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Pipeline Surveillance Contracts and Political Economy of Rent Distribution in Nigeria's Oil Sector, 2015-2025

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the political economy of pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) and their role in shaping rent distribution within Nigeria's oil sector between 2015 and 2025. While PSCs are officially designed to curb pipeline vandalism and oil theft, they have evolved into complex mechanisms for redistributing oil rents among state actors, ex-militants, private security firms, and host communities in the Niger Delta. Anchored in Rentier State Theory and Clientelist Theory, the study interrogates how these contracts operate within Nigeria's broader rentier political structure, where access to resource wealth is mediated through informal networks and patronage relations. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach, combining documentary analysis with Key Informant Interviews (KII) involving stakeholders from government agencies, security institutions, private contractors, civil society, and oil-producing communities. This triangulated approach enables a deeper understanding of both formal policy intentions and informal practices shaping PSC implementation. Findings reveal that PSCs function as instruments of "security patronage," facilitating elite bargaining, co-opting former militant actors, and stabilizing fragile security arrangements in oil-producing regions. At the same time, they reinforce informal governance structures, encourage elite capture, and perpetuate unequal rent-sharing arrangements that often exclude broader community interests. Although PSCs have contributed to a reduction in pipeline vandalism and improvements in oil output in recent years, their effectiveness remains contingent on continuous financial incentives. The study concludes that PSCs represent a hybrid system of security governance and rent allocation, with significant implications for institutional development, transparency, and sustainable resource governance in Nigeria's oil-dependent economy.

KEYWORDS: Pipeline Vandalism, Oil Theft, State Actors, Ex-Militants, Private Security, Host Communities

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's oil sector remains the cornerstone of its political economy, accounting for over 70% of government revenue and more than 80% of export earnings over the past decades (World Bank, 2023; Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries [OPEC], 2022). Since the discovery of crude oil in commercial quantities in Oloibiri in 1956, petroleum resources have fundamentally shaped Nigeria's economic structure, fiscal policy, and governance architecture. Oil has not only financed state expenditure but has also reconfigured state-society relations, shifting the Nigerian state toward a rent-dependent model in which revenue generation is largely decoupled from productive economic activity and taxation (Terry Lynn Karl, 1997; Michael L. Ross, 2012).

However, this dependence has entrenched structural vulnerabilities, particularly those associated with rentierism, institutional fragility, and conflict in oil-producing regions. In rentier political systems, the state's reliance on externally generated rents, rather than domestic taxation, often weakens accountability mechanisms, fosters corruption, and encourages distributive rather than productive governance (Hazem Beblawi & Giacomo Luciani, 1987; Douglass C. North, 1990). In Nigeria, these dynamics are especially pronounced in the Niger Delta, where oil extraction coexists with widespread poverty, environmental degradation, and political marginalization (Cyril Obi, 2010; Michael Watts, 2008).

One of the most persistent challenges confronting Nigeria's oil sector is the phenomenon of pipeline vandalism and crude oil theft, particularly in the Niger Delta region. These activities have evolved from localized acts of sabotage into highly organized criminal enterprises involving complex networks of local actors, militant groups, security operatives, political elites, and transnational syndicates (Michael Watts, 2008; Judith Burdin Asuni, 2009). Oil theft, commonly referred to as "bunkering", has become deeply embedded in the political economy of the region, functioning not only as a criminal activity but also as a livelihood strategy and a tool of political bargaining (Obi, 2010; Ikelegbe, 2013).

Between 2015 and 2022, Nigeria reportedly lost hundreds of thousands of barrels of crude oil per day due to theft and pipeline disruptions, resulting in billions of dollars in revenue losses and severe fiscal constraints (Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative [NEITI], 2021; World Bank, 2023). These losses have had far-reaching implications for macroeconomic stability,

including reduced foreign exchange earnings, budget deficits, and constraints on public investment. Beyond economic costs, pipeline vandalism has also contributed to extensive environmental degradation, including oil spills, water contamination, and destruction of farmlands, thereby undermining livelihoods and exacerbating human insecurity in the Niger Delta (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2011; Obi, 2010).

The persistence of oil theft and pipeline sabotage is deeply rooted in the historical and political economy of the Niger Delta. Scholars have long argued that the region exemplifies the "resource curse," where resource abundance paradoxically leads to underdevelopment, conflict, and weak institutions (Auty, 1993; Ross, 2012). In the Nigerian context, this paradox is compounded by longstanding grievances over resource control, inequitable revenue distribution, and environmental injustice. These grievances have fueled cycles of protest, militancy, and state repression, particularly since the 1990s (Watts, 2004; Obi, 2010).

The rise of militant groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in the 2000s marked a significant escalation of conflict, characterized by attacks on oil infrastructure, kidnapping of oil workers, and disruption of production. These developments forced the Nigerian state to adopt a range of policy responses, including military interventions and negotiated settlements. Among these, the Presidential Amnesty Programme introduced in 2009 represented a major shift toward non-militarized conflict management. The program offered stipends, vocational training, and reintegration opportunities to former militants, leading to a temporary reduction in violence and restoration of oil production (Ugwuanyi & Chukwuemeka, 2013).

However, while the amnesty program achieved short-term stability, it did not address the structural drivers of conflict, including unemployment, governance deficits, and environmental degradation (Nwajiaku-Dahou, 2012). Instead, it institutionalized a system of rent-based pacification, whereby former militants were incorporated into state-controlled patronage networks. This created new forms of dependency and competition over access to state resources, laying the groundwork for subsequent security and governance challenges.

Within this broader context, pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) emerged as a strategic intervention aimed at securing oil infrastructure and reducing production losses. Beginning in the mid-2010s and expanding significantly between 2015 and 2025, PSCs involve the outsourcing of pipeline protection to private security firms and individuals, many of whom are linked to former militant leaders and local elites. This shift reflects a broader transformation in security governance, from state-centric approaches toward hybrid arrangements involving both formal and informal actors (Omeje, 2006; Obi, 2018).

The adoption of PSCs can be understood as part of a pragmatic response by the Nigerian state to the limitations of conventional security strategies. Given the vast and difficult terrain of the Niger Delta, as well as the embeddedness of oil theft networks within local communities, state security agencies alone have proven insufficient in addressing pipeline vandalism. By engaging local actors with intimate knowledge of the terrain and social networks, PSCs aim to enhance surveillance capacity and deter sabotage.

At face value, PSCs have yielded measurable improvements in pipeline security and oil production. Reports indicate that increased engagement of private surveillance contractors has contributed to a decline in large-scale oil theft and improved operational efficiency in recent years (Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative [NEITI], 2021). In some cases, crude oil output has rebounded following the award of major surveillance contracts, suggesting a degree of effectiveness in curbing disruptions.

However, beyond these apparent successes, PSCs raise critical questions about governance, accountability, and the broader political economy of resource management in Nigeria. Emerging evidence suggests that PSCs function not merely as security arrangements but as mechanisms for redistributing oil rents among key actors within Nigeria's political system. In many cases, contracts are awarded based on political considerations, including loyalty, influence, and capacity to mobilize or contain violence, rather than technical expertise or efficiency (Stakeholder Democracy Network, 2019).

This pattern aligns with broader dynamics of rent distribution in rentier states, where access to resource wealth is mediated through patronage networks and elite bargaining processes (Beblawi & Luciani, 1987; Karl, 1997). In this context, PSCs can be interpreted as instruments of clientelist exchange, whereby the state allocates economic benefits to strategically important actors in return for political support and security cooperation (Scott, 1972).

Furthermore, the allocation of PSCs has significant implications for local power relations in the Niger Delta. By channeling substantial financial resources to selected individuals and groups, these contracts can reinforce existing hierarchies, exacerbate inequalities, and generate new forms of exclusion and contestation within communities (Obi, 2018). The concentration of contracts among a limited number of actors has, in some instances, fueled intra-community tensions and competition, thereby reproducing the very conflicts that PSCs are intended to mitigate.

At the same time, PSCs have been described as "payment-for-peace" mechanisms, whereby the state effectively compensates potential disruptors to maintain stability in oil-producing areas (Asuni, 2009; Watts, 2008). While this approach may reduce immediate threats to infrastructure, it raises concerns about long-term sustainability, as it creates incentives for continued rent-seeking and dependence on state patronage.

This dual character of PSCs, as both security instruments and rent distribution mechanisms, reflects the complex interplay between formal institutions and informal practices in Nigeria's oil sector. It underscores the extent to which governance in the sector is shaped by negotiated arrangements, political settlements, and adaptive strategies in response to persistent insecurity (North, 1990; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004).

Against this backdrop, this study examines the political economy of pipeline surveillance contracts in Nigeria between 2015 and 2025, with a particular focus on their role in shaping patterns of rent distribution, security governance, and institutional outcomes. The central argument advanced in this paper is that PSCs constitute politically mediated instruments of rent allocation embedded within Nigeria's rentier system, rather than neutral or purely technical security interventions.

So, the study contributes to broader debates on resource governance, conflict management, and the political economy of security in resource-dependent states. It also provides policy-relevant insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with hybrid security arrangements, particularly in contexts characterized by weak institutions and entrenched patronage systems. Ultimately, understanding the political economy of PSCs is essential for designing more transparent, equitable, and sustainable approaches to managing Nigeria's oil sector and addressing the underlying drivers of conflict in the Niger Delta.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in **Rentier State Theory** and **Clientelist Theory**, which together provide a robust analytical lens for understanding the political economy of pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) in Nigeria's oil sector. While Rentier State Theory explains the structural dynamics of resource dependence and rent distribution, Clientelist Theory illuminates the micro-level mechanisms through which political actors allocate resources in exchange for loyalty and control. The integration of these frameworks enables a comprehensive analysis of PSCs as both institutional and relational phenomena embedded within Nigeria's oil-dependent political economy.

Rentier State Theory

Rentier State Theory emerged from attempts to explain the political and economic characteristics of states that derive a substantial proportion of their revenues from externally generated rents, particularly natural resource exports (Mahdavy, 1970; Beblawi & Luciani, 1987). In such states, the government is not primarily dependent on domestic taxation but rather on revenues accrued from oil exports, thereby altering the nature of state-society relations.

Beblawi & Luciani (1987) identify key features of rentier states, including:

1. Heavy Reliance on External Rents

A defining characteristic of a rentier state is its dependence on externally generated revenues, particularly from natural resources such as oil, gas, or minerals. Unlike productive economies that generate income through taxation, industrial output, or diversified economic activities, rentier states derive a substantial portion of their national income from rents paid by external actors (Mahdavy, 1970; Beblawi & Luciani, 1987).

In Nigeria, oil exports constitute the primary source of foreign exchange earnings and government revenue. These rents are "external" because they originate from international markets rather than domestic economic productivity. This structure fundamentally alters the relationship between the state and society, as the government does not rely heavily on citizens for revenue through taxation (Ross, 2012).

The implication of this reliance is twofold. First, it reduces incentives for economic diversification, as the state becomes comfortable with easy revenue flows from natural resources. Second, it creates vulnerability to global price fluctuations, making the economy highly unstable during periods of oil price volatility (Karl, 1997). Thus, external rent dependence fosters both economic fragility and structural imbalance.

2. Limited Productive Economic Diversification

Rentier states typically exhibit weak or underdeveloped productive sectors, as the abundance of resource rents discourages investment in agriculture, manufacturing, and other non-resource sectors (Auty, 1993). This phenomenon is often linked to the "Dutch Disease," where resource exports lead to currency appreciation, making other sectors less competitive internationally.

In the Nigerian case, decades of oil dependence have contributed to the neglect of agriculture and manufacturing, which were once major contributors to GDP before the oil boom. The dominance of the oil sector crowds out other productive activities, leading to an economy that is narrowly based and highly dependent on a single commodity (Obi, 2010).

Moreover, rentier economies tend to prioritize consumption over production. Governments use oil revenues to finance imports, subsidies, and public sector wages rather than investing in long-term productive capacity. This results in structural unemployment, low industrialization, and limited innovation (Ross, 2012).

The absence of diversification also reinforces regional inequalities, particularly in resource-producing areas like the Niger Delta, where wealth generation coexists with underdevelopment and environmental degradation.

3. Dominant Role of the State in Rent Allocation

In rentier states, the government assumes a central role as the primary distributor of wealth, controlling access to resource rents and allocating them through budgets, contracts, subsidies, and patronage networks (Beblawi & Luciani, 1987; Karl, 1997). This centralization of economic power transforms the state into the main avenue for wealth accumulation.

In Nigeria, the federal government controls oil revenues and distributes them through various mechanisms, including fiscal transfers, public contracts, and political appointments. This creates intense competition among political actors for access to state resources, often leading to rent-seeking behavior and elite bargaining (Joseph, 1987).

Pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) exemplify this dynamic. Rather than being purely security-driven, they function as instruments through which the state allocates rents to politically relevant actors, including former militants and local elites. This reinforces the perception of the state as a "dispenser of patronage" rather than a neutral regulator.

The dominance of the state in rent allocation also weakens market mechanisms, as economic success becomes tied to political connections rather than productivity or innovation. Consequently, corruption and inefficiency become systemic features of governance (Mehlum, Moene, & Torvik, 2006).

4. Weak Accountability Due to Low Taxation

A critical implication of rentierism is the erosion of accountability mechanisms, arising from the state's limited reliance on taxation. In conventional political economy theory, taxation creates a fiscal contract between the state and citizens, whereby governments are held accountable for how public resources are managed (North, 1990).

However, in rentier states, where revenues are derived primarily from external rents, this fiscal contract is weakened or absent. Governments are less dependent on citizens for revenue and therefore face reduced pressure to be transparent, efficient, or responsive (Ross, 2012).

In Nigeria, the dominance of oil revenues has historically limited the development of a strong tax culture. As a result, citizens have limited leverage to demand accountability, while political elites exercise significant discretion over resource allocation. This contributes to governance challenges such as corruption, mismanagement, and lack of transparency (Watts, 2008).

Furthermore, weak accountability fosters the persistence of informal institutions and patronage systems, as political leaders prioritize loyalty over performance. This dynamic is particularly evident in the allocation of PSCs, where contracts are often awarded based on political considerations rather than merit or efficiency.

Taken together, these four features, external rent dependence, limited diversification, state dominance in allocation, and weak accountability, form the structural foundation of rentier political economies. In Nigeria, these characteristics interact to produce a governance system in which oil rents are central to political survival, economic organization, and conflict management.

Within this framework, pipeline surveillance contracts can be understood as a logical extension of rentier governance, serving as instruments for distributing rents, maintaining political stability, and managing security challenges through informal and clientelist arrangements.

These characteristics are strongly reflected in Nigeria's oil economy. Since the 1970s oil boom, the Nigerian state has increasingly relied on petroleum revenues, leading to a governance system in which political power is closely tied to access to oil rents (Karl, 1997; Ross, 2012).

A central proposition of Rentier State Theory is that the availability of resource rents enables governments to maintain political stability through distributive mechanisms rather than through productive economic performance or democratic accountability (Ross, 2012). This is often achieved through patronage, subsidies, and targeted allocations designed to co-opt potential opposition and maintain elite coalitions (Karl, 1997).

In the Nigerian context, oil rents have historically been used to sustain political settlements among competing elites at the federal, state, and local levels (Joseph, 1987; Watts, 2008). The distribution of oil revenues through fiscal federalism, contracts, and state expenditures has created a system of rent-seeking and elite bargaining, where access to state resources becomes the primary objective of political competition (Auty, 1993; Obi, 2010).

Furthermore, Rentier State Theory highlights the tendency for resource-dependent states to develop weak institutions and high levels of corruption, as the abundance of rents reduces incentives for institutional development and accountability (North, 1990; Mehlum, Moene, & Torvik, 2006). In Nigeria's oil sector, this has manifested in opaque contract allocation processes, weak regulatory oversight, and the proliferation of informal governance practices.

Importantly, the theory also emphasizes the role of rents in conflict management. Rather than resolving underlying grievances, rentier states often use resource revenues to buy peace through compensatory mechanisms (Basedau & Lay, 2009). This is particularly evident in the Niger Delta, where oil rents have been used to manage militant groups through amnesty programs, compensation payments, and contractual arrangements.

Pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) can thus be interpreted within the rentier framework as instruments through which the state redistributes oil rents to strategically important actors in order to maintain stability in oil-producing regions. Rather than representing purely technical security interventions, PSCs reflect the broader logic of rentier governance, where resource revenues are deployed to manage political risks and sustain the existing order.

Clientelist Theory

While Rentier State Theory explains the structural context of resource dependence, Clientelist Theory provides insight into the relational mechanisms through which rents are distributed. Clientelism refers to a system of exchange in which political actors provide material benefits, such as money, contracts, or services, in return for political support, loyalty, or compliance (Scott, 1972; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007).

James C. Scott (1972) conceptualizes clientelism as a dyadic relationship between patrons and clients, characterized by asymmetry, reciprocity, and informality. Patrons possess access to resources and power, while clients offer support, loyalty, or services in exchange. These relationships are often embedded within broader networks of political and social exchange, forming complex patron-client systems that structure political behavior.

In many developing countries, clientelism operates as a dominant mode of political organization, particularly in contexts where formal institutions are weak or ineffective (Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1984; Walle, 2007). In such settings, access to state resources is mediated through informal networks rather than formal rules, leading to the personalization of power and the politicization of resource allocation.

In Nigeria, clientelist practices have been extensively documented across various sectors, including public procurement, employment, and resource distribution (Joseph, 1987; Ayoade, 1998). The oil sector, in particular, provides fertile ground for clientelist exchanges due to the high value of rents and the central role of the state in their allocation (Watts, 2008; Obi, 2010).

Clientelist Theory also emphasizes the role of material incentives in maintaining political order. By distributing benefits to key actors, political leaders can secure loyalty, prevent dissent, and consolidate their power base (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). However, this system often leads to inefficiency, inequality, and the exclusion of non-aligned groups, thereby undermining broader developmental outcomes.

Within the context of pipeline surveillance contracts, clientelism is evident in the allocation of contracts to individuals and groups based on their political relevance and capacity to influence security dynamics. Former militant leaders, community elites, and politically connected actors are often selected as beneficiaries of PSCs, reflecting their strategic importance within the local political economy.

These contracts serve as material incentives designed to secure compliance and cooperation, effectively transforming potential disruptors into stakeholders in the protection of oil infrastructure. As such, PSCs function as instruments of clientelist exchange, where economic benefits are traded for security and political stability.

Analytical Synthesis: PSCs as Clientelist Rent-Distribution Instruments

The integration of Rentier State Theory and Clientelist Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the political economy of pipeline surveillance contracts in Nigeria. While Rentier State Theory explains the availability and strategic use of oil rents, Clientelist Theory elucidates the mechanisms through which these rents are distributed among actors.

Within this integrated framework, PSCs can be conceptualized as **clientelist rent-distribution instruments operating within a rentier state system**. Specifically, they represent a form of "security rent allocation", where the state deploys oil revenues to secure the cooperation of non-state actors involved in or capable of disrupting oil production.

This analytical perspective highlights several key dynamics:

1. **Instrumentalization of Security**: PSCs transform security provision into a transactional arrangement, where protection of pipelines is contingent on financial incentives rather than institutional capacity.
2. **Elite Bargaining and Political Settlements**: The allocation of PSCs reflects ongoing negotiations among political elites, former militants, and local actors, forming part of a broader political settlement aimed at maintaining stability (Khan, 2010).
3. **Informalization of Governance**: PSCs blur the boundary between formal and informal institutions, embedding security governance within patronage networks and negotiated arrangements (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004).
4. **Reproduction of Rent-Seeking Behavior**: By linking financial rewards to control over violence or disruption, PSCs may incentivize rent-seeking and perpetuate cycles of insecurity (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).
5. **Conditional Stability and Dependency**: Stability achieved through PSCs is contingent on continued rent flows, creating a dependency that may undermine long-term institutional development.

Relevance of the Framework to the Study

The combined application of Rentier State Theory and Clientelist Theory is particularly relevant for analyzing Nigeria's oil sector, where resource dependence and informal political practices intersect. This framework allows the study to move beyond conventional explanations of pipeline vandalism as purely criminal or technical problems, and instead situates them within broader political and economic structures.

By conceptualizing PSCs as clientelist rent-distribution mechanisms, the study provides a nuanced understanding of their dual role as both security interventions and instruments of political control. This approach also highlights the limitations of PSCs as a long-term solution, given their reliance on informal arrangements and continuous rent allocation.

Ultimately, the theoretical framework underscores the need for institutional reforms that address both the structural conditions of rentierism and the relational dynamics of clientelism, in order to promote more transparent, accountable, and sustainable governance in Nigeria's oil sector.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory research design, which is particularly suited for investigating complex political and institutional phenomena such as pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) and their role in rent distribution within Nigeria's oil sector. Qualitative approaches are appropriate where the objective is to understand processes, meanings, power relations, and informal practices that are not easily captured through quantitative techniques (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

The exploratory nature of the study is justified by the relative opacity surrounding PSCs, especially with respect to contract allocation, beneficiary networks, and the informal mechanisms through which security and rent distribution are negotiated. Given that PSCs operate at the intersection of formal policy frameworks and informal political arrangements, a qualitative approach enables a nuanced and context-sensitive analysis of these dynamics (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Khan, 2010).

The study combines documentary analysis and Key Informant Interviews (KII) to achieve methodological triangulation. Documentary analysis provides a macro-level understanding of policy evolution, institutional frameworks, and publicly available data, while KIIs offer micro-level insights into the lived experiences, perceptions, and strategies of actors directly involved in PSC implementation (Bowen, 2009; Flick, 2018).

This dual-method approach enhances the depth and credibility of the findings by allowing the researcher to cross-validate evidence from multiple sources and to capture both formal narratives and informal practices shaping Nigeria's oil sector governance.

Data Sources and Collection

Documentary Analysis

Documentary analysis was employed as a primary method for examining policy frameworks, institutional arrangements, and historical developments related to pipeline surveillance contracts. Documents analyzed included:

- Reports from the Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI)
- Publications from the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited (NNPCL)
- Policy briefs from civil society organizations such as Stakeholder Democracy Network
- International development reports (e.g., World Bank, UN agencies)
- Academic literature on oil governance, rentier politics, and security outsourcing

Documentary analysis is particularly useful for identifying patterns, tracing policy evolution, and providing contextual background for qualitative research (Bowen, 2009). It also enables the researcher to interrogate official narratives and compare them with empirical realities derived from field-based data.

Key Informant Interviews (KII)

To complement documentary evidence, the study utilized Key Informant Interviews (KII) to generate primary data. KIIs are widely used in political economy research to capture insider perspectives and uncover informal processes that are not documented in official records (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select respondents with specialized knowledge and direct involvement in pipeline surveillance activities and oil sector governance. Purposive sampling is appropriate for qualitative research where the aim is to obtain rich, relevant, and context-specific information rather than statistical representativeness (Patton, 2015).

The study targeted the following categories of informants:

- Officials of the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited (NNPCL)
- Security personnel (including military, police, and civil defense officers involved in pipeline protection)
- Executives of private surveillance firms engaged in PSCs
- Former militant leaders and contractors operating in the Niger Delta
- Community leaders and youth representatives from oil-producing areas

These categories were selected to ensure a multi-actor perspective, capturing the diverse interests, experiences, and power relations that shape PSC implementation. The inclusion of both state and non-state actors reflects the hybrid nature of security governance in Nigeria's oil sector (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2011; Avant, 2005).

A total of 20 key informants were interviewed. This sample size is consistent with qualitative research standards, where emphasis is placed on depth rather than breadth, and where data saturation, rather than numerical representation, determines adequacy (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2017).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provide a balance between consistency and flexibility. An interview guide was developed to ensure coverage of key themes while allowing respondents to elaborate on issues based on their experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

The interview guide focused on the following themes:

- The rationale behind pipeline surveillance contracts
- Criteria and processes for contract allocation
- Patterns of rent distribution among actors

- The role of PSCs in security and conflict management
- Inclusion and exclusion dynamics within host communities
- Perceived effectiveness and sustainability of PSCs

Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and via virtual platforms, depending on accessibility, geographical location, and security considerations. Each interview lasted approximately 30-60 minutes. Where consent was granted, interviews were audio-recorded; otherwise, detailed notes were taken.

Given the sensitivity of issues related to oil governance, security, and political patronage, strict ethical standards were maintained. Respondents were assured of:

- Confidentiality and anonymity
- Voluntary participation and the right to withdraw
- Informed consent prior to participation

To protect participants, pseudonyms were used, and identifiable information was excluded from the analysis and reporting. These measures align with best practices in qualitative research ethics (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001).

Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis as the primary analytical technique, following the framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative research for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within data (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

The analysis proceeded through the following stages:

1. **Data Familiarization**; Interview transcripts and documents were read repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data.
2. **Initial Coding**: Relevant segments of data were coded based on recurring ideas, concepts, and patterns.
3. **Theme Development**: Codes were grouped into broader themes reflecting key dimensions of PSCs, such as rent distribution, patronage networks, and security governance.
4. **Theme Review and Refinement**: Themes were reviewed to ensure internal coherence and consistency with the data.
5. **Interpretation**: Themes were interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework, linking empirical findings to Rentier State Theory and Clientelist Theory.

The integration of documentary evidence and interview data allowed for analytical triangulation, enhancing the robustness and credibility of the findings (Flick, 2018).

Despite its strengths, the study has certain limitations:

- Restricted access to confidential contract data
- Potential bias in responses from politically exposed informants
- Limited generalizability due to qualitative design

However, the use of KIIs mitigates these limitations by providing first-hand insights into otherwise opaque processes, thereby enhancing the explanatory power of the study.

FINDINGS / DISCUSSION

PSCs as Instruments of Rent Distribution

Findings from both documentary evidence and Key Informant Interviews (KII) indicate that pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) function as direct channels for the redistribution of oil rents, with allocation patterns shaped more by political considerations, social influence, and control over local networks than by technical efficiency or operational competence. Rather than being governed strictly by formal procurement criteria such as pipeline length, terrain complexity, or surveillance technology, PSCs are embedded within a broader system of patronage and negotiated political settlements.

A recurring theme across interviews is that PSCs are strategically deployed to co-opt actors who possess the capacity to either facilitate or disrupt oil production. As one senior official observed:

"These contracts are not really about surveillance alone. They are about settling people who have the capacity to disrupt oil production." (KII 1, Senior NNPCL Official, Abuja).

This perspective underscores the extent to which PSCs are used as instruments of conflict management through economic inclusion, where individuals or groups previously associated with militancy or oil theft are incorporated into the formal security architecture. In this sense, PSCs represent a continuation of earlier rent-based pacification strategies, such as the Presidential Amnesty Programme, but in a more decentralized and operationalized form.

Similarly, responses from private contractors reveal that contract valuation is closely linked to social capital and influence, rather than measurable performance indicators:

"The amount you are given depends on how many boys you control, not the pipeline length." (KII 2, Private Surveillance Contractor, Warri)

This statement highlights a critical dimension of rent distribution within PSCs: the monetization of informal authority structures. Contractors with extensive local networks, often referred to as "boys", are perceived as more valuable because of their ability to enforce compliance, deter sabotage, and maintain territorial control. Consequently, financial allocations are calibrated to reflect the size and influence of these networks, reinforcing a system in which power over people translates directly into access to state resources.

From a political economy perspective, these findings align with the logic of rentier governance, where the state utilizes resource rents to maintain stability by selectively distributing benefits to strategically important actors (Beblawi & Luciani, 1987; Karl, 1997). At the same time, they reflect the dynamics of clientelist exchange, in which material rewards are exchanged for loyalty, compliance, and security cooperation (Scott, 1972). PSCs thus operate at the intersection of these two systems, serving as instruments through which oil rents are redistributed in ways that sustain both political order and informal governance networks.

Importantly, the use of PSCs as rent distribution mechanisms has significant implications for efficiency and accountability. Because contract allocation is driven by political and social considerations, there is limited emphasis on performance monitoring, transparency, or cost-effectiveness. This can lead to inflated contract values, duplication of roles, and weak oversight, ultimately undermining the efficiency of pipeline surveillance operations. Furthermore, the reliance on informal networks creates opportunities for elite capture, as politically connected individuals are more likely to secure lucrative contracts, often at the expense of broader community participation.

At the community level, the concentration of PSC benefits among a limited number of actors can generate perceptions of exclusion and inequality. While some individuals and groups are incorporated into the rent distribution system, others remain marginalized, potentially creating new sources of tension and conflict. This selective inclusion reinforces hierarchical power structures within local communities, where access to PSC-related rents becomes a key determinant of socio-economic status and political influence.

Overall, the evidence suggests that PSCs function less as purely technical security interventions and more as institutionalized mechanisms for redistributing oil rents within Nigeria's rentier political economy. By linking financial rewards to the capacity for disruption and control, PSCs transform security into a transactional arrangement, where stability is achieved through continuous rent allocation rather than through institutional strengthening or structural reform.

Patronage Networks and Elite Capture

The allocation of pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) reflects deeply entrenched patronage systems that link political elites, former militant leaders, and security actors within Nigeria's oil governance framework. Rather than operating through open, competitive, and merit-based processes, PSCs are often distributed through informal political networks, where access is determined by proximity to power and strategic relevance within the Niger Delta's security landscape.

This pattern is clearly illustrated in the perceptions of key informants:

"If you are not politically connected, you cannot access these contracts. It is a closed circle." (KII 3, Policy Analyst, Port Harcourt)

"The government uses these contracts to maintain relationships with powerful actors in the Niger Delta." (KII 4, Civil Society Actor, Yenagoa)

These responses highlight the extent to which PSCs are embedded within a system of elite bargaining and political patronage, where contracts serve as tools for consolidating alliances and managing influential actors. By allocating lucrative surveillance contracts to politically connected individuals, particularly former militant leaders, the state effectively integrates these actors into its governance structure, transforming them from potential disruptors into beneficiaries of the oil economy.

From a political economy perspective, this reinforces patterns of elite capture, where access to oil rents is concentrated among a narrow group of actors with political leverage (Beblawi & Luciani, 1987; Joseph, 1987). Consequently, PSCs do not merely reflect administrative decisions but are part of a broader strategy of maintaining political stability through selective inclusion. However, this system also perpetuates inequality and undermines transparency, as those outside these networks remain excluded from the benefits of resource governance.

PSCs as "Payment for Peace" Mechanisms

Pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) operate not only as security arrangements but also as informal peace agreements designed to prevent pipeline sabotage and stabilize oil production in the Niger Delta. Evidence from Key Informant Interviews suggests that PSCs function as a form of economic pacification, where financial incentives are used to secure the cooperation of actors who might otherwise engage in or facilitate disruptive activities.

This dynamic is reflected in the views of community and security stakeholders:

"When people are engaged, pipelines are safe. When they are excluded, vandalism increases." (KII 5, Community Leader, Rivers State)

"It is cheaper for the government to pay these groups than to repair pipelines every time they are destroyed." (KII 6, Security Officer, Niger Delta)

These insights highlight a pragmatic logic underpinning PSCs: inclusion through rent distribution reduces incentives for sabotage. By incorporating former militants, local youth groups, and influential community actors into the surveillance framework, the state effectively transforms potential threats into stakeholders in the protection of oil infrastructure. This aligns with broader rentier

strategies of conflict management, where resource revenues are deployed to maintain stability rather than to address underlying structural grievances (Basedau & Lay, 2009; Watts, 2008).

However, while PSCs may be cost-effective in the short term, reducing repair costs, production losses, and security expenditures, they institutionalize a system in which peace is contingent on continuous financial flows. This creates a conditional stability, where the absence or delay of payments may quickly lead to renewed vandalism and conflict. As such, PSCs represent an informal but fragile conflict management strategy, grounded more in negotiated incentives than in durable institutional solutions.

Exclusion, Inequality, and Conflict Reproduction

Despite their role in stabilizing oil infrastructure, pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) simultaneously generate patterns of exclusion and inequality that can undermine long-term peace and social cohesion in the Niger Delta. The selective allocation of contracts to a limited number of politically connected individuals, often former militant leaders or influential elites, creates a system in which the benefits of oil rents are unevenly distributed within host communities.

This concern is strongly reflected in the perspectives of local stakeholders:

"Only a few big names benefit. The rest of the community is left out." (KII 7, Youth Leader, Bayelsa State)

"When contracts are unevenly shared, it creates new tensions within communities." (KII 8, NGO Representative, Delta State)

These responses reveal that while PSCs incorporate certain actors into the rent distribution system, they simultaneously marginalize others, particularly ordinary community members and youth groups without political connections. This selective inclusion reinforces existing power hierarchies, where access to PSC-related benefits becomes concentrated among a small elite, thereby deepening socio-economic disparities at the local level.

From a political economy perspective, such uneven distribution of rents can lead to what scholars describe as "conflict reproduction", where the very mechanisms designed to manage insecurity inadvertently generate new forms of grievance and competition (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Obi, 2010). Excluded groups may perceive PSCs as unjust or illegitimate, increasing the likelihood of resentment, protest, or even renewed acts of sabotage as a means of gaining recognition and access to resources.

Moreover, intra-community tensions may intensify as different groups compete for inclusion in the PSC framework, leading to fragmentation and instability within local governance structures. In this sense, PSCs create a paradox: while they may reduce large-scale pipeline vandalism in the short term, they also embed new fault lines of inequality and contestation that can sustain cycles of conflict over time.

Overall, these findings underscore the limitations of PSCs as a conflict management strategy, highlighting the need for more inclusive and equitable approaches to resource governance in the Niger Delta.

Effectiveness and Structural Dependency

While pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) have demonstrably contributed to improvements in pipeline security and reductions in crude oil theft, their effectiveness appears to be contingent on the continuous flow of financial incentives. Evidence from Key Informant Interviews suggests that the gains recorded under PSC arrangements are not necessarily the result of strengthened institutional capacity, but rather of sustained rent-based engagement with key actors in the Niger Delta.

This conditional nature of effectiveness is clearly reflected in stakeholder perspectives:

"Oil theft reduced significantly after these contracts were awarded, but if payments stop, the problem will return." (KII 9, Industry Expert, Lagos)

"This system works, but it is not sustainable because it depends on constant financial incentives." (KII 10, Academic Researcher, Port Harcourt)

These insights point to a fundamental contradiction at the heart of PSCs. On the one hand, they have achieved measurable short-term success by aligning the interests of local actors with the protection of oil infrastructure. On the other hand, they have created a system of structural dependency, in which security outcomes are tied to ongoing financial transfers rather than to durable institutional reforms or community-driven ownership of resources.

From a political economy perspective, this dynamic reflects what can be described as a "dependency trap", where the state becomes locked into a cycle of continuous rent allocation to maintain stability (Karl, 1997; Ross, 2012). The withdrawal or disruption of these payments risks reversing the gains achieved, as previously co-opted actors may revert to disruptive activities or withdraw their cooperation.

Moreover, this dependency undermines incentives for long-term investment in formal security institutions, regulatory oversight, and sustainable development initiatives. Instead of addressing the structural drivers of insecurity, such as unemployment, environmental degradation, and governance deficits, PSCs effectively manage symptoms through financial appeasement.

In the long run, therefore, the effectiveness of PSCs remains fragile and potentially unsustainable. While they may serve as a pragmatic short-term solution, their reliance on continuous rent flows raises critical concerns about their viability as a long-term strategy for securing Nigeria's oil infrastructure and promoting stable resource governance.

Hybrid Security Governance

Pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) have significantly transformed the architecture of security governance in Nigeria's oil sector, giving rise to a hybrid system that combines state and non-state actors in the protection of critical infrastructure. Under this

arrangement, formal security institutions, such as the military, police, and civil defense, operate alongside private surveillance contractors, many of whom are former militant leaders or locally embedded actors with deep knowledge of the terrain and community dynamics.

Insights from Key Informant Interviews illustrate the practical realities of this hybrid configuration:

"Sometimes contractors know more about pipeline activities than the military." (KII 11, Security Official, Abuja)

"There is collaboration, but also competition, between formal security agencies and contractors." (KII 12, Oil Company Staff, Lagos)

These responses highlight two key features of hybrid security governance. First, informational asymmetry often favors non-state actors, particularly contractors who possess localized intelligence, social networks, and operational familiarity with pipeline routes. This can enhance surveillance effectiveness but also shifts practical control away from formal institutions. Second, the coexistence of multiple actors creates a dynamic of both cooperation and rivalry, as different groups negotiate authority, resources, and recognition within the security landscape.

From a governance perspective, this hybridization blurs the boundaries between public authority and private influence, raising concerns about accountability, coordination, and institutional coherence (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2011). The overlapping roles of state agencies and private contractors can lead to ambiguity in command structures, duplication of responsibilities, and challenges in enforcing standards and oversight. In some cases, contractors may operate with significant autonomy, further complicating regulatory control.

Moreover, the integration of non-state actors into security provision reflects broader trends in the privatization and informalization of security, particularly in contexts where state capacity is limited or contested (Avant, 2005). While such arrangements may offer short-term gains in effectiveness, they risk entrenching parallel systems of authority that undermine the development of strong, rule-based institutions.

Overall, PSCs have produced a hybrid security regime that is both adaptive and problematic: adaptive in its ability to leverage local knowledge and networks, but problematic in its tendency to weaken institutional accountability and consolidate informal power structures within Nigeria's oil sector.

CONCLUSION

Pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) have evolved into a central mechanism for managing both security and political stability in Nigeria's oil sector between 2015 and 2025. As this study has demonstrated, PSCs extend beyond their formal mandate of infrastructure protection to function as strategic instruments of rent distribution, conflict management, and political consolidation within Nigeria's rentier political economy. By incorporating former militants, private contractors, and local elites into the surveillance framework, the state has been able to reduce pipeline vandalism and improve crude oil output in the short term.

However, these gains are accompanied by significant structural limitations. PSCs are deeply embedded in clientelist networks and patronage systems, where access to contracts is mediated by political connections rather than transparency, efficiency, or merit. This has reinforced elite capture, widened inequalities within host communities, and contributed to new forms of exclusion and contestation. Moreover, the reliance on continuous financial incentives has created a system of conditional stability, in which security outcomes are dependent on sustained rent flows rather than durable institutional reforms.

The emergence of hybrid security governance further complicates the landscape, as the growing role of non-state actors blurs institutional boundaries and weakens accountability mechanisms. While this arrangement has improved operational effectiveness in some respects, it also raises concerns about long-term governance capacity and the erosion of formal state authority.

Overall, the study concludes that PSCs represent a hybrid system of security governance and rent allocation, reflecting the broader dynamics of rentierism and clientelism in Nigeria's oil sector. Although they provide a pragmatic response to immediate security challenges, their long-term sustainability remains questionable. Without comprehensive reforms aimed at enhancing transparency, promoting inclusive participation, and strengthening formal institutions, PSCs are likely to perpetuate the very structural conditions that sustain insecurity and underdevelopment in the Niger Delta.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from the study's findings on rent distribution, patronage networks, exclusion, structural dependency, and hybrid security governance, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance transparency, effectiveness, and sustainability of pipeline surveillance arrangements in Nigeria's oil sector.

1. The government should institutionalize transparent procurement processes for pipeline surveillance contracts. This includes Public disclosure of contract values, beneficiaries, and selection criteria, Competitive bidding processes subject to oversight by regulatory agencies and strengthening the role of institutions such as the Bureau of Public Procurement (BPP) and the Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI) to reduce opportunities for patronage-based allocation and improve public trust in resource governance.

2. Given that PSC effectiveness is currently tied to informal influence rather than measurable outcomes, there is a need to adopt performance-based contracting models. Contracts should be linked to clearly defined key performance indicators (KPIs), such as reduction in pipeline breaches, independent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and periodic contract reviews based on verified outcomes to shift the focus from political loyalty to operational efficiency and accountability.
3. To mitigate exclusion and inequality, PSC frameworks should be redesigned to incorporate broader community participation. This can be achieved through community-based surveillance cooperatives representing diverse local stakeholders, equitable distribution of benefits across youth groups, women, and marginalized populations and integration of traditional institutions and local governance structures. Inclusive models can reduce intra-community tensions and enhance local ownership of security initiatives.
4. To address the risks of a dependency trap, where security is contingent on continuous financial incentives, policymakers should develop a phased strategy to reduce reliance on PSCs, invest in strengthening formal security institutions (military, civil defense, and policing systems) and enhance technological surveillance systems (e.g., drones, satellite monitoring, pipeline sensors). This transition will promote a more sustainable and institution-driven security framework.
5. To address the challenges of hybrid security arrangements, there is a need to improve coordination between state and non-state actors. This includes establishing clear command structures and operational protocols, defining roles and responsibilities of contractors and security agencies and creating joint monitoring units to oversee surveillance activities.
6. Long-term security cannot be achieved without addressing the underlying causes of conflict. Therefore, government and stakeholders should invest in sustainable development projects (education, employment, infrastructure), strengthen environmental governance and remediation efforts and implement equitable resource distribution policies.
7. Finally, strengthening regulatory oversight is critical to curbing inefficiencies and corruption within PSC frameworks. This can be achieved through independent audits of surveillance contracts, strengthening anti-corruption agencies such as the EFCC and ICPC and leveraging digital platforms for tracking contract implementation and payments

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