



MODERNIZING STRATEGIC ARMY HUMAN INTELLIGENCE COLLECTION: AFRICA AS A CASE STUDY

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Introduction

The U.S. Army finds itself facing a problem set not encountered since the fall of the Soviet Union. The Cold War saw extensive strategic posturing between the two great powers and their respective allies. This environment drove the development of intelligence methodologies designed to collect against strategic objectives, preparing the force for proxy conflicts or large-scale combat. These intelligence collection methods were deployed during the “shape” operational phase—what we now recognize as “setting the theater.”

Following 9/11, the Global War on Terror and the subsequent shift toward counterinsurgency operations (COIN) required new tactics, techniques, and procedures focused on small-scale, tactical intelligence collection. As major combat campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan concluded, the Army pivoted again toward the emerging threats posed by strategic competitors like China or Russia. This return to preparing for large-scale combat operations has driven doctrinal changes, particularly in how we train Human Intelligence Collectors (military occupational specialty [MOS] 35M) and Counterintelligence Agents (MOS 35L).

While modern training scenarios prepare Soldiers for force-on-force engagements and doctrinal updates support the joint operational environment, much of the Army is struggling to catch up. The national priority remains strategic competition,

with a growing emphasis on multidomain and multidisciplinary operations. However, at the division level and below, many leaders still rely on (and in some cases even prefer) the familiar methodologies of COIN.

This transition leaves many tactical leaders unprepared. The resulting skills gap often forces a reliance on past COIN experience as a basis for operational planning. However, these familiar tactics may prove inadequate for the current strategic environment. For the intelligence warfighter, theater-level strategic competition is built on campaign plans and national strategies. Two decades of COIN indoctrination now hinders division and corps leaders as they attempt to shift their mission focus.

Tactical requirements for kinetic operations remain important, as seen in the African theater where U.S. forces support host nations in countering violent extremist organizations. As noted in Army Field Manual (FM) 2-0, *Intelligence*, supporting Army forces across varied strategic contexts requires “an effective intelligence warfighting function that is continuously vigilant and flexible.”¹ Achieving this unity of effort with partners is critical to mission success. Ultimately, adapting our intelligence collection for strategic competition requires the continuous refinement, training, and dissemination of modern doctrine to leaders at all echelons.

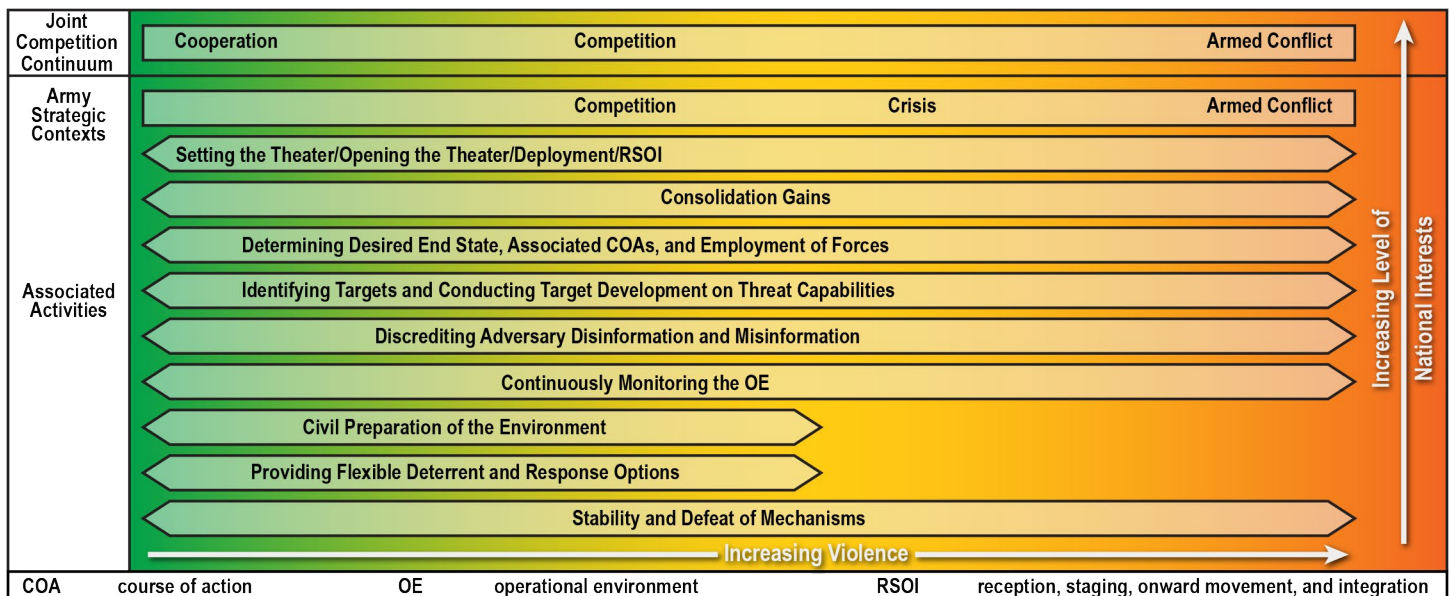


Figure. Joint competition continuum aligned with the Army strategic contexts²

A Complex Theater of Operations

Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Campaigns and Operations*, defines strategy as “an idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and multinational objectives.”³

Within the African theater, U.S. forces struggle to maintain focus on these broader strategic objectives, often finding it difficult to expand operations beyond COIN and counterterrorism, particularly regarding intelligence collection. The continent faces overlapping challenges, including coups, regime changes, humanitarian crises, porous borders, and aggressive violent extremist organizations. Concurrently, great power competitors like Russia and China are making significant gains. This dynamic environment makes Africa one of the most complex regions for conducting intelligence operations.

While military and civilian leaders well understand Africa’s strategic importance, a gap persists between defined strategic objectives and the resources allocated to intelligence warfighters. Africa offers environments for both tactical and strategic intelligence collection and sharing, yet understanding how to employ these capabilities appropriately remains a struggle for U.S. military leaders at all echelons.

With the U.S. government acknowledging that Russia and China are actively vying for mastery of Africa’s vast natural resources, the imperative is clear. Our African partner nations must elevate their own strategic collection endeavors, allowing the U.S. military to guide the training and equipping necessary to redirect both their intelligence efforts and our own.

Fighting for Strategic Intelligence

FM 2-0 lays out the vital importance of intelligence operations while setting the theater:

Intelligence is integral in supporting operations during competition. Often, this intelligence support is expressed as setting the theater among Army intelligence professionals. . . .The intelligence staff must establish a baseline intelligence architecture to meet a broad range of requirements, to include ensuring information is available to support decision making if the strategic context transitions to crisis and armed conflict. . . . Intelligence products assist the commander in countering actions by adversaries that challenge the security of forward-stationed units and the stability of a nation or region and are contrary to U.S. interests.⁴

Adapting collection operations to the threat begins with recognizing the strategic environment and identifying key locations in the relevant campaign strategies and plans. This understanding is vital to determining where, how, and why collectors conduct their missions. It is also key to understanding the relationship between the objectives and authorities of both the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of State, and by extension, the implications for the U.S. Army, whose intelligence staff must adapt to competing theater requirements.

Consequently, the focus of collection must align with strategic national requirements, rather than relying solely on nested operational and tactical priority intelligence requirements (PIRs). This paradigm shift involves not only meeting U.S. national intelligence requirements, but also preparing strategic partners to answer their own PIRs and solidify intelligence-sharing frameworks.

This shift in operations will produce a follow-on effect, forcing a departure from the “metrics-based collections” legacy of COIN and counterterrorism intelligence operations. Historically, Army leaders focused heavily on quantitative outputs—producing large numbers of tactical reports or answering only local PIRs—at the expense of robust, widely disseminated strategic reports. Under the legacy system, collectors have little incentive to answer and report on national requirements.

A review of typical PIRs for tactical commands (brigade and below) reveals requirements that remain heavily focused on local, tactical information. While this information is essential during armed combat, it often misses strategically valuable intelligence. Ultimately, collection priorities between lower-echelon tactical units and higher headquarters are desynchronized. In strategic competition, the critical focus shifts to higher echelons (division and above), where intelligence warfighters must expand their collection efforts to answer national-level requirements.

Strategic Support to Competition in Africa

Intelligence warfighters experienced in intelligence preparation of the operational environment (IPOE) can guide collection efforts toward key areas such as infrastructure, the economy, governance, and local populations. The first step of IPOE is defining the operational environment (OE). While generally used to plan maneuver element actions, intelligence warfighters can also use IPOE step 1 to support intelligence mission analysis and planning for collection operations. This step helps identify the authorities, placement, and access available to collectors.

A clear understanding of the OE, especially in a complex region like Africa, is essential for effective intelligence gathering. This understanding optimizes collection efforts, maximizing their impact and ensuring they complement the activities of other entities and assets operating in the theater. Furthermore, intelligence warfighters can expand their influence by conducting thorough mission analysis and working alongside Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs) and State Partnership Program units to increase the overall effectiveness of mission sets.

A tool often neglected by collection planners and collectors is the crosswalk of civil considerations (ASCOPE—areas, structures, capabilities, organizations, people, and events) with operational variables (PMESII—political, military, economic, social, information, and infrastructure) found in Army Techniques Publication 2-01.3, *Intelligence Preparation of the Operational Environment*.⁵ This doctrinal tool already helps drive civil affairs operations through strategic understanding of the OE.

By understanding the PMESII/ASCOPE crosswalk, planners and assets can map these variables to the DIME-FIL (diplomatic, information, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement) model within the national strategic framework, thereby continuing to foster a joint operational mindset. These analytical frameworks are key to thoroughly defining and guiding a greater understanding of the OE.

Competition with Russia

The world watched with concern as private military contractors (PMCs), including Russia's Wagner Group and the Dyck

Advisory Group, effectively destabilized governments in places like Mali, the Central African Republic, and Mozambique. Following the February 2022 outbreak of hostilities in the Russo-Ukrainian war and the subsequent death of Wagner Group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin, Russia introduced the Afrika Korps to formalize and extend its political and military presence in Africa.⁶

The Russian strategy of offering PMC support to less-than-democratic governments and to leaders who instigate coups has proven to be both effective and disruptive. While Russia's long-term goals in Africa are not completely transparent, its actions across several African nations suggest that encouraging strong anti-Western sentiment is chief among Russian objectives. Additionally, Russia has positioned PMCs in strategic areas to exploit advanced and rare earth materials once local power shifts.

Because many African countries seek strong security partnerships, the war in Ukraine has created a strategic opportunity for the West (particularly the United States) to reaffirm itself as the partner of choice. Countering PMC operations projects soft power and prevents widespread civilian casualties. This alone does not completely sway African nations towards the West, however, as African leaders are highly adept at playing geopolitical competitors against one another.

To counter this, a greater emphasis on military engagements, paired with deliberate strategic intelligence collection, is required to build and affirm future military partnerships. The 2023 coup in Niger, for example, demonstrated that many African nations are disillusioned with Western intervention; however, Niger's hesitancy to immediately allow Russian PMCs to gain a foothold also reveals a critical vulnerability in the Russian strategy.

Competition with China

The focus of China's objectives in Africa centers predominantly on economic competition. Like Russia, China is vying for the strategic acquisition and control of vast natural resources across the African continent. China's strategy of offering affordable contracts for infrastructure, telecommunications, and trade, primarily through its Belt and Road Initiative, has long appealed to developing African nations. Offers of lower interest rates and rapid funding make these contracts highly attractive, yet they often impose debilitating penalties for failure to repay.⁷

In tandem with economic maneuvers, China is steadily expanding its military presence in Africa through strategic placement and security partnerships. Paul Nantulya, a Research Associate at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, notes that "China is leveraging its military training exercises with African forces to advance China's expeditionary capabilities and geostrategic ambitions."⁸ These bold moves by China demand

deliberate and focused countermeasures through strategic intelligence collection and the cultivation of local liaisons.

Beyond economic and military initiatives, China has introduced Confucius Institutes to promote Chinese culture and language in approximately 60 African countries, including Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Djibouti.⁹ These endeavors highlight Beijing's concentrated efforts to gain strong cultural footholds across Africa. To combat this influence, U.S. Army intelligence professionals must develop closer partnerships with U.S. Civil Affairs and Department of State assets on the ground.

Finally, China continues to seek access to and control of coastal territory through deep-water port projects spanning the entire continent. U.S. Army intelligence must prioritize tracking, analyzing, and ultimately countering these geostrategic maritime initiatives.

Leveraging Resources for Success

U.S. Special Operations Forces, Civil Affairs teams, and SFABs can offer unmatched placement and access to these critical areas of interest. To magnify the strategic value of civil information and military liaisons, the United States must posture itself to be the partner of choice in Africa. Deliberate intelligence collection can dictate where Civil Affairs and SFAB assets can make the most strategic impact. "Operations to shape, prevent, conduct large-scale ground combat, and consolidate gains summarize the Army's strategic roles as part of a joint force. Each strategic role presents a unique set of intelligence requirements discussed fully in FM 2-0."¹⁰ Human intelligence collectors should leverage their relationships with Civil Affairs teams and SFABs to answer these strategic-level requirements.

African nations require assurance from the United States before seeking or deepening military partnerships. While the United States honors the vast majority of its international agreements, occasional shortfalls in meeting commitments have sometimes projected an image of hollow partnerships. This has driven some countries to either cut ties or seek geopolitical competitors to fill the gaps. Expanding the land power network between the U.S. Army and its African partners through strategically focused intelligence collection is one method of countering adversaries during competition. Embassy-based Offices of Defense and Security Cooperation are addressing this need by developing 3-to-5-year plans for military-to-military engagements and training. These plans can strategically develop intelligence collection operations above tactical and operational levels, resulting in more relevant strategic requirements and highly valuable intelligence sharing.

Intelligence collection focusing on strategic players in the theater can guide units to position collectors at key locations. While non-DoD organizations are primarily charged with assessing partner nation gaps and weaknesses, the Army must

determine how it can best contribute to and augment these efforts. Leveraging the Army's overt collection capabilities can provide vital information often overlooked by higher-tier national organizations. Focused collection supports decision-makers in assessing how to employ the right assets, in the right places, with the proper support to meet both military and national strategic intent. In a 2021 strategic paper, the Army Chief of Staff noted, "This persistent and deliberate approach creates multiple dilemmas for our adversaries, who will seek to gain influence with many of the same partners."¹¹ Operational management teams and counterintelligence and human intelligence staff elements must leverage missions and assets like Civil Affairs, SFABs, and State Partnership Programs as sources for strategic collection.

As a subordinate unit of the 207th Military Intelligence Brigade (Theater), the 307th Forward Collection Battalion supports U.S. Army Europe-Africa by aligning its collection operations with this strategic mindset. To do so, it is utilizing its Counterintelligence Human Intelligence Analytical Support Element (CHASE) to great effect. The CHASE provides timely analysis and intelligence for mission planning and active collections,¹² highlighting the critical impact that thorough analysis and study of the OE has on preparation of the strategic environment.

Conclusion

Intelligence collection operations are constantly transforming. New doctrinal concepts continue to develop as we better understand large-scale combat and multidomain operations through movement, maneuver, and the close monitoring of active conflicts like the Russo-Ukrainian War.

From the United States strategic intelligence vantage point, the global landscape of future conflicts shows Russia and China actively influencing and interfering with our African partners' political, military, and economic arenas to expand their footholds on the resource-rich continent.

U.S. intelligence collection must adapt its methodologies, doctrinal application, and training to meet this theater's complex requirements. Fostering ingenuity by leveraging readily available U.S. Army resources offers leaders and planners at all echelons the necessary tools to meet the threats of strategic competition. Ultimately, utilizing existing doctrinal frameworks and maintaining operational flexibility will drive the intelligence collection necessary to support strategic victory. 🌟

Endnotes

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