WHAT ARE THE PROS AND CONS OF CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE IN COUNTERINSURGENCY OPERATIONS?

Alexandros Kassidiaris

(Security Analyst, Postgraduate from the Department of War Studies, King's College London, UK)

'If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles' (Sun Tzu, 2012). The importance of thoroughly knowing and understanding the enemy on the battlefield can be summarized in this well-known and diachronic Sun Tzu's quotation. But what are the implications of this 'knowledge' in the contemporary operational theater? Besides the military and tactical capabilities, the significance of other individual key elements cannot be overlooked. One of the prominent elements that fall into this category is the familiarization with the enemy's cultural context. This hypothesis is even more vital when the potential enemy may be hidden among the civilians of a specific population which actually shapes the traditional pattern of insurgencies.

The key aspects of cultural intelligence and the potential benefits that it offers during counterinsurgency operations will be examined in this essay. A complete image will be provided by studying in depth the parameters of US engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2001 to date, regarding those particular difficulties that US forces faced as a consequence of the ignorance upon crucial parameters related to the insurgents' culture. Additionally the possible fallacies deriving from generalizing and oversimplifying the principles of culture awareness are going to be equally stressed.

Definition of Cultural Intelligence and its Impact on Battlefield

Cultural intelligence is the pluralistic process that makes a person understand and adapt to new cultural contexts (Earley, 2003). Practically, when applied in the

operational theatre, it could be seen as a useful means of supplying personnel with the information needed, in order an adequate degree of familiarization to be created with a given area and the local population, a key success factor in COIN operations (Gentry, 2010).

There is a founded belief that a wrong interpretation of the socio-political situation would downgrade even the most excellent tactical capabilities (Marston & Malkasian, 2008). This assumption stresses the great importance of cultural awareness when facing an insurgency. Knowing exactly who the insurgents are would enhance the possibilities to win. However in order this to be achieved, another parameter tightly connected to cultural awareness should be initially ensured; gaining and maintaining the support of local people (Nagl, 2005).

In an attempt to present a complete image of the cultural intelligence process during COIN operations a summary of the suggested sequence of actions will follow.

Primarily cultural research and analysis of the suggested country and people should take place if possible before the deployment of COIN forces. The research should provide an *a priori* ambiguous image of the synthesis and distribution of the people along the region; as a result the sectors that the operating personnel should focus on would be already defined. Ground forces should promote a convenient and trustworthy attitude towards the locals, combined with deep respect for their way of life and beliefs, in order a climate of mutual trust to be achieved much more easily and quickly. Such a climate would be created only if the COIN forces achieve a great degree of cultural awareness. This kind of productive interaction may give timely access to significant information, regarding the fact that the insurgent groups are not always likely to be friendly to or even tolerated by the whole population. Therefore there is a strong potential of creating ties with the locals and eventually establishing an intelligence network based on domestic sources (Amos et al., 2008).

Going up hierarchically towards operational and strategic level it seems that the proper evaluation and use of that intelligence can be determining, since the decision makers are aware of the insurgents' culture. Religious and cultural knowledge will give the analysts the ability to predict precisely enough, future action of the insurgents, probable targets, areas of increased risk or periods of repose. Following the intelligence cycle and going back to the forces located on field, a

cooperation that could drastically reduce insurgents' capabilities and at the same time protect adequately the operating personnel is achieved.

Cultural anthropologist Montgomery McFate has aptly summarized how the lack of cultural awareness could sabotage a clandestine operation in each and every level: 'Misunderstanding culture at a strategic level can produce policies that exacerbate an insurgency; a lack of cultural knowledge at an operational level can lead to negative public opinion; and ignorance of the culture at a tactical level endangers both civilians and troops.' (McFate, 2005).

Potential Drawbacks of Cultural Intelligence

Thus far cultural intelligence has proved to be a useful tool for COIN operations. There are some points of special attention though, that if not considered properly could be misleading and bring opposite results from those sought.

The most usual mistake is oversimplifying and generalizing the concept of cultural awareness; applying it with no prior research and without considering the unique characteristics that define every nation, religion or group of people. For example a claim that all Arabs would act alike during an insurgency should be characterized at least as naïve; or taking for granted a specific reaction when facing an enemy in different time periods is equally wrong. As Porter had aptly remarked the role of cultural awareness may be deceiving and misleading when applied *dogmatically* (Porter, 2007).

Another critical parameter is the dynamics of the battle over the cultural context of a specific community. During counter-insurgency operations should always be considered the fluid nature of the people involved; regarding that insurgency and counterinsurgency could be seen as a peculiar category of war (Fearon & Laitin, 2003) the potential impact on the population is unpredictable. Factors like propaganda, casualties of close relatives and long-lasting stress could have a crucial effect on the people and eventually, notwithstanding how extensively has the cultural background been analyzed and it does remain a matter to change during operations. Inability to adapt to those changes would make the COIN forces futile and vulnerable (Porter, 2007).

How cultural intelligence affected US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan

The cases of US campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq are suggestive of the negative consequences following lack of cultural awareness. Now we should examine this assumption connected to all the three basic levels of planning.

A devastating miscalculation of US officials can be seen at the strategic level. The initial plan involved an ill-prepared 'Phase 4' of the war, with strategic objectives the termination of the conflict and the rebuilding of both countries. However during the planning for such a great venture no one seemed to seriously consider the former political structure and traditional "governmental" scheme (Cordman, 2003). In both cases US officials failed to really understand the very idea of the tribe-based and clan-based system. For example in Iraq Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) efforts for "de-ba'athification" of the country after toppling Saddam, made tribal system the most useful weapon in the insurgents' hands. Such procedures marginalized the once powerful and now humiliated men of the former regimes, created an isolating environment cutting the ties with the new central authority and turned large groups of people to the insurgents side (Baram, 2008).

Going down to operational and tactical level, the negative effect of US alienating policy had been unquestionable. The high-level of technological means seemed inadequate for vital intelligence gathering. The traditional *vis-a-vis* communication system dominating both countries, underlined the need for the creation of a network based on Human Intelligence (Ferris, 2003). Meanwhile the reluctance of Western personnel to leave the military bases and the isolation from local population (notwithstanding that it has been happening overall for security reasons), undermined the "hearts and minds" policy sought through actions like the educational and health system reconstruction (Duyvesteyn, 2011). Finally daily routine procedures, such as a body control (regarding Muslim strict body code especially when it comes to women) or a vehicle control could turn to serious or even lethal incidents due to the lack of cultural awareness (Baram, 2008).

Such discouraging developments pushed the policy makers in Washington and Heads Stuff of Pentagon re-conceptualize and rearrange their strategy. Under those circumstances the promising Human Terrain System program has emerged, with main objective the cultivation of cultural awareness among

Coalition forces. The central idea suggested the deployment of mixed teams consisted of military and civilian personnel that would conduct the appropriate research and then help the troops understand the socio-cultural and religious context of the operational environment. First teams have been deployed in 2007 and the impressive results led to a wide expansion of HT program (at least by far wider than the initial estimations) in terms of human and economic resources. A commander of the *Independence Brigade* had characteristically commented: "If someone told me they were taking my HTT, I'd have a platoon of infantry to stop them…The HTT has absolutely contributed to our operational mission" (McFate & Fondacaro, 2011). Eventually HTS managed to make the Coalition forces culturally aware and, therefore decision making, from highest to the lowest level, much more targeted and productive.

Conclusions

The catalytic role of cultural intelligence in COIN operations cannot be overlooked, by no means. The importance of this idea has been examined and proved, regarding the remarkable cultural turn in intelligence operations of last years, with the distinct examples of US engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan. However implicating that cultural intelligence is *panacea* and a divine solution to all intelligence failures of the past may be also tricking. Generalizing the concept can lead to wrong assessment and create a phony image of the enemy that could eventually put at stake the personnel and the operations. Apparently the *sectio aurea* lies between the thorough study and careful implementation of cultural intelligence concepts.

References:

Baram, A. (2008). *Who are the insurgents? Sunni Arab rebels in Iraq* (pp. 4-9). DIANE Publishing.

Cordesman, A. H. (2003). *Iraq: Too uncertain to call* (pp.2-3). Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Duyvesteyn, I. (2011). Hearts and Minds, Cultural Awareness and Good Intelligence: The Blueprint for Successful Counter-insurgency?. *Intelligence and National Security*, *26*(4), 448-449.

Earley, P. C. (2002). Redefining interactions across cultures and organizations: Moving forward with cultural intelligence. *Research in organizational behavior*, *24*, 274.

Fearon, J. D., & Laitin, D. D. (2003). Ethnicity, insurgency, and civil war. *American political science review*, *97*(01), 79-80.

Ferris, J. (2003). A New American Way of War? C4ISR, Intelligence and Information Operations in Operation 'Iraqi Freedom': A Provisional Assessment. *Intelligence and National Security*, *18*(4), 160.

Gentry, J. A. (2010). Intelligence learning and adaptation: Lessons from Counterinsurgency Wars. *Intelligence and National Security*, *25(1)*, 50-51, 75.

Marston, D., & Malkasian, C. (Eds.). (2008). *Counterinsurgency in modern warfare* (p. 16). Osprey Publishing.

McFate, M. (2005). The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture. *Joint Force Quarterly, 38(3),* 44.

McFate, M., & Fondacaro, S. (2011). Reflections on the Human Terrain System during the first 4 years. *Prism*, *2*(4), 64.

Nagl, J. A. (1999). Learning to eat soup with a knife: British and American Army counterinsurgency learning during the Malayan emergency and the Vietnam War. *World Affairs*, *161*(4), 193-199.

Nagl, J. A., Amos, J. F., Sewall, S., & Petraeus, D. H. (2008). *The US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (p.121). University of Chicago Press.

Porter, P. (2007). Good Anthropology, Bad History: The Cultural Turn in Studying War. *Parameters*, *37*(2), 46.

Tzu, S. (2012). *The Illustrated Art of War* (p. 111). Courier Corporation.