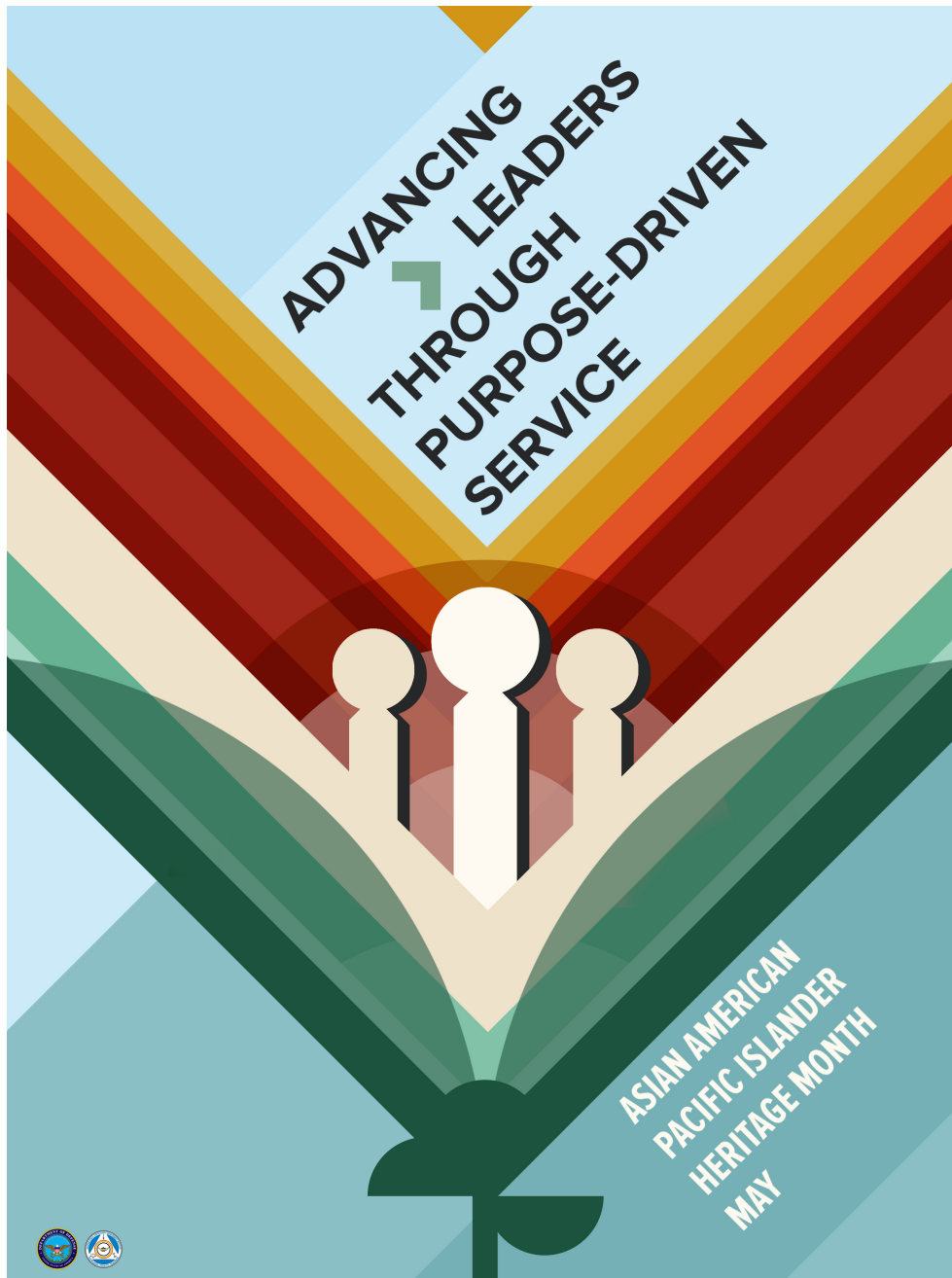


Asian Americans are strategic human capital asset for national security

By Allison Abbe, Ph.D., Army War College Professor of Organizational Studies 31 May 2021

RELATED LINKS

[Allison Abbe - LinkedIn](#)



Rhetoric about the Chinese origins of COVID-19 over the past year has spurred its own epidemic of [violence against Asians and Asian Americans](#)

across the U.S. Examples of this violence have emerged [among U.S. service members](#) and [against an Asian American veteran](#). The treatment and inclusion of Asian Americans is a strategic human capital challenge for the national security community that warrants immediate attention. The 2017 National Security Strategy identified competition with China as top strategic priority, and the new administration has elevated competition with China as the primary pacing challenge for the U.S. As a result, understanding national interests and cultures in the Indo-Pacific region is essential to countering China's influence and maintaining critical partnerships.

Asian Americans have much to contribute but are underrepresented in the national security workforce and have been a neglected demographic in recent discussions of diversity and inclusion in the DoD. Amid the [domestic hostility toward Asian ethnic minorities](#), civilian and military senior leaders in DoD need to consider three issues to meet the human capital demands of a Pacific-focused strategy: programs, personnel, and culture.

Programs: Where Are the Human Capital Initiatives to Support the Indo-Pacific Strategic Focus?

The shift in priorities to the Indo-Pacific region after the extended focus on the Middle East means the U.S. may not yet have the regional and cultural insight needed across the force, or [strategic empathy](#) for key actors. In the office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, [short tenures and vacancies](#) since the Bush administration have left gaps in the alignment of human capital initiatives with strategic priorities.

[Lessons from the Middle East and Afghanistan](#) can help DoD anticipate demand and begin preparing in the competition phase, well before a conflict, rather than waiting until conflict is underway to recognize the human capital needs. For example, the 09L military linguist program in the Army [addressed the need](#) for heritage foreign language speakers in the Middle East. Now, recruiting Asian heritage language speakers would help ensure cultural and linguistic expertise is available when it's needed, and the Air Force is doing so with its [Language-Enabled Airmen Program](#).

Lessons from the [Afghanistan-Pakistan \(AfPak\) Hands program](#) can be similarly instructive. Based in part on the Department of State's [China Hands program in the 1940s](#), AfPak Hands established a cadre of military personnel with language, cultural, regional, and advisory skills to engage leaders at the operational and strategic levels in theater. The program demonstrated both [successes and shortcomings](#) in its implementation in its ten years, offering lessons for talent management. General Martin Dempsey initiated an Asia-Pacific (APAC) version of the program [during](#)

[his tenure](#) as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but APAC Hands barely lifted off before fading entirely.

In another initiative, the [Defense Language and National Security Office](#) developed the Regional Proficiency Assessment Tool to help commanders identify personnel within their commands with regional knowledge that may not be evident from their personnel records. This tool is a self-report of experiences, language proficiencies, and related skills in 15 world regions. However, the RPAT privileges formal education and assignments over informal learning and heritage experiences, leaving questions about its relevance for Asian Americans and other heritage groups. In addition, relatively few service members have completed it, in spite of a [Government Accountability Office review](#) indicating it would be implemented in 2015.

Personnel: Where Are the Asian American General Officers?

Asian Americans are [under-represented in the U.S. military](#), comprising 4.4% of active-duty service members in 2018, but 6.3% of the adult U.S. population. They are similarly underrepresented in the [intelligence community](#) at only 4.3% of the workforce. Their representation among the officer corps is concerning. While Asian Americans are 9.7% of the U.S. population with bachelor's degrees, they are only 5.2% of officers. Underrepresentation of Asian Americans at senior levels is even more stark – they are only [1.8% of General Officers or Flag Officers](#).

Accessions of Asian American officers [has improved](#) in [recent years](#), and retaining these young officers will be key to building a bench of more diverse senior leaders for the future. Representation of Asian Americans [among the federal workforce](#) (excluding the intelligence community) is very similar to that of the US population, at 6.1 and 6.3, respectively. Thus, it's not interest or public service motivation that keeps Asian Americans. Security clearances may be more challenging for applicants with more recent family immigration history, but risk-benefit considerations can be managed as a component of [risk analysis](#) that is already part of the investigation process.

Culture: To What Extent Are National and Organizational Culture a Barrier?

National culture and organizational culture set the conditions for inclusion

of Asian Americans in DOD, and Asian Americans have long struggled for inclusion into American national identity. Historically, the literal exclusion of Asians from the U.S. took the form of law and policy -- for example, the [Chinese Exclusion Act](#) and the detention camps for Japanese Americans in WWII.

Inducing empathy can be a very simple way to improve this – asking people to put themselves in the shoes of an Asian American character [can help increase the inclusion](#) of Asian Americans into notions of “us” rather than “them.” Further research is needed to determine whether such interventions have a lasting impact, but their simplicity and impact in the lab are promising.

Ensuring that the organizational culture is inclusive Asian Americans is important for gaining the [benefits of cognitive diversity](#) provided by multicultural service members. Specifically, accommodating the bicultural identities of many Asian Americans may provide important benefits on complex tasks with high uncertainty. Asian Americans often engage in [frame switching](#) that allows them to apply different cultural lenses depending on the situation. These perspectives can enhance innovation and divergent problem solving, but organizations can only reap these benefits when they create climates of [psychological safety](#) for their members. This climate requires less emphasis on cognitive conformity and [more tolerance of uniqueness](#). Benefiting from diverse cultural perspectives Asian Americans bring thus requires leaders who can help members manage dual identities without forcing them to sacrifice or suppress one for another.

The role of Asian Americans is also important in strategic messaging. China seeks to exploit rifts in U.S. race relations for promotion of communism and to undermine U.S. credibility on human rights issues. Attacks on Asian Americans in the U.S. have the potential to bolster Chinese information operations campaigns if left unanswered.

Asian Americans are an underappreciated strategic human capital resource in national security. As the U.S. focuses on China as a competitor, strategy and concepts have taken shape to better modernize, organize, and equip the joint force. Human capital should also be part of the equation. Defense leaders should make systematic efforts to improve the recruitment, retention, and inclusion of Asian Americans in the armed forces.
