

Not Just Regarding Afghanistan

Dangerous Assumptions, Cultural (In)competence—and Weak Reflexivity

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That the West could build a state and military in its own image, from the outside-in and from the top-down, without an adequate—much less a deep—understanding of Afghan society and culture was a dangerous assumption.* One might say this notion represents our most fundamental error, generative of many missteps. Perhaps the earliest strategic failure in Afghanistan was the distracting invasion of Iraq in 2003, a campaign that also suffered from a similar set of fundamental, faulty assumptions. Iraq was yet another intervention with no real planning it seems for the aftermath—for all the social and political variables that must be considered to mitigate chaos and prevent prolonged conflict. Just design the exquisite air and ground campaigns, shock and awe, and rebuild the infrastructure, re-engineer the society itself with our models as templates. There seems to be a pattern, a way of thinking, so deeply embedded one might call it *cultural*, upon which we need to reflect.

Beginning in 2013, I worked for a couple of years as an instructor at the US Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School in sometimes testy classrooms, where we taught a foundations in cross-cultural competence course and subsequently assessed what constituted “cultural training” throughout the Special Forces (SF) regiment. Looking back, we should have done more to document and process the experiences these war fighters or “warrior-diplomats” shared from their prior deployments, but some conversations stand out. These are the memories that have surfaced recently watching events in Afghanistan unfold.

One of the techniques we used in the classroom was to take military after-action reviews of a particular attack on an outpost, or even “green on blue” incidents,¹ and—reading beyond the official report—think through what cross-cultural (mis)communication or local social/community factors may have been at

* Disclaimer: I have had colleagues who have served in the Human Terrain System and/or the military and, by and large, are courageous and compassionate people with a sense of duty and solidarity. They want/ed to do the right thing for the right reasons—and did. There were many successful missions, much good done. This short commentary is a reflection on the systemic issues larger than any individuals.

play and what may have been missed leading to such events. We also watched clips from the film *Restrepo*, which could trigger some pretty raw reactions.² More often, however, there was a sense of resignation, a collective awareness of the ridiculous expectations for young Soldiers to head up the mountain to negotiate with elders from a society vastly different from their own, making all sorts of promises that would likely never materialize. After one particularly heated discussion, one young sergeant summed it up: “We get it, Doc, but if those are the orders, and that is the plan, what are we supposed to do?” I could not answer that question then, and still cannot nearly a decade later. Why have these plans seemed so ill-advised, the strategy so adrift—and yet rigid in the sense that it was not responsive enough to the on-the-ground, lived realities of both the Afghan population and our own personnel?

Outside the classroom, seeking to understand the continuing training SF teams received, we observed a fairly typical key leader engagement (KLE) training, with contractors playing the roles of, for example, an Afghan National Police chief. When we asked the soldiers, many of whom had been back and forth to Afghanistan multiple times already, to assess the training, the response was: “Appreciate this training but it really comes too late . . . my next deployment will involve very little to no KLEs anyway, and will be focused more on direct action,” a euphemism for kill-or-capture operations, which may or may not have even involved Afghan counterparts. In short, they knew they were on a sort of a hamster wheel, focused more on eliminating bad guys without the anticorruption, relationship- and institution-building work that needed to go along with it, but nobody had the power to change that fact. And this was more than seven years ago.³ The shock so many Americans across the civilian-military divide are feeling now is probably not as widespread among those who actually spent time in Afghanistan.

Most of these Soldiers (and their families) were tired and frustrated and had a sense for years that what ultimately happened this past weekend was inevitable, though the fall of the Afghan government and the capitulation of its security forces may have happened quicker than most would have thought. Commanders and senior leaders valued the metrics they could count and could neither see nor admit we were not building durable, self-sufficient partner capacity (much less making sustainable inroads influencing local social and political life—save without bags of cash). Policy makers, comfortable with the status quo and/or making decisions with other calculations, may not have listened anyway. Military members may like to blame the politicians and policy makers; civilians may like to blame the military—and general/flag officers in particular. One administration blames another. And everyone hates an academic pontificating and finger wag-

ging from his armchair. There is indeed plenty of blame and critique to go around. However, a fundamental truth that emerges, in terms of moving beyond blame games and toward taking responsibility and moving forward is that we simply have not done enough to understand others—or ourselves.

Cultural competence is defined not only by our ability to understand the diverse perspectives of others but also as the ability to reflexively examine our own world-views and ways of thinking.⁴ As Americans, we expect our will to be done, and our superior technological and conventional military power to win—the quicker, the better the fix. We think we know “what right looks like” based on what makes sense to us, with healthy doses of leadership and organizational models borrowed from corporate America and applied in the mountains of Afghanistan.⁵ We seem to value and promote hubris and ego more than humility and intellect—and commanders confident with the answers instead of asking difficult questions.⁶

How do we stop enabling cultures of corruption and creating paper armies? How do we move beyond short-term deployment cycles thinking? What good is it to suck up a bunch of intelligence data points if we do not understand historical trajectories, social structures, and cultural logics? What expectations of success should we have if we cannot do more to incorporate a range of perspectives and instead endeavor to impose our own (without the patience to even do that)? Even if our culture and system were superior (hint: thinking so is part of the problem, and what drives our misadventures), it will not work to impose it.

While we may not be able to hold accountable all those who said, “all green, sir” and progressed in their careers—or who ignored reports from on the ground for years that we were not actually able to accomplish what we said we had—we need to avoid this situation in the future. A more culturally competent force, up and down the chain of command, can only help, and for the past 10–15 years, the Department of Defense (DOD) has made more of an effort to provide language, regional expertise, and culture (LREC) training and education. But has it been enough? Does everyone get adequate predeployment training at the level needed and relevant to their specialty or mission? Do combatant command planners have enough language-designated positions identified for critical assignments? And if so, would we even have the personnel to fill such roles? To be fair to the military, this is probably a larger US government and American worldview problem. It is also presumptuous to expect foreign service officers to hop from one embassy bubble to Washington to another embassy bubble every couple of years and expect deep, grounded knowledge of social and political dynamics too far beyond capital cities and the perils of well-heeled groupthink. Perhaps a Regionally Aligned Force concept could benefit more than just the Army, to allow the joint force to develop long-term relationships with security partners and a deeper un-

derstanding of particular operational environments, beyond the surface and the “graveyard of empires” shorthand, as if Afghanistan is “returning to the Dark Ages” after the Enlightened Ones have withdrawn.

Military leaders and strategists may be tempted to see this moment as an opportunity to leave behind the Global War on Terror era, the counterinsurgency and stability operations our military is not necessarily optimized for, and pivot to preparing for “near-peer” conflict or the “high-end fight,” wherein they may assume (again erroneously) that this sociocultural understanding stuff is less relevant, even irrelevant, compared to battlefield Xs and Os. Once again, firepower will win the day more than “hearts and minds,” and it is, after all, much easier to plan out math problems on maps without all those inconvenient human beings in the way. The other, preferable, option is to plus-up our LREC resourcing across the regions, combining a capability resident in the joint, total force with the ability to be discerning in bringing in actual experts, having critical conversations, and applying their insights instead of glossing over or outright dismissing the sociocultural dynamics involved. In doing so, we may find a way to recover and sustain the best efforts and models in civ-mil coordination developed over the last two decades (e.g., village stability operations and provincial reconstruction teams), and establish our own interagency networks, with more shared training pipelines, exercises, and educational opportunities, prior to having to break through stovepipes downrange.

And again, we may want to pivot to great-power competition, or rename it strategic competition, but it is highly likely that violent extremist organizations are not going to abide by our desires.⁷ Do not disregard and cross-train our Pashto and Dari speakers in Chinese just yet—and how many of them do we have anyway after 20 years? The number is probably considerably less than the thousands of interpreters we are leaving behind in Afghanistan now. We need to be more proactive incentivizing and developing these capabilities in the total force, and for other regions beyond US Central Command or Indo-Pacific Command areas of responsibility, as well, for this is a *global* competition. Especially if members’ promotion potential is not limited by their longer-term commitments to programs like the Afghanistan-Pakistan Hands Program, we may find these sorts of efforts even help with retention of an all-volunteer force. After all, our service members are human beings, too, and we all require meaning and purpose.

Since 2011, when I first started working for the US military as a sociocultural analyst for West Africa, I had frequent offers to join the Human Terrain System (HTS) in Afghanistan as a contractor—the main vehicle through which to recruit PhDs and social scientists to develop this sort of knowledge. While I had some requisite training in conducting fieldwork, with no knowledge of local languages

and experience in the region (or in a war zone), I thought I had very little to no business going to Afghanistan—though if I had the courage, I could have made a lot of money. This short article is not a full indictment of HTS.⁸ However, many who wound up working in that project were hastily recruited and not always qualified to conduct such research—and some, coming out of a private security contractor world, joined for other reasons entirely. Those who were qualified to conduct research but not exactly prepared for combat were put in danger to their own safety, some also giving their very lives in the effort, and the military did not always know how to apply their research and analysis. So, the “only” or main effort to understand Afghanistan (and Iraq), HTS, if reasonable conceptually and even worth revisiting, was in its execution haphazard at best and ultimately dangerously inadequate by any measure.⁹

There must be ways to both scale-up and improve the vetting and training for contributors to any future HTS-like effort, planned for in advance and not created on the fly after a war starts, and perhaps serving interagency teams more than military units primarily. Instead of universities training PhDs to enter a system that for most represents a form of indentured servitude, give these candidates more opportunities in national service beyond a handful of Boren fellowships and a Minerva grant program with a big-data fetish firmly entrenched in a Western worldview. This may mean more anthropologists than political scientists and international relations theorists. Get our sharpest minds with the longest-term engagements in “other” societies, from diverse cultural backgrounds themselves, helping those with the budgets and power to have real impact and influence in this world make more informed decisions. We probably have enough whipper-snappers coming straight out of college into DC or Ivy Masters programs, which the system seems more comfortable molding into beltway bureaucrats and think-tankers, cut from a certain cloth. We would do better to support and bring in more mature scholars, perhaps rougher around the edges, but who have done more long-term fieldwork to more fully comprehend the perspectives of others and how their societies actually operate, having spent years researching, working, and living with them.

To take just one example of an opportunity to put our money where our mouth is: The entire US Fulbright program annual budget is currently around \$250 million, a figure easily surpassed by dropping just one or two GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast bombs like the one used in Afghanistan in 2017, which did very little to make us or Afghans any safer or more secure. Having both a citizenry and military more engaged in foreign affairs and educated in global languages and cultures just might provide such security. I am fortunate enough to work now for a service that understands the importance of LREC training and education, but

other services' culture centers have been defunded or shuttered entirely.¹⁰ These programs are relative decimal dust that may just prevent the misapplication of trillions and require reinvigoration.

Without incorporating real regional expertise and cultural understanding, policy and strategy will always be a house built on sand—an ethnocentric fantasy on paper. Ultimately, the fall of Afghanistan does not signify an “intelligence failure” per se. There were many who could see the coming chaos like they did in Iraq or Libya, and the recent Taliban takeover as the inevitable result of the truth that those who know the culture have the advantage. In our military organizational cultures, characterized by strong hierarchies, we tend to see what we want and give the boss the most favorable report regardless of its relationship to the lived realities of those on the ground. This tendency is combined with a failure to integrate those with the deepest knowledge of the people and societies our strategies effect into the strategy and policy development to begin with, and later within operational planning that critically considers the broader human domain. It is notable that recent discourse on Joint All Domain Operations (JADO) rarely mentions the human domain in this respect, except for the human-machine/artificial intelligence relationship. Our LREC capabilities were not robust enough after 9/11—still are not—and thus, they are not even close to being adequately integrated. If we continue with this fundamental flaw, it will generate missteps, regardless of what we plan to do, be it counterterrorism operations or strategic competition. While we cannot afford to wait, we must also not treat this effort as a quick fix, but rather a long-term, multigenerational effort and investment that will serve us, our partners, and the prospects for global security well.

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Notes

1. Incidents in which a neutral force, such as Afghan security forces, fires upon the friendly force, such as US or allied service members.

2. *Restrepo* is a 2010 documentary focusing on the Afghanistan war, directed by journalist Sebastian Junger and photojournalist Tim Hetherington. The film explores the two journalists'

year spent in Afghanistan on assignment for *Vanity Fair*, embedded with the US Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade in the Korangal Valley of Kunar province.

3. For reference, the documentary *This Is What Winning Looks Like* was shot and released in the 2012–13 timeframe: <https://www.youtube.com/>.

4. For the best model developed for the DOD, see Louise J. Rasmussen, Winston R. Sieck, and Jasmine L. Duran, "A Model of Culture-General Competence for Education and Training: Validation Across Services and Key Specialties," Defense Language and National Security Education Office, n.d., <https://www.cultureready.org/>.

5. Rasmussen and Sieck also produced *What happens after the 3rd cup of tea? A cultural sense-making guide to Afghanistan*. US DOD. 2010. With scenarios developed during their research in Afghanistan, we used this practical guide in various workshops to practice perspective taking, for example, on why Afghans would not plan as we might expect. Often it was because we always had control over resources and made the ultimate decisions; so, why would they?

6. See the final scene from *War Machine* (2017), with a new commander convinced he will be "the (chosen) one" to fix what predecessors could not, for an apt, if exaggerated, illustration of the pattern: <https://youtu.be/>.

7. United Nations, *Eleventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team*, S/2020/415, 27 May 2020, <https://www.undocs.org/>. See also: *UN Security Council report* from 1 June 2021, particularly Section C, "The Taliban and Al-Qaida," <https://www.undocs.org/en/S/2021/486>

8. For a more rigorous assessment of HTS, see Michael Davies, "The Truth About Human Terrain Teams: An Evidence-Based Response to Gian Gentile," *E-International Relations*, 21 September 2013, <https://www.e-ir.info/>.

9. For an insider's reflections on HTS, see Ryan Evans, "The Seven Deadly Sins of the Human Terrain System: An Insider's Perspective," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 13 July 2015, <https://www.fpri.org/>.

10. See *The Rise and Decline of U.S. Military Culture Programs, 2004–20*, edited by Kerry B. Fosher and Lauren Mackenzie (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2021), <https://www.usmcu.edu/>.

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