Conceptions of Leadership
U.S. and African Models

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Cultural understanding is a prerequisite for effective interoperability, the gold standard to which the U.S. military aspires as it operates alongside partner militaries. Unfortunately, our history reveals numerous instances where this standard was neglected, usually leading to frustration, lack of progress, and incomplete objectives. In Africa, a continent with over two thousand languages and three thousand ethnic groups, the cultural differences between the U.S. military and our African military partners can be particularly pronounced, resulting in insufficient plans to address U.S. and partner needs.[1] For bilateral and multilateral events developed by the U.S. military, we must take into consideration our partners' specific conceptions of leadership and their force capabilities if the events are to be truly feasible, acceptable, and suitable for the participants.

An academic research program known as the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) program created a model that is employed by ethnographic researchers to study how leadership and cultural domains intersect across numerous distinct dimensions. Researchers using this model consider nine factors in their analysis: uncertainty avoidance, power distance, societal collectivism, in-group collectivism, gender egalitarianism, assertiveness, future orientation, performance orientation, and humane orientation.[2]

This research model provides significant insight into why certain cultures conceive of leadership differently. For example, some cultures place a high value on "learning from mistakes," whereas others have a much more punitive mind-set with respect to errors.[3] Other cultures place a high value on the immediate, whereas others consider a leader's near-term emphasis to be rash and impetuous. It is important to note these differences are more than just stylistic. Accounting for a partner nation's cultural outlook is fundamental to constructing effective theater security cooperation activities. To that end, some broad cultural leadership attributes should be accounted for based on existing research.

Leader Styles

One important dimension of GLOBE research is centered on the prevailing leader styles in different cultures. Culled from a list of twenty-one leader attributes, the six leader styles include

- charismatic/value-based style,
- team-oriented style,
- participative style,
- humane style,
- self-protective style, and
- autonomous style.[4]

When initiating fresh partnerships, it is helpful to conduct an initial comparison between the prevailing U.S. style and that of our African partners. It becomes apparent almost immediately that our approaches can differ widely. GLOBE research shows the charismatic style is most valued in the United States, with self-protective

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U.S. Marine Corps Maj. Keith Vital speaks to Armed Forces of Liberia soldiers about their mission and progress during a field training exercise 25 February 2009 at Camp Sandee S. Ware in Careysburg District, Liberia. (Photo by Sgt. Elsa Portillo, U.S. Marine Corps)

coming in last.[5] Charismatic style, defined by outward passion, a guiding vision, and an inspirational demeanor, resonates in the U.S. military culture accustomed to a certain amount of command swagger.[6] In contrast, a team-oriented approach, one predicated on loyalty and cooperation, is favored by black respondents in South Africa.[7] Meanwhile, in Morocco, a participative style that pushes leaders down into the trenches with their team members is the favored approach.[8]

In the aforementioned countries, these values represent the inherent understanding of how a leader behaves. As such, U.S. doctrinal and cultural models are often incorrect for developing African leaders of all echelons. African models must serve as the primary basis for African curriculum development, professionalization initiatives, and capability development efforts. By transplanting Western models onto African militaries, U.S. envoys risk a fundamental failure of recognizing the environment generating these leader models as well as the environment in which they will soon be required to operate. For U.S. military leaders and planners, these dynamics must also be examined on a personal level when considering how best to engage African leaders. Being cognizant of one's personal bearing and comportment is an important part of dealing with African counterparts,

for even the most culturally nested plan cannot overcome a tone-deaf presentation.

The modern French experience in Africa provides an example of a carefully developed and culturally attuned approach to partnering. A 2006 *Military Review* article by retired French Col. Henri Boré details the significant amount of thought and preparation that he and his compatriots invested to ensure the effectiveness of their unconventional warfare efforts alongside African partners. This groundwork was exhaustive and time intensive, but it frequently resulted in a number of mission-essential insights. Boré writes of the sometimes-jarring learning process:

> There are beliefs and practices below the cultural surface that many Westerners miss or find difficult to fathom: a company commander in Chad shooting one of his lieutenants in the head for lack of respect in front of the unit; a captain, native of the south of Mauritania, paying obedience to his second lieutenant, who was a member of a dominant northern

U.S. military members from the Defense Medical Readiness Training Institute and infantrymen from 3rd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, join with soldiers from the Gabonese Armed Forces for a huddle during a tactical combat casualty care course 17 June 2016 while participating in Central Accord 2016 in Libreville, Gabon. U.S. Army Africa conducts the exercise annually with joint and multinational partners to practice and demonstrate proficiency in conducting peacekeeping operations. (Photo by Tech Sgt. Brian Kimball, U.S. Army Africa)

tribe; regular soldiers killing women and children execution-style in Rwanda.[9]

These vignettes suggest a fundamentally different set of leader dynamics facing African militaries, dynamics that are not easily addressed with the French or U.S. military leadership models. As Boré concludes from his time in Africa, a fresh way of thinking was essential when endeavoring to enter any new country, noting, "Altogether, we were deeply aware that cultural adjustments were vital to mission accomplishment."[10]

Meeting the Mark: Plan Ahead

Many other considerations exist at the operational and strategic levels. If the first step in constructing leader engagements is recognizing the cultural divide, the next step must be integrating this knowledge into the broader aspects of our interactions with our African partners. Aid organizations often speak of the risk of oversaturation in developing areas of Africa, or the introduction of assistance beyond what a community can reasonably manage. A similar risk exists for the U.S. military with dropping a heavily resourced, exhaustively researched, technology-facilitated system of leading troops like mission command on a partner military with neither the resources nor the cultural orientation necessary to make it work.

In addition to the differing cultural leadership styles previously mentioned, the spectrum of cultural comfort with decentralized decision-making demands close attention. One cause of the disinclination to empower subordinates is the very different focus of U.S. and African organizations, given their entirely different threat orientations. Whereas the United States looks outward with an expeditionary mindset, threats facing African militaries skew internally.[11] For domestically focused African militaries often closely tied to political leadership, ceding control to lower echelons might seem excessively risky. Thus, mission command, while a suitable approach for a large and complex expeditionary organization like the U.S. military, might not be the ideal fit for African militaries.

If U.S. leaders determine an alternate command-and-control model is indeed appropriate, a study of African national leadership competencies can be a helpful guide. A Center for Creative Leadership study illustrates some fascinating points concerning the comparative strengths and weaknesses of African

states. In West African states, perception of leadership competencies demonstrated particularly high marks for resourcefulness; however, their metrics for the nuts-and-bolts skill of "leading employees" was quite low.[12] In southern African states, the favorable attribute of decisiveness placed in the top half of leader attributes, whereas self-awareness placed near the bottom.[13] For U.S. leaders, knowledge of these dynamics and others is critical to crafting effective strategies to meet partner needs. In addition to these culturally ingrained leadership attributes, there are existing military doctrines that cannot be easily overridden. For the U.S. military, well-intentioned initiatives that nonetheless run counter to doctrinal processes inculcated in our African partners can create cognitive dissonance and challenge their ability to learn. Worse yet, partner resentment or the frustrated abandonment of U.S. techniques could undermine the strength of the partnership itself.

A great number of resources exist for U.S. leaders to consult prior to engaging with African partners. One such resource is the Africa Center for Strategic Studies at Fort McNair, Washington, D.C. The center provides a wealth of in-depth, country- and region-specific research to inform involved parties on the numerous institutional and environmental issues facing leaders in the partner country.[14] The Ike Skelton Combined Arms Research Library of the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, is a resource that combines its archival journal material with tutorials on how to utilize a variety of freely available military databases.[15] Finally, the African Leadership Centre at King's College London has extensive monographs, working papers, studies, and podcasts devoted to the study of leadership on the African continent.[16] These resources, in concert with a mindset oriented toward optimizing the many existing positive African leader attributes, form the foundation of a constructive and mutually rewarding connection.

African militaries fill a spectrum of roles and operate in a range of dynamic environments. This demands an adaptive spirit familiar to those in the U.S. military growing accustomed to an expanding range of missions around the globe. Approached correctly, African and U.S. militaries can adapt to face our respective challenges side by side. Success in these partnerships lies not in modeling African militaries in the United States' likeness, but in understanding, leveraging, and complementing our distinct strengths. ∎

Notes

1. Claire Felter, "Why Does Africa Have So Many Languages?," *Christian Science Monitor*, 21 April 2015, accessed 12 September 2016, http://www.csmonitor.com/Science/Science-Notebook/2015/0421/Why-does-Africa-have-so-many-languages; Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, "Africa," accessed 12 September 21016, http://www.nupi.no/en/Our-research/Regions/Africa.

2. Robert House, Mansour Javidan, Paul Hanges, and Peter Dorfman, "Understanding Cultures and Implicit Leadership Theories Across the Globe: An Introduction to Project Globe," *Journal of World Business* 37, no. 1 (2002): 3–10, accessed 19 August 2016, http://www.thunderbird.edu/wwwfiles/sites/globe/pdf/jwb_globe_intro.pdf.

3. Ibid., 9.

4. Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), "Leader Effectiveness and Culture: The GLOBE Study," CCL website, 2014, accessed 19 August 2016, http://www.ccl.org/leadership/pdf/assessments/globe-study.pdf. GLOBE researchers utilize geographic areas rather than specific countries as the primary means of organizing their research. The two geographic areas relevant to the African continent are "The Middle East," which includes North Africa, and "Sub-Saharan Africa."

5. Ibid., 7.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 6. The study's authors distinguish between white and black respondents in South Africa as a means of controlling for the pronounced Western-European and African attitudinal split there.

8. Ibid.

9. Henri Boré, "Cultural Awareness and Irregular Warfare: French Army Experience in Africa," *Military Review* 86, no. 4 (July-August 2006): 111, accessed 22 August 2016, http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20060831_art016.pdf.

10. Ibid.

11. Joseph Soeters and Audrey Van Ouytsel, "The Challenge of Diffusing Military Professionalism in Africa," *Armed Forces & Society* 40, no. 2 (2014): 252–68. This is a pronounced difference, as expeditionary and territorial armies are manned, trained, and equipped according to very different sets of needs. There is also the dual role that African militaries often fill of military-police force, yet another factor for Western militaries to account for when squaring their own orientation with that of their African partners.

12. Regina Eckert and Simon Rweyongoza, "Leadership Development in Africa: A Focus on Strengths," *Center for Creative Leadership white paper* (Greensboro, NC: CCL, 2010).

13. Ibid.

14. Africa Center for Strategic Studies website, accessed 22 August 2016, http://africacenter.org/.

15. Ike Skelton Combined Arms Research Library, last modified 13 July 2016, accessed 22 August 2016, http://usacac.army.mil/organizations/cace/carl.

16. African Leadership Centre website, accessed 22 August 2016, http://www.africanleadershipcentre.org.