COMPOSITE WARFARE

The Conduct of Successful Ground Force Operations in Africa

Eeben Barlow
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brigade commander, occasional division commander, and special advisor to several chiefs of staff.

When I started writing a book about the conduct of military operations in Africa, I did so not as an attempt to counter the many good books on conflict, war and warfare that already exist, but to enlighten African scholars and soldiers on how I believe they should go about defending their countries.

Many modern day African armies are clones of the armies established by their once colonial masters, Cold War allies, or new international allies. Many of the principles and TTPs\(^1\) they were—and are still being—taught relate to fighting in Europe and the Middle East and not in Africa. Some of these concepts are not even relevant to Africa as Africa does not possess nuclear rocket forces, strategic air forces, or large naval fleets. Indeed, Africa is currently the dumping ground for bad advice, and old and sometimes obsolete weapons from both the East and the West.

With complex, diverse, and ever evolving demographics, the potential for conflict and war remains a very real danger. Internal differences and foreign interference have merely added to the confusion and tension.

African conflicts and wars are generally low-tech and are fought with ‘boots on the ground’, often with little or no close air support. This has resulted in numerous costly and protracted conflicts and wars.

A lack of actionable and credible intelligence, poor strategies and plans, acceptance of poor advice, inadequate doctrines, lack of training and equipment, and lack of political direction and independent will has resulted in many half-fought conflicts and wars. These have simmered for years in several countries, and finally erupted in chaos and misery, affecting millions of people in the process. Indeed, Africa bears testimony to the fact that half-fought wars are never won.

There are many outstanding military scholars who will criticise my approach to ending a conflict or war in Africa. Criticism is good as healthy debate can only lead to improvements within the armed forces that are tasked to ensure the safety of their countries and citizens, and bring about peace as rapidly and economically as possible. I will gladly accept any positive criticism from those who have actually helped beleaguered governments to succeed, either in winning wars or ending conflicts in Africa.

African conflicts and wars are not fought along politically correct lines; nor should they be fought to achieve stalemates merely to satisfy international organisations, foreign governments, and NGOs—there is simply too much at stake.

These conflicts and wars are brutal, vicious, and savage, and often fought at very close quarters.

If Africa is to take its rightful place in the world, it must bring these conflicts and wars to a speedy conclusion.

My hope is that this work will assist armies in Africa to do just that.

Eeben Barlow
Pretoria, 2015

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\(^1\) Tactics, techniques, and procedures
Part 1: Understanding Conflict and War in Africa

Chapter 1

Conflict and War in Africa

*Despite the political rhetoric, the wars we fight are about control, influence, and resources. Unless we work together, we will give these three critical requirements to those who seek our downfall. If we allow that to happen, we will become slaves in our own lands. The choice we have is simple: become someone’s proxy or choose our own destiny.*

– Author to the deputy minister of defence of an African government, 2013

War is the result of hostilities between the political leaders of opposing nations and it is aimed at achieving a subjective geo-political result. Historically, state on state aggression has been expressed through ‘conventional warfare’ but since the end of the Cold War, this has been the exception rather than the norm.

In certain instances, state on state aggression may appear as war fought by other means (clandestine and covert warfare, psychological warfare, diplomatic warfare, economic warfare, cyber-warfare, strategic communications operations, and proxy forces doing battle on behalf of sponsor governments). Specific political, economic, and/or military goals can also be achieved by intimidating opponents through political and military posturing.

Conflict, for the purpose of this work, will refer primarily to internal (domestic or national) dissent. Whatever the cause, conflict, left unchecked, may result in the development of armed anti-government movements which can spill across national borders into neighbouring states and result in limited military actions involving proxy forces. Though this work will focus on the manner in which combat operations are conducted, specific attention will be given to military operations in post-Cold War Africa.

Where rebel groups, anti-government forces, fifth columnists, terrorist groups, and other politically, economically, and ideologically driven forces initiate and engage in conflict, the development of action and reaction remains relevant, even though the conflict may appear as unconventional warfare. In such instances, armed anti-government forces try to replace existing political orders illegally and violently. They will also try to seize control of assets and resources in their respective areas of operations as it is control over these that gives them their perceived economic power and the financial wherewithal to sustain conflict. The approach they take to achieving their aims will have a direct bearing on the nature of the conflict and the political and military counter-responses undertaken to contain and negate their actions.

There are many diverse cultures, traditions, religions, and languages in Africa. There are


2 Armed anti-government uprisings or movements are also commonly referred to as insurgencies.

3 Armed anti-government forces will henceforth be referred to as AGFs. AGFs include all armed and/or destructive forces (rebel groups, guerrillas, and terrorists). The enemy can thus consist of AGFs or hostile armed forces. AGFs can be driven by nationalist and/or other ideals or act on behalf of a sponsoring government.

4 Fifth columnists are anti-government elements or groups that aim to undermine the government from within. Their activities are usually covert and they often act in conjunction with and in support of AGFs.

5 It is imperative that armed forces work in close cooperation with law enforcement agencies as many of these conflicts are funded by organised crime.
also numerous political and ethnic differences. These, coupled with poverty, hunger, loss of hope, disparity of wealth, and oppression, often make conflict inevitable.

When politics and diplomacy fail, conflict and/or war become unavoidable and in Africa, conflicts and wars often flare up or reignite in spite of diplomatic and political efforts.

The escalation of verbal conflict into armed conflict is continued by the armed forces of the nations involved, or by armed anti-government forces attempting to wrest control from governments having been so ordered by their respective political leaders or financial sponsors. The conflict or war will continue until one side accepts defeat or accepts a ceasefire and capitulates.

As such, conflict and war may become the mechanism by which governments enforce domestic or foreign policies and the armed forces, the instrument of force by which the security of a state is ensured. A state may also use proxy forces to further its influence and can additionally, collapse a target government by creating the perception that it is under external control or under siege.

Due to the reciprocal nature of conflict and war, those beyond Africa do not usually consider actions like genocide, mass-murder, and aggressive occupation of territory to be war, as war is characterised by organised national armed forces doing battle against one another. While many view the conduct of war as a cultural phenomenon, the practice of war is not linked to any particular type of political organisation, philosophy, or society. Indeed, the conduct of conflict and war can be traced back to wars between villages, city states, tribes, cultures, religions, nations, and empires from the beginnings of human history.

The following objectives and goals must be borne in mind when considering the general functions of the armed forces:

• To continually assess the politico-military environment and the real, potential, or predicted threats against the state
• To deter hostile forces that aspire to collapse and replace the government or seize areas that may provide economic or political advantages
• To contain hostile forces that have commenced offensives against the government
• To neutralise hostile forces that pose a direct armed threat to the state and the government
• To degrade the command and control structures of hostile forces
• To exhaust hostile forces
• To annihilate hostile forces

Assessing the developing politico-military environment and existing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats is an ongoing intelligence function. The armed forces must—at all times—know what the potential for conflict and war is, the types of threats they may face, and how the threats will appear (i.e. conventional or unconventional).

To deter hostile forces, the armed forces must present a definite and credible threat and overcome the enemy with aggressive fire-and-maneuuvre. The armed forces’ ability to deter threats is enhanced by structure, organisation, training, equipment, doctrine, and leadership.

Containing domestic hostile forces that have commenced offensive actions against the government involves supporting law enforcement agencies by conducting operations to stabilise hostile areas that may harbour AGFs. If the threat is regionally based, the armed forces will be required to contain it by conducting defensive and offensive operations. If a hostile armed force has invaded the country, containment may involve halting the enemy’s advance and forcing it into a defensive position, after which a counter-offensive must be launched to destroy it, or compel the enemy forces to withdraw.

6 The term ‘armed forces’ refers to state-controlled military forces which include ground forces, air forces, and naval/riverine forces. It must not be confused with ‘armed force’ which implies force by the use of arms.

7 Hostile forces can include AGFs and hostile armed forces from neighbouring or even regional and international governments.