



Research Paper

Illegal Oil Bunkering on Security Architecture in Rivers State

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Abstract

The menace of illegal oil bunkering appears to have hit in the main of the state apparatus which is supposed to stop it. This paper examined the illegal oil bunkering on the security architecture of Rivers State between 2007 and 2025. The paper was instituted to achieve the objective of analyzing how illegal oil bunkering has influenced insecurity in the state. The research adopted the Weak State Theory to explain how governance failures, weak institutional capacity, and corruption create an enabling environment for illegal activities to thrive. The paper employed a combination of descriptive and historical research designs, utilizing both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were obtained through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted across selected communities, while secondary data were sourced from scholarly publications and official reports. Data were analyzed using qualitative content and thematic techniques. Findings revealed that illegal oil bunkering was largely driven by poverty, unemployment, and socio-economic exclusion, which pushed many youths into militancy and criminal networks. The study further showed that bunkering activities were highly organized, involving syndicates, security personnel, and influential actors, thereby reinforcing a cycle of corruption and impunity. It was also found that the proceeds from bunkering facilitated the proliferation of arms, increased violent crimes such as kidnapping and pipeline vandalism, and intensified communal conflicts. The paper concluded that illegal oil bunkering has significantly weakened the security architecture of Rivers State and undermined the safety of lives and properties. The paper thus, recommends that government should address structural socio-economic challenges, strengthen institutional accountability, and adopt technological surveillance systems to effectively combat illegal oil bunkering while enhancing security in Rivers State by the use of improves security surveillance technologies.

Keywords: Illegal Oil Bunkering, Security Architecture, Insecurity, Rivers State, Weak State Theory

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I. Introduction

Nigeria remains the largest oil producer in Africa and a major player in the global oil market, with petroleum resources forming the backbone of its economy since the 1970s. The discovery of oil in commercial quantity in Oloibiri in 1956 marked a turning point in Nigeria's economic trajectory, making crude oil the dominant source of foreign exchange earnings and government revenue (Davis, 2010; Ajodo, 2002). The Niger Delta region, particularly Rivers State, hosts vast oil deposits and serves as the hub of oil exploration and production activities carried out by both the Nigerian government and multinational oil corporations (Ajodo-Adebanjoko&Ojua, 2013). Consequently, oil has contributed significantly to Nigeria's geopolitical relevance, enabling its active participation in regional and global affairs. However, despite the enormous wealth generated from oil, the Niger Delta region has continued to experience environmental degradation, underdevelopment, and socio-economic deprivation. Oil exploration activities have resulted in pollution, gas flaring, and destruction of livelihoods, particularly in fishing and farming communities (Ransome-Kuti, 2006). Scholars such as Osaghae

(1995) and Watts (2008) argue that the persistent neglect of the region by the government and the inequitable distribution of oil revenues have fueled grievances among the local population, leading to agitation, protests, and eventually militancy. The emergence of militant groups and violent conflicts in the Niger Delta further intensified between 2008 and 2009, characterized by oil facility vandalism, kidnapping, and illegal oil bunkering. Although the Federal Government introduced the Amnesty Programme in 2009 to curb militancy and restore peace, the initiative failed to address the underlying structural issues such as unemployment, poverty, and marginalization (Ajodo-Adebanjoko, 2016). As a result, illegal oil bunkering and artisanal refining have persisted as alternative means of livelihood among youths in the region (Allen, 2012; Naanen, 2019). Illegal oil bunkering, which involves the theft of crude oil from pipelines and facilities, has become a major challenge in Rivers State.

According to Asuni (2009), this illicit activity is carried out through pipeline vandalism, illegal tapping, and collaboration with international actors. The consequences include economic losses, environmental degradation, and increased insecurity. The proliferation of illegal refining camps has also contributed to air pollution, notably the “black soot” crisis in Port Harcourt, posing severe health risks to residents (Godwin, 2021). Oil is a strategic resource that plays a crucial role in national development, economic growth, and global political dynamics (Gilpin, 2018; Campbell, 2019). In Nigeria, oil revenue accounts for a significant proportion of government income and foreign exchange earnings, making it central to national stability and development (Nkechi, 2023). The Niger Delta region, which produces over 80% of Nigeria’s oil, is therefore critical to the country’s economic survival (Boris & Job, 2015; Ibori, 2009). Paradoxically, despite its resource wealth, the region remains underdeveloped, with high levels of poverty, unemployment, and limited access to basic infrastructure (Ibaba, 2005; Ejovi et al., 2014). This contradiction has contributed to the emergence of illegal economic activities such as oil bunkering, which has further exacerbated insecurity in the region. Illegal oil bunkering has led to the proliferation of armed groups, increased violence, environmental degradation, and loss of government revenue (Obi, 2010; Ikelegbe, 2005).

Estimates indicate that Nigeria loses substantial revenue daily due to oil theft, undermining national economic stability and development efforts (Dalby, 2014). Furthermore, the activities of illegal bunkering networks have been linked to organized crime, corruption, and violent conflicts, posing serious threats to national security (Adams, 2017; Okoh, 2018; Smith, 2019). Despite government interventions such as the Amnesty Programme and security operations, the problem persists, largely due to inadequate understanding of its root causes and dynamics (Mernyi, 2014). Given these challenges, there is a need to critically examine the nexus between illegal oil bunkering and insecurity in Rivers State, as understanding the causes, consequences, and implications of this phenomenon is essential for developing effective strategies to promote sustainable security architecture for the protection of lives and properties in the state. A key objective of the paper is to analyze the impact of illegal oil bunkering on the security architecture of Rivers State. To achieve this objective, the paper raised the research question; how does illegal oil bunkering impact on the security architecture of Rivers State?

The Weak State Theory

The term weak state has been used in international relations to describe a state that lacks the capacity to effectively govern and provide for its citizens. This can be due to factors such as poor governance, lack of resources or mismanagement of resources, or instability. The theory suggests that weak states can be vulnerable to internal conflict, external intervention, and other threats. Some of the proponents of the weak state theory are: Robert Rotberg, Gros, Jean-Germain, Stephen Krasner, Charles Tilly, Susan Woodward and Jackson, Robert. According to Gros (1996) in weak states, there is an absence of public coercive forces to uphold law and order and police their territory effectively. He further postulated that in such states, the ruling elites tend to privatize state institutions by using them for their own personal security and to promote and protect their business interests. Rotberg(2000) noted that weak states include a broad continuum of states that are: inherently weak because of geographical, physical, or fundamental economic constraints; basically strong, but temporarily or situationally weak because of internal antagonisms, management flaws, greed, despotism, or external attacks; and a mixture of the two. Weak states typically harbor ethnic, religious, linguistic, or other inter-communal tensions that have not yet, or not yet thoroughly, become overtly violent. Urban crime rates tend to be higher and increasing. In weak states, the ability to provide adequate measures of other political goods is diminished or diminishing. Physical infrastructural networks have deteriorated. Schools and hospitals show signs of neglect, particularly outside the main cities. GDP per capita and other critical economic indicators have fallen or are falling, some-times dramatically; levels of venal corruption are embarrassingly high and escalating. Weak states usually honor rule of law precepts in the breach. They harass civil society. Weak states are often ruled by despots, elected or not. Robert Jackson argues that a weak state is not necessarily underdeveloped, undemocratic or destroyed by international war. Their adverse condition is self-inflicted. They are political failures (Jackson, 2000) Jackson concludes that weak states are:

States that cannot or will not safeguard minimal civic conditions for their population: domestic peace, law and order, and good governance, juridical shell that shrouds an insecure and even dangerous condition domestically, a state of nature. Such states have an international legal existence but very little domestic political existence. (Jackson, 2000).

Krasner also leaves a striking example of the domestic situation in a weak state:

In such states, infrastructure deteriorates; corruption is widespread; borders are unregulated; gross domestic product is declining or stagnant; crime is rampant; and the national currency is not widely accepted. Armed groups operate within the state's boundaries but outside the control of the government. The writ of the central government may not extend to the whole country; in some cases, it may not extend beyond the capital. Authority may be exercised by local entities in other parts of the country, or by no one at all. (Krasner (2004)

In summary, a weak state has the following characteristics. First, weak states typically have limited capacity to provide public goods and services, such as security, healthcare, and education. Second, they often have poor governance, with high levels of corruption and limited rule of law. Third, they may have a lack of legitimacy, with citizens feeling disconnected from the state and its institutions. Fourth, they may have weak control over their territory with the presence of armed non-state actors. Fifth, a weak state lacks the capacity to effectively enforce laws and regulations, creating an environment conducive to illegal activities. Finally, weak states often have inadequate institutional capacity, including ineffective law enforcement agencies, judiciary, and regulatory bodies, which hinders efforts to combat illegal activities.

The weak state theory can be a useful lens for understanding illegal oil bunkering and insecurity in Rivers state. Nigeria has been described as a weak state due to factors such as corruption, poor governance, armed conflict by insurgents and lack of control over its territory (Mailafia, 2001). Nigeria as a weak state creates an enabling environment for illegal oil bunkering to thrive, as perpetrators are emboldened by the lack of effective enforcement and accountability. Again, weak states may struggle to maintain control over their territory, leading to the proliferation of armed groups, including those involved in illegal oil bunkering. In addition, the prevalence of illegal oil bunkering in a weak state can contribute to increased insecurity, as rival groups and individuals clash over control of oil resources and territories. Finally, weak states may also experience economic instability due to the loss of revenue from illegal oil bunkering, which can further exacerbate insecurity and undermine the state's ability to provide basic services.

Prevalence of Oil Bunkering in Nigeria

Despite efforts at solving the problem of illegal oil bunkering associated with the two layers discussed above, very little success has been achieved in this regard. The nature of the criminal network associated with the illegal space of oil bunkering makes it quite difficult to manage. In fact, Akpan (2016) captures the sophistication of social actors involved in the illicit trade in crude and refined petroleum products clearly when he argued that the "vandals and those involved in all levels of oil bunkering are not the streeturchins commonly called Area Boys; they are well-heeled criminals often armed with information, technical data, skill and sophisticated weapons (p3)". Perhaps the sophistication of the criminal network, persistent poverty and unemployment as well as the lack of political will on the part of government all unite to ensure that illegal oil bunkering prevails in Nigeria. The prevalence level of illegal oil bunkering is particularly alarming when we appreciate the fact that several billion of Naira have been spent on the security of pipelines and oil production facilities in the country.

What is interesting however, is that in the midst of widely held public opinion concerning the increase in security allocations, pipeline surveillance contracts and reduction in youth militancy in the Niger Delta, illegal oil theft and refining have continued to thrive. This goes a long way to show that the illegal space of oil bunkering is highly attractive to more youths especially those that are unemployed. Also, its prevalence serves to prove the high-level criminal network that drives and sustains the illicit trade in crude and refined petroleum products in the country. There are several statistics on the incremental nature of the illegal oil bunkering space that clearly suggest the resilience of the illicit industry. For instance, there are those who believe that the volume of crude oil theft or illegal oil bunkering has increased from 100,000 to 500,000 barrels per day between 2010 and 2015 (see; Akpan, 2016; Okafor, 2018). This incremental trajectory of illegal oil bunkering also justifies the fact that powerful members of the ruling class are involved in the business either directly or indirectly.

In addition to the high-powered criminal syndicates that drive and sustain the illegal oil bunkering business in Nigeria, widespread poverty and unemployment continue to provide the army of youths required to man the illicit industry. Unemployed youths in the Niger Delta region pose a significant threat to the oil and gas industry especially following the perception that the natural resources belong to them. This category of youths are a constant threat to the

pipelines as well as other facilities of the multinational oil corporations operating in the Niger Delta region. This is why it is believed that illegal oil bunkering from different pipeline points that have been vandalized, when put together constitute a very significant source of oil theft outlets in the country. As a medium that increases the prevalence of illegal oil bunkering, pipeline vandalization by mostly unemployed but technically experienced youths, lead to huge loss of petroleum products to bunkering activities. Scholars seem to agree with the fact that pipeline vandalism has increased over the years despite the reduction in militancy due to the Federal Government's Amnesty programme for ex-militants. As Obenade and Amangabara (2014) have observed, the basic refining technique, first used during the Biafran Civil War, was resurrected and modernized by members of militant camps between 2005 and 2009, providing fuel and cash to support the Niger Delta insurgency. However, due to the failure to address the issue of illegal oil bunkering coupled with the perceived material reward associated with it, militants now turned ex-militants returned to their various homes and expanded the illicit trade. This goes to show that militancy is not actually the driver of crude oil theft but youth unemployment. For instance, Okoli and Orinya (2013 citing Ogbeni, 2012) have argued that "a total of 16,083 pipeline breaks were recorded within the last 10 years adding that while 398 pipeline breaks representing 2.4 percent were due to ruptures, the activities of un-patriotic vandals accounted for 15,685 breaks which translated to about 97.5 percent of the total number of cases (67).

Also, there is a strong understanding that even the artisanal pipeline vandals tend to get huge support from the first layer of illegal oil bunkering actors. Hence, powerful players in the oil bunkering business are believed to provide the funding for artisanal pipeline vandals and their associated bunkering activities as a way of creating distraction from the major criminal network involved in the first layer of syndicate oil theft. In line with this, Adishi and Hunga (2017 citing Olusola, 2013), contend that this normally occurs when wealthy criminals prey on young unemployed minds by empowering them with instruments for pipeline vandalism for their own selfish interests and reward them with cash compensations (p48). The increase in the number of youths that are unemployed will continue to undermine efforts at reducing the scourge of illegal oil bunkering in the country. This is because given the highly materialistic nature of our society and the get rich quick syndrome that comes with it, such youths will tend to find it worthwhile to take the risks associated with the illegal oil bunkering space in order to get out of poverty. Recent data on the illegal space of oil bunkering provides very telling insight into the incremental nature of the illicit trade. Okafor (2018) in an article published in the Vanguard newspaper highlighted the increase in oil bunkering between 2016 and 2017.

In the publication, he referred to Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) as having reported that illegal oil bunkering has increased by 50% between 2016 and 2017. By the statistics provided, it was reported that illegal oil bunkering from its pipeline networks in Nigeria actually increased from 6,000 barrels per day to 9,000 barrels per day for SPDC alone. This shows that despite huge investment in security endeavours, illegal oil bunkering continues to prevail. Another factor that increases the prevalence of illegal oil bunkering in Nigeria is the equally increasing nature of the economy of conflict (Ikelegbe, 2005) as a product of class based political economy of natural resource governance. By this we mean, the fact that conflict in the Niger Delta region which plays host to the oil and gas industry in the country, fundamentally arose in reaction to the injustice associated with the governance of the petroleum industry. However, in addition to playing the role of liberation of the region from the shackles of exploitation by the ruling class, the economy of conflict also serves as a camouflage for illicit oil bunkering. In other words, conflict provides the necessary conditions as well as environment for the perpetuation of all kinds of criminal activities including illegal trade in oil. Similarly, the proceeds from illegal oil bunkering is further used to sustain the conflict economy and the cycle goes on. This shows that conflict and oil bunkering are mutually reinforcing to the extent that one produces the other as they both unite to sustain each other.

Concept of Security

To properly clearly appreciate the meaning of insecurity, it is apposite to discuss extensively the concept of security, which is the opposite of insecurity. The concept of national security remains ambiguous, having evolved from simpler definitions which emphasized freedom from military threat and from political coercion (Paleri, 2008; Brown, 1983). Among the many definitions proposed to date are the following, which show how the concept has evolved to encompass non-military concerns. A nation has security when it does not have to sacrifice its legitimate interests to avoid war, and is able, if challenged, to maintain them by war. (Lippmann, 1943). The distinctive meaning of national security means freedom from foreign dictation.

(Lasswell, 1950. National security objectively means the absence of threats to acquired values and subjectively, the absence of fear that such values will be attacked." (Wolfers, 1960). National security then is the ability to preserve the nation's physical integrity and territory; to maintain its economic relations with the rest of the world on reasonable terms; to preserve its nature, institution, and governance from disruption from outside; and to control its borders. (Harold Brown, U.S. Secretary of Defense, 1977-1981). National security is best described as a capacity to control those domestic and foreign conditions that the public opinion of a given community believes necessary to enjoy its own self-determination or autonomy, prosperity and wellbeing. (Maier, 1990). National security is an appropriate and aggressive blend of political resilience and maturity, human resources, economic structure and capacity, technological competence, industrial base and availability of natural resources and finally the military might." (National Defence College of India, 1996). National security is the measurable state of the capability of a nation to overcome the multi-dimensional threats to the apparent well-being of its people and its survival as a nation-state at any given time, by balancing all instruments of state policy through governance... and is extendable to global security by variables external to it. (Paleri, 2008). National and international security] may be understood as a shared freedom from fear and want, and the freedom to live in dignity. It implies social and ecological health rather than the absence of risk... and is a common right. (Ammerdown Group, 2016). According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, security is the state of being protected or safe from harm; things done to make people or places safe. It could also mean, freedom from danger. Although, traditionally, whenever the concept of security is mentioned focus is made to state security (Solomon, 2015). It is perhaps in this context that Imobighe (1990:224) defines security as freedom from danger or threat to a nation's ability to protect and develop itself, promote its cherished values and legitimate interests. However, over the years, scholars and analysts have begun to conceptualise security within the context of the human being. This is predicated on the new thinking that when the individuals are not safe, the state cannot be said to be safe (Alli, 2015), For according to platonian Philosophy, the state is the individual written large. This has led to the widening of the concept of security to include non-military threats to the individual, such as poverty, diseases, environmental degradation, bad governance, political oppression etc. This has given rise to the concept of human security. Consequently, Francis (2005:22) posits that security, though a contested word is generally believed to be a condition of safety from fear, anxiety, danger, poverty and oppression of the individual.

Other scholars like McNamara (1968), Jinadu (2000), and Nnoli (2006), have also suggested that security should be re-defined or re-conceptualised to accommodate the concerns and threats of the human person. McNamara for instance, argues that, in the light of new realities in the contemporary times, it has become imperative to review the concept of security. To him security means much than the security of the state. According to him: Security is not military hardware, though it may include it; security is not military force, though it may involve it; security is not traditional military activity, though it may encompass it. Security is development and without development there can be no security (McNamara, 1968:149). According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), security means protection from hidden and hurtful disruptions in the pattern of daily life in homes, offices or communities. It further defines it as the state of being or making safe, secure from danger. According to Adebakin (2012), "security is the activities that ensure the protection of a country, person, properties of the community against future threats, danger, mishaps and all other forms of perils. Otto & Ukpere (2012), and Adebakin (2012), assert that "security means protection from hidden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life in homes, offices or communities. Also, Nwagboso (2012), viewed security as the act of being safe from harm or danger, the defence, protection, and preservation of values, and the absence of threats to acquired values. In the same vein, King (2016), cited in Gubak & Bulus (2018), described security as stability and continuity of livelihood, predictability of daily life, protection from crime, and freedom from psychological harm. Security is related to the presence of peace, safety, happiness, and the protection of human and physical resources or the absence of crisis, and threats to human injury among others. Wehmeier and Ashby (2002), define security as protection against something that might happen in the future or as the activities involved in protecting a country, a building or persons against threats or danger. Essentially, security must be related to the presence of peace, safety and happiness; and the protection of human and physical resources as well as the absence of crisis, threats or human injury amongst others as the presence of peace could facilitate progress. According to Francis (2005), security is a state of being safe and the absence of fear, anxiety, danger, poverty and oppression. It is the preservation of core values and the absence of threat to these values. Imobighe (1990), however opines that security is the freedom from threat to a nation's capability to defend and develop itself, promote its values and lawful interest (Zabadi, 2005), on the other hand posits that:

Security is a state in which people or things are not exposed to danger of physical or moral aggression, accident, theft or decline. This view is associated with the survival of the state and the preservation of its citizens. In other words, the state has the responsibility of the use of force and power for the safety of its territory and its people (Zabadi, 2005).

Ibeanu(2000),maintained that security means the capacity of groups (and individuals as their agents) to provide their physical and psychological needs and livelihoods.This means a progressive elimination of objective conditions that limit this capacity as well as reduction of fears and anxieties about their abilities to meet these needs. In this sense, he further posited that security has to do with protection from poverty, exploitation, disease, bio-chemical contamination, injustice and the like. An assessment of the views of Ibeanu shows that emphasis was laid on human aspects of security which emphasized poverty reduction, equitable distribution of resources and trenchment of justice. Igbuzor (2011), and Oche (2001), while conceptualising security placed emphasis on the absence of threats to peace, stability, national cohesion, political and socio-economic objectives of a country. It is conceived as to be secure and free from both fear of physical, psychological abuse, violence, persecution, or death and from want such as food, health and good job (Asmau & Abdulrasheed, 2020). Also, Omede(2012), sees security as a dynamic condition which involves the relative ability of a state to counter threats to its core values and interests.

Security can further be described as stability and continuity of livelihood (stable and steady income), predictability of daily life (knowing what to expect), protection from crime (feeling safe), and freedom from psychological harm (safety or protection from emotional stress which results from the assurance or knowing that one is wanted, accepted, loved and protected in the society. It focuses on emotional and psychological sense of belonging to a social group which can offer one protection. This description of the foregoing structured the concept of security into four dimensions. These dimensions can be woven together to give a composite definition of security as the protection against all forms of harm whether physical, economic or psychological (Olabanji & Ese, 2014).

Igbuzor (2011), contended that security is not the absence of threats or security issues, but the ability to rise to the challenges posed by these threats with expediency and expertise. It demands safety from chronic threats and protection from

harmful disruption. Security embraces all measures designed to protect and safeguard the citizenry and the resources of individuals, groups, businesses and the nation against sabotage or violent occurrence (Ogunleye, et al 2013).. According to Al-Mashal (2010), national security should address "the physical, social and psychological quality of life of a society and its members both in domestic setting and within the larger regional and global system (non-conventional security). National security has been construed in different ways, each of which emphasized vital factors underlying ideals. In his contribution to national security discourse, Paleri (2008) posited that national security is the measurable state of the capacity of a nation to overcome the multi-dimensional threats to the apparent well-being of its people and its survival as a nation-state at any given time by balancing all instruments of state policy through governance, and is extendable to global security by variables external to it. National security is therefore, the requirement to maintain the survival of a nation-state through the use of economic power, diplomacy, power projection and political power.

All the above definitions show that national security has metamorphosed over time from issues of just national defence to more encompassing situations affecting national economy and existence. It was expanded to include international economics, long term goals of national development and reconciliation. They are very important for the security of any nation. With this approach Asad (2007) says "that national security cannot be narrowed down to exclusively military term. Socioeconomic and cultural aspects, problems of development and modernization, and national integrations should be deemed important in considering it". Al-Marshat (1985) is of the opinion that national security is more than territorial defence and should focus on the "physical, social and psychological equality of life of a society and its members both in the domestic setting and within the larger regional and global system". According to Matthew (1989), global development now suggests the need for another analogous broadening definition of national security to include resources, environmental and demographic issues.

Mbachu(2012), contends that national security has to do with the security of the entire citizenry in all ramifications of life that covers health, economy, education, good government, food technology, environment, politics, etc. in the same vein, Nwozor (2013) has pointed out that national security now transcends the traditional frontiers of state centrism and incorporates man and the environment within the milieu of sustainability. Thus, within the precinct of this conceptualization, national security may be viewed as "a multidimensional phenomenon whose leitmotif centers on safeguarding national values, which in turn encompasses all the actions taken by the state in furtherance of its diverse policies concerning its overall security whether symbolic, physical or psychological" (Nwozor, Olanrewaju & Ake, 2019: 11). According to UNDP (1994: 229) national security can summarily be described as "protection from the threat of disease, hunger, unemployment, crime, social conflict, political repression, and environmental hazards". Similarly, Mofolorunsho, Idah & Abu-Saeed (2019: 179) conceptualize national security as:

The ability of the government to curtail any form of internal or external threat capable of undermining her primary responsibilities of protecting her citizenry and property. It includes all attempts to safeguard the unity, values, and all legitimate and culturally prescribed norms of citizens to perform their societal obligation as well

as meet basic survival needs" (Mofolorunsho, Idah & Abu-Saeed, 2019:179).

According to Mofolorunsho, Idah & Abu-Saeed (2019), national security is critical for national development and intra-societal co-existence. It entails the protection of a nation and its people from internal and external aggression and other matters of geographical, social, and economic interest. Orji, (2012:199) posits that "pivotal to the survival of any society is its law and order which are predicated on national security. National security must be broadened to accommodate economic, environmental, and demographic issues as they are important in understanding the new causes of intra-state conflicts".

Richard (2020) in his contribution saw national security as the requirement to maintain the security of the nation. It includes measures put in place by government to guard against political, economic, energy, food, environmental, health, communication, transportation and loss of territorial integrity. To achieve national security, a country must invest in diverse areas and address current emanating threats such as economic, youth unemployment, disease epidemic, extremism, terrorism, insurgency, environmental degradation, energy insufficiency, drug cartels, child trafficking, cybercrime, corruption, trade imbalance and outright hostility from foreign governments.

National security practically touches all spheres of human existence. The best way to approach it is from its overlapping effects that range from food security to issues of environmental degradation. It also touches on health matters and encompasses psychological security as well as arms security. As much as a nation may face danger, national security may also be viewed as a multidimensional process whose purpose is to safeguard national values such as survival, self-preservation and self-perpetuation, which is why Ken (2019) viewed national security in terms of sustainable development rather than the narrower term: environment degradation and scarcity. He reincorporates multiple, social, economic (including food security) and political factors shaping environmental conditions and environmental governance, which were missing from the simplified analysis of environmental scarcity and violent conflict. National security is appropriately broadened to embrace much more than the traditional state-centered and fundamentally military issues often associated with national security.

On the whole, national security encompasses efforts geared towards achieving total and absolute security and safety of all entities that make up a nation state such as Nigeria. The security of these entities uphold the sustainability of a nation state's autonomy and sovereignty. It encapsulates the confidence of a nation's state by its citizens on its ability to provide, protect, secure and encyst the nation (Nigeria) in safety against any aggression, be it internally or from external means. Thus, national security has been intrinsically linked to human security. However, human security is at the epicenter of national security. Human security prioritizes the security of the individual over that of the state since there can be no state without its citizens (Nwozor, Olanrewaju & Ake, 2019:11).

From the foregoing, it is apparent that the objective of national security is to achieve complete security for both the state and its citizens by engendering an environment of peace. It is a peaceful environment that catalyzes the realization of people's well-being. A peaceful environment must reassure the citizens of their safety from every form of symbolic, physical, and psychological threats (Nwozor, Olanrewaju & Ake, 2019). Therefore, the national security of any nation encompasses other vital areas such as environmental protection, social and food security, and more especially the prevalence of lawlessness, chaos, and eventual disintegration. It might be military, economic, ideological, or cultural (Nwolise, 2006; Omede, 2011; Gubak & Bulus, 2018).

It should be noted that the government is primarily responsible for national security in Nigeria. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria specified in section 14(1)(b) that the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government. This has to do with the protection of the lives and properties of the citizens as well as the guarantee of citizens' welfare through the provision of the basic needs of lives. In other words, ensuring freedom from fear and freedom from want (Osewa, 2022). Therefore, the inability of the government to guarantee the safety of life and property of her citizenry most especially within her territory negates the very existence of the government (Mofolorunsho, Idah & Abu-Saeed, 2019:178). Since almost every state constitutionally pledges to pursue the welfare of its citizens, its national security framework must necessarily incorporate policy thrusts that focus on, and rectify issues that are promotive of human security (Nwozor, Olanrewaju & Ake, 2019).

Different security agencies are in charge of maintaining internal and national security in Nigeria. These are the

police, immigration, customs, and civil defence organizations (Osewa, 2022). Notwithstanding, Nigeria as a state is currently bedeviled with internal insecurity challenges such as Boko Haram insurgency, terrorism, militancy, banditry, Fulani herdsmen/Farmers clashes, kidnappings, armed robbery, communal clashes, religious conflicts, etc (Mofolorunsho, Idah & Abu-Saeed, 2019). All these have continued to hinder the development of the country as well as the threatened national security country. Other dangers that serve as a threat to national security include hunger, starvation, poverty, unemployment, youth restiveness, environmental degradation, pollution, natural disasters, diseases, homelessness, underdevelopment, actions by violent non-state actors, narcotic cartels and by multinational corporations, marginalization, and socio-economic injustices (Onigbinde, 2008; Gubak & Bulus, 2018; Gambo & Inuwa, 2020; Usman & Singh, 2021). Security is crucial for national unity, cohesion, peace, nation-building, and sustainable development. Consequently, national security is a desideratum, sine qua non for nation-building, economic growth, and development of any country (Ewetan & Urhie, 2014).

II. Method

This paper adopted a combination of qualitative descriptive and historical research designs to provide a comprehensive understanding of oil bunkering and insecurity in Rivers State. A research design serves as a blueprint guiding data collection and analysis (Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996; Obasi, 1999). The descriptive design enabled the paper to systematically examine current patterns of oil bunkering and associated insecurity, drawing from diverse sources such as government reports, academic literature, and field data. In contrast, the historical design traced the evolution of oil bunkering and insecurity over time, linking past developments in the oil industry to present security challenges. The study area, Rivers State, is located in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria with Port Harcourt as its capital. It is characterized by rich natural resources, especially crude oil, diverse ethnic groups, and significant economic activities such as fishing, farming, and petroleum production. The state’s socio-economic and political structure makes it a critical area for examining the relationship between resource exploitation and insecurity. The study population comprised selected stakeholders, including security operatives, youth leaders, and community representatives across six Local Government Areas.

Table 1: Selected communities and respondents to illustrate the distribution of participants involved in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs).

S/N	Local Government Area	Communities	No of Respondents
1.	Abua/Odual	Amaraka	8
2..	Akukutoru	Idama	8
3.	Andoni	Ataba	8
4.	Oyigbo	Komkom	8
5.	Emohua	Obelle	8
6	Etche	Odagwa	8
Total			48

Source: Field Survey, 2025

From the table, a total of Twenty-Four (24) respondents I took part in the focal group discussion in the six (6) communities. That is, eight (8) discussants in each community. Similarly, the same number of people were interviewed in the focal communities. Data were sourced from both primary and secondary methods. Primary data were collected through KIIs and FGDs, while secondary data were obtained from journals, official reports, and institutional publications. The instruments were validated through expert review to ensure content validity. Data collection followed qualitative procedures, and analysis was conducted using content and thematic technique

III. Data Presentation

Impact of illegal oil bunkering on security architecture of Rivers State.

The sting of destitution that most people lived in their communities draw them into militant groups that promised to lift them out of abject poverty into prosperous life. A greater majority of Nigerians are living in absolute poverty and social exclusions, and if any one promises to bring about changes in their poverty-stricken situations, people are usually compelled to follow the terrain of hopeful good life either through fair means or foul. With this in mind, members of the militants are committed to fight for what they strongly believe is their right to defend their lives and

property. In Nigeria, according to Agboti and Nnam (2015), various forms of crimes such as political thugs, robbery, arson, murder, kidnapping and militancy can be explained and understood within the purview of 'deprivation-discontent' philosophy which is embedded in different types of social exclusion. Ikoh (2011) posited that long years of negligent by successive government to develop the Niger Delta region and the failure of multinational oil companies to integrate and transform the oil-producing communities into prosperous communities led to the feeling of deprivation and sequent crises that made militancy and kidnapping pervasive crimes in Nigeria today. Agboti and Nnam (2015) explained that many Nigerians (people of Niger Delta precisely) have suffered exclusion of different kinds in their day-to-day activities. They are frequently abused and neglected, politically battered and abandoned, and their constitutional rights denied with impunity. When people are relatively deprived of essential goods and services as well as excluded from their natural resources, frustration and depression will invariably ensue and consequently lead to acting out of their discontentment and aggression through all means, including crime, violence and militancy. Specifically, the duo added, that somewhat doused ugly incidence of militancy in the Niger Delta. It is within this context that one should make sense of the phenomenon of oil bunkering and insecurity in Rivers state, one of the states in the Niger-Delta.

The fundamental aspect of illegal oil bunkering is that it is a criminal enterprise run by syndicates that steal and trade crude oil and refined petroleum products for profit. These syndicates use a variety of sophisticated and frequently violent tactics, such as pipelinesabotage, illegal refining, and smuggling (Boris, 2015; Raimi, 2023). The substantial profits made from oil bunkering not only support these networks but also give them the ability to grow, corrupt officials, and continue a cycle of violence and impunity. What's more, diverting national revenue from legal channels leads to poverty and unemployment, both of which serve as havens for criminal activity. The practice has grown to be a significant source of income for criminal organisations, which has raised the risk of bloodshed, social discontent, and instability. Illegal bunkering activities worsen the security situation since they sometimes include armed organisations that engage in violent conflicts with opposing factions or security forces, putting the lives of bystanders in jeopardy. The practice has grown to be a significant source of income for criminal organisations, which has raised the risk of bloodshed, social discontent, and instability.

Under the cover of illicit oil operations, terrorism, insurgency, and organised crime flourish thanks to the enormous resources available to criminal syndicates. Profits from oil theft are used by terrorist organisations like Boko Haram and militants in the Niger Delta to fund their activities, enlist new soldiers, and continue acts of violence (Gubak & Bulus, 2018; Allen, 2024). In addition to undermining official authority, the rise of armed organisations exacerbates societal tensions and fosters a culture of fear and insecurity. The region's level of insecurity has increased as a result of the activity, which has increased different types of crime, such as kidnappings, assaults on oil installations, and conflicts between competing gangs. According to Aluko (2018), oil theft in the Niger-Delta has led to widespread internal security challenges, including increased arms proliferation, communal conflicts, and heightened law enforcement-militant clashes. His study provides critical insights into the operational tactics of oil thieves. However, it largely neglects the role of international actors in sustaining the illicit oil trade, a dimension this study seeks to integrate.

Oil bunkering has spurred on a high level of insecurity in Rivers State. Armed cartels are behind illegal refineries in the creeks of the Niger Delta, and particularly Rivers State. The proceeds from the illegal refineries are aiding the importation of illegal arms and ammunition. The result of these activities result in insecurity in the region like kidnapping, armed robbery, assassinations, rape and other form of violence (Bello, 2008). Besides, oil bunkering has made the oil communities in Rivers State to be infiltrated with armed security men. On the roads in Rivers State, security operatives of all colourations are often sighted collecting money from people on the way in the name of checkmating oil bunkering. Many lives have been wasted in confrontations between security operatives and those engaged in oil bunkering.

The saturation of the Niger Delta with weapons of warfare comes from two sources partly from the weapons acquired by militants from the proceeds of illegal bunkering and ransom from victims of kidnapping and partly from those brought into the region by law enforcement agents like the Police and JTF, to check the activities of the militants. The Niger Delta is therefore said to be containing the heaviest concentration of weapons in the country a situation which makes it similar to that of a war theater. The sad thing is that most of these weapons are in the hands of youths who should be utilizing their times in more profitable ways.

Illegal oil bunkering fuels insecurity in Rivers State's Niger Delta through:

S/No	Date	Community	Effect
1	2018	Bodo	Oil Spills from Shell pipeline led displacement of residents
2	2013	Andoni	Fire outbreak that led to loss of many lives and destruction of many houses
3	2015	Okrika	Clash between rival groups led to loss of many lives.
4	2017	Eleme	Fire outbreak led to displacements of residents leading to insecurity and conflict
5	2018	Tai	Clash between rival groups that led to loss of many lives
6	2019	Bonny	Fire outbreak led to destruction of lives and properties.

Source: Researcher's Field Work

IV. Discussions

Focus Group Discussion(FGD)

Theme 1: Effective Strategies to combat illegal oil bunkering in the Niger Delta

The results from the KPIs revealed diverse strategies to combat illegal oil bunkering in the Niger Delta, including technological surveillance, military deployment, modular refineries, and engaging ex-militants. Respondents in the key person interview emphasized the critical need for deploying advanced surveillance technology to protect Nigeria's oil pipelines from illegal bunkering. Several respondents highlighted the limitations of current security measures and underscored the importance of leveraging modern technology to enhance monitoring and detection capabilities. As one respondent stated,

"Relying solely on physical patrols has proven inadequate in addressing the challenges of illegal oil bunkering. To enhance pipeline security, there is a pressing need to invest in advanced surveillance technologies such as drones, sensors, and satellite imagery. These tools would enable continuous monitoring and provide real-time data, allowing for quicker detection and response to breaches. (Male KPI participant, aged 42).

Another interviewee echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that,

"Technology represents the future of pipeline security. By utilizing real-time data, we can swiftly detect and address any breaches in the pipeline system, ensuring a more effective and timely response. This approach not only enhances monitoring capabilities but also significantly reduces the risk of illegal activities, making it a crucial tool in safeguarding critical oil infrastructure (Female KPI participant, aged 44)."

The consensus among these respondents was that technology could provide a proactive approach to securing oil infrastructure, reducing the frequency and impact of illegal activities. In addition to advocating for technological solutions, some respondents in the interview stressed the importance of deploying more military personnel to the Niger Delta region. They argued that an increased military presence would serve as a deterrent to those involved in illegal bunkering. However, they also suggested that the establishment of modular refineries within the region could significantly reduce the incentives for such illicit activities. One respondent explained,

"If individuals are provided with legal avenues to refine and profit from oil, the appeal of engaging in illegal bunkering will significantly decrease. By establishing legitimate economic opportunities, such as modular refineries, communities can shift away from illicit activities. This approach not only curtails illegal bunkering but also promotes sustainable development and economic stability in the region (Male KPI participant, aged 53).

Another added, "*Modular refineries have the potential to generate*

employment and bring economic benefits to local communities, thereby reducing the inclination toward illegal activities as a means of survival. By offering legitimate income opportunities, these refineries can help address the root causes of illegal bunkering, fostering economic growth and stability while promoting lawful livelihoods in the Niger Delta region (Male KPI participant, aged 47).

This dual approach of enhancing security through military deployment and addressing the economic drivers of illegal bunkering through local refineries was seen as a comprehensive strategy to tackle the issue. Other respondents offered a more unconventional solution, suggesting that former militants be tasked with guarding the pipelines. These individuals, who are intimately familiar with the terrain and the tactics used by illegal bunkers, could be an effective force in protecting the region's oil infrastructure. One respondent argued,

“Who better to protect the pipelines than those who once participated in illegal activities? Their intimate knowledge of the operations and tactics involved in oil bunkering positions them uniquely to anticipate and prevent these crimes. By turning former militants into protectors, we can leverage their experience to enhance pipeline security and reduce illegal bunkering effectively (Male KPI participant, aged 42).”

Another respondent added,

“Engaging ex-militants in this way gives them a stake in the system. It transforms them from part of the problem to part of the solution infrastructure (Female KPI participant, aged 41).

This perspective reflects a belief that involving former combatants in the security framework could not only reduce illegal bunkering but also help reintegrate these individuals into society in a constructive manner. By offering them legitimate employment opportunities, the strategy aims to reduce the likelihood of their return to criminal activities and contribute to long-term peace and stability in the Niger Delta.

Interviews were conducted in five locations, (Rumuekpe, Oyigbo, Odagwa, Abua-Odual, and Soku-), five people were interviewed. Three of them were workers operating it for big-men, while the other two were all owners of the distilleries. They revealed their sources of crude oil, technique of refining and marketing outlets respectively.

One of the interviewees from Rumuekpe in Emohua LGA gave their source of crude oil as follows:

“We paid an engineer working with International Oil Companies (IOCs) to teach us the technology of removing the Christmas-Tree from the wellhead to be able to take crude oil directly from the wellhead.

Another respondent from Odagwa in Etche LGA revealed their source of crude oil as follows:

“We buy our crude oil from the point owners (a combination of war-lords and serving military officials) whom get the service of a professional welder to tap into the high pressure pipeline and divert a little portion of it with host to a convenient creek for loading, while it is still working normally (this is also called hot-tapping).

On their technique for refining the crude oil into different component products, one of the interviewees from Sokul in Akuku-toru revealed the following style.

First you get a welder to construct a pot made of 3mm plates and angle irons, then the number of plates determines the size of the pot. Then you place the pot in a oven (specially constructed for the purpose) which will be heated at different temperature, then get a carpenter to construct a cooler (condenser) that will be filled with water in order to cool the vapor pipe to convert the vapor into different liquid forms of petrol, kerosene and diesel; engine oil and waste (tar) are the last components you get from the bottom of the pot. The size of the pot determines the volume of by-products derivable. All other interviewees affirmed the above pattern for refining crude oil locally. The picture below depicts what is obtainable in the creeks.



Plates 1: LOCAL DISTILLERIES



Plate 2: WASTE PIT

The fire engulfed welded container is the pot where crude oil is boiled at different temperature, the wooden figure is the cooler where different forms of vapour is condensed into liquid, the black pit is where waste (tar) is contained, and the large container is the receiver of the liquefied form of different vapourized by-products of crude oil.

On their marketing outlets, a respondent from Emohua stated that:

“People buy in small and large scales, those who buy in large scales come with vessels and barges, most of which are contractors that supplies for oil companies, the ones that buy in small scale come with locally constructed boats to supply local customers within the environment.

Another respondent from Oyigbo revealed that:

“Tankers escorted by the Nigerian Police and Military come to buy in large quantity from them; and even small scale buyers come with their vehicles to buy after settling the Police and military on the way.

The study revealed that the phenomenon of bunkering was still very active and found numerous in the creeks of Niger Delta in spite of the presence of security operatives. It was revealed through the study that both security personnel's, government officials and several businessmen were involved in the exercise. All the persons interviewed refused to give their names and they all claimed unemployment, negligence from government and IOCs and lack of development of their localities as excuse for getting involved in bunkering activities. It was also revealed through the study that most of their major buyers are IOCs supply contractors, this speaks volume of how much Nigeria needs these local refineries.

Key Findings

The findings reveal that illegal oil bunkering in Rivers State is fundamentally driven by poverty, unemployment, and prolonged socio-economic neglect, which push youths into militancy and criminal networks. It further shows that bunkering activities are highly organized, involving syndicates, security operatives, and international collaborators, thereby strengthening armed groups and escalating violence. The study also establishes that these activities significantly weaken the security architecture through increased arms proliferation, kidnappings, communal conflicts, and widespread environmental disasters.

V. Conclusion

The study concludes that illegal oil bunkering has become a major threat to the security architecture of Rivers State, deeply rooted in socio-economic deprivation and governance failures. The persistence of poverty, unemployment, and marginalization continues to provide a fertile ground for the recruitment of youths into bunkering networks and militant groups. The organized nature of oil theft, supported by powerful syndicates and complicit actors, has entrenched a cycle of violence, corruption, and impunity in the region. Furthermore, the proliferation of arms and the rise in criminal activities such as kidnapping, pipeline vandalism, and communal clashes have significantly undermined peace and stability. The environmental consequences, including oil spills, fire outbreaks, and pollution, have further displaced communities and worsened human insecurity. Despite government interventions, the continued involvement of some security personnel and elites has weakened enforcement efforts and sustained the illegal economy. Overall, the study affirms that without addressing the root causes and structural drivers, illegal oil bunkering will remain a critical challenge to security and sustainable development in Rivers State.

VI. Recommendations

The government should address the root causes of illegal oil bunkering by creating sustainable employment opportunities and investing in the socio-economic development of host communities. There is a need to deploy advanced surveillance technologies and strengthen institutional accountability to curb the involvement of security personnel and elites in bunkering activities. Additionally, integrating ex-militants into formal security and economic structures, alongside the establishment of modular refineries, can reduce illegal activities and enhance regional stability.

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