

## INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AS AN ASSET FOR ENSURING INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

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**Abstract:** *Intercultural communication is a field of study that enables us to interact effectively and appropriately across cultures. The field of intercultural communication is based on the insight that communication everywhere contains traces of culture (s) and that cultural values are displayed in communication behavior. The field is often aligned with socio-linguistics, cultural anthropology, and cross-cultural psychology – however, practitioners in the field of intercultural communication focus on communication in context as their primary theoretical concern. This paper argues that, in today's interconnected world, effective intercultural communication is a strategic enabler of international security: knowledge and skills at the heart of the field of intercultural communication are a natural platform for advancing international security. Therefore, developing intercultural communication skills can improve the quality of intercultural interactions which leads to minimizing misunderstanding and conflict. Cross-cultural relations and negotiation are dependent on communication skills, which make them foundational to cross-cultural competence. The knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures are necessary in order to maintain international collaboration among countries and to ensure international peace.*

**Keywords:** *intercultural communication; security; conflict; cultural values; strategy*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Since an early age, I had to face the challenge of interacting and communicating with people from other countries, who spoke a different language and grew up in a different culture, with a different set of values and norms. At first, I saw this as an opportunity to learn a new language and to get to know the culture that was related to, but it soon became an important aspect of my whole life which turned into a difficult, but beautiful, intercultural journey. During high school, I used to participate almost every month in international meetings organized by the European Youth Parliament where I faced another challenge that eventually formed and developed my intercultural communication skills completely. In less than a week, I had to get to know and understand the different perspectives that my committee colleagues had, despite the fact that each of us was coming from different countries in Europe. We were challenged to communicate efficiently, debate and get to a common ground on a certain topic against the cultural barriers that we all felt at first.

Until today, the committee experience in this international organization has remained the best

example that I can give of intercultural communication, an example that supports the hypothesis of this paper as well. It is very interesting to watch how ten to fifteen teenagers and youth from different countries get together and become a united team in less than a few days, debate the current topic that was given and find solutions to the problems that are raised through an intercultural and interdisciplinary process. The committee work, the resolution writing, the way cultural and linguistic barriers are passed and used in their own advantage still amazes me, and the reason why I am sharing this personal experience at the beginning of this paper is because I strongly believe that it stays at the basis of my hypothesis. It also stood at the bases of my formation as an adult through the influence that it had on the choices that I made afterwards. I moved to a foreign culture to study (the United Kingdom) and from there to another culture (Syria) even more different and, to many, harder to adapt. I formed my family uniting two cultures, and both my professional and personal life became a perfect example of what intercultural communication is. This is how I started to look at the interactions between cultures not only from the theoretical

perspective, but also from the practical, day to day experiences that I have had so far.

Therefore this paper argues that, in today's interconnected world, effective intercultural communication is a strategic enabler of international security because knowledge and skills that are promoted and developed at the heart of the field of intercultural communication are a natural platform for advancing international security and for creating the platform for dialogue and negotiation in international conflicts. Still, it is important to underline that this paper does not argue that intercultural communication alone is the key to solving the international security challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It would be naive to assume that just with the promotion, understanding and development of intercultural communication skills the war and intercultural conflict would end. However, the existence of these problems does emphasize the need for both individuals/civilians and people who work in the field of politics, international relations and security to learn more about the interaction with different cultures.

The paper has three main parts: 1) it gives an insight of the concept of international communication and its development; 2) it presents shortly the field of international security and the main challenges that it faces nowadays; 3) it explains the ways in which intercultural communication can become an asset for ensuring international security.

## 2. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Both culture and communication have complex meanings and need to be defined. While the culture that we belong to provides us with a set of standards that govern how, when, what, and even why we communicate, one must first understand the concept of culture itself in order to appreciate how it influences communication.

**2.1 Culture.** Culture is a very popular and increasingly overused term in contemporary society. Nowadays, we are all familiar with expressions such as cultural differences, cultural diversity, multiculturalism, corporate culture, cross-culture, and other variations that continually appear in the popular media. The field of culture has extended and became connected to other fields like corporate management, health care, psychology, education, public relations, marketing, and advertising.

The use of the term culture is broad and should not be limited to the role that it plays in our day to

day lives. We should first acknowledge that 'culture' means much more than that. And, as a simple example, it often happens to hear about cases of military forces operating in different corners of the world without having the necessary knowledge and understanding of the local culture. Therefore the meaning of culture reaches far beyond our daily activities, conversations and traditions to fields such as the one of security.

It is rather hard to provide just one definition of just what constitutes culture or exactly what culture does. Alike the other term analyzed in this part – communication, the term culture has been treated from different angles and has been given a variety of complex, sometimes abstract, definitions. Some of them will be provided further on.

Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1920:83), a British anthropologist has defined culture as a "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". Although very old, the definition is still prevailing. Personally, I would replace society with group, as the society can be formed out of more than one cultural group and the elements counted by Sir Edwards represent a group better than a whole society. A short but concise definition is provided by Ruth Benedict (1959:16): "What really binds men together is their culture—the ideas and the standards they have in common". This definition is simple and true, but presents just one facet of the term culture – the binding force that it has. However, culture is more than just a binding power; it is also an element of difference, individuality, even conflict, if we take into consideration intercultural conflicts that are becoming more and more present at different levels and scales. Clifford Geertz (1973:89) provides a more complex explanation and defines culture as "a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life". Among the three definitions that were chosen, I consider the last one to be the closest to the purpose of this paper.

There is also an exemplified, practical and easier to understand explanation of culture that reflects its complexity at the same time. If we think about the word 'football' and try to visualize the representation that we give it according our understanding, the results are: most U.S. Americans will envision two teams of eleven men each in helmets and pads; someone in Montréal,

Canada, would imagine twelve men per team; a resident of Sidney, Australia, may think of two eighteen-man teams in shorts and jerseys competing to kick an oblong ball between two uprights; a young woman in Sao Paulo, Brazil, would probably picture two opposing teams of eleven men, or women, attempting to kick around ball into a net. It is true that in each of the identified cases, 'football' is a sport contest, but the playing fields, equipment, and rules of each game are quite different.

By the use of these examples, the paper provided an applied explanation of 'culture' as representing the rules for living and functioning in society. The analogy with a game is not a coincidence, because culture provides the rules for playing the game of life (Gudykunst, 2004; Yamada, 1997).

**2.2 Communication.** Alike culture, communication has been defined in various forms, reflecting every time the author's objective or a specific context. In the trial to bring together as many aspect of communication as possible, the authors usually come up with long and abstract definitions that are rather hard to digest for the reader. There are also cases in which the definition provided for communication is succinct or just designed to explain a specific type or instance of communication. Bearing in mind the purpose of this paper and the relation that we draw between culture and communication, a short and precise definition is preferred. Thus, to serve the aim of this piece of work, communication is the management of messages with the objective of creating meaning (Griffin, 2005:167).

It is also relevant in this context to quote the definition provided by the media critic and theorist James Carey who explains communication as "a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed" in his 1992 book "Communication as Culture." According to Carey, individuals define their reality via sharing their experiences with others (1992:18). In other words, each of us creates his or her reality according to the message of communication. From this angle, the importance of communication becomes crucial.

**2.3 Intercultural communication.** Made up by two terms that were already of high complexity, intercultural communication can be defined as summoning the "knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures" (Wiseman, 2002:

208). Seen as a skill or competence, intercultural communication must be developed and practiced by any individual of the 21st century and it should be one of the most important elements that provide peace and balance in our societies. In other words and seen from a larger context, globalization has brought about the realization that modern societies must learn to cooperate in order to prevent their mutual self destruction.

Firstly, we should agree that our world has changed and we live in an era where intercultural communication skills are not just an asset anymore; they are a requirement. This observation comes from the fact that it has never been so easy for people from different nations and ethnicities to meet and interact as it is today. This has been achieved through various, fast and amazing advances in technology that now allow people to move quickly and easily across vast distances, both physically and virtually.

Therefore, the role of intercultural communication and its efficient use is to help bridge cultural differences, mitigate problems, and assist in achieving more harmonious, productive relations. In the paper "State of the art themes in cross-cultural *communication research: A systematic and meta-analytic review*", Merkin, Taras, & Steel (2013:15) reveal that the most common hypotheses related to the link between cultural values and communication behaviour are devoted to: indirectness, self-promotion, face saving concerns, attitudes towards silence, openness, interruption, personal space, high context communication, deception, dramatise and ritualism. According to the authors, an understanding of these communication patterns is integral to beginning the process of building relationships across cultures.

### 3. INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

**3.1 International security's field.** The importance of semantics is relevant for the analysis of the term "international security" in order to understand the sense of urgency and significance that it carries along. Adrian Hyde-Price pointed out that securitizing an issue means removing it from the regular political discourse and "signal[ing] a need for it to be addressed urgently and with exceptional means" (Hyde-Price, 2001: 38). So far, the concept and study of international security has been understood as the study of the use of force between nations, with a particular focus on the role of great powers. This reflected the realist perspective that international security involved the

territorial integrity of nations and the greatest threat to such territorial integrity was posed by wars between states, and particularly between great powers (Nye and Lynn-Jones, 1998:18). But, the spectrum of international security has actually changed in the current times and focused on other elements beyond the state and great powers. This is explained by the current challenges to the security of our international society and the evolution of threats to our international security.

**3.2 Current challenges to the international security.** The twenty-first century has changed the traditional perspective of 'security' and brought new forms to the international security. Among the changes, we can count the following: the origin of threats (threats are no longer primarily coming from states, or just from states; threats are coming from ethnic groups obsessed by hyper nationalism, from criminal gangs, Mafiosi governance, from epidemics, AIDS, terrorism, dangerous food, from poverty, from economic mismanagement, from over-population, from failed states, from flows of refugees, and, most importantly, from pollution and the effects of pollution, the irrigation and destruction of nature, and the diversification of nature); the victims of the new threats are primarily the single individual (individual or human security), society (societal security), and the globe (global security); the physical and economical survival of the individual is threatened; the survival of societies is threatened, as concerns identity and coherence; the survival of the world as we know it is threatened in the long-run. Therefore, it can be emphasized that there is a common, global awareness of the necessity of fighting for the sustainability of the globe (Bertel Heurlin and Kristensen, 2002:695).

Another proof of the changing spectrum of international security that also emphasizes the role of culture and intercultural communication is the expanded definition of security calls for a wider range of security areas by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA):

- Economic: creation of employment and measures against poverty.
- Food: measures against hunger and famine.
- Health: measures against disease, unsafe food, malnutrition and lack of access to basic health care.
- Environmental: measures against environmental degradation, resource depletion, natural disasters and pollution.

- Personal: measures against physical violence, crime, terrorism, domestic violence and child labor.

- Community: measures against inter-ethnic, religious and other identity tensions.

- Political: measures against political repression and human rights abuses.

Therefore, OCHA's range of security areas proves that human security elements have evolved to a new and wider dimension, as they go beyond military protection and engage threats to human dignity. Accordingly, it has become necessary for states to make conscious efforts towards building links with other states and to consciously engage in global security initiatives. And this can only be achieved through successful dialogue and cooperation based on efficient intercultural communication.

#### **4. THE RELATION BETWEEN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY**

Firstly, we have to acknowledge the fact that intercultural communication skills represent the essential foundation on which international security enabling practices such as conflict resolution and negotiation are built. There are different perspectives or practical fields in which intercultural communication can help maintain international security: 1) at individual level, through developing culturally-relevant knowledge, increasing self-awareness and other-awareness, transforming mindsets, affective habits and behaviours in order to communicate competently and adaptively across cultures; 2) at regional/national level, through policies that promote and support intercultural communication (such as the ones that focus on migration or minorities), intercultural bridge national programs (culture, music, art, sports or any other field in which organized activities can bring together people from different cultures and get them to know and understand each other and collaborate), educational programs that develop the intercultural communication competences naturally from early age; 3) at international level, through international policies that promote and support intercultural communication (for example, allocating special funds to projects that put intercultural communication into practice), through measures against inter-ethnic, religious and other identity tensions such conflict resolution and negotiation methods that are based on intercultural communication competences (with trained personnel).

The unique contribution made by intercultural communication skills at any of the presented levels is their applicability regardless of the language spoken or the location of the interaction because these foundational skills enable people to interact more effectively in both a newly acquired language and their own native tongue.

There is a field directly related to international security where the role of intercultural communication has been understood and promoted recently – the military who serve in operations outside the borders. In today's culturally diverse operational environment, individuals ranging from commanding officers to strategic sergeants often rely on the war fighting capabilities of negotiating and relationship-building to accomplish their mission. However, if negotiation and cross-cultural relations represent the entryway to success in this environment, communication skills are the keys needed to open the door.

An illustrative example given by Triandis' (1994: 29) who claims that the first Gulf War could have been avoided had the parties involved been better educated about nonverbal communication patterns:

On January 9, 1991, the foreign minister of Iraq, Tariq Aziz, and the United States Secretary of State, James Baker, met in Geneva to attempt a last-minute compromise that would avoid a war. Seated next to Aziz was the half brother of Iraq's President, Saddam Hussein. The half-brother kept calling Baghdad to provide Hussein with his evaluation of what was going on. Baker used the verbal channel of communication almost exclusively and said very clearly that the U.S. would attack if Iraq did not move out of Kuwait. The Iraqis, however, paid less attention to what Baker said and most attention to how he said it. Hussein's half-brother reported to Baghdad that the Americans will not attack. They are weak. They are calm. They are not angry. They are only talking. Six days later, the United States unleashed Operation Desert Storm ...and Iraq lost close to 175,000 citizens.

Triandis further suggests that if Baker had pounded the table, yelled, and shown outward signs of anger to communicate intent nonverbally, the Iraqis may have decoded Baker's message the way he intended and the outcome may have been entirely different. Situations such as these are the focus of intercultural communication research which examines patterns of interaction in order to predict misunderstanding.

The example given by Triandis is by far not the only one and it can be extended to current

international security operations, whose success depends on micro-relations whether they occur at the negotiation table or on the battlefield. Such high-impact interpersonal interactions determine whether or not the practices of partnership-building or negotiating can even begin. Whereas macro-level international security often focuses on long term strategic goals between nations, micro-level international security entails the interpersonal interactions necessary to put such goals into action. In the book "Powerful Peace", J. Robert DuBois calls for the relentless pursuit of interpersonal and international peacekeeping as an imperative to global security (2012:54). DuBois captures the essence of the relationships that stay at the foundation of the micro-level international security necessary to put such goals into action. And he is not the only one to support it. In the famous Turkish series "The valley of wolves" that present the fight of the Turkish military against the Kurdish terrorist organization PKK, there is a scene that reflects the same message. The commander and one of the officers are separated during the battle from the other members of the army and they shoot back at the terrorists trying to get back to their fellows. Angry and stressed, the commander tells the officer: 'It is all the fault of these bloody Kurds. All the bad things happen because of them'. The officer, shy and frightened, answers: 'Commander, with all the respect, I am a Kurd, too.' The commander replies without any hesitation: 'You may be, but I know you personally.' The scene reflects once again how interpersonal relations can change the rules of the game and redefine intercultural conflicts and collaborations.

As emphasized by DeBois (2012:73), it is here, at the micro-level of international security that the make-or-break policy moments occur. Like any other human relationship, cooperative alliances are formed or dissolved one conversation at a time. Improving the quality and outcomes of such conversations is a main focus of intercultural communication research – which makes it distinct from the study of language alone. Whereas linguistic competence is concerned with the ability to speak a language, communication competence is concerned with the ability to use a language effectively and appropriately in context. Therefore, it is not enough to teach the military only a foreign language in order to send them in special missions abroad, but more important than the language are the intercultural communication competencies that they have to develop in order to adapt and develop useful inter-personal relations that can serve for the success of the mission.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper argued that the knowledge and skills at the heart of the field of intercultural communication, promoted and applied at different levels, represent important elements to ensure international security. Therefore, in order to develop the necessary intercultural communication competence, leadership must "ensure proper application and institutionalization of these [knowledge and skill] competencies within education, training, assessment and daily application" (McDonald *et al.*, 2008:2). This can be done at both regional/national and international level through various national and international policies, programs (also educational programs) and activities.

To sum up, although we accept that intercultural communication alone is not the key to solving the international security challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, developing intercultural communication skills can improve the quality of intercultural interactions which leads to minimizing misunderstanding and conflict at individual, regional, national and international level. Cross-cultural relations and negotiation are dependent on communication skills, which make them foundational to cross-cultural competence. The knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures are necessary in order to maintain international collaboration among countries and to ensure international peace.

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