

Cross-Cultural Competence: A Key Enablement for 21st Century Military Leaders

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Abstract

Since the mid-20th century, America's military personnel have repeatedly displayed a troubling lack of cross-cultural skills in their contacts with foreign societies, resulting in fraught human relations and frantic, temporary military initiatives to generate missing skills. The most painful recent iterations occurred during America's Global War on Terror (GWOT) after 2003, when desperate pleas from the field for greater cross-cultural capability stimulated a decade of promising educational initiatives, most of which were then scaled back or abandoned altogether. This article identifies the continuously missing capability as Cross-Cultural Competence (3C) distinguishing it from language fluency and regional knowledge. It outlines the 3C domain, offering an overview of its components and describing why proficiency in this unique set of skills will remain an essential military requirement for military leaders in the 21st century, certain to be urgently sought by the US again in the future. The article calls attention to the challenging educational and programmatic prerequisites to developing cross-cultural competence within military leadership. Finally, based on recent American experience, the article offers recommendations for the US and other liberal democracies seeking to develop cross-cultural skills within the leadership of their security communities.

Keywords

Cultural Competence, Leadership, Military Education

1. Introduction

The first decade of the 21st century witnessed unprecedented American military attention to capabilities identified by the novel acronym LREC—shorthand for Language, Regional Expertise and Culture. This preoccupation grew out of the highly fraught human relations encountered by American service personnel en-

gaged overseas in the Global War on Terror (Barno, 2006; Gray, 2006; Fosher & Mackenzie, 2021a). Reacting to the needs from the field, as early as 2007, individual US military services had established service-specific programs and organizations to generate new capabilities. By 2015, the LREC rubric itself had appeared in national military policy mandates (U.S. Department of Defense Directive (DoDD) 5160.41E, 2015; U.S. Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI) 5160.70, 2016).

Fortunately for the United States, at the advent of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), its military already had a foundation on which to build language learning and regional familiarity. It subsequently boosted existing programs, increasing the inventory of foreign language speakers and regional experts, and embarking on an agenda that in 2025 still appeared sustainable over the long term (Henk & Abbe, 2024; Watson, Wolfel, & Kalkstein, 2025).

Less fortuitously, an early interest in a cross-cultural skillset, distinct from language and regional knowledge, was not correspondingly sustained. After a promising initial burst of enthusiasm, service commitment to these skills waned, eventually falling to a level that may best be described as minimal and static (Henk & Abbe, 2024). This occurred despite the severely problematic human relations facing US service personnel in the culturally complex circumstances of overseas combat operations. Least represented and most needed were practical skills to work with, through and across cultural boundaries (Bradford, 1997; Connable, 2004; Mackenzie & Henk, 2025).

American commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan wound down after 2010 and the demands for cross-cultural expertise seemingly abated, so a waning interest by senior military leaders may have been inevitable. But the problem was more profound. This was a third iteration in seventy years of the same story (Abbe & Gouge, 2012; Abbe, 2013; Fitzgerald, 2013; Mackenzie & Miller, 2017). Recurring periods of desperate need for military cross-cultural skills had been followed by brief spates of frantic effort to solve the problem, only to see the interest quickly evaporate, leaving little trace. By the early 21st century, the US military had long faced both a need and an inability to commit itself to a robust cross-cultural skillset. Tellingly, it also failed to precisely define the missing skills or connect the scientific and educational infrastructure necessary to further develop, refine, teach and measure them. Absent a clear articulation of desired skills and given a lack of definitional precision, a loss of interest was entirely predictable. The country's senior military leaders simply would not commit resources to what seemed to them little more than vague aspirations (Fosher, 2021).

This article examines the most recent US efforts to generate military cross-cultural competence, offering a description of experiences that may also be of interest to policymakers in other liberal democracies. The article provides five contributions to that end: first, it defines Cross-Cultural Competence (3C), the key deliverable of the skillset, suggesting why it will continue to be important. Next, it outlines the contents of the 3C domain itself in an effort to achieve as much precision as the current state of the science will allow. It then briefly describes the American

experience, identifying obstacles to the culture skills initiatives and suggesting how these might have been surmounted. Finally, it offers several implications for military leadership and national military policy that could usefully inform future efforts.

2. Zeroing in on Cross-Cultural Competence (3C)

Culture is an abstraction so broad in contemporary jargon that it eludes a widely accepted definition inside and outside academe. In US military parlance, a lack of definitional specificity in the past has supported a specious argument that language proficiency and regional expertise are themselves cultural skills so comprehensive that they fully satisfy the needs of America's military leaders (Abbe, 2013). That argument blithely ignored the depth of the cultural roots underlying the troubled human relations that regularly confront service personnel in their overseas assignments. It is important here to distinguish cross-cultural skills from language fluency and regional expertise, all three of which are part of the US military LREC paradigm. The cultural skills are unique. Neither language proficiency nor regional expertise has ever provided access to the conceptual space and mental models of foreign counterparts (Fosher & Mackenzie, 2021a; Henk & Abbe, 2024). This role for culture is now acknowledged in US military policy, which unambiguously distinguishes culture skills from language fluency and regional expertise, even if the culture skills are still minimally defined in service thinking.

Still, this discussion is not about culture *per se*. It is about a set of capabilities that enables a military leader to cope and thrive in circumstances of cultural differences and cultural complexity. Nor does this article denigrate the importance of language fluency and regional knowledge. In almost all military cross-cultural contexts, those capabilities can be supremely important, well worth the expenditure of almost any resources to acquire them. However, language skills and regional knowledge in the US military experience often are more notable for their absence than their contribution.

Despite its best efforts, the United States has never been able to generate (and efficiently assign) enough fluent language speakers and regional experts for every military requirement (Rosenthal, 2011). Then, too, as noted above, language and regional expertise do not provide the conceptual granularity to inform many of the complex interpersonal relations on the ground in contingency environments, and the language and regional skills are severely constrained by geography. When they are available and relevant, language fluency and regional knowledge work wonderfully in tandem with a cross-cultural skillset, but they are not that skillset (Connable, 2021; Henk & Abbe, 2024).

This begs the question: what then, specifically, are the elements of a supposedly unique cross-cultural skillset for military leaders? That issue is revisited below, but it is useful to begin here by first noting the intended effect.

The most desirable outcome of culture learning for military applications is what former US Air Force anthropologist Brian Selmeski described as Cross-Cultural

Competence (3C). Basing this formula on earlier work by culture scientists, he defined 3C as “the ability to quickly and accurately comprehend, then appropriately and effectively act in a culturally complex environment to achieve the desired effect” (Selmeski, 2007; See also McCloskey & Mateo, 2016). Selmeski later appended that definition with the observations that the competence is not necessarily dependent on prior knowledge of the other culture and that the skills can be applied even though the conceptual content of the other culture may conflict with one’s own deep-seated mores and cultural assumptions (Selmeski, 2021).

In this conceptualization, 3C is an inventory of capabilities that can be applied anywhere (Brislin, 1986). The US military professional literature describes this inventory as consisting of “culture-general concepts and skills that can help military personnel make sense of available information when specific information is unavailable or rapidly changing” (Fosher & Mackenzie, 2023). Regional knowledge may be a useful addition, but it is not a necessary component of 3C.

A culture-general approach has provoked some controversy in US military academe. It was a relatively novel approach in the early 21st century, all too easily perceived as a threat by legacy thinkers. Scholars and practitioners steeped in traditional language, history and regional studies found it difficult to imagine how a cultural skillset could meaningfully be stripped from a particular social environment. Yet that is the precise objective of 3C.

There are three key drivers behind this argument. First is the fact that cultural data are generalizable. Human belief and behavior—both individual and collective—occur in repeatable patterns, making them amenable to scientific inquiry, categorization, and prediction. If a cultural pattern is recognizable, related behavior can be anticipated with some degree of confidence. So the skillset itself, anchored in the replicable experimentation of behavioral science, is very much about understanding patterns of human behavior and acquiring the tip-off cues that can help anticipate and react to it (Mackenzie & Henk, 2025).

A second driver is the fact that while cultural patterns are generalizable and recurring, they are anything but static within human communities. Some patterns are relatively stable over time, but many others are fluid, subject to shift and change, sometimes rapidly (Ingold, 1994). The culture-general skills of the 3C-equipped military leader are very much about recognizing both the patterns and the ongoing directions of change, along with the implications for military decisions.

A third driver is of key importance. In the relationship equation, the most basic foundational 3C skills are not as much about the other as they are about the self. An ability to work effectively across cultural boundaries rests heavily on the development of personal attributes that enable an individual to set aside his or her own cultural assumptions and biases, attenuate the natural human aversion to the unfamiliar, and enter the conceptual reality of the other (Mackenzie & Miller, 2017; Abbe, 2021a).

Successful application of virtually all 3C skills requires the prior development

of personal attributes such as self-awareness, self-regulation, cognitive flexibility, empathy, perspective-taking, rapport-building, the ability to adapt without adopting, facility in suspending judgment and rejecting facile assumptions, comfort with uncertainty, and working through culture shock (Fosher & Mackenzie, 2023); Mackenzie & Henk, 2025). For most, even a modest 3C capability demands the deliberate, long-term self-development of these personal characteristics.

3. The 3C Enablement as a Whole

The foundational capabilities are one part of the 3C endowment, arguably the most important for most military leaders. However, the advanced 3C skills offer two other broad inventories of conceptual tools. The first is what might be termed conceptual access. This is a familiarity with cultural patterns sufficient to enable recognition of a pattern of belief and behavior, wherever it may be encountered. The recognition would be accompanied by an understanding of the implications for a military engagement. The second set of conceptual tools consists of what might be termed the follow-on praxis—facility in selecting and applying an inventory of responses necessary to mitigate a threat, promote collaboration or take advantage of an opportunity (Henk & Abbe, 2024).

The highest and most desirable attainment of 3C in practice would be the synergistic combination of all these categories: a military leader with highly developed personal attributes able to enter unfamiliar cultural circumstances, quickly make sense of the relevant equities, select an appropriate response (including measures to achieve productive collaboration), navigate the challenges and successfully complete a military mission. This, to be sure, is an idealized portrait, and few leaders are likely ever to fully attain it. But many would benefit profoundly by acquiring key pieces. Not all cross-cultural engagements require the same degree of 3C proficiency (Mackenzie & Henk, 2025).

4. The Skills in the Basket

Whatever their capability, military leaders regularly engage in activities that demand 3C skills, depending on the mission and the circumstances. One obvious dimension is the recognition of exploitable adversary characteristics. This, in turn, facilitates operations aimed at frustrating an opponent's activities and dictating his choices. Even at the most violent end of the spectrum of conflict, cross-cultural skills are important (Mackenzie, 2014).

Still, high-intensity combat operations represent a relatively small proportion of military activity, and whatever the intensity, resort to conflict is inherently a human relations issue, “political activity by other means” in the widely quoted dictum of 19th-century thinker Carl von Clausewitz (1976). The objectives and options of all the actors are informed by cultural considerations. Without significant cultural insight into an adversary, it is unlikely that the prospects of success for any military intervention can be realistically appraised. On occasion, American policymakers have had access to such insight, exemplified during the World War

II era by the insightful contributions of anthropologist [Ruth Benedict \(1946\)](#). More typically, they have not, as the military interventions of the early 21st century regrettably have illustrated ([Connable, 2004](#)).

Admittedly, deep insight into a particular adversary is not a culture-general skill, but more the culture-specific domain of the regional expert. But profound regional expertise is not always available on short notice. Decision makers equipped with mature 3C skills have more than enough sensitivity to pose the right questions, affording at least some protection from unwise choices.

The contemporary roles of America's military leaders go well beyond those of kill and compel, as they are deeply embedded in cross-cultural relationships at many levels with foreign military entities, along with foreign and domestic public and private sector actors and organizations. Here, the required expertise includes communication, conflict resolution, relationship building, collaboration, operational planning, instruction and leadership. In all these roles, inadequate cross-cultural skills incur a risk of mission failure ([Bradford, 1997](#); [Bartholf, 2011](#); [Colvin, 2023](#)).

To be more precise about the employment of the 3C skillset, the most salient elements are *comprehend*, *act* and *culturally complex*. In other words, this is about making sense of relevant human relations, then doing something productive about them, often in challenging circumstances ([Zinni, 1998](#)).

Other than the foundational skills, 3C mainly is about expertise in recognizing and dealing with patterns of belief and behavior. The skills consist of the identification of the pattern (or an ability to ferret it out with an inventory of conceptual tools), and an accompanying capacity to manipulate the resulting knowledge for mission success. The patterns themselves would be observed in the beliefs and behavior of some group, association, society or other human collectivity.

This leads to an obvious question: what pieces of the vast expanse of culture would concern a military leader? Quite obviously, cataloguing a full range of belief and behavior in human societies would be an impossibly complex undertaking. Fortunately, since 3C skills draw from a small slice of the human cultural inventory, it is also unnecessary. Beyond the foundational skills already described, the domain can be mapped into five broad categories:

- 1) Cross-cultural communication.
- 2) World view.
- 3) Social organization.
- 4) Threats, security, civil-military relations and the management of violence.
- 5) Leading, following, mentoring, teaching.

These categories are sufficiently comprehensive to include most of the military 3C concerns and sufficiently distinct to be examined as separate entities although they intersect at many points. A truly exhaustive treatment is well beyond the scope of this article, but selected examples are cited below to outline the domain.

5. Cross-Cultural Communication

Communication, broadly understood, is a 3C enablement impacting virtually all

the others. It might also be characterized as messaging and has many aspects, some of which are foundational skills previously noted. It goes well beyond simple exchanges of information, being the primary vehicle through which human beings interact, build relationships, and shape social reality (Gudykunst, 2003; Mackenzie, 2014; Steen, 2021).

Effective, comprehensive two-way exchange of meaning across cultural boundaries is the most obvious form of this capability. Its components include language, paralinguage and other modes of communication. A 3C-equipped military leader would be sensitive both to the process and to the effects of messages and could be expected to understand—and react effectively to—communication along the scale of high context to low context cultural environments (Hall, 1959, 1976).

The skillset also infers a capacity to enter the reality of the other, to view situations, circumstances and prospects as the other views them and collectively analyze them using the same mental models. A 3C practitioner would be sensitive to the way language impacts and informs the world views of native speakers (Underhill, 2011). 3C skills include facility in recognizing and working through the manipulation of emotion in communication.

Communication difficulties were endemic to US military operations in Iraq after 2003, leading one bright young Marine officer, based on his experience, to write an article in a professional journal entitled “Marines are from Mars, Iraqis are from Venus” (Connable, 2004), a dramatic way of highlighting relational challenges. The problems included language shortfalls, but went much beyond language alone, having to do with conflicting mental models, contrasting world views, and the resulting difficult human relationships.

One assumption in the 3C paradigm is that effective communication does not require a common language. Many cross-cultural engagements rely on interpreters. So an obvious 3C skill is the effective employment of interpreters with the capacity to verify the accuracy and comprehensiveness of communication.

3C communication skills extend to an understanding of how information flows in, through and between groups, how it is managed and influenced by information gatekeepers, and how it might be intersected for mission success. A related skill is the ability to recognize the malign information operations of opponents, meeting them with a repertoire of effective countermeasures. Some of the most sophisticated 3C skills include proficiency in cross-cultural negotiations and conflict de-escalation. Mature application of these skills typically requires intensive education and considerable experience.

Not counting the foundational attributes, cross-cultural communication in all aspects is the most difficult and the most time-consuming 3C enablement to produce. Even more than the other skills in the 3C basket, this one relies heavily on the continuing development of the foundational skills.

6. World View

A key objective of both the foundational skills and the communication skills is the

ability to enter the cognitive space of another individual to understand the reality perceived by the other person. A shorthand for that reality is world view. This encompasses an individual's system of mental models and beliefs about the world and how it works, forming "the foundational cognitive, affective and evaluative assumptions and frameworks about the nature of reality which (people) use to order their lives" (Hiebert, 2008).

Groups and associations are not sentient beings, so it is technically incorrect to suggest that they can have world views. However, members of a group can share so many common beliefs that a little reification here may not be a mortal sin. Still, it is more scientifically accurate to refer to the shared mental models as social norms.

A wide variety of social norms may be of considerable 3C interest, including the collective agreements about the following:

- 1) Sources of authority for making personal and collective decisions, including tradition and historical narratives.
- 2) Nature of right and wrong and the relevance of that dichotomy to personal and collective behavior.
- 3) Basic nature of the *cosmos* (is it organized and harmonious or chaotic and conflictive?).
- 4) Views on the purpose and value of life, including motivation, if any, to safeguard life.
- 5) Conceptions of pollution and contamination, both physical/material and spiritual.
- 6) Things in life that are so precious that extraordinary measures are warranted to protect them, which may be material (as in livelihood, possessions and property), human relationships (as in wellbeing of family or kin groups), social-conceptual (as in unthreatened values and traditions) or personal (such as preserving reputation/*dignitas*/face). This category includes the perception of threats to these things.
- 7) Enduring grievances, resentments, hatreds and sources of personal and collective discontent.
- 8) Perceptions of inherent individual rights and the point of balance between individual prerogatives and societal demands.
- 9) Degree of reliance on either emotion or cause-and-effect logic to influence individual and collective decisions.
- 10) Tolerance of innovation and change (technological or social). The category includes patterns of reaction to change.
- 11) Views regarding the use of violence, including the circumstances under which it may be applied, actors with the prerogative (or responsibility) to apply it, and the forms it should be allowed to take.
- 12) Perceptions of causality, including belief in non-human agency in human affairs, and acceptance or rejection of Western materialist assumptions about the events of life. Included here are beliefs about sorcery and the spirit world, the ex-

istence, purpose and will of a Creator (or existence of *karma*) and convictions about ultimate accountability for life choices.

13) Beliefs about the latitude of human agency (as opposed to dictates of fate).

14) Attitudes about personal obligations, loyalty and responsibilities to other people, including beliefs about the legitimacy of authority and expectations of leadership.

15) Attitudes about the obligations and responsibility of others to ego, and appropriate personal responses if those expectations are not met.

16) Attitudes toward absolute or empirical truth and views about the degree to which truth may be (or even should be) reconstructed to fit the differing circumstances of life.

17) Circumstances, if any, under which duplicity, deceit, dissembling and manipulation of others are warranted (or even required).

18) Attitudes towards sexual exploitation/sexual violence.

19) Attitudes towards what Western Europeans might consider nepotism, graft and corruption.

20) Conceptions of time, including beliefs about the importance of time in regulating the events of life.

21) Beliefs about the value accorded to personal possessions and responsibilities for stewardship of public property.

22) Attitudes about the essential elements of the good life (achievements, emoluments, status or security) including beliefs about threats to the good life.

US military personnel frequently have struggled to collaborate effectively with counterparts in other cultures that do not hold similar world views on issues such as the value of human life, tolerance of violence, importance of empirical truth and causality. As an example of the latter, if members of a counterpart society are inclined to attribute all adverse circumstances to fate or sorcery, it may be difficult to make a case for good prior planning or even for basic hygiene.

7. Social Organization

The worldview of individuals in a society will bear on every aspect of behavior, including social organization. That said, a useful approach to analyzing social organization itself is to ask: who is responsible to whom, for what, and under what circumstances? Some specific 3C concerns in social organization are noted below (Henk & Abbe, 2024).

1) *The Ties that Bind*. The existence of a distinct social group is predicated on some combination of bonds, connections or ties. These might include kinship, affinity, ethnicity, caste, language, shared leadership, residential proximity, livelihood, educational cohort, religion/ideology, shared historical narrative, shared grievances, shared quest for security, political party, or even shared recreation or criminal activity. Members of any society are typically connected by multiple ties. Key 3C interests would include the nature and strength of the ties, degree of group cohesion, inter-group linkages and the relative importance of specific ties in par-

ticular circumstances (Simmel, 1955; Granovetter, 1973; Migdal, 1988).

2) *External Linkages*. Social groups in all parts of the world maintain connections with external actors. These may result from a diaspora, common religion, shared ideology, intellectual pursuits, sporting interests, commerce or even criminal endeavor (Metz, 2024). 3C skills would include an ability to recognize the kinds of linkages, gauge their influence and assess their implications for stability and for military operations.

3) *Power, Prestige and Influence*. A significant 3C concern is the identification of actors that mobilize group activity, ranging from those that can compel activity to those that simply inspire and influence it. Of interest here are the circumstances under which coercion or influence will be exercised, and the limits of those prerogatives. Inadequate command of this skill poses considerable risk of alienating key actors, failing to identify influential allies or opponents, and inadvertently establishing harmful local relationships.

4) *Patron-Client Ideology*. Among the regularly occurring varieties of power relationships in societies are those of patron and client, with the attendant ideology of loyalty and obligations (Wolf, 2004). 3C skills would provide insights into the degree to which the local society views a US military member in relation to the local patron-client relationships and would assist the military member in efforts to avoid inadvertent entanglements.

5) *Social Stratification, Divisions and Distinctions*. Societies inevitably include distinctions in status of component groups, whether based on ethnicity, class, caste, generation, gender, learning, shared personal characteristics or minority standing of one kind or another. 3C skills include the ability to recognize the patterns and assess the implications for human rights, stability and military interventions.

6) *Decision-Making*. An important 3C enablement is the ability to unravel community processes for making collective decisions and a recognition of the cues that indicate the results of those decisions. Inability to recognize the processes—or misinterpretation of the cues—can unnecessarily endanger a military contingent or miss significant opportunity. Mature skills in this sphere include some capacity to influence community decisions.

7) *Articulation of the Traditional and the Modern*. Societies in the developing world frequently include some combination of traditional socio-political-religious authorities along with the institutions of a contemporary nation state. Sometimes this combination works with harmonious complementarity. Often it does not. 3C skill in discerning the traditional/modern relationships, including disconnects and tensions, can protect against ill-advised hiring decisions, unwise interventions and poor mission choices.

8) *Livelihood*. Related to the traditional/modern political dichotomy are human connections tied to livelihood. In making a living, many of the world's urban and peri-urban citizens are simultaneously subject to dictates of the international economy, the public sector (national) economy, and an informal economy. Others still

are tied to rural subsistence economies (Freeman, 2000). Economic pressures can be harsh and unforgiving, while economic safety nets are rare. A key 3C enablement is an understanding of livelihood connections and challenges, their impact on societal stability, and their relevance to personal and collective choices.

8. Threats, Security, Civil-Military Relations and the Management of Violence

Many of the military 3C skills find their most useful application in the difficult circumstances of societal trauma or conflict, where cultural boundaries are further complicated by fear, confusion, suspicion and hatred. Communication skills and familiarity with patterns of worldview and the elements of social organization are still important, but success in these circumstances often is dependent on additional capacities, some of which are noted here.

1) *Unique characteristics of stressed societies.* Severely distressed societies often exhibit behavioral patterns that differ from those in stable, unstressed circumstances (Connable, 2021). Social trauma can empower pathologies that are suppressed in more “normal” times, including criminality, sociopathy, psychopathy and the emergence of the ubiquitous entrepreneurs of violence. Anticipating those patterns, understanding how traumatized groups seek succor and security, and anticipating the emergence of social pathologies, may be key to mission success.

2) *Working with sources of instability.* Almost all groups reflect some form of destabilizing division, either latent or manifest. Ability to recognize destabilizing grievances, discern the threat to the military mission that they pose, and avoid entanglement in them is a significant 3C enablement. At a much higher level of 3C sophistication, capacity to resolve disputes and attenuate conflict could be viewed as treasured resource.

3) *Understanding “security” cross-culturally.* Security is a contested concept in Western academe (Terriff et al., 1999), but citizens in most of the world’s societies have clear perceptions of their vital needs and the things that threaten them. Although they occur in repeated patterns, the needs themselves can reflect substantial cultural variation, ranging from safety from physical harm to access to material necessities of life to freedom from destabilizing change. Security consists of a perception that the needs are adequately met and that valued assets are safeguarded. An important 3C skill is the ability to recognize and work within local conceptions of security. Even more useful is the ability to anticipate local responses when a community considers its security to be compromised.

4) *Anticipating resort to violence.* Contemporary Western political philosophy tends to accept sociologist Max Weber’s assertion that the state possesses a monopoly of violence (Waters & Waters, 2015), but this notion would be met with incredulity or derision in much of the world (Sheehan, 2008). Non-state actors consider themselves justified in resorting to violence for any number of reasons, whether in search of community security, seeking revenge for perceived wrongs, coercively promoting radical ideologies or engaging in outright criminality. These

motivations overlap, sometimes producing hideous barbarity and human rights abuse. Significantly, such violence occurs in repeated patterns. A seasoned 3C practitioner would understand the culturally varied sources of violence, anticipate its manifestations, and know how these impact options for military interventions.

5) *Parameters of civil-military relations*. The concept of a state's "monopoly of violence" rests at least partially on the assumptions that the security institutions of the state are disciplined, competently led, subject to civilian control and accountable to the larger society (Huntington, 1957). Such assumptions are simply unfounded for much of the world, including countries that collaborate militarily with the United States. In many circumstances, incompetent, corrupt, exploitative, predatory, and unaccountable state security entities are prime contributors to societal grievances and regional instability (Tilly, 1985; Feaver, 2005; Feaver, 1996). 3C skills include an understanding of patterns in civil-military relations and culturally informed wisdom on how to discern and pursue national interests without alienating regional allies or compromising the human security of local societies.

6) One notable capacity here is the ability to recognize and deal with the threat of war crimes and crimes against humanity, roles not for weak stomachs, soft spines, faint hearts or irresolute minds (Honig & Both, 1997).

9. Leading, Following, Mentoring, Teaching

Pursuing national interests by leaders of almost any liberal democracy in the 21st century inherently involves military relationships with foreign actors. Such relationships range from formal alliances to very temporary coalitions to informal partnerships and training missions, some sudden and brief. America's military professionals, for their part, take the roles of leadership and teaching seriously. With sufficient warning, they would seek to equip themselves with language and regional knowledge. But service personnel from the US and other liberal democracies are also regularly confronted with unanticipated requirements to lead, mentor and teach, sometimes in unfamiliar circumstances and with little notice. A grounding in the 3C precursor skills, cross-cultural communications and familiarity with the cultural patterns in world view and social organization would offer a reasonably comprehensive preparation. Several additional skills are appropriate to these roles.

1) *Leading cross-culturally*. Service personnel frequently find themselves in positions where they must exercise formal or informal leadership. Important 3C skills in these circumstances include an ability to discern and meet the leadership expectations of others, facility in building teamwork, skill in harnessing culturally diverse perspectives, facility in resolving disputes and achieving unity of purpose, and (in the very best of circumstances) a capacity to inspire students, imitators, followers or subordinates to technical, operational and moral excellence.

2) *Mentoring and teaching cross-culturally*. Preferred learning styles and instructional techniques are culturally dependent, as are the desirable attributes of

those with the prerogative to teach. A 3C practitioner could be expected to seek out and recognize the patterns in local preferences. The skillset also includes the ability to identify the incentives and obstacles to learning. At a more sophisticated level, 3C capabilities might include some empirical capacity to assess the effectiveness of the teaching and the level of actual learning.

3) *Expectation management.* Working across deep cultural divides in traumatic circumstances is a scenario ripe for misunderstanding. That certainly includes the exercise of leadership and the challenges of teaching. An experienced 3C practitioner could be expected to display a mature appreciation for the art of the possible and limits of the reasonably expectable in such circumstances.

10. Tempering the Ambition

The foregoing lists of 3C skills, though intended simply as examples, may suggest that the domain itself is so vast as to make mastery of it by any single military leader quite unrealistic. But that conclusion would miss the point.

The science behind 3C skills comes from a multiplicity of disciplines ranging across the behavioral and social sciences and including the experiences of practitioners. It is very unlikely that any single individual will ever fully master all the personal attributes and all the available insights from all the relevant disciplines. Nor is that a necessary objective. Leaders with a solid foundation and a reasonable repertoire of 3C skills represent a formidable military capability and a considerable educational achievement. That alone is a worthy and realistic long-term objective.

Demand for 3C skills is also limited by practitioners' responsibilities. Different military roles require different capabilities. The mix of skills appropriate to an intelligence analyst or signals intercept operator would be quite different than those of an infantry team chief operating in a rural village, or a staff officer negotiating basing rights in a foreign country. While the prime object of 3C development is the ability to interact productively across cultural boundaries, there are many military roles for which some 3C insights are valuable even if direct contact with a foreign counterpart is rare.

Service members have differing capacities to absorb and employ cross-cultural skills. This is empirically demonstrable in language learning capabilities. It is likely that future assessment will find cross-cultural competence correlates with attributes such as emotional intelligence, present in varying degrees within any population. US national military policy already recognizes differing levels of competence in all the LREC skills, including culture (CJCSI, 2013, enclosures G, H and I).

It is also worth noting here that cultural skill development differs from language and regional learning in several key respects. First, building these skills is a long-term learning proposition based heavily upon personal self-development over time. It is unlikely to reach its potential unless it begins early in a service career – possibly even in pre-accession education and is reinforced at all levels of service

instruction by continual self-development and increasingly advanced incremental learning. A military leader in the early stages of the journey is not likely to have the same capability as a mature 3C practitioner with a stronger background of experiential learning.

A related point about the uniqueness of this field is that cross-cultural competence is a three-dimensional paradigm, conforming to the US Army leadership expectation of be, know and do. In other words, 3C requires the deliberate development of personal attributes (the foundational skills) into which the cultural knowledge must be integrated before capabilities emerge that can be effectively applied. During the entire learning process, the skills must be realistically and regularly exercised if they are to be developed at all. Nor will they reach their potential unless all three dimensions are simultaneously pursued. 3C at almost any meaningful level simply is not an enablement that can be produced on demand in a short training session.

11. How Successful Were the Recent US Military Culture Learning Programs?

For a decade after 2005, the US military committed substantial resources to the development of language, regional expertise and cultural skills. A language strategy promulgated in 2005 laid out a coherent path to a greater inventory of foreign language assets, promoting efforts to teach needed languages and energizing the recruitment of native language speakers (U.S. Department of Defense, 2005; Watson, Wolfel, & Kalkstein, 2025). Regional studies, already a significant element in officer professional development, received additional emphasis. By 2015, high-level policy documents from the offices of the Secretary of War and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had defined language, region and culture skills under the LREC rubric and had mandated an oversight infrastructure for them in professional military education (U.S. Department of Defense Directive (DoDD) 5160.41E, 2015).

In 2007, the Army attempted to partially bypass the need for long-term culture education of its personnel by initiating a program to contract the required cross-cultural expertise from academe. It embarked on an ambitious and generously funded effort to embed civilian behavioral scientists within its combat units in Iraq and Afghanistan. The program was controversial from the outset, both within and outside the US military. It struggled to recruit qualified candidates and its performance in the field was disappointing. It was quietly discontinued in 2015 (Connable, 2009; Jaschik, 2015).

By 2007 each of the individual services had also activated culture centers to generate culture skills within the uniformed military itself. Within several years, these had made discernible progress (Selmeski, 2021). Yet surprisingly, given the initial enthusiasm and some genuine successes, all but one of those centers had disappeared by 2015, and the final one by 2025. The demise of the centers pointed to an unambiguous downward trajectory in the commitment to cultural skills after

less than a decade of concerted effort (Mackenzie & Henk, 2025).

Loss of the service culture centers also eliminated a prime mechanism for cross-service communication, fertilization and collaboration on culture learning. The centers had functioned as hubs to connect research and lessons learned to praxis, a role not subsequently assumed by any US military organization.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the waning interest of senior leadership and disappearance of the culture centers, educational emphasis on cross-cultural capability in military academe did not progress much beyond some foundational skills and a modicum of cross-cultural communication (Abbe, 2021b). In fairness, that represented an advance over the situation prior to the Global War on Terror, but it was far from meeting the needs identified during the conflict. In 2025 there was little indication that cross-cultural competence would progress any further in the near term (Henk & Abbe, 2024).

Beyond the closure of the centers, there were several reasons why the latest pursuit of US military culture skills stagnated after a decade of effort. Some of the changes were external, driven by the international security environment after 2010. By that point, US military attention had begun to pivot away from the declining conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and was placing renewed emphasis on conventional capabilities against near-peer adversaries. These changes, accompanied by shrinking military budgets, left fewer resources for activities not viewed as core concerns. But beyond the international security environment, at least seven other factors, all internal to the service, undermined the cross-cultural competence initiatives.

The first was the time it took to identify the most promising approaches. Efforts underway by about 2005 were significantly obstructed for several years by lack of a clear vision of the end state. Ideally, the quest for cross-cultural skills would have commenced with a precise and widely shared vision. But in contrast, at the outset there were many discordant voices promoting alternative agendas and actors competing for visibility and access. Most of these lacked a precise understanding of the skills needed (Fosher & Mackenzie, 2021b). But the lag in finding a credible approach, compounded by bureaucratic inertia and the short duration of senior leaders' interest, ultimately proved a lethal combination.

Secondly, the early push from the top was met by resistance below. Subordinate institutions did not all share the same enthusiasm, and some actively resisted. Influential military leaders were annoyed by the inference that they did not already possess a fully satisfactory repertoire of cross-cultural skills, while some considered such skills irrelevant (Connable, 2021). Military educators—particularly those already engaged in regional studies—professed doubt that 3C learning could add anything more of value. Disciplinary and departmental tribalism in service schools resulted in refusal to give up jealously guarded student learning hours (Fosher & Gauldin, 2021). But perhaps the key factor in institutional obstruction was the virtual absence of culture scientists in the military educational establishment. This was a missing community of subject matter experts that could have

harnessed the science, created curricula and advocated for culture learning (Fosher, 2021).

This third factor—a lack of cultural scientists in the military establishment—speaks to the issue of constituencies. Language and regionalist communities in the US military have long enjoyed a significant number of educators, supervisors and practitioners. Even prior to GWOT, service pedagogy in language and regional expertise was mature and sophisticated. The same was manifestly not true for culture learning (Mackenzie & Henk, 2025).

The expertise underlying 3C was (and still is) scattered in small pieces across the scholarly and research entities of world-wide civilian academe. The foundational science has never been organized into a certified inventory from which professional military education could draw and which a 3C practitioner could be expected to master. Nor has there ever been a coherent compilation of empirically based interventions to facilitate mission success (Fosher, 2021). Without that content, a comprehensive pedagogy for the skills remains something of a pipe dream.

Much of the expertise that could underwrite military 3C development rests in the behavioral sciences, posing another thorny problem. The US military has long struggled, with very limited success, to recruit behavioral scientists (Deitchman, 2014; Fosher, 2021). The continuing failure to attract these subject matter experts is a direct result of widespread antipathy towards the military within behavioral science communities since at least the Vietnam War era (Lucas, 2009; Price, 2011, 2023; Albro et al., 2012; Rubinstein, 2012; Rohde, 2013). Despite vigorous recruitment efforts after 2005, the number of behavioralists in professional military education remained small and their distribution too scattered to provide a critical mass adequate to advance cultural learning. There simply never has been a significant constituency of US military culture scientists, either in the military schools and research institutions or in the policy oversight infrastructure (Fosher, 2021; Simons, 2021; Mackenzie & Henk, 2025).

A fourth factor has much to do with military culture. In 2005, senior military leaders expected their sudden investment in new culture learning programs to quickly rectify the desperate needs of the Global War on Terror. When the programs failed to produce dramatic immediate results, early enthusiasts were disillusioned. Too, in a profession obsessed with metrics, at the outset of the initiatives the culture programs did not have credible assessment methodology (such as the Defense Language Proficiency Tests), so progress could not be empirically measured and touted to decision makers (Abbe, Geller, & Everett, 2010; Fosher, 2021). Perhaps more significantly, the services also failed to identify a unique cross-cultural skill-set with sufficient clarity, precision and urgency to establish a permanent official understanding of it or a demand for it. As a result, when defense priorities shifted after 2010 and pleas from the field abated, senior leaders' attention quickly moved elsewhere, as did resources needed to continue the existing efforts (Fosher & Mackenzie, 2021b).

A fifth factor was the limited clout and coherence of the policy documents that

mandated responsibilities for the new skills. To their credit, these documents identified culture-general qualifications distinct from language and regional expertise. However, the skills prescribed for culture were minimal, amateurish and poorly anchored in the available science, suggesting an absence of true subject matter experts in their construction. Additionally, the mandates did not address mechanisms to acquire the expertise needed, hold military academe accountable for developing the skills or indicate how any resulting learning might be empirically assessed (Mackenzie & Henk, 2025).

A sixth factor was the failure to connect existing scientific research institutions—such as the Army Research Institute—to the military organizations that delivered culture education (Abbe, 2021b; Henk & Abbe, 2024). And that disconnect relates directly to an earlier observation: no one had ever assembled and compiled an authoritative inventory of 3C skills in a militarily relevant way or succeeded in communicating a compelling vision for that skillset to senior leaders. This point is significant. Even before GWOT, US military programs for language learning and regional studies had visibility and credibility with senior leaders. 3C did not.

In 2025, perhaps the most critical missing piece in any US effort to resuscitate 3C learning was the lack of a cross-cultural hub, node or nexus—a critical mass of scientists, skilled practitioners and educators working together—that could advocate for 3C, harness and convert the available science into military skills, integrate the results into long-term service education, commission further research to plug the gaps, and develop the assessment methodology necessary to measure success (Henk & Abbe, 2024); Mackenzie & Henk, 2025).

12. Some Implications

America's episodic quest for military cross-cultural competence offers a useful case from which instructive lessons may be drawn. An honest appraisal of efforts begun in 2005 would characterize the progress as modest at best. Yet the numerous shortcomings illuminate specific measures that could significantly advance a future initiative. Some of the lessons are unique to the American experience; others may apply beyond the United States. Five observations are offered here. These include the importance of early clarity and precision of vision, the necessary presence of a qualified program superintendent, the role of a strategic plan, priority in harnessing the science (and scientists), and the necessity of getting the policy mandates right from the outset.

13. Early Clarity and Precision of the Vision

In the US experience, an initial incoherent scrambling for solutions by about 2005 prevented an early launch of viable programs for developing cultural skills. Neither the exact problem nor the appropriate solutions were evident in the early years. However, given that experience, this startup defect could be avoided in a future initiative. If 3C development over the long term were the accepted solution

from the outset, many of the previous early problems could have been avoided.

14. A Qualified Superintendent

Also missing at the outset of the culture initiatives in 2005 was a single bureaucratic insider or small team with impeccable culture science credentials and the exclusive prerogative to identify a vision, along with a credible inventory of desired skills and a development program to produce them. It took several years of effort before the 3C paradigm emerged as a dominant approach to developing cultural skills. By then, service interest at the top had begun its irreversible decline. But that defect, too, could easily be avoided in a future program.

A related issue was the lack of a messenger that could communicate a compelling vision to senior policymakers. This role called for a gifted communicator with the required access, possessed of the skills both to precisely identify the new capabilities in military terms and convincingly define the advantages that these would deliver, while fending off the disruptive intrusions of enthusiastic amateurs and scientifically illiterate (but ambitious) bureaucrats (Fosher, 2021). This may have been an appropriate role for a program supervisor.

15. A Strategic Plan

Taking a page from the US military's Language Transformation Roadmap of 2005, the culture initiatives would have been well served in their early life by the existence of a strategic plan. Specifically, a Culture Transformation Roadmap, copying its language analog, could have been expected to articulate a clear vision and outline an attainable path to realizing it. Like any good strategic plan, it would have identified achievable ends (the new capabilities), feasible ways (steps required to attain the ends), and the required means (the resources required for the effort over the long term). Assuming such a plan were endorsed and promulgated at the highest level, it could have more authoritatively and precisely driven required changes, focused the policy mandates and protected the effort from the vagaries of shifting military priorities (Mackenzie & Henk, 2025).

With retrospective insight, a strategic plan also could have identified how the required expertise would be developed and how subject matter experts would be recruited, employed and protected over the long term. It would have specified a supervisory infrastructure required to oversee 3C generation, identifying mechanisms to assure accountability for the quality of the education at all levels based on empirical assessment of the skills produced and acquired.

A strategic plan could have been expected to show how the essential pieces of 3C development fit together. Specifically, the plan would have identified the connections between civilian academe, military academe, military research agencies, military consumers (departments, combatant commands, intelligence agencies) and the supervisory infrastructure necessary for continued refinement of expertise.

The plan could profitably have insisted on patience and perseverance. 3C generation is a long-term proposition. Though well worth the effort in the long run,

an initiative of this complexity and novelty requires years of effort before reaping a substantial pay-off.

16. Harnessing the Science

Prior to the issuance of any policy mandates for culture skills, it would have been beneficial for an authoritative group of qualified insiders, including experienced culture scientists and skilled practitioners, to develop a reasonably comprehensive understanding of the skills and a grasp of sensible expectations for teaching, learning and application. This expertise could have locked in 3C as the intended objective, informed the strategic plan and avoided weaknesses in the eventual policy mandates.

The importance of harnessing and protecting the science increases as the culture learning initiative progresses. Recruiting the expertise, developing and refining the domain, keeping the approach focused and consistent, improving the policy mandates, plugging the knowledge gaps with research, incorporating lessons learned, refining the pedagogy and creating cutting-edge assessment would all seem to require a national-level centralized approach. Taking another page from the US military language programs, a Culture Center, analogous to the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) may have served this role admirably. Activation of a national military Culture Center has been strongly advocated in recent US professional military literature (Henk & Abbe, 2024; Mackenzie & Henk, 2025).

17. Policy Mandates

The overall approach and focus of the existing US policy mandates for LREC—including the “culture” component—are reasonably coherent. Among other things, they identify the LREC domains, catalog a list of desired skills and competency levels, and specify a supervisory infrastructure stretching from the Secretariat of War down through the major military commands and agencies. The scope and approach of the existing mandates are hard to fault.

It is in the details that the weaknesses of the mandates are evident, at least for cultural skills. Already identified is the weak grasp of cultural science. The mandates also fail to establish tangible accountability for cultural learning within military educational institutions themselves. A stronger emphasis on the content and accountability for 3C learning may have better protected the 3C initiatives after the early years.

The supervisory infrastructure described in the mandates also raises concerns for oversight of 3C learning. In the mandates, the senior policymaker responsible for culture is the Senior Language Authority (SLA), a position located in the Office of the Undersecretary of War for Personnel and Readiness. This national-level official, in turn, oversees a steering committee of Senior Language Authorities drawn from the headquarters of the military services, combatant commands and intelligence agencies.

While the SLA structure is charged with overseeing development of all the LREC domains—language skills, regional expertise and culture capabilities—membership requires no expertise in culture science and the whole enterprise has a distinct language orientation. As of late 2025, there was little evidence that SLAs at any level had a vision for 3C development. To correct this oversight, a senior position equivalent to the SLA, filled by an incumbent with genuine culture science credentials, and charged specifically with responsibility for 3C development (in other words, a Senior Culture Authority) would seem to be a wise innovation (Mackenzie & Henk, 2025).

18. Concluding Observations

The US Armed Forces—the most technologically proficient military establishment in the history of mankind—have consistently demonstrated an unparalleled ability to acquire and apply the instrumentality of annihilation. Tragically, to date they have lacked an equivalent expertise in cross-cultural competence, a set of skills whose value could have been critically beneficial in GWOT and will undoubtedly be needed again. As an optimistic observation, such skills may yet trump the effectiveness of any material weapon in the ambiguous conflicts of the 21st century.

Unquestionably, the attentive publics of liberal democracies expect their military establishments to manage and apply violence proficiently as well as ethically. But intelligent use of the military (or any security agency) necessarily comes down to pursuit of human relations objectives that are difficult to achieve without a nuanced capacity to skillfully navigate amongst the aspirations, values, priorities and perceptions of relevant actors, whether those are fellow citizens, allies, adversaries or impacted non-combatants. These are cultural skills.

The world's liberal democracies exhibit differing historical experiences and national priorities, not to mention security sectors that differ in nature, scale and usage, so the relevance of the US experience to other countries cannot be assumed. However, at least three findings from the American story would seem to be broadly applicable to any effort to build military cross-cultural skills. Foremost among these would be an early consensus on the desired end state, consisting of a clear vision of what a cross-culturally competent leader is expected to be, know and do and a durable commitment to pursuing that vision. A second would be the necessity of harnessing the available science and attaching it to military education. A third would be a robust emphasis on the foundational skills, inserted as early as possible into the educational pipeline, since these are critical building blocks to virtually all the other cross-cultural capabilities. Acquisition of the foundational skills could be expected to incentivize the pursuit of greater capability. Arguably, they are also the most useful and the hardest to produce.

The American experience suggests that a serious effort to develop a mature, cross-culturally competent military is a challenging proposition. It would necessarily draw from (and collate) expertise that has never been comprehensively as-

sembled in a form needed for military learning. It requires the substantial participation of subject matter experts from scholarly communities that harbor considerable ill-feeling towards the military. The long lead time necessary to produce significant 3C results conflicts with military culture, with its constant shifts in priorities and preference for instant, measurable results. Ultimately, the health of a 3C program depends on the emergence of a significant, permanent constituency of 3C scholars and practitioners within the military establishment itself, a development that has yet to occur anywhere.

Even under the best of circumstances, a body of cross-culturally competent military leaders cannot be achieved quickly, and cross-cultural skills will not solve all the trenchant human relations dilemmas. But even in minimal amounts, 3C offers significant advantages at all levels of military responsibility, and can be expected to reduce the traumas, mitigate the frictions and humanize the contacts of combat deployments. A cross-culturally competent military remains a highly desirable objective and a continuing need. Though difficult, it is an achievable goal.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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