

Preparing SFABs for the Complexity of Human Interaction

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We are training, advising, and assisting indigenous armies all over the world, and I expect that will increase and not decrease.

—Gen. Mark A. Milley, Army Chief of Staff

A recent Associated Press article highlighted the importance of cultural sensitivity and empathy in preparing the Army's new security force assistance brigades (SFABs).¹ While certainly useful and appropriate skills, SFAB-related articles typically only scratch the surface regarding the importance of understanding the human terrain while deployed abroad. Fortunately, a few research efforts provide deeper thinking and analysis to increase our understanding. Forces Command, Training and Doctrine Command, and the Army at large would be well served to make significant investments in human domain training to maximize SFAB effectiveness as they advise, train, and assist foreign forces in their own environments.

Apart from distracting stories about beret colors, SFAB articles typically emphasize a few key points. First of all, the six SFABs will provide a trained force dedicated to the *advise-and-assist* mission. Second, this added force structure will reportedly replace the current ad hoc approach and free up conventional forces to prepare for conventional wars. Finally, the SFAB training program will include extensive cultural and language training.² It appears that after sixteen years of the U.S. military training, advising, and interacting with Afghans, Iraqis, and others with mixed results, the SFAB concept provides the Army with another opportunity to get it right. However, initial coverage of the SFAB suggests that the curricula are

still not comprehensive enough for our forces to operate successfully in the human domain.

In support of the "Army's effort to create a permanent, professional training program," this article recommends three sources to inform that training regimen.³ Two separate research efforts published by the U.S. Army War College in 2015 offer helpful constructs for developing such a program. The third source, the *Joint Concept for Human Aspects of Military Operations* (JC-HAMO), was informed by the previous research and published in October 2016. These three sources are discussed in the following paragraphs.

What may seem contrary to a comprehensive training program, the Army's SFAB recruiting website emphasizes that its soldiers serve as "combat advisors, not nation builders."⁴ Understandably, this phrase serves to remind leaders and recruits that the Army should stick to what it knows and not repeat its nation-building attempts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Each of the sources discussed below proposes subjects that are likely to fall outside the comfort zone of most SFAB leaders and soldiers. Knowledge in these subjects is not intended to enable our forces to build a national government or even to piece

Ratik Ole Kuyana, a safari guide, awaits the arrival of more service-members 15 October 2009 who participated in Natural Fire 10 in Uganda, a training exercise in which East African partner nations and the U.S. military worked together on a humanitarian assistance mission. Security force assistance brigades will provide a trained force dedicated to the *advise-and-assist* mission, free up conventional forces to prepare for conventional wars, and receive extensive cultural and language training to better enable multinational training and real-world mission execution in complex operating environments such as East Africa. (Photo by Spc. Jason Nolte, U.S. Army)



together a department within said government. Rather, the intent of a broader training program is to provide SFABs with the requisite tools to understand, relate to, and properly advise the foreign forces they are assigned.

Training for the Human Domain

For the first source, two British authors suggest specific categories for operating in the human domain in their monograph, *Training Humans for the Human Domain*. Steve Tatham and Keir Giles refer to these categories, or academic disciplines, as the “four ‘ologies’ and one ‘istics’”: psychology, theology, anthropology, sociology, and linguistics.⁵ To be effective at advising foreign forces within their own culture and environment, it stands to reason that understanding how and why humans think and act would yield invaluable insights for SFABs to formulate appropriate advice.

Extensive education and training in these subjects may seem cost prohibitive. However, before ruling out investment in such a curriculum, the authors share how the UK military grades and confers different levels of proficiency, such as expert, practitioner, and familiar. Further, Tatham and Giles appropriately recognize that an individual’s level of proficiency should depend on their respective role or position. While some personnel may require expert knowledge in one or more categories, all per-

sonnel should possess familiarity across the range of subjects.⁶ Using a gradient of expertise can allocate resources more effectively.

Perhaps also with an eye toward cost, the authors suggest three accelerated ways to close this human terrain knowledge gap. First, build or supplement red teams with experts in the social sciences discussed above and then assimilate red team input, some of which may be counterintuitive, into the planning process. A second way is to leverage

and expand the foreign area officer program. This talented group of cultural advisors could train and develop a familiar-to-practitioner corps of advisors. Third, retain reservists with specialized knowledge in these areas, presumably through financial bonuses.⁷ This last method is also applicable for active-duty members that may have gained such knowledge through advisory missions or other experiences, including experienced SFAB soldiers.

Tatham and Giles also remind us that the “basic principles of understanding human terrain can hardly be described as new.” They continue by citing Marine Corps intelligence analysis that cautions, “study the people” or risk “decisive defeat.”⁸ That study should include the psychological makeup and cultural viewpoint of the population. Such analysis is consistent with Marine Corps doctrine that emphasizes human behavior, specifically:

It is the human dimension which infuses war with its intangible moral factors. War is shaped by human nature and is subject to the complexities, inconsistencies, and peculiarities which characterize human behavior. Since war is an act of violence based on irreconcilable disagreement, it will invariably inflame and be shaped by human emotions.⁹

The Marine Corps’ definition of human dimension is significantly broader than the Army’s version, which focuses on performance and resiliency of its own soldiers and formations. This distinction was made by the next source, which used the term *human elements* to minimize confusion.¹⁰

Human Elements of Military Operations

The second recommended source consists of the findings and tools developed by “The Human Elements of Military Operations” workshop, held 13–14 January 2015 at the U.S. Army War College, which was sponsored by the joint Strategic Landpower Task Force.¹¹ The workshop focused on determining what human elements are applicable for the full range of military operations. A diverse group of scholars from twelve universities created two very different and flexible frameworks of human elements to consider when operating abroad.

The workshop participants were divided into two comparable groups, and the frameworks were developed independently. One framework identified eight broad categories, or major elements: culture,

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information, security, economics, physical, power/politics, key actors, and unknowns. The six major elements of the second framework include identity, social structures and institutions, physical, psychology, information, and basic needs. In addition to the shared elements of information and physical, the top element from both frameworks—culture and identity, respectively—share many of the same descriptions and subelements.¹²

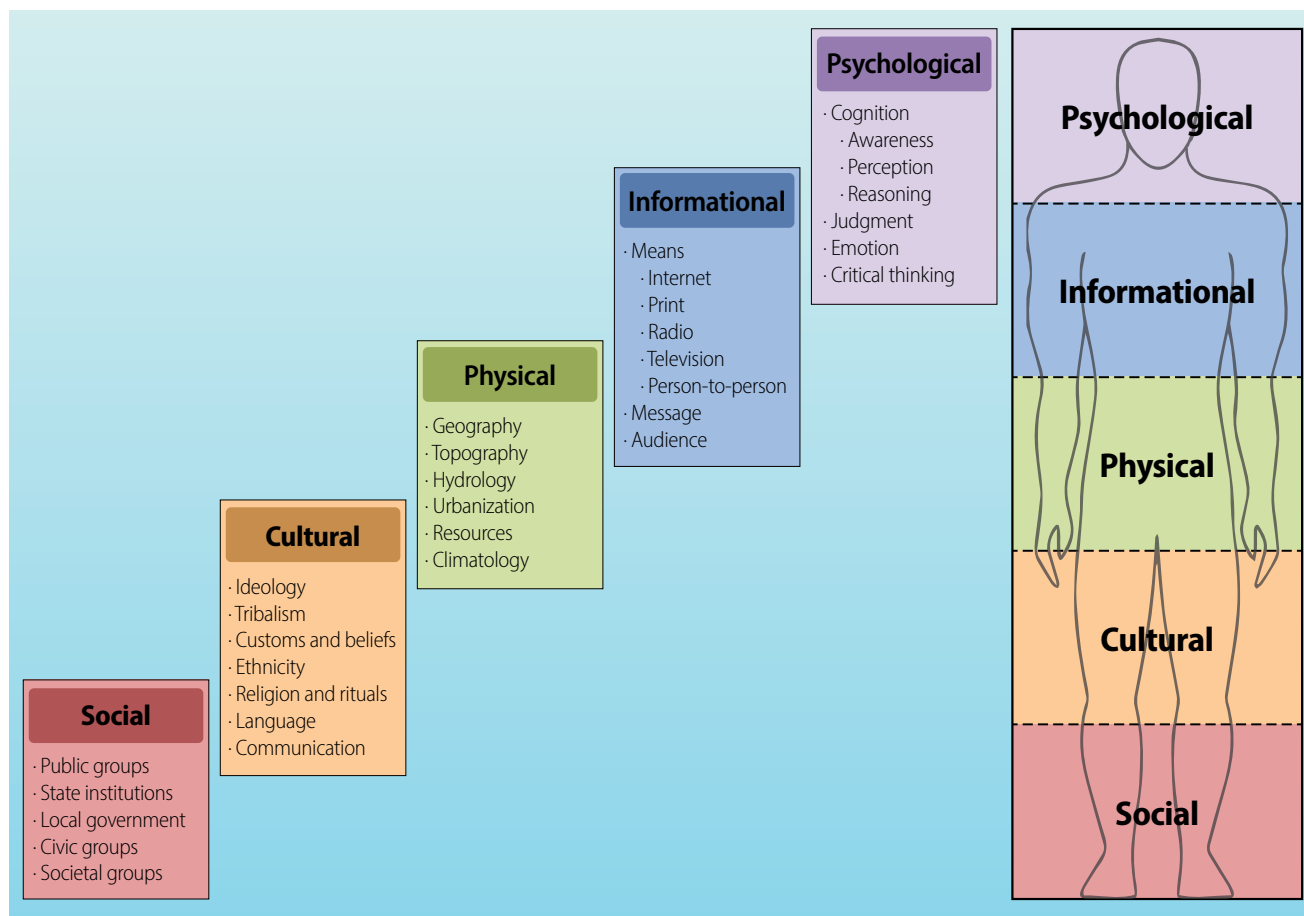
Comparatively, all five categories from the previously discussed monograph were represented as major elements or subelements in one or both frameworks.

The workshop stood out for its interdisciplinary approach, which yielded these two holistic and interactive frameworks. Participants insisted on building flexibility into their frameworks to increase their applicability for a wide range of missions. Such flexibility is particularly important when advising and assisting different peoples from different cultures. As an example, one framework includes the category of unknowns in order to underscore that “no one-size-fits-all framework exists due to the complexity of humans, their dynamic interactions, and the changing environments around them.”¹³ Flexibility in the other framework is provided

Capt. Christopher Young, a combat advisor team leader for the 2nd Battalion, 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB), engages with a local civilian role player 15 January 2018 during the unit's rotation at the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, Louisiana. The training was conducted in order to prepare the then newly formed 1st SFAB for a deployment to Afghanistan in the spring of 2018. The SFABs provide combat advising capability while enabling brigade combat teams to prepare for decisive action, improving the readiness of the Army and its partners. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Sierra A. Melendez, U.S. Army)

by multiple levels of analysis, and the focus is not necessarily on a key actor at the individual level. This framework allows for “any element at one level to interact with a different element at another level.”¹⁴ Similarly, Tatham and Giles touch on flexibility by pointing out that communication with various audiences “must be tailored to the local dynamics and with respect to the behaviors one is seeking to change.”¹⁵

In keeping with the flexibility theme, workshop participants emphasized that any framework “should not be viewed as a checklist to hastily complete, but rather a tool to be considered, updated, and refined on a regular basis” throughout all phases of a military



(Figure from "Workshop Report: Human Elements of Military Operations")

Figure 1. Pre-Workshop Graphic of Human Elements

operation. That refinement includes the framework itself.¹⁶ An author for Small Wars Journal also discusses the checklist approach. In February 2017, Patricia DeGennaro emphasized the importance and complexity of human interaction, and she lamented how human terrain analysis has become a "box to check," if it is not ignored altogether.¹⁷ Credit goes to her journal for not ignoring it but rather waving the banner and advocating for more understanding and training for the human domain.

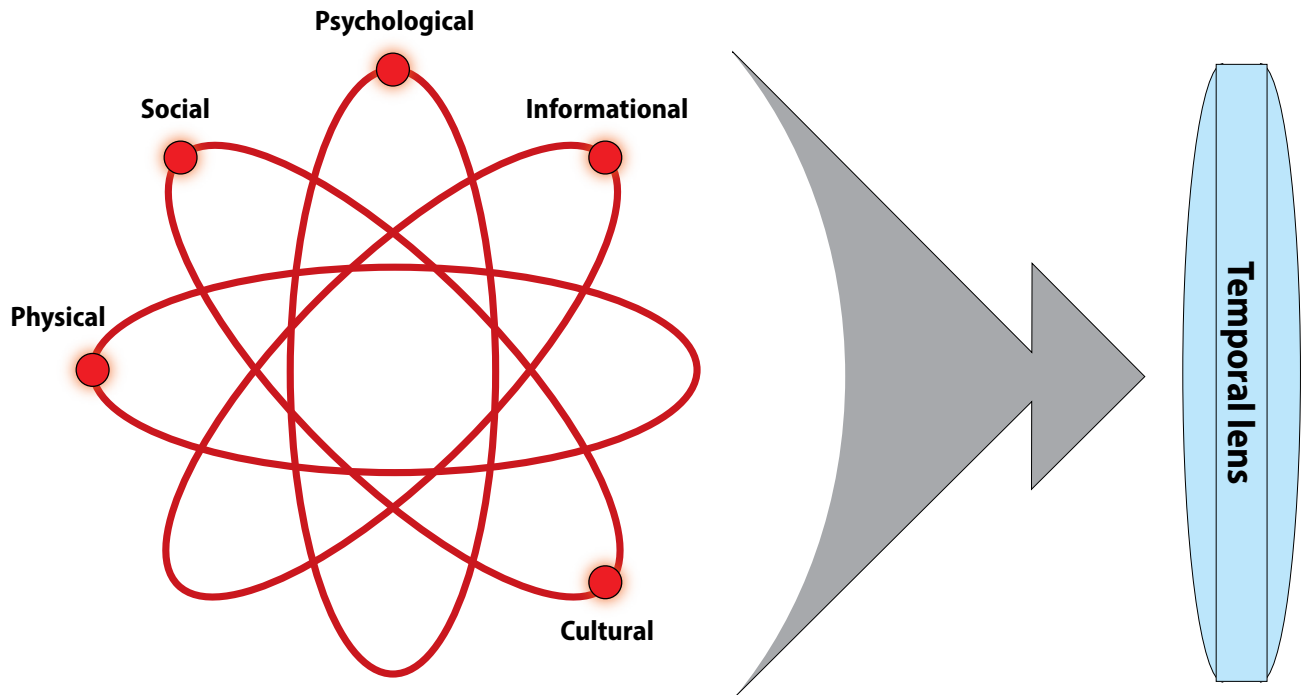
Workshop Informed the Joint Concept

The third recommended source for SFAB development is the *JC-HAMO*, which was informed by the human elements workshop. In addition to the previously discussed frameworks, workshop participants also examined and provided feedback on a preliminary

graphic for *JC-HAMO*, as requested by the Strategic Landpower Task Force.¹⁸ That feedback directly led to a revamped graphic for the joint concept.

The preliminary graphic depicted a human outline divided into five segments, labeled as psychological, informational, physical, cultural, and social (see figure 1).¹⁹ While the five elements remained the same, their depiction changed in two significant ways in the new graphic (see figure 2, page 93).²⁰ First, the segmented human outline morphed into an atom with revolving electrons, each representing a human element. Similar to the workshop discussions, this new graphic shows that the "elements are interconnected and interact with each other in a continuous and fluid manner."²¹

For the second major adaptation, the *JC-HAMO* graphic now includes a *temporal lens*, which allows for the human elements to be examined over time. This



(Figure from *Joint Concept for Human Aspects of Military Operations*)

Figure 2. Final Joint Concept for Human Aspects of Military Operations (JC-HAMO) Graphic

temporal aspect was discussed at the workshop where participants “emphasized the importance of time” and “changes over time.”²² Different or changing circumstances may affect perspectives and decisions of relevant actors, requiring reassessment at different points in time.²³

However, JC-HAMO is much more than one graphic. It is a comprehensive approach to consider the human aspects at play in military operations. Its central idea is to develop a mindset that considers and seeks to understand these human aspects. This approach can improve how the joint force interacts with key actors within various environments.²⁴

To facilitate this improved interaction, the joint concept proposes an operational framework to identify, evaluate, anticipate, and influence relevant actors. This cycle of analysis, referred to as the *four imperatives* in JC-HAMO, contributes to “ongoing and continuous efforts to comprehend conditions and relevant actor behavior.”²⁵ Relevant actors include individuals, groups, and populations that are critical to mission success.²⁶ After all, wars are fought or avoided by these actors, all of which are human.

Avoiding the Mirror

By way of example, the SFAB training curricula should include recognizing the importance of avoiding *mirror imaging*—a concept mentioned in all three recommended sources. First, the monograph asserted that understanding the human terrain is necessary to avoid mirroring, that is “projecting Western assumptions onto a non-Western actor,” thereby failing to correctly assess that actor “whose decision-making calculus sits in a different framework to our own.”²⁷ Second, some workshop participants felt the preliminary graphic (figure 1) “suffered from linear thinking and mirror imaging.”²⁸ And finally, the joint concept encourages self-assessments by the joint force to understand their biases and avoid mirror imaging.²⁹

Based on recent comments by its commander, the first SFAB is trying to avoid this pitfall. Col. Scott Jackson was recently quoted as saying, “To be an effective advisor you have to be willing to work within that culture without losing your cultural identity.”³⁰ Jackson provided further explanation by emphasizing two key points. First, “our partners respect us for who we are as long as we respect



them for who they are.” Second, our advice needs to be consistent with and not violate their culture, but we cannot lose our own cultural identity in the process.³¹

In conclusion, the SFAB concept provides the Army with another opportunity to properly invest in human domain training. A deeper understanding and appreciation of the human elements and how they interact will better prepare soldiers for this seemingly enduring advise and assist mission. This article recommended three sources to inform and develop such curricula. As the new assistance brigades continue

A new one-star command, Security Force Assistance Command (patch shown here), will be stood up on Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to oversee the Army’s security force assistance brigades (SFABs). The Army plans to have six SFABs by 2022. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

to form and take shape, the Army should heed the Marine Corps’ warning. In addition to avoiding decisive defeat, studying and understanding people will enable SFABs to effectively advise foreign forces and minimize future conflict. ■

Notes

Epigraph. Jared Keller, “Army Chief of Staff: It’s ‘Forever Train and Advise,’ Not ‘Forever War,’” *Task & Purpose*, 9 October 2017, accessed 28 February 2018, <http://taskandpurpose.com/army-mark-milley-advise-assist-ausa/>.

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2. C. Todd Lopez, “Security Force Assistance Brigades to Free Brigade Combat Teams from Advise, Assist Mission,” *Army.mil*, 18 May 2017, accessed 28 February 2018, https://www.army.mil/article/188004/security_force_assistance_brigades_to_free_brigade_combat_teams_from_advise_assist_mission.

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10. Brent A. Kauffman, "Workshop Report: Human Elements of Military Operations" (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Center for Strategic Leadership, 14 October 2015), 4, accessed 28 February 2018, <http://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/2978.pdf>.

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17. Patricia DeGennaro, "Does the Human Domain Matter?" *Small Wars Journal*, 23 February 2017, accessed 28 February 2018, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/does-the-human-domain-matter>.

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19. Ibid., 11. This graphic is also found in U.S. Special Operations Command, *Operating in the Human Domain*, version 1.0 (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: U.S. Special Operations Command, 3 August 2015), 13.

20. *Joint Concept for Human Aspects of Military Operations (JC-HAMO)* (Washington, DC: U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 19 October 2016), 6.

21. Ibid., 5–6.

22. Kauffman, "Workshop Report," 2, 7, 8, 10.

23. *JC-HAMO*, 7–8.

24. Ibid., 13.

25. Ibid., 13–14.

26. Ibid., 16.

27. Tatham and Giles, *Training Humans for the Human Domain*, xi, 33.

28. Kauffman, "Workshop Report," 12.

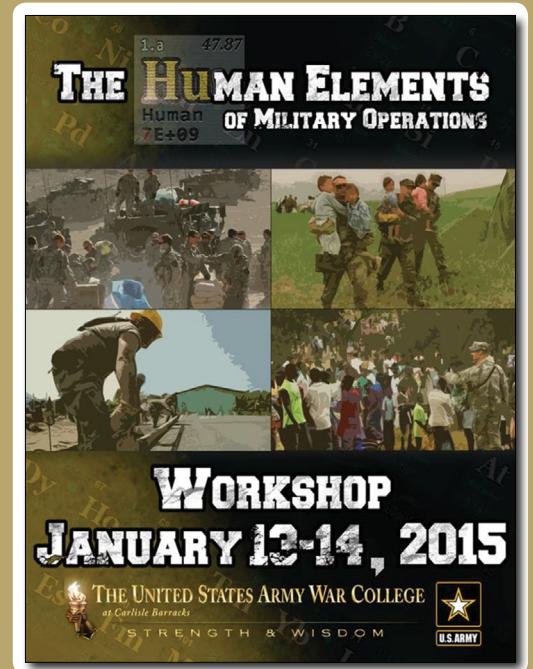
29. *JC-HAMO*, 19, 28.

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31. Scott A. Jackson (commander, 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade), email message to author, 20 November 2017.

Military Review

WE RECOMMEND



In January 2015, the U.S. Army War College conducted a workshop focused on understanding the human elements of military operations. Under the assumption that current doctrine did not then adequately address the moral, cognitive, social, and physical conditions endemic to populations among whom U.S. forces may have to operate, two groups of experts from the behavioral and social sciences participated in an interdisciplinary examination of what human elements military leaders and soldiers need to incorporate into strategic and operational planning for foreign areas. The overall purpose of the workshop was to foster the development of new flexible, contextual frameworks for social and cultural analysis to facilitate more effective operational planning and execution. For the summary of workshop findings and recommendations, please visit: <http://www.cslarmy.mil/LCDW/StrategicWargamingDivision/publications/Human%20Elements%20Workshop%20Report.pdf>.