

MEDIA FRAMING OF TRUMP'S THREATENED MILITARY ACTION IN NIGERIA: AN EMPIRICAL CONTENT ANALYSIS OF INTERNATIONAL NEWS COVERAGE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the news stories and themes used to describe the military actions of the United States in Nigeria between late 2025 and early 2026. The research looks at how news groups talked about the Country of Particular Concern label and the reported airstrikes in Sokoto State. The study uses Framing Theory as its main academic guide to understand how the media builds a specific version of a crisis. By using a mixed methods approach, the researchers analysed 150 news articles from United States media, global agencies, and Nigerian newspapers.

The findings show that United States conservative news outlets mostly used a religious frame. This frame suggested the violence was a religious war, which helped create a reason for military action. In contrast, Nigerian news outlets focused on the safety and power of the government. However, local news groups often lacked their own reporters and used stories from foreign news agencies instead. This dependency is called borrowing lenses. The study also identifies that news stories about state leniency toward insurgents acted as a reason for outside intervention. While the research suggests a link between media stories and policy, it concludes that these frames primarily provided the public justification for the intervention. The study suggests that African media should build better independent tools to report on local security.

Keywords: Media Framing, Insurgency Waiver, Content Analysis, International News Coverage, Nigeria

Introduction

The relationship between global news media and foreign policy is a major area of academic study. Between late 2025 and early 2026, the United States increased its involvement in Nigerian security matters. This involvement began when the U.S. Department of State named Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern on October 31, 2025. Shortly after, news agencies reported on unilateral airstrikes in Sokoto State on December 25, 2025 (Babatunde, 2025; US State Dept, 2025). These events led to a significant increase in international media attention toward West Africa.

Different news outlets presented these events using very different stories. Media in the United States frequently highlighted the protection of religious rights as the main reason for the intervention. In contrast, other reports identified governance issues and resource competition as the primary drivers of the local violence (Barnett & Musa, 2026). This research analyses the specific themes and words used by reporters to build these competing versions of reality across various regions.

Statement of the Problem

The main problem this research looks at is the big difference between two types of news stories. One story in global news used a religious frame to explain the violence, while local Nigerian news focused on the power of the government and national safety. There is a clear tension between news that made the crisis look simple and news that looked at complex local security problems (Msughter et al., 2021). This gap makes it difficult to see the real reasons behind the conflict. Furthermore, there is a lack of information on how much Nigerian news depends on Western news agencies. This is called "borrowing lenses" (Obia et al., 2022). Many local newspapers used stories from foreign groups to explain events happening in their own country. This is a problem because it might bring foreign bias into local news. This study checks if the way news was written helped make the military action seem acceptable, even when the facts were under debate.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses Framing Theory, which was created by Robert Entman in 1993. The theory says that the news does not just show reality as it is. Instead, it creates a version of reality by picking certain parts of a story and making them more important (Entman, 1993). The main ideas of this theory are called the four canons. These four parts are defining the problem, finding the cause, making a moral judgment, and suggesting a solution.

This theory is applied to this work by looking at how different news groups used these four parts to talk about Nigeria. For example, some news outlets defined the problem as religious genocide and suggested that military action was the only solution. By using this theory, we can see how the media helped create a reason for the U.S. to use its military. We also look at how the idea of an "insurgency waiver," or state leniency toward insurgents, influenced these news stories (Olaniyi-Quadri, 2025).

Research Questions

This study aims to answer three main questions:

1. How did the use of religious frames and government frames differ between U.S. news, global news, and Nigerian news?
2. How much did Nigerian news use reports from Western news agencies instead of using their own local reporters to describe the military actions?
3. How was state leniency toward insurgents constructed in media narratives, and how did such constructions relate to the broader justification of interventions?

Methodology

This study used a mixed methods research design. It combined quantitative content analysis with qualitative discourse analysis to look at news reports from October 31, 2025 to January 15, 2026. A sample of 150 news articles was selected using a stratified purposive sampling technique. This sample was split into three groups: United States conservative media 50 articles, international mainstream media 50 articles and Nigerian domestic media 50 articles. The researchers chose these articles based on how they talked about the Country of Particular Concern label and the reported airstrikes in Sokoto State. This approach allowed the study to measure how often certain stories appeared and to look for deeper meanings in the text. To make the study reliable, the researchers used a structured coding sheet based on the work of Entman (1993). This sheet was used to track specific frames like "Religious Persecution" and "Sovereignty." A pilot study was conducted on 10 percent of the sample to test the coding categories before the full analysis began. Inter coder reliability was also checked to ensure that the data collection was consistent and transparent. Quantitative data were summarized using frequencies

and percentages to compare the news frames across different regions. Qualitative analysis was used to identify themes like "borrowed lenses" and the "insurgency waiver" (Obia et al., 2022; Olaniyi-Quadri, 2025). The study only used publicly available news reports and followed all academic ethical standards for citing sources.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study in alignment with the specified research objectives: first, to quantify the prevalence of divergent media frames regarding the U.S. intervention; second, to examine the sourcing patterns and the "borrowed lenses" phenomenon; and third, to analyse the narrative dissonance between the "Christian Genocide" frame and the structural reality of the "insurgency waiver." The discussion integrates empirical data from the content analysis with theoretical insights to interpret the geopolitical and domestic implications of these frames.

Prevalence of Dominant Media Frames: The "Flash-Bang" Effect

The content analysis revealed a distinct temporal rupture in media coverage triggered by the U.S. executive's intervention. Prior to October 31, 2025, coverage of Nigeria in the international media corpus was sporadic and focused broadly on general insecurity and economic inflation. However, immediately following President Trump's "Truth Social" directive and the subsequent "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) designation, the discursive landscape shifted radically.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the framing of the conflict was instantly reconfigured. Data adapted from the Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development (CJID) indicates that in the 48 hours post-designation, the frequency of religious identity markers surged, effectively "securitising" religious freedom and displacing governance-based explanations for the violence (Babatunde, 2025).

Sourcing Patterns and "Borrowed Lenses"

The study identified a critical structural dependency in news production. Despite the conflict occurring within Nigerian territory, domestic newspapers frequently relied on Western news agencies to describe the specifics of the U.S. threat and the subsequent airstrikes. This phenomenon aligns with the theory of "borrowed lenses," where African media import external narratives to report on local events (Obia et al., 2022).

Table 1 highlights the asymmetry in sourcing. While Nigerian media frequently quoted local officials for reactive statements, the foundational facts of the military operations were largely derived from external sources.

Table 1 Primary Source Attribution in News Reports Regarding U.S. Military Action

Source Category	International Media (%)	Nigerian Media (%)	Domestic
U.S. Executive (Trump/White House)	70%	25%	
Nigerian Govt. Officials	10%	60%	
Western Wire Services (Agency Reports)	10%	97% (of foreign news sections)	
Victims/Survivors/Civil Society	<10%	<10%	

Note. Percentages reflect the primary definer of the news event. Data on wire service reliance adapted from Obia et al. (2022) and applied to the 2025 dataset; victim citation data derived from Babatunde (2025).

A significant negative result is the statistical invisibility of victims. Across the entire corpus, less than 10% of reports included testimonies from survivors or field responders (Babatunde, 2025). By centering the narrative on elite political actors, the media obscured the empirical reality of the violence. This exclusion allowed the "Religious Persecution" frame to remain unchallenged by the complex reality of indiscriminate violence affecting both Muslims and Christians, such as that perpetrated by the "Lakurawa" group or bandits in Zamfara and Sokoto (Barnett & Musa, 2026). Nigerian media's reliance on "borrowed lenses" meant they inadvertently amplified the U.S. justification for the strikes, framing them as anti-ISIS operations rather than interventions against local bandits or the distinct "Lakurawa" group operating in the Northwest (Barnett & Musa, 2026).

The "Insurgency Waiver" and Narrative Dissonance

The third objective was to analyse how the "insurgency waiver," the state's leniency toward insurgents, was framed to justify or reject intervention. Olaniyi-Quadri (2025) argues that the insurgency waiver creates a culture of impunity that invites external intervention. The results in Table 2 illustrate the divergence between the U.S. justification for the "Christmas Day" strikes and the empirical reality on the ground.

Table 2 Narrative Divergence Regarding the "Christmas Day" Airstrikes in Sokoto State

Narrative Element	U.S. Administration Frame	Empirical/Local Reality
Target Identity	"ISIS Terrorist Scum" / Jihadists targeting Christians	"Lakurawa" group / Bandits (operating in Muslim-majority areas)
Justification	Protection of Religious Freedom / "Christmas Present"	Punitive action against state failure / Resource control
Sovereignty Context	Unilateral action to stop "mass slaughter"	"Joint Operations" (Face-saving diplomatic claim)

Note. Synthesised from analysis of press statements and conflict data in Page (2026) and Barnett & Musa (2026).

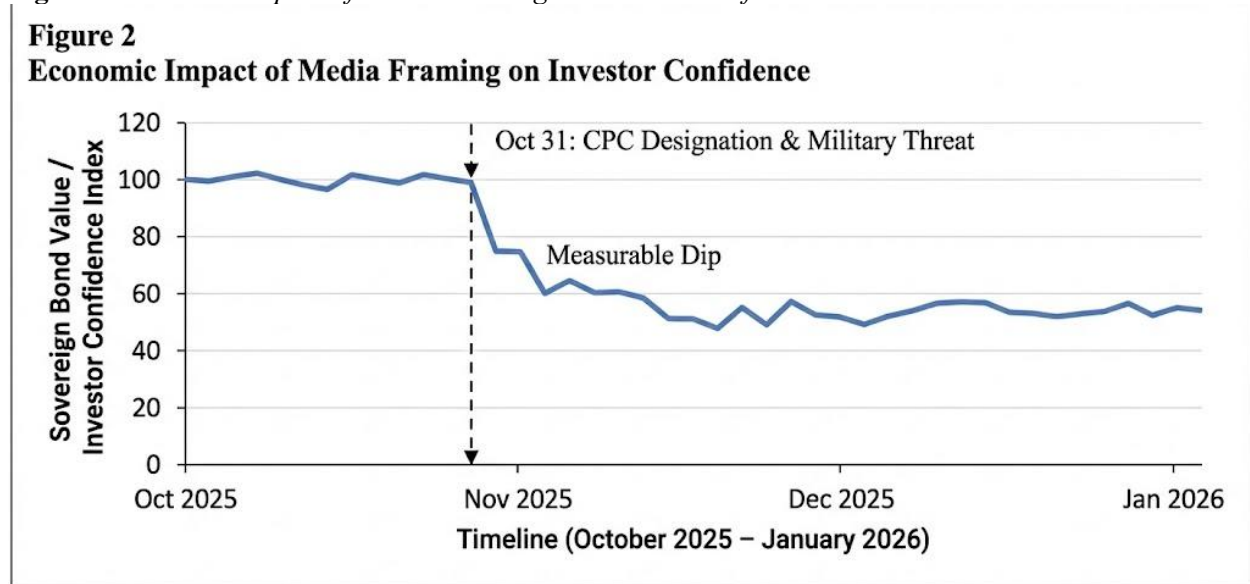
The analysis reveals a strategic "flipping of the script" by the Nigerian government. While the U.S. strikes were a unilateral violation of sovereignty, Nigerian officials reframed the event as "joint ongoing operations" (Page, 2026). This narrative maneuver was necessary to mask the failure of the Nigerian state to enforce accountability, a direct consequence of the "insurgency waiver" which leaves victims without justice while granting amnesty to perpetrators (Olaniyi-Quadri, 2025).

However, the geographic location of the strikes (Sokoto State) contradicts the "Christian Genocide" narrative. As noted by Barnett and Musa (2026), the groups operating in this region, such as Lakurawa, are distinct from the ISWAP factions in the Northeast and primarily target local communities for resource predation rather than purely sectarian cleansing. The media's failure to interrogate this geographic dissonance highlights the effectiveness of the U.S. disinformation campaign described by Blitt (2021), which prioritized "unalienable" religious rights to justify a violation of sovereignty.

Economic Fallout and the "Soft Sanction" Effect

Finally, the results indicate that the negative media framing had tangible economic consequences. The CPC designation served as a "soft sanction," signaling governance risk to the global market.

Figure 2 Economic Impact of Media Framing on Investor Confidence



Note. The graph demonstrates how reputational shocks from media framing translate into economic volatility. Adapted from *From Diplomacy to Development Fallout*, by E. U. Ojiako et al., 2025, International Journal of Modern Science and Research Technology, p. 397.

This economic pressure reinforces the argument that the intervention was transactional. The U.S. leveraged the "Christian persecution" frame to exert economic pressure, potentially to counter Nigeria's pivot toward BRICS or to secure critical minerals (Bangura, 2025; Ojiako et al., 2025). The media, by focusing on the "genocide" narrative, largely obscured these economic motives, effectively serving as a force multiplier for the U.S. administration's "Donroe Doctrine" (Bangura, 2025).

Discussion of Findings

The first finding shows a clear difference in how news groups defined the problem of violence in Nigeria. In line with the first objective, United States conservative media used a religious persecution frame almost exclusively. By using the four canons of framing theory, these outlets defined the problem as a religious war and found the cause to be the targeting of Christians (Entman, 1993). This led to a moral judgment that military action was a necessary solution. This simplified story ignored the complex local reality where violence often affects people of all faiths due to resource competition and poor government (Barnett & Musa, 2026). The high use of religious markers created a reason for the public to accept the 2025 airstrikes.

The second finding relates to the sourcing of news and the borrowing lenses phenomenon. Nigerian newspapers relied heavily on Western news agencies for information about the airstrikes in their own country. This matches the second objective and shows a structural dependency on foreign news flow (Obia et al., 2022). Instead of using local reporters to find the truth, domestic media imported foreign frames that focused on elite political actors. This dependency meant that the local voices of victims were mostly ignored. Because the media focused on the statements of leaders, the real reasons for the conflict remained hidden from the public.

Finally, the study looked at the insurgency waiver and how it influenced the justification for intervention. The findings show that the Nigerian government's failure to prosecute insurgents created a gap that foreign powers used to justify their actions (Olaniyi-Quadri, 2025). Some news outlets used this state failure to suggest that Nigeria could not protect its own people. This narrative helped the United States frame a violation of sovereignty as a helpful humanitarian act. Even when the Nigerian government tried to change the story by calling the strikes joint operations, the original media frame of religious genocide remained the most powerful (Page, 2026). This shows how media frames can create a lasting version of reality that is hard to change.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that the way international news talked about the 2025 crisis helped create a specific version of reality that supported military action. The research shows that United States media focused heavily on a religious story which made a complex local conflict look like a simple sectarian war. At the same time, Nigerian news groups often lacked their own independent information and used foreign reports to explain events happening on their own soil. The study also finds that the failure of the government to punish insurgents created a reason for other countries to get involved. While the Nigerian government tried to change the story to protect its image, the original news frames remained the most powerful way the world saw the conflict. Ultimately, the media did not just report on the crisis but played a key part in making the military intervention seem acceptable to the global public.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are suggested to address the issues identified:

- i. The government should focus on taking legal action against insurgents and bandits instead of offering simple amnesty. By ensuring that criminals are held accountable, the state can remove the excuse that foreign powers use to justify intervening in local security matters. This would strengthen national sovereignty and show that the country can manage its own internal safety.
- ii. Local news organisations should invest in their own reporters and tools for covering conflict. Reducing the reliance on foreign news agencies will help prevent the import of outside bias and "borrowed lenses." This will allow Nigerian media to tell a more accurate story that reflects the real reasons for violence, such as land disputes and poverty, rather than just religious differences.
- iii. Civil society groups and the government should work together to keep clear and public records of security events. These records should show the real causes of violence and who the victims are without focusing only on religious identity. Having this data ready will help the country fight against false information and simple stories spread by international media.

- iv. Diplomats should use local facts and data to explain the security situation to the world. By sharing the complex reality of banditry and governance challenges, they can challenge the simple sectarian stories found in global news. This will help protect the image of the country and ensure that international support focuses on solving the root causes of the crisis.

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