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Stavridis Presses to Close Language, Cultural Skills Gap

By Donna Miles
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Feb. 5, 2013 – Despite “the widest imaginable set of skills” among the Defense Department’s 3.2 million military and civilian members, the Defense Department has an “obvious capability gap” in its lack of foreign language skills that affect its global missions, the supreme allied commander for Europe and commander of U.S. European Command lamented in his command blog.

Navy Adm. James G. Stavridis quoted Charlemagne, who observed that “to know another language is to have a second soul.”

“In this rapidly globalizing 21st century world, that simple statement summarizes the gift of regional expertise, cultural understanding and the ability to communicate directly in the language of an ally, partner or colleague,” Stavridis wrote. Yet, he noted, fewer than 10 percent of DOD members speak a second language.

That leaves a gap that goes beyond mere linguists, he said.

“In order to operate in a world that relies more and more on coalition action to succeed,” the admiral said, “we must develop the attendant skills of regional expertise and cultural understanding.”

Yet, Stavridis said, he has seen “a mixed bag” of forces arriving at their combatant command assignments: some highly skilled in language, culture and history of their region, some with just a “dusting” of exposure, and others totally inexperienced.

“We can do better,” he said. “I’ve learned that the shipmates who truly have the language, culture, and regional skills are often ‘silver bullets’ that can transform a difficult challenge into a success.”

Stavridis said he regularly sees the fruits of these abilities as he oversees NATO’s global operations.

It’s evident in Afghanistan, where 50 troop-contributing nations are operating in a nation with complex language, culture and historical challenges as they conduct supporting the “largest single security mission in the world today,” he noted. But it’s equally important elsewhere in the world where nations with diverse histories, traditions and beliefs come together to support common missions, he said, noting peacekeeping in Kosovo and counterpiracy off the Horn of Africa as examples.

“As opposed to many of our European partners, who effortlessly speak four or five languages and have a deep knowledge of each other’s background and culture, we in the U.S. are failing to fully train and prepare for this kind of international work,” Stavridis said. “This is an area in which we have much work to do.”

As a linguist himself, Stavridis said, these skills have paid off during his seven years as a combatant commander at U.S. Southern Command and Eucom. He learned French as a child living in Europe, and uses that ability in his NATO role. He studied Spanish to the point that he could use it to conduct meetings, improving his ability to work with his Latin-American counterparts. Reading Russian literature and history and learning the culture improved his ability to work with his Russian colleagues, he noted.

So to promote language and cultural skills more widely across the Defense Department, he offered three recommendations:

- Strengthen language programs, while considering mandatory second-language skills at least among officers, and more incentives and training militarywide;
- Boost the foreign affairs officer field by providing better promotion opportunities, recruiting top-quality candidates into the field and ensuring continued growth through appropriate grade education; and
- Build on the “Afghan-Pakistan Hands” model to establish similar programs in other parts of the world, including the Asia-Pacific, Latin America and Caribbean, Africa and other regions.

“These individuals would be the equivalent of ‘special forces’ in the world of global engagement, with truly deep, repetitive tours in the region, utter fluency in the language and graduate-level knowledge of history, literature, geography, economics and the like,” Stavridis wrote.

“All of this requires investment -- not huge amounts, but smart money spent on smart programs,” Stavridis recognized. But more importantly, he said, it requires “a belief that part of providing security in this turbulent 21st century will mean we must ‘know the world’ so much better than we do today.”

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