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Cultural Intelligence and the United States Military

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Despite the overwhelming superiority of the United States in conventional combat and war operations, the world's only superpower has been less successful in unconventional, low context, low intensity and limited conflicts. Difficulties encountered in such conflicts derive in part from a lack of cultural awareness by the military and from its failure to institutionalize cultural awareness as a part of its doctrine and training especially in intelligence. In addition to introducing the concepts of cultural awareness and how to apply cultural intelligence, this paper examines current challenges to their implementation in mainstream operations.

Definition

Cultural awareness is an understanding of all aspects of a nation's *cultural arc*—its past, present and future. Once awareness is achieved, tools that constantly create such awareness can be incorporated into intelligence mechanisms and thus establish cultural intelligence (CULTINT). This type of intelligence concerns the ability to engage in a set of behaviors that use language, interpersonal skills and qualities appropriately tuned to the culture-based values and attitudes of the people with whom one interacts. A culture comprises equivocal layers based on language, society, customs, economy, religion, history and many other factors. These can be reflected in *tangible characteristics,* such as physical appearance, clothing, architecture, gestures, pace of life, sports and diet, or *attitudinal characteristics,* such as tolerance to change, notions of time and space, societal roles, communications styles, convictions, beliefs, notions of justice and ethics. Each one of these factors contributes to a cultural identity, loosely defined as a temporal shared system of meanings, beliefs, values and behaviors through which experience is interpreted and carried out.

Culture awareness is central to ensuring successful military operations, especially in long-term, low-intensity conflicts. Language is an ambassador for every culture. Language barriers thus present the greatest impediment to this end in light, namely, of a lack of training in difficult languages, such as Arabic, Mandarin and Farsi; the incorrect interpretation of translated data; inadequate computerized translation tools; and a shortage of foreign language speakers. In a paper on the "Clash of Perceptions," Howard and Guidère stress the importance of treating language not only as a system of signification but also as a system of meaning and communication. (Howard & Guidère 2006) Examining the Iraqi insurgency, they revealed elements of cultural encryption used by insurgents in their rhetoric. Unlike conventional techniques of encryption, cultural encryption involves the semantic and the effectiveness problems of communications. An analysis of a message is incomplete without knowing the tacit and embedded concepts the message conveys and communicates.

A number of scales have been developed to explore cultural difference and better understand cultures. Among the best known domain-unspecific scales are Peterson's five cultural style

indicators. (Peterson 2004) The first scale concerns the range between equality, whereby a party is self-directed and can challenge authority, and hierarchy, whereby parties take directions from their superiors and do not question the status quo. In the second scale, differences between direct communication—where people speak openly of their concerns—and indirect communication—where tone and discretion are more valued—are outlined. The third scale focuses on individual versus group orientation; the fourth on work and task orientation as opposed to relationship-based orientation; and the fifth on the range between risk and caution.

In the military sense, cultural intelligence is a complicated pursuit in anthropology, psychology, communications, sociology, history and, above all, military doctrine. Earley and Yang's definition of an individual's cultural intelligence as "a person's ability to adapt to new cultural concepts" (Riva 2003) provides a simple barometer to measure a person's intelligence in that domain.

Implementation

The Marine Corps International Affairs Officer (IAO) Program was established to increase the cultural awareness of troops on the ground and to prevent culturally-based misunderstandings. This program has been insufficient, as evidenced by a 2003 study of "combatant commanders," suggesting that there are too few IAO officers and no incentives for future recruits to enter the program. (Anderson 2004: 25)

The basic cultural training of US ground troops has also been insufficient, as namely illustrated by dramatic misunderstandings between troops deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan and the local populations in those countries. (Hudson & Warman 2005) A 2004 directive by the Department of Defense (DoD) pushed for curriculum reform at service schools and for Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs focusing on foreign language and regional studies. As highlights the *Army Field Manual on Stability Operations and Support Operations*, "Cultural information is critical to gauge the potential reactions to the operation, to avoid misunderstandings, and to improve the effectiveness of the operations." (US Department of the Army 2003: 2-3) Despite this acknowledgement, implementation of the DoD Directive has been parsimonious and only a limited number of anthropology, language or insurgency courses have been added to the curriculum. (Hudson & Warman 2005: 73) The US Army has however announced that a Basic Officer Leadership Course (BOLC) will be fully implemented in July 2006. This course may provide an opportunity to focus on cultural intelligence for small unit commanders on the ground.

Despite encouraging signs that the military realizes the need to significantly increase cultural intelligence through, for example, the creation of the USMC Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning, such efforts must be dramatically intensified in order to ensure successful implementation. Lieutenant Commander John P. Coles of the US Navy asserts that current cultural intelligence problems in the US defense and security arsenal include writing that abuses combat terms for combat operations; a lack of emphasis and agreement on requirements; inadequate detail for successful planning; and a lack of provision for augmenting military units

with cultural intelligence experts. (Coles 2005) More recently, the White House terminated a $25 million program to establish a core of civilian reserves knowledgeable of post-combat security issues proposed for the FY2007 budget.

Current Issues

Recent American history has witnessed frequent failures in the application of cultural intelligence and awareness, ranging from the war in Vietnam to ongoing deadlock over North Korea's nuclear ambitions. The US military occupation of Iraq constitutes the most prominent contemporary example. These failures have increased the time spent in foreign combat operations and have prolonged Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW), such as Somalia and Haiti.

The application of cultural intelligence and awareness on the ground in Iraq is essential to improving relations with the native population. A lack of officers cognizant of the native culture has led to countless misunderstandings and escalating violence between US forces and the Iraqi insurgency. Although significant intelligence has been gathered on the insurgent enemy, intelligence on the Iraqi culture and population as a whole is sorely missing.

A Key Defense Strategy Tool

Cultural awareness and intelligence is a key element of operational planning in the US defense arsenal. Examining situational awareness and technical intelligence factors no longer suffices, as cultural factors have become increasingly relevant in the post-Cold War period. As major combat operations shorten and MOOTW activities, such as nation building and peacekeeping, expand, cultural awareness and intelligence must be brought to the forefront of military planning.

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