Interview with LTC Thomas

**Situation in Cot**

* **Prior security challenges**
  + 2016 March was the Ivorian 9/11 when there was a large scale attack that targeted westerners at brunch. 19 died, half were western and it was a wake-up call. 2019/20/21 there were numerous attacks. There was no security presence in the north, no training and no ct force.
  + Refugee crisis. 30-35 thousand refugees in the north when we got here, now it is 800,000. 98% of refugees come from Burkina Faso.
* **Econ of Cot**
* Cot is bastion of middle class, world leader in chocolate. They have gas deposites and they are a wealthy country. They have 7% GDP growth while Ghana’s growth is negative. The sahel is on fire. This is where people come to get jobs. National election is in 2025 and refugee crisis does not mix well with elections. Cot is a welcoming country and hospitality is very important.

**3 things in 2021 that improved security dynamics**

* North operational zone, northern corridor of the country there was a one star command. Big stuff at joint headquarters. 2500 ground forces deployed on the border and 2300 Gendarmie police. All under the same command so around 3500 PAX. Last attack was in 2021 so presence has made a difference. It was a $150 million investment (not sure if this is the Ivorian investment or the US investment)
* Information and intelligence
  + CT operational intel center. Interagency intel fusion. 1 star command. Gendarmie. Identified potential terror threats, especially financial support networks, cattle trafficking, which is big source of income. They plan, execute operations with Gendarmie. 60-70 operations per year, intel driven, completely Ivorian funded and idea.
* International CT Academy. Ivorian Franco cooperation. AILCT. 13-14 board members. They train the force. African center of excellence. 35 courses per year. Third branch of academy is a think-tank.

**Ivorian goals:**

Terrorism is threat one. Number two goal for the country is dis/mis information which is coming from the Sahel. This is important to the president. Disinformation is spread to create distrust and create social riffs. Huge focus of the partner. The president has seen what happened in Mali and Burkina Faso

**DOD response**

Arrival of the MIST team last year is important. Full team came in the fall with three persons. Do US sponsored information efforts, partner capacity building by doing monthly seminars sharing lessons learned. They hosted a counter disinformation conference last summer with 55 participants half of which were military and half civilian.

* Social cohesion or civ mil is important goal. This is related to counter disinformation. How to build trust with police and the military. Hospitals bridge (?).
  1. Multi week training at Armed Froces academy. Training to help them with curriculum. There is no dedicated civ-mil officer.
* Ivorian military
  1. Little capacity. They asked for programming so there is a lot of focus here. Not much capacity in the military.
  2. They have a robust press office. This military does not do stratcom well. No strategic plan. No social media. They do not get out ahead of stories, they have a long way to go.
  3. There is a history of mutinies in the past, led by soldieres of the old regime, there is some disgruntlement.
  4. They don’t brag but they could be bragging.
  5. PAO capacity
     + There are 5-10 PAO in the MOD, 25 in joint service; they have robust capacities.
     + But they do not get out and communicate
     + For example, there were rumors of a border incursion but they do nothing to address it.
     + They have 3k forces in north and they need to tell their story and tell the narrative; We do it on our channels
     + In 20002-2006 there was a civil war; an electoral crisis in 2010. Population lost trust int eh military and they need to bolster civ mil capacities
* 5 year plan
  1. Starts with MIST, conducting mostly seminars. Sometimes SOCAF/SETAF does exchanges
  2. Create workforce. Have PA soldiers but they are not a full fledged force. Not simple fix but generational. They need embedded advisors
  3. US developing a multi year plan with money and resources. Will be fully kicked off in 2027
* Challenges
  1. Time. We have 120 DOD persons in country, there are so many activities.
  2. The large team is good but challenge is time and prioritization
* Lines of operation for embassy
  1. Counter terrorism
  2. Battle space awareness to include maritime and cyber
  3. Mis/disinformation
* China
  + China never comes up; they are not a security threat
  + China is building here as are the UAE and Turkey
  + Cot is an “enemy to none, friend to all” so they are welcoming of investments
  + China engaging in illegal fishing
  + Provide weapons and training but they are more in business and want to defend sales. They are big on infrastructure development; support the city with Smart City which puts cameras on the street (I think with facial recognition)
* Russia
  + Ivorians are concerned with Russian action. Seen it in mali and burkina faso
* France
  + How are they focused on disinformation? I don’t know.
  + Not huge focus on disinformation. They have 17-18 embedded advisors. It is not multilaterally coordinated with the US but bilateral with Ivorians
* British? Nothing but EU is a significant partner
* Issues with coordination with AFRICOM or concerns about good idea fairies?
  + “Best plans are drafted with the embassy in coordination with host military” needs have to be identified here.
  + Offices of security cooperation can’t wait, need to push forward.