International Security and Arms Control in Africa: Assessing Nigeria's Response to the Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons, 2015–2025

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Abstract
The proliferation and illicit circulation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) remained a major threat to international, regional and national security in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, where terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, communal violence and organised crime were sustained by illicit access to firearms. This study assessed Nigeria's response to the proliferation of SALW between 2015 and 2025, with particular attention to the effectiveness of its national, regional and international arms-control measures. The study was anchored on Securitization Theory, developed by Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998). A mixed-methods documentary design was adopted, combining quantitative analysis of verified arms-interception and recovery data with qualitative analysis of international treaties, ECOWAS instruments, Nigerian institutional measures, official policy documents, judicial/legal materials and recent scholarly literature. The findings showed that Nigeria progressively strengthened its institutional response, especially through the establishment of the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (NCCSALW) in 2021, enhanced border enforcement, weapons marking, stockpile-management initiatives, inter-agency cooperation and international engagement. However, the response remained constrained by porous borders, locally manufactured firearms, diversion from official stockpiles, weak tracing and record-keeping systems, institutional fragmentation and persistent demand generated by insecurity. The study concluded that Nigeria's response had become more comprehensive but remained predominantly reactive rather than preventive. It recommended integrated firearms tracing and marking, stronger border and regional intelligence cooperation, systematic management of state and security-force stockpiles, and community-based prevention programmes addressing the demand for illicit weapons.

1. Introduction

The proliferation and illicit circulation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) constitute one of the most persistent challenges to international peace and security. Unlike major conventional weapons whose acquisition and deployment are usually associated with states, SALWs are comparatively portable, concealable, durable and easily transferred among state and non-state actors. Their accessibility has therefore made them particularly important in contemporary armed conflicts, terrorism, organised crime, communal violence and political instability. The United Nations has continued to identify illicit SALW as a major contributor to violent deaths, armed conflict, forced displacement, humanitarian crises and developmental setbacks. The Fourth United Nations Review Conference on the Programme of Action on SALW, held in 2024,

consequently adopted an outcome framework for strengthening implementation between 2024 and 2030 (United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs [UNODA], 2024).

The African context is particularly significant. The continent has experienced prolonged civil wars, insurgencies, terrorism, communal conflicts, political violence and transnational organised crime in which SALWs have played an enabling role. The African Union (AU) therefore treats SALW control as part of its wider peace and security architecture, alongside counter-terrorism, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, mine action and security-sector reform (African Union, 2026). The relationship between arms availability and insecurity is, however, not necessarily linear. Weapons do not independently create political grievances or violent conflicts; rather, they increase the capacity of actors to transform grievances, criminal opportunities and political disputes into lethal violence. This distinction is important because effective arms control must address both the supply of weapons and the conditions generating demand for them.

West Africa presents an especially important sub-regional dimension. The ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related Materials established legally binding obligations concerning the manufacture, possession, transfer, marking, registration, stockpiling and destruction of SALWs. Nigeria ratified the ECOWAS Convention on 27 October 2008 and consequently entered the regional arms-control regime before the period examined in this study (ECOWAS Commission, 2006/2024).

Nigeria occupies a central position in this security environment. Its large population, extensive land and maritime borders, strategic location between the Gulf of Guinea and the Sahel, and proximity to conflict-affected areas make it both an important destination and transit environment for illicit firearms. The country has simultaneously experienced Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) insurgency in the north-east, banditry and kidnapping in the north-west, farmer-herder violence in parts of the north-central region, separatist and criminal violence in the south-east, and different manifestations of armed criminality across the country. The Institute for Security Studies has identified Nigeria as a major illicit firearms market in West Africa and has linked the proliferation of firearms to terrorism, organised crime, banditry, communal conflict and other forms of violence (Institute for Security Studies [ISS], 2024). The problem is compounded by the multiple sources of illicit firearms. Weapons entering Nigeria may be trafficked across international borders, diverted from government or security-service stockpiles, stolen from legitimate owners, or manufactured locally. The Nigerian government itself has acknowledged that locally manufactured firearms constitute an important part of the country's firearms problem. In its submission to the United Nations Firearms Protocol discussions, Nigeria identified illicit manufacture, trafficking and diversion as significant challenges, including locally made handguns, shotguns, assault rifles and other weapons (Government of Nigeria, 2021).

Nigeria's response evolved considerably between 2015 and 2025. At the international level, Nigeria became an early supporter of the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) and has repeatedly reaffirmed its commitment to the treaty and the UN Programme of Action on SALW. UN treaty records confirm Nigeria's signature and ratification of the ATT, while Nigerian statements to the UN in 2024 and 2025 reaffirmed its commitment to international conventional-arms regulation and the UN Programme of Action. At the domestic level, the establishment of the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (NCCSALW) in May 2021 represented a significant institutional development. The Centre was established pursuant to Article 24 of the ECOWAS Convention and was mandated to coordinate national efforts against illicit SALW proliferation (NCCSALW, 2025). Its activities subsequently expanded to include

weapons marking, tracing, stockpile management, inter-agency coordination, public awareness and cooperation with international partners. In March 2025, for example, the Centre commenced a weapons-marking course designed to improve marking and record-keeping capabilities among Nigerian security agencies (NCCSALW, 2025).

Nevertheless, the persistence of illicit firearms despite these interventions raises an important question about the effectiveness of Nigeria's response. In February 2025, the Nigeria Customs Service transferred 1,599 assorted firearms and 2,298 rounds of ammunition to the NCCSALW following interceptions made between 2018 and 2024. The scale of this handover demonstrated both the effectiveness of some enforcement measures and the continuing magnitude of illicit firearms flows (Nigeria Customs Service, 2025). Similarly, Operation Safe Haven reported recovering 220 SALWs and 1,874 rounds of ammunition between 2024 and August 2025, indicating that illicit weapons remained embedded in violent criminal networks (Voice of Nigeria, 2025). The central problem, therefore, is not the absence of Nigerian arms-control measures. Rather, it is the apparent gap between the expansion of legal, institutional and operational measures and the continued availability of illicit weapons. This raises questions about whether Nigeria's response has addressed the structural drivers of proliferation or has remained largely reactive, focusing on seizures after weapons have already entered circulation.

Existing scholarship has examined Nigeria's security architecture and SALW proliferation (Asiyanbi et al., 2024), local manufacture (Assanvo, 2017), local-government and community-level insecurity, and the relationship between illicit firearms and organised violence. However, comparatively less attention has been given to a decade-long assessment that simultaneously evaluates Nigeria's domestic response and its relationship with regional and international arms-control regimes. The period 2015–2025 is particularly useful because it captures the escalation of insurgency and banditry, the establishment of NCCSALW in 2021, the strengthening of weapons-marking and stockpile-management measures, and Nigeria's renewed engagement with the UN SALW framework following the 2024 Review Conference. This study therefore addressed the following questions:

RQ1: To what extent did Nigeria's domestic, regional and international arms-control measures address the proliferation of small arms and light weapons between 2015 and 2025?

RQ2: What factors constrained the effectiveness of Nigeria's response to SALW proliferation during the period?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Concept of Small Arms and Light Weapons

Small arms and light weapons are generally understood as conventional firearms and related weapons designed for individual or collective use. Small arms commonly include revolvers, pistols, rifles, carbines, sub-machine guns and light machine guns, while light weapons include weapons such as heavy machine guns, portable grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft and anti-tank systems and certain mortars. The ECOWAS Convention adopts a comprehensive regulatory approach covering weapons, ammunition and related materials throughout their lifecycle (ECOWAS Commission, 2006/2024). The importance of SALWs lies less in their destructive capacity individually than in their accessibility and mobility. They can be transported through informal routes, concealed in commercial consignments and transferred between criminal organisations, insurgent groups and civilian networks. Their durability also allows weapons originally manufactured or legally imported years earlier to remain in circulation long after the

original conflict or transaction has ended.The United Nations consequently approaches SALW control as a lifecycle-management problem involving manufacture, marking, record-keeping, stockpile management, transfer controls, border enforcement, tracing, seizure and destruction (UNODA, 2024).

2.2 Arms Proliferation and International Security

The international-security implications of SALW proliferation are multidimensional. Illicit weapons facilitate insurgency and terrorism, strengthen organised criminal markets, undermine state authority and increase the lethality of local conflicts. The United Nations has emphasised that illicit SALW flows undermine peace and security and contribute to humanitarian and developmental crises (UNODA, 2024).

In Africa, the problem has been aggravated by porous borders, protracted conflicts, weak state institutions and transnational criminal networks. The Sahel is especially important because weapons circulating from conflict zones can move across multiple national boundaries. Nigeria's geographical position means that developments in Libya, Niger, Chad, Cameroon and the wider Sahel can influence the national firearms environment. ISS research has specifically identified tri-border areas involving Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria as important locations in the illicit firearms economy, emphasising that demand factors, markets and trafficking routes must be addressed collectively rather than through isolated national enforcement (Alusala, n.d.).

2.3 Drivers of SALW Proliferation in Nigeria

The Nigerian SALW problem is driven by interacting supply and demand factors.

First is insecurity-induced demand. Where communities perceive the state as unable to protect lives and property, individuals and groups may seek weapons for self-defence. ISS has observed that the proliferation of insecurity has generated pressure for greater civilian access to firearms, even though liberalisation could itself increase violence (ISS, 2024). Second is cross-border trafficking. Nigeria's extensive borders create enforcement challenges, particularly where neighbouring states experience armed conflict or weak border governance. Weapons can move through informal trade routes alongside legitimate commercial and migratory flows.

Third is local manufacture. Artisanal gunsmithing has existed in Nigeria for decades. ISS research indicates that locally manufactured firearms have constituted an important portion of weapons circulating in parts of the country and argues that controlling artisanal production is essential to regional arms-control efforts (Assanvo, 2017). Fourth is diversion and leakage from official stockpiles. Weak armoury management can allow firearms to be lost, stolen or diverted. The NCCSALW Director-General stated in 2025 that weaknesses in armoury management within security institutions contributed to firearms proliferation, highlighting the importance of physical security and stockpile accountability (NCCSALW, 2025).

Fifth is the criminal economy. The proceeds of kidnapping, banditry, drug trafficking and other criminal activities can finance the acquisition of firearms. In February 2025, the NCCSALW Director-General specifically identified proceeds of crime as a source of financing for arms smuggling into Nigeria (Ogune, 2025).

2.4 Nigeria's Institutional Response

Nigeria's institutional response evolved significantly during the study period. Before 2021, responsibilities for firearms control were distributed among the police, military, customs, immigration, intelligence and other security agencies. This produced operational capabilities but

also created coordination challenges. The establishment of NCCSALW in 2021 represented an attempt to create a central coordinating authority. According to the Centre, its mandate includes preventing and controlling SALW proliferation, coordinating relevant agencies and strengthening national and international partnerships (NCCSALW, 2025).

The Centre has subsequently expanded its operational activities. These have included weapons marking, stockpile management, destruction, public sensitisation, inter-agency cooperation and collaboration with international partners. In March 2025, NCCSALW and the Nigerian Correctional Service agreed to cooperate on weapon marking, tracing, intelligence sharing and stockpile management (NCCSALW, 2025). The Nigeria Customs Service also plays an important role because many firearms enter through formal ports and border routes. The February 2025 handover of 1,599 firearms and 2,298 rounds of ammunition to NCCSALW demonstrates the importance of customs enforcement and inter-agency transfer of seized weapons (Nigeria Customs Service, 2025).

2.5 Regional Arms-Control Framework

Nigeria's response is embedded within ECOWAS arms-control arrangements. The ECOWAS Convention requires member states to regulate the manufacture, possession, transfer, marking and destruction of SALWs. It also provides for national commissions or coordinating mechanisms and regional cooperation. Nigeria's ratification in 2008 therefore preceded the period examined in this study but provided the legal basis for many subsequent national initiatives. The creation of NCCSALW in 2021 was explicitly linked to Article 24 of the ECOWAS Convention (NCCSALW, 2025).

The regional dimension is particularly important because purely national enforcement cannot adequately address transnational trafficking. Effective regional cooperation requires shared intelligence, coordinated border control, harmonised legislation, tracing mechanisms and joint operations.

2.6 International Arms-Control Regime

At the global level, Nigeria is a participant in the Arms Trade Treaty regime and has repeatedly expressed support for the treaty's objectives. The ATT establishes common international standards for the international trade and transfer of conventional arms and seeks to prevent diversion into illicit markets (United Nations, 2013). Nigeria signed and ratified the treaty in 2013/2014 and has continued to participate in its implementation processes. Nigeria also participates in the UN Programme of Action on SALW. The Fourth Review Conference in 2024 adopted a consensus outcome document establishing action-oriented measures for 2024–2030, including measures on tracing, emerging technologies, international cooperation and assistance (UNODA, 2024). This international framework is important because the illicit arms market is transnational. Arms may be manufactured in one country, transported through another and used in a third. Consequently, international cooperation is indispensable.

2.7 Empirical Literature

Asiyanbi et al. (2024) examined Nigeria's security architecture and the proliferation of SALWs and found that although several measures had been introduced, the response had not sufficiently addressed the structural causes of proliferation. Their study is significant because it demonstrates that institutional responses can be weakened when they concentrate on the immediate symptoms of arms proliferation rather than the socioeconomic and political factors sustaining demand. ISS

research similarly demonstrates that local manufacture and cross-border trafficking remain important components of West Africa's firearms economy (Assanvo, 2017; Alusala, n.d.).
UNODC's Nigeria Strategic Vision identifies illicit firearms proliferation as involving imported, trafficked and locally manufactured weapons and links firearms demand to terrorism and farmer-herder conflicts (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2024). The literature therefore suggests that Nigeria has developed increasingly sophisticated institutional responses, but that effectiveness continues to be undermined by the interaction of insecurity, illegal manufacture, trafficking, diversion and weak institutional capacity.

2.8 Literature Gap

Three major gaps emerge.
First, much of the literature examines individual aspects of SALW proliferation—such as local manufacture, trafficking or insecurity—rather than assessing Nigeria's overall arms-control response. Second, existing studies often focus on particular regions or conflicts and do not sufficiently connect Nigeria's domestic measures to the ECOWAS and global arms-control regimes. Third, limited longitudinal research covers the institutional evolution from 2015 through the establishment of NCCSALW in 2021 and the strengthened international SALW framework emerging from the 2024 UN Review Conference. This study addresses these gaps by examining Nigeria's response as a multi-level security and arms-control process covering domestic, regional and international measures between 2015 and 2025.

3. Theoretical Framework: Securitization Theory

Securitization Theory was developed principally by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde in their seminal work Security: A New Framework for Analysis (1998). The theory emerged from the Copenhagen School of security studies and challenged traditional approaches that treated security primarily as an objective condition. Instead, securitization theory argues that an issue becomes a security issue when political actors successfully present it as an existential threat requiring extraordinary or urgent measures (Buzan et al., 1998).
The theory rests on several assumptions. First, security is partly socially constructed through political discourse and institutional practices. Second, political actors identify particular objects as being threatened and seek to persuade relevant audiences that exceptional action is justified. Third, securitization involves a relationship among the securitizing actor, the referent object and the audience. Fourth, once an issue has been successfully securitized, governments can mobilise resources, institutions and exceptional measures that might not be available under ordinary policy conditions (Buzan et al., 1998). Contemporary security research has subsequently expanded securitization analysis beyond traditional military threats to include transnational crime and other non-traditional threats. The theory is appropriate for this study because SALW proliferation in Nigeria has progressively moved from being treated primarily as a firearms-regulation problem to being understood as a national and international security threat. The association of illicit firearms with terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, communal violence and organised crime has allowed the Nigerian state to mobilise military, police, customs, intelligence and specialised institutional resources against the problem. Asiyanbi et al. (2024) similarly conceptualised SALW proliferation as a challenge to Nigeria's security architecture.
Applied to Nigeria, securitization theory helps explain the establishment of NCCSALW in 2021, the strengthening of border controls, weapons-marking initiatives, stockpile-management measures and increased cooperation with international partners. These measures demonstrate the

transformation of illicit arms proliferation from a conventional regulatory issue into a central component of national security policy. However, the theory also exposes a potential weakness: securitization may encourage predominantly coercive responses while insufficiently addressing the socioeconomic conditions that generate weapons demand. Thus, the effectiveness of Nigeria's response depends on whether securitization is balanced with preventive, developmental and community-based approaches.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Study Area

The study adopted a mixed-methods longitudinal documentary research design covering Nigeria between 2015 and 2025. The quantitative component examined verified data on firearms interceptions, seizures, recoveries and weapons-control activities reported by Nigerian government institutions and reputable international organisations. The qualitative component analysed international treaties, ECOWAS instruments, Nigerian institutional documents, official statements, policy materials, recent academic studies and credible security research. Nigeria was selected because of its strategic position in West Africa, its exposure to terrorism, banditry and organised crime, and its central role in regional and international arms-control initiatives.

4.2 Sources of Data and Methods of Data Analysis

Primary documentary data were obtained from official sources including NCCSALW, the Nigeria Customs Service, the Nigerian government, the United Nations, UNODA, the African Union and ECOWAS. Secondary data were drawn from peer-reviewed literature and established research organisations such as the Institute for Security Studies. Quantitative information was analysed using descriptive statistics, frequency comparisons and percentage calculations where comparable observations existed. Qualitative materials were subjected to thematic content analysis under four themes: institutional response, enforcement and interdiction, regional/international cooperation, and constraints on effectiveness. Triangulation was employed by comparing official data with international instruments and independent scholarly/security assessments. Where comprehensive annual data were unavailable, the study deliberately avoided constructing artificial annual estimates and instead used only verifiable observations.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Research Question One: To What Extent Did Nigeria's Measures Address SALW Proliferation?

The evidence indicates that Nigeria's response became progressively more institutionalised between 2015 and 2025. Four major developments were identified: strengthening of international commitments, regional cooperation, creation of NCCSALW and expansion of operational enforcement.

Table 1. Major Institutional and Policy Measures in Nigeria's SALW Response, 2015–2025

Period	Measure/Development	Security-control significance
2015–2020	Police, military, customs and intelligence-led firearms enforcement	Provided operational seizure and interdiction capacity
2015–2020	Implementation of ECOWAS	Embedded Nigeria's response

	SALW obligations	in regional arms-control rules
2015–2020	Implementation of ATT and UN Programme of Action commitments	Strengthened international legal and policy obligations
2021	Establishment of NCCSALW	Created a dedicated national coordinating institution
2021–2023	Expansion of inter-agency cooperation and arms-control coordination	Reduced fragmentation among security institutions
2024	Participation in Fourth UN PoA Review Conference	Reinforced international cooperation, tracing and lifecycle control
2025	Weapons-marking training and tracing/record-management initiatives	Strengthened accountability and traceability
2025	Customs transfer of 1,599 firearms and 2,298 ammunition to NCCSALW	Demonstrated enforcement and institutional handover
2025	Increased cooperation with U.S. and other international partners	Expanded technical and capacity-building support

Sources: Compiled by the researcher (2026).

The table demonstrates that Nigeria did not rely on a single policy instrument. Rather, the national response evolved toward a multi-layered model involving legislation, enforcement, institutional coordination, international cooperation, weapons management and tracing. The establishment of NCCSALW was particularly significant. Before 2021, responsibilities were dispersed across multiple security institutions. Although these institutions possessed specialised capabilities, fragmented responsibility could make it difficult to maintain comprehensive records and coordinate national firearms policy. NCCSALW was created specifically to address the proliferation problem and to coordinate national efforts in accordance with the ECOWAS framework (NCCSALW, 2025).

The institutionalisation of arms control also improved weapons-marking capacity. In March 2025, NCCSALW conducted a seven-day weapons-marking course involving personnel from the Centre, armed forces and other arms-bearing agencies. The training was explicitly intended to improve weapons marking and record-keeping (NCCSALW, 2025). This is important because seizure without tracing has limited preventive value. If authorities recover a weapon but cannot establish its origin, legal owner, transfer history or point of diversion, the seizure removes an individual weapon without necessarily disrupting the trafficking network that supplied it. Marking and tracing therefore shift arms control from reactive enforcement toward preventive supply-chain accountability.

5.2 Evidence from Firearms Interceptions and Recoveries

Available official evidence demonstrates that Nigerian enforcement agencies continued to intercept significant quantities of illicit weapons during the period.

Table 2. Selected Verified Nigerian Arms Interdiction and Recovery Indicators

Year/period	Agency/source	Verified recovery/interception	Interpretation
2018–2024	Nigeria Customs Service	1,599 firearms	Demonstrates sustained border/customs interdiction
2018–2024	Nigeria Customs Service	2,298 rounds of ammunition	Demonstrates seizure of accompanying ammunition
2024–Aug. 2025	Operation Safe Haven	220 SALWs	Indicates continuing availability of illicit weapons among criminal groups
2024–Aug. 2025	Operation Safe Haven	1,874 rounds of ammunition	Demonstrates continuing ammunition circulation

Sources: Compiled by the researcher (2026).

These figures must be interpreted carefully. They do not represent the total quantity of illicit firearms entering or circulating in Nigeria, because seizures reflect only weapons detected by enforcement authorities. They therefore cannot be used to calculate a national prevalence rate. Nevertheless, they provide important evidence of two simultaneous realities. First, Nigerian agencies have demonstrated measurable enforcement capacity. Second, significant quantities of illicit weapons remained available to criminal and armed groups despite enforcement efforts.

The February 2025 Customs handover is particularly revealing. The firearms were intercepted between 2018 and 2024 but were formally transferred to NCCSALW in 2025. This demonstrates the importance of institutional chains for seized weapons. It also suggests that firearms control involves not merely interception but secure custody, documentation, tracing and eventual destruction or lawful disposition (Nigeria Customs Service, 2025).

5.3 Research Question Two: What Factors Constrained Nigeria's Response?

The evidence indicates that Nigeria's response was constrained by five principal factors: porous borders and transnational trafficking, local manufacture, diversion from official stockpiles, persistent demand generated by insecurity, and institutional/data limitations.

Table 3. Major Constraints on Nigeria's SALW-Control Response, 2015–2025

Constraint	Evidence	Effect on arms control
Porous borders	Weapons move through transnational Sahel and West African routes	Makes unilateral enforcement insufficient
Local manufacture	Artisanal firearms production remains significant	Bypasses conventional import controls
Stockpile diversion	Weak armoury management can facilitate leakage	Reintroduces weapons into illicit markets

Insecurity-driven demand	Terrorism, banditry, kidnapping and communal conflict create demand	Enforcement alone cannot eliminate demand
Institutional fragmentation	Multiple security agencies retain firearms-control responsibilities	Can weaken information sharing and coordination
Weak tracing/records	Difficulty linking seized weapons to their sources	Limits disruption of trafficking networks
Socioeconomic vulnerabilities	Poverty, unemployment and insecurity can sustain recruitment and demand	Creates structural incentives for illicit arms acquisition

Sources: Compiled by the researcher (2026).

Porous Borders and Transnational Trafficking. Nigeria's location within the West African security environment means that national firearms control is inseparable from regional border governance. The Sahel's conflict systems, criminal networks and informal trading corridors create opportunities for weapons trafficking. ISS research specifically identifies the Burkina Faso–Niger–Nigeria area as an important environment for illicit firearms flows (Alusala, n.d.). The implication is that Nigeria can seize weapons at its borders and still experience continued inflows if neighbouring trafficking networks remain active. Consequently, the effectiveness of Nigeria's response depends heavily on intelligence exchange, coordinated patrols, joint operations and regional tracing. Local Manufacture. Local manufacture represents a particularly difficult control problem because conventional border measures cannot prevent weapons manufactured inside the country from entering illicit circulation. ISS documented the significance of artisanal firearms production in West Africa and identified Nigeria as one of the countries where local manufacture contributes to the illicit firearms market (Assanvo, 2017). This suggests that Nigeria's arms-control strategy must address gunsmiths, production materials, manufacturing knowledge and distribution networks rather than focusing exclusively on imported firearms. Diversion from Official Stockpiles. Another major challenge is the diversion or loss of weapons from official armouries. The NCCSALW leadership specifically identified weak armoury management as a contributor to firearms proliferation in 2025 (NCCSALW, 2025). This is particularly significant from a national-security perspective because government-owned firearms can be more sophisticated and lethal than locally produced weapons. Poor stockpile management can therefore unintentionally create supply for the very criminal actors the security sector is attempting to combat. Insecurity as a Driver of Demand. One of the most important findings is that insecurity itself generates demand for firearms. Where communities believe that state protection is inadequate, individuals and groups may seek weapons for self-defence. ISS has argued that the growth of insecurity has generated public pressure for increased access to firearms. However, it also cautions that wider access to firearms could intensify violence rather than resolve insecurity (ISS, 2024). This creates a policy paradox: the government must reduce illegal firearms while simultaneously addressing the conditions that motivate individuals to acquire them.

5.4 International and Regional Cooperation

Nigeria's response cannot be assessed solely by domestic enforcement. Its international and regional commitments represent an important component of its strategy.

Table 4. Nigeria's Multi-Level Arms-Control Architecture

Level	Instrument/institution	Principal contribution
Global	Arms Trade Treaty	Regulation of international conventional-arms transfers and prevention of diversion
Global	UN Programme of Action	Framework for preventing and combating illicit SALW
Global	International Tracing Instrument	Identification and tracing of illicit SALW
Regional	ECOWAS Convention	Legally binding West African SALW-control framework
Regional	ECOWAS cooperation	Cross-border information sharing and regional coordination
National	NCCSALW	National coordination and SALW control
National	Nigeria Customs Service	Border and import-control enforcement
National	Police/Military/Intelligence agencies	Seizure, investigation, stockpile protection and counter-insurgency
International cooperation	UN, U.S. and technical partners	Capacity building, training and technical assistance

Sources: Compiled by the researcher(2026).

Nigeria's participation in these regimes indicates that its policy response is not isolated. The country has repeatedly affirmed its commitment to the ATT and UN Programme of Action. In 2024, Nigeria stated at the UN that it remained committed to combating illicit SALW and strengthening borders and regional cooperation. In 2025, Nigeria again emphasised the importance of international cooperation and the prevention of diversion. The 2024 UN Review Conference was particularly significant because states adopted action-oriented measures covering 2024–2030. These measures addressed tracing, emerging technologies, manufacturing and international cooperation (UNODA, 2024).

For Nigeria, the emerging technological dimension is increasingly important. The UN process has identified challenges associated with polymer and modular weapons and 3D printing, which can complicate conventional approaches to firearms identification and tracking (UNODA, 2025).

5.5 Nigeria's Response: Reactive Successes and Preventive Weaknesses

The evidence suggests that Nigeria's response achieved important successes but remained disproportionately reactive.

Table 5. Assessment of Nigeria's SALW Response, 2015–2025

Response dimension	Assessment	Evidence
Legal/international commitment	Strong	ATT, UN PoA and ECOWAS commitments
National coordination	Improved	NCCSALW established in 2021

Border enforcement	Significant but insufficient	Customs interceptions and seizures
Weapons marking	Improving	2025 marking training
Stockpile management	Improving but problematic	Continued concern over armoury leakage
Inter-agency cooperation	Improving	NCCSALW partnerships with security agencies
Regional cooperation	Necessary but incomplete	Transnational trafficking persists
Community prevention	Relatively weak	Demand generated by insecurity remains
Local-manufacture control	Incomplete	Artisanal production remains a challenge
Overall effectiveness	Partial	Institutional capacity increased, but proliferation persisted

Sources: Compiled by the researcher (2026).

The overall assessment is therefore partial effectiveness. Nigeria developed important institutional and operational capabilities, but the continued recovery of illicit weapons demonstrates that the underlying proliferation ecosystem was not eliminated. This finding is consistent with Asiyanbi et al. (2024), who concluded that Nigeria's measures had produced limited results because they frequently addressed the visible manifestations of the problem rather than its deeper structural causes.

5.6 Discussion Through Securitization Theory

Securitization Theory provides a useful explanation for this pattern.

Nigeria increasingly constructed illicit SALW proliferation as an existential national-security threat because of its connection to terrorism, banditry, kidnapping and organised crime. This securitization enabled the state to mobilise military, police, customs, intelligence and specialised institutional resources. The creation of NCCSALW represents a particularly clear manifestation of securitization. The establishment of a dedicated national institution in 2021 transformed SALW control from a dispersed regulatory responsibility into a specialised national-security function (NCCSALW, 2025). Similarly, weapons marking, stockpile management and border operations demonstrate the institutional consequences of securitization. Resources are directed toward a threat perceived as capable of undermining state authority and human security. However, securitization theory also helps identify the limitations of the Nigerian response. When a problem is framed primarily as a security threat, government responses may become heavily coercive. Military operations, seizures and arrests may remove weapons but fail to address the demand for them. The Nigerian case demonstrates that SALW proliferation is simultaneously a security, governance, socioeconomic and transnational-crime problem. Consequently, a purely securitised response cannot be sufficient. The findings suggest that Nigeria needs to move from reactive securitization toward preventive security governance. This would mean combining interdiction and coercive enforcement with weapons tracing, border intelligence, community violence prevention, local gunsmith regulation, stockpile accountability and socioeconomic interventions.

6. Conclusion

This study examined Nigeria's response to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons between 2015 and 2025 within the broader context of international security and African arms control. The first major finding was that Nigeria significantly strengthened its institutional response during the period. The establishment of NCCSALW in 2021 created a dedicated national coordinating institution and represented an important improvement over the previously fragmented institutional arrangement. Subsequent activities in weapons marking, tracing, stockpile management and inter-agency coordination further demonstrated institutional development. The second finding was that Nigeria maintained significant enforcement capacity. The Nigeria Customs Service's transfer of 1,599 firearms and 2,298 rounds of ammunition to NCCSALW in 2025 demonstrated the ability of national institutions to intercept and secure illicit weapons. Operation Safe Haven's recovery of 220 SALWs and 1,874 rounds of ammunition between 2024 and August 2025 further demonstrated continuing enforcement activity. The third finding was that Nigeria's response was embedded within strong regional and international frameworks. Its participation in the ECOWAS Convention, Arms Trade Treaty and UN Programme of Action created important legal and normative foundations for arms control. Nigeria also continued to participate actively in international discussions, including the 2024 UN Review Conference. The fourth finding, however, was that these measures had not eliminated proliferation. Cross-border trafficking, local manufacture, stockpile diversion, institutional weaknesses and insecurity-driven demand continued to sustain illicit firearms markets. The problem was therefore not principally the absence of laws or institutions but the difficulty of translating formal commitments into comprehensive preventive control. The study consequently concludes that Nigeria's response between 2015 and 2025 was institutionally progressive but operationally incomplete. The country moved from a fragmented enforcement approach toward a more coordinated national arms-control architecture, but its response remained predominantly reactive. The persistence of illicit firearms demonstrates that seizures and military operations must be complemented by tracing, stockpile accountability, border intelligence, regulation of local manufacture and interventions aimed at reducing the demand for illicit weapons.

From the perspective of Securitization Theory, Nigeria successfully elevated SALW proliferation from a conventional regulatory problem to a national-security concern. The next stage should be to broaden the response from securitization to sustainable security governance by integrating enforcement with prevention, development, community resilience and regional cooperation.

7. Recommendations

following from the study findings, the study recommended the following:

1. Based on RQ1: NCCSALW should establish a unified digital firearms-marking and tracing database linking the military, police, customs, intelligence agencies and other authorised arms-bearing institutions. Every recovered firearm should be traceable to its manufacturer, importer, lawful custodian or point of diversion.
2. Based on RQ1: Nigeria should strengthen joint intelligence, coordinated border operations and real-time information sharing with ECOWAS and neighbouring states, particularly Niger, Chad, Benin and Cameroon, because illicit arms trafficking cannot be effectively controlled through unilateral national enforcement.
3. Based on RQ2: All Nigerian security and law-enforcement institutions should conduct regular independent armoury audits, reconcile weapons inventories and impose clear institutional

responsibility for missing or diverted firearms. This should become a measurable component of security-sector accountability.

4. Based on RQ2: Government should complement enforcement with community violence-prevention programmes, regulation and engagement of artisanal gunsmiths, voluntary weapons-recovery initiatives and interventions addressing the insecurity that encourages civilians and criminal groups to acquire firearms. This would shift Nigeria's strategy from predominantly reactive seizure toward preventive arms control.

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