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Cultural awareness - an imperative for military personnel ?

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Abstract. *This article focuses on cultural awareness of military personnel starting from the premise that millennial cultures cannot be changed in the short or medium term or shouldn't be changed by the others. It begins with the cultural awareness means and with its evolution from concern to the stage of necessity, to the concept of cultural awareness and in the end to a national security priority. It addresses the cultural dimension as a part of the military operations, along with the technical part that is absolutely necessary, but not sufficient. It continues with the stage of scientific research in the field, starting from the first step that should be taken in the cultural awareness process and from the need to introduce cultural education into the military and leaders development programs and in the end it highlights the influence that culture has on state policy and that cultural dimension has on national security. It concludes that cultural awareness becomes an imperative for multinational military operations effectiveness, for a successful cooperation with allies, for close interaction between military personnel who come from different cultures, for adapting to the security changes in countries where military personnel is needed and for succeeding national security policies.*

1. Introduction

Cultures from immemorial times to nowadays, deeply rooted in history, shaped by thousands of years, witnessing hundreds of events and influenced by dozens of factors cannot be forgotten, ignored or changed in the short or medium term, especially by people belonging to other cultures who are not considered to be part of that culture, so they have no right in their view to interfere in any way, or metaphorically speaking who are not *part of the family*. We can ask ourselves if the other cultures should be changed in the end or something must be changed about it or we just simply should change *the lens* through which we look at them and then to act from this new level of understanding. This outside *look* with other lenses is about perception and not about culture itself, requires a superior approach and might have positive effects for everyone involved, even if it doesn't solve the cultural differences.

Also, we can ask ourselves why one of the cultures should be changed and others shouldn't be, which of them are considered to be *good* or *bad* and more than that who has the right and the power to change them. Regarding this right and power, it should be taken into consideration that the other powerful states or actors, who want that cultural change and would have benefits from it, didn't have any contribution to their history or to them at all, so why should they have the right to impose a different culture or just because they have the power and that should be enough?. The answer might be that one of the cultures should be changed because it affects the evolution of those states, the fundamental rights and freedoms, on the one hand and can have repercussions for the other states, on the other hand. According to domestic and international law, the right to make any change belongs to the states concerned, but the real power belongs to the most powerful actors who have strategic interests in these states with different cultures.

Given this complex cultural context which is not always taken into consideration too seriously by the other cultures and by the military personnel when assigned to carry out multinational missions and considering the other states' strategic interests, cultural awareness becomes more important to be learned and applied versus ignored and not just because history proved this so many times, but because one of the military consequences can be prevented by understanding it and by acting accordingly when is needed. Generally speaking, a thing of which we are not aware that exists or a thing whose assigned significance is not understood by others cannot be observed, taken into consideration or respected.

When it comes to cultures, to avoid possible consequences, cultural awareness could provide military personnel to go on multinational missions with more than a theoretical basis, more than a cultural understanding, but an ability to recognise the cultural effects. In other words, cultural awareness involves not only understanding what culture means for them, but understanding how culture shaped them and acting accordingly. Cultural awareness will help military personnel reduce cultural barriers, communication difficulties, will allow them to process the intention before acting in a way in which the respective culture might interpret it as being offensive or intentional and avoid potential conflicts that might escalate. Awareness of another culture should not be misunderstood as disrespect for one's own culture or identity by showing respect to the others, but rather should be understood as knowing other cultures too and as assuming consequences in case of ignorance or in case of disrespect shown.

Starting from this premise, according to which *millennial cultures cannot be changed in the short or medium term or shouldn't be changed by the others*, we can say that acceptance of cultural diversity, along with cultural awareness that involves understanding and recognising the cultural effects and with respect for the others cultures becomes imperative. These actions that should be taken to accept, to raise awareness and to respect multiculturalism can have positive effects in several areas, such as: reducing the occurrence and spread of conflicts, improving international relations, increasing the effectiveness of military operations in these multicultural environments and ensuring national security of states involved, in the end. Regarding effectiveness of military missions, research conducted by authors in the international literature has determined that "between cultural awareness and tactical effectiveness of multinational military structures there is a directly proportional relationship" [1].

2. **Cultural awareness - means, evolution and importance**

Intercultural relations are as old as recorded history, being inevitable in the survival and evolution of mankind. Over the time, these have been successful or failures, have created friends or enemies, have evolved and drawn attention, becoming in the end an important pillar in the evolution of a state. Then, these relationships have become a concern, especially for the military area which has been involved in multinational missions. Usually, military operations take place where needed, at home or abroad. When we speak about abroad, we speak in most cases about cultural awareness too. In the United States of America, which is one of the most powerful states involved in almost multinational missions, culture was first recognized as a factor in war in the 19th century.

In the early stages of concern, cultural dimension as being part of participation in multinational missions focused only on general rules that should be known and followed by military personnel in the areas where the missions were carried out. What was missing was, in William Wunderle view, the context that could have facilitated the process of cultural understanding. The concept of *cultural understanding* is defined by William Wunderle as being: "a deep awareness of specific culture that allows an overview of thought processes, motivational factors and other issues that directly support the military decision-making process" [2]. This concern evolved to the stage of necessity, which led to the measures such as: education and training of military personnel from the perspective of relationships with other cultures, and so appeared the concept of *cultural awareness* which involves cultural understanding.

For example, the permanent nature of the conflicts in the Middle East involved the long presence of the foreign military on the territory of different states. This long and unwanted foreign presence considered to be intrusive by those cultures, the actions that have been taken on their territory and against them by the foreign military and the extreme religious beliefs, among other factors, contributed to the concept of *terrorism* as a consequence and as a form of response. This is a major example that requires more than a deep understanding of the others' culture, but assuming the consequences so that actions on their territory and against them are taken accordingly. As Eastern culture is at the opposite pole of Western culture, in a way of speaking, *a bridge* of communication between the two diametrically opposed cultures should be accepted and respected by both parties involved even if the terrorism has the power to destroy this bridge, metaphorically speaking.

Over time, understanding cultures and, implicitly, the societies that act on them become more than a concern and a necessity, more exactly become an integral part of military operations from stability to nation-building. The effectiveness of these military operations, among factors such as training, logistics, intelligence, adaptability, language, territory or weather, depends on cultural factors too. Regarding cultural factor importance, from the international literature resulted that the cultural factor is "an imperative for current and future military operations" and that cultural awareness could be associated with "a kind of gravity center of the common military actions' effectiveness" [1].

Even if the technical part is absolutely necessary in multinational military missions, in practice it proved to be not sufficient. In this regard, Montgomery McFate warned that "the danger is that we assume that technical solutions are sufficient" [3]. This aspect is confirmed by an observation of a military commander during military operations which referred to the *insufficient sufficiency* of technical data, as follows: "i had a perfect situational awareness. What I lacked was cultural awareness" [3]. This was also confirmed by the former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, lieutenant general James Clapper Jr., who stated that besides technical data are transmitted and detailed cultural dimension data, like "local customs, ethnicity, biographical data, military geography and infectious diseases" [3]. Thus, cultural awareness is more than an additional factor in multinational military missions, but an imperative one.

In the last thirty years, there has been a significant increase in the number of military operations that have required member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to contribute with military personnel. After the military campaigns of 2001 and 2003, in which military personnel were on the territory of Afghanistan and Iraq, there was a reorientation of United States military leaders on cultural awareness, as follows: "the Department of Defense has declared the need to expanding the awareness of military forces about other cultures, as part of a major transformation in orientation" [4]. On the one hand, this expansion of cultural awareness could have been seen as a positive measure for the military area, but on the other hand this could have meant that some cultural failures had happened and determined this expansion.

In these military operations carried out by NATO member states or under the aegis of the European Union or the United Nations, Romania also contributed in order to respect the commitments assumed and those derived from being one of the international community members. At the end of 2019, the heads of state and government who attended the North Atlantic Council meeting in London "reaffirmed their commitment to the security and long-term stability of Afghanistan" [5], this being just one example. Romania has a significant contribution to this commitment, being the sixth contributing nation according to the number of military personnel, which requires paying attention to cultural awareness in Romania as well.

In the unpredictable international security environment, cultural awareness can win or lose its place in multinational missions. As an example, the president of the United States, Joe Biden, announced recently that the United States military "will be withdrawn from Afghanistan by September 2021" [6]. This doesn't mean that cultural awareness lost its importance, because if it ends in one place it doesn't mean that it can't start in another, but rather that there is an interdependence between the foreign policy of the most powerful states and the place that cultural awareness can take in national security policies, cases when cultural awareness becomes an imperative for national security policies.

3. The stage of scientific research in the field

William Wunderle draws attention to the fact that the area of cultural expertise of military personnel is not limited only to the culture of opponents, but also extends to "the culture of allies, civilian counterparts, non-governmental organizations, international organizations and others" [2]. Thus, the imperative for cultural awareness is not only found in national security policies, in international relations, in multinational military missions, but also within military structures that consist of military personnel who come from different cultures, as the international system includes different states with different cultures. Related to this *inside* cultural awareness, Yvonne Masakowski noted that staff who are part of multinational missions usually work in high-risk and life-threatening conditions, so in these conditions mutual trust becomes an imperative.

An additional reason is that military personnel act not only individually, but also in teams when the situation requires, which means that they depend on each other. It is known that trust is a crucial factor in relationships at all levels, but in this particular case it is more than a relationship between two or more military and more than a mission, it's about staying alive. Masakowski warns that "frequently, national or racial stereotypes can prevent the strengthening of such trust" [7], to which we can add that these stereotypes can have repercussions on team cohesion, on the effectiveness of actions undertaken and on their own lives too.

Regarding military personnel interaction with the other cultures, Maxie McFarland noted that the relationship with other cultures requires an approach that involves "finesse, diplomacy and communication" instead of using coercive methods and means, so a peaceful approach and not a violent one and mentioned that a successful approach should be based on an understanding of "individual, community and social normative models" [8] which are necessary in performing the military tasks. Also, he considers that cultural education is a necessity in the programs for the military and leaders development, a measure that would help the approach above to be successful.

Steven Viall remarked on the growing degree of cultural misunderstanding and appreciated that expanding cultural awareness would lessen conflicts, on the one hand, and increase the chances of peaceful alternatives, on the other hand, which would be a desirable way for everyone from this point of view. It is important to mention here that this process of expanding is not enough for this desired and peaceful way, but rather a factor that would help in this complex peaceful process. Looking from a cultural perspective, there is a relationship of proportionality between the three elements mentioned above, cultural awareness, conflict and harmony. In this *trinomial*, cultural awareness could be one of the factors that can ensure the balance between conflict and harmony, or at least that can prevent conflict.

Steven Viall goes deeper and his research indicates that the basis of a cultural awareness training should be found, at an early stage, basis that would represent a culture of the future military. Looking into the future, this culture would have two functions, a foundation for understanding other cultures and a foundation for achieving a cultural competence. The difference between the two concepts of *cultural awareness* and *competence* lies in the degree of knowledge of culture in question, from basic to the highest level. In the context in which the actions of the military in multicultural environments have amplified and acquired a character of continuity lately, the author appreciates that it is an "imperative that an adequate training of cultural literacy" be an integral part of the skills acquired by the military personnel and he justifies this imperative by considering culture as being "a key component of global military operations" [9].

In his research, Steven Viall noted also that there is an incompatibility between the cultural awareness that should be acquired by the military personnel and the organizational culture that is implemented for years and which is not questioned, you just simply have to act accordingly. If cultural awareness involves cultural sensitivity, finesse, diplomacy, communication or understanding, at the opposite the military organizational culture involves an impassivity, an inflexibility, a detachment, an offensive approach, compliance, acceptance and fulfillment of tasks assigned accordingly. With other words, cultural awareness is focused on reflection and understanding, while military organizational culture is focused on solution and action.

More than being a key component, as Steven Viall said, Montgomery Mc Fate suggested that cultural knowledge of opponents should be a "national security priority" and noted that "not nation-states, but cultures provide the underlying structures of political life" [3], which means that culture has a deep influence in a state policy and that it should be taken into consideration accordingly and not ignored, not only by military structures, but by leaders too in international relations and in national security policies too. Regarding Montgomery Mc Fate suggestion, William Wunderle states that experiences resulting from the United States military personnel presence in the territory of some Middle Eastern or African states have shown that "understanding foreign cultures and societies has become a national priority" [2].

The national security policy of the most influential states, such as the United States of America, Russia, China, Germany or United Kingdom of Great Britain involves major strategic interests in certain countries whose cultures are diametrically opposed to them, such as Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya or Egypt. In this international strategic context, cultural awareness becomes an imperative for national security policy of these states involved. Also, the military presence in a foreign territory, doubled by the lack of a cultural awareness, can trigger an insignificant event that can become a major one between the states involved and can affect their national security in the end.

4. Conclusions

Intercultural relations, especially in the military area, have evolved from the stage of concern to the stage of necessity, to the concept of *cultural awareness* and to a national security priority. This concept is an imperative inside military structures and outside when multinational military missions involve interaction with members of other cultures. The cultural dimension is, along with the technical part, a component of multinational military missions, an imperative for their effectiveness and a balancing factor between conflict and harmony. More than that, there is an interdependence between the foreign policy of states involved in multinational missions and the place that cultural awareness can take in national security policies of these states.

Military operations involve, besides the own territory presence and defending responsibilities, presence and attributions all in the world is needed, which means that cultural awareness is needed too. Given this fact, the scientific research in the field indicated that the first step in the cultural awareness process should be cultural awareness training of the future military at an early age and that cultural education should be a necessity in the programs for the military and leaders development too. An obstacle in this cultural educational approach was indicated as being the incompatibility between cultural awareness and organizational military culture. Also, the scientific research in the field identified the influence that culture has on state policy and connected cultural dimension with national security.

Given the multinational military missions, the cooperation with military allies, the interactions between military personnel in military operations, the unpredictable international security environment, the national security policy of the most influential states with major strategic interests in countries whose cultures requires understanding before acting, cultural awareness becomes an imperative for multinational military operations effectiveness, for a successful cooperation with allies, for close interaction between military personnel who come from different cultures, for adapting to the security changes in countries when military personnel is needed and for succeeding national security policies too.

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