

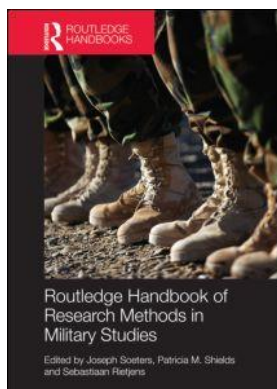
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### **Studying Host-Nationals in Operational Areas**

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## 6

# STUDYING HOST-NATIONALS IN OPERATIONAL AREAS

## The challenge of Afghanistan

*William Maley*

**M. Van Bijlert (2009) ‘Unruly commanders and violent power struggles: Taliban networks in Uruzgan’, in Antonio Giustozzi (ed.), *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*. London: Hurst and Co., pp. 155–178.**

*Decoding the New Taliban* puts on display a number of approaches to understanding post-nationals in Afghanistan, from which militaries could readily profit. Two of the contributors to this edited collection have military experience of their own, but of very different kinds. Dr David Kilcullen, now a well-known writer on counterinsurgency and author of *The Accidental Guerrilla*, was formerly a lieutenant-colonel in the Australian Army. On the other hand, Mohammad Osman Tariq Elias was a *mujahid* in the Afghan resistance in the 1980s. All the other contributors are long-standing observers of Afghanistan who can claim the kind of familiarity with the situation on the ground that is often denied to those who see the country only on short-term rotations. As an edited collection, the book puts on display different interpretations of both the circumstances leading to the re-emergence of the Taliban, and the significance of this particular phenomenon. In this way, it allows for the kind of contestation of ideas that can allow knowledge to build up. The editor has set out not to impose a particular line of argument upon his contributors, but rather to find contributors who will have interesting arguments to advance.

Martine van Bijlert’s study of Taliban networks in Uruzgan provides a good example of how one can go about navigating the methodological complexities of studying host-nationals in Afghanistan. The fundamental technique that she has used is what one might call *immersion*: as she puts it, the analysis in the chapter ‘is based on conversations over a period of several years with tribal leaders, commanders, villagers, government officials and NGO workers, who either are from Uruzgan or spent considerable time working in the province’. Two elements are central to such an approach. One is *linguistic skill*. Bijlert, a former Dutch diplomat, has an excellent command of Afghan languages. The other is *time*. In contrast to some military personnel whose efforts to study

*(continued)*

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host-nationals have been hampered by short postings, this author has been able not only to accumulate a substantial knowledge base, but also to establish trusting relationships with local informants in a way that can be difficult for militaries who are perceived as players in local politics by virtue of the power that they can exercise.

Beyond the technique of immersion, van Bijlert displays one other skill that is of critical importance, namely an ability to conceptualise. A real challenge in studying host-nationals in Afghanistan is that one can be overwhelmed by an avalanche of information which can hinder rather than assist understanding. On the one hand, she makes effective use of terms that Afghans in Uruzgan themselves deploy to characterise their social worlds. On the other, she makes equally effective use of Western terms such as revenge, rivalry and opportunity to explain Taliban behaviour.

## Introduction

The study of host-nationals in Afghanistan raises a number of serious issues for the military. If one accepts the Clausewitzian understanding of strategy as the harnessing of military force to the realisation of political objectives, then an understanding of the context – social, political, and economic – within which political objectives are located becomes essential if the objectives of a military deployment are to be realised. Yet the skills that may be required in order to undertake the kind of analysis that this involves often do not figure prominently in the curricula of military academies, and may require an understanding of the complexities of social anthropology that even a highly skilled scholar may struggle to attain. All this creates for military forces a major set of challenges. And in few theatres of operation can these challenges have been more acute than in Afghanistan.

One of the reasons why this is the case is that Afghans typically live simultaneously in a number of different social worlds. The world that they choose to inhabit can shift on a daily basis, depending upon the incentive structures by which people are confronted. Thus, even analyses which pay lip-service to familiar bases of social organisation that are typically discussed in the Afghan context, such as tribe, ethnic identity, sectarian identity, gender, class, or physical location, can do less than justice to the way in which individuals trying to survive in a hostile environment can shift their affiliations or manipulate their identities as a way of securing some degree of protection. As a result, host-nationals in Afghanistan should not be considered in any respect a fixed category. Rather, they take on a kaleidoscopic character that reflects the shifting foundations of Afghan politics and society. The aim of this chapter is to explore some of the dimensions of these complexities.

## Objectives of studying host-nationals

The inclination to study host-nationals is very much a product of particular forms of modern armed conflict. Ruth Benedict's famous study *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Benedict 1946), based on an analysis during the Second World War of Japanese writings, provides a notable early example. Where set-piece battles are fought between organised military forces, the citizens or residents of the countries in which the battles are being fought often appear as little more than extras in the performance, peripheral to the outcomes of the battles themselves. Such battles, however, by no means exhaust the range of activities for modern militaries in the

territories in which they are deployed. More and more conflicts since the end of the Second World War have pitted insurgents, resistance movements, or other armed groups against professional uniformed militaries, often in circumstances in which the asymmetries of 'hard' power are manifest, and the real struggle is a political one for the loyalty and support of the population at large. This was particularly the case in such well-known conflicts as the Chinese Civil War in the years before the fall of Peking in 1949, and the phase of the Vietnam War that concluded with the fall of Saigon in 1975. In each of these cases, substantial and well-organised armed forces had very significant roles to play, but ordinary people also played important roles in shaping the outcomes of the struggles. A key consequence has been a proliferation of serious scholarly and military literature concerned with guerrilla warfare, counterinsurgency, and the ways in which the 'hearts and minds' of target populations can be won (see Kaplan 2013). This requires attention to the peculiarities of local populations that generals of earlier times could safely overlook. But that said, host-nationals can be studied with a number of different objectives in mind, of which five are particularly important.

First, host-nationals may be studied simply with a view to *gathering information* relating to their beliefs, affiliations, and character. There is no doubt that information of this kind can potentially be of considerable benefit to military forces, but the danger that obviously arises is that there may be an almost infinite range of data-points that must somehow be processed to make them meaningful. Here, it is useful to bear in mind the distinction that the philosopher Karl Popper used to draw between the 'bucket' and the 'searchlight' theories of knowledge (Popper 1972: 341–361). The weakness of the former is that it puts the accumulation of data at the centre of the enterprise, whereas as Popper rightly argued, it is theory and theoretical presuppositions that provide the searchlight that allows such a mass of data to be scrutinised, processed and managed. Unless one can make sense of information, it will be of little value.

Second, host-nationals may be studied with a view to facilitating the *exercise of domination* over people, territory or political relations. There are all sorts of respects in which the capacity of militaries to exercise domination is central to the hope of realising military objectives. If populations remain fractious, if territory remains insecure, and if plotting against military forces is a routine activity in the areas in which they are deployed, then the prospects that military force will be able to deliver meaningful political objectives are likely to be poor. Yet it is very difficult to exercise domination over people or in an environment that one does not understand. For this reason, there is at least a threshold level of comprehension that needs to be met if the attempt to work in a complex environment is not to collapse.

Third, one may study host-nationals in order to help *enhance the legitimacy of the deployed forces and their mission*. A legitimate mission – one that enjoys generalised normative support – is more likely to secure cooperation from informed and authoritative locals than is one which is regarded with scepticism. Furthermore, a legitimate mission will be better placed to pursue a range of activities to consolidate what gains have flowed from the use of kinetic force. Yet to build legitimacy, it is necessary to understand what *kinds* of factors are relevant in the eyes of the local population. Skill and speed in the execution of reconstruction projects, for example, will do little to build legitimacy if the key criterion of legitimacy for locals relates to the religious values to which the deployed military forces are committed. There is no substitute for a fine-grained understanding of these complexities.

Fourth, it can be useful to study host-nationals in order to improve one's understanding of what the likely consequences of particular actions might be. For example, in the Afghan province of Uruzgan, Australian forces became strongly involved in supporting a particular militia leader, Matiullah Khan (see Schmeidl 2010; Maley 2011a: 131–132). A closer study of the social environment in which he was operating might have prompted a degree of caution. Matiullah

is a member of the Popalzai tribe of Durrani Pushtuns. The favouritism shown to him has had the effect of alienating non-Popalzai Durrans, non-Durrans, and non-Pushtuns alike. While Australian forces remained deployed, the situation was unlikely to spiral out of control, but fireworks are likely as the international presence winds down.

Finally, those militaries that wish ultimately to extract themselves with some dignity from a theatre of operations may find it useful to understand how to co-opt diverse local actors into the wider projects that militaries are seeking to advance (see Kitzen 2012). If this is done successfully, it may ease the process of exit.

### Challenges for the social sciences and humanities

When one embarks on the study of host-nationals, a number of disciplinary approaches are available. One obvious point of departure is provided by the lessons of *political science*. In a narrowly institutional sense, political science may not offer that much to the soldier in the field, although an understanding of the wider political context within which ordinary Afghans position themselves is undoubtedly important. Where political science is valuable in particular is in focusing attention on power relations as a central dimension of people's lives. In highly institutionalised political systems, such as one finds in developed Western democracies, ordinary people may be able to live their lives comfortably without paying too much attention to power relations. In Afghanistan by contrast, where individuals have struggled for decades to cope with the consequences of institutional failure, an understanding of power relations and dynamics is likely to be crucial to people's capacities to navigate the complexities of everyday life. This applies not only to the power relations in particular localities, but also to the complex interactions between the centre and periphery in Afghanistan, since formal institutional maps may do little to capture the reality of power exercised on the basis of personal relationships and affinities (see Barfield 2010: 302–311).

In the analysis of social power, *social anthropology* is at least as important a discipline as political science, and it is perhaps not surprising that a number of the most significant writers on Afghanistan have been anthropologists: Louis Dupree, Pierre Centlivres, Robert Canfield, Nazif Shahrani, Ashraf Ghani, Thomas Barfield, and Alessandro Monsutti. The writings of such scholars are perpetually instructive, and a number of them remain major contributors to our understanding of contemporary Afghanistan. Social anthropology, by focusing on the multifarious interactions of rules, roles, relations and resources, can supply more-nuanced accounts of complexity than the macro approach of political science has to offer. The difficulty for social anthropologists is that their research methods tend to rely on extensive fieldwork and interaction with the populations that they study. While Afghanistan now provides wonderful opportunities for research of this kind, all too often the perceived risks of allowing young researchers into the field, combined with the difficulty of obtaining insurance to provide them with protection, prompts universities in particular to tread with excessive caution when considering whether to give staff or students permission to travel (see Maley 2011b).

Another approach, arguably a subset of social anthropology, involves the detailed study of *culture*. The idea of culture is a complex one, and embraces not only beliefs that are held within a population – mythological, religious, ideological, historical or scientific – but also the embodiment of beliefs in literature, tradition and conventions, norms and rules. Since 2001, both qualitative and survey analyses have provided valuable insights into the beliefs and attitudes of ordinary Afghans. Nonetheless, because the idea of culture is complex, it needs to be handled with caution when one is attempting to explain social and political behaviour. First, it is dangerous to assume that the shape of social and political institutions is simply an outgrowth of

pre-existing cultural patterns. In the real world, a range of causal factors can contribute to the shape which institutions take, and culture is only one of these (Pateman 1971). Second, all too frequently one encounters analyses which looked at the behaviour of political actors as evidence of culture. This runs the risk of contaminating with circularity one's attempted explanation of behaviour: if one is seeking to explain behaviour, one cannot do so by reference to an explanatory variable of which behaviour is an element. Third, within any given territory, there may be a multiplicity of cultural patterns on display. This is certainly the case in Afghanistan, with over 50 identified ethnic groups (see Orywal 1986; Schetter 2003), and many other cross-cutting bases of networking and stratification. This can make the use of a single 'cultural advisor' somewhat perilous, no matter how insightful a particular individual may be (see Sieff 2013).

Since beliefs and attitudes tend to be communicated in natural language, there is much to be gained through the study of the *semantics of the languages of host-nationals*. This is particularly a problem for militaries, since the interpreters whom they are typically in a position to recruit may well be competently bilingual for the discussion of most routine matters, but need not necessarily have much sense of the complex cultural scripts that can pervade the subtleties of linguistic interaction (see Wierzbicka 1997, 1999; Goddard 2011). Afghan languages are rich with metaphor, allusion, and embodied cultural mores (Kieffer 2011), and can usefully be mined to shed light on the complexities of the micro-societies in which they are used. Interpreters can also have interests of their own to protect, and these can distort messages in both directions. There is no easy solution to this problem, but it pays to bear it in mind.

Finally, one should never lose sight of the importance of what Michael Polanyi called 'tacit knowledge'. As Polanyi famously put it, 'we can know more than we can tell' (Polanyi 1966: 4). The capacity of the mind to integrate in a subliminal fashion a whole range of data-points underpins this insight. In this vein, the eminent political scientist T.H. Rigby counselled that one should never underestimate the value of simply wandering around to pick up the 'smell and feel' of a situation. But that said, this is not a capacity that comes readily to beginners. It is readily detectable in specialists on Afghanistan who have spent years studying the country and its people. It is much harder to inculcate in a young soldier on his or her first deployment, especially if security concerns throw up barriers to interaction with ordinary people. Here, the impact of so-called 'green on blue attacks' stretches well beyond the immediate victims: by eroding trust, such attacks undermine the ability of foreign soldiers to get to know the people with whom they are working.

### The burden of history

Hegel's warning that the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only when dusk is falling highlights the dangers of seeking to learn too much from history. Nonetheless, history can be a useful companion when one seeks to make sense of complex circumstances that confront one in unfamiliar environments. But that said, the so-called 'lessons of history' do not come neatly packaged. Indeed, Sir Karl Popper famously observed that history has no meaning, but he went on to say that we can give it a meaning (Popper 1966: vol. 2: 278). The challenge is to make sure that we do not draw erroneous lessons or rely on false analogies (see Khong 1992).

Afghanistan is unfortunate to have been oversupplied by its history with analogies that can easily mislead. Its history is one littered with military encounters. The cover of a recently published (and estimable) book states that the 'so-called first war of the twenty-first century actually began more than 2,300 years ago when Alexander the Great led his army into what is now a sprawling ruin in northern Afghanistan' (Holt 2012). The nineteenth century witnessed a number of military encounters between Afghan and foreign forces that have shaped perceptions



of the Afghan theatre of operations to this day. The First and Second Anglo-Afghan Wars of 1839–1842 and 1879–1880 seem in particular to have left a substantial burden of preconceptions and images that can surface with little notice in Staff College presentations on Afghanistan and in lectures by military historians. On a number of occasions, this writer has sat through such lectures awaiting with mounting trepidation the inevitable resort to the verse of Rudyard Kipling: ‘When you’re wounded and left on Afghanistan’s plains . . .’. There is of course no harm in learning the history of earlier wars in Afghanistan, but one needs to show appropriate caution. Robert Johnson, concluding an excellent study of Afghanistan’s military history, warns that ‘we should be extremely circumspect of the historical record as a means to glean lessons for current operations’ (Johnson 2012: 301).

In particular, there are dangers in adopting approaches to Afghanistan which mirror the worst excesses of Orientalism. The idea of Orientalism is a complex one (Said 1978; Barkawi and Stanksi 2012), but at its most basic it involves reducing complex actors to stereotypical ‘others’ to whom notions of rationality are alien given the potency of the raw emotions and drives that are seen as shaping their behaviour. Such thinking can prompt analyses of the most spurious kind. For example, the conflict between 1992 and 1995 that caused ruinous damage to the southern suburbs of Kabul was frequently depicted as an inexplicable upsurge of ethnic hostility, profoundly irrational, and evidence that Afghans were congenitally prone to the reckless use of violence as a way of achieving their objectives. One writer described it as a ‘vicious squabble’ (Fergusson 2010: 9), as if the conflicting parties were ill-disciplined children. But such an interpretation was always suspect (see Maley 2009: 162), and a recent meticulous study shows how the behaviours of the various combatant parties were strongly political in character and reflected a high degree of rationality (Christia 2012: 57–100).

Orientalist views of Afghanistan do the country a disservice by depicting it as frozen in time, with any attempt at moving forward doomed to inevitable failure. Those who cleave to this view may well be influenced by the well-documented failure of communist modernisers in the late 1970s to have any positive effect on the environment in which they were working. This, however, is an unfortunate analogy, which de-authenticates the current generation of young Afghan modernisers who are very different from their predecessors. The modernisers of the 1970s were driven by a crude variant of Marxist ideology. By contrast the modernisers of the twenty-first century are very much a product of globalisation. Processes of globalisation have affected Afghanistan more dramatically than virtually any other country in the world. Below the surface, Afghanistan is experiencing profound changes. An Asia Foundation survey in 2012 found that 80 per cent of respondents had a functioning radio in their households, 71 per cent a mobile phone, and 52 per cent a television, with television access reaching 40 per cent even in rural areas (Asia Foundation 2012: 171). Furthermore, as of 2010, an estimated 68.3 per cent of the population was under the age of 25 (Afghan Public Health Institute 2011: 19). Militaries would do well to avoid images of Afghans as white-bearded tribal leaders disconnected from the wider world.

### Human terrain analysis

One approach to the study of host-nationals has been embodied in the so-called ‘human terrain system’ (HTS). In an article published in the *Military Review* in 2005, McFate and Jackson argued that the US Department of Defense ‘should create and house an organization of social scientists having strong connections to the services and combatant commands. The organization should act as a clearinghouse for cultural knowledge, conduct on-the-ground ethnographic field research, provide reachback to combatant commanders, design and conduct cultural training;

and disseminate knowledge to the field in a useable form' (McFate and Jackson 2005: 20). An initial pilot study was followed by the deployment to Afghanistan of a first team in February 2007, and in 2010 the programme was made permanent. The achievements of the human terrain system are difficult to assess: there has been no serious, comprehensive open-source appraisal of its achievements. Two major problems, however, severely compromised the human terrain team approach.

First, the impetus to develop a human terrain system for Afghanistan ran into major difficulties in the sphere of professional ethics. Like many social sciences, the discipline of anthropology has developed an elaborate code of ethics to govern the responsibilities of members of the anthropology profession in their dealings with the subjects of their research. Shortly after the first human terrain teams were deployed in Afghanistan, the American Anthropological Association issued a statement criticising the Human Terrain System Project. The statement raised a number of concerns, but three were particularly potent. First, it noted that 'anthropologists work in a war zone under conditions that make it difficult for those they communicate with to give "informed consent" without coercion, or for this consent to be taken at face value or freely refused'. Second, it noted that as members of HTS teams, 'anthropologists provide information and counsel to U.S. military field commanders. This poses a risk that information provided by HTS anthropologists could be used to make decisions about identifying and selecting specific populations as targets of U.S. military operations either in the short or long term'. Third, it noted that because 'HTS identifies anthropology and anthropologists with U.S. military operations, this identification – given the existing range of globally dispersed understandings of U.S. militarism – may create serious difficulties for, including grave risks to the personal safety of, many non-HTS anthropologists and the people they study' (American Anthropological Association 2007; see also Forte 2011). All these propositions could be debated, but they proved sufficient to scare many professional anthropologists away from any engagement with the program.

Second, declining security in Afghanistan has made it harder for human terrain teams to operate with any degree of safety, or without endangering their interlocutors (Gezari 2009). To the extent that human terrain teams become associated in the minds of ordinary Afghans with wider military operations, the likelihood diminishes that ordinary people will cooperate actively with the teams if the ultimate outcome of the struggle for Afghanistan's future remains uncertain. Furthermore, lives have been tragically lost within the teams themselves. In 2008, Michael Vinay Bhatia, a fine scholar with an excellent record of research (see Bhatia 2007; Bhatia 2008; Bhatia and Sedra 2008) was killed when the vehicle in which he was travelling struck an improvised explosive device in Khost. And in November 2008, Paula Loyd was doused with petrol and set on fire in the village of Chehel Gazi, and subsequently died of her injuries in January 2009 (Constable 2009). These deaths again have had the effect of undermining the appeal of programmes of this kind for professional anthropologists: there are safer ways in which those interested in Afghan society can pursue their interests.

### **Intelligence analysis**

Another device for enhancing an understanding of host-nationals is military intelligence. This has a very long history in the operations of states, with Queen Elizabeth I having drawn on an expert intelligence service headed by Sir Francis Walsingham. In modern times, intelligence has underpinned the planning of military operations at both strategic and tactical levels, and in addition, resources have been effectively devoted to deception operations and counterintelligence as partners of mainstream intelligence analyses. In a counterinsurgency environment,



understanding host-nationals is an important element of intelligence activity, differing from human terrain analysis principally through its reliance on permanent military personnel, whether uniformed or not, in contrast to contracted anthropologists and social scientists. Intelligence information comes in a number of different forms, including ‘human intelligence’, obtained from human sources, and signals intelligence, obtained through the interception of electronic communications.

While it is difficult to generalise, a critical analysis of US intelligence gathering in Afghanistan suggests that there has been significant room for improvement. In a January 2010 study, Flynn, Pottinger and Batchelor identified a number of systemic flaws in US intelligence capabilities. They opened with the following damning passage:

Having focused the overwhelming majority of its collection efforts and analytical brainpower on insurgent groups, the vast intelligence apparatus is unable to answer fundamental questions about the environment in which U.S. and allied forces operate and the people they seek to persuade. Ignorant of local economics and land-owners, hazy about who the powerbrokers are and how they might be influenced, incurious about the correlations between various development projects and the levels of cooperation among villagers, and disengaged from people in the best position to find answers – whether aid workers or Afghan soldiers – U.S. intelligence officers and analysts can do little but shrug in response to high level decision-makers seeking the knowledge, analysis, and information they need to wage a successful counterinsurgency.

(Flynn et al. 2010: 7)

They also highlight the insidious effects of new means of packaging information:

The format of intelligence products matters. Commanders who think PowerPoint storyboards and color-coded spreadsheets are adequate for describing the Afghan conflict and its complexities have some soul searching to do. Sufficient knowledge will not come from slides with little more text than a comic strip. Commanders must demand substantive written narratives and analyses from their intel shops and make the time to read them. There are no shortcuts. Microsoft Word, rather than PowerPoint, should be the tool of choice for intelligence professionals in a counterinsurgency.

(Flynn et al. 2010: 23–24)

There are ethical as well as technical concerns surrounding intelligence gathering as well. One recent press report alleges that women taking part in a sewing project were used without their knowledge to pinpoint the locations of Taliban dwellings (Kelly 2013). Such manipulation goes well beyond what would ever be permitted for academic researchers, and may help explain why many observers remain sceptical about the purposes that can motivate military attempts to study host-nationals.

### **Coping better**

The two previous sections paint a somewhat-dispiriting picture of achievement in the area of studying host-nationals in Afghanistan since 2001. While there is no magic solution to the

problems that have confronted human terrain analysis and intelligence gathering, there are a number of options available that deserve consideration as ways of improving performance on the ground.

First, longer deployments can enhance the opportunity for soldiers to develop a better understanding of the environment in which they are operating. This proved to be a serious problem with the so-called Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan. All too often, it was just at the point where trust was beginning to be established that a scheduled rotation of troops occurred, removing from the theatre of operations the very people that locals had at last been getting to know (Yaqub and Maley 2008: 10–11). Furthermore, short deployments compromise organisational memory, which can be critical for effective organisational performance (Mahler with Casamayou 2009: 205–207).

Second, there is a need for improved education and training for forces deploying to countries such as Afghanistan. A number of military forces have training programmes that incorporate discussion of cultural awareness, but these face a number of problems. There is no single ‘Afghan’ culture, but rather a range of diverse cultural practices that can be encountered in different parts of the country. As one observer has put it, ‘Afghanistan is home to different ethno-linguistic and tribal communities and each group adheres to and cherishes its unique traditions and way of life’ (Emadi 2005: 135; see also Nojumi et al. 2009). There is therefore a risk that if, for example, cultural awareness training has been conducted by people familiar with Tajik communities from the north, soldiers will be ill-prepared for deployment in areas where the population is more mixed.

Furthermore, the environment within which cultural awareness training takes place before troops are deployed differs in subtle ways from what they will encounter in the field. The Australian Federal Police, for example, has built an entire village near the headquarters of its International Deployment Group designed to simulate the circumstances that deployed police are likely to encounter when they are sent overseas, and training sometimes includes interaction with migrants and refugees who have come from the country in which the deployment is to occur. But there is an inevitable difference between the approach of those who are recruited to assist such endeavours, and real locals in a country such as Afghanistan. Afghans in Afghanistan are entangled in a complex power game which gives their interactions with international forces a strategic dimension. Foreigners invite manipulation by locals, especially if the foreigners are powerful but lack any deep understanding of what is going on around them. In addition, it is one thing to be told about cultural mores: it is another thing to respect them in practice (Nordland 2012), and if foreign forces are increasingly seen as occupiers rather than liberators or partners, their margin for error in cultural understanding will likely be very narrow.

Third, for reasons that have been obvious since the time of Socrates, it is important that there be structures of analysis that allowed different views about host-nationals to be advanced and contested. The danger in a theatre of operations such as Afghanistan is that information will be stove-piped, and that particular items of received wisdom will acquire a status within organisations and bureaucracies that they do not deserve. Skilled management of operations requires a flexible awareness of the operating environment, and this is not always easy to secure. In part, this is because political leaderships in the United States and within NATO have proved incapable of articulating a clear overarching vision for the mission, leaving personnel on the ground to muddle through in areas where strategic guidance is required. In such circumstances, oversimplified precepts can easily become a substitute for strategic logic. But it also reflects an ineluctable tension between hierarchy as an organisational principle within militaries, and the contest of ideas as a dominant principle within research communities. This is not an easy gap to bridge.

## Conclusion

The preceding sections of this chapter have documented a range of challenges in studying host-nationals, both for militaries in general, and for militaries in Afghanistan in particular. Military organisations may not be well trained or well structured to do a good job, and the complexity of the analytical tasks involved may overwhelm even the best of analysts. There are a range of identifiable steps that might be taken to address these problems, but the barriers to taking them may prove significant, and there is always the risk that by the time the need for more effective approaches is recognised, a mission may already be mired in controversy, which provides a less-than-perfect environment for seeking to overcome such deficits.

Is a fine-grained analysis of host-nationals always necessary? Arguably not. Although the idea of common sense is itself a complex one (Rosenfeld 2011), in some circumstances common sense may be all that one needs in order to sense approaching danger, especially at the strategic level, and direct oneself towards wiser pathways. As an example, the circumstances surrounding the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003 come to mind. No one should have been surprised when things began to go awry. Iraq had long been dominated by a Sunni Muslim minority, in a country where the majority of the population consisted of Shiite Muslims. The overthrow of the existing elite, followed by democratisation, required very careful handling. These changes held out the prospect of consigning the former rulers and their sectarian supporters to the position of a permanent minority, in circumstances in which for the new rulers and their associates, the temptation to engage in revenge would be all too understandable given the former regime's abominable record of human rights violations (see Hiltermann 2007). It was therefore blindingly obvious that the former elite would most likely engage in spoiler behaviour, something facilitated by its ready access to the weaponry of the Iraqi armed forces. One simply did not need to be a specialist on the culture, society or politics of Iraq to be able to identify this danger, and it was an indictment of the judgement of US political leaders that they seem not to have given it a moment's thought.

As an act of foolishness, this was on a par with invading Russia as winter approached, the mistake that proved catastrophic for Napoleon in 1812 and Hitler in 1941. And it was by no means an isolated case: the parallels with earlier strategic misjudgements in Vietnam are rather obvious (see Brodie 1973). In the real world, however, choices for armed forces in the field tend to be more complicated, with both risks and opportunities, both costs and benefits, being associated with the various options that one confronts. It is in this world of grey, where one does not enjoy the luxury of black-or-white choices, that the skills required for careful analysis of social complexity come into their own. As long as militaries inhabit a complex world, they will need the mental and analytical tools to cope with such complexity.

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