

Opening the Door to Cultural Understanding and Mutual Cooperation

Multinational Military Partnerships and Educational Outreach

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The world we live in is quickly shifting: former threats are receding while new dangers materialize, and growing adversaries begin their assertive force projection on the regional and global stages. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has been able to stay ahead of these emerging threats through economic, military, and scientific dominance and through mutual cooperation within its strongly knit alliance network. As American hegemony wanes—particularly in the Indo-Pacific—strength in numbers and diversity will only increase in necessity as the international system begins to reveal elements of multipolarity with increasingly bellicose centers of gravity. Improving the efficacy of our multinational military partnerships through better educated and trained personnel will be the key to effective operations overseas in our most paramount area of responsibility.

Within US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), American politico-military foreign relations have included bilateral arrangements to coordinate with our allies, execute multinational exercises, and arrange arms sales with our partners. However, there are more actions necessary to maintain collective defense security agreements and a norms-based liberal international order for the deterrence of near-peer adversaries, particularly in the new administration. This article will explore the current status of our military and diplomatic relations with allies in the Indo-Pacific theater through published research and the authors' anecdotal experiences from working with multinational partners during different assignments, exercises, and distinguished visitor support to highlight Department of Defense successes, failures, and areas for improvement. These qualitative experiences will illuminate how cultural understanding is the key to the multilateral success of the United States' alliance network.

Additionally, the authors will provide recommendations on how the US Air Force could construct a force equipped with the organic capacity to understand the numerous cultures in our expansive but strong-knit alliance network to better cope with emerging threats over the next decade. These recommendations focus on key points such as the education of our in-theater personnel at the base level

with respect to culture, the provision of more opportunities for cross-cultural exchange outside of the established Air Force Culture and Language Center (AF-CLC) sphere, and the galvanization of involvement in local and regional civic groups. Only through a deeper cultural understanding of language, regional expertise, and culture (LREC) can we hope to strengthen our mutual security for the future.

Partnerships and Exercises

The Air Force's core missions of global vigilance, reach, and power and American national interests are leveraged with the ability to synchronize interdependent operations through unprecedented range anywhere in the world.¹ However, the Department of Defense—unable to execute its operations everywhere unilaterally—relies upon foreign partners for basing forward deployed personnel, staging operations, and coordinating military efforts. Except for Bhutan (informal), Iran, North Korea, and Taiwan (informal), the United States currently maintains formal diplomatic relations with nearly every country in the Indo-Pacific and is party to numerous bilateral and multilateral agreements.

As detailed in the 2018 *National Defense Strategy*, the emergence of long-term, strategic competition with China and Russia in the Indo-Pacific and the weakening of the post-World War II international order present challenges to the United States' military advantage and its ability to promote liberal values in the region.² Rapid technological advancements and the changing character of war—along with the impact of nonstate actors—further complicate a simple, holistic response and necessitate the new administration to promote greater flexibility by the myriad of American military forces in cooperation with local partners.

Our long-term strategic competitors have increasingly engaged in multilateral exercises and security arrangements in opposition to the liberal international order and traditional American allies. Portraying elements of anti-Atlanticism on one end of the geopolitical spectrum and of antidemocratization as a whole, the growing direction of the United States' near-peer adversaries is toward a Eurasian continentalism made visible through increases in geopolitically motivated regional exercises and expansionist posturing.³ Some examples include Russia's Central Asian military exercise Tsentr in 2019 that notably included such regional players as China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan and also China's Sea Guardians 2020, which was a bilateral naval exercise between regional partners China and Pakistan.⁴ There have also been aggressive overtures for regional influence including increased drills in the South China Sea and incursions of the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea by vast numbers of Chinese vessels⁵ further highlighting the encroachment of the dominant continental pow-

ers and the United States' command of the sea.⁶ Japanese Defense Minister Taro Kano at the Committee of Foreign Affairs and Defense in the Diet warned in August 2020 that the Japan Self-Defense Forces “will act firmly” to counter the intensification of Chinese activity in the region.⁷ Technological advances by China, North Korea, and Russia with aircraft carriers, longer-range ballistic missiles, and hypersonic glide missiles further expand the offensive reach of adversarial powers.⁸ These changes have been part of the driving force heightening threat levels in the Indo-Pacific, causing other regional players, such as South Korea, to either vacillate between sticking with the US alliance-based multilateralism and nonintervention or, in countries such as Japan, to turn further toward the United States as a means to protect their interests—both realities of which the United States should continue to be cognizant and seek to leverage.⁹

The United States alliance network consists of multiple collective defense arrangements. Although the North Atlantic Treaty Organization between the European powers, United States, and Canada may be the most famous, the Indo-Pacific is home to a number of historic arrangements established during the 1950s and 1960s, including those with Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, Japan, and South Korea.¹⁰ Contemporaneously, USINDOPACOM is the primary unified combatant command associated with five mutual defense treaties and postured American forces numbering 375,000 in personnel, more than one thousand aircraft, and five carrier strike groups.¹¹ With a sphere of influence of 36 nations and 50% of the world's population, USINDOPACOM is the largest of the combatant commands and arguably will be the most critical in the near future.¹²

Anecdotal Experience

The authors have had a number of experiences working alongside allied partners in the Indo-Pacific through assignments at bases in the theater and in bilateral and multilateral exercises. These have furthered their understanding of the intricate multilateral relationships in the alliance and solidified their conclusion that cultural differences are a strength and that cooperation is critical for our relations in the region.

Captain Gluck

In 2018, Capt Julian Gluck was deployed as a B-52 pilot to the Indo-Pacific as part of Pacific Air Forces' (PACAF) Continuous Bomber Presence. The main training event he participated in during this time was Exercise Cope North—a long-standing joint and trilateral exercise with the Japan Air Self-Defense Force

(JASDF) and Royal Australian Air Force. With a focus on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief training, the combined force of nearly 3,000 service members from 21 flying units flew more than 100 aircraft in the skies over Guam to “enhance multilateral air operations” and “promote stability and security throughout the Indo-Pacific by enabling regional forces to hone vital readiness skills critical to maintaining regional stability.”¹³

As an intermediate-level proficiency Japanese speaker in the Language Enabled Airman Program (LEAP), Captain Gluck leveraged his language background during mission planning with his fellow aviators, acting as an unofficial translator and intermediary when linguistic confusion arose between the English- and Japanese-speaking planners and flyers prior to their sorties (flying events). During the exercise, he translated an unclassified B-52 capabilities briefing into Japanese and presented the slides to pilots and mechanics from the JASDF to help familiarize the other players in the aircraft stack with the B-52 bomber’s abilities and limitations for better integration. He also provided tours of a static display of the B-52 to JASDF maintenance personnel and notably served as the lead for the distinguished visitor event involving the then-commander of Air Defense Command, Lt Gen Hiroaki Maehara, and his entourage, which was highlighted by PACAF public affairs and LEAP as an example of leveraging language capability abroad.¹⁴

The official and unofficial events at Exercise Cope North—including a large party hosted by the Japanese prior to the exercise’s kick-off and a culminating celebratory event at the end with revelry and the trading of military patches—illuminated the strengthening of international ties that can occur at these multilateral events when executed correctly. Over the course of the exercise, the author noted the increased synergy in planning and the execution of operations that came with practice, while the social events and interaction between the senior leaders forged relationships with an increased appreciation for their partners’ international cooperation. The sorties familiarized the countries’ deployed forces with coordinated employment across diverse mission sets, and participants finished the exercise with tangible experience working with their regional allies.

Challenges noted by the author during Exercise Cope North focused primarily on language barriers where non-English-speaking participants relied upon a small cadre of bilingual participants (primarily on the JASDF side) with varying levels of fluency and miniscule contingent of professional translators or Foreign Area Officers for the event. Mission planning, briefings, sorties, and debriefs were less effective due to language barriers and the cultural differences that existed with planning and analytical processes. Lastly, the classification of information—a vital and omnipresent element when working with multinational partners—diminishes

full interoperability with capabilities and tactics, techniques, and procedures, while preserving necessary information for the countries' respective intelligence and military apparatuses.

Captain Muhlenberg

Capt Byron Muhlenberg has led a majority Japanese workforce and organized multiple bilateral cooperation events—including senior leader gatherings, annual community events, and officer exchanges—affording him the opportunity to directly observe the transformative effect of partnership in the Indo-Pacific.

In one such experience, Captain Muhlenberg traveled to Hokkaido, Japan, to support the bilateral exercise Northern Viper as an Air Force interpreter through LEAP. Involving the US Marine Corps and Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF), the exercise's focus was on practicing maneuvering and winter combat training as a combined force. Exercises such as these are critical, as they show a direct and public commitment to mutual cooperation and interoperability. The author's role in this exercise was to assist the Marines in synchronizing port operations and equipment movement with the Tomakomai Port Authority, the local city government, the JGSDF, and the shipping contractor to ensure smooth equipment offloading from the cargo ship and transportation to the training grounds. He noticed that determined interaction over the course of the operation was the key to success. As the participants from the highest level to the lowest Marine increased their interactions with their local counterparts, the operation became smoother, and cooperation increased. It is likely that deeper cultural understanding resulted from these increased interactions and was the key to the bilateral operation's success.

In another experience at Yokota Air Base, Japan, Captain Muhlenberg led a team of Airmen in a bilateral exchange with JASDF members. While the ostensible goal was to assist the JASDF team in an English-medium speech competition, the actual intent was to sow the seeds of interchange between the two allied forces. Over the course of six months, members employed in various job specialties from both nations met over speech practices, base visits, public ceremonial events, and social hours. These interactions developed fellowship and promoted otherwise improbable information exchange about each other's respective services and functional skills—joint efforts personally commended by the JASDF Chief of Staff.

Captain Muhlenberg noticed a few major themes in these experiences. These concerted efforts to display unity and promote exchange actually led to greater individualized opportunities to deepen cultural understanding, heightening the personalized importance of the alliance. There was also a marked transformation

in world perspective—US members' tones changed when speaking about the mission in Japan, and their behaviors in conducting operations with the Japanese changed as well. These transformations were driven by two factors in particular that were and still are inherent in the force: (1) there is an overwhelming interest in forging bilateral relationships, and (2) mission execution is paramount. These are factors that leaders need to keep in mind when promoting multilateralism.

There were also a few potential pain points observed throughout these experiences. While US military members do want to meet service members from other countries' militaries, there either are limited opportunities, or the individuals are unaware of the opportunities that exist. Furthermore, bilateral exercises and events generally start out rocky, either from a paucity of knowledge of a partner's culture or because the relationship between the two sides has yet to be fully developed. This is further compounded by the inability to employ cultural experts early in the process to fill in these and other possible gaps.

In the next section, we will provide a few recommendations on how to resolve these pain points.

Recommendations

Our first recommendation is for better education of in-theater personnel at the base level and prior to multinational exercises. Currently, Expeditionary Culture Field Guides,¹⁵ tailored by AFCLC to the needs of the Department of Defense and peer-reviewed by academics, exist to better familiarize military members with particular countries; however, greater support for their expansion to more nations and greater proliferation of the materials through awareness of their availability online and in the Culture Field Guide mobile application would assist personnel with applying this knowledge to hands-on training.¹⁶ Additionally, training prior to deployments or exercises with components based on cultural clusters and cross-cultural analytical models like Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory would aid in the collective understanding of the foundations of local culture and differences with one's own—better equipping American forces to integrate with their foreign partners.¹⁷ With added linguistic, cultural, and regional education, war fighters will immediately build better relationships for success, rather than spending time trying to learn the basics about each other prior to cooperating, or worse, during the exercise or operation.

The second recommendation is to provide to all Airmen, regardless of their level of cultural understanding, more opportunities for cross-cultural exchange outside of the more formalized opportunities within the Air Force. LEAP within AFCLC is a "career-spanning, volunteer program open to officers and enlisted across all specialties to sustain and enhance foreign language skills of Airmen."¹⁸

The more than 3,000 Airmen who as a whole train in 95 languages represent a cadre of more adequately skilled regional specialists with prior language backgrounds.¹⁹ Outside of LEAP exist other culture and language experts in the Air and Space Forces whose experiences the Department could better leverage to further develop Airmen and Guardians when engaged with foreign partners domestically and overseas; this could be better accomplished with more utilization of the regional experience identifier subset of the special experience identifiers (SEI) catalogued by the Air Force Personnel Center. These SEIs track levels of regional experience in particular geographic regions (e.g., Northeast Asia) based on a number of quantitative and qualitative factors. In addition to the more specifically trained and focused groups, greater outreach to personnel who desire more generalist learning and cultural knowledge would enhance the foundations of military members who would otherwise lack the mentorship or opportunity to learn—due to an unawareness of how to take advantage of the many tools available online and at bases. Deeper sponsorship of local exchange groups and base events for language and culture (e.g., Japanese or Korean) would provide Airmen and Guardians the framework to establish relationships with foreign peers, build knowledge, and increase baseline cultural awareness when moved or deployed.

The final recommendation is to galvanize involvement and cooperation with local and regional civic groups. Through municipal and international organizations and charitable programs, military members and foreign citizens can further culture exchange. While our bases are consistently working to improve relationships with local communities and municipal governments, there are areas of opportunity past these traditional channels. These groups may be based on similar interests (e.g., the Knights of Columbus or sports fandom), foreign exchange or communication (e.g., Global Shapers, Rotary, or Toastmasters), or be organic or impromptu efforts (e.g., disaster relief teams or 5K races). In addition to the benefit of armed forces personnel gaining cultural awareness, these programs expose citizens of foreign countries to military members involved in activities other than their core job duties as war fighters—showing the human element behind the uniform, engaging individuals in communication between citizens and service members, and promoting positive civil-military relations. The Department of the Air Force should continue to take positive steps to promote partnership with these organizations and others like them and provide opportunities for service member involvement.

Conclusion

To open the door to cultural understanding to a greater number of actors across the force, the USAF should increase efforts at raising foundational knowledge for

personnel and enhance cultural training prior to military exercises, deployments, and permanent changes of station overseas. The implementation of the aforementioned recommendations would address our ability to respond to the LREC challenges highlighted in the *National Defense Strategy* and increase mutual understanding while strengthening relationships with our multilateral partners and local populations. These changes are actionable efforts to counter the encroachment by near-peer adversaries on current and potential partners in the Indo-Pacific region. Through the formation of war fighters with outward-looking mindsets ready to leverage similarities and differences in, and fight alongside, multilateral coalitions, the United States through the Air Force and USINDOPACOM will improve the responsiveness and flexibility of our alliance network to react to emerging threats and ensure collective defense in this vital region. 🌐

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