Strategic Insights: Lost in Translation

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The type of wars being fought since the end of World War II has changed dramatically from those fought in the first half of the 20th century and before. Wars fought **between** countries have dropped in number to nearly zero, while the number of wars fought **inside** individual countries has risen dramatically (see Figure 1).[1]

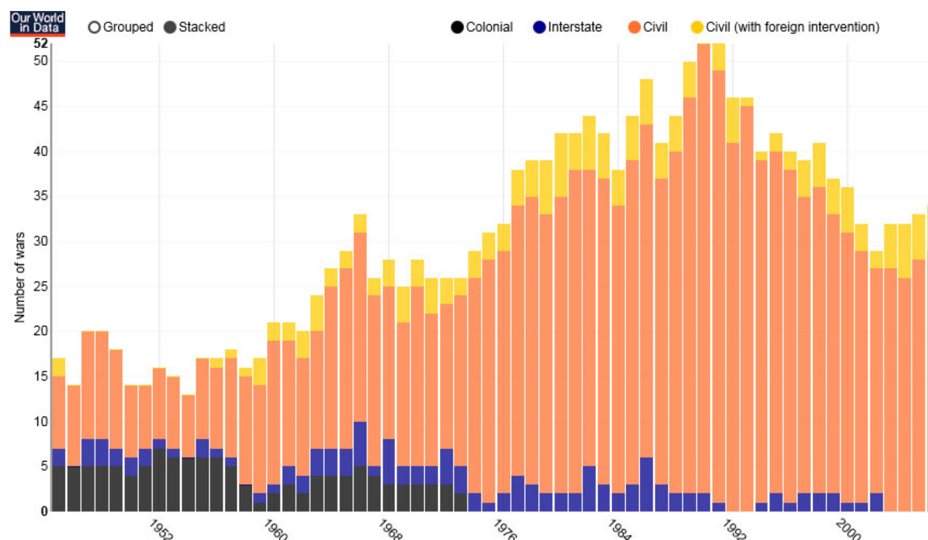

Figure 1. Number of State-Based Armed Conflicts 1946-2007 (by type)[2]
[click to enlarge]

The reasons for the tectonic shift in human conflict from interstate wars to intrastate wars are diverse and interconnected, and they have been discussed at length elsewhere.[3] In short, global alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the strengthening and maturing of multinational organizations such as the European Union and the G-20, the globalization of corporate interests, and the resolution of most international boundary issues since the end of World War II are among the causes for the decline in conflict between countries. Meanwhile, resurgent ethnic nationalism and the growth of corresponding

separatist movements, the global rise of middle classes (the precursor of revolution), and the historically cyclical reincarnation of radical Islam are among the reasons for the increase in internal conflicts.[4]

While the U.S. Army must obviously be prepared to fight a war at the "high end" of the conflict spectrum, these long-term trends in global geopolitics mean, in real terms, that the great majority of conflicts that the American military will be called upon to fight during the 21st-century will very likely be foreign internal conflicts at the "low end," such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan today. This, of course, raises the whole Composite Risk Management (CRM) structure of Department of Defense planning and involves one of the consequent "likelihood vs. consequence" paradoxes, which the Enterprise Risk Assessment Model (ERAM) was put in place to address a decade ago.[5]

After fighting and losing at the strategic level, two more of these "low end" conflicts, the U.S. Army is again refocusing on readiness to fight at the "high end," or what is now termed "a major near-peer war," just as it did after the Vietnam debacle. The brief affair with counterinsurgency is over again—the Army had a fling with Robert Thompson, but is married to George Patton. This is another parallel to the Vietnam War—and this repetition of history alone should raise many questions across the whole enterprise. These include, among others, whether a military organizational structure inherited from Napoleon is the best basis for 21st-century warfare, and whether our enemies have, in fact, **already** learned to exploit the systemic weaknesses inherent in the risk-management model of accepting "low-end" risk as a consequence of preparing for "high-end" conflict. Since 1964, some 65,000 American service members have lost their lives in "low end" foreign internal conflicts, and more than 400,000 more have been wounded. None have been killed or wounded in a "high-end" international peer conflict between forces of comparable size and technical capabilities. It is legitimate to ask, then, how much "risk at the low end" is acceptable in order to prepare for a type of war that has not been fought since 1945, and whether we should not be incorporating lessons of how to fight foreign internal conflicts better in the future. Unfortunately, this is not happening.

An easy place to start rethinking readiness would be to learn the lessons that those 65,000 lives bought, and incorporate them into doctrine, both to avoid repeating them, and to improve our chances of success on a type of battlefield where tactical victory and strategic failure have been the norm since 1965. I have written extensively on the strategic lessons unlearned from Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, but the failure to learn the larger strategic lessons of those wars has also obscured many important operational-level lessons which have also been lost in the wash.[6] The first among these is language, or rather, the lack of it. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. military relied almost exclusively on interpreters, with disastrous consequences. In a change from the Vietnam War—where the U.S. military trained at least 45,000 deploying service members to speak Vietnamese and probably twice that number—for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, apart from some remotely-based intelligence specialists doing classified work, the U.S. military trained almost no deploying personnel to speak either Arabic or Pashto fluently.[7] Instead, it relied on interpreters or "terps" as the

troops called them. This policy was an unmitigated failure and an important cause of the U.S. inability to get traction at the operational level of war in both countries. All of the thousands and thousands of day-to-day tactical engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan that involved communicating with someone who did not speak English were intended to combine together and attain an operational objective, but they were all essentially gobbledygook.[8]

Studies have shown that an interpreted dialogue with a highly skilled interpreter fluent in both languages is, at best, a 50 percent communication. At least 25 percent of the speaker's meaning and intent is lost going in each direction through the interpreter. Much of conversational meaning is embedded in nuance, tone, inflection, and colloquial expressions—elements that are lost through interpretation. As one anthropologist wrote of his experience in the war zone of the eastern Congo:

> It's easy . . . to feel excluded from a conversation when working through an interpreter . . . I wanted to convey compassion and empathy. What use is mere intonation when my words are meaningless? When I have no control over how my language, or my intent, or my concern would come across because my words weren't my own?[9]

The low quality of, and lack of qualification for, interpreters in both conflicts were a frequent source of scandal. By 2010, the contracting of manifestly unqualified interpreters in Afghanistan became so bad it led to a Congressional investigation.[10] Contractors paid to supply qualified, skilled interpreters often simply hired men off the streets who happened to speak the native language. However, simultaneous interpretation is a trained skill, like repairing a car. Being born in a country does not qualify a person to be an interpreter any more than being born in Detroit qualifies a person to be a car mechanic. The same was true of "cultural advisors" and trainers throughout both conflicts.

Virtually all of the many interpreters I knew in Afghanistan over the years were native Dari-speaking young men from urban areas who were willing to take an enormous risk for a big paycheck. They were hired because, like many Afghans, they spoke a second language to some extent—in this case Pashto. That linguistic ability, however, was almost always suboptimal to put it politely. In many cases, it was what we called "Tarzan Pashto." Their skill in English also was almost always marginal at best. They were listening to us speaking English, and understanding perhaps half of what we said (and none of the context, colloquialisms, or subtlety), translating it into Dari in their minds, then re-translating it again into pidgin Pashto. Conversations with critically important Afghan leaders, military officers, and village elders were, on a good day, a dialogue conducted on the level of four-year olds. This alone was enough to completely undermine the entire "hearts and minds" effort, whether it was critical *Jirga* (tribal council) meetings with tribal leaders in Kandahar Province or training young military officers in Kabul. As Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn note:

> The West's engagement also failed to grasp the importance of personal relationships in Afghanistan. In most cases, international forces could not even speak to those on whose behalf they were supposedly fighting, because language training was never a priority. . . . Even more damaging was the lack of language skills of those on the ground in the orchards of Arghandab or the forests of Kunar, who were acting as de facto ambassadors for the international effort.[11]

One simply does not earn the trust of foreigners to the point of putting their lives in your hands and doing what you ask by speaking to them like a four-year old. If a Muslim came into your Christian community at home and asked you—speaking Arabic through an interpreter from another state who did not like your community—to trust him and put your life and your family's lives in his hands while using the sentence complexity of a four-year old child, would you do it? No, and millions of Afghans and Iraqis did not either.

In reality, it was worse than that. If the damage had stopped there, the outcomes would mostly have been neutral. In fact, they were often negative, for cultural reasons which many astute young officers I worked with in Afghanistan saw and understood: The men doing the interpreting were not ethnic Pashtuns (very few Pashtuns were willing to do this work because of the danger to their families, and even Tajik interpreters from the North told no one what they did for a living, not even their parents) and they were young. In Pashtun culture, young men do not speak. They listen. Only when they reach middle age will Pashtun men participate in a conversation with older men present. Young men are simply not culturally respected. Therefore, U.S. officers were communicating via a (young) man who, culturally, should not have been speaking to an elder at all. More importantly, almost all the young "terps" I knew had the standard contempt of urban Tajiks for rural Pashtuns, who they looked upon as hillbillies and backwoods *Deliverance* cast members.[12] This usually came through in some way, even if subconsciously, in their interpretation work. Furthermore, the young urban Tajik interpreters understood almost nothing of the subtleties of Pashtun language, culture, and etiquette, and they did not know the proper honorifics to use with elders to show respect, and had no respect for them in any case.[13] In every conversation, the perceived culprit for this thinly veiled contempt and lack of respect was not the interpreter—it was the American holding the conversation. The same dynamic played out again and again in Iraq, where American forces would take Shi'a interpreters into meetings with Sunnis and vice versa, oblivious to the animosity this created before the conversation even started.

It is a fact of human communication that people evaluate the intelligence of others through the eloquence and persuasiveness of their spoken words, especially people who are illiterate, because they have no access to the written word. A person who has a good command of their language is considered intelligent and wise. Conversely, a person who does not is considered ignorant and not worth listening to. In the Peace Corps, I was assigned to a rural school construction program in the Ecuadorian Amazon and partnered with a highly qualified civil engineer. I had a high school diploma at the time and had no idea how to mix concrete, pour footers, lay cinder block, and keep it all level. For my colleague, this was child's play. However, at the time, I was bilingual in Spanish, which was the language of the villagers, and my friend

and colleague knew almost none. Therefore, he would explain to me in English how to do something, and I would explain it to the locals in fluent Spanish. Every time during that year when the villagers had a problem or wanted advice, they came to me. I lost count of how many times one of them said to me when I asked them why, "I'm coming to you because you are very smart. Your friend is nice, but he's not very bright."[14] In reality, I was a dunce, a young high school graduate with no idea how to build a school, while my friend was an experienced engineer in his thirties with a master's degree and a decade of experience in the real world. Yet, they trusted me, came to me with their problems, and thought I was the smart one because I spoke their language. Anthropologists have seen this phenomenon all over the world, especially in primitive cultures and regions of low literacy. As Professor of Anthropological and Comparative Anatomy Mark Henneberg, of the University of Adelaide notes, "when a foreigner tries to communicate with us using an imperfect, broken, version of our language, our impression is that they are not very intelligent."[15] Multiply this effect times every tactical conversation that has taken place with an interpreter in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Basically, they thought we were all stupid, all the time, because we could not speak their language well. In the rare cases where an American taught himself to speak Pashto, like the State Department advisor Carter Malkasian, the effects were nearly miraculous. Everywhere else in Iraq and Afghanistan, except when local tribal elements found it in their interest to cooperate with us anyway, the counterinsurgency effort almost always went sideways. If you cannot communicate effectively, you cannot gain trust and confidence.

The war in Afghanistan will soon enter its 17th year, and the war in Iraq its 14th, yet in its combatant ranks today, the U.S. Army still has virtually no one who can speak Arabic, Pashto, or Dari, despite the fact that a significant number of American service members have already performed five tours of duty in Iraq or Afghanistan. Each of these grueling and dangerous tours involved protracted pre-deployment training in a broad spectrum of combat and life-saving skills—training which collectively accounts for years of their active duty service. Yet, hardly a minute was spent in pre-deployment language training. All of that training in mock villages and mock engagements with "local leaders" (incompetently played by urban expatriate Afghans and Iraqis with no clue how rural Afghans and Iraqis behave because they had never visited the rural areas), was rendered irrelevant on the battlefield in the real world by the almost total lack of ability of U.S. Forces to talk face-to-face with real Afghans and Iraqis. Instead, every day in every engagement, they had their words, intent, meanings and emotions—that were intended to build trust—reduced to meaningless baby-talk by interpreters.

The facts in this case are pretty simple: Like it or not, foreign internal conflict is the predominant type of war that the U.S. Army will likely be called upon by our political leadership to fight for the foreseeable future. Unlike major international land wars, this type of conflict cannot be won without the ability in every platoon and rifle squad to communicate precisely and eloquently with the local population, with local leaders, and with the military officers and men they are attempting to train and advise. The use of interpreters for this vital communication has been proven beyond any doubt in two wars to be a complete waste of time and money, and it contributed significantly to operational failure across Iraq and

Afghanistan.[16] I met many generals in Afghanistan who repeated the axiom that you cannot kill your way out of an insurgency, but that is all they ever trained their soldiers to do. How many infantry platoon leaders and company commanders were sent to a year of Pashto or Arabic language training prior to deployment? None. The ability to speak the local language does not ensure victory in a foreign internal conflict, but the lack of it is the handmaiden of defeat. In no small part, the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan were lost in translation.

ENDNOTES

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14. Paraphrasing of multiple, similar statements made to and translated by the present author.

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