Effects of Culture on Training Foreign Security Forces

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The Problem

Beginning just a few years after World War II with the passage of the Greece-Turkey Security Act of 1947, the DoD has been in the business of training and advising foreign security forces with the purpose of increasing their capacity to provide for their own security. However, DoD's approach to these efforts is largely premised on management theories grounded in Western cultural norms of interpersonal interaction—characteristics not present in the Near East, Central and Southeast Asia, or across the Maghreb and the Horn of Africa where post-9/11 U.S. Security sector assistance focuses. Further, the focus has been at the tactical level, which has proven to be unsustainable.

Within the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), the Department of Defense (DoD) formally pointed to the need to build partner capacity, a theme that is repeated in subsequent DoD strategy publications. The 2014 QDR notes that "capacity building is neither an easy nor short term task. Traditional solutions, such as pre-packaged, untailored seminars or courses paid for by IMET [International Military Education and Training] appropriations, do not build sustainable capability. Sustainability requires the foreign partner to have institutions able to manage acquisition of material, arrange logistics services and manage human resources."

To build partner institutional capacity, DoD sponsors several Defense Institution Building (DIB) programs. To be successful, these programs require a tailored and patient approach to the cultural norms of the partner nation— something not frequently addressed by DoD practitioners.

Why Institutional Capacity Matters and How It Relates to Culture

In general, the biggest gaps at the institutional level are weak planning processes. Defense planners must identify, prioritize, fund, and sustain military capability within national budgetary structures. In Western culture, our planning processes tend to focus on points of disagreement, which empower stakeholders to arrive at consensus-based decisions. However, we have not encountered such processes in many non-Western nations. Rather, those decision-making processes

> **DoD's success rate in its capacity building efforts would improve by incorporating an understanding of how to account for host nation cultural norms prior to any capacity building initiative.**

avoid open deliberation of points of disagreement and process participants are not incentivized to make consensus-based decisions.

A case in point is the U.S.-funded and -installed Afghan Human Resources Information Management System (AHRIMS). The purpose of this automated information system for recording and archiving personnel information was to improve existing Afghan personnel management practices that rely on paper records. However, the system not only was unsustainable from a technical standpoint, it was also a cultural mismatch. As a result, the Afghans do not use the system. Rather they revert to paper processes with which they are more familiar. Why? For one reason, Afghan considerations, such as ethnically balancing the force—something AHRIMS was not designed to track or measure—trumped the Western norm of hiring and promoting based on a stratified ranking of merit.

DIB Must Apply Change Management Principles in a Culturally Relevant Way

A recent RAND report assessed the effectiveness of the Warsaw Initiative Fund (WIF) program, a DoD capacity building program, at building defense institutional capacity in the Balkans, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. The report found that WIF was moderately to slightly effective in the Balkans and the Caucasus, but ineffective in Central Asia because of the tribal loyalties that dilute a government's ability to manage using Western models of organization and governance (Perry, et al. 2013).

The RAND report alludes to something we have also observed as practitioners. Foreign culture presents barriers to the success of capacity building efforts; these barriers must be accounted for prior to engagement. Just because a nation's defense leaders agree to an offer of assistance from the United States does not mean they intend to embrace the advice. Americans, due to their cultural norms, tend to confuse what is deference by a foreign counterpart at the start of an effort with agreement, which results only in temporary, unsustainable change. This is especially true for U.S.-funded engagements.

Daryl Conner, of the Center for Leadership Studies, identifies what practitioners should avoid during a capacity-building engagement (Conner 2012):

- Being so eager to help with implementation that clients might be left without the will to take charge upon the practitioner's departure.

- Making a project appear easier, less manpower-intensive, and less complicated to the client than it actually will be.

- Solving problems instead of transferring skill to their counterparts.

- Focusing too much on what to do instead of how to think.

- Allowing clients to think they can change behaviors without changing mindsets.

- Personally taking on responsibilities that are the chore of the client's staff.

- Catering to the desires of the client personnel with whom the practitioner works instead of the leaders who sponsor the project.

Consistent with Mr. Conner's findings, Peter Morgan, of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), notes that capacity development efforts frequently become "a problem rather than a solution." Technical assistance can crowd out local initiative and create dependence by host nations on new structures and systems implemented by foreign practitioners (Morgan 2002). Also, foreign technical assistance projects might be accepted by host nations in fearing that other kinds of aid would be denied if they declined. The UNDP report acknowledges Botswana's positive reform example, which included realistic time frames for project completion, strong host country leadership overcoming inertia, and country "ownership" of the reform (Banerjee, Valdiva and Mkandla 2002). Columbia University researchers found "ownership" to be highly relevant to the success of capacity building projects, which boils down to a simple thought: who requested the engagement in the first place (Engebretson, et al. 2011)?

Finally, we observe, and the development community agrees, that greater use of short-term technical cooperation personnel through multiple, short visits, paired with local staff who learn and implement a reform, leads to a greater chance of a successful capacity building

effort—rather than a direct delivery of a process or system (Danielson, Hoebrink and Mongula 2002).

What Is Culture and How Does It Affect Capacity Building Efforts?

Institutions whose norms are different, even if the nation's government structures, technology base, and human technical capacity are similar, may not accept solutions and concepts that rest on Western norms. For example, in the West, conflict tends to be resolved openly and through general consensus. In Asian society, open conflict is avoided. Leadership dynamics are also different. In non-Western environments decisions are not easily questioned by subordinates, even if those subordinates reach a different conclusion using a participative decision-making process. Even if leadership buy-in is obtained, there may be informal leadership or loyalty networks that mitigate the power. Another Western cultural norm is the acceptance of winners and losers. In other cultures, solutions where "everyone wins," or at least no one's reputation is sullied as a result, may be more readily accepted.

Integrating cultural knowledge into a capacity-building engagement requires planning and constant awareness. Gerald Heuett, a corporate trainer based in Asia, points to three things that must be factored simultaneously. First, if deference to leadership is strong within the culture, engagements and methodologies should be introduced into the organization through its leadership, not an outside body. Changes should be credited to leadership and not

outsiders. Conclusions of a new decision-making tool or process should focus on considerations instead of answers, for leaders to maintain credibility while accepting solutions generated by a foreign process. Second, in a culture that values relationship-based interaction, a proper staff must be in place; if a culture values harmony, any new decision must not create points of conflict. Third, thought must be given to whether a culture values group or individual initiative and permit processes to work accordingly (Hewett 2001).

Characteristics of Advisors Who Seek to Build Capacity in Foreign Institutions

Shekhar Singh, of the UNDP, wrote that capacity retention is not achieved by seminars and workshops that communicate common problems and solutions. Rather, deciding what to do and how to execute requires a capacity many client countries lack. Singh also notes that "experts" from the West are usually selected based on their subject matter knowledge, not on their ability to impart their knowledge to others (Singh 2002). From our view, technical experts without good consulting skills are not likely to be effective; however, a good consultant, with the right technical information, may be effective. Also key is balancing global standards with national needs in order to tailor the best practices of technical assistance to fit within the existing processes of a given country, even if existing processes are weak

(Engebretson, et al. 2011). A Columbia University report found the extent to which advice can be communicated to and adapted by [foreign] counterparts is determinative in the success of institution building initiatives and requires advisors who are culturally competent.

Seeking to improve the effectiveness of its overseas technical assistance personnel, a 1981 Canadian study (Hawes and Kealey 1981) aimed to derive metrics by which to select and train personnel for projects in developing countries. Sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency, the analysis surveyed and studied 160 Canadian technical advisors on 26 projects in six countries and 90 host country nationals. Interestingly, host country nationals viewed the effectiveness of assistance as a function of only two factors: intercultural interaction both socially and in the office (which led to a transfer of skill), and the degree of personal adjustment of the practitioner to the local environment. Strong interpersonal skills were the only consistent and significant factor in successful projects.

Conclusion—A Practitioner's View

DoD's limited experience[1] in executing DIB programs mirrors the trends of the development community as a whole. The approach to capacity building seeks a balance between the introduction of modern analytical tools and decision-making processes and the ability of host nation

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[1] Our observation does not include the efforts at institution building undertaken in Iraq or Afghanistan under the auspices of Multi-National Security Transition Command–Iraq and Combined Security Transitional Command–Afghanistan. These are not DIB efforts sponsored by OSD DIB program funds.

organizations to utilize them given their technical limitation or cultural constraints. Therefore, early in an engagement, we rarely instruct host nations to make significant changes to their organizational structure or processes. Instead, we focus on strengthening existing processes such that new information or analytic visibility is available to leadership through current channels. By creating opportunities to see success from small changes, we have found leaders more likely to engage and support broader changes.

Instead of single-occasion seminars or classroom engagements, our visits over the course of a planned DIB effort last from one to two weeks and recur every six to twelve weeks for the duration of a project, which can be three years or more. The time on the ground during an engagement and the time between engagements is a joint decision arrived at by host nation leadership, the DoD sponsor, and the practitioners, and is largely based upon the availability and absorptive capacity of the host nation. We try to best balance how to be 'part of the team' in a classic consultancy role without falling into the trap of building or executing solutions on our own.

However, we encounter very few other DoD programs in the field calibrated to the cultural factors discussed here. We suspect that DoD's success rate in its capacity building efforts would improve by incorporating an understanding of how to account for host nation cultural norms prior to any capacity building initiative. The literature on cultural norms strongly suggests that we "western" advisors need to become more self-conscious about the degree to which our conceptualization of analytically based management is bound to our culture and not universally applicable. Further, an increased understanding would also allow DoD program managers to better select individuals for capacity building assignments.

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The original article was published in *Small Wars Journal*, November 2014.

"Foreign Culture and Its Effect on US Department of Defense Efforts to Train and Advise Foreign Security Forces"

http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/foreign-culture-and-its-effect-on-us-department-of-defense-efforts-to-train-and-advise-fore

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