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Understanding Culture in Your Area of Operations

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Abstract

It is important that military leaders attain a cultural understanding of their tactical operating environment. This paper will compare the historic invasions of the Soviet Union and the United States into Afghanistan, and to what extent the lack of cultural awareness by the invaders has led to repeated failures to dominate and control the region. The Soviet Union faced many of the same challenges that America faces today with regard to Afghanistan. They had no understanding of the principles of Pashtunwali and were unable to stem the flow of weapons and fighters. Eventually, when faced with the high loss of life, prolonged economic drain, and loss of support at from its citizens, the Soviets lost the will to continue. After a series of failed governmental heads, the Taliban soon moved in to claim victory.

Understanding Culture in Your Area of Operations

It can be argued that the Soviet Union's invasion into Afghanistan to preserve the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) government was fought in a different era, using different tactics and technologies and therefore completely dissimilar to the current situation that the United States is facing there today. To some extent, this may be true, but there are more parallels than one may think. First, the Soviets were drawn into the conflict by the mujahideen resistance, which later evolved into the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Second, both invasions succeeded in quickly seizing control of key cities and main axes of travel while approximately 80 percent of the country remained uncontrolled. In addition, during both occupations, the mujahideen fighters separated into smaller groups and waged war using guerilla style tactics, adding years to the conflict. Lastly, the Soviet, and what is likely the United States', exit strategy was to train the Afghan forces and shift the responsibility of fighting the mujahideen to Afghanistan so it could to govern without foreign assistance.

What is not known, however, is how similar will the outcome of these two conflicts will be viewed after the United States pulls its troops out of Afghanistan. The Soviet invasion is seen as a failure by the many in the international community because civil unrest and hostilities continued after the withdrawal of Soviet forces in February 1989. Prime Minister Najibullah was only able to remain in power for three years after the Soviet pullout. When it collapsed in March of 1992, the triumphant mujahideen entered the capitol city of Kabul and fighting rapidly broke out amongst the various militias. The lawlessness and chaos that followed gave rise to the Taliban. By the mid-1990s, the Taliban had firmly established control in the urban centers (U.S. Department of State, 2008).

The leadership of Soviet Union failed to develop an understanding of the culture and complexities of the people it tried to control. The large “presence of Soviet troops did not have the desired effect of pacifying the country. On the contrary, it exacerbated a nationalistic feeling, causing the rebellion to spread even more” (Wikipedia, n.d. Soviet War in Afghanistan). They were in fact fueling the insurgency that they were trying to quell. Many Muslims have long felt oppressed by non-Muslims and will travel many miles and cross borders just to be part of the fight against the “infidel”. The mujahideen tribesmen maintain blood feuds with their neighboring tribes, yet will put them on hold and band together to fight against invaders. In addition, they tend not to think of the length of war in years but in as long as it takes. They do not mind trading territory for time and will maintain just enough resistance until interest of the occupier in war has waned. In order to understand the intricacies of the Afghan population, one must first look at the Pashtun tribesman.

The Pashtun and Pashtunwali

The Pashtun also recognized, as Pathans, Pushtuns, Afghans, or Pakhtuns are one of the largest tribal groups in the world. It is estimated that between 15 and 21 million Pashtun people live in southeastern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan. They are the largest ethnic majority of the population of Afghanistan (approx. 45%) and are the largest minority group of Pakistan’s population (approx. 16%). Their tribal organization consists of large cultural groups divided into tribes, sub-tribes, clans, sub-clans and even kinship groups. Each one governs its own region. Whether feuding between clans or when invaded by outsiders, they are known for their ferocity in battle. In their minds, the Afghan-Pakistan border is an invisible line designed to separate the Pashtun people (Terrorist Planet, n.d.).

The identity of a Pakhtun is characterized by his devotion to the male-centered code of conduct, the Pashtunwali, or translated, “the way of the Pashtun”. It is an unwritten code that establishes social order and accountability. It contains values related to one’s honor, independence, unity, hospitality, chivalry, humiliation and vengeance (Terrorist Planet, n.d.).

Most important is the notion of honor, which is expressed in a harsh all or nothing approach. A life without honor is a life not worth living for a Pakhtun. Everything a Pashtun does in life is motivated by this thought. He is constantly building or defending his honor. If a Pashtun does not defend, or more importantly, avenge offenses against his honor, he has no honor. Revenge may be quick or it may take generations, but vengeance will remain the primary focal point for the family until honor is restored.

Another key aspect of Pashtunwali is hospitality. It is used as a way of showing mutual respect, camaraderie, and alliance. It requires the host to give shelter, food and drink, clothing, and personal protection to anyone requesting it, even if the guest is considered an enemy. It is understood that, however temporary, the hospitality must continue for as long as the person is within the confines of one’s territory. This too, is interconnected to the perception of honor, for the host gains honor by providing for his visitor, and the guest is measured as weak for requiring the protection of another. The host is expected to be willing to sacrifice his own life to defend those he has granted refuge to (Global Security, n.d.). Therefore, when the United States insisted that the Taliban hand over bin Laden, the Taliban refused because bin Laden was considered a guest in the country, and thus under its protection. To turn him over would have gone against the principles of Pashtunwali and therefore, an offense to the Taliban’s honor (Johnson & Mason, 2008).

Pashtunwali is also the basis of the Pashtun legal system. It uses the tribe's communal expectations of its members to conform to the traditions and collective values to impose strict obligations of each member. Pashtuns males take great pride in their personal independence and freedom from authority. Even though male tribal elders are looked to for their experience and wisdom, all of the tribe's male are considered equal. In this way, no Pashtun male may tell any other adult Pashtun male what to do.

The basis of power lies within group consensus and the main means for resolving important issues lies within the *salah-mashwarah*, or "discussion". For serious infractions, treaty negotiations, or matters likely to result in grave consequence, a *jirga*, or "gathering" is called. All of the adult males of the tribe gather for a traditional assembly in which the discussion is conducted. This complex process may take months to conclude since all of the males are considered equal members and the final judgment must be unanimous. It usually begins by ritually placing a rock between the homes of the affected parties, signifying an unchallengeable truce, to avoid escalating tensions or violence. Tribal elders are then selected to conduct investigations and lead discussions and deliberations. They will meet many times with both families to establish the facts and to secure the commitment of the families to resign themselves to the process and its outcome. The elders will hear evidence, interview any witnesses and consider reparation options. At no time will members of the two families appear in the same room at the same time. Once the final judgment is agreed upon, and before it is pronounced, it is first explained to the families to allow them to reconcile its members to the decision and serves as a cooling off period. The judgment will permit families to retain their respective honor and serve as fair compensation by tribal norms to the aggrieved family.

Refusal, by either family, to abide by the settlement is extremely uncommon. If the judgment is rejected on the other hand, the family will be forced to leave the community. The standard solution for a family that refuses the conditions of the judgment and attempts to stay in the village is to have its home(s) burned to the ground. “In a closed, interdependent rural society, a Pashtun family without honor becomes a pariah, unable to complete for advantageous marriages or economic opportunities, and shunned by other families as a disgrace to the clan” (Johnson & Mason, 2008, No Sign until the Burst of Fire, p. 59). In Pashtun society, all extended members of the family share in the consequences for the actions of its individuals. Therefore, the Pashtun male’s pride in the liberty he enjoys is more about being free from being told what to do than freedom to do what he wishes.

Professors Thomas H. Johnson (National Security Affairs) and M. Chris Mason (Center for Advanced Defense Studies) wrote the following in their article “No Sign until the Burst of Fire”:

Perhaps most important for U.S. security interests in the region, the millions of tribesmen who live within this system have no desire to have a new, alien system imposed on them by outsiders. Furthermore, Pashtuns are generally convinced that their system of social order produces men superior to those of the Western model (2008, p. 61).

In the same article, they write:

For centuries, these interlocking elements of the unwritten code of the Pashtun – freedom, honor, revenge, and chivalry – have defeated every effort to subdue the

Pashtuns and supersede Pashtunwali with a more codified and centralized rule of law. Nevertheless, Western policymakers continue to ignore or to downplay the primacy of these fundamental cultural values in their efforts to shape strategies for southern Afghanistan and northern Pakistan, while the Taliban and al-Qaida use them for recruitment, shelter, and social mobilization (2008, p. 64).

Imposing a Centralized Governance

The Pashtun social structure is like that of a target with the individual standing at the bull's-eye. He is circled by many concentric rings of family, extended family, village, clan, tribe, and major cultural-linguistic group. His level of loyalty directly corresponds to his proximity in relation to these rings. In times of crisis, rather than requiring the services of the government, he turns to kinship, or if necessary, the next larger social group (M. Jamil Hanifi, 1978). Pashtuns connect in socially, economically, and politically, within these concentric rings. This connection foils the central government's attempts at establishing a foothold in the tribal regions (Johnson & Mason, 2008).

As one elderly Pashtun tribesman told Mountstuart Elphinstone, a British official visiting Afghanistan in 1809, "We are content with discord, we are content with alarms, we are content with blood... we will never be content with a master." This characteristic makes Pashtuns the perfect insurgents (Stephen Tanner, 2002, p. 134).

Conclusion

While it may be simple to dismiss the history and culture of others, in a combat situation, an understanding of the culture in which you operate is a necessity in order to affect lasting change. The Afghanistan Mountains and valleys are littered with the bones of fallen soldiers from multiple invaders throughout history. If the United States fails to establish a stable central government, capable of controlling its own people and borders, we too risk being viewed by the international community as being defeated. More importantly, the Taliban, mujahideen and foreign fighters, and extremist groups like al-Qaeda will share this view and will feel even more empowered to spread violence throughout the world. Only with an understanding of Afghanistan's people and their cultures, can we initiate changes that its citizens will accept.

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