

Cultural Understanding and its Importance to Military Operations

SGM Kathleen E. Tellier

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

Class #35

Course Facilitator: SGM Lauri Dove

24 February 2009

Abstract

Cultural understanding of the enemy and the populace is a key factor in success on the battlefield. Knowledge of the human terrain allows leaders and soldiers to foresee the impact of military operations on both sides, thereby allowing them to plan and conduct effective operations. One example of success and one example of failure to achieve cultural understanding are compared and contrasted: the counterinsurgency operations in Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines (2002-present) and the Strategic Hamlet Program in Vietnam (1961-1963). The contrasting outcomes of these two military operations illustrate the importance of cultural and societal factors in modern warfare, and the need for leaders and soldiers to prepare for this reality in the future.

Cultural Understanding and its Importance to Military Operations

The notion that understanding the enemy is important to successful military operations is not new. As far back as the 6th century B.C., the Chinese general Sun Tzu ("know thy enemy")¹ noted it in his treatise, *The Art of War* (McFate, 2005). However, despite the widespread acknowledgement that understanding the enemy and other aspects of human terrain are vital, our military struggles at times to achieve that insight, especially with respect to cultural understanding. It is a daunting task to understand the human terrain of the modern battlefield due to its complex and dynamic nature. However, military history demonstrates that cultural understanding of the enemy and populace is a key factor in success and lack of understanding can lead to counterproductive efforts and failure.

There are numerous examples throughout military history illustrating how understanding of the human or cultural terrain was key to achieving military success. Equally as numerous are the examples where a lack of this knowledge led to failure. One of the more recent examples of success is the ongoing Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines (OEF-P) being conducted in the predominantly Muslim southern Philippine islands, namely Mindanao, Basilan, and the Sulu Archipelago (Kaplan, 2005). In an effort to stop Al-Qaeda affiliated militant Islamic groups such as Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah from using the southern Philippines as a base of operations, the United States has conducted unconventional warfare operations in the region since 2002. The Joint Special Operations Task Force - Philippines (JSOTF-P), numbering 500-700 U.S military personnel, have been working closely with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and Philippine National Police (PNP). JSOTF-P has been training the AFP and PNP to

1. "Know thy enemy" is a paraphrase of the Sun Tzu quote that is often translated in its longer version as "if you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles." (McFate, 2005).

conduct combat operations against the terrorists and has been influencing the region's population through information operations (IO) and civil-military operations (CMO) to reject the terrorist groups. (Magnuson, 2008).

In order to understand the local populations of the southern Philippines islands, U.S. Special Forces teams worked with the AFP and conducted surveys throughout the region (Kaplan, 2005). Through these surveys and meetings with local leaders, the concerns and needs of each of the communities were understood, and subsequent operations were tailored to specifically address these areas. Projects and assistance were varied and extensive: medical and dental services, school construction and repair, water systems, road construction, even mosque construction. Kaplan (2005) points out that all of these projects were accomplished with the AFP visibly in the lead, thereby legitimizing the host nation armed forces among the population and increasing the confidence of villagers to provide information about the terrorists to the AFP and U.S. forces who were seen as bringing stability, peace, and development to their communities. Although difficult to understand culturally for Americans, these surveys revealed that elections and democracy were not important to the local population. Learning this fact at the outset prevented the U.S. forces from wasting effort and alienating the population.

In addition to humanitarian assistance, U.S. personnel have devoted considerable effort to other indirect methods of influencing the population in the southern Philippines. Military Information Support Teams (MIST) work with Filipinos to produce posters, advertisements, radio shows, and even comic books to provide information and educate the local communities of the destructive consequences of allowing terrorist and militant groups into their region (Magnuson, 2008).

Although far from being free of militant Islamic groups, the southern Philippine islands have seen a decrease in their numbers, and many of the most dangerous individuals have been killed, captured, or driven out. According to Eckert (2006), AFP presence in Basilan has decreased from 15 battalions to 2 battalions, due to the improved security and prosperity of the region. This development is attributable to the U.S. military operations of OEF-P which strengthened the AFP and improved the stability of the region (Kaplan, 2005).

In contrast to the success experienced with the counterinsurgent-counterterrorist efforts in the southern Philippines, the "Strategic Hamlet Program" of the early 1960s in Vietnam was considered a failure from its inception (Kolko, 1994). Although flawed in multiple ways, the root cause of the program's failure was a lack of understanding of Vietnamese culture and values, especially with respect to their land.

The Strategic Hamlet Program was a short-lived population transfer and protection program, launched in 1961 and abandoned less than a few years later (Kolko, 1994). The goal of the program was to isolate the insurgents from the non-combatant populace, a standard counterinsurgency operational practice which isolates insurgents from resources, potential recruits, information, and sanctuary (US Army FM 3-24, 2006). The Strategic Hamlet Program was designed and implemented jointly by the government of South Vietnam (GVN), U.S. advisors, and British advisors. The plan was for designated hamlets (clusters of houses in rural areas), both existing and new, to be fortified and protected by villagers and the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN). Peasants throughout the countryside were resettled in these strategically-located hamlets (Wikipedia, Strategic Hamlet Program, 2009). In less than two years, 8.5 million peasants were settled in over 7,000 hamlets (USASMA H109A, 2008).

By all accounts, the program failed to achieve its goals and created animosity amongst the non-combatant populace towards the GVN. The Vietnamese people in rural communities had deep attachments to their hereditary lands, which were often burial sites for ancestors. The villagers resented the loss of their land, the forced resettlement, the forced labor to create fortifications, the loss of freedom of movement, and the lack of armed protection they received from the GVN and ARVN (Friedman, 2009). Worse yet, the unpopular program gave the Vietcong insurgents, the National Liberation Front (NLF), a great source for their own information operations campaign against the GVN and United States. They portrayed the strategic hamlets as "concentration camps" or "jails" demonstrating the "inhuman cruelty of the Americans and Diem²." (Friedman, 2009).

In retrospect, it seems obvious that the GVN and U.S. advisors should have considered the concerns, desires, motivations, and values of the south Vietnamese villagers before implementing such an extensively disruptive and costly program. As stated by Friedman (2009), "the program was doomed to failure because of the great love of the Vietnamese people for their hereditary land and their freedom." How could the GVN and U.S. have been so blind? One explanation is that they were influenced by the success of a similar resettlement program, called the "Briggs Plan" implemented by the British Army in Malaya (now Malaysia) during the counterinsurgency in the 1950s. Although similar, the program involved a much smaller part of the population (approximately 500,000 ethnic Chinese Malays) who didn't legally own their land, and thus weren't as affected by the uprooting. Also, the security and material support provided to the resettled population was extensive, and the resettled Chinese villagers

2. Ngo Dinh Diem was the President of South Vietnam (1955-1963).

experienced a tangible improvement in their standard of living (Friedman, 2009; Wikipedia, Briggs Plan, 2009).

The contrasting outcomes of these two specific military operations, counterinsurgency operations in OEF-Philippines and the Strategic Hamlet Program in Vietnam, illustrate the importance of cultural understanding of the human terrain, both the non-combatant and enemy population. Assumptions and generalizations about the human terrain are often incorrect. On-the-ground surveys, assessments, and analysis of the population at hand are critical to meaningful understanding. One could argue that efforts to understand human terrain are not feasible for the military, especially for conventional forces. Knowledge of foreign cultures and languages require extensive training, time, experience, and resources. A legitimate argument against increased efforts to understand cultural factors is that conventional forces cannot gain this understanding without sacrificing critical competence in other areas, for example, tactical and technical skills. Also, currently, with respect to cultural and social knowledge of adversaries, "DoD lacks the right programs, systems, models, personnel, and organizations" (McFate, 2005), therefore, one could argue that it's a bridge too far for the military at current levels of funding and personnel.

In conclusion, the U.S. military faces great challenges today and in the future due to the increasingly complex and dynamic nature of the contemporary operating environment (COE). To achieve success, conventional forces must prepare for full spectrum operations, requiring a broader set of skills and knowledge. One of the most important is cultural understanding of the battlefield, in order to foresee the impact of military operations on communities and the enemy. This understanding cannot be shallow or generalized, since this can lead to poor planning and implementation of military operations. Cultural understanding is vital to the effectiveness of a

wide range of operations - information operations, civil-military operations, human intelligence collection, developing host nation security forces - to name a few. The two specific examples of military operations discussed previously, OEF-Philippines and the Strategic Hamlet Program, illustrate that success or failure of an operation can hinge on understanding the human terrain, specifically cultural and societal factors at the local level. It is important for leaders and soldiers to have a baseline knowledge of history and culture of the populations in which they are operating. However, this is simply a starting point. Each region or community will have significant differences, requiring an open-minded and adaptive attitude in order to refine that cultural knowledge through continual gathering and analysis of information in the operating environment.

References

- Eckert, W. (2006, November). Defeating the Idea: Unconventional Warfare in Southern Philippines. *Special Warfare* 19(6). Retrieved February 21, 2009, from <http://www.soc.mil/swcs/swmag/>.
- Friedman, H.A. (2009). PSYOP of the Strategic Hamlet in Vietnam. Retrieved February 21, 2009, from <http://www.psywarrior.com>.
- Kaplan, R.D. (2005, October). Imperial Grunts: With the Army Special Forces in the Philippines and Afghanistan - Laboratories of Counterinsurgency. *The Atlantic*, 296(3). Retrieved February 8, 2009, from <http://www.theatlantic.com>.
- Kolko, G. (1994). *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience*. New York: The New Press.
- Magnuson, S. (2008, February). Forgotten Front: To Counter Terrorism, Philippine Army Takes Lessons From U.S. Forces. *National Defense Magazine*. Retrieved February 13, 2009, from <http://www.thefreelibrary.com>
- McFate, M. (2005). The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture. *Joint Force Quarterly*, 38, 42-48.
- U.S. Department of Army, Field Manual 3-24 (2006, December). *Counterinsurgency*.
- U.S. Army Sergeants Major Course (2008, April). *History Lesson H109A: Vietnam - The Crisis of the NCO Corps*. Retrieved February 7, 2009, from U.S. Army Sergeants Major Course History Lesson CD 1.
- Wikipedia (2009). *Strategic Hamlet Program* Retrieved February 21, 2009, from http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strategic_Hamlet_Program