The Concept of the Human Terrain.

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Abstract

Two case studies are used in a contrast and comparative manner to illustrate the decision making

processes in different parts of the world and to highlight the inherent flaws in the once defunct,

twice revitalized, three times suspended concept of the human terrain. The first decision making

process represents the socio-cultural, economic, and religious characteristics often encountered

in Asia. The second process is based on the socio-cultural, economic, and religious features

typically utilized in the West and European countries. The terms Asia, West, and European are

not defined. The case studies and argument support a conclusive analysis of the concept of the

human terrain at the National Security Council level.

   Keywords: socio-cultural, human terrain, hybrid, asymmetric, irregular warfare,

   and waste and mismanagement.

The Concept of the Human Terrain.

The hybrid or irregular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan spawned interest in the human terrain. In the United States (U.S.) the concept is officially called the Human Terrain System (HTS) (Forrester, 2009). Proponents of the HTS suggest that socio-cultural knowledge is the key to understanding any particular society, or group within a society. In theory, socio-cultural awareness helps to determine how societies and groups make decisions and detailed socio-cultural information helps reveal the person or persons behind important decisions. Knowing who made what decision and why in a conflict zone is a key intelligence task. Understanding the decision making process, theoretically, can provide friendly forces with insight into the future plans of secretive individuals, underground groups, and clandestine societies. As touted, HTS can provide community leaders, policy makers, stability workers, law enforcement, and military commanders with an enhanced mindfulness of the people and activities in their areas of responsibility. Supposedly, HTS analyses also reduce the probably of negative responses towards U.S., coalition, and or partnering forces (2009). If the HTS concept is valid, then HTS products would have great tactical, operational, and strategic value especially in asymmetric environments in which ambiguity, change, and unpredictability are the norm. The question then is whether, or not the HTS works?

The U.S. is not the only nation that is curious about the concept of the human terrain and the benefits it supposedly provides. With the benefits in mid, several countries have embraced the concept. For instance, advocates of the concept in the United Kingdom believe that socio-cultural information is vital for stability operations. British doctrine says an understanding of the human dimensions of conflict is "a critical determinant in preventing conflict, shaping it and influencing the actors involved." (Ministry of Defense, 2013, pg. iii) So the HTS has even been

reconciled with, or integrated into the conceptualization for conflict and stability operations presumably making the HTS more valuable.

From its beginning to its demise the HTS was advertised by some individuals as a prodigious success. The promotional messaging however was contrary to the evidence. Those close to the system knew that after a few years of use in conflict zones several glaring problems emerged. The most pressing issue was that of validity. HTS was originally taken-on by the U.S. Army Training Doctrine and Command (TRADOC) as a proof-of-concept program, but never met the required thresholds. There was an abundant amount of anecdotal information pertaining to the HTS; mostly based on feelings, attitudes, and perceptions. Scientific evidence that showed the concept actually worked was blatantly missing, but the program continued. Therefore the HTS remained a source of contention. Some individuals jokingly referred to the HTS as a very expensive mechanism that generated "COINcidental" information and intelligence instead of genuine and reliable counterinsurgency (COIN) related information and intelligence. The following case studies illustrate the complex nature of an anthropological, socio-culture assessment and attempt to show the intellectual and operational limitations of the HTS.

Case Study: Number 1

An Asian woman met and subsequently married a Westerner after two years of courtship. Members of the Asian woman's family told her to marry the foreigner since he had money. Both were Catholic and so were their families. Several months after the marriage the wife asked the husband if he could help her family. The family had a small store in their house which was their only source of income. She said if the father had a motorcycle he could use it to find work in the rural area where the family lived. The newlywed husband gave his wife a down payment for the motorcycle and several hundred dollars to stock the store with goods to sell. The wife sent the

money to her family. After a week the wife said that the father had arranged to buy a motorcycle with monthly payments and that the added money was used to stock the family store with goods. After five months of payments the husband thought that the motorcycle had been paid off. His wife however asked for more money to pay the debt. When the husband asked what happen to the money, he was told that a couple of payments had been missed and that the family spent the money for food. He was also told that the income from the store wasn't enough to live on. The husband believed his wife's explanation about her family's situation, so the husband reluctantly gave her more money to finish paying off the debt. During the next year the wife asked if two of her sisters could live with them, so they could look for work. The wife explained how difficult life was in the country side, so the husband agreed. During that time different family members came to visit and usually stayed for a couple of days. The family members always showed up unannounced and had to be asked to leave. The husband eventually got tired of the intrusions and explained to his wife that in a Catholic marriage the wife was supposed to follow the husband and respect the husbands' wishes. The wife wasn't interested in the guidance from the Bible. This puzzled the husband since his wife was supposed to be Catholic.

After more than one year the husband was told by a brother-in-law that the family had actually bought two motorcycles and that the husband had paid for both. Another sister had decided to buy a second motorcycle, but could not pay for it, so a family decision was made for the husband to pay for both motorcycles. The husband was not told about the decision. The husband also discovered that his wife's father was an alcoholic and drank daily with much of the income from the store being used for alcohol.

Analysis

In some Asian families the obligations that one owes to one's family is never paid. That duty is embedded in a person from childhood on and throughout adulthood. From an early age children are told that the family is their number one concern and that everything they do should be for their family. Phrases like "blood is thicker than water" and "blood ties are the strongest" are passed from grandparents to parent and onto the child. Children, adolescents, and young adults are told not to tell outsiders anything about the family and not to share family secrets. They are also told that it's ok to take advantage of people outside of the family, as long as it is for the family. This includes husbands, friends, co-workers, and distant relatives and includes activities that are considered illegal such as thief, lying, confidence scams, prostitution, and corruption. In this setting family duties defy both law and religion. For example, the Bible says that when a man and woman marry they should leave their respective families and start their own. But in a number of Asian families daughters and sons are expected to remain loyal, subservient, and beholding to the family of origin. Yet everyone in the family still claims to be religiously pious. Decisions are made by the family and not by individuals. Within some Asian families servitude is a cultural norm and psychological and physical abuse as well as continual pressure are used to reinforce the norm.

In Asia, socio-cultural norms based on family ties are usually informal and therefore undocumented. That makes it very difficult to gather information about those norms, as compared to more sophisticated means of socio-cultural expression like religion, politics, and other determinants of social status. In the preceding case, the wife could not refuse the family decision, even though she was married, even though she was Catholic, and even though the marriage vows, marriage contract, and the guidance from the Bible say that a wife should

"submit' to the will of the husband (King James, 1610). In this case, the Asian family was a closed system and dysfunctional, so an understanding of the family decision making process is difficult, if not impossible to discern. That is unless you are a family member. In some cases an outsider may never know who the decision makers are.

Case Study: Number 2

The setting is a school in Afghanistan under the auspicious of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The school is a part of the NATO Training Mission and multi-national cadres staff the school and conduct the day-to-day operations. There are about 200 personnel assigned to the school including a contingent of Afghanistan National Army (ANA) members who are intended to assume responsibility for the school after NATO forces leave. School staff teach five different courses to about 2000 students a month. The ANA teach only Afghanistan students and manage their portion of the school semi-independently. Western techniques are used to administer and manage the school which has a director, executive officer, course specific staff leaders, and instructors assigned to each course. Course critiques are used to gain feedback from the students and lessons learned are sought for the various topics that are taught. Basically a double feedback loop is used to improve courses.

The school has written administrative policies, job descriptions, a collaborative computer network, and course, class, reference, and video libraries in English, Pashto, and Dari. Regular staff meetings are used to analyze and improve the courseware. The director is a U.S. Special Forces officer and prefers a situational contingency approach towards management and administration (More, Vito & Walsh, 2012, pg. 80-81). The reason for this is the non-traditional, hybrid, and or low-intensity type of conflict in Afghanistan. During scheduled staff meetings the director listens to suggestions about how to improve the course. He then examines the reliability

of the suggestion, weighs the evidence, gathers more evidence, looks at cost effectiveness or

potential waste, and then makes a determination based on multiple factors. The ANA director and

key ANA staff also participate in the staff meetings and the decision making process.

Analysis

Although the school utilized Western and European management techniques the ANA

staff readily adopted and continues to use those techniques. In Afghanistan ethic affiliations are

important as well as social status. Military officers are usually from military officer families and

enlisted are typically from families, or clans that have numerous enlisted men. Promotions and

choice assignments are often based upon family ties or prearranged marriages in which deals are

made between families. The idea to use more modern methods of management is intended to

show a clear distinction between traditional cultural ways that encourage corruption and newer

management techniques that include others such as professionals who are outside of the family.

In this new setting, the ANA director made all the decisions, the executive officer ensured the

decisions were followed, and the staff carried out those decisions. As compared to the first

decision making process the ANA process has clear goals, transparency, and inclusiveness and

therefore works more proficiently.

Discussion and Summary

The first case study demonstrates the limits of an anthropological, socio-cultural

assessment, as related to the decision making process in a close-knit family that fosters servitude

as a cultural-family norm. If a husband doesn't know the decision making process in his wife's

family, how can a social scientist or anthropologist that is in a country for six-months or one-year

ever learn that process? Such a person is an outsider, and in some countries will always be an

outsider. It's unrealistic to think otherwise. It is important to learn who the decision makers are in

a conflict zone and if possible understand why certain decisions were made, but in some circumstances the decision making process and who makes the decisions will not be discovered by superficial means. The HTS is one of those superficial processes.

The second case study presents a more tried and true means of decision making and is clearly more transparent and more analytical. Time will tell whether or not the ANA keep the established process, or revert back to more traditional tribal ways. Mechanisms can be put into place to monitor and measure this more modern process and the success or failures of the ANA who are using the process. This is not true with the HTS.

Recently USA Today reported that the HTS program "spent at least $726 million from 2007 to 2014 in Iraq and Afghanistan" and in the fall of 2014 the program was terminated (Brook, 2015). An Army spokesman explained that commanders in Afghanistan felt they no longer needed HTS analyses. The article also said that the program had problems like falsified pay documents; allegations of sexual harassment and racism; unaccountable behavior; and lack of oversight (2015). Numerous other reports and articles have gone on to say that the HTS concept simply did not work, with some of the reports citing technical difficulties and others mentioning the theoretical underpinning (Evens, 2015; Dowd, 2015; Gezari, 2015; Gregory, 2015; Gonzalez, 2015; Harshaw, 2015; Stanton, 2010; Perlmutter, 2015; Green, 2015; Rex, 2015). Termination of the program after all the positive hype, negative notoriety, and tremendous costs leaves one wondering. If the HTS concept was valid, than why was the program terminated? On the other hand, if the concept did not work, then why was so much money spent on the program for so long? Were the returns worth that much money?

People who were inside the program and people who were outside the program reported the following. The duties and responsibilities of the various jobs within the HTS were spelled out

in detail, but the vision, administration, and management of the program and the direction and guidance of teams and individuals were lacking (Clinton et al., 2010). Years after the program was up-and-running, as late as 2012, very few people associated with the HTS could actually explain why they were doing what they were doing. Perhaps this was due to the fact that the HTS was not integrated well into the intelligence preparation of the operational environment/battlefield process. Nor integrated well into the intelligence targeting/synthesis process. The biggest deficiency however was that the HTS concept was not integrated at all into the more advanced, complex, and dynamic Joint Irregular Warfare Operating Concept (CJCS, 2007, 2010) which was exclusively developed for irregular threats; like the ones encountered in Iraq and Afghanistan and the ones that the HTS was supposedly intended for. As a result, the HTS was a stand-alone directionless program. This left HTS team leaders, research managers, social scientists, and human terrain analysts in the dark as to the reasons why they were doing what they were doing.

Termination or failure of the program can clearly be attributed to two missing actions or activities. First, the lack of a quality controlled, standardized, U.S. Government institutional wide curriculum for irregular threats and/or the whole of government approach. One that explains the two concepts, or visions, the intent, and the roles of various agencies, departments, and support elements, to include the intelligence community, via the whole of government approach. The second missing action, or activity was the nonexistent personal involvement of the Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, and the Department of State in the whole of government approach which the Secretary and State Department are wholly responsible for. These two deficiencies are at the level of the National Security Council (NSC) and were apparently condoned.

Although several investigative bodies have already examined the HTS, the Under Secretary of Defense who is a member of the NSC needs to perform a thorough investigation of the HTS program. One that first determines what the HTS was intended to be: i.e. an intelligence program? Or a TRADOC training program? Or a training program for inexperienced intelligence types to bring them up-to-speed on anthropological-socio-cultural issues? Then after the intent is defined, the HTS concept needs to be critically reviewed for validity and ownership. The third step should be a review of exactly who decided to continue the project without proof-of-validity? And who benefited from the program monetarily? Naming the name or names. Then finally, whether or not tax payer dollars can be recouped, or not should be asked?

Many individuals would argue that no further inquiry is required since the HTS is seemingly dead, but in July of 2014 proponents of the HTS tried to breathe life back into the system in the form of a pilot project. House Report 4435 said, if the bill was passed it would require the "Secretary of the Army to conduct a pilot program to utilize Human Terrain System assets in the U.S. Pacific Command area of responsibility" (May 2014, Section 1074). The first HTS pilot was in 2005. How could a pilot program be justified, again, after years of implementation and then termination? Yet another pricey revival?

The HTS was limited from its inception and should have never been considered a panacea, but somehow it was. Today, where do we place the HTS on a continuum of irregular threat mitigation techniques? Is it nested to the right or left of the idea of "Three Cups of Tea" (Mortenson & Relin, 2007), or in the center along with the likewise expensive, not so productive, non-validated or disproven, and also defunct Counterinsurgency Advisory and Assistance Team concept? Or is the HTS still a parentless and misunderstood program? Obviously, the controversy still continues.

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