In war nothing is more important to a commander than the facts concerning the strength, dispositions, and intentions of his opponent, and the proper interpretation of those facts.

—President Dwight D. Eisenhower

War is inextricably tied to the populations inhabiting the land domain. All military capabilities are ultimately linked to land and, in most cases, the ability to prevail in ground combat becomes a decisive factor in breaking an enemy’s will. Understanding the human context that enables the enemy’s will, which includes culture, economics, and history, is as important as understanding the enemy’s military capabilities. Commanders cannot presume that superior military capability alone creates the desired effects on an enemy.

—ADP 3-0, Operations

Introduction

The term military cultural awareness usually conjures up thoughts of key leader engagements, civil affairs, the winning of hearts and minds, counterinsurgency operations, international partner relationships and communication, and other such endeavors of military importance. However, even in the bloodiest, most violent large-scale ground combat operations, the cultural awareness of our enemies and of ourselves plays a key role on the battlefield. Take for example some hard lessons the Axis Powers learned in World War II and the United States experienced during the Korean War.

Japan

Before World War II, members of the Japanese high command saw a strongly isolationist United States as greedy and preoccupied with making money. They did not see the behaviors and norms that indicated a sense of honor among the American people, similar to that of the Japanese. They also vastly underestimated Americans’ sense of pride and their anger over the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The Japanese thought a quick strike against the United States fleet at Pearl Harbor and subsequent operations would cripple our military enough to force us to the negotiation table, effectively leaving Japan to pursue its interests in Asia.

Instead, the Japanese high command’s lack of cultural awareness left senior officers lethally underestimating the situation. They did not realize how quickly and dramatically a perceived sneak attack would channel a generally isolationist-leaning American public’s peacetime pursuits (even if America was already ramping up military production with the Lend-Lease Act and other initiatives) into a colossal wartime mobilization and an angry desire for decisive retribution.

Lend-Lease Act

The Lend-Lease Act stated that the U.S. government could lend or lease (rather than sell) war supplies to any nation deemed “vital to the defense of the United States.” Under this policy, the United States was able to supply military aid to its foreign allies during World War II while still remaining officially neutral in the conflict. Most importantly, passage of the Lend-Lease Act enabled a struggling Great Britain to continue fighting against Germany virtually on its own until the United States entered World War II late in 1941.

Dominate Phase of Joint Operations

The dominate phase focuses on breaking an enemy’s will to resist or, in noncombat situations, to control an [operational environment] OE. Success in the dominate phase depends on overmatching enemy capabilities at the right time and place. Operations can range from large-scale combat to various stability activities, depending on the nature of the enemy and the OE. Dominate phase activities may establish the conditions to achieve strategic objectives early, or they may set the conditions for transition to the next phase of the operation.

—FM 3-0, Operations
Germany

Adolf Hitler wanted to subjugate England, but he also admired its accomplishments—its Empire, its conquests, and its ethnic makeup. Some of his contemporaries said that even after hostilities broke out, Hitler hoped for a measure of peace with Great Britain, although it never could have happened given the British culture. Hitler reflected on this in his Directive No.16 (Operation Sea Lion), 16 July 1940, which described a landing operation against England. In the directive, he wrote, “As England, in spite of the hopelessness of her military position, has so far shown herself unwilling to come to any compromise, I have decided to begin to prepare for, and if necessary to carry out, an invasion of England.”

Testimony by World War II-era German officers suggests that Hitler’s admiration and willingness to coexist (albeit in a dominant-subservient relationship) with England was a significant factor in Hitler’s decision not to pursue a conflict with England with the intensity needed to reach a decisive end. This eventually resulted in Germany having to fight a two-front war. Hitler’s lack of understanding of English culture as a whole became apparent when he misjudged England’s pre-war support and his interactions with numerous wealthy, powerful English citizens, including the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, believing they would condone his open military aggression that ultimately led to the outbreak of World War II.

By not pursuing England’s defeat with the same zeal as it did with other countries, Germany left an isolated England alone but resolute. This in turn allowed the United States to focus on the European theater, as well as a base of operations when it entered the fray. By then, Hitler had turned east to attack Russia, leaving a regrouped England ready to fight on the European continent alongside Americans and other allies on the Western Front while Russia eventually crushed Germany from the East.

On an operational level, cultural awareness might have made a significant difference for the U.S. Army with regard to the Battle of the Bulge. Some have speculated that if the strategic-level leadership had taken into account not only the tendencies of Hitler and his generals but also German culture, especially historic German military culture, it would have resulted in more widespread anticipation and preparation for the Germans’ surprise Battle of the Bulge counteroffensive, potentially saving untold lives.

Germany’s successful invasion of France and Belgium earlier in the war was a reason for Germany to use the Ardennes Forest once again in their counterattack during the Battle of the Bulge. Given Hitler’s and the Nazis’ deep association with German mythology, there was also a significant cultural
factor in using the forest for Germany’s last great attack against its enemies. German culture has always had a close emotional association with the forest—a place seen as representative of true German character and unity, struggle, taming of the wilderness, and ultimately victory. For Hitler, who ordered this counteroffensive to the surprise of his own generals, the use of the forest was in line with his cultural and racial views of how Germany should conduct itself. Military historian Peter Caddick-Adams notes that even the name of the counteroffensive, Herbstnebel, which means Autumn Fog, has connotations of extremely influential and popular German mythological operas by Richard Wagner, who made extensive use of the mythological German forest in his works. Wagner was a favorite composer of Hitler and the Nazi leadership. Wagner was aware of the significance of forests in Teutonic culture and myths. He chose the forest as the primary background for his operas and used fog as a motif to signal foreboding. Indeed, several people in the American military warned of such an attack, but those who heard these warnings did not look at the situation culturally. Instead, they thought that the time, location, and quantitative state of German Army forces made such an attack in the forest extremely unlikely.

Korea

Some say that a lack of cultural awareness played a role in American GEN Douglas MacArthur not expecting the Chinese to attack United States forces in North Korea in 1950. Nor did he expect them to mount such an effective attack. Many historians believe he did not consider China’s cultural willingness (and Chinese leader Mao Zedong’s personal willingness) to take large numbers of casualties—even against America, a country with an established nuclear capability. He also did not understand that the still-fledgling communist Chinese government saw the opportunity to solidify its legitimacy and gain prestige by fighting the United States. Several factors may have contributed to GEN MacArthur’s mindset. Some think that the general’s experience fighting the Japanese in World War II guided his views and expectations of the Chinese during the Korean War, even though these two forces were culturally completely different. One was a conventional army that had aims and strategies limited in part by the shortcomings of its available resources and industrial potential. The other was an army that had found success in a long guerilla campaign. Others cite the lack of cultural self-awareness was due to personal hubris. GEN MacArthur had what many referred to as a sycophantic echo chamber, where people only told him what he wanted to hear, even if it was contrary to the opinions of other military leaders and President Truman’s administration.

Current and Future Operations

Even basic cultural awareness can have a tremendous impact on kinetic combat strategy and operations. For example, in World War II, the Soviet Union had a totalitarian, centralized communist party leadership set in the socio-economic context of a centuries-old peasant-aristocrat culture. This, combined with Russia’s history of invaders, flat western plains, and limited access to the seas, should have led the Germans to the accurate conclusion that the Soviet Union would fight a war of attrition that relied on its willingness to sacrifice both people and equipment.

A peer or near-peer adversary engaged in large-scale ground combat operations against the United States will likely apply history and cultural awareness to the fight. Our adversary will have a cultural, historical, and strategic understanding of the force-multiplying power of public perception manipulation in a Western liberal democracy such as ours—one that is generally casualty-averse, pervasively internet-connected, media-informed, and increasingly expectant of instant results. Their priority will likely be to achieve the highest number of U.S. casualties and local civilian deaths, and control of the length of engagements, regardless of territorial or traditional military gains, because of the impact these actions would have on our media and
national morale. And they will also use cyberspace and information warfare to exploit shared cultural norms, historical grievances, friendly political decision making, and other actions of perception management.

It is also likely that adversaries will exploit gaps in U.S. military tactics, operations, and strategy, particularly in our technology and weapons platforms. They will find vulnerabilities, exploitable opportunities, or weak points in our systems. In Iraq and Afghanistan, we were vulnerable to low-tech improvised explosive devices and ambushes from poorly trained, poorly equipped insurgents. We were able to degrade but not eliminate such tactics. Now imagine the tactics and strategies that our peer and near-peer adversaries will use, applying vastly superior training and technology in all the domains.

Conclusion

These are just a few examples of how culture can play a direct, key role in operational and strategic combat operations—not just before or after military engagement but also in the planning and execution of the combat engagements themselves.

Epigraph

President Dwight D. Eisenhower, when laying the cornerstone for the Central Intelligence Agency building, Langley, VA, 3 November 1959, quoted in Department of the Army, Field Manual (FM) 3-0, Operations (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 6 October 2017), 2-42. Change 1 was issued on 6 December 2017.


Endnotes

1. Department of the Army, FM 3-0, Operations, 1-13–1-14; emphasis added.

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