



A Chinese paratrooper coaches South African peers on how to use Chinese rifles during “Airborne Platoon,” a tactical training exercise held at a military training ground in China’s Hubei Province in July 2017. Chinese news sources report that a total of seven countries participated; among them, Russia and Kazakhstan. (Photo by Ernest Gunasekara-Rockwell, courtesy of Air University)

Nine Narratives Destroying American Diplomacy and How to Counter Them

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To deliver for our own people, we must also engage deeply with the rest of the world.

—2022 *National Security Strategy*

This article is not about peace. It's about how America is failing to advance its most powerful tool to succeed in competition, deter armed conflict, and win decisively if necessary—its people.

If you find the title misleading, you've caught a glimpse of the tangled-knot-too-tied we currently face. Our idea of diplomacy as an instrument used only on the edges of conflict may not have gotten us in noticeable trouble in the past. But the game has changed.

Modern threats can't be defeated by poking at them with a stick. Trends working against the values of democracies everywhere are so enmeshed in the fabric of how the whole world operates no one nation can address them alone. Relationships with allies and partners no longer serve a ceremonial purpose—they're essential to the confident collaboration and exchange of knowledge, equipment, and access required to launch a response that stands a chance of turning the tide.

The U.S. *National Security Strategy* and the American people, too, eye a cornerstone of the solution to this crisis: We need to strengthen our ability to understand and engage authentically with the world.¹

Yet, our investment in the Americans we charge with performing this function is dwindling. Across the Department of Defense (DOD), programs promoting diplomacy skills, international awareness, and cultural competence are disappearing.² Why? Because it's hard to measure their contributions to national security objectives. Without justification, funding is redirected.

I'm an applied psychologist who's spent twenty years doing studies, instruction, and consulting with the DOD Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture programs. In this article I share nine narratives I hear in conversations that distract us from solving the measurement problem. These are stories that keep us from developing programs that effectively help national security professionals achieve valued outcomes in environments where people don't think like them.

I also share my views on countering these narratives. My hope is to contribute to a discussion and collaboration to determine how we align our resources with our pressing requirements.

1. Diplomacy Is for Diplomats

Here's an influential narrative: understanding foreign cultures and engaging with the people in them is for diplomats.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, diplomacy means "a profession."³ But it also refers generally to skills in managing relationships and dealing effectively with people. In our accounting sheet for power, diplomacy occupies its own column separate from the military.⁴ This may give wind to a story that it is for State Department personnel, and the only people in the DOD who need these skills are those who execute special or irregular types of missions, like foreign area officers, civil affairs, security cooperation and security force assistance professionals, advisors, and intelligence analysts.

We know every American we send overseas or who engages with visitors on U.S. soil can make or break foreign relations.⁵ The State Department sends approximately fifteen thousand foreign service officers overseas each year, whereas the DOD sends about 173,000 service members. We've committed to the requirement that all military commands incorporate an understanding of foreign civilian environments to mitigate harm.⁶

Yet, current priorities dictate that navigating other cultures is not a core competency within the DOD.⁷ As preparation to engage with the world, most national security personnel are equipped with little more than brief computer-based training and messages like "be respectful."

Consider this response from a service member when asked how they would approach a scenario where a Southeast Asian military partner hadn't followed their instructions: "I would talk to him and probably be like, 'Respectfully, thank you for volunteering to help rip out the work you did incorrectly. Now you can do it right.'"⁸

If our goal is to build international relationships that are real, as in transformational not transactional, a *please and thank you* instruction doesn't cut it. It's not enough to intend respect. We must understand how and why, *and* be able to earn it, too.

Having interviewed more than seven hundred service members about using cultural skills and understanding in their jobs, I've found the "Ugly American" idea to be deceptive.⁹ It directs attention to the bully in the room. Most Americans mean well, want to do good, and welcome opportunities to improve their ability to engage with others.



In a time where even the effectiveness of cultural programs for DOD specialists is questioned, rendering them in jeopardy, how do we change ideas about whose abilities to work with the world we invest in and why?¹⁰

Competitors already affect change using gray-zone methods straddling U.S. government areas of responsibility.¹¹ We must rewrite our *responsibility narrative*. Diplomacy is for everyone. It's for all personnel who make decisions in relation to people who don't think the same way they do.

2. We Don't Need This in Strategic Competition

This narrative circulates: strategic competition means international awareness and cultural skills are less important.

The story goes in this new environment, dominance centers on economic levers and maintaining information and technological superiority. Since we mostly work with partners, we're fine so long as we don't do anything egregiously insulting.

Not everyone agrees with this spin.

In the words of Nicholas Burns, U.S. ambassador to the People's Republic of China, at the 2023 U.S. Global

A soldier from the Indiana National Guard's 2nd Battalion, 151st Infantry Regiment, 76th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, arm wrestles with a member of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Forces in a friendly match during Orient Shield, 31 August 2018. Japan, with approximately fifty-five thousand permanently assigned active-duty service members, hosts the largest contingent of U.S. military personnel abroad. (Photo by Spc. Joshua A. Syberg, U.S. Army)

Leadership Coalition Summit, "Managing competition and cooperation with China is all about people to people relationships. There's no replacement for a diplomat, or a man or woman in uniform showing up."¹²

Roads to relationships can be winding. Imagine speaking with a Southeast Asian officer about his navy's capabilities. It's been a long day, and communication is slow. Your partner struggles to translate technical terms into English and often repeats, "Your Navy is big." You're both tired. Suddenly, he says, "You know the chicken?" You're instantly confused. "The chicken," he repeats. "You know, lunch." You slowly agree. You know what a chicken is. "How long can chicken fly?" he asks. "Uhm, not very far," you reply. "500 meters," he exclaims, "if you drop off the side of ship."

Do you each walk away from this exchange frustrated or with a deeper connection?



The pressure is on for Americans who “show up.” China is the world’s largest diplomatic power and increasingly outmatches the United States in contact hours abroad.¹³ There are three hundred thousand Chinese students in the United States every year, and a recent count of American students in China is 382.¹⁴ Compared to China, the U.S. military currently maintains more bases and personnel abroad in support of various missions. But the People’s Liberation Army is noticeably expanding its global footprint along with the advanced platforms as well as logistical and expeditionary capabilities needed to sustain presence beyond China’s borders.¹⁵

In the minds of service members I’ve engaged with, strategic competition has both increased the requirement for cultural understanding and complicated it.

Here are some of the questions they grapple with: How can we predict what kind of influence China can have in Venezuela and work accordingly? How do we integrate with an East Asian partner force previously trained by Russia?

Service members tell me, “We need the ability to be ready to go to any region, anywhere on the globe, and work with anyone. We need to change our

A People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force Y-20A heavy-lift transport with low-visibility markings lands Chinese military personnel at an undisclosed location in 2021. Along with the Y-20U tanker variant in development, this aircraft extends the range of PRC’s fleet of refuelable fighters and bombers and expands the PLA’s expeditionary capabilities. (Photo courtesy of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation)

mindset with short notice and have strategies that help us adapt.”

Let’s change the *competition narrative*. A new environment means new requirements. We can train to these.

3. We Don’t Have Time

Most leaders I meet see value in programs that help their people understand and work better with others at home and abroad. A recurring hedge is “we just don’t have the time to do it.”

There’s something to this. Deployment tempos are high, and mission orders are often released at crunch time. Learning about a new region and culture competes with ensuring readiness on warfighting skills and completing tasks like getting immunizations, visas, and family affairs squared away.

While this narrative holds truth, it's led us astray. Focusing on cultural preparation as something to squeeze in when getting ready for a specific assignment has led us to pursue the shortest possible amount of time to teach culture. Is it a week, a day, an hour?

Let's first tackle a core belief that supports this narrative.

There's a tendency to think culture is fundamentally about knowledge; the more cultural information

First, our *time narrative* must change. Here's a new story to get started: time spent learning culture accelerates our ability to shape the future.

4. We Can Just Bring in an Expert

Certain people are experts when it comes to culture, and we can just bring them in, and they can tell us what we need to know.

This story is pervasive.

“We've lost the link between culture and doing the job, and that has discouraged us from seeking alternative ways to define and meet the requirements. As a result, we continue to waste time.”

you have, the more culturally competent you are. Since there's so much information that could be learned, it's overwhelming.

Here's the problem. We've lost the link between culture and doing the job, and that has discouraged us from seeking alternative ways to define and meet the requirements. As a result, we continue to waste time.

Yes, really. Service members tell me,

“Understanding culture helps us accomplish objectives faster.”

Understanding culture helps us connect, and relationships help us get things done. That's just for starters. Understanding the culture, history, beliefs, and motivations of partners and allies helps us appreciate why organizational processes and hierarchy are the way they are so we can make realistic plans to improve them. It helps us get underneath risk avoidance so we can manage it. It helps us assess the level of buy-in to U.S. proposals and set realistic timelines.

One major I spoke with said this about the culture-speed relationship: “[In Korea] you can't force change from the bottom up and you can't expect the top down to go quickly. You can waste time asking something from someone with zero influence. Understanding culture ... it's like swimming with a swimsuit versus with all your clothes on. You go faster in a swimsuit.”¹⁶

We'll never have efficient programs to develop time-saving cultural capabilities if we don't take time to develop them. China and Russia take a long view.¹⁷ Can we?

After realizing in the early 2000s that service members could engage better with people outside the United States, eyes went to social scientists.¹⁸ A host of culture programs and cultural advisor job billets were created.¹⁹ Culture centers of excellence were stood up.²⁰ These efforts aimed to infuse social science and native cultural expertise into military training and operations.

Many of these initiatives no longer exist, but legacies remain. One is the lingering perception that culture is hard. The inherent quest for depth in social science combined with increased information access makes it difficult to scope what should be learned; hence, a perceived time crunch.

A more perilous progeny is the idea that culture programs exist to increase sensitivity and accommodation. A scientist's goal is to learn, and their methods involve a host of practices enabling them to blend in and be passive observers.

A national security professional's goal is to make decisions that compel change. Service members, teachers, and scholars agree that seeking sensitivity and accommodation in the context of national security isn't just ineffective; it's dangerous.²¹

In the words of Dr. Eli Berman, a research director at the UC Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, “It falls into the trap of being naïve of what the true objectives of the partner are. And that's a lack of discipline and a lack of thoughtfulness.”²²

So, what happened? We skipped a step: defining requirements. We started *doing* first and attempted to



When Iraqis misunderstood his soldiers' mission on 3 April 2003, then-Lt. Col. Chris Hughes, commander of the 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, urged his infantry to back off and take a knee to keep from making enemies of civilians. Hughes's formal Army training for dealing with this type of situation had involved using "a helicopter's rotor wash" to drive away the crowd, or fire warning shots. His creativity played a significant role in inspiring a critical examination of military regional and cultural preparation in the early 2000s. (Images courtesy of Maj. Gen. [Ret.] Chris Hughes, U.S. Army)

retrofit requirements afterward. National security professionals need organic cultural expertise, but not just that, they need a practical kind of cultural expertise.²³

What does that look like and how do we teach it?

Industry has been using job analysis for one hundred years to ensure they invest in capabilities that matter. We can benefit if we turn the *expertise narrative* upside down.²⁴

Instead of modeling social science, we should use its methods to discover the cultural skills and knowledge service members need to develop expertise in making decisions, achieving outcomes, and creating change. This will provide more targeted programs with articulated requirements and ties to measurable value propositions.

5. We Can Just Google It

This idea is spreading fast: with the explosion of information technology and global accessibility, engaging successfully across cultures is a matter of having the right apps.

Technology provides information access at a rapidly increasing volume and speed. Artificial intelligence (AI) can synthesize information, write messages, and participate in meetings for us. It might even someday alert us to potential communication breakdowns. The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency is exploring AI-enabled cultural translators—a machine translation tool with social and cultural understanding that can detect and interpret sociocultural factors,

emotions, shifts in communication, and give real-time alerts to possible miscommunication.²⁵

Someday.

"Put butter on the forehead." This is the first step in a Google translated recipe for Danish meatballs. Forehead and frying pan are the same word in Danish.

Now, imagine the response to "write a 150-word email to an Egyptian general informing him that we can't deliver the equipment to the airfield we originally promised. Be respectful but firm."

Today's generative AIs will do what we ask in a second. But even when using it in English, we must edit to make sure we don't sound like robots.²⁶ When using it with a foreign audience, without understanding the culture, we fly blind on giving instructions. When checking the answers, we won't know what we're missing.

Is my tone on point? Is the emphasis right, focusing on what can't be done instead of what can? Should I be less direct? Do I paint a picture of my context and considerations? Put a personal touch to my message and include emotion?

Wait, my generative AI was "raised" in a Western culture. When instructed to be respectful, will it behave like the service member who started their sentence, "Respectfully ..."?

Picture a real-time scenario. You're working in Africa, and a doctor from a French nongovernmental organization asks

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you, “Why do Americans hate black people?” Standing next to you is the leader of a local military unit you’re training; he’s listening intently. Your pulse increases. You start speaking. Your AI-tool alerts—you’re agitated—impending cultural collision. It suggests a message in your earpiece. Do you trust it without verifying?

Technology can enhance decision-making, improve learning, and provide new avenues for engaging with the world.²⁷ It can’t replace critical thinking.

Revising the *technology narrative*, we can explore the skills and knowledge people need to best leverage technology as support, not replacement for thought. Within this story, perhaps we can focus on developing the abilities to read between the lines, distinguish fake from real, and better realize our potential to engage with other humans.

6. It's More of an Art Than a Science

A narrative exists that understanding other cultures and engaging effectively in them is more art than science. That is, it’s a unique talent only a subset of the population will ever possess.

I’ve heard this in countless side conversations: “This culture stuff, it’s not for me. It’s for so-and-so on my team. He’s good at this.” And it’s not just people saying this about themselves. I hear this from educators too. “This student doesn’t get it. He’s just not a people-person.”

There’s a widely held belief that some people are socially adept (extraverts) and others aren’t (introverts).²⁸ This simplified social dichotomy supports the belief that some people are natural purveyors of the art of engaging across cultures. Calling this ability art makes it special and unbounded, convincing us that we’d be foolish to force development through training, let alone try to measure it.

National security professionals engage in settings so complex that it can seem getting it “right” requires a magic brush. How else can you paint a message that inspires intended outcomes or change by accommodating one person while breaking the expectations of another?

Introverts, in reality, often have excellent social skills.²⁹ Artists spend lifetimes exploring the application of scientific parameters in their pursuit of aesthetic masterpieces. And there are simple habits and strategies anyone can learn to be more effective in engaging across cultures.³⁰

Instead of calling it *art*, we should champion the idea that you can get better at working across cultures no matter who you are.

Changing the *talent narrative* creates value all around. We acknowledge that requirements are not only definable but also measurable. We motivate and empower people to seek and ask for opportunities to improve.³¹ With priorities and resources in place so people have access to learning and practice, we’ll have greatly expanded the workforce we put toward our key objectives.³²

7. Experience and Exposure Are Enough

A story circulates that experience with and exposure to foreign people and cultures is sufficient to improve cultural competence and the ability to engage internationally.

Several organizational approaches are born from this narrative. For specialists like foreign area officers, in-region training is a mandatory experiential stage of their professional development. One goal of International Military Exchange Training programs is exposure—exposing U.S. service members to foreign perspectives and vice versa. In military field training and exercises, service members with experience deploying overseas are used as cultural subject-matter experts to teach the next generation.

This narrative has us on thin ice. The relationship among experience, exposure, and the development of cultural capabilities is complex.³³ Sometimes, exposure hardens our hearts. Just because we see how people think and live in other places in the world doesn’t mean we’re going to like them and seek to engage and learn. This goes both ways. Just because people from other parts of the world meet us doesn’t mean they’ll like us, gain understanding, or give us opportunities to learn from them.

That’s not all. Education science teaches us that humans don’t learn from experience and exposure automatically—it requires effort.³⁴ This means cultural understanding and diplomacy skills aren’t acquired by osmosis.

It’s not as bad as it sounds. It’s not that experience and exposure aren’t valuable, but you can’t reach a faraway destination just by learning how to drive a stick shift. With systematic support mechanisms in place to ensure deliberate, varied practice, and reflection,

experience *can* be a powerful source of learning.³⁵ Other professional areas, like medicine, have realized valuable business outcomes of teaching experiential learning skills.³⁶ It makes doctors better problem-solvers and their patients report increased happiness.

Here's a new *experience narrative*: with effort, we can make cultural experiences possible road maps for future practice. This idea could open doors to exploring programs that help people maximize cultural learning

“ We can make cultural experiences possible roadmaps for future practice. This idea could open doors to exploring programs that help people maximize cultural learning while they're on the job.

while they're on the job. Which, all in all, seems like a great return on investment and resources.

8. We're Already Doing It

Culture is already baked into everything we do by design. Additional requirements mean “extra” time and cost.

I hear this: “We don't need a class on culture because we already cover this ... in Operational Design, Red Teaming, Military Deception, Survival- Escape-Resistance-Evasion school, Casualty Assistance ...”

Some of these courses, like the last three, do by design touch on engaging with people. Though, the rapport you work on is different than working with allies and partners.

Courses like the first two prepare service members to think about people from other cultures. They give guidance and practice with frameworks for “getting inside the minds” of foreign populations and planning accordingly. Service members I've spoken to tell me these courses help them overcome blind spots and understand different cultural perspectives. They learn that how they see another country is different than how these countries see themselves.

Some service members raise the question, “Who checks my work?” They say, “In the classroom we rely on the cultural savvy of teaching staff. When I make decisions without a physical connection to the environment, it can be hard to identify what the ground truths are. For my deductions to hold weight, there needs to

be an expertise check. Without it, there's a likelihood I could fill in gaps with incorrect assumptions that may lead to operational mistakes.”

When it comes to operating in foreign cultural contexts, training should include tests of the validity of one's assumptions and provide platforms for losing and learning.³⁷

A wider concern is that some walk away from instruction with the idea: “Now we've got this covered.”

Once you know something, it can be hard to imagine others don't.³⁸

Not everyone gets these courses, though. They're graduate level and offered midcareer, at which point they're optional and require command approval. Using culture on the job is a team sport. Think about it this way, an awesome quarterback is nothing without great receivers. For a person executing a plan underpinned by cultural considerations who isn't in on the “reasons why,” left and right limits will be murky, and completing the forward pass pure luck.

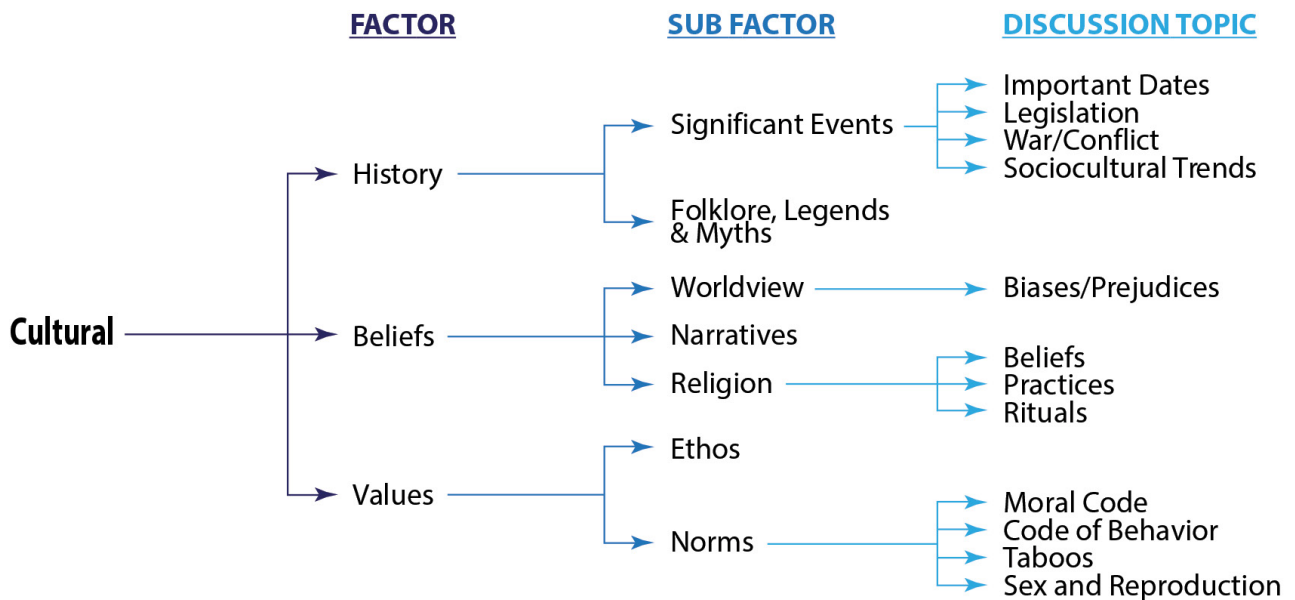
Great courses exist that hit learning objectives relevant to cultural understanding and engagement. So, in a sense we are doing it. It's sort of invisible, though, making it difficult to see how much is happening and for whom.

What's an alternative framing for the *by-design narrative*? We do it on purpose, like we mean it.

With this story, we could design deliberate learning paths and progression. Cultural capabilities would be institutionally valued for everyone. Imagine if getting better at engaging with the world counted toward promotion.

9. We Can Get the Job Done Without It

Recall the major who said you swim faster in a swimsuit. One implication of his observation is that understanding culture helps you do the job quicker. Another is you can get the job done without it.



The Socio-Cultural Analysis Framework was developed to streamline existing Army approaches to listing, describing, and assessing socio-cultural indicators for operationally relevant purposes. It presents a taxonomy including nine domains with twenty-eight associated factors, and eighty-six subfactors. Shown here is the cultural domain, which “gives insights into the way people think, the reasons for their beliefs and perceptions, and what kind of behavior they can be expected to display in given situations.” (Graphic from Global Cultural Knowledge Network, *Socio-Cultural Analysis Framework: A U.S. Army Guide on How to Research and Write Socio-Cultural Analyses*)

Americans get things done. We tend to believe that doing something is better than doing nothing.³⁹ Execution is the goal, and complexity-induced paralysis is an undesirable outcome.

Accordingly, national security practitioners have many tools to distill clarity from complexity. A commonly used one is PMESII-PT (political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, physical environment, and time).⁴⁰ This template allows planners and decision-makers to capture everything they know about a foreign location in table format. Other templates are specifically designed to capture culture.⁴¹ Their intent is to help people understand the environments they make decisions in so they can develop good plans that achieve acceptable results in a timely manner.

A recent study, though, shows that military decision-makers struggle to think creatively.⁴² Some see the spreadsheet approach as creating a cumbersome, ineffective, “check the block” mentality. They argue for further simplification.⁴³ Others say spreadsheets give an illusion of knowing—you have all the parts but no concept of how they go together. What we need is better questioning skills.⁴⁴ Others again say standardized decision processes, and the war games and exercises they’re

practiced in risk teaching service members to “play the game.” What we need is a way to test the validity of assumptions against an adversary that reacts. An adversary that thinks. We need to build in surprise.⁴⁵

Currently, we continue to use these frameworks, and we continue to get things done. Like the Cheshire Cat observed, you’re bound to get somewhere if you walk long enough. The problem is, once we’ve chosen a road, it’s hard to imagine choosing another.⁴⁶ We’re left with little inspiration to look for what’s missing.

The gap appears to reside somewhere in the connection between information and flesh.

How do we use analysis to make inferences about actual humans and incorporate these into decisions we make about them? Inferences that allow us to manage expectations, plan communication, exert influence, display competence, and build relationships in spaces where people think differently.

How do we discover alternative courses of action? Alternatives to how we typically do things that fit our intent and the processes that are possible and acceptable in a new environment? Where locals and partners may not trust one another, share information with, or desire to protect each other.



How do we redefine our criteria for success? Reshape them when our partners, allies, or adversaries have goals that are hard to imagine because they're not what we'd want for ourselves. When it's important to be seen as most powerful—without necessarily being most powerful. To achieve progress for some people, not others. To reject innovation because it changes aspects of your world that hold value.

Can we get the job done without it? We can get a job done without it.

Here's a way to recast our *execution narrative*: paraphrasing Gen. Anthony Zinni, understanding culture helps us understand what the job is.⁴⁷

We Can Flip the Script

The nine narratives present barriers to prioritizing deliberate development and deployment of people who, by design not by chance, engage and expand America's influence in the world. But we can flip these scripts.

In my experience, when service members say they don't have time or don't need culture programs, they're not rejecting the function, only its form. They appreciate the value of the intended capabilities, perhaps more deeply than anyone.

Overcoming obstacles to change in our thinking is a first step. The next is to invest in defining the actual requirements and design solutions that effectively

An artist's rendering of Chinese shipping giant COSCO's \$3 billion port project in Chancay, Peru, once completed. Twenty-two nations in the U.S. Southern Command's (USSOUTHCOM) area of responsibility have signed onto China's Belt and Road Initiative. Army Gen. Laura J. Richardson, USSOUTHCOM commanding general, told attendees of the Aspen Security Forum in July 2024, "I worry about the dual use nature of that. These are state-owned enterprises by a communist government. I worry about the flipping of that to a military application." (Photo courtesy of the Peruvian Ministry of Transport and Communication)

meet needs. Solutions that are engaging have sound objectives including skills to practice and quantifiable outcomes, as in performance we can hear, see, and measure.

Who knows, programs that help us engage better with the rest of the world might even directly deliver results for ourselves. An NCO I spoke with said it best:

I've had good teams and we've gotten the job done. But there were a lot of internal struggles because of differences. This person is religious, and that person isn't, so they see things differently. Our purpose brings us together, but still, work's a lot harder when you're trying to overcome internal noise in your head about another person. If you have that awareness, if you want to change, you know where to start.⁴⁸ ■

Notes

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