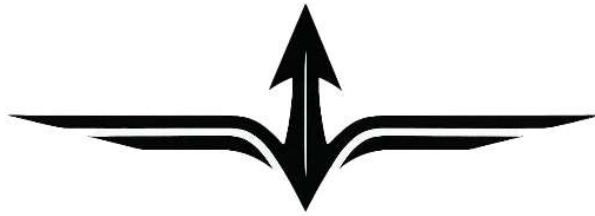


# Chapter 13



## Warrior Traditions, Modern Strength

Lumpy Lumbaca

*“People will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors.”*

— Edmund Burke,  
*Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790

### Introduction

Warrior culture refers to living systems of values, customs, and historical memory prioritizing martial skills, honor, loyalty, and collective defense. Formed through generations of conflict and statecraft, these traditions continue to shape how individuals identify with the profession of arms and how institutions recruit, train, lead, and fight. In the Indo-Pacific, warrior cultures serve as

social frameworks that guide behavior in peace and war, informing doctrine, discipline, and collaboration with partners rather than remaining relics of a distant past.

Across this maritime and civilizational mosaic, enduring martial legacies—from Japan’s samurai codes to India’s *Kshatriya* traditions—anchor norms of restraint, duty, and cohesion inside modern forces. The United States operates within this ecosystem with its own warrior tradition—anchored in the citizen-soldier ethos, a professional noncommissioned officer corps, and a command philosophy that prizes disciplined initiative. These traditions are not identical, but they are compatible. Shared martial values can accelerate trust and interoperability in coalitions such as the Quad and combined exercises like Malabar and Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC). They also underpin U.S. posture in the region, where operational concepts like Agile Combat Employment (ACE) and Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO) depend on trust, access, and seamless coordination with allies and partners. Yet these bonds require constant care to prevent divergence and misunderstanding.

Understanding warrior culture is therefore vital for alliance management and military diplomacy. Recognizing the cultural foundations of a partner’s military systems helps the United States and its allies navigate differences in doctrine, operational styles, and decision-making, thereby smoothing the path for collaboration in combined exercises and real-world contingencies. For the United States, which sustains its strategic edge through a network of alliances and partnerships, engaging these legacies is not symbolic but strategic. Across Oceania, Northeast Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, warrior traditions supply cohesion, legitimacy, and

environment-specific expertise that enhance U.S. interoperability with regional partners and strengthen the credibility of multinational coalitions.

## Oceania

The warrior spirit in Oceania is inseparable from the region's maritime environment and its traditions of kinship and community defense. Far from fading into history, these legacies remain active forces in shaping how militaries recruit, train, and cohere. Seafaring skills, ritual practice, and culturally legitimate leadership continue to provide practical advantages in maritime domain awareness, peacekeeping, and humanitarian response across the Pacific. By grounding contemporary forces in ancestral traditions, Pacific states draw strength, cohesion, and public legitimacy from a shared warrior identity.

The Māori of New Zealand illustrate how traditional values can be woven into modern defense institutions. The *toa* tradition of courage, discipline, and collective obligation finds expression today in the New Zealand Defence Force, where ceremonies such as the *haka* serve as powerful affirmations of unity and cultural pride.<sup>2</sup> Performed in training and combined exercises, these rituals reinforce national identity and build trust and recognition among international partners.

Fiji provides another compelling example. The Republic of Fiji Military Forces, long associated with United Nations (UN) peacekeeping,<sup>3</sup> carries a reputation for steadiness under pressure and for diplomacy in volatile environments. These qualities are rooted in *iTaukei* values tied to the *vanua*—the interconnection of people,

place, and identity.<sup>4</sup> As Professor Unaisi Nabobo-Baba explains, principles such as *veikauwaitaki* (caring for one another), *veitokoni* (reciprocity), and *vakarokoroko* (respect) are inseparable from the Fijian understanding of community and land.<sup>5</sup> Carried into deployments, these values translate into mediation skills, rapport with local populations, and a balance of enforcement with empathy. This ethic enhances Fiji's credibility with partners such as Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, demonstrating how indigenous values shape not only identity but also operational behavior in the field.

Indigenous seamanship also remains a critical resource. The Torres Strait Islanders, with centuries of navigational expertise in challenging littoral environments, have translated those skills into modern contributions to Australia's maritime environment protection roles.<sup>6</sup> Their knowledge of small-boat handling, reefs, and tidal movements strengthens joint patrols against illegal fishing and piracy—areas where technology alone cannot substitute for local expertise. Similar continuities are visible in Vanuatu, where traditions of warrior leadership and community defense inform participation in regional peacekeeping<sup>7</sup> and disaster response, and in Papua New Guinea,<sup>8</sup> where the Defence Force draws upon tribal traditions of bravery and territorial defense to operate effectively in rugged terrain.

Elsewhere in the Pacific, the Solomon Islands' history of inter-island warfare and tribal authority continues to shape security cooperation with Australia and New Zealand, particularly in maritime patrols and stabilization missions.<sup>9</sup> Tonga, whose warrior identity can be traced back to the Tu'i Tonga Empire,<sup>10</sup> retains a strong ethos of discipline and service. Tongan forces regularly

contribute to peacekeeping and regional security, and their maritime heritage lends credibility and resilience to coalition operations.<sup>11</sup>

Taken together, Oceania's warrior cultures furnish cohesion and legitimacy within armed forces, transmit environment-specific skills that enhance littoral and jungle operations, and strengthen bonds between militaries and the communities they serve. In multinational contexts, these traditions make Pacific forces trusted contributors, offering repeatable practices and perspectives that partners can learn with, not simply learn about. For U.S. forces, this alignment reinforces a shared approach to decentralized execution, where trust, cohesion, and small-unit initiative translate directly into operational effectiveness in distributed environments.

### **Northeast Asia**

Northeast Asia's armed forces retain deep connections to martial traditions, but their modern significance lies in how those legacies are adapted to shape professionalism, civil-military relations, and international partnerships.

In Japan, the modern interpretation of *Bushidō* emphasizes restraint, discipline, loyalty, and service. Historian Stephen Turnbull argues that its contemporary influence lies less in medieval origins than in its translation into professional norms of self-control and ethical conduct.<sup>12</sup> The Japan Self-Defense Forces' performance during the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami response illustrated that ethos in practice, as more than 100,000 personnel executed one of the largest humanitarian operations in history with precision and restraint.<sup>13</sup> Officer education frequently uses historical case studies from the samurai era to cultivate ethical responsibility, reinforcing

Japan's credibility as a reliable ally within the U.S.-Japan alliance and as a dependable partner in the Quad.

Okinawa's distinct martial legacy adds another dimension. The *Peichin* warrior-administrators of the Ryukyu Kingdom<sup>14</sup> combined combat skill with diplomacy, and Okinawan traditions such as karate and *kobudō* now function as instruments of soft power.<sup>15</sup> When incorporated into military ceremonies and outreach, they strengthen cohesion within the Self-Defense Forces and signal seriousness to international partners.

South Korea similarly draws on its warrior heritage. The values associated with the *hwarang* of the Silla dynasty—discipline, duty, and collective pride—resonate in the Republic of Korea's (ROK) military culture and national service.<sup>16</sup> This ethic has long reinforced combined planning and training in the ROK-U.S. alliance and underpins South Korea's contributions to multinational operations, from peacekeeping to maritime interdictions.

Mongolia presents a martial identity rooted in the legacy of steppe warfare under Genghis Khan, but its most tangible expression today lies in peacekeeping and multinational training. The Mongolian Armed Forces bring expeditionary resilience and fieldcraft to operations abroad and host regular exercises that strengthen cooperation with a wide range of partners, including the United States.<sup>17</sup>

Taiwan's defense culture also incorporates indigenous traditions that emphasize resilience, initiative, and intimate knowledge of demanding terrain. Although comprising only about 3% of the population, indigenous Taiwanese are disproportionately represented in the armed forces,<sup>18</sup> particularly in units tasked with

mountainous and jungle operations. Their expertise supports Taiwan's asymmetric and distributed defense concepts, where small-unit initiative and terrain mastery are critical. This integration strengthens Taiwan's capacity to resist coercion and enhances its credibility as a security partner.

Taken together, the cases of Japan, Korea, Mongolia, and Taiwan illustrate how warrior legacies in Northeast Asia continue to inform modern professionalism, operational effectiveness, and alliance behavior. When framed as living systems of discipline and resilience, these traditions provide common ethical and practical ground that makes integration with partners, including the United States, more seamless and enduring, particularly where professional norms of restraint, accountability, and disciplined initiative reinforce shared expectations for command and execution.

### **South Asia**

Across South Asia, martial legacies are not museum pieces but living sources of cohesion, legitimacy, and professional identity. Their relevance lies in how they are translated into regimental life, leadership norms, and habits of cooperation with partners.

In India, the *Kshatriya* inheritance is most visible in regimental traditions that prize discipline, sacrifice, and service. Rajput, Maratha, and Sikh lineages supply a language of duty that binds diverse recruits into coherent units. The Sikh tradition of the Khalsa has long emphasized courage anchored in ethical restraint, a combination reflected in the Indian Army's Sikh Regiments, among the most decorated formations in the force.<sup>19</sup> Regimental battle honors, colors, and commemorations sustain esprit de corps across

India's linguistic and religious diversity while grounding military identity in lawful conduct rather than romanticized combat.

India's strategic culture reaches back to the *Arthashastra* and epic literature such as the *Mahabharata*, which frames warfare as a matter of order and responsibility. This inheritance informs India's contemporary military diplomacy.<sup>20</sup> Exercises like Malabar with the United States, Japan, and Australia are not just technical evolutions but also extensions of a tradition of statecraft and coalition building. The Indian Navy's ethos, encapsulated in the motto *Sam No Varunah* (Let the Lord of the Seas be propitious to us),<sup>21</sup> underscores a moral responsibility in maritime operations that complements the practical demands of integrated patrols and complex combined exercises.

Indigenous warrior traditions have also shaped specialized competencies. In India's northeast, communities long accustomed to hill warfare developed small-unit patrolling, tracking, and community engagement techniques that today inform counterinsurgency doctrine.<sup>22</sup> Rather than locking identity to tribe or region, these traditions show how local knowledge can be adapted into modern training and, in turn, shared with partners through bilateral and regional programs.

Beyond India, Nepal's Gurkhas embody a warrior ethos that combines toughness with reliability. Their service in the British and Indian armies and in UN peacekeeping makes them cultural bridges in multinational operations.<sup>23</sup> Sri Lanka draws on narratives of sovereignty and endurance that now animate maritime security, search and rescue, and Indian Ocean cooperation. The Maldives

contributes, although at a smaller scale, through maritime domain awareness and coastal defense.<sup>24</sup>

Taken together, South Asia's warrior inheritances are most valuable when channeled into professionalism, unit cohesion, and environment-specific expertise. They strengthen national forces at home and, through combined training with the United States and other partners, establish shared expectations for conduct, leadership, and mission focus that accelerate integration, make it steadier, and render it more credible.

### **Southeast Asia**

Southeast Asia's military cultures draw on legacies of warrior kings, maritime polities, and village defense traditions. Their value today lies less in romantic imagery than in the habits they cultivate: disciplined small-unit leadership, jungle and littoral mastery, and civil-military rapport. Those habits travel well in coalition settings and matter directly to how the United States trains and operates with regional partners.

Indonesia's archipelagic history continues to shape force design and seamanship. The memory of Majapahit<sup>25</sup> as a maritime power survives less as nostalgia than as a premium on coastal surveillance and interisland mobility. Among Indonesia's seafaring communities, Bugis's expertise with currents, reefs, and small-boat navigation continues to inform practical training for near-shore operations.<sup>26</sup> In U.S.-Indonesia exercises such as Garuda Shield,<sup>27</sup> that local knowledge pairs naturally with American emphasis on distributed maritime and littoral operations, giving combined units

an intuitive feel for archipelagic maneuver that technology alone cannot provide.

Thailand's martial narrative is anchored in the figure of King Naresuan, the 16th-century monarch remembered for liberating Siam from Burmese rule, and in a temple-to-barracks ethic of loyalty and discipline shaped by Theravada Buddhism. The result is a military culture that treats ceremony seriously but subordinates it to readiness.<sup>28</sup> In training with Thai units, I found that historical reference was a practical tool of leadership, not an ornament. Commanders used it to reinforce restraint, endurance, and care for subordinates during field problems. Cobra Gold, one of the Indo-Pacific's largest annual exercises, is the proving ground for this ethic. Thai and U.S. units validate interoperability from combined-arms live fire to command-post planning, and the more profound effect is trust earned through shared routines, clear protocol, and consistent performance under stress.

In the Philippines, the Armed Forces inherit a barangay tradition of community defense, rooted in the precolonial village as the basic political and security unit.<sup>29</sup> That legacy translates into small-unit initiative and close ties with local leaders. These traits are evident in jungle patrolling, riverine operations, and village engagements, and they are central to combined training with the United States during Balikatan. Philippine units bring terrain intuition and community rapport that complement U.S. enablers, making partnered operations more acceptable to local populations and more resilient in complex environments.<sup>30</sup>

Vietnam's military identity is infused with narratives of national endurance associated with Tran Hung Dao,<sup>31</sup> the 13th-century

commander who repelled multiple Mongol invasions and is revered as a symbol of resilience. In contemporary practice, those narratives underpin disciplined coastal defense, maritime law enforcement, and the steady professionalization of the Vietnam People's Army. As Vietnam expands defense cooperation with outside partners, including growing naval exchanges, its emphasis on restraint and mission focus has facilitated practical collaboration without theatrical claims about history.

Malaysia's armed forces draw on a Malay maritime inheritance and on the moral vocabulary of figures such as Hang Tuah, the 15th-century admiral of the Malacca Sultanate, celebrated for loyalty, bravery, and martial skills.<sup>32</sup> Today, however, their distinctiveness is most visible in jungle expertise. The Malaysian Army has institutionalized long-honed skills in tracking, camouflage, and survival, and routinely shares those competencies with partners. U.S.–Malaysia exercises, including Keris Strike, have used Malaysian jungle schools and instructors to raise combined standards for small-unit movement and sustainment in dense rainforest.<sup>33</sup>

Across these cases, the throughline is operational. Traditions provide cohesion and legitimacy within units, but they also generate repeatable techniques for harsh environments and a grammar of respect that reduces friction in coalition work. For the United States, that combination is not ornamental. It is what makes Southeast Asian partners credible in dispersed and austere settings and what allows concepts like ACE, DMO, and Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) to be practiced with forces whose own warrior legacies already prize discipline, endurance, and care for the community they serve.

## The American Tradition in Context

While Indo-Pacific warrior cultures are often defined by ancient lineages or communal defense, the American tradition reflects a different lineage: a citizen-soldier ethic paired with a highly professional force. Forged in the friction of the Revolutionary War, it emerged from the tension between militia participation and the demands of disciplined regular forces.<sup>34</sup> That tension endures, producing a military identity that remains accountable to civil authority and bounded by law.

The modern expression lies in the strength of the noncommissioned officer corps and a command philosophy that prizes disciplined initiative. Shaped by the Civil War—where volunteer soldiers expected leadership grounded in example rather than rank alone<sup>35</sup>—the American approach places a premium on competence, shared risk, and trust earned in action. Mission command reflects this lineage, empowering leaders to act within a commander's intent while reinforcing accountability through candid assessment.<sup>36</sup> Practices such as after-action reviews sustain a professional culture in which credibility flows from performance, and leadership is validated by those it leads.

In this sense, the United States contributes more than technical capability. It brings a professional grammar of decentralized execution that complements regional warrior traditions. This shared approach enables concepts such as Distributed Maritime Operations and expeditionary approaches to function as trust-based systems, not simply technological constructs.

## **Cultural Exchanges through Military Exercises**

Combined exercises across the Indo-Pacific—Balikatan, Cobra Gold, RIMPAC, Malabar—are more than tactical rehearsals. They function as proving grounds where doctrine, procedure, and culture are tested in concert. When units train, plan, and live together, service members absorb each other’s rituals and decision-making habits, lowering frictions in real operations. Cultural programs, often labeled “cultural nights,” do real work in this setting: shared food, music, and martial demonstrations create familiarity that carries over into command-post planning, live-fire ranges, and after-action reviews. The effect is cumulative trust rather than spectacle, and that trust sustains interoperability long after the exercise ends.

The dividends are tangible. Familiarity with partners’ honor codes, greeting protocols, and ritual forms gives liaison officers and small-unit leaders a common grammar of respect that speeds coordination under stress. In my experience, units that took cultural engagement seriously also adapted more quickly in technical areas, crosswalked standard operating procedures, aligned risk thresholds, and debriefed candidly. Rooted in a professional ethos that prizes accountability and disciplined initiative, U.S. training practices—particularly rigorous after-action reviews and transparent assessment—reinforce this process. This translated into smoother coalition planning and higher confidence when U.S. concepts were practiced alongside allies.

Indigenous skill sets have become integral to these exchanges. Bugis-Makassar seamanship and Torres Strait Islanders’ reef knowledge, for example, no doubt improve small-boat handling and near-shore navigation training, improving patrol safety and

persistence in complex littoral waters. In South Asia, the warrior codes of communities such as the Naga and Gurkha continue to inform counterinsurgency and stabilization practices. Traditions of loyalty, community defense, and terrain mastery translate into small-unit patrolling and principled restraint—skills that remain central in bilateral training and deployments. To maximize these benefits, planners now bring military historians and cultural advisors into multinational planning cells. Their insights help ensure operations respect local customs, religious rhythm, and memorial space, improving both force protection and host-nation legitimacy.

Taken together, exercises that treat culture as professional competency—not an afterthought—produce coalitions that are faster, steadier, and more credible. They allow U.S. and regional forces to learn with one another, not merely learn about one another, and they convert inherited warrior traditions into repeatable habits that matter in the field.

### **Operational Values of Warrior Traditions**

When warrior traditions are treated as professional competencies rather than curiosities, they reshape how coalitions plan, posture, and fight. Training alongside partners whose ethos emphasizes ancestral duty and communal solidarity allows U.S. forces to tailor their engagements, avoid missteps, and build trust more quickly under stress. With Gurkha units, for instance, understanding clan honor and devotional practice informs key leader interactions, casualty protocols, and small-unit discipline. The result is steadier patrol deconfliction, calmer conduct at checkpoints, and more reliable follow-through when conditions deteriorate.

Peacekeeping and stabilization missions demonstrate the same dynamic. Fijian, Mongolian, and Indian contingents draw on codes that value steadiness, restraint, and protection of the vulnerable. In volatile environments, those codes translate into crowd control that de-escalates, negotiations that preserve dignity, and command climates that reward composure. Maritime operations show a parallel payoff. Indigenous navigation and survival skills from the Bugis, Cham, and Torres Strait Islander communities provide reef reading, tidal timing, and small-boat risk management that technology alone cannot replicate. When U.S. forces practice expeditionary littoral operations with partners who hold this environmental mastery, dispersal plans become safer, insertion windows more realistic, and sustainment more resilient.

Warrior traditions also underpin human capital. Where military service is a multi-generational vocation, retention is stronger, the noncommissioned officer corps is more seasoned, and leadership continuity is more stable. For coalitions, that stability accelerates trust: seeing the same partner leaders year after year shortens the time needed to align rules of engagement, communication protocols, and risk thresholds.

In counterinsurgency and hybrid warfare, warrior lineages can lend legitimacy to community-based defense when integrated within lawful frameworks. Drawing on respected local figures to raise auxiliary forces fosters ownership and compliance, provided oversight and human-rights training are explicit. Done well, this converts inherited authority into accountable security capacity rather than factional power.

These traditions also matter in the information domain. Societies that honor their martial heritage through education, memorial observance, and ritual often display higher cohesion and greater resilience against disinformation. Integrating locally resonant narratives and symbols into coalition messaging enhances credibility and blunts adversary efforts to portray combined forces as outsiders.

For practitioners, the implementation is clear. Build cultural ground truth into planning cells with vetted historians, anthropologists, and experienced local noncommissioned officers. Translate insights into checklists and annexes—covering greetings, customs, crowd-control phrases, or memorial-site restrictions—and rehearse this as seriously as communications or medical drills. Capturing lessons in after-action reviews ensures culture is not performative but repeatable. When approached this way, warrior traditions cease to be background symbolism and instead deliver operational value: coalitions move faster, act steadier, and project authority that is credible to the communities they serve.

## **Conclusion**

Across the Indo-Pacific, warrior traditions are not relics. They are living systems that shape identity, discipline, cohesion, and the way militaries partner in the field. From Oceania's warrior spirit to Japan's *Bushidō* and India's *Kshatriya* ethos, these legacies provide shared norms of loyalty, restraint, and service that international partners readily recognize. They add depth to professional military education, cultivating forces that are technically proficient,

culturally aware, and bonded by a sense of mission larger than themselves.

For the United States, engaging these traditions is strategic, not symbolic. Its own warrior tradition—grounded in disciplined initiative and professional accountability—aligns naturally with many Indo-Pacific partners. Exercises such as RIMPAC, Malabar, Cobra Gold, and Balikatan are more than tactical rehearsals; they are places where doctrine is tested, and culture is absorbed side by side. This shared learning strengthens coalition cohesion, underwrites concepts like ACE, DMO, and EABO, and turns access and basing arrangements into habits of trust under stress.

The lesson is clear: treat culture as a professional competency. Embedding cultural advisors, respecting local ritual with intent, and codifying indigenous skills in training make coalitions faster, steadier, and more credible. Over time, continuity compounds trust, converting historical legacies into modern strength; an operational edge rather than background culture.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The author is solely responsible for the views expressed in this publication, which do not necessarily represent the official policy or position of the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, the U.S. Department of War, or the U.S. government.
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