

# Strategy Research Project

## Cross-Cultural Competence: Secret to Success in Future Operating Environments

by

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Abstract

The rapidly changing operating environment of today suggests that landpower forces will increasingly operate in and among congested urban areas where interaction with indigenous inhabitants is required. To be successful, these operations will require a more thorough understanding of the language, region, and culture(s); referred throughout this paper as language, regional expertise and culture (LREC) competencies. The Marine Corps must adopt additional measures to meet the future challenges associated with an increasingly complex and ambiguous operating environment. First, the Marine Corps must create a full-time, single-track foreign area officer cadre within its intelligence enterprise. Second, intelligence specialists must become specialized by region in order to develop a more robust cross-cultural expertise. Third, the Marine Corps must employ a more effective talent management process that will ensure the placement of the right person in the right job. Throughout the paper, I use John Kotter's eight-stage process of creating major change to examine the difficulties in implementing these recommendations.

## **Cross-Cultural Competence: Secret to Success in Future Operating Environments**

We must recognize that the essential 'key terrain' is the will of a host nation's population . . . [This] permits us to gain the trust of skeptical populations, thus . . . suffocating their ideology.

—General J. N. Mattis<sup>1</sup>

More than 2000 years ago Sun Tzu said, "Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril."<sup>2</sup> This concept has never been more relevant than it is today and its meaning expands far beyond merely knowing the enemy's weapons and capabilities. The rapidly changing operating environment of today suggests that landpower forces will increasingly operate in and among congested urban areas where interaction with indigenous inhabitants is required.<sup>3</sup> To be successful, these operations will require a thorough understanding of the language, region, and culture(s); referred to throughout this paper as language, regional expertise and culture (LREC) competencies. The Marine Corps has been mostly reactive when it comes to developing LREC competencies.<sup>4</sup> However, there has been renewed emphasis because of the recent observations from more than a decade of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued policy and guidance directing the services to provide the Geographic Combatant Commands with forces well versed in LREC competencies.<sup>5</sup> Despite some recent improvements, the Marine Corps, and likewise, the Army, must adopt additional measures to meet the future challenges associated with an increasingly complex and ambiguous operating environment.

This paper first examines changes in the future operating environment that demand improved organic LREC competencies and highlights past LREC successes and failures. Next, it briefly examines ongoing initiatives to improve LREC

competencies, comparing and contrasting the Army's ongoing initiatives regarding regionally aligned forces (RAF), and recommends three additional measures to expand upon this effort. These measures include creation of a Marine Corps full-time, single-track foreign area officer (FAO) primary military occupational specialty (MOS) cadre within its intelligence enterprise. Second, intelligence specialists must become specialized by region in order to develop a more robust cross-cultural expertise. Third, the Marine Corps must employ a more effective talent management process that will ensure skills, training, and experience maximize the return on investment and facilitate the placement of the right person in the right job. Throughout the paper, I use John Kotter's eight-stage process of creating major change to examine the difficulties in implementing these recommendations.

#### Kotter's Eight-Stage Process

John Kotter, a Harvard Business School professor, is an author of six best-selling books and is widely regarded as the foremost speaker on leadership and change.<sup>6</sup> In *Leading Change*, Kotter provides an extensive eight-stage process to enable major organizational change. The premise behind the process is that change within an organization is never easy, but there are ways to mitigate objections and overcome obstacles. The eight-stage process includes,

- 1) Establishing a sense of urgency
- 2) Creating the guiding coalition
- 3) Developing a vision and strategy
- 4) Communicating the change vision
- 5) Empowering a broad base of people to take action
- 6) Generating short-term wins

7) Consolidating gains and producing even more change

8) Institutionalizing new approaches in the culture.<sup>7</sup>

Kotter stresses the importance of sequencing, and while several steps may occur simultaneously, skipping just a single step can lead to problems.<sup>8</sup> Using these steps as a lens, this paper will examine what the Marine Corps has done well with regard to LREC and where there is still room for improvement.

The Commandant of the Marine Corps, through the issuance of the Marine Corps Operating Concept (MOC), created a climate that welcomes bottom-up ideas to address problems facing the Marine Corps. In the MOC, the Commandant encourages creative thinking, welcomes ideas and recommendations, and challenges all Marines to seek innovated solutions to complex problems. The recommendations contained herein, however, require changes to the way the Marine Corps has operated for many years regarding the importance of LREC competencies and the approach they used for talent management. What will inhibit these changes is senior leadership's inability or unwillingness to encourage risk taking and nontraditional ideas, which is Kotter's step number five: empowering broad-based actions.<sup>9</sup> Until senior leaders truly embrace innovative solutions, outside of the box ideas, and concepts that deviate from "that's the way it has always been done" or "that's too difficult," seemingly radical changes to enhance LREC competencies and changes to the talent management process will not gain sufficient traction. Despite all of the difficulty in implementing radical change, there has been some progress. This paper highlights those successes and failures.

### The Future Operating Environment

While the character of warfare continually changes, the nature of war has remained relatively unchanged; "a clash between opposing human wills, the human

dimension is central in war.”<sup>10</sup> The common element across the entire spectrum of conflict is the human dimension. Historically, the United States (U.S.) has a less-than-stellar record in conflicts other than large-scale conventional force on force and has frequently ignored the increasingly important human dimension. Demographic shifts, resource scarcity and globalization suggest that the future operating environment will be in a state of persistent disorder.<sup>11</sup> How are these three elements influencing the operating environment and what comparable examples can one draw upon from the past to illustrate how best to train and prepare ground forces for future conflicts?

A growing trend around the world is the migration of people toward urban areas. Estimates suggest that roughly 60% of the world’s population will live in large coastal megacities, which is a city with a population of 10 million or more inhabitants, by 2035.<sup>12</sup> The driving force behind this massive migration towards megacities is the quest for more opportunities and a better way life.<sup>13</sup> The underlying factors contributing to massive migration often include conflict, natural disasters, and/or a lack of employment opportunities in one’s native country. For example, Europe is experiencing the largest migration of refugees since World War II due to the Syrian Civil War and turmoil across North Africa.<sup>14</sup> In addition to straining European infrastructure, the refugee migration also creates cultural friction as migrants attempt, or refuse to assimilate, into a new culture. These issues place enormous stress on existing infrastructure, available resources, and local governments’ ability to provide basic services such as security, housing, sanitation and healthcare to name just a few.

As more people flood these megacities, resource scarcity becomes a reality as host nations struggle to provide basic resources such as water, food and fuel. In many

instances, developing countries are not prepared to accommodate such an explosive population growth.<sup>15</sup> Failure to address these issues will result in a frustrated, poverty-stricken disenfranchised sector of society that demands more from their government. Even worse, this disenfranchised sector resorts to crime and becomes fertile recruiting ground for violent extremists further reducing their government's ability to provide security. What exacerbates this issue is the increased connectedness, or globalization, among different societies, particularly between the "haves" and the "have-nots."<sup>16</sup>

Globalization, accelerated by rapidly evolving technological advances, is having a profound impact on the security environment. Despite its many benefits, globalization also presents several challenges. Today, more than 40% of the world's population connects to the internet.<sup>17</sup> By 2020, studies estimate that more than 20 billion devices will connect to the internet of things.<sup>18</sup> This increased access to information through readily available communication devices enables economically depressed societies to share grievances, highlight governments' inability to provide basic services, and can facilitate the spread of violent extremist ideologies.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, globalization blurs the distinction between state and non-state actors by providing the latter with a platform to establish norms and conduct government-like functions without having to adhere to borders. Singularly, these three issues do not guarantee future conflict, however collectively they present significant indicators of a chaotic and uncertain security environment that will require ground forces engaged in irregular warfare.

Given these changes in the operating environment, "future battles will often be fought in population centers, driving policy makers to favor non-kinetic capabilities and alternate approaches to conflict resolution."<sup>20</sup> These operations will likely require less of

imposing traditional “violence” upon an opposing force and more of changing populations’ will using soft power and enhancing host nation’s ability to provide basic services while simultaneously delegitimizing the enemy’s ideology.<sup>21</sup> This can be particularly useful in combatting the spread of violent extremism, which is a major contributor to the persistent disorder of the future operating environment. In February 2016, the Director of National Intelligence, Mr. James Clapper stated, “Violent extremists are operationally active in about 40 countries. Seven countries are experiencing a collapse of central government authority. Fourteen others face regime-threatening or violent instability, or both. Another 59 countries face a significant risk of instability through 2016.”<sup>22</sup> These are precisely the conditions where LREC competencies are required to fully understand and appreciate the human dimension of conflict in order to counter a deteriorating situation. There are numerous examples from recent conflicts that illustrate how LREC competencies in this type of operating environment can mean the difference between success and failure.

#### Historical Examples of LREC Successes and Failures

The first of three examples to highlight the criticality of LREC competencies is one of the most successful post-World War II counterinsurgencies, the Malayan Emergency, conducted by the British from 1948 to 1960. Malay, a British protected state and an important supplier of rubber and tin, was in disarray following the occupation and eventual withdrawal of Japanese forces following World War II (WWII). The newly established and struggling Malayan government faced growing unemployment, a deteriorating economy, and a cultural divide between the Malaysians and the roughly two million unassimilated ethnic Chinese inhabitants.<sup>23</sup> The Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA), composed of roughly 95% ethnic Chinese was the armed wing of the Malayan

Communist Party (MCP) and used this dismal situation to discredit the Malayan government and further their legitimacy.<sup>24</sup> The MRLA used coercion and extortion to solicit support from the impoverished and neglected ethnic Chinese.<sup>25</sup> With their vital interests at stake, the British were not about to let the Malayan economy or the security situation deteriorate any further.

In 1948, a spike in assassinations and other violent crimes, presumably to be the work of the MRLA, caused the Malayan government to declare a state of emergency.<sup>26</sup> Britain, suffering from her own economic problems following WWII, developed a long-term, low-cost strategy to defeat the MCP's insurgency. In light of some initial mistakes and a lack of favorable progress, Britain appointed Lieutenant General Sir Harold Briggs to serve as the Director of Operations.<sup>27</sup> Under his leadership, they developed a bottom-up counterinsurgent strategy, later referred to as the "Briggs Plan," which would ultimately destroy the insurgency.<sup>28</sup> Briggs' plan laid out four main lines of effort (LOE) designed to separate the insurgents from the populations, formalize the counterinsurgent management system, expand intelligence gathering, and deploy small-unit security forces on a territorial basis.<sup>29</sup> These initiatives not only proved successful, but also highlighted the importance of LREC competencies and helped shape future counterinsurgency strategies. How did these LOEs work and why were they so effective?

As is the case with most insurgencies, support from the population was critical for the MRLA's survival. The British realized that the ethnic Chinese squatters, who were suffering from starvation, unemployment and a lack of security, were providing the MRLA the majority of their support primarily because of extortion and a lack of other

prosperous alternatives. As such, the British and Malayan authorities resettled these Chinese squatters into new villages, provided them with security and other basic services, thereby reducing the MRLA's infrastructure and increasing the counterinsurgency's intelligence apparatus.<sup>30</sup> Another successful LOE was the creation of a "Home Guard," predominately in the new Chinese villages, but also throughout Malaya. This program, initially supported by small, embedded British military units, placed an indigenous "face" on the counterinsurgency effort and enhanced security, expanded intelligence collection against the MRLA, and facilitated the provision of other basic services.<sup>31</sup>

Ultimately, one of the most significant contributing factors to the success of the Malayan Emergency was the organic LREC competencies within the British military. In fact, many believe that the phrase, "winning the hearts and minds" emerged from this conflict.<sup>32</sup> Their familiarity with the culture, customs, geography, political apparatus, and the adversary played a pivotal role throughout the conflict.<sup>33</sup> This example highlights how abundant LREC competencies led to success, but what happens when organic LREC competencies are lacking?

While most people associate failure with the Vietnam conflict, there were many valuable lessons learned and tactics employed that are as relevant today as they were more than 50 years ago. Similar to the future operating environment envisioned above, the Vietnam conflict was a conflict fought among the people. Ho Chi Minh, the president of North Vietnam, was determined to reunite the North and the South.<sup>34</sup> In an effort to destabilize and discredit South Vietnam, guerillas from both North and South Vietnam, known as the Viet Cong (VC), began attacking the South Vietnamese government.<sup>35</sup> In

1965, the United States deployed increasingly larger numbers of troops to support the struggling South Vietnamese government. Ho Chi Minh, largely inspired by Mao Tse Tung's strategy in China, recognized the importance of garnering the support of the local populace to employ his successful insurgency.<sup>36</sup>

Despite regular U.S. patrols through the villages and hamlets, the VC infiltrated these areas at night spreading propaganda, taxing the local inhabitants, and terrorizing the people. Even further, the VC capitalized on the South Vietnam government's inability to keep their promises regarding land reform and their inability to provide security to the villagers.<sup>37</sup> These villages helplessly employed Popular Forces (PF), which were untrained and ill-equipped South Vietnamese militias, to provide security, but they were no match for the VC.<sup>38</sup> However, Ho Chi Minh and his senior leaders were not the only ones who realized the importance of the indigenous populous.

In the summer of 1965, the Marines of 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment were assigned an enormous 10-mile area of responsibility (AOR) surrounding the Phu Bai Airfield southeast of Hue City in Central South Vietnam. With limited men and no sign of reinforcements, they quickly realized it was impossible to secure their AOR using only organic assets.<sup>39</sup> As such, their resourceful leadership recognized the untapped potential of the indigenous PF. To harness the PF's true potential, they created a Combined Action Program (CAP) where platoons of Marines would live in the small villages alongside their PF counterparts. The CAP's mission had two objectives:

(1) to enhance village and hamlet-level security by the active performance of integrated military operations with the Popular Forces, and

(2) to increase the ability of the villagers to sustain and defend themselves by encouraging and participating in projects contributing to the well-being of the people and their identification with the national government.<sup>40</sup>

This enormously effective program not only established mutual trust between the Marines and the villagers, but it increased the confidence and capabilities of the PF, thereby enhancing security, reducing the VC's influence over the population, and enabling an intelligence network otherwise not available to the Marines.<sup>41</sup> Despite the CAP's successes, there were still flaws in the program and the management of key language and cultural competencies.

At the start of the conflict, the Marine Corps had very little organic Vietnamese language capability. Unlike basic infantry skills, language and cultural competencies take significant time to develop. Equally important, when Marines acquire those skills it is imperative to employ effective talent management practices to maximize the return on investment. Within the villages, language barriers between the Marines, PF, and local citizens often caused minor disputes to become strategic problems due to misunderstandings associated with navigating the language barriers.<sup>42</sup>

Cultural expertise was not much better and collectively these two competencies were critical to establishing trust and rapport with the PF and villagers. A study of the CAP in 1969 even found numerous Marines with Vietnamese language competencies working in assignments that did not employ their skills, which lowered morale and highlighted wasted critically short resources.<sup>43</sup> Did we learn from these important lessons and develop better methods to proactively train and employ forces with vital

language and cultural competencies? The last and more recent example will show an equally complex operating environment that shares many of the same challenges.

There are numerous similarities between the Vietnam conflict and Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. First, the host nation governments struggled to provide basic services to their people.<sup>44</sup> Second, cultural differences, fueled by radical ideologies, created an environment where insurgents relied upon the local populace for logistical support, recruitment, and intelligence. Third, the enemy was indistinguishable from the local inhabitants, which made large-scale bombing and conventional force-on-force tactics ineffective and often counterproductive. Lastly, U.S. forces conducted extensive train, advise, and equip missions that involved heavy interaction among indigenous security forces and local inhabitants. Unfortunately, one does not need to look far in order to find countless lessons learned surrounding inadequate cross-cultural and language competencies despite previous lessons learned from similar conflicts and operating environments.

In a 2015 article in *Military Review*, Lieutenant General Herbert R. McMaster wrote,

In Iraq, an inadequate understanding of tribal, ethnic, and religious drivers of conflict at the local level sometimes led to military operations (such as raids against suspected enemy networks) that exacerbated fears or offended the sense of honor of populations in ways that strengthened the insurgency.<sup>45</sup>

The House Armed Services Committee published a study in 2008 that sites at least four other studies from Iraq and Afghanistan that highlighted the critical shortfall of language and cultural competencies.<sup>46</sup> According to the Army Center for Lessons Learned, lack of cultural understanding was among the top five lessons learned from Iraq and Afghanistan; a common theme echoed by several senior leaders such as Generals

David Petraeus and Raymond Ordierno.<sup>47</sup> In a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan stated that language and cultural training was as important as marksmanship training.<sup>48</sup> Lieutenant General Michael Flynn published a report in 2010 that said,

The United States has focused the overwhelming majority of collection efforts and analytical brainpower on insurgent groups, our intelligence apparatus still finds itself unable to answer fundamental questions about the environment in which we operate and the people we are trying to protect and persuade.<sup>49</sup>

To meet the growing demand, the U.S. was able to surge Arabic linguists from different countries, but they often came from different regions of the world and lacked the required cultural expertise, or more gravely, imposed their own cultural beliefs during translation.<sup>50</sup> With all this emphasis on language and cross-cultural competencies, what has the Marine Corps done to meet the demand, how does it compare to the Army's initiatives, and is it adequate?

#### Ongoing Initiatives to Improve Language and Cross-Cultural Competencies

In response to the overwhelming evidence pointing to the importance of LREC competencies, the 35th Commandant, General James Amos, issued the first LREC strategy in 2010. This document was the genesis for one of the Marine Corps' most bold LREC competency development initiatives, the Regional, Cultural, and Language Familiarization (RCLF) Program.<sup>51</sup> The Marine Corps University defines the program as a,

career-long training and education program that begins at accession and instills, develops, and sustains a basic language, regional, culture (LRC) capability in our career Marines to ensure that the Corps has assets within each unit to assist in operational planning and execution in all operationally significant regions of the world.<sup>52</sup>

The program, while not the be-all and end-all fix to developing LREC competencies, provides significant improvements towards meeting the Combatant Commanders' (CCDR) basic LREC requirements. A brief overview of the program will illustrate its applicability to the ongoing Army LREC initiatives.

The RCLF program focuses on developing LREC competencies in career-level Marines, both officer and enlisted, and builds in complexity throughout one's career.<sup>53</sup> Regions are determined using several sources, such as the Global Employment of the Force, intelligence estimates, and other operational requirements. The Basic School leadership then assigns each officer to one of the seventeen regions based upon the needs of the Marine Corps. For enlisted Marines, regional assignments accompany their promotion to the rank of Sergeant. Initially, the enlisted assignments are random, but Marines who already possess unique LREC competencies may submit a request to change their assigned region as applicable. In order to complete the required training, Marines access the appropriate block of instruction using distant education software. Completion is graded, tracked, and required in order to meet Professional Military Education requirements for grade.<sup>54</sup> This initiative was also a step towards realizing the much-needed organizational change as seen through the lens of Kotter's eight-stage process.

This increased emphasis on LREC competencies and the predictions of a future operating environment involving operations in and among populations effectively establish Kotter's first step: develop a sense of urgency. Simultaneously, the Commandant developed a vision and strategy and attempted to communicate that vision through the issuance of the LREC strategy, which are steps three and four.

Additionally, the RCLF Program is a great example of Kotter's "quick win" step six. Despite these key ingredients, certain steps are missing, which Kotter suggests is a recipe for failure.<sup>55</sup> More specifically, the Marine Corps did not create a guiding coalition or empower broad-based action, steps two and five. The absence of these steps, senior leaders not embracing the vision and/or if a lack of appetite to change the importance of LREC competencies, will inhibit true organizational change. While the RCLF program does not create experts, its applicability to the Army's RAF would almost certainly be beneficial.

In 2013, the Army rolled out the concept RAF in its Army Strategic Planning Guidance 2013. In an effort to better support the CCDR, the intentions behind the RAF concept is to enhance relationships with allies and partner nations and increase regional familiarity and expertise to deter and counter threats to American interests.<sup>56</sup> As the name suggests, forces that are assigned or allocated align to their respective regional combatant commander. While this initiative has enormous potential, it also carries with it several obstacles. "To be effective, Soldiers must be familiar with local cultures, personalities and conditions in the theaters they operate in."<sup>57</sup> To accomplish this, the Army should consider adopting the Marine Corps' relatively low-cost and easily accessible RCLF program. Unfortunately, all the LREC competencies in the world are useless if the services lack a robust mechanism to track individual training, experiences, and skills and a talent management assignment process to ensure those skills are properly used.

After more than a decade of fighting simultaneous counterinsurgencies, thousands of Marines, Soldiers, Airmen and Sailors have lived among the local

populations, trained and advised host nation counterparts while learning their cultures and languages, and yet there was no mechanism to track and/or manage those individuals. Even further, why was there not a mechanism to reward or incentivize an individual for a particular assignment in order to capitalize on previous skills, relationships developed, or other experiences? In an era of fiscal uncertainty, it is more responsible and efficient to manage this talent pool than it is to retrain new service members to perform the same functions. While not a perfect solution, the Marine Corps adopted a second initiative to track Marines with these skills.

In response to a Department of Defense (DOD) requirement to identify and track service members with security force assistance-related training, education and experience, the Marine Corps implemented the Foreign Security Force (FSF) Advisor MOS, which enabled the tracking of LREC competencies linked to previous advisor experiences and training.<sup>58</sup> To be eligible for the “free” MOS, Marines must meet certain criteria, such as having completed their RCLF requirements for grade, attended one or more advisor training courses, or have completed no less than six months of on-the-job training in an advisor role.<sup>59</sup> The value and skills associated with advisor experiences are numerous. Marines can,

Analyze and apply operational culture, build and maintain relationships with FSF counterparts to further mission objectives, recognize and mitigate cultural stress, develop and implement training plans and events to build the FSF's capacity, participate in security cooperation planning, and understand USG [U.S. Government] and service objectives and plans for an assigned region or country.<sup>60</sup>

These are precisely the skills that will be vital in the future operating environment to enhance relationships with allies and partners and build partner capacity. According to a 2014 GAO report, the Army is still developing a mechanism to capture these skills, but

once finalized, it will provide an invaluable benefit to unlock the full potential of the RAF concept.<sup>61</sup> This is another example of Kotter's "quick win" step, but like the RCLF program above, it will not result in substantial organizational change without an emphasis on the other steps. While these improvements are substantial, this paper argues that the future operating environment requires the Marine Corps to adopt better methods to develop, maintain, and employ LREC competencies.

### The Way Forward

In 2005, DOD Directive 1315.17 redirected the services to develop and maintain a FAO program. This directive did little to standardize the FAO program across the DOD, but rather emphasized the program's importance given the complexity of the future operating environment and the need to develop and maintain "bilateral and multilateral military activities and relationships across the range of operations."<sup>62</sup>

Department of Defense Instruction 1315.20 defines a FAO as a

commissioned officers who possess a broad range of military skills and experiences; qualification in their primary military occupational specialty and/or designator; graduate-level or equivalent education focusing on, but not limited to, the historical, political, diplomatic, military/security, cultural, sociological, scientific, economic, and geographic factors of specific foreign countries and regions; in-country/regional experience involving significant interaction with host nationals and host-nation entities in the foreign countries or regions in which they specialize; and proficiency in one or more of the predominant languages in their regions of expertise (with the goal of attaining professional-level proficiency).<sup>63</sup>

This lengthy list of requirements, many of which are perishable, takes a significant amount of time to develop. How does the Marine Corps accomplish this?

The Marine Corps and the Air Force use a dual-track career management system for their FAO program. This means that Marines and Airmen maintain two MOSs, their primary MOS and the FAO MOS, and alternate between the two MOSs

throughout their career. The Army and Navy, on the other hand, utilize a single-track approach where their officers participate in the FAO program full-time throughout the remainder of their careers.<sup>64</sup> Marine Corps Administrative Message 619-12 suggests that Marine Corps FAOs are experts for their assigned area, but attaining this level of expertise is impossible through part-time, dual-track participation.<sup>65</sup> According to the Oxford English dictionary, the definition of an expert is, “A person who has a comprehensive and authoritative knowledge of or skill in a particular area.”<sup>66</sup> The Marine Corps requires only one utilization tour following the FAO designation, which is woefully inadequate to develop true experts.

The Marine Corps Order (MCO) governing the FAO program even acknowledges that, “Today’s operating environment demands a degree of LREC capability that requires years, not weeks, of training and education, as well as a greater understanding of the factors that drive social change.”<sup>67</sup> How can one establish this level of LREC competencies bouncing back and forth between two MOS career paths? This order even comes close to discouraging potential applicants due to the possible negative consequences associated with being out of one’s primary MOS for long periods. Collectively, these inefficiencies and contradictions demand the Marine Corps revisit their FAO strategy.

In 2013, the Institute for Defense Analysis completed a thorough study of the DOD FAO program. The study, which spanned more than a year, included hundreds of interviews that included FAOs from every branch of service, supervisors across DOD and other governmental agencies, as well as combatant commands. All agencies, all federal departments, and all services agreed that the Army’s FAO program is the “gold

standard” compared to all other Services in terms of FAO skill acquisition.<sup>68</sup> It is not surprising that a full-time, single-track program develops unmatched levels of language proficiency and regional expertise. Therefore, in standard Marine Corps fashion, it is only fitting to take an effective Army concept and make it even better. Despite all of the positive characteristics of the Army FAO program, however, the study does mention a recurring negative theme that requires attention: maintaining contemporary operational relevance as military officers.

For the Marine Corps, the first step is to adopt the Army’s single-track FAO model. The Army had also used the dual-track in the past, but a 1997 Office of Personnel Management System report found that they were not producing very many officers with true expertise or experience so they converted to the single-track model.<sup>69</sup> Fredrick the Great famously provided an applicable analogy that highlights this dilemma, “He who defends everything, defends nothing.” The second step, primarily to counter the contemporary operational relevance void, is to place the FAO program under the intelligence warfighting function, where enhanced LREC competencies are force multipliers in their primary MOS and to the CCDRs. The Human Intelligence discipline, for example, relies heavily upon establishing rapport through interaction with indigenous populations. A thorough understanding of different cultures and an ability to speak the native language enhances their ability to accomplish their assigned missions. In fact, all intelligence disciplines, such as signals intelligence, would benefit from enhanced language and cultural expertise. The Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication -2, *Intelligence*, defines intelligence as “knowledge about the enemy or surrounding environment.” It goes on to define the surrounding environment as “weather, terrain,

transportation network, local population, and any other factors needed to describe a potential area of employment.”<sup>70</sup> What could be more applicable and operationally relevant to this warfighting function than a FAO’s language skills, regional expertise and cultural familiarity?

The next problem is the continual loss of LREC competencies across the Intelligence enterprise. The Marine Corps has adopted a generalist vice specialist mentality in certain areas of its intelligence enterprise. While there are multiple examples of this practice, this paper only focuses on the 0231 MOS or the intelligence specialist. According to the MOS manual, the 0231s’ (E-1 through E-8) duties include “the collection, recording, analysis, processing, and dissemination information/intelligence.”<sup>71</sup> After receiving initial intelligence training, Marines usually receive two or three-year orders to one of three locations; Camp Pendleton, CA; Camp Lejeune, NC; or Okinawa, Japan. The rotational cycle and relatively short tour lengths generally inhibit an intelligence analyst from developing a high level of regional expertise. With few exceptions, they will spend three years becoming familiar with a particular problem set in one region of world only to find themselves stationed on the other side of the globe upon completion of their assignment. As a result, much of that knowledge and experience is lost or wasted as the Marine transfers to their new assignment and starts fresh on a new region.<sup>72</sup>

Both the National Security Strategy (NSS) and the Capstone Concept for Joint Operations predict a rapidly changing security environment, but who is constantly monitoring and analyzing those environments to detect the change?<sup>73</sup> These constant changes make it extremely difficult to stay current and impossible to become a regional

expert if one is studying a new region every few years. The answer is not to just rely on the civilian intelligence analysts for regional expertise, especially when the services are more than capable of developing this expertise organically. More importantly, do intelligence analysts in the National Capital Region have a better understanding of ground truth regarding atmospherics in a particular district in Afghanistan or do the intelligence specialists assigned to the battalion operating in that district have better situational awareness?<sup>74</sup> Additionally, what happens to that knowledge and experience when the Marine's tour is up and he/she gets orders to Okinawa to focus on North Korea? A viable solution to combat this revolving door of LREC competencies is the permeant assignment of intelligence specialists to a particular region of the world.

The concept, which essentially takes the RCLF regional assignments to the next level, would entail an intelligence specialist receiving one regional assignment for their entire career. The only way to develop true regional and cultural expertise is years of experience focusing on a particular region. While it may not be feasible to have experts for every country or potential hotspot, long-range intelligence estimates, which are also part of the RCLF program, provide a solid baseline. As per the MOS manual, a certain percentage of intelligence specialists also receive language training.<sup>75</sup> Under this concept, those select intelligence specialists would receive formal language training corresponding to their respective regional assignment. The result, an intelligence specialist with regional and cultural expertise that speaks the local language, is a force multiplier for any commander. There are several ways to facilitate this specialization.

Minor changes to the current Intelligence Specialist's career progression can accommodate rotational requirements and still afford intelligence specialists the

opportunities to enhance and maintain their regional expertise. For example, an extensive exchange program with various service-level intelligence organizations, as well as other DOD and governmental organizations, must be explored and expanded. This process has several advantages. First, it provides both civilians and Marines the opportunity to view their particular region through the tactical, operational, and even strategic-level lenses. Second, it facilitates and develops habitual relationships across the larger intelligence enterprise, enhances the ability to leverage an entire intelligence enterprise against a particular problem set, and improves interoperability across the entire joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational network. Lastly, a formal exchange program would enhance job satisfaction by affording Marines diverse assignment options otherwise not attainable. There are also operational enhancements that can better support commanders.

Given the predictions surrounding the future operating environment, theater security cooperation-type operations will play a critical role in achieving our NSS in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.<sup>76</sup> These types of missions, particularly those conducted in permissive environments, provide Marines invaluable and otherwise unachievable immersion opportunities to apply linguistic skills, study cultures and regional issues, and develop a greater understanding of the operational environment. Enhanced LREC competencies also furthers partnership relations, thereby improving host nation capabilities and future basing options in the event of a crisis. Lastly, intelligence plays a vital role in these types of missions to not only provide a clearer picture to decision makers, but also by building partner capacity to conduct intelligence-related activities.<sup>77</sup> To be truly effective,

however, these recommendations require an innovative change to the way the Marine Corps manages its talent.

Developing robust LREC competencies, for the intelligence specialists and the Marine Corps writ large, is useless if there is not a mechanism in place that assigns Marines with specific LREC competencies to billets that utilize those skills.

Unfortunately, there are too many examples of Marines, and soldiers for that matter, who possess high-demand low-density skills working in billets that do not employ those skills.<sup>78</sup> The good news is that this topic is receiving much more attention, which is likely due to current fiscal constraints and the loss of frustrated personnel with enormous skills not working in appropriate assignments.<sup>79</sup> Imagine a scenario where an intelligence specialist completes a rigorous and expensive language-training program, such as Mandarin Chinese, yet finds himself/herself stationed in U.S. Southern Command. Unfortunately, this scenario happens all too often, but not because of ill intentions. The cause of this problem is a lack of a sophisticated talent assignment system and belief that the needs of the Marine Corps must always trump individual desires and/or common sense.<sup>80</sup> One solution to help mitigate these occurrences is to reevaluate our priorities and the resources allocated against them.

The 2016 Marine Corps LREC Strategy states that, “LREC skills should be considered as a factor within the assignments, especially in instances where Marines are selected for assignment as a Marine Attaché or similar duties.”<sup>81</sup> The MCO governing the International Affairs Program states that, “Regional expertise should be aligned with operating forces assignments as well as in Joint/external/supporting establishment billets.”<sup>82</sup> The problem with both of these statements are the words

“should be.” These types of caveats suggest that LREC competencies do not carry the weight of importance that multiple GAO reports, CCDRs, Secretaries of Defense and Service operating concepts suggest they ought to carry. The Marine Corps has recently developed a system to track LREC competencies, so the next step is to direct that those competencies drive the assignment process for certain MOSs.<sup>83</sup> This step requires a significant transformation in the assignment process, but more importantly, it requires a change in the importance the Marine Corps places on certain training, education, and experience.

In an environment of competing requirements and diminished resources it has become increasingly difficult to resource various capabilities. Language and cultural training is often only a priority when an immediate conflict demands increased emphasis.<sup>84</sup> Managing and funding LREC competencies in this fashion will not produce the competencies needed to succeed in the future operating environment. If nearly every future conflict will involve an enemy, an indigenous population, a host nation, and multinational partners, as suggested by the various documents mentioned above, then should not DOD develop the competencies required to understand, influence, and operate to win those conflicts? The Army and the Marine Corps spend billions of dollars on equipment that will potentially never be employed in the future operating environment, yet they are routinely reluctant to fund a competency to an appropriate level that every conflict will require. Realizing these kinds of changes will not be easy, but Kotter’s eight-stage process for creating major change can provide the roadmap.

For years, Marines carried out orders without question. If senior leaders wanted subordinates’ opinion, then they would give it to them. There was little truth to power

and good ideas started only at the top and flowed downward without question. There are, however, signs of change. A senior Marine Corps officer spoke at the Army War College in 2017 and shared a story that illustrates a significant shift from this trend. The officer stated that a Marine Sergeant sent the Commandant of the Marine Corps a 30-page paper that contained ideas and recommendations to improve the Marine Corps.<sup>85</sup> Just a decade ago, there would have been a long line of Gunnery Sergeants, First Sergeants and Sergeants Major seeking out this Sergeant to provide some professional counseling. Today, however, the Commandant not only appreciated the recommendations, but also arranged a several hour conference call with the Sergeant to discuss the paper further. This mindset, guidance, and direction is what has been preventing the Marine Corps from realizing significant organizational change as seen in Kotter's eight-stage process. While it will take time for this to promulgate throughout the ranks, this is the start of an organizational culture that is conducive to undergoing major change.

### Conclusion

There is near unanimous opinion that the future operating environment will be chaotic, complex, and uncertain. Demographic shifts, resource scarcity, and population interconnectedness will inhibit states' abilities to provide basic services thereby threatening U.S. national interests. As such, landpower forces, such as the Marines and Army, will be required to operate in and among local populations in densely populated urban megacities. As history has illustrated, to be effective in this environment, Marines and Soldiers need to know the enemy, speak the language, understand the culture, and be familiar with regional issues, otherwise known as LREC competencies. Current

practices are inadequate to meet these future demands and require additional methods to achieve success.

The Marine Corps must implement three improvements to enhance LREC competencies in order to provide commanders with the required tools to succeed in the future operating environment. First, the Marine Corps should adopt the Army's single-track FAO program and place FAOs within the Intelligence Enterprise. Second, intelligence specialists should receive career-long regional assignments immediately following initial training. Third, the Marine Corps must develop an improved talent management process and mindset to ensure that Marines who possess certain LREC competencies are given assignments that maximize those skills. Incorporating these changes will not be easy, but by leveraging Kotter's eight-stage process, the Marine Corps can effectively communicate the vision, convince senior leadership that current policies are inadequate, and overcome the obstacles standing in the way.

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