



# Translational Research

at the USMC Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning

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## Marines and Foreign Military Cultures

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*"... the human dimension is central in war. It is the human dimension which infuses war with its intangible moral factors."*

*Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication-1: Warfighting*

### Why do Marines need knowledge of foreign military culture?<sup>1</sup>

Through doctrinal publications, Marine Corps leadership articulates the importance of understanding human factors for Marines to effectively exploit an opponent's weaknesses. Acknowledging the dictum of ancient military strategist, Sun Tsu, the U.S. military has dedicated significant resources to "know thy enemy and know thyself." However, much of the emphasis has been on tangible, material capabilities, including number of enemy personnel, number and type of armored vehicles, size of air force, etc. The U.S. military seems to struggle with understanding those intangible moral factors that Marine Corps leadership recognizes are introduced by the human dimension of warfighting. This is not surprising; intangibles "are difficult to grasp and impossible to quantify. We cannot easily gauge forces like national and military resolve, national and individual conscience, emotion, fear, courage, morale, leadership, or esprit."<sup>ii</sup> These and other such factors, referred to as military culture in this article, are powerful influencers in the battlespace, but hard to grasp for the very reason they are intangible. Furthermore, these factors are not only embodied by "thy enemies" and "thyself." Much of Marines' interaction with foreign peoples involves working with, rather than against, foreign military personnel. Marine missions across the range of military operations require Marines to understand friendly foreign security forces as well. Thus, the applicability of understanding the "other" extends beyond exploiting an opponent's weaknesses and requires Marines to understand the cultural factors shaping a foreign military in order to use them for mutual benefit.

Efforts to date to infuse cultural learning into the Marine Corps training and education continuum have emphasized the value of understanding the cultures of local populations and have yet to formalize learning about the cultures of our foreign military partners. National security documents and policy papers point out that the American military will increasingly rely on engaging partner and allied security forces to meet national security objectives. Accordingly, the Marine Corps is increasingly called upon to engage in missions "... to improve the capabilities of local governments and their security forces to increase stability and prevent conflict. This requires Marines who are not only fighters, but also trainers, mentors and advisors - roles requiring unique

### Research Notes

#### "Resiliency"

In May, William Marcellino and Amanda Boak-Riggs began work assisting Frank Tortorello on the TECOM-sponsored resiliency project. Bill is a researcher who is a sociolinguist as well as a former U.S. Marine rifleman and tank officer. Amanda is a research assistant with a background in public policy and political science. Her experience includes working at the Center for Complex Operations at National Defense University and the United Methodist Committee on Relief.

#### "CAOCL Survey II"

On 4 May, "CAOCL Survey II" launched to thousands of Marines. This survey investigates how Marines value and use culture on deployment.

#### CAOCL Disclaimer

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual authors 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.

and highly-desirable skills.”<sup>iii</sup> This trend in Marine Corps’ missions is consistent with the U.S. military’s strategy “... to employ indirect approaches – primarily through building the capacity of partner governments and their security forces – to prevent festering problems from turning into crises that require costly and controversial direct military intervention.”<sup>iv</sup> Thus, in addition to the cultural knowledge and skills Marines need for dealing with foreign civilian populations, it is imperative to improve Marines’ cultural knowledge and skills to work with foreign security forces in a variety of settings, including partnering, training, combined exercises, coalition warfare, and others. And such understanding requires going beyond the tangible capabilities of a foreign security force to hone in on those intangible influencers that shape how it trains, learns, adapts, builds cohesiveness, and fights.

Taking into account the intangibles in our partnered forces is important so that Marines can begin to answer many of the “why?” questions that arise during engagements and so facilitate more effective partnering. For example, what is considered honorable and brave in some Sub-Saharan states explains why many officers in the region neglect the concept of force protection. Local commanders may be afraid they will lose the respect of their troops if they wear body armor or take cover during a firefight. Accounting for this when preparing training events or collaborating with such forces will help Marines anticipate what local forces will or will not accept as part of joint activities or as best practices in their own training. Having this knowledge before interacting with a foreign force will yield more impactful learning, lessen misunderstanding, advance collaboration more effectively and efficiently, and assist in shaping realistic, achievable objectives.

### **Military culture is different**

The military culture in any state is different, to varying degrees, from the prevailing cultures in society. The military organization can be a powerful instrument in changing the culture of those joining its ranks. In fact, in many cases the values, beliefs and behavior of members of the armed forces are inconsistent with those of the society at large. Steep hierarchy, strict discipline, and readiness to self-sacrifice for brother-in-arms and mission in the armed forces can be quite incompatible with individualism, self-indulgence, and discursive pluralism found in liberal democracies. Of course, military organizations have varying ability, or willingness, to change the culture of their members. Some militaries are apprehensive of changing the culture of personnel too much and thereby creating a large gulf between society and the armed forces in terms of outlook, values, and beliefs. Germany, for example, thinking back to the collaboration of the armed forces with the Nazi regime, aims to maintain a strong connection between military and society by deliberately cultivating “citizen soldiers” – active members of society and the political community, sharing a professional ethic tied to the values of democracy. In the United States, on the other hand, some argue there is a growing cultural gap between the military and the society it serves and protects; the values and outlooks of each seem to increasingly diverge.<sup>v</sup> The point is that the military organization and the society from which it is derived are different in their cultural patterns. Studying only the cultural attributes of local populations limits a full appreciation of intangible influencers shaping Marines’ operations.

### **A military culture framework for Marines**

The existing approaches to analyzing military forces are inherently limited as they treat countries’ militaries as organizations with consistent cultural patterns, thereby excluding contradictions, nuances, and paradoxes as well as larger social and political contexts. Differences in missions, training, tradition, and leadership can lead to discrete cultural patterns for each unit within the same service. Marines need to be able to account not only for diversity between the culture of a military and society at large, but also for diversity within a single military organization and within the various units of that organization in order to anticipate how culture may impact the outcome of a mission. For example, in countries such as Georgia, Columbia, and Mexico, military units training with Marines tend to be among the best the countries have and are unique within their national military organizations. In Sub-Saharan Africa, some units are tasked with ensuring the survival of the ruling elite and may be made up exclusively of members of a particular ethnic group; these units not only have unique functions, missions, and capabilities, but also personnel who are not representative of the ethnic makeup of the society at large. Accordingly, the unit’s culture and behavior are distinct from any other unit in the armed forces. The ability of Marines to appreciate these cultural differences can enhance their planning effectiveness and enable them to overcome potential cultural friction points. Therefore, an analytical framework that not only helps Marines gain understanding of the prevailing culture in a military organization, but also assists them in navigating the culture of the units with which they will interact, may serve to decrease some of the current complexity in partnership and engagement relationships.

A military culture framework should provide the means to systematically analyze a foreign military culture. Such a framework is not intended to provide ‘the answers’ per se, but rather a general set of guidelines or tools for Marines to use to seek out relevant information prior to and during deployments. It is also

designed for curriculum developers to apply to specific military forces. The framework should be a menu of choices; Marines should focus only on those elements that are most relevant to their mission. Curriculum developers, on the other hand, having relatively more time, can analyze all elements in order to gain a fuller understanding of the foreign military culture.

The framework should address how to identify the “big picture” of a foreign military culture, including, for example, the strategic and military implications of a state’s strategic culture, the functions of the military organization in the context of the state’s national security system, and the interplay of military and civilian/national culture. Additionally, it needs to address how to identify the cultures of the military’s numerous subgroups and organizations and how to figure out what makes individuals join, stay, serve, share, endure, and sacrifice in these subgroups and in the larger organization. The framework also must help Marines operationalize the knowledge. Cultural information can be very abstract unless its relevance is demonstrated. For example, in training missions, knowing the cultural patterns of the foreign unit may be useful as it can help Marines gain insights into how the foreign unit processes information and learns new practices. Therefore, as a first step, the military culture framework should provide the tools to examine the following:

- Strategic culture: How does the state see its place and goals in the international security environment? What is the state’s outlook on international cooperation and conflict? What are the enduring national interests?
- National security system: How does the state’s strategic culture influence the role and functions of the national military? How does the state attain domestic and international security? What are the functions of the military in the national security system? What are the politics of national security?
- Civil-military relations: What is the role of the military in the political system? What is the extent of civilian and democratic control of the armed forces? What are the relations between military and society? Are the national and military policies aligned?
- Military organizational culture: What are the organization’s doctrine and mission? What are the formal core values, symbols, and important narratives? What is its experience in warfighting and other operations? What is the formal view on what represents legitimate violence? What are the differences/similarities between the military culture and prevailing civilian cultures? What are the Officer/NCO/enlisted/draftees relationships? What are the decision-making and planning processes? What are the levels of horizontal, vertical, and organizational trust? What is the capacity for joint and combined operations? What is the level of risk tolerance? What is the system for career-long education and training? How do military personnel process information and learn?<sup>vi</sup> How do they handle death and injury, including physical, psychological, and moral injuries? What are the promotion and punishment processes?
- Military sub-cultures. In addition to most of the factors from the previous bullet, this element also includes: What are the formal and informal values and beliefs? How do sub-groups interact? What is the informal understanding of legitimate violence? How does unity of effort work? How is commander’s intent interpreted? What is the extent of esprit de corps? What is the degree of unit cohesiveness and how is it achieved and broken? What are the degrees of flexibility and adaptability? What is leadership? What is the level of initiative? What is the individual’s motivation to join, stay, serve, endure, and sacrifice? How do individuals and units learn, train, adapt, and fight? What is seen as heroic and cowardly? How do they perceive the U.S. military and the U.S. Marines?

Second, the framework should also include sections operationalizing the elements and providing strategies to help answer the “so what?” considerations for Marines. These strategies should provide Marines insights into how the elements are related, what range of unit behavior is probable, and, in general, help them anticipate the second- and third-order effects of actions and policies. At the same time, it must be made clear that gaining insights into the culture of the foreign military unit does not lead to prediction of behavior; it is rather about anticipating the ranges of the probable, possible, and likely.

Third, because information might be unavailable, and planning time limited, such a framework should also provide guidelines on how Marines can capture the needed knowledge once their interaction with their foreign counterparts commences. Marines need to free themselves of preconceived notions and stereotypes about the foreign military and observe the behavior and symbols of their counterparts. It is as if they must complete a puzzle with its own, sometimes very different, logic and structure.

### **How to study a military culture?**

Military culture displays both persistent and dynamic tendencies. As with any culture, military culture is enduring as values, organization, and functions persist over time. However, military culture also changes over time in response to variations in the state and society, the impact of war, the role of leadership, the advance of

technology, and aggregations of changes in individual thought and behavior. Therefore, understanding another military culture requires that Marines and analysts capture both tendencies. It requires historical perspective, the collection and analysis of current information, and observation through their ongoing interactions with the other military.

How do we get this knowledge and information? Some of it is already widely available in open sources.<sup>vii</sup> There are many national level history books that provide information on the role of the military in the history of the country; they outline the traditional functional role of the military organization and describe how it sees itself in the life of the nation, how it has performed in various conflicts, and what its relationship is with the society and the state. This body of knowledge also describes what the military values, what it measures itself up against, and what it sees as its traditional allies and enemies, both internal and external. Furthermore, the organization's doctrine and missions, studies of its attitudes, self-image, and relationship with society and state institutions published in journal and news articles can provide a more contemporary snapshot of the role and nature of the military organization and its culture. In some cases, however, information may be simply unavailable, particularly with regard to the specific units with whom Marines may be interacting. In this case, the Marines will have to gather it through observation while working with their counterparts.

## Conclusion

Marines have a long tradition of working with foreign militaries. This tradition is reflected in many of their doctrinal publications. The Small Wars Manual first captured the Corps' thoughts on interacting with foreign security forces, and many of these concepts were reworked as part of MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency. Recent extensive engagements with coalition and local forces in Iraq and Afghanistan have added further valuable lessons. However, despite these accumulated experiences, we have not yet fully equipped ourselves with the needed understanding to be most effective in interacting with allies and partners. Budget constraints and political realities in the near future will lead to continued combined activities across the range of military operations. Marines' participation in Combatant Commands' theater security cooperation efforts will expand significantly. Marines will be involved in the training and advising of foreign security forces and building partnership capacity in conflict prevention and warfighting. At the same time, Marines will have to build upon the Corp's ability to plan and execute missions in a variety of settings with traditional allies. These activities demand a detailed understanding of foreign security forces' culture. For this reason, a comprehensive approach to learning about military culture is needed to prepare Marines for their future operations.

### Notes:

<sup>i</sup>Military culture is used in this article as a shorthand for the intangible qualities of a military organization, including values, beliefs, morale, behavior, cohesiveness, trust, esprit de corps, etc.

<sup>ii</sup>Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1, *Warfighting*, p. 16.

<sup>iii</sup>35th Commandant of the Marine Corps, "Commandant's Planning Guidance, 2010," p. 6.

<sup>iv</sup>Secretary Robert Gates, "A Balanced Strategy" in *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2009).

<sup>v</sup>See for example Pew Research Center, *The Military-Civilian Gap: War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era* (5 October 2011). Available at <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2011/10/veterans-report.pdf>. See also Wendy Chambers, "Divided We Stand: Reflections on Civilians, Warfighters and War," CAOCL Dispatches Vol. 2, Issue 1.

<sup>vi</sup>Wendy Chambers, "Your Smarts Aren't Like Mine: Understanding Intellect Across Cultures," CAOCL Dispatches, Vol. 1, No. 3. The article discusses how Marines can gain understanding of what intelligence in the local culture is, but similar approaches can be applied to understanding how the local culture understands bravery, cohesiveness, leadership, etc.

<sup>vii</sup>Marine Corps Intelligence Activity also produces unclassified, FOUO military culture studies.

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