

# Cultural Awareness in Modern Warfare

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*The international events of recent years have pointed to the fact that the role of the correlation and relationship between cultural awareness and the armed forces are much more important than as previously thought, and the analysis of the cultural background of the adversary can greatly help defeat the enemy and understand their motivations in modern conflicts. Today's confrontations are not only about the use of physical force, but also about the clash of cultural narratives and identities. The better we understand the cultural aspect, the better we can provide resources to learn about the enemy's cultural background, and the faster we can find weak points and use them as leverage to develop a successful strategy. The role of cultural awareness in modern warfare should not be underestimated. The presence of cultural factors can also be discovered during the recent Russian–Ukrainian war, which can be analysed not only as a traditional clash of forces, but also as a cultural and historical clash of the two countries.*

**Keywords:** cultural awareness, culture war, ethnocentrism, anthropology, military

## Cultural awareness

International relations are not only about politics and decision making, but they also have a great impact on the lives of people all around the world. International relations play a major role in shaping our world today. It is a broad, dynamic, and multidisciplinary field encompassing various social, economic, and political interactions among sovereign states and non-state actors. These relationships are essential in defining the complex interactions among the many players in today's world. It involves the analysis and comprehension of the complex relationships among states in addition to the factors shaping these interactions, such as cultural differences, economic interests, geography, as well as political ideologies.<sup>2</sup>

In an increasingly complex global environment, the connection between cultural awareness and military force has opened up new dimensions in warfare. Political and military leaders are now facing the challenge to deal with armed conflicts from

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a new perspective that recognises the role of cultural context, values and identity in the development, as well as resolution of conflicts. In order to gain insight into the background of 21<sup>st</sup> century conflicts, it is necessary to have a precise understanding of the depth of cultural differences. We all come from a culture that programs the individual and determines how to interpret social cues, behaviour and relationships, which make a culture, a group, or a nation unique. Culture can vary throughout time and space, and the different aspects of our own culture affect us more than it affects others.<sup>3</sup> In order to understand cultural awareness, a key step is to realise how culture impacts us all and how it influences people's views of the world.

Cultural awareness is the ability to become a conscious observer and thus being mindful of the similarities and differences among cultural groups.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, such a mindset, which can be learnt, provides the possibility to analyse the decisions of another person, group, or nation in such a way that their motivations are comprehensible. This can mean a strategic advantage during the planning process of military operations. In the field of social sciences, it is cultural anthropology that deals with the potentials of cultural awareness, since the understanding of the distinctions of a foreign culture is essential for the effective study of a society. Cultural awareness is based on such a fundamental respect that is inevitable to examine a stranger's background and perspective. Without respect and humility, it is impossible to understand subtle differences, which, in some cases, are the key to comprehend the entirety of a culture in a way it is also present in wars. Without mutual respect between opponents, it is impossible to either defeat the enemy or end the war.

## **The importance of cultural background in military operations**

Understanding cultures and societies is crucial in post-conflict stability and support operations,<sup>5</sup> peacekeeping and nation-building interventions, all of which require close and occasionally long-term interactions between people of other cultures and the Western militaries. In addition, the success of UN and NATO military operations requires that not only should soldiers become experts on the culture of their adversaries, but also their allies, civilian local workers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), international organisations (IOs), etc., since effective cooperation in a multicultural environment is only attainable by the development and use of these skills on a daily basis.<sup>6</sup>

In modern conflicts, cultural awareness is an increasingly significant factor of military operations. The more culturally different the enemy is from the civilian population, the more important it is for the military to understand the foreign society and the cultural background of both the locals as well as the enemy to ensure operational success. Cultural awareness can reduce friction and conflicts among people from different cultures in the area of operations, and improve the military's ability to accomplish its mission by gaining

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<sup>3</sup> GILBERT et al. 2007 12.

<sup>4</sup> GOODE et al. 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Stability and support operations (SASO).

<sup>6</sup> WUNDERLE 2006: 15.

insight into the intentions of civilian groups living there, thus enabling military leaders to go beyond such limitations as ethnocentrism.

Ethnocentrism, as a reference system and a way of thinking, has a great influence on the military mindset and on the judgment of cultures during military operations. It represents a real threat in operational areas, like the one we encountered in Afghanistan, in addition to the possibility of negatively influencing subsequent cooperation. Over the course of history, several cases have been recorded when certain military leaders attempted to interpret the actions and motivations of the enemy based on their own cultural norms. However, those interpretations turned out to be false and thus claimed human lives. As one sees it, these casualties could have been prevented by providing correct information.

Ethnocentrism is the judgement of different value systems (norms, customs, world views, lifestyles) through our own lens based on our own cultural values with the direct consequence of positively or negatively discriminating everything unusual. It is common that this evaluation is based on the preconception that our own cultural values are superior to that of other ethnic groups. Ethnocentrism is a characteristic of each and every nation in some form, or the other, and to a certain extent, it is even necessary, since social cohesion is unimaginable without a healthy national consciousness. Excessive ethnocentrism, however, can be devastating.<sup>7</sup>

Ethnocentrism is a phenomenon we frequently encounter during military conflicts, when people, who identify with a certain culture, ethnicity, ideology or religion, organise themselves into different groups, and at a certain level of the war, it is the clash of these cultures that can be observed. Although ethnocentrism is often debatable, it plays an important role in conflicts. Therefore, it is necessary to understand its significance and effects in warfare. The respect and preservation of cultural diversity is not an easy task in a multicultural environment. The risk of cultural insults has become an integral part of our daily lives, while prejudice, intolerance and humiliation can have serious consequences for individuals, communities, and societies. When inadequate attention is paid to cultural sensitivity or understanding in a society, it poses a risk of people developing stereotypes and prejudices about other cultures, which often leads to cultural insults. Offensive comments, mockery of cultural symbols or traditional garment can cause a significant amount of tension and can break the bonds between different communities within a society.

The cultural characteristics and mindset of a nation have a great influence on the outcome of war. A culture comprises various factors including language, religion, history, values and beliefs, which influence the individuals' and a groups' perception of the world, interpretation of events and interactions with others. By understanding different cultures, nations can foster mutual acceptance and respect, reduce misunderstanding and strengthen cooperation in addressing global challenges.<sup>8</sup> During military operations, cooperation is even more vital, and it is a must to cooperate with not only foreigners, but also with own subordinates.

As we can see, ethnocentrism has both positive, as well as negative effects. One negative consequence, which I have already briefly written about, is the ethnocentric

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<sup>7</sup> KISDI 2012: 11.

<sup>8</sup> KHAN et al. 2020.

mindset, as a result of which another culture and identity becomes a matter of indifference. Consequently, the warring parties will not understand and respect each other, despite the fact that understanding the enemy is essential to its defeat, as the development of a strategy requires consideration of the enemy's possible actions and response to the use of force. Furthermore, culture and language are the primary segments of influence, so it is absolutely necessary to hire experts who are aware of the depths of the foreign culture, or are ready to thoroughly familiarise themselves with it. Furthermore, one of the greatest dangers of ethnocentrism is prejudice, which greatly influences a soldier's actions in the operational area. Based on assumptions, prejudice distorts our thinking, thus increasing our ethnocentric judgment, which leads to negative consequences. Ethnocentrism also has a long-term result, namely the traumas resulting from injuries, which remain for generations in the injured culture long after the war is over.

Increased attention is to be paid to the development of cultural awareness throughout military training and education. In order to overcome ethnocentrism, it is important to develop cultural sensitivity with the help of cultural specialists. The discipline that is able to reveal the differences between cultures and present them with comparative methods is Cultural Anthropology. The personnel of the Hungarian Armed Forces often have to communicate with dozens of foreigners in English or French in a multicultural environment abroad where they operate. Such circumstances often cause tension, and if we miss to prepare the members of our personnel to handle these situations, it can have long-term dire consequences, especially in such sensitive and dangerous times as it is today, when conflicts are becoming increasingly international and cultures are clashing. In such conflicts, it becomes ever so important to strengthen cultural competences in order to be able to adapt to the challenges of the battlefield.

## The period of the culture war

Violent conflicts increased in various parts of the world. Starting with the Russian–Ukrainian war in 2022, followed by the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and the Israeli counterstrike against the Gaza Strip – which raises the possibility of a wider Middle East war –, violence also increased across Syria, including armed drone attacks by U.S. troops. At the end of September in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan seized the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh – forcing approximately 100,000 ethnic Armenians<sup>9</sup> to leave their historical homes in the area, and fighting flared up again with Armenia. Meanwhile, in Sudan in Africa a civil war is raging, conflicts have returned to Ethiopia, and Niger's military takeover in July was the sixth coup in the Sahel Region and West Africa since 2020. There are many conflicts in the world where culture and identity play an important role in the fighting. In many of today's cultural conflicts, it is ethnic and religious minorities as well as groups based on regional and political dimensions that fight against each other. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is one of the most striking examples of cultural and identity clashes in which the parties fight for their own land. What makes this

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<sup>9</sup> HOVHANNISYAN 2023.

situation almost unresolvable is that both sides consider the same territory as their own on a religious, historical, and cultural basis. Conflicts with similar cultural backgrounds are the Rwandan genocide, the Kashmir conflict, and the Balkan war, as these conflicts have an impact on regional and international stability, hinder international cooperation, and exacerbate instability in the affected regions.<sup>10</sup>

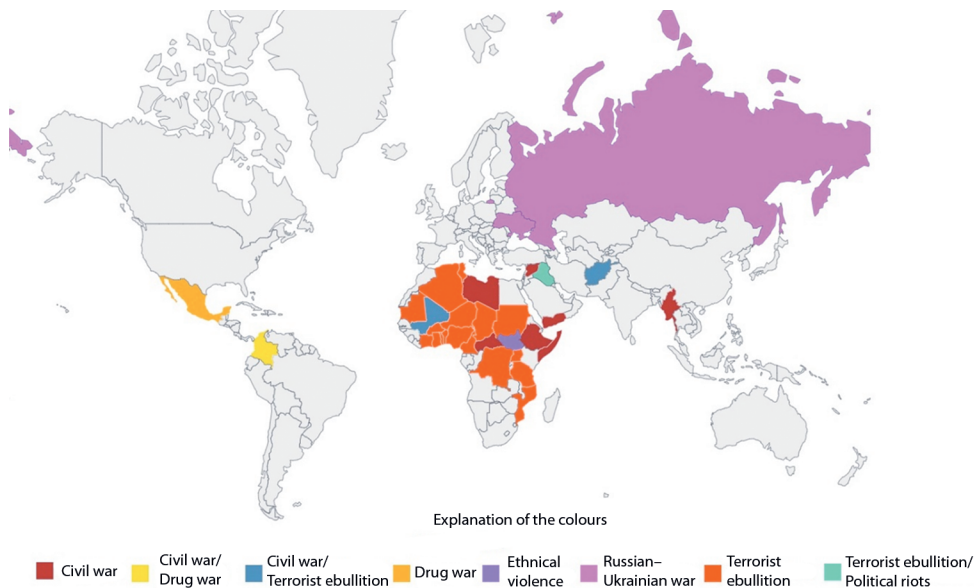


Figure 1: Map: wars fought in 2023

Source: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-currently-at-war>

## The culture wars of the present

The Arab–Israeli conflict is influenced by cultural differences. On the one hand, it is disputes over land ownership that caused the conflict, as both the Israelis and the Arabs consider the land sacred. However, religion also plays a major role, as differing religious narratives have led to intense cultural divisions. These cultural differences raise challenges in communication and understanding by hindering dialogue and negotiation. Cultural stereotypes and bias have also contributed to mistrust and a lack of understanding.<sup>11</sup>

The primary cause of the 1994 Rwandan genocide was ethnic and cultural tension between Rwanda's Tutsi and Hutu communities. The origin of the conflict can be traced back to Belgian colonial policy, which classified Rwandans into two ethnic groups, namely the Tutsis and the Hutus, based on arbitrary physical characteristics. The tension between the two communities remained even after gaining their independence from

<sup>10</sup> KRAUSE–RENWICK 1996: 213–217.

<sup>11</sup> APPEL et al. 2008.

Belgium. This cultural and ethnic division was exploited by political leaders in order to incite violence and justify the mass slaughter of the Tutsis. Hutu extremists used hate propaganda to justify their actions, portraying the Tutsi as a threat to the Hutu way of life, and their massacre as a “cockroach extermination”. The dehumanisation of the Tutsi was a vital element of the genocide, where cultural and ethnic differences were claimed to justify their massacre.<sup>12</sup>

The Kashmir conflict, rooted in the 1947 partition of India, is a long-standing territorial dispute between India and Pakistan over the Jammu and Kashmir region, which is under Indian domination despite the majority of the population being Muslim. The main factors of the Kashmir conflict are the cultural and religious differences between the two countries.<sup>13</sup> Due to the fact that the majority of the population in the Jammu and Kashmir region is Muslim, they consider themselves culturally and religiously closer to Pakistan than to India. The cultural dispute led to violent clashes between Indian security forces and militants in the region.<sup>14</sup> International efforts to resolve the Kashmir conflict have been ongoing for decades, with little success. The role of cultural debates in the Kashmir conflict highlights the importance of understanding and managing cultural and religious differences in international relations.<sup>15</sup>

The Balkan wars of the 1990s and the Kashmir conflict both involved such cultural disputes that led to violent confrontations. In the Balkan Wars, the conflict between Bosnian Serbs, Croats and Muslims was driven by cultural and religious differences. Similarly, the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan also has a profound cultural dimension, both claiming the territory as their own. The role of cultural disputes in these conflicts highlights the importance of addressing these disputes diplomatically, promoting mutual understanding between different groups. International organisations, such as the UN, play a crucial role in preventing conflicts and promoting peace in such situations.<sup>16</sup>

Among the important historical aspects of the Russian–Ukrainian war is the creation of culturally very different identities in different regions of Ukraine. Every region of Ukraine has its own unique history, including Transcarpathia, the only part of Ukraine that historically experienced a long-term Hungarian rule. Most of the southern territories were carved out of the Crimean Khanate, while the major part of central Ukraine once belonged to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The history of Ukraine was greatly influenced by the political situation in Poland and Russia (Soviet Union). All previous regimes left their marks on the region, for example, Polish and Hungarian are still widely understood and spoken in Galicia and Transcarpathia, while in the eastern and southern regions a Russian-speaking population predominates over Ukrainians. Russia under the presidency of Vladimir Putin has never treated the countries of the former Soviet Union as sovereign states. The same applies to Georgia and Moldova outside of Ukraine. In Russia’s strategic thinking, these countries are viewed as states with a Russian identity and a sense of belonging, thus remaining under the influence of Russia. As for Russian politics, the primary factors

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<sup>12</sup> GOUREVITCH 1999.

<sup>13</sup> HUSAIN et al. 2020.

<sup>14</sup> KAMIL KAZAN 1997.

<sup>15</sup> HUSAIN et al. 2020.

<sup>16</sup> MUSARAJ 2013.

leading to the conflict is the lack of international acknowledgement of Russia's power status as well as the active interest of certain countries to join Western organisations, such as the European Union or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The reasons for the outbreak of the war can be traced back to 1994, when Ukraine entered into partnership with the European Union by signing the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. In 2009, Ukraine was invited to join the Eastern Partnership project within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy. In 2012, Poland participated in the ratification of the European Union–Ukraine Association Agreement. In June 2012, the European Parliament decided to send a delegation to Ukraine, and despite all the lies, corruption, blackmail, and Ukrainian oligarchs, the EU had a positive attitude towards this relationship. Contrary to the Ukrainian dreams of full involvement, on 21 November 2013, a week before the Eastern Partnership summit, the Ukrainian government (under the influence of Moscow) suspended preparations for signing the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement. After President Viktor Yanukovich expressed his opinion, Prime Minister Mykola Azarov announced that Ukraine would not ratify the document for reasons of national security. The following day, about 2,000 people gathered in Maidan Square, the main square of Kyiv, where the 2004 Orange Revolution had taken place, to demonstrate against their deprivation of a better future, which led to deadly clashes between the protestors and the police. Considering the tense situation that had developed on the nights of 21 and 22 February 2014, President Viktor Yanukovich left Kyiv and flew to Kharkiv. Yanukovich's flight was followed by the decision of the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada (Supreme Council) to release Tymoshenko from prison, who made an immediate appearance on Maidan Square to encourage further protests.<sup>17</sup> These events initiated the cultural gap between Ukraine and President Putin, which eventually escalated to the occupation of Crimea and the “special military operation” of 2022, thus causing a deep and protracted antagonism, the end of which no one can predict.

## Globalisation and war

David Brooks stated<sup>18</sup> that the great Cold War struggle between communism and capitalism ended in the 1990s and democracy was on the rise. Nations became more and more dependent on each other economically. It seemed that the Internet was poised to facilitate worldwide communication and a global convergence around universal values such as freedom, equality, personal dignity, pluralism, and human rights. We named this convergence process globalisation. It was above all an economic and technological process focusing on an increasing international trade and investment. Nevertheless, globalisation was also a political, social and moral process. In the 1990s, Anthony Giddens<sup>19</sup> a British sociologist, claimed that globalisation is “a change in our living conditions. This is how we live now.” This included “the intensification of worldwide social relations”. Globalisation

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<sup>17</sup> HIMKA 2015.

<sup>18</sup> BROOKS 2022.

<sup>19</sup> GIDDENS 1990: 64.

was about the integration of world views, products, ideas, and culture. The assumptions that the world's nations, admiring the success of Western democracies, would follow suit; that modernisation would bring about more consumerist and secular societies, as in Europe and the U.S., driven by the desire to make wealth rather than conquer others, turned out to be false. Our world is not like that anymore. It was an optimistic vision about the future course of history, progress, and convergence. Unfortunately, this vision does not describe the world we live in today. The globalisation process has slowed down and in some respect has even reversed. There are much more global conflicts than during the 1990s. Trade, travel, and even communication between political blocs have become more troublesome morally, politically and economically. Many Western consumers do not want to trade with China due to accusations of forced labour and genocide. Many Western CEOs are rethinking their activities in China as the regime is growing increasingly hostile to the West and supply chains are being threatened by political uncertainty. World economy seems to be gradually splitting into a Western and a Chinese zone. Naturally, globalisation as a flow of trade will continue. But globalisation as the driving force behind world affairs seems to be over. Economic rivalry has now merged with political, moral, and other aspects into one global competition for dominance.<sup>20</sup>

In order to end current conflicts, fostering cooperation through cultural understanding and acceptance would be vital. Cultural diversity is to be seen as such a value that can promote better communication, trust and mutual learning. Cultural differences, however, can lead to misunderstanding and conflicts. Stereotypes and biases can also hinder cooperation. Therefore, cultural sensitivity and respect are essential. It is imperative that we approach cultural acceptance with a critical mindset and recognise the importance of cultural self-determination.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusions

People in different cultures have different ways to express themselves and make themselves understood, which leads to misunderstanding and, as a result, conflicts. The prevention of conflicts by understanding different cultures is an important aspect in both military operations and politics. By gaining a deeper understanding of each other's cultural values, norms, and beliefs, we can build trust and reduce the chance of misunderstanding that might lead to conflicts.<sup>22</sup> It is, however, essential to approach this task with a critical sense to recognise the diversity within cultures and to avoid stereotypes and generalisations that can perpetuate conflicts. In addition, it is important to handle cultural differences constructively, to engage in dialogue and negotiations in order to find mutually acceptable solutions that respect the cultural values of all parties involved. By recognising and appreciating the unique cultural identities of others, we can foster peaceful relationships

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<sup>20</sup> BROOKS 2022.

<sup>21</sup> NISHII-ÖZBILGIN 2007.

<sup>22</sup> NISHII-ÖZBILGIN 2007.



and build bridges of understanding and respect.<sup>23</sup> Promoting mutual understanding and acceptance of different cultures is a crucial factor of international relations. Recognising the value of cultural diversity and the unique strengths of each and every culture can lead to greater harmony and cooperation between nations.

International experience and military force developments indicate that the development of modern military preparations and technical equipment has become more area-specific. Furthermore, Western countries, such as Norway, the United States and Great Britain, articulate the better understanding of the local civil society as a critical strategic advantage. Therefore, the shaping of this shift in knowledge and way of thinking can no longer be described as a scientific fad, but rather developing such competence is our duty. In a multicultural environment, a single soldier's mistake is enough to set back the development of trust with the locals for several years. The military challenges and experiences of the 21<sup>st</sup> century prove the vital importance of the military use of anthropology. Developing cultural awareness is essential to understand and avoid unnecessary conflicts that otherwise might accompany military tasks. We experienced the kind of tension in Kosovo, Afghanistan, the Central African Republic as well as the Western Sahara that, in addition to the war situation, intensified the antagonism between the local population and the military forces coming to their aid. Obviously, every nation faces different challenges back home, but in an operational environment, cooperation is key to survival.

The development of cultural sensitivity as a competence and the application of cultural anthropology, together enable the military force to better comprehend and more effectively manage modern conflicts. Cooperation and mutual understanding are the key factors to a successful conflict management, and the achievement of sustainable peace. With their approach and research, cultural anthropologists can promote a more effective conflict management and the achievement of long-term stability. However, competence as the conscious use of skills and abilities is absolutely necessary for every soldier who performs military service abroad or overseas. Soldiers working in the operational area aim at reducing conflicts and increasing effective cooperation with the local armed forces and civilians. The development of such competencies is a long process, though. These are to be learned over the course of years, and even then there is the risk of interpreting and using the information subjectively. However, as articulated by the International Society of Military Sciences (ISMS), which brings together the highest level of military educational institutions of small democratic countries, gaining this knowledge capacitates today's soldiers to successfully tackle the challenges of the future. After all, it is not only past experience that must be utilised, but in addition to the development of our technical equipment, our training and education must also be continuously and simultaneously improve if we want to deploy knowledgeable soldiers.

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<sup>23</sup> STEERS et al. 2010: 76.

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