

Security Partnerships with State and Non-State Armed Groups:  
A New Voices in National Security Workshop Report

**Approaching and Evaluating Security Partnerships**

Rosalie Rubio

Ph.D. Candidate, George Washington University  
New Voices Research Fellow, Bridging the Gap

**June 2022**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The New Voices in National Security Workshop on Security Partnerships with State and Non-State Armed Groups recently convened to discuss topics of security partnerships addressing a series of questions related to: (1) When should the US engage in security partnerships with foreign militaries and non-state armed groups? (2) How should the US manage its security partnerships and judge their effectiveness? (3) How do our conceptualization of terms such as influence, legitimacy and consistency affect our understanding of the establishment and conduct of security partnerships? These topics are increasingly salient considering shifts in American strategic interests and the need to situate security partnerships within a broader approach to foreign policy. This memo synthesizes the workshop discussion, noting areas of (dis)agreement, divergence between theory and practice, and the implications of these dynamics—noting topics of interest and future research for scholars and practitioners alike.

New Voices in National Security is an initiative of Bridging the Gap, generously supported by the Raymond Frankel Foundation. The New Voices Workshop on Security Partnerships with State and Non-State Armed Groups was a collaboration between Bridging the Gap and Perry World House at the University of Pennsylvania. The workshop took place at the Penn Biden Center in Washington, DC on May 13, 2022.

## **Introduction**

A common tool of American foreign policy has been the establishment and development of security partnerships. The US government has sought to establish relationships and provide support to foreign armed actors—whether a foreign military, security service, police, or non-state armed group as a means of achieving a variety of strategic interests. The recent New Voices Workshop on Security Partnerships with States and Non-State Armed Groups was hosted by Bridging the Gap in partnership with Perry World House at the University of Pennsylvania. In this day-long workshop, a select group of 27 scholars and practitioners from a variety of universities and policy institutions explored the ways in which the United States seeks to approach, navigate, and evaluate its security partnerships.

Scholars and practitioners specializing in security partnerships discussed key challenges in establishing successful partnerships: issues such as defining and measuring their successes and failures, the difficulties of reconciling competing interests in increasingly complex conflict and geostrategic environments, the challenges of anticipating the long-run effects of these partnerships, and the difficulty with accurately weighing tradeoffs and accurately pricing in costs. Participants were able to embark on rich discussions surrounding these issues and others in the conduct of security partnerships centered on the exploration of two primary questions. First, when should the US engage in security partnerships with foreign militaries and non-state armed groups? And second, how should the US manage its security partnerships and judge their effectiveness?

While addressing these questions, three new questions organically emerged and guided much of the day's conversation.

- (1) How do our conceptualizations of terms such as influence, legitimacy and consistency affect our understanding of the establishment and conduct of security partnerships?
- (2) Who should the relevant stakeholders within the US government be in approaching partnerships with foreign actors? How do funding authorities shape US government agencies' ability to engage with partners and with one another?
- (3) How can scholars and practitioners recognize and potentially reconcile differing intellectual priorities in asking and answering questions related to security partnerships?

This memo summarizes the workshop’s discussion of these questions and highlights areas of (relative) consensus, areas of disagreement, areas for future research, and key takeaways.

## **Areas of Consensus**

### *Words Matter, Contexts Matter*

Participants generally agreed that when answering questions about when, why, how and to what degree of success the US can engage in security partnerships, there needs to be a clear acknowledgement that the questions pose, and the answers proposed will depend on the definitions adopted for the outcomes of interest and the contexts explored. Having conversations that explicitly acknowledge operating definitions and scope conditions will allow scholars and practitioners alike to develop more sophisticated understandings of the dynamics of security partnerships. The implementation and effects of security cooperation and assistance often vary by conflict environment (such as steady state/peacetime, active conflict, and post-conflict), and across partner combinations. Additionally, some partnerships often engage stakeholders from different backgrounds such as civilian or military, urban or rural, state or non-state actors, and security forces beyond the military. Having a clear understanding of the concepts and contexts discussed can help foster more productive conversations and identify more holistic answers to the questions raised by scholars and practitioners.

### *Unpacking Assumptions*

Participants acknowledged that their understandings of security partnerships were often limited by the “mirror-imaging” assumption, i.e., assuming that partners behave in ways that mimic American institutions and approaches to governance. Such an approach often obfuscates important issues about partner interests and priorities, which impact perceptions of the aid packages provided by the United States.

Relatedly, practitioners acknowledged stovepiping within their security assistance and cooperation initiatives. By approaching partnerships with a strict bifurcation between the civilian and military sides, participants recognized a tendency to over-emphasize the role of the military at the expense of civilian institutions. Participants argued that stakeholders within the US government should strive for greater cooperation across diplomatic and military efforts in order to develop a more cohesive and

comprehensive approach in engaging partners in order to be equipped with a clearer understanding of the potential costs, benefits, and long-term implications of different interventions and activities with partners.

### *Carrots, Sticks, or Something Else?*

Many participants approached questions related to the establishment and conduct of security partnership through the lens of a cost-benefit analysis in order to determine whether to approach partners with positive inducements (carrots) or negative inducements (sticks). However, some participants argued that the US government should attempt to go beyond this narrow, binary approach to identify creative approaches to finding consensus. The US should aim to couple a clear-eyed understanding of what their partners really want and what they can achieve with a curiosity for potential alternatives in engaging with partners in order to better meet them where they are. Doing so may be conducive to identifying creative, cost-effective ways to engage with partners and find agreement on certain issues where they might otherwise have been able to overcome interest divergence. For example, one participant described a moment where anti-corruption policy was used to create an opportunity for interest alignment with Iraqi leadership where one did not exist before. The participant detailed a moment when the United States pushed for anti-corruption reform in Afghanistan and Iraqi elites saw this and noticed an opportunity to adopt similar reforms in exchange for publicity stating their cooperation on anti-corruption. The participant recounted this exchange between the United States and Iraq as a way of explaining that explicitly understanding partners' interests creates opportunities for creative diplomacy and the alignment of interests.

### *Importance of Funding Authorities*

Participants delved deeply into the variety of funding authorities that structure how the US can approach security partnerships through its security assistance and security cooperation programs. They generally agreed on the need to better understand the existing funding authorities and how they work in order to assess if they are designed to meet the challenges they face. Authorities are often strictly defined and impose limitations on the types of cooperation and assistance activities are allowed to be carried out and by whom. This can make it difficult for stakeholders within the US government, such as the Department of State, to get more actively involved in partnerships. The need for greater flexibility within the authorities was raised

numerous times to adapt to evolving situations and align US foreign policy interests with partner interests more effectively.

## **Areas of Divergence**

### *Conceptualization*

Following the opening presentations by scholars, the first question posed by a practitioner was, “how are you all defining security force assistance?” which revealed a fundamental point of divergence among participants about how to define and operationalize key terms and ideas related to security partnerships. Participants then came to acknowledge the importance of factors such as influence, legitimacy, and consistency in the conduct of security partnerships. However, as conversations surrounding these issues evolved, this spurred debate about conceptualization, which served as a theme throughout the workshop.

### *Influence*

Both scholars and practitioners agreed that the United States engages in security partnerships with an aim to shaping the behavior of its partners by either altering their behavior to better fit US preferences. However, participants disagreed on whether to conceive of influence as a “verb” or a “noun” or as a means or an end. Some participants argued that influence is something that the US does to achieve certain objectives whereas others argued that influence is something that the US should aim to accrue as an objective. Differing understandings of influence corresponded with differing perspectives on how the US should aim to engage their partners and what to expect from those partnerships.

### *Legitimacy & Consistency*

Participants homed in on the concept of legitimacy dubbing it “the word of the afternoon” and discussed how legitimacy can make or break security assistance and cooperation initiatives. One participant suggested that the greatest mistake the United States has repeatedly made in its long-term interventions in conflicts like Afghanistan, Vietnam, and Iraq was to prioritize legal legitimacy, or the external recognition of a government, versus popular legitimacy, which is the recognition of a population of the right of some government to affect their lives. Other participants agreed that the type of legitimacy the US tries to foster in its partners matters because it has an

important bearing on whether security cooperation and assistance initiatives last and can have a positive impact on the situation on the ground. Importantly, others added that legitimacy is not fixed and can also vary regionally and across time.

Relatedly, consistency was also identified as an important related factor in underlying legitimacy because it reflects the actors' stated aims and commitments to a partnership. However, participants were sure to point out that the term consistency implied a sense of stasis that is not reflective of the realities at hand; consistency can also take on a variety of meanings as goals shift with the situation on the ground. It is important to note that consistency is not as stable as it may seem, and it can have both positive and negative implications. For example, consistency in training forces can foster a richer understanding of a security cooperation mission which improves its probability of success but a consistency in delivering assistance, regardless of harmful partner behaviors such as human rights abuses, can foster perverse incentives for recipients to stay the course and develop a sense of entitlement. In sum, consistency operates at different levels and can cut in different ways depending on the level of analysis and the context.

#### *Intellectual Priorities of Scholars and Practitioners*

Throughout the workshop, scholars and practitioners came to acknowledge that there may be significant differences in intellectual priorities. On one hand, the kinds of questions scholars are asking may not necessarily be the ones practitioners need answered. On the other hand, scholars may not be able to decisively answer the questions practitioners have given limitations in access to data, the methods they use, or their research goals. Participants noted that this incompatibility in priorities is likely rooted in differing professional aims. Practitioners want a more holistic understanding of an issue to better assess how to use limited resources whereas scholars aim to answer more narrowly defined questions given their incentives to establish causality in their work. Despite these differences, practitioners emphasized the importance of increased collaboration between both parties. By seeking opportunities for collaboration would allow scholars and practitioners to combine their respective subject-matter expertise in order to find leverage on questions of professional importance and of broader strategic importance to US foreign policy interests.

## **Future Areas of Research**

The wide-ranging conversations about the importance of conceptualizations and contexts, unpacking assumptions, and identifying appropriate divisions of labor in security partnerships as well as disagreements over these same concepts and the differing priorities between scholars and practitioners raised several questions suitable for future research:

- (1) How do definitions and operationalizations of concepts like influence, legitimacy, and consistency impact understandings of security partnerships?
- (2) How have different authorities related to security partnerships been used? Does this ultimately matter? Does engaging specific authorities impact the relationship between the US and its partner or the effectiveness of that partnership overall?
- (3) How does the introduction of competitors in security partnerships alter the way in which partners (or recipients) approach security partnerships? For example, if the world is moving away from a context in which the US is the only provider of training and military basing to one in which competitors like China are also looking to establish partnerships, does that change the relationship between the US and its partner because of the introduction of outside options?
- (4) Taking time horizons into consideration, do different types of security partnerships foster different long-run effects? For example, do certain types of military assistance create significant shifts in the balance of civil-military relations in recipient countries over time?

## **Key Takeaways**

The New Voices in National Security workshop on security partnerships covered a range of issues. While participants were in general agreement on several issues related to American security partnerships today, the conversation revolved primarily around the debate over the conceptualizations and approaches to understanding and measuring success, understanding the tradeoffs in engaging with partners, identifying opportunities to improve interagency interoperability and collaboration among scholars and practitioners. Below are several key takeaways from the workshop's discussion:

- Scholars and practitioners alike need to think carefully about concepts that are often taken for granted such as influence, legitimacy, and consistency.
- It is important to think about security partnerships as being conditioned by their particular contexts and characteristics. The context and specific actors involved in a particular case will have important implications for how the partnership works and how to best gauge its effectiveness in achieving progress toward US objectives.
- The work of scholars and practitioners is profoundly different; this means that often, the questions they ask and how they go about answering them will not be the same. Given professional incentives and their academic training, scholars tend to focus on the establishment of causal relationships. Whether their research is qualitative, quantitative, or both scholars often need to pose more narrow questions to establish causality. Conversely, practitioners develop policy and programming which often focuses on how processes lead to specific outcomes. It is important to explicitly acknowledge these distinctions so that scholars and practitioners identify where the gaps in their shared understanding are before seeking to collaborate.
- Scholars and practitioners must prioritize opportunities for collaboration and continue working together to leverage their relative strengths. Scholars have the tools to explore questions surrounding security partnerships at greater depth but lack the access to information that practitioners have.
- There needs to be a clearer understanding of how different authorities shape and constrain how the US government can engage in security partnerships and if those authorities are up to the task or if new authorities need to be established.