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## Foreign Culture and its Effect on US Department of Defense Efforts to Train and Advise Foreign Security Forces

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### Foreign Culture and its Effect on US Department of Defense Efforts to Train and Advise Foreign Security Forces

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#### Abstract

Recently revised, Department of Defense (DOD) Directive 3000.07 (Irregular Warfare) still directs DOD to be able to train and advise foreign security forces, and military doctrine guiding US military departments how to train their members for this activity (Joint Publication 3-22; Foreign Internal Defense) has its origins in the Kennedy administration. Indeed, for decades, DOD has sought to strengthen capabilities of America's security partners. However, the majority of the lessons learned, and training provided to general purpose forces, civilians, and contractors still largely rest and rely upon US experience in building partner capabilities during the Cold War. This experience is premised on management and governance theories grounded in Western cultural norms of interpersonal interaction—characteristics not present in the Near East, Central and Southeast Asia, or across the Maghreb and the Horn of Africa where post-9/11 US security sector assistance is focused. In these locations, the private sector and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) have experience DOD should learn from and adapt into its training and education programs. This essay presents what has been learned from the perspective of non-security capacity development efforts as well as our practitioners' perspective and observations on the effectiveness of DOD's post 9/11 efforts to train and advise foreign security forces.

#### Introduction

After 9/11, the DOD put renewed focus on working with partners and allies as part of a deliberate strategy to blunt global terrorism and insurgency inspired by Islamist ideology. Beginning with the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), DOD formally pointed to the need to build the security capabilities of partner nations. Speaking to this, the 2006 QDR[1] stated,

The ability of the United States and its allies to work together to influence the global environment is fundamental to defeating terrorist networks. Wherever possible, the United States works with or through others: enabling allied and partner capabilities, building their capacity and developing mechanisms to share the risks and responsibilities of today's complex challenges.

In various forms, this narrative was repeated in each subsequent iteration of defense strategy to include the

2014 QDR which listed building security globally as one of the three pillars of US Defense Strategy.

Since 9/11, the DOD and the rest of the US Government (USG) has learned that building sustainable security capacity building is neither an easy nor short-term task. Traditional solutions, such as pre-packaged, untailored seminars or courses paid for by USG International Military Education and Training appropriations do not build sustainable capability. Additionally, merely equipping foreign military units is insufficient to establish the capability to effectively and sustainably utilize the equipment. Even equipment specific training is not sufficient to establish a sustainable capability. Sustainability requires the foreign partner have institutions able to manage acquisition of material, budget for a sustainable force, arrange logistics services, and manage human resources.

To that end, the DOD also recognized it needed to focus on institutional-level capabilities. Reflecting this awareness, in 2010, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said,

We have made great strides in building up the operational capacity of our partners - training and equipping troops and mentoring them in the field. But there has not been enough attention paid to building the institutional capacity—such as defense ministries—and the human capital—leadership skills and attitudes—needed to sustain security.[2]

To build capacity at the institutional level, the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) established a set of Defense Institution Building (DIB) programs. DIB programs help “develop effective, efficient and accountable partner defense establishments, including defense ministries, general and joint staffs and commands, and supporting institutions.”[3]

Through its DIB programs, DOD is seeking to build partner security capacity at the institutional level where the responsibility to establish policy, issue guidance, and manage the processes necessary to organize, train, equip and sustain security capability exists. To that end, private firms and IGOs working in the non-security sector show that building institutional capacity requires a tailored, patient approach attuned to the cultural norms of the partner nation – something DOD has not consistently demonstrated an ability to do well.

### **Why Institutional Capacity Matters and How it Relates to Culture**

In general, the biggest gaps at the institutional level are weak planning processes. Within defense institutions, defense planners must determine what capabilities require investment and prioritize them; because, the budget available to pay for defense capabilities will fall short of the amount desired. Thus, effective planning requires planners reconcile defense policy and guidance, the budget, and anticipated opportunities and challenges prior to making investment decisions purposed to create military capability. In Western culture, our decision-making processes tend to focus on points of disagreement and they empower stakeholders to arrive at consensus based decisions. However, this is not what we have encountered during post-9/11 activities aimed at improving defense-planning processes in non-Western nations. Rather, decision-making processes are likely to avoid open deliberation of points of disagreement and process participants are not empowered to make consensus based decisions.

A case in point is the Afghan Human Resources Information Management System (AHRIMS). This system was a US funded automated information system for recording and archiving Afghan National Army (ANA) personnel information. Its purpose was to improve existing ANA personnel management practices that rely on paper records. Hypothetically, using the reports the system could create, defense leaders in Kabul could determine whether personnel resources were being utilized in accordance with national-level guidance and plan for necessary adjustments. AHRIMS data could also be used as aid for the assignments process and to improve the effectiveness of the recruiting and training functions.

However, there were two problems with the solution. First were technical issues. The Afghans' information technology infrastructure did not possess the capability to maintain or fully utilize the system. More importantly, the system's design was a mismatch with Afghan cultural values. Afghans do not place preeminence on the Western cultural norm of hiring and promotion based on a stratified ranking of merit. Other considerations, like ethnic balance, are more important, and this does not require an automated system to measure.

The combination of technical issues and cultural mismatch led to an unsustainable capability. Technically, ineffective (or non-existent) data links between the Ministry of Defense, ANA Headquarters, and field units meant the database could not be electronically updated as personnel actions took place. So, Afghans continued to maintain paper records even after AHRIMS was installed to overcome its limitations and to track what is culturally important to them.

Recognizing a sustainment challenge, the US Army issued a request for proposal (RFP) in 2013 for system maintenance, development, and training.<sup>[4]</sup> But the RFP cannot address the underlying cultural resistance to the solution and it will not fix all technical capacity issues. While members of the US team responsible for selecting and fielding AHRIMS will point to Afghans who were part of the decision making process and agreed to the project, AHRIMS demonstrates the failure of expecting western decision making practices to succeed in bringing about institutional reform in a non-western culture. A better approach would have been to allow the Afghans to privately consider and deliberate whether they desired to field an automated information system to manage human resources; and if they did, then design the system with national technical limitations and cultural norms considered before deciding to use US taxpayer funds to pay for an unsustainable system.

### **The Deficiency of DOD's Approach to Building Partner Capacity**

US efforts at building partner military capacities tend to focus on tactical units and individuals. Whether through equipment transfers authorized by special DOD authorities, foreign military financing, or training at instructional facilities like the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation at Fort Benning, Georgia, the primary focus is on training and equipping units and individuals on the use of military equipment. Recognizing that providing new equipment to partner military forces is futile if spare parts, fuel, or ammunition cannot consistently reach the field, DOD policy does encourage security cooperation personnel to consider whether a request for military equipment would result in a valid, sustainable operational capability.<sup>[5]</sup> However, this policy is mainly applied to nations who pay cash to buy US equipment through the foreign military sales process and not to USG grant aid, whether the grant comes from DOD or State department appropriations. Grant aid nations tend to receive equipment and tactical training without a plan in place to ensure sustained operations and maintenance. Short term goals may be achieved, but if the purpose is sustainable partner capacity, then DOD's approach traditionally falls short.

With an eye towards building sustainable partner security capacity, OSD Policy has established a number of programs and initiatives charged to build the institutional capacity of foreign defense institutions. The sparse data that exists on the effects of these programs points to limited results at best when the focus of the initiative is a nation outside traditional NATO and European allies and partners. A recent RAND report assessed the effectiveness of the Warsaw Initiative Fund (WIF) program at building defense institutional capacity in the Balkans, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. The report found that WIF was moderately effective in the Balkans, marginally effective in the Caucasus, and ineffective in Central Asia. The reason given for the lack of effectiveness in Central Asia is the regional and tribal loyalties that dilute a government's ability to manage armed forces in accordance with Euro-Atlantic models.<sup>[6]</sup>

The RAND report alludes to something we have also observed as practitioners. Foreign culture,

especially non-western foreign culture, present barriers to the success of capacity building efforts and these barriers must be accounted for prior to engagement. Succinctly put, US advisors tend to confuse deference by a foreign counterpart at the start of an effort with agreement, and that only results in temporary, unsustainable change.

### **Successful Institutional Capacity Building Relies on Change Management Principles Applied in a Culturally Relevant Way**

Institution building efforts, whether in defense or non-defense institutions, seeks one or more of three things: To change existing organizational processes; to create new processes within an existing organization; or to create a new organization within an existing structure. Historic and current literature provides numerous studies on how and why these types of efforts fail or succeed. A few examples follow.

Daryl Conner, of the private think-tank, the Center for Leadership Studies, provides points on what to avoid during a capacity-building engagement:[7]

- Practitioners so eager to help with implementation they do not ensure clients have the will to take charge upon the practitioner's departure.
- Making a project appear easier, less manpower-intensive, and less complicated to the client than it actually will be.
- Practitioners solving problems themselves instead of transferring skill to their counterparts.
- Focusing too much on what to do instead of how to think.
- Allowing clients to think they can change behaviors without changing mindsets.
- Personally taking on responsibilities that are the chore of the client's leadership.
- Catering to the desires of the client personnel with whom we work instead of the leaders who sponsor the project.

Consistent with Mr. Conner's findings, Peter Morgan, of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) notes capacity development efforts frequently become "a problem rather than a solution." For much of the Post-World War II era, assistance strategy was to *design and deliver* a capability for use by the client nation. Local staff input was not considered. Sidelining local staff during design sapped local energy necessary for experimentation and learning. Thus, the capability itself was the root cause of many technical failures that followed the end of the assistance. Technical assistance crowded out local initiative and created dependence by host nations on new structures and systems implemented by foreign practitioners that were ultimately unacceptable[8].

John Kotter, a professor at Harvard Business School asserts that there are eight common errors (regardless of time, culture, or place) made by leaders who desire to bring about organizational change. Of these, he lists, "neglecting to anchor changes firmly in the organizational culture," as the principal reason most management reforms efforts ultimately fail. The consequence is that new strategies are not implemented and process improvement/change initiatives do not deliver the hoped-for results. This makes future reform efforts even more difficult.[9]

Finally, a Columbia university study found the question of "ownership" to be highly relevant and boils down to a simple thought: *who requested the engagement in the first place?* The study noted work published in the UNDP Policy Development journal in 2002 that compared Botswana with the Philippines. Botswana falls into a bucket of nations that can adopt a "take it or leave it" approach with regard to which assistance packages from global bodies they will accept. Rejecting assistance entails no repercussion on other projects to which they may be party or to their relationship with the West. The Philippines, on the other hand, will sometimes not decline an assistance offer, since doing so may

jeopardize other non-related but essential assistance[10].

As a case study, Botswana points to what is required for success:

- Realistic assessments of the time frames and the probability of success before implementing assistance measures.
- Strong partner nation political leadership commitment in order to overcome bureaucratic inertia and address resistance to reforms.
- A strong strategic partnership between the host country and the international advisors, with “country ownership” an integral part of the reform process.
- Reform processes that are sequenced and not rushed.[11]

To conclude this section, if it is a given that strengthening institutions requires some degree of change to existing structure and/or process; successfully navigating change is a key to institutional capacity building. Further, if leading change that lasts requires the change be anchored in the organizational culture of the institution, then it follows that successful process change requires local staff be utilized for implementation and sustainment of the process. Therefore, we observe and the development community agrees that greater use of short-term technical cooperation personnel through multiple, short visits, paired with local staff to learn and implement the project, leads to a greater chance of a successful capacity building effort.[12]

### **What is Culture and How Does it Affect Capacity Building Efforts**

Culture is a “pattern of beliefs, value systems, rituals, behaviors and practices that have an impact on the individual and the organization.[13]” Therefore, individual’s roles in an organization must be considered in capacity building efforts. Individuals whose norms are different, even if the nation’s government structures, technology base, and human technical capacity are similar, may not readily accept solutions and concepts that rest on Western norms.

For example, in the West, conflict tends to be resolved openly and through general consensus. In Asian society, open conflict is avoided. Leadership dynamics are also different. Many non-Western cultures grant leaders near total loyalty or support and their decisions are not easily questioned by subordinates, even if those subordinates reach a different conclusion using a participative decision-making process.

Relationship webs are also culturally relevant in determining the success of a capacity-building engagement. In Asia, practitioners must take account of *guanxi*,[14] the network of personal relationships that drive decision-making or obligations. Such *guanxi* relationships are determined not by rank or position but by longstanding personal connections. Benefits do *not* accrue to outsiders or new employees brought in for an engagement. In the Middle East, the concept of *wasta* can be an albatross for conscientious officials seeking to improve their institution, but called on by family obligations to help their own[15]. Knowing these things, a western practitioner operating in a non-western culture will need to exercise patience to allow reform to take place in a way that manages important and unseen host country relationships.

Another Western cultural norm is the acceptance of winners and losers. In other cultures, the idea may be untenable even for the winner. Concern for a group’s reputation and desire for a mutually acceptable resolution mean that solutions where “everyone wins,” or at least no one’s reputation is sullied as a result, are most likely to be implemented.

Integrating cultural knowledge into a capacity-building engagement requires planning and constant awareness. Gerald Heuett, a corporate trainer based in Asia points to three things that must be factored

simultaneously: Leadership Deference, Collaborative Behaviors, and Worker Empowerment. The three factors can be integrated into an engagement strategy accordingly:

*Leadership:* If deference to leadership is strong within the culture, engagements, and methodologies should be introduced into the organization through its leadership, not an outside body. Changes should be credited to leadership and not outsiders. Additionally, any conclusions of a new decision-making tool or process should focus on *considerations* instead of *answers*. This allows leadership to maintain credibility while accepting solutions generated by a foreign process.

*Collaborative Behaviors:* In cultures that value relationship-based exchanges, engagements must make use of donor-country staff within client country organizations. Long-term relationships, with multiple and frequent contact, are key. Also, once the engagement is underway, reduction of open conflict in new processes is necessary for cultures that stress social harmony.

*Empowerment:* Client organization staff will respond to incentives differently based on their culture. In Asian cultures, individuals are held accountable based on the interest of the group. A process that emphasizes one individual's role in "solving" a problem would not sit well with the group, but placing emphasis on collaboration (between individuals or offices) has potential for success.

A useful tool to help analyze a given environment with respect to culture prior to a capacity-building engagements is Hofstede's four factors<sup>[16]</sup>: Power Distance, Individualism vs. Collectivism, Masculinity-Femininity, and Uncertainty Avoidance.

*Power Distance:* The extent to which low-level members of an organization accept that power is shared unequally. In a country with high power-distance scores, practitioners should expect subordinate organizations or managers not to question the practices of superiors.

*Individualism vs. Collectivism:* Individualistic cultures stress personal recognition, achievement, and vocalism. Collectivist cultures expect individuals to act as members of a group. The UK and nations settled by British Colonists have high individualistic scores

*Masculinity vs. Femininity:* A masculine society emphasizes competitiveness and assertion, whereas a feminine culture values relationships and quality of life. Japan's score, for example, indicates its cultural emphasizes competitiveness and assertion more than any other.

*Uncertainty Avoidance:* This measures the desire members of society have to minimize risk and uncertainty. Countries with a high index will naturally focus on planning and rules. Cultures with a low index may allow fate to play a larger role in the planning process.

Hofstede scores, by factor, are publicly available via the World Wide Web.<sup>[17]</sup>

### **Characteristics of Advisors Who Seek to Build Capacity in Foreign Institutions**

Shekhar Sing, of the UNDP, wrote that capacity retention is not achieved by seminars and workshops that communicate common problems and solutions. Rather, deciding on what to do and how to implement requires a capacity many client countries lack. Singh also notes that "experts" from the West are usually selected based on their subject matter knowledge, not on their ability to impart their knowledge to their local counterparts<sup>[18]</sup>. From our view, technical experts without good consulting skills are not likely to be effective; however, a good consultant, trained to advise in a culturally relevant manner and armed with the right technical information, may be effective.

Another key is an advisor's ability to balance global standards with national needs in order to tailor the best practices of technical assistance to fit within the existing processes of a given country, even if

existing processes are weak.[19] The term to describe this ability, borrowed from the education community, is referred to as cultural competence.[20] A Columbia university study found the extent to which advice can be communicated to and adapted by [foreign] counterparts is determinative in the success of institution building initiatives and requires advisors that are culturally competent. [21]

Seeking to improve the effectiveness of its overseas technical assistance personnel, a 1981 Canadian study [22] aimed to derive metrics by which to select and train personnel for projects in developing countries. Sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency, the study surveyed and studied 160 Canadian technical advisors on twenty-six projects in six countries and ninety host country nationals. Interestingly, host country nationals viewed the effectiveness of assistance as a function of only two factors: intercultural interaction both socially and in the office (which led to a transfer of skill), and the degree of personal adjustment of the practitioner to the local environment.

The study also correlated personal traits with outcomes. Of the measurable traits present in the Canadian practitioners, strong interpersonal skills were the only consistent and significant factor in successful projects. The study described an effective practitioner in foreign settings to have an inter-personal orientation,[23] and positive but realistic expectations.

Another requirement for advisors is the ability to factor in the prevailing cultural heritage of the client state before designing a capacity building effort. [24] Many development ideas and implementation strategies advertised as globally relevant assume Western cultural norms. However, Western norms promote individual responsibility and flexibility and these are not universal. Thus, western practitioners must be cognizant of their own biases toward individualistic decision making processes and tailor assistance for Western methods to have application; especially in collectivist cultures.

### **Conclusion - A Practitioner's View**

The authors have all participated in DIB activities under OSD sponsorship in other than NATO nations. In our opinion, DOD's limited experience executing DIB programs[25] mirrors the trends of the development community writ large. As a rule, OSD's DIB practitioners keep in mind the key factors for success suggested by the literature on change management and governance and capacity building in developing societies. Particular emphasis is given to creating local ownership on the part of the host nation interlocutors as a prerequisite for successful engagements. The approach to institutional process improvement seeks a balance between the introduction of modern analytical tools and decision-making processes and the ability of host nation organizations to utilize them given their technical limitation or cultural constraints.

We also find that international best practices are a useful touchstone, but not a talisman. Improving local practices and processes in accordance with existing national laws and policies, rather than pushing a nation to adopt and implement international standards, seems to produce more frequent success. Ergo, early in an engagement, we rarely instruct host nations to make significant changes to their organizational structure or processes. Instead, we focus on strengthening existing processes such that new information or analytic visibility is available to host nation leadership. By creating opportunities to see success from small changes, we have found leaders more likely to engage in conversations about large changes. If leaders realize the limitations of their current process and if organizational culture allows (either because of their individual influence or due to their ability to assemble a large enough coalition such that consensus for change forms), we have seen leaders willing to take on larger, more difficult projects.

Also, per the design of OSD's DIB programs, we avoid the classroom, event-based method of assistance largely employed through traditional USG programs such as International Military Education and Training. [26] Our visits over the course of a planned DIB effort last from one to two weeks and recur every six to

twelve weeks for the duration of a project, which can be three years or more. The time on the ground during an engagement and the time between engagements is a joint decision arrived at by host nation leadership, the DOD sponsor, and the practitioners, and is largely based upon the availability and absorptive capacity of the host nation. While engaged, we are charged with familiarizing ourselves with the host nation customs, organization, processes, and leadership to become ‘part of the team’ in a classic consultancy role.

However, OSD sponsored DIB programs are a small percentage of DOD’s total capacity building efforts. We encounter very few other DOD personnel, to include DOD contractors, in the field conducting capacity building efforts attuned to the factors of success we have raised in this paper. Even with an eye on change management practices and culture, institutional building engagements often don’t succeed. Security capacity building is no exception. Air University’s Brian Selmeski cites thirty-five studies between 2000 and 2007 that point to a lack of success in efforts by the militaries of industrialized countries to succeed in non-context-specific efforts (i.e. unplanned military operations) in a foreign country[27]. Given that capacity building efforts are still largely unplanned military operations, we suspect that DOD’s and perhaps even the whole USG’s success rate in its capacity building efforts would improve by incorporating a more sophisticated understanding of how to account for host nation cultural norms prior to any capacity building initiative. The literature on cultural norms strongly suggests that we “western” advisors need to become more self-conscious about the degree to which our conceptualization of analytically based management is bound to our culture and not universally applicable.

Given culture’s impact on successful capacity-building, DOD needs to better understand the connection between culture and effective capacity building in order to prepare practitioners for their assignments. With this understanding, DOD could tailor its training for practitioners sent to build partner capacity in non-Western cultures. Further, an increased understanding would also allow DOD program manager’s to better select individuals for capacity building assignments.

To conclude, we share a short anecdote from a successful pre-9/11 DOD effort more like the primary focus of post-9/11 capacity building efforts. Mutual Defense Assistance Program activity in the Republic of the Philippines in the late 1940s and 50s successfully built Philippine’s armed forces capacity from the institutional to the tactical level to resist and put down a Marxist insurgency. Reflecting back on this successful effort, retired Major General Edward Lansdale, who worked in the Joint US Military Advisory Group in Manila, noted that for American advice to be accepted by Philippine military leaders and government officials, it was important that the Americans (1) assume back-row seats for themselves so Philippine government officials could look good and receive the credit for successful operations, and (2) demonstrate a willingness to accept Philippine leaders into their most valued social institutions[28] rather than separate the personal and professional. Like most primary recipients of aid today, Philippine culture is less familiar to most Americans than those of NATO and European nations. Then, as now, Lansdale knew that understanding and bridging cultural differences is necessary to successfully build the military capabilities of foreign armed forces and their defense institutions;

## **End Notes**

[1] US Department of Defense, Quadrennial Defense Review Report (Washington, DC: February 6, 2006)

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- [3] DoD Inspector General Report, DODIG-2013-019.
- [4] Federal Business Opportunities, Solicitation Number \_081913.
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- [6] Walter L. Perry, Stuart E. Johnson, Jessica Yeats, Natasha Lander, David C. Gompert, and Christopher Sanger, “The Warsaw Initiative Fund Program: An Assessment” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, May 2013).
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- [13] Morgan, Peter. 2002. “Technical Assistance: Correcting the Precedents.” UNDP Development Policy Journal 2: 1–22.
- [14] Guanxi is something one accumulates through demonstrated dependability, trustworthiness, and respect during interpersonal interaction. Developing guanxi allows one to expect to be dealt with more honestly in a culture that otherwise views lying and cheating as normal business practice. Christopher Warren-Gash, “Want to Capitalize on China? You Better Have Good Guanxi,” Forbes.com, March 15, 2012.
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[20] Cultural Competence: “Cultural competence is the integration and transformation of knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes used to increase the quality of services; thereby producing better outcomes.” Definition from the US National Association of School Psychologists

[21] Same as #19.

[22] Hawes, Frank and Daniel J. Kealey. 1981. “An Empirical Study of Canadian Technical Assistance: Adaptation and Effectiveness on Overseas Assignment.” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 5, no. 3:239–258.

[23] Defined within the study as a curiosity of and natural respect for other cultures.

[24] Heuett, Gerald H. 2001. “The Sun Does Not Always Set In The West, Building Effective and Sustainable Organizational Development Strategies in Asia Through the Integration of Cultural Values and Enablers”

[25] Our observation does not include the efforts at institution building undertaken in Iraq or Afghanistan under the auspices of Multi-National Security Transition Command – Iraq and Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan. These are not DIB efforts sponsored and paid for by OSD DIB program funds.

[26] Title 22 U.S.C §2347. IMET provides military education and training to military and related civilian personnel of foreign countries through (1) attendance at military educational and training facilities in the United States (other than Service academies) and abroad; (2) attendance in special courses of instruction at schools and institutions of learning or research in the United States and abroad; and (3) observation and orientation visits to military facilities and related activities in the United States and abroad.

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