Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons, Non-State Actors and Counter-Terrorism in Nigeria

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Abstract

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) has emerged as a critical security challenge in Nigeria, significantly empowering non-state actors and complicating counter-terrorism efforts. This study interrogated the nexus between the widespread availability of SALWs, the rise of violent non-state actors—such as insurgents, bandits, secessionists, and criminal gangs—and the effectiveness of Nigeria's counter-terrorism strategies. It draws upon empirical evidence and policy analyses and examined how porous borders, weak arms control mechanisms, corruption, and political instability have facilitated the inflow and domestic circulation of SALWs. These weapons as the study showed, not only escalate the lethality of conflicts but also embolden non-state actors, undermining the authority of the state and endangering civilian populations. The paper further explored how groups like Boko Haram, ISWAP, and regional militias leverage illicit arms markets to sustain their campaigns of violence. In response, Nigeria's security architecture has relied heavily on kinetic military approaches, often without complementary strategies targeting the arms trade itself. The study revealed that the current counter-terrorism efforts are hamstrung by inadequate regulation, poor inter-agency coordination, and insufficient community engagement. It recommends a multifaceted approach combining disarmament, strengthened border security, regional collaboration, intelligence sharing, and community-based peacebuilding initiatives. Ultimately, the study concludes that curbing the proliferation of SALWs is imperative not only for neutralizing violent non-state actors but also for restoring state legitimacy and fostering sustainable peace in Nigeria.

Keywords: SALW, Counterterrorism, Non-State Actors, Boko Haram, Insurgents

Introduction

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in Nigeria has become a critical factor exacerbating insecurity, terrorism, and the entrenchment of non-state actors across the country. From the emergence of Boko Haram in the Northeast to the activities of bandits in the Northwest and separatist militias in the Southeast, SALW have empowered non-state actors to challenge state authority and threaten national cohesion. The diffusion of these weapons has not only intensified violent conflicts but also complicated the Nigerian state's counter-terrorism strategies. According to the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa (UNREC), over 350 million small arms are circulating globally, with West Africa accounting for an estimated 100 million; Nigeria alone is believed to host over 6 million of these (UNREC, 2018). This prevalence has transformed Nigeria into a theater of

armed non-state activity, fueled by porous borders, weak state institutions, corruption, and the inadequate enforcement of arms control laws.

Non-state actors—ranging from insurgents and terrorist groups to criminal gangs and ethnic militias—have increasingly acquired and deployed SALW to exert control over territory, populations, and economic resources. Boko Haram, for instance, has used light weapons and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to conduct asymmetric warfare against military targets and civilians alike, leading to the deaths of over 35,000 people since 2009 (Institute for Security Studies, 2021). Similarly, armed herders, cultist groups, and secessionist movements such as the Eastern Security Network (ESN) have weaponized civilian spaces, contributing to mass displacement and widespread fear. These developments reveal a deepening nexus between SALW proliferation and the resilience of non-state actors in Nigeria's multifaceted security crisis.

Compounding the challenge is the inadequacy of Nigeria's counter-terrorism response, which has largely focused on kinetic military strategies without a robust framework for arms control and border security. Although the Nigerian government has launched various security operations—such as Operation Lafiya Dole, Operation Hadin Kai, and Operation Safe Haven—these efforts have often failed to stem the flow of illegal arms or dismantle arms trafficking networks. Moreover, the country's participation in multilateral treaties such as the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons and the United Nations Programme of Action (UNPoA) on SALW has yet to translate into effective domestic implementation (Edeko, 2011; Adejo, 2020). As scholars such as Akinola (2020) and Kwaja & Ojewale (2021) have noted, the lack of synergy between national disarmament efforts and community-based security frameworks has left significant gaps in Nigeria's counter-terrorism architecture.

Therefore, this study interrogated the intricate relationship between the proliferation of SALW, the rise and sustenance of non-state actors, and the effectiveness of Nigeria's counter-terrorism strategies. It assessed how the unregulated flow of light weapons fuels non-state violence and undermines the state's monopoly of force, while also examining the limitations of current security responses. Ultimately, the research proposed comprehensive policy options that align arms control, regional cooperation, and inclusive security governance for sustainable peace in Nigeria.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology to examine the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs), non-state actors, and counter-terrorism in Nigeria. Data was gathered using secondary data from reports, policy documents, and academic. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and meanings, offering a nuanced understanding of the security dynamics surrounding SALWs and counter-terrorism.

Definitions of Terms

Light Weapons

Boutwell and Klare (1999), described light weapons as "lethal instruments of war that, although less powerful than major conventional weapons, are responsible for the majority of

civilian deaths in contemporary armed conflicts." They emphasize that light weapons include "weapons designed to be carried and operated by small crews, such as rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), light mortars, and shoulder-fired missiles." This definition highlights not only the technical features of light weapons but also their significant humanitarian impact, especially in civil wars and insurgencies across the developing world.

Non-state Actors

Similarly, Krahmann (2005) defines non-state actors as "private organizations or individuals that operate independently of state control and are capable of influencing domestic and international affairs, either through cooperation or confrontation with states." This perspective expands on their potential roles—not just in collaboration with governments but also as challengers to state authority. These actors play essential roles in areas such as human rights advocacy, humanitarian aid, economic development, conflict mediation, and even security provision, particularly in weak or failing states.

Counter- Terrorism

Counterterrorism refers to the strategies, tactics, and practices adopted by governments and organizations to prevent, deter, and respond to acts of terrorism. According to the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (2020), counterterrorism is defined as "a set of practices, tactics, techniques, and strategies that governments, militaries, police departments, and corporations adopt to detect, prevent, and respond to terrorism." This definition emphasizes the multidimensional nature of counterterrorism, which includes both proactive and reactive measures across different sectors. It recognizes the involvement of multiple stakeholders, including law enforcement, military institutions, and civil society in combatting terrorism.

Origin and Evolution of Terrorism in Nigeria

The origin and evolution of terrorism in Nigeria are deeply rooted in the country's complex history of ethno-religious tensions, economic disparities, political marginalization, and weak governance structures. Terrorism in Nigeria emerged prominently in the post-independence era, with incidents rooted in political violence and religious extremism. However, its current manifestation, especially with groups like Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), has transformed the security landscape dramatically. The roots of modern terrorism in Nigeria can be traced to the 1980 Maitatsine riots in Kano, which marked one of the earliest forms of religious extremism. Mohammed Marwa Maitatsine, a radical preacher, led a sect that violently opposed Western education and modernity, resulting in thousands of deaths (Loimeier, 2012). Although the movement was suppressed, it laid the ideological foundation for later groups like Boko Haram.

Founded in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf in Maiduguri, Borno State, Boko Haram emerged as a Salafist group advocating the replacement of secular governance with Islamic law. Initially, it operated peacefully, but following Yusuf's extrajudicial killing by security forces in 2009, the group transformed into a violent insurgent movement (Walker, 2012). The group's grievances were rooted in widespread poverty, corruption, and perceived marginalization of northern Nigeria by the federal government. The socio-economic underdevelopment of the northeast region, coupled with high youth unemployment and weak institutional response, created fertile ground for radicalization and recruitment (Onuoha, 2014).

By 2011, Boko Haram had escalated its tactics, targeting police stations, churches, mosques, markets, and government buildings using suicide bombers and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The 2014 abduction of over 270 Chibok schoolgirls drew global attention, highlighting the group's growing influence and brutality. In 2015, Boko Haram pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIS), becoming ISWAP. This marked a strategic shift in operations, with ISWAP focusing more on military targets and gaining some support among local populations by providing basic services in certain areas (Zenn, 2018). The Nigerian government has responded with various counterterrorism efforts, including military operations like Operation Lafiya Dole, regional cooperation through the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), and deradicalization programs.

Despite these, the insurgency has persisted, with splinter factions complicating efforts. Moreover, terrorism has evolved beyond the northeast. Banditry and terrorist attacks in the northwest, often linked to criminal-terrorist hybrids, have further destabilized Nigeria's security environment (Campbell & Harwood, 2020). Additionally, religious and ethnic tensions in the Middle Belt and growing separatist agitations in the southeast indicate that terrorism in Nigeria is not monolithic but multifaceted. Over time, the evolution of terrorism in Nigeria has been shaped by both local dynamics and transnational influences, including connections with global jihadist networks, porous borders, and the proliferation of small arms.

Sources and Drivers of the Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Nigeria

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) in Nigeria is a multifaceted problem rooted in a combination of internal vulnerabilities and external influences. A primary source of SALWs is Nigeria's porous borders, which span over 4,000 kilometers and are poorly policed, making the illicit trafficking of weapons from neighboring countries such as Chad, Niger, and Cameroon both easy and frequent (Onuoha, 2011). The collapse of Libya and subsequent spread of weapons across the Sahel region have also contributed significantly, as arms from Muammar Gaddafi's arsenal have flooded West Africa, including Nigeria, following the 2011 NATO-backed intervention (UNODC, 2013). These weapons often fall into the hands of insurgent groups, ethnic militias, and criminal syndicates. Internally, the widespread availability of arms is driven by local demand generated by ethno-religious conflicts, farmer-herder clashes, and political violence. For instance, armed groups in the Niger Delta and insurgents like Boko Haram have used SALWs to further their agendas, taking advantage of state weakness and insecurity (Okeke & Aniche, 2016).

Political instability and governance failures further fuel the proliferation. During electoral cycles, political actors have been known to arm thugs and militias for intimidation and rigging purposes, with these weapons later entering illicit circulation (Olojo, 2013). Weak institutional control, particularly by the Nigerian Customs Service, Immigration Service, and border security agencies, allows for ineffective interdiction of illegal arms shipments. Compounding this is widespread corruption, which undermines enforcement efforts and facilitates trafficking (Ugwueze & Emma-Echiegu, 2015). The demand side is intensified by feelings of marginalization, unemployment, and poverty, especially in the North-East, North-West, and South-South regions. Young men in these areas are susceptible to recruitment into violent groups where arms are both tools of empowerment and economic survival.

Additionally, regional instability in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin, characterized by the presence of extremist groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, and bandit gangs, has created a militarized zone where arms circulate freely. Weapons captured from national security forces or smuggled through arms markets in countries like Mali and Sudan further exacerbate the situation (Edeko, 2011). Moreover, Nigeria's domestic arms manufacturing capabilities, particularly illegal workshops in places like Awka and Onitsha, serve as internal sources of SALWs. Though rudimentary, these workshops produce locally made firearms that are widely distributed among criminal elements (Ibrahim, 2021).

Global arms trade networks also play a role, as Nigeria has been identified as a destination for diverted legal arms shipments. Despite being a signatory to international arms control instruments such as the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons and the UN Programme of Action, implementation and enforcement remain weak due to lack of political will, inadequate funding, and bureaucratic inefficiencies (Akinwale, 2010). Thus, the sources and drivers of SALWs proliferation in Nigeria are deeply interlinked with regional insecurity, internal governance challenges, socio-economic deprivation, and transnational criminal networks, necessitating a comprehensive and multidimensional response.

Role of Non-State Actors in the Spread and use of SALWs

The proliferation and misuse of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) in Nigeria have been significantly influenced by various non-state actors whose roles have evolved in scope and complexity over the years. These non-state actors, which include insurgent groups, ethnic militias, criminal gangs, arms traffickers, and even some civil society elements, have contributed both directly and indirectly to the accessibility, distribution, and deployment of SALWs across the country. Their involvement has aggravated violent conflicts, fueled criminality, and undermined national security efforts (Onuoha, 2011).

First, insurgent groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have played a central role in the spread and use of SALWs in Nigeria, particularly in the North-East. These groups obtain arms through cross-border smuggling networks, raids on military facilities, and black markets, and they use them to perpetrate attacks on civilian populations, security forces, and government installations. The strategic deployment of SALWs has enabled them to maintain a campaign of asymmetric warfare, often overwhelming under-equipped local security operatives (Akinola, 2015). Their access to these weapons has also emboldened their operational capacity, contributing to prolonged instability in the region.

Second, ethnic militias and vigilante groups, such as the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), the Bakassi Boys, and various Middle Belt defense militias, have emerged in response to perceived or real security threats and marginalization. While these groups often begin as community defense initiatives, many have evolved into organized armed groups with access to SALWs. These actors frequently acquire weapons through local black markets or from corrupt elements within the military and police forces. Their possession of SALWs has transformed local disputes into violent confrontations, escalating inter-communal conflicts and contributing to the culture of violence across many Nigerian states (Albert, 2007).

Third, organized criminal networks and cult gangs in the Niger Delta and urban centers such as Lagos and Port Harcourt have also fueled the circulation and use of SALWs. These groups engage in armed robbery, kidnapping for ransom, oil bunkering, and other forms of economic crimes. They rely heavily on SALWs to enforce their operations, protect territory, and intimidate both civilians and rival groups. The militarization of these groups has made them formidable forces, sometimes even challenging the authority of the Nigerian state in certain locales (Asuni, 2009). In the Niger Delta, for example, militants previously engaged in the struggle for resource control now use SALWs in piracy and oil theft, reinforcing insecurity in maritime areas.

Fourth, international arms traffickers and local black market dealers have facilitated the movement and availability of SALWs in Nigeria. Weak border controls, porous frontiers, and institutional corruption have allowed these actors to smuggle weapons from conflict zones such as Libya, Mali, and Chad into Nigeria. These weapons often end up in the hands of insurgents, bandits, and criminal syndicates. Traffickers exploit transnational smuggling routes and take advantage of inadequate customs inspections and poor coordination among regional security agencies (Nte, 2011). Their operations are often clandestine, making detection and prevention efforts exceedingly difficult for Nigerian authorities.

Fifth, some civil society elements and political actors, though not always directly violent, have played indirect roles in the spread of SALWs. During election periods, for instance, political elites have been known to arm thugs and youth groups to intimidate opponents and manipulate electoral outcomes. Once the elections are over, these weapons are seldom retrieved, and they often become tools for criminal activity and violence. Moreover, the failure of disarmament and demobilization initiatives, often due to poor oversight and politicization, means that former combatants retain access to SALWs long after their formal disengagement from armed groups (Okeke, 2014). These dynamics reflect how political patronage and weak institutional mechanisms have contributed to the entrenchment of armed violence in Nigerian society.

Impact of SALWs on the Scale, Nature, and Persistence of Terrorism and Violent Conflicts in Nigeria

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) in Nigeria has had a profound impact on the scale, nature, and persistence of terrorism and violent conflicts across the country. SALWs are easily portable, relatively inexpensive, and readily available on both legal and illicit markets, making them the weapon of choice for a wide range of violent actors, from insurgents and terrorists to ethnic militias, criminal gangs, and communal vigilantes. Their widespread availability has escalated the lethality and duration of conflicts, particularly in the North-East, North-West, and parts of the Niger Delta and Middle Belt regions. One of the most visible impacts of SALWs is the intensification of terrorism perpetrated by groups such as Boko Haram and its splinter factions like the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). The easy access to SALWs has enabled these groups to conduct coordinated attacks on military installations, civilian populations, and critical infrastructure with devastating consequences.

According to the Small Arms Survey (2020), over 350 million illicit firearms are estimated to circulate globally, with over 70% believed to be in sub-Saharan Africa, and Nigeria being a key transit and destination country. The porous borders and weak law enforcement capabilities have turned the country into a hub for arms trafficking, with weapons flowing in from Libya, Chad, and the Central African region (Onuoha, 2011). These arms not only fuel terrorism but also enable its persistence by providing militants with the means to replenish their arsenals after every engagement. Moreover, the nature of violent conflicts in Nigeria has become increasingly militarized and sophisticated due to SALWs proliferation. What may have started as communal clashes over land or resource control now often escalate into protracted armed confrontations involving automatic weapons, grenades, and even improvised explosive devices. For example, the herder-farmer conflicts in the Middle Belt, particularly in Benue, Plateau, and Nasarawa states, have transformed from traditional agrarian disputes into full-blown armed conflicts largely because of the availability of firearms (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Similarly, militant groups in the Niger Delta have leveraged access to SALWs to sustain their campaigns against oil infrastructure and engage in piracy and oil bunkering, further entrenching insecurity in the region. The persistence of these conflicts is also linked to the enduring circulation of SALWs, which continue to change hands across actors and regions. Recycled from one conflict zone to another, these weapons ensure that violence does not subside even after peace accords or military interventions. Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs have often failed due to the inability to track and retrieve the vast number of weapons in circulation, especially in rural and hard-to-reach areas (Florquin & Gramizzi, 2009).

Furthermore, SALWs undermine state authority and exacerbate weak governance. Armed non-state actors often become alternative centers of power in regions where state presence is limited, using their firepower to extort, control territory, and impose parallel administrations. In the North-West, for example, banditry has morphed into a highly organized form of violent entrepreneurship enabled by SALWs, with armed groups conducting mass kidnappings, displacing communities, and collecting ransom payments in regions like Zamfara and Katsina (Okoli & Ugwu, 2021). In addition, the proliferation of SALWs has had a significant psychological and socio-economic toll on Nigerian society. The climate of fear and insecurity created by gun violence discourages investment, disrupts education, and leads to the displacement of populations, thereby exacerbating poverty and social exclusion.

Effectiveness of Nigeria's Counter-Terrorism Strategies in Curbing the Influence of SALWs and Neutralizing Non-State Armed Actors

Nigeria's counter-terrorism strategies have evolved over the years in response to the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) and the rise of non-state armed actors, particularly in the Northeast and other conflict-prone zones. Despite considerable investment in security infrastructure, legal frameworks, and regional cooperation, the effectiveness of these strategies remains mixed. On one hand, the Nigerian government has taken several initiatives aimed at curbing the circulation of SALWs and dismantling insurgent networks. These include the establishment of the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (NCCSALW) in 2021, designed to serve as a centralized institution

for the coordination and implementation of arms control policies (Onuoha, 2022). The NCCSALW builds on Nigeria's commitment to regional agreements like the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related Materials (2006), which promotes harmonized legislation and border control measures among member states. While commendable, enforcement has been undermined by porous borders, weak institutional capacity, and corruption within security agencies (Akinola, 2021). This has allowed arms smuggling to flourish, supplying both insurgents like Boko Haram and violent criminal groups across the North-West and South-South regions.

In terms of operational counter-terrorism efforts, Nigeria has prioritized kinetic military responses through Joint Task Forces such as Operation Lafiya Dole and its successor Operation Hadin Kai. These operations have achieved some tactical victories, including the killing of high-profile Boko Haram commanders and the reclaiming of territory previously held by insurgents (Adeosun & Ogunnubi, 2023). The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), comprising forces from Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Cameroon, and Benin, has also bolstered regional coordination in countering transnational threats. However, such military-focused strategies often overlook the root causes of violent extremism and the dynamics of local governance. The overreliance on hard power has led to accusations of human rights abuses and alienation of local communities, which in turn undermines public trust and facilitates the recruitment efforts of armed groups (Amnesty International, 2020; Okoli & Ugwu, 2021).

Additionally, Nigeria has implemented deradicalization and reintegration programs through the Operation Safe Corridor (OSC) initiative, which targets repentant Boko Haram fighters. While the program is innovative in its aim to neutralize ideological extremism, its impact has been constrained by limited transparency, public resistance, and insufficient support mechanisms for reintegration (Agbiboa, 2021). Community members often express distrust toward former combatants, raising concerns about the sustainability of such interventions without parallel investment in victims' support and community reconciliation. Furthermore, the proliferation of SALWs remains a critical enabler of violent conflict and criminality. According to the Small Arms Survey (2022), Nigeria is estimated to host over 6 million illicit weapons in civilian hands, posing a serious challenge to national security and counter-terrorism efforts. The ease with which these weapons circulate—fueled by regional instability in the Sahel and Libya—exacerbates the capacity of non-state actors to resist state interventions.

In recognition of these multifaceted challenges, experts argue for a more comprehensive and intelligence-driven approach to counter-terrorism that integrates local actors, addresses structural inequalities, and improves governance. Akinyemi and Ezeobi (2022) emphasize the need to combine military action with socio-economic development and conflict-sensitive interventions that target the underlying drivers of insecurity, such as youth unemployment, ethno-religious marginalization, and land disputes. Moreover, enhanced coordination between security agencies and civil society organizations can improve early warning systems and promote community resilience against radicalization. In conclusion, while Nigeria has made notable efforts to curb the influence of SALWs and neutralize non-state armed actors through various counter-terrorism strategies, the overall effectiveness of these measures is

hindered by systemic governance deficits, institutional weaknesses, and inadequate attention to human security. A more integrated, inclusive, and preventive framework is essential to achieving sustainable peace and security.

Recommendations

i. **Strengthen Border Control and Arms Tracking Mechanisms**: The Nigerian government must enhance surveillance and control across porous borders, particularly in the North-East and North-West regions, to curb the illegal flow of small arms and light weapons (SALWs). This requires the deployment of advanced technologies such as drones, biometric scanning, and real-time customs data-sharing with neighboring countries. Additionally, establishing a central national arms registry and collaborating with the ECOWAS Small Arms Program (ECOSAP) will bolster the monitoring and tracing of weapon transfers within and beyond Nigeria's borders.

ii. **Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) of Non-State Actors**: Effective counter-terrorism requires integrating non-kinetic strategies such as DDR to weaken non-state armed groups. Government agencies in collaboration with community leaders, civil society organizations, and international partners should implement community-based disarmament campaigns that offer economic incentives, vocational training, and psychosocial support for former combatants. This helps reduce recidivism and reintegrate ex-militants as productive members of society, thus reducing the pool of armed non-state actors.

iii. **Intelligence-Led Policing and Inter-Agency Collaboration:** To address the complexity of terrorism and illicit arms networks, Nigeria must institutionalize intelligence-led policing that prioritizes proactive information gathering, analysis, and inter-agency coordination. Establishing a centralized intelligence fusion center will improve data sharing between the military, police, DSS, and customs. Furthermore, community policing initiatives should be expanded to build trust with local populations and improve human intelligence capabilities in areas vulnerable to terrorism.

Conclusion

In sum, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) in Nigeria has significantly exacerbated the challenges of counter-terrorism, particularly by empowering non-state actors and violent extremist groups. The ease of access to illicit arms has emboldened insurgent factions such as Boko Haram, bandits, and separatist militias, undermining national security and destabilizing affected regions. This arms proliferation thrives due to porous borders, weak institutional controls, corruption, and ineffective regulation, making it difficult for the Nigerian state to assert its monopoly on violence. Non-state actors have not only exploited this insecurity to pursue ideological, economic, or ethno-religious goals but have also filled security vacuums in many rural and underserved communities, further eroding public trust in the state. In response, Nigeria's counter-terrorism efforts must be recalibrated to address the root causes of arms circulation and non-state violence. This includes enhancing border security, strengthening intelligence and surveillance capabilities, promoting regional cooperation, and implementing disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs. Equally important is the need to invest in community-based conflict resolution, socioeconomic development, and civic engagement to reduce the appeal of extremist

ideologies. Ultimately, without a comprehensive, multidimensional approach that combines security enforcement with structural reforms, the cycle of violence driven by the proliferation of SALWs and the rise of non-state actors will continue to undermine Nigeria's counter-terrorism goals and broader national development objectives. A secure Nigeria must therefore prioritize arms control as a critical component of its national security strategy.

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