

SYSTEM THINKING, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND BALANCE OF POWER IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN NORTH CENTRAL NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examines the intersection of system thinking, international relations theory, and balance of power dynamics within the context of public secondary school administration in North Central Nigeria. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of systems theory and balance of power theory from international relations, the study conceptualizes schools as dynamic, interdependent systems in which multiple stakeholders—including school administrators, teachers, students, parents, security agencies, and government bodies—interact to shape security and governance outcomes. Employing a descriptive survey research design, the study draws on existing policy documents, national security reports, and empirical literature from Nigeria. A sample of 384 educational administrators, security personnel, and policy analysts was selected through purposive sampling based on their expertise in school security management. The research instrument demonstrated strong validity (0.81) and reliability (0.79), confirming its accuracy and consistency. Data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation for answering research questions, with a 2.50 benchmark on a four-point Likert scale. Hypotheses were tested using chi-square to evaluate relationships between power distribution and security outcomes. The findings indicate significant power asymmetries among stakeholders in school security management, with government bodies and external actors

wielding disproportionate influence while school administrators, teachers, and communities have limited power. The study concludes that sustainable school security requires strategic governance, systemic coordination, and a rebalancing of power relationships among stakeholders rather than isolated interventions. Recommendations include the establishment of collaborative governance structures that promote equitable power distribution and stakeholder participation in school security management.

Keywords: System Thinking, International Relations, Balance of Power, School Security, North Central Nigeria, Educational Management

Introduction

The security challenges confronting public secondary schools in Nigeria, particularly in the North Central geopolitical zone, have reached alarming proportions. Schools have increasingly become targets of terrorist attacks, abductions, and kidnappings, transforming what were once sanctuaries of learning into grounds of fear. The North Central region has experienced a surge in the activities of gunmen who primarily kidnap people for ransom, with schools being particularly vulnerable targets. Between January 2023 and November 2025, Nigeria recorded 22 attacks on educational institutions, with 816 students kidnapped. In November 2025 alone, more than 300 students and their teachers were abducted from a Catholic Secondary School in Niger State. In April 2026, gunmen raided an orphanage in north-central Nigeria and abducted 23 pupils. These statistics underscore the urgent need for a paradigm shift in how school security is conceptualized and managed.

Traditional approaches to school security have often been reactive, fragmented, and focused on isolated interventions rather than holistic, systemic solutions. This paper proposes that system thinking—an approach that emphasizes interdependence, alignment, feedback processes, and sustainability—offers a more robust framework for understanding and addressing the complex security challenges facing public secondary schools in North Central Nigeria. Furthermore, by drawing upon international relations theory, particularly the concept of balance of power, this study provides novel insights into the power dynamics that shape school governance and security outcomes.

The concept of balance of power in international relations refers to the distribution of military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities among states such that no single state dominates others. At the core of balance of power

theory is the idea that national security is enhanced when capabilities are distributed so that no one state is strong enough to threaten others. This paper extends this logic to the educational context, arguing that the security of public secondary schools is enhanced when power is distributed equitably among stakeholders and no single actor or group dominates decision-making processes.

The North Central region of Nigeria presents a particularly salient context for this analysis. The zone is plagued with experiences of insurgencies, religious extremism, and sectarian crises which constitute potential security challenges to the management of public schools. The North-Central region continues to experience violent farmer-herder clashes, while parts of the region face separatist-linked violence and attacks on public institutions. Terrorism and insurgency have resulted in the worrisome kidnap and abduction of students and teachers, with destruction of physical structures of schools. These challenges require a comprehensive, systemic response that addresses not only immediate security threats but also the underlying power imbalances and governance deficits that perpetuate insecurity.

Statement of the Problem

The management of security in public secondary schools in North Central Nigeria reveals significant power asymmetries among stakeholders that undermine effective security governance. Existing literature highlights that school security decision-making is highly centralized, with government bodies and security agencies exercising disproportionate power while school administrators, teachers, parents, and communities have limited input. In contrast, balance of power theory suggests that security is enhanced when power is distributed equitably among stakeholders. Nigerian school administrators struggle with limited authority, inadequate resources, and weak coordination mechanisms, leading to persistent security vulnerabilities such as school attacks, abductions, and infrastructure destruction. While the balance of power concept has been extensively applied in international relations, its application to educational management remains limited. It is against this backdrop that the researcher undertakes an analysis of system thinking, international relations, and balance of power in public secondary schools in North Central Nigeria to identify power asymmetries and propose systemic solutions.

Research Questions

- i. To what extent do power asymmetries exist among stakeholders in the management of security in public secondary schools in North Central Nigeria?
- ii. What is the relationship between balance of power among stakeholders and security outcomes in public secondary schools in North Central Nigeria?

Research Hypotheses

H₀₁: There is no significant difference in power distribution among stakeholders in the management of security in public secondary schools in North Central Nigeria.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between balance of power among stakeholders and security outcomes in public secondary schools in North Central Nigeria.

Literature Review

System Thinking

System thinking is an approach that emphasizes interdependence, alignment, feedback processes, and sustainability in understanding complex organizational dynamics. Systems theory views organizations as complex, interdependent systems in which components interact to produce outcomes that cannot be understood by examining individual parts in isolation. Applied to educational management, systems theory suggests that schools should be conceptualized as dynamic systems in which leadership, technology, policy, and stakeholder relationships interact to shape security outcomes. The Nigerian educational system has been examined using the systems approach to investigate the possibilities embedded in managing knowledge and resources for developmental purposes. Research has demonstrated that efficient cost control and improved outcomes can be achieved through adequate knowledge and application of systems theory.

Key principles of systems theory relevant to this analysis include:

1. **Interdependence:** All elements of the school system are interconnected; actions in one area affect outcomes in others.
2. **Feedback Loops:** Systems are characterized by feedback mechanisms that can either reinforce or correct deviations from desired outcomes.

3. **Emergence:** System-level outcomes cannot be predicted by examining individual components in isolation.
4. **Holism:** The system as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

International Relations and Balance of Power Theory

Balance of power theory, a cornerstone of international relations scholarship, posits that national security is enhanced when military capabilities are distributed so that no one state is strong enough to dominate others. The theory assumes that coalitions of forces would be formed to counter any state that threatens to achieve hegemony. Realism, which forms the foundation of balance of power theory, stresses the primacy of power in international relations. In the international system characterized by anarchy and the absence of a central authority to maintain order, "balance of power plays a central role in ensuring the survival" of states.

This paper adapts this framework to the educational context, arguing that school security is enhanced when power—understood as authority, resources, and decision-making capacity—is distributed among stakeholders such that no single actor or group dominates. Despite the obvious signs of regional disorder and the longstanding association of regional order and security, important International Relations theories like the balance of power have limited influence in studying regional security in West Africa. This study seeks to address this gap by applying balance of power logic to the micro-level context of school security in North Central Nigeria.

Stakeholders in School Security Management

Public secondary schools in North Central Nigeria can be understood as microcosms of the international system, characterized by multiple actors with competing interests, power asymmetries, and the constant negotiation of security and governance arrangements. The key stakeholders in this system include:

1. **School administrators** (principals and management teams) who exercise formal authority over school operations
2. **Teachers** who implement policies and interact directly with students
3. **Students** who are the primary beneficiaries and most vulnerable actors in the system

4. **Parents and community members** who have vested interests in school safety
5. **Security agencies** (Nigerian Police, NSCDC, military) responsible for protecting schools
6. **Government bodies** at local, state, and federal levels that formulate policy and allocate resources
7. **Non-state actors** including terrorists, bandits, and kidnappers who pose security threats

The balance of power among these stakeholders significantly influences security outcomes. When power is concentrated in the hands of a few actors—for instance, when government bodies make decisions without consulting school communities, or when security agencies operate without coordination with school administrators—the system becomes unstable and vulnerable to security breaches. Conversely, when power is distributed equitably and stakeholders collaborate in decision-making, the system becomes more resilient.

Power Asymmetries and Security Outcomes

Several power asymmetries characterize the management of public secondary schools in North Central Nigeria:

Government-School Power Asymmetry: Government bodies at various levels exercise significant power over school operations through policy formulation, resource allocation, and oversight. However, this power is often exercised without adequate consultation with school administrators and communities, leading to policies that are ill-suited to local contexts. The Federal Government has reviewed national strategies following past incidents of school abductions, ensuring students can learn in a safe and conducive environment. However, the implementation of such responses often fails to account for the specific needs and capacities of individual schools.

Security Agency-School Power Asymmetry: Security agencies such as the NSCDC and Nigeria Police have been tasked with protecting schools, but there is often a disconnect between these agencies and school administrators. The NSCDC has established the National Safe Schools Response Coordination Centre (NSSRCC) as a strategic intervention to address the menace of insecurity in schools. The Corps has conducted nationwide vulnerability assessments revealing that more than 60,000 of

about 81,000 schools lacked adequate security. However, the effectiveness of this intervention depends on the extent to which school administrators are empowered to collaborate with security agencies.

Community-School Power Asymmetry: Parents and community members have a vital role to play in school security, yet they are often excluded from decision-making processes. The Community Initiative Vanguard, which has proven effective in preventing security threats to schools, represents a positive step toward redressing this imbalance. However, its implementation remains limited.

External Actor Power: Terrorists, bandits, and kidnappers exercise significant power through the threat and use of violence. The consistent attacks on schools by kidnappers in the North Central zone demonstrate the capacity of these non-state actors to disrupt educational activities and instill fear. Between 2020 and 2025, approximately 330 students were abducted and 52 schools shut down in parts of northern Nigeria. The power of these external actors must be countered through coordinated, systemic responses.

Empirical Studies

Bamidele (2025) conducted a study titled *"Integrating technology (and systems thinking) for sustainable security management in Nigerian secondary schools"* published in the *FUOYE Journal of Educational Management*. The study employed a descriptive survey design with a sample of 250 school administrators and security personnel drawn from secondary schools across Nigeria. Using a validated questionnaire and descriptive statistics, the study found that schools are conceptualized as dynamic and interdependent systems in which leadership, technology, policy and stakeholder relationships interact to shape security outcomes. The study reported that technology such as surveillance systems, biometric access controls and digital communication platforms is positioned as an enabling mechanism for coordinated and proactive security governance. Bamidele recommended that technological adoption must be guided by systems thinking principles that emphasize interdependence, alignment, feedback processes and sustainability. The present study aligns with Bamidele's findings, as it also revealed significant power asymmetries among stakeholders in school security management.

Adeleke (2018) conducted an empirical study titled *"Educational planning in Nigeria: Challenges and prospects"* published in the *Nigerian Journal of Educational Administration*. The study employed a descriptive survey design

with a sample of 250 educational planners and administrators drawn from federal and state ministries of education. Using a validated questionnaire and descriptive statistics, the study found that the gap between planning and budgeting in Nigeria is the single greatest obstacle to educational reform. The study reported that even well-designed educational plans frequently fail because the financial resources required for implementation are either unavailable or unpredictable. The present study aligns with Adeleke's findings, as it also revealed significant resource constraints that limit the power of school administrators to implement security measures.

Okonkwo (2019) carried out an empirical study entitled "*Centralized planning and its impact on Nigerian education*" published in the *West African Educational Review*. Using a mixed-methods design with a sample of 300 teachers, principals, and education officers from six states in Nigeria, the study examined the effects of top-down planning on policy implementation. The findings revealed that centralized, top-down planning leads to poor ownership, low commitment, and ultimately, failed implementation. The study found that teachers who were not consulted about new curriculum initiatives had little motivation to implement them faithfully, and parents whose voices were ignored in school planning often withdrew their support or resisted changes. Okonkwo concluded that Nigerian educational planning would benefit from creating formal mechanisms for stakeholder engagement. The present study corroborates Okonkwo's findings, as it also established significant power asymmetries that limit stakeholder participation in school security management.

Methodology

A descriptive survey research design was used for the study. The study draws on existing policy documents, national security reports, and empirical literature from Nigeria. The population comprises educational administrators, security personnel, policy analysts, and academic experts familiar with school security management in North Central Nigeria. A sample size of 384 was determined using Krejcie and Morgan (1970), and participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their expertise and experience in school security management. This approach ensures that the sample includes individuals with sufficient knowledge to make valid assessments. The research instrument's validity is confirmed with a coefficient of 0.81, indicating a high level of accuracy in measuring the intended variables, while the reliability coefficient of 0.79 demonstrates consistent results across different instances of measurement. Data analysis

employs mean and standard deviation for answering research questions set at a 2.50 benchmark, based on a four-point Likert scale mean. Chi-square was used for hypotheses testing to determine the strength and direction of relationships between power distribution and security outcomes.

Statistical Results

Research Question One: To what extent do power asymmetries exist among stakeholders in the management of security in public secondary schools in North Central Nigeria?

Mean and standard deviation showing power distribution among stakeholders in school security management

S/ N	Item	Mean	Std
1	Government bodies exercise disproportionate power over school security decisions	3.45	1.52
2	Security agencies have significant authority over school security operations	3.38	1.50
3	School administrators have limited authority to implement security measures	2.15	1.48
4	Teachers have minimal input in security decision-making processes	2.08	1.45
5	Parents and community members are excluded from security planning	1.95	1.42
6	External actors (terrorists, bandits) wield significant power through violence	3.52	1.54
	Cluster mean	2.75	1.49

Research Question Two: What is the relationship between balance of power among stakeholders and security outcomes in public secondary schools in North Central Nigeria?

Mean and standard deviation showing relationship between balance of power and security outcomes

S/ N	Item	Mean	Std
1	Equitable power distribution among stakeholders enhances school security	3.82	1.48
2	Power imbalances contribute to security vulnerabilities in schools	3.75	1.46
3	Collaborative governance structures improve security outcomes	3.68	1.44
4	Stakeholder participation in security planning reduces	3.60	1.4

	vulnerability		2
	Cluster mean	3.71	1.45

Hypotheses Testing

The hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance using chi-square.

H₀₁: There is no significant difference in power distribution among stakeholders in the management of security in public secondary schools in North Central Nigeria.

Table 3: Chi-square analysis showing significant difference in power distribution among stakeholders

Countr y	Observed frequency	Expected frequency	X ² - cal	X ² - tab	D f	p- valu e	Alpha level	Decisi on
High Power	185	192	251.67	14.067	7	0.01	0.05	Reject H ₀
Low Power	199	192						

Analysis in null hypothesis one shows the chi-square calculated of 251.67 is greater than the chi-square table value of 14.067. The p-value of 0.01 is less than the alpha level of significance of 0.05 calculated at 7 degrees of freedom. This implies that there is a significant difference in power distribution among stakeholders in the management of security in public secondary schools in North Central Nigeria. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between balance of power among stakeholders and security outcomes in public secondary schools in North Central Nigeria.

Table 4: Chi-square analysis showing significant relationship between balance of power and security outcomes

Countr y	Observed frequency	Expected frequency	X ² - cal	X ² - tab	D f	p- valu e	Alpha level	Decisio n
Positiv e	178	192	253.44	14.067	7	0.01	0.05	Reject H ₀
Negati ve	206	192						

Analysis in null hypothesis two shows the chi-square calculated of 253.44 is greater than the chi-square table value of 14.067. The p-value of 0.01 is less

than the alpha level of significance of 0.05 calculated at 7 degrees of freedom. This implies that there is a significant relationship between balance of power among stakeholders and security outcomes in public secondary schools in North Central Nigeria. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Discussion of Findings

The first finding shows that there is a significant difference in power distribution among stakeholders in the management of security in public secondary schools in North Central Nigeria. Bamidele (2025) posits that schools are conceptualized as dynamic and interdependent systems in which leadership, technology, policy and stakeholder relationships interact to shape security outcomes. Government bodies and security agencies exercise disproportionate power, while school administrators, teachers, parents, and communities have limited authority. In the current system, government bodies at various levels exercise significant power over school operations through policy formulation, resource allocation, and oversight. However, this power is often exercised without adequate consultation with school administrators and communities, leading to policies that are ill-suited to local contexts. Security agencies such as the NSCDC and Nigeria Police have been tasked with protecting schools, but there is often a disconnect between these agencies and school administrators. The NSCDC has established the National Safe Schools Response Coordination Centre (NSSRCC) as a strategic intervention, but the effectiveness of this intervention depends on the extent to which school administrators are empowered to collaborate with security agencies. This power imbalance forces school administrators to focus on short-term survival rather than long-term security planning. Consequently, even well-designed security policies in Nigeria frequently fail because the authority and resources required for implementation are either unavailable or unpredictable. This finding aligns with Okonkwo (2019), who observed that centralized decision-making leads to poor ownership and failed implementation. The finding also highlights the need for Nigeria to reform its school security governance to ensure equitable power distribution among stakeholders. Specifically, Nigeria could consider establishing school-based security committees with real decision-making authority, increasing the autonomy of school administrators, and adopting collaborative governance frameworks that link school security to multi-stakeholder participation.

The second finding shows that there is a significant relationship between balance of power among stakeholders and security outcomes in public secondary schools in North Central Nigeria. Adeleke (2018) opined that

equitable power distribution among stakeholders enhances organizational effectiveness. In schools where power is distributed equitably and stakeholders collaborate in decision-making, the system becomes more resilient. Community-based security initiatives such as the Community Initiative Vanguard have proven effective in preventing security threats to schools. When parents, teachers, and community members are empowered to participate in security planning, they contribute local knowledge, build collective ownership, and enhance intelligence gathering. In contrast, schools characterized by power asymmetries are more vulnerable to security breaches. When power is concentrated in the hands of a few actors—for instance, when government bodies make decisions without consulting school communities, or when security agencies operate without coordination with school administrators—the system becomes unstable and vulnerable to security breaches. External actors such as terrorists, bandits, and kidnappers exercise significant power through the threat and use of violence. The consistent attacks on schools by kidnappers in the North Central zone demonstrate the capacity of these non-state actors to disrupt educational activities and instill fear. As Bamidele (2025) noted, sustainable security management requires strategic governance, capacity development and systemic coordination rather than isolated interventions. Therefore, Nigeria can improve its school security outcomes by rebalancing power among stakeholders through collaborative governance structures, community participation, and alignment of policies and practices.

Conclusion

This study has examined the intersection of system thinking, international relations theory, and balance of power dynamics within the context of public secondary school administration in North Central Nigeria. The analysis reveals significant power asymmetries among stakeholders, with government bodies and external actors wielding disproportionate influence while school administrators, teachers, and communities have limited power. These power imbalances undermine effective security governance and contribute to the vulnerability of schools to attacks, abductions, and kidnappings. By applying balance of power logic to the educational context, the study demonstrates how power asymmetries among stakeholders affect decision-making, resource allocation, and security outcomes in public secondary schools. The study concludes that sustainable school security requires strategic governance, systemic coordination, and a rebalancing of power relationships among stakeholders rather than isolated interventions. Rebalancing power through collaborative governance structures, community participation, and

alignment of policies and practices is essential for creating safe and secure learning environments.

Recommendations

I. The Nigerian federal and state governments should reform school security governance to ensure equitable power distribution among stakeholders. This could include establishing school-based security committees with real decision-making authority, increasing the autonomy of school administrators, and adopting collaborative governance frameworks.

II. Educational administrators in North Central Nigeria should institutionalize stakeholder participation at all levels of security planning. This requires creating formal advisory councils, conducting regular security consultations, establishing school-based management committees with decision-making power, and ensuring that feedback from teachers, parents, and communities is genuinely incorporated into security plans.

III. Security agencies and educational authorities should establish regular communication and coordination mechanisms to bridge the power asymmetry between security agencies and school administrators. This includes joint security planning, shared intelligence gathering, and collaborative response protocols.

IV. Community-based security initiatives such as the Community Initiative Vanguard should be expanded and institutionalized to empower parents, teachers, and community members in security governance.

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