Future Operating Environments for Civil Affairs Forces

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The Civil Affairs (CA) Corps must acknowledge that preparedness for large-scale combat operations (LSCO) is its primary mission. This is not a call to stop competition, shaping, and irregular warfare activities. Rather, it is a mandate to leverage these activities to prepare for future conflict. This paper argues that future conflict will occur in a rapidly evolving operational environment shaped by autonomous systems, artificial intelligence, electronic warfare, long-range fires, cyber threats, and civilian disruption.

Current training methodologies and equipping are insufficient to win in operations against the People's Liberation Army which is the current pacing threat. CA forces can no longer assume they will operate in relatively safe rear areas. The proliferation of inexpensive unmanned systems and long-range fires capabilities now hold division, corps, and field army rear areas at risk. The CA Corps must assume that all activities from the homeland to the front line will be contested.

Failure to address this undermines unity of action, in which rear areas lack the civil security and civil control required to enable long-range fires, sustainment, and command and control activities necessary to fight and win. Decreased support to forward units will result in increased casualties and tax land component capabilities, reducing the commander's ability to mass combat power at the decisive point.

This paper recommends organizing CA operations across deep, close, and rear areas. During competition CA should develop resilient civil networks, civil-defense relationships, and dual-use capabilities that can withstand the transition to conflict. Pre-established networks enable remote operations to detect and assess targets in deep areas, shape civil component actions in the close area, and provide options to reestablish security and control in rear areas during large-scale combat operations. This requires collaboration between special operations and conventional CA and deliberate pre-conflict coordination and development of high-value networks. CA capabilities must be assessed, transferred, and transitioned to secure rear areas, provide decisive support to consolidate of gains, and set conditions for transition to host-nation control.

Preparing the total CA force requires doctrinal updates to reflect operational conditions across the deep, close, and rear areas to clarify CA roles in division and corps operations. Its field headquarters should be organized for civil security to consolidate gains. Its units require modern, resilient, compatible communications systems to access and contribute reporting to enable decision advantage. Training and education should emphasize integrating Civil Preparation of the Operational Environment into the Military Decision-Making Process, developing civil networks for civil security, operations in contested electromagnetic environments, and survivability under constant observation. It needs realistic Combat Training Center exercise training with external evaluation. Its commanders must provide clear training guidance for readiness for LSCO while conducting competition and shaping activities.

If the CA Corps orients on these objectives, the force will be postured to fight, win, and transition consolidated gains as directed. If the benchmark for success is set against the pacing threat in conflict, the Corps will be well positioned to achieve objectives at and below the threshold of armed conflict.