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Brothers and Sisters from Another Mother—Promoting Inter-cultural Understanding, Conflict Reduction, and Solidarity Among Partner Forces in the Sahel

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Abstract

The dynamics of war have changed markedly from conventional battlefield kinetic encounters to unconventional sub-threshold or asymmetric warfare, with combatants using new tactics and emergent technologies to gain a comparative advantage over their adversaries. In the face of such developments and mindful of globalized extremist challenges, we propose that fresh innovations should be encouraged with respect to the conventional training of international and African partner forces tasked with teaming up to engage security threats in the Sahel region. Accordingly, this article promotes a contemporary peacebuilding approach using a transformative, dialogical methodology that focuses on the promotion of greater inter-cultural understanding between local security forces and their external allies. We suggest that such an intervention is cost-effective, sustainable, adaptable, and replicable, insofar as it builds unity and shared understanding, and reduces direct and indirect violence (e.g., green-on-blue casualties and resentment toward different troops). It increases motivation and strengthens solidarity in the field to help partners work toward shared goals and enhanced operational effectiveness, which in turn results in conflict reduction and a more sustainable peace.

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The critically acclaimed film, *Tirailleurs*¹ tracks the forced enlistment of a father and son from West Africa in the French campaign during World War I. Those watching the original French language version as non-first language speakers might activate subtitles to assist in understanding. It is surprising, therefore, that when the voice of the protagonist commences, no subtitles come up. One might be forgiven for thinking that there is a bug in the system. Reaching for the non-responsive controls, if one does not speak Fulani, one might feel disorientated and thrown by the goings on in the opening scenes. In the absence of understanding the words, one is forced to gain information from observing human interactions, gestures, landscapes, and floral and faunal context.

The resultant chaos is intentional on the part of the director and proves immensely insightful. This is great cinema, for it corrals the viewer into empathizing with the enlisted father, who cannot speak French. Much like the viewer's helpless fumbling around to find the subtitles, he wanders around the encampment in a state of alienation, asking fellow African soldiers if anyone can speak his language, often to a frosty and mocking reception. One can imagine his angst at being forced into a context that he cannot decipher, relying on translation via interpreters for his survival and that of his young son, the latter being his priority. It is dramatically ironic, therefore, that the son, who is in the same infantry section, but who can speak French, is embraced by French officers and promoted for valor in the same contacts, while his father, the de facto hero, is marginalized.

The film encapsulates the esprit de corps of military solidarity as it explores the complexity of cultural pluralism in combat. Nobody escapes unscathed. Much like the subtitles of a film, a lingua franca among partner forces is mission critical in terms of preventing antagonism and partner-on-friendly fire, and beyond that, to promoting solidarity, such as between African and international partner forces in the Sahel.

This anecdote speaks directly to the topic of this article. Communicative limitations and resultant miscommunications in operational theaters can increase tensions, exacerbating divisions that lead to non-cooperation, resentment, an escalation in conflict, violence, and even death. Both authors have been to war; one as a humanitarian deployed in emergency coordination during active conflicts and the other as a soldier and officer in battlefield contacts. Both have worked on extremist movements in Africa and have experienced the opportunity cost of inattentiveness to inter-cultural communication and understanding.² Accordingly, this article seeks to offer a transformative approach to building relations between African and international partner forces such as those of the United Nations (UN), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), EU, UK, and US through dialogue and mutual understanding that will contribute to remedying the issue of their sustained cooperation and conflict reduction at a systemic level in the Sahel.

The Changing Character of War in the Anthropocene

The opening two decades of the twenty-first century have forced humanity to face up to some dramatic changes. Increasing concerns over human actions during the Anthropocene and their deleterious, irreversible consequences for life on Earth reached a crescendo at the 2022 climate meeting of the United Nations.³ If the bleak prognosis has anything to offer humanity, it is the certain knowledge that we are living in a changing world, burdened with significant costs of conflict.⁴ As the world changes, the nature of human activity and enterprise adapts and changes with the dynamic and fluid environments facing us.⁵

The context of war and peace appears to be no different. Classical definitions of war still hold sway; war still involves contention by force (see Cicero); it can still be regarded as a relation

between states (Jean-Jacques Rousseau), although today it often involves non-state actors and, to paraphrase Carl von Clausewitz, it remains defined as the continuation of politics by other means. Although force in contemporary times can manifest in terms that are radically different from those of the ancients (consider the reference to new technology below), the violent and belligerent nature of war remains constant, as does the non-violent and harmonious nature of peace.⁶ However, the dynamics violently propelling us in one direction, or gently nudging us in the other, have changed.

Almost twenty years ago, Hew Strachan pointed out that “getting to the heart of war is both less and more complex: less because the nature of war probably changes less over time than does its character (a point derived from Clausewitz), more because defining the nature of war is a complex, inter-disciplinary process. Philosophy is not a bad place to begin.”⁷ Strachan argues that with the second invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the so-called “war on terror,” certain sea changes became apparent in the character of contemporary war. He notes that their underlying causes remain traditional (ethnicity, religion, statehood) with regional more than global roots, concluding that “if war remains an adversarial business whose dynamics create their own consequences, which can themselves be unpredictable, its nature cannot change.” Using the challenges identified both in Iraq and Afghanistan, he points out that policy “has to adapt to the changing character of war, so that its aspirations remain in step with war itself and with what war can actually deliver.”⁸

Changes to the character of war arise, in no small part from the rapid onset of the fourth industrial revolution and boom in technology. In *What It Is Like To Go to War*, Karl Marlantes, a decorated Marine officer, Vietnam veteran, and alumnus of the University of Oxford and Yale University, puts it as follows:

It is bad enough that we send our youth off to fight our wars ill prepared for the spiritual and psychological consequences of entering combat. Add to this the fact that combat is becoming increasingly intermingled with the ordinary civilian world. With cell phones, Facebook, Twitter, air travel, and remoted controlled weaponry, the battlefield is less clearly defined and the bloody consequences of what modern weapons do can be completely masked. Consider the bomber crews that fly from the United States and back to bomb Iraq or Libya, telling their spouses and kids they’ll be gone a little longer than usual that day... Imagine the psychic split that must ensue from bringing in death and destruction from the sky on a group of terrorists... and then driving home from the base to dinner with the spouse and kids.⁹

Akin to this, Grégoire Chamayou, in *Drone Theory*, argues that “in many respects, the drone dreams of achieving through technology a miniature equivalence to that fictional eye of God.”¹⁰ However, as he argues, drones are not merely about panoptical surveillance but about lethal enforcement strikes, or what he refers to as “annihilation.” Citing the fear, insecurity, and terror unleashed on recipient communities, he proposes that drones effectively traumatize populations who are subjected to a constant state of hypervigilance, uncertainty, and stress over the prospects of being struck.¹¹

Cautioning against heavy-handed state interventions, Kim Hudson and Dan Henk note that, “from the earliest beginnings, violence and coercion have been features of the human condition,” while the contemporary difference is that, “much of the new security thinking reflects a profound pessimism about the willingness or ability of individual states to realise a comprehensive liberal security vision.”¹²

What has changed are the dynamics of a globalized society in the throes of the so-called fourth industrial revolution, coupled with the advance of the military-industrial complex. This is accompanied by the backsliding of all things liberal, which coincides with what Edward Luce describes as the retreat of Western liberalism as we advance toward the third decade of the third millennium.¹³ In light of this, a plethora of authors refer to alternatives such as “adaptive peacebuilding,” “developmental peace,” the “sustaining peace agenda,” and the “perpetual peacebuilding” paradigm.¹⁴

Ours represents an intentional attempt to promote peace, albeit within a context of conflict and protracted violence. To achieve our aim, we invoke the old Aristotelian maxim favored by scholastic philosopher Thomas Aquinas, “one and the same is the knowledge of opposites.”¹⁵ We will argue that in the face of war, advancing knowledge that promotes peace is critical and, moreover, that efforts to reduce conflict and promote lasting peace and harmony in the Sahel will rely largely on shared communications between African and international partner forces. Regrettably, as Christian Peterson et al. point out in their introductory chapter of *The Oxford Handbook of Peace History*, “many scholars prefer to ‘play war’ by producing more scholarship about the components of war than the dynamics of peace.”¹⁶ It is thus that we enter the realm of peace studies.

Peace Studies Gloss: Emergence Out of Twentieth Century Conflict and Twenty-first Century Evolution

The discipline of peace studies largely arose out of the post–World War II milieu, gaining momentum as the Cold War ensued. More specifically, within this area of studies, Oliver Ramsbotham et al. track the historical emergence of conflict resolution, noting its transfer from corporate and community contexts to civil and international conflicts and its uptake in the 1950s and 1960s in response to the existentialist threat posed by nuclear proliferation and superpower posturing.¹⁷

They suggest that while the 1970s on into the 1980s were characterized by the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, alternative dispute resolution, and protracted social conflicts such as that witnessed in Israel and Palestine,

By the 1980s, conflict resolution ideas were increasingly making a difference in real conflicts. [...] In the Middle East, a peace process was getting under way in which negotiators on both sides had gained experience both of each other and of conflict resolution through problem-solving workshops. In Northern Ireland, groups inspired by the new approach had set up community relations initiatives [...] In war-torn regions of Africa and South-East Asia, development workers and humanitarian agencies were seeing the need to take account of conflict and conflict resolution as an integral part of their activities.¹⁸

By comparison, Ramsbotham et al. note that the 1990s largely focused on reconstruction, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, with increasing democratization in former totalitarian states (such as apartheid South Africa) on the one hand and genocidal crimes against humanity on the other, such as that witnessed in Bosnia and Rwanda.

They note that as the singular global conflict of the Cold War diminished, internal conflicts along ethno-religious, linguistic, and self-deterministic fault lines erupted, leading to mercenary and militia violence against civilian populations. Simultaneously, major world leaders espoused peace and conflict resolution, with related development funding initiatives, while fresh challenges

arose from non-state conflicts, the hegemony of limited Western methods, and the applicability of cold-war conflict models to post–Cold War contexts.¹⁹

Hence, despite some pessimism raised toward the end of the twentieth century, the first decade of the third millennium largely commenced with an optimism about the prospects of globalization and world peace, ushering in the so-called “liberal peace” model.²⁰ However, just as the cosmopolitan approach to building and sustaining peace was coming to the fore, the attack on the Twin Towers at the World Trade Center in New York and attempted attack on the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 proved to be a seismic moment that bifurcated the paths ahead.²¹ The response to 9/11 triggered the so-called global war on terror, with radicalization both to the left and to the right.

While we in the academy were teaching about international humanitarian law and the emerging doctrine of the responsibility to protect (R2P), the United States and its allies unleashed an infraction upon the sovereignty of the state of Iraq, claiming as justification the still unsubstantiated claim of the presence of weapons of mass destruction. As the theater of military operations expanded into Afghanistan, newly emerging information and communications technology (ICT) and social media enabled the Arab Spring, which commenced with uprisings in Tunisia that rapidly spread across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). This tinderbox ignited neighborhood revolutions of the people against totalitarian and authoritarian rulers and was perhaps most visible in the Syrian conflict, which escalated into all-out war.

The demise of R2P coincided with the NATO airstrikes on Libya, which were seen as a dramatic overreach and undermining of advances in regional and sub-regional peacebuilding, such as that observed through the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).²² With the abandonment of principles such as subsidiarity and solidarity within geopolitical responses to conflict and violence, and the increasing skepticism about the West, Northern partners soon began to lose credibility, opening up spaces for alternative entrants to the fray. These included groups such as the Russian paramilitary Wagner Group and increasingly Islamic extremists such as Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and related terror groups.

One might argue that the death knell of liberal peacebuilding was the abrupt, chaotic, and catastrophic withdrawal of allied forces from Afghanistan in 2021. After two decades of intense international involvement, the citizens of that country were all but abandoned to their fate at the hands of the Taliban, who had made it abundantly clear in advance that they would not respect the norms of international law. Blatant violations of women’s and children’s rights, and those of minorities, make it clear that liberal democracy has sounded the retreat.

In its place, we are confronted with aggressive and totalizing territorial contestation and expansion, such as evidenced by Russia in Ukraine, for example, and the turn to conservative, nationalistic, and right-leaning governance in traditional democracies. All of this, undoubtedly, has been exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has reversed developmental advances, caused economic recession, and resulted in a world of uncertainty accompanied by angst, in light of the accelerating crisis surrounding climate change and planetary integrity.

In effect, this gloss over the arc of peace studies over the last eighty years suggests that the first decade of the twenty-first century saw increasing skepticism around the notions of conflict management and resolution, with critical interrogation suggesting that the resumption of hostilities and recurring triggers might have been underestimated in the wave of enthusiasm around positive developments in global society at the end of the twentieth century.

Having witnessed the waning enthusiasm for modernist views on upwards and onwards progress, in a post-structuralist milieu, unfolding from the mid-1990s much more sensitivity toward the ebb and flow of conflict ensued.²³ Accordingly, instead of seeing the process of conflict resolution as a tick-box exercise, Johan Galtung suggests the following: “By *peace* we mean the capacity to transform conflicts with empathy and creativity, without violence; a never-ending process.”²⁴ From the early 2000s, increasing attention was paid to the nuanced difference in approach between conflict resolution and conflict transformation, whereby some practitioners, such as Hugh Miall, Oliver Ramsbotham, and Tom Woodhouse sought to promote extensions between the two, while others such as John Paul Lederach saw clear differences.²⁵

As Ramsbotham et al. point out,

This broad view of conflict transformation is necessary to correct the misperception that conflict resolution rests on an assumption of harmony of interests between actors, and that third-party mediators can settle conflicts by appealing to the reason or underlying humanity of the parties. On the contrary, conflict transformation requires real changes in parties’ interests, goals or self-definitions. These may be forced by the conflict itself, or may come about because of intra-party changes, shifts in the constituencies of the parties, or changes in the context in which the conflict is situated. Conflict resolution must therefore be concerned not only with the issues that divide the main parties but also with the social, psychological, and political changes that are necessary to address root causes.²⁶

Our colleague Geoff Harris, writing on war, conflict, and peacebuilding in Africa, regards conflict as inevitable and defines it as an “incompatibility of needs and interest between individuals and groups,” noting that it can be ignored or managed, resolved and “albeit not commonly, transformed.” On his reading, “conflict transformation concerns the relationship between the parties and is likely to involve truth, justice, mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation.”²⁷ He notes how a lack of responsiveness to conflict can spill over into direct violence or other indirect or less obvious forms such as structural or cultural violence (cf. Galtung).

Finally, authors such as Nicholas Ross and Mareike Schomerus remind us of the ongoing gap between policy and practice.²⁸ Despite the signaling of reform in the United Nations and notable efforts by various UN agencies, this remains challenging for the sustainable implementation and promotion of peace.²⁹

Transformative Learning and Ecosystems Theory

Given the theoretical evolution of peace studies as a whole, and mindful of the shift in nuance within applied conflict studies from management and resolution to transformation, it is possible to discuss the approach adopted by the International Centre of Nonviolence (ICON) at the Durban University of Technology, South Africa. ICON engages the study of conflict and violence, along the spectrum from negative peace, often known as “the silencing of the guns” or “the absence of violent conflict” to positive peace, whereby notions such as reconciliation, restoration, lasting social harmony and sustained well-being are explored. The very action of moving from negative to positive peace entails transformation. ICON undertakes this work both in contexts of direct violence and indirect violence.

As such, ICON’s work embraces two complementary theoretical paradigms, namely transformative learning and ecosystems theory. The notion of transformative learning hinges on

the relationship between encouraging critical reflection, and the nexus between directed thought and applied action. Efforts in this area were pioneered by Jack Mezirow.³⁰

For Mezirow, a defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience. For some, any uncritically assimilated explanation from an authority figure will suffice. But in contemporary societies we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgments, and feelings of others. Facilitating such understanding is the cardinal goal of adult education. Transformative learning develops autonomous thinking.³¹

Picking up on Mezirow,³² Christopher Blundell et al. note that, “frames of reference, which form through experience, are used to categorize experiences and interpret new information,” becoming “the basis for habits of mind, which are broadly orientating ways to think, feel and act.”³³ Such frames of reference are powerful influencers of behavioral change and can be applied from intra-individual through to societal levels or systems.

As Periklis Pavlidis recognizes, the active shaping by human beings of their living conditions, as well as the conscious transformation of social relations, are closely connected with the critical distancing from the surrounding prevailing reality, with the understanding of its internal contradictions and therefore, with the perception of the potential and prospects of its evolution. Cultivation, therefore, of our ability to think dialectically, concerns not only our thought but our practical activity as well.³⁴

To this end, we adopt a transformative approach within the following conceptual frame, namely ecosystems theory as initiated by Urie Bronfenbrenner and subsequently developed.³⁵ He suggested that human development is significantly influenced by the interactions that the individual being shares with their surrounding physical and social ecology, as evidenced within and across four systems: micro, meso, exo, and macrosystems. Initially, Bronfenbrenner developed his theory with children and was concerned with their self-other interactions on ontogenesis, but now it is applied to diverse contexts to assist with adaptive and optimal development across the lifespan.

Galtung, likewise, refers to four levels of organization of “the human condition” (micro, meso, macro, and mega), noting that the center of gravity of societies shifts over time from a closed to an open approach to being. Referring to four stages, he argues for a shift from intolerance to tolerance, then to dialogue, and finally to *mutual learning*, which in his opinion, “holds the key to the future.”³⁶ Indeed, with efforts to curb extremisms, which themselves at base level reflect a societal reversal, namely, a lack of dialogue, lack of tolerance, and return to intolerance, serious attention must be invested to advance mutual learning between African and international partner forces.

Thus framed, we can move to discuss how such an approach to the reduction of conflict and violence can be enabled by undertaking a process of transformative learning, within a relevant setting, as informed by our suggested approach, namely conducting it within a systems context. Effectively, this entails promoting the notions of tolerance, dialogue, and mutual learning for transformation at the individual, small group, larger group, and collective levels. For this we shall shortly turn to a discussion of the promotion of inter-cultural understanding among partner forces in the Sahel.

First, however, it is helpful to consider Robert Scales’s theory of four world wars, which aptly reinforces the need for attentiveness to the changing dynamics of war: the First World War was the chemist’s war, the second was the physicist’s war, the third (or Cold War) was the information theorist’s war, and the fourth will be the behavioral scientist’s war.³⁷ He writes:

World War IV will cause a shift in the classical centers of gravity from the will of governments to the perceptions of populations. Victory will be defined more in terms of capturing the psycho-cultural rather than the geographical high ground. Understanding and empathy will be important weapons of war. Soldier conduct will be as important as skill at arms. Culture awareness and the ability to build ties of trust will offer protection to our troops more effectively than body armor.³⁸

Recognizing this keystone of culture, Francois Vreÿ, Abel Esterhuyse, and Thomas Mandrup suggest that despite military culture being critically important for military effectiveness, it has been neglected due to three primary factors, namely negative perceptions of armed forces, dated literature, and largely external sources with little African input.

They cite the South African Defence Force (SADF) Military Dictionary, which defines culture as, “the accumulated total of a group’s knowledge, skills, beliefs, traditions and artefacts, usually related to a period of time,” noting that, irrespective of how it plays out, military culture “directs, shapes, informs and provides the context to every single military action, whether of an organizational or operational nature, and irrespective of how big or small such action is. There is a direct link between military culture and those factors which ensure success.”³⁹

Mindful of the decisiveness of culture and the key importance of promoting empathy and understanding through cultural awareness and building relationships that are based on trust, we now approach the topic of African and international partner forces that engage extremists in the Sahel.

Understanding Partners’ Cultures in the Fight Against Extremism

The recent withdrawal of French and European forces from Mali, after nine years on Operation Barkhane, and the suspension by the Nigerien junta of the US Nigerien Accord allowing a US presence in Niger, has dangerous ramifications for countering violent extremist organizations (C-VEOs), the prevention of human trafficking, the protection of civilians, defending women’s rights, setting the security conditions for jump-starting economies, and defeating exploitative corruption in the Sahel as a whole.⁴⁰

Military juntas have taken advantage of the gaps left by inept and corrupt leaders and replaced quasi democracies, autocracies, and oligarchies with military rule and sought new partners including mercenary organizations and allies that are less “rules based,” are content to ignore human rights, and do not encourage democratic rights values.⁴¹ Little has changed with concessions from mining and mineral rights being renegotiated with alternative competitors such as the Russian mercenary company Wagner Group and private military or security companies that have started taking over the training of Sahel security forces with little or no emphasis on human rights, justice pathways, countering human trafficking, and gender and child protection concerns.⁴²

What is evident, in cases such as the failure of the G5 Sahel coalition against jihadist insurgencies, is that Sahelian counter-extremism missions fail not because of a lack of tactical successes against the adversaries but rather due to a lack of understanding of the politics, economics, social group dynamics, sensitivities, beliefs, and values of the partner forces and the countries’ populations.⁴³ Where one Western or international partner force fails, another is soon ready to fill the gap and exploit the opportunity to attack the former in the information space, especially if there is an easy and particularly emotive and sensitive historical counter-imperialist

narrative that detracts from the juntas own inability to deal with the problem of violent extremism, economic decline, political instability, and human rights transgressions.⁴⁴

It is critical for us to understand why international partnerships are either successful, enduring, and persistent or fail from the onset or even before they begin. Commanders, planning teams, and operators who will interact on the ground, whether that is in training or on operations, must understand that operational risks including those to mission, reputation, and life, lie within the clear understanding of each other's cultures, histories, developmental ecosystems, and overall needs and desired end states. Without this understanding, the partnership will not endure because the frictions that exist between cultures will be exacerbated by stresses of training and combat.

The Grave Error of Paternalism in Partnerships

The international partner forces must learn an alternative, more informed and empathetic style of diplomacy at every level, from strategy to tactics. This is necessary to avoid taking what is viewed by African partners as “a meddling, patronising, imperial or colonial approach,” one to which the post Françafrique (France's sphere of economic, political, and military influence in its former colonies) countries are particularly sensitive.⁴⁵ This is especially reinforced because many Malians continue to live with the system's negative impacts to their economy, political autonomy, and local development. This particular anti-French and wider anti-“imperialist,” read Western, sensitivity has been exploited and exacerbated by effective misinformation and disinformation campaigns, narratives, and information products by organizations such as Wagner Group and Russia's Africa Corps. Popular anti-colonial and anti-imperialist narratives are easy to propagate with populations looking conveniently to history to explain or blame the current complex situations on the past. These narratives have been used effectively by juntas and Chinese and Russian information operations to mobilize urban and rural unrest and protests against French, US, and European interests and reputation in the Sahel. An appropriate response does not necessitate being “hyper” alert to sensitivities, but rather turns on being situationally and culturally aware, empathetic, trained, and educated. Such a response avoids getting into situations that allow these sensitivities to manifest or where adversaries, actors, and competitors exploit a simple “demonization” narrative among a receptive marginalized and often impoverished audience.⁴⁶

Critical to this is an understanding of the differences between international forces that largely consist of northwestern European and North American individualist personnel interacting with highly collectivist Sahelian partner forces. Misunderstandings of this social group phenomenon are often the underlying cause of frictions, especially when culturally northwestern individualists who make up a significant proportion of peace keeping, peace support, and peace enforcement “coalitions of the willing” cannot understand why collectivists do not lead, make decisions, manage people and equipment, plan, or conduct operations in the same way that Westerners do.

For individualist partner forces there is no desire to keep the social grouping or community happy at the expense of output, transparency, fairness, and efficiency, whereas the collectivist Sahelians must ensure that their collective, ethnicity, tribe, clan, or family support each other, even when transparency, efficiency, and output are adversely affected. It is extremely difficult for international armies and security forces, who base their “measurement of effect” on “output,” to adapt their thinking to building relationships first. It takes considerable understanding, empathy, and behavioral change to manage and develop ways, means, and ends to deal with this dichotomy.

The Art of Understanding

The challenge of training Europeans and Americans to understand and to empathize with African partners is not insurmountable, but takes considerable development of the individual, team, and collective knowledge of the eco-behavioral ecosystems within which Sahelian partner forces develop, the civilian population's struggles and aspirations, the lenses through which the people see their history, politics, their economic constraints, their social groups and networks of influence, their beliefs and values, and their physical, psychological, and information environment.⁴⁷ Westerners must be taught how to develop high context communication skills or less direct and more meaningful implied verbal and nonverbal communication to foster a deeper understanding of the Sahelian partners' implied communication rather than relying on the more explicit communication so typical in NATO and UN security forces and armies.

This approach requires an interest in the individual and collective experiences of the Sahelian partner and an understanding of the completely opposite ecosystems of the people with whom they are partnering. Both parties must be taught how to manage the relationship and its associated behavioral dimensions and idiosyncrasies to prevent frictions. Creating training and education solutions that give both partners the knowledge, skills, experiences, and behaviors is challenging. More importantly, providing a viewpoint or lens similar to one's colleagues on the local or international partner force remains a difficult task both in terms of understanding each other's complex development as well as the politics, economics, social groups, networks, interests, and positions that affect the current operation. Both partners need to understand how each other's environment and immediate settings from family, education, and external influences have shaped the broader cultural values, laws, customs, and sensitivities.

Where Europeans and Americans want to take the lead and direct, they need to step back and allow the Sahelian partner to lead and make their own decisions while facilitating their progress against the insurgents, rather than fighting the insurgency for them. European and US governments must analyze the mistakes of Vietnam, Afghanistan, and now the Sahel and understand that the speculative model of trying to establish a proxy force based on European or American militaries and police forces may be flawed from the outset. Despite the common colonial experience of many African countries, the overarching *raison d'être* of these forces was the protection of the state, and this has remained unchanged since decolonization.

Doctrinally these forces remain the same with little change to structure, training, discipline, and attitudes toward the civil population and civic institutions. The Sahelian security model was designed to protect the few from the masses and not the masses from a complex insurgency. Little has been done to develop the methods of leadership, management, command, and control. Creating carbon copies of international armies that have long developmental histories as expeditionary forces supported by sophisticated command, control, logistics, planning, and intelligence will fail at the first hurdle if solely attempting to advance the core military business of operations in the absence of consideration of Sahelian social structures, politics, economics, beliefs, and values.

“Reading the room”—Communicating in the High Context

One of the most difficult transformative approaches to building trust between partners is understanding how different partners communicate and reflect, whether that is in the “low context” explicit style typical of Western partners who get straight to the point or talk about business or solutions, or in the “high context” implied style, relying on body language, gestures, non-verbal cues, storytelling, and understanding status and hierarchical relationships so typical of Sahelian

partners. US and European military personnel tend to get “straight to the point” and concern themselves with the facts of the matter known in the military as the BLUF or “bottom line up front” and the tangible output, desired effect, or product of a conversation. Westerners especially want to understand exactly what they need to do or get from the partner to solve a problem or understand an issue as quickly as possible and move on. Often international partner forces ignore the surrounding context, principals, history, and associated events in the past, which they see as superfluous to the issue at hand, looking only to the future and how to plan for the next situation.

There exists, within Western military theories of strategy, the Lykke strategy model, namely that everything can be solved quickly, expeditiously, and that the “ends (objectives), ways (concepts) and means (resources)” are clear.⁴⁸ This is not the case with many Sahelian partners for whom context, significant events, history, the internecine relationships of extended kith, kin, and influence are not only important but shape the current situation and the future. Without understanding this alternative perspective and context and acknowledging the importance of it to Sahelian partners, Western forces and governments will continue to misunderstand the intricacies of diplomacy and negotiation in a meeting with Sahelian partners where nothing is heard or said, but everything is implied and understood.

These two styles of communication mean that neither understands why the other either places so much emphasis on explicit information, or why the other implies what the desired end state is and leaves critical information unsaid. Unless the detail between the lines is comprehended by interpreters on both sides, it is difficult to understand what the other partner really means or wants from the relationship. This can prove to be detrimental to an enduring and persistent relationship where neither fully understands what the other values and believes in, or knows what their position and interests are.

Clearly the stress of conflict, political interests, and the fight for resources exacerbates the situation, making the pursuit of effective cooperation even more fragile especially when the ends are different. A good example of this is illustrated by the French experience in Mali. While the French end state was to contain, disrupt, or defeat the extremist threat to France’s interests, the Malian government (especially individuals in control of resources and mining concessions), intended merely to limit the extremists’ freedom of action and influence over their interests. Their ability to control those resources and create the conditions to enable them to generate personal wealth without interference was the end state, not necessarily the defeat of the extremists.⁴⁹ This quickly brought them into conflict with one another, where the French intended to train the Malians to act as a proxy force capable of containing the insurgency according to French doctrine, rather than promote the needs of the Malians, which were often diametrically opposed.

This inability to understand what either partner wanted in terms of objectives, output, or “ends” meant that in the high context world of the Sahel, where relationships are built on interpersonal trust, Malian military personnel valued enduring personal relationships with high context communication, while the French valued the ability of the Malians to produce the “solution” that they wanted the partner to deliver, before any relationship was built. Neither was able to meet the other’s needs, as neither understood what was required from the relationship and the end state. This would have a significant effect in the breakdown of the relationship and worse still, the pursuit of a peace. The civilian populations caught in between the factions would suffer the most from the breakdown.

Protecting Civilians, Women, Peace, and Security

Undoubtedly gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, and abuse is not solely committed by VEOs and has been perpetuated by armed forces, security forces, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) alike. International partner forces must develop a clear understanding of how Sahel partner forces perceive violence against civilians and “win over,” train, and educate sensitively the Sahel partner force, against illegal, unacceptable, and unprofessional military behavior. The difficulty lies in understanding what the tolerance threshold is for violence and illegal, unacceptable behavior, adjusting perceptions and educating against violence against civilians and women, while developing the partner forces’ mindfulness of international humanitarian law (IHL).

The challenge to the international partner is how to train and educate the African partner force to champion women, peace, and security and to develop gender mainstreaming in their organization, conduct of planning, training, and operations, and diversifying their personnel to ensure that they engage with women affected by conflict.⁵⁰ This is a difficult task especially when one considers that some cultures are more conservative in their approach to the emancipation and inclusion of women in the military and security forces. International partner forces must train their personnel and the partner force to understand and plan for the reality of gender issues in their mission.⁵¹

Unlike their own Western economies, international partner forces may encounter an African civilian population that may be at risk purely by carrying out their daily economic and domestic practices and pattern of life. Adults and children (and especially women and girls) are more vulnerable to the threat of extremist violence purely because their more traditional agrarian and domestic roles (traveling long distances, unguarded to collect water and firewood, going to school alone, attending markets or working in fields) makes them easy targets and exposes them to risk from gender-based violence, sexual abuse, intimidation, kidnapping, and ethnic targeting.

At the strategic, operational, and tactical levels, planners must consider the African gender perspective if they are to have a positive effect on stemming human rights violations. At the strategic level, planners must analyze the operational value of having a diverse gender range sewn into the force to be deployed, especially in countries where the female population is greater than the male population and more vulnerable to gender targeting. The presence of female officers and soldiers provides the force with the ability to train and operate alongside women in the partner force and to adapt to engage with, protect, and interact with the female population as well. Women as a force multiplier cannot be underestimated. Victims of gender-based violence and conflict-related sexual violence are anecdotally less likely to approach male soldiers than they are female soldiers.

The UN Security Council (UNSC) has specifically mandated UN peacekeeping operations and signatories to UNSC Resolution 1325 to address conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). Along with other mission substantive entities, the military component is responsible for proactively preventing CRSV, deterring perpetrators, protecting civilians, especially women and children, and neutralizing potential, impending, and ongoing CRSV threats.

To facilitate peacekeepers, police, and the military in carrying out these mandated tasks, the UN-CRSV Specialized Training Materials (STM) package was developed. These materials familiarize militaries with the concept of CRSV, clarify roles and responsibilities, and equip them with the required tools to proactively address CRSV in their operational environment. It is the international partner’s responsibility, as a signatory, to engage with the African partner force (some

of whom are signatories themselves) and provide training through these packages to educate, prevent, deter, report, and manage the response to CRSV.

Cultural Training against Strategic Failure

There is little evidence to suggest that Western forces spend sufficient time educating, training, and teaching their people at various levels, from the strategic “big government” top-level state departments, foreign affairs, diplomatic corps, national security, international policy, and operations departments down to the lowest tactical level soldier, to truly understand partners. The exception to the rule is characterized by deep subject matter experts who have had the experience of living in the country and learning the language and culture themselves.

Country and cultural knowledge, communications skills, behaviors, and experiential learning can all be delivered to some extent in an academic and practical environment, however teaching empathy with the partner force, understanding their ecosystems, education, how they learn, what they value, and their perspectives on others is critical to strategic, operational, and tactical success and must be learned over time and “on the job.”

That said even the “on the job” learning remains unmonitored, unevaluated, and unexploited. As an example, the failure of the Afghan National Army to prosecute a successful campaign against the Taliban post the withdrawal of US and multinational forces from tactical and operational responsibility suggests the following. Irrelevant of how carefully designed a strategy is, and how effective coalition forces are at the operational and tactical level, if a dependency on an external international partner force exists, it will never change a culture, but only a few behaviors and less so transfer any significant ability to carbon copy the organization and its outputs. Moreover, it will damage the host nation’s ability to conduct its own C-VEO response using its own resources and methods.

The example remains extant for the Sahelian model, where setting up a partner force supported by an inordinate amount of financial backing, technology, equipment, capability, and capacity that the local partner force cannot replicate, teaches false and unsustainable lessons to the international forces providing the assistance and sets up the partner force for inevitable failure.

“Wargaming” versus “Peacegaming” the Consequences

Fundamental to understanding a Sahelian partner force’s culture is spending time researching their motivations, interests, networks, influence, perceptions of what they need in terms of training, conduct of operations, and “what good looks like.” What the Sahelian partner “needs” and what the international forces assess is required for them in terms of “outputs” are often at loggerheads with each other. Negotiating the “middle ground” is key to success. How one achieves this often requires practicing with international forces and if possible, the Sahelian partner force in a tabletop exercise or “wargame” of scenarios with injects of disruptive activity, negotiation, frictions, or events that the international force would not anticipate or understand but that are common to the partner force’s culture, upbringing, levels of education, sensitivities, or lenses of experience.

Lessons learned from previous iterations of similar operations and training exercises like Exercise Flintlock should be used to shape the wargaming event.⁵² The aim is to inoculate both the international forces and the Sahelian partner forces, desensitize them and practice for occurrences that would normally cause friction and explore means, tools, methods, and strategies to overcome these issues. Conducting this sort of simulation of friction in a game while breaking down barriers, creating understanding, and building rapport is better than doing it “live” in the

training or operational environment where the risks are higher and the possibility of both divorcing themselves from working with the other more damaging.⁵³

Economy, Corruption, and Patronage

Evidence suggests that the conflict in the Sahel is firmly rooted in complex social, historic, economic, climate, agricultural, and political frustrations of the populations of the Sahel and not in easily recited violent extremist ideological reasons, which are popular in France, Europe, and the US.⁵⁴ Successful C-VEO strategies require a more holistic approach rather than a unilateral military solution, with analysis of the source of the conflict indicating that the fight for resources is a greater “push pull” factor in causing the conflict than religion alone.⁵⁵

In the Sahel where resources are limited, marginalized communities are economically repressed, agriculture is failing, and people are unable to generate income to sustain a living, especially as they are excluded from rentier patronage and a corrupt system based on mining and mineral extraction and the associated services. Inevitably VEOs fill the gap and provide economic alternatives as well as forms of social mobility, whether that consists of trafficked women and girls, slaves, cattle, camels, weapons, food, fuel, or drugs. In Europe and the US, graft, corruption, nepotism, and patronage are seen as undermining to a free and fair economy, while in the Sahel systems they may be the only means by which some are able to sustain their families where little economic activity and welfare exists.⁵⁶

Interfering in Sahelian economic practices of corruption, patronage, and nepotism, especially around services and contracts that support international forces’ camps and sustainment may have the opposite effect and turn the population against international forces irrespective of how good the intentions are. Sensitive and alternative ways and means to spread resources and opportunities without encouraging corruption must be practiced, with commensurate education imparted to international partner forces to avoid any cultural frictions over sensitive economic practices that negatively impact host nation soldiers’ families financially.

Awareness of the economic desperation of Sahelians and the system is imperative to a sensitive approach to activities that could further undermine economic stability. Treating the symptoms of conflict, i.e., the violence associated with VEOs, does nothing to address the real underlying causes, which sit firmly in the economic sphere. It is important for international partner forces to understand that their role, within this conflict, is a stabilizing factor but not the solution, without which, real economic growth cannot be jump-started and sustained.

Conclusion

This article has advocated for the critical necessity of inter-cultural understanding between international partner forces and African forces engaging extremist threats in the Sahel. After some preliminary engagement on the changing character of war in the current era and the emergence of contemporary peace studies out of war and post-conflict reconstruction, the notion of transformative learning was advanced and located within ecosystems theory, for the purpose of conflict reduction and advancement of peace.

As has been discussed in the case of the Sahel, culture, strategy, and success are intricately and decisively intertwined. To ignore this is to risk jeopardizing human lives. Understanding Sahelian partners’ sensitivities, their complex socioeconomic and political struggles, and the deadly intricacies of the C-VEO conflict remains one of the most complex challenges facing

African and international partner forces. This is especially the case in the absence of significant investment in culturally sensitive training and education.

Indeed, training can mitigate the risk of cultural faux pas and may prevent some frictions, but ultimately it is the responsibility of the international and host nation partner forces to build rapport, knowledge on each other's unique styles of leadership, contextual communication, and management of both people and material. Without a deeper understanding of people and the conflict dynamics and context by each and every actor from the strategic to the tactical, any foray into the region is inevitably on a path to failure.

Accordingly, Hudson and Henk propose that

Military education emphasizes critical times and places at which concentrated effort can be directed to achieve decisive results – the tactician's *schwerpunkt*. The challenge here is to broaden perspectives to apply this expertise to decisive results involving diverse communities of actors in a culturally complex environment – to seek a social *schwerpunkt*, the outcome of which is human well-being, harmonious human relations in general and productive civil-military relations in particular. Of particular value would be senior security-sector officials able to visualize and pursue ends as broad as self-sufficient societies able to peacefully resolve internal differences with mutually advantageous linkages to the wider international community.⁵⁷

This social *schwerpunkt*, cross-cultural competence, rests on a significant challenge, namely “the expectation that security-sector personnel successfully perform their duties in circumstances of significant cultural complexity that include differing organizational cultures and members of different nationalities and people-groups... rendered more complex by world-view differences often encountered within larger societies, reflecting differences of religious belief, class, generation, gender and similar factors.”⁵⁸ To address this, perspective-taking, suspended judgment, and ‘cultural filtering’ of verbal and non-verbal communications across cultural boundaries is required.

In all of this, they propose, as do we, that relationship-building is mission critical. If you want peace, prepare for a mutual understanding of the other, which socially, economically, and ethically represents a much better longer-term investment than preparing for war or for the related costs of conflict.⁵⁹

To advance this pressing endeavor, the last word of the current article but opening move of the way forward is provided by the recently deceased Professor Johan Galtung on the importance of relationality to peace culture and the measure of our humanity:

Violence and war, conflict, and peace, all have one thing in common: they are relational. Violence takes place between perpetrator and victim, war between belligerents, conflict between goals held by actors and by implication between actors, peace between actors, as a peace structure, with a peace culture. The actors may be individuals or collectivists; either way, the basic measure of peace is what happens to human beings, the extent to which their basic needs and basic rights are met. *Homo mensura*: man is the measure of all things (Protagoras).⁶⁰

Notes

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