

October 2018

Security Cooperation as a National Defense Strategy Tool

Hijab Shah and Melissa Dalton

Security cooperation has long been a vital tool of U.S. foreign policy. The [2018 National Defense Strategy](#) (NDS) elevates its importance. “Strengthening alliances and attracting new partners” is one of the three pillars delineated in the NDS as a major line of effort against strategic competitors such as Russia and China. As the United States evolves its global approach in the face of increasingly complex security challenges, the U.S. government may find that it is more reliant than ever on allies and partners in the pursuit of shared security goals in key conflict theatres and broader regions of interest. This will involve a spectrum of activities including institutional capacity building, training, exercises, education, and arms sales, to meet operational, transactional, and broader foreign policy objectives. Historically, this has been a source of strength for the United States, building a network of partners and allies to address common problems beyond which the United States may be able to accomplish alone. Security cooperation is thus a way to ensure U.S. superiority in this era of strategic competition. However, countervailing priorities in the current U.S. administration challenge this formulation. In addition, questions remain as to how the Department of Defense—and more broadly, the U.S. national security interagency—will organize for and resource the strategic application of security cooperation.

Shifting Priorities and Resourcing

Over the last two decades, security cooperation authorities and resourcing largely have been focused on counterterrorism objectives. While this will remain a focus area for security cooperation, to truly leverage this tool as an extension of strategy, it will require changes to prioritization of requirements from Combatant Commands in support of contingency plans and their synchronization with the foreign policy priorities of U.S. Embassy country teams. It will also require a strong policy rudder steer from the Departments of State and Defense to prompt deeper assessment and identification of requirements to align allied and partner investments in the capabilities necessary for deterring, competing, and defending against strategic competitors. This may include a different capability mix than what has been

emphasized over the last 20 years, a blending and innovation of existing security cooperation activities, and a renewed emphasis on others. For example, institutional capacity building, which Congress now requires to be integrated with all security cooperation programming, can play an important role in building resilience to external penetration that seeks to disrupt or dissuade allied and partner behavior. The U.S. executive and legislative branches are still in the early days of establishing the policies and processes to direct and oversee the new alignment and resourcing of security cooperation activities in service of strategic competition.

Reconciling ‘America First’

The Trump administration has continued the trend seen over the last two U.S. administrations to burden-share—and increasingly to burden-shift—security requirements onto allies and partners. However, the U.S. administration’s emphasis on “America First” seems countervailing to its security cooperation agenda. On the one hand, the NDS [specifically states](#) that strengthening the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance is a strategic priority; on the other hand, President Donald Trump [criticizes and questions](#) the utility of the instrumental NATO mutual defense compact. These contradictions have hampered U.S. credibility in the eyes of not just current but also prospective allies and partners. As in the Cold War, allies and partners can be a vital bolstering force against strategic competitors, but only if they are confident in the durability of the alliance with the United States and not confused by contradictory messages from the administration.

Leveraging Arms Transfers

The Trump administration has sought to offset some of the strain of this contradiction with allies with its emphasis on lowering the bar for arms transfers. U.S. arms and weapons systems are highly sought after by foreign countries, which benefits the United States both monetarily and strategically—the latter, specifically, resulting in partners that may be better equipped to partake in U.S. efforts against strategic competitors. Despite restrictions on which countries the United States could sell weapons to, U.S. arms sales in FY 2017 capped at [\\$41.93 billion](#)—25 percent higher than the previous year. The Trump administration’s new [U.S. Conventional Arms Transfer \(CAT\) Policy](#) now lowers restrictions for potential buyers, following in the NDS logic of empowering allies and partners and deepening interoperability in the face of strategic competition. Indeed, with the global arms market growing increasingly competitive, this update to the CAT policy is a strong signal of U.S. resolve to step up.

However, the CAT policy has been the source of significant [debate](#) amongst interested parties, for several reasons. First, there is U.S. interagency disagreement as to whether or not arms sales should fall under the security cooperation rubric, or if it is a wholly separate and transactional endeavor more closely linked to relationship management with foreign partners. This lack of clarity and agreement within the U.S. government impacts how it evaluates arms transfers in support of broader foreign policy goals as well as the synchronization of resources in support of policy objectives. Second, arms transfers are an important foreign policy tool used by the United States to more directly leverage partner cooperation; the new CAT policy might jeopardize that leverage if arms transfers are more easily and openly available. Finally, arms transfers provided via direct commercial sales might increase the risk of [human rights violations](#), since the United States will have reduced influence over partners' use of U.S. weapons once the transfer is completed. The controversy surrounding U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia as it continues its campaign in Yemen highlight these concerns. The U.S. administration should include arms transfers in its security cooperation rationale as they directly relate to and influence the military trajectory of allies and partners. Failing to do so risks bifurcating efforts that may run parallel or contradictory to foreign policy objectives at best or undermine them at worst.

Ensuring Return on Investment

Pooling resources and sharing responsibility with partner forces is a critical aspect of U.S. efforts to best strategic competitors as [described](#) within the NDS. However, despite billions of dollars' worth of grant-based security assistance to its allies and partners—with another \$3.4 billion [approved](#) for FY 2019—the United States has yet to see the proportionate returns from its investment in foreign countries' security capabilities. In several areas, U.S. partners are [not yet ready](#) to shoulder the burdens that the U.S. administration seeks of them with gaps in professionalization, modernization, and interoperability with U.S. forces. Growing assessment, monitoring, and evaluation (AM&E) standards and mechanisms to enable the U.S. government to track how its investments are being utilized and to what extent shared U.S. and partner goals are being achieved, as mandated by the FY 2017 and 2018 National Defense Authorization Acts, will help. However, the lack of high-level policy prioritization for these tasks, exacerbated by staff capacity and workforce shortfalls, have resulted in some useful steps forward but slow progress overall.

The U.S. government should consider approaching security cooperation from a return-on-investment lens, articulating and implementing clear and practical AM&E standards, benchmarks, corrective measures, and results in support of strategic objectives. Better AM&E could pave the way for a greater return on investment and therefore result in reliable, capable partnerships that provide the United States an edge over its strategic competitors.

Conclusion

Security cooperation is not a strategy unto itself but is clearly a critical way to achieve strategic aims. The U.S. government should pursue security cooperation with a clear-eyed assessment of the risks and tradeoffs for the sake of “improving a relationship,” weighed against operational, economic, and humanitarian considerations. With growing impulses to burden-shift global security requirements onto allies and partners, the United States will have to resist temptations to rush into security cooperation commitments. It will have to build policy frameworks and technical approaches that are both rigorous and responsive to enable it to compete and secure its objectives in the twenty-first century.

Hijab Shah is a research associate in the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C. Melissa Dalton is a senior fellow and deputy director of the International Security Program and director of the Cooperative Defense Project at CSIS.

Commentary is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2018 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.