

Exploration of the Area of Multinational Operations and Inter-Cultural Factors: An Update of HFM-120/RTG Activities

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ABSTRACT

HFM-120/RTG 'Exploration of the Area of Multinational Operations and Inter-Cultural Factors' first began life as Exploratory Team-036 (ET-036) in February 2003. The recommendation and formation of such an ET was the direct result of recognising the emerging importance of cultural factors within modern military operations. The shift from traditional warfighting capabilities to a more complex level of coalition interoperability has become more pronounced since the operations in the Balkans during the early 1990s. The issues and lessons which arose from the high profile involvements in Bosnia, Kosovo Afghanistan, and currently in Iraq, have illustrated the need to explore and consider the impact of cultural factors on multinational operations. HFM-120/RTG is currently involved in exploring the key cultural factors that contribute to effective multinational operations. This paper discusses the activities and progress to date, some emerging findings of interest, and suggests some early direction for future work in this area.

1.0 BACKGROUND

Since 1990, there has been a significant increase in the number of military operations that have required NATO nations to contribute forces as part of a multinational coalition. Moreover, the range of mission types has broadened with an increased focus on Low Intensity Conflict, including peace-keeping, peace-support, and humanitarian operations. This trend is expected to continue. There is evidence to suggest that subtle differences in the organisational and national cultures of troop-contributing nations' armed services can have an impact upon the overall operational effectiveness of the multinational force. Therefore, there exists a requirement to consider, integrate, and guide on the inter-cultural issues and factors that surround multinational inter-working. Owing to the nature of this research area, it is highly desirable that a multinational perspective is developed regarding the most important topics for investigation. It is to be hoped that, in the future, complimentary research programmes in the contributing nations will develop an improved appreciation of the problem area and contribute to appropriate intervention strategies.

It is important that a cross-national and cross-cultural forum be formed in order to utilise fully individual nations' current understanding of the issue of multinationality in military operations. The growing number of nations within NATO and interaction with PfP¹ nations suggests that the collective knowledge-base and guidance held within such a forum can only serve to strengthen current NATO understanding and preparation for future operations.

¹ Partnership for Peace nations.

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2.0 WHAT HAVE WE DONE SO FAR?

2.1 Exploratory Team-036

Within ET-036 it was necessary to adopt a rigorous methodological approach in order to deliver a programme of work that would address the exploration of inter-cultural factors of multinational operations. Therefore, in line with NATO RTO² requirements a technical activity proposal (TAP) was produced in order to draw attention from other potential NATO/PfP nations to the topic of interest. At the first meeting of ET-036 this TAP was addressed and consensus achieved among the nations present (UK, USA, Canada, Netherlands, Germany, France, and Slovakia). Also at this first meeting a draft terms of reference (TOR) was drawn up, which addressed in slightly more detail the objectives and deliverables of any subsequent research task group (RTG).

Additionally, at the first meeting, to help build rapport among the international technical team and also a sense of common understanding regarding inter-cultural factors, the scientists in attendance presented on their current national programmes of work that would support the proposed ET-036 activity. This provided an insight into the national interests and highlighted the diverse perspectives on a common theme (i.e. inter-cultural factors of multinational operations). It was surprising at this early stage that more nations were not forthcoming in their interest in the subject matter. This may be reflected in the hierarchical communications flow within the RTO and the national organisations involved in identifying suitable candidates for involvement with such scientific activities.

At the second meeting of ET-036 the draft TOR was agreed and an initial programme of work (PoW) drafted. It was agreed that as this appeared to be the first ET of its type to address the vastness of ‘culture’ and the impact of cultural factors on coalitions and multinational operations, that a state-of-the-art review (SOAR) may be required. The development of a SOAR was seen as a necessary first step to get a cross-sectional ‘snapshot’ of the current national and international activities and understandings regarding the subject matter. The key questions driving this requirement were: ‘where are we now? and what do we know, and conversely, not know, about cultural factors?’ Other subsequent activities were proposed, but caveated on the assumption that these may be affected by the findings from the SOAR and the evidently increasing interest in the topics of cultural factors, multinational experimentation, coalition performance and interoperability.

2.2 Research Task Group-120

It was approved by the RTO and HFM Panel to grant RTG status to ET-036. Therefore, in the autumn of 2003 NATO HFM-120/RTG ‘An Exploration of the Area of Multinational Operations and Inter-Cultural Factors’ was formed.

2.2.1 RTG Meeting No.1 (October 2003)

The aim of the first meeting was to identify the full-range of possible key cultural topics, factors, and variables. Hence, a brainstorming session was conducted by the scientists present. This was a very qualitative activity, which encouraged a free thinking and intellectually roaming environment. Time pressures and criticism were not imposed, and free discussions were encouraged in order to elicit fully the pertinent topics, factors and variables. This brainstorming session produced ~84 separate factors. The next stage was an attempt to corral these individual issues into more manageable categories. Again, a free flowing discussion session was facilitated in order to achieve this. Broadly, the issues captured fell into 11 overarching categories. These were:

- Pre-disposition
- Organisations (personnel)

² Research Technology Organisation (RTO).

- Organisations (operational)
- Context of multinational operations
- Process and experience
- Leadership and management
- Preparation
- Technology
- Metrics, tools, techniques, methods
- Society
- Mutual understanding

It was decided that these overarching categories would serve, for the meantime, as chapter headings for the SOAR. However, it was recognised and accepted that subsequent literature searches and developments in this area might change the number and shape of these categories, with possibilities for the amalgamation of categories, the dissolution and expansion of others, and the emergence of new categories.

Having agreed on the range of factors/issues/topics and the overarching chapters they sat under it was decided that the next step was for individual nations to return to their respective organisations and conduct a national and international literature search. A search criteria was devised to describe the format, timescales, potential search engines, journals and organisations where the relevant literature may reside.

The priority was to identify intra-national research projects, programmes of work, and reports *etc* but to also include any additional and appropriate literature that was captured along with the national sift.

RTG Meeting No.2 (March 2004)

The aim of this meeting was to synthesise and distribute the gathered literature among the contributing nations so that each individual nation possessed the sum of all the nations' literature searches. There were limitations concerning the amount of success that individual researchers achieved in locating and capturing national programmes of work and wider sources of literature.

Further refinements were made to the original framework. This periodic iterative process is necessary in order to reflect expert opinion and developments on the subject matter. Discussions produced several new topics and issues, which produced an updated framework containing the following categories; hence, chapter titles:

- Pre-disposition and psychosocial aspects
- Organisations (personnel)
- Organisations (operational)
- Context of multinational operations
- Process and experience
- Leadership and management
- Preparation
- Technology

- Metrics, tools, techniques, methods
- Society
- Mutual understanding
- Teams

The next step was to establish the distribution of effort between the contributing nations for the chapters of the SOAR. Nations volunteered to lead for a particular chapter topic, which broadly reflected their national programmes of work or specialist interests. In addition to lead responsibility, a number of nations also opted to support other nations on topics of interest. Therefore, for each overarching chapter topic (e.g. communication) there was an identified lead nation (i.e. USA) and for some chapters an additional nation (or two) to assist with reviews and technical writing contributions.

It was at this stage in the RTG activities that the growing interest in cultural factors within the international military scientific community began to increase significantly. In February 2004 ET-049 'Adaptability in Coalition Teamwork' was established. ET-049 runs in parallel with a NATO Concept Development and Experimentation (CD&E) ET on 'Leader and Team Adaptability in Multinational Coalitions: Cultural Diversity in Cognition and Teamwork'. This was established as a more focused ET with potential for an experimental capability.

Therefore, a decision was taken that 120/RTG should be responsible for overarching issues and topics, reflected in its remit of an 'exploration' of inter-cultural factors, whereas ET-049 would be more focused and experimental. The acknowledgement of this highlighted the growing interest in 'things' to do with culture, coalitions, and multinational forces and operations. As such, the original PoW was re-aligned with the agreement of the RTO HQ.

As a point of interest, the 120/RTG chairman was present at the inaugural meeting of ET-049 and this cross-panel involvement was fully justified when on day one of the meeting a course of action suggested by ET-049 members was to establish the range of factors and issues within a framework (i.e. a sort of SOAR). Had this cross-panel communication and involvement not taken place then the subsequent duplication of effort would have been an extremely expensive and redundant activity.

RTG Meeting No.3 (October 2004)

The progress made by individual nations was reviewed. Further searches of the literature were being amalgamated into individual chapters and distributed among the participating nations and group members. Several other potential routes to exploit the gathered information were discussed. For example, could 120/RTG develop a shared international database that contained all the report references, technical papers, journal articles and empirical / experimental data captured during the lifespan of the RTG? Despite the potential utility and benefit of sharing such information the maintenance costs in terms of manpower made the practicality of such a database impossible for any single nation to burden.

Also at this meeting it was necessary to establish and agree an end of year report to be submitted to the RTO HQ and HFM panel. This was a simple document that captured the chronological activities and progress of the RTG.

Finally, the option as to whether to hold a workshop and/or symposium on the subject matter was discussed. It was decided that it may benefit NATO and the wider international military community if a well organised symposium on the subject of cultural factors and their implications for operational performance was organised (potentially in 2007). One of the deliverables from 120/RTG is to suggest and support the organisation and chairing of such a symposium at the conclusion of the current RTG.

RTG Meeting No.4 (June 2005)

The aim of this meeting was to present, internally to the RTG, our accumulated literature, knowledge and analysis thus far. Each chapter within the SOAR was presented by the lead nation author. Some limitations were evident and these mainly concerned national commitment and support. In response to this it was necessary to decide where nations could support other chapters or whether they were restricted to concentrate on their own chapter(s). Progress is slower than predicted, but is still directed at achieving its aim and objectives. The optimistic bias in task completion times reflects the 'planning fallacy' found within the established scientific literature.

3.0 WHAT ARE WE CURRENTLY DOING?

As it currently stands, the main activities of 120/RTG involve the further refinement of individual contributors' chapters to the SOAR, and the editing process in pulling together the overall document. The national group members of 120/RTG continue to communicate and collaborate with other NATO HFM and CDE activities, as well as other international experimentation campaigns (e.g. MNE 4). Progress will continue as planned, but is willing to adapt should the need arise. However, the need to produce an overarching knowledge-base to assist and inform national and international activities related to inter-cultural factors for multinational operations is paramount.

4.0 INITIAL FINDINGS

Although it is too early to report on definitive findings, it is possible to comment upon a few emerging themes and issues as an interim deliverable to help inform other activities and Defence Scientists engaged in this subject matter.

(1) Initial analysis of the gathered literature suggests that there is not as much valid and robust research as possibly assumed. Because of the increasing emphasis on issues to do with cultural factors within coalition contexts, it is often assumed that much research is currently being conducted in this area by the various NATO and wider international military nations. Much of the literature is heavily reliant on a theoretical approach, often evidenced by anecdotal evidence and subjective perspectives. Although there is a legitimate case for the application of qualitative methods, the validity and reliability of some studies can be brought into question. However, there is a growing body of empirical evidence that is beginning to address cultural factors using rigorous scientific enquiry. However, an evidence-based approach, using robust scientific methods should be encouraged.

(2) Research can sometimes be too narrowly focused on specific factors and issues, or alternatively, be so broad as to dilute the meaning behind any contributing cultural factors. Although this is an artefact of scientific enquiry, in so much that focused, valid and reliable research or studies may not be useful in the 'real world' applied military context and the results not generalisable outside the particular context, the same can be said of research that is so badly designed and conducted that the results are meaningless. Therefore, the key lesson to consider revolves around the 'so what?' question. This refers to the internal reflective aspect of the researcher in asking who the research is for (military customer)? Why is the research important? What will the output be? How will it make a difference to military performance and the capability of multinational forces?

(3) Despite the lip service and political emphasis that cultural factors are important within multinational contexts, it is difficult to establish valid and reliable cause-and-effect relationships to operational performance and capability. This links to the two points mentioned above. The military tend to have an attitude that if the issue is not a 'showstopper' then it can wait as there may be more pressing and urgent issues to address. But should we wait for a cultural showstopper that (a) could have been averted? and (b) can be directly attributed to cultural factors (through rigorous, reliable and valid research)?

(4) The fact that we have established a framework and categories highlights the range of issues and factors to consider in multinational forces. Do we have to wait for something terrible to go wrong, i.e. a ‘showstopper’?

5.0 LIMITATIONS

There are a number of emerging limitations, both with our empirical data collection and also within some of the findings. Although these may correct themselves over time or may indeed disappear, it is worth highlighting them now for historical reference.

(1) If cultural factors are important then the number of national and international research programmes focused on this topic is less than significant, given national Defence research budgets. This may be a rather contentious statement, and it has already been made in the section above, but this appears to be the case. There are two possible explanations for this that could either be independent or interdependent. They are (1) that there really isn’t as much rigorous and robust research on this topic as imagined, and/or (2) our internal national literature and research searches have failed to capture and identify the full extent of this research.

(2) There exists vast amounts of papers, reports, presentations and literature written on this topic, but separating out the meaningful from the rhetorical is a significant manpower intensive challenge. Keyword searches will produce huge ‘hit’ numbers, but the number directly relevant to the inter-cultural factors of multinational forces is less than often perceived. Once this analytical trawl has been conducted it is then necessary to try and sort out the ‘good’ from the ‘bad’ literature. Added to this is the issue that maybe some very useful and pertinent papers, reports, research have somehow been missed in the initial searches.

(3) The emergence of projects and defence activities claiming to address ‘coalitions’, ‘culture’, ‘interoperability’, and ‘multinationality’. The rationale for some of this work can be misleading, and as cynical as it sounds, could be an attempt to secure national funding for scientific research programmes. There is a danger that some activities claiming to address cultural factors and multinational forces are focused at technology insertion, without considering the human dimensions involved (organisational, social, cognitive). Again, this is all part of the learning and analytical process within the literature searches (time, manpower, energy and funding).

(4) The constraints and issues mentioned have limited the role of 120/RTG to an ‘exploratory’ capability. Although it was anticipated that much could be achieved by this group. It was obvious from early on that the proposed tasks would be larger and more complex than originally imagined. This is not necessarily a complete limitation, as the RTG can be used to inform other emerging groups and teams (e.g. NATO HFM ET-049 Adaptable Coalition Teamwork). However, it is recognised that 120/RTG should remain as an overarching group that retains an exploratory function so that it can assist other NATO and national research activities.

6.0 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE WORK IN THIS AREA

Again, it is too early to provide definitive suggestions and direction, but the current work can be used to help inform and guide where possible. Some useful suggestions and guidance includes:

(1) The need to balance the desired expectancies with the achievable and practical. The topic of inter-cultural factors and multinational forces is an expansive, complex interaction of factors. The range of issues contained within our chapters highlight the potential enormity of the subject matter. Therefore, some very serious thought needs to be invested in future research and the lessons from the research already identified.

(2) The work of 120/RTG to date has helped to develop communities of interest, networks and collaboration across NATO (including TTCP, ABCA, and bi-lateral agreements) on the topic of inter-cultural factors and multinational forces (e.g. the linkages with ET-049). This should be fostered and built upon for future work in this area. Where NATO RTO considers other research activities involving issues and factors directly related to cultural factors, people issues, organisations, coalitions etc then it should make sure that other concurrent activities are aware and also that the most pertinent national researchers and scientists are communicated with.

(3) The progress and knowledge gained so far has helped to inform other work in this area focused at experimentation. As described earlier, when ET-049 was first formed it initially suggested attempting a SOAR much the same as 120/RTG. Thankfully, duplication of effort was avoided and alternative opportunities suggested. ET-049 has since made excellent progress by becoming involved in multinational experimentation on Allied Warrior 04 and the forthcoming Allied Warrior 05 and Multinational Experiment 4 (MNE 4). Multinational experimentation offers an ideal opportunity to investigate the role and impact of cultural factors. By considering the initial findings of this RTG, coupled with the limitations and suggestions mentioned above, future groups interested in experimentation and cultural factors should consult and communicate with the appropriate (and growing) community of interest and international network of Defence Scientists involved with this subject matter.

(4) Finally, cultural factors of coalition forces and multinational operations involve the interaction of people, organised within organisational structures and processes, and communicating and interoperating via technologies, i.e. a holistic socio-technical system. Therefore, these three key factors (people, organisation, technology) MUST be fully considered in an interdependent framework. Future research in this area should not investigate any one (or two) of these three factors in isolation and independent of the others. To do so would reduce the 'real world' application and utility of such studies for the optimisation of military capability.

