

FEATURE ARTICLES

Multinational Staff Assignments: Cross-Cultural Preparation

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ABSTRACT

The context of multinational military staffs is uniquely challenging for leaders. Diverse cultures and structural challenges driven by competing national interests interact to present complex problems for officers. This study explores how military officers prepared themselves and the nature of the challenges they faced in these assignments with an abductive, qualitative approach. Results reveal some of the reasons why preparation for these assignments is inconsistent or insufficient and offers implications for institutional culture-general, culture-specific, and cross-cultural competence development programs.

The need for national security experts to be competent while operating in multi-cultural environments has become axiomatic after 18 years of continuous coalition-based combat operations. Wars are won or lost within the human domain – complex “physical, cultural and social environments” (Odierno, Amos, & McRaven, 2013) that resist easy understanding and manipulation. Indeed, expanding global connectivity, continued commitment of American servicemen and women across the world, and the reality of the Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental, and Multinational (JIIM) nature of national defense validate the need for leaders with cross-cultural competence.

Sparked by the emergence of Counterinsurgency (COIN) missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Department of Defense (DoD) in the United States invested substantially in understanding cultural competence and developing programs to educate and train personnel on operating among diverse cultures (Green Sands & Greene-Sands, 2014). Simultaneously, interest in the topic expanded in business and academia (see Gelfand, Aycan, Erez, & Leung, 2017 for a review). As a result, much more is known about the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other attributes (KSAO's) associated with increased performance in environments where culture plays a significant role (Human Dimension Capabilities Development Task Force (HDCDTF), 2015a). Furthermore, how cultural competence is developed is similarly better understood (Reid, Kaloydis, Suddeth, & Green-Sands, 2014).

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Despite the seemingly obvious importance of the topic and increased capability to address developmental needs, the DoD's interest in the education, training, and preparation of military personnel for operations in this "human domain" has been inconsistent (Fosher, 2014). While professional military education institutions remain relatively committed to regional study programs, their efforts to develop enduring programs on cross-cultural competence training and preparation have been less consistent. Likely related to the DoD's challenge to effectively scale culture-specific, culture-general, and cross-cultural competence training and education, students at the United States Army War College (USAWC) voiced dissatisfaction with their own multi-cultural assignment preparation. Consequently, the authors (faculty at the USAWC), leveraged the multinational nature of USAWC's student population in conducting an exploratory study

to address a specific question: How can the USAWC offer instruction at the operational and strategic level to better prepare its students for assignments to and leadership of multinational staffs or organizations?

This study contributes to both research and practice. As an exploratory study examining current experiences in preparing for multicultural assignments, findings can drive further research focused on addressing real-world challenges in delivering useful and timely cultural training and education. Findings can also influence senior leader decisions associated with the institutionalization of cultural training and preparation efforts. Specifically, this study should help the design and implementation of curriculum in professional military education institutions to address current shortcomings in preparation for multinational staff assignments. Finally, findings can inform

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individual efforts to develop cultural competencies prior to assignment in culturally demanding and rewarding environments.

Method

Given the research team's interest in how to improve preparation for multicultural staff assignments, we used an abductive approach¹ (Behfar & Okhuysen, 2018) and began with semi-structured interviews with military officers who had experience on a multinational staff. We defined a multinational staff as an on-going or ad hoc staff that consisted of bi-lateral or multi-lateral military staffs (e.g., North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)). We chose an exploratory, semi-structured interview approach because our goal was to find out what common challenges officers faced, and how they advised, in hindsight, to better prepare,

rather than to compare their responses to a particular standard of preparation.

Research Setting and Participants

The research setting was the USAWC in Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. The USAWC educates and develops leaders for service at the strategic level, while advancing knowledge in the global application of landpower. The student body is comprised of approximately 60% senior U.S. Army officers (Lieutenant Colonels and Colonels). The other 40% contains international military officers from approximately 80 nations, federal civilian employees, and other service officers. The College's regional studies program serves as the foundation for cultural education, while the diverse student population and culture-focused electives augment development of cross-cultural competence.

¹ An abductive approach is exploratory, using particular observations or patterns to generate *plausible* explanations about a problem or unresolved question. As such, the knowledge claim, or the degree of certainty one can claim in conclusions is not as strong from this approach as it is when using an inductive (starting from a hypothesis and looking for confirming or disconfirming evidence for a *probable* conclusion) or deductive approach (eliminating alternative explanation for a more *certain* conclusion). Since we were exploring the experiences of students to better understand a how to prepare for multinational assignments, this was an appropriate approach (see Behfar & Okhuysen, 2018 for an overview).

We used purposive sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Kemper et al., 2003) to recruit officers who could talk about their experiences in multinational staffs. To recruit participants, we emailed the study body to identify 23 volunteers with relevant staff experience. 13 of the participants were American and consisted of three U.S. Air Force officers, one Department of Defense civilian, one Army National Guard officer,

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and eight active Army officers. Ten of the participants were military officers from other nations: eight were NATO/European officers, one was from Central Asia, and one was from the Asia-Pacific region.

Procedure

The interview protocol consisted of questions focused on three areas of interest:

- 1) How did the officers prepare for their multinational staff assignment?
- 2) What did they learn while on that assignment?
- 3) What advice could they offer to officers taking a position on a multinational staff in order to be more prepared?

The interview team used a standard set of interview questions to maintain consistency in the type of information elicited (Johnson & Turner, 2003; Seidler, 1974), and asked follow-up questions when necessary for clarification. The interviews lasted on average 30-40 minutes. To reduce variance in the interviews, the team conducted two practice interviews to validate the interview protocol. At least two members of the study team were present for each interview, with one as the interviewer and the other as the note recorder. One half of the study team conducted interviews with the U.S. officers, the other half with the international officers. This was important as the members of the study team that interviewed one group of officers were not the ones used to analyze that group of interviews during the analysis phase.

Analysis

The study team organized itself into four, two-person subgroups to analyze the field notes. Those who interviewed U.S. officers analyzed the international officer interviews and the same rule applied to those who interviewed the international officers. This afforded greater objectivity in the analysis of the

written summaries. The analysis took place in three stages. In stages one and two the U.S. and international interviews were analyzed separately. In the first stage, the subgroups reviewed the field notes and looked for main ideas and themes within the interviews. The subgroups did their analysis independent of each other and then compared their results for consistency. When there was disagreement, a passage in the interview was discussed and reconciled. These commonly agreed upon passages were our “units of analysis.” In the second stage, the same sub-groups worked together to sort these units into common themes, consistent with the content coding methodology (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the third stage pattern-coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was used to look for “meta-themes” across both the U.S. and the international participants’ interviews. We then looked within the meta-themes to analyze the contents and find differences (if any) between what the U.S. officers and international officers reported.

Results

The results of the analysis according to the five main meta-themes that emerged. The results of our analysis offer insight into the shortcomings of preparation, highlights the unique structural complexity of what individuals experience in the multinational staff environment, and why this unique context makes it difficult to prepare officers in advance of their assignments.

Meta-Theme 1: Getting Ready (But Not Feeling Ready)

While most participants noted they did not arrive at their assignment as prepared as they would have liked, both the U.S. and international officers noted some activity prior to their assignment. Generally, officers got ready for their assignments in one of three ways, none of which left them feeling adequately prepared (see Table 1):

Table 1. Summary of How Officers Reported Getting Ready for Their Multinational Staff Assignments

SOURCE OR PROVIDER

Home-Country Military	Host-Organization	Informal (mentors, self-study, or peers and predecessors)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General Military Education: This included non-mission specific coursework to build skills and knowledge in military education, policy making, advising, senior leader engagement, or culture-general topics. • Specific Military Training: This included training specific to a deployment or assignment (e.g., an enduring, non-deployed staff) including culture-specific topics. • Reach-Back: International officers (not U.S.) reported reaching back to their nations for support and assistance while on the multinational staffs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multinational Organizational Training/Onboarding: This tended to be training courses specific to a multinational staff to help facilitate the transition to the staff, either in their home country prior to departure or on-site upon arrival. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentorship (Before Arrival & On-Hand): Many officers reported relying on experienced officers from both their own and other countries to help them prepare and execute responsibilities. • Drawing on Prior Experience: Many reported benefiting from lessons learned in prior overseas deployments and bi-lateral or multinational staff assignments earlier in their career. • Self-Preparation: Most officers reported reading about regional history, current events, political issues, and doing self-directed study. • No Preparation/On the Job: Several participants reported they did not prepare in advance, either formally or informally; all learning was done on the job.

Meta-Theme 2: Structural Challenges

Multinational staffs range in size, but because they consist of multiple nations and require coordination of activities and resources, the need for leaders to understand and align a complex organizational system emerged as an important theme in our analysis. The structure of a multinational staff consists of the strategic goals, operational systems and processes, and reporting relationships that enable the coalition/alliance to achieve its objectives. The challenges in this category arose from outside the staff, but significantly impacted the way the staff was able to operate, plan, and interact with one another *internally*. The context

of geo-politics or historical relationships between countries, for example, influenced the way the staffs were designed and subsequently operated, and often how members oriented toward one another. A critical leadership activity, therefore, was to mitigate friction that naturally arose between alliance members in a way that allowed them to effectively share power, align interests, divide resources, and coordinate efforts to achieve the staff’s mission. Specifically, the officers in our study reported having to work hard at minimizing the operational disruptions of three main issues as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Experienced Structural Challenges

Structural Challenge	Subsequent Impact on Staff Operations
Operational Restrictions (Caveats)	Differences in national interests and objectives mandated by national politics placed operational restrictions on militaries by their home countries in the form of caveats. For example, one country might want to deter aggression while another might want to defeat and remove a threat. Caveats meant nations differed in their willingness to take risk in some missions. Some members were there to “show their flag” but could not tolerate casualties. Commanders had to navigate this difference between <i>participation</i> and <i>contribution</i> and had to reconcile caveats in operational planning and execution.
Intelligence Sharing	While multinational organizations have shared intelligence infrastructures, some nations had pre-existing agreements outside of the staff structure that allow them to share more freely with one another, while excluding some nations from operational knowledge. In addition, every nation has different interests and/or prior history of involvement in a given mission or region. As a result, challenges manifested around managing and sharing information systems, staffing in operational planning, and granting authorities to share intelligence among member nations.
Nonequivalence	Countries also differed in the degree of resources allocated by their home countries in support of multinational operations. These resources differed in the amount and sophistication of equipment, in the size of forces committed, and in the number, quality, or rank of the personnel assigned to fill staff or leadership positions. This was influenced partially by the country size and affluence: larger nations tended to have larger pools of officers who had been through professional education and who were available to serve in multinational staff positions. Some nations were not able to provide personnel of equivalent rank across nations (i.e., a Major may be sent to fill a position other nations fill with a Colonel). Resulting differences of rank and competence created non-normative compatibility issues among the staff.

Meta-Theme 3: Cultural Barriers

While participants reported that shared military culture (over national culture) in the multinational staff provided a buffer against the negative effects of cultural integration, both U.S. and international officers also reported that there remained undercurrents of friction based on national culture. For example, most of the participants noted that many officers arrived at headquarters with preconceived notions informed by stereotypes, which naturally affected group and organizational dynamics. The interviewed officers

perceived these underlying social dynamics as both opportunities and limitations. The natural, subconscious affinities for similar cultures within the headquarters tended to create exclusive sub-grouping rather than an inclusive environment due to language and cultural affinities around common language (e.g., Five Eyes (FVEY) countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States)), history of ethnic or regional conflict, or cultural proximity. Some participants reported this dynamic as disruptive (requiring intervention) because they perpetuated

or confirmed previously held stereotypes and drove a natural gravitation toward others of similar ilk. Others reported that these in-groups could be comforting to those who felt displaced from their element and tended to describe them as positive ways to socialize and bond with each other (e.g., drinking, dining, and tasteful joking). They also occasionally reported leveraging national customs and holidays as opportunities to “break the ice” between different groups and build cohesion.

A second finding of interest was that sources of perceived incompetence were viewed differently by the

U.S. and the international officers who participated in our study. While all of the officers agreed about the challenges of stereotypes, they disagreed in how they perceived challenges around language and respect. The U.S. officers tended to view these challenges as process problems, related to logistics and translation. The international officers, however, viewed the issue more personally—viewing them more as a signal of status and identity and as an issue of normative respect. They specifically voiced concern about a mismatch between their own actual vs. perceived competence in the eyes of U.S. officers. We summarize these differences in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Summary of the Sources of Perceived Incompetence in Others

**SOURCES OF PERCEIVED INCOMPETENCE IN OTHERS
(OR FRUSTRATION WITH OTHERS)**

U.S. Officer Perceptions/Concerns	International Officer Perceptions/Concerns
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues with Fluency: U.S. officers experienced frustration around poor fluency slowing the pace of work, inhibiting their counterparts from contributing in meetings, and relying on lower-level officers who spoke better English than equal counterparts in the chain of command. • Issues with Translation: U.S. officers reported frustration with the time it took to work with translators to get the technical translations of words correct. This often required a great deal of pre-preparation and a need for better language acquisition. • Issues with Vocabulary: U.S. officers reported issues with Queen’s vs. American English and a need to carefully monitor how certain vocabulary words and terms (e.g., Arabian vs. Persian Gulf) could trigger political sensitivities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Militaries Differ in Preparedness: International officers noted the wide variance in competence among participating officers and warned of the risk for leaders to assume all officers had similar opportunities for training and education. • Rank Does Not Necessarily Equal Competence: International officers reported frustration that rank is too often used as a measure of competence. They commented that junior officers in smaller militaries often have more responsibilities or exposure to strategic level working and advising. At the same time, in larger militaries, some senior officers might lack sufficient experience or education for the role they are assigned to perform. • Fluency Does Not Equal Competence: International officers acknowledged that fluency in the English language seemed to serve as a proxy for professional competence. They suggested that English language proficiency was difficult for some militaries to achieve across and within ranks to provide sufficient capacity for sustained manning. Consequently, international officers advised that a lack of fluency should not be equated with a lack of professional competence.

Meta-Theme 4: Skills And Attributes For Leading In A Multinational Staff Context

One of the goals of this project was to learn what officers felt unprepared to do in their staff assignments. In this meta-theme they offered an answer: they wanted to develop skills consistent with creating *unity of effort*. A common theme emphasized skills consistent with the American military concept of Mission Command (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2019), which is built upon trust, shared understanding, and enabling disciplined initiative. Participants suggested that

Mission Command in the multinational environment required focused efforts to align interests, following the practice of socializing rather than merely issuing orders, and using broad guidance as a way to start a conversation that would begin to build toward a solution. With the benefit of hindsight and time to reflect on their experiences, participants reported that these types of skills, and knowledge of the formal and informal organization, are how they built trustful relationships that contributed to building unity of effort (Table 4):

Table 4. Summary of Knowledge, Skills, and Attributes Officers Recommend Developing

<p>Individual Knowledge and Attributes</p>	<p>Self-Awareness: Understanding individual strengths and weaknesses for operating in a multi-cultural organization (cultural competence).</p> <p>Patience: Developing patience and the ability to adapt to a longer, slower process to accomplish outcomes. This was identified as a challenge for U.S. officers.</p> <p>Empathy and Humility: Gaining an appreciation that “one way did not fit all” and that seeing the situation from others’ viewpoint opened the door to collective perspective taking and mutual understanding, all of which added to one’s credibility and trustworthiness in the eyes of officers from other nations. Participants, for example, reported that repeatedly updating their staff’s knowledge of each country’s political processes and reasons for national caveats was helpful in breaking stereotypes because it reinforced why some countries participated more in exercises and missions than others.</p> <p>System Knowledge: Taking the time to learn the technical skills to navigate the systems and processes particular to the organization (e.g., ISAF/NATO doctrine and processes) rather than force the methods of their home country on the staff.</p> <p>Culture-Specific Knowledge: Undertaking self-directed study of relevant culture, history, interests, and constraints of participating nations to anticipate expectations and avoid tensions mentioned in the previous section.</p>
<p>Leader Skills</p>	<p>Diversity Facilitation: “Embracing the multinational” meant having facilitation skills that leverage functional diversity while minimizing the cultural, resource, and language differences that undermined cohesion.</p> <p>Creating Alignment: Leveraging superordinate identity (military/NATO) and shared purpose to overcome cultural barriers. One commander reported never wearing his country flag in an attempt to create a superordinate identity in this staff—rather he only wore the NATO flag—repeating that his presence and actions had to be “more NATO than NATO.”</p>

Onboarding: Developing and implementing socialization programs to accelerate integration. Leaders who created on-boarding processes and systems that were specific to their staff and the way it functioned and needed to interface with the larger organization aided incoming staff officers the best. As mentioned previously, not all militaries prepared their officers the same way. Designing programs to welcome, orient, and assimilate new personnel worked well. Participants advised incoming officers to prepare locally and to have carefully designed hand-offs between officers (e.g., one participant called this a HOTO, or a Hand Over-Take Over).

Time Management: Balancing conflicting temporal expectations. Astute leaders understood that cultures differed in how they thought about efficient use of time, expectations for how fixed deadlines were, and the impact of these differing expectations on collaborative efforts. As one participant noted, "NATO likes to talk"—reflecting how communication about time and deadlines can be culturally bound and how work pace, urgency, and expectation of deadlines differ widely between cultures. A common understanding of how to implement management responsibilities within the operating or established procedures (rather than merely following one nation's way) led to greater effectiveness. The value of taking the time to have a cup of coffee was something that most Americans reported underestimating.

Socializing (not Issuing) Orders: Setting conditions for aligned action through socializing orders for collective buy-in. Participants advised better awareness of the inter-workings of informal organizational networks ("spaghetti diagrams"); learning to communicate and align different efforts within the organization was important in supporting tasks and providing clarity to those within and across the enterprise. This often meant officers had to adapt to a more collaborative planning process, seeing continuous input and remaining open to change (an iterative rather than linear planning process).

Boundary Spanning: Understanding and managing external influencers. Participants advised setting up a system to maintain situational awareness of external stakeholders' influence on policy and process (e.g., national caveats/interests) helped enable planning and operations.

Cross-Cultural Accountability: Holding participants from all nations accountable for performance regardless of personnel systems. Participants also advised becoming more involved in personnel management. They described a general hesitation in the multinational staff setting to report on an officer's poor performance to another country's military or embassy. From an external point of view, they thought the best leaders tried to be more influential in the selection and accountability process.

Meta-Theme 5: Perceptions Of U.S. Officers

In conversations with international officers, some clear perceptions of U.S. officers (both positive and negative) emerged. Some of these fit the stereotypical image of U.S. military officers: Being mission-focused, hardworking, adept planners, and possessing a capacity for self-improvement. However, negative aspects of U.S. behavior included unwavering adherence to U.S.-based structure, templates, or practices; a general lack of interpersonal skills (a lack of patience, empathy, and relationship building); a perception of discomfort in multinational settings; a perceived behavioral

posturing as overly competitive and assertive; and being perceived as unwilling to exude trust in partners. Most of the U.S. officers we interviewed were aware of these perceptions.

Discussion

Overall, most participants reported they did not feel adequately prepared upon arrival for their multinational staff assignments. They did, however, learn a great deal from their counterparts while on their assignment. While most officers recognized familiar basic leadership lessons such as the need for self-awareness and the importance of trust from their

military education, the multinational setting put these skills into a new context: the interplay of organizational structure, the historical context of geopolitical relationships, the influence of political agreements and constraints between member nations, the impact of cultural customs on officer behavior, and the social dynamics of a multinational chain of command—all of which required nuance and agility in their leadership style that many had thought about independently but not experienced together before.

Each of these meta-themes provide some insight into why students felt somewhat unprepared. Results regarding the first meta-theme of preparation suggest that the scale of friction encountered in multinational organizations made institutional education and training developmental experiences appear insufficient. Yet the varied preparatory experiences among our participants makes determining whether culture-general or culture-specific education and training is what will actually address this shortcoming. Most of them did not reference cross-cultural competence training and education as a way of preparing prior to arriving at their assignment (although we did ask them about this). This omission is reflected in some of the harder skills to develop shown in Table 4 (e.g., self-awareness, patience, and empathy), especially in a demanding multinational staff context. Future research can explore if programs could be effective and scalable for this specific context. The results did strongly suggest the value of this context specific onboarding (see Table 4). Effective socialization programs accelerate new team member understanding of role tasks and expands social knowledge (Moreland & Levine, 2002) essential to organizational interoperability and individual satisfaction. Consequently, leaders in multinational military organizations should expend time and resources in both onboarding and mentorship programs that help their staff develop these kinds of skills. Interestingly, international officers reported reaching back to home countries during the socialization process for support, likely due to a

lower density of same-nation colleagues and mentors. A downside to this practice is less integration within the staff.

Results from the second structural friction meta-theme suggest that the context of multinational military staffs is unique for officers because of the external geopolitical influence on the internal staff operations. National (and individual) motivations for participation in multinational staffs varied. Power and resource differences were accentuated. Individual members were cognizant of competing demands between the multinational organization and home nations. These structural differences influenced staff processes (e.g., information sharing) with implications for leadership, team building, and performance. While no one reported questioning the loyalty of other officers, their ability to participate and “be one of the team” was limited by caveats and access to information. Considering how structural constraints influence multinational military staffs, the generalizability of other research on culture and organizations in this unique context is unclear. Taken together, structural considerations are likely idiosyncratic and require culture-specific (staff-specific) training and preparation.

Findings in the third meta-theme that cultural affinities and stereotyping were barriers to effectiveness were not surprising and is consistent with other research (e.g., Fisher, Bell, Dierdorff, & Belohlav, 2012; Thatcher & Patel, 2011). More compelling was the difference between U.S. and international perspectives regarding cultural friction arising from competence perceptions and language. Possibly from a privileged position of numerical majority, resource dominance, and language fluency, U.S. officers suggested that language challenges (with English) slowed processes and became a significant barrier to effectiveness. International officers were less concerned with language challenges and instead suggested that poor appreciation of competence, divorced from nationality,

language proficiency, or rank, negatively impacted the multinational staff's ability to maximize the contribution potential of its members. International officer concerns have some similarities with those expressed in social identity threat (Steele, 1997) that suggests that different social groups experience the same context differently. Additionally, this theory suggests that lower-power group members are more sensitive to perceptions of respect (Emerson & Murphy, 2014). Research in this area can likely inform developmental programs and improve individual perspective taking that might address this international officer concern.

The fourth meta-theme reflected the skills and attributes officers believed best predicted performance on multinational staffs. Certain attributes such as

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patience and empathy are likely dispositional and less responsive to development. Unfortunately, these attributes were listed as weaknesses in U.S. officers by their international colleagues in meta-theme five. Efforts to improve self-awareness, though, may help officers to be aware of tendencies and develop behaviors conducive to the particular environment. The remaining list of skills (see Table 4) are more amenable to training and education. Program managers should consider where and when these skills are best reinforced.

Implications

Based on this study and student demand, the USAWC augmented existing cross-cultural curricula with the development of an elective course on multi-national assignments. The course helps prepare leaders for multi-national assignments in three ways. First, students improve their self-awareness through a cross-cultural assessment and feedback tool. Second, course material focuses on the formal doctrine and systems, as well as informal operations, in multi-national military organizations—a unique context not regularly addressed in the core residential or regional studies programs—that addresses some of the concerns as discovered in the meta-themes above. Finally, the students enrolled in the course have a variety of multinational experiences (ranging from some to none) and the course is team taught by four faculty (an international officer, an Air Force officer, a civilian, and an Army Officer) who have multinational staff expertise. This diversity combined with experiential learning events and regular personalized feedback provide students opportunities to practice cross-cultural competencies in a supportive environment and allows students to preview how their leadership skills might play out in this new context (albeit in a simulated environment). However, this small program and others like it exemplify the challenges associated with conducting preparation training at scale for the services. It is likely that self-directed study will remain an essential element of efforts to prepare military members for assignments on multi-national staffs.

In fact, most participants reported performing some form of self-directed study in preparation for assignments, and our findings suggest a few ways to improve in that effort. Maximizing self-preparation will likely accelerate the onboarding process and integration upon arrival. First of all, participants stressed the importance of self-awareness—but this

had a few meanings in the multinational context. First, it meant understanding how others experience you, and thinking forward about how one's traits and abilities would transfer (and translate) to the multinational context. Participants also stressed the importance of developing culture-specific knowledge through self-directed reading to better understand different cultures and societies, and their histories. Self-awareness in this context meant understanding the limits of how this knowledge (and any previous experience) might not immediately translate to the operating context of the multinational staff, even though it was relevant, important, and useful. One important way to test this knowledge prior to departure was to seek out others (especially those with multinational staff experience) for personalized feedback on cross-cultural performance and potential, and this is also a way of anticipating challenges one might face in a role (and a way to learn from mistakes that the person before you made). Finally, it is important to "reach forward" to the organization you will be joining to identify relevant multi-national staff doctrine and standard operating procedures prior to arrival. Find out staff-specific onboarding information as soon as you can to make your transition easier. Participants emphasized the importance of mentors and sponsors and recommended reaching out to others and the organization prior to assignment to better understand the specific environment, identify potential problems, and gain knowledge through their experience. Finally, participants noted the importance of taking the time (more than usual) to think about daily leadership experiences, feedback, and to do meaningful reflection. This learning cycle depended on individual humility and a learning orientation to excel in the complex multinational environment.

Conclusion

Cross-cultural demands on military members are increasing, yet a sustaining a consistent institutional approach to addressing preparatory and developmental needs may be impractical for the

services. Moreover, the efficacy of cultural training and education is unclear (Littrell & Salas, 2005), and we hope our study helps to answer why. Our meta-themes demonstrated, in the experiences of U.S. and international officers, what was uniquely challenging about their assignments. What seemed to be challenging was on one hand not surprising—skills like patience, self-awareness, humility, perspective taking—are desirable leadership attributes that are difficult for most people in any context. The context, however, of a multinational staff is new. It is complex and requires a greater degree of self-regulation which depletes psychological resources required to take the perspective of others and sustain a high degree of self-regulation (Vancouver, 2000). Participants also told us that the most helpful preparation was when their staff oriented them locally—how the leader of the staff ran the staff, how the staff managed the challenges we reported, and how the staff interacted with the larger organization. The paradox for educators is that this kind of local orientation is nearly impossible to scale: it is idiosyncratic to the staff leader and the people in the staff. It is also politically unattractive for nations to fund, and the requirements for program efficacy and funding the education of foreign officers can be complicated. As such, it is likely up to officers to include this skill set in their repertoire of military professionalism in the ways we suggest above. Indeed, some argue that selecting for individual differences in cultural competence for specific assignments may be more effective than scaled development programs for all military members (Human Dimension Capabilities Development Task Force (HDCDTF), 2015b). Ultimately, the purpose of cross-cultural development in the military is to enable constructive engagement with members of other nations and cultures in support of national security objectives. Continued emphasis on this subject area from leaders and academia remains warranted, and it is our hope that this article will generate conversation on that topic.

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