

Women, Peace, and Security in the Indo-Pacific

US Personnel Views from the Ground

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Abstract

The 2022 *National Security Strategy* underscores the United States' challenges amid the era of great-power competition, characterized by shifting geopolitical dynamics and a complex rules-based order. Meeting these challenges necessitates forging partnerships and alliances, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, a region of paramount importance to US security and prosperity. This study focuses on the implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) initiative in the Indo-Pacific, capturing insights from US personnel on the ground. It delves into the progress and hurdles of the WPS initiative, exploring its potential contributions to bolstering partnerships. Moreover, the study examines partner nations' perceptions and responses to this agenda. The findings not only shed light on the current landscape but also offer recommendations for future strategic endeavors. In a dynamic global context, this research informs strategies to enhance US engagement and security.

The 2022 *National Security Strategy* illuminates the considerable challenges confronting the United States within the current dynamics of international relations during the era of the great-power competition. Strategic competition plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of the international order. In contrast to the post-Cold War era, heightened geopolitical rivalries, nationalism, and populism are prevalent, presenting formidable obstacles to the maintenance of a rules-based order that underpins global peace and prosperity. The trajectory of these challenges and opportunities navigated by the United States will profoundly influence the nation's future security and prosperity.

A cornerstone strategy emphasized in the *National Security Strategy* involves cultivating a network of alliances and partnerships that uphold and solidify US principles and institutions. A robust and cohesive NATO, alliances in the Indo-Pacific, and security partnerships spanning various geographical regions offer platforms that foster collaboration among nations, thereby fortifying the international order. Within the Indo-Pacific region, the People's Republic of China

(PRC) emerges as “America’s most consequential geopolitical challenge.”¹ The PRC has propelled its diplomatic, military, economic, and technological influence and seeks to reshape the international order in a manner divergent from the US-led rules-based system.

The 2022 *Indo-Pacific Strategy* underscores the significance of the Indo-Pacific region in terms of US security and prosperity. This region possesses a “strategic value that would only grow in the 21st century.”² With more than half the global population residing in the Indo-Pacific and the region propelling nearly two-thirds of the world’s economy, its centrality to the United States intensifies politically, financially, economically, and socially. Consequently, the import of partnerships and alliances between the United States and Indo-Pacific partner nations remains paramount.

Joseph Nye accentuated the primacy of soft power—the capacity to acquire influence through attraction rather than coercion or financial inducements—and the potency derived from embracing specific cultural components, values, and practices of a nation. In the post–Cold War era, a seismic shift in global politics has transpired, marked by a reconfiguration of great-power dynamics. Economic interdependence across nations, transnational actors, nationalism, technological diffusion, evolving political agendas, and accelerated access to information all contribute to the dispersal of centralized or polarized power. While hard power, notably military might, once predominant, is growing more arduous to wield, soft power is gaining parity in significance. The measure of power resides in “the ability to change the behavior of states.”³ When a nation’s assets, encompassing cultural and ideological allure, alongside the regulations and structures of international regimes, attain legitimacy in the eyes of other nations, the likelihood of resistance diminishes. Such circumstances foster alignment of interests among nations for the common good.

In an era characterized by great-power competition, wherein the significance of partnering with allied nations continues to escalate, the United States’ soft power must not be underestimated. The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) initiative, a manifestation of soft power, holds the potential to profoundly influence the United States’ efforts in establishing partnerships and alliances. This article concentrates on the implementation of the WPS initiative by the United States

¹ *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, October 2022), 11, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

² *National Security Strategy*, 4.

³ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power and Great-Power Competition: Shifting Sands in the Balance of Power between the United States and China* (Singapore: Springer, 2023), 5.

within the Indo-Pacific region. The study scrutinizes the execution of WPS and its prevailing status across Indo-Pacific countries. This scrutiny is conducted by assessing the perspectives and responses of partner nations, as observed by US personnel actively engaged in program execution and direct interaction with these partner nations on the ground, all in the service of US national interests.

Women, Peace, and Security

The United Nations Security Council introduced Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on WPS in 2000, affirming the significance of women's roles in conflict resolution, negotiations, peace processes and agreements, and humanitarian responses. Women play an active and constructive role in generating meaningful outcomes pertaining to peace making and peace building. This dynamic contribution facilitates the prevention, alleviation, or resolution of violent conflicts, thereby advancing stability and peace within the realm of international security challenges. A resounding call persists for greater engagement of women as leaders and pivotal participants in the realm of global peace and security, involving them intimately in consequential decision making.

In 2017, the US government launched the Women, Peace, and Security Act, enshrining the core tenets of WPS. The legislation aims to elevate women's human rights and foster heightened female involvement across economic, social, and political spheres. It seeks to empower women to exert substantial influence in both domestic and international arenas. Both governmental and nongovernmental sectors have embraced the principles of WPS.

In an interconnected era where nations are increasingly interdependent, an exploration of the implementation status of WPS within the US government, particularly the Department of Defense (DoD), and its interactions with partner nations, stands to provide invaluable insights. Such an inquiry could shed light on how the WPS initiative effectively contributes to the construction of partnerships and alliances, reveal prevalent issues or challenges, and chart a path forward for the United States.

Methodology

To investigate the current state of WPS implementation within Indo-Pacific countries and to gain insight into the perspectives and responses of partner nations, a phenomenological study was undertaken. Phenomenological studies delve

into uncovering “the essence or underlying structure of a phenomenon.”⁴ Accordingly, data collection aimed to capture emic viewpoints, or those of insiders intimately familiar with the subject matter. The study engaged in in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting 60 to 90 minutes each with US personnel actively involved in executing WPS initiatives within partner nations across the Indo-Pacific region. A total of nine interviews were conducted.

Interview participants encompassed a range of US personnel, both civilian and military, hailing from Malaysia, Taiwan, Mongolia, and the Philippines. Additionally, three civilians affiliated with the US Indo-Pacific Command were interviewed, providing insights into broader regional policy endeavors. In total, the interviewees numbered eleven—comprising five males and six females. Owing to assignments that took some interviewees from one Indo-Pacific country to another, certain individuals possessed insights extending beyond their immediate country of residence, thus enriching the information pool.

During the interviews, two interviewers were present, with Zoom.gov serving as the platform for conducting and recording these sessions. Detailed notes were taken throughout the interviews. Subsequently, each interview underwent transcription using NVivo transcription software and was subsequently reviewed for accuracy by project team members. The process of data analysis entailed identifying recurrent patterns and grouping them into overarching emerging themes.

Table 1. Interview participants

Number Assigned to Interviewees	Partner Nation	Gender	Civilian/Military
1	Malaysia	Male	Military
2	Malaysia	Female	Civilian
3	Mongolia	Female	Civilian
4	Mongolia	Male	Civilian
5	Philippines	Male	Military
6	Philippines	Female1	Military
7	Philippines	Female2	Military
8	Taiwan	Male	Military
9	Indo-Pacific Command	Female1	Civilian
10	Indo-Pacific Command	Female 2	Civilian
11	Indo-Pacific Command	Male	Civilian

⁴ Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 42.

Findings

The WPS initiative advocates for equity, equality, diversity, inclusivity, and meritocracy. These foundational principles hold the potential to establish positive dynamics in collaborative relationships with partner nations. Nevertheless, owing to its recent integration into the DoD and the security cooperation realm, few US personnel possess a profound comprehension of the initiative or a well-defined strategy for its seamless incorporation into the system. Consequently, the WPS initiative encounters challenges within both the US DoD and among partner nations.

WPS as a Competitive Strategy

The WPS initiative represents a nascent and evolving endeavor that necessitates broader awareness and integration within the DoD enterprise. It is currently in the process of solidifying its identity as a comprehensive agenda. This initiative introduces fresh viewpoints and narratives, diverging from conventional perspectives. With its primary goal of fostering gender equity and equality, the WPS initiative aims to infuse gender perspectives into DoD planning, operational activities, and investments.

At its core, WPS champions diversity, inclusivity, and meritocracy. Diversity augments opportunities and encourages diverse voices to contribute more significantly. The US military benefits from a varied pool of individuals who leverage their distinct backgrounds and skill sets. Inclusivity extends beyond gender composition, encompassing collaboration with both government and nongovernment sectors, as well as multinational partners. As one interviewee succinctly states, “We’d like to work with multiple partners, multinationals when possible across government sectors and with the NGOs, all kind of comers.”⁵ Meritocracy advocates for the inclusion of capable and competent women in leadership and decision-making roles. Empowering women through training, skill building, and enhanced opportunities underscores the thrust of meritocracy. This trajectory positions the United States as an inclusive nation and the DoD as a force of inclusiveness, fostering productive ties with partner nations.

Advocates of WPS assert that its essence transcends a mere increase in women within peacekeeping forces. Instead, gender equity and equality can catalyze institutional improvements and enhance group cohesion, bolstering collaborative military endeavors. Infusing women’s perspectives into the collaborative planning

⁵ Civilian, Female2, Indo-Pacific Command, interview with the author.

process, fortifying strategic communication, increasing female participation in educational initiatives, and featuring female leaders as speakers in government-sponsored events collectively contribute to national security and stability.

While the US government lends its support to WPS and endeavors to advance the program, the initiative grapples with challenges within the DoD and partner nations. Challenges within the DoD revolve around institutionalization and operationalization. Conversely, challenges with partner nations often arise from cultural disparities and differing operational methodologies, potentially leading to miscommunications and complications in program execution. Some of the issues and challenges that manifest within the DoD might also manifest within partner nations across the Indo-Pacific region.

WPS in the US Department of Defense

The WPS initiative demonstrates greater progress within the civilian sector compared to the military domain, where additional time is required for its implementation. The civilian realm, notably corporate sectors, has witnessed an upswing in female participation and an increase in women occupying higher leadership positions. In this context, both the government and military currently lean on civilian leadership and practices to facilitate more effective program execution.

Several factors contribute to the challenges faced by the WPS initiative. Its nomenclature, limited familiarity with WPS among US personnel on the ground, inadequate communication between the Department of State (DoS) and DoD, intragender competition, and concerns among female personnel about potential isolation within male-dominated environments collectively present hurdles during implementation.

Nomenclature of “Women,” “Peace,” and “Security.” The WPS initiative faces the challenge of frequent misunderstanding, both within the military and the private sector, primarily due to its nomenclature: “Women,” “Peace,” and “Security.” Specifically, the initial two terms, *women* and *peace*, can potentially mislead audiences into perceiving the initiative as exclusively directed toward women. Thus, careful consideration is exercised regarding the speaker, purpose, and intended audience. As one respondent emphasized, “Words matter. We are very deliberate on the kind of terminology that we use.”⁶

WPS Still Alien to US Personnel. Familiarity with WPS is not uniform among US personnel on the ground. Statements like “I don’t have the knowledge to be

⁶ Civilian, Female2, Indo-Pacific Command, interview with the author.

able to comment,⁷ “The program seems fairly new right now. I don’t have anything specific in mind,”⁸ and “It’s probably at just the beginning level, nascent level type of thing”⁹ underscore that many US personnel remain unacquainted with the initiative. These personnel are in the process of becoming acquainted with the concept. Consequently, as they become informed about the best WPS practices in neighboring partner nations, they may incorporate the WPS agenda into their program development or adapt existing practices. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the WPS initiative continues to undergo development and requires broader dissemination and establishment both within and outside the DoD.

While US personnel stationed within partner nations hold the potential to significantly bolster the initiative, they also encounter challenges. Numerous practitioners find themselves burdened by their daily missions, occasionally struggling to generate innovative ideas and to stay attuned to forthcoming changes. As one individual expressed, “We’re so busy here that it’s hard to generate, to think creatively on ways to make this integrated into our programs.”¹⁰

Different Attributes within the US Government. In his report titled “Defense Is from Mars, State Is from Venus,” Rickey L. Rife examined distinct institutional values, operational characteristics, and personality preferences existing between the DoS and DoD.¹¹ These variations within the US government persist in the execution of WPS and hold the potential to give rise to confusion or tension, particularly during collaborations with partner nations. As one participant noted, “State and DoD don’t speak the same language . . . there is the technical aspect in getting to know all of the acronyms. . . . There’s also just learning how to communicate between two very important parts of the same government that do not speak to each other.”¹²

Competition among Women and Fear of Singled Out. While competition among women might not be directly tied to challenges within the DoD, this factor can serve as an underlying influence that potentially hampers the ascent of women into higher leadership roles or positions of authority. Within the military, a competitive attitude may emerge, leading some women to create distance from

⁷ Civilian, Female2, Indo-Pacific Command, interview with the author.

⁸ Civilian, Female2, Indo-Pacific Command, interview with the author.

⁹ Military, Male, Taiwan, interview with the author.

¹⁰ Military, Female1, Philippines, interview with the author.

¹¹ Rickey L. Rife, *Defense is from Mars, State is from Venus: Improving Communications and Promoting National Security* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, 1998), <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

¹² Civilian, Female, Malaysia, interview with the author.

their female counterparts. As one individual reflected, “Although we should be supporting each other and pulling together, we find ourselves sometimes being competitive or trying to distance ourselves from other women.”¹³ Additionally, a prevailing trend involves refraining from forming alliances with other women due to concerns about being singled out as a separate group within the workplace.

WPS in the Indo-Pacific

While challenges within the DoD are evident, interactions with partner nations reveal even more formidable obstacles due to disparities in history, culture, operational approaches, and the diverse interests of each partner nation in relation to the United States. The United States maintains steadfast treaty alliances with countries such as Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand, and has cultivated partnerships with numerous other Indo-Pacific nations. Within the Indo-Pacific region, each country possesses a unique historical trajectory, cultural identity, and network of relationships with neighboring states. These nations also exhibit varying expectations concerning gender roles.

For instance, Mongolia’s historical alignment with the former Soviet Union (1921–1990) contrasts sharply with its current partnership with the United States. While Japan shares a robust political and military alliance with the United States, underlying tensions persist between China and Japan due to past events such as the Japanese attack and war crimes committed against China during the twentieth century (e.g., the Second Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1945). As a result, intricate dynamics characterize interactions not only among Asian nations but also between Indo-Pacific countries and the United States. To ensure the success of partnerships and alliances, one must meticulously consider multiple factors.

Although issues and challenges, both shared and distinct, might arise within the DoD and across partner nations, the magnitude of challenges is likely to be more pronounced when dealing with partner nations, even when addressing the same agenda.

Partner Nations’ Varied Reactions to the United States and Its Policy. Reactions to the United States and its government policy and programs tend to vary depending on partner nations. Indo-Pacific countries’ distinct histories, cultures, economies, and political interests exert influence on partnerships and alliances with the United States. While many partner nations respond favorably, differences arise in their levels of receptiveness to US initiatives. The Philippines, for instance, displays eagerness for training opportunities and subject-matter ex-

¹³ Military, Female2, Philippines, interview with the author.

changes, whereas Malaysia exercises caution, evaluating new proposals based on its own standpoint before committing. Mongolia, in the wake of its prolonged association with the Soviet Union, is increasingly accepting the United States as a partner. Taiwan, due to its complex political situation with the PRC, leans heavily on the United States for military exercises, strategies, and initiatives. Indonesia may not fully embrace US programs, but new initiatives find acceptance when associated benefits are evident. The Papua New Guinea Defense Force has recently established a gender equity and equality committee, with women holding majority influence.

The Philippines, an enduring US partner in Asia and a non-NATO ally, shares a strong bond with the United States dating back to the late nineteenth century. The two nations maintain a robust military-to-military relationship, with US soft power significantly present. American restaurants, stores, music, and films pervade the islands. A significant number of Filipino-Americans serve in the US military, and personal connections between Filipinos and the US military are common. The United States is hailed as the “a partner of choice when it comes to security cooperation.”¹⁴ The country’s sociable and open communication style complements its warm and engaging island culture, emphasizing relationship building and connections, bolstered by strong family ties.

In Malaysia, a predominantly Muslim-Malay majority coexists with Christian or Buddhist Chinese and Hindu Indians, with Muslim Malaysians holding the dominant position. Given the strong alignment of Muslim Malaysians with Islam, they tend to favor nations sharing their religion, including those in the Middle East such as Iraq and Palestine. Consequently, figures like former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein garnered favor, while conflicts like the Iraq War or the Israel–Palestine issue were unpopular. The PRC exploits these sentiments, projecting negative perceptions of the United States to Malaysian Muslims. Malaysians perceive themselves as regional leaders, aspiring to synchronize with major powers. Their response is positive when an initiative seems favorable but tends to be guarded when challenges arise, often prioritizing preservation over negotiation. As one respondent put it, “Malaysia is difficult. . . . They are very set in their ways. . . . They have a certain business process within their defense structure, and they’re unwilling to change it and adapt.”¹⁵

Mongolia, while secular, embodies an amalgamation of influences, including former Soviet-style communism, Buddhism, traditional culture, and contempo-

¹⁴ Military, Male, Philippines, interview with the author.

¹⁵ Military, Male, Malaysia, interview with the author.

rary US influences. Preferences for Russia or the United States stem from age-related divisions. The younger population, shaped by cable TV and social media exposure, inclines toward the United States due to English language acquisition and affinity for US soft power. In contrast, those older than 40, raised under communism, regard Russia as a supportive ally responsible for infrastructural development. The current Mongolian prime minister prioritizes Western-educated administration. Overall, Mongolia views the United States as a caring partner invested in its welfare.

For Taiwan, nurturing a long-term positive relationship with the United States is of paramount importance, as evident through its friendly stance. Due to Taiwan's delicate political relations with the PRC, US support contributes to interoperability, deterrence against the PRC, and self-defense. New US initiatives are generally welcomed by Taiwan, provided they align with the country's interests and logic.

Women's Social Status in Partner Nations. The extent of women's social participation and their visibility in society varies depending on the country. Cultural norms, gender roles, and societal expectations exert significant influence on women's equity and equality within each nation. The implementation of the WPS initiative is impacted by distinct standards and gender-related stereotypes.

For instance, active female participation characterizes both the military and broader society in the Philippines. Female officers take prominent roles within certain battalions and contribute significantly to military operations. The participation of female officers and noncommissioned officers in US exchange programs demonstrates a notably high ratio. Nonetheless, the progression of many female officers often stalls at the mid-career level, with only rare advancement to the rank of general officer. However, upon ascending to higher leadership positions, women wield influence in decision making, actively assuming leadership roles rather than serving as mere figureheads. Notably, the Philippines has had female presidents in its history, and a woman currently holds the position of vice president. While their numbers may not be extensive, women in positions of authority are treated equitably. One respondent noted, "If I can draw a parallel to Japan, there are a lot of women in positions of power in the Philippines government."¹⁶ Within familial contexts, Filipino women often wield considerable influence. Many take on the role of primary breadwinners, working overseas to earn incomes that they send back home. Filipino women foster mutual support and unity by engaging with each other and forming cohesive groups.

¹⁶ Military, Female2, Philippines, interview with the author.

Women in Malaysia hold positions of empowerment and representation across civil society. They serve as business owners, ranging from small- to large-size enterprises, as well as doctors and lawyers. Additionally, they take on roles as social ambassadors and spearhead initiatives in democratic reforms, human rights advocacy, and legislative changes. In the Malay military, female soldiers work alongside their male counterparts, even in challenging jungle assignments. Guided by the principles of meritocracy and equality, Malaysia has advanced women into positions of general officers and officers.

In Mongolia, a higher proportion of women tend to graduate from college compared to men. Women contribute across various sectors of the economy and demonstrate a heightened inclination to champion democracy, peace, and national security. Over the past two decades, Mongolian women have played a significant role in peacekeeping operations. Many women also serve as breadwinners for their families. Despite the substantial female presence in lower and mid-level positions, men continue to occupy higher ranks in the social hierarchy.

Japan and Korea uphold patriarchal values that endorse male breadwinning roles. Traditional Korean families, for instance, might struggle to accept the idea of a female as the primary provider assuming a leading role. Both Japan and Korea tend to promote women in a way that adheres to expected standards, often with a performative approach.

Taiwanese women actively engage in various sectors of society, encompassing the realms of economy, trade, government, and law. The civilian population holds women in high regard, demonstrating positive attitudes toward them. Moreover, societal encouragement fosters increased participation of girls. An impressive 42 percent of legislators are women. Notably, women who serve in the Taiwanese armed forces are all volunteers, motivated by patriotism. Their promotions to general officer and officer positions are determined by their capabilities and merits. Leadership positions are occupied by numerous women, particularly within the civilian domain. In contrast to other Northeast Asian nations, Taiwanese women exhibit a tendency toward greater Americanization. A respondent noted, "Even with my recent two years in Japan, Taiwan has more gender equality than Japan does."¹⁷

Despite the presence of active female participation across Indo-Pacific nations and the elevation of certain women to senior leadership roles, a glass ceiling appears to persist for women in these countries. Interestingly, the private sector offers more leadership opportunities for women than either the government or the

¹⁷ Military, Male, Taiwan, interview with the author.

military. Many women actively engage socially during their 20s and 30s. Nevertheless, they often depart from such involvement around the age of 40, either redirecting their focus toward their families or yielding to societal pressures. As one respondent put it, “A lot of young women who are very active politically and leading the charge, mostly from the twenties through their thirties, then they are just not there anymore.”¹⁸ Consequently, despite their significant contributions during their formative years, relatively few women ascend to high-ranking leadership positions. This situation could potentially impede the progress of the WPS initiative.

Different System, Different Interpretation. Each partner nation maintains its distinct government structure, and government organizations may operate differently from the United States. While the US military remains apolitical, this is not always the case with partner nations. A respondent noted, “I took that for granted. I assumed that they know we [US military] are apolitical.”¹⁹ Variations in organizational structure across each nation can lead to misinterpretations and misunderstandings, potentially hindering the introduction of new initiatives proposed by the United States. For instance, when a Malaysian general officer observed a certain female congressional member on US television advocating women’s rights and expressing LGBT values, this could lead to confusion about the true intent of the WPS proposal when introduced by the DoD. The same respondent shared, “Is this from the Democratic Party? We don’t want a rainbow flag here. I’ve had a Malaysian officer tell me that.”²⁰

Cultural Barriers: Locals vs. Americans. Introducing new security cooperation initiatives necessitates effective communication with partner nation authorities and a comprehensive understanding of the local population, especially their perceptions of WPS practices and their acceptance of the program. The local population must embrace the ideology and benefits of WPS as a soft power to align with the United States. However, different standards often apply between US personnel and the local population, particularly concerning females. As one respondent with experience in Japan noted, “I spent a lot of time in Japan. . . . I’ve noticed that there are expectations for Japanese people and those expectations are not necessarily carried over to foreigners. It’s like, it’s okay, they are Americans.”²¹

Consequently, many US personnel find themselves detached from locals, which poses challenges in capturing the subtleties of social dynamics during negotia-

¹⁸ Civilian, Female, Malaysia, interview with the author.

¹⁹ Military, Male, Malaysia, interview with the author.

²⁰ Military, Male, Malaysia, interview with the author.

²¹ Military, Female2, Philippines, interview with the author.

tions and discussions. Another respondent shared, “Me being a woman, me being a foreigner, they don’t speak English, they just don’t wanna interact with you because they are afraid, but I have gotten pretty used to that.”²² This isolation and limited engagement may result in an inadequate grasp of partner nations’ needs and desires. As one respondent expressed, “It’s hard to understand the nuances of what makes it different as a woman.”²³

Social and Institutional Barriers. Women in partner nations encounter both social and institutional barriers, despite their aspirations to elevate their social positions and enhance their lives. Their potential for participation and influence is not inherently lacking; rather, they require guidance, support, and education for self-development. For instance, Afghan women faced challenges in accessing English and related education classes due to existing divisions of labor (such as household chores) and childcare responsibilities. Without essential infrastructure, like simultaneous childcare options or targeted events, women cannot fully embrace opportunities.

US Government Expecting Faster Return. Like many security cooperation efforts, the US government seeks a return on investment (ROI). The government aims to witness positive changes in partner nations through investment and WPS implementation. With an entity such as the military, which is more action-oriented, the US government might move faster than partner nations, despite challenges, and could anticipate quicker returns when partner nations are not yet prepared. As one respondent stated, “Our government moves very fast. Sometimes it doesn’t seem like it does but sometimes we move faster than the institutions of the partner nations that we’re trying to build capacity in.”²⁴

This expectation for a swifter return could sometimes backfire, failing to provide the anticipated ROI. For example, two females were trained as pilots in Afghanistan. However, neither could return to their home country, as their institution did not accept them. Their promotion occurred too soon for Afghans to embrace the new female role. As one respondent observed, “We were pushing for female pilots in Afghanistan. . . . Both of those young females did not return to Afghanistan because they were not embraced by the rest of the institution. It was too soon, too fast.”²⁵

Economic Reliance on the People’s Republic of China. Many Indo-Pacific nations engage in trade with the PRC and hold economic interests with them. The

²² Civilian, Female, Mongolia, interview with the author.

²³ Civilian, Female, Malaysia, interview with the author.

²⁴ Military, Male, Malaysia, interview with the author.

²⁵ Military, Male, Malaysia, interview with the author.

PRC exercises a certain degree of control over these countries. Consequently, they hesitate to provoke the PRC in their interactions within the realm of international relations. One interviewee posited, “Everybody else is afraid . . . because then China will sanction them economically, and that’s too much.”²⁶

Given the PRC’s One China policy, Indo-Pacific countries often exclude Taiwan from their regional and international events, regardless of their initial intentions. Instead of offering complete support to US initiatives, these countries tend to oscillate between the PRC and the United States, adjusting their stance to navigate the complex dynamics.

Discussion and Recommendations for Strategic Approaches

The findings indicate that the WPS agenda still has a considerable journey ahead to become firmly established within both the US government and partner nations. As a relatively recent initiative, the mainstreaming, institutionalization, and operationalization of WPS should primarily occur within the DoD. Despite the adoption of UNSCR 1325 in 2000 and the WPS Act in 2017, the full integration of gender perspectives into the modus operandi of the DoD is a gradual process. This entails identifying institutional mechanisms, studying and applying WPS as an intellectual concept across various domains, and incorporating gender concepts into doctrine, policies, theater campaign plans, guidance for human security, objectives writing, country engagement plans, and exercises. The DoD, in collaboration with the DoS, assumes a pivotal role in forging security cooperation partnerships and alliances. The absence of a robust establishment of WPS within the US government could lead to more challenges.

For instance, if US personnel on the ground lack familiarity with the WPS mission and practices, their ability to effectively advocate for partner nations’ compliance with the United States could be compromised. Moreover, if the terms *women* and *peace* inadvertently generate bias among DoD personnel and pigeon-hole WPS as exclusively addressing women, it could hinder the acceptance of the initiative among Indo-Pacific partner nations with more traditional gender perspectives. Additional challenges emerge concerning WPS implementation in partner nations due to cultural barriers, distinct governmental organizational systems and functions, and unique geopolitical dynamics of each country. Consequently, the WPS initiative must prioritize building a solid foundation within the US government while concurrently advancing security cooperation endeavors related to the initiative in partner nations. As noted by Jennifer Thomson, the

²⁶ Military, Male, Taiwan, interview with the author.

design and implementation of political institutions play a vital role in the WPS initiative,²⁷ and capacity-building programs must encompass the inclusion of gender perspectives and implementation strategies.²⁸

The following are recommendations to assist the WPS initiative in building a stronghold both in and out of DoD. While certain strategic approaches may be tailored to the US context, others could be more relevant to partner nations. Certain approaches could be applicable in both domestic and international settings.

Presentation and Framing of WPS

Careful considerations should guide the presentation of WPS within DoD, civil society, and partner nations. Language must be chosen deliberately when introducing WPS. As one respondent noted, “A lot of it is framing how you are messaging it.”²⁹ Given that WPS encompasses gender perspectives, exclusive emphasis on women conversing with women could reinforce the misconception that WPS is solely a women’s concern, rather than an initiative relevant to all genders and for the collective benefit. Caution is essential to prevent the audience from disengaging before they have the chance to encounter new knowledge, ideas, and applications associated with WPS.

Civil society sectors tend to feature more female leaders and catalysts for change compared to the defense sector. Collaborating with women and garnering support from female leaders within civilian organizations, such as US and multinational corporations, the DoS, or the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), facilitates the expansion beyond the traditional DoD sphere and inclusivity in the evolving initiative.

Customer Tailored Approach

A tailored approach appears necessary to effectively promote WPS to various entities within the United States and partner nations. Within the United States, customization should occur between governmental and nongovernmental sectors. Partner nations exhibit overlapping but distinct perspectives on gender equity and

²⁷ Jennifer Thomson, “The Women, Peace, and Security Agenda and Feminist Institutionalism: A Research Agenda,” *International Studies Review* 21, no. 4 (December 2019): 598–613, <https://doi.org/>.

²⁸ Natalie Trogus, “Bridging the Gap toward a Gendered Perspective in Security Force Advising,” in *Women, Peace, and Security in Professional Military Education*, ed. Lauren Mackenzie and Dana Perkins (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2022), 169–212, <https://www.usmcu.edu/>.

²⁹ Civilian, Female1, Indo-Pacific Command, interview with the author.

equality. Consequently, tailored approaches are essential across various sectors within partner nations, whether governmental or nongovernmental. Each partner nation possesses distinct interests in relation to the United States. Despite differences in military capabilities, Malaysia seeks to align itself with great powers, fostering stronger collaborations and partnerships when Malaysians feel a sense of unity with the United States and perceive themselves as equals to the great power. Due to the PRC's One China policy, Taiwan often experiences isolation and exclusion from official government events and related international forums. Facilitating regional or international events and offering opportunities for nations like Taiwan to participate could cultivate increased collaboration, allow Taiwan to engage more with other states, and deepen their understanding and awareness of the WPS initiative.

Given that partner nations may not consistently perceive or comprehend agendas in the same manner as the United States, misinterpretations and resistance might arise. As one interviewee put it, "Pushing something based on your values which contradict our values . . . we're not okay with that."³⁰ Shared understanding is not guaranteed among partner nations within the same region. While commonalities and intersecting interests may exist regionally, an approach tailored to each country's distinct context is essential, influencing country-specific objectives. The same respondent noted that "Malaysia and Indonesia are very similar, but Malaysia and Bangladesh very different. Malaysia and Papua New Guinea, a little bit different."³¹ Framing WPS appropriately for Indo-Pacific countries, addressing their specific needs and incorporating their perspectives, is crucial. Another interviewee expressed that "Reaching people where they are is important. I think one thing that helps us promote the United States is, we as a democratic society, we promote people thinking freely."³²

In-depth Language and Cultural Studies

Each nation, including the United States, holds its own biases, viewpoints, and assessments. One respondent stated, "Mongolians are opinionated like I am."³³ Conducting a thorough examination of the target language and culture of a partner nation and mastering the art of discerning subtleties in cross-cultural interactions before engaging in official discussions, can prove beneficial. Tailoring the

³⁰ Military, Male, Malaysia, interview with the author.

³¹ Military, Male, Malaysia, interview with the author.

³² Civilian, Female, Mongolia, interview with the author.

³³ Civilian, Female, Mongolia, interview with the author.

presentation of WPS to suit the cultural context of partner nations has the potential to garner greater local support. As another interviewee suggested, “Get a bit of cultural nuance and texture before approaching the partner nation at an official dialogue. That should be something built into the folks in policy.”³⁴

Communications with Partner Nations

Engaging in communication with partner nations regarding their capacity-building goals and WPS initiatives holds the potential to facilitate strategic planning. An INDOPACOM respondent noted, “There is an absolute need to have those types of discussions and the more we integrate that across the structure, the mil to mil and civ to mil engagement structure, the better.”³⁵ Maintaining continuous dialogue could enhance the perceptions of the civilian population toward the United States. Reemphasizing the significance of WPS, underscoring the role of diversity in strengthening security, educating the population on the pivotal role of women in conflict prevention, ensuring coherence, advocating for increased engagements, and persistently advocating the agenda with partner nations could form a strategic approach. As another respondent advocated, “If you make it formal and if you make it clear and transparent, it’s going to have the best results in the long run.”³⁶

However, employing a forceful manner and communication style may elicit resistance. Employing direct and transparent communication while also considering cultural sensitivities can be beneficial. As the previous respondent continued, “I have seen WPS briefed to them in a forceful manner. I had a direct conversation with the gentleman from Indo-Pacific Command. I said, don’t patronize them. That actually does not work out well for us.”³⁷

Use of Educational Platforms with Embedded WPS Theme

Utilizing educational platforms to reach various communities in partner nations could be a strategic approach. Symposiums, forums, speaking series like TED talks, and university circuits could be used as educational venues where women leaders can share insights about leadership and innovation. Expanding the scope of these events to include a broader audience, comprising both males and females, and featuring strong female leaders showcasing merit-based US val-

³⁴ Military, Male, Malaysia, interview with the author.

³⁵ Civilian, Male, Indo-Pacific Command, interview with the author.

³⁶ Military, Male, Malaysia, interview with the author.

³⁷ Military, Male, Malaysia, interview with the author.

ues underscores the robustness of an inclusive society rooted in equality. This also underscores how individual potentials flourish when all genders are equally promoted. As one interviewee put it, “When you see a powerful women leader speaking eloquently about how they rose and their respective industry, they can tell. Wow, that’s a product of America, that’s what American values produce.”³⁸

Rather than explicitly foregrounding the WPS agenda in public, integrating the WPS theme alongside other academic topics could mitigate bias among partner nations, as certain audiences might still be hesitant toward the concept and may be disinclined to participate. As another respondent cautioned, “Subtle nuanced approach . . . if you want to cast a lot of nets, I think this approach would be better.”³⁹

Showcase through Presence

Demonstrating to partner nations through actual showcases can wield a powerful impact. One respondent put it this way: “Seeing representation is the most important.”⁴⁰ Inviting female leaders as guest speakers to government-sponsored events, either from the military or civil sectors such as corporate America, to discuss leadership values or organizational changes they’ve spearheaded in their respective domains, or having the presence of female leaders who have risen through merit within the military—be it the first fighter pilots, the first female rangers, or female commanders of specific units—whether they are retired or currently serving, could vividly illustrate the inclusivity of the US DoD across its programs. As another interviewee stated, “Women are not inherently weak and men are not inherently strong. Just simply being present and doing your job and being competent at your job I think gives a good model.”⁴¹

Moreover, creating avenues for women leaders in the United States to engage with their counterparts in partner nations, exchanging insights about female perspectives within society at large, could potentially pave the way for future collaborations and foster spheres of influence.

Use IMET to Provide Opportunities for Women

The DoS’s International Military Education and Training (IMET) program includes allocated funding for female candidates. IMET offers avenues for women

³⁸ Military, Male, Malaysia, interview with the author.

³⁹ Military, Male, Philippines, interview with the author.

⁴⁰ Military, Male, Malaysia, interview with the author.

⁴¹ Military, Female2, Philippines, interview with the author.

to engage in intensive study within the United States. Enhancing recruitment efforts to be more inclusive of female candidates, integrating WPS elements into IMET courses, providing supplementary resources, and encouraging female candidates to pursue leadership roles could significantly assist partner nations. As one interviewee stated, “Giving more women the opportunity to do an intensive study in the United States would be a huge win.”⁴²

Bringing key individuals with growth potential from partner nations to the United States to experience the country, its values, operational methods, governmental system, education, and training could positively influence future US policy direction. As another respondent put it, “I have never really met anyone who has gone to the United States and had just an absolutely horrible time. They usually come back excited, wanting to go back.”⁴³

Collecting Gender Data and Removing Social Barriers

To tailor approaches specifically for partner nations and address their distinct needs, it would be advantageous to gather gender-specific data from these nations for WPS strategies. Women encounter varying obstacles within their respective countries, with their ability to exert influence often limited by local cultural norms. Adopting a US-centric WPS approach could potentially expose women to vulnerabilities, inviting backlash or reprisals from their home states. While collaborating with influential women could prove beneficial, taking a broader perspective by identifying and dismantling institutional barriers that hinder women’s progress toward higher roles could be an alternative strategy.

Drawing from the example of Afghan women, their responsibilities for child-care and household chores impede their attendance in English classes—a skill crucial for their survival as refugees in the United States. Creating a supportive framework and eliminating societal obstacles for Afghan women, such as providing childcare services, has liberated them from traditional roles, ultimately enabling further advancement. An exhaustive examination of institutional mechanisms that perpetuate social barriers before crafting plans appears to be essential. As one respondent stated, “What can we do to undo those or what impacts can we have on those barriers?”⁴⁴

⁴² Civilian, Female, Malaysia, interview with the author.

⁴³ Civilian, Female, Mongolia, interview with the author.

⁴⁴ Civilian, Female2, Indo-Pacific Command, interview with the author.

Selective Approach with US Agendas

Consideration should be given to adopting a discerning approach in determining which agendas to share with partner nations and which programs to execute. Partner nations value having their perspectives acknowledged and often prefer a range of options to choose from. Imposing exclusively US-centric viewpoints when promoting agendas is not consistently received positively. As one respondent observed, “When we force our values on our partners, that never ever works for us. . . . We have two failed wars to demonstrate what happens when we push our agendas, our values on indigenous populations.”⁴⁵

When engaging with partner nations, exercising caution is crucial as new programs are introduced. The same respondent stated, “If I see something that comes across that is going to offend or not get traction, I don’t do it. I go back to the implementer and say this won’t work for the following reasons. You need to have a tough conversation.”⁴⁶

Utilization of US Personnel on the Ground

Incorporating US personnel within partner nations can contribute to the development of targeted programs or events for WPS implementation. Personnel from the US stationed on the ground possess greater exposure to local cultures and are more attuned to the potential preferences and aversions of the local population. They can offer insights and suggestions on how to further refine program designs. For instance, in the organization of a summit, symposium, or conference, on-site US personnel can assist in selecting an appropriate hosting venue and identifying locally prominent and respected individuals to invite as guest speakers. They can also determine suitable participants and allocate roles for these individuals within the events. Additionally, when necessary, they can provide recommendations for program enhancements. As one interviewee suggested, “Keep the idea in Foreign Area Officers’ minds, when they are working on engagements, they like keeping an eye out for the topic women, peace, and security and looking for opportunities.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Military, Male, Malaysia, interview with the author.

⁴⁶ Military, Male, Malaysia, interview with the author.

⁴⁷ Military, Female1, Philippines, interview with the author.

Use of Soft Power

Employing soft power, the capacity to amass influence through attraction and persuasion, offers an additional strategy for the United States to consider.⁴⁸ US soft power, emanating from sources such as Hollywood, Microsoft, Harvard, music, sports, and the tenets of liberal democratic ideology, contributes to the dissemination of US values and norms. The WPS initiative can leverage US cultural outputs, media, and diverse social and educational initiatives to spotlight US strengths and to influence the thoughts and actions of individuals in partner nations. For instance, Hollywood films surpass local movies in popularity within Malaysia, where many Malaysians possess Netflix subscriptions and form a substantial consumer base in the entertainment industry. By appealing to partner nations through nonimposing and noncoercive products, the United States may foster a greater willingness among these nations to embrace US programs.

Include Women in Planning

LtCol Natalie Trogus, USMC, highlighted that education and training, even for predeployment missions, often lack gender perspectives.⁴⁹ Capacity-building programs might not achieve their full potential without the inclusion of gender perspectives. When devising new programs, involving women in the planning phase and integrating female perspectives could enhance collaborations and cooperation among genders. WPS initiatives encompass shifting narratives, diversifying perspectives, and addressing challenges in novel ways. To catalyze these changes, it is crucial to incorporate women's voices in the discourse and to integrate their insights into the planning and development processes.

Make a Contrast with China and/or Russia

An additional strategy for promoting the United States involves drawing contrasts with China and/or Russia. China, for instance, operates as an authoritarian nation where adherence to the government's prescribed path is expected, leaving little room for deviating from authority. Such an environment is not conducive to frequent innovations. Therefore, a program showcasing innovative women leaders who have achieved through merit could serve as an avenue to demonstrate a strength that the United States possesses, in contrast to what China or Russia

⁴⁸ Nye, *Soft Power and Great-Power Competition*.

⁴⁹ Natalie Trogus, "Bridging the Gap toward a Gendered Perspective in Security Force Advising," in *Women, Peace, and Security in Professional Military Education*, ed. Lauren Mackenzie and Dana Perkins (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2022), <https://www.usmcu.edu/>.

may lack. As one interviewee stated, “That’s where we shine because the Chinese can’t touch us in that space because they don’t do that.”⁵⁰

Seek Balance between US and Partner Nations’ Expectations

Partner nations do not all progress at the same pace as the DoD. Each partner nation holds distinct priorities and occupies varying stages in pursuing their political agendas. While advancing US initiatives, striving to comprehend the partner nation’s position and finding equilibrium between US interests and those of the partner nation could prove beneficial. As one respondent pointed out, “We have to be very careful because we want to be in lockstep with them. We don’t want to be seen as this force that is pushing an agenda on a partner nation.”⁵¹

Introduce WPS beyond Capital Cities

The WPS initiative could extend its introduction beyond the capital cities of partner nations. Establishing local institutions where women can gather and offer mutual support might enhance women’s confidence. These local entities could also facilitate internal mentoring programs. The United Nations Women office has emphasized the necessity for greater gender parity within local governance structures. Consequently, WPS programs should encompass areas beyond major cities to reach a broader spectrum of populations.

Have a Partner Nation Influence Another Partner Nation

A partner nation could use amicable means to encourage another partner nation to adopt US policies and cultivate favorable perceptions of the United States. For instance, Malaysia, being a Muslim country, values the humanitarian aid extended by the United States to Afghanistan. If the WPS agenda were interwoven with humanitarian assistance in countries sharing religious or camaraderie bonds, the initiative could wield greater influence. One respondent advocated, “If we added perhaps an aspect of WPS and talking about our humanitarian assistance to, particularly the Muslim world, that could potentially have an influence.”⁵²

⁵⁰ Military, Male, Malaysia, interview with the author.

⁵¹ Military, Male, Malaysia, interview with the author.

⁵² Civilian, Female, Malaysia, interview with the author.

Focus on the Same Goal

Despite disparities between the United States and partner nations, if both countries concentrate on a shared objective and sustain collaborative efforts, partner nations could eventually adopt women's empowerment and their involvement in security and peacebuilding. Research indicates that groups operate with greater intelligence than individuals.⁵³ When more women engage in the group, collective intelligence grows. Additionally, cohesion is not tied to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender, but rather to shared goals and objectives.⁵⁴ Consequently, "as long as we just continue to work together and realize that we have the same goal . . . women's empowerment and their participation in security and peacebuilding will come."⁵⁵

Conclusion

The US *Indo-Pacific Strategy* asserts, "American interests can only be advanced if we firmly anchor the United States in the Indo-Pacific and strengthen the region itself, alongside our closest allies and partners."⁵⁶ In the era of great-power competition, strategic circumstances undergo constant change, and historical challenges persist. Therefore, the significance of the partnership and alliance between the United States and Indo-Pacific partner nations cannot be underestimated.

Addressing institutional bias and establishing institutional mechanisms for women to access pathways to success and assume decision-making roles necessitate collaboration from both men and women. As one INDOPACOM respondent put it, "It can't just be women's issue because it really takes men and women to be engaged in this and to see again the concept of gender, and how that really changes your worldview."⁵⁷ As evidenced by Thomas Szayna and colleagues' study on women's integration into US special operations forces, opposition and resis-

⁵³ See: Anita Woolley and Thomas W. Malone, "Defend Your Research: What Makes a Team Smarter? More Women," *Harvard Business Review*, June 2011, <https://hbr.org/>.

⁵⁴ Ellen L. Haring, "What women bring to the fight," *Parameters* 43, no. 2 (2013): 27–32, doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2893.

⁵⁵ Civilian, Female, Mongolia, interview with the author.

⁵⁶ *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC: The White House, February 2022), 5, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

⁵⁷ Civilian, Female2, Indo-Pacific Command, interview with the author.

tance to including excluded group personnel diminished when the mainstream recognized that inclusion did not diminish unit readiness or cohesion.⁵⁸

Functioning as a form of soft power, the WPS initiative possesses the potential to reinforce the US presence in the Indo-Pacific region. Women's involvement in peace negotiations has demonstrated their ability to enhance the quality and sustainability of peace processes. However, the WPS initiative must still overcome existing barriers set by many partner nations and within the DoD. Stereotypes regarding gender roles are products of respective national cultures. Altering perceptions of gender roles that have been deeply ingrained in people's minds takes time. Nevertheless, with a long-term objective, persistence, and determination, the possibility of progress lies ahead. ♣

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⁵⁸ Thomas S. Szayna et al., *Considerations for Integrating Women into Closed Occupations in the U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), <https://www.rand.org/>.