Deep Waters: The Maritime Security Landscape in the Gulf of Guinea", in *EUISS Briefs*, January 2025, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/node/3332>.

<sup>68</sup> D'Amato, Silvia and Edoardo Baldaro, "Does the Sahel Need NATO?", in *ICCT Short Read*, 26 August 2024, <https://icct.nl/node/3977>.

<sup>69</sup> United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) website: *Climate Change in the Mediterranean*, <https://www.unep.org/unepmap/node/20387>.

<sup>70</sup> NATO, *NATO Helps to Boost Scientific Cooperation*, cit.

<sup>71</sup> Dizolele, Mvemba Phezo, "In Africa, NATO Is the Past", in *CSIS Commentaries*, 12 July 2024, <https://www.csis.org/node/111482>.

The Alliance's broader strategic approach to climate security, articulated through partnership frameworks and capacity-building initiatives, may well serve in addressing challenges where climate change intersects with conflict dynamics, and where, as in Nigeria, conflict resolution support and sensitivity training initiatives have shown success in diminishing resource-based conflicts.<sup>72</sup> Nigeria's experience exemplifies the multidimensional nature of climate-related security challenges that NATO's conceptual framework seeks to address: the interaction between environmental stress, demographic pressures, and governance weaknesses creates conditions conducive to both communal violence and transnational security threats that extend beyond national borders to affect regional stability in West Africa.<sup>73</sup>

## 5. Conclusion and policy recommendations

Overall, Nigeria demonstrates that today's security challenges posed by climate change are inherently transnational or "nexus" in character, capable of transcending borders and extending beyond individual contexts to present common challenges across diverse territories. This is particularly acute when addressing climate and human security.

The Nigerian context is also a powerful illustration that traditional hard security responses to climate-related instability are limited, suggesting that effective interventions should integrate environmental management, sustainable development, and conflict prevention strategies within broader frameworks of regional cooperation and international partnership. It is therefore necessary to develop responses that are both replicable across different contexts while simultaneously taking into consideration the specificities and needs of the individual contexts in which they are deployed.

<sup>72</sup> Rüttinger, Lukas et al., *African Climate Security Risk Assessment*, Berlin, adelphi, December 2023, <https://weatheringrisk.org/en/node/364>.

<sup>73</sup> Tharif, Kheira, "Climate Change and Violent Conflict in West Africa: Assessing the Evidence", in *SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security*, No. 2022/3 (February 2022), <https://doi.org/10.55163/VHIY5372>.

This is not to suggest that NATO should intervene in Nigeria or seek a leadership role in mitigating some of the current drivers of instability in the country. At this juncture, Nigeria should instead serve as a case study for NATO leaders to improve their operational understanding of a complex crisis, begin expanding their strategic foresight or planning efforts related to the African continent and Middle Eastern region to adopt a nexus approach, and look to complement – not supersede – existing EU and bilateral efforts. This is key to avoid a process of over securitisation of climate security issues, wherein a military-first lens limits the integration of other political, economic, diplomatic and security dimensions. This will require several shifts within the organisation and its approach, including:

- *Maintaining progress on climate security:* As discussed, NATO has already made notable progress in mainstreaming climate security into its doctrine and institutions, including its Climate Change and Security Action Plan and establishment of the NATO Climate Change and Security Centre of Excellence (CCASCOE). It must not let the recent push for hard security acquisitions to cast aside or dismantle this progress. Instead, leaders must emphasise that the Alliance can do two things at once: acquire additional military capabilities that reinforce deterrence against Russia and other strategic competitors while simultaneously preparing for the complex climate security challenges to come, many of which will intersect with member state security interests.
- *Widely integrating Nigeria and other “nexus” case studies into the Alliance’s understanding of risk and relevant institutional structures:* This could include more integration with the CCASCOE or relevant Brussels-based divisions, developing risk maps related to the Lake Chad Basin or Sahel region, and integrating regional security dynamics into the Alliance’s strategic foresight activities. Beyond that, there are pathways to improve military-military cooperation and civil-military cooperation, either through existing disaster response centres or novel methods like joint working groups, research, or technical support.
- *Exploring a NATO approach to Nigeria – or the broader West African region:* While the Alliance’s mandate remains laser-focused on guaranteeing “the freedom and security of its members through political and military means”, today’s geopolitical situation requires a broader interpretation of the risks and factors relevant to freedom and security for the Alliance. Overall, forging closer ties between NATO and Nigeria related to nexus risks has the potential to be mutually beneficial: enhancing Nigeria’s own internal capacity to respond to complex security challenges while providing a strong partnership and broader

domain awareness for the NATO Alliance and its members.

- *Improving cohesion with the EU and other regional actors:* As examined above, the EU, African Union, and other regional actors already have investments, development partnerships, and expertise in the West African context. As European governments step up their defence investments, stakeholders on the NATO side must prioritise understanding their existing programming, incorporating relevant security dynamics into their planning, and identifying areas where the EU and NATO could work more complementarily.

On the EU side, the bloc has the potential to serve as a leading actor in addressing climate security risks and other complex crises alongside NATO, provided it overcomes certain limitations of its own that have thus far constrained its capacity to incorporate climate security considerations into its foreign policy. Among these:

- *Enhancing cross-silo policy integration:* To effectively address the multifaceted challenges of climate security, also in other fragile contexts, the EU should adopt an integrated and holistic approach to climate risks that bridges humanitarian, development, and peace efforts, framing conflict drivers, climate stress, democracy and governance issues as part of the same picture. First, policy responses should be grounded in joint and context-specific analysis of risks and vulnerabilities, aligning humanitarian relief with development programming and peacebuilding, to reduce structural drivers of fragility while also ensuring that urgent humanitarian needs are met.

- *Adopt a comprehensive framework – including resource allocation:* Allocate resources within a coherent framework that clearly defines objectives, challenges, and priorities, ensuring that climate security is systematically embedded in foreign and security policy. At the same time, the EU's financial instruments should be made more predictable, flexible, and multi-annual, thereby allowing for a sequenced use of resources across the nexus, avoiding fragmentation and volatility that could exacerbate instability. Empowering local actors and civil society is key in ensuring that adequate resources are allocated to actors most in need or most capable of playing a relevant role in addressing these challenges, ensuring inclusive and sustainable responses. EU climate security strategy should therefore remain a central pillar of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), integrating systematic connections between the different dimensions of the nexus to address local instabilities arising from multiple interconnected dynamics. Overall, climate security continues to

represent a promising area of cooperation across the transatlantic alliance – an area of cooperation that inherently requires a less siloed and more cross-functional nexus approach.

- *Strengthen long-term climate security responses*: Ensure that funding mechanisms move beyond short-term humanitarian responses to also address long-term development and resilience needs, thereby tackling the root causes of climate-related insecurity. In this, the EU should give priority to prevention and resilience-building. This means investing in early warning systems, conflict prevention, mediation, and sustainable development initiatives that address the root causes of climate-related insecurity. Humanitarian action should remain principled and needs-based, but where possible, it should be complemented by longer-term strategies that strengthen governance, foster inclusive growth, and enhance local dispute resolution mechanisms.
- *Promote coordination with NATO*: Foster a complementary division of roles and responsibilities between the EU and NATO in addressing climate-related risks, avoiding duplication and reinforcing strategic coherence. The EU should capitalise on NATO's growing interest in the security implications of climate change to establish a coordination that both integrates the instruments available to the two actors and avoids the risk of climate securitisation. A comprehensive toolkit – encompassing political, economic, diplomatic, and military instruments – could facilitate the promotion of peaceful cooperation, the advancement of sustainable development initiatives, and the creation of multilateral engagement mechanisms that offer alternatives to military competition. Such an approach would contribute to promote shared interests through non-military means. This becomes even more critical at a political juncture in which both the EU and NATO are seeking a new balance in their relationship, and at a time when the Atlantic Alliance may be tempted to scale back its commitment to climate-related issues and should be supported along this path of implementing climate considerations into its strategic doctrines. Precisely because an excessive focus on military dimensions should be avoided, the EU ought to strengthen coordination within the multilateral system. Building complementarity with UN agencies, development banks, and regional organisations will be essential to fostering coherence and effectiveness. In the African context, this entails close cooperation with the African Union, as well as sustained engagement with national governments.

# What NATO Can Learn from Nigeria's Complex Crisis

The world faces an ever-expanding set of complex crises. As humanitarian needs, food insecurity, extreme weather events, and global inequality continue to spike, multilateral institutions have found themselves underfunded, understaffed and often politicised for electoral gain. Considering these trends, NATO has faced increasing pressure to integrate non-traditional security challenges into their planning, while expanding their mission set to support humanitarian and multilateral efforts alongside the ongoing work of more traditional actors like the European Union. As NATO considers a definition of security that includes human security, a climate security approach offers a framework through which the Alliance can reduce silos, better incorporate the many drivers of insecurity, and develop a unified response to modern threats. While policymakers and military leaders already intellectually understand that climate change, conflict, food security, and migration combine to drive security risks, previous efforts to reduce silos have faced significant challenges. This is in part due to NATO's historically narrow mission set and structures but can also be attributed to a broader lack of tools and training to integrate such a perspective – particularly case studies that connect current examples of complex crises to the Alliance's mission set and priority theatre. In short, defence institutions have not yet made the jump between an academic understanding of “the climate-security nexus” and its operational application, the “so what”. This research paper begins to establish such an evidence base – using Nigeria as a case study of a complex political environment where climate change, security, and instability intersect, with potential spillover effects for transatlantic institutions and their security interests.



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