



Athena Perspective

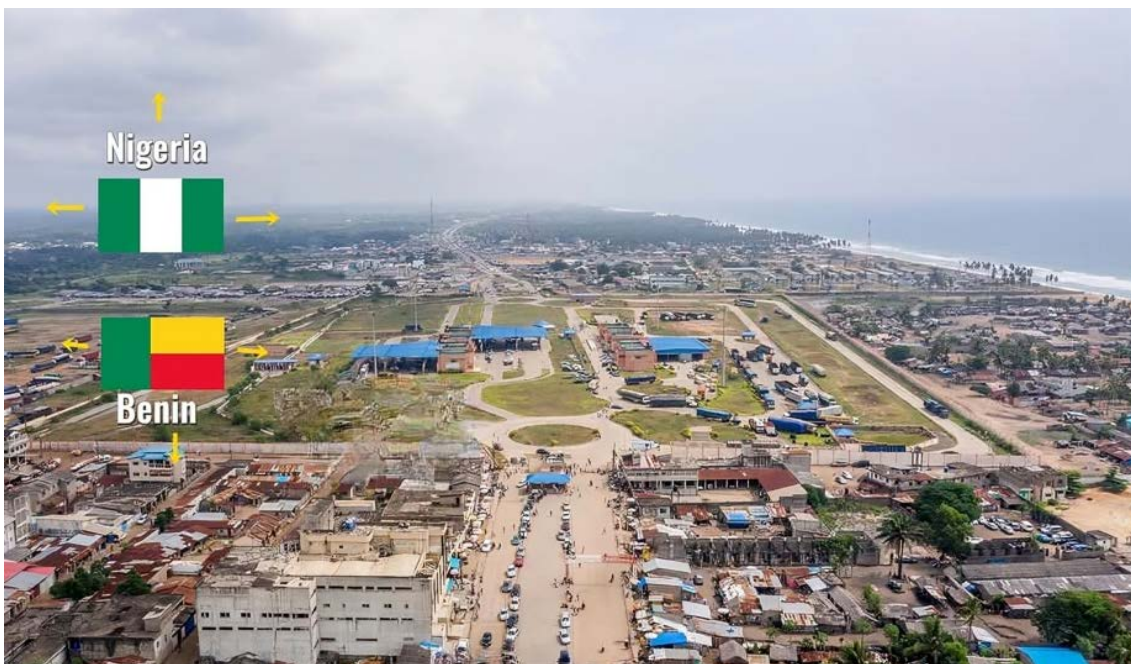
Vol 3 · Issue 20 · 19-25 May 2026

Fragmentation at the Frontier

Why Nigeria's Borders Lack a Governing Authority

Ohifeme Ejemai

Athena Centre for Policy and Leadership



Seme-Krake, Nigeria-Benin border

Executive Snapshot

A - Core Diagnosis

Nigeria's borders are failing not because of an absence of state presence, but because of institutional fragmentation: authority is dispersed across multiple agencies, with no single institution accountable for border outcomes as an integrated system.

B - Governance Implications

Fragmented mandates, budgets, and data systems diffuse accountability, enable rent-seeking, weaken deterrence, and reduce border enforcement to episodic interventions rather than sustained sovereign control.

C - Key Data Points

\$46bn

Crude oil theft
(2019–2022)

~200,000

bpd loss
(2021)

1-2%

Non-oil GDP loss
(Due to smuggling)

Sources: World Factbook, Nigeria Economic Diagnostics

D - Central Thesis

Effective border governance is a state-capacity threshold issue. Without unified authority, interoperable systems, and enforceable accountability, Nigeria's fiscal consolidation, security stabilisation, and broader reform agenda will remain structurally constrained.

E - Policy Watchpoint

The continued absence of a single authority accountable for border outcomes means that coordination without enforceable command will perpetuate fiscal leakage and security vulnerabilities amid ongoing economic reforms. At the same time, institutional fragmentation entrenches rent-seeking and bureaucratic resistance, suggesting that border reform is unlikely to advance unless political sequencing, incentive realignment, and unified accountability are addressed in parallel.

Fragmentation at the Frontier

Ohifeme Ejemai · Athena Centre for Policy and Leadership

Why Nigeria's Borders Lack a Governing Authority

Nigeria does not lack border agencies. It lacks a unified border authority. Across Nigeria's land and maritime frontiers, multiple security, enforcement, and regulatory institutions operate simultaneously. Immigration officers manage entry and exit. Customs officials inspect goods and collect duties. Police formations enforce criminal law. Intelligence agencies monitor threats. The Armed Forces intervene where insecurity escalates. Yet no single institution is fully accountable for whether Nigeria's borders actually function as coherent instruments of sovereignty, revenue protection, and security control.

This is the central contradiction of Nigeria's border governance architecture: authority is widely dispersed, but accountability remains institutionally fragmented.

Nigeria's borders are therefore not failing because the state is absent. They are failing because the state is fragmented, operating through parallel mandates, disconnected systems, and misaligned incentives that prevent unified territorial control. Coordination exists in form but not in enforceable authority. Presence exists in numbers, but not in coherence.

This institutional incoherence has become strategically significant within the current reform window. Between 2023 and 2025, Nigeria is simultaneously managing fuel subsidy removal, exchange-rate unification, elevated debt-service ratios, and constrained fiscal space. Under these conditions, border-related revenue leakage, through oil theft, customs erosion, informal cross-border trade, and illicit maritime activity, imposes macro-fiscal costs that directly undermine consolidation efforts.

Between 2019 and 2022 alone, crude oil theft and associated losses were officially estimated at over [US\\$46 billion](#), equivalent to multiple years of federal capital expenditure. World Bank diagnostics estimate that smuggling and customs under-invoicing reduced non-oil revenue by [1–2 per cent of GDP](#) annually in the late 2010s. These are not marginal losses. They are structural drains on state capacity.

At the same time, instability across the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin has increased the strategic importance of effective border governance for internal security, regional credibility, and [investor confidence](#). Armed groups exploit border seams for logistics, recruitment, financing, and sanctuary. Nigeria's extensive land borders with Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, combined with a large maritime domain in the Gulf of Guinea, place the country at the intersection of multiple regional [threat vectors](#).

The national question is therefore no longer whether border governance matters. It is whether Nigeria's institutional architecture is fit for purpose under fiscal stress, reform-induced price differentials, and regional security pressure.

The Institutional Roots of Border Failure

Why Fragmentation, Not Geography, Drives Insecurity

Border insecurity in Nigeria is often explained through geography, threat intensity, or manpower gaps. While these factors matter, they obscure the more consequential driver: institutional incoherence.

Effective border governance requires the coordinated execution of four core state functions:

- 01** – Surveillance and intelligence
- 02** – Migration and identity management
- 03** – Trade and customs enforcement
- 04** – Interdiction of transnational crime

In Nigeria, these functions are distributed across multiple agencies operating under separate legal mandates, budgetary processes, command hierarchies, and information systems. Authority is divided. Operational boundaries overlap. Accountability dissipates.

Responsibility is spread across the Nigeria Immigration Service, Nigeria Customs Service, Nigeria Police Force, domestic and foreign intelligence agencies, maritime regulators, and the Armed Forces, pursuant to the [1999 Constitution](#). Each mandate is legally defined, yet no statute establishes unified operational command or assigns consolidated responsibility for overall border outcomes.

Coordination mechanisms exist, task forces, joint committees, ad hoc operations, but they rely on inter-agency goodwill rather than enforceable authority. When coordination fails, no institution bears systemic responsibility.

Fragmentation is reinforced by administrative and fiscal design. Each agency submits independent budget proposals, manages separate procurement processes, and operates distinct databases. Performance reporting flows vertically within institutions, while cross-agency coordination failures carry no sanction. Agencies that preserve autonomy face few penalties; those that attempt integration incur costs without guaranteed institutional reward.

The operational consequences are predictable. At major land corridors, transporters may encounter overlapping inspections by Customs, Immigration, Police, NDLEA, and local security formations, each operating with separate reporting systems and disconnected databases. Yet large portions of the same corridors remain under-monitored due to weak inter-agency coordination and uneven deployment.

Customs may identify suspicious consignments that immigration databases cannot cross-reference. Intelligence agencies may classify information in ways that prevent timely sharing. Surveillance assets procured by different agencies often operate on incompatible platforms, limiting system-wide visibility. Maritime interdictions at sea are frequently

undermined by weak inland enforcement that allows illicit cargo to disperse rapidly once ashore.

Border enforcement thus becomes episodic rather than systemic. Tactical gains, whether in maritime patrols, port security upgrades, or land interdictions, fail to translate into durable deterrence.

Nigeria does not merely suffer from porous borders. It suffers from a fragmented state operating at the border.

Mapping Nigeria's Border Governance Architecture

Mandates Without Unified Authority

Understanding the failure requires clarity on how authority overlaps and accountability disappears.

Function	Lead Institution(s)	Core Weakness
Migration management	Nigeria Immigration Service	Weak interoperability with Customs and intelligence databases
Trade enforcement	Nigeria Customs Service	Revenue–security trade-offs; fragmented intelligence
Maritime security	Navy/NIMASA	Jurisdictional overlap; inland enforcement gaps
Intelligence coordination	DSS/NIA/Defence Intelligence	Fragmented databases; classification barriers
Land border security	Police/Armed Forces	Reactive deployment; unclear civilian oversight

No single institution is responsible for border outcomes as a system. Authority is dispersed widely enough to diffuse accountability, but not coherently enough to sustain territorial control.

Evidence and Data

Fiscal Losses, Security Pressure, and Enforcement Limits

Nigeria continues to rank among the countries most affected by terrorism, with incidents disproportionately concentrated in border-adjacent [northern states](#). The geographic clustering of violence reinforces the role of cross-border mobility in insurgent logistics, recruitment, and financing.

Fiscal evidence is equally revealing. Audited reports by the Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative estimate that crude oil theft between 2019 and 2022 averaged [US\\$11–12 billion](#) per year. In 2021 alone, losses were estimated at approximately 200,000 barrels per day, representing 7–10 per cent of production during that period.

World Bank analysis indicates that smuggling and informal cross-border trade reduced Nigeria's non-oil revenue by [1–2 per cent of GDP](#) annually between 2015 and 2019. In nominal terms, this equated to several trillion naira per year, comparable in some budget cycles to federal capital expenditure allocations.

The 2019 land-border closure provides a revealing policy experiment. While the closure disrupted some smuggling routes, it also raised domestic food prices, constrained formal trade, and produced limited durable [revenue gains](#). Once borders reopened, enforcement gaps re-emerged. Episodic restriction did not resolve structural weaknesses.

Maritime data show a similar pattern. Reported piracy incidents in the Gulf of Guinea declined between 2021 and 2023, yet illegal bunkering and cargo diversion [persisted](#). Visible security metrics improved; underlying governance deficits remained.

The Political Economy of Institutional Incoherence

Why Fragmentation Persists

Fragmentation is not accidental. In important respects, it is politically functional.

First, institutional consolidation produces clear losers. Agencies currently exercising autonomous control over procurement, postings, and discretionary enforcement face reduced autonomy under integrated command structures. Resistance is therefore rational, not pathological.

Second, fragmented enforcement creates discretion. Discretion creates rents. Informal trade ecosystems intersect with local patronage structures, particularly in border communities where selective enforcement sustains livelihoods and political alliances. Systemic integration would curtail these arrangements.

Third, reform costs are concentrated while benefits are diffuse. Agencies asked to integrate systems or share intelligence incur immediate organisational and financial costs. The fiscal and security gains accrue primarily to the centre. Without compensation or sequencing strategies, resistance is predictable.

Finally, episodic crackdowns provide political optics. As long as short-term operations, technology procurements, or border closures signal action, deeper institutional reform can be deferred without immediate penalty.

Institutional incoherence thus becomes self-reinforcing.

Comparative Insights

Principles of Effective Border Governance

Comparative experience suggests that institutional design matters more than geography and that effective border governance depends less on multiplying agencies than on ensuring coherence, clarity of responsibility, and operational integration.

Country	Institutional Approach	Key Measures Adopted	Core Outcome / Lesson
South Africa	Consolidated operational control under the Border Management Authority	Clear statutory authority, centralised accountability, retention of sectoral expertise	Responsibility for outcomes was centralised, improving institutional coordination and accountability
Kenya	Prioritised interoperability rather than institutional merger	Joint command centres, shared biometric systems, coordinated risk profiling	Improved clearance times and interdiction rates without expanding the number of agencies
Morocco	Aligned surveillance investment with legal and bilateral coordination frameworks	Integrated surveillance systems, legal reinforcement, cross-border coordination	Strengthened deterrence through institutional coherence rather than numerical expansion

Policy Pathways for Reform

From Coordination to Enforceable Authority

Generic calls for improved coordination are no longer sufficient. Nigeria must interrogate the institutional model itself.

01 Establish Unified Border Outcome Accountability

Nigeria should consider establishing a National Border Management Authority with statutory responsibility for aggregate border outcomes, while retaining sectoral agencies for execution. This would clarify accountability without erasing institutional expertise.

02 Shift to Corridor-Based Operational Command

Operational control should be organised around high-risk corridors rather than agency silos. Corridor commanders should integrate customs, immigration, intelligence, and security assets under unified operational plans.

03 Integrate Border Intelligence Systems

Border-relevant intelligence systems should be interoperable by mandate. Classification protocols must permit operational sharing while protecting sources.

04 Link Fiscal Leakage to Performance Evaluation

Customs leakage, oil theft, and informal trade losses should be explicitly incorporated into border performance frameworks, aligning fiscal and security incentives.

05 Sequence Reform Based on Political Feasibility

Short-term reforms should focus on interoperability and joint command mechanisms. Structural consolidation should be treated as a conditional scenario, subject to political feasibility and risk assessment rather than assumed [inevitability](#).

Conclusion

Border Governance as a State-Capacity Threshold

Nigeria's borders are not merely lines on a map. They are interfaces where sovereignty, fiscal integrity, and security are exercised, or eroded.

Fragmented governance imposes measurable fiscal losses, weakens deterrence, and undermines institutional credibility. Border reform is therefore not a sectoral adjustment. It is a state-capacity threshold.

Without unified authority, interoperable systems, and enforceable accountability, Nigeria's fiscal and security reforms will remain structurally constrained, regardless of manpower, technology, or episodic enforcement.

Major General Ohifeme Ejemai (retd), PhD, is a Senior Visiting Fellow at Athena Centre for Policy and Leadership

Views expressed are those of the author.

Governance Signals

Reading institutional movement beneath political events.

Rape Suspect Escapes Custody During Investigation

A male suspect accused of defiling a 16-year-old girl in Rivers State escaped from police custody during a crime scene visit after reportedly not being restrained. The Rivers State Police Command confirmed the escape, sanctioned an officer involved, and launched efforts to re-arrest the suspect.

Governance implication

The incident raises serious concerns about procedural lapses, accountability failures, and the capacity of law enforcement institutions to safeguard victims and ensure justice delivery.

Athena Assessment — This case reflects broader institutional weaknesses within Nigeria's criminal justice system, where operational negligence risks undermining public trust and weakening confidence in child protection mechanisms.

Lawmaker Donates Vehicles to Adeleke's Re-election Campaign

A federal lawmaker, Bamidele Salam, donated 10 buses and 150 motorcycles to support the re-election campaign logistics of Ademola Adeleke ahead of the August governorship election. The intervention is intended to strengthen grassroots mobilisation, improve voter outreach, and enhance campaign coordination across wards in the constituency.

Governance implication

The development highlights the growing role of political patronage and resource mobilisation in electoral campaigns, raising broader questions around campaign financing, equity, and the use of influence by public office holders.

Athena Assessment — While grassroots mobilisation remains central to democratic participation, the increasing deployment of material resources in campaigns reinforces concerns about unequal political competition and the enduring influence of patronage networks in Nigeria's electoral process.

CSOs Call for Action Over Rising Hypertension Cases

Civil society organisations in Nigeria have called on the Federal Government to strengthen food regulations and introduce stricter sodium reduction policies to curb rising cases of hypertension and other non-communicable diseases linked to high salt intake. They warned that widespread consumption of processed foods with hidden sodium levels is contributing significantly to the growing burden of cardiovascular diseases in the country.

Governance implication

The advocacy underscores the need for stronger regulatory frameworks on food safety, clearer nutrition labelling, and improved inter-agency coordination to protect public health and ensure informed consumer choices.

Athena Assessment — This reflects a preventive public health governance gap, where weak food system regulation and limited consumer awareness are amplifying avoidable disease burdens, highlighting the urgency of evidence-based policy intervention.

Ogun State Unveils 24-Hour Independent Electricity Generation Reform

The Ogun State Government, led by Dapo Abiodun, has launched a state-led electricity reform strategy involving new independent power plants and a statewide consumption audit aimed at delivering 24-hour electricity supply. The initiative, anchored on the Electricity Act 2023, seeks to boost industrial productivity, reduce outages, and improve energy reliability across key cities including Abeokuta, Ota, Sagamu, and Ijebu-Ode.

Governance implication

The policy reflects a growing shift towards subnational energy autonomy in Nigeria, raising important governance questions around regulatory coordination, tariff design, and the capacity of states to sustainably manage power generation and distribution systems.

Athena Assessment — This represents a potentially transformative subnational infrastructure reform model, where data-driven energy planning and decentralised power generation could significantly strengthen industrial competitiveness—provided institutional safeguards, financial sustainability, and regulatory discipline are effectively maintained.

Regional Watch

Where West African governance and security intersect.



U.S. and Cameroon Deepen Maritime Security Cooperation

U.S. Navy Task Force 66, led by U.S. Sixth Fleet Task Force 66, conducted unmanned surface vessel (USV) training in Douala, Cameroon under the Obangame Express exercise, using Lightfish and GARC platforms to simulate the detection and interception of maritime threats. The exercise demonstrated a rapid-response unmanned maritime capability designed to strengthen surveillance, port security, and operational reach.

Strategic significance

The deployment signals a growing shift towards autonomous and low-footprint maritime security operations, reinforcing regional partnerships and expanding rapid-response capacity across strategic waters in West Africa.

Athena Assessment

This reflects the increasing integration of autonomous technologies into security cooperation frameworks, potentially reshaping maritime deterrence and operational strategy across Africa's coastal regions.

What to watch

Watch whether this exercise evolves into sustained USV deployment and deeper integration of autonomous maritime systems across Gulf of Guinea security operations.

Benin Court Sentences Ex-Lawmaker Soumaïla Boké to Five Years in Prison

Former Benin lawmaker Sounon Boké Soumaïla has been sentenced to five years' imprisonment for allegedly advocating a coup d'état through social media messages deemed capable of disturbing public order. The court also imposed a fine of 10 million CFA francs following his conviction by the Court for the Repression of Economic Crimes and Terrorism.

Strategic significance

The ruling highlights growing tensions between state security priorities and political freedoms in parts of West Africa, where governments increasingly use legal mechanisms to address perceived threats to constitutional order.

Athena Assessment

This case reflects the broader challenge of balancing national stability with democratic rights, particularly in a regional environment shaped by recurring coup risks and tightening political space.

What to watch

Watch for reactions from civil society and regional actors over concerns around judicial independence, freedom of expression, and the precedent this may set for political dissent in Benin.

Niger Suspends French Outlets: Press Freedom Concerns Grow Amid Tightening State Control.

Authorities in Niger have suspended nine France-based media outlets and continue to detain four journalists, prompting criticism from the Committee to Protect Journalists over increasing restrictions on press freedom. Officials justified the move on national security grounds, accusing affected outlets of disseminating content capable of undermining public order and institutional stability.

Strategic significance

The development signals a broader trend of tightening information control across the Alliance of Sahel States, where security concerns are increasingly intersecting with media regulation and state authority.

Athena Assessment

This reflects an emerging governance pattern in parts of the Sahel where political transitions and security pressures are reshaping civic space, raising concerns over democratic accountability and the long-term health of independent media institutions.

What to watch

Watch whether media restrictions deepen across the Alliance of Sahel States and whether regional or international pressure influences the trajectory of press freedom and civic space in Niger.

Chad Rejects UN Strike Claims

The Chadian government has rejected UN allegations that recent airstrikes in the Lake Chad basin killed around 100 civilians, insisting the operations targeted Boko Haram positions and not civilian areas. It has instead called for an independent international investigation to verify the facts..

Strategic significance

The exchange highlights rising tension between counterterrorism operations in the Lake Chad region and international humanitarian scrutiny, underscoring the challenge of maintaining legitimacy while conducting high-intensity asymmetric warfare.

Athena Assessment

This reflects a recurring governance and security dilemma in the Sahel-Lake Chad corridor, where weak battlefield verification mechanisms and contested narratives risk undermining trust between regional militaries and international oversight bodies.

What to watch

Watch whether an independent investigation is launched and how UN-Chad relations evolve amid ongoing counterinsurgency operations against Boko Haram in the Lake Chad basin.

Athena Perspective · Athena Centre for Policy and Leadership

Abuja · Nigeria · www.athenacentre.org