"Cultural Awareness in Afghan Helicopter Dispute—A Case Study"
John J. Hopkins III

Most of us engage in cross cultural communication in a variety of ways, oftentimes without even realizing we are doing so. These cultural interactions can occur when we dine at our favorite ethnic restaurant or even when we visit another portion of the very country we live in. In most of these situations, a lack of cultural awareness resulting in a misstep or insensitivity can be harmless, though possibly embarrassing. In other situations, however, cultural awareness and the ability to communicate across boundaries can be crucial. Such is the case for military members who are increasingly being called upon to travel the world, establish relationships with the people they meet, and engage in mentoring and training activities. Unfortunately, many of these mentors have had very little exposure to the cultures that they now find themselves operating in. Missteps or insensitivity can result in misperceptions that can become a threat to the entire mission. This paper focuses on how awareness of a few basic cultural characteristics could have assisted mentors to the Afghan Air Corps in understanding the Afghan position in a particular dispute. Advanced knowledge concerning the cultural implications of individualist and communitarian mentalities, time orientations, and views regarding free-will could have quickly allowed both American mentors and their Afghan counterparts to understand the positions taken by each.

The relevant situation for this case study occurred near the end of 2007 through the beginning of 2008. Ten Mi-17 helicopters donated by the United Arab Emirates to the Afghan Air Corps were supposed to begin arriving by the end of 2007.[1] The American mentors assigned to train the Afghan Air Corps eagerly awaited the arrival of the helicopters to continue training. They were extremely happy when they received word through command channels that the transfer of the first helicopter had occurred and the aircraft was now in-country. Unfortunately, that elation quickly turned to dismay when it was revealed that a local food service contractor

was in possession of the helicopter and had been flying it for months prior to the transfer. Further, that company had not received word of the transfer and intended to continue flying the asset until they were informed by their corporate chain to release the helicopter, as they believed they had a valid contract for its lease.

American leadership discussed the situation and decided to recommend to Afghan Air Corps leaders that Afghan guards be assigned to the aircraft to prevent its flight—effectively taking the helicopter from the contractor. The Afghan Air Corps attorneys were opposed to such a course of action and advised Afghan leaders against it. Air Corps leaders were also opposed to the course of action and so the issue stagnated as the helicopter continued to be flown by the contractor. The Americans were increasingly frustrated and the Afghans were continually pushed to act. While these talks with Afghan leadership continued, mentors were able to track the helicopter's title through multiple corporations and countries and thereby cause the contractor to be notified of the legal transfer within a few weeks. While the issue was ultimately resolved favorably, the question remained as to why the Americans favored the course of action proposed and why the Afghans were so reluctant to implement it. Had each side understood the other's culture, they may have understood the positions more readily.

The first of the cultural characteristics that parties should be aware of is whether the cultures involved accept individualistic or communitarian values and beliefs. A culture that values the individual—such as the United States—places great emphasis on the value of one's self as independent, self directed and autonomous.[2] On the opposite end of the spectrum, a culture that values community—such as Afghanistan—rewards members for allegiance to group values, interdependence and cooperation.[3] These two characteristics form a basis to understand how each culture will react to various events. For example, an individualist response to conflict

would likely be to handle the situation independently of others; whereas a communitarian response would be to act jointly. These characteristics also affect the cultures' viewpoints on use of law versus custom, and the importance of reputation or "face."

The cultural response to conflict is an important factor in analyzing disputes. For the individualist culture, conflict is a potential way of advancement. That said, disputes are a way of validating equality, stressing the adversarial approach, honing persuasive and logical arguments, and accenting personal initiative.[4] That approach is a stark contrast to the Afghan communitarian approach where "piety" and "stoicism" are the admired traits of the community.[5] Raymond Cohen, author of *Negotiating Across Cultures*, notes that in such a community, "Actions likely to disrupt group harmony are to be shunned and those that promote it, highly valued. Confrontation is anathema."[6] These two viewpoints played out in the helicopter dispute.

The Americans promoted the seizure of the aircraft as a logical solution since there was official word of the title transfer. They also saw this course of action as a way for Afghan Air Corps leadership to demonstrate initiative to their commanders and advance themselves within the community. The Afghans, on the other hand, viewed such an aggressive tactic as a loss of piety and stoicism. To them, the forceful taking of the aircraft would have disrupted relationships with the contractor and would also require a direct confrontation. It was anathema to their very core beliefs.

The next factor that played out in this helicopter dispute concerned each culture's view on law and custom. For Western type cultures, Cohen states, "Rights and duties are defined by law, not ascription. Contract, not custom, prescribes the individual's legal obligation to a given transaction, role, or course of action."[7] To Eastern cultures, like Afghanistan, though, the law is virtually meaningless. Cohen notes that, to those cultures, conflict is resolved in different ways.

He states, "Conflict is resolved not by resort to formal processes of law, but by mechanisms of communal conciliation, concerned less with abstract principles of justice than with the requirements of continuing harmony."[8]

In the helicopter dispute, the American view centered heavily on legal rights. Official word was that the transfer had occurred whether or not the company received proper notification. The Afghan Air Corps therefore had the right to assume control over the asset to the exclusion of the contractor. The Afghans, though, perceived the situation differently. They preferred to wait until the situation could be resolved informally without disrupting harmony. They did not choose to rely on legal rights or process. Rather, they chose to preserve "face."

An individualist protects "face" by taking a competitive stance in negotiations or confronting someone who is perceived to have committed a wrong.[9] In Afghanistan, though, protecting "face" is more complicated. As *CultureGrams* states, "Personal disputes are not solved easily because of the need to protect one's honor. Family honor is also affected by personal behavior, so living the code properly is considered essential."[10] This conception of honor guides their actions and also makes them consider the effects to their opponent in a dispute. As Cohen notes, "Because the social disruption caused by loss of face is likely to be severe . . . elaborate mechanisms have evolved to protect not only one's own face, but also that of others."[11]

In the helicopter dispute, the Americans believed that the Afghan's should act competitively. There could only be one winner, or owner, of the helicopter and so a direct confrontation was needed to gain proper control. The Afghans, however, were concerned about how they would appear to others if they engaged in such an aggressive tactic. Would they be perceived as dishonorable for taking the helicopter from a contractor who believed that they had

a legal right to be using it? They also were concerned about the contractor's loss of "face." Would having the helicopter taken embarrass the company and its owners?

Each culture's notion of time also played a role in their actions during the helicopter dispute. There are two basic approaches to time—monochronic and polychronic. Michelle LeBaron, of *Beyond Intractability*, explains, "Monochronic approaches to time are linear, sequential and involve focusing on one thing at a time."[12] This is the approach to time used by most Western nations and accents time as "quantitative, measured in units that reflect the march of progress."[13] LeBaron further explains that, in the East, time feels like it has unlimited continuity, an unraveling rather than a strict boundary.[14] In this polychronic orientation to time, the time to complete an interaction is elastic and more important than any particular schedule.[15]

In this situation, schedules and deadlines were very important to the American mentors. They were anxious to get the Afghans trained and one more helicopter would certainly have helped. Additionally, in their view time was money—a helicopter engine only has so many good flying hours before needing to be replaced and every hour flown by the contractors was one less for the Afghans. To the Afghans, though, time was elastic. Cohen explains this view when he states, "Timeliness is measured by days and weeks, not hours and minutes . . . Steadiness, not haste, is the cardinal virtue."[16] Additionally, as Maurice Poitras noted in an Army Command and General Staff College report, "Afghans have a very different notion of time compared to westerners, because of their culture and lifestyle. They are not rushed for time and financial considerations and for a typical Afghan, what cannot be accomplished today can always be left until tomorrow."[17] Basically, the Afghans understood that sooner or later the company would receive word and affect the transfer. They were not nearly as concerned about the engine wear

or having an extra helicopter for training as they understood that the whole process would be relatively short compared with the long history of the Afghan people.

Finally, each culture's view of self determination and fate played a role in the situation. Self determination and fate refer "to the degree to which we feel ourselves the masters of our lives, versus the degree to which we see ourselves as subject to things outside our control."[18] LeBaron states, "If someone invested in free will crosses paths with someone more fatalistic in orientation, miscommunication is likely. The first person may expect action and accountability . . . The second person will expect respect for the natural order of things."[19] This description encompasses the exact nature of the American versus the Afghan view in the helicopter dispute.

In typical American fashion, the American mentors believed that the Afghans should shape their own environment and take control of the situation. This American viewpoint harkens back to early American history. As LeBaron notes, "The frontier mentality of 'conquering' the wilderness, and the expansiveness of the land stretching huge distances, may relate to generally high levels of confidence in the ability to shape and choose our destinies."[20] That view is in direct contrast with the Afghan viewpoint that things will occur if they are Allah's will. As noted by *CultureGrams* when referencing the Afghan people, "People's outlook on life is influenced by a great faith that Allah controls everything and that everything happens according to his will. This belief helps Afghans accept a very hard life, even if it somewhat dampens personal initiative to rise above difficult circumstances."[21] In the helicopter situation, the Afghans saw no need to pursue aggressive tactics. If it was Allah's will they would receive the helicopter without having to violate their other cultural predilections.

Cultural awareness and the ability to communicate across boundaries are crucial skills for American Service-members acting as mentors to other nations. Awareness of a few simple

cultural characteristics could have assisted mentors to the Afghan Air Corps in understanding the Afghan position during a dispute over the appropriate course of action to take regarding title to a donated helicopter. Advanced knowledge concerning the cultural implications of individualist and communitarian mentalities, time orientations, and views regarding free-will could have quickly allowed the mentors to understand why their Afghan counterparts had taken a passive stance rather than engage in aggressive tactics. This knowledge would have been beneficial in developing alternate courses of action.

[1] Schwartz, Cmdr Joey and Alberdeston, Maj Sonny, "Building Air Power for Afghanistan," Web. 20 Dec 2007.
[2] LeBaron, "Communication Tools for Understanding Cultural Differences." http://beyondintractability.org/essay/communication_tools/.
[3] LeBaron, "Communication Tools for Understanding Cultural Differences." http://beyondintractability.org/essay/communication_tools/.
[4] Cohen, *Negotiating Across Cultures*, 29-30.
[5] "Afghanistan." *CultureGrams Online Edition*. ProQuest, 2010. Web. 9 Mar 2010.
[6] Cohen, *Negotiating Across Cultures*, 31.
[7] Cohen, *Negotiating Across Cultures*, 29.
[8] Cohen, *Negotiating Across Cultures*, 31.
[9] LeBaron, "Cross-Cultural Communication." http://beyondintractability.org/essay/cross-cultural_communication/.
[10] "Afghanistan." *CultureGrams Online Edition*. ProQuest, 2010. Web. 9 Mar 2010.
[11] Cohen, *Negotiating Across Cultures*, 30.
[12] LeBaron, "Culture-Based Negotiation Styles." http://beyondintractability.org/essay/culture_negotiation/.
[13] LeBaron, "Cross-Cultural Communication." http://beyondintractability.org/essay/cross-cultural_communication/.
[14] LeBaron, "Cross-Cultural Communication." http://beyondintractability.org/essay/cross-cultural_communication/.
[15] LeBaron, "Culture-Based Negotiation Styles." http://beyondintractability.org/essay/culture_negotiation/.
[16] Cohen, *Negotiating Across Cultures*, 34.
[17] Poitras, "Adoptable Afghan Customs or Practices in a Military Operations Environment," 25.
[18] LeBaron, "Cross-Cultural Communication." http://beyondintractability.org/essay/cross-cultural_communication/.
[19] LeBaron, "Cross-Cultural Communication." http://beyondintractability.org/essay/cross-cultural_communication/.
[20] LeBaron, "Cross-Cultural Communication." http://beyondintractability.org/essay/cross-cultural_communication/.
[21] "Afghanistan." *CultureGrams Online Edition*. ProQuest, 2010. Web. 9 Mar 2010.

Bibliography

"Afghanistan." *CultureGrams Online Edition*. ProQuest, 2010. Web. 9 Mar 2010. http://online.culturegrams.com/world/.

Cohen, Raymond. *Negotiating Across Cultures.* Rev. ed. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997.

LeBaron, Michelle. "Communication Tools for Understanding Cultural Differences." Ed. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. June 2003. Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO. http://beyondintractability.org/essay/communication_tools/.

LeBaron, Michelle. "Culture-Based Negotiation Styles." Ed. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. July 2003. Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO. http://beyondintractability.org/essay/culture_negotiation/.

LeBaron, Michelle. "Cross-Cultural Communication." Ed. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. July 2003. Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO. http://beyondintractability.org/essay/cross-cultural_communication/.

Poitras, Maj Maurice V. "Adoptable Afghan Customs or Practices in a Military Operations Environment." Monograph Report no. 21-05-2009. Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army Command and General Staff College, 2009.

Schwartz, Cmdr. Joey and Alberdeston, Maj Sonny. "Building Air Power For Afghanistan." Air Force Print News, 20 December 2007. http://bagram.afcent.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123080337