Cross-Cultural Competence of the Dutch Military in Afghanistan

Richard DeRidder[1]

ICCN, Breda

Coen van den Berg

The Netherlands Defense Academy, Breda

Joseph Soeters

The Netherlands Defense Academy, Breda and University of Tilburg

Jef Syroit

Open University, Heerlen

[1] Corresponding author. ICCN, Marksingel 34, 4811 NW Breda, The Netherlands. Tel: +31 76 30 000 10; GSM: +31 6 301 66 459. E-mail address: deridder@iccn.nl

ABSTRACT

Recent arguments have emphasized the importance of culture-general skills for the military to operate in far away regions. However, until present there has been no empirical evidence to demonstrate that cross-cultural competence (CCC) directly influences the effectiveness of military personnel in foreign missions.

The present study, based on data collected among 304 Dutch military on mission in the Afghan province Uruzgan in 2007-2008, aims at establishing the relationship between CCC, the attitude of the military toward the local population, and the effectiveness of their contacts with the population. It was expected that military with higher CCC would obtain better results in their contacts with the local population and that the relation between CCC and contact efficiency would be mediated by the attitude toward locals.

The data analyses show that the perceived quality of contacts, the military's attitude toward the local population, and in particular the military's competencies openness and respect explained the perceived effectiveness of these contacts. The importance of these results for CCC-training of the military is discussed at the end of this research note.

Success in peace operations in far-flung regions depends to a large degree on the ability of soldiers to interact smoothly with people from the local communities (Duffy, 2000; McFarland, 2005). That is because in today's military operations there are no longer sharp frontlines between enemies; one of the features of today's operations is that they are conducted in wars among people (Smith, 2005). Moreover, present conflicts are defined as situations in which soldiers with cultural intelligence are needed to win the psycho-cultural high ground rather than just the geographical high ground (Scales, 2009). It is therefore not surprising that issues such as 'cultural awareness', 'cultural sensitivity' and 'cultural competence' are considered as important for the military in stability or peacekeeping operations (Euwema & Van Emmerik, 2007; Hernandez, 2007; Holmes-Eber & Salmoni, 2008; Petraeus, 2006; Rubinstein, 2005).

At present, a number of national armed forces such as the Americans, the Australians, the British, the Canadians, but also the Germans, South-Africans and the Dutch offer specific cultural training programs to their personnel (e.g. Mills & Smith, 2004;Winslow, Kammhuber & Soeters, 2004). These programs intend to make military personnel aware of their culture-related personal biases, and to increase their ability to function effectively in cross-cultural interactions. However, the focus of the different training programs, their content, intensity, timing, duration and scope differ among these countries (Ooink, 2008). One of the main points of discussion is, whether (or not) one should prepare the military – immediately before deployment – to understand and act according to the specific cultural customs of the foreign regions where they will be deployed. The alternative view is that the military need to be trained in basic or generic cross-cultural competencies that can be of use in any unfamiliar environment.

In order to solve this debate, it is necessary to ascertain whether Cross-Cultural Competence (CCC) increases the military's success in foreign missions. Up to now, there is evidence that specific dimensions of CCC - measured by the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (Van de Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000) and by the Intercultural Adjustment Potential Scale (Matsumoto, Grissom & Dinnel, 2001) - are related to adjustment, subjective well-being, mental health, lower levels of depression and less homesickness (cf. Abbe, Gulick & Herman, 2007; Van de Vijver & Breugelmans, 2008). It should be noted, however, that these results were obtained for students and highly educated expatriates only. The question therefore arises if and, if so to which extent, CCC is related to the intercultural interaction, of soldiers, NCOs and officers in a foreign environment. We will address this question in this research note.

Hypotheses

The main hypothesis is (1) that military with higher CCC will perceive their intercultural contacts with the local population as more effective than military with lower CCC. As a second hypothesis we also expect that (2) military people who have a positive attitude toward the local population will experience their contact as more positive, and will perceive higher effectiveness, i.e. obtain more positive results. Moreover, we will try to find out, whether the relation between CCC and perceived effectiveness is a direct one, or that it is mediated by the military's attitude toward the local population. Based on studies with expatriates (Takeuchi, Tesluk, Yun & Lepak, 2005) and students (van der Zee & Brinkman, 2004), we finally expect that (3) military people with previous mission experience abroad in similar cultures as the one in which they are currently deployed, will be more effective than those who lack this experience.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 304 Dutch military people (67% soldiers, 23% Non-commissioned officers and almost 10% officers) belonging to the Battle Group and the Provincial Reconstruction Team in the Afghan province of Uruzgan (2007 – 2008) voluntarily participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 18 to 53 years ($M = 26$; $SD = 7$). Most of them were male (less than 2% females). Twenty-five percent had a low level of education (primary school and lower vocational training), 54% a medium level of secondary or vocational training, and 21% a higher level (high school and more). Almost 61% had fulfilled at least one foreign assignment before having been deployed to Uruzgan. The survey, supported by the commanders, was administered to them about two months after their return from the operations in Afghanistan, during an evaluation meeting in the Netherlands.

Measurement of Cross-Cultural Competence

CCC was measured by the FORCE-IT62, an instrument to evaluate a persons' competence to function in a complex intercultural setting. It intends to measure basic, trait-like tendencies rather than specific abilities or skills needed in a particular intercultural setting. The FORCE-IT62 is a combination of the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (Van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2000; 2001) consisting of five characteristics -Flexibility, Openness, Cultural Empathy, Emotional Stability and Social Initiative -, and two subscales especially developed for multi-party collaboration, i.e. Respect and Trust. The latter two subscales emerged from one of the authors' research

on different samples of military officers, international managers and diplomats. A vast majority of them spontaneously mentioned that respect and trust are among the most important factors of successful international cooperation. Moreover, the FORCE-IT62 addresses characteristics of the profile of a cross-culturally competent individual identified by Kealey & Ruben (1983, p. 165), who state that such a person "is truly open to and interested in other people and their ideas, capable of building relationships of trust among people. He or she is sensitive to the feelings and thoughts of another, expresses respect and positive regard for others, and is nonjudgmental. Finally, he or she tends to be self-confident, is able to take initiative, is calm in situations of frustration and ambiguity and is not rigid." The scales Flexibility, Respect and Trust consist of 10 items, the other scales have 8 items each. All answers on the sixty-two FORCE-IT62 items are given on a 5-point Likert scale (*strongly disagree-strongly agree*).

Description of the Subscales of the FORCE-IT62

(1) Flexibility, the capability of an individual to change easily from one strategy to another. Since familiar ways of handling things will not necessarily work in a new cultural environment, being flexible allows a person to switch easily between groups that are culturally different.

(2) Openness, the ability of a person to have an open and unprejudiced attitude toward out-group members, people with other points of view and toward different cultural norms and values.

(3) Respect, the aptitude of people to accept others unconditionally. The main importance is demonstrating respect and esteem for a persons' worth as a human being, even though others apparently have different attitudes and opinions or even - in the person's view - deviant behaviour.

(4) Cultural empathy (sensitivity), the ability to empathize with the feelings, views, and behaviour of members from groups that are culturally different.

(5) Emotional stability, the capability to remain calm and in full control when confronted by interpersonal conflict or in stressful situations.

(6) Social initiative, the aptitude to approach others and social situations in a lively way and to take initiative.

(7) Trust, refers to the tendency to take accept vulnerability when trusting others and to accept that one cannot control all conditions neither others' intentions or behaviour.

Reliabilities of the Subscales of the FORCE-IT62

Van der Zee & van Oudenhoven (2000, 2001, 2002) and Van der Zee, Zaal & Piekstra (2003) did extensive research with respect to the reliability of the subscales of the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire. They found reliability coefficients ranging from 0.72 to 0.87. A recent analysis with a sample of 242 students of the Netherlands Defence Academy with the present version of the FORCE-IT62 yielded Cronbach's αs of 0.61, 0.80, 0.68, 0.75, 0.60, 0.81 and 0.66 for the seven subscales, respectively. Similar reliabilities were found for a sample of 443 Dutch military NCOs and officers who were deployed in foreign missions over the past three years. In brief, the subscales of the FORCE-IT62 attain an acceptable level of reliability for relatively high educated military. In the present study acceptable reliabilities were obtained for Openness (0,78), Respect (0,66), Cultural empathy (0,76), Emotional stability (0,60) and Initiative (0,80). However, two subscales showed reliabilities lower than 0.60 (Flexibility and Trust). Based on this finding these latter subscales were discarded from further analyses.

Attitude toward the Local Population

The military's attitude toward the local population was measured by 8 items embedded among 21 characteristics about the population of Uruzgan. The questions were worded as "I think/find that the population of Uruzgan generally is [trustworthy, peaceful, respectable, sympathetic, of good will, tolerant, apathetic and conservative]". The answer for each characteristic was measured on a 9-point Likert scale (*completely disagree-completely agree*). The attitude scale proved to be reliable (α = 0.84).

Perceived Effectiveness of Contact with the Local Population

Contact with the local population was measured by means of a 5-point frequency scale (never, once or a few times, a few times a month, weekly, daily). The perceived effectiveness of those contacts was measured by asking the military respondents about the results of their contacts in terms of the following four outcomes: "Did – in your opinion - your contacts (1) result in an increase in security in the area? (2) lead to an improvement of the cooperation with the local population? (3) support the reconstruction of the area, and (4) increase the trust of the local population in your team or unit? Answers ranged from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 9 (*completely agree*). Because these four items were highly intercorrelated (r's ranging from .72 to .84), they were combined into an overall perceived effectiveness score (α = .93). The respondents also indicated

how they personally had experienced their contacts on a 5-point scale (*very negative* to *very positive*).

RESULTS

General Overview

Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of all subscales are presented in Table 1. The majority of the military personnel deployed in Uruzgan has had frequent contact with the local population. Slightly more than 60% interacted with locals on a daily (34%) or at least a weekly basis (26%). About 30% indicated they had interacted with the locals a few times per month, or once or a few times during the whole deployment period of four months altogether. Only 9% of the military never had such contacts. In general, those who had contact with local people experienced these contacts as slightly positive ($M = 3.56$; $SD = 0.73$). To formulate it differently, 41% experienced their contacts with the local population as negative, and 59% as positive. The mean perceived effectiveness of contacts score was 5.12 ($SD = 1.78$) on a scale ranging from 1 to 9, indicating that – on the average - the military considered their contacts as slightly effective. About 29% of the military considered their effectiveness as low (scores < 4.5) and 36% considered their contacts as rather to very effective (scores >6).

Table 1.   Means, Standard Deviations and correlations between the main variables of 304 Dutch military

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Frequency contact with local population[a]	3.84	1.13	-							
2. Attitude toward local population[b]	4.48	1.27	.054	-						
3. Experienced quality of contact[a]	3.56	.73	.082	.464**	-					
4. Perceived effectiveness of contact[b]	5.12	1.78	.126*	.363**	.420**	-				
5. Openness[c]	34.39	5.31	.095	.374**	.324**	.244**	-			
6. Respect[c]	34.29	3.74	-.073	.276**	.218**	.256**	.383**	-		
7. Cultural Empathy[c]	38.08	4.21	.044	.237**	.149*	.158**	.432**	.478**	-	
8. Emotional Stability[c]	37.83	3.80	.093	.100	.018	.070	.058	.156**	.319**	-
9. Social Initiative[c]	36.42	4.39	.096	.153*	.036	.046	.281**	.104	.477**	.445**

Note. [a] 1=never/very negative;5=daily/very positive; [b] 1= very negative;9= very positive; * p<.05; ** p<.01; [c] values of CCCs vary between 10 and 50.

As can be seen in Table 1, the average attitude of the Dutch military toward the local population was neither positive nor negative ($M = 4.48$).

The cross-cultural competence scores could vary between 10 and 50. Inspection of Table 1 suggests that, on the average, the participants in this study score relatively high on cultural empathy ($M = 38.08$) and emotional stability ($M = 37.83$).[2] Further inspection of Table 1 shows that the military's attitude toward the local population is positively related to the experience of contacts, perceived effectiveness and to all CCCs, except emotional stability. The perceived effectiveness of the contacts is significantly related to frequency of contact, attitude toward the local population, experienced quality of contact and the CCCs openness, respect and cultural empathy.

Table 2.   <u>Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for variables predicting perceived effectiveness of contact with local population (N=252)</u>

Variable	<u>B</u>	<u>SE B</u>	β
Step 1			
Openness	0.06	0.02	0.18**
Respect	0.10	0.03	0.21**
Step 2			
Openness	0.03	0.02	0.08
Respect	0.08	0.03	0.17**
Attitude toward local population	0.42	0.09	0.30***
Step 3			
Openness	0.01	0.02	0.04
Respect	0.07	0.03	0.16*
Attitude toward local population	0.25	0.09	0.18**
Experienced quality of contact	0.73	0.15	0.30***

<u>Note.</u> *<u>p</u> < .05; **<u>p</u> < .01; ***<u>p</u> < .001. <u>R</u>² = .11 for Step 1; Δ<u>R</u>² = . 08 for Step 2; Δ<u>R</u>² = . 07 for Step 3 (<u>p</u>s < .01).

Test of the Hypotheses

Before testing our hypotheses we ascertained, whether background variables of the participants (rank, age, education) and frequency of contact had any effect on the attitude

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[2] In comparison to a sample of 443 Dutch military NCOs and officers, trained by ICCN before deployment in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Bosnia and Africa during the last three years, participants in the present study score significantly (p<.05) lower on all competencies except cultural empathy and emotional stability

toward the local population and on the perceived effectiveness of intercultural contact. In a first set of analyses the attitude toward the local population and perceived effectiveness were regressed on the variables rank, age, education and frequency of contact. It appeared that the attitude toward the local population was only related to age, i.e. older participants had a more positive attitude than younger ones, $R^2 = 0.07$; $F(4, 257) = 5.89$; $p<.01$, $\beta_{age} = 0.28$. The same independent variables explained 3% of the variance of perceived effectiveness, $R^2 = 0.03$; $F(4, 257) = 2.96$; $p<.05$. Only rank ($\beta = 0.19$) and frequency of contact ($\beta = 0.13$) were significant predictors ($p<.05$): officers rated their contacts as more effective than soldiers, and the more often the participants had contact with the local population the more effective these contacts were rated. These results indicate that general background variables and frequency of contact are somewhat related to attitude toward the local population and to perceived effectiveness of the intercultural interaction, but these relationships, although statistically significant, are rather weak.

In line with hypothesis 2 significant partial correlations were obtained between attitude toward the population and the experienced quality of contacts, controlling for perceived effectiveness of contact, partial $r = 0.30$, $p < 01$. Also the relationship between the military's general attitude toward the local population and the perceived effectiveness of contact was significant, controlling for experienced quality of contact, partial $r = 0.20$, $p < 01$. In short, the more positive the attitude toward the local population, the more the military experienced their contacts with inhabitants of Uruzgan as positive, and the more these contacts were rated effective. These results confirm our second hypothesis.

The direct relationship between CCC and perceived effectiveness (Hypothesis 1) was tested by means of a multiple regression analysis in which the perceived effectiveness of the contacts was introduced as the dependent variable and the 5 cross-cultural competencies (Openness, Respect, Cultural empathy, Emotional stability and Social initiative) as predictors. This analysis resulted in a model ($R^2 = 0.09$; F(7, 272) = 3.99; $p<.001$) with two competencies, *Respect* ($\beta = 0.19$) and *Openness* ($\beta = 0.19$) as significant predictors. Those military people who score higher on the cross-cultural competences *respect* and *openness* indicate their contacts with locals to be more effective. Hence, Hypothesis 1 can only be partially accepted.

In order to assess whether the significant relation between Openness and Respect and perceived effectiveness is mediated by the attitude toward locals and/or by the experienced quality of contacts, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis (MRA) was

performed (Baron & Kenny, 1986). In the first step we introduced the CCCs Openness and Respect as predictors of perceived effectiveness (see Table 2, step 1). In the second step we additionally introduced the attitude toward the local population, resulting in an increase of explained variance with 8% (see step 2 in Table 2), $\Delta R^2 = 0.08$; $F_{change}(1, 253) = 21.54$; $p < .001$). This step shows that only the effect of Openness is mediated by the attitude toward the population (β for Openness is reduced from .17 to .08, NS). *Respect* ($\beta = .17$) and attitude ($\beta = .30$) remain as significant predictors. In the third step (see step 3 in Table 2) the experienced quality of contact was additionally introduced as independent variable, resulting in a significant increase of explained variance of perceived effectiveness, $\Delta R^2 = .07$, $F_{change}(1, 248) = 23.03$, $p < .001$). It shows that the perceived effectiveness of contacts can be predicted by *Respect* ($\beta = .15$), attitude toward the population ($\beta = .18$), and experienced quality of contact ($\beta = .30$) explaining 24% of the variance of perceived effectiveness, $R^2 = .24$, $F(4, 248) = 21,22$, $p < .001$.[3] In brief, the experienced effectiveness of the military's contact with the local population is directly related to the experienced quality of these contacts and affected by (a) the military's positive attitude toward the population, and (b) the CCC Respect. The CCC Openness only indirectly relates to effectiveness via the military's attitude toward the population.

In the present sample 58% had experience with at least one previous mission abroad. The military who had previous mission experience did not differ from those with no previous mission experience with regard to the perceived effectiveness of their contacts with the local population, $t(256) = .44$, ns, nor in their experienced quality of these contacts $t(258) = .97$, ns. Thus, previous mission experience, in general, did not appear to improve the experienced quality and perceived effectiveness of the military's contacts with local people in Uruzgan. Restricting previous mission experience to those countries with a similar Islamic religion (Iraq and Afghanistan) and contrasting this group (35.7%) to those who lacked this experience did not change the findings. Military who had been on a previous mission in Afghanistan or in Iraq did not experience their contacts with the local population of Uruzgan as more positive, $t(264) = .25$, ns, nor did they attain a higher degree of perceived effectiveness $t(262) = -.76$, ns. Hence, our third hypothesis must be rejected.

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[3] Similar analyses were performed with the variables rank, age, and frequency of contact introduced as predictors. In comparison to the main variables in the present study these variables explain less than 1% of the variance.

In summary, soldiers' previous mission experience in similar countries has no predictive value for the perceived effectiveness of their contacts with local people in Uruzgan. The perceived effectiveness is related to a positive attitude toward the population, and to the experienced quality of these contacts. Most importantly for the present study is that the competencies *Respect* and *Openness* affect the perceived effectiveness of intercultural contacts the military personnel has with local people.

In order to sharpen the picture of intercultural effectiveness, a canonical discriminant analysis was performed to find out the difference between approximately 1/3 of the military personnel who felt their contacts were effective and the 1/3 who did not. In absolute terms the first group considered their contacts with the local population as effective ($M = 6.8$; SD=0.70), the last one as ineffective ($M = 2.9$; SD=1.07). With respect to which factors do these two groups differ?

Entering in the equation the 5 CCCs, the experienced quality of contact and the attitude toward the local population, resulted in a significant discriminant function, $\chi^2 = 56.6$, $p<.001$, with an Eigen-value of .39 and a canonical correlation of .53. Using Wilk's lambda for stepwise introduction, three variables stand out as significant, namely *experienced quality of contact*, *attitude toward the local population,* and the cross-cultural competence *Respect* (with respective coefficients of .66, .41 and .34). This means that military who rate their contacts as rather effective, as compared to those with little or no results, experience their contacts as more positive ($M =3.9$ vs $M = 3.2$, respectively), have a more positive attitude toward the population (respective means are 4.9 vs. 3.9), and show a larger competence in Respect (respective means 34.7 vs. 32.7). Subsequent analyses (MANOVA and T-tests) show that the obtained differences are all significant (at $p<.001$).

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study support one of the three hypotheses that we formulated at the beginning of this research note and confirm one hypothesis at least partially. Effectiveness of intercultural contacts – based on the military's rating of security, cooperation, reconstruction and trust - is clearly related to the military's CCC, their experienced quality of contact and to a positive attitude toward the local population. Moreover, it became clear, that the impact of CCC on perceived effectiveness can be direct (Respect) or indirect (Openness).

Before drawing any conclusions, some of the weaknesses of the study should be mentioned. On the one hand it could be argued that all data are based on answers to a questionnaire and that the data were collected after their mission in Uruzgan, i.e. after all contacts had taken place. True, no direct observational data of the contacts between the military and the local population were collected. In fact, conducting direct observations in the area of operations is far too dangerous for non-military personnel; in any case, one does not get permission to do so. Neither did we, in the present study, measure the military's attitude toward the local population and the CCC of the participants before their contacts took place. The issue of the relative stability of the basic trait-like intercultural competences is left for future research to explore.

A further topic of discussion relates to the general application and use of CCC-questionnaires. In the present sample, it appeared that the reliabilities of two of the subscales of the FORCE-IT62 were too low to warrant further analysis (Flexibility and Trust). In part these low reliabilities may be due to the fact that, in particular for the subscale Flexibility, a relatively large number of items (6 out of 10) have to be recoded, as these items indicate inflexibility rather than flexibility. However, it also raises the question to which extent the FORCE-IT62 is more suitable for people with a reasonably high level of education. Until now this scale and also the MPQ on which it is in part based are only tested with people with a rather high level of education (cf. Van der Zee, Zaal & Piekstra, 2003).

The general belief among practitioners and scholars (e.g. Takeuchi, Tesluk, Yun & Lepak, 2005) that previous experience in a similar country facilitates intercultural contacts was not validated in the present study. This finding suggests that the concept 'experience' needs to be specified. It may well be that experience only helps if the similarity of the new culture is indeed very high, and that the specific culture (norms, customs and values) of Uruzgan is quite different from that of Iraq and other areas of Afghanistan, even though they all share the Islamic religion. Other aspects, that will make a difference are for instance, the location of deployment (big city or rural area), the function of the military, and the level of encountered insecurity or violence. Soldiers' view of the local population has shown to deteriorate with the extent of perceived threat (Van den Berg, Dechesne, Soeters, Duel & Andres, under review). Soldiers' idealistic motivation was found to be an important factor for sustaining soldiers' positive perception of the local population. Likewise motivation seems to be an important factor in cultural adaptation (Ang, Van Dyne, Koh, Ng, Templer, Tay-Lee & Chandrasekar,

2007). Another possibility is that experience abroad does not directly transfer to intercultural contacts in another country, but that experience does have an effect on CCC (cf Van der Zee & Brinkmann, 2004). We indeed found that a sample of 443 Dutch NCOs and officers who had mission experience obtained significantly higher scores on some of the FORCE-IT competencies, namely Flexibility, Openness and Emotional stability than those who had no mission experience. As Openness has an effect on the military's attitude toward the population and indirectly on the perceived effectiveness of contacts, previous mission experience may indirectly increase effectiveness. Concerning the CCC-questionnaire used, but more importantly related to the concept of CCC itself, there is one issue left to discuss, i.e. the finding in the present study that Respect is directly connected to (perceived) effectiveness, while Openness appeared to be mediated by the attitude of the military toward the local population. To what extent do which CCCs directly affect the military's effectiveness? This question seems important to us, as the attitude toward the population may change (and possibly become negative), due to incidents that may take place during military missions. Moreover, if some CCCs, such as Openness, only affect behaviour in an intercultural setting when positive attitudes are present, then one wonders how stable some CCCs are. Also it means, that one might focus in selection and training primarily on those CCCs that directly affect the military's functioning.

Conclusion

The present study clearly indicates that certain Cross-cultural competences, in particular Respect and Openness, together with a positive attitude toward the local population and the experienced quality of contacts will predict the peeved effectiveness of the military's intercultural contacts.

Previous 'experience' in other assignments or other areas of a country is insufficient to function adequately in a new area.

In The Netherlands, before each mission, all military receive up to date information about the history, religion and specific cultural do's and do not's of the specific area where they will be deployed. In addition to this, the present study shows, that time and effort should be invested to make sure that the military has a positive attitude toward the local population before they start their mission. Emphasis on soldiers' motivation may support their willingness to see through the daily hassles of the mission area and maintain a more positive attitude toward the local population. Moreover, one has to make sure that the military personnel possess the basic cross-cultural competences of

respect and openness. In particular general trait-like CCC as measured by the FORCE-IT62, will help the military not only to function more adequately in Uruzgan. It is believed, that highly cross-culturally competent soldiers, NCOs and officers will also function more effectively in any foreign assignment. We therefore suggest that an assessment of cross-cultural competences and a basic training to improve those competences should be an indispensable element of the training program of each military person. Which CCCs are most relevant, and which CCCs are most easily developed and changed is an important issue left for further research.

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