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Security or Development: Which Drives the Other? Evidence from African Panels

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the longstanding “chicken or egg” philosophical dilemma in the development-security field by analyzing the direction of causality between economic development and national security across African countries, with a particular focus on how this relationship varies by income level. To achieve this, we mobilized a dataset covering 33 African countries over the period 2004 to 2019, applying the Dumitrescu and Hurlin panel Granger causality test. Our findings reveal a robust, unidirectional causality from economic development to national security across all income levels, with the strongest effects in lower-income and lower-middle-income countries. Conversely, causality from homeland stability to economic development is only significant in upper-middle-income countries and weak or absent in others. These results suggest that while economic growth broadly drives homeland stability in Africa, the influence of national security on growth becomes significant primarily at higher income levels. Policy implications emphasize the need to promote inclusive and sustained economic growth to enhance national stability, especially in lower-income countries. Investments in infrastructure, education, and institutional quality are vital to support this growth

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and indirectly foster stability. For upper-middle-income countries, strengthening governance and political institutions is equally important to reinforce economic development. Our paper contributes to understanding the nuanced causal relationship between economic development and national security in Africa, highlighting the importance of income-level-specific strategies to achieve sustainable development and security.

Keywords: Economic Development; National Security; Political Stability; Granger Causality; Panel Data; Africa; Income Levels; Dumitrescu-Hurlin Test

1. Introduction

The concept of security is complex and multifaceted, with numerous and diverse perspectives existing without a single consensus definition. Historically, understanding has been influenced by theoretical definitions and historical events. Core themes often examined in policy and academic literature when defining security include stability, safety, protection, freedom from fear, threat, and conflict. From a different view, security can also be defined as physical safety, economic welfare, autonomy, and psychological well-being ^[1] (p. 2). Security can be seen as a precondition for development ^[2] (p. 81).

Building upon the foundational concept of national security, the term “**Homeland security**” has emerged as a distinct yet interrelated paradigm, particularly in the post-9/11 attacks. While national security traditionally encompasses the protection of a nation’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political stability, homeland security specifically focuses on safeguarding the domestic front from a spectrum of threats, both natural and man-made.

One of the latest institutional innovations in national security is the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Emerged immediately after 9/11, and articulates homeland security as “a concerted national effort to ensure a homeland that is safe, secure, and resilient against terrorism and other hazards where national interests, aspirations, and way of life can thrive” ^[3] (p. 288). This definition underscores an approach that extends beyond counterterrorism and traditional threats to include disaster resilience, border security, cybersecurity, and immigration enforcement ^[4] (p. 2).

The evolution of homeland security reflects a shift from a predominantly military-centric national security model to a more multifaceted approach that incorporates civilian agencies and addresses a broader range of threats.

This transformation acknowledges the interconnection of various sectors and the necessity for coordinated efforts across government and local levels to effectively manage and mitigate risks to the homeland ^[4] (p. 2).

In academic definitions of national security studies after the 2001, two predominant interpretive frameworks have emerged: the “**Security School**” and the “**Hegemony School**.” These paradigms offer distinct perspectives on homeland security as a concept.

1.1. The Security School

The Security School posits a state-centric model of international relations wherein actor behavior is primarily determined by the exigent imperative to maintain homeland security. This theoretical framework conceptualizes state actions as precautionary measures undertaken not for political or ideological agendas, but rather as a rational response to the systemic assessment of material threat vectors. Consequently, the principal emphasis resides in the prioritization of risk mitigation and strategic preparedness against perceived vulnerabilities and emergent geopolitical risks ^[5] (pp. 9–10). Within this analytical paradigm, high-level security decisions are interpreted as functionally determined by a non-negotiable commitment to national preservation, frequently leveraging the epistemic authority and intelligence estimates provided by the state’s intelligence community ^[6] (p. 14).

1.2. The Hegemony School

The Hegemony School is often associated with a strand of Realism and balance-of-power theory, which interprets state strategic action as fundamentally driven by the imperative to consolidate or expand systemic dominance and achieve geopolitical predominance. This

perspective proposes that great power interventions are manifestations of a state's effort to exploit its condition of unprecedented primacy. Consequently, these deliberate actions are directed toward reshaping the geopolitical landscape and promoting institutional, economic, or ideological architectures that are conducive to long-term supremacy, representing a state's attempt to revise the international system^[7] (pp. 17, 214).

Despite notable policy progress, Africa's development structure remains constrained by persistent poverty, limited productive diversification, and fiscal fragility. Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for about 16 percent of the world's population but roughly 67 percent of people living in extreme poverty, underscoring the scale of unmet social investment needs (World Bank)^[8]. At the same time, the infrastructure financing gap is estimated to be \$181–221 billion annually for 2023–2030, far above current expenditure levels, according to African Development Bank (AfDB)^[9]. These constraints interact with rising security burdens: according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)^[10], many African countries devote between 2 and 5 percent of GDP to military and security spending, a share that has increased amid growing domestic and regional conflicts. This composition problem in public expenditure—where higher security outlays crowd out education, health, and infrastructure—limits human-capital accumulation and long-run growth^[11,12]. Furthermore, fragility and violent extremism are often rooted in economic exclusion rather than ideology, creating a feedback loop in which under-investment in basic services fuels instability, which in turn raises security spending^[12,13]. Recent UNDP Human Development Reports highlight that without strengthened governance, social resilience, and regional coordination, Africa risks remaining trapped in a cycle where insecurity undermines development and underdevelopment perpetuates insecurity.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a comprehensive review of the theoretical and empirical literature on the development–security nexus, with a particular emphasis on recent African-focused studies. Section 3 outlines the methodological framework, including the data sources, variable measurement, and the Dumitrescu and Hurlin (2012)^[14] panel causality approach employed in the analysis. Section 4

presents and discusses the empirical results, highlighting the causal dynamics between economic development and national security across different income groups. Section 5 draws the policy implications derived from the findings, emphasizing strategies for achieving a balanced and sustainable relationship between security and development in Africa. Finally, Section 6 concludes the paper by summarizing the main insights, outlining the study's limitations, and suggesting avenues for future research.

2. Literature Review: Development and Security

The academic studies on the relationship between national security and economic development has evolved considerably. Early perspectives often viewed them as distinct, with security focusing on military empowerment and territorial sovereignty, while development centered on economic growth and fighting poverty. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes their profound interconnectedness, convergence, and mutual reinforcement. The “security-development nexus” emerged as a key framework by scholars like Gunnar Myrdal. He pointed out the broader societal factors influencing development, implicitly including stability and order^[15] (p. 119). Emphasizing how insecurity undermines economic progress through conflict, displacement, and the destruction of infrastructure, while conversely, poverty and inequality can fuel instability and threaten homeland security^[16] (p. 320).

A significant academic research explores the detrimental impact of conflict and insecurity on economic development. Literature has consistently shown that armed conflict leads to significant declines in GDP, discourages foreign investment and domestic entrepreneurship, disrupts trade, and diverts resources away from productive sectors towards security spending^[17] (p. 4). Furthermore, prolonged periods of instability destroy human capital through forced migration, reduced access to education and healthcare, and increased levels of political division. The absence of a secure environment also erodes the establishment of strong institutions, the rule of law, and property rights, all of which are essential for sustained economic growth^[18] (p. 41).

Conversely, economic development is increasingly recognized as a vital pillar of long-term national security.

Inclusive economic growth can address underlying grievances, reduce inequality, limit radical ideologies, and create opportunities, thereby diminishing the likelihood of social unrest and violent conflict ^[19] (p. 5). A strong and diversified economy provides primordial resources for a robust security apparatus, including defense spending, intelligence gathering, and law enforcement. Moreover, economic interdependence can reinforce cooperation and strengthen ties between nations, thus reduce the incentives for conflict ^[20] (p. 27). The concept of “human security” further broadens the understanding of security to include economic well-being, health, and access to resources, highlighting the developmental dimensions of security.

Recent scholarship delves into the nuances of this relationship, examining the specific pathways through which security and development interact. This includes the role of governance and institutional quality as mediating factors. For instance, weak governance and high levels of corruption can undermine both security and development by fostering instability, diverting resources, and hindering economic opportunities (Acemoglu and Robinson ^[21]). Research also explores the impact of specific security threats, such as terrorism and organized crime, on economic activity and investor confidence. Furthermore, the literature increasingly considers the implications of climate change and resource scarcity as shared challenges that necessitate integrated security and development responses ^[22] (pp. 639–655).

In recent years, empirical research has increasing-

ly demonstrated that the traditional separation between security and development does not hold in Africa. Njifen and Anemann (2023) ^[23] found that **military spending in Sub-Saharan Africa** significantly hampers human capital development: for 44 countries, greater defence outlays correlated with lower school enrolment and poorer health outcomes. Likewise, more recent work shows that **governance deficits**—such as weak institutions and unchecked corruption—undermine both growth and stability. For example, Isser et al. (2024) ^[24] report that despite the region’s growth in the early 2000s, uneven state capacity and reform reversal have contributed to rising political instability, limiting the effectiveness of development programmes in delivering outcomes. These findings underline that **security-development dynamics** are shaped as much by institutional quality as by resource flows. Multidisciplinary scholarship has also brought new dimensions into the security–development debate. For instance, Efayena and Olele (2024) ^[25] demonstrate that in 35 African economies, **terrorism and military expenditure** significantly impact environmental sustainability and indirectly influence development outcomes.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data and Variables

This study relies on a balanced panel dataset covering 33 African countries over the period 2004–2019. The dataset combines data from two main sources (**Table 1**):

Table 1. Variables Description and Data Sources.

Variable	Proxy/Definition	Measurement Unit/ Scale	Source	Expected Role in Analysis
Economic Development	Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita (constant 2015 US\$)	Continuous (log-transformed)	World Bank, <i>World Development Indicators (WDI)</i>	Proxy for level of economic development
National Security	Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism Index	Ranges from –2.5 (weak) to +2.5 (strong)	World Bank, <i>Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI)</i>	Proxy for level of political stability and national security

Source: Authors’ elaboration.

Our preliminary descriptive analysis reveals significant variation in economic development and political stability across African countries by income level. Upper middle-income countries exhibit substantially higher GDP per capita alongside relatively stable national security, while lower middle-income countries face moderate economic

development and some political instability. Low-income countries continue to experience very low development levels coupled with greater threats to national security. This pattern highlights persistent challenges, particularly for the lower-income groups, where both development and security remain pressing concerns (**Table 2**).

Table 2. Study Variables.

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Upper Middle Income				
GDP per capita	8387.10	3809.35	3468.20	20532.95
National Security	0.07	0.93	-2.57	1.20
Lower Middle Income				
GDP per capita	2145.59	830.98	910.29	3907.65
National Security	-0.44	0.73	-2.21	1.04
Low Income				
GDP per capita	631.30	217.50	292.35	1237.50
National Security	-0.92	0.75	-2.70	0.63
Africa				
GDP per capita	3297.17	3788.98	292.35	20532.95
National Security	-0.47	0.88	-2.70	1.20

Source: Author's elaboration.

3.2. Empirical Strategy

To empirically investigate the direction of causality between economic development and political stability in African countries, we adopt a panel Granger causality testing framework as proposed by Dumitrescu and Hurlin (2012)^[14]. This methodology is particularly suited for heterogeneous panel data, allowing for country-specific causal dynamics while accommodating cross-sectional dependence. The objective is to test whether changes in GDP per capita (as a proxy for development) Granger-cause changes in Political Stability, Absence of Violence and Terrorism (as a proxy for national security), or vice versa.

4. Empirical Results and Discussion

4.1. Stationarity Analysis

To ensure the validity of panel causality and VAR estimations, we first examine the stationarity properties of the two main variables of interest—GDP per capita and National Security—using both the Levin-Lin-Chu (LLC)

and Im-Pesaran-Shin (IPS) unit root tests. Table 3 presents the results of the panel unit root tests.

The stationarity of the key variables was assessed using the LLC and IPS panel unit root tests. The results for GDP per capita are somewhat mixed. While the LLC test rejects the null hypothesis of a unit root at the 1% significance level (adjusted t -statistic = -2.8193; $p = 0.0024$), the IPS test fails to reject the null, yielding a W -bar statistic of 1.2793 ($p = 0.8996$). Given the differing assumptions of the two tests—with LLC assuming a common unit root process and IPS allowing for heterogeneity—it appears that the stationarity of GDP per capita is not uniform across countries. This suggests caution and potentially favors the use of first-differenced values in further dynamic analyses involving this variable.

In contrast, the findings for National Security are robust across both tests. The LLC test strongly rejects the null hypothesis ($t = -5.2320$; $p = 0.0000$), as does the IPS test (W -bar = -3.0051; $p = 0.0013$), indicating stationarity of this variable across the panel. The consistency between tests supports the inclusion of National Security in levels in subsequent estimations.

Table 3. Panel Unit Root Test Results.

Variable	Test	Statistic	p -Value	Stationarity	Significance
GDP per capita	LLC	-2.8193	0.0024	Stationary	**
	IPS	1.2793	0.8996	Non-stationary	—
National Security	LLC	-5.232	0	Stationary	***
	IPS	-3.0051	0.0013	Stationary	***

Note: H0 = presence of unit root; Ha = stationarity. Stars indicate statistical significance: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$.

Source: Author's calculation.

4.2. Granger Causality Analysis

To explore the potential causal dynamics between GDP per capita and National Security, we employ the Dumitrescu and Hurlin (2012)^[14] heterogeneous panel Granger causality test by income level. This method is well-suited to panels with a relatively small-time dimension and allows for heterogeneity in causal relationships across cross-sectional units (**Table 4**).

The Granger causality analysis (**Table 4**) by income level reveals a nuanced relationship between GDP per capita and National Security across African countries.

For **all income groups**, there is strong and consistent evidence of a **unidirectional causal effect from GDP per capita to National Security**. Specifically, the null hypothesis that GDP per capita does not Granger-cause Political Stability is rejected at the 1% significance level in upper middle-, lower middle-, and lower-income groups based on the Z-bar statistic, with the lower income group also showing significance for the more robust Z-bar tilde statistic. This indicates that economic development is a critical driver of national security dynamics across African countries, regardless of income classification.

These findings align with established theoretical and empirical literature emphasizing the economic foundations of homeland order. Scholars like Lipset (1959)^[26] and Acemoglu and Robinson (2006)^[21] argue that economic devel-

opment reinforces national institutions by increasing the opportunity cost of instability. In the African context, Fosu (2008)^[27] highlights that sustained growth bolsters state capacity, which in turn stabilizes political environments. Our results provide empirical validation of these claims, demonstrating the importance of economic performance for homeland security and political stability at different development stages.

Conversely, the reverse causality—from National Security to GDP per capita—varies by income level. It is **only in the upper middle-income group** that there is suggestive evidence of national security Granger-causing GDP per capita, though significance is weaker and less robust. For both lower middle- and lower-income groups, this reverse relationship is statistically insignificant, suggesting that national security does not strongly predict economic performance in these countries within the time frame and data analyzed.

This partial divergence from studies like Aisen and Veiga (2013)^[28], who found that national security threats negatively impact growth, may be due to heterogeneous political environments and institutional capacities across income groups. It also suggests that in less developed countries, economic growth may precede and foster political stability more so than the other way around, potentially reflecting delayed or indirect effects of political conditions on economic outcomes.

Table 4. Panel Granger Causality Test Results.

Income Level	Direction of Causality	Lag Order	W-Bar	Z-Bar	p-Value (Z-Bar)	Z-Bar Tilde	p-Value (Z-Bar Tilde)	Conclusion (at 5% Significance)
1: Upper Middle	GDP per capita → National Security	2	4.119	3.1778	0.0015	1.3454	0.1785	Reject H_0 for Z-bar: GDP per capita Granger-causes National Security
	National Security → GDP per capita	2	4.659	3.9879	0.0001	1.815	0.0695	Reject H_0 for Z-bar: National Security Granger-causes GDP per capita
2: Lower Middle	GDP per capita → National Security	2	3.747	3.0261	0.0025	1.1805	0.2378	Reject H_0 for Z-bar: GDP per capita Granger-causes National Security
	National Security → GDP per capita	2	2.675	1.1684	0.2427	0.1036	0.9175	Fail to reject H_0 : No Granger causality from National Security to GDP per capita
3: Lower Income	GDP per capita → National Security	2	5.432	5.945	0	2.8727	0.0041	Reject H_0 for both Z-bar and Z-bar tilde: Strong evidence that GDP per capita Granger-causes National Security
	National Security → GDP per capita	2	1.86	-0.242	0.8085	-0.7143	0.4751	Fail to reject H_0 : No Granger causality from National Security to GDP per capita

Note: → indicates “does Granger-cause”. Rejection of the null hypothesis implies causality in at least one panel.

Source: Author’s calculation.

5. Policy Implications

The empirical evidence indicating a strong unidirectional causality from economic development to national security across African countries underscores the crucial role of sustained economic growth in fostering the home. This suggests that policymakers should prioritize strategies that promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth as a foundation for homeland security and stability. By creating an enabling environment for investment, diversifying economies, and enhancing productivity, governments can strengthen social cohesion and reduce the risks of internal threats.

The heterogeneity observed across income groups implies that policy approaches must be tailored to the economic realities of countries. In lower and lower-middle income countries, where political stability does not appear to significantly drive economic growth, the focus should remain on economic development initiatives such as infrastructure improvements, education, and regulatory reforms. Meanwhile, upper middle-income countries, which exhibit some evidence of causality running from national security to economic performance, could benefit from simultaneously strengthening national institutions and governance frameworks to reinforce economic gains.

Institutional quality and governance remain vital for ensuring internal stability alongside economic progress. Policies that enhance regulatory quality, the rule of law, government effectiveness, and anti-corruption measures can create a virtuous cycle where economic growth and political stability mutually reinforce each other. Moreover, economic growth strategies must emphasize inclusiveness to mitigate social inequalities that can fuel internal threats. Programs aimed at social protection, equitable access to essential services, and support for marginalized populations will help translate economic improvements into broader political stability.

Recognizing the diversity in security and economic contexts across African countries is essential for effective policymaking. The relationship between national security and economic growth varies depending on country-specific factors, including historical legacies and institutional capacities. Development programs and international support should therefore be designed with careful consideration of

these unique contexts rather than relying on uniform policy prescriptions.

Finally, the findings highlight the importance of long-term commitment to development goals. Since homeland security may not immediately lead to economic growth in many African countries, policymakers should maintain steady investment in economic and institutional reforms. While short-term political fluctuations may not drastically affect economic outcomes, sustained efforts will gradually build resilient political institutions and promote lasting development.

6. Conclusions

The main goal of this paper is to analyze the direction of causality between economic development and national security across African countries, with a particular focus on how this relationship varies by income level. To achieve this, we mobilized a dataset covering 33 African countries over the period 2004 to 2019. Economic development is proxied by GDP per capita, while national security is measured through relevant indices capturing security conditions and homeland threats.

We adopt a panel Granger causality testing framework developed by Dumitrescu and Hurlin (2012)^[14], which is especially suited for heterogeneous panels and allows for country-specific causal relationships while accounting for cross-sectional dependence. This method is appropriate for medium-sized panels like the one in this study and is flexible in handling both balanced and unbalanced data. The approach enables us to test the predictive causal links between economic development and national security, while explicitly examining differences by income categories—upper-middle income, lower-middle income, and lower income.

The results reveal a consistent and statistically significant unidirectional causality running from economic development to national security across all income levels. This indicates that improvements in economic performance tend to predict increases in homeland security, with the strongest effects observed in lower-income and lower-middle income countries. In contrast, the reverse causality from national security to economic development is significant only in upper-middle income countries and is weak or

statistically insignificant in the other groups. These findings suggest that while economic growth is a key driver of national security throughout Africa, the stabilizing influence of national institutions on growth may require a higher level of economic development to become effective.

From a policy perspective, these results underscore the importance of fostering inclusive and sustained economic growth as a foundation for enhancing national security, particularly in lower-income African countries. Strategies aimed at improving infrastructure, education, and institutional quality should be prioritized to support growth and, indirectly, strengthen homeland stability. In countries with higher income levels, efforts to improve governance and institutional effectiveness are also crucial, as political stability in these contexts can in turn reinforce economic development. Overall, a balanced approach that simultaneously targets economic performance and political governance will be essential to create a virtuous cycle between development and security.

This study, however, has limitations that should be acknowledged. While it considers income-level heterogeneity, it does not fully capture other contextual factors such as cultural, historical, or geopolitical influences that may shape the development-security nexus. Future research could benefit from incorporating these dimensions or conducting more detailed country-specific analyses. Despite these limitations, the findings provide valuable insights into how the interplay between economic development and national security varies across income groups in Africa, offering important guidance for tailored policy design.

In conclusion, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the causal relationship between development and security in the African context. The evidence supports the notion that economic growth plays a critical role in fostering internal security, but this relationship is complex and varies by income level. Policymakers should therefore design context-specific strategies that promote sustainable growth and strengthen institutions to ensure long-term national security and development progress.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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