Linking Past and Present: A Critical Analysis of the US-Libya Intervention in Relation to Proposed US Military Support for Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigates how the legacy of the United States intervention in Libya continues to shape current debates about proposed US military support for Nigeria's security problems. It looks at the political, security and regional consequences of the Libya crisis and shows how the collapse of state institutions in 2011, along with the spread of armed groups across the Sahel, reshaped West Africa's security environment. The study uses a qualitative design that draws on policy documents, scholarly works and interviews with experts to trace how lessons from Libya influence the thinking

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of Nigerian policymakers, civil society actors and security analysts as they weigh the risks and possible gains of deeper US involvement. The analysis brings forward the concerns that often guide these discussions, including fears over sovereignty, long-term stability and the unintended effects that external military actions can trigger. At the same time, it considers the view that carefully structured US support could strengthen Nigeria's counter-banditry and counter-terrorism efforts if managed within clear political and operational boundaries. By connecting a past intervention to a present policy dilemma, the study shows how historical experience shapes security choices in Nigeria today. The findings help clarify the conditions under which external assistance can support, or undermine, national security goals in fragile and conflict-prone settings.

Keywords: Libya, Nigeria, Security, Security Intervention, Counter-Terrorism, Counter-Banditry

Introduction

The pervasive narrative of a targeted "Christian genocide" in Nigeria has turned an already powerful framing of the nation's complex security landscape into an internationally recognisable galvanising point, which shapes foreign policy discourses (Baguda, 2025). This framing, put forward by several advocacy groups and some political actors, simplifies a very complex conflict into a clear story of religious persecution that has placed immense pressure on the Nigerian government from abroad (Sampson, 2012). While the literature most often stresses that resource competition, criminal economics, and political grievance are the main drivers of violence, as evident in the work of Campbell (2021), among others, the power of the religious persecution narrative has been important in projecting Nigeria's crisis onto the world stage and framing it as a moral imperative for global action.

The security challenges fuelling this story are indeed grave and multi-fronted, involving a very difficult test of the state's authority and capacity. Nigeria grapples with a sustained Islamist insurgency in the Northeast

conducted by elements of Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province, lethal conflicts between pastoralists and farmers in the Middle Belt, and endemic criminal banditry and kidnapping for ransom in the Northwest (Anyadike, 2017). The combined impact of these crises has been brutal, with more than three million internally displaced persons and a persistent atmosphere of fear that corrodes the social bond (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre-IMO, 2023). The evident sheer scale and agility of these non-state armed actors have stretched the Nigerian military and security services beyond the breaking point, sowing visible strains and fostering a public perception of a government incapable of performing its most basic function.

This perception of state helplessness, whether wholly accurate or not, has created a strategic opening for external actors to advance their influence and propose solutions. The United States, in particular, stands better positioned as a key potential partner, with debates circulating regarding the appropriate level and form of military support (Olurounbi, 2025). Proponents view the situation as a critical juncture wherein failure to take action decisively could lead to further unravelling of the most populous African nation and key regional anchor, with catastrophic humanitarian and strategic consequences for the entire West African region (Pham, 2012). Thus, proposals for enhanced assistance, from advanced intelligence sharing and specialised training to more direct forms of tactical support, have moved from peripheral suggestions to the central points of discussion in bilateral security dialogues.

It is nonetheless fraught with the baggage of a chequered history, where the international community's record of intervention in Africa does provide a deep well of cautionary tales. Past operations, many launched with declarative humanitarian or security intentions, have often produced outcomes that exacerbated long-term instability, leaving a legacy of suspicion among both local populations and policymakers (Adebayo, 2021). This historical consciousness ensures that new proposals for foreign military involvement are not evaluated on their own merits alone, but critically examined through the prism of previous failures, where the road to unintended consequences was paved with good intentions.

The 2011 US-NATO intervention in Libya stands as the most immediate and powerful of these cautionary precedents; its consequences casting a long and tangible shadow over current security debates. Authorised under UN Security Council Resolution 1973 to protect civilians, the operation quickly transitioned into a regime-change campaign that left the nation without functioning state institutions, plunging it into a decade of factional warfare and creating a vacuum exploited by traffickers and extremists (Maluwa, 2023). The Libyan operation, therefore, serves as a modern archetype of how a narrowly focused military action can trigger a cascade of negative second-order effects, fundamentally altering the regional security architecture (Alexander, 2023).

Crucially, the fallout from Libya's collapse did not remain within its borders; it directly fuelled the intensification of security crises across the Sahel, including in Nigeria (Pius et al., 2024). The massive diversion of advanced weaponry from Libyan stockpiles, alongside the dispersal of thousands of battle-hardened militants, injected a new level of lethality and tactical sophistication into existing conflicts in neighbouring states (Zenn, 2020). A 2013 United Nations report explicitly documented the "significant quantities of weapons and ammunition from Libyan stockpiles" being found in the hands of armed groups across the Sahel, confirming the direct link between the intervention and regional arms proliferation (UN Security Council, 2013). This direct line of causation makes the Libyan case an inescapable reference point for those who warn that external military action can produce blowback that ultimately strengthens the very threats it seeks to contain (Joshua, 2025).

It is at the precise intersection of this pressing contemporary crisis and this potent historical legacy that the debate over US military support for Nigeria is situated. The discourse is not merely a technical assessment of military capacity; it is a deep conversation between the urgent need for security and the deep-seated fear of repeating a disastrous precedent. The lessons drawn from Libya-sovereignty, state fragmentation, and long-term outcomes are actively shaping the calculus of Nigerian policymakers, security analysts, and civil society leaders as they reflect on the risks and potential rewards of a deeper American security partnership (Musa et al., 2016). Whether the proposed support can be structured to definitively avoid the

catalytic chain of events seen in North Africa a decade earlier then becomes a core question.

Consequently, this research study critically explores how the legacies of the US-Libya intervention consciously and subconsciously inform the contemporary policy dilemma facing proposed US military support for Nigeria. By linking a definitive past action with a present-day security calculus, the analysis aims to shed light on the strong, usually unarticulated assumptions informing stakeholder positions. It navigates the tension between the perceived need for external aid to respond to an immediate, catastrophic crisis and the deep trepidation that such aid might, under specific circumstances, undermine the long-term stability and sovereignty it seeks to protect, ultimately demonstrating active construction of historical memory within the boundaries of what is possible in international security cooperation.

Literature Review

The Politics of Military Intervention and Security Cooperation

The intellectual history underlying military intervention in political science is underpinned by a fundamental and perennial tension between the principles of state sovereignty and those of external power projection. Rooted in the Westphalian order, the norm of non-interference has long been a cornerstone of international law, affording states protection against foreign incursion. Yet, this principle has consistently been countered by powerful states acting upon doctrines of national interest, humanitarian imperative, or civilising mission. Thus, the theoretical landscape is fundamentally contested, defined by the perpetual struggle between the inviolability of the state and the arguments, both strategic and ethical, used to justify crossing its borders (Charlesworth & Chinkin, 2000). This foundational tension is not some relic of the past; it provides the essential backdrop against which any contemporary proposal for foreign military involvement, including in Nigeria, will invariably be framed.

Within this broad context, realist thought has provided the most candid justification for intervention, representing it as an inalienable right of powerful states pursuing strategic objectives. National interest—whether defined as securing resources, checking rivals, or stabilising regions—is, from such a perspective, the overriding driver. As Stephen Walt (2018) argues, few

interventions are ever purely altruistic; they are calculated acts of statecraft meant to shape the international environment to the intervenor's advantage. From this very realist perspective, security cooperation is not a form of charity but a tool of influence, one by which allied militaries can be developed, access to strategic locations secured, and a state's security apparatus embedded within that of a partner nation. As such, any offer of support entails inherent suspicion on the part of recipients, who must decipher what underlying strategic calculus lies beneath, a dynamic unusually clear in Nigeria's cautious approach to U.S. overtures.

In contrast to realist self-interest, liberal institutionalist theories have advanced a more normative framework, particularly in the post-Cold War era. This school of thought focuses on such aspects as multilateral sanctions and humanitarian justification, most notably through the evolving doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). According to Bellamy (2011), R2P assumes that state sovereignty implies a responsibility to protect one's population and that, in the event of a state's failure to do so, the international community has a responsibility to intervene using diplomatic, humanitarian, and, lastly, military means. It was this very logic that supplied the legitimising language for the UN-mandated intervention in Libya in 2011. Yet the controversial aftermath of that mission has profoundly complicated the liberal interventionist project, laying bare a critical gap between the theory of mandated protection and the chaotic practice of post-intervention state collapse.

This more limited form of engagement, security cooperation, has become the preferred instrument of major powers in response to high costs and strategic failures of large-scale interventions. This model, encompassing military aid, training, intelligence sharing, and logistical support, is often championed as one that is cost-effective and politically sustainable. Its proponents argue that it enables the external powers to build partner capacity and address security threats "by, with, and through" local forces, thus avoiding the pitfalls of large-scale troop deployments (Avey et al., 2019). For the sponsoring state, this signifies a lower-risk form of influence. For the recipient state, it suggests the possibility of enhancing capability without the overt symbolism of foreign combat troops on its soil, a sensitive issue in any sovereign context.

This technical, capacity-building narrative often obscures the intense political contestation that security cooperation provokes in the host nation. Receiving external military support is never a transaction; it is a profoundly political process that fires up debates over national dignity, sovereignty, and the risk of dependency. As Campbell outlines in the Nigerian context, even "low-cost" offers of support come under scrutiny through the historical lens of colonialism and neo-imperialism. The question becomes: Who is setting the agenda? Outsourcing equipment, intelligence, and advisory roles creates power dynamics that subtly, or overtly, shift decision-making authority. Thus, the debate in Nigeria is not over whether U.S. support is tactically useful but about the larger political relationship it speaks to and the potential for a partnership to evolve into a patron-client dynamic that constrains national autonomy.

The Problem of Unintended Consequences and Blowback

The theory of unintended consequences, as popularised by Merton (1936), states that human action, particularly in complex social systems, often produces outcomes that are not only unanticipated but may run directly counter to the original intent of the actors. In international relations, this concept moves from a philosophical observation to a central analytical problem because the use of military force represents one of the most disruptive forms of intervention into a pre-existing political ecosystem. The scholarly literature underscores the fact that these systems are marked by feedback loops, nonlinear reactions, and a number of independent actors. This makes the prediction of outcomes with any great degree of accuracy almost impossible. Consequently, even interventions launched with the most precise and limited aims can set off a cascade of secondary effects, fundamentally changing the strategic landscape, often to the detriment of both the intervener and the local population (Sparks & Ehrlinger, 2012).

This is where the concept of "blowback" can be considered a pivotal contribution: Johnson popularised this term in 2000 in describing the unintended, negative consequences of covert operations that recoil upon their originators. Initially used in the context of clandestine activities of intelligence agencies, the usefulness of the term has expanded to include the broader, long-term consequences of overt foreign policy. This includes

fuelling anti-Western insurgencies, the global radicalisation of populations, and the undermining of the intervening state's moral authority and soft power. As such, this framework challenges the simplistic, linear models of policy planning by introducing a historic and systemic dimension which forces analysts to consider how today's surgical strike might cultivate tomorrow's generation of adversaries.

This dynamic is perhaps most poignantly evident in the literature on humanitarian intervention, where actions taken to alleviate human suffering can paradoxically exacerbate it. For instance, scholars like Alan Kuperman (2013) have made the detailed case that through weakening the authority of a central state, even a repressive one, and at the same time empowering rebel factions, military intervention can dismantle an extant political order without replacing it with a stable alternative. The result is a security vacuum, which generally engenders a protracted civil war, state fragmentation, and a significant increase in civilian casualties over the long term. Initial short-term humanitarian success at halting a particular atrocity thus gives way to a long-term, large-scale humanitarian catastrophe, raising profound ethical and strategic questions about the net consequences of such actions.

The intervention in Libya in 2011 is the contemporary archetype for this theory of perverse outcomes, providing a clear causal pathway from intervention to regional destabilisation. According to Kuperman (2013), the military campaign to disable the Gaddafi regime did not end in a stable transition but catalysed instead the state's total collapse, which created a power vacuum that descended into factional war and, critically, rendered the country's extensive arms depots vulnerable to looting. As Wehrey (2018) documents, the failure to secure these stockpiles in the aftermath of the conflict was a catastrophic oversight-one that directly enabled the proliferation of advanced weaponry across the Sahel. This was no minor side effect but a central consequence that fundamentally altered the military balance in the region.

This theoretical and empirical legacy continues to inform the Nigerian security calculus to this day. The documented flow of small arms and light weapons from Libya into the hands of militant groups operating in the Sahel, including those within Nigeria, is a lived reality rather than an academic finding. Indeed, a 2013 United Nations report provided clear proof of this

arms pipeline and, as such, verifiable evidence of the blowback mechanism. For Nigerian policymakers and security analysts, the Libyan precedent thus represents a powerful, evidence-based prediction model. It suggests that external military action, whatever its immediate tactical goals may be, also holds an inherent, significant risk of unleashing forces that intensify the very threats, such as banditry and insurgency, which it seeks to contain. This transforms the debate over U.S. support from a simple cost-benefit analysis into a complex risk-assessment exercise dominated by the fear of replicating a known, disastrous outcome.

Historical Analogies as Cognitive Frameworks in Foreign Policy

The complexity of international politics frequently makes decision-makers fall back on cognitive shortcuts when processing information and considering different courses of action. Perhaps the most powerful among these heuristics consists of historical analogies, which serve as readily available templates that give meaning to novel crises. For a number of years, scholars in foreign policy analysis have been illustrating that policy-makers do not consider each situation as a unique event but rather use pattern-matching, setting up similarities between current dilemmas and past events (Redd & Mintz, 2013). In so doing, a situation is well diagnosed, blame is assigned, solutions are prescribed, and outcomes are forecasted with a view to decreasing uncertainty and making the environment somewhat more manageable.

This phenomenon has a robust theoretical grounding in the seminal works of scholars like Robert Jervis (1976) and Yuen Foong Khong (1992). Jervis's analysis of perception and misperception showed how preconceived beliefs and historical frames lead to the processing of incoming information in a way that discards most contradictory evidence. Khong's detailed analysis of Vietnam War decision-making makes this clear. He shows that two powerful historical analogies largely shaped the Johnson administration's thinking: Munich, interpreted as evidence that appeasement invites aggression, and Korea, understood as a lesson in the necessity of fighting a limited war. It was not simply a question of these analogies being rhetorical devices; they were cognitive architectures that defined the very nature of the problem, which identified key actors as aggressors and which prescribed a military response as the only viable solution.

The power of a historical analogy, however, extends far beyond individual cognition into the realm of public discourse and political mobilisation. A potent analogy becomes a shared frame of reference, a shorthand that can be invoked to legitimise a policy or, conversely, to rally opposition against it. The "Vietnam syndrome," for instance, evolved from a specific historical experience into a broad cultural and political constraint on American military power for decades, creating a default public scepticism toward overseas engagements perceived as "quagmires." In this discursive function, analogies are deployed to simplify complex issues for public consumption, to assign moral valence to actors and actions, and to build coalitions by activating shared historical understandings and fears.

The default historical frame through which foreign military involvement has usually been viewed in post-colonial African states is one of profound suspicion, rooted in the lived experience of colonialism and the manipulative proxy politics of the Cold War. This historical memory instils a baseline scepticism towards the intentions of former colonial powers and other major powers, as observed by Adebayo (2021). The 2011 intervention in Libya has not replaced this deep-seated frame but has powerfully reinforced and refreshed it with a fresh, vivid, and regionally specific script. It has become the new pre-eminent analogy for how Western military action, even under a UN mandate, unfolds and ends, not with stability and democracy, but with state collapse, factional violence, and regional contagion.

This theoretical approach to analogies is crucial for deciphering the Nigerian debate on U.S. military support. Where Nigerian elites, from government officials to editorial writers, invoke the case of Libya, they do not simply invoke a past event, but actively mobilise a powerful cognitive and discursive frame for diagnosing the risks of the proposed U.S. partnership. The "Libya analogy" positions the United States as an unreliable intervener whose actions create chaos, frames the proposed support as a potential trigger for national fragmentation, and foretells a high likelihood of regional blowback. It thus offers a ready-made, affectively powerful, and politically compelling narrative that structures the entire debate and places the onus of proof on the advocates of cooperation exceptionally high. The analogy does not just inform the debate; it actively constrains the policy options considered politically acceptable.

Synthesising the Framework: The Libyan Precedent as an Intervening Variable

With the constituents of the theoretical puzzle specified, this section synthesises them to construct the new analytical framework guiding this study. The review above shows that, although the literature on intervention, unintended consequences, and historical analogies is voluminous, these strands often run in parallel rather than intersect. One finds numerous studies investigating either the policy decision to intervene or the measurable outcomes of a policy, but fewer trace, more systematically, how the memory of the outcomes of a past intervention actively shapes the political pre-conditions for a later possible intervention. It is at this scholarly juncture that the following analysis places itself, aiming to shed light on the important yet often neglected discursive and perceptual space between a policy's proposal and its possibility of implementation.

This paper argues that the legacy of the 2011 US-Libya intervention serves not as background context but rather as a powerful intervening variable that critically mediates the reception of new security cooperation proposals. An intervening variable explains the relationship between an independent variable and a dependent variable. In this case, the proposal of U.S. military support for Nigeria is the independent variable, while the degree of political acceptance or resistance within Nigeria is the dependent variable. The technical merits of the proposal—the number of advisors, the sophistication of intelligence to be shared—constitute the independent variable. But the political and public reception of that proposal is not determined by these technicalities alone. Instead, it is filtered—and often distorted—through the pervasive and largely negative perceptual lens of the Libyan precedent.

This framework enables a more sophisticated reinterpretation of the central tension with which this paper began: the clash between the perceived helplessness of the Nigerian state and fierce protection of its sovereignty. As viewed through this theoretical framework, this tension is not simply a binary choice. Rather, it is a complex calculation in which the apparent logic of accepting external help to address a dire security crisis is weighed against a deeply ingrained, historically-validated fear that such help will ultimately prove counter-productive. The "helplessness" argument is

tempered by the "sovereignty" argument, precisely because the Libyan analogy seems to provide a reasonably clear forecast of how accepting help leads to a catastrophic loss of control, thereby exacerbating the very helplessness it is designed to solve.

The result is that the Libyan precedent functions as an important political binding, actively constraining the range of politically viable policy options, open to both the United States and Nigeria. The overt pursuit of a forceful U.S. military partnership becomes, for Nigerian leaders, a politically perilous venture because it makes them vulnerable to powerful charges of having failed to learn the "lessons of Libya" and put national stability at risk. For U.S. policymakers, it entails a situation whereby their offerings are received with a prima facie scepticism never to be overcome by technical briefings. They must, instead, engage in an anterior discursive struggle through which to differentiate their current offer from the model provided by Libya or else explicitly to address and mitigate the specific chain of consequences that marked the earlier failure.

It follows that this synthesised framework posits that any holistic understanding of the debate over U.S. security support for Nigeria is incomplete without placing the Libyan analogy at its core. The subsequent sections trace concrete manifestations of this theoretical dynamic, namely, how the cognitive framework of the "Libya lesson" is articulated by Nigerian stakeholders and how that shapes the political viability of security cooperation. In so doing, this research moves beyond a policy analysis to a deeper explanation of how ghosts of past interventions haunt present-day security dilemmas and effectively govern the boundaries of acceptable action long before any formal decision is made.

Empirical Review

This complex interplay between foreign intervention and African security has provided a richly fertile ground for academic inquiry, as befits the large number of scholarly works focused on dissecting the 2011 NATO-led intervention in Libya. Scholars such as Wehrey (2018) and Kuperman (2013) have provided exhaustive accounts of the immediate execution of the intervention and its devastating aftermath, documenting in great detail how what began as a mandate to protect civilians promptly deteriorated into a

condition of protracted civil war and institutional implosion. Their analyses have proven indispensable in establishing the Libyan conflict as a paradigmatic case—one in which the toppling of a dictator far from constituted a prelude to stability but rather functioned as a catalyst for regional disintegration. This scholarship has so deeply embedded the "Libya disaster" narrative within both academic and policy circles that it has become impossible to discuss any form of Western military action in Africa independently of the example set by Libya.

Running parallel has been a distinct and rigorous vein of literature dedicated to diagnosing the causes of Nigeria's complex and intractable security crises. Scholars such as Campbell (2021) and Zenn (2020) have extensively mapped the topography of violence, from the Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast to the criminal banditry that is laying waste to the Northwest. These studies effectively emphasise what the Nigerian state can and cannot do in terms of projecting power and securing territory, with fingers often pointed at systemic issues of governance, corruption, and inter-ethnic tensions. A subgroup within this body of work has traced, empirically, the clear linkages between the fallout from Libya and the deteriorating security situation in the Sahel, including direct proliferation of arms and fighters from the north as a key factor intensifying local conflicts. This literature provides a clear empirical basis for understanding cross-border repercussions of state failure.

Where these two bodies of literature intersect, a third field of scholarship is brought to bear: the study of historical analogies in foreign policy. Building off the seminal work of Jervis (1976) and Khong (1992), modern-day analysts commonly note the ways in which past events, such as the Vietnam War, beget cognitive structures that delimit subsequent policy choices. In the African context, authors such as Adebayo (2021) have aptly demonstrated how an abiding mistrust of Western intervention, rooted in the colonial and Cold War experiences, constitutes a chronic perceptual filter through which novel security partnerships are perceived. It is, therefore, established that the Libyan intervention is a powerful negative analogy, and that Nigeria faces a grave security crisis; the former has a tangible, material impact on the latter.

However, a critical gap persists in how these established literatures interact. The current research tends to operate in silos: the Libya studies on the direct outcomes of the intervention, the Nigeria scholarship on the internal and regional dynamics of conflict, and the analogy literature on broad cognitive principles. What remains underexplored is the specific causal mechanism linking them—that is, a systematic investigation into how the Libyan precedent, as a powerful historical analogy, is actively mobilised within the domestic Nigerian policy arena to shape, constrain, and contest the political feasibility of a specific, contemporary policy proposal, namely, enhanced U.S. military support. The existing works tell us that Libya matters and that Nigeria is vulnerable, but they do not fully illuminate how the memory of the former is weaponised to govern the political discourse surrounding solutions to the latter.

It is precisely within this gap that the present research places itself. This study goes further than either documenting the material consequences of intervention or stating that analogies matter in the abstract. Rather, it seeks to trace the precise discursive pathways through which the "Libya lesson" is articulated, contested, and deployed by Nigerian policymakers, security elites, and civil society actors. By interrogating how this specific historical analogy functions as an intervening variable that actively loads the debate with preconceived risks and predetermined narratives, the current research provides a more detailed explanation for the deep-seated political constraints surrounding US-Nigeria security cooperation and bridges the usually separate domains of intervention analysis, regional security studies, and foreign policy decision-making theory.

Methodology

The study is a qualitative research design that employs process-tracing to critically analyse the causal mechanisms linking the US-Libya intervention legacy to the contemporary debate on US security cooperation with Nigeria. As such, this research strategy involves an intensive, structured focused case study comparison of the 2011 intervention as the formative historical case and the ongoing Nigerian policy deliberation as a case of contemporary resonance. It is selected for its potential to shed light on the complex ways through which the transmission, interpretation, and mobilisation of historical lessons by policy actors occur in detail.

Data collection is triangulated across three distinct sources to ensure robustness and validity. First, a comprehensive document analysis was conducted, examining official policy statements from the US Department of Defence, Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Defence, coupled with examination of transcripts of relevant parliamentary debates, and reports from international bodies such as the United Nations. To capture nuanced perceptions and internal logics from the key stakeholders, twenty semi-structured interviews were carried out with a purposively selected cohort of Nigerian security analysts, senior civil servants, and representatives from major civil society organisations. Third, leading Nigerian newspapers were systematically discourse-analysed, including policy journal commentaries and public statements between 2018 and 2023, to trace the public invocation and framing of the "Libya analogy." Collected data were subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis, where a coding scheme was developed both deductively from the theoretical framework and inductively from the data itself to identify recurring patterns, argumentative structures, and the specific usage of historical analogies.

Data Analysis and Findings

The analysis of interview data, policy documents, and public discourse shows that the legacy of the 2011 US-Libya intervention operates as the dominant cognitive and political frame through which proposed US military support for Nigeria is assessed. This framing is not monolithic but manifests in three distinct yet interlinked patterns: as a sovereignty-focused veto, as a template for risk assessment, and as a set of conditions for highly circumscribed cooperation. All in all, the data underlines that the Libyan analogy is less of a historical reference than an active, persuasive tool in a high-stakes debate over national autonomy and security.

A related conclusion is the mobilisation of the Libyan precedent to express a fundamental, sovereignty-based veto against deeper security entanglement with the United States. Rooted in both widespread sentiment among civil society leaders and in a leading faction of the Nigerian security establishment, this perspective draws the direct causal link between external intervention and the irreversible erosion of national self-determination. "Libya showed that the American playbook ends not with a strengthened partner

but with a client state or a failed state," said a retired brigadier-general. "We cannot outsource our security without eventually ceding our sovereignty." This framework understands the chaos that followed Gaddafi not as an accident but rather as an intrinsic consequence of the intervention model itself, framing any partnership with the United States as the first step on a slippery slope towards dependency and loss of control over national security strategy.

The study finds that the Libyan case represents a specific and widely accepted template of risk of unintended consequences, shaping profoundly the cost-benefit analysis of Nigerian policymakers. The weaponisation of Libya's stockpiles and the resultant destabilisation of the Sahel were interpreted by interview respondents as a predictable rather than accidental outcome. As a senior analyst at a prominent Abuja-based think tank added, "When we discuss US support, the first question is always, 'What is the exit strategy?' and the second is, 'How do we prevent creating the very militias we are trying to defeat?' Libya provides the script for what happens when you don't have good answers." This risk-averse calculus, imported directly from the Libyan experience, forces proponents to pre-emptively address a detailed catalogue of potential negative second- and third-order effects, raising the evidentiary bar for approval of the policy.

Yet, the results also uncover a more nuanced stance: conditional acceptance of support, premised on a conscious effort to "learn the right lessons" from Libya. This view is pursued by some elements of the Nigerian military and foreign ministry and does not reject cooperation outright but rather uses the Libyan failure as a way to define a strict set of operational and political parameters. The data identifies key conditions for acceptable support: it must be exclusively advisory and intelligence-driven, with no potential for direct combat roles; fully transparent and channelled through recognised Nigerian command structures in order to avoid creating parallel, unaccountable forces; and coupled with a long-term, jointly-managed plan for political and economic stabilisation in conflict-affected regions. As captured by one foreign ministry official, "the lesson of Libya is not 'do nothing,' but 'do it differently.' The support must be on our terms, for our objectives, and must not replicate the model that disintegrated the Libyan state."

The most telling point, however, is that the Libyan analogy serves as a major political restraint, irrespective of the technical merits of proposed US assistance. The sheer prevalence of Libya in media commentaries and parliamentary debates has rendered open advocacy for a robust US partnership, a politically untenable position for many leaders in Nigeria. The analogy has been used to great effect to paint proponents as naive or reckless with national sovereignty. The result is that the US proposal does not compete on a level playing field; it is already defensively positioned against a potent, negatively charged historical narrative. This shows how a historical analogy can concretely have the power to structure a policy arena, effectively circumscribing the scope of politically feasible action before even the details of the policy itself have been fully negotiated. The shadow of Libya thus figures not merely as a background context but as an active participant in the Nigerian security debate—setting terms, defining risks, and narrowing paths around which any potential US-Nigeria security cooperation must manoeuvre.

Discussion of Findings

The findings in this study strongly affirm the central thesis driving this paper: that the legacy of the US-Libya intervention functions as a powerful intervening variable, critically shaping the political and perceptual landscape in which US-Nigeria security cooperation is debated. In sum, the data reveal that the Libyan precedent is not a passive historical reference but an active cognitive framework and a potent political tool. This discussion synthesises these findings to argue that the "Libya lesson" has become a structural constraint, effectively governing the boundaries of acceptable policy action by defining the terms of the debate, raising the political costs of cooperation, and compelling a specific, restrictive model of engagement.

First, the findings elucidate the exact mechanisms through which the historical analogy exerts its influence, moving from the theoretical propositions of Jervis (1976) and Khong (1992) to a concrete, contemporary case. The Nigerian discussion indeed shows a clear pattern-matching process, whereby the proposed US support is diagnostically framed through the Libyan script. However, this is not simply a superficial comparison; it is a deep-seated cognitive process through which US intentions are looked

upon suspiciously, mission creep is taken for granted, and state fragility is foretold as the end-state. This supports the theory that analogies are heuristic devices for dealing with complexity, but at the same time expands on the theory by showing how, within a post-colonial setting, a regional analogy-Libya can strengthen and refresh a preexisting historical analogy-colonialism, and generate an especially resilient filter of scepticism. That the "Libya syndrome" is coming of age as a region-specific counterpart of the "Vietnam syndrome," with a similar ability to restrain policy for decades, is illustrated by the Nigerian case.

Moreover, this research shows how the fear of unintended consequences, theorised by Johnson 2000 and Kuperman 2013, is operationalised in political discourse. The Libyan example furnishes a ready-made catalogue of specific risks—weapons proliferation, militia empowerment, regional blowback—that advocates for cooperation must directly confront. This shifts the burden of proof. The question is no longer simply "Will this support make us safer?" but rather "Can you guarantee that this will not lead to a Libyan-style collapse?" This is an impossibly high bar to clear, and it effectively stalls proactive policy initiatives. A risk-aversion, rooted not in abstraction but in a tangible, well-documented regional event, makes the Libyan analogy a more powerful deterrent than theoretical warnings could ever be.

Perhaps the most telling finding with respect to the analogy's power is conditional acceptance of support, predicated on strict parameters. This finding suggests that the Libyan precedent is so dominant that it even sets the conditions for its own circumvention. Demands related to advisory-only roles, transparent channels, and Nigerian command—a direct consequence of the perceived failures of the Libyan model, in which a no-fly zone escalated into regime change, and the absence of post-conflict planning gave way to chaos—represent a more nuanced finding than one of outright rejection. This nuanced finding moves the analysis beyond the binary of for-or-against and uncovers how a negative historical example actively designs the architecture of whatever potentially permissible cooperation might occur, ensuring it is the opposite of the failed model.

The discussion makes it clear that the debate over US security support for Nigeria cannot be understood through a purely strategic or material lens. The political feasibility of cooperation, the discussion shows, is not a

function of the capacity of the Nigerian military or of the severity of the threat. It is mediated by a powerful, pervasive, and politically potent memory of the US-Libya intervention. This analogy has become a structural feature of the Nigerian policy arena, shaping elite calculus, public discourse, and the political cost-benefit analysis of engagement with the United States. For policymakers, what this means is that technical offers of assistance will continue to face an uphill battle until they are preceded by a deliberate and convincing discursive effort to come to grips with the legacy of Libya and to show, both in word and proposed deed, just how this new partnership is fundamentally different from its disastrous predecessor. It would seem that the shadow of the past is long enough to darken the possibilities of the future.

Conclusion

This article aimed to explore how the legacy of the 2011 US-Libya intervention shapes the contemporary debate on proposed US military support for Nigeria's security challenges. The evidence here demonstrates conclusively that the Libyan precedent is not merely a historical footnote but rather a dominant and active cognitive framework that critically mediates this policy discourse. The Libyan precedent acts as a powerful intervening variable, shaping perceptions and constraining options by raising the political cost of cooperation. As analysed, Nigerian stakeholders—from policymakers to civil society—consistently utilised the "Libya lesson" as a diagnostic tool with which to frame US intentions; a predictive model with which to forecast risks of state fragmentation and blowback; and a prescriptive guide to define the strict, sovereignty-centric parameters for any acceptable form of support. In all, the shadow of Libya has become a structural constraint on the policy arena, ensuring that the debate is conducted on a terrain of deep scepticism, where the burden of proof rests overwhelmingly on those advocating deeper security cooperation.

Recommendations

US policymakers need to be upfront about the Libyan analogy when working with Nigerian officials, making it clear how any support is different in purpose, limits, and respect for Nigeria's sovereignty. Aid should focus on partnership,

not replacement—no direct combat roles, all assistance under Nigerian control, and linked to long-term development and governance so it strengthens the state rather than taking over.

For Nigeria, it is important to set a clear, public framework for working with outside partners, spelling out key rules like keeping command sovereign and avoiding foreign troops on the ground. At the same time, a joint monitoring system with the US can keep everything on track, prevent unintended consequences, and show that the partnership stays within its intended goals.

Avenues for Future Research

This study opens avenues for further research, including comparing how the "Libya lesson" is perceived in other Sahelian states and examining the influence of competing historical analogies like Somalia or Mali. Additionally, a longitudinal study could track whether the Libyan analogy's influence diminishes over time or becomes a permanent part of Nigeria's strategic mindset.

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