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# Multicultural Challenges for Armed Forces in Theatre

The end of the Cold War has not seen the expected decline in the relevance of armed forces. In fact, armed forces across the world, especially those of NATO member and NATO partner countries, are busier than ever before. They have to cover the whole range of missions – from peacekeeping to combat. For this reason, armed forces are deployed in missions in an array of tasks. They have to combat threats of military and mostly non-military transnational nature emerging from political, economic, and societal considerations.<sup>1</sup> These missions require more adaptive, flexible and mobile forces to deal with the broad range of tasks.<sup>2</sup> National armed forces have to cooperate intensively with the armed forces of other nations in the theatre.

Various evaluations of multicultural missions can be found in research literature.<sup>3</sup> They deal on the one hand with the advantages of diversity and on the other with the pitfalls of such multicultural missions. Behind the various national military contributors are the national populations, which indirectly exercise political and social influence on the forces deployed. Each player operates within its own cultural sphere, according to its own understanding of the situation and its own policies and practices.

In this article our interest focusses on this last point: the military-military challenges within different national armed forces operating together. Since the end of the Cold War cooperation within armed forces has expanded and deepened.<sup>4</sup> Of course, cooperation also existed during the Cold War in different UN missions. But these missions normally did not have the mandate to use force. They were just peacekeeping missions under Paragraph 6 of the UN Convention. So cooperation within the different armed forces was limited to bureaucratic cooperation and was never tested in a real mission.

Tibor Szvircsev Tresch\*

## The emergence of multicultural forces

Military operations have been analyzed mainly from historical, organizational, and institutional perspectives. In recent years there has also been a growing interest in culture-related factors and issues in multinational operations. Findings show that the basic conditions for successful military cooperation within armed forces are communication, mutual understanding, friendliness, open-mindedness and social competence.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the research findings clearly indicate that lack of skills and training in multinational teamwork is a specific barrier to effective performance in coalition missions.

But what were and what are the main reasons for multinational forces? First, the Cold War in the context of East-West con-

frontation, alliances were far more important, urgent and effective. Second, the UN missions conducted since 1948. In these missions, the different armed forces were used to working together and had a good opportunity to share experiences in the field. The third major reason was the end of the Cold War, which saw an increase in multinational forces accompanied by downsizing of armed forces, low military budgets, and new threats and combat missions. However, although multinational

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military operations in themselves are nothing new, since the end of the Cold War military multinationalism has acquired a new dimension. The most important fact is that the quality of cooperation has changed. In the past cooperation took place at chief of staff and headquarters level, while today national units are also being integrated into bi-national or multinational formations.<sup>6</sup> So the internationalization of personnel (for instance in multinational headquarters or in standing formations) and the multinational and multicultural

character of military contingents during deployments have become the principal features of current military activities.

Since the end of the Cold War all European states have reduced their armed forces and face the problem of shrunken defence budgets that do not allow them to train and equip their troops to the level required for employment in autonomous missions. Generally speaking, by applying the principle of multinational cooperation it is possible to concentrate capacities and produce military results in higher quantities with lower costs.<sup>7</sup>

To conclude, the post-Cold War period has seen a significant increase in the number of military operations that have required UN, NATO and other organizations to contribute forces as part of multinational coalitions in order to implement a variety of missions such as peacekeeping, peace enforcement, antiterrorist actions, humanitarian aid, policing, etc. Since the first UN mission in 1948 in the

<sup>1</sup> Heinecken, Lindy (2005). New missions and the changing character of military missions. Paper presented at the Biennial International 45th Anniversary Conference, Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society, 21–23 October 2005, Chicago.

<sup>2</sup> Boëne, Bernard (2003). «La professionnalisation des armées: contexte et raisons, impact fonctionnel et sociopolitique.» *Revue française de sociologie*, Volume 44, No. 4, 647–693.

<sup>3</sup> On 15 and 16 March 2007 a conference was held at the NATO Defense College in Rome, also dealing with the topic of "Cultural Challenges in Military Operations". The fruitful and critical discussions during the conference and the recommendations and thoughts of the participants have been implemented in this article. For more details see the forthcoming publication: Szvircsev Tresch, Tibor; Dufourcq, Jean (eds.) (2007). *Cultural Challenges in Military Operations*. Occasional Paper, NATO Defense College, Rome.

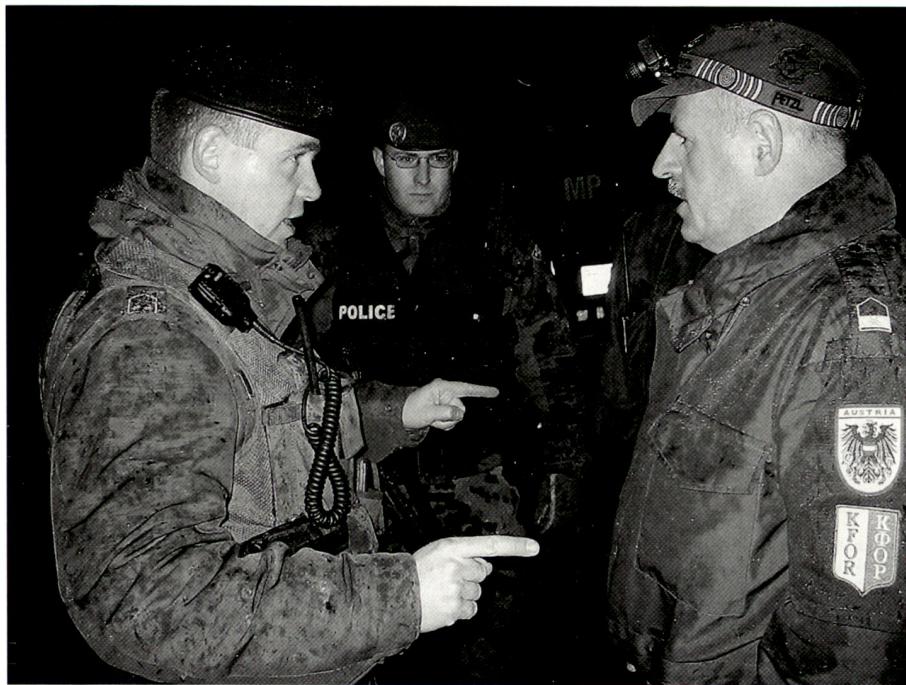
<sup>4</sup> Klein, Paul; Haltiner Karl W. (2005). Multinationality as a Challenge for Armed Forces. In: Caforio, Giuseppe; Kümmel, Gerhard (eds.) (2005). *Military Missions and Their Implications Reconsidered: The Aftermath of September 11th. Contributions to Conflict Management, Peace Economics and Development*, Volume 2, Elsevier Ltd.: Amsterdam, 403–414.

<sup>5</sup> See also: Moelker, René; Soeters, Joseph; Vom Hagen, Ulrich (2006). Sympathy, the Cement of Interoperability – German-Netherlands Military Cooperation, Cross-cultural Images and Attitudes in Longitudinal (10 Years) Perspective. In: Vom Hagen, Ulrich; Moelker, René; Soeters, Joseph (eds.) (2006). *Cultural Interoperability. Ten Years of Research into Co-operation in the First German-Netherlands Corps Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Bundeswehr. Forum International*. Volume 27. Breda & Strausberg, 15–51.

<sup>6</sup> Klein, Paul; Kümmel, Gerhard (2000). The Internationalization of Military Life. Necessity, Problems and Prospects of Multinational Armed Forces. In: Kümmel, Gerhard; Prüfert, Andreas D. (eds.) (2000). *Military Sociology. The Richness of a Discipline*. Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, Baden-Baden, 311–328.

<sup>7</sup> Klein et al. (2005). Multinationality as a Challenge for Armed Forces.

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**The basic conditions for successful military cooperation within armed forces are communication, mutual understanding, friendliness, open-mindedness and social competence.**

Foto: Zentrum elektronische Medien

Middle East (UNTSO), 61 missions have been carried out by the UN. 43 of these missions started after 1989. In 2006, there were 114 troop-contributing nations, who had over 80,000 soldiers, military observers and police in the field:<sup>8</sup> a clear indication of the need for closer cooperation among armed forces.

New missions also need to have political legitimacy. Shared responsibilities and balance of power control tend to improve political and public acceptance of military operations, as in the case of UN operations legitimized by the Security Council.

## Military culture

Culture can always be a factor in cooperation among people from different countries, whether it plays a central role or influences it subtly and gently. Normally culture refers to values, norms, or all human activities within one group. These norms and values differ from culture to culture and from nation to nation. In this regard,

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when describing national cultures, common elements within each nation can be highlighted, but culture cannot be generalized to every individual within a nation. For example, in many parts of the world, such as the Middle East, Asia and Russia, compromise has a negative connotation, and is often associated with surrendering

principles and losing face.<sup>9</sup> But that does not mean that it applies to every person of a particular culture. It should be understood more as a general criterion for evaluation of these societies. However, armed forces have a unique culture, which can be described as follows:

Military organizations are specialized in threatening and making use of collective violence. The use of focused violence calls for a high degree of coordination. Military organizational culture is based on a rigidly structured top to bottom leadership with a

**The military is probably the only organization that is ready to risk its partial destruction and to put the lives of its members willingly at risk.**

clear chain of command based on the principle of centralization. The military is probably the only organization that is ready to risk its partial destruction and to put the lives of its members willingly at risk in order to attain its goals. The soldier is expected to sacrifice his or her individual freedom and, if inevitable, his or her life for a collective cause, because the community is valued more importantly than the individual. There is a clear primacy of the collective. Morale and cohesion are vital factors in combat motivation and are part of the soldier's education and training.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the fact that military personnel represent different national military traditions, the military profession has a large array of commonalities. Military culture tends to be very similar all over the world,

at least in Europe and within alliances like NATO. The result of this similarity is that military personnel from different nations get along with one other without too many problems.<sup>11</sup> There seems to be – within NATO, for instance – a kind of supranational military culture, enabling military personnel from different backgrounds to work together smoothly.<sup>12</sup> However, on the inside, the military is not unique and homogeneous. Going from the macro down to the micro level, armed forces themselves have a variety of subcultures.<sup>13</sup> These subcultures are found in structural as well as geographical areas. Structural subcultures appear to be of at least two different kinds: horizontal among the services and vertical among the different categories of personnel, such as the classic vertical structure of officers or NCOs. Obviously, there are national culture-related variations on this theme and not every branch or unit within the military – not even within one nation – will be the same in this respect. For example, different approaches to time can give rise to problems of cooperation between U.S. armed forces and North European armies on the one hand and military personnel from the South, Mediterranean countries, Africa or Asia on the other. Generally speaking, people from the South start and end meetings at flexible times, take breaks when it seems appropriate, view

<sup>8</sup>United Nations (2007). United Nations Peace Operations. Year in Review 2006. [http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/pub/year\\_review06/](http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/pub/year_review06/)

<sup>9</sup>Leeds, Christopher A. (2001). Culture, Conflict Resolution, Peacekeeper Training and the D Mediator. International Peacekeeping, Vol. 8, No. 4, (Winter 2001), Taylor & Francis Ltd, London, 92–110.

<sup>10</sup>Haltiner, Karl W.; Szvircsev Tresch, Tibor (2006). Phänomene «Militär» – Eigenschaften einer eigenartigen Organisation. In: Annen, Hubert; Zwygart, Ulrich (2006). Das Ruder in der Hand. Aspekte der Führung und Ausbildung in Armee, Wirtschaft und Politik. Festschrift für Rudolf Steiger. Huber & Co. Verlag: Frauenfeld, 193–202.

<sup>11</sup>Soeters, Joseph; Resteigne, Delphine; Moelker, René; Manigart, Philippe (2006). Smooth and Strained International Military Co-operation. In: Vom Hagen, Ulrich; Moelker, René; Soeters, Joseph (eds.) (2006). Cultural Interoperability: Ten Years of Research into Co-operation in the First German-Netherlands Corps. Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Bundeswehr. Forum International. Volume 27. Breda & Straussberg, 131–161.

<sup>12</sup>Soeters, Joseph; Poponete, Christina-Rodica; Page, Joseph T. (2006). Culture's consequences in the military. In: Britt, Thomas W.; Adler, Amy B.; Castro, Carl A. (eds.). (2006). Military life: The psychology of serving in peace and combat. Vol. 4, Military Culture. Westport, CT: Praeger Security International; Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc. Chapter 2, 13–34.

<sup>13</sup>Soeters, Joseph; Winslow, Donna J.; Weibull, Alise (2003). Military Culture. In: Caforio, Giuseppe (ed.) (2003). Handbook of the Sociology of the Military. Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, New York, 237–254.

People from the South start and end meetings at flexible times, take breaks when it seems appropriate, view start times as flexible, and do not take lateness personally.

start times as flexible, and do not take lateness personally. Nordic cultures tend to prefer prompt beginnings and endings; they schedule breaks, deal with one agenda item at a time and view lateness as devaluing or a mark of disrespect.<sup>14</sup> These kinds of behaviour also affect the national militaries.

### Multiculturalism and multinationality in the military

On the whole, two different kinds of multinationality can be observed, each with different preconditions for the working process. Firstly, standing multinational corps based in barracks in one of the participating countries: at most two to four countries are involved in these standing formations. Examples are EUFOR, permanently headquartered in Florence, or the 1st German-Netherlands Corps, located in Munster. These units have encountered some of the sociological problems typical of multinational military formations, such as language, different ranking systems, payment and so on. But all in all smooth cooperation is possible in standing formations.

Secondly, the form of multinational cooperation more frequently observed nowadays is based on ad hoc cooperation in military missions abroad, for example in Kosovo, Afghanistan or Iraq. Here nations from more than 40 countries may be involved in one mission. This can cause misunderstandings and jeopardize the mission goals. In most cases multinational forces are needed to intervene quickly and on an ad hoc basis in crisis situations which are ambiguous, dangerous and complex. National militaries assigned to urgent missions often have no time for specific joint training with the other armed forces. Additionally, they are subjected to different Rules of Engagement (ROE) and different legal systems governing discipline and the use of violence.<sup>15</sup>

As mentioned above, multinational armed forces normally consist of more than two nations. Even when cooperation is binational, many problems can arise. There is always a preponderance of one party, leading to tensions and animosity. At Camp Julien in Afghanistan, for example, most of the friction that arose was between the large minority of Belgians and the dominating Canadians. In this case there was moderate heterogeneity: two sizeable participating armed forces that formed two "blocs" and were continuously frustrating each other.<sup>16</sup>

But the multinational approach is common. It is an example of high heterogeneity involving several countries and national contingents of roughly equal size, a condition which helps to optimize processes and outputs. With many armed forces of different cultures in the same mission, personal conversations about one's own culture frequently take place and friendly compari-

sons are made. On the whole it seems that officers are ready to engage in such multinational contacts. At the rank and file rank level this readiness is less frequent.<sup>17</sup>

In multinational missions, national units have to surrender some control and have less autonomy. People in general, and military personnel in particular, do not like to be dependent on other nations, certainly not in life-threatening and dangerous situ-

Military personnel in particular, do not like to be dependent on other nations in situations that can be life-threatening and dangerous.

ations. This dependence has to be adapted to interdependence, which means that it is essential to stress the equal status of all units involved in the multinational mission. If each nation insists on having its own support, this leads to lack of confidence in the ability of other nations to provide it adequately.<sup>18</sup>



A broad knowledge of the area of military operations is essential, including aspects related to geography, demography, socio-economics, culture, customs, traditions and religion.

Foto: Zentrum elektronische Medien

<sup>14</sup> Beyond Intractability: Culture-Based Negotiation Styles. [http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/culture\\_negotiation/](http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/culture_negotiation/)

<sup>15</sup> Elron, Efrat; Shamir, Boas; Ben-Ari, Eyal (1999). Why Don't They Fight Each Other? Cultural Diversity and Operational Unity in Multinational Forces. *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 26, No. 1, (Fall 1999), 73–98.

<sup>16</sup> Soeters et al. (2006). Smooth and Strained International Military Co-operation.

<sup>17</sup> Van Ruiten, Schelte (2006). Who is We? Narratives Regarding Trust, Identity and Co-operation within 1 (GE/NL) Corps. In: Vom Hagen, Ulrich; Moelker, René; Soeters, Joseph (eds.) (2006). Cultural Interoperability. Ten Years of Research into Co-operation in the First German-Netherlands Corps. Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Bundeswehr. Forum International. Volume 27. Breda & Strausberg, 97–129. Elron, Efrat; Halevy, Nir; Ari, Eyal Ben; Shamir, Boas (2003). Cooperation and Coordination across Cultures in the Peacekeeping Forces: Individual and Organizational Integrating Mechanisms. In: Britt, W. Thomas; Adler, B. Amy (2003). The Psychology of the Peacekeeper. Lessons from the Field. Praeger, Westport, Connecticut, 261–282.

<sup>18</sup> Soeters, Joseph; Tanerçan, Erhan; Varoğlu, Kadir; Sığrı, Ünsal (2004). Turkish-Dutch Encounters in Peace Operations. *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 11, No. 2, (Summer 2004), Taylor & Francis Ltd, London, 354–368.



Communication between the military, international organizations, NGOs, local authorities and the media is crucial for the positive outcome of a mission. Foto: ISAF

#### Different Strategies: Assimilation, Integration and Separation

In multinational missions there are three different strategies for the armed forces involved: assimilation, integration and separation.<sup>19</sup> In general, the assimilation strategy tends to develop if one armed force clearly dominates the others. Normally, the larger party implicitly or explicitly expects this to happen. If the smaller parties agree, this strategy generally works quite well. But this means that the smaller armed forces have to internalise the culture of the lead nation. In reality most national armed forces are proud of themselves and are not likely to hand over their collective identity, so it seems that for the military this strategy as a rule does not work very well.

The integration strategy, on the other hand, tries to get people from different national armed forces working and living together, which happens quite successfully in multinational headquarters or in low intensity operations. "According to this approach, working and living conditions are shared, and the lines of command are fully international. One common language is used requiring all members to be sufficiently proficient".<sup>20</sup> The precondition for this strategy is that the staff from all nations involved should know the relevant procedures of their integrated unit.

If armed forces are not inclined to give up on their own cultural practices, then a strategy of separation may be the best. This approach can be strengthened by giving each national contingent its own role and geographical area of responsibility where it can act more or less independently. Secondly, the separation strategy also entails each contingent having its own housing facilities in its own camp. In this case, each national contingent commander has his own distinct authority based upon national sensitivities. This strategy is very appropriate for elite units who have strong

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internal cohesion, but are reluctant to be involved with other units in high intensity conflicts. Both strategies, integration and assimilation, seem to work. If the cultural differences among the armed forces are strong, the separation strategy is preferable.<sup>21</sup>

The question of the right strategy is not just a scientific one, as the example of the Anglo-Dutch cooperation in Cyprus (UNFICYP) shows: "In the case of the Anglo-Dutch cooperation and after the fairly problematic experiences with the fully mixed Anglo-Dutch structure during the first two rotations, it was decided the Dutch company would be given its own subsector".<sup>22</sup> This shift in the level of cooperation seemed to improve the efficiency and certainly the motivation of the Dutch contingent.

#### Critical factors in multicultural cooperation in military missions

In standing formations, cultural differences are minimized over time and do not cause great concern, as the example of the 1st German-Netherlands Corps in Munster shows. In missions abroad this well-rehearsed cooperation can change dramatically. In Afghanistan, Dutch and German forces who were used to cooperating as a standing formation in Munster also worked together. Even though these two armies had been cooperating closely for years as standing formations, the mission in Afgha-

nistan was fraught with tension. Unlike Munster, where positions are covered on a more or less equal basis, in Afghanistan the Dutch contingent was much smaller than its German counterpart and the operation was clearly dominated and conducted by the Germans. The isolated position of the Dutch encouraged internal gossip and grievances.<sup>23</sup> They complained about the supply of goods, logistics, and the safety policies implemented by the Germans. Small things like the availability of telephones, the quality of the food and alcohol policies, which varied between the Germans and the Dutch, caused friction. Relations between the German and the Dutch units deteriorated and this was publicised in the Dutch newspaper "Brabants Dagblad" of January 11, 2003 in an article that quoted Dutch soldiers as saying that "the Afghans are not the problem, the Germans are ...".<sup>24</sup>

As we have seen from this example, in a mission abroad minor issues can undermine mutual trust and good working relations. But it is not just the small things that hinder smooth cooperation. Multi-national missions face challenges on at least three different levels of cultural diversity:

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the political-cultural level (macro level), the organizational-cultural level (mezzo level) and the individual-cultural level (micro level). Every level is confronted with specific challenges and problems in military-military cooperation. Of course the different levels are interconnected: the classification is just a rough pattern for further research on this topic.

For each level the most critical factors in multicultural missions are listed below.

<sup>19</sup> Soeters et al. (2006). Culture's consequences in the military.

<sup>20</sup> Moelker et al. (2006). Sympathy, the Cement of Interoperability, 48.

<sup>21</sup> Soeters et al. (2006). Culture's consequences in the military.

<sup>22</sup> Soeters, Joseph; Bos-Bakx, Miepke (2003). Cross-Cultural Issues in Peacekeeping Operations. In: Britt, Thomas W.; Adler, Amy B. (2003). The Psychology of the Peacekeeper. Lessons from the Field. Praeger, Westport, Connecticut, 283–298 (Page 292).

<sup>23</sup> Soeters et al. (2006). Smooth and Strained International Military Co-operation.

<sup>24</sup> Moelker, René; Soeters, Joseph (2003). Putting the Collaboration to the Test, Münster and Kabul. In: Vom Hagen, Ulrich; Klein, Paul; True Love. A Study in Integrated Multinationality within 1 (German/Netherlands) Corps. Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Bundeswehr. Forum International. Volume 25. Breda & Strausberg, 127–146 (Page 133).



European armed forces and NATO in particular are more and more frequently turning from simple co-operation between purely national units to a mixture of soldiers from different countries (even on small unit level).

Foto: SHAPE

#### Political-cultural level

On the political-cultural level five major challenges must be highlighted: clear mission statement and definition of the end-state by the political authorities; well-defined Rules of Engagement; politically clear division of responsibility; loyalty conflicts and general problems emerging from cultural diversity.

*Clear mission statement and end-state:* The purpose of the mission must be described precisely and the commanders have to understand the political goals. The military mission should follow the mandate and serve the political goals as defined by the international authorities; hence the need to ensure that the military force's conceptual platform will be relevant and well-developed. Without a conceptual platform based on accumulated knowledge and experience and converted into well-established doctrine and training, the military mission as a whole is doomed to fail.<sup>25</sup>

*Rules of Engagement:* ROE are essential in order to clarify the mission and the main steps to be taken, thus avoiding any kind of misunderstandings and duplication of efforts. Where forces are operating alongside each other without a common set of ROE, real difficulties in implementing the mandate arise.<sup>26</sup> National caveats have a direct bearing on this. Of course each nation has

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a different risk threshold, as we see in Afghanistan. National caveats can be regarded as the right to "opt out" of missions that in the nation's view might endanger the forces. But if a multinational force is to function effectively, it must aspire to become a "risk community"<sup>27</sup> in which national caveats can be translated over time into transnational ROE.

*Division of responsibility/tasks:* A clear political division of responsibility between the respective armed forces helps to improve the mission's effectiveness. If every national contingent is aware of its tasks,

misunderstandings can be minimized. Division of tasks makes it easier for the different contingents to concentrate on individual parts of the mission. But for effective sharing of responsibilities, trust in the other national armed forces is extremely important.

The experience in the INTERFET mission in East Timor is a good example of successfully shared tasks and responsibilities. Under the lead of the Australian General Cosgrove, synchronization of the efforts of the multinational force contingents started and proceeded in accordance with the national political guidelines of the armed forces involved. Right from the start he formed a core war fighting element based on the Australian, New Zealand, and British contingents. These forces were responsible for initial security operations and were sent to the zones where the heaviest fighting was expected. The other major contingents took over tasks such as humanitarian assistance operations, for

<sup>25</sup> King, Anthony (2006). The Word of Command: Communication and Cohesion in the Military Armed Forces & Society, Vol. 32, No. 3, (April 2006), 493–512.

<sup>26</sup> Forster, Anthony (2006). Armed Forces and Society in Europe. Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire.

<sup>27</sup> Coker, Christopher (2006). Between Iraq and a Hard Place. RUSI, Vol. 151, No. 5, (October 2006), 14–19 (Page 17).

which they were mandated, organized and trained.<sup>28</sup>

However, the INTERFET mission demonstrated that an excellent way of proceeding is to task contributors to provide their core capabilities (e.g., war fighting, logistics, rebuilding) and consider their political sensibilities. In any case, detailed determination of the politically and militarily responsibilities of each contingent must be defined in the guidelines for troop-contributing nations.

**Diversity:** Closely related to the division of responsibilities and tasks is the fact that the national armed forces differ in terms of military culture and political perception of the mission. The advantage of that diversity is an increase in cognitive resources and task-relevant abilities and skills in the organizational structure of a multi-national force. This can result in higher creativity and better quality of decisions.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, diversity in perceptions, political views and values may rise barriers to interaction, misunderstandings, prejudices and unknowingly offensive behaviour which reduce the chances for constructive activity.<sup>30</sup> The solution may lie in tolerating and accepting political and cultural differences. This creates more cultural space, allowing national units to engage in their culture-specific practices.

Since cultural diversity could have a negative impact on the mission's effectiveness, the main goal is to enhance cultural integration and interaction on the political level.

**Multiplicity of Loyalties:** Multinational forces are composed of people from different countries, each one expressing strong affiliation with his or her country. This naturally creates an environment of varied loyalties and associations. It may lead to parallel national chains of command, because national governments wish to retain ultimate control over their national

under whose command the Turkish company had in fact been placed.”<sup>31</sup> However, when states deploy forces to military missions, national military forces have the tendency to establish parallel reporting and control structures with their home headquarters. Since field commanders have to report both to national and to operations command, national Defense policies and legislation can result in a lack of coordination between the national command and the coalition command. Planners of missions should bear that in mind and officers have to be trained to understand the unity of a mission.

#### Organizational-cultural level

On the organizational-cultural level, in missions abroad armed forces differ mainly in hierarchy and rank, the use of alcohol and force, the rotation system for missions, and types of units (combat or support oriented, Army, Navy, Air Force). Under certain circumstances these differences can cause serious problems in the cooperation of the armed forces concerned. It can also be an organizational advantage for multi-national units.

**Hierarchy and rank:** Military organizations are similarly structured. One of the most striking features of any armed force is the strength of its hierarchical system per se. A hierarchical organization is crucial to ensure that personnel act in an appropriate manner, even if parts of the armed forces have been destroyed by the enemy or are unable to fight. But levels of hierarchy in national armies differ in two ways. Firstly, various ranking systems exist. In Europe or within NATO it is obvious that national armed forces are more and more in line with NATO standards. The structural

problem seems to have been solved in recent years. The cultural aspects of hierarchy are much more interesting. Some countries draw a clear distinction between ranks, not just in a structural sense but also in a psychological and social sense.

An issue that arises in many missions abroad are the differences in the power competences between the various levels of rank.<sup>32</sup> Some countries rely on an autocratic style of leadership, whereas other armed forces place far more emphasis on consultation and consensus. However, the authoritarian way in which orders are issued in some armies may appear strange

Some countries rely on an autocratic style of leadership, whereas in other armed forces there is far more emphasis on consultation and consensus.

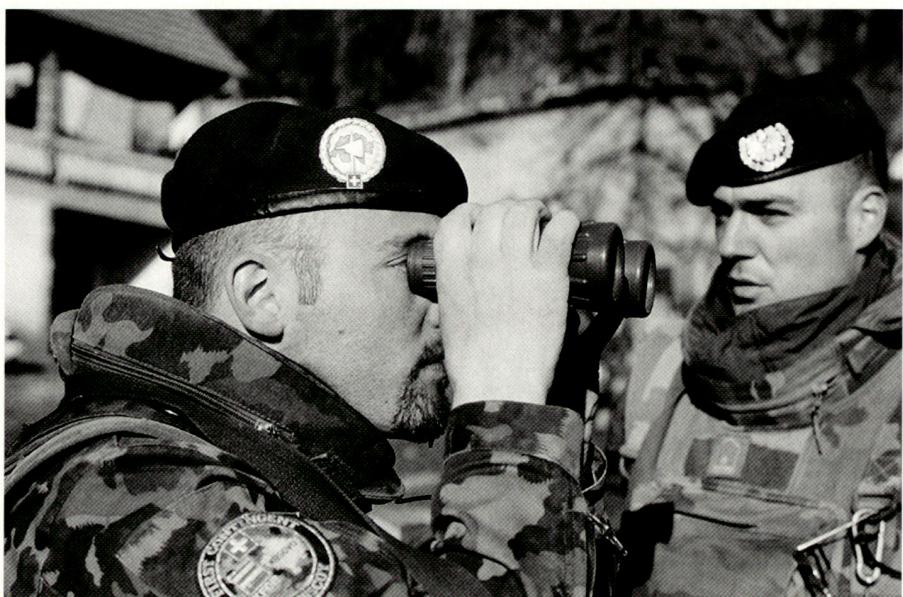
<sup>28</sup> Ballard, John R. (2002). Mastering Coalition Command in Modern Peace Operations: Operation “Stabilise” in East Timor. *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring 2002), Frank Cass Taylor and Co. Ltd, London, 83–101.

<sup>29</sup> Elron et al. (1999). Why Don't They Fight Each Other?

<sup>30</sup> Duffey, Tamara (2000). Cultural issues in Contemporary Peacekeeping. In: Woodhouse, Tom; Ramsbotham, Oliver (2000). *Peacekeeping and Conflict Resolution*. Frank Cass, London, 142–168.

<sup>31</sup> Soeters et al. (2004). Turkish-Dutch Encounters in Peace Operations, page 358.

<sup>32</sup> Soeters et al. (2004). Turkish-Dutch Encounters in Peace Operations.



The political end state and the Rules of Engagement should be absolutely clear and shared.

Foto: Zentrum elektronische Medien



**The personality of the Commander and personal relationships are very important.**  
Foto: Zentrum elektronische Medien

in the eyes of more consensus-based armed forces, because in the former there is very little place for participative leadership. Questioning the decision of superiors is considered as impolite and something that destroys harmony. "Turkish and British (but also German) officers do not expect to be contradicted, which is in line with the relatively strong power distance in the armed forces of those countries."<sup>33</sup>

For mission effectiveness it is imperative to have the same or at least a similar concept of hierarchy, both structurally and culturally, within the respective national armed forces.

*Use of alcohol and food:* Differences exist in the permitted consumption of alcohol by soldiers and officers in their free time. Some nations have the so called "two can" regulation, which allows them to drink two bottles of beer per day. Other nations have no restrictions. Research shows that soldiers from nations with drinking limitations had difficulties understanding that other nationalities were permitted to drink alcohol without any formal restraints.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, more missions are taking place in regions with religious backgrounds that are different from Western societies. Also armies with different religions are involved in multinational forces. This can lead to tensions if the national kitchen unit in charge is not aware of such cultural differences. It should, for example, be common knowledge that Muslims do not eat pork and drink little, if any, alcohol.<sup>35</sup>

*Use of force.* The interpretation of the same event or situation often differs according to nationality. Mindset may influence activities within the specific operational environment (war fighting/reconstruction, dangerous/more relaxing, etc.). In encounters among military personnel from different nations, debates arise on how to patrol, how to carry one's weapon, how to establish close and positive contact with

the local population, and how to communicate with the local authorities. On the one hand they are related to different threat perceptions, and on the other hand organisational cultures play a role. In Kosovo, for example, a U.S. soldier who wants to get food from outside the camp will need armed vehicles and at least four escort soldiers, whereas a Danish officer will just have an ordinary jeep with two soldiers.<sup>36</sup> This is a case where the U.S. military is far more concerned with force protection. This could also explain why the American approach is more confrontational. Americans seem to be much tougher and more distant in their contacts with the local population than other forces in the field.<sup>37</sup> In general, Americans are more focused on the sharper end of war fighting, whereas armies from North European countries such as Sweden, Finland and Norway place more emphasis on the peacekeeping aspect.

*Rotation:* Multinational forces are temporary organizations. There is frequent rotation of military personnel. But force rotation differs considerably from one nation to another. Most units serve six months, some only four. Some civilian employees serve

**Within a twelve to fifteen month tour of duty, such as the Americans have in Iraq, it is difficult to maintain motivation and the same level of performance at all times.**

even less. In view of the constant fluctuation of personnel, it is difficult to establish long term cooperation in theatre. It can be argued that, on the personal and organizational level, more time and prolonged contacts are necessary in order to become

really familiar with one another and to appreciate soldiers of other nationalities. This has an impact on the multinational force as an organization. Without mutual understanding based on longstanding working relations, previously developed procedures are difficult to implement. But boredom, at least on the rank and file level (for instance guarding the compound), is one of the major problems. Within a twelve to fifteen month tour of duty, such as the Americans have in Iraq, it is difficult to maintain motivation and the same level of performance at all times.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the reintegration of military personnel at home should be taken into account. Most experts believe that it takes several months to readjust to their home country. Four months is the typical readjustment period after a non-traumatic deployment, while a much longer period is required to recover from a traumatic deployment.<sup>39</sup>

*Different units:* Experiences in Afghanistan have demonstrated that military personnel from staff units and less elitist units faced relatively fewer problems when cooperating with military from other nationalities. Elite units of various nations are far less inclined to accept other people's views. In what is perhaps a too simple generalisation, it can be stated that the further soldiers are away from core combat expertise, the more likely they will succeed in cooperation with other armed forces. A case study on Dutch infantry and artillery units in Bosnia, conducted by Liora Sion,<sup>40</sup> found that the soldiers from these two

<sup>33</sup> Soeters et al. (2006). Culture's consequences in the military, 23.

<sup>34</sup> Moelker et al. (2003). Putting the Collaboration to the Test, Münster and Kabul.

<sup>35</sup> Soeters et al. (2004). Turkish-Dutch Encounters in Peace Operations.

<sup>36</sup> Soeters et al. (2003). Cross-Cultural Issues in Peacekeeping Operations.

<sup>37</sup> Coker, Christopher (2006). Between Iraq and a Hard Place; Soeters et al. (2006). Smooth and Strained International Military Cooperation.

<sup>38</sup> See also: Best, Carla (2002). A Young Officer's View of Peace Support Operations. In: Essens, Peter; Vogelaar, Ad; Tanercan, Erhan; Winslow, Donna (eds.) (2002). The Human in Command: Peace Support Operations. Mets & Schilt, Amsterdam and KMA Royal Netherlands Military Academy, Breda, 52–63.

<sup>39</sup> Thompson, Megan; Gignac, Monique (2002). Adaptation to Peace Support Operations: The Experience of Canadian Forces Augmentees. In: Essens, Peter; Vogelaar, Ad; Tanercan, Erhan; Winslow, Donna (eds.) (2002). The Human in Command: Peace Support Operations. Mets & Schilt, Amsterdam and KMA Royal Netherlands Military Academy, Breda, 235–263.

<sup>40</sup> Sion, Liora (2006). "Too Sweet and Innocent for War"? Dutch Peacekeepers and the Use of Violence. Armed Forces & Society, Vol. 32, No. 3, (April 2006), 454–474.

units had different perceptions about the mission. While most of the Dutch infantry soldiers questioned defined the mission as combat, artillery soldiers defined it as humanitarian. The different perceptions of the mission shaped different levels of satisfaction with work. The combat oriented

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**The different perceptions of the mission shaped different levels of satisfaction with work.**

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infantry soldiers were less satisfied than the artillery soldiers, who viewed the mission as humanitarian. Infantry soldiers were proud of their performance during the training in the Netherlands and Germany and felt ready for deployment. «They rejected the mission's humanitarian aspects in Bosnia because it was not as exciting as their training, and they felt frustrated and dissatisfied.»<sup>41</sup>

A further distinction exists among the Army, the Navy and the Air Force. According to research by Soeters et al.<sup>42</sup>, in the Air Force the uniformity in technologies reduces the cultural impact. Air Force operations are completely structured because of the danger of technical failures caused by human error. They have common operating procedures and training which minimize the effects of different culture-related working styles. So the cultural impact on Air Force operations seems to be lower than in the Army.

**Individual-cultural level**

This aspect affects soldiers to a higher degree because it demands initiative and a willingness to enhance professional skills and cultural awareness in two main areas: intercultural training and language. Of course, without political and organizational support the individual soldier would be not able to improve competency in these domains. Ultimately, though, individual effort is required of each and every soldier.

**Training:** Appropriate training and military skills are the basis for successful missions abroad. Special training is needed, particularly for multicultural force operations, because success normally comes to those who train together. Soldiers have to be more flexible, better trained and better educated.

Today most countries think that intercultural training is their own national business. With this precondition, a process of comprehensive training within armed forces is not likely to develop. Without mutual pre-deployment training, national

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**Intercultural training is important as part of combat training.**

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contingents would be better deployed separately. But in the majority of cases this is not possible, for geographical and operational reasons. In the end the various armed forces will be forced to train and work together if the mission is to be carried

out effectively. Intercultural training is important as part of combat training. Studies have demonstrated that a life-threatening event (for instance an attack) has a negative impact on willingness to cooperate with military personnel from other nations.<sup>43</sup>

**Language:** There should be one official language, e.g. English, in order to guarantee effective communication flows within the mission. Also, military personnel should have a basic knowledge of the local language. Lack of overall language preparation and specialized English language training is one of the most serious challenges to the

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**There is an undeniable need for a common language among units deployed on missions.**

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individual integration of national soldiers in a multinational environment. Research demonstrates that conflicts rarely occur, but when they do, they are caused by misunderstandings and disagreements related to culture and language.<sup>44</sup> These language-related problems are exemplified by the experience at the Kabul International Airport (KAIA): «The most prominent one referred to the Spanish medics who did not master the English language sufficiently, inducing people in case of emergency to seek medical help outside the base at the German medical facilities at ISAF HQ.»<sup>45</sup> There is an undeniable need for a common language among units deployed on missions, and deployed soldiers should be willing to learn languages. This is crucial to both the execution of the mission and the day-to-day tasks of deployed forces. English language training for the forces should therefore be intensified. However, language in a multinational context is an instrument of individual power for those who are proficient in English, enabling them to dominate interaction and decisions.<sup>46</sup>



**Kabul International Airport (KAIA): All national units are more or less equally in size, and all have been assigned to one specific, independent operational task. Therefore the cooperation runs fairly smoothly and successfully.**

Foto: ISAF

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 465.

<sup>42</sup> Soeters et al. (2006). Culture's consequences in the military.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>44</sup> Elron et al. (2003). Cooperation and Cooperation across Cultures in the Peacekeeping Forces.

<sup>45</sup> Soeters et al. (2006). Smooth and Strained International Military Co-operation, 148.

<sup>46</sup> Abel, Heike (2007). Multinationale Streitkräftestrukturen als Herausforderung für die Streitkräfteintegration Europas. Das Beispiel der Deutsch-Französischen Militärkooperation. In: Kümmel, Gerhard; Collmer, Sabine (Hrsg.). Die Bundeswehr heute und morgen. Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, Baden-Baden, 47–64.

When forces come under fire, proper communication is critical. In a combat situation, units are effective when they are able to communicate. Under strain, officers and soldiers tend to fall back on their native language. This hinders the success of missions in high intensity environments.

## Conclusion

In the face of new threats and declining budgets, NATO and the EU have been forced to engage in multicultural missions. Alliance members simply do not have the resources to engage in independent military action and, for reasons of political legitimacy, it has also become essential for the US to operate in coalitions. Multinational missions are a reality.<sup>47</sup>

European armed forces and NATO in particular are more and more frequently moving from simple cooperation between purely national units to a mixture of soldiers from different countries within even the smallest units. This applies not only to standing formations and international Headquarters but also to units in missions abroad. In multinational missions, military personnel are confronted with various challenges, not only on the organizational but also on the cultural level: soldiers have to show intercultural competence, be loyal to their nation and, at the same time, integrate themselves into multinational forces.<sup>48</sup> The willingness to accept vulnerability and contribute to the collective is essential. Furthermore, the development of intercultural understandings among commanders and their officers is crucial for a successful multinational mission. For that

**Soldiers have to show intercultural competence, be loyal to their nation and, at the same time, integrate themselves into multinational forces.**

purpose, more emphasis should be placed on intercultural training.

Effectiveness is crucial for a military mission. In multicultural missions, effectiveness depends on successful and smooth cooperation among all the armed forces involved. The effectiveness of a mission is also affected by the complexity of the tasks assigned to the mission itself. According to the research results of cultural challenges, there are certain measures which should be taken in account in order to make operations effective and manageable on the political-cultural level:

- The political end state and the Rules of Engagement should be absolutely clear and shared.
- For effective sharing of responsibility, trust in the other national armed forces is extremely important. Thus duplication of command and control can be avoided.
- Culturally armed forces should not be too different from each other.

The organizational-cultural level

- Common activities have a positive influence on social interaction. They foster integration and multinational contacts and can reduce organizational differences related to hierarchy and rank.

● Multinational forces are successful when operating in a low intensity environment, while life-threatening combat situations seem to reduce the multinational output because of the different perceptions of the use of force.

- National rotation systems should be more closely coordinated.
- Multinational units should not comprise so-called "elite units", which have strong internal cohesion but are reluctant to cooperate with other (national and foreign) units.

The individual-cultural level

- Participants should be provided with intensive intercultural training, especially in language skills (in a common language, normally English). Language training should focus not only on the language problems themselves (difficulties in comprehension, use of slang, abbreviations, etc.) but also on culturally based cognitive perceptions.

Generally speaking, multinational cooperation in standing formations is not a problem, and smooth cooperation and working relations are achieved on the political-cultural, organizational-cultural and individual-cultural level. Multinational arrangements also seem to have proved adequate in low intensity operations. On a purely individual level, tensions can arise, particularly among soldiers, over small things like consumption of alcohol, language difficulties, etc. The main multicultural challenges emerge in high intensity missions, such as those in Iraq and increasingly so in Afghanistan. Besides cooperation problems on the individual level, organizational differences will in-



**There is an undeniable need for a common language among units deployed. This is crucial to both the execution of the mission and the day-to-day tasks of deployed forces.**

Foto: Zentrum elektronische Medien

<sup>47</sup> King, Anthony (2007). The Paradox of Multinationality. Paper presented at the conference "Cultural Challenges in Military Operations", NATO Defense College, 15–16 March 2007, Rome.

<sup>48</sup> Tomforde, Maren (2007). How about pasta and beer? Intercultural Challenges of German-Italian Cooperation in Kosovo. Paper presented at the conference "Cultural Challenges in Military Operations", NATO Defense College, 15–16 March 2007, Rome.



Multinational troops at ISAF HQ in Kabul. Foto: ISAF

crease in life-threatening situations. Also, the implementation of national caveats (which in the end represent the national mentality of armed forces and are culturally motivated), with the aim of protecting the nation's soldiers and obtaining the poli-

will have to internalise the culture of the lead nation and opt for the assimilation strategy. As explained above, most national armed forces are unlikely to hand over their collective identity and so the assimilation strategy does not work very well. Therefore, multicultural armed forces in challenging missions face a paradoxical situation. Multicultural missions have become necessary due to strategic, political and financial reasons, but multinationality may tend to minimize operational success in real combat missions. ●

**The main multicultural challenges are in high intensity missions, such as those in Iraq and increasingly so in Afghanistan.**

tical support of the national population, may hinder attainment of the mission's goal. Tensions can emerge, placing a strain on the multinational coalition and impeding further cooperation. It would appear that in high intensity missions multiculturalism has its limitations. In this case the most effective multinational forces may indeed be those consisting of small national contingents under a strong lead nation. But this means that the smaller armed forces