



**Language and Culture Summit:
Strengthening Air Force Language Skills
and Cultural Competencies**

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General Norty Schwartz

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Introduction

Dr. Kleinman, thank you very much for that kind introduction. Dr. Stanley, thank you for hosting this very important summit, and for offering me the opportunity to share a few thoughts with this distinguished audience.

And, to all: I am grateful for your daily professional efforts, as we strengthen our collective language skills and cultural competencies, and strive to operate more effectively with our partners around the world. Although I will devote a portion of my time today to speaking on Air Force efforts to bolster the skills and competencies of Airmen, I would note a very important, broader point from the outset:

The best way that we, as the U.S. Armed Forces, will achieve the necessary level of language skills and cultural competencies is through a holistic Joint and Interagency approach.

I have stated in other venues that “land victories” or “maritime victories” or “air and space victories” are only tactical victories. The successes that are truly consequential—the ones that carry genuine strategic importance—are *U.S.* victories that are garnered through collaboration with our Joint and Interagency teammates.

This general principle of unity and integration is as well-applied to our strategies as it is in describing meaningful outcomes. We therefore would do well to strengthen our efforts to work together as an entire Department of Defense, as we develop our strategies toward greater DoD-wide linguistic capabilities and cross-cultural competence. It is in this broader context that your Air Force is working to improve its linguistic, regional, and cultural competencies.

Observations on Language, Region, and Culture

Cultural understanding is extremely important to our ability to affect positive outcomes. As we pursue our national interests in an interconnected, globalized world, we must be cognizant not only of socio-economic and political institutions; we must genuinely and increasingly appreciate linguistic, regional, and cultural



constructs. Our 20th-Century experiences with so-called “non-Western” cultures—for example, on the African continent—brought us in contact with social, economic, and political phenomena that were decidedly influenced by culture and its various elements, such as hierarchy, clientelism, religious loyalty, and communal solidarity. On some levels, we failed to comprehend the existence of these dimensions, let alone appreciate their implications. This led to mixed results in our undertakings around the globe.

Of course, these cultural elements will manifest themselves differently in 21st-Century Afghanistan or the Middle East, than they did in 20th-Century Africa. But, the point of this fundamental proposition is ever relevant: if we underestimate the significance of language, region, and culture in our global endeavors, we do so at our own risk, and to the detriment of our effectiveness. With this as the basic premise, I’d like to provide you with a few other observations.

First, our commitments around the globe continue to increase in scope and complexity. From ongoing combat operations in Afghanistan and recent efforts in Iraq, to life-saving and life-sustaining humanitarian operations in Pakistan, Chile, and Haiti, the U.S. military is called to respond across the entire spectrum of operations. The future holds more of the same for us, including counterinsurgency, irregular, or hybrid efforts, similar to our current emphasis; and including potential requirements at the higher end of the spectrum, involving interaction with near-peer actors.

Note that not only is the application of military power varied; the regional and cultural settings in which we apply our capabilities will continue to be divergent. So, a humanitarian operation in, say, Chile—where we were able to provide additional technological wherewithal and training, and then largely watch with wonder and pride—would have had an entirely different outcome had we done the same in Haiti, where Airmen continue to directly use their language skills and cultural appreciation to harmonize and focus the multi-national effort to help the Haitian people. These Airmen, such as those from the 514th Air Mobility Wing at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, are melding their airfield and expeditionary base management skills magnificently with their language and cultural



proficiencies, bringing Cuban, Brazilian, French, and Russian aid workers and aircrews together to train Haitian airfield operations technicians, firefighters, and other vital emergency management workers.

In short, our approaches are never “one size fits all.” Instead, they must be carefully tailored and scaled so that our efforts are appropriate for the particular environment.

A second observation is that we will be asked to do more, even while we continue to recover from a worldwide economic downturn that will challenge us with shrinking defense portions of national budgets and decreased purchasing power. Consistent with the Air Force’s technological heritage, some of our efficiencies will come from leveraging technology and automation, even in the area of enhancing language skills. Back in the 1950s and 60s, the Air Force Foreign Technology Division, working closely with industry, initiated a simple word-for-word, Russian-to-English translation capability, outputting 5,000 words per hour. During the Vietnam era, the Rome Air Development Center developed an English-to-Vietnamese translator which, with manual post-editing, translated around five million words of military manuals to support building partner capacity efforts.

Today, we are field-testing so-called “Phraselator” prototypes, funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency’s Small Business Innovative Research Program, which will provide hand-held capability to translate 40 to 50 thousand words of spoken Iraqi Arabic. This and other technological innovations have the potential to enhance our capacity to relate and interact.

Other efficiencies will come from more effective international partnerships. We share the challenges of fiscal austerity and limited resources with our partners around the world; but, with these challenges come opportunities to promote and develop new partnerships, strengthen existing ones, and pool limited resources toward greater integrated capabilities. We must recognize these opportunities, and foster relationships that can bring about necessary capabilities in a time when we can expect fewer costly, materiel or U.S.-only solutions to our challenges. This recognition could help to guide our investment strategy, drawing more attention to



relatively inexpensive language and cultural training that will yield significant benefits to our building and nurturing of international partnerships.

Indeed, building international partnerships and partner capacities is vitally important, as the 2010 report on the Quadrennial Defense Review emphasizes. But, to engage effectively, we must be willing to see beyond familiar paradigms, and appreciate—if not embrace—foreign linguistic, regional, and cultural norms. The reality is that our international partners very often possess unique capabilities, skills, and experiences that can be leveraged toward mutual benefit.

Teaming with international partners, however, sometimes does not happen seamlessly or without considerable effort. We must resist the tendency to overlook these capabilities, skills, and experiences—or worse, to acknowledge their existence, but nonetheless dismiss their usefulness—simply because they do not mesh effortlessly with ours, or because we don't understand how to apply them. As the 2008 National Defense Strategy emphasized, the importance of partner nations in collective efforts to address shared challenges will only continue to increase. Consequently, the prominence of language skills and regional and cultural appreciation will continue to grow, facilitating vital face-to-face interaction for which there is little substitute.

The Air Force has made an institutional commitment to advancing our capabilities to address this reality, by designating the building of partnerships and partner capacity as a Service Core Function. Central to building partnerships and capacities is our ability to appreciate unfamiliar cultures, and to communicate and relate with an ever-growing number of international partners. Again, as we and our partners all face budgetary pressures for the foreseeable future, we will have to rely further on collaboration and interoperability, to integrate our capabilities and augment any shortfalls.

Also, as our missions have evolved and expanded, so too do our interactions with foreign partners. Today, in addition to flying in and out of remote airfields, or commanding air and space assets from garrisoned Combined Air Operations Centers, Airmen are directly interacting and operating with coalition partners and local populations more than ever—in provinces and cities, and in villages and



neighborhoods. One of our primary missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, is to train our airman counterparts, so that their current embryonic capabilities can develop into viable and reliable core competencies. At the other end of the spectrum, our interaction with other, highly-developed air forces finds us collaborating on advanced capabilities, such as with our F-35 partnerships and efforts to develop next-generation space and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities.

In all of these ongoing efforts, we have direct interaction with our international counterparts. Thankfully, the benefits are not limited only to increases in partner capacity, although that is certainly an important outcome. I am especially heartened that, through cultural appreciation and relationship-building, our affinity as fellow airmen—a “global community of airmen,” if you will—is bolstered to our real benefit as well.

Air Force Efforts to Strengthen Language Skills and Cultural Competence

Therefore, we, as an Air Force, will continue to put forth tremendous effort to revolutionize our capabilities in language and culture. But, to be clear, we are still at the beginning of a lengthy effort. As Secretary Gates has noted, “Understanding the traditions, motivations, and languages of other parts of the world has not always been a strong suit of the United States. It was a problem during the Cold War, and [it] remains a problem.”

Today, as we move forward, we must view the challenge, and therefore our strategy, holistically and with an appreciation for the language-culture nexus. “Culture dictates language,” says this year’s winner of the Air Force Language Professional of the Year, an Air Force Office of Special Investigations agent. He explains that, even with similar languages, “Fluent professionals understand the language and culture, and can read between the lines that make up a thousand words...Misunderstand the culture, and you will misinterpret the language.”

These are astute observations from a remarkable language and culture professional; but, I would take it even further, and offer that even with the *same* language, nuance can be colored by the culture of the speakers, and subtleties can



emerge. Therefore, even with English as the world's *lingua franca*, we stand to miss these finer linguistic notes, unless we appreciate the cultural dimensions that shape the perspectives of the non-native speaker.

I mention this point because most of English usage today across the globe is by non-native speakers. As of around 2002 or 2003, with an estimated 80 to 85 percent of English speakers being bilingual, the number of people speaking English as a foreign or second language surpassed the number of its native speakers, according to one academic study.

I mention this *not* to suggest that our international partners' efforts to learn English are unimportant, or that it should lessen our requirement to become multilingual ourselves. Quite the contrary, I am constantly impressed by our international partners' efforts, such as when I visited Kandahar eight days ago, and spent time with our Afghan partners participating in the "Thunder Lab," an innovative English-immersion project, run by the 438th Air Expeditionary Wing and the NATO Air Training Command in Afghanistan. I'm also encouraged by the accomplishments of programs such as the Defense Language Institute English Language Center and the interagency English Language Program Working Group, which support English training to international allies and partners, both in-residence and downrange.

However, I do mention the prevalence of non-native English speakers, to emphasize that any usage of English—or of any language—is shaped by the speaker's culture. I am reminded of the time—a true story—when an associate, married to a nonnative English speaker, recalled the day on which there was a torrential rainfall, and he forgot his umbrella. Stepping inside through the front door, he was soaked to the bone; and, as he dried off in the foyer, his wife conjured the image of that familiar idiom of a "drowned rat." Try as she did, she couldn't recall the exact turn of phrase, so she attempted a clever approximation: "a mouse dipped in water." You can imagine his reaction—I would imagine with amused endearment.

Indeed, it is virtually impossible to disentangle culture and language, which is why I am proud of Air Force cultural modeling efforts in direct support of the OSD



Human Social, Cultural, and Behavioral Modeling Program. Using the National Operational Environment Model, the Air Force Research Laboratory and Air Force Office of Scientific Research are helping to explore cultural contours, representations of governance, security institutions, critical infrastructure, and social well-being to model and forecast the human terrain, and offer cultural insights to Joint analysis and planning.

In addition to our scientifically-rigorous modeling, I am also proud to report that elements of our language, region, and culture—or “LRC”—programs have been cited as potential benchmarks. A good example is our Language-Enabled Airman Program, or “LEAP,” which is designed to attract, recruit, deliberately develop, and sustain a cadre of Airmen who are linguistically capable, regionally savvy, and culturally attuned. While the selection of approximately 460 Air Force Academy and ROTC cadets and active-duty officers for LEAP is in itself significant, I emphasize this program’s career-long focus on maximizing LRC competencies, while helping to minimize overall cost to the Air Force. Again, our efforts must maintain the long view—to shoot for strategic significance. So, with LEAP, I am encouraged by our more active approach to providing language and culture training to cadets and active-duty officers early in their careers. And, I’m appreciative of the hard work of the Air Force Culture and Language Center in bringing us closer to our vision of cross-culturally competent, career Airmen.

Also, we will continue to bolster the ranks of our Regional Affairs Strategists, or “RAS,” with 54 officer accessions in 2010. This increases the number of RAS officers to 195, with an additional 80 officers in the training pipeline. As the demand for RAS competencies in building partnerships and partner capacity increases, the number of required accessions for 2011 will increase to 63.

Conclusion

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, as we contemplate critical issues involving language, region, and culture, it is useful to observe our tendency to focus on the differences between us and our international partners, and to highlight the challenges that are posed by these differences. I’d therefore like to close with an observation on ties that bind and bring us together.



As we gather at this summit today, I am inspired to hope for collective efforts that can produce a shift in our own culture—a shift that would empower us to not so readily perceive “differences” in a pejorative sense. Indeed, our goals today should include fostering, in our own service, a sincere appreciation for diverse perspectives and outlooks, and greater awareness of techniques for employing this diversity. This will strengthen us as we work with our own teammates and global friends and partners in common cause, toward shared objectives, and with constant purpose.

It is fitting, therefore, that we highlight the sentiment that already serves to bring us together today—the principal value that we have in common with our global partners, which is this: *service* to our respective nations. Despite potentially problematic responses to cultural differences, what brings us together with our international partners is the sense of higher purpose to serve our fellow citizens. Whether you are military or a defense civilian, we share a kinship with our counterparts around the world. Oftentimes, the military-to-military rapport is the centerpiece of the diplomatic relationship, including times when political winds shift, and the nation-to-nation connection cools. The more that our military-to-military connections remain vibrant, the stronger our strategic relationships can become.

Let us resolve to draw on the power of this connection, and to find more ways to nurture it through deeper appreciation of language and culture. If we are successful, we stand to strengthen the military-to-military goodwill that we already enjoy, and to approach, on a person-to-person basis, the ideals of a more closely-connected international community. For better or worse, economic and social globalization is here to stay. We should endeavor to help shape this environment, and not just be a reactive force within it. Our commitment to language and cultural competence will better position us to properly shape versus merely react.

I thank you again for your time today, and for your professional efforts every day.