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Key Teachings of Sun Tzu on Intelligence Applicable to Strategy and National Security in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This occasional paper examines the relevance of Sun Tzu's teachings on intelligence to strategy and national security in African states. Drawing on Realism, Intelligence Theory and Complexity Theory, the paper argues that Sun Tzu regarded intelligence as the decisive foundation of successful strategy of nation-states rather than merely a supporting military function. The paper analyses key themes including intelligence as the foundation of strategy, understanding the adversary, strategic self-assessment, human intelligence, intelligence coordination, counter-intelligence, intelligence-informed decision-making, technological innovation and ethical intelligence governance. The paper contends that these principles remain highly applicable to contemporary security challenges confronting African states. The paper concludes that strengthening intelligence-led governance, inter-agency coordination, regional cooperation and democratic oversight will enhance strategic decision-making, national resilience and sustainable security across Africa.

Keywords

Sun Tzu, Intelligence, Strategy, National Security, African states, Intelligence-led governance.

INTRODUCTION

Intelligence is a fundamental instrument of strategy and national security. Beyond supporting security and military operations, intelligence enables states to anticipate threats, reduce strategic uncertainty and make informed decisions to protect national interests. As contemporary security challenges become increasingly interconnected, gathering timely and reliable intelligence becomes indispensable for effective governance and strategic planning. Consequently, intelligence has evolved into a core function of national security institutions and a critical enabler of conflict prevention, crisis management and national resilience.

The relevance of intelligence in a strategic context has been emphasised since at least the time of Sun Tzu's Art of War. In opposition to perceiving war as primarily a military undertaking, Sun Tzu contends the key to victory lies in superior intelligence. The author's famous

dictum of "knowing the enemy and knowing yourself" summarises his belief that intelligence must guide every phase of strategy, from threat assessment and knowledge of the enemy to national capability assessment and decision-making.¹ The discussions by Sun Tzu on the use of spies further demonstrate how intelligence remains an indispensable function of statecraft rather than merely a battlefield support activity.

These insights remain particularly relevant to Africa's contemporary security environment. The growth in violent extremist organisations in the Sahel region, insecurity at sea in the Gulf of Guinea, cybercrime, smuggling, irregular migration and the sophisticated nature of hybrid threats mean an intelligence-based approach that combines national capacities with regional cooperation is required. The use of tools such as the AU's Continental Early Warning System and the ECOWARN demonstrates the increased dependence on intelligence for preventive purposes.

This paper discusses certain core teachings of Sun Tzu regarding intelligence and the relevance of same in terms of strategic planning and national security in Africa. Through Realism, Intelligence and Complexity theories, the paper proves Sun Tzu's perception of intelligence as the bedrock of strategy. The paper analyses Sun Tzu's teachings on strategic intelligence, understanding the adversary, strategic self-assessment, human intelligence, intelligence coordination, deception and counterintelligence, intelligence-informed decision-making, technological innovation and ethical intelligence governance. It is evident these timeless principles provide a foundation for enhancing intelligence-led governance and national resilience in tackling the evolving security threats confronting Africa.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The paper relies on the Realism Theory, Intelligence Theory and the Complexity Theory to analyse the significance of Sun Tzu's teaching on intelligence in strategy and national security in Africa. The theories complement one another in explaining why intelligence is necessary for making strategic decisions, especially in the wake of terrorism, violence, organised crime, cybersecurity, climatic insecurity and geopolitics. "Knowing the enemy and knowing yourself" is a timeless Sun Tzu's principle that captures the assumptions in these theories in that intelligence reduces uncertainties, improves strategic thinking and helps decision-makers attain their goals with minimum cost.

Realism is the main theoretical underpinning of Sun Tzu's idea of intelligence. According to realists, the international system is anarchic in nature and, therefore, states must struggle to survive and pursue their interests and be able to exercise enough power to defeat their enemies.² In this case, intelligence becomes an instrument of state power by minimising strategic uncertainties

and providing decision-makers with information for sound policy decisions. The idea that victory is supposed to be won not through superiority in force but superiority in knowledge is also an assumption Sun Tzu espouses. This is in terms of the systematic gathering of information about an enemy and even about one's own forces before taking any military or political action. In Africa, this thinking is evident in applying intelligence to counter terrorism in the Sahel region, maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea and transborder crime organisations.³

The intelligence cycle, under the Intelligence Theory, forms the operational mechanism through which Sun Tzu's philosophy is comprehended in modern practice. The intelligence cycle involves planning and direction, collection, processing, analysis and dissemination and feedback to ensure decision-makers are provided with intelligence.⁴ Sun Tzu dedicates a chapter to espionage to demonstrate the fact that intelligence is an essential component in predicting threats and understanding enemies.⁵ It is notable he emphasises the necessity to collect and analyse information consistently, a practice that coincides with the modern intelligence approach and which incorporates human intelligence, signals intelligence, geospatial intelligence, open-source intelligence and artificial intelligence. For instance, in African countries, intelligence fusion centres, national intelligence coordination bodies and regional early warning systems reflect such practice.

The Complexity Theory complements Realism and the Intelligence Theory in appreciating the fact that modern security threats are a result of interactions among political, economic, technological, environmental and social systems.⁶ Contrary to the linear approach of traditional security theories, the Complexity Theory understands security threats are evolving and dynamic and, thus, call for adaptive measures. Adaptation is consistent

with Sun Tzu, who insists great commanders keep adapting strategies based on evolving situations.⁷ Climate change, irregular migration, cybersecurity, pandemics and violent extremism in Africa are a demonstration of complex national security situations in the modern world.

INTELLIGENCE AS THE FOUNDATION OF STRATEGY

An influential lesson on strategy imparted by Sun Tzu is that intelligence provides the foundation for the success of a strategy. According to Sun Tzu's, the success of a strategy does not depend on numbers or troop strength, but on the knowledge of the enemy, the environment and the capabilities of the army. Sun Tzu's statement, "Know your enemy and know yourself, and in a hundred battles you will not be in danger" reflects this view.⁸ It is still relevant in the modern strategy and national security in Africa, where governments face numerous challenges which cannot be overcome through military actions.

Contemporary strategic thinking also accepts that intelligence forms the basis of all national security strategies, security and defence planning and crisis management. The expeditious provision of information on emerging threats, intentions, vulnerabilities and opportunities of the adversary enables political and military leaderships to make sound judgements and minimise the danger of uncertainties.⁹ Hence, the entire strategic process, from the threat identification to assessment is enhanced by the intelligence capability. Instead of reacting to a crisis, intelligence enables governments to be proactive and take preventive measures, as Sun Tzu emphasises when he stresses winning prior to war than during the war.

The relevance of intelligence is more pronounced in the changing security environment of African nations. The expansion of violent extremist organisations across the Sahel region, the

proliferation of transnational organised crime, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, cybercrime, arms trafficking and irregular migration demonstrate conventional military responses alone are insufficient. Effective national security increasingly depends on integrated intelligence systems capable of collecting, analysing and disseminating actionable information across multiple agencies and jurisdictions. Recognising this need, the AU has strengthened the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) as a pillar of the African Peace and Security Architecture to provide timely intelligence, monitor emerging threats and support preventive decision-making by the Peace and Security Council.¹⁰ Similarly, regional mechanisms such as ECOWARN promote intelligence exchange and cooperation among ECOWAS member countries.¹¹

National practices on the continent are additional evidence of the relevance of intelligence-driven security. The National Security Strategy of Ghana (2020) and the National Framework for Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism place intelligence at the core of efforts to prevent terrorist spillover from the Sahel region through early warnings, inter-agency cooperation and community outreach. Additionally, Kenya and Nigeria have improved their capacity for intelligence fusion and surveillance to respond to terrorist organisations operating along the countries' porous borders.¹² These instances demonstrate how intelligence is used not only for military purposes but also for border control, counterterrorism, electoral security and disaster readiness.¹³

Sun Tzu's teachings also highlight the importance of having intelligence that provides an accurate picture of both the strengths and weaknesses of an organisation. Strategic awareness enhances the understanding of organisational weaknesses, resource allocation and adapting to new challenges even before an opponent capitalises

on the weaknesses. When applied in the context of African countries, this aspect emphasises the need for national security assessments, improving institutional capacity through capability reviews and reforms in intelligence institutions and enhancing professionalism. In the contemporary world where threats have become multi-faceted, intelligence extends beyond military reconnaissance to encompass political, economic, cyber, environmental and social intelligence, among other forms. Thus, Sun Tzu's teachings ensure the concept of good strategy being founded on excellent intelligence prevails even in contemporary times.¹⁴

KNOWING THE ADVERSARY

Expanding on the idea that intelligence is the basis of strategy, Sun Tzu states intelligence must be geared toward knowing the opponent. Although intelligence helps provide data required for strategic decision-making, its biggest advantage is that it allows decision-makers to assess the opponent's intent, weaknesses, strengths and potential actions. "Know your enemy and know yourself" clearly reflects victory can be achieved only when one gains comprehensive knowledge about the opponent before engaging in a war.¹⁵ In contemporary African security environment where threats are multifaceted and dynamic, this principle remains crucial for successful national security planning.

Understanding the enemy goes beyond identifying the adversary to include knowing their intentions, leadership structure, recruitment methods, sources of financing, operational tactics and other supporting entities. That is why modern intelligence agencies employ all three intelligence categories to understand threats.¹⁶ Moreover, intelligence-led threat assessment aids in the identification of the differences between immediate and future threats. With this, policymakers prioritise resources according to

threat levels and craft a corresponding response. This is the concept Sun Tzu emphasises in advocating the use of superior knowledge to defeat the enemy.

Such relevance is highlighted in cases where certain African countries are fighting violent extremism. Terrorist groups on the continent include Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP), Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).¹⁷ Defeating such groups requires intelligence efforts that extend beyond military intelligence to encompass an understanding of the groups' ideologies, communities, finance and recruitment efforts. Such intelligence enables governments to integrate military operations with preventive measures, community engagement and programmes to prevent and counter violent extremism.¹⁸

The principle is equally applicable to combating transnational organised crime. Criminal networks engaged in drug trafficking, illegal mining, human trafficking, piracy and arms smuggling operate across national borders through sophisticated financial and logistical systems. Effective disruption, therefore, depends on intelligence sharing among national agencies and regional organisations. The Accra Initiative, for instance, seeks to promote intelligence cooperation among West African coastal states to prevent the southward expansion of violent extremist groups from the Sahel region, while the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) facilitates intelligence exchange and coordinated operations against Boko Haram around the Lake Chad Basin. Similarly, the AU Mechanism for Police Cooperation (AFRIPOL) enhances cooperation to fight organised crime and terrorism.¹⁹ These strategies reflect Sun Tzu's strategy that the acquisition of knowledge about an opponent is not an individual but a team effort.

Also, modern opponents tend to utilise cyberattacks, disinformation and foreign manipulation to destabilise nations without a conventional war. Therefore, in contemporary warfare, “knowing the adversary” involves monitoring the digital landscape, identifying online adversaries and analysing the hybrid forms of threats that involve political, economic and technology tools of coercion. It is crucial for African countries to combine human intelligence, signals intelligence, cyber intelligence and open-source intelligence to analyse the threat environment.

KNOWING YOURSELF

Self-knowledge is another lesson Sun Tzu relates to the knowledge of the adversary. While knowledge of the enemy helps governments predict external dangers, success also requires an objective evaluation of a government’s own strengths and weaknesses. According to Sun Tzu, a leader who understands both the adversary and his own position is bound to win, since “if you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles”.²⁰ The principle is relevant to contemporary strategy and security in Africa because it stresses the significance of self-evaluation and self-assessment before intelligence-led governance becomes successful.

To know oneself is to conduct a thorough assessment of one’s capabilities in the political, military, economic, technological and social realms. Modern intelligence agencies play an important role in self-assessment through strategic assessments.²¹ These evaluations offer African governments an accurate perception of national preparedness and allow security organizations to base their planning on an assessment of current threats. It is not a matter of being too optimistic about national strengths and too pessimistic about risks that Sun Tzu advocates objectivity.

Regarding Africa, self-awareness is especially critical since the nature of security challenges varies considerably across countries. Each of such threats, be it terrorism in the Sahel region, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, secessionist attacks, cybercrime, electoral insecurity and environmental conflicts, calls for specialised institutional capability and solutions. Therefore, the need for adequate professional human capacity, technological capacity, legal tools and coordination mechanisms remains an issue. Likewise, the AU Master Roadmap of Practical Steps to Silence the Guns in Africa emphasises the need for strong institutions, good governance and early warning systems.²²

This principle is evident in the formulation of an all-encompassing National Security Strategy in some African states. For instance, the National Security Strategy of Ghana (2020) considers the country’s strengths and weaknesses from the perspectives of political governance, border security, economic security, cybersecurity, environmental resilience and intelligence collaboration.²³ Similar to this is the case of Rwanda where its governance and security strategies have been enhanced through consistent institutional review and intelligence, as well as public administration and technology.²⁴ These examples demonstrate self-assessment is not a one-time exercise but a continuous strategic process that enables governments to adapt to changing security environments.

Knowing oneself also requires organisational learning within intelligence and security institutions. Intelligence failures frequently result not only from insufficient information but also from poor coordination, institutional complacency, inadequate analytical capacity and ineffective decision-making. Regular capability reviews, lessons-learned exercises, professional education and strategic audits, therefore, strengthen institutional performance and reduce

the likelihood of repeating past mistakes.²⁵ Moreover, democratic control and accountability ensure intelligence agencies gain greater self-awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and improve their level of professionalism.

HUMAN INTELLIGENCE AND STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE

Following Sun Tzu's principle of understanding the enemy and understanding oneself, a crucial lesson is the absolute necessity of human intelligence (HUMINT) in gaining strategic advantages. While most ancient military texts pay limited attention to intelligence gathering, Sun Tzu specifically devotes a chapter, 'The Use of Spies', to the topic.²⁶ The author's statement, "foreknowledge must be gained through those who understand the situation of the enemy", highlights the relevance of HUMINT as the cornerstone of strategic efforts. While technology has advanced significantly through surveillance technology, cyber intelligence and artificial intelligence, HUMINT remains vital in that it provides understanding of the motives, intentions and perceptions that cannot otherwise be achieved.

In modern intelligence operations, HUMINT consists of gathering information through human resources such as confidential sources, undercover agents, defectors, diplomatic representatives and local people.²⁷ Such intelligence is extremely important when assessing emerging threats, analysing the opponent's leadership structure and identifying radicalisation trends. Contemporary intelligence organisations include HUMINT in a wider intelligence package comprising signals, geospatial and open-source intelligence.

HUMINT becomes particularly relevant in Africa where security challenges originate at the community level before escalating into broader national security concerns. Extremist and terror

groups operating in the Sahel region, the Lake Chad Basin region and northern Mozambique often take advantage of such local issues as grievances, ethnic tensions, poverty and weak state presence to recruit people. This means HUMINT gathered from reliable community sources becomes the first source of intelligence about extremist operations, recruiting campaigns and attacks being planned. Community engagement, in this case, becomes a tool of intelligence rather than policing that contributes to early warning and conflict prevention.²⁸

Several African countries have adopted community-centred intelligence approaches. For instance, Ghana has strengthened community engagement under its National Framework for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism through cooperation among security agencies, traditional authorities, religious leaders and local communities in northern border regions vulnerable to terrorist infiltration.²⁹ Similarly, Kenya has increased community policing efforts to enhance intelligence gathering about Al-Shabaab.³⁰ Nigeria has employed intelligence from the locals in the fight against Boko Haram and ISWAP. These examples indicate effective counterterrorism is not only about technology; it also involves the confidence and cooperation of local communities, which are key in providing critical information required for preventive measures.

Sun Tzu also understood the need for the effectiveness of HUMINT to be determined by professionalism, confidentiality and proper management of sources. In this regard, contemporary intelligence organisations must ensure the process of applying HUMINT aligns with national laws and human rights standards while maintaining the confidentiality of sources. Ethical recruitment, information security and effective supervision are essential in maintaining public trust and ensuring efficiency. In the

evolving security environment in Africa where opponents are developing quickly and taking advantage of weak spots in the region, Sun Tzu's teaching remind us of the importance of HUMINT in intelligence-based strategy.

INTELLIGENCE COORDINATION AND INFORMATION SHARING

Building upon Sun Tzu's emphasis on the value of HUMINT, an equally important lesson is that intelligence achieves its greatest strategic value when it is effectively coordinated and shared among decision-makers and operational actors. Although *The Art of War* does not describe modern intelligence institutions, Sun Tzu consistently emphasises information from different sources must be collected, verified and integrated before commanders formulate strategy.³¹ Intelligence coordination and information sharing are modern manifestation of the above principle within the national security process because they guarantee information coming from different sources is integrated into a consolidated analysis to support decision-making. Due to the transnational and multidimensional character of current security challenges, no single organisation or state possesses the necessary information for effective counterattack.

Intelligence coordination in the contemporary world requires the integration of intelligence gathered by intelligence services, police departments, the military, immigration service, customs service and the cybersecurity department. Through intelligence fusion, fragmented intelligence can be turned into useful intelligence.³² The approach is based on Sun Tzu's perception that stand-alone information has little meaning unless collectively analysed for the purpose of deciphering the intentions and actions of the adversary. Thus, intelligence coordination has become a critical element of national security through intelligence strategies.

The significance of intelligence collaboration is especially pronounced in Africa, where security challenges often transcend national boundaries. Terrorists, transnational criminal organisations, pirates, smugglers and cybercriminals exploit porous borders and weak inter-agency coordination to evade detection. The key to dealing with such challenges lies in timely intelligence sharing among national agencies and regional organisations. This is what ECOWARN is designed to achieve by collecting information on political instability, terrorist activities and humanitarian emergencies to allow preventive action by partner countries.³³ These mechanisms illustrate how intelligence synchronisation increases situational awareness and improves collective security.

Additionally, certain security mechanisms on the continent provide more examples of the application of Sun Tzu's principles. For instance, the Accra Initiative was successful in synchronising intelligence among Ghana, Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo to counter the southward advance of terrorism from the Sahel region through joint intelligence assessment, surveillance and joint operations. Similarly, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) has been useful for Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Niger in synchronising intelligence and military actions against Boko Haram and the ISWAP. Moreover, at the national level, the Ghana Joint Intelligence Committee is an example of institutional coordination through the integration of intelligence from various security and intelligence organisations.³⁴ These examples demonstrate how coordination of intelligence activities improves strategic planning, crisis management and operations.

DECEPTION AND COUNTERINTELLIGENCE

Based on the concept of intelligence coordination and sharing, Sun Tzu advocates the combination

of intelligence, deception and counterintelligence to secure strategic advantages while depriving the enemy of valuable information. “All warfare is based on deception” is one of the most quoted doctrines in Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*.³⁵ While this statement may have been made regarding the military, the same logic applies to contemporary national security, whereby the application of deception and counterintelligence is meant to protect the state’s interest and not the application of trickery to deceive others for selfish ends. Contemporary intelligence makes use of deception to confuse the enemy about their intention or capability, whereas counterintelligence attempts to prevent espionage and sabotage.³⁶

The significance of counterintelligence has grown since contemporary adversaries do not always apply traditional military means to wage war. Various terrorist groups, criminal gangs, cybercriminals and foreign intelligence organisations all attempt to gain access to classified information, infrastructure and decision-making processes of governments. Hence, the intelligence community is not only tasked with gathering intelligence, but also its protection. Counterintelligence must include personnel screening, protection against internal threats, cybersecurity, secure communications, protective security and surveillance of hostile intelligence operations. This is consistent with Sun Tzu’s dictum that a commander should deprive the enemy of reliable intelligence while protecting the commander’s plans.

In the case of African nations, deception and counterintelligence have become more important since security threats have become hybrid in nature. Violent extremist organisations employ deception by disguising their agents among civilian populations, disseminating false information and using encrypted communication channels to evade detection. Similarly, criminal transnational organisations resort to deception

through illicit channels for conducting monetary transactions, while hostile foreign entities now use cyberspace and social media to indulge in espionage. This makes it essential for states to have counterintelligence systems which should include HUMINT, cyber intelligence, digital forensics and strategic communications.³⁷

Many African nations have adopted reform policies that enhance counterintelligence and information security. Ghana’s Security and Intelligence Agencies Act, 2026 (Act 1168) provides the legislative framework for intelligence agencies to safeguard national security through intelligence and counterintelligence operations.³⁸ Similarly, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa have built defences in cyberspace to fight terrorism, espionage and cybercrime.³⁹ ECOWAS has further increased collaboration on cybersecurity, intelligence exchange and counterterrorism efforts in tackling cross-border security challenges.⁴⁰ These efforts have demonstrated the intelligence defence is equally critical to its collection.

Nonetheless, Sun Tzu’s wisdom also suggests deception and counterintelligence must be applied strategically and with discipline. Counterintelligence actions in democracies must abide by all legal requirements to respect human rights. Overreliance on secrecy and illegal surveillance tends to jeopardise public trust in the system. Hence, the application of Sun Tzu’s principles in modern times must be in harmony with the balance of security and democracy. In the changing security scenario of Africa, where non-state actor threats to both state apparatus and public confidence is becoming increasingly evident, the relevance of deception and counterintelligence cannot be overstressed.

INTELLIGENCE FOR STRATEGIC DECISION-MAKING

After reviewing deception and counter-

intelligence, the final objective of intelligence lies in aiding the government in making effective and strategic decisions. This point also ties back to the theoretical background of the paper - Realism, Intelligence Theory, and Complexity Theory. Realism argues intelligence equips states to defend their interests in the international system due to the uncertainties of such an anarchic world. The Intelligence Theory focuses on the intelligence process that helps transform raw information into knowledge usable for policymakers, whereas the Complexity Theory emphasises the relevance of flexible decisions.⁴¹ However, Sun Tzu foresees these modern-day warfare approaches when he indicates successful leaders make decisions based on intelligence and not assumptions and emotional reactions. The fact that victory lies in knowledge implies intelligence acts as a vital link between information and strategy.⁴²

In the contemporary national security environment, intelligence assists the decision-making process in the strategic, operational and tactical arenas. In the strategic arena, intelligence helps decision-making regarding national security policies, defence strategies, foreign policy and resource allocation. In the operational arena, intelligence helps in decision-making on the conduct of military operations, border security and law enforcement operations. In the tactical arena, intelligence makes it possible for commanders to make sound decisions in response to immediate threats. Overall, intelligence helps reduce uncertainty by providing information on emerging threats, adversary intentions and alternative actions.

This intelligence-led approach is particularly relevant to Africa's evolving security landscape. The continent must address numerous challenges, including violence extremism, piracy, organised crime, cybersecurity, electoral violence, illegal migration and climate insecurity. These interconnected threats necessitate that the

governments take prompt intelligence-based action. The National Security Strategy of Ghana (2020) ensures intelligence remains integral to strategic decision-making through effective threat assessment, inter-agency coordination and early warning systems. For instance, in Kenya, the intelligence-based approach applies intelligence in relation to border management, policing and community relations. In Rwanda, strategic intelligence assessments are employed to enhance national resilience and disaster preparedness.⁴³ These cases illustrate how intelligence facilitates preventive security measures instead of reactive security policies.

Regional organisations further highlight the role of intelligence in decision-making. For instance, CEWS provides strategic information to the AU Peace and Security Council for preventive diplomacy and crisis management. In addition, ECOWARN helps decision-making by providing information on political instability, terrorism and humanitarian issues in West Africa. These cases are examples of Sun Tzu's strategy, which indicates good intelligence enables leaders to control events rather than reacting to them.⁴⁴

However, intelligence becomes relevant to sound decision-making only when the intelligence is objective, timely and apolitical. Weaknesses in analytical capabilities, institutional rivalry, delays in intelligence transmission and selection potentially cause strategic mistakes with serious security implications. It is, therefore, necessary for intelligence agencies to be analytically independent, apply robust analytic methodologies and offer policymakers unbiased assessments. Sun Tsu's lessons remain valid in the face of the increasingly complicated security situation confronting African states. Thus, intelligence must not only inform the emergence of threats but should also equip leaders to anticipate future events.

TECHNOLOGY AND INTELLIGENCE

The rapid progress in technology has changed the process of intelligence gathering, analysed and disseminated. These changes further solidify the theoretical premises discussed in this paper. The technological edge strengthens the state in Realism because the theory enables the state to protect its interests and maintain its strategic advantage in a competitive world. According to the Intelligence Theory, technological advancements help intelligence gathering at all phases of the intelligence process in terms of accuracy and efficiency. However, the Complexity Theory points out technological innovations present new challenges and risks as well.⁴⁵ While Sun Tzu belonged to a period where there was no digital technology, it is pertinent to note his lessons on the need for accurate, relevant and timely information are relevant even in the contemporary intelligence world. From Sun Tzu's lessons, one learns technology should act as a force multiplier of intelligence.

The use of sophisticated technology is essential to modern-day intelligence gathering and is exemplified by tools such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, big data, geospatial intelligence, signals intelligence, cyber intelligence, satellite imagery, unmanned aerial systems and open-source intelligence. Technology facilitates the processing of big data and the identification of underlying patterns in ways not achievable by humans.⁴⁶ One such technology that has been helpful in automatic anomaly detection, social media monitoring and threat prediction is artificial intelligence. This technology ensures any security threats are detected before they materialise. Nonetheless, according to Sun Tzu's teachings, these technical skills must match human skills that understand how to interpret intelligence politically and strategically.

Technology has become a crucial aspect regarding the security challenges confronting African countries. There has been a growing tendency among terrorist organisations, organised and cyber criminals to employ technology such as social media and encryption in recruiting individuals and in undertaking operations. Thus, intelligence services in African countries must invest in technologies such as digital surveillance, cybersecurity, biometrics and Geographic Information System (GIS) to enhance national security. Ghana has witnessed improvement in the functioning of the National Cyber Security Authority in addition to the implementation of the National Signals Bureau (Act 1040).⁴⁷ Similarly, Kenya employs sophisticated surveillance techniques, whereas Rwanda has developed an intelligence-driven digital governance.⁴⁸

The application of technology for intelligence gathering has received regional cooperation. For instance, CEWS deploys technological tools such as digital data systems and satellite information to aid intelligence gathering and facilitate decision-making conflict prevention on the continent. Also, ECOWAS constantly improves ECOWARN through digital reporting and information-sharing systems.⁴⁹

However, these technological developments pose several national security risks. Artificial intelligence may be deployed to spread false information. Cyberattacks may focus on national infrastructure, and surveillance through technology is not without privacy and ethical considerations. Thus, it becomes incumbent on intelligence agencies to incorporate the power of technological innovations into laws, security measures and oversight processes. In accordance with Sun Tzu's principles, technology must improve strategic decisions-making rather serve as an alternative. Africa's fast-changing security environment requires that technology be blended with HUMINT for effective decision-making.

ETHICAL INTELLIGENCE AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Considering the discussions on intelligence and technology, the growing prevalence of enhanced intelligence technologies calls for ethical intelligence and democracy even more. While technology has significantly enhanced intelligence gathering, analysis and decision-making, it has also increased the risks of unlawful surveillance, privacy violations, political misuse and cyber intrusions. This theme, therefore, returns to the theoretical foundations of the paper. It should be noted that although Realism recognises intelligence as a crucial tool to safeguard national interests, it does not undermine the necessity of having legitimate institutions to maintain national stability. The Intelligence Theory stresses the relevance of the objectivity, legality and reliability of intelligence, whereas the Complexity Theory stresses the importance of trust, legitimacy and accountability.⁵⁰ Though Sun Tzu is in favour of espionage and deception, one virtue common in all his writings is the application of discipline, leadership and intelligence to protect the state rather than serving selfish purposes.⁵¹

Ethical intelligence refers to the gathering, analysis and the utilisation of intelligence based on constitutional norms, laws and human rights standards. Modern democracies understand the need for intelligence agencies to wield substantial power to safeguard national security; nevertheless, that power must balance with proper legal controls.⁵² Politicised, manipulated or illegal application of intelligence jeopardises the process of democracy, destroys trust and ultimately compromises national security. Therefore, professionalism, political neutrality, integrity and civil liberty have become vital components of modern intelligence governance.

Africa exemplifies how the need for ethical intelligence is becoming more significant. In

many African democracies, reform have been adopted to improve the legal regimes controlling intelligence agencies, as well as to increase oversight by the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. The Security and Intelligence Agencies Act, 2026 (Act 1168) is a legal regime designed to outline the mandates, roles and oversight systems required to ensure intelligence operations are legal and aim at democratic governance. The same applies to South Africa's intelligence reforms aimed at increasing oversight by parliament, the Inspector-General of Intelligence, among others.⁵³ These reforms recognise the fact that the effectiveness of intelligence agencies is derived from the legitimacy accorded them by the citizenry and from the respect for constitutional ideals rather than from their secretive nature.

Regional and international organisations lend weight to this governance agenda. The AU's African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance emphasises constitutional governance and the rule of law as the foundations of peace and security. Similarly, the UN's Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy recognises human rights and the rule of law help improve counterterrorism and intelligence efforts.⁵⁴ These guidelines are especially significant because African intelligence agencies employ such technologies as artificial intelligence, digital surveillance, biometrics and cyber intelligence, which demand adequate legal measures for their proper protection.

STRATEGIC LESSONS FOR AFRICAN STATES

The paper demonstrates Sun Tzu's teachings on intelligence remain relevant to strengthening strategy and national security across Africa. The first lesson is that intelligence must be institutionalised as a strategic function that informs national policy and governance, rather than being confined to supporting military and law

enforcement operations. Intelligence assessments should guide national security strategies, foreign policy, human security planning and crisis management.

Secondly, African states should strengthen integrated intelligence coordination by enhancing cooperation among intelligence agencies, the armed forces, the police, immigration and border protection and cybersecurity institutions. Intelligence fusion and information sharing leads to better early warnings and reduces duplication in dealing with transnational threats.

Thirdly, capacity building among intelligence professionals is crucial. Governments should focus on strengthening their HUMINT capabilities along with technological intelligence, which includes artificial intelligence, geospatial intelligence, cyber intelligence and open-source intelligence. However, technological innovation should complement, rather than replace, sound analytical judgement and community-based intelligence.

Moreover, intelligence cooperation should be strengthened at the regional and continental levels through mechanisms such as CEWS, ECOWARN and other regional security arrangements. Since terrorism, organised crime, cyber threats and irregular migration transcend national borders, collective intelligence remains indispensable for preventive security.

Finally, intelligence effectiveness depends on democratic governance. African intelligence agencies must operate professionally and legally to guarantee accountability, legislative oversight and the observance of human rights. According to Sun Tzu's teachings, intelligence must be applied cautiously to identify threats, make sound decisions and safeguard national interests. By adopting such lessons in national security governance, African countries will be in a better position to enhance

resilience and prevent conflicts.

CONCLUSION

Sun Tzu's teachings on intelligence remain relevant to strategy and national security in Africa because the teachings demonstrate strategic advantage depends less on the accumulation of coercive power than on superior knowledge, anticipation and informed decision-making. Across the themes examined, a central lesson is that effective intelligence requires the integration of human insight, technological capability, institutional coordination, counterintelligence and strategic leadership. Yet, important tensions persist. The pursuit of secrecy must be balanced against democratic accountability; technological surveillance against privacy and human rights; inter-agency information sharing against protection of sensitive sources; deception against credibility; and demands for rapid intelligence assessments against analytical rigour. Likewise, expanding intelligence capabilities without corresponding oversight risks transforming national security instruments into sources of political insecurity.

Looking ahead, African states must move beyond intelligence modernisation centred primarily on technology acquisition toward building adaptive intelligence ecosystems capable of anticipating systemic risks. This entails increasing funding in strategic foresight, indigenised intelligence studies, polyglot cultural intelligence analysis and red teaming of security assumptions. States must also establish mechanisms for auditing algorithmic and AI-assisted intelligence, develop regional protocols for intelligence cooperation during cross-border crises and institutionalise periodic reviews of intelligence effectiveness. Ultimately, Sun Tzu's enduring lesson is that intelligence achieves strategic value only when knowledge is converted into timely, proportionate and legitimate action.

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