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Culture: a sixth domain and the introduction of the 'C6ISRT' framework

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ABSTRACT

The traditional domains of land, sea, and air warfare have long held prominence, while space and cyberspace have recently gained recognition as spheres of conflict. As conflicts continue to evolve, the domains of war must expand to accommodate new dimensions of engagement and integrate them alongside those human-centred factors that have previously held considerable sway. It is imperative, therefore, to recognise culture as the sixth domain and reflect upon its profound influence on group thinking, decision-making, and behaviour. Integrating culture into the Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Cyber, Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance and Targeting (C6ISRT) framework acknowledges its strategic relevance in shaping military strategies and responses in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. This paradigm shift highlights that the modern landscape extends beyond physical and virtual theatres to encompass the cognitive and social dimensions that define human interactions and conflicts.

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Introduction

In the realm of military strategy, the traditional domains of warfare – land, sea, air – have long dominated the discourse, with space and cyberspace more recently introduced. However, the evolving nature of global conflicts and the rise of non-physical factors have compelled military experts and policymakers to consider new dimensions in the pursuit of a robust security and defence approach (Belei 2019). The complex nature of hybrid warfare and “grey zone” activity¹ will also increasingly require the propounding of policy and strategic responses that are neither escalatory nor concessive (Bilal 2021; Sharpe et al. 2024). While militaries have traditionally existed for warfighting, they are increasingly employed across the lower end of the cooperation, competition, crisis, and conflict scale. This “competition continuum” is useful in demonstrating how activity can occur across all tiers simultaneously (U.S. DoD, 2019).

Einstein (1946) asserted that a nation “cannot simultaneously prevent and prepare for war” (no pagination), it is certainly possible that he was inferring that preparing for war

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only ensures its arrival (Einstein 1946). Henry Kissinger (2023) echoes this sentiment and proclaims that fear of war elicits hope, and that US-China escalatory antagonism and subsequent conflict must be avoided, or it will bring about “mutually assured destruction” (no pagination). Strategic peacekeeping is a popular term for an operation that falls between peacekeeping and peace enforcement (Dandeker and Gow 2007). In light of the observation that nations are choosing to conduct asymmetrical and sub-threshold activity, this dimensional shift is apparent (Beurpere and Marsh 2022). Moreover, Le Guyader (2000) and Kao et al. (2021) advocate the idea of expanding the domains of warfare to include cognitive science. While these commentators appear to focus on the “human mind” as the sixth domain of warfare; an alternative view is that culture represents a more valid means of assessment. It is suggested that culture can be scientifically measured and focuses on the all-important notion of group-thinking (Alcorn and Eisenfeld 2022; Carpenter and Roer 2022; Le Guyader 2000).

This paper will explore culture as a valid cognitive expansion of the domains of warfare. Culture is the ideas, customs, and social behaviours of a group of people (Carpenter and Roer 2022). Cultural insight is, furthermore, considered a potent force multiplier in the shaping of attitudes, and the framing of perceptions, beliefs, behaviours, and overall decision-making. It follows that culture is a compelling candidate for the sixth domain of warfare (Shafahat 2020). Similarly, culture could be introduced as a component of the Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Cyber, Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance and Targeting (C5ISRT) framework (Newman et al. 2022), thus becoming C6ISRT.

Culture did not attract attention in the discipline of international security studies until the 1980s, when ideational explanations of state behaviour were pervasive (Johnston 1995). Undoubtedly, however, culture has a deterministic effect on the amalgamation of attitude, behaviours, and beliefs of nations, organisations, and individuals alike, and contributes to social learning (Han 2022; Libel 2018). Additionally, culture plays a significant role in the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural characteristics of psychopathology and, to a degree causal relevance, in the expression and conduct of warfare (Pennock 2023; Spiro 2001).

Acknowledging the view that cultural perspectives often vary across different societal domains (Graham et al. 2016); it has been argued that national and organisational culture plays a causal role in how military services structure, equip, write doctrine, and fight wars (Donnithorne 2013). This is a critical concept. The military portrays a largely coherent organisational culture, but there are cultural distinctions across the various branches and units it is composed of; needless to say, similar observations can be made across society (Gelfand 2019). These positions suggest that there are many distinct cultural attitudes and beliefs concerning the myriad ways in which warfare should be conducted; and, moreover, that these distinctions are likely to be observed within a given nation and its military organisations. For example, considerable variance exists in the manner in which services structure their combat roles – whether Army and Navy, or special operations and conventional forces (Adamsky 2011; DCDC 2009; Dunivin 1994). This highlights the intellectual and subjective capacity of different nations and militaries to respond and adapt to a new way of warfighting (Kim 2009).

This paper delves into the proposition of culture as a legitimate and critical “sixth domain of warfare” and explores its significance in the context of a whole-force approach. As we navigate the complexities of modern geopolitical landscapes, the

acknowledgment of cultural influence as a decisive factor has the capacity to revolutionise military operations. This applies in equal measure when targeting clearly defined combatants and/or when seeking to influence sub-threshold actors or civilian populations. As the world moves beyond the traditional paradigms of warfare, adopting culture as a sixth domain can unlock new dimensions of strategic advantage. By integrating cultural understanding into the whole-force approach, we can build a more nuanced, agile, and culturally sensitive military framework capable of forging more robust partnerships and achieving lasting geopolitical outcomes (Horgan 2014). The exploration of culture as a domain of warfare will provide invaluable insights and challenge the future of defence and security in today's increasingly interconnected and culturally diverse world.

The Whole Force Concept emerged in the UK defence context around 2010 as a response to budgetary pressures and the need for more flexible and efficient force structures (Taylor 2011). It is defined as the "Effective, agile, and resilient capability delivered by an integrated, pre-planned and affordable military capability composed of a mix of regular and reserve military personnel, civil servants and industry actors to meet Defence requirements" (Gearson et al. 2020, 9). This concept represents a shift from traditional military-centric approaches to a more inclusive and collaborative model of defence capability.

While the Whole Force Concept is a significant step towards integration, it does not fully encompass a whole-of-government approach as it does not integrate all elements of national power. To address this limitation, this paper proposes an expanded definition that accommodates all areas of the PESTLE²/DIMEFIL³ framework. PESTLE is a strategic analysis tool originating from business management, while DIMEFIL is a framework used in national security contexts, particularly in the United States.

The integration of these frameworks provides a comprehensive strategy to address the multitude of complex security challenges a nation may face (Kimsey et al. 2020). This approach aligns with the evolving nature of modern conflicts, which often transcend traditional military boundaries and require a coordinated response across multiple domains of national power.

The PESTLE tool is preferred in this context as it presents a clearly defined hierarchy without over-emphasising the role of the military as a political tool. This aligns with the Clausewitzian ideal that the violence of war is subordinate to its political purpose (Von Clausewitz 1832; von Clausewitz and Graham 1997). By adopting this expanded whole-force concept, we can better analyse and respond to complex security challenges in a holistic manner, considering the interplay between various elements of national power and societal factors.

The application of the Whole Force Concept and analytical tools like PESTLE to diverse global contexts illustrates a fundamental tension between the complexity of cultural dynamics and the more simplified notion of "national" culture. While these frameworks provide valuable structures for analysis and organisation, they are themselves products of specific cultural and intellectual traditions, primarily rooted in Western, Anglo-American approaches to military organisation and business management. This cultural origin potentially limits their universal applicability and highlights the need for careful adaptation when used in different cultural contexts. The Whole Force Concept, for instance, reflects a particular understanding of civil-military relations and organisational integration that may not align with the cultural norms and institutional structures of all nations. Similarly, the PESTLE framework, while comprehensive, may

prioritise certain factors over others based on Western economic and political paradigms. Recognising these cultural underpinnings is crucial for understanding both the strengths and limitations of these tools. Moreover, the cultural dynamics within the Whole Force itself – the interplay between military, civilian, and corporate cultures – add another layer of complexity that challenges simplistic notions of organisational or national culture. This tension underscores the need for a nuanced, context-sensitive approach that acknowledges the overlapping and often contradictory cultural influences at play in modern security environments, moving beyond reductive national stereotypes to engage with the full complexity of cultural interactions in global security affairs.

Understanding and embracing culture as an integral component of a nation's strategic dispositions is critical in aligning activities to achieve desired outcomes. Cultural insight can support enhanced communication and improved engagement with local populations, whilst simultaneously shaping strategic narratives to achieve favourable outcomes in contemporary conflicts (Cohen 1996; K. Johnson 2009). Focusing on attitudes, behaviours, and mindsets will fundamentally shape all domains of warfare, as the human component is common to all (Denning 2015).

Understanding culture as a domain of warfare

Culture, a multifaceted and dynamic concept, encompasses the shared beliefs, values, customs, traditions, and social behaviours that define a group's identity. Owing to its multiple variations and interconnected strands, culture has been regarded as hard to define. However, contemporary definitions of culture provide greater scope for empirical assessment (Buckham 1892; Karlsson 2009). Culture is the way of life of a community of people. It is directly impacted by explicit factors (such as marketing, politics, inherited beliefs, and moral precepts), and implicit means (including norms of behaviour and initiative learning). Culture is, therefore, a complex process of interactions (Shepherd 2014). In warfare, culture extends beyond the lines of geographical or national boundaries and profoundly influences the conduct and outcome of military operations (Molnar 2007). More broadly, it is relational ethnography and not bounded by the construct of nations (Desmond 2014). This echoes the concept of constructivism: the premise that nations behave in terms of negotiated ideas, principles, and identity; as opposed to the dominant approach of realism, that focuses on material interests (Grey and Marcella 2010). Culture is the amalgamation of attitudes, beliefs, and mindsets. To a greater extent, it defines state, combatant and civilian preferences for, and reactions to, conflict, strategies, and engagement with adversaries (Legro 1994). Similarly, Kilcullen (2007) argues that strategic culture shapes statecraft, which in turn drives military strategy. It is, therefore, essential that any defence policy, and by extension any security policy, must align with a nation's strategic culture or succumb to failure (Kilcullen 2007).

Throughout history, cultural influence has played a pivotal role in shaping the outcomes of battles and campaigns. It has also led militarised societies and martial cultures to materialise (Horn and Kristiansen 2018). Ancient military commanders identified the importance of understanding the cultural nuances of adversaries to exploit vulnerabilities or establish alliances, as well as strengthen their own armies (Chao, Jaquet, and Kim 2023; Kagan 2003). It is almost certain that their approaches to conflict would have focused on cultural values and ethics, as well

as cultural innovations such as structures, technology, and other areas of societal evolution (*ibid.*). From Sun Tzu's teachings in *The Art of War* and the conquering empires of the past, military victories often hinged on cultural insights (knowing thy enemy) and the ability to adapt strategies accordingly (Tzu 1971). Cultural misunderstandings and misjudgments have also contributed to catastrophic consequences in conflicts, such as the Philippines Insurrections and the Vietnam War. Events such as these underscore the need for cultural awareness in military endeavours (Green 2008). Conversely, proximal cross-cultural understanding can lead to understanding, cooperation, and compromise, thus averting the need for conflict (*ibid.*).

The role of culture in shaping behaviours, perceptions, and decision-making

Culture profoundly impacts perceptions, behaviours, and decision-making in military and civilian contexts. Cultural perception influences how individuals interpret information, perceive threats, and respond to stimuli (Albritton and Pisano 2022). Cultural norms and social conditioning shape the conduct of combatants on the battlefield, as well as the attitudes and support of local populations toward any military forces (Jager 2007; Worby 2010). Understanding these cultural nuances is crucial for effective engagement, conflict de-escalation, and the winning of hearts and minds in areas of operation (Norvell 2022).

Earley (2003, 9) defines cultural intelligence (CQ) as “A person’s capability for successful adaptation to new cultural settings, that is, unfamiliar settings attributable to cultural context.” In military operations, high CQ is instrumental in mitigating misunderstandings, building rapport with local populations, and collaborating with multinational forces (Spencer and Balasevicius 2009). Commanders and soldiers with high CQ can navigate cross-cultural interactions with respect, empathy, and openness; thereby, fostering positive relationships and, at the strategic level, defusing potential conflicts (*ibid.*). Moreover, CQ empowers military leaders to devise culturally sensitive strategies and communication tactics, thus strengthening the impact of information operations and strategic messaging (*ibid.*). This broader awareness and dynamism of problem-solving will create opportunities for de-escalation and facilitate leadership exploring “off-ramp” activity (Komorita 1973; Roberts and Hardie 2015).

As we delve into the domain of culture as a factor in warfare, it becomes evident that understanding cultural dynamics is not a mere nicety but a strategic imperative. Both the historical and contemporary evidence highlights the role of culture in shaping perceptions and decision-making, underscoring the need for military forces to embrace cultural intelligence as a core competency. This understanding lays the foundation for exploring how culture intertwines with the whole-force approach, enriching the military’s arsenal for effectively addressing contemporary security challenges.

The whole-force approach: a comprehensive military strategy

The whole-force framework, and the recognition of space and cyberspace as critical domains, represents a paradigm shift in military strategy. In transcending the traditional reliance on kinetic capabilities across land, sea, and air domains, militaries can explore “soft” power as a tool to avoid a “hard” war (Nye 2003, 2004). The whole-force concept

entails integrating all elements of national power to achieve security objectives effectively (Gearson et al. 2020). Beyond the military component, this approach encompasses diplomatic efforts to foster alliances and engage in conflict resolution, economic initiatives to promote stability and development, and informational endeavours to shape perceptions and narratives.

Combining these diverse instruments of power through a whole-force approach seeks to address complex security challenges holistically and comprehensively; however, it does not address the root cause of increasingly hostile behaviours. If it is not employed in a systematic, comprehensive manner, the whole-force approach (and by extension DIMEFIL) becomes little more than a “tick box” exercise that overemphasises resource allocation and addresses symptoms as opposed to causation. Introducing culture as a domain of warfare, and a necessary introduction to “C6ISR,” will refocus strategy towards addressing causation for a meaningful security outcome as it has the capacity to change the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of the target audience(s).

The relevance and impact of the DIMEFIL components varies depending upon the “stages of war” experienced. According to the U.S. Department of Defense (2019) the accepted stages of war are cooperation, competition, crises, and conflict. A simple but important example is the increasingly crucial role the military plays in the escalation from cooperation towards conflict. The first mention of DIMEFIL in the context of national security was by The White House (2003). Despite the utility of this discussion, the White House’s narrative failed to present a holistic view of national instruments of power. The PESTLE paradigm offers a holistic perspective, and while culture is typically considered a sociological attribute, it innately diffuses across all PESTLE characteristics. It would be prudent to highlight the complexities of culture as a force that influences, and is influenced by PESTLE activity, past and present. Culture is, therefore, defined by the collective contemporary and historical behaviours of people. Table 1, below, illustrates the comparative mapping of PESTLE and DIMEFIL tools.

Table 1. Comparison of PESTLE and DIMEFIL tools to demonstrate the military-centric view of DIMEFIL and its narrow aperture for considering other national instruments of power.

PESTLE	DIMEFIL
Political	Diplomatic, Informational, Military, Intelligence
Economic	Economic, Finance
Sociological	
Technological	
Legal	Law Enforcement
Environmental	

Table One highlights the overemphasis of political and economic levers of national power of the DIMEFIL tool. As illustrated, DIMEFIL fails to consider the impact of sociology, technology, or environmental factors for a whole-of-government approach to warfare. Sociological and environmental considerations contribute to the moral component of warfare, and the moral and ethical dimensions of military operations in particular. Comparatively, technology remains broadly a physical component but will also facilitate a conceptual advantage against an adversary. It is important to note that this paper will not explore the physical, conceptual, and moral components of warfare, beyond highlighting their relevance in the application of a whole-force framework.

Components of the whole-force approach

The following definitions are proposed to facilitate discussion regarding the concepts of the DIMEFIL tool.

- (1) **Military:** The military component remains a fundamental aspect of the whole-force approach, providing the capability to respond decisively to threats and protect national interests. It includes conventional and unconventional forces, strategic deterrence, and contingency planning to maintain readiness for various scenarios.
- (2) **Diplomatic:** Diplomatic initiatives are pivotal in establishing and nurturing international partnerships, alliances, and coalitions. Diplomatic engagements are intended to facilitate conflict resolution, prevent escalation, and enable cooperative efforts for pursuing shared security objectives.
- (3) **Economic:** Economic stability and development are vital in maintaining global security. Economic initiatives, including foreign aid, trade agreements, and development assistance, contributions to conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction, and fostering conditions conducive to lasting peace.
- (4) **Informational:** In the Information Age, the informational component of the whole-force approach gains paramount importance. The informational component comprises strategic communication, public diplomacy, and information operations. These mechanisms are employed to influence narratives, counter disinformation, and win the support of local, regional and global audiences.
- (5) **Finance:** Paralleling the economic component, finance refers to the fiscal and monetary tools that a country can employ to support its national interests. These include managing budgets, financial stability, international financial institutions, and economic policies.
- (6) **Intelligence:** Intelligence refers to the tasking, collection, analysis, and dissemination of information to inform decision-making and enhance national security. It requires intelligence agencies to gather and assess data related to potential threats and opportunities.
- (7) **Law Enforcement:** The law enforcement component deals with the maintenance of internal security, the enforcement of domestic laws, and, when appropriate, international laws. This includes police forces, intelligence agencies, and other entities responsible for safeguarding the country from internal threats and protecting shared domains such as space and the high seas.

Firstly, the whole-force approach proposes integrating multiple elements of national power and offers several advantages over conventional, single-domain approaches to warfare (Augusto, Walton, and Chu 2020). The whole-force framework increases versatility and allows decision-makers to tailor responses to specific threats and situations. Secondly, the whole-force approach promotes synergy among its components, ensuring a holistic, unified, and coherent effort towards the achievement of strategic objectives (U.S. Department of Defense 2018). Thirdly, the incorporation of non-physical or “soft” tools, such as diplomatic and informational levers of power, enables conflict resolution without resorting

to kinetic action, thus reducing the potential for the collateral damage and civilian casualties associated with military action (Nye 2003). Nye (2003) does, however, highlight that while the destructiveness of conflict is avoided, the toll of a “soft war” may be equally as damaging. A soft war is audience-agnostic and may entail significant economic, psychological, political, or diplomatic damage to communities of people not directly involved in a conflict or “soft war.”

The competition continuum, the idea that nations are neither at war nor at peace but in a state of enduring competition, was outlined in the preceding section of this paper. While conflict and crisis are relatively binary states, competition and cooperation are not as discrete. State cooperation and competition occurs over protracted periods of time and, consequently, may occur despite an overall adversarial posture (Patchen 1987). Commentators suggest that conciliatory behaviours, if done so willingly and driven by a powerful actor, are effective in eliciting a cooperative response from an adversary (Komorita 1973; Mitchell 2007). Conciliatory behaviour will ensure intractable conflicts are more effectively managed and potentially resolved (Kriesberg 2003). Nevertheless, relative national power is an area in which further research may highlight opportunities for conciliatory action between adversarial nations.

Traditional military approaches, focused primarily on kinetic warfare, face limitations in addressing contemporary security challenges. Thus, militaries are pivoting to high-tech, hybrid means of conducting war (Danyk, Maliarchuk, and Briggs 2017). Modern conflicts often involve asymmetric threats, where non-physical factors, including cultural dynamics, significantly influence outcomes (Geiß 2006). It follows that the whole-force approach must embrace cultural understanding and culturally nuanced intelligence processes as integral elements of its framework to achieve success in complex environments. Cultural awareness can enhance communication with local populations, facilitate effective information operations, and bolster diplomatic efforts by recognising and respecting diverse perspectives and norms (Norvell 2022).

In recognising the multifaceted nature of global security challenges, the whole-force approach is an evolving and inherently adaptable strategy to navigate an interconnected and culturally diverse world (Galbreath 2015). Exploration of the synergies between culture and this comprehensive military framework, highlights the potential for a more nuanced and culturally sensitive approach to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Embracing culture as a credible sixth domain of warfare within the whole-force approach promises to enhance military effectiveness and build bridges of understanding in a rapidly evolving global landscape (CADS Staff 2006).

The evolving nature of conflict and the rise of information operations

The evolving nature of global conflict demands a broader understanding of contemporary security challenges. With the rise of technology and democratisation of information and its dissemination, adversaries now employ non-physical means to influence perceptions, sow discord, and achieve their objectives (Skingsley 2020). Information operations, media operations, cyber warfare, and psychological warfare have emerged as powerful tools in the contemporary battlefield (Corn, Williams, and Ford 2018). All these levers of

influence operate through or from cyberspace. Crucially, they are dependent upon a technical and culturally aware workforce that appreciates the ramifications of narratives and messaging upon the target audience (Herrick 2016).

Recognising the significance of cultural influence within these operations becomes imperative to effectively conducting hybrid operations, as well as countering and responding to the asymmetric threats therein. Herrick (2016) also highlights that policy makers and academics should explore the utility of social media operations, and thereby cultural influence, as a military tool. Whether employed as an enduring operation across the continuum, or reserved for conflict, “cultural influence” operations may multiply the force delivered through military activity, help predispose an adversary to de-escalation or set the moral conditions for victory.

Cultural understanding for effective engagement with local populations

Engaging with local populations is essential for mission success and building lasting stability during proximal operations. Moreover, culture significantly shapes behaviours, expectations, and trust in foreign forces (Albritton and Pisano 2022). These observations remain equally critical for cyberspace actors who must operate as a virtual extension and a manifestation of the physical world (Aiken 2016). A profound understanding of cultural norms, values, and traditions enables military personnel to navigate social dynamics, identify allies, and mitigate potential cultural misunderstandings. By embracing cultural awareness, the whole-force approach can foster positive relationships at both the local and macro population level, secure critical support, and pave the way for sustainable security partnerships (CADS Staff 2006). Breakwell (2014) highlights how awareness, understanding, acceptance, assimilation, and salience contribute towards the reconciliation of the micro, meso and macro levels of social representations – a system of values, ideas and practices regarding a given social object. This integrative framework highlights opportunities for a richer understanding of the interactions between strategic (macro), organisational (Meso), and community or micro cultures.

Enhancing communication and strategic messaging through cultural awareness

Strategic communication, and its associated messaging, have become pivotal in shaping perceptions and narratives in contemporary conflicts: whether garnering support for a military intervention (such as in Libya in 2011), or directing the ongoing narrative regarding the Ukraine-Russia conflict (Colley 2015; SDRA 2023). Cultural nuances influence how messages are received and interpreted by target audiences particularly, when they are misguided or damaging (Kilcullen 2009). The ability to tailor messages that resonate within cultural contexts enhances the effectiveness of information operations, public diplomacy, and strategic communications (B. Johnson and Zellen 2020). By leveraging cultural awareness and population-centric activity, military forces can build trust, credibility, and empathy, ultimately contributing to the success of diplomatic endeavours and cooperative initiatives (*ibid.*). They can also avoid increasingly aggressive and escalatory behaviours by focusing on engagement in

mutual benefits, common perceptions, and education (His Majesty's Government Ministry of Defence and Foreign & Commonwealth Office 2017). While education and strategic communications are somewhat atypical domains of military activity, they are increasingly necessary to maintain competitive advantage, exploit military success, and enable self-sufficient security forces (Matisek, Reno, and Rosenberg 2023).

As information operations and cyber warfare become central components of conflict, CQ will become increasingly important for military personnel. To maximise the impact of social media and information operations, and the cultural narratives that enable them, messaging must be suitable, account for prevailing sentiments, and be appropriately pitched for the target audience, thus ensuring uptake and "virality" (Tatham 2015). Crucially, cyber adversaries often exploit cultural vulnerabilities to propagate disinformation, undermine morale, and influence public opinion. This was demonstrated in 2003 by the PRC's adoption of its "Three Warfares" Doctrine which recognised, in addition to conventional combat, non-kinetic activity of psychological operations, overt and covert media manipulation, and legal warfare ("lawfare")⁴ (Livermore 2018). Crucially, the "Three Warfares" Doctrine targets an audience's predisposition to an "idea" and weaponises it for influence.

Equipped with high CQ, military strategists can discern and counter these tactics effectively (Norvell 2022). Moreover, CQ empowers intelligence analysts and defensive information operations teams to comprehend the motivations and strategies of adversaries, leading to proactive defence measures and mitigating potential threats. This approach is pertinent across all domains of conflict, but is especially relevant in the cyber domain, where social media and information operations are ubiquitous.

In a world where non-physical factors increasingly influence the physical dynamics of conflict, culture emerges as a critical component of the whole-force approach. By understanding cultural dynamics, military forces can navigate complex information environments, engage with local populations more effectively, and design communication strategies that resonate with diverse audiences. Integrating cultural awareness into the whole-force approach enhances military efficacy, strengthens partnerships, fosters understanding, and contributes to long-term global stability. Culture is, therefore, a credible sixth domain of warfare that empowers military forces to face the complexities of the modern world with adaptability, localised sensitivity, and an acute awareness of strategic advantage. A cultural domain will undoubtedly lend credence to the notion of multi-domain integration and maximise the return on investment of military activities by introducing an intangible cognitive component to tangible physical domains.

Domains of warfare

The following description of the domains of warfare is derived from HMG's Joint Concept Notes (2009). The domains of warfare represent diverse areas where armed forces and technologies are employed to achieve military goals. The domains of warfare are an organisational construct that comprise a space of responsibility with unique operational characteristics. They have grown as military forces are able to operate and manoeuvre through or from these different spaces. In chronological order, the land domain was followed by the sea, the air, cyber and then finally the space domain

(Ministry of Defence 2022). The penultimate domain of warfare, cyber, was declared in 2004 by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the U.S. National Military Strategy (U.S. Cyber Command n.d.).

This cursory overview illuminates the point that domains grow as humans exert ever greater influence over a conceptual and literal space. “Cyberspace”⁵ has existed as a term since William Gibson introduced it in his book, *Burning Chrome* in 1982. Gibson later popularised the term in his book *Neuromancer* (1984). It is telling that almost 30-years passed before cyberspace became an accepted domain of warfare. While Gibson’s definition of cyberspace is not wholly correct, the viewpoint that cyberspace is a “consensual hallucination of computer networks” serves to demonstrate the rationale that existence is driven in the minds of people (Gibson 1982, 69).

The fifth domain of warfare, space, was declared in 2019 by NATO, and in 2022 by the UK MoD (Ministry of Defence 2022; NATO 2023). While space has been long militarised (*i.e.*, used for military purposes), it has yet to be openly weaponised (Sharpe et al. 2023a; Zwart and Henderson 2021). The constraints of access and technology likely contributed to the delay in space becoming recognised as a domain, as nations were less able to meaningfully compete for advantage through or from outer space. Nonetheless, outer space has long been a domain that has captured the collective imagination and considered an opportunity to drive humanity forward in its conquest of the stars (Sharpe et al. 2023b).

Contemporaneously, the idea that culture can become a domain of warfare is easier to imagine. Culture is an abstract concept and is an extension of human evolutionary cognition (Bender 2019). Similarly, the cyberspace domain is an extension of the human mind and is thus a product of cultural evolution and innovation, one that is enriched with cultural values and epistemological orientations (*ibid.*; Inglis 2016). Fortunately, numerous relational frameworks⁶ attempt to conceptualise the interconnectedness and complexity of the cultural domain. Many of these frameworks indicate extreme diversity, which is, in turn, regarded as a significant obstacle to “cultural advantage” or “cultural manoeuvre.” These terms are of notable import to this paper and will be discussed in greater depth. Competitive advantage, the foundation of these terms, is defined as a significant advantage over competitors. It is associated with cost allocation and the results of the operation as dictated by the organisational strategy (Isoraite 2018). Additionally, cultural advantage may be deemed, “A culture that provides advantage towards achieving military aims” and/or “a culture that is influenced for military advantage.” Meanwhile, the authors propose cultural manoeuvre could be based on the definition of freedom of manoeuvre. Connable et al. (2012) proposes that freedom of manoeuvre “Is the degree to which individuals or groups have, or perceive that they have, the ability to move from place to place within a given environment as well as into and out of that environment” (Connable et al. 2012). Thus, the definition proposed by the authors for cultural manoeuvre is “The degree to which individuals and groups have, or perceive that they have, to shape and create a favourable cultural environment for competitive advantage.”

The hierarchy of these domains can vary depending on the military doctrine followed and the context of domain utilisation. Generally, the domains of warfare appear in a hierarchical order, a format defined by the ‘Multi-Domain Operations’ framework (U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command 2018). However, determining the exact

placement of the cultural domain in this hierarchy is subjective and contextually determined. This paper argues that culture is the most critical of the current domains as it is the most pervasive determinant.

Culture plays a significant role in shaping attitudes, beliefs, and mindsets. It is the foundation for decision-making processes, communication, and behaviour across all other domains. Understanding cultural dynamics is crucial for developing effective military strategies, tactics, and operational approaches. Therefore, the cultural domain should be afforded precedence as it acknowledges the influence of interpersonal variables across all the domains of warfare, and more broadly the whole force approach.

Activity conducted in the physical domains presents a compelling case that culture is the lowest in the hierarchy of the domains, as the use of physical force or coercion will directly influence ideas, customs, and social behaviours of people. There remains causal significance between culture and action, but to assume culture shapes action through values and the guidance of a desirable cultural end state is misleading (Swidler 1986). Yet, this proposal is not representative of the complexity of culture, or its significance to the whole-force approach. Placing the cultural domain at the bottom of the hierarchy presents an inaccurate view that culture is influenced solely by the outcomes of actions in the physical domains. Swidler (1986, 273–274) proposes that culture is significant in “constructing strategies of action” more so than “ends of action” and thereby indicates that “ways” and “means” are shaped by culture more than the “ends.” This is useful to highlight the causal relevance of culture in shaping physical action as opposed to the contrast.

Building on Swidler’s (1986) propositions, the placement of the cultural domain in the hierarchy can be complex and subjective, with academics debating the correct relational model. Various factors, including present contexts, desired emphasis on cultural understanding, and all PESTLE activity, to a degree, influence culture; thereby representing an aggregation of cultural realism and relativism. This is a paradigm between culture that is derived from socio-politics vs learned behaviour (Johnston 1999). These propositions present a compelling case that the domains of warfare are all interconnected and, in essence, form a feedback loop with no true hierarchy. Although PESTLE was designed as a business tool that considers the degree to which the sociological attribute focuses on the impacts of societal change and culture affects business, the PESTLE model can be easily pivoted to warfighting. The relational framework of the domain hierarchies is an area that may be further explored. [Figure 1](#), below illustrates the Six Domains of Warfare.

Case studies: cultural influences in modern conflicts

Afghanistan: understanding tribal dynamics and local norms

The most recent war in Afghanistan (October 2001 – August 2021) exemplifies how cultural complexity significantly shapes military operations and outcomes. Far from being a unified cultural entity, Afghanistan’s diverse tribal landscape, regional variations, and deeply ingrained cultural norms posed unique challenges to foreign forces (Balkhi 2023). Seth Jones (2009) argues that successful

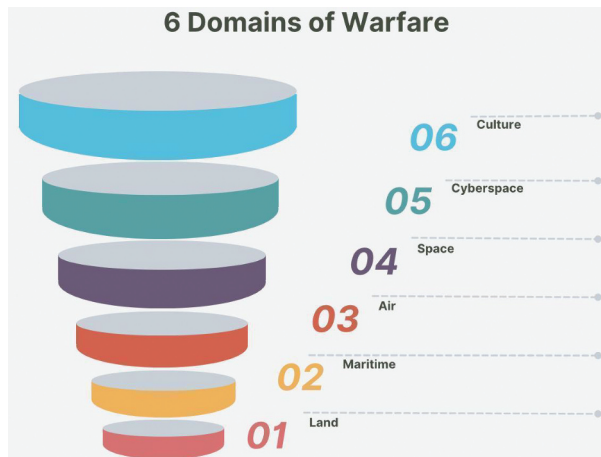


Figure 1. Hierarchical view of the six domains of warfare.

engagements with local communities necessitate a nuanced understanding of tribal dynamics, social hierarchies, and customary practices, which vary significantly across the country.

The failure to grasp these cultural intricacies and their regional differences has led to strained relations with local populations and hampered stabilisation efforts (Lister 2011). Following the overthrow of the Taliban regime, the U.S. and its coalition partners failed to acknowledge the diverse cultural preferences of Afghan people, including their often-conflicting views on governance structures. They made no systematic efforts to engage with the myriad local tribes or institutions, each with its own distinct cultural norms and power dynamics (Jones 2009).

In not appreciating the bottom-up culture favoured in many parts of Afghanistan, while simultaneously overlooking the complex interplay between centralised and decentralised power structures, the U.S., like the Soviets before them, failed to achieve stability (*Ibid.*). This oversimplification of Afghan culture as a monolithic entity led to strategies that were ill-suited to the country's diverse cultural landscape.

By embracing cultural intelligence and recognising the complex nature of Afghan society, military forces might have better navigated the intricacies of various regional and tribal cultures, built trust with diverse groups, and forged meaningful partnerships for sustained peace and stability (*Ibid.*). Arguably, this failure to engage with Afghanistan's cultural complexity contributed to the post-coalition regression and the ongoing humanitarian crisis (Mason 2021).

Despite the Taliban achieving territorial control, the plight of the Afghan people continues to worsen, highlighting the inadequacy of Western strategies that failed to account for the country's cultural diversity. The West's approach of conditional aid proved unsustainable in the face of Afghanistan's complex cultural and political realities (Hakimi and Price 2022). The ongoing challenges in areas such as the economy, malnutrition, women's rights, and internal displacements underscore the importance of culturally nuanced, locally adapted approaches to ensure long-lasting change (*Ibid.*).

Iraq and Syria: leveraging cultural narratives in information warfare

Coalition operations in the Middle East exemplify how cultural narratives and ideologies are central to warfare and operational success. Adversaries exploit cultural and religious identities to foster extremism, recruit supporters, and spread propaganda (Speckhard and Ellenberg 2020). Military forces seeking to counter these narratives must possess cultural understanding to craft counter-messaging strategies that resonate with the region's diverse populations. Drawing a tangential but relevant comparison, it is helpful to note that despite eliminating a number of cartel leaders, the U.S. Kingpin Strategy and its "War on Drugs" failed to stem the flow of drugs from Colombia into the USA – the strategy's ultimate goal. Similarly, numerous Jihadist movements have emerged since the attacks of 9/11 and have remained a credible global threat actor, despite the investment of trillions of dollars across the DIMEFIL components by the West (Wright et al. 2017). Kilcullen (2020) argues that the application of a Kingpin Strategy in the fight against ISIS created a more extreme and potent terrorist threat. In this case, the West failed to recognise the cultural distinction and social, political, and ethical difference of perspective between the metaphors of "freedom fighter" and "terrorist" (Jaspal and Coyle 2014).

These vignettes demonstrate that direct force, resource and capacity advantages across the DIMEFIL components are almost irrelevant in addressing the root cause of certain security concerns. Exploring a nuanced approach that acknowledges and respects cultural sensitivities will enhance the credibility of the messaging, weaken extremist propaganda, and foster greater receptivity to alternative narratives; thus representing a potential alternative to the adaptive-pressure and potentially extremism-inducing military action (Kilcullen 2020).

Ukraine: the impact of historical and cultural ties in diplomatic efforts

Cultural diplomacy –the role that culture plays in international relations, particularly during geopolitical conflicts, historical and cultural ties– can significantly influence diplomatic efforts (Bound et al. 2007). The situation in Ukraine provides valuable insights into how shared cultural heritage and historical connections shape diplomatic relationships, alliances, and the focus of warfare (Davies 2023). Recognising the significance of these ties allows nations to engage in diplomatic negotiations more effectively, seek common ground, and foster regional stability. Cultural understanding enables diplomats to navigate sensitive historical issues and build bridges of understanding between nations, ultimately facilitating conflict resolution and cooperation. While it is possible to argue that Russia and Ukraine share elements of a parallel cultural history, this proposition lacks nuance (Kurin 2023). There are similarities but culture is not language or religion alone, and it is deeply rooted in history. During the 20th century, Ukraine underwent significant "Russification" as part of the Soviet Union, and is now experiencing revival of its pre-soviet culture as a result of the ongoing Ukraine-Russia conflict (Kondrat 2023). The Soviet Union's historical imposition on Ukraine has now become a source of Ukraine's strength against its oppressor. Whilst offering a limited perspective, this vignette demonstrates the nuance and veracity of the role of culture in warfare, whilst simultaneously highlighting how closely aligned Ukraine has become with Europe than its perceived cultural relative – Russia.

The preceding case studies exemplify the role of culture in modern conflicts as becomes increasingly apparent. These examples highlight the necessity of incorporating cultural intelligence within the whole-force approach. By understanding cultural dynamics, military forces can support other actors across the whole-force domain to navigate complex environments with finesse, make informed decisions, and respond to security challenges with cultural sensitivity. The case studies underscore how culture as a credible sixth domain of warfare bolsters military effectiveness and shapes strategic outcomes in an interconnected world – one that is heavily influenced by the complex intersection of cultural diversity and asymmetric threats.

Challenges and consideration in implementing culture as a domain of warfare

Integrating culture as a domain of warfare brings forth ethical considerations and the need for considerable interpersonal sensitivity; these factors must be addressed in ethical and legal fora. Such discussion would help to ensure any expansion of the designation of war to include culture would minimise the likelihood of geopolitical tension. Military actions must respect the cultural values and rights of local populations to maintain moral legitimacy and isolate adversary and insurgent forces.

There are profound links between cultural relativism, human rights law, and moral philosophy (Teson 1985). Avoiding cultural insensitivity or inadvertent harm is crucial to winning the support and trust of communities, preventing unintended backlash, and upholding international norms and human rights standards (*ibid.*). A historical example of this is the Boxer Uprising⁷ in China. The Boxer Uprising serves as a poignant reminder of the consequences of cultural insensitivity. Misunderstanding and dismissing local customs and values fuelled violent hostilities, resulting in significant loss of life and the exacerbation of tensions between China and Western powers (Thoralf 2008). These outcomes underscore the critical importance of embracing cultural understanding and respect to prevent similar conflicts and foster harmonious international relations.

Cultural activity must be conducted for the understanding of cultural differences, and, where necessary, to aid in the delivery of diplomatic reconciliation. As culture influences military strategies and operations, a principled and culturally aware approach is essential to ensuring military activity is legitimate, ethical, and meaningful (CADS Staff 2006). The pursuit of culture as a warfare designation drives the preferred form of conflict away from kinetic means and human lives (Gross and Meisels 2017). It focuses warfare towards non-kinetic conflict resolution through influence, information, and psychological operations as well as the broader “soft” instruments of national power.

Of note, Iran has adopted culture as a component of warfare, and employs Iranian Cultural Centres to conduct a soft war, or *jang-e narm*, against the West (Jones 2020). Similarly, China’s Confucius Institutes are designed to promote and popularise Chinese language and culture. More critically for the West, however, is the well-established proposition that the Confucius Institutes are owned by and operate through an authoritarian government (Cho and Jeong 2008; Shambaugh 2007). While arguably beholden to the politics of its authoritarian regime, the Confucius Institutes exemplify the successful employment of soft power and cultural influence to achieve a higher strategic ambition.

Effectively implementing culture as a domain of warfare requires military institutions to recognise the value of thorough cultural training and education. The Special Operations Executive (SOE) considered local culture for both planning and execution of operations during World War II, with SOE agents exploiting customs and social norms to achieve their missions (Cobbett 2019). Examples of this include understanding and appreciating the diverse beliefs, political views, and agendas of the various European resistance forces, as well as blending into local populations to conduct clandestine activity (Cobbett 2019; Weiss 2021).

Equipping military personnel with the necessary cultural intelligence and skills is pivotal for preparing them to navigate diverse environments and engage effectively with local populations (Wong and Gerras 2019). This CQ has proved effective in many theatres with examples as early as World War 1 and Colonel T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia's) success in the Arabian Peninsula that set the conditions for an Allied invasion of Syria (Spencer and Balasevicius 2009). Incorporating the study of culture into military curricula, and providing ongoing training, will ensure that cultural understanding becomes an innate principle in military mindsets and operational planning. This is further reinforced by the idea that militaries and intelligence communities suffer from a lack of cultural understanding, not a lack of information (McFate 2006).

The process of integrating culture within the whole-force approach will necessitate an appropriate balance between traditional physical domains and the non-physical aspects of conflict. While cultural intelligence enhances military effectiveness, it must complement but not overshadow the importance of conventional capabilities, lest it risk being exploited by adversary nations (Seigel and Fouraker 1960). Maintaining a comprehensive strategy without neglecting the significance of traditional military domains is necessary for protecting and securing national sovereignty. Striking this balance ensures a versatile, adaptable, and responsive whole-force approach to addressing a multitude of diverse security challenges.

As we embrace culture as a credible sixth domain of warfare, it is essential to address the raft of nascent challenges outlined in this paper as a means of developing a holistic, culturally sensitive military strategy. Ethical considerations underscore the importance of conducting military operations with respect for and awareness of cultural values, while cultural training and education empower military personnel to engage with diverse populations more effectively. By establishing an equilibrium between traditional and non-physical domains, the whole-force approach can capitalise on the power of cultural intelligence to enhance military operations and achieve lasting security outcomes in an increasingly complex and culturally diverse world (Schaefer et al. 2020). Weaponised "soft" power may even ensure military victory without conflict. It is, however, likely to carry an array of diplomatic costs. A Soft War prescribes less destructive but equally objectionable crippling tactics, such as the imposition of economic sanctions and the implementation of lawfare, which can have devastating impacts upon those who endure their grip.

Future implications and recommendations

Including culture as a domain of warfare opens new avenues for geopolitical strategies. In an interconnected world, where information and narratives play an influential role,

cultural understanding becomes a strategic imperative. By leveraging cultural intelligence, nations can fine-tune military and diplomatic efforts to align with the preferences and sensitivities of the diverse populations they encounter. Cultural insights can help identify potential allies, anticipate adversaries' reactions, and shape cooperative partnerships to address emerging security challenges. Cultural awareness may facilitate more effective negotiation strategies, mediate different behaviours between competing nations, and act as an agent for stabilising global geopolitics. An endeavour such as this is not military alone and must be inherently “whole-force” to ensure its efficacy.

Investing in research and development of cultural intelligence is imperative to fully harness the potential of culture as a domain of warfare. Advancements in data analytics, sociocultural studies, and cognitive sciences can contribute to the development of a robust framework for understanding cultural dynamics and their impact on conflicts (Bail 2014; O'Brien, Sood, and Shete 2022). Allocating resources to support research initiatives, multidisciplinary collaborations, and technological innovations will equip military forces with the cutting-edge tools needed to navigate cultural complexities in the evolving landscape of warfare and broader geopolitical uncertainty.

The whole-force approach emphasises cooperation among various elements of national power. Likewise, fostering collaborations with academic institutions, international organisations, regional experts, and local people themselves enhances cross-cultural engagement and understanding. Partnerships can facilitate cultural exchange programmes, joint training, and knowledge-sharing initiatives. By actively involving diverse stakeholders, while noting the necessity of protecting information through security and vetting programmes, military forces can acquire fresh perspectives, broaden cultural horizons, and create comprehensive strategies that resonate with the regional populations with whom they operate.

As we look ahead to the future implications of culture as a domain of warfare, strategic considerations and investments will be vital in fully integrating cultural intelligence within military operations. The potential for culture to shape geopolitical strategies emphasises the significance of understanding diverse cultural contexts and leveraging this knowledge for enhanced security outcomes. By prioritising research, technological advancements, and partnerships, military forces can embrace the power of culture within the whole-force approach, paving the way for more culturally sensitive, effective, and agile strategies in an ever-changing global landscape.

The UK must invest more heavily in developing cultural units that are focused on delivering cultural advantage and manoeuvre for HMG's competitive advantage and strategic outcomes. Not only will this enable the UK to exercise its soft power more effectively, but it will also diversify operational and strategic thinking and create a geopolitical climate predisposed to cultural relativism through education and shared understanding. Further enhancing those units that are subject matter experts on cultural nuance and understanding will facilitate organisational appreciation for ethnography that will diffuse across all operations and activity.

Conclusion

This paper explored the proposition of culture as a credible sixth domain of warfare and its critical role in a whole-force approach to contemporary security challenges.

Integrating culture within military strategy unlocks new dimensions in understanding, communicating, and engaging with diverse populations and adversaries. Culture, a dynamic and multifaceted concept, significantly influences conflict dynamics and shapes the conduct of military operations. By accepting culture as a fundamental (sixth) domain of warfare, governments and military forces can enhance their cultural intelligence, navigate complex social environments, and build meaningful partnerships with nations, local communities and key personnel. This cultural understanding empowers military personnel to craft effective communication strategies, counter misinformation, and foster cooperation in diplomatic endeavours.

Integrating culture as a domain of warfare will enrich military capabilities by acknowledging the profound influence of non-physical factors in modern conflicts and is illustrative that communication and interpersonal engagement are the foundation of human activity. The case studies highlight how cultural dynamics impact conflicts in different regions, emphasising the need for cultural awareness in strategic planning, operational delivery and tactical-level interactions. Nonetheless, implementing culture as a domain of warfare comes with an array of ethical considerations. It necessitates investments in research and development of cultural intelligence and the fostering of SME collaboration to enhance cross-cultural engagement.

Culture holds the potential to shape geopolitical strategies and foster lasting security partnerships. Embracing cultural intelligence sets the conditions for an adaptable, innovative, and successful military capable of operating in an interconnected and culturally diverse world. Culture is a credible sixth domain of warfare and aligns with the whole-force approach to enable military forces to address complex security challenges more effectively. As we continue to evolve in an ever-changing world, integrating culture as a domain of warfare may emerge as a transformative step toward building a more secure, stable, and interconnected future. By undertaking the principles outlined, it is possible to advance the concept of a cultural domain in warfare and promote a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to military operations. Accepting culture as a domain of warfare requires a shift in mindset, increased awareness, and a commitment to developing the necessary capabilities across government.

The UK must invest in the less conventional and human-centric components of warfare and aspire for meaningful security outcomes. The history of humankind is littered with examples of military operations that failed to achieve the desired end state. The continued pursuit of narrow or limited solutions to highly complex, human problems will inevitably lead to additional failures. While there is obvious merit in political and military leadership pursuing options for fighting and winning a “hard” war, doing so without consideration for “softer” tools, only ensures the perpetuity of conflict. Likewise, although believing in a prevailing utopia may seem misguided and inexpedient, perceiving it as the pinnacle of human social evolution is most certainly not.

Notes

1. Hybrid warfare is the fusion of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal behaviour to achieve desired political objectives (Hoffman 2007). “Grey-zone” activity refers to a state’s utilisation of diverse tactics to influence an adversary’s behaviour

- without risking escalation of tensions beyond the conflict threshold (Hoffman 2018; Kaushal 2022; Mazarr 2015; Sharpe and Trichas 2024)
2. Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, and Environmental.
 3. Diplomatic, Information, Military, Economic, Financial, Intelligence, and Law Enforcement.
 4. Battles pertaining to legal jousting. It is the use of legal systems and institutions to damage or delegitimise an opponent, or to deter individual's usage of their legal rights (Dunlap 2001, 9).
 5. In the context of this paper, "cyberspace" is defined as a global domain within the information environment consisting of telecommunications and information networks, technology infrastructures, data, the internet, computer systems, and embedded processors and controllers' (Congressional Research Service 2022; Sharpe and Trichas 2024).
 6. Relational-Cultural Theory refers to a branch of psychology that deals with human relations (Jordan 2017).
 7. The "Boxer Uprising" and "Boxer War" refer to two different, but related upsurges of violence that took place in Northern China between 1899 and 1901 (Thoralf 2008).

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