Regional Understanding and Unity of Effort

Applying the Global SOF Network in Future Operating Environments Communications

BY CHRISTOPHER VARHOLA

The convergence of popular wars, ethnic and religious conflict, ideological extremism, and competition over diminishing resources are "messy" scenarios that defy prescriptive solutions. Yet this messiness is what increasingly defines today's operating environment, requiring adaptive combinations of knowledge and action within a unified interagency framework. In this context, Special Operations Forces (SOF), to include Information Operations and Civil Affairs, plays an increasingly active and necessary role. To this end, "the global SOF network vision consists of a globally networked force of SOF, interagency allies and partners able to rapidly respond to, and persistently address, regional contingencies and threats to stability."[1] The success of both the conventional military and the global SOF network requires sustained regional expertise for success in future operating environments, as well as institutionalized relationships with interagency partners born from mutual respect, common interests, and a shared understanding of the operating environment. This article proposes an increased emphasis on understanding both the institutional and geo-cultural operating environments. In theory, this is nothing new, but in reality, it requires a shift in the ways we look at military education, senior leaders, and strategic expectations.

Overseas military operations in today's operating environment are frequently coordinated and conducted in U.S. embassies, each of which represents an interagency task force that seeks to gather information, promote development, empower allies, and disrupt terrorist networks

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through both direct and indirect activities. It is accepted that the U.S. military, to include SOF, needs to operate in joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational (JIIM) environments, as well as in volatile, uncertain, and ambiguous (VUCA) situations. These concepts join the dustbin of hollow buzzwords, however, if they are not realized through institutionalized emphasis and mechanisms for operational application. It is not enough to say something is "complex." There must be efforts to understand the elements of that complexity. This is particularly the case with SOF, which must possess the dual capability of interacting with conventional counterparts and operating effectively out of U.S. embassies throughout the world. With this in mind, no matter how proficient SOF is in direct action, SOF will ultimately be unsuccessful without the participation of other entities, to include U.S. embassy country teams, Geographic Combatant Commands (GCCs), and in most cases, partner nations.

Interagency

Military success in dealing with other government agencies must go beyond tired clichés of different institutional cultures. Like any objectification of culture, there will exist certain simplistic elements of truth in such characterizations. Even where broad ends are compatible, different ways and means result in interagency approaches that may seem to favor some and marginalize others. However, interagency relations are obscured by a more complex reality in which geopolitical context, personality, and variable levels of experience and competence carry a heavy influence. While interagency accommodation and integration is incumbent on all agencies, some types of military activities, such as training of host

nation military forces contribute to the gradual transformation that the Department of State is often trying to promote. Other activities may be seen as undermining it.

State Department efforts at transformational diplomacy seek to change governments through a stimulation of civil society and democratic processes, not armed conflict.[2] Defense institution building (DIB) is an important element of these efforts. Here the military provides sought after expertise. The use of U.S. embassies as nodes in other than declared theaters of conflict (ODTAC), however, represents a new paradigm that is contrary to the traditional steady-state mission of the U.S. State Department (DOS), and can cause friction with foreign partner nations. In these situations, military forces must have authorities and a clear mission. Authorities give actions legitimacy and legal standing. Absent relevant authorities, interagency integration will be challenging regardless of the skills and preparation of military members. Even with clear authorities, uncertainty about how to accomplish mission sets without undesirable unintended consequences demands interagency effectiveness. This is not an intuitive process, but rather one that requires multiple institutional perspectives and the balancing of diplomatic risk in relation to military objectives.

A lack of authorities, competition, or lack of clarity between DOS and Department of Defense (DOD) results in predictable and avoidable entrenchment in perceived institutional imperatives. This is particularly the case for interagency dynamics at U.S. embassies, where the U.S. military risks a reputation for attempting to implement plans that do not take host nation government structures and long-term U.S. interests into account. Along these lines, polarized tension between DOD,

to include SOF, and chiefs of mission has been common in the last twenty years. It is common to hear DOD personnel talk of anti-military ambassadors, as well as State Department personnel talking of military personnel who create problems and then leave. Areas of contention include Chief of Mission versus Combatant Commander authorities concerning security and force protection requirements, reporting chains, and limiting DOD assets on where they can go, who they can interact with, and what they can do. This tension is good when based on clear understandings and honest communication; however, the tension is destructive and cyclical when based on inherited personality conflicts and dogmatic positions.

In this respect, success in JIIM needs to begin with recognizing, understanding, utilizing, and empowering the structures that are already in existence. Every country that has a U.S. embassy already has a functioning interagency structure in the form of a country team. A failure by DOD elements to understand its role and functions in turn undermines the interagency process. The Senior Defense Official/Defense Attaché (SDO/DATT) represents DOD on the country team and provides a conduit for all other DOD elements, to include Special Operations Forces Liaison Elements (SOFLEs) and senior leaders. In theory, no DOD activity should be planned without close coordination with the SDO/DATT. Both at embassies and the GCCs, Foreign Area Officers (FAOs) are the lynchpin between SOF, the GCC, the host nation, and the country team. The simplistic antagonisms that sometimes exist between GCC staffs, the Theater Special Operations Command (TSOC), and ambassadors are all too frequently a failure to adequately empower and understand the role

of the SDO/DATTs, who, more often than not, have the experience and knowledge of the operational context as well as knowledge of the multiple personalities involved. This places the burden on defense attachés to understand military campaign plans and embassy Integrated Country Strategies (ICS) and integrate these with the nuances and challenges inherent to distinct countries within the context of international and regional dynamics and implications. Choreographed meetings and rigid office calls do little to overcome interagency tensions. Rather, it takes sustained trust and confidence-building through regular and meaningful interactions.

For instance, a senior leader, staff officer, or operator who has inherited a mission set with little preparation or regional understanding will not be able to effectively "sell it" to an ambassador or country team, thus inviting time consuming micromanagement and oversight. In the same regard, operators who have had specialized training in various forms of tradecraft and informational skillsets cannot expect to be equally adept in multiple regions. This has proven problematic in the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) area of responsibility (AOR), where individuals fresh from the Middle East or Afghanistan are faced with entirely new institutional and social operating environments. This places them in an unequal role with interagency counterparts, with the added pressure to achieve results in a four, six, or nine month rotation, causing personal frustration and exacerbating interagency tension.

This is aggravated by unclear military command and control structures and the different operating approaches and mandates of different SOF elements and GCCs. If the U.S. military is unable to achieve internal unity of

effort, it is unrealistic to expect that military units and activities can be efficiently integrated into interagency dynamics. SOF activities often require the approval and support of both the U.S. ambassador and the host nation, which in turn requires that their activities be synchronized with both Theater Campaign Plans (TCPs) and embassy ICSs. Even for SOF elements operating outside of the TCP, coordination and synchronization of efforts within an interagency framework is still necessary. In both cases, SOF needs to bring regional expertise and credible plans that further the TCP and make it into a credible operational blueprint as opposed to a remote, wordy document with little real world application that does not reflect the richness of diverse operating environments.

Such richness can also be lost when complexity is reduced to "lines of effort" that utilize critical events and decisive points to reflect multifaceted and converging events. Whereas these are useful in mapping out a commander's intent, such approaches run the risk of portraying decontextualized and irrelevant indicators as opposed to a meaningful progression towards national security objectives. Military agreements between the U.S. and various African countries provide a case in point. In a recent example, a "partner nation" in Africa agreed to host an American military training team to conduct training on intelligence sharing and collection. However, three days before the event was scheduled to start, the host nation stated it would cancel the training if the Americans did not pay a particular caterer thousands of dollars to provide meals for the students. This presented a challenge in that the United States did not have the authorities to pay for subsistence. Creative interagency funding was nonetheless patched

together and the training was executed. The fact that the training was secondary to the bribe is a sound indicator that this did not reflect an advanced military to military relationship between the United States and this country. This, however, was lost on both senior U.S. military and State Department leadership, which both insisted that the training was too important to cancel.

On the contrary, this indicated the low esteem that the particular host nation placed on the training and on relations with the United States. As leadership and staff officers rotate out of embassies and AFRICOM, this training event nonetheless will likely be reduced to a historical data point inaccurately reflecting a growing and enhanced partnership. Rather, the event reflected the manner in which the United States was seen more as a source of revenue that could be manipulated, than as a strategic partner. Nevertheless, this was a "critical event" that needed to be accomplished to give the impression of close military to military relations and to accomplish the tasks associated with a particular line of effort.

In this regard, "one size fits all" approaches to multiple countries are inadequate. Even seemingly straightforward undertakings such as military assistance and training will differ significantly from country to country based on civil military relations and attitudes towards the U.S. The stark contrast between Kenya and Ethiopia provides an example.

The complexities become magnified for activities such as disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), which most often involve multiple zones of contention along ethnic, religious, political, and economic lines. Techniques that were successful in Liberia, for example, will not necessarily be

successful in larger heterogeneous conflicts such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and South Sudan. Similarly, techniques that garnered success ten years ago in a specific operating environment are unlikely to still be applicable. The better approach is to stress the lessons from previous experience (both successes and failures) in a manner that is tailored to the specificities of new and changing operating environments. While this may seem like a splitting of hairs, it is not. On the contrary, it reflects a level of maturity and capability that directly impacts the degree of autonomy that will be afforded by the country team and ambassador. Here the SDO/DATT must play the role of enabler and honest broker (and must be empowered to do so). Every country is unique and success rests on adapting existing means in a way that matches unique sociopolitical dynamics.

Moreover, in conflict, action bereft of regional understanding is more likely to have cascading negative results. Iraq and

Afghanistan are cases in point, as is Somalia. In 1993, for example, the targeting of a meeting of elders from Mohammed Farah Aidid's Habr Gidr clan seemed logical from a simplistic link analysis point of view. However, some of the individuals killed in the strike were opposed to Aideed and were engaged in peace discussions with the United Nations.[3] The net result of the strike, rather than removing sources of instability, was to exacerbate and polarize the conflict between the United States and a broader Somali society as well as removing a social structure that could have contributed to a cessation of hostilities. In the wake of the chaos that followed, the rise of the Union of Islamic Courts contributed to some degree of stability, albeit one that mixed grassroots support with links to international terrorism. Yet the removal of the Union of Islamic Courts by Ethiopia with U.S. support resulted in the rise of the even more extreme al-Shabaab.[4]

PH1 R. Oriez

An abandoned Mogadishu Street known as the Green Line, Jan 1993. In conflict action bereft of regional understanding is more likely to have cascading negative effects.

Ongoing efforts against al-Shabaab have resulted in a multipolar conflict in which U.S. interests and regional stability are intertwined with an increasingly fragile and tense coalition of African states that is bolstered by U.S. SOF and supported with security cooperation efforts by Combined Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) and U.S. Africa Command. The military defeat of al-Shabaab is certainly attainable, but again, it is uncertain how the vacuum they leave will be filled. Herein lies the importance of aligning multinational military, diplomatic, and development efforts in a manner that meets the interests of the Somali people, neighboring countries, the international community, and the United States. That is a far more uncertain proposition than the destruction of a terrorist network.

Regional

Despite its importance, the military has been stymied in efforts to institutionalize and apply regional expertise. The U.S. military's need for regional understanding became readily apparent in World War II, when the Army found itself fighting in diverse locations that included Western Europe, North Africa, China, and multiple distinct Pacific island settings. Miscalculations in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq later reinforced this need. As the world's population approaches eight billion people, there is no strategically relevant land area that does not possess multiple complex and changing population groups. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan created a newfound but short-lived and rudimentary emphasis on studying the culture of foreign operating environments, but these were largely limited to specific campaigns or generic examinations of culture.

Like Somalia in the 1990s and at present, Iraq and Afghanistan in the 2000s proved to be exceedingly complex battlegrounds and polities, overlaid with difficult languages and unfamiliar cultures. As such, operationally sound regional understanding needs to go beyond broad discussions of "culture" that objectify other peoples. They also need to go beyond basic forms of cross-cultural competence, abstract learning about "culture," and superficial social understandings. Culture, although important, is a challenging and often inappropriate unit of analysis for military plans and operations. To be effective, the current U.S. military mindset that anyone can go anywhere to do anything having only read a book or two and gotten a 30-minute cultural briefing needs to be discarded.

Regional expertise must also go beyond individual knowledge. It must include institutional knowledge that maintains continuity between rotational forces. Even where a baseline of regional knowledge does exist, this must be constantly updated through methodologically sound approaches that are woven into the tactical, operational, and strategic fabrics. Although the conventional military may earmark certain units for a particular AOR, this is in a manner that lacks personnel continuity or institutionalized training. It seems unlikely that the broader conventional force has the will to change this, despite conversations concerning the role and importance of regionally aligned forces. Rotations of field grade officers in and out of the GCCs, component commands, and sub-unified commands, assures that the personnel system will continue to staff the regionally aligned headquarters with exceptional soldiers, pilots, and surface warfare officers who have had no training or appreciable experience in a given region.

Moreover, in AFRICOM, which is based in Germany, continuity is undermined by the five-year rotation of civilian workers. This all but guarantees that an already limited supply of Africa specialists will not be able to entrench itself in a GCC that is still maturing. This lingering gap in U.S. military capability and the ongoing U.S. Army belief that the use of force, common sense, and solid planning are sufficient for success anywhere in the world can be likened to the U.S. unwillingness to create a separate Armor corps until 1940, France's reliance on the Maginot Line, and the notion that French élan could achieve success in 1914.

Herein lies a key comparative advantage of SOF within the U.S. military. SOF has the advantage of regionally aligning forces and thus plays a valuable role in comprehending multifaceted social settings. SOF has emphasized the importance of the human domain of warfare, which SOCOM defines as "the totality of the physical, cultural, and social environment that influence human behavior in a population-centric conflict."[5] However, even within SOF, the ongoing campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have diluted the emphasis on regional expertise. SOF does not have enough trained operators to be everywhere at once. As a result, the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq required a surge of all SOF. This came at the expense of building a generation of SOF regional expertise in other parts of the world. Crises in places as diverse as the Horn of Africa, Syria, and Afghanistan require specialized approaches and languages that account for the socio-economic structural underpinnings and motivations for conflict. This has renewed relevance in an increasingly multipolar world and in the midst of seemingly persistent conflict, where building relations and empowering regional states and organizations are logical remedies and are rightly a key element of U.S. diplomatic efforts and SOF activities.

Regional expertise and the ability to work with interagency partners have gained increased importance in what Fareed Zakaria refers to as the "post-American world." Zakaria posits an international domain in which U.S. supremacy is relatively less in the face of growing regional powers and organizations.[6] As a result, U.S. freedom of action is reduced and requires coordination and permission from partner/host nations and regional organizations. Paradoxically, SOF will increasingly find itself in regional or institutional situations where there is a greater need for freedom of action, but their actions will be under tenuous control by foreign governments that do not necessarily welcome an open and armed U.S. presence. In such situations, seamless interagency integration becomes a practical requirement, as opposed to a lofty objective or topic of instruction.

Despite the relative decline of U.S. influence, strategic access and combatting violent extremism remain cornerstones of our national security interests. With political limitations on "boots on the ground," furthering these interests requires strategic partnerships and the empowerment of regional actors. The use of strategic partners, though, cannot assume that these partners have the same interests, and to some extent, values, as us. This has proved troublesome in situations as diverse as the Diem government in Vietnam, Ethiopia, El Salvador, the former Zaire, Somalia, and Pakistan, as well as with opium-dealing warlord police chiefs and governors in Afghanistan. These approaches have often deteriorated into overly obvious forms of transactional diplomacy, rife with corruption

and often resulting in divisiveness, despite U.S. intentions of fostering inclusive civil societies. Transactional diplomacy accordingly goes only as far as we are willing to pay. As we have come to realize in places such as Djibouti, Pakistan, and Kyrgyzstan, the amount to maintain the transaction is by no means fixed. After the initial investment, proxies have a stronger bargaining position to demand more resources, such as payment for basing rights, and to diverge significantly from U.S. interests.

Whereas this falls primarily in the realm of diplomacy and is a strategic problem with no readily apparent solution, senior military leaders must still be aware of the larger context and be able to question inappropriate or one-sided military-to-military relationships. Although the United States might have had little choice but to provide continued military support in places such as Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, caution should be exercised in blindly acquiescing to host nation demands, especially where they involve a lack of reciprocal commitment to sustainability, defense institution building, and confidence-building. Military agreements and assistance packages may seem like logical metrics to reflect close security cooperation, but this is likewise obvious to host nations, which in turn are in an advantageous position to drive a lopsided bargain while not adhering to the spirit of the agreements. This harms the United States in its ability to exert future influence and undermines its moral credibility with oppressed population groups.

The use of proxies and the maintenance of transactional diplomacy may reduce, but does not obviate, the need for unified action in hazardous areas. The 2010 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR), for example, stressed the importance of increased civilian control and proposed that the State Department should operate more effectively in dangerous environments and to expand these efforts "despite the heightened risks."[7] Similarly, USAID brings money to a fight and often sends development specialists with an admirable knowledge of a given region. Economic development, humanitarian aid, and promoting civil society are indispensable elements in conflict resolution and stabilization. However, these activities can only go so far, especially if they do not seamlessly blend with military and security considerations. The U.S. Department of State is not the British Colonial Service, but rather an agency charged with maintaining diplomatic relations with a host nation's ministry of foreign affairs. Foreign Service Officers in DOS and USAID are not recruited, trained, or prepared to operate in combat zones, much less to piece societies back together in the midst of conflict.

The 2012 Benghazi attack clarified for the State Department that an acceptance of heightened risk equates to an acceptance of casualties. In the aftermath of Benghazi, the State Department has largely backtracked on this approach and has increased restrictions in hazardous environments, with Somalia being a case in point. Civilian control will still exist, but it will be less likely to be physically present in hazardous areas. The 2015 QDDR, while acknowledging that operating in dangerous areas is an integral element of diplomacy and development efforts throughout the world, nonetheless stresses managing and mitigating risk.[8] This creates space for enhanced interagency cooperation, particularly with SOF, which can provide conflict expertise, security, and access in hazardous regions that would otherwise be denied to diplomats and development specialists. This includes both SOF

and conventional Civil Affairs forces, which have overlapping missions with both DOS and USAID in areas such as governance, humanitarian assistance, and public health. In this regard, the military plays a valuable and singular role within interagency processes.

This role is likely to be in greater demand in a world facing increased population and competition over diminishing resources. As the world's population steadily increases, massive concentrations of individuals in the developing world are faced with a tenuous existence. In this vacuum, violence and extremist ideology will continue to gain a foothold as an expression of discontent. This convergence of factors makes it insufficient for SOF and the broader U.S. military to simply understand

religion, ideology, and extremism in an isolated manner. [9] There must also be an understanding of the social, political, and economic underpinnings that breed extremism and socio-political action. Gerald Hickey's 1967 anthropological analysis of the highlands of Vietnam, for example, highlighted the economic needs, political aspirations, and military realities of peoples marginalized by the South Vietnamese government.

This proved a prescient analysis for future military and political developments in that country and became a focal point for U.S. irregular warfare efforts in Vietnam. [10] Unfortunately, it did not sufficiently resonate with senior U.S. and South Vietnamese

American troops destroying enemy bunkers in the highlands of Vietnam during the Vietnam War.

government leaders to influence the overall strategy or outcome in Vietnam.

Senior Leaders

In his analysis of the congressional involvement with the U.S. military in the Korean conflict, T.R. Fehrenbach notes that while congressmen are hesitant to involve themselves in "specialized" matters concerning ships and aircraft, "almost any fool has felt in his heart he could command a regiment."[11] A similar observation can be made concerning today's senior military leaders regarding regional specialization. While generals have staffs that are designed to provide them with this type of specialized knowledge, this presumes that the staffs themselves are sufficiently capable. This will not necessarily be the case, especially in areas in which the military does not habitually operate and when leaders surround themselves with staff officers whom they trust, but who have inappropriate experiences and backgrounds. Inadequate knowledge can also be exacerbated by force protection measures which geographically place individuals in a region but limit their outside interactions; and noncombat environments where staffs are less inclined to provide clear recommendations to convergent problems with no clear answers. This can place senior leaders in a position where they feel a need to act even if they do not have a clear vision on how or why, leading to an attitude that Brigadier General Kimberly Field characterizes as "an attitude of winning plus combat arms commander-centric focus equals full spectrum success."[12]

Major Jason Warren expands on this theme with his contention that the U.S. Army has shifted from a focus on capable strategic leaders to what he refers to as centurions: tactically sound senior leaders who are not necessarily prepared or have the mindset to operate in complex interagency settings.[13] The combat arms, to include surface warfare and aviation, do indeed provide a clear path for progression, but they do not automatically equip senior leaders and their staffs to face the challenges and social diversity characteristic of today's global operating environment. In contrast, FAOs often lack tactical experience relative to their peers, despite having significant training and experience in particular regions. In this respect, FAOs are not often viewed as upwardly mobile centurions and, ironically, are in a structurally inferior position to more tactically-experienced peers and senior leaders who are often new to, and unfamiliar with the region they are overseeing. The transference of tactical acumen to strategic and interagency settings, however, has not proven a sound method.

In a candid self-critique, for example, a former commander of Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa introduced an article on his experiences in CJTF-HOA by recognizing the complexity of the region, but saying that he was given three weeks' notice for his assignment and that he "would have been hard pressed to identify Djibouti on a map, let alone appreciate the scope and challenge of my assignment."[14] Combined with a constantly rotating staff with little experience in Africa and little institutional memory, this continued CJTF-HOA's unbalanced relationships with interagency counterparts in the region. Although not ideal, CJTF-HOA's limited base of regional knowledge and experience was offset by a cadre of experienced military attachés and country teams at embassies in the CJTF-HOA AOR, as well as guidance and restraint by ambassadors. This, however, is a luxury that will not always exist, especially for

ad hoc task forces in contingency operations as well as SOF elements operating in more remote settings. In such circumstances, such a lack of experience and preparation is both reckless and dangerous.

Recognizing the limitations of many senior leaders, SDO/DATTs, as the diplomatically accredited senior defense officials in their assigned countries, are designed to be the primary tool with which senior military leaders interact with the embassy country team, to include the ambassador. Protocol requirements and social niceties aside, there should not be any aura of prestige in interacting directly with ambassadors. A newly assigned general officer who insists on flying in for a meeting with an ambassador with scripted talking points and without first sitting down with the SDO/DATT in a one-on-one discussion displays a destructive misunderstanding of the role of the SDO/DATT, and their daily interactions and trust with the ambassador and country team. Ambassadors are not action officers and should not be placed in that position. Like general officers, ambassadors should be decision makers who reach conclusions and resolve conflicts based on the combined products of multiple parties that are born from solid staff work. Here staff work can be characterized as a synthesis of coordination, perspectives of multiple parties, knowledge of the operating context, and a decided absence of dogmatism that can hinder negotiation and compromise.

Similar caution should be exercised in dealing with host nation counterparts. Within a U.S. embassy, relationship building is a methodology that is executed through a continuous effort to obtain mutual understanding of respective intents, desired endstates, and policy constraints. This is not to say that senior leaders should not meet with key host nation leaders, but that meetings should be conducted with a recognition that the SDO/DATT and country team should be the ones empowered to maintain relations, and not be relegated to a disempowered administrative facilitator for general officer visits that are often vague of purpose, full of optimism, and short on duration, knowledge and content. Like an effective reserve, visiting senior leaders must be guided to the *Schwerrpunkt* of an interagency battlefield and committed to reinforce success or offset failure. They cannot always position themselves as the main effort.

Attempting to reproduce the system of perfunctory key leader engagements (KLEs) from Iraq and Afghanistan elsewhere in the world may give an outward appearance of relationship-building, but may also undermine nuanced and continuous efforts that are born from a deeper understanding of the operating environment than most general officers are able to attain. Absent concerted U.S. military efforts to develop a reproducing and vertically aligned base of expertise, senior military leaders' intentions of building trust and long term relationships with host nations are often unrealistic. For such reasons, it is sometimes common for ambassadors to insist on accompanying senior military leaders to meetings with host nation counterparts. While this may be perceived as micromanaging in a manner that undermines U.S. military credibility, it is suggestive of the manner in which interagency counterparts often perceive the military as well as the intricate hybrid political-military context that exists in many non-Western militaries.

The Way Ahead

Develop Relevant Knowledge: The understanding of an operating environment must go

beyond simplistic notions of culture, thinking that if we do not show the soles of our feet, we will gain respect. So too must knowledge go beyond simplistic surveys and assessments that are prone to reduce intangibles into quantified tangibles. So too must generic methodologies be tailored to specific operating environments.

Breadth must be replaced with Depth: Regional overviews do not provide a sufficient knowledge base for complex operations. The Army War College, Air War College, and National War College, for example, provide senior officer students with regional instruction, but students are encouraged to select a region in which they have little or no familiarity. An African FAO, for example, is discouraged from taking electives on Africa. This approach provides a travel guide level of knowledge that gives familiarity with strategic issues, but not necessarily understanding. In short, in the present system, it prepares someone to go to a GCC, but it does not provide the GCC with the level of knowledge necessary to formulate optimally effective plans or to operate on an equal footing with interagency counterparts.

War colleges should instead focus on advanced studies of geo-strategic issues, not introductory level studies for students who do not have a foundation of first-hand experience. These would ideally start in intermediate level education and influence assignments for the duration of that officer's career, to include more advanced studies at war colleges. Command emphasis should also be placed on attendance at the existing regional programs at the Army's Special Warfare Center and the Air Force's Special Operations School. Furthermore, as the U.S. military continues its self-hypnosis about being a learning organization, this must extend to regional studies. As such, regional positions as instructors/professors at military academic institutions should be viewed as dynamic platforms for promising leaders.

Empower SDO/DATTs: There must be recognition that the rapport between SDO/DATTs and senior leaders should transcend purely hierarchical relationships. A general officer would be loath to give medical advice to a doctor or technical advice to a pilot, regardless of their rank. In a similar vein, that same general officer needs to recognize the specialist nature of being a Foreign Area Officer and Defense Attaché. This requires a departure from a cognitive paradigm of favoring tactical prowess over regional understanding. This does not relieve FAOs from being tactically sound and understanding both conventional and SOF operations, but rather recognizes their critical enabler function, particularly in embassy settings.

SOF Liaison Elements (SOFLE): Especially in the absence of military attachés with a background in special operations, SOFLEs play an invaluable role in coordinating SOF activities and advising the ambassador and country team. The effectiveness of SOFLEs, however, is diminished as a result of their high turnover rates and short-duration missions. All too often, they are also new to a region. Optimally, SOFLE tenure in an embassy should exceed one year.[15] Furthermore, offering these officers the opportunity to bring their families to some embassy environments on extended rotations would enhance familiarization with both foreign and interagency cultures, and provide for more sustainable staffing.

Understand Budgets and Authorities: In the modern interagency battlefield, the understanding of resources and authorities can be more important than knowledge of weapon systems or the enemy order of battle, especially where funds are approved by one agency and executed by another. Lines of effort, critical events, and decisive points that are not synchronized with specific authorities, resources, and timelines for budget allocation are not only command approved fictions, they are distractors from the longer term approaches most characteristic of U.S. embassy country teams. This is no longer the exclusive purview of security cooperation officers and SOF; this knowledge must extend to senior leaders and staffs throughout the military.

Partnerships with the Host Nation: Partnerships with a host nation can proffer significant gains, but they often require long-term relationships built on trust, not short-term imperatives. A SOF captain who goes to a country for a short-duration mission will likely develop relationships with foreign counterparts. If that same officer returns as a major and again as a lieutenant colonel, he then has the opportunity to expand upon those relationships and levels of trust in a manner that will have military benefit. If he later has the opportunity to be assigned to the U.S. Embassy as a SOFLE or military attaché in that country, he will have a level of credibility, network of senior contacts, and expertise highly valued and utilized by country team counterparts.

Institutional memory rests with people, not with databases: By definition, databases reduce the richness of knowledge into storable and accessible data. This, however, presumes that the people drawing on that data have a sufficient base of knowledge to understand, contextualize, and apply it. Furthermore, interagency partners cannot always be relied upon to provide relevant and accurate regional understanding or to have the access to attain such knowledge. This is a capability that must be firmly rooted in both SOF and the larger military.

Balance SOF Roles: Prowess in direct action cannot come at the expense of emphasis on being able to understand operating environments and the consequences of direct action. An understanding of basic socio-economic dynamics, for example, can be more important than the names of individual insurgents, who perhaps should be viewed less as the sources of conflict and more as symptoms of larger issues. Their removal may in turn exacerbate instability rather than promote it.

Critical Thinking Cannot Replace Actual Knowledge: Approaches such as operational design and critical thinking must be methodologically sound complements to a strong base of knowledge, not a substitute. "Critical Thinking" and operational design models, in addition to providing fresh and unbiased insights, can also be crutches used to compensate for inadequate preparation and experience. There is an inherent contradiction in "questioning assumptions" when a staff does not have the base of knowledge to adequately understand those assumptions or the likely unintended consequences of action. This lack of knowledge diminishes the staff role of advising commanders and can result in increased command-influenced groupthink, potentially placing the military in a subservient and/or confrontational role with interagency partners

With this in mind, it is interesting that the same former CJTF-HOA commander recounts in his article that his lack of regional knowledge was actually an asset because it allowed him to approach the challenges he faced with an open mind.[16] The article concludes with the ultimate success of his tenure as a commander and the knowledge he attained. While in no way disputing this finding, it is interesting to conjecture how much more successful he would have been had he had any sort of background or experience in the region or experience working in a U.S. embassy.

Conclusion

In Afghanistan and Iraq the U.S. military operated so long without credible regional understanding, expertise, and continuity that these elements have largely lost value in leadership and decisionmaking structures. In both cases a failure to understand and operationally account for basic social factors played a significant role in the challenges faced by the U.S. military and its interagency partners. Even with the benefit of hindsight, many in the U.S. military still do not fully comprehend the complexity and nuance that the United States and its coalition partners faced in those settings. Attempting to repeat the performance of Iraq and Afghanistan in newly relevant operating environments is to invite failure.

In today's globalized world, clear dividing lines between stability operations and combat operations no longer exist. These terms are but categorizations of convenience imposed by the U.S. military. Populations can no longer be segregated from conflict, and understanding the socio-economic drivers of conflict is something that SOF must have the same proficiency

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U.S. Soldiers transport and unpack humanitarian aid to an Afghani town.

in as direct action. DOD Instruction 3000.5 (Stability Operations) rightly blurs the lines between combat and stability, which are often overlapping and concurrent. Both types of operations require ongoing efforts to understand changing social structures and attitudes. This requires not just regionally knowledgeable field operators, but also complementary higher staffs. If it is unrealistic for the conventional military to gain and maintain these skills due to personnel shortfalls and worldwide rotational requirements, it is increasingly incumbent on SOF to make up for these shortfalls.

While SOF is on the forefront of many of these undertakings, it is by no means alone, nor is it a guarantor of its own success. Interagency partners such as the State Department and USAID play a valuable role in gaining approval for action, as well as adding to a broader comprehension of the operating environment. In turn, there must be a reciprocal willingness to understand and systematically incorporate these perspectives into plans and operations, especially in other than declared theaters of conflict scenarios. This requires more than common sense, campaign plan rhetoric, and force of will by senior officers. It requires in-depth knowledge of the factors underlying social systems, and methods to incorporate changing conditions into plans and operations.

It is too late to attempt to gain such knowledge in compressed crisis action timelines. Military education, combined with Phase Zero operations and partnering with interagency counterparts in U.S. embassies, provides the opportunity to enhance U.S. military capability. However, these experiences must be meaningful. If they are not utilized as a means to invest in people and capture

complex social analysis, they will produce superficial long-term benefits. In Iraq, Fallujah and Baghdad were complex scenarios, but their scale pales in comparison to megacities and imploded societies throughout much of the developing world. Major urban areas, ethnic wars, and resource-driven conflict are indeed complex to a degree that might appear incomprehensible. However, now is the time to factor that complexity (and the limitations it will engender) into our plans and capabilities so we can properly assess realistic and achievable goals and endstates. PRISM

Notes

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[16] Wayne W. Grigsby Jr., Cheryl Sim and Matt Dabkowski, 2015.