

Organizational Culture and Combat Readiness: A Thematic Review of Military Performance Drivers

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Abstract

Combat readiness has become a principal strategic preoccupation for NATO and Western armed forces in the face of large-scale conventional warfare returning to Europe. While leadership, morale, and training receive abundant intellectual attention, readiness's cultural underpinnings remain theoretically fragmented and empirically undefined. This study, therefore, answers the following research question: How does organizational culture generate, sustain, and differentiate levels of combat readiness across contemporary military establishments? The problem is formulated as a lack of any integrated framework connecting cultural mechanisms with the psychological, operational, or institutional components of readiness. It adopts a qualitative conceptual methodology based on a structured thematic literature review that synthesizes works from organizational behavior theory through military sociology to defense studies. Six theoretical lenses are applied-Resource-Based View; High Reliability Organization theory; Social Identity Theory; Social Exchange Theory; Mission Command doctrine and Organizational Learning Theory-to develop an integrated Culture-Readiness Framework. The five cultural drivers identified as readiness are mutually reinforcing in a virtuous cycle: discipline, esprit de corps, trust and cohesion, mission command, and learning orientation. Motivation is enabled by an outcome of readiness. The analysis shows what motivates soldiers individually or collectively toward the achievement of victory, even against all odds, with scant resources available. Hence, the requirement for adaptive execution is expressed through institutional resilience, wherein failure does not lead to collapse but instead inspires greater effort until success is attained.

Keywords:

Organizational Culture; Combat Readiness; Cohesion; Mission Command; Military Leadership; Defense Transformation; Resilience; Military Sociology.

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1. Introduction

Large-scale conventional warfare has returned to being a central feature of international security. Military organizations are therefore reassessing the very fundamentals of combat readiness. Despite the huge doctrinal attention paid to the subject, readiness continues more or less conceptually through material indicators—force structure, equipment serviceability, and training hours logged. This is an analytical omission regarding those cultural mechanisms that permit cohesion, elasticity, and resilience within militaries under extreme stress until better understood at some later date. Useful work has been done on leadership, morale, and cohesion, but these strands remain fragmented within existing scholarship on the subject and do not explain why similarly trained and equipped forces perform so variously in real combat. The article begins by filling this conceptual gap and develops the argument that organizational culture is a strategic capability that creates and sustains combat readiness. Culture defines the way in which military personnel resolve ambiguity, internalize mission purpose, allocate trust, and synchronize action under pressure. Recent conflicts – from the surprisingly quick downfall of the Afghan National Army to unanticipated endurance displayed by Ukrainian forces -have proven that cultural factors can easily overmatch apparent preparedness for battle in determining eventual success or failure on the battlefield.

The article therefore proposes a Culture-Readiness Framework in six theoretical perspectives to integrate the fragmented knowledge: Resource-Based View (RBV), High-Reliability Organization theory (HRO), Social Identity Theory (SIT), and Social Exchange Theory (SET); Mission Command Doctrine; and Organizational Learning Theory (OLT). The synthesis of these theories develops five readiness cultural drivers as mutually reinforcing deep structures of readiness at three levels — discipline, esprit de corps, trust/coherence/mission, command/learning orientation — at psychological, operational, and institutional levels. The study contributes to the literature on military organizations by conceptualizing culture as a dynamic readiness capability, specifying mechanisms linking cultural attributes to performance under risk, and developing a single unified model that also happens to explain cross-national variation in military effectiveness. The proposed approach is therefore an advance over descriptive accounts of “military ethos” in providing a theory-driven explanation for how culture transforms material inputs into sustained combat power.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Conceptual Foundations of Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is one of the most studied, yet conceptually elusive, constructions in organizational research. It has been variously defined as the “social glue” binding organizations together ([Deal and Kennedy 1982, 98-103](#)), a process of

normative control operating beyond formal authority to regulate behavior (Ouchi 1981), and a shared system of meanings shaping the way people interpret and respond to their environment (Schein 2010). In military organizations, culture is both symbolic and instrumental; it forms the basis of decision-making, discipline, cohesion, risk behavior, and ultimately mission success (Soeters 2018; Kolditz et al. 2003; Snider 1999).

2.1.1. Defining Organizational Culture

Schein (2010) assumed, “Culture is a pattern of shared basic assumptions that a group has learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration. Therefore, culture is shared and learned; something deep but strongly behavior-oriented. Hofstede et al. (2010) described culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one organization from another,” thus providing a structural view on the concept. Culture, according to Pettigrew (1979), develops through values, symbols, and rituals that get historically embedded within the very fabric of organizational life. This allows military culture to be perceived as a historically established system of values and assumptions determined by hierarchy, battle experience, and national ideology (Soeters et al. 2007).

2.1.2. Components of Organizational Culture

Schein’s (2010) three-level model provides a valuable lens for understanding culture’s depth within armed forces (See Table 1).

TABLE no. 1. Layers of Organizational Culture in Military Contexts

Layer	Description	Military Example
Artifacts	Visible structures and observable practices that reflect organizational priorities and identity	Uniforms, saluting rituals, parades, and insignia
Espoused values	Formal doctrines and official beliefs guiding organizational behavior	Duty, honor, loyalty, and service ethos
Basic assumptions	Deep, taken-for-granted truths that are unconsciously shared and rarely questioned	Obedience, chain of command, legitimacy of authority

Source: Adapted from Schein (2010). *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. John Wiley & Sons.

This layered model explains why culture in military institutions is highly resilient: formal systems reinforce informal norms that, over time, solidify into institutionalized assumptions central to organizational identity and combat behavior.

2.1.3. Organizational Culture as a Performance System

Since the 1980s, research has increasingly emphasized links between culture and performance. Deal & Kennedy (1982) argued for the creation of behavioral alignment by “strong cultures”, while Kotter (2008) discussed adaptive and non-adaptive cultures. Adaptive cultures that can easily readjust in response to change are crucially important for militaries working in unstable and ambiguous environments (Farrell,

Terriff, and Osinga 2020; King 2013). More recent scholarships consider culture as an integrated performance system that organizes behavior under uncertainty (Chatman and O'Reilly 2016). From a High-Reliability Organization (HRO) point of view, it is cultural attributes such as vigilance, disciplined communication, and constant learning that create operational resilience within high-risk domains like aviation, nuclear operations, or warfare (Weick and Sutcliffe 2015). Readiness is thus not the outcome of training and equipment but rather a function of cultural mechanisms that maintain collective discipline as well as adaptability under stress.

2.2. Military Organizational Culture: Characteristics and Frameworks

Military organizational culture is a unique sociological and psychological phenomenon developed by the specific requirements of armed conflict, defense needs, and highly institutionalized traditions (Soeters 2018; Winslow 1998). In comparison with civilian organizations operating inside market economies characterized as relatively safe, low-risk settings, the military must be prepared to operate amid uncertainty, moral dilemmas, and lethal risk. Thus, culture serves not only symbolic purposes but operationalizes capability in the organization of discipline, cohesion, and leadership (NATO 2025b; King 2013; Wong and Gerras 2015).

2.2.1. Distinctive Characteristics of Military Culture

While civilian organizations emphasize innovation, competitiveness, or customer value (Schein 2010), military institutions are defined by obedience and duty, sacrifice, loyalty, and mission accomplishment (Soeters, Winslow, and Weibull 2007). They can be carried out through hierarchy and discipline by collectivism or esprit de corps, tradition, and mission orientation. All of these behaviors stabilize the organization under combat pressure (see Table 2).

TABLE no. 2. Core Traits of Military Organizational Culture

Military Cultural Trait	Description	Example
Hierarchy & Command Structure	Strict authority and rank hierarchy ensuring order and control	U.S. Army Chain of Command Doctrine (ADP 6-0, 2019)
Discipline	Compliance with orders and maintenance of standards	Turkish Armed Forces' principle "Emre itaat esastr"
Collectivism	Team-before-self orientation	British Army motto: "Serve to Lead."
Esprit de Corps	Strong unit identity and pride	U.S. Marine Corps warrior ethos
Tradition & Continuity	Preservation of symbols, rituals, and heritage	NATO regimental identity systems
Mission Orientation	Operational focus and readiness	Israeli Defense Forces' "Tnufa" agility reform

Source: Adapted from Soeters et al. (2007); NATO (2025a).

These features underscore the fact that an effective performance in combat needs to be collectively aligned and psychologically resilient. Therefore, cultural mechanisms become stabilizers in uncertainty, disruption, and chaos ([Weick and Sutcliffe 2015](#); [Gerras and Wong 2016](#)).

2.2.2. Structural Foundations of Military Culture

The military culture emanates from structural and institutional bureaucracy. Hierarchy and professionalism duality ([Huntington 1957](#)) integrated with operational autonomy of a constabulary force, balancing capability and legitimacy-preferred society by Janowitz ([1960](#)). Institutional dualism embeds enduring values inside professional ethos: duty to honor nations.

Cultural evolution in military organizations is path-dependent ([Farrell, Terriff, and Osinga 2020](#)). For instance:

- The German Bundeswehr institutionalized *Innere Führung* to prevent authoritarian command culture.
- The U.S. Army institutionalized Mission Command in the post-Vietnam era to permit greater decentralization.
- Discipline in the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) is amalgamated with a nationalist identity, and that it is an outcome reflecting the ethos of the War of Independence.
- The Russian Armed Forces maintain a centralized obedience culture shaped by Soviet doctrine ([Galeotti 2019](#)).

These examples highlight the fact that national histories shape distinct cultural trajectories while maintaining universal elements essential to combat readiness.

2.2.3. Cognitive, Functional, and Analytical Perspectives on Military Culture

Military culture provides the shared cognitive schemas through which members interpret uncertainty, impose self-discipline, and coordinate action under duress. It delivers to soldiers a means by which they can collectively understand ambiguous operational environments ([Hedlund and Björkman 2017](#)), and shares both in garrison aspects of behavioral norms that define what is acceptable or prohibited as well as combat ones ([Griffith 2002](#)). Culture works through these cognitive and normative mechanisms to synchronize collective behavior for better coordination with quicker responses, plus enhanced psychological stamina during high-pressure operations. Four functions sustain readiness within an integrated framework of military culture:

- *Motivational Function*: Reinforces warrior ethos, morale, and purpose.
- *Coordination Function*: Ensures behavioral predictability under uncertainty.
- *Control Function*: Maintains lawful conduct and command integrity.
- *Adaptation Function*: Facilitates learning, flexibility, and tactical innovation.

This closely tallies with the Resilience Doctrine ([2022b](#)) of NATO, which articulates that contemporary preparedness is an organizational capability to function

and maintain cohesion and will under hybrid threat conditions. Analytically, several conceptual frameworks-assumptions, norms, performance, and cohesion approaches-offer perspectives on military culture. A common inference across these perspectives is that culture offers interpretive logic and provides normative stability for the very acts of performance, adaptation, and resilience readiness expressed. In this respect, readiness is not only materially determined but also culturally mediated through mechanisms of collective sensemaking, sustaining discipline, and supporting continuous adjustment in combat operations.

2.4. Combat Readiness: Operational and Organizational Dimensions

Combat readiness is a basic concept of military science and doctrine. It is generally defined as the ability of armed forces to undertake missions in combat or crisis situations. The early conceptualizations of readiness provided for actual accounting indicators such as personnel strength, equipment serviceability, and logistic provisioning (U.S. Department of Defense 1962; Millett and Murray 2010, 10-11). In later works by defense scholars and within current NATO doctrine, readiness is highlighted as a multidimensional construct that comprises operational capabilities on the one hand and organizational competence plus human factors on the other (King 2013; NATO 2025b; RAND 2019). Readiness now means being ready but also having a dynamic capability driven by leadership training, logistics, morale, and organizational culture (Brooks 2016; Griffith 2002).

2.4.1. Definitions and Evolution of the Concept

Traditionally, readiness has been considered a measurable outcome of force structure and material condition. For decades, the U.S. Army reported on readiness in terms of personnel strength and weapons availability combined with training status reporting (U.S. Army 1994; Feickert 2019). However, later operational experiences from Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan illustrated the fact that apparent high levels of material readiness do not necessarily translate into actual combat capability (Biddle 2010; Krepinevich 1992). The new concept of readiness integrates all forms of adaptability, resilience, and interoperability as a state of readiness. Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) doctrine conceptualizes “hazırlık seviyesi” (state of readiness) as a synthesis of physical, psychological, and doctrinal preparedness. It is related to “eğitim disiplini, birlik ruhu” (esprit de corps), and “göreve adanmışlık” (mission commitment). An analysis conducted on the two different levels-NATO and national doctrines shows an emerging consensus on recognizing readiness as having cultural and organizational roots.

2.4.2. Dimensions of Combat Readiness

Both scholarly and doctrinal sources identify several interrelated dimensions of readiness (See Table 3).

These dimensions demonstrate that readiness transcends tactical proficiency. It is an organizational and cultural state based on trust, cohesion, and institutional adaptability (King 2013; Gerras and Wong 2016). In other words, being ready for

TABLE no. 3. Key Dimensions of Combat Readiness

Dimension	Description	Representative Sources
Training Readiness	Proficiency in mission-essential tasks and tactical competence	NATO (2025a); U.S. Army FM 7-0 (2021)
Personnel Readiness	Physical, psychological, and professional suitability of personnel	Griffith (2002); RAND (2019)
Equipment & Logistics Readiness	Availability and maintenance of weapons, supplies, and mobility assets	Millett & Murray (1988); Feickert (2019)
Operational Readiness	Capability to execute missions under real combat conditions	Biddle (2010); King (2013)
Leadership Readiness	Quality of command, decision-making, and force management	Wong & Gerras (2015); ADP 6-22 (2019)
Moral Readiness	Motivation, cohesion, discipline, and will to fight	Siebold (2007); Lester, et al. (2015)
Organizational Readiness	Institutional adaptability, learning, and command climate	Weick & Sutcliffe (2015); Brooks (2016)

Source: Compiled by the author based on NATO (2025a), RAND (2019), and military readiness literature.

combat means a person is mentally and morally set to engage in actual fighting and that the organization is prepared for sustained performance in war.

2.4.3. *Readiness vs. Combat Effectiveness*

Readiness and effectiveness are usually conflated, analytically they can be separated. Readiness is associated with preparedness, while effectiveness can be associated with the eventual output of performance (Biddle 2010; Cohen 2012). Therefore, a unit may be ready but still eventually perform ineffectively due to bad leadership or low morale within the unit, as was documented in Iraq and Afghanistan where so many units were reported to have been very prepared before deployment (Freedman 2017; Galeotti 2019) or cohesive and disciplined units performing effectively with scant resources (King 2013; Kolditz et al. 2003). This distinction highlights that it is organizational culture that serves as connective tissue between readiness and effectiveness through motivated and resilient or even undisciplined behavior under stress (Soeters 2018; Snider 1999).

2.4.4. *Organizational Readiness*

Organizational readiness, in the words of defense transformation theorists, is the anticipative and adaptive capabilities, collective competencies of military organizations (Brooks 2016; Farrell and Terriff 2002). More recently, however, preparedness has been defined as a function or outcome emanating from certain cultural attributes (RAND 2019; NATO 2025a; NATO Mission Command

Concept 2020). These include:

- *Mission command philosophy* - decentralized leadership and initiative.
- *Learning culture* - after-action reviews and doctrinal evolution.
- *Psychological resilience* - sustaining morale and mental endurance.
- *Ethical cohesion* - maintaining discipline and legitimacy.

Empirical research shows that organizational readiness's long-term effectiveness is more reliable than material preparedness (Ulmer 2012; Gerras and Wong 2016). Culturally cohesive units adapt faster, even if they are less technologically advanced than their rigid counterpart, an interoperability study found within NATO (NATO ACT 2020).

2.4.5. The Cultural Dimension of Readiness

Even with growing acknowledgment of human and institutional factors, the cultural aspect of readiness stays under-theorized (Farrell, Terriff, and Osinga 2020; Farrell, Osinga, and Russell 2015). Culture gets shaped by readiness in the enforcement of discipline, the facilitation of cohesion, and the building of trust and innovation through psychological safety. Culture turns readiness from a mechanical state into a living capability. The next section develops this argument further by amalgamating these findings into a single Culture–Readiness Framework to show how cultural dimensions and mechanisms jointly generate readiness outcomes.

3. Methodology

The study develops a concept using an approach of theory building supported by a structured thematic literature review. The intention is not to develop some comprehensive systematic review but rather to weld various strands of scholarship into one coherent theoretical framework that explains how organizational culture creates combat readiness.

3.1. Literature Search Strategy

The initial search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, and JSTOR. It later expanded to ProQuest and specific defense-oriented repositories such as NATO ACT, RAND, RUSI, and U.S./UK doctrinal publications. The search spanned from 2000 to 2024. However, in order to provide a theoretical grounding for the research, some earlier works have also been included.

3.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Included sources:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles,
- Monographs in the field of military sociology and organizational behavior,
- NATO/DoD doctrinal documents,
- RAND/RUSI research reports,
- Empirical case analyses of contemporary conflicts.

Excluded sources:

- Non-academic commentary,
- Journalistic reporting with no analytical depth,
- Sources focusing only on technology or logistics, with no consideration of organizational variables.

3.3. Analytical Procedure

The analysis was based on a structured thematic coding process:

Thematic clustering: Concepts were grouped into higher-order theme clusters (discipline, trust, identity, initiative, learning).

Theoretical mapping: Themes were cross-referenced with six theoretical lenses. (RBV, HRO, SIT, SET, Mission Command OLT)

Framework synthesis: The Culture–Readiness Framework was constructed by integrating cultural drivers and mechanisms and readiness outcomes into a single unified theoretical model.

3.4. Justification of Methodological Approach

A conceptual design is appropriate due to the fact that the literature on military culture and readiness is wide but fragmented across different disciplines. The aim here is toward the integration of theory, not a meta-analysis. This approach aligns with leading conceptual review standards used in strategy, organizational behaviors, and defense studies.

4. Findings

4.1. Theoretical Links Between Organizational Culture and Combat Readiness

The link between organizational culture and behavioral readiness is proven by military doctrine and in research literature, but the real mechanism needs further theoretical integration. Readiness was earlier considered a structural or logistical condition ([U.S. Department of Defense 2018](#); [NATO 2023](#)). In recent discourse, it is viewed more as cultural and psychological processes through which readiness is achieved and sustained – consider trust, learning, adaptability, and identity ([Soeters 2018](#); [King 2013](#); [Gerras and Wong 2016](#)). This section provides a composite of six theoretical perspectives that together explain how military culture transforms structure and training into combat capability: Social Identity Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Organizational Learning Theory, and High Reliability Organization Theory.

4.1.1. Social Identity Theory: Cohesion and Willingness to Fight

Social Identity Theory (SIT), originally developed by Tajfel & Turner (2004), deals with the aspect of group self-concept and its resultant loyalty, motivation, and willingness to sacrifice. In military application, SIT occupies a unit culture shared identity space ([Siebold 2007](#)), moral readiness ([Griffith 2002](#)), and under fire cohesion ([Lester et al. 2015](#)). Classic research by Shils & Janovitz (1948), reiterated later ([Kolditz et al. 2003](#); [King 2013](#)), proves that soldiers fight first for comrades

and then for unit identity before ideology. NATO (2023) codifies this mechanism as ‘fighting spirit’, placing collective identity at the core as a readiness enabler. Therefore, culture leads to enhanced readiness through cultivated belongingness, unity, and resilience.

4.1.2. Social Exchange Theory: Trust, Commitment, and Command Climate

The Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau 1986) stresses reciprocal trust as the base of climates of effective command. In perceptions of fairness and support from the organization in return, loyalty, compliance, and extra-role effort are manifested (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). Trust replaces control in an interdependent yet hierarchical military environment to foster resilience with disciplined initiative (Wong and Gerras 2015; Snider 1999). Supportive leadership cultures raise psychological readiness at the level of unit performance according to empirical evidence provided by research conducted by Bartone (2006) and Britt et al. (2005). The Turkish Armed Forces’ doctrine defines strategic cultural asset protracted operations sustaining readiness as “güven duygusu” (trust). Culture enables readiness through social exchange norms that reinforce cohesion and legitimacy.

4.1.3. Organizational Learning Theory: Adaptation Under Uncertainty

Organizational Learning Theory (OLT) (Argyris and Schön 1996) describes how the adaptive military cultures oriented toward learning are able to maintain the state of readiness under high levels of uncertainty and high operational tempos through institutionalization of after-action reviews and feedback loops on flexibility in doctrine (Garvin 2000; U.S. Army 2021, FM 7-0). Militaries fostering double-loop learning shall rapidly adjust tactics and doctrines as evidenced in cases of hybrid wars (Farrell, Osinga, and Russell 2013; Murray and Millett 1998), while doctrinal inertia and strategic lag characterize hierarchical organizations with rigid structures (Ulmer 2012; Farrell and Terriff 2002). Learning translates into sustained readiness when Israel Defense Forces or Ukrainian Armed Forces’ type adaptive cultures learn continuously until preparedness becomes part and parcel, hence making culture Ready through continuous learning, then rapid adaptation (RAND 2019; Freedman 2017).

4.1.4. High Reliability Organization Theory: Readiness Under Risk

High Reliability Organization or HRO theory (Weick and Sutcliffe 2015) describes the way in which complex organizations manage to support high levels of reliable performance even under conditions of extremity. HROs develop cultural norms around vigilance, redundancy, and expertise-based hierarchy rather than rigid structural forms. The military inculcates these attributes through disciplined alertness, collective mindfulness, and elasticity in high-reliability air, naval, and special operations forces (Roberts 1993; Rochlin 1999; King 2013). NATO Mission Command Doctrine (2020) as well as U.S. Army leadership doctrine manuals (U.S.Army 2019, ADP 6-22) articulate this message linking a reliability culture to a readiness culture. In this conceptualization, readiness is defined as a function of an organization’s cultural capacity for sustaining reliable performance amidst uncertainty and shock.

4.1.5. Mission Command Doctrine: Cultural Empowerment of Readiness

Historically rooted in the Prusso-German tradition of Auftragstaktik, which later evolved into the modern ‘Mission Command’ doctrine (Führen mit Auftrag), this philosophy today reflects a broader, alliance-wide emphasis on decentralized execution and commander’s intent. Mission Command (U.S. Army 2019, ADP 6-22; NATO 2025b) blends doctrine and culture by decentralized decision in promoting disciplined initiative and mutual trust. It works best in a transmitting intent-and-trust environment rather than a micromanaging one (Echevarria 2012; Wong and Gerras 2015). Decentralization leads to chaos without shared purpose, but with it, units display operational agility and initiative (O’Hanlon 2015). The cultural doctrine is attributed to battlefield adaptability by the Bundeswehr, British Army, as well as the U.S. Army (Shamir, 2011). This is, therefore, a case where readiness through a trust-based culture can be operationalized dynamically across preparedness for warfare.

4.1.6. Resource-Based View: Culture as a Strategic Readiness Capability

The Resource-Based View (Barney 1991) of strategic management argues that a firm’s competitive advantage lies in resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN). For the military organization, culture itself becomes a strategic resource, a readiness capability continuously available beyond periods of technological or budgetary sustainment (King 2013; Brooks 2016). Culture cannot be copied easily; it emanates from collective history, sacrifice, and professional identity (Farrell and Terriff 2002). This is why armies such as the Finnish or Israeli can maintain high levels of readiness with scant resources through strong professional cultures (Galeotti 2019). Culture is thus the enduring ability that transforms structure into combat power (See Table 4).

TABLE no.4 . Theoretical Perspectives Linking Organizational Culture and Combat Readiness

Theory	Core Cultural Focus	Mechanism	Impact on Readiness
Social Identity Theory (SIT)	Culture as shared identity	Cohesion, esprit de corps, loyalty	Morale, unit effectiveness, collective action
Social Exchange Theory (SET)	Culture as reciprocity and trust norms	Leader–member exchange, perceived support, mutual obligation	Cohesion, loyalty, and discretionary effort under stress
Organizational Learning Theory (OLT)	Culture as feedback and adaptation system	After-action reviews, double-loop learning, shared knowledge	Continuous improvement and long-term readiness
High-Reliability Organization (HRO)	Culture as a reliability system	Error control, redundancy, and mindful learning	Safety, mission continuity, error resilience
Mission Command Doctrine	Culture as empowerment and intent alignment	Decentralized trust, initiative, disciplined autonomy	Flexibility, decision speed, agile coordination
Resource-Based View (RBV)	Culture as an intangible resource / dynamic capability	Discipline, trust, collective learning	Sustained adaptability and performance

Source: Author’s synthesis based on Barney (1991), Weick & Sutcliffe (2015), Tajfel & Turner (2004), Cropanzano & Mitchell (2005), NATO (2020), and Argyris & Schön (1996).

4.2. A Narrative Synthesis of Key Cultural Drivers of Combat Readiness

Military readiness is still mostly measured in material and operational terms. Increasingly, it is a function of those cultural variables that dictate the way armies fight, adapt, and endure (King 2013; Soeters 2018). Culture acts not as some background condition but as an operational force that sustains discipline, cohesion, trust, and adaptability through which culture delivers effects via motivation and identity, command behavior, and learning capacity mechanisms regulating how soldiers and units respond under stress and uncertainty (Weick and Sutcliffe 2015; Snider 1999).

Five major cultural drivers of combat readiness were synthesized and found consistently common across the NATO, TSK, U.S., British, and Israeli forces (See Table 5). These are:

- Discipline and command culture,
- Esprit de corps and collective identity,
- Trust, cohesion, moral readiness,
- Mission command and adaptive execution,
- Learning culture and operational resilience.

TABLE no. 5. Cultural Drivers of Combat Readiness – Mechanisms and Evidence

Cultural Driver	Mechanism	Academic Sources	Doctrinal Sources	Readiness Impact
Discipline & Command Culture	Enforces order, maintains operational control	Soeters (2018); Ulmer (2012)	ADP 6-22 (2019); TSK Disiplin Kanunu (2013)	Increases reliability under battlefield stress
Esprit de Corps & Collective Identity	Enhances belonging, motivation to fight	Siebold (2007); King (2013); Kolditz et al. (2003)	NATO (2025a)	Strengthens unit morale and perseverance
Trust, Cohesion & Moral Readiness	Builds horizontal and vertical trust	Griffith (2002); Lester et al. (2015)	U.S. Army Leadership Doctrine (2019)	Improves resilience and psychological readiness
Mission Command & Adaptive Execution	Enables initiative and decentralized decisions	Echevarria (2012); Gerras & Wong (2016)	NATO Mission Command Concept (2020); U.S. ADP 6-0	Enhances agility in complex battlefields
Learning Culture & Operational Resilience	Institutionalizes adaptation and improvement	Argyris & Schön (1996); Farrell & Terriff (2002)	NATO ACT Transformation (2021)	Increases long-term readiness and innovation

Source: Compiled by the author based on NATO (2025a), RAND (2019), and military readiness literature.

4.2.1. Discipline and Command Culture

Discipline is one of the foundational expressions of military organizational culture, providing order, dependability, and collective unity in high-risk environments (Huntington 1957; Janowitz 1960; Soeters 2018). Beyond rule-bound compliance,

culturally embedded discipline is understood across doctrines as a moral and professional commitment that enables coherent mission execution under legitimate command authority (King 2013). Western and non-Western militaries persistently represent discipline as the ethical basis of cohesion: a moral obligation in the U.S. Army (2019, ADP 6-22), founding collective professionalism in NATO (NATO 2023), or keeping military order within Turkish Armed Forces (TSK Disiplin Kanunu 2013). All readiness enablers are pressed behaviors under stress that maintain formation integrity and survivability on the battlefield (Biddle 2010; Griffiths 2002). It further articulates healthy command climates through trust reinforcement between lawful obedience to orders, relationships, and leaders-subordinates (Snider 1999; Ulmer 2012). Psychologically resilient because Lester et al. (2015) say social cohesion is built when shared standards adherence builds resilience

Disciplined command cultures are ready to deliver at the moment of execution, and operational evidence supports this fact. British forces in Korea and the Falklands attribute tactical successes to disciplined small-unit actions, as do Turkish units engaged in nonlinear operations with insurgents inside their territory (RAND 2019). Rapid organizational collapse among Iraqi forces was observed when Mosul fell due to apparently weak discipline, accelerating disintegration within an already failing organization (Galeotti 2019). However, rigidity can have a negative effect by stifling initiative or suppressing mission command, thus reducing agility (Gerras and Wong 2016; Shamir 2011). Modern armies emphasize professional values-based forms of discipline, combining responsible autonomy, ethical leadership, and lawful obedience (Soeters 2018; Wong and Gerras 2015).

4.2.2. Esprit de Corps and Collective Identity

Esprit de corps is defined as pride, emotional bonding, and a sense of shared commitment within the unit. It is one among several standing cultural forces that stand ready to shape combat readiness. More than just morale, it implies an emotional contract built on loyalty and shared hardship, in willingness to endure dangers for the sake of comrades (Griffith 2002; Kolditz et al 2003). Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 2004) explains this mechanism: group identification enhances motivation and sacrifice while making resistance against psychological wear-and-tear possible by military rituals/traditions/collective hardship, which strengthen the same binding identity under fire with cohesion. Empirical research links high levels of unit identification with confidence/endurance,/combat effectiveness. In 2022, the Ukrainian forces were highly ready with a resilience based on a strong national identity and moral cohesion. On the other hand, it was an illustration of how quickly an army with a feeble collective identity disintegrates, no matter what material investments have been made in the collapse of the Afghan National Army (Jones 2021; RAND 2022). This is more proof that emotional-cultural cohesion should be attained by cultural cultivation because there can never be sufficient resources to create it. Spirit de corps is taken as a doctrinal requirement. NATO defines it within warrior spirit\endash related endurance components (NATO 2025b), emphasized

through shared hardship in U.S. Army doctrine (U.S. Army 2019), and the Turkish Armed Forces highlight “spirit of unity and comradeship” among their core values for resilience. At the Battalion/System level, Esprit de Corps enhances readiness via three mechanisms: Stress resistance (Sustaining alertness under prolonged strain), determination (reinforcing perseverance during hardship), and value-based (preventing fragmentation under pressure). Esprit de corps is not at all an obsolete concept but a central psychosocial readiness factor in the modern hybrid warfare, where identity, morale, and cohesion have again assumed the role of decisive strategic elements. However, in fact, it explains what has changed about this rather than suggesting that hybrid warfare has rendered it obsolete (King 2013; Wong and Gerras 2015; RUSI 2022).

4.2.3. Trust, Cohesion, and Moral Readiness

Trust and cohesion are the psychological core of readiness. They have always turned out to be some of the best predictors of actual performance on the battlefield (Griffith 2002; King 2013; Lester et al. 2015). Trust coordinates action under risk whereby confidence is reinforced in leaders, fellow soldiers, and the mission itself that discipline structures behavior (Britt, Castro, and Adler 2005; Wong and Gerras 2015). Cohesion binds them into a single fighting unit capable of sustaining combat with emotional resilience (Siebold 2007; Soeters 2018). This is what sustains moral readiness – the will to fight psychologically despite adversity – trust at different levels between peers horizontally and toward leaders vertically as distinguished by military research (Griffith 2002; Siebold 2007). The insurance among comrades never to leave each other behind remains one powerful source among many for courage found on battlefields (Shils and Janowitz 1948; Kolditz et al. 2003). Obedience is based on perceived competence and fairness rather than fear. Vertical trust enhances a higher level of obedience based on perceived competence and fairness (Snider 1999; Gerras and Wong 2016). Empirical findings among the U.S. forces, NATO forces, and Israeli forces state that cohesion is a much better predictor of combat performance than material or numerical superiority (Ben-Shalom and Shamir 2011; Lester et al. 2015). Trust drives moral readiness: “preparedness in the mind” and willingness to go through the stress of battle (Britt et al. 2007). Moral readiness emanates from ethical conviction, emotional resilience – a soldier’s alignment with his leaders’ purpose, cultural attributes enhanced through training (Soeters 2018; RUSI 2022).

Recent wars have emphasized this dynamic relationship between trust and defense: Ukraine’s defense of Kyiv in 2022 was dependent largely on strong horizontal trust and volunteer cohesiveness, while the collapse of the Afghan National Army was a result of long-term erosion of vertical trust-in leadership (Jones 2021; RAND 2022). According to the doctrines of both NATO and national armies (Turkiye included), morale, cohesion, and institutional trust form the basic parameters of readiness. Trust is considered a strategic resource by modern armies, which sustains endurance, allows decentralized execution and accomplishment of missions, and is therefore being treated as much more than just a psychological contract within their

organizations. The breakdown at any level in command of authority due to a lack/trust would mean an extremely fast deterioration of organizational readiness.

4.2.4. Mission Command and Adaptive Execution

Mission Command is both a doctrinal philosophy and cultural system oriented toward the facilitation of initiative-based execution through decentralized command structures. This, therefore, involves trust elements between different echelons in the intent put forward by commanders; disciplined initiatives are considered within distributed decision-making processes (Shamir 2011; Echevarria 2012). That a command climate, where subordinates are empowered by intent rather than detailed control, exists at all levels implies, however, that it cannot exist or be practiced effectively within any organization whose dominant culture happens to be one of fear, rigidity, bureaucracy, etc. (Ulmer 2012; Soeters 2018). From an aspect concerning readiness, mission command enables what NATO has defined as “adaptive execution” ability, forces change intentions, tactics, and real-time situational awareness (NATO 2023). Two components allow this to happen culturally: decentralized initiative, junior leaders allowed to exploit opportunities, and mutual trust and shared understanding prevent the paralysis of decisions under uncertainty. Top-down orders increase organizational survivability. Contemporary conflicts demonstrate a connection between readiness and the fact that Ukrainian drone cells are organized around small autonomous units. The government and military leadership admitted the effectiveness of this strategy in restricting Russian advances through accelerated adaptation for 2022/23 winter operations (Watling and Reynolds 2022; RUSI 2022). RAND reports also highlighted a fact that has been largely glossed over in public discourse: luck ran out long before Western material support arrived because something far more important was institutionalized within the armed forces after the 2014 reforms—central mission-type command culture. Meanwhile, Russian forces were suffering another well-documented fate: centralized rigidity where initiative is punished, and tactical flexibility arrives late. NATO’s Mission Command warfighting principle is again contested inside its own ranks but codified as core doctrine by the Capstone Concept for Turkish Armed Forces, stating they practice mission-oriented command: “Commanders provide their intent at all levels down to the lowest echelons possible; subordinates determine how best execute based on the situation.” Thus, Mission Command is a readiness enabler. Accelerating decision cycles, such as Boyd’s OODA loop, improves adaptability and survivability against hybrid and asymmetric threats by embedding empowerment and ethical command norms into organizational culture through training that makes the rules second nature to all members of the organization.

4.2.5. Learning Culture and Operational Resilience

A new buzzword for being ready to fight has entered the scene. Resilience. The ability of a force to stay functional under disruption and be able to dynamically adjust in real time (NATO 2023; Murray and Millett 1998). What sits at the heart of resilience is learning culture – the organizational capability standing on failure detection and

assimilation of battlefield feedback into rapid adjustment of doctrine, tactics, and procedures (Argyris and Schön 1996; Garvin 2000). Readiness as a cultural process rather than a condition when adversaries are continually adaptive within high-risk dynamic environments becomes something that is pursued continuously by military organizations. There are three levels at which military personnel learn: individual experiential learning, unit-level collective learning, and institutional doctrinal adaptation (Crossan, Lane, and White 1999; Farrell and Osinga 2015). Integration between these levels through after-action reviews (AAR) and more structured lessons learned systems, which convert operational shortfalls into improvement forms, effective learning cultures (U.S Army 2021, FM7-0; NATO JALLC 2019).

Recent wars display a clear connection between the readiness advantages and learning-oriented cultures. Small Ukrainian units rapidly adjusted their tactics in the early stages of the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion, agility attributed to a NATO-style learning system introduced into the armed forces after 2014 (Watling and Reynolds 2022; RAND 2023). On the other hand, Russian units were found with doctrinal rigidity supported by a punitive command climate that hardly allows any form of learning through adaptation-by-mistake processes Galeotti (2019). It has therefore become an agenda for readiness transformation across NATO formations where cognitive agility is emphasized together with interoperability and organizational adaptabilities as reflected among Turkish Armed Forces who institutionalized debriefing-and-review practice within joint training cycles Learning-oriented cultures enable junior leaders execute innovations under pressure situations while keeping them disciplined executors, hence what many have described “disciplined flexibility” (Shamir 2011; Raetze et al. 2022; Weick and Sutcliffe 2015). A modern military is prepared if it can learn faster than its opponents. This has become a popular aphorism in contemporary defense scholarship (Freedman 2017; Farrell et al. 2013). Readiness may not be an attribute sitting at the periphery of learning culture, but is rather the process by which battlefield friction is transformed into adaptation and sits at the core of resilient, combat-effective organizations.

5. Discussion

These results show that organizational culture is not some peripherally sociological variable but lies at the very heart of a determinant pathway toward combat readiness. Only part of the variance in battlefield performance can be explained by material indicators: training hours, equipment availability, and force size, as parameters within which outcomes are possible. A self-reinforcing system is formed by five cultural drivers discovered in this study that determine what militaries think about learning and action under conditions involving risk and uncertainty. Three key insights emerge:

First, readiness is fundamentally cultural before it becomes material. A force with strong discipline, identity, trust, initiative, and learning orientation always

outperforms a materially better adversary. The collapse of the Afghan National Army despite huge external investments shows the limits of a material-centric readiness model. On the other hand, Ukrainian forces show how much operational resilience can be exhibited when there is strength at the cultural level.

Second, cultural drivers interact synergistically. Trust with discipline and order. Cohesion with mission command is synergetic to order from trust and discipline. Identity with learning- readiness as an emergent property of a balanced, integrated system between different cultural drivers.

Third, the Culture–Readiness Framework explains that military organizations differ vastly in their speeds of adaptation. Cultural factors permit quick processing of information on battles, readiness for decentralized initiatives at lower levels, and continuous improvements or changes. These are capabilities necessary under conditions of hybrid warfare where an opponent develops new tactics faster than they can be countered through traditional bureaucratic means.

They challenge dominant readiness metrics and demand conceptualization-integration wider than including cultural variables into policy, doctrine, and force development.

Conclusion

This study shows organizational culture as the deep structure of combat readiness, in how military organizations think and behave, adapt or sustain themselves under uncertainty and operational stress. From a long diversity of doctrines, theoretical perspectives, and contemporary cases on conflict, a single pattern emerges as readiness is not just some function regarding headcount, available equipment, or completed training cycles, but that collective cultural capacity which helps military organizations transform material resources into actual, effective, and sustained fighting power. The five identified cultural drivers work as an interdependent system to generate psychological, operational, and institutional forms of readiness across discipline, esprit de corps, trust & cohesion, mission command, and learning orientation. It explains at a very basic level why forces similarly materially prepared can perform so radically differently when engaged for real in combat situations. On the other hand, armed forces without such cultural attributes disintegrate rapidly under apparent conditions of readiness on paper once they come into contact with real pressure. A comparison emerging from recent conflicts ensures this conclusion: trust, a shared sense of belonging between members and leaders at all levels within an organization's culture; internalization by command structures down through every rank to the lowest soldier in ethical behavior that learns dynamically. These factors strongly condition success or failure for battlefield outcomes.

Theoretically, this study integrates six major perspectives (RBV, HRO, SIT and SET, Mission Command doctrine, and Organizational Learning Theory) into a unified

Culture–Readiness Framework. This is the first theory to overcome fragmented literature and position culture as a strategic capability: durable, path-dependent, and difficult to replicate. It also clearly specifies the mechanisms through which culture enables disciplined autonomy, social cohesion, and adaptive problem solving; hence reducing long-standing tension between hierarchy versus initiative in military organizations. Practically, it indicates that investment in organizational cultures should be considered equally important as investments made toward technology, logistics, force structure by military leaders or defense policymakers who must transform so-called “soft factors” of cohesion/trust/command climate/moral readiness/learning systems into hard measurable components of readiness. It also determines the level at which it becomes ready because readiness is a function of culture. Therefore, there can be no compensation for technological or numerical superiority over an enemy whose cultural foundation is strong, but that of its own forces is weak and brittle. By recognizing culture as a core readiness enabler and cultivating disciplined institutional cohesion, armed forces will attain preparedness to sustain them in discovery and victory over complex twenty-first-century conflicts.

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