

Trump Doctrine and Implications of Nigeria's Designation as Country of Particular Concern (CPC)

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Abstract

Driven by the Trump doctrine of America's first, the United States of America designated Nigeria as a country of particular concern in October 2025, alleging the persecution of Nigerians by radical Islamic and terrorist groups. The US issued threats of direct military attacks and on 25th December, 2026, proceeded to strike on terrorists' hideouts in Sokoto State. This paper argues that while international law as provided in the UN Charter has expressly prohibited the external intervention of one state in the internal affairs of another, international security concerns especially since the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US and the ensuing war against terror has opened a new caveat for intervention in the internal affairs of another state on humanitarian grounds. Drawing on secondary data and anchored on realist theory of international relations, it argues that the designation of Nigeria as a country of particular concern was justified given the persecution of Christians by radical Islamic groups across the country. It establishes that the designation of Nigeria as CPC has three main implications for Nigeria. The CPC status is a confirmation of the failure of the Nigerian government to protect the lives and property of Christians and other Nigerian citizens. The United States and Nigeria are cooperating on security. The US is leveraging its security support to achieve its national interests defined in terms of the search for natural resources and the sale of arms to Nigeria. This article argues that the benefits of United States security intervention in Nigeria outweigh whatever economic and political benefits that are accruable to the US. The intervention is therefore a humanitarian gesture and is deemed to be permissible by international humanitarian law. It concludes that sustained strategic and effective defence cooperation between Nigeria is crucial to ending the persecution of Nigerians and other citizens, and thereby engendering a climate of sustainable development.

Introduction

After decades of military rule, Nigeria witnessed the successful restoration of its democratic system of government in 1999. The decades of military rule had been characterized by political repression, the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil war (1967-1970), gross violations of human rights, economic crisis resulting from the wasteful and corruptive management of oil revenues, and ultimately, unprecedented socioeconomic underdevelopment marked by poverty, social and economic inequality, and unemployment. As a result of these plethora of development challenges, military rule hitherto hailed as "corrective" or "redemptive" regimes, attracted nation-wide opprobrium and international condemnation. Local and international forces coalesced in mounting popular pressures for democratic resurgence, and this eventuated in the return to democracy in 1999 amidst a nation-wide euphoria underlined by lofty

expectations. Security of lives and property generally being the obligation of every leviathan, the primary duty of the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as enshrined in its ground norm is the security and welfare of the people (The 1999 Constitution, Federal republic of Nigeria).

In translating Nigeria's normative security and developmental commitment into reality, successive Nigerian presidencies from Chief Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007), Umaru Musa Yar Adua (2007-2010), Goodluck Ebelle Jonathan (2010-2015), Muhammadu Buhari (2015-2023) and Bola Ahmed Tinubu (2023-Date) all concerned themselves with the security and welfare of their fellow citizens. However, Nigeria has continued to be plagued by persistent systemic insecurities that have negatively impacted the welfare of the people. Nigeria has experienced ethno-religious conflicts, land conflicts, and communal conflicts. Other forms of insecurity are Niger Delta militancy and economic sabotage, armed banditry, Fulani herdsman violence, abductions, militancy and Islamic terrorism perpetrated by Islamic armed groups such as Boko Haram, Miyetti Allah Kauta Hore, the Islamic State West African Province and Ansaru. These radical Islamic groups are affiliated to international terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Persistent, targeted, calculated armed violence Has resulted in the persecution or genocidal killing of Christians in the face of government incapacity or insensitivity. Armed violence by radical Islamic groups resulted in monumental loss of lives, attacks on churches, schools and hospitals, violations of human rights, wanton destruction of farms and farm produce, forced displacement of people from their indigenous and ancestral communities, and the strangulation of economic development. This motivated the United States to designate Nigeria as country of particular concern. The issued threats of military attacks in Nigeria if the Nigerian government failed to take decisive actions to stop the killings of Christians. Following the designation, the US carried out a militarily on terrorists' hideouts in Sokoto. This study examines the implications of the US designation of Nigeria as a country of particular concern.

The Trump Doctrine

This section discusses the Trump Doctrine as the United States foreign policy and the driving force of the designation of Nigeria as country of particular concern. Therefore, it is important to note that a country's foreign policy is the compass of its inter-state relations. This is because inter-state relations are entered into by states to achieve their objectives defined as national interests. Foreign policy is the instrument through which states articulate and pursue their national interests. It is mainly because of this that this discourse dwells on the trump doctrine. The Trump doctrine; a foreign policy enunciated by Donald J. Trump, the 45th and 47th President of the United States of America is a strategic US foreign policy that has placed "America First" in all its domestic and foreign affairs. By putting America first in domestic and international affairs, Trump doctrine seeks to make America great again following years of its perceived political and economic decline in global reckoning, especially when viewed against the surging power of the Peoples Republic of China in the 21st century. From the first trump administration (2017-2021), to the Second trump administration, the trump doctrine has advocated American nationalism (Wojczewski, 2020) that the valorizes nation-state sovereignty and populism. Humiro (2024) has pointed out that the first principle of Trumpism is the priority it places on sovereignty as a means to prosperity, human rights and democracy. At the United Nations General Assembly on September 19, 2017, Donald Trump underscored the significance of sovereignty:

In foreign affairs, we are renewing this founding principle of sovereignty. Our governments first duty is to its people, to our nations ... to serve their needs, to ensure their safety, to preserve their rights and to defend their values. As President of the United States, I will always, and should always put your countries

first. All responsible leaders have an obligation to serve their own citizens, and the nation-state remains the best vehicle for elevating the human condition (President Donald J. Trump's Address at the UN General Assembly, September, 19, 2017).

Populism is the ideology that champions the interest of American people and community over and above those of the other citizens and states. Nationalism together with populism are embedded or intertwined in the principle of sovereignty all of which place priority on the attainment of national prosperity. This implies that prosperity is possible within the ambit of the state. Thus, America's domestic policy agenda is centered around the prioritization of immigration politics (Weiner, 2020; Humiro, 2024; Rumley & Groeling, 2025), border security (Rumley & Groeling, 2025), national security (Humiro, 2024), protection of vital American industries or the economy (Weinster & Humiro, 2024), and the defense of American identity (Josa, 2019). Rumley and Groeling (2025) is of the view that the defense of American identity entails the preservation of America's cultural, moral and patriotic values through the defense of its borders, culture and Judeo-Christian heritage that informed the construction of American identity over the centuries.

The US foreign policy has been further concerned with territorial expansion, a commitment to conflict resolution, and the strategic use of military force during the Second Trump administration (Rumley & Groeling, 2025). Trumpism is built on a rejection of liberal internationalism that privileges global governance. It is the position of Wojczewski (2020) that Trumpism contests the liberal internationalism that guided U.S foreign policy since World War II and declares it obsolete. Similarly, Gnesotto (2025, p.1) argues that the concern of Trumpism is to abolish the international order that was established in 1945. Thus, Weiner (2020) notes that Trumpism is an anti-liberal ideology. But as Kupchan (2025, p.1) argues, "the United States is opposed to liberal internationalism because power in the international system is shifting from West to East, and North to South, undermining a global order that rested on the West's material and ideological primacy". Thus, as Josa (2017, p.4) observed, "The paradox of the Trump administration's current attack on the liberal order described above is that its greatest promoter has been the United States itself, serving not only a replicated image of its principles and values but also serving vital interests". The rejection of the liberal international order has manifested in the condemnation and rejection by the United States of global governance institutions such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the United Nations and the World Health Organization (WHO). It is characterized by a growing distrust of international institutions, alleging that through liberal internationalism, the U.S enters into alliances with countries that rip the US off through unfair trade practices and defense burden-sharing, and suggests that the promotion of the liberal international order is not in America's interest (Brands, 2017; Ikenberry, 2017). Kupchan (2025) opines that by opposing liberal internationalism, Trumpism perceives the world as polarized into friends and enemies and advocates that nations-states cooperate with only friends, while avoiding their enemies. By so doing, Trumpism is opposed to collective efforts at counter- aggression, international commerce, arresting global warming, preventing nuclear proliferation, and regulating the development and deployment of artificial intelligence. This implies that nation-states relations are transactional as they are predicated on what states can achieve rather than goodwill.

Theoretical framework

Realist Theory of International Relations

The nation-state is the main actor in international relations. Indeed, the international system is the arena

of inter-state politics. Inter-state relations are characterized by cooperation and conflict with the national interest as the main driving force. In the absence of an overarching authority exercising authority over the international system, states tend to pursue essentially their own national interests. The international system is therefore a venue for power struggle among states. Power is therefore the currency of inter-state relations. It is the position of this article that the United States intervention in addressing Nigeria's security challenge by the Donald Trump reflects America's power in the international system which is realist in nature. Thus, it has placed the discussion within the analytical circuit of realist theory of international relations. In classical times, Thucydides (460-400 BCE) and Sun Tzu (544-496 BCE) (544-496 BCE) featured as the first realist thinkers. Realist thinking continued through Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), Otto Von Bismarck (1815–1898). Contemporary theorists of realism include Hans Morgenthau (Morgenthau, 1941), Karl Mearsheimer (Mearsheimer, 1967), and Michael Keohane (Keohane, 1996), among others. The central axiom of realist theory is that States as the main actors in international relations act primarily in pursuit of power and the projection and protection of their national interests. The theory views power as the currency of international relations. The main assumptions of realism are state-centricity, survival, self-help.

The central assumption of realist theory is state-centricity. State-centricity is a realist principle that recognizes the State as the main, unitary and rational actor in international relations. It views States as the major actors in the international system with sovereignty as their distinguishing characteristic. State-centricity also emphasizes the notion of power, the primacy of national security, the economy, and power structures in the international system. These core issues lie at the heart of States' national interests. National interests outweigh ideological commitments to international law, democracy, or human rights. The predominant goal of States in the international system is their own survival.

Realism views the international system as characterized by self-help. It assumes that the international system is anarchic. There is no overarching authority above States in the international system that regulates the workings of the system. The security of a State can only be realized through self-help due to the anarchical nature of the international system. This reality best describes the actions and inactions of United States of America in Africa and Nigeria in particular. In the same context, the US operates on the logic of self-help, seeking to prevent any regional or external power from threatening its hegemony. This can be seen in the US military presence in Nigeria and its intelligence and military support to Nigeria. The foregoing illustrates the fact that the US often adopts policies not necessarily aimed at conflict resolution per se, but at sustaining a balance of power favorable to its national interests through self-help.

The Legal Basis of The United States Intervention in Nigeria

The main purpose of international law which came into effect immediately after World War II, is to prevent the scourge of war and therefore maintain world peace and security. By so doing, international law has categorically prohibited the unilateral use of force between and among states (Nabiebu, Eja, Njong, & Agube, 2025). For instance, Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter, obliges all member states to "refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state" (D'Amato, 2013). Nabiebu et al (2025) is of the view that though this prohibition is not qualified, it is presented as a universal and peremptory norm, a jus cogens obligation from which no derogation is permitted. Under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the UN Security Council deliberately centralized the authority to authorize coercive military action for the purpose of maintaining world peace or constituting a "threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression." The only

explicit exception to this monopoly is articulated in Article 51, which preserves the “inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security” (Azubuike, 2011).

International law is therefore very clear about a country’s intervention in the internal affairs of another country. The position of international law is that a State is prohibited from unilaterally intervening in the internal affairs of another state. This implies that only the United Nations under certain circumstances is permitted to interfere for the purpose of ensuring world peace and security. Collective security is therefore permitted but this can only be authorized by the United Nations Security Council. Yet, in practice, the state-centric nature of international law has been challenged by the realities of civil wars, insurgencies, and, transnational terrorism. Thus, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has played a crucial role in interpreting the provisions of international law, generally adopting a restrictive stance. In the landmark 1986 Case Concerning Military and Paramilitary activities in and against Nicaragua, the ICJ firmly rejected the U.S. argument that its support for the rebels known as the Contras in Nicaragua could be justified as collective self-defense (MacDonald, 1987). The Court held that for self-defense to be lawful, the victim state must have been the subject of an “armed attack” and must declare itself to be under such an attack, requesting assistance. The United States was not a victim and therefore was not justified to act in self-defense. The ICJ further established that the provision of arms or logistical support to rebels, while potentially a prohibited intervention, did not itself constitute an “armed attack” giving rise to a right of self-defense. This high threshold was reaffirmed in the 2005 legal consequences of the construction of a wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory advisory opinion, where the Court stated that Article 51 of the UN charter recognizes the existence of an inherent right of self-defense “in the case of armed attack by one State against another State” (Orakhelashvili, 2006).

From the foregoing, it is clear that in the strict interpretation of the UN Charter, the intervention of one state in the internal affairs of another state is not permitted by international law. However, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 on the United States placed the interpretation of Article 2(4) under unprecedented strain. In response to the Al Qaeda attacks, the United Nations Security Council in Resolution 1368, recognized the “inherent right of individual or collective self-defense” in the context of the 9/11 attacks, implicitly accepting that a large-scale attack by a non-state actor could indeed trigger Article 51 (Schmitt, 2011; Nabiedu et al, 2025). This paved the way for the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, where the Taliban government was deemed to have harbored Al-Qaeda. The US operation garnered widespread international support, largely because the Taliban’s control of Afghan territory created a clear nexus between the non-state actor and the host state (Nabiedu, et al, 2025). Capitalizing on Resolution 1368, and moving beyond the intervention in Afghanistan, the United States’ subsequent “Global War on Terror” under the George Bush administration quickly expanded beyond this relatively clear case. As Nabiedu et al (2025) have stated:

The United States and its allies began to articulate a more expansive doctrine, arguing that the right of self-defense could be invoked against non-state actors located in the territory of states that were “unwilling or unable” to suppress the threat themselves. This doctrine represents a radical departure from the Nicaragua framework. It effectively argues that a state’s inability to control its territory” a failure of domestic sovereignty” can itself become a legal justification for other states to violate its international legal sovereignty through military action. The “unwilling or unable” test has no explicit basis in the text

of the UN Charter or in the statute of the ICJ. It is a doctrine born from state practice and legal advocacy, primarily by the United States and a small number of allies like the United Kingdom and Australia. Bethlehem (2012), a proponent of self-defense, argued that self-defense is a necessary adaptation to the realities of modern terrorism, where threats are networked, borderless, and can emanate from states that lack the capacity or will to confront them. On the contrary, O'Connell and Hakimi (2011) have contended that it is a dangerous and illegal doctrine that eviscerates Article 2(4), turning every weak state into a potential free-fire zone for more powerful neighbors (Hakimi, 2011). It is their further argument that this replaces the objective requirement of an "armed attack" with a subjective assessment of a host state's capabilities and intentions, a standard ripe for abuse. The International Court of Justice has yet to rule directly on the doctrine's validity, leaving it in a legal grey zone" not clearly lawful, yet practiced by powerful states with a degree of acquiescence from parts of the international community. This is the fractured and contentious legal landscape into which Donald Trump's declaration regarding Nigeria is projected. It is a landscape where the clear black-letter law of the Charter is increasingly clouded by claims of security necessity, creating a permission structure for unilateral force that threatens to become the new normal.

Warranting Factors of US Designation of Nigeria as CPC and its Intervention

The primary duty of the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is to ensure the Security and welfare of its citizens (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 as amended). It is also a fundamental duty of the State to harness its natural resource endowments and ensure national prosperity anchored on the principles of social and economic justice. The constitution also guarantees fundamental human rights to citizens among which are the right to freedom of religion, right to life, and right to ownership of property. In addition, Nigeria being a signatory to international human right treaties is saddled with the mandate to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties: the Universal Declaration of Human rights 1948, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights.

Despite the normative foundation of Nigerian democracy, the designation and re-designation of Nigeria as a country of Particular concern finds its cogent explanation in the failure of Nigeria to fulfil its international obligations by protecting human rights generally, and protecting the violations of the religious of Christians. While it is true, as Nabiedu et al (2025) have asserted that Nigeria is not a failed state, it is undoubtedly clear that it is a state with profound governance deficits, severe socioeconomic underdevelopment, and grave and protracted security challenges that have directly resulted in the persecution of Christians by radical Islamic groups proclaiming competing versions of Islamic extremism. Nigeria has witnessed Jihadi violence, armed Fulani terrorist violence, insecurity and persecution of Christians. Recent incidents of armed violence and persecution of Christians can be traced to the outbreak and spread of Boko Haram insurgency in Borno state in 2009 under the command of Mohammed Yusuf (Foucher, 2024; The Kukah Centre, 2023; Open Doors, 2026). Boko Haram is a Salafi-jihadist group fighting for the replacement of the secular Nigerian state with an Islamic one based on a strict compliance to the Sharia law, throughout the country. It operates in the North East of Nigeria, in particular in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe, exerting violence against westerners, Christians and Muslims considered infidels.

Boko It has further expanded its activities in the North-West and in Niger state in the North-Central region. Since its rise in 2009, the Boko Haram insurgency has adversely affected some 15 million people, displaced over two million people and caused an estimated 20 000 to 30 000 deaths (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2023). In 2016 Boko Haram split into two factions: Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'adati wal Jihad (JASJD), led by Abubakar Shekau, and the Islamic State - West Africa (ISWAP), led by Abu Musab al Barnawi. However, this distinction is often not reflected in media reports, which refer to Boko Haram (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2023).

After a brutal crackdown by the Nigerian security forces which resulted in death of Yusuf in 2021, the group re-emerged under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, launching a campaign of astonishing violence marked by mass killings, suicide bombings, abductions, and seizure of territory. Notable cases of abductions include 2014 Chibok schoolgirls" and the use of suicide bombers (Afolabi & Yusuf, 2019). Other terrorist groups that have unleashed human atrocities include the Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP), Fulani militia, Ansaru and Lakaruwa has significantly compromised the security of Nigeria. Protracted terrorist activities have resulted in the situation whereby the Nigerian state is increasingly losing its monopoly on the legitimate use of force as a plethora of armed groups have not waged war against the state but have made attempts to take over parts of the Nigeria territory. The response of the Nigerian state response to insecurity has been multifaceted, but ultimately insufficient to achieve a decisive victory (Nabiedu, et al, 2025). The president Muhammadu government relocated the force headquarters to Maiduguri to strategically position the armed forces to fight the Boko Haram insurgency. The military has launched numerous large-scale operations, such as Operation Lafiya Dole and its successor, Operation Hadin Kai (Abayomi, 2023). These operations have helped the Nigerian State recaptured territory and degrade the groups' conventional capabilities, but it has failed to eradicate the insurgency. The Nigerian Armed Forces while putting in their best to secure the country have been severely hampered by corruption, poor equipment maintenance, and low morale. The operations of security forces have caused serious human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings and torture, which have fueled local grievances and aided insurgent recruitment (Okoye & Adejoh, 2025). Governmental action has not been able to address the root cause or drivers of the conflicts and insecurity in Nigeria such as extreme poverty, competition over access to economic resources such as land and water, lack of economic opportunity, environmental degradation, and weak and unaccountable governance. This has created a resilient insurgency that can retreat into the vast Sambisa Forest or across porous borders into Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, only to re-emerge. The incontestable fact is that the Nigerian state is manifestly failing in responsibility to protect Nigerian Christians right to freedom of worship and right to life. Nigerian have been subjected to gross violations of their fundamental human rights by radical or extremist Islamist groups. Christians are murdered in indiscriminate attacks. Christian women are subjected to sexual violence, raped and sexually abused. Christian children are forced to adhere to Islamic religious precepts in the northern states. Muslim converts to Christianity suffer from discrimination and violence, mainly in the northern states.

According to the Kukah Centre (2023), the persecution of Christians can be traced to the formation of the Sokoto Caliphate following the Usman Dan Fodio Jihad (Holy war) in the 19th Century. Spurred by a radical ideology of Jihad, Usman Danfodio conquered a greater part of the present-day Northern Nigeria. This historical event gave birth to Islamic dominance that has spread across Northern Nigeria. Though greeted with resistance, Christianity was able to thrive with the help of the missionaries who built schools, churches, and social and health infrastructure across the region. Contemporary Northern Nigeria has

continued to witness the dominance of radical Islamic activities that have stifled and undermined the freedom of Christian worship. The 1999 constitution recognizes sharia law and twelve northern states are governed by sharia law (Open Doors, 2026). There is no separation between the affairs of the government and Islamic doctrines in states like Kano, Sokoto, Kaduna and Zamfara (The Kukah Centre, 2023). It is on record that Radical Islamic ideology cultivated by the 19th century jihad has continued, and, as The Kukah Centre (2023, p3) has rightly averred, radical Islamic groups such as “Boko Haram, ISWAP, and extremist Muslims have couched their ideologies on this historical background (and the extremist interpretation of the Quran) to advance the course of Islamic dominance which consequently leads to Christian persecution in Northern Nigeria. Within this context, the separation of the state and religion (Islam) has been impossible. State structures are instrumentalized to promote Islam in the North which directly results in Christian persecution in Northern Nigeria. According to Open Doors (2026, p.1) Christians are the main victims of terrorist attacks, armed violence and banditry:

Christians suffer from a severe combination of ethno-religious hostility, Islamic oppression, dictatorial paranoia and organized corruption and crime. Mostly in northern Sharia-governed states, Christians are deprived of essential freedoms. All over the north, Christians suffer from Islamist militant violence by different groups. Most of the violence against Christians is carried out by Muslim Fulani militants and “bandits” of Fulani descent, more than by Boko Haram and ISWAP combined....

Nigerian Christians in the Middle Belt are bearing the brunt of violent attacks” from those identified as “Fulani militants,” and the number and ferocity of the attacks on Christian villages have led to the conclusion that these incursions are a deliberate land grab to remove Christians from their ancestral homes and Islamize the region (Shea, 2025). Open Doors (2026) has pointed out that Fulani Militants have attacked predominantly Christian villages in several northern states, killing, raping and abducting people, destroying churches and other buildings, destroying farms, looting harvests, occupying farmlands, grabbing farmlands and communities and causing forced displacement and unprecedented humanitarian crisis (Open Doors, 2026). In north-central Nigeria, Christian farmers are unable to carry out agricultural activities due to armed violence, land-grabbing and total disregard for state legislations regulating land use and animal husbandry in places like Benue State (Open Doors, 2026). Attacks on Christians have persisted due to lack of security presence in rural communities and increased acquisition of sophisticated weapons by Fulani militia (Nabiedu, et al, 2025). Fulani terrorism has been compounded and complicated by the unchecked influx of Fulani militants from neighbouring countries into Nigeria (Nabiedu et al, 2025). Consequently, Fulani insurgency has spread to Southern Nigeria with the South-East and South West states. Muslim Fulani militia hiding in the forests of southern states and performing guerilla-style attacks. There are many instances of Christian persecution in Nigeria. For example, on 11 March 2025, 22 Christians were abducted from Chibiya community in Maro ward in Kajuru Local Government Area of Kaduna state. Most of the victims were women. They were abducted by Fulani militants who were insisting on a peace deal that allowed armed Fulani Ethnic Militia members to reside in the community. On 14 April 2025, Zike, a Christian community in Bassa Local Government Area of Plateau state, came under a midnight attack by Fulani militants chanting Allahu Akubar. The attack took place despite a military operation base less than 3 miles from the community. A total of 51 Christians, mostly women and children, were killed in the attack. Between 13 and 14 June 2025, the Christian farming community of Yelwata, in Guma Local Government Area of Benue state, came under a 4-hour attack by Fulani militants with little or no intervention by the military. More than 258 people, mostly women and children, were

slaughtered with machetes, shot or burnt to death in their own houses. The Paramount ruler of the Tiv Nation described the massacre as a calculated, genocidal attack by Fulani militia.

Nigeria's Designation as a Country of Particular Concern and its implications

In response to the deteriorating security and the persecution of Christians the United States under the first and second Trump administration declared Nigeria a “country of particular concern”. The classification of a country as being of particular concern is outlined in the United States International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998 (Gilbert, 2020; Open Doors, 2026; Shea, 2025), a law that institutionalized religious freedom as a pillar of American foreign policy (Shea, 2025). Under section 402 of the Act, “country of particular concern” is a designation given to a foreign country whose government has engaged in or tolerated especially severe violations of the religious freedom of its citizens. Section 405 (a) of the Act stipulates 15 sanctions that the US can impose when it designates a country as a CPC. Section 407 of the Act allows the president of the US to waive these sanctions based on national interest or to further the interest of the Act. For this reason, in most cases, the designation is seldom followed by sanctions. Nigeria was designated a country of particular concern because of allegations of “genocide” against Christians (IRFA, 1998). The first designation of Nigeria as country of particular was in 2020. The US State Department Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in its 2020 Annual Report recommended to the US government that Nigeria be designated “Country of Particular Concern (CPC)” for its ongoing, systematic, and egregious religious freedom violations. On Monday, December 7, 2020, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement that:

The United States is designating Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, the DPRK, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan as Countries of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, for engaging in or tolerating “systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom (Gilbert, 2020, p.1).

The United States further noted with specific reference to Nigeria that since the dawn of the twenty-first century, and with horrifying acceleration in recent years, verified reports of murders, rapes, mutilations, and kidnapping of Christians in Nigeria had persistently increased. These attacks were frequently accompanied by the torching of homes, churches, villages, and agricultural fields. It stressed that 1,202 Nigerian Christians were killed in the first six months of 2020. This was in addition to 11,000 Christians who had been killed since 15 July 2015. The United States observed that such violence had reached a point at which expert observers and analysts had warned of a “progressive genocide” (Gilbert, 2020) or a “slow-motion war” (Gilbert, 2020), specifically targeting Christians across Africa’s largest and most economically powerful nation (Gilbert, 2020). The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) speaking through its Chair, Gayle Manchin praised the State Department’s designation of Nigeria as CPC, stressing that “We particularly welcome Nigeria’s designation for the first time as a CPC for tolerating egregious violations of religious freedom, which USCIRF had been recommending since 2009. Nigeria’s designation in 2020 was not followed with sanctions. Instead, the US continued to provide security assistance, military cooperation and development aid to Nigeria. The US only used the period of designation to call Nigeria’s attention for improved protection of religious communities and accountability for perpetrators (Owonikoko, 2025).

Nigeria is the first secular democracy that has been named a CPC, which demonstrates that the country should be vigilant that all forms of governments respect religious freedom. As already pointed out, Nigeria’s CPC designation was predicated on the fact that the violence committed by Boko Haram

militants, ISWAP, armed Fulani herdsmen and other terrorist groups had continued for years, resulting in the killings, displacements and destructions of properties belonging to Christians in Nigeria. For instance, the World Watch Monitor (2020) stated that the Boko Haram insurgency which started in 2009 claimed over 30,000 lives in the last decade. Regarding armed Fulani herdsmen attacks, the report noted that an estimated over 6000 deaths occurred due to Fulani insurgency since 2015 and that over 1,000 Christians were killed, from January to November 2019 (World Watch Monitor, 2020). In 2021, the Biden administration that succeeded Donald Trump removed Nigeria from the CPC list (Owonikoko, 2025). Biden argued that the security challenge in Nigeria were due to climate change and struggle over access to land rather than the targeted killing of Christians (Owonikoko, 2025).

Citing the same reasons of the systematic persecution of Christian persecution by radical Muslim sects, the United States under the second trump administration re-designated Nigeria as a CPC on 31 October, 2025 (Gilbert, 2020; Shea, 2025; Open Doors). President trump argued that Nigerian Christians were facing an existential threat (Owonikoko, 2025). President Donald Trump directed U.S. Congressman Riley Moore and the House Appropriations Committee Chairman Tom Cole to lead an investigation into the alleged persecution and killings of Christians in Nigeria. Moore led a congressional fact-finding delegation to Nigeria and subsequently presented an official report and policy options to the White House. Riley Moore and his team while presenting the report of their fact-finding mission which confirmed ongoing genocide in Nigeria to the White House on February 23, 2026 stated that:

I traveled on a bipartisan delegation to Nigeria and saw with my own eyes the horrific atrocities Christians face, and the instability the Nigerian government must combat. Through Congressional hearings, expert testimony, meeting with Internally Displaced People, hearing from religious leaders, and engaging with high-level Nigerian government officials, we have provided a clear picture of the threat environment in Nigeria and the horrific persecution Christians face. This report outlines concrete steps to impose accountability measures, counter radical Islamic terrorism, and lays out a plan to work in coordination and cooperation with the Nigerian government to bring security to all the people of Nigeria. Our brothers and sisters in Christ have suffered in silence for too long. The world is now watching, and I urge the Nigerian government to take the opportunity to deepen and strengthen its relationship with the United States. Doing so is in the interest of both our great nations. Together, we must address these pressing security challenges and bring an end to violence against Christians (Moore, 2026).

The fact-finding report presented to the White House itself read as follows:

After decades of persecution, Nigeria is the deadliest place in the world to be a Christian. Christians are subject to ongoing violent attacks from well-armed Fulani militia and terrorist groups resulting in the death and murder of tens of thousands of Christians, including pastors and priests, the destruction of thousands of churches and schools, as well as kidnappings. Blasphemy laws in Nigeria's northern states are used to silence speech and dissent, target Christian minorities, and justify so-called "convictions" without due process (Moore, 2026).

Following a resolution of the US House of Representatives that Nigerian Christians were subjected to religious persecution, Riley Moore issued the following statement:

This resolution condemns the horrific persecution of Christians in Nigeria. For far too long, the world has turned a blind eye to the suffering of innocent Christians—entire villages destroyed, churches burned, pastors tortured, families torn apart. This grave suffering must end now. I'm calling on all my colleagues - both Republican and Democrat alike - to unite in defense of faith and freedom. The United States must make it clear that we will not tolerate the slaughter of Christians or the persecution of anyone for their

belief in Jesus Christ. I want to thank President Trump for his bold and unwavering leadership in defense of Christians in Nigeria. His official designation of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern will save the lives of thousands of Christians. I am grateful for President Trump's trust in me to lead this effort in the House alongside Chairman Tom Cole (Congressman Riley M. Moore, 2025).

The Resolution was supported by congressmen notable among which were Wesley Hunt, Mary Miller, Andrew Clyde, Ralph Norman, Andy Biggs, Jeff Van Drew, Mark Messmer, Mark Alford, Marlin Stutzman, Barry Moore, Brandon Gill, Buddy Carter, Robert Aderholt, Gary Palmer, Greg Steube, Addison McDowell, John James, and Gus Bilirakis (Congress Man Riley M. Moore, 2025). Justifying Nigeria's CPC declaration, Shea (2025), stated that Fulani violence against Middle Belt Christian communities undoubtedly meets the CPC criteria. The author noted that:

The Fulani community is among West Africa's largest ethnic groups, and its millions of members are divided into hundreds of clans across that region. They are largely Muslim, and most are not involved in extremist violence. The Middle Belt attacks are carried out by well-armed groups of radicalized Fulani nomadic herders. They are supported by the cattle barons in the powerful Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association and similar groups in Nigeria. They likely are influenced by but are distinct from some Fulani elsewhere in West Africa who have been recruited by al Qaeda into the terror group JNIM and its offshoot, Lakurawa, which wreaks havoc in Nigeria's northwest against Muslims and non-Muslims, alike. Nor should they be conflated, as some scholars have, with those known as "bandits," Nigeria's various criminal gangs that show no religious motivation in their violent acts (Shea, 2025, p.3).

Considering the facticity of Christian genocide, Donald Trump threatened to enter Nigeria "guns-a-blazing". Trump also threatened to cut -off all aid to Nigeria unless the Nigerian authorities stopped the egregious violence. It is the position of this article that the designation of Nigeria as a CPC is justified given the scale of killings of Christian populations by radical Islamic or terrorist groups. The declaration and the subsequent US military airstrike on terrorists' hideouts in Sokoto State on December 25, 2025 are justified as humanitarian interventions which are in accord with international humanitarian law. Nigeria has a constitution that has guaranteed the religious of all citizens. The constitution also guarantees the right to life, freedom of association and assembly and the right to own property. Nigeria is also signatory to the United Nations Charter (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). The guiding principle of the UN Charter is to ensure world peace and security. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has recognized and protected the inalienable rights of all peoples, including the right to freedom of religion and the right to life. While the UN charter prohibits a country from interference in the external affairs of another country, the increasing security challenges posed by terrorist groups prompted the United States following the 9/11 Al Qaeda attacks on the United Nations to come up with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1368, that recognized the "inherent right of individual or collective self-defense" in the context of the 9/11 attacks, implicitly accepting that a large-scale attack by a non-state actor could indeed trigger Article 51 (Schmitt, 2011; Nabiedu et al, 2025).

This implies that unilateral action is permissible for the purpose of fighting terrorists which is a global security problem. Furthermore, the United States carried out airstrike on terrorists in Sokoto with the consent of the government of Nigeria. In addition, the United Nations Responsibility to protect has permitted external interventions on the grounds of humanitarianism – to save lives. It is the position of this article that the United States intervention was on humanitarian grounds as it was targeted at ending the persecution of Nigerians. positive and negative implications for Nigeria. Despite the justification, there appears to be positive and negative consequences of US intervention. On a positive note, it is clear that

the persecution of Nigerian Christians by radical Islamic groups especially in northern Nigeria has come to the notice of the international community. By coming to the attention of the international community, and the United States for that matter, Nigeria's CPC status has exposed the failure of the Nigerian state in discharging its obligations effectively and efficiently by securing the lives and property belonging to Christians across the country. Even though Nigeria, through the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yusuf Tuggar rejected the persecution of Nigerian Christians, generalizing that the insecurity experienced by the country was affecting all Nigerians irrespective of their religious affiliations, the truth of the matter is that Boko Haram, ISWAP, Ansaru, Lakaruwa and Mahmud, the most notorious and destructive terrorists organizations in Nigeria are all Islamic sects that have espoused and defended different versions of radical Islam. Armed violence by these radical Islamic sects and terrorist organizations have resulted in the targeting and systematic persecution of Nigerian Christians (Open Doors, 2026; the Kukah Centre, 2023). Thus, rather than being a stigma, Nigeria's CPC status is a wakeup call on the Nigerian government to rise up to its responsibility of defending and protecting its citizens generally, and Christians from attacks and killings by radical Islamist groups in particular. It is a call to put an end to the systematic killing of Nigerians. It is a wake up call on the Nigerian government to put an end to the attacks on churches, the killing of Christians and the clergy, the sacking of Christian farming communities, and the destruction of their property. The CPC status further underscores governance challenges including the country's dysfunctional security system, endemic corruption, the challenges of pluralism, and socioeconomic underdevelopment in Nigeria.

Following the blacklisting of Nigeria as a violator of religious freedom, the United States and Nigeria established a bilateral defence working group with the purpose of fighting Nigeria's insecurity and putting an end to Christian persecution. Nigeria has started leveraging this bilateral security cooperation to address its national security challenges. On Christmas night 2025, the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) launched airstrikes in the Northwestern region of Nigeria, targeting what it described as Islamic State terrorists. The operation affected terrorist hideouts in Bauni Forest near Niger border, Jabo in Tambuwal Local Government Area of Sokoto State and Offa in Kwara State. US President Donald Trump framed the strikes as an attempt to stop the 'Christian genocide' in Nigeria (The Cable, 2026; Adebayo, 2026). The operation involved over a dozen Tomahawk missiles fired from a U.S. Navy ship with the approval of Nigerian President, Bola Tinubu (Lukiv & Okafor, 2025). Nigerian troops and the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) forces carried out another coordinated joint airstrike in the Metele area of Borno State, killing 21 ISWAP fighters. These two US-led counters-terrorism operations followed intelligence reports tracking insurgent movements and were built upon broader counter-terrorism cooperation in northeastern Nigeria (The Cable, 2026). As part of the defence cooperation, the United States deployed its elite military team to Nigeria to train the Nigerian military and facilitate intelligence gathering to improve the performance of Nigerian security in dealing with armed terrorist attacks. Major General Uba Samaila, Director Defence Information of the Defence Headquarters, Nigeria, in press release on 16 February 2026 announced on behalf of the Defence Headquarters, the arrival of 100 US military personnel and associated equipment at Bauchi Airfield to support Nigeria in counter-terrorism, stating that:

The deployment forms part of the deliberation during a working group engagement by Nigerian delegation and it's US counterpart. The arrival is planned and deliberate following a formal request by the Federal Government of Nigeria to the US government to support a clearly defined military training requirement, technical support and intelligence sharing with the members of the Armed Forces of Nigeria. The

collaboration will provide access to specialized technical capabilities aimed at strengthening Nigeria's ability to deter terrorists' threats and enhance the protection of vulnerable communities across the country. The US personnel are technical specialists serving strictly in an advisory and training capacity. They are not combat forces. All training activities will be conducted under the authority, direction and control of the Nigerian Government and in close coordination with the Nigerian Armed Forces. Nigerian troops, alongside these advisers, will commence a series of joint training engagements and intelligence focused cooperation initiatives. These activities are designed to enhance the capacity of Nigerian troops to effectively identify and neutralize extremist terrorist groups seeking to destabilize the nation. The Armed Forces of Nigeria remain fully committed to degrading and defeating terrorist organizations that threaten the country's sovereignty, national security and the safety of its citizens. The DHQ assures Nigerians of continued transparency and the provision of clear, accurate and timely information regarding the military cooperation efforts.

More than 10 months after the designation of Nigeria as a CPC, the United States insisted that it was not prepared to remove Nigeria from the blacklist. Rep. Riley M. Moore wrote on his X handle that "We absolutely cannot remove the CPC designation from Nigeria while radical Islamic terrorists continue this horrific violence against Christians. The Nigerian government must meet its commitments to protect innocent Christian communities" It is to be noted that the negative aspect of Nigeria's CPC status and the direct military interventions of the US in Nigeria's internal security challenges is that while Nigeria's insecurity, and in particular, the persecution of Nigerian Christians has featured as the main justification for the United States designation of Nigeria as a CPC, it is important to recognize the fact that the pursuit of US strategic economic and political interests have also been at play. Guided by the America first foreign policy, the United States is capitalizing on Nigeria's deteriorating security to pursue her national interests in the extractive resource sector. The economic interests of the United States in developing countries are tied to the sale of arms to Africa, natural resource extraction, energy security, and trade in other manufactured goods and services. To begin with, the US is a leader in the global marketing and distribution of arms in the world. Therefore, the US has taken advantage of Nigeria's deteriorating security to sell arms to Nigeria. Through the United States-Nigeria Working Group, the United States has supplied arms to Nigeria. The United States approved sales of sophisticated precision military weapons worth US\$346 million to Nigeria (Owonikoko, 2025).

Economically, Nigeria is rich in oil and gas which are critical to global energy security. The United States has invested heavily in Nigeria's oil and gas sector. Nigeria is also rich in solid minerals and new minerals that are indispensable for the production of renewable technologies. US actions are geared towards protecting its vital economic assets and investments in Nigeria. Meanwhile, the US is threatened by the close and increasing bilateral economic and political relations between Nigeria and China. Under the rubric of China-Africa Relations and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRICS) China has heavily invested in Nigeria's infrastructure in exchange for Nigeria's crude oil. Through BRICS, Nigeria has become increasingly aligned with China. China has emerged as "the factory of the world" (Chisom, 2026). China has overtaken the United States as the largest world trading nation. China holds the largest share of global merchandise trade and it is a major force in global supply chains and international trade (Chisom, 2026). The volume of trade between Nigeria and China has increased substantially while that between the United States and Nigeria has dropped significantly. For example, the United States has sharply cut its import of Nigerian crude oil by nearly 50 percent (Adeyemi, 2026). US multinational oil companies have divested in the Nigerian oil sector while China is investing heavily in the sector.

It should be noted that while US-Nigeria trade is declining, Nigeria has emerged as China's major trade partner over the past two decades. China's exports to Nigeria climbed to a record USD24.9 Billion in 2025, reversing three consecutive years of decline and extending a decade long expansion that has reinforced China's dominance in Nigeria's imports (Chima, 2026). The China National Bureau of Statistics (2025) reported that exports rose from USD18.9 billion in 2024 to USD 24.9 billion in 2025, being the highest level recorded in nine years. This figure surpassed the previous peak of USD 22.6 billion reached in 2021 and is nearly three times the USD 9.72 billion recorded in 2016 (China National Bureau of Statistics, 2025; Chima, 2026). The US perceives China's engagements with Nigeria under the infrastructure-for-natural resources agreements, China has acquired large blocks of oil investments in Nigeria. The designation of Nigeria, and the US military strikes on terrorist camps in Sokoto is therefore not just an act of US humanitarianism but also carries with it a relic of American new imperialism in Nigeria, Africa's largest economy.

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the designation of Nigeria as country of particular concern by the United states of America in 2020 and 2025. The paper rooted in realist theory and drawing on secondary data has established that, the United States invoked its International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 as amended to designate Nigeria as a country of particular concern under the first and second trump administrations respectively, due to the egregious violations and systematic persecution of Christians following the inability of the Nigerian state to protect Christians. It argues that in both 2020 and 2025, Nigerian Christians had been subjected to systematic slaughter by Fulani militia and Islamic terrorist groups. Therefore, the designation of Nigeria as a CPC by the Trump administrations was all justified. The military airstrike in Nigeria which the US carried with the consent of the federal Government of Nigeria in the Northwestern and Northeastern regions of Nigeria that targeted terrorists' hideouts were also justified. Thus, despite the fact that the United nations Charter expressly prohibits the use of force by one state against another or unilateral intervention in the internal affairs of another state, the intervention was permissible under international law. The global war against terror, especially since the Bush Doctrine following the Al Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Centre in the United States has resulted in the recalibration of the mechanisms for dealing with terror. The United Nations Security Council in Resolution 1368, recognized the "inherent right of individual or collective self-defense" in the context of the 9/11 attacks, implicitly accepting that a large-scale attack by a non-state actor could indeed trigger Article 51 (Schmitt, 2011; Nabiedu et al, 2025). Boko Haram, ISWAP, Ansaru, Lakaruwa, armed Fulani Militia are all terrorist organizations. The responsibility to protect allows a state to intervene in the internal affairs of another state with the consent of the benefiting state. Besides, the US intervention was not directed at the Nigerian military. The attacks were carried out to against the enemies of the Nigerian state – Boko Haram, ISWAP, ANSARU, Lakaruwa, Armed Fulani Militia. The US backlisting of Nigeria and the military intervention have resulted in defence cooperation between the two countries. More significantly, the ten months after the CPC status was slammed on Nigeria, Nigeria's security situation has improved remarkably. In Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau and Taraba States, the slaughter of Christians and other Nigerians has reduced even though isolated incidents have continued to occur from time to time. The Nigerian government must therefore continue to leverage its defence cooperation with the US to stamp out terrorism and restore security and peace for all Nigerians irrespective of their religious background.

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