

STATEMENT FOR THE SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

“Department of Defense Security Cooperation and Assistance Programs and Authorities”

Testimony By:
CDR Jeff Eggers, USN (Ret.)
Senior Fellow, New America
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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Fischer, Ranking Member Nelson, and members of the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify on U.S. security cooperation. And I’m honored to join colleagues Mike McNerney and Melissa Dalton.

Early in my career, I served as a practitioner implementing security cooperation programs at the operational and institutional levels. More recently, I’ve conducted research on the efficacy of U.S. security sector assistance (or SSA, to include both State-led security assistance and DOD-led security cooperation), interviewing academics and those in government responsible for SSA programs. This statement summarizes the findings of that research and an associated report.

Overall, there are signs that modern SSA programs are proving ineffective as they increasingly focus on “building partner capacity” as a means of addressing threats to U.S. interests. Considerable media attention has shed light on the more spectacular failures, such as Yemen and Syria, raising awareness of the problem, but this scrutiny has not yet yielded any significant debate toward re-engineering a better solution. In considering both the magnitude of U.S. security sector assistance and the complex range of security challenges abroad, I welcome the committee’s attention to this important issue.

“PATCHWORK” ATOP AN AGING FOUNDATION

The foundation of the modern security assistance framework stems from the Cold War era, when the U.S. was principally interested in buttressing the existing capabilities of, and improving interoperability with, its close allies. Specifically, the roots of the modern system derive from the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 and Arms Export Control Act of 1976, and its enduring authorities that have since been codified in Title 22 of U.S. Code, such as Foreign Military Sales (FMS), Foreign Military Financing (FMF), and International Military Education and Training (IMET).

These processes and its corresponding infrastructure were designed around a more slowly evolving environment, where the basic threat vectors changed little from year to year. The implementation of these State authorities came to rest within the Department of Defense, which created the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) in 1961 to manage the relevant processes. Despite the radical shift in the global security landscape since the turn of the century, these decades-old building blocks remain the foundation of our modern security sector assistance paradigm.

Numerous attempts have been made in the last decade to update this paradigm to make it more responsive and agile to the current threat environment. By and large, this effort has focused on the perceived challenge of fragile and failing states that give rise to sub-state transnational threats. The most recent innovations, to include “1206” (now 2282) “train and equip” funding, the Global Security Contingency Fund (GSCF), and the Counterterrorism Partnership Fund (CTPF), have received mixed reviews and assessments.

Nonetheless, there is broad consensus that this current framework has become a cumbersome “patchwork” of authorities atop an outdated foundation. While there was some hope for relief from the post-9/11 pace of foreign crises and engagements, wherein the national security apparatus could be reset, the trend of persistent global conflict has defied those expectations, leaving little bandwidth to go beyond tinkering with the “patchwork” framework.

EFFECTIVENESS VARIES BASED ON EXPECTATION

The existing SSA infrastructure is not only outdated. Prior studies and current practitioners have found that it is generally ineffective where it seeks to build partner capacity in fragile, high-threat environments. And increasingly, this is the principle demand placed on this infrastructure. In cases where security sector assistance has sought to make gradual improvements to existing and mature capabilities (Colombia, Philippines, etc.), it is generally perceived as effective. In other instances, where the assistance is employed to buy access or influence (Pakistan, Israel, Oman, etc.), the track record is mixed in this more modest and transactional mode. However, in cases where the assistance literally seeks to “build” new capability (Yemen, Syria, Iraq, etc.) in high-risk theaters with political instability, program results have ranged from marginally effective to ineffective.

Thus it is important to distinguish among the widely varying forms of security sector assistance. The following five-part, informal framework summarizes the various forms of SSA in use today:

- 1. Legacy Assistance.** Older aspects of security sector assistance that are essentially fixed as a result of historical diplomatic agreements or expectations, such as the U.S. FMF assistance to Egypt and Israel, which was brokered in the Camp David accords, whereby the U.S. essentially bought peace through the guarantee of an indefinite provision of security sector assistance.
- 2. Access and Influence.** Cases where the primary U.S. intent of security assistance is a transactional exchange to secure strategic access or influence, rather than the expectation of actual capability, and whereby the U.S. gains a cooperative relationship of a strategic nature that exceeds the relative weight of the actual capability.
- 3. Allied Interoperability and Capability.** Assistance to allied states, whereby the U.S. ensures interoperability and capability within those forces it might someday be allied with in conflict.
- 4. Fragile State Capability.** This category addresses the modern demand behind the 1206 authority and the concept of “building partner capacity.” These recipient nations are scarcely “partners” in the traditional sense, but they require security and governance

capability augmentation to counter the threat of non-state actors that pose a threat to the state and the broader international community.

- 5. Regional and Multilateral Support.** This category recognizes that regional approaches are required in many modern conflict areas, where assistance can also be directed at regional and multilateral entities (African Union, AMISOM, etc.).

TOWARD A MORE SUSTAINABLE MODEL OF SECURITY

The difficulties of “building partner capacity” (BPC) efforts are worth attention because BPC is being prioritized as a preferred alternative to direct U.S. intervention, seen as a cost-effective means of security in a time of increasingly constrained defense budgets and diminished political will for U.S. troop deployments. Thus the current administration has sought to re-design its counterterrorism strategy around a more sustainable approach built on “partnerships.” However, the challenges of BPC programming could pose a serious risk to the aspiration of asking partners to bear more of America’s security burden, and should therefore be pursued with careful consideration and planning.

Moreover, it is unclear how to balance the growing reliance on “partnerships” and “building partner capacity” with other core requirements to be prepared to win our nation’s wars in more conventional models of state-on-state conflict. In an increasingly interdependent world, “grey” conflicts like those currently simmering in Ukraine and the South China Sea pose a complex set of challenges to Defense planners, particularly in the context of security sector assistance.

These difficulties are not to suggest that the concepts of partnership and BPC should be abandoned, but that such investment should be planned more carefully and tailored toward cases and countries where it can make a demonstrable effect against emerging threats. For instance, these hybrid models of “grey” conflict—between the extremes of preparing allies for conventional state-on-state conflict and the over-ambitious programs of “nation-building” in fragile states—are likely a higher-return target for investment.

STRUCTURAL AND PROCESS PROBLEMS

The chief structural issue is the historical problem of tension between the Departments of Defense and State over Title 10 and Title 22 authorities, which has become exacerbated by the “patchwork” and proliferation of new Defense authorities, with renewed concerns within the State Department over the “militarization of foreign policy.” Addressing the causes of this tension are beyond the scope of this statement, but the two most prevalent are: 1) the legacy and structural nature of stove-piped authorities (Title 10 vs. Title 22) and the respective oversight committees (Armed Services vs. Foreign Affairs); and 2) the lack of State expeditionary resources to conduct civilian-based security sector assistance.

There are also concerns with process-related issues, such as the speed, efficiency and prioritization of security sector assistance authorities. Of these, speed has received the most attention, as the fast-changing nature of the security challenges has placed emphasis on the ability to deliver new capabilities more rapidly and with greater agility. Prioritization, or alignment of priorities and

programs, is the second greatest concern. There is general consensus that this is well-managed within countries and theaters, but that it does not occur in a way that allows for synchronization and oversight at the national level. Third is the question of efficiency, or the gaps and redundancies among authorities. The “patchwork” problem makes the process more cumbersome, although gaps can be overcome by innovating with a mosaic of authorities. While inefficient, concern over the problem of excess, overlapping, or stove-piped authorities is not universally shared, as some stakeholders find benefit in the patchwork as a means of securing dedicated resources.

STRATEGIC DESIGN

The more pressing problem is that of strategic design and overall effectiveness. The push to outsource security burdens through building partner capacity efforts has not been founded in realistic assessments of whether the political and structural characteristics of recipient host nations would be suited to these efforts. Rather, this push was founded in a desire for action coupled with the need for a more sustainable alternative to unilateral U.S. engagement.

As a result, it is not clear that partnership-based models will be capable of delivering the desired outcome of securing U.S. interests against certain threats, and the outlook for the partnership approach likely depends on what the United States hopes to achieve. In cases where the intent is to respond to, vice prevent or prepare for, conflict or a failing state, the range of circumstances that would enable an effective investment of security sector assistance toward building capacity are very narrow. In cases where the intent is to maintain a strategic relationship that provides for transactional access or reinforces existing capabilities, the range is much wider.

A related over-arching concern is the lack of a coordinated U.S. government strategy for security sector assistance. There is general articulation, in several strategy and doctrine products, of the broad intent of U.S. security assistance, yet there is no detailed top-down strategy as to why the current array of programs and activities is structured the way it is. Rather, the array of programs is generally the result of a bottom-up process driven by country teams and regional leadership (Ambassadors, COCOMs, Defense and State bureaus, etc.) who push for certain programs in countries based on their country or regional strategy. While some regions are stronger in their strategic design and planning than others, there is generally good alignment at the regional level between the strategic resources, design and objectives. However, no such alignment exists at the global level across all regions. In addition, there is widespread difficulty in aggregating resource and program data across the government to create a compiled analysis of funding across activity types and countries.

In theory, theater security assistance objectives would be aligned with a national-level security assistance strategy, but there is no mechanism by which the full range of resources and activities are made consistent with a relative prioritization of national security priorities. The Pentagon’s annual strategic planning guidance provides some guidance and alignment, but it remains indirect and with a broader focus than security assistance. In this context, the FY16 NDAA (Section 1202) requirement to report on a “strategic framework” for security cooperation is a useful step forward.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Efficiency vs. Effectiveness. Security cooperation reform is generally focused on improving efficiency (overlap, redundancy, speed, etc.) but the central problem is one of strategic design and the overall return on investment. There are gaps and overlapping efforts in the “patchwork,” and the process is inefficient and slow, but these issues are secondary to the problem of ineffective security cooperation.

Recipient Nation Considerations. Planning against recipient nation characteristics remains a key limiting factor to the effectiveness of security sector assistance. While staffers responsible for security cooperation programs are becoming better trained and organized toward generating effective programs, there is an over-arching need to better design assistance programs that are approached holistically from end-to-end (tactical to institutional) and have the political and civilian institutional support to complement the program.

Lack of Global Synchronization. Interagency synchronization of program resourcing appears to work well at the country and regional level, but is not synchronized at the inter-theater or global level. There is no formalized and effective process among the agencies for the coordination of security sector assistance globally, although it occurs informally across regional and functional organizations.

Building vs. Improving Capability. It is difficult to quickly “build” new capability where it does not already exist and such efforts tend to fail. By contrast, investments to improve or reinforce existing capabilities have generally proven more successful. “Building” partner capacity, particularly in a conflict-afflicted country, is costly relative to the effects achieved, and requires more time than is generally anticipated or programmed. Thus “reinforcing” partner capacity may be a more reasonable U.S. goal for this type of assistance.

Sequencing Tactical and Institutional Capability Generation. Building tactical “teeth” skills takes considerably less time than building institutional logistical support, which in turn requires less time than developing the civilian institutions of governance and rule of law that are necessary to complement security institutions. Moreover, building logistical tail after the tactical “teeth” may seem logical or necessary when faced with the urgency of conflict, but unsupported tactical troops will falter due to attrition and poor morale, which can become a strategic liability to the broader security assistance effort. Therefore, it is worth re-balancing the sequence of building tactical level forces well before institutional support mechanisms are in place.

Importance of Regionalization. Security cooperation planning and infrastructure is generally country-focused, but many of these problems are regional in nature. Investing in multilateral or regional constructs could mitigate the risk of lagging political will in particular nations, but this requires a separate effort to invest in buttressing the integrity of these multilateral and regional organizations.

Sustainment Concerns. There are concerns with the sustainability of programs funded over one or two years. Beyond the question of whether these projects can be sustained by U.S. funding is a larger issue of whether they are sustainable, i.e. whether the host nation has the institutional strength to provide the support needed to sustain these projects over the long-term.

Transparency of Resourcing Data. It is very difficult to aggregate and analyze SSA expenditures because of the various accounting methodologies utilized, and the lack of a central database.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In general, the U.S. should temper its ambition to “build” capacity where it does not exist, or in the absence of political stability and civilian institutions. The following suggestions have specific pertinence to legislative requirements toward improving the return on investment of U.S. security sector assistance:

- Leverage FY16 NDAA Section 1202 to develop a global strategic framework for U.S. security sector assistance.
- SSA programming should use realistic long-term timelines and should be planned and vetted at the front-end against an enhanced framework of selected feasibility criteria (i.e. political will, absorptive capacity, sustainability, etc.).
- Leverage joint authorities (e.g., 2282 and GSCF) to conduct longer-term stabilization approaches focused on governance and rule-of-law efforts.
- Enact a long-term effort to resolve the problem of U.S. military training civilian security forces and the lack of expeditionary capability and resources within civilian agencies.
- Anticipate that Leahy Amendment concerns will increasingly emerge as the expansion of security sector assistance runs up against human rights, and consider means to update those requirements to manage this expansion.

Madam Chairman, Senator Nelson, Members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to offer this testimony. I hope this statement serves useful in your consideration of reform, and I’d again look forward to assisting the committee in any way possible in the future.