Building organizational adaptive capacity: the U.S. Army’s performance in the Iraq War and its implications for the ROK Army

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This study delves into the issues of the U.S. Army’s adaptive capacity in the Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) Phase IV. The author borrows the concept of organizational adaptive capacity while arguing that adaptive capacity framework can provide coherent theoretical explanations for the U.S. Army’s unsatisfactory performance in OIF Phase IV. The author, then, tries to apply the analysis of U.S. Army’s experience to the Republic of Korea (ROK) Army. The ROK Army has tried to follow the U.S. Army from doctrine to weapon systems and the author sees that there is a possibility that the ROK Army will be faced with similar challenges that the U.S. Army had to deal with. Thus, the author argues that drawing theoretical implications and lessons from U.S. experiences should be regarded important tasks for the ROK Army.

Introduction

By observing the performance of the U.S. Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) Phase IV, there have been many observers who raised questions regarding the U.S. Army’s adaptive capacity. They think that the U.S. Army, as one of the key policy instruments of its Overseas Contingency Operations (formerly known as the War on Terror), should be able to adapt itself to different missions and environments. However, the Army’s performance in OIF Phase IV was disappointing. Many observers attribute the U.S. Army’s unsatisfactory performance in the Iraq War to various sources, ranging from problems in political leadership to ineffective weapons systems.

Several explanations, from various perspectives, have been offered as reasons for the unsatisfactory performance; however they all fall short of coherent theoretical explanations. This has happened because there is no comprehensive framework that can overarch issues of military operation and organizational theory. Acknowledging this and with the intent of establishing a tentative framework for further analysis, this study borrows the concept of organizational adaptive capacity and tries to explain the U.S. Army’s unsatisfactory performance in OIF Phase IV by applying this concept.

In the meantime, the U.S. Army’s experience in OIF Phase IV might be applied to the Republic of Korea (ROK) Army in many of the cases. It is because the ROK Army has tried to follow the example of the U.S. Army, from doctrine to weapon systems. Literally, the U.S. Army has been a role model for the ROK Army. If the U.S. Army has not been able to successfully adapt to counterinsurgency and

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reconstruction operations, the ROK Army would end up in a similar situation. Thus, studying the U.S. Army’s experience in Iraq might be an important task for the ROK Army.

In this article, I will (i) provide an overview of the adaptive capacity concept; (ii) examine the issues of the U.S. Army’s performance in OIF Phase IV in terms of adaptive capacity; and (iii) draw theoretical implications and lessons for the ROK Army.

Organizational adaptive capacity

Enhancing organizational adaptive capacity is important to the military. Like business firms which need to adapt to turbulent environments, the military, and especially the Army, needs to build its adaptive capacity to guarantee its successful handling of the full range of missions: peacekeeping operations, humanitarian relief operations, guerrilla warfare and major conventional warfare. Some commentators refer to this as building a full-spectrum force. Indeed, U.S. politicians and citizens expect the U.S. Army to become a full-spectrum force. They believe that the U.S. Army should revolutionize its units in order to guarantee the successful accomplishment of its various missions. In this sense, the U.S. Army’s manifest objective of establishing a full-spectrum force is closely related to the theoretical discussion of organizational adaptive capacity.

Adaptive capacity—theoretical perspective

The definition of adaptive capacity is “the ability to cope with unknown future circumstances.” Why, then, is adaptive capacity important? It is because every organization needs to cope with unpredictable environments. Organizational adaptive capacity explicitly emphasizes the ability of organizational change. Haeckel provides some implications regarding this aspect; according to him, an adaptive organization develops a four-phase (sense–interpret–decide–act) loop. By using the four phase loop, an organization can make sense of environmental signals, and internalize them, thus changing itself into a successful organization. Kenyon B. De Greene wrote, “[t]he adaptive organization must have an ongoing capability for anticipation of organizational and environmental reconfiguration, an ongoing capability for problem-solving, and an ongoing capability for managing difficulties and crises.” Thus, the most conspicuous characteristic of adaptive capacity concept is its emphasis on the ability of reacting to contingencies and crises.

How then is the concept of adaptive capacity different from adaptation? According to Staber and Sydow, adaptive capacity is different from adaptation in that adaptive capacity sees organizational change as “a dynamic process of continuous learning and adjustment that permits ambiguity and complexity.” Thus, learning is an important aspect of organizational adaptive capacity. While quoting Argyris and Schon, they conclude that organizational capacity for double-loop learning, which also means a higher level of organizational reflexivity, can lead an organization to a higher level of adaptive capacity. Haeckel emphasizes this aspect while arguing that his adaptive loop (sense–interpret–decide–act) may or may not trigger a learning process. He wrote, “[s]ystematic learning requires more than adaptation within a given context, it requires adaptation of the context itself.”