



SECURITY COOPERATION: A KEY PILLAR OF DEFENSE POLICY

By Derek S. Reveron



Derek S. Reveron is Professor of National Security Affairs at the U.S. Naval War College. The views expressed here are the author's alone and do not represent the official position of the Department of the Navy, the Department of Defense or the U.S. government. They are based on testimony given before the House Armed Services Committee on October 21, 2015.

Foreign policy of the 2010s was supposed to be different: there would be no great power tensions, the governments of Iraq and Afghanistan would be strong enough to confront their own security challengers, and the US could pivot away from Middle East turmoil to do nation building at home. Yet the United States has confronted a very different world. Russia invaded Ukraine and annexed parts of Crimea, and launched military operations in Syria; China violated Vietnam's sovereignty drilling for hydrocarbons in its Exclusive Economic Zone, established an air defense identification zone conflicting with Japan, and created "islands" in the disputed South China Sea, exacerbating tensions with the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia; Iraq struggled against the group ISIS, ceding a significant portion of its territory; Afghanistan failed to parlay a decade of international investment, leading to a Taliban resurgence; and intrastate conflict caused closure of U.S. embassies in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Graham Allison and Dmitri Simes summed it up well: "peace seems increasingly out of reach as threats to U.S. security and prosperity multiply both at the systemic level, where dissatisfied major powers are increasingly challenging the international order, and at the state and substate level, where dissatisfied ethnic, tribal, religious and other groups are destabilizing key countries and even entire regions."¹

The Benefits of the Indirect Approach

In an effort to reach for peace, the United States responds to foreign policy crises like these not by sending combat forces to confront aggression, but instead by sending weapons, trainers, and advisors to tackle security deficits.² The United States aspires to create true partners that can confront their own threats to internal stability (e.g., terrorism) or alleviate security dilemmas (e.g. the rise of China). Thus, strengthening weak states and supporting developed partners through security cooperation remain a national security priority. Not new, this approach continues a long-term tradition of U.S. foreign policy that seeks to empower its partners to confront their own security challenges rather than attempt to solve them through American force alone. To be sure, the U.S. military remains a potent combat force and regularly conducts counterterrorism strikes in the Middle East, leads maritime coalitions in the Indian Ocean, and maintains a capacity to wage major war in Asia.

¹ Graham T. Allison and Dmitri K. Simes, "Russia and America Stumbling to War," *National Interest*, April 20, 2015.

<http://www.nationalinterest.org/feature/russia-america-stumbling-war-12662>

² Presidential Policy Directive 23 (Security Sector Assistance) noted the US must "help partner nations build sustainable capacity to address common security challenges." Presidential Policy Directive/PPD-23: Security Sector Assistance (Washington, DC: The White House, 2013).

In addition to this warfighting capacity, successive administrations have sought to prevent conflict by helping regimes through security cooperation, which includes all Department of Defense interactions with foreign defense establishments.³

Since coalition operations are a norm, security cooperation also ensures partners are interoperable with US forces. For example, in Afghanistan, we operated with 50 partners who often could provide capabilities that the United States could not, such as police training. In Bahrain, a U.S. officer directs three naval task forces composed of 30 partners who collectively protect vital trade routes. And in Key West, Joint Interagency Task Force South serves as a fusion center supporting international efforts to eliminate illicit trafficking in the Caribbean and Latin America. Security cooperation enables these coalitions to work; the programs ensure partners have access to the U.S. defense industrial base; and U.S.-sponsored military exercises promote interoperability.

As the United States looks ahead, the country is sure to follow the tradition in defense strategy that prioritizes enabling partners through training and equipping their forces. Over the last 15 years, the number of status of forces agreements (SOFAs) increased from 40 to 117. This is due, in part, to the fact that while administrations may change, fundamental U.S. interests have not. These include: protecting the US homeland from catastrophic attack, sustaining a global system marked by open lines of communication to facilitate commerce, promoting international security, and preventing powers hostile to the United States from being able to dominate important areas of the world.⁴

The United States aspires to create true partners who can confront their own threats to internal stability, which organized crime, violent actors, and regional rivals exploit. Known as the “indirect approach,” the U.S. helps countries fill security deficits that exist when a country cannot independently protect its own national security. American generosity helps explain this, but U.S. national security benefits too. For example, by providing radars and surveillance technology, Central American countries can control their airspace and can interdict drug-filled planes bound for the US; by providing logistic support, Pakistan can lead a maritime coalition promoting maritime security in the Indian Ocean; and by selling AEGIS destroyers, Japan can counter North Korean missiles and provide early warning of missile threats to the United States.

Through security cooperation programs like these, the United States helps other countries meet their immediate national security needs, but there is also an effort to foster independence so states can contribute to global security. This is most visible in a program such as the Global Peacekeeping Operations Initiative that trains and equips foreign militaries to participate in peacekeeping operations. While the United States does not want to deploy ground forces under the United Nations flag, it does play a key role in peacekeeping by training and equipping over 250,000 peacekeepers since 2005. Programs like GPOI enabled Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda to participate in an African Union peacekeeping mission in Somalia. An officer from Chad seemed to capture the rationale for other countries’ efforts to contribute to global security: “When your neighbor’s house is burning, you have to put it out, because if not, yours is next.”⁵ U.S. security cooperation often provides the tools countries need when their national security demands exceed their security capacities.

The preventive and cooperative approach to foreign policy is visible in today’s military, which has undergone dramatic change over the last three decades. Defense strategy embraces the notion that the U.S. military does much more than fight wars. The military trains, equips, and deploys peacekeepers; provides humanitarian assistance and disaster relief; and supports other militaries to reduce security deficits throughout the world. With national security focused on weak states and regional challengers, the U.S. military has been evolving from a force of confrontation to one of cooperation.

The rationale for security cooperation has been based on the assumption that instability breeds chaos, which would make it more likely that the US or the international community would face pressure to intervene in the future. Given America’s global foreign policy, many countries have large expectations for assistance from the United States, but the US also derives benefits from security cooperation. Among these are:

³ Security cooperation is defined in military doctrine as “All Department of Defense interactions with foreign defense establishments to build defense relationships that promote specific US security interests, develop allied and friendly military capabilities for self-defense and multinational operations, and provide US forces with peacetime and contingency access to a host nation.” Chairman, US Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Joint Publication 1-02, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, March 2015. http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod_dictionary

⁴ Derek S. Reveron, Nikolas K. Gvosdev, and Mackubin T. Owens, *US Foreign Policy and Defense Strategy: The Evolution of an Incidental Superpower* (Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press, 2015).

⁵ Quoted in “African Training Exercise Turns Urgent as Threats Grow,” *New York Times*, March 8, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/08/world/africa/african-training-exercise-turns-urgent-as-threats-grow.html>

- Obtaining base access as a *quid pro quo*
- Augmenting U.S. force structure by providing logistics and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance support to coalition partners in the Middle East
- Promoting a favorable balance of power by selling weapon systems and training programs to Gulf Cooperation Council countries to balance Iran
- Harmonizing areas of cooperation by working with Japan and Israel on missile defense
- Promoting self-defense through the Georgia Train and Equip program
- Reinforcing sovereignty through programs like Plan Colombia and the Merida Initiative with Mexico
- Supporting the US industrial base and creating interoperable air forces through the F-35 program

As these reasons suggest, security cooperation is much bigger than train and equip forces in combat zones. Given the scope of these programs and diversity of the partners, one can develop measurable objectives. These include: the strength of regional security agreements, the types of regional cooperation (e.g., participation in U.S.-led air, maritime, or land operations), willingness of foreign governments to counter threats the U.S. identifies (e.g. terrorism), and the relative receptivity of U.S. forces within the partner country. Internal to countries, one can measure how well partners combat security challenges, the strength of civil–military relations, and the levels of respect for human rights. Measurement can include the extent to which international commerce flows freely, levels of cooperation between military and international relief organizations, and support for international initiatives to combat disease, illicit activity, and weapons proliferation.

Challenges for Security Cooperation

At times security cooperation can be limitless, dissatisfying, and futile. At times partners misinterpret the assistance and do not appreciate the transitory nature of the assistance. To convince partners that Cold War logic no longer governs security cooperation, U.S. military officers promote human rights, encourage military professionalization, and serve as mentors to military officers in developing countries throughout the world. At the Naval War College, for example, over 65 countries send their best and brightest to learn alongside their American peers.

Over the last three decades, the U.S. military has embraced security cooperation, but there are important risks to highlight. First, the non-exclusive nature of these activities will produce more failures than successes, which negatively impacts confidence in security cooperation as a tool. Second, the personnel system is not producing sufficient talent to support these missions. American forces no longer operate in isolation and need an appreciation of the historical, cultural, and political dimensions of its partners. Third, there is a tendency to over-rely on partners thinking they can accomplish U.S. objectives when they either lack the political motivation or the skills to do so. Fourth, US weapons given to partners can be lost or used against U.S. forces. Finally, other countries will rely on the U.S. to subsidize their own defense budgets, creating a “free-rider” problem.

Underlying these risks are fundamental limits of what an external actor can accomplish through security cooperation; without indigenous political support, programs can only have marginal impact on a country’s security and stability. All of these programs clearly indicate that change in weak states must come primarily from within; external actors are limited in what they can accomplish.⁶ Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter captured this while frustrated with U.S. efforts to enable Iraq to confront its security challenges. “We can give them training, we can give them equipment — we obviously can't give them the will to fight. But if we give them training, we give them equipment, and give them support, and give them some time, I hope they will develop the will to fight, because only if they fight can ISIL remain defeated.”⁷

Given the disappointments in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, there is a potential for the value of security cooperation to be ignored, but these programs are not confined to combat zones alone. When thinking about security cooperation, we should look at how international partners contribute to coalition operations and global security. U.S. budgetary declines will likely

⁶ Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done about It* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁷ Quoted in Vanessa Williams, “Defense Secretary Carter: Iraq’s forces showed ‘no will to fight’ Islamic State,” *Washington Post*, May 24, 2015. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2015/05/24/defense-secretary-carter-iraqs-forces-showed-no-will-to-fight-islamic-state/>

reinforce the importance of security cooperation, as the U.S. will need more partners and allies to augment its own defense capacities. Security cooperation has become a panacea, but those inside and outside of government must understand the importance of security deficits, how militaries are changing from forces of confrontation to forces of cooperation, the challenges of the “by, with, and through partners” approach, and why security cooperation is an important pillar of defense strategy.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For more information, contact Eli Gilman at 215-732-3774, ext. 103, email fpri@fpri.org, or visit us at www.fpri.org