Cultural Intelligence: SA Army in Peace Operations

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Declaration

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Place

15 August 2012
Date
Abstract

The South African Army has over the past few years played a major role in Africa’s Peace support operations. The army has a responsibility to ensure that its participation in these operations result in sustainable, community based long lasting peace, with minimum civilian and military casualties. The ability to know one’s enemy, his intentions and the terrain, more often than not, determines the success or failure of a mission.

The failure of the US intelligence community and armed forces to know, respect and appreciate the Middle Eastern Muslim community’s culture, religion and social settings led to a mission with disastrous consequences in Iraq and Afghanistan. A mission that would last for over ten years with no clear achievable objectives and rejection by the local population and ultimately global disapproval.
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1. Introduction

The introduction of democracy and the destruction of Apartheid in South Africa meant a lot of different things to different sectors of society and industry. Immediately after the elections South Africa was confronted with a few continental security challenges, among others the genocide in Rwanda and the civil war in Somalia. Politically, as a continental super power and a new democracy with the necessary economic and military muscles it was seen as South Africa’s responsibility to intervene and stop the carnage.

As for the military, democracy meant a completely new role, a role that was to be largely defined by peaceful and humanitarian operations instead of destructive counter insurgency and internal dissent repression operations. However, given the history of the nature of operations carried out by the then South African Defence Force (SADF) and particularly the army, it became clear that the new South African National Defence Force (SANDF) was not fully equipped and ready for the new role that would become its defining character and primary external role.

SADF members were highly effective and experienced in the fields of counter insurgency, and bush war, with troops whose skills and training was geared towards the containment of internal problems by force. The Bantustans states came with their own armies with limited combat experience and little expertise to talk about. The liberation movements such as the African National Congress (ANC) which came with its military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) and the Pan African Congress (PAC) which also brought its own military wing, Azanian People Liberation Army (APLA), were mostly equipped with skills and knowledge of guerrilla and revolutionary asymmetric warfare.

This meant that the new SANDF was to become a huge and diverse force but with little or no experience in what was to become its future role. Peace Operations in a culturally rich and sensitive Africa.

The focus of this paper will be Peace Keeping Intelligence (PKI), with specific reference to the cultural dynamics of society. Why is it necessary to have a scientific study of cultural intelligence? The paper will show that cultural intelligence although usually ignored is a very important part of military strategy and tactics and in modern military operations, the knowledge of the ‘human terrain’ is more likely to determine the outcome of an operation and its long term effects.
The paper will, through the use of practical examples and known missions, attempt to prove that there exists a desperate need for soldiers to know and understand the socio-economic environment in which they operate, know the political, economic and cultural environments, have a clear and comprehensive understanding of all social and non-military factors affecting the particular society.

It is in this context that the paper will argue in favour of cultural intelligence and provide facts to prove that the South African army needs to invest more time and resources on cultural intelligence so as to build a lasting and community-based peace.

The objective of the paper, which is to prove the importance of cultural intelligence, will be achieved through the provision of a detailed summary of the history behind peace operations, this will be done so as to create a context and provide a theoretical framework from which the reader can understand the underlying logic behind the paper.

This will then be followed by introducing the reader to the art of intelligence and its cultural dimension. The last section of the paper will focus on the SANDF, and particularly the army’s role in line with UN objectives in peace operations. Do we need cultural intelligence, if yes why do we need it and how is knowing the ‘human terrain’ going to help or detriment us prior, during and post operations.
2. Evolution of Peace operations

Over the past decades the term ‘peace operations’ has been used to mean and explain a lot of related activities, the nature of these activities has evolved with time. During the cold-war era and before, peace operations were confined to monitoring cease fire agreements already agreed upon by the contending parties, a typical example being the first deployment of United Nations (UN) observers to monitor the peace agreement between Israel and her neighbours in the late 1940s (Williams, 1995).

The evolution of peace operations meant that in keeping with its mandate of protecting civilians and ensuring global peace, security and stability, the UN had to look into the possibility of deploying light armed infantry combat troops into troubled and unstable regions, this developments and the number of conflicts increasing at an exponential rate in Africa and elsewhere paved a way for the emergence of new and advanced second generation peace operations in response to more complex international security challenges.

2.1 Peace keeping

Peace keeping is the second step after peacemaking. This is the most common of peace operations; it involves the use of minimum military force to maintain the already existing agreements between differing forces. Peace keeping operations are normally characterised by clear rules of engagement, these operations in their nature are not an end but rather a means to an end. Such operations are used to create a viable environment for a political and diplomatic solution to be found and implemented. The current deployment of South African troops to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi, and the Sudan are examples of peace keeping operations (Williams 1995).

2.2 Peace enforcement

Peace enforcement operations on the other hand involve the use of military force not to maintain an already existing agreement but to end the conflict itself. This is achieved through military engagements with the contending parties. Given the nature of the UN as an international organisation with no independent war making capabilities, these operations are normally carried by sovereign states unilaterally or in cooperation with another state (Williams, 1995).
The attack and ultimate overthrow of Colonel Gadhafi’s Libyan regime by the US and her allies is one such example. For any one of the above mentioned operations to succeed, it is important for both the foot soldiers and the commanders to know what type of a peace operation are they involved in.

3. South Africa in Africa’s peace operations

Before 1994, South Africa actively deployed military force against its neighbours seen to be in support of the ANC and any other organisation standing against apartheid. The most notorious and successful being the deployment of 32 BATTALION against the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) forces, and other liberation armies in Angola, and Namibia (The then South West Africa).

In the eyes of many African leaders and people, South Africa represented a threat and a major challenge to the independence of Africa, the defeat of colonialism, and the defeat of what was seen as western influence and imperialism and the achievement of human rights, especially given its military might, economic muscles and support by the United States (US).

Upon assuming power in 1994, the new government saw it as a moral obligation to distance itself and prove to be different from the past government on issues of regional and continental social responsibilities. This meant the pursuit and promotion of human rights, support for neighbouring troubled countries and the promotion of peace and democracy.

South Africa occupied a high position on moral grounds in the international human rights platform due to having achieved a negotiated democratic order, and the implementation of programmes such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC); it was therefore inevitable that at some point South Africa will be drawn into Africa’s conflict resolution, either as mediator or peace maker. South Africa had the necessary economic and military resources required and it was to a larger extent expected to “pay for the crimes” of the previous government (Southall, 2006).

4. Intelligence

Intelligence can mean a lot of things to different people; however within a military context intelligence has its own special meaning. One of the world’s greatest war strategists of all times, Carl von Clausewitz (As cited in Christopher. Richard & Wesley. 2009) defines intelligence as
“every sort of information about the enemy and his country, in short the basis of all our own plans and operations”. This definition however has its own loopholes as it describes intelligence as merely information about the enemy. The question still remains, what is intelligence and how does it differ from information.

Information can be anything, daily newspaper reports from the Daily Sun, Sowetan or Pretoria News can be considered information, News reports from SABC Television can be considered information, but would it be wise to classify this information as intelligence? That would mean journalists, and news reporters are intelligence officers which is obviously not correct.

Intelligence and information cannot be equated, it is true that intelligence involves information. But it is more than just information, it is a question of who collects the information, who or what is the source of such information, the manner in which it is collected and processed, who needs and uses such information and for what purpose.

Taking all the necessary factors into consideration, intelligence can be defined as that which is dependent on confidential sources and methods for full effectiveness, performed by trained officers of the state for state purposes and consumption, with a specific focus on foreign subjects. In a nutshell intelligence is secret, state activity to understand or influence foreign entities (Christopher, Richard & Wesley 2009).

5. Cultural intelligence

Generally, cultural intelligence can be defined as an analysis of social, political, economic, and demographic information that can provide an understanding of a society (Coles, 2005). Cultural Intelligence is again defined as the ability to recognise the shared beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours of a group of people and to apply this knowledge towards a specific goal (Spencer, 2008). Within an African context however, cultural intelligence should be broader and seek to respond to the broad and diverse challenges facing Africa. Cultural intelligence cannot be of any use to the military unless it is timely, specific and most importantly reliable.

6. The need for cultural intelligence

The ability to know one’s enemy and his intentions, more often than not, determines the success or failure of a mission. The failure of the US intelligence community to know, respect and
appreciate the middle eastern Muslim community’s culture, religion and social settings led to disastrous and lasting consequences in Iraq and Afghanistan during and after the ‘war on terror’, a war that would last for over ten years with no clear achievable objectives and rejection by the local population and ultimately global disapproval (Heinecken & Winslow, 2010).

The above mentioned event provides more than enough evidence to prove that there exist a serious and desperate need for the South African Army to have prior knowledge of what to expect before deploying troops on peace keeping missions. Cultural intelligence provides a foundation for the development and maintenance of successful military missions. Within a military context, cultural intelligence should be seen and understood as more than just demographic statistics. Unlike other areas of intelligence, cultural intelligence provides an understanding of how and why individuals and groups act in a particular way.

Conventionally, wars are known to be fought between nations over territory, economic reasons, political expansionism and lately regime change. Today however, things are different, the nature of modern warfare has transformed to an extent that only a few wars are fought between nations. Today’s wars are being fought within nations, and there exist a never ending news supply of civil wars motivated by ethnic, racial, cultural, religious and political differences among people of the same nation (Adebajo 2011).

Africa is home to a considerable number of known tribal, religious, ethnic and post-colonial political conflicts in the world. The ethnic cleansing in Rwanda, religious and racially motivated conflicts in the Sudan and Somalia, the civil wars fuelled by political rivalry in the DRC, The Hutu rebellion in Burundi and recently the Christian and Muslim rivalry in Nigeria and many more, all in a period of less than 15 years (Adebajo 2011). Each and every one of the above mentioned conflicts might have arose due to one or more reasons, but the fact of the matter is that cultural differences played an enormous role.

Ethnic divisions and hatred, cultural superiority, religious and tribal animosity all created favourable conditions for violent confrontations (Carmel 1999). All of these and other divisive factors makes it impossible for the South African Army to engage in successful peace missions and conflict resolution programs without a clear and comprehensive understanding of these regions, their cultures, traditions and customs.
7. The SA Army and the need for Cultural intelligence in peace and stabilization operations.

In March of 2003, the US and her North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies officially declared war on Iraq. The operation had the following as its primary objectives;

- Identify and defeat the entire al-Qaeda high command, with Osama Bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi as high priority
- Defeat Sadam Hussein and enforce a regime change
- Identify and destroy all al-Qaeda training camps
- Bring peace, stability and democracy to Iraq

Most of the above mentioned objectives were achieved to a certain extent, particularly the first three. Largely due to the fact that the achievement of these objectives required military force. With the US and her allies being in command of superior forces and weapons, victory on their part was inevitable. Conventional military operations were quickly won (Coles, 2005).

What about the last objective? It is a well known fact that up to this day, almost 10 years since the war begun, there is still no peace in Iraq, democracy is still a dream that might never materialise; one cannot even begin to talk about stability. Lack of understanding of the local population and their culture was the primary cause of this failure of a mega proportion.

The success or failure of a peace operation is largely dependent on the relationship between peace keepers and the local population, this relationship can be influenced by a lot of factors such as individual and troop collective attitudes, personalities and most importantly culturally, ethnically, and racially motivated behaviour (De brito, 1997).

Cultural intelligence must form part of the initial plan prior to the deployment of troops to troubled regions in Africa. The SA Army needs to know what the leaders and their opponents will think before they do, know their capabilities and limitations, know who makes decisions and what is it about their country and society that makes them different from the rest (Coles, 2005).

General Anthony Zinni, former commander of operations in mission Restore Hope, stressed the importance of cultural intelligence when he said (As cited in Coles, 2005).
It is important for the Army to know why they are at war and what is their desired outcome, their languages, their way of life, the needs and aspirations of the local population so as to win their minds and hearts, how far they are willing to go to achieve their stated objectives and all other social and non military factors.

Knowing your enemy as a commander and a soldier has always been the first principle of warfare. Although peace operations cannot be equated to warfare, the fact remains that peace operations are still military operations in need of military strategy and tactics whose success or failure depends on one’s knowledge of foreign cultures. Peace operations in Africa require a hands-on and practical management of post conflict cultural differences (Heinecken & Winslow, 2010).

Lack of cultural knowledge at strategic level in countries such as Burundi and Sudan where religious, race and cultural intolerance are at the core of the conflict can lead to the development of policies that can fuel an insurgency and derail the peace process. Many conflicts in Africa come as a result of failure to understand and tolerate different cultural groups (Donais 2012).

In the year 2000, a survey was conducted among senior and junior army officers in the SANDF on deployment in conflicts ridden areas in Africa. Almost all respondents stated that “We sometimes or always experience difficulties when interacting with civilian population, local authorities, local fighting factions and the media” (Heinecken & Winslow, 2010).

This is due to lack of cultural understanding of the human terrain of operation. Mission failures and unnecessary loss of lives make cultural intelligence an important element of strategy and not just another “expandable” casualty in the planning process.

History and very recent events in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Bosnia, Sudan and many more has proven that a lasting and genuine peace can only be achieved if the peace makers and peace keepers have a clear understanding of the conflict, its origin and its support structures.

7.1. Major challenges

The SA army does not have a comprehensive pre-deployment cultural education training program. Soldiers are given introductory lessons on the history behind the conflict, and a few lessons on basic terms for basic communication purposes. Most of the soldiers deployed on these missions lack the capacity to understand the complex ethnic, religious, economic and political dynamics behind these conflicts (Williams, 1995).
Peace operations and armies in their own nature draw large interests from the international community and media. The idea of human rights and respect for diversity and foreign culture is very well respected internationally. It is therefore of critical importance that foot-soldiers on the ground be intellectually equipped with the ability to deal with issues that might arise in a manner that will not compromise mission success (Coles, 2011). Soldiers on the ground are the real focus point of international media and human rights organisations, not strategic decision makers who are not in the field. One wrong movement might turn international opinion against soldiers and ultimately ruin the entire operation.

Naturally, peacekeepers should be seen as objective and impartial, non partisan and taking no sides. This is important for the success of a peace operation and drawing in the local community to be part of a home grown solution.

Impartiality and non partisanship, real or perceived, cannot be possible unless soldiers deployed are familiar with the local cultural environment from all sides. Soldiers on the ground must be able to communicate with all the affected parties in their own languages, must have a thorough understanding and appreciation of local customs, and lastly must be familiar with the local political dynamics and social aspects of a society.

The last and important challenge is discipline. Armed soldiers in peace operations find themselves in a special and tempting position. During peace operations soldiers deal directly with the most vulnerable elements of society in times of conflicts; women and children (Williams 1995). The rape and abuse of women and young girls is a very prevalent practice during many peace operations.

Lack of discipline among soldiers with regard to how they treat the local population and conduct themselves has the potential of discrediting the credibility of an organisation, brings embarrassment to the entire force and country and tore the entire operation apart. The behaviour of South African troops on deployment, especially off-duty troops in Burundi and the DRC has been a great embarrassment for South Africa, this result in the force with a bad name and reputation (Mandrup 2008). Cultural intelligence should ultimately lead to the provision of specialised pre-deployment training programs that will assist in dealing with issues of ill-discipline.
7.2. Lessons learned from peacekeeping in Africa

In 1994 almost half a million of civilian men, women, and children were killed in Rwanda. This tragedy occurred in spite of the presence of a UN Peace keeping force. The performance of the UN force in Rwanda is still questionable to this day. Was the UN fully aware of the cultural complexity of this conflict? Was the force level right? Was the correct and appropriate units deployed? Were the soldiers aware of the cultural dynamics of Rwanda? (Malan, 1997).

It is important and necessary to study, analyse and understand the background to the conflict, social, cultural, political and economic dynamics of the society in question. A comprehensive analysis of these factors will provide an early warning system and assist the SA Army in determining the right time to intervene, the right units to deploy, and type of training to provide to both the commanders and the troops (Anyidoho, 1997).

It is difficult and sometimes can be impossible to collect actionable intelligence in conflict zones. This is where the importance of cultural intelligence comes in. Cultural intelligence can assist in recruiting and cultivating reliable and loyal human intelligence assets. Close relations based on cultural understanding between soldiers and the local population can be of great value to the SA Army.

8. Recommendations

The SA Army must develop a cultural intelligence collection and analysis capability which will not only provide the necessary pre-deployment information about the human terrain, but will also provide guidance and serve as a point of departure towards the design and provision of pre-deployment training programs.

As an army we need to be able to recognise and appreciate the limits of our means and capabilities. The development of advanced cultural intelligence and situation awareness programs will enable the Army to have a reliable and accurate early warning system that will guide the army’s actions prior and during troop’s deployment.

The SA Army’s contribution to peace operations should be based on rational and practical solutions that seek to address and resolve conflicts from their root causes. This can only happen if soldiers and their respective commanders are fully conversant with all socio economic, cultural and non military factors affecting both belligerent parties and the affected communities.
Unlike most world armies, the SA Army has an advantage due to diversity and continental cultural experience accumulated by many MK and APLA combatants during their years in exile. The army need to exploit such skills and knowledge to its advantage. Such members could be used to provide training and cultural awareness programs to new and young members to be deployed.

9. Conclusion

Somalia, Rwanda, and recently Iraq and Afghanistan, all presents examples of what could be considered operational failure. In Somalia, peace keeping forces were killed and their bodies dragged in front of international television eyes, in Rwanda masses of civilians were killed while the entire international community sit and did nothing, peace keeping troops were deployed while it was already too late. In Iraq and Afghanistan military operations were quickly won by the coalition forces due to their superior air and fire power, but to this day the exist no peace or internal stability to talk about.

All the above mentioned operations have one or more factors in common. However it is important to note that they all failed to take into consideration the human terrain as part of the equation in their strategic calculations. Soldiers are faced with loyal and patriotic citizens in their host countries during peace keeping missions, this call for maximum participation and interaction between soldiers on deployment and the local population.

The reality is that, the SA Army will continue leading Peace Operations in Africa for many years to come. This calls for huge commitments and investments in the army’s cultural and general intelligence capabilities. This will enable the army to engage belligerent parties from an informed, impartial and non partisan position, ultimately creating a viable environment for a community based and long term peace.
10. References


