

## Promoting Intercommunity Relations for Effective Security and Peacebuilding along the Sokoto-Zamfara-Katsina Axis of the Nigeria-Niger Borderland

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**Abstract:** This article explores the emerging narratives surrounding the persistent phenomenon of armed banditry in the region. It focuses on the factors and actors driving banditry along the Nigeria-Niger borderlands. Using data from both primary and secondary sources, the study reveals that internal strife along the borderlands and the collapse of state control have facilitated the proliferation of small arms, significantly increasing the intensity of banditry in Nigeria's northwest. The research concludes that the prolonged neglect of border communities has deprived them of basic necessities, exacerbating the situation. As a result, Nigeria's northwestern states—Sokoto, Zamfara, and Katsina, which border Niger—have become safe havens for raiders and bandits, who, in some cases, establish 'informal structures' of control over the borderland communities.

**Keywords:** Intercommunity Relations, Security, Peacebuilding, Armed Banditry, Cross-Border Crime, Small Arms Proliferation, Cattle Rustling.

## INTRODUCTION

Nigeria-Niger borderland is hitherto one of the most peaceful border areas in Africa characterized by a long tradition of trade and peaceful co-existence. However, the area has recently become a theatre of violence which manifests in the form of insurgency, robbery, cattle rustling, kidnapping, and banditry facilitated by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons along with the illicit smuggling of dangerous drugs. The actions of the bandits have resulted in the loss of thousands of lives. Property and food items worth billions of Naira have been destroyed. While multiple studies documented dominant discourses about armed banditry in Nigeria, the emerging narratives about the phenomenon in Nigeria's borderlands with the Niger Republic have received little scholarly attention. Studies indicate that armed bandits who perpetrate violence in Nigeria's north-west seek sanctuary along the border with Niger as a base where they get recruits. However, one major challenge that has not been well addressed in the literature is the paucity of information on the correlation/nexus between the violence in Nigeria's northwest on one hand and its negative effects on trade relations among the communities proximate to the border. Being an area of informal cross-border activities, the violence becomes so complex, transforming from farmer-herder conflict into a phenomenal expansion of banditry. Using primary and secondary data, this article argues that the internal strife in the borderlands and the inability of the neighboring states to effectively coordinate border control measures have enabled the proliferation of small arms and supply of drugs that increased the intensity of banditry in the border areas. This has seriously affected the flow of legitimate goods mainly from Nigeria into the neighboring Niger. This development led to the rise in border criminal networks alleged to be financed and supported by sophisticated business syndicates using different strategies. The purpose of this article is twofold: First, to study the factors responsible for the growth of criminal activities related to banditry and the motives of various actors through such changing strategy across the borderlands, and second, to examine the negative consequences of the growing wave of insecurity on the trade relations amongst the communities proximate to Nigeria-Niger boundary. What is the role

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of local institutions, authorities, and vigilantes or informal security organizations, in either containing the insecurity situation or otherwise? This article seeks to explore the afore-stated analytical powers in an attempt to identify the drivers of cross-border crimes along the Nigeria-Niger borderlands.

### **Nigeria-Niger Border**

The Nigeria-Niger border falls within the Sahelian region of West Africa, which had been relatively a stable corridor for the movement of goods and services. The region is now becoming a theatre of crime and terrorist activities or at least what some scholars may call 'Jihadist insurgency' with sporadic increase in casualties (UNOWAS 2020). The various factors and/or actors that have exacerbated the fragile security situation in the region since the early 1990s are firmly rooted in the 'scarcely governed' nature of the forest land and borderlines. The persistent security threats posed by the activities of different individuals and groups engaging in the movement of goods across the borders have made the 'mobile conflict' even more volatile, spreading quickly and sporadically along the borderline zones, making it extremely difficult to be contained (OECD/SWAC, 2020). The area thus, appears to be as dangerous as the north-eastern Nigeria where Boko Haram terrorists have wreaked havoc over the past 10 years (Zenn 2018). To understand the linkage clearly, a brief overview of the political economy of the area is provided below.

Nigeria's North West border with the Niger Republic is one of the porous border areas Nigeria had with its neighbors. The border cut across well-established historical, ethnic, political, and cultural linkages that also predated colonial rule. The people of Nigeria's northwest zone share some common ethnic, cultural, and religious affinity with their neighbors in the contiguous countries of Niger and Benin republics. In contemporary times, however, cross-border interactions in this zone have been essentially economic. The post-independence period, particularly the era of the oil boom in Nigeria, saw an intensification of cross-border activities (Balami, 2006: 11). Relatively easy money was flowing through the Nigerian economy which boosted consumption on the part of Nigerians. This stimulated an increase in the export of livestock and cowpeas from Niger, and several re-exported products from the international markets mainly through the Benin Republic. The other impact of Nigeria's oil boom was the export of subsidized products from Nigeria, especially fertilizer which was smuggled across the borders for the benefit of the farmers in the neighboring countries of this zone: Nigeria, Niger, and Benin Republics.

The commodities that are traded across the northwest borders include foodstuffs, grains, livestock, petroleum products, drugs, arms, currency, vehicles, and some re-exports. These economic ties between Nigeria and its northwest border neighbors display an overwhelming dependence upon the Nigerian economy. This dependence is manifested in the thriving cross-border trade that occurs in Nigeria's northwest. It is therefore clear that the major security concerns in the zone emanate from the cross-border flow of people and goods that are occasioned by the trade. Having identified the fact that some security threats emanate from cross-border trade it is important to have an understanding of cross-border trade because the very nature of the trade itself has security implications for both countries. For the inhabitants of the borderlands in the area, their similar ethnographic characteristics ensure that the official boundaries do not in any way, pose an obstacle to economic activities. As a result, trading and cross-border movements are a daily occurrence. For instance, it had been estimated that over 90% of the total volume of local shipment of foodstuff to Birni-Konni and other border settlements in Niger and Benin originates from Illela, Nigeria (Iliya, 1993: 41). This could be said to be the same of other border areas in the Northwest zone. In fact, the border areas located in the zone particularly those stretching from Kamba in Kebbi state to Jibia in Katsina state, constitute the most porous portions of the border and are responsible for a large volume of trade between the two countries. These areas are very popular in informal cross-border trade in food items, manufactured goods, petroleum products, livestock, textile products, and second-hand cars (Yoroms, 2007: 196-7). While it is true that cross-border trade has definite advantages in terms of enhancement of cooperation and economic integration, on the other side of the coin, illegal trade and criminality, certainly have deleterious consequences.

As indicated above, the porous nature of the area makes it so easy to cross and difficult to police (Yoroms, 2007: 207). This means by implication, goods and services traded across the border are not at all easily accounted for. Even those that pass through the official border posts are in most cases under-estimated. The result, therefore, is that not only the governments of the two countries are not benefiting significantly from the trade, but even those border markets and financial institutions could not be developed to provide the required services for better economic development of the two countries. Also, the fact that Nigeria is the largest consumer nation if not in the whole of the African continent at least in the West African sub-region, and due to poor economic mismanagement, the country's economy became very vulnerable both internally and externally (Nwoke, 2000: 8). This has led to the over-dependence on the international market, hence this undermined the security situation of the country.

### **Armed Banditry along the Nigeria-Niger Border**

The conflict along the borderline particularly in the Sokoto-Zamfara-Katsina axis of the Nigeria-Niger border initially appeared as farmer-herder disputes over access to land, but it has now been transformed into a full-fledged conflict involving many actors with various interests, thus inevitably posing national, regional, and international security risks

(International Crisis Group, 2020). The area has been beset by an explosion in criminal activity and infiltration by jihadist groups (Zenn 2018). Over the years, the security in the region has deteriorated due to certain changes in the eco-system which affected peoples' livelihoods negatively. This exacerbated long-running competition among farmers and herders as both groups began to mobilize various armed groups as 'vigilantes' for protection. The involvement of local institutions/traditional rulers in the conflict has created incentive for local actors, particularly community-based groups such as the *Miyetti-Allah* Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN), militant vigilante groups such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (JTF), *Yan Sakai* and *Yan Banga*. As these groups are mobile and have divergent motives, the conflict became difficult to contain and thus, spilled across the boundaries thereby making the borderlands unsecured.

The nature and pattern of the conflict in Northwest Nigeria is multi-faceted and can be categorized into three major types. The first involves violence between predominantly Hausa sedentary farmers, supported by vigilantes, and Fulani herders, who are mostly nomadic (International Crisis Group, 2020). In response, Fulani herders have organized decentralized militias under local commanders, fighting on behalf of herders in their disputes with farmers. The second category encompasses criminal violence, including large-scale cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery, pillaging, and attacks on gold miners and traders (Chitra, 2020). The final category consists of political manipulation of the conflict for specific gains, through targeted assassinations, kidnappings, and sponsored banditry (Tanwa, 2019).

The region's geographical and historical context, strategically located along the Sahel, has facilitated trade and contact between communities along the Nigeria-Niger border. However, the porous nature of the borderlands has allowed organized syndicates to trade small arms and light weapons, leading to the proliferation of armed gangs operating from ungoverned forest areas. These gangs engage in cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, and armed robbery.

The breakdown of authority at the local and state levels has fostered an environment conducive to the emergence of a complex informal security sector. Rival armed groups and criminal gangs, acting under the guise of vigilantism or engaging in reprisal attacks, have created ungoverned spaces in the border territories. While armed banditry has already rendered the borderlands insecure, the activities of vigilante groups have intensified the role of criminal groups, enabling them to establish their own governance structures. This has made movement along traditional trade corridors increasingly dangerous, crippling the local economies of neighboring border communities. As a result, food production, pastoralism, animal husbandry, and cross-border trade have declined significantly (WANEP, 2020:7).

### **Impact of Armed Banditry on the Border Economy and Security**

The recent insecurity in the North-West region, a continuation of existing security threats, has severely impacted communities along the border areas. Farming, the mainstay of the local economies in the Sahelian region, has been particularly disrupted by bandit attacks, affecting both agricultural productivity and the pastoral economy, with serious implications for food security (FAO, 2020). Many farming communities were forced to abandon their farmlands near forests, as bandits exploited these areas to attack and kidnap farmers. Those who remained were often subjected to taxation by the bandits before accessing their farms. This decline in agricultural production led to a sharp rise in food prices. In some border areas, bandits extorted farmers, demanding payments ranging from USD 100 to USD 10,000 to access their land, significantly reducing the volume of food being traded between the two countries (IOM, May 2020). Reports indicate that farming activities in Zamfara and Katsina states were limited to a few areas, resulting in a 60% decline in food production (WANEP, 2020). In Sokoto and Kebbi states, many rice farmers were similarly affected, with farmlands abandoned due to bandit attacks. The dwindling income of local farmers and other vulnerable groups, especially women, has also hindered their ability to continue participating in cross-border trade.

Cattle rustling has also had a devastating impact on the society and economy of the border region. Since 2010, it has escalated, leading to violent conflicts between the Fulani, supported by allies from Niger, and local farmers. These conflicts have claimed thousands of lives and destroyed property worth billions of Naira. It is believed that no community along the Nigeria-Niger border has been unaffected by cattle rustling. In Zamfara, for example, over 150 communities and villages were displaced due to the activities of bandits or cattle rustlers as of May 2019 (ICG, 2020:16). Similar stories are reported in Sokoto and Katsina. The effects of these conflicts have spread to neighboring towns and villages in the Niger Republic, as perpetrators seek refuge across the border when pursued.

In addition to cattle rustling, there has been widespread destruction of lives and property, along with human rights violations. Banditry has created a large population of destitute individuals, orphans, and widows in rural areas of Sokoto, Zamfara, and Katsina due to ongoing raids, theft, and sexual violence. The nature of bandit operations has also shifted from cattle rustling and robbery to more brutal attacks, partly in response to the creation of the Yan-Sa-kai and the intensification of their fight against gang members (Field Work Data, 2022). The Yan-Sa-kai, empowered and supported by local sponsors, often acted with impunity, arresting, maiming, and killing accused persons without due process. Their numbers, strength, and weaponry increased significantly by 2013. By 2016, cattle rustling had become more complex and transnational, involving members from Niger, Mali, and Chad, including Tuaregs with connections to Sahelian rebel groups.

The infiltration of foreign elements significantly transformed the gang in various ways. New members were recruited, more weapons were introduced, and fighters were trained in modern guerrilla strategies and tactics. In addition to cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom became a new tactic. Poverty-stricken youths across villages were recruited as informants, providing intelligence in exchange for monetary rewards (Field Work Data, 2022). Most of the affected areas in Sokoto and Katsina share boundaries with Zamfara and Niger Republic. Following the assassination of Buharin Daji, a notorious gang leader in Zamfara, new deadly cells emerged. Approximately 30 splinter gangs formed, with one wing led by Buhari's son, Aliyu Zakwai, who took command of a new faction.

Cattle rustling and banditry are not restricted to Nigeria's northwest but are also common in the Maradi region along Niger's south-central border with Nigeria. Maradi is becoming another hotspot, threatening national efforts to control insecurity in the region. Since 2017, Maradi has been affected by the spread of organized, violent banditry from northwest Nigeria, where cattle rustling and kidnappings for ransom are rampant. Armed criminals from Sokoto, Zamfara, and Katsina cross the border at night on motorcycles, attacking locals before retreating to the wooded areas and the Baban-Rafi Forest straddling the two countries (ICG, 2021:4). In 2021, a local newspaper in Niger, *\*Le Souffle de Maradi\**, reported 2,735 stolen animals, 91 abductions, and ransom payments totaling 51 million CFA francs (over €77,500) (Koné, 2022:2). In the first quarter of 2022, a national humanitarian organization recorded 76 incidents, including rape, assaults, cattle theft, and 29 kidnappings. The insecurity has displaced livelihoods as locals flee to safer areas, afraid to work their fields or graze livestock. By April 2021, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs counted over 25,000 internally displaced Nigeriens. They fled to better-protected towns such as Sarkin Yamma, Gabi, Madarounfa, and Maradi, where they were joined by over 81,000 Nigerian refugees from Katsina, Zamfara, and Sokoto. While some internally displaced people were hosted by extended families, most Nigerian refugees were grouped in camps with limited food aid, shelter, and poor access to basic services.

The influx of illicit firearms into communities in the North-West region has exacerbated bandit attacks, discouraging investment and triggering economic crises for individuals and communities. The conflict's spillover effect on neighboring Niger has hindered inter-community and cross-border trade. Several major markets, such as Jibia (Katsina State), Illela (Sokoto State), and Shinkafi (Zamfara State), have been severely affected by frequent attacks. These markets are crucial for both countries, serving as hubs for cross-border traders. Their strategic importance attracts merchants from across the region who trade in foodstuffs such as maize, millet, guinea corn, and beans (Sama'ila, 2019:2). However, their proximity to border areas has made them vulnerable to attacks. Kidnapping victims are often taken to 'ungoverned' border spaces in Niger Republic and vice versa (Babangida, October 2020). As a result, traders began avoiding these markets for fear of being kidnapped, leading to a decline in cross-border trading activities. Market sales and supplies have plummeted, with one revenue officer in Jibia, Katsina State, lamenting that the number of trailers of foodstuffs arriving at the market dropped from eight per week to half a truck in two months, reducing revenue from N500,000 to less than N100,000 (Musa Faru and Gurbin-bore, February 2020). According to a 2019 report on food insecurity by the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWSNET, 2019), Shinkafi market in Zamfara State operated at only 30% to 40% of its normal capacity during the review period, while Dandume market in Katsina State functioned at just 15% to 25% of projected trading levels (<https://fews.net/west-africa/nigeria/food-security-outlook/june-2019>).

The porous nature of the border, stemming from an inadequate number of border enforcement agencies, lack of facilities, and other issues, has made criminal activities along the border possible. Poor security at the border has contributed to the spread of armed banditry. Additionally, most border personnel lack basic working facilities and accommodation. They have insufficient arms, vehicles, and functional communication equipment. In some areas, border control posts are located in the hinterlands, making it easy for individuals with questionable intentions to cross into Nigerian territory via footpaths or seasonal roads, bypassing control posts. Border markets at key entry points are also exploited by locals who buy and sell contraband goods and weapons. Large-scale smugglers use these markets to create illegal routes for their operations, often with the complicity of locals, whose strong cross-border ties make them difficult for law enforcement agents to identify. Moreover, fraudulent cross-border traders, such as those involved in smuggling petroleum, can cross with minimal interference, and these vehicles could be used to transport arms and ammunition into Nigeria, posing a serious security threat.

Another major issue contributing to insecurity is religious disturbances along the borderlands, mainly through acts of terrorism perpetrated by groups such as Jama'atu Ahlissunnah Lidda'awatiwal Jihad (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad), also known as Boko Haram. It was reported that around 37,000 people were killed, and over 2.4 million people have been displaced, now living in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps (BBC Hausa report, October 2020). One critical concern is the sophisticated weapons used by militants in their attacks on northwestern Nigeria. Insecurity and terrorism have severely affected inter-communal relations across Nigeria's borders with its neighbors (UNDP, 2016). This has resulted in tighter restrictions on movement by security forces, increased suspicion among communities due to fear of Boko Haram infiltration, and heightened tensions between border communities (Wapmuk, 2018:186).



Efforts to address these security challenges have been ongoing. In 2012, Nigeria and the Republic of Niger met under the auspices of the Nigeria-Niger Joint Commission for Cooperation (NNJCC) and agreed on joint patrols along their borders and the provision of logistics for the re-demarcation of their international boundary. A communiqué from the session expressed concerns over terrorism and emphasized joint efforts to tackle the security threat in the region. More recently, in 2017, Sokoto, Zamfara, and Katsina states, along with their counterparts from Niger Republic, commissioned a cross-border trade route to boost economic cooperation between the two nations. This initiative aims to eliminate obstacles faced by traders and enhance the economies of both countries. Infrastructure developments such as the extension of rail service from Kaura Namoda to Sokoto and the Niger Republic border, the establishment of a truck transit park, and the Illela International Market will further promote commercial activities in the area (Punch, December 2017). In 2020, Nigeria awarded a contract for the construction of a rail line from Kano to Maradi (Niger Republic).

However, the alienation suffered by the border areas as a result of government policies has induced the border communities to condone and sometimes connive with the criminal exploits of the undesirable elements operating along the common borders. The success of alien infiltration at the borders and the free flow of arms could be attributed to poor security arrangements at the border. Furthermore, apart from the glaring security problems, there is also a lack of coordination and cooperation among the security outfits at the border to deal with the menace of armed banditry. It is therefore the contention of this brief article that, the federal republic of Nigeria and Niger to coordinate their security out pits to ensure collective security at the border. If the defence and security network is collectivized, through the use of a community security framework at the border posts the syndrome of cross-border armed banditry emanating from community border relations could be reduced drastically.

### **Refugee flow into Niger**

Due to the devastating impact of the conflict which led to the loss of thousands of lives and property in the zone, the Nigerian border population became at the mercy of their Nigerian counterparts. The increase in the level of banditry and cattle rustling along Nigeria-Niger border areas, as indicated in the previous sections, has led to the migration of Nigerians into the neighboring towns in Niger. Reports by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees have shown that an estimated 23,000 persons were forced to migrate from north-western states to seek safety in the neighbouring Niger Republic in just one month (IOM/DTM, 2019: 2). The number further increased to more than 60,000 since the influx began in April 2019 (Nduka, 2020:2). According to the report, more than 40,000 Nigerians had migrated to Niger as a result of killings and kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria (IOM/DTM, 2019: 3). Many of these victims sought refuge in Maradi, the second largest city in Niger. Furthermore, some 95 percent of the refugees fled from Nigeria's Sokoto state, the rest are from Kano, Zamfara, and Katsina states (Field Work Data, February 2022).

Furthermore, a BBC report shows that close to 7,000 refugees were relocated for safety in villages 20km away from the Nigeria-Niger border (BBC English Service, 2020). An assessment of the situation in the affected states conducted by the International Organization on Migration (2019) showed an estimated 66,900 people have been displaced and are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance (IOM/DTM, 2019:1). The State of Zamfara has the highest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) at 38,113. While Katsina state has the second largest number of IDPs at 16,257 (IOM/DTM, 2019: 2). The assessment carried out in Sokoto state recorded over 12,527 individuals as displaced within the state because of the recent hostilities perpetuated by the armed group ravaging the region. All the LGAs in Sokoto state bordering Zamfara state were reported to have been affected by this security challenge. As per the assessment, Sabon-Birni, a border town and a Local Government Area in Sokoto State has the highest number of affected persons at 10,000, followed by Rabah with 2,300 individuals (IOM/DTM, 2019: 2). According to our data from the fieldwork more than 25,000 Nigerians have fled to Niger from the affected states. Most of these have made their way to border localities of Madarounfa, Guidan Runji, and Guidan Sory as well as to Gabi and Nyelwa townships in the Maradi region. Most of the IDPs that arrived Niger are reported to have taken illegal routes to enter the country (Field Work Data, February-March, 2022).

## **CONCLUSION**

Given this situation, it is possible, therefore, to expect the prevalence of informal institutions to take over the control of trade routes in the region thereby determining cross-border trade relations among communities living along the border areas. Nigeria's North West border with the Niger Republic is one of the porous border areas Nigeria had with its neighbors as it cut across established historical, ethnic, political, and cultural linkages that predated colonial rule. The region has been heterogeneous with varied ecological/geographical zones inhabited by various political communities with different socio-cultural and linguistic orientations. In contemporary times, however, cross-border interactions in this region have been essentially economic. The post-independence period, particularly the era of the oil boom in Nigeria, saw an intensification of cross-border activities. The commodities that are traded across Nigeria-Niger borderlands include foodstuffs, livestock, petroleum products, drugs, arms, currency, vehicles, and some re-exports. For many decades the economic ties between these border communities display an overwhelming dependence upon the Nigerian economy. This dependence is manifested in the thriving cross-border trade. It is therefore clear that the major security concerns in the zone emanate from the cross-border flow of people and goods that are occasioned by the trade. This arrangement has been

seriously disrupted by cross-border crimes in the form of cattle rustling, kidnapping, and banditry, as well as the proliferation of small arms and light weapons.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Nigeria-Niger border region, which was scarcely a topic of international conflict discussions until the past 15 years, now poses a significant threat to global peace. The failure of these two neighboring countries to develop effective mechanisms—either unilaterally or multilaterally—to manage their borderland has created a vacuum exploited by bandits and international terrorist organizations. This paper highlights the critical link between the growing violence in Nigeria's northwest and its negative impact on intercommunity relations in the border areas. With this in mind, the following recommendations are addressed to various stakeholders, aimed not only at mitigating the immediate threats of cross-border crime but also at contributing to the long-term development and stability of the Sokoto–Zamfara–Katsina axis and surrounding regions:

- i. Implement hotlines or online platforms for real-time communication and information exchange between community members and security agencies.
- ii. Establish confidential reporting mechanisms to encourage community members to report suspicious activities.
- iii. Deter criminal involvement by raising awareness among community members about the consequences of crime, while investing in alternative livelihood opportunities.
- iv. Encourage private sector involvement in initiatives that create legitimate and sustainable economic opportunities for border communities.
- v. Ensure representatives from relevant ministries, law enforcement, and security forces hold regular meetings, share information, and collaborate to curb cross-border crimes.
- vi. Strengthen crime detection, border management, and collaborative investigation efforts between law enforcement and security forces.
- vii. Support corporate social responsibility initiatives focused on community development and crime prevention in border areas, with investments in education, healthcare, and infrastructure.
- viii. Promote transparent and ethical business practices to reduce the risk of facilitating crime.
- ix. Civil society organizations and traditional leaders should support state authorities in adopting technologies to track and monitor goods, preventing the trafficking of illicit items.
- x. State governments should invest in advanced surveillance systems and border security technologies, including ground-based radar systems, fixed surveillance towers, satellite imaging, and seismic, acoustic, and magnetic sensors.
- xi. Collaborate with government, law enforcement, and communities to develop joint initiatives against cross-border crimes.
- xii. Advocate for policies that promote collaboration in anti-crime efforts and work with authorities to create a supportive environment for these initiatives.
- xiii. Partner with international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration, INTERPOL, or the UN Office on Drugs and Crime to access relevant resources, information, and networks.

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