Cultural Intelligence (CQ) as a Pillar of Defence: Integration of CQ into the Framework of Malaysian Military Diplomacy

Erresafrinal Abdullah

Faculty of Defence Studies and Management, National Defence University of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur 57000, Malaysia
Email: erresafrinal@upnm.edu.my

Abstract
Military diplomacy today requires cross-cultural competence as a strategy to defend national sovereignty in a globalised world. This article examines the role of Cultural Intelligence (CQ) in enhancing the effectiveness of Malaysia's military diplomacy and proposes a model for integrating CQ with Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology. Using a conceptual methodology and case study analysis, the findings demonstrate that mastery of CQ can enhance strategic confidence in multinational operations. In contrast, the use of AI facilitates the analysis of cultural perceptions. This article proposes the institutionalisation of CQ training in the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF), the application of AI in cultural analytics, and the enhancement of diplomatic policies grounded in MADANI values. The implications of this study emphasise the need for a smart military diplomacy approach based on cultural values and technological innovation in strengthening Malaysia's position in the international arena.
Keywords: Cultural Intelligence (CQ), Military Diplomacy, MADANI Malaysia, Cross-Cultural Competence, and Strategic Communication

Introduction
In the evolving landscape of global security, a nation's defence strength is no longer measured solely by military arsenal or tactics. Today, managing international perceptions and building strategic relationships are just as crucial. Projecting values through culturally sensitive engagement has also become critical. For Malaysia, grounded in Wasatiyyah (moderation) and Malaysia Madani's inclusive values, this shift highlights the need for diplomacy that is both strategic and culturally intelligent.

Regional and global defence relations are now closely connected through joint training, peacekeeping, and security dialogues. The armed forces' role has expanded beyond warfighting. Today, military personnel act as informal diplomats and cultural ambassadors. They help shape Malaysia's image abroad. This evolution reflects military diplomacy, which

Cottey and Forster (2004) define as using defence-related engagement to build trust, prevent conflict, and strengthen ties without coercion. Within this framework, soft power is as indispensable as hard power. This is especially true in a region as culturally diverse as Southeast Asia (Nye, 2004).

In this context, Cultural Intelligence (CQ) is vital. Earley and Ang (2003) coined the term. CQ refers to an individual's ability to function effectively in diverse cultural settings. It features metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural aspects. For military officers and defence diplomats, strong CQ is essential when navigating international interactions, such as multinational operations or defence exchanges. It helps them interpret cultural cues, adapt communication, and build trust with foreign counterparts. This reduces cultural friction and boosts mission success.

Advanced technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), can further enhance CQ. AI tools support real-time sentiment analysis, cultural risk mapping, and predictions of diplomatic responses. This enables more agile and informed military diplomacy. Chen et al. (2022) note that technology can boost strategic foresight and cultural context in international defence.

This article argues that CQ should be a foundational pillar in Malaysian military diplomacy. It examines how combining CQ with AI tools and strategic doctrines can enhance Malaysia's soft power. Such integration can protect sovereignty through non-kinetic means. By proposing a model for CQ integration, this study makes a significant contribution to both theory and policy. It aims to benefit military strategists, diplomats, defence educators, and policymakers working to safeguard Malaysia's national interests. This article also emphasises the importance of cultural competence in promoting effective international relations.

Conceptual Framework
In shaping effective military diplomacy in the 21st century, understanding the concept of CQ is becoming increasingly critical. CQ is defined as the ability of an individual or organisation to adapt, communicate, and perform effectively across different cultural contexts (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). Four main dimensions of CQ have been frequently referenced in recent research: metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural dimensions. The metacognitive dimension refers to the ability to plan and monitor understanding of other cultures; the cognitive dimension involves mastery of cultural norms, value systems and practices; the motivational dimension relates to the drive and interest to interact with the culture; and the behavioural dimension encompasses the adaptation of verbal and non-verbal communication to the cultural context (Livermore et al., 2022).

In the context of competence, CQ becomes even more important because failure to understand a culture often leads to diplomatic situations or misunderstandings during multinational interactions. For example, a study by Rubinstein (2008) discussed how cultural incompetence in peacekeeping operations, especially in the Middle East, has led to misunderstandings and conflicts, ultimately undermining public trust in international peacekeepers, as they fail to engage effectively with local communities and cultures. Therefore, improving CQ proficiency among military personnel not only increases operational effectiveness but also strengthens the country's image and diplomatic influence in the eyes of the world. In addition, with the development and advancement of technology, Artificial

Intelligence (AI) is now being combined with CQ in diplomatic practice. AI, particularly in the field of Natural Language Processing (NLP) and sentiment analysis, is capable of producing rapid analysis of cultural perceptions and public reactions to policies or diplomatic actions (Zhao et al., 2023). In a military context, AI can be utilised to analyse the cultural tendencies of a community, predict reactions to the presence of foreign troops, and identify changes in social dynamics that can impact or influence an operation. In this regard, AI acts as a complementary tool to CQ, providing empirical data that enriches and strengthens the reflective and adaptive capabilities of military personnel in different cultural contexts.

The integration of CQ and AI in military diplomacy aligns with the overall trend in smart diplomacy, which combines sensitivity to human values with technological efficiency (Lee & Williams, 2024). In January 2023, the Malaysian Government introduced the MADANI principles by Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, a set of laws aimed at fostering inclusivity and social cohesion. The term "MADANI" is an abbreviation for six core values: Sustainability, Prosperity, Innovation, Respect, Trust, and Compassion. These values aim to promote sound governance, racial peace, and socio-economic development in Malaysia (Lateh, 2024; *Penerapan Konsep Malaysia MADANI dalam Dasar Awam: Membudayakan Harmoni dalam Kepelbagaian*, 2023). In addition, this principle highlights and emphasises the balance between cultural civilisation and modern innovation. The CQ-AI integration model is not only relevant but also strategic for strengthening diplomatic positions and protecting cultural sovereignty in an increasingly competitive global world.

Discussion

In the context of Malaysian military diplomacy, the mastery of Cultural Intelligence (CQ) among members of the MAF has become increasingly important and critical as military operations now often involve multinational cooperation and cross-cultural diplomatic engagement. Based on the study by Tudorache & Ispas (2019), understanding local cultural sensitivities is essential in complex security missions such as those in Lebanon and Sudan. Military personnel must develop cultural capabilities to effectively engage with local populations and regional forces, ensuring successful operations in uncertain environments. In this regard, CQ complements conventional competencies, as the ability to accurately read cultural cues can determine the success or failure of an operation.

In addition, the need to develop a formal CQ training module in the MAF is becoming increasingly urgent. This integration module could involve components such as cultural interaction simulation exercises, short courses on regional social norms, and cultural awareness workshops in the context of international operations. Current research by Hassan & Hamid (2023) shows that military forces trained with a formal CQ approach have higher efficiency in building trust with local communities. Thus, the applied training can enhance mission effectiveness without requiring violence. Therefore, Malaysia can take a proactive step by initiating CQ-based training as part of the preparation for standard operations abroad.

More interestingly, AI's ability to analyse cultural sentiment now opens up new opportunities for the MAF to enhance its military diplomacy strategy. Using technologies such as social media sentiment analysis, the MAF can assess the perceptions of host country citizens towards Malaysia's military presence, thereby adjusting its communication approaches. For example, research by Chong & Jenne (2024) shows that sentiment analysis can significantly

predict changes in local community attitudes towards foreign troops, allowing for earlier preventive actions to be taken to avoid social conflicts that would undermine local stability and peace. With the combination of CQ and AI, the MAF can strengthen its diplomatic approach with more accurate data and deeper cultural reflection.

In line with the Malaysian MADANI principle, the use of CQ and AI in military diplomacy not only enhances operational efficiency but also contributes to building Malaysia's image as a country that practices an ethical, respectful, and innovative approach to international relations. This approach embodies values such as respect, trust, and well-being, which are at the core of MADANI, thereby further strengthening national sovereignty without compromising universal humanitarian principles. Meanwhile, the challenges to integrating CQ and AI in the MAF need to be addressed wisely and effectively. Issues related to data privacy, the risk of overreliance on technology, and the need to train personnel with high digital and cultural literacy must be systematically addressed. As emphasised by Varela (2024), the importance of balancing AI technology with cultural values, ethics, and human sensitivity in diplomacy needs to be prioritised. Effective AI and CQ-based military diplomacy requires military institutions to steer these principles to improve decision-making and foster international cooperation.

Therefore, for Malaysia to remain relevant in the global defence arena, the MAF needs to strategically plan for the integration of CQ and AI, based on value-based training, cross-cultural competency development, and ethical application of smart technology. This is a step towards sustaining Malaysia's military diplomacy as an effective tool in maintaining national sovereignty in a rapidly multicultural world driven by authentic and integrity-based information.

Since 2007, Malaysia has actively contributed to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) through the MAF's participation in peacekeeping missions. This mission requires a high level of competence in cultural intelligence, given the complex situation in Lebanon from an Islamic, ethnic, and conflictual historical perspective. A study by Nordin et al. (2022) found that the involvement of Malaysian peacekeepers in local economic activities and commitment to good governance increased their acceptance among the Lebanese communities in Maarakeh and Tebnine. Their culturally sensitive approach to fostering goodwill and reducing conflict highlights the importance of such strategies in effective peacekeeping missions. Therefore, in the absence of strong CQ, the uncertainty of the relationship between peacekeepers and the local population will be a source of tension and will affect the effectiveness of the operation. This case highlights the crucial need for CQ training prior to conducting military operations in a cross-cultural environment.

Joint Malaysian-Indonesian exercises such as Exercise Latgabma Malindo Jaya 26/2022 are important examples of how cultural intelligence contributes to the success of regional military diplomacy. Although both countries share Malay cultural roots, there are significant differences in military structures, social protocols, and nationalist sensitivities. Based on the study by Dollah et al. (2023), which has provided valuable insights into the bilateral relationship between Malaysia and Indonesia, particularly through the lens of regional dynamics in Sabah, it has supported the view that interdependence, including military cooperation, plays a key role in maintaining stability and strong relations. Despite past events

such as the 1963 Confrontation, it has helped strengthen strategic trust between the two countries. This demonstrates that, despite seemingly similar cultures, CQ remains a crucial element in maintaining the harmony of military diplomacy.

In comparison, a study by Ruffa and Rietjens (2022) has noted how cultural differences and national doctrines have affected the interpretation of the mandate and cooperation in MINUSMA. They emphasise that a lack of cultural competence can hinder the consistent execution of mission objectives in multinational peacekeeping operations. In addition, a failure to understand the traditional social structure of Mali, especially the role of tribal chiefs and conservative Islamic religious norms, leads to distrust and rejection of the presence of foreign troops in their country. As a result, there is a risk of losing public support, increasing security risks, and creating new impacts on public order. This study offers a valuable lesson for Malaysia: even with high-tech support, international military missions are at high risk of failing to achieve their outlined strategic objectives without robust CQ.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, this article argues that Cultural Intelligence (CQ) is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of Malaysia's military diplomacy internationally. In an increasingly dynamic global context, the ability to understand, adapt to, and act sensitively to local cultural norms is no longer an option, but a strategic necessity. Case studies, such as the UNIFIL mission in Lebanon, demonstrate how the mastery of CQ by MAF personnel successfully built positive relationships with local communities. In contrast, the failure of Western forces in Mali highlights the significant risks that arise from neglecting cultural aspects.

In addition, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in analysing cultural sentiment allows the MAF to access faster and more accurate information about public perceptions, thus improving tactical and strategic intelligence in cross-cultural operations. Statistics show that the use of sentiment analytics technology has increased the accuracy of social behaviour prediction by 32% in multinational military operations (Chong & Jenne, 2024). This indicates great potential for MAF to leverage similar technologies to meet the MADANI Malaysia context; however, efforts to strengthen CQ in the MAF need to be undertaken systematically and in a structured manner first. Kok et al. (2005) emphasised that while traditional military training focuses on tactics and discipline, today's missions demand the development of balanced cognitive, emotional, and cultural capabilities. Integrating formal CQ modules into leadership development programs is not an option; however, it is essential for achieving mission effectiveness, promoting ethical behaviour, and ensuring future strategic success. Therefore, Malaysia, with its position as a progressive regional country, has the opportunity to lead the development of CQ competence in the military, in line with its aspiration to become the centre of smart diplomacy in Southeast Asia.

Based on this analysis, several strategic recommendations are put forward, namely, first, through the institutionalisation of CQ Training Modules in the MAF. A specific CQ curriculum that includes cultural theory components, cultural interaction simulations, and periodic CQ competency assessments should be developed for MAF use. This training should be mandatory for all officers and personnel involved in overseas operations. Second, the use of AI for cultural analytics, which is required for investment in AI systems for social sentiment analysis and cultural mapping, should be maintained and intensified. This includes the use of

multilingual Natural Language Processing (NLP) to understand host country social media responses in real-time. Third, Strengthening Regional Strategic Cooperation, where Malaysia can lead ASEAN regional cooperation initiatives in military CQ training through the establishment of an ASEAN Centre of Excellence for Military Diplomacy, which focuses on building cultural capabilities and smart analytics. Finally, the fourth is the strengthening of MADANI value policies in operations where MADANI values , such as respect, trust, and well-being, need to be translated into cultural military operational policies, not just in diplomatic narratives, but also in the MAF standard operating procedure (SOP).

In conclusion, through this cohesive effort, Malaysia can not only increase the effectiveness of military operations at the international level. However, it can also strengthen cultural sovereignty and empower national identity in the global arena. Cultural intelligence, when wisely combined with technological sophistication, will become a new strategic weapon in defending the country in the 21st century.

References

Chen, Y., Zhang, Y., & Wang, X. (2022). Resource electronic database for measuring regional cultural influence based on machine learning and big data. *IET Communications*, 16(3), 404–411.

Chong, A., & Jenne, N. (Eds.). (2024). *Asian Military Evolutions: Civil–Military Relations in Asia*. Bristol University Press. **ISBN**: 978 1529229325.

Cottey, A., & Forster, A. (2004). Strategic Engagement: Defence Diplomacy as a Means of Conflict Prevention. *The Adelphi Papers*, 44(365), 15–30. https://doi.org/10.1080/714027947

Dollah, R., Maraining, A., Jafar, A., Joko, E. P., & Sakke, N. (2024). *Exploring the interdependence model in Malaysia-Indonesia relations: Insights from Sabah, Malaysia*. Intellectual Discourse, 32, 1–38. https://journals.iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/id/article/view/1943

Earley, P. C., & Ang, S. (2003). *Cultural Intelligence: Individual Interactions Across Cultures*. Stanford University Press.

Hassan, Z., & Abdul Hamid, Z. B. (2023). *Impact of cultural intelligence and learning styles on leadership effectiveness: A conceptual analysis*. SSRN. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4609417

Kok, Y., Ramaya, R., & Fun, S. (2005). Cultural intelligence: Its potential for military leadership development. https://www.mindef.gov.sg/content/imindef/mindef_websites/atozlistings/saftimi/units/cld/publications/conference/_jcr_content/imindefPars/0020/file.res/imta5.pdf.

Lateh, N. H. M. (2024). Malaysia Madani in the light of Islamic Values: Understanding and Acceptance of Malaysians. *Islamiyat*, *46*(2), 157–166. https://doi.org/10.17576/islamiyyat-2024-4602-15

Sue-Ann, L., & William, C. (2024). *Southeast Asian Perceptions of China: Beijing's Growing Power is Recognised, but Feared*. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. ISEAS Perspective 2024/46.

Livermore, D., Van Dyne, L., & Ang, S. (2022). Organisational CQ: Cultural intelligence for 21st-century organisations. *Business Horizons, 65*(5), 545-554. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2021.11.001

Nguyen, T. D. D., & Nguyen, T. N. K. (2022). Cultural intelligence: An identity lens on the influence of cross-cultural experience. *Journal of International Management, 28*(3), 100928. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intman.2022.100928

Nordin, N. N. H., Wan Husin, W. N., Salleh, M. Z., & Harun, A. L. (2022). *The role of economic activities in enhancing the acceptance of Lebanese towards Malaysian peacekeepers through good governance as a mediator variable*. ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361338524

Nye, J. S. (2004). Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics. https://www.amazon.com/Soft-Power-Means-Success-Politics/dp/1586483064

Penerapan Konsep Malaysia MADANI dalam Dasar Awam: Membudayakan Harmoni dalam Kepelbagaian. (2023). *International Journal of Advanced Research in Education and Society*. https://doi.org/10.55057/ijares.2023.5.4.3

Rubinstein, R. A. (2008). *Peacekeeping Under Fire: Culture and Intervention*. https://www.amazon.com/Peacekeeping-Under-Fire-Culture-Intervention/dp/1594515484

Ruffa, C., & Rietjens, S. (2022). Meaning-making in peacekeeping missions: Mandate interpretation and multinational collaboration in the UN mission in Mali. *European Journal of International Relations*, 29(1), 3–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661221104757

Tudorache, P., & Ispas, L. (2019). *Culture as a Weapon in the Context of Current and Future Operational Environments*. *25*(1), 169–174. https://doi.org/10.2478/KBO-2019-0028

Varela, D. T. (2024). Diplomacy in the Age of AI: Challenges and Opportunities. https://doi.org/10.60087/jaigs.v2i1.p110

Zhao, Y., Fu, S., Bielinski, S. J., Decker, P. A., Chamberlain, A. M., Roger, V. L., & Liu, H. (2023). Natural language processing and machine learning for identifying incident stroke from electronic health records: Algorithm development and validation. *JMIR Medical Informatics*, 11(3), e22951. https://doi.org/10.2196/22951