Human Terrain:
A Tactical Issue
or a Strategic C4I Problem?

Dr. S. K. Numrich
Institute for Defense Analyses
snumrich@ida.org

Outline

- Why Human Terrain
- Backlash Caused by Lack of Specificity
- Human Terrain: Strategic, Operational and Tactical
- Stemming Chaos: Taxonomy
- C4ISR as Nexus
- Cultural Understanding Begins at Home
Our Wargame Has Changed

The time-honored battlefield is no more – in the face of peacekeeping, nation building, counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism

The face of warfare is not integral to our training systems or C4ISR platforms

Critical Gaps in Our Capability

Conducting military operations in a low-intensity conflict without ethnographic and cultural intelligence is like building a house without using your thumbs: it is a wasteful, clumsy, and unnecessarily slow process at best, with a high probability for frustration and failure.

But while waste on a building site means merely loss of time and materials, waste on the battlefield means loss of life, both civilian and military, with high potential for failure having grave geopolitical consequences to the loser.

HTS

I asked my brigade commanders what was the number one thing you would have liked to have had more of, and they all said cultural knowledge.

MG Chiarelli
What Is Human Terrain?

- This is a difficult question to answer because the term was coined by the military and does not arise from any one or group of recognized academic disciplines.
- Army used the analogy to physical terrain – a fundamental part of situation awareness:
  - Terrain is important militarily.
  - Knowing the high ground is antecedent to gaining it.
  - Detailed knowledge of terrain enables maneuver warfare.
  - You can build it into a map and it remains usable.
  - To within bounds, you can modify and control it.
  - Terrain is many things: typography; geology and soil type; it’s natural coverage (forests); it’s roadways, rail lines, bridges; it’s what humans build onto ground.
- As physical terrain is a composite, so is human terrain – but can we define the pieces?

Definition Is in the Eyes of the Beholder

- When the Regional Combatant Commanders were asked about their skill base for handling this human terrain, the indicated gaps in the following areas:
  - Societal/cultural/tribal knowledge,
  - Knowledge of economy,
  - Knowledge of infrastructure,
  - Knowledge about evolving threats, and
  - Language capabilities.
Issues with Academics

- **Culture**: The system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning. 
  - This is one definition of culture, but there is no single, blessed definition within the communities that deal with it.
  - The military has not defined what specific information is sought, but most especially for what purpose.

- **Result**
  - Anthropologists have the image of "gun toting" field researchers who are doing military stuff and not research and in the process are poisoning the environment for real field researcher.
  - Strangely, anthropology was born out of military need (British Empire) and well-known anthropologists have worked with the military.

- **Our failure to articulate needs**
  - Prevents us from understanding STRATEGIC as well as tactical needs
  - Alienates those who could help us most
  - Keeps us from appreciating the full scope of needs and requirements and existing programs that have capability to assist – C4ISR community

Needs at All Levels – Not Just Tactical

- **Strategic Needs (data and models)**
  - Support effective use of COCOM resources in Theater Security Cooperation Plans
  - Understand how to collect and manage socio-cultural data from nations in AOR
  - Get ahead of the game through the ability to do global hot spotting using state stability, rise of insurgency, global data sets and polling
    - Set priorities for ISR and other resources
    - Gain collaboration with other Agencies based on good information

- **Operational Needs**
  - Develop well-informed plans of full range of actions
  - Understand how to quell problems early by understand populations
  - Build situation awareness meaningfully

- **Tactical Needs**
  - Have more options for carrying out Commander’s Intent
  - Understand when and how roles can be shared with indigenous groups
  - Be safer and less lethal
Interaction of Strategic and Tactical

Multi-disciplinary Multi-year Focused R&D Program

- Inter-Agency Coordinated Security Plans
- Hot-Spotting Prioritization

Effective Safer Less Lethal Tactical Operations

- Adaptive Informed Operational Plans
- Improved SA Informed ISR

Order Out of Chaos

Typology for Human Terrain
- Adaptable to nation, group, individual
- Focus on decision-making
- Tailored to needs of military
- Suitable from tactical to strategic

Current Situation
- Multiplicity of individual groups, cylinders of excellence (stovepipes)
- Databases abound but do not cover full scope of needed information
- Tactical databases being developed by every unit – no operational or strategic unifying guidance
- Tactical data unavailable broadly to inform operation plans of strategy
Data Layering / Prioritization

Understanding Human Terrain Data
- Some elements don’t change rapidly
  - Language
  - Tribal locations
  - Religions
  - History of conflict
- Some change gradually
  - Economic status
  - Infrastructure
  - Local leadership
- Some can change rapidly
  - Immediate needs and wants

Who can / should collect data?
- Professionals who understand their field and the business of data collection
  - Economists, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, statisticians, pollsters
- Should the soldier be collecting field data – probably not
  - Soldier has a different job, but needs to be able to interpret local situations
  - This implies that training be augmented to provide soldiers with this capability
- How to collect specific local data if not using soldiers
  - Rapid ethnographic assessment done by professional field researchers
  - Backed by area knowledge, language capability and guiding questions
- Maintain long-term data collection, share opportunistic data, collect specific local data only in priority situations and when local interaction is imminent

An Issue of Tools

- Critical need for tools at every level
  - No connective tissue to indicate how different dimensions interconnect
  - Most relevant models are hardest to interpret and validate
  - Lack of models to inform planning tools
- Data for most models is extremely difficulty to acquire
  - Until we have an informed data acquisition strategy and a structure by which to share data, building and testing models will remain very difficult
Why C4I?

- **C4I Community Understands**
  - Data structures
  - Problems of information interchange
  - Issues of data security
  - Cueing, prioritization and data integration
  - Supporting planning with data and models

- **Collaboration and communication**
  - Service Oriented Architectures
  - Network centric data structure
  - Provider push and user pull

- **Enables the interaction of strategic, operational, tactical**
  - Serves all the communities
  - Can integrate information to provide situation awareness which is what is required at all levels

But nobody asked you?
Cross-cultural understanding begins at home!