



Strategic Futures:

Nigerian Air Force Requirements In The Post Insurgency Era



First published 2019.

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Nigerian Air Force Requirements In The Post Insurgency Era

The Conflict Studies And Analysis Project At The Global Initiative For Civil Stabilisation

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Preamble

Nigeria is Africa's largest economy, and most populous country, possessing a population estimated to be above 200million people, and covering an area of 923,763 sqkms. It is situated in the middle of an increasingly restive region, with chaos in the Western Sahel and Libya to its north and west, a longrunning Islamist insurgency in its own northeast periphery, an increasingly violent secessionist conflict in Cameroon to its east, and fragile states in Chad and Central Africa, with the former country its only buffer from the chaos in Sudan.

Historically, Nigeria has been one of Africa's preeminent continental powers, and the leading power in the West African region, with its military leading stabilising interventions in other African countries wracked by conflict including Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea Bissau. In addition, it has also played a strong role in supporting United Nations Peacekeeping Operations globally, with deployments in theatres from Darfur to East Timor.

Introduction

Although Nigeria historically has been a major continental power, two decades of focusing on internal challenges has seen the capabilities of the Nigerian military to fight sustained state on state warfare, and also project power beyond its borders, deteriorate sharply.

This deterioration was most apparent in the Nigerian Air Force, which prior to the tenure of the current Chief of Air Staff, Air Marshal Sadique Abubakar, and his last two predecessors had largely been reduced in stature and capabilities to a point where it was largely combat ineffective. However, reforms began by his predecessors and expanded and institutionalised further by Air Marshal Sadique Abubakar, has seen the Nigerian Air Force rapidly transform from its previous place, to its current position as the most competent service in the Nigerian Armed Forces today.

Nigeria today faces significant longterm threats from longrunning insurgencies within its own borders, destabilisation in its wider region, the presence of military bases belonging to outside powers in the countries surrounding it, and historical faultlines in relations with its neighbours.

However, although ISWAP and Boko Haram pose a potent strategic threat to Nigeria's internal stability, the continued activities of other Islamic State affiliates plus Al-Qaeda-linked groups in the wider region is leading to the collapse of state control in many areas in the wider region. While Nigeria today faces a very marginal risk of aggressive action against it by its neighbours, it is however significantly vulnerable to asymmetric warfare campaigns, if they are waged against it, by its neighbours or external powers. Historical faultlines[1] exist between Nigeria and some of its neighbours particularly Chad, Cameroon and the Republic of Benin over territory, or in the case of Benin, allegations of economic sabotage. On multiple occasions in the past, Nigerian troops engaged in combat to clear out Chadian[2] and Cameroonian troops who had occupied territory that was deemed Nigerian, with the tacit support of France[3].

Although Nigeria and these neighbours with which it has had clashes in the past, are currently united in fighting the common threat of Boko Haram and ISWAP, a post-insurgency future holds the potential for relations, which are currently still characterised by distrust, to deteriorate into passive confrontation, with Nigeria's neighbours waging silent asymmetric warfare through proxies against it. There is a broad consensus in many parts of Nigeria's intelligence, military and national security policy establishment, that Chad and Cameroon in particular tolerated and at certain times tacitly enabled Boko Haram groups to destabilise and weaken Nigeria, only dropping that tacit support when the insurgents began to pose a viable threat to their own security. There is a strong current in Nigeria's national security and defence architecture, that believes that Nigeria's neighbours would not have been able to tacitly wage asymmetric warfare in the past against Nigeria, without permission from France given the fact that their security policy is directed by Paris.

Today, France maintains bases in Niamey, Madama, Arlit, in Niger Republic and N'Djamena, Chad, in addition to a base south of Nigeria in Gabon. Germany has opened a military base in Niamey, while the United States maintains Intelligence, Reconnaissance and Surveillance (ISR) bases in Garuoa, Cameroon, and Agadez, Niger. In addition there are US special operations units stationed in N'Djamena, Chad, and Niamey Arlit, and Diffa, Niger Republic. Also the United Arab Emirates is planning to base unmanned ISR platform colocated with the French base at Madama, in Niger. In a post insurgency strategic future, this plethora of foreign bases ringing Nigeria, will be a major potential threat to the security of its national interests.

As a key capability-component in Nigeria's arsenal of means to protect its national interest within and outside its borders, the Nigerian Air Force (NAF) must prepare for the post-insurgency future adequately. To prepare for a post-insurgency strategic future, the Nigerian Air Force must focus on the key areas of Intelligence, Training/Capacity Building, Jointness, Equipment Acquisition and Holding.

Intelligence

The Nigerian Air Force must invest in developing its ability to collect, process, analyse and disseminate intelligence produced by NAF assets. It must make investments in manned and unmanned ISR platforms to cover Nigeria's territory and also be able to collect Signals Intelligence (SIGINT), Electronic Intelligence (ELINT), and Imagery Intelligence (IMINT) deep within neighbouring countries, or on expeditionary/out of area operations.

To balance the use of manned and unmanned airborne ISR platforms, the Nigerian Air Force must invest in developing organic Human Intelligence (HUMINT) collection capabilities. A fusion of HUMINT and airborne ISR capabilities will give the Nigerian Air Force a robust intelligence architecture, and capabilities that will greatly improve situational awareness at the tactical, operational and strategic levels both for the Air Force, and the wider Armed Forces.

Training/Capacity Building

The Nigerian Air Force must place even greater emphasis on training and retraining and expanding the capacity of airmen to perform assigned tasks. Cooperation with more advanced air forces of friendly and strategically autonomous countries e.g Turkey and Pakistan must be invested in, to ensure that Nigerian airmen develop and refine skills relevant to the strategic future of Nigerian air power development and employment.

In addition to continuously training the individual airman to be competent and capable at performing his job, investment must be made in enhancing the capacity to perform, of the Air Force as a whole. Strategic air warfare exercises/wargames must be initiated and regularly carried out, mobilising the Air Force and preparing it to carry out strategic air operations in support of the national interest, as a body whole.

Bilateral exercises with friendly and allied air forces will need to be initiated and institutionalised as a way to continuously improve the competence of individual air men and units, and the Nigerian Air Force as a whole.

Jointness

The present of the Nigerian Armed Forces is increasingly one of joint operations whether as part of joint service task forces (Niger Delta, Northeast Nigeria) or expeditionary deployments(the 2017 deployment to Senegal in to intervene inthe Gambia), and its strategic future in the post-insurgency will be built around jointness.

Whether it is interventions in support of fostering stability and security in neighbouring countries, or interventions to eliminate hostile actors operating out of neighbouring states, the Nigerian Armed Forces will have to operate more as a joint force with all services working together to achieve the designated objective. Thus, the Nigerian Air Force must invest in developing the skills and capabilities to support the Army and Navy when it is called upon to do so. This must be reflected in the procurement and training directions the Air Force takes going forward.

Maritime patrol aircraft to support the Navy, along with ISR platforms for land side missions, and transport aircraft to provide mobility of men and logistics in support of the Army, along with the specialists to integrate the Air Force's unique capability sets with Army and Navy planning and operations, will be key investments the Air Force must make for the future.

Equipment Acquisition/Holding

The Nigerian Air Force must invest in equipment acquisition to fulfil the orientation it adopts for a strategic post-insurgency future. Apart from manned and unmanned ISR platforms, maritime patrol aircraft and transport aircraft, investment must be in combat platforms to put teeth in its aerial warfare capabilities.

With the amount of potential strategic future threats facing Nigeria, the Nigerian Air Force must invest in the combat air platforms to dominate its airspace and if necessary the airspace of its neighbours.

Investments in precision air-delivered weapon systems and the support systems that complete the kill-chains for such precision air-delivered weapons must be considered a principal priority of the Air Force in its procurement future.

Research and Development must be given the primary importance it deserves, and focus must be placed in ensuring that Nigeria reaches self-sufficiency in critical air warfare systems.

In addition to equipment acquisition the Air Force must invest in equipment holding. Greater emphasis must be placed on maintenance and repair, and in developing air base defence in the face of hostile actors. Should the Air Force deploy in intervention missions into hostile terrain, it must possess the capability to protect its air and ground assets in forward operating positions from a repeat of the 2013 Boko Haram attacks on the Nigerian Air Force base in Maiduguri which saw several critical air platforms severely damaged.

End Notes

- [1] Adedoyin O, 2006. Nigeria's Relations with her Neighbors. *Stude Tribes Tribals*. 4 (1): 7 – 17
- [2] James I, 1987. The Nigerian-Chadian Border Conflict. *The Nigerian Journal of International Affairs*. 10 (1): 63 – 73.
- [3] The Independent Uk. "French Deploying Troops Says Nigeria"
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/french-deploying-troops-says-nigeria-1427908.html>

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