Transforming the Force: Foreign Adversary Cultural Threat

Montgomery McFate, PhD, JD
Office of Naval Research
montgomery_mcfate@onr.navy.mil

The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent, and should not be attributed to, the Office of Naval Research, the United States Navy, or the United States government.
Culture Matters

"I had perfect situational awareness. What I lacked was cultural awareness. I knew where every enemy tank was dug in on the outskirts of Tallil. Only problem was, my soldiers had to fight fanatics charging on foot or in pickups and firing AK-47s and RPGs. Great technical intelligence. Wrong enemy.” – returning commander from the 3rd Infantry Division

“I had never visited Indochina, nor did I understand or appreciate its history, language, culture, or values.... When it came to Vietnam, we found ourselves setting policy for a region that was terra incognita.” – Robert S. MacNamara
Agenda

- What is culture?
- Why does cultural awareness matter now?
- Are we prepared?
- How can culture be weaponized?
- What are the benefits?
Anthropology: “the Handmaiden of Colonialism”

- What is it?
  - Study of culture
  - Non-Western, tribal societies
  - Methodology
  - Etic versus emic perspectives

- What are the origins?
  - Late 19th century Great Britain
  - U.S. Indian Wars (1865-1885)
Understanding foreign cultures and societies has always been the military’s business.

“Remote area warfare is controlled in a major way by the environment in which the warfare occurs, and by the sociological and anthropological characteristics of the people involved in the war, and by the nature of the conflict itself.”

-- Dr. R.L. Sproul, director of DARPA, testifying before Congress, 1965
Because the Doctrine Says So...

- Joint Publication 3-0JP 3-0, Doctrine for Joint Operations
- JP 3-05, Doctrine for Joint Special Operations
- JP 3-06, Doctrine for Joint Urban Operations
- JP 3-07, Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War
- JP 3-53, Joint Doctrine for Psychological Operations War
Geo-Strategic Context

- SSCs
  - Operational environments “disconnected from the global economy”
  - Failed states

- 4GW Adversaries
  - Non-Western
  - Non-hierarchical
  - Operating outside of the context of nation-states
  - Motivated ideologically
Force Transformation

- Conflict paradigm
- Knowledge gap
- Training gap
- Advisor gap
- Analysis gap
Culture as a Weapon

Understanding adversary culture can improve:

1. Cultural intelligence
2. Counterinsurgency
3. Stability and Support Operations
4. PSYOP
Cultural Intelligence?

- The “decapitation scenario”
- Tribes: a social ordering principle
- How did 4ID catch Saddam Hussein?
Counterinsurgency

- “Hearts and Minds”
- Use Iraqi culture to our advantage by
  - Recognizing ancient cultural patterns
  - Utilizing norms and values (*al-sharaf*)
  - Utilizing pre-existing social structures (tribal sheiks)
Stability and Support Operations

- Utilize pre-existing systems
- Ask a village elder
- Recognize local symbols
- Respect local gender roles
- Drink more coffee
Psychological Operations

- Entered English language circa 1941: Weltanschauungskrieg
- Influence requires deep cultural understanding of the adversary
Ineffective Cultural PSYOP

- Korean War “Ghosts at the Table pamphlet”
Effective Cultural PSYOP

- Vietnam War “Operation Wandering Soul”
Benefits of Understanding Adversary Culture

Understanding adversaries within their own cultural and social contexts will allow us to:

- Better assess their vulnerabilities to both kinetic and non-kinetic weapons
- Predict their behavior (to some degree)
- Craft effects-based operations at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels
Conclusion

- Adversary culture is increasingly relevant.
- US forces need to improve their ability to function in non-Western, indigenous tribal areas.
- Cultural knowledge is a force multiplier.
- A DOD-wide initiative is needed.
Transforming the Force: Foreign Adversary Cultural Threat

Montgomery McFate, PhD, JD
Office of Naval Research
montgomery_mcfate@onr.navy.mil

The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent, and should not be attributed to, the Office of Naval Research, the United States Navy, or the United States government.