



Translational Research

at the USMC Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning

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Part 1: Friction Points and Culture in Integrated Military Partnerships

By Kristin Post

There are many configurations of military partnerships. In Afghanistan, the multinational mission has involved more than 40 different countries operating together in NATO headquarters and regional areas of operation (AOs). However, the most salient partnership of Operation Enduring Freedom has been between its “native” forces and its foreign military partners. The host nation military is often superseded during a military intervention [1], and a rebuilding process is frequently necessary. This is all the more true in Afghanistan, which is struggling to overcome a number of issues, including depleted leadership structure, corruption, poverty, and high illiteracy [2]. NATO’s training premise is that “only Afghans can ultimately secure and stabilize their country” [3]. In order to get the Afghan security forces to this point, NATO partners have “integrated” with Afghan police or army units. Even as the overall force levels are decreasing, this integrated partnership remains critical as Afghans progress toward self-sufficiency.

An “integrated” military partnership is formally defined as “different national armed forces [that are] working and living together” [4]. I observed how this played out in Helmand Province, where Marines and Afghans lived, trained, planned, patrolled, engaged the local population, and executed missions together. From September 2009 to June 2010, I was deployed for nine months as a social scientist on the Human Terrain Team (HTT7). My observations during this time period will form the basis of a two-part series of articles. The first will address the basic cultural misunderstandings that occur as a result of two military and national cultures living together in the same space. The second article will recount how Marines worked with their Afghan partners in response to personnel and leadership issues. Although these articles do not contribute to a formal assessment of the Marine-Afghan partnership [5], they will highlight certain challenges and opportunities that are often overlooked when executing joint military operations.

Research Notes

CAOCL Hosts a Norwegian Army Lieutenant Social Anthropologist

Lieutenant Margrethe Haug of the Norwegian Army spent January 2011 with CAOCL to learn how the Marine Corps addresses culture, specifically general social science concepts and skills, in professional military education and predeployment training.

Upcoming Event: Civilian-Military Round Table Discussion, 18 May 2011

CAOCL’s Translational Research Group, in partnership with the Marine Corps University’s Command and Staff College, is hosting a round table discussion on the “Rules of Engagement: what are the ethics and strategies behind the civilian-military relationship?” to identify ways to improve CAOCL training and education efforts on how institutional culture impacts effective partnering in multi-lateral, multi-agency operations in conflict, post-conflict and post-disaster areas.

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual author and do not necessarily represent the views of either CAOCL or any other governmental agency. Any references to this newsletter should include the foregoing statement.

There are inherent challenges to establishing any “integrated” military partnership. There is, of course, the risk of force protection in combining two groups with weapons and unknown allegiances [6]. There is also the intensity of the conflict. For each partner, every life-threatening event that occurs can result in decreased motivation, or “a negative impact on willingness to cooperate with military personnel from other nations” [7]. However, even if there are no life-threatening events, the success of multinational partnerships is threatened by “misunderstandings and disagreements related to culture and language” [8]. These differences in national and military cultures are significant, even among Western powers. For instance, a NATO partnership in Afghanistan between German and Dutch partners led to a situation where the Dutch said the Afghans were not their main problem. Rather, it was the Germans, due to issues over food quality, alcohol policies and telephone availability [9]. This is critical to note for the future partnerships into which Marines may enter, following Afghanistan. Judging from this example, any integrated partnership has the potential to fail as a result of national or military cultural differences.

Afghanistan is unique in that these cultural differences are extremely obvious. In the table below, I list some of the common points of friction that I observed between Marines and Afghans. These friction points are significant in that the “little things” can result in a lack of trust or disrespect between partner forces. On the other hand, cultural friction is not indicative of a failed partnership. In fact, despite these aggravations, Marines and Afghans shared a great deal of mutual good will, as evidenced by their sharing mealtimes, playing volleyball or soccer when not on patrol, and having movie nights or karaoke nights to pass the time. Moreover, Marines and Afghans continue to successfully execute daily military operations with rare exceptions.

Table 1: Common Points of Cultural Friction Observed [10]

Marines	Afghans
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sanitation and hygiene • Use of cell phones • Tardiness or “moving slowly” • Internal friction (within Afghan unit) • Nepotism • Drug use • Major or minor abuse of local population • “Lack of motivation” especially among leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of water for prayer/ablutions • Difficulty in getting permission to leave the base • “Stinginess” when requested to share equipment • Bad-tasting Meals Ready to Eat (MREs) • Prayer locations and time to pray • Insulting use of language

National and military cultural differences combine to create these friction points. For instance, a national cultural difference is evident in the most prevalent Marine complaint, bathroom use. Port-a-johns and plywood stalls are built with toilet seats which are made for sitting; whereas Afghans are accustomed to squatting. Add to that the expeditionary solution of the “wag bag.” Afghans may not intuitively understand the process, which involves capturing waste in a zip lock bag and occasionally transporting it to a burn pit. In addition to the unfamiliar mechanics, cultural factors come into play. For some Afghans, the idea of carrying human waste in public, even in a bag, and despite the expeditionary circumstances, is shameful.

In another example, cell phone use reflects both national and military cultural differences. Afghan national culture prioritizes the family unit. Afghan police and soldiers were observed using cell phones whenever a signal was available, likely in order to maintain contact with their families. This is in stark contrast to the almost non-existent cell phone use by Marines [11]. Even if Marines wanted to stay in touch with their families, they and their families have been acculturated to expect minimal communication over long periods of time [12]. Afghans could perceive Marines’ lack of communication as a sign of disrespect for the family, and Marines could view Afghans use of cell phones as unprofessional or undermining mission security. These kinds of misunderstandings are layered in cultural and practical issues; but despite their complex origins, they are rather simple to address.

Since mutual trust between partner forces in high intensity environments is critical [13], it is worth considering options for increasing this trust. One way to do this is through training, of which there are two kinds. The Marines can prepare themselves for their new cultural environment (and are doing so) through pre-deployment training. However, most general infantry pre-deployment training focuses on interacting with the local population, rather than on the issues of military partnerships. The Marine Corps Center for Advanced Operational Cultural Learning (CAOCL) provides a brief on Afghan security forces, and has the capacity to develop additional briefs on common cultural friction points for other missions involving military partnering, if requested by the operating forces.

Research News

24 February 2011

Dr. Wendy Chambers presented "Iraqi Perceptions of US-Led Counter-IED Training in Iraq" to the Small Wars Discussion Group in Quantico, VA.

25 February 2011

Ms. Erika Tarzi along with Ms. Kristin Post led the Enhanced Staff Ride proof of concept at Yorktown with select faculty from Marine Corps University's Command and Staff College.

17 March 2011

Ms. Jennifer Clark presented "The Anfal Campaign: Mass Graves, Forensic Archaeology, and the Prosecution of Saddam" at the Small Wars Discussion Group in Quantico, VA.

The other kind of training is done by the Marine unit with the military partners after they are embedded together. This inter-cultural training about American culture and Marine culture will prepare their partners for how to best understand and work with Marines. For example, prior to distributing MREs, Marines could demonstrate how they are heated. Since communication and training styles differ among all of the militaries, Marines could show a few video clips of their basic training to illustrate the communication and training styles they have developed. Much of this kind of information is transferred on an individual basis, but pre-prepared hip pocket briefs reflect a proactive stance to potential (and common) friction points.

It is logical that joint military partnerships focus on the military aspects of partnering: mission execution, force protection, logistics, etc. However, there is also reason to prepare oneself and one's partner for the cultural aspects of the partnership. The purpose is not to shift the focus away from the military aspects, but to widen the aperture to consider other factors that contribute to a successful partnership. Cultural friction points seem insignificant, but any military partnership will benefit from improved cross cultural understanding, especially "integrated" partnerships that involve intense, rigorous and dangerous activities.

Notes:

- [1] Small Wars Manual. 1940, 12-3, p. 2
- [2] NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A) "Year in Review, November, 2009-November, 2010" (2010).
- [3] Ibid, p. 6
- [4] Dr. Tibor Tresch, "Multicultural Challenges for Armed Forces in Theatre," Military Power Revue der Schweizer Armee, Nr 2-2007 (2007): 37.
- [5] There is no known formal academic research on the Afghan-Marine partnership. However, the Marines have published products which address various aspects of military partnerships. These include the Marine Corps Combat Development Command's "Tentative Manual For Partnering Operations" (April 2010) and the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity's pamphlet on "Military Culture and Society in Iran" viewed on [http://projects.publicintegrity.org/iranintelligence/Iran%20\(D\)/html/iran/MilitaryCulture/index.html](http://projects.publicintegrity.org/iranintelligence/Iran%20(D)/html/iran/MilitaryCulture/index.html).
- [6] Since late November 2010, seven US troops have been killed by Afghan security forces. Tom Vandenbrook, USA Today, posted February 17, 2011. <http://www.marinecorps-times.com/news/2011/02/ap-afghan-security-forces-undergo-stricter-vetting-021711/>
- [7] Dr. Tibor Tresch, "Multicultural Challenges for Armed Forces in Theatre," Military Power Revue der Schweizer Armee, Nr 2-2007 (2007): 41.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] Ibid. p 37.
- [10] What appears are culturally-related themes overheard in conversation with Marines and Afghans and observed while living on jointly operated patrol bases. They are not representative of all the challenges each party faced. Furthermore, Marines often spoke to me in private, while most Afghans spoke to me in translated interviews (often with Marines nearby). In this context, Afghans tended to discuss their issues with their leadership or their government, rather than with their Marine partners, and thus this list of Afghan friction points is more heavily reliant on what I observed rather than what they said.
- [11] Some Marines used cell phones to keep in contact with Afghan partners; but the general policy is that cell phones are an operational security threat.
- [12] The documentary "The Marines" shows the first night of basic training, where every recruit is told to call his or her family to request they not be in communication. This is one of many examples where Marines and their families are "trained" to expect lack of communication.
- [13] Dr. Tibor Tresch, "Multicultural Challenges for Armed Forces in Theatre," Military Power Revue der Schweizer Armee, Nr 2-2007 (2007): 42.

The Military Social Science 2011 Colloquium

By Erika Tarzi

CAOCL's Translational Research Group (TRG) and the Marine Corps Combat Development Command's Operational Analysis Division co-sponsored the Military Operational Research Society's Military Social Science 2011 Colloquium at the Gray Research Center at Quantico, Virginia, on 18 March 2011. This colloquium provided a multi-disciplinary overview and review of the current state of social science practice in the Marine Corps and offered military social and behavioral science practitioners from across the services and DoD a forum to exchange ideas and stimulate collaboration. TRG staff was heavily involved in conference planning and organizing and also actively participated in the colloquium panels. The following is a brief synopsis of TRG's panel presentations:

TRG's Director, Dr. Fosher, provided introductory remarks, emphasizing the value of partnering social and behavioral scientists with the warfighter to expose these scientists to a unique kind of peer-review and critique that helps ensure the operational relevance of their work. She stressed this during her TRG presentation for the "Where is Social Science Headed in the Marine Corps?" panel, elaborating on TRG's mission to integrate social and behavioral science in Marine Corps initiatives and support CAOCL's training and education work. "This is a group effort," she added, "that requires both Marines and social and behavioral scientists at the table to ensure success."

TRG's Dr. Tortorello presented "Cultural Training: Professional Judgment, Not Numbers", which looked at the cultural process for training Marines to be warfighters, as part of the panel on "Assessing USMC Culture Training and Education". Dr. Tortorello discussed how we order our moral world through physicality and the messages our movements send, drawing on examples from his participant observation of the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program. The challenge, he noted, was conducting cultural assessments and overcoming the institutional need for quantitative data to demonstrate effectiveness. He left the audience with the following question, "How do you convert professional judgment into accepted assessment data?"

In the afternoon session on DoD Field Ethnography, TRG's Ms. Jennifer Clark and Ms. Kristin Post presented on their personal experiences with field ethnography in Iraq and Afghanistan respectively. Using a variety of examples and lessons learned, they challenged the audience to think about how social science practitioners can best serve the military's needs in conflict zones. They asked them to consider if we best serve a need doing field-work in conflict zones or if we are better assets as teachers and trainers to military counterparts who serve in foreign locales. While there were no firm conclusions, the ensuing discussion proved lively.

Overall, the colloquium was a success. It not only served as a forum for professional exchange but also fostered deeper collaboration and partnership between Marine Corps organizations.

Translational Research at USMC's Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning

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