Strategic Alliances and Educational Empowerment

US Security Cooperation through the Regional Defense Fellowship and International Military Education and Training Programs

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Abstract

Every year, the US Department of Defense (DOD) invests billions to engage in numerous cooperative activities with partner nation security forces and officials, solidifying its partnerships. The DOD’s Regional Defense Fellowship Program (RDFP) and the Department of State’s International Military Education and Training (IMET) program offer education and training to foreign military and civilian personnel, fostering international military relationships, exchanging military systems information, promoting military professionalism, and instilling human rights and democratic values. This qualitative evaluation reports findings from interviews with security cooperation officers and civilian employees from Colombia, Ethiopia, Georgia, Mexico, and Thailand, directly involved in in-country security cooperation tasks. Data show RDFP and IMET activities span technical training, English language instruction, seminars, workshops, and professional military education, including undergraduate and graduate education. Returns on Investment can be short- or long-term, with short-term outcomes being tangible and long-term outcomes intangible, potentially taking decades to manifest. Recommendations for program enhancement are provided.

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The 2018 National Defense Strategy highlighted the importance of strengthening ties with partner nations.¹ Creating new partnerships and building the capacity of existing partnerships are the core priorities of security cooperation that could lead to “developing allied and friendly military capabilities for self-defense and coalition operations; improving information exchange; and providing U.S. forces with peacetime and contingency access and en route infrastructure.”² The United States has been collaborating with or working through others to enable allied and partner capabilities, build capacity,

and develop mechanisms to share challenging risks and responsibilities. Long-term efforts have been made to build and maintain a foundational base of security partners through exercises, military education, and exchanges.

Every year, the US Department of Defense (DOD) pours billions of dollars into orchestrating thousands of cooperative activities with security forces and officials globally, aimed at fortifying its partnerships. Among these investments, the DOD’s Regional Defense Fellowship Program (RDFP) and the Department of State’s (DOS) International Military Education and Training (IMET) initiative stand out. These programs extend educational and training opportunities to foreign military and civilian personnel from partner nations, nurturing relationships among international military allies, facilitating the exchange of military systems information, fostering military professionalism, and instilling human rights and democratic values.

Nevertheless, lingering doubts persist regarding the efficacy of these security cooperation endeavors in advancing US objectives. What strategies prove fruitful, and which falter? Do these investments deliver the anticipated dividends? What is the return on investment (ROI) for the United States? Assessing program effectiveness now poses a mounting challenge to security cooperation efforts. To attain desired strategic outcomes, the United States must meticulously allocate resources and delineate priorities for both short-term and long-term objectives.

As part of a broader study, this qualitative analysis delves into the perspectives and insights of US personnel on the ground, particularly those stationed in countries bordering the Indo-Pacific Ocean. The study scrutinizes interview responses concerning the RDFP and IMET programs from security cooperation officers (SCO) and/or local employees directly involved in executing security cooperation tasks. The report hones in on training components, including course selection, candidate selection, the current state of program implementation, ROI assessment, and potential areas for enhancement, accompanied by recommendations for improvement.

The Rising Importance of the Indo-Pacific Region

The 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy asserts that “the United States is an Indo-Pacific power.” The Indo-Pacific construct connects seven continents: Africa, Europe, Asia, the Americas, Australia, and Antarctica. This region propels nearly two-thirds

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of global economic growth, with its nations emerging as vital trade and investment partners for the United States. Yet, it also represents a delicate security landscape due to the escalating influence of the People’s Republic of China across economic, diplomatic, technological, and military domains. China’s Belt and Road Initiative, coupled with its coercive tactics and military assertiveness, poses threats that challenge the principles underpinning the US-led international order, including human rights and international law.

Meanwhile, Russia, while portraying itself as a neutral partner to many regional countries, wields a significant level of political, economic, and military influence. Moscow has been cultivating diplomatic relationships with key countries in the Indo-Pacific region. For instance, it has been providing diplomatic support to China on Indo-Pacific issues. Despite the West’s pressure to condemn Russia’s actions in Ukraine, many countries in the Indo-Pacific region have refused to join Western sanctions. Russia’s reengagement in the Indo-Pacific region is driven by economic ambitions, with Moscow seeking extensive exploration and extraction of key natural resources, establishing a more robust supply chain, and hoping to export its sanctioned energy resources. Additionally, Russia has been increasing its military maneuvers in the Indo-Pacific region, often in collaboration with China.

Indo-Pacific nations play a pivotal role in shaping the international order, with potential implications for the United States and its allies and partners. The region is a pivotal maritime crossroads, where crucial sea routes converge. These sea routes are vital for global trade, making the region a key player in global economic stability and growth. The decisions made by the nations in this region can have far-reaching implications for global trade policies and practices. Moreover, the Indo-Pacific nations are not just passive observers in the geopolitical competition between major powers. They are actively shaping the rules and norms of the international system. For instance, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), an organization of 10 Southeast Asian countries, has been instrumental in promoting dialogue and cooperation in the region. Its centrality in the regional architecture has been recognized by all major powers, including the United States, China, and Russia. Furthermore, the Indo-Pacific nations are increasingly asserting their strategic autonomy. They are navigating the intensifying competition between the

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8 Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States.
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United States and China, and now the emerging conflict between the United States and Russia. These nations are leveraging their strategic locations, economic strengths, and diplomatic ties to negotiate better terms with these major powers.

Despite the Indo-Pacific’s dependence on bilateral power dynamics, predominantly between the United States and China, a balanced power equilibrium has yet to materialize. The United States assumes a crucial security role in the region, while China aspires to establish itself as a normative power. Although both Washington and Beijing aim for regional security and stability, their visions and approaches diverge. Many nations seek to benefit from the US presence while avoiding confrontations with China, which wields growing influence across trade, diplomacy, cyber, space technology, and military capabilities. This dynamic places several Indo-Pacific countries, particularly those in East Asia, in a conundrum as they navigate between competing visions of the United States and China. Consequently, they refrain from aligning completely with the United States.

This geopolitical uncertainty fuels concerns within Washington regarding the potential swing of Indo-Pacific nations toward Chinese influence in the absence of robust US leadership. Ultimately, the strategic competition between the United States and China is poised to shape the regional security and stability of the Indo-Pacific region.

The strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific region is poised to intensify in the twenty-first century. There is an imperative to forge rule-based regional orders, synchronize US values with those of partners and allies, bolster collective capacity, capitalize on regional opportunities, and be ready to confront anticipated challenges. Examining US security cooperation education and training endeavors in the Indo-Pacific, along with their methodologies and lessons learned, holds considerable merit.

Methodology

This evaluative study centers on uncovering insights and comprehension from individuals integral to security cooperation efforts. To gain deeper insights into RDFP and IMET education and training activities, as well as alumni contributions in partner nations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with US personnel stationed in Colombia, Ethiopia, Georgia, Mexico, and Thailand. While these countries span different continents, they fall within the ambit of the Indo-Pacific region and are influenced by both the United States and China.

The evaluation team reached out to US military and civilian personnel directly engaged in RDFP and IMET security cooperation initiatives, employing snowball sampling to expand the pool of interviewees. After identifying key participants meeting the criteria, the team solicited referrals to identify additional individuals.
involved in defense cooperation missions. Each country was represented by at least two participants, with interviews lasting 60–90 minutes conducted via Zoom.gov. All interviews were recorded using the Zoom recording feature and securely archived, while interviewers also maintained written notes. Subsequently, interview data were transcribed for systematic analysis, focusing on identifying recurring patterns within the data.\(^9\)

**Findings**

RDFP and IMET education and training initiatives encompass a diverse array of activities, spanning technical training, English language instruction, seminars, and workshops on professional military education (PME), including both undergraduate- and graduate-level education. Course selection by the United States and partner nations is guided by country-specific objectives outlined in the Combined Education and Training Program Plan (CETPP), with candidate selection overseen by partner nations. Eligibility for courses in the United States is contingent upon candidates passing an English proficiency test. The primary aim of these educational programs is to foster relationship and partnership building while advancing both US and partner nation objectives. Providing personnel from partner nations with opportunities to immerse themselves in US culture, democratic principles, and values serves to deepen their understanding of US expectations and operational methods.

According to insights gleaned from interviews, alumni generally express satisfaction with their experiences upon returning from their studies. They often take pride in their achievements and are expected to leverage their newfound knowledge to contribute positively to their home countries by applying their skills and working towards improvement.

Partner nations overall desire to have RDFP and IMET funds in their countries. The education and training provided by the United States are held in high esteem by partner nations. Candidates view their selection for RDFP and IMET programs as both an honor and a privilege. Through these programs, candidates acquire valuable skills and knowledge from US education and training activities. Depending on the circumstances in their home country, alumni often experience career advancement, with some securing promotions upon their return. ROIs for the United States may manifest in both short-term and long-term outcomes, but challenges exist in realizing these anticipated returns.

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Course Selection

Courses are chosen based on US country objectives and partner nation priorities. The contents of the course catalog often influence this selection process. The Security Cooperation Education and Training Working Group (SCETWG) furnishes the course catalog to partner nations, allowing each host nation to determine the type of course required within their borders. Some variation in course selection exists depending on the country. While some partner nations select courses based on invitations from the US embassy team, others engage in negotiations with the United States, seeking a balance between their own needs and US objectives. For instance, Ethiopia typically requests courses tailored for senior officers, whereas the United States places greater emphasis on training lower-level officers—such as captains, lieutenants, and cadets—who are instrumental in shaping the future force. Negotiations are conducted to bridge any disparities between partner nations’ and US preferences.

The availability of funding and the source thereof also influence course selection. IMET funding, favored by the DOS, is often directed toward PME, while Foreign Military Sales (FMS) funds are allocated for technical training, such as aircraft maintenance. Notably, due to their status as high-priority countries for the United States, Ethiopia and Colombia receive additional resources, facilitating expanded course offerings. As expressed by US personnel, “We would take what the partner nation asked us for, which in a lot of cases was senior level PME, and really go back, relook at their requirements, and try to match some of what they asked for, but with some of what we thought would best suit both the USG and them.”¹⁰ “There is no cookie-cutter. It’s all in us talking, and we refine it; it takes months and years.”¹¹

Despite concerted efforts by both the United States and partner nations to align education and training activities with country objectives, disparities persist between the courses offered by the US and the requirements of partner nations. For instance, in the context of the five-year plan between the United States and Mexico, wherein military leaders from both nations establish strategic priorities with mutual understanding, a potential gap emerges between the expectations of partner nations and those of the United States. This planning process includes aligning training with country priorities. Once courses are selected for the upcoming five-year period, they tend to remain unchanged and repetitive. Consequently, many of the courses

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¹⁰ Military, Ethiopia, interview with the author.
¹¹ Military, Colombia, interview with the author.
offered in Mexico focus on counterterrorism rather than addressing emerging issues within the country.

In contrast to the US military, the Mexican military often collaborates with civilians in various domains, such as law enforcement and emergency management. Introducing programs related to civil-military relationships could prove beneficial for the country. As one interviewee pointed out, “Mexico would like to see more civil-military relationship courses, more illegal immigration-related courses instead of too many counterterrorism courses.” Despite changes in Mexico’s judicial system, the RDFP courses have yet to adapt to these developments in the course catalog. This misalignment between RDFP/IMET courses and the immediate needs of the host country can result in low participation rates.

Not all courses align with country objectives. Despite Mexico’s aim of providing chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosives (CBRNE) training to the Mexican Armed Forces, none of the RDFP courses address this critical topic. A similar situation arises concerning their objectives regarding port security against illicit trafficking. This disconnect is observed in other countries as well. For instance, Georgia expresses a desire for more political courses as it seeks to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and bolster its defenses against Russian aggression.

Regardless of the specific focus of the courses, the principles of human rights and democratic governance appear to be integrated into the curriculum, whether for technical training or graduate-level professional military education. As one respondent emphasized, “There will be human rights components in whatever you do. If you’re working on something nothing to do with human rights . . . how to turn the wrench, you will have training on human rights.”

Candidate Selection

Based on interview data from Colombia, Georgia, Ethiopia, Mexico, and Thailand, RDFP and IMET activities exhibit similar yet varied approaches in their program implementations with partner nations. Despite their affiliation with the US government, candidate and course selection may diverge depending on partner nations’ circumstances and needs. These factors can encompass military structure, domestic political dynamics, business practices, country objectives, gender composition, specific course prerequisites, funding availability, the depth of partner nations’ relationship with the United States, and the impact of pandemics or epidemics.

12 Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.
13 Military, Colombia, interview with the author.
The United States does not partake in candidate selection. Instead, upon receiving invitations for particular courses, the US security cooperation embassy team facilitates formal communication between the United States and partner nations. This official announcement, disseminated to the partner nation’s Ministry of Defense (MOD), typically includes detailed criteria for course selection, US expectations, required ranks and positions, academic prerequisites, and the number of available slots. The host nation assumes the responsibility of selecting candidates and forwards their nominations to the US embassy team.

Upon receipt of the host country’s nominations, the United States administers English proficiency tests and conducts Leahy vetting.\(^\text{14}\) Candidates undergo biometric and eye scan tests, and they are even required to provide information about their grandparents. Although the specifics of how host nations nominate candidates are not extensively reported to the United States, the subsequent selection process tends to adhere to principles of equity, inclusivity, and transparency.

Despite the absence of official reports, partner nations appear to exercise discretion in selecting candidates based on their respective priorities. This selection process can take various forms: competitive assessments, individual database evaluations, personal networks, or alignment with candidates’ assigned home-country duties and academic requisites. Furthermore, the partner nation’s rapport with the United States appears to exert influence.

For nearly three decades, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) held sway as a prominent political force in Ethiopia, operating within the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition, which governed the nation from 1991 to 2018. On 2 April 2018, Abiy Ahmed made history as the first prime minister of Ethiopia of Oromo descent. Ahmed’s academic journey led him to earn a master’s degree in transformational leadership in 2011 from the International Leadership Institute in Addis Ababa, in collaboration with Greenwich University in London. Notably, Ahmed’s tenure has been marked by a commitment to reform and has garnered international acclaim for his peace efforts, culminating in the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. Leading up to Ahmed’s inauguration, Ethiopia confronted the entrenched dominance of the Tigrayan tribe, characterized by pervasive nepotism. This internal power dynamic significantly influenced the country’s candidate selection processes and opportunity distribution. Despite Ethiopia’s diverse mosaic of nearly 300 ethnic groups, Tigrayans disproportionately

\(^{14}\) *Leahy vetting* encompasses two statutory provisions barring the US government from allocating funds for aid to units of foreign security forces upon credible information linking said unit to gross violations of human rights (GVHR). This law applies to both the DOD and DOS. Torture, extrajudicial killing, enforced disappearance, and rape under color of law are deemed GVHRs by the US government in enforcing this vetting.
secured opportunities in programs like RDFP and IMET. However, the ascension of a new Western-educated prime minister who is ostensibly aligned with US principles signaled a paradigm shift toward broader inclusivity and opportunity.\textsuperscript{15}

Conversely, Colombia’s candidate selection prioritizes individuals engaged in counterterrorism efforts, vetting candidates to ensure alignment with specific RDFP course criteria. Georgia’s approach emphasizes a balanced representation across military ranks and civilian roles, including a modest percentage of women (5–8 percent of military personnel). Meanwhile, Mexico adopts a dual-candidate strategy, appointing a primary candidate alongside an alternate, facilitating flexibility in meeting requirements and adapting to evolving circumstances.

Each country’s military structure evidently shapes the landscape of education and training opportunities. Take Georgia, for instance, where the military leans heavily toward officers, leaving a dearth in the noncommissioned officer (NCO) ranks. Consequently, officers find themselves more involved in RDFP and IMET undertakings. With a focus predominantly on land forces, Georgia’s military is predominantly army-centric. To recalibrate this structural imbalance, the United States prioritizes bolstering the NCO cadre and dispatches candidates for NCO training to acquaint them with American NCO roles and responsibilities. Additionally, Georgia dispatches candidates to various service academies, including those for the air force and navy.

Similarly, Ethiopia grapples with a comparable scenario. Historically, Ethiopia has directed RDFP and IMET initiatives toward mid- and senior-level officers. Consequently, numerous high-ranking officers benefited from these programs until the watershed moment of 2018 when the country underwent a political transition. The current exigencies of the nation also play a pivotal role in senior officer selection. Ethiopia endeavors to bridge the leadership gap within its defense forces, particularly addressing the dearth of formal academic military education and training among senior leaders.

While partner nations hold the responsibility for nominating candidates, the United States wields authority over the allocation of slots allotted to each country, thereby exerting a substantial influence on candidate selection. The allocation of slots entails a redistribution of resources among partner nations, prompting a keen awareness among them regarding the potential consequences of slot loss, thus fostering a competitive environment for slot acquisition.

To mitigate the risk of admitting individuals of questionable integrity or those unable to pass the rigorous human rights vetting process, the United States can

\textsuperscript{15} Hilary Matfess and Anne Lauder, “After Agreement in Ethiopia’s Tigray Region, What Stands in the Way of Lasting Peace?,” IPI Global Observatory, 7 February 2023, https://theglobalobservatory.org/.
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cautions partner nations about the possibility of slot reduction. In instances where partner nations fail to present candidates meeting the expected criteria set by the United States, the withholding of slots serves as a consequential measure. As one participant underscored, “If you don’t use what’s given to you, you’re not going to get it again.”

Furthermore, the United States possesses the prerogative to stipulate preferences or requirements within the official communication dispatched to partner nations. For instance, the officio may articulate the US preference for increased female and civilian participation in education and training programs.

Countries prioritized by the United States for additional funding tend to allocate more resources toward the development of their candidates. Georgia stands out as a particularly high-priority nation, notably within the European Command’s strategic purview. Georgia has consistently dispatched a significant number of candidates to both short- and long-term RDFP and IMET programs in the United States and Europe, underscoring its strong commitment to fostering a robust military partnership with the United States and NATO. Aspiring to achieve parity and interoperability with US forces, Georgia makes substantial investments in its candidates and adopts a discerning approach to candidate selection. However, despite meticulous vetting processes, instances arise where candidates fall short of expectations. As one respondent recounted, “We’ve had students that have failed out just recently, failed out of West Point.”

External factors such as pandemics or epidemics can disrupt candidate selection processes for RDFP and IMET activities. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, military resources have been redirected toward providing real-world support for pandemic response efforts. Consequently, various challenges have emerged, including a scarcity of candidates, candidates failing to meet designated timelines, and candidates failing to meet requirements. In such scenarios, the United States may face constraints in accepting qualified candidates if, for instance, partner nations fail to respond to calls for candidates, experience sudden cancellations, or are unable to adhere to timelines for biographical, biometric, and Leahy vetting processes.

**Female Candidates**

The United States has undertaken continuous endeavors to enhance the representation of women in RDFP and IMET activities. However, the extent of women’s participation often hinges on gender demographics and the status of

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16 Military, Colombia, interview with the author.
17 Military, Georgia, interview with the author.
females within partner nations’ military hierarchies. Notably, in several partner nations such as Thailand, Ethiopia, and Mexico, women are rarely elevated to higher echelons of military leadership, reflecting persisting adherence to traditional gender roles entrenched in many cultures. Consequently, the limited military ranks attained by women often render them ineligible for RDFP and IMET opportunities.

For instance, in Mexico, RDFP courses predominantly cater to higher-ranking officers, typically requiring candidates to hold the rank of O4 and above, a rank seldom achieved by females. Consequently, when partner nations do nominate female candidates for education and training, they are often relegated to lower- to mid-grade officer-level courses, primarily for auxiliary roles.

Moreover, the specifications outlined for certain RDFP courses can further impede female participation. Partner nations may allocate RDFP funds to specific military units, as seen in Colombia’s provision of educational and training opportunities tailored for counterterrorism-related special operation units, where women are notably scarce. Consequently, despite the intentions of the United States to promote gender inclusivity, RDFP funds may not be utilized for training women.

The dearth of women in partner nations’ military structures exacerbates the scarcity of female candidates in RDFP and IMET educational endeavors. As one participant underscored, “In the special forces community, there are no females whatsoever.”

English language proficiency requirements also play a significant role in shaping female participation rates. In countries such as Ethiopia, men often outperform women on English proficiency tests, resulting in a higher number of men meeting the minimum language requirement. Consequently, given the mandatory English testing prerequisite for RDFP and IMET programs, a greater proportion of men tend to engage in education and training activities funded by the United States.

Conversely, in Georgia, women enjoy equal opportunities as men to partake in RDFP and IMET endeavors. Despite the limited representation of women within the Georgian military, access to these programs is not contingent upon gender or rank.

The endeavor to boost female participation is an ongoing commitment, evidenced by the allocation of additional funding aimed at incentivizing increased female engagement. When US security cooperation personnel advocate for greater female participation within partner nations, it seems to sway their selection of female candidates. As highlighted by one interviewee, “Dr. XX does a tremendous job. Women, Peace and Security, she pushes that WPS agenda. They are getting a lot better at including women in their courses and I believe a lot has to do with Dr. XX.”

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18 Civilian, Colombia, interview with the author.
19 Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.
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English Proficiency Requirement

Once partner nations nominate candidates, the English Comprehension Level (ECL) test becomes a pivotal assessment tool. The test aims to gauge candidates’ capacity to comprehend US course content and adhere to US education and training standards. Candidates who achieve the minimum required score and pass the Leahy vetting process are subsequently sent to the designated schools. For those requiring additional English support, avenues such as waiver requests from the embassy team or enrollment at the Defense Language Institute English Language Center (DLIELC) in San Antonio, Texas, are pursued.

Given that English may not be the native or even secondary language for many citizens of partner nations, candidates often encounter challenges with English proficiency. In Ethiopia, for instance, a significant number of senior officers, women, and NCOs struggle to meet the initial language criteria. Additionally, some military personnel opt not to take the English test for fear of potential repercussions on their social standing.

As a result, the English proficiency test serves as a gatekeeper in candidate selection and could impede partner nations’ ability to nominate highly qualified individuals. To secure allocated RDFP and IMET slots, partner nations prioritize individuals capable of meeting the minimum English requirements. Consequently, there is a tendency for partner nations to repeatedly select the same individuals rather than actively seeking out the most suitable candidates to align with both US and partner nations’ objectives. As noted by one respondent, “They don’t have English . . . they need to write and do essays and you know, express themselves like a college student. They send the same person. They send the same person that has the English.”

This recurrent selection pattern may not always result in the most qualified candidates being chosen, potentially impacting their influence within their respective services or hindering their prospects for swift promotion. As highlighted by a US personnel, “A lot of times the Thai military is tied to not wanting to give up those courses . . . but at the same time, I’m not quite sure if everybody that we’re sending is the person that’s moving up the fastest or has the most influence in their service.”

Return on Investment

“This is cooperation. . . . It’s a business transaction in a way. It’s not just you give free training, and you don’t give us anything back.”

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20 Civilian, Colombia, interview with the author.
21 Military, Thailand, interview with the author.
22 Military, Colombia, interview with the author.
In the business sector, ROI is regarded as “a primary tool for decision-making for capital investments.” Conversely, tracking and quantifying ROI in security cooperation, particularly in RDFP and IMET education and training activities, presents formidable challenges, with outcomes often remaining obscure. Nonetheless, certain returns may manifest more conspicuously over time.

RDFP and IMET initiatives yield both immediate and enduring returns. Short-term benefits typically materialize relatively swiftly and are characterized by their tangible nature. These may include the immediate application of newly acquired knowledge and technical skills, the acknowledgment of candidates within partner nations, and ongoing efforts by partner nations to align with US standards.

On the other hand, long-term returns may unfold gradually over decades and often encompass intangible aspects. These may encompass the depth and breadth of partnerships forged between the United States and partner nations, shaped by enduring human connections and a mutual comprehension of each other’s doctrines, values, and cultural norms. Certain ROIs may transition from short-term effects to enduring outcomes over time.

The United States encounters challenges in realizing ROIs from partner nations, attributed to various factors such as the underutilization of US-trained human resources, potential turnover within military personnel, or partner nations’ absence of mandatory service requirements, particularly following the receipt of US-funded education. Regarding education and training, technical training typically yields immediate returns, whereas PME tends to yield long-term benefits. As one respondent remarked, “You don’t get an immediate return on investment when it comes to IMET.”

Examples of short-term ROI are as follows:

1. **Alumni on a good career track.** Short-term ROI can be observed through the career trajectories of RDFP and IMET alumni upon their return to their home countries following completion of their education and/or training in the United States. Alumni often secure positions of significance within their respective nations, garnering recognition and assuming roles that can have a transformative impact, as evidenced in countries like Georgia, Mexico, and Ethiopia. Notably, many high-ranking government officials in Georgia have received education in the West, fostering a close working relationship between the United States and partner nations. This

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24 Military, Colombia, interview with the author.
collaborative spirit is exemplified by the close coordination between the Georgian MOD and the US Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC).

Similarly, in Ethiopia, IMET graduates frequently ascend to more promising career tracks upon their return. They are often assigned roles within military education and training institutions or various directorates of the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) headquarters. The presence of these professionally educated military officers within such institutions serves to enhance command and control capabilities. They wield influence in shaping leadership practices and play a pivotal role in the development of defense force capabilities, fostering reliance, discipline, accountability, and professional standards necessary for effective mission execution. As one participant affirmed, “Most IMET and RDFP graduates held a position within the defense force. Some are office holders at headquarters level, while others are commanders and instructors in different training institutions.”

2. Alumni contribution to partner nation military. The ability of RDFP and IMET alumni to effect change by applying the knowledge, skills, and expertise acquired in the United States represents another instance of short-term ROI. In Ethiopia, for instance, graduates of US PME programs played a pivotal role in establishing the country’s first War College in 2019. Drawing from their educational experiences in the United States, these alumni developed the curriculum independently, thereby enhancing the ENDF’s command-and-control capabilities. Furthermore, US-trained professionals are actively engaged in crafting a national military white paper, which will inform the ENDF’s new doctrine and force structure. As one respondent succinctly articulated, “I got to send folks and see them come back and make an impact.”

Similar transformative contributions have been witnessed in Thailand, where the Command and General Staff College (CGSC) designed its curriculum modeled after the US CGSC curriculum. These initiatives, whether in the form of curriculum development or the formulation of white papers, are tangible products of short-term ROI.

3. Alumni contributions beyond the military. RDFP and IMET alumni extend their contributions beyond the realm of the military, influencing broader societal contexts. Notably, the United Nations (UN) and European

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25 Civilian, Ethiopia, interview with the author.
26 Military, Ethiopia, interview with the author.
Union (EU) have recognized Georgia’s advancements in its electoral system, attributing improvements to the adoption of Western principles and values, including freedom of speech and democratic election procedures.

4. **Technical training and foreign military sales.** ROI manifests through the technical training imparted by the United States to partner nations. This training enables these nations to independently operate new aircraft and US military equipment. RDFP and IMET education and training initiatives equip partner nations, such as Colombia and Thailand, with the necessary skills to utilize, maintain, and ensure secure communications for aircraft and other equipment procured from the United States. As partner nations enhance their self-reliance with US equipment, it fosters opportunities for increased US military sales, thereby promoting interoperability.

5. **Interoperability.** The ability to utilize shared equipment fosters interoperability between the United States and partner nations. While immediate US-partner nation interoperability may be considered a short-term ROI, it has the potential to evolve into enduring benefits over time. For instance, Thailand and the United States conducted joint exercises in Hawaii utilizing US equipment. Thanks to the training provided on the operation of US equipment, the Thai military could participate in exercises like Lightning Forge without the need to transport weapons from their own inventory, such as Stryker vehicles. Moreover, the Royal Thai Army is undergoing modernization and restructuring efforts aligned with US doctrine, facilitating enhanced communication and cooperation between the two nations in training environments.

This shared operational approach facilitates bilateral or multilateral interoperability, where nations collaborate toward common objectives, such as regional or international peacekeeping operations. For example, Georgia has deployed troops to Iraq and Afghanistan alongside the United States in the fight against terrorism. Similarly, Ethiopia has contributed troops to Somalia as a partner nation in support of US objectives.

6. **Emergency collaborations.** In addition to promoting interoperability, RDFP and IMET activities play a crucial role in meeting mission requirements, particularly during emergencies that necessitate humanitarian assistance, disaster response, and special operations. PME facilitates the establishment of a shared doctrinal understanding and fosters effective communication and collaboration between the United States and partner nations, thereby strengthening working relationships with counterparts.
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An illustrative example of this collaboration occurred in Colombia when a malfunctioning US military aircraft encountered landing gear issues. Leveraging their shared doctrine and personal and professional relationships forged through RDFP and IMET activities, the US and Colombian Air Forces collaborated seamlessly to safely land the plane. Moreover, during natural disasters, partner nations can collaborate with the United States on rescue plans and other pertinent countermeasures, leveraging the synergies established through RDFP and IMET initiatives.

7. **Efforts to meet US standards.** RDFP and IMET programs serve to familiarize partner nations with the standards upheld by the United States, which they are encouraged to adhere to in order to maximize the benefits of US education and training. Partner nations generally exhibit a preference for leveraging RDFP and IMET opportunities. To safeguard their allocated slots, partner nations diligently endeavor to meet the rigorous standards and expectations set forth by the United States. These efforts often involve educating their populace about the fundamental principles prized by the United States.

For instance, Colombia remains committed to educating legal professionals and members of the judiciary on the paramount importance of human rights. Colombia’s proactive stance on human rights education is underscored by the observations of neighboring countries such as Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, which have faced repercussions in the form of revoked RDFP and IMET support due to human rights violations. Consequently, Colombia remains vigilant in promoting and instilling the ethos of human rights, particularly in regions where the influence of narcotrafficking organizations is minimal.

8. **US as the first partner of choice.** The favorable outcomes of RDFP and IMET educational and training initiatives prompt partner nations to prioritize the United States as their preferred security cooperation partner. Partner nations consistently opt to engage with the United States in matters of security cooperation. Through procurement assistance and the training of proficient individuals to uphold and sustain acquired products, the United States fosters a mutually beneficial arrangement for both nations.
One of the foremost objectives of security cooperation is to cultivate enduring partnerships and shared objectives between the United States and partner nations. The efficacy of long-term ROI is often gauged indirectly, such as by assessing the sustainability of relationships forged among US and partner nation personnel trained together in RDFP and IMET activities, as well as the proficiency of alumni in implementing US principles and values in their roles. As articulated by an interviewee, “The best return on our investment for IMET is when we get somebody back, who is a trained leader, who knows how to work in a NATO interoperable setting.”²⁷ While short-term ROI might have intangible aspects, their effects could be more influential in the long run.

1. **Instillment of democratic principles and human rights.** RDFP and IMET education and training initiatives have exposed alumni to democratic principles and values of human rights. Participation in these programs, as well as residing in the United States and other Western nations, fosters a deeper comprehension of the fundamental values that underpin US domestic and foreign policies. As noted by one respondent, “Some of them have already been to . . . U.S. training and education, and did see . . . a broader lens towards human rights and more of an understanding of basic

²⁷ Military, Georgia, interview with the author.
human rights. . . . Whereas, students that haven't had any kind of U.S. cultural or educational experience may not have seen the importance of it.”

2. **Alumni making changes at home with embedded US values.** Acquiring an understanding of US values and norms has played a pivotal role in shaping professional military conduct, fostering respect for human rights, and promoting civilian control of the military. As observed by a US personnel, “Six months they had spent in the U.S. that year . . . Western values and cultures, the respect for human rights had been ingrained in their thinking.” Additionally, alumni demonstrate an enhanced regard for civil governance. Upon returning to their respective nations, alumni apply the knowledge gained in the United States, thereby contributing to the development and progress of their homeland while upholding embedded US values.

3. **Influencing partner nation's military education.** US PME has the potential to shape the military education of partner nations by influencing their curriculum. Notably, the curriculum at the Thai CGSC draws heavily from the US CGSC curriculum. While this curriculum furnishes a fundamental framework for military operations and may facilitate short-term interoperability, its US influence could also exert a lasting impact on the cognitive processes, decision making, and operational approaches of military professionals in partner nations. As noted by one participant, “Even though the vocabulary was a little challenging, the base ideas I felt were very much the same.”

4. **Professionalization and alignment of partner nation military structure to the United States.** RDFP and IMET activities play a crucial role in harmonizing the military structures of partner nations with that of the United States. Many partner nations face challenges in terms of assets, personnel, and resources compared to the US military. Despite these disparities, Georgia endeavors to emulate the PME framework of the United States. The organizational and structural model of the US military serves as a blueprint for numerous partner nations. As noted by one respondent, “Anytime we get an opportunity to bring them here . . . they see our culture. It helps them professionalize their military and align a lot of what they do with what we do here in the U.S. and the way our militaries are set up . . .

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28 Military, Thailand, interview with the author.
29 Military, Ethiopia, interview with the author.
30 Military, Thailand, interview with the author.
They’re having a big push on training NCOs in the Mexican Marine Corps. That’s huge because they never used to do that.”

Adopting a structured and professionalized corps akin to that of the United States helps mitigate turnover, as personnel can fulfill multiple roles. Exposure to hands-on experiences during stays in the United States facilitates the assimilation of partner nations into the structure and conduct of the US military. The same respondent also emphasized that “professionalization starts to take place not only in the officer corps but in the enlisted corps. You can see it through all the services.”

5. **Expanding world outlook and strategizing common pursuits.** Participation in RDFP and IMET activities alongside diverse US partner nations fosters heightened awareness and broadens participants’ perspectives. For instance, when addressing challenges like illegal fishing, border security, and narcotrafficking, participants discover that other countries, particularly those within the same region, confront similar issues. By exchanging anecdotes about challenging circumstances in their respective home countries, candidates gain insights into shared concerns, interests, and strategies for pursuing common objectives collaboratively as a unified team.

6. **Human relationship building.** The bonds forged through personal connections established as classmates and friends, where shared learning experiences and exposure to ideas are commonplace, play a pivotal role in fostering trust and relationships. Shared proficiency in professionalism aids in communication and comprehension. As underscored by one personnel, “It’s easier to communicate . . . if we meet one day somewhere and we will be talking about the progress of our relation, country relationship, and whatever. It will be going to be much easier in the future than if we have never met each other, and if we have never seen each other. So, when classmates work together, it’s great. I mean, it’s wonderful.”

The human connections cultivated through RDFP and IMET activities facilitate the establishment of collaborative bonds, even in later stages of one’s career when alumni assume leadership roles. As one respondent posited, “You can have two high-level leaders who can relate immediately based on what they have done even though they don’t speak the same

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31 Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.
32 Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.
33 Civilian, Georgia, interview with the author.
language very well. They can relate to having done the same thing even if it’s just airborne school, jumping out of an airplane. Being able to make that immediate connection is huge. At the end of the day, we’re human beings, and we like to connect with one another. If we can connect with one another, it makes it easier. . . . It’s human nature.”

Consequently, RDFP and IMET activities have contributed to improved resource management, strategic planning and execution, and logistical programs—essentially enhancing bilateral and NATO interoperability.

7. A better understanding of US culture. Residing in the United States, interacting with Americans, and observing American lifestyles, ideologies, and business practices provide firsthand experiential learning opportunities that deepen comprehension of US culture and operational methods. This heightened cultural awareness and understanding can facilitate intercultural communication and foster tolerance toward divergent perspectives.

![Figure 2. Long-term return on investment](image)

**Challenges to ROI**

RDFP and IMET activities serve as potent tools for fostering relationships between US personnel and their counterparts in partner nations, enabling the transmission of American culture across all echelons, from NCOs to senior officers.

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34 Military, Colombia, interview with the author.
However, converting an initial positive encounter into a lasting outcome that benefits the United States poses a significant challenge. As noted by one interviewee, “It’s one thing to have a personal relationship coming out of IMET-fund but it’s quite another to provide a long-lasting U.S. cultural experience that officers or NCOs in some cases can take back to their country and then that would continue to blossom and share throughout their military ranks.”

Securing returns on investments made in RDFP and IMET activities presents difficulties for the United States. Despite expectations that partner nations would promote US-trained candidates funded through these programs as touchpoints for American interests, the reality is often different. Partner nations do not always leverage US-trained RDFP and IMET alumni effectively. In the absence of supervision from US personnel, partner nations may reintegrate alumni into their previous roles without affording them the opportunity to apply their newfound knowledge. Moreover, the positions assigned to these alumni by partner nations may not align adequately with their acquired education. As one participant observed, “We have noticed anecdotally, some situations were like, take a war college graduate or CGSC graduate, and we’ll put him or her into a position that is not commensurate with the education they have.” Another participant expressed, “Sometimes if I’m not careful . . . they just send them back to their units and that slot is lost because you’re not using the assets I’m giving you.”

The absence of mandatory service requirements following completion of RDFP and IMET activities poses a significant hurdle to realizing US ROI. As one interviewee confirmed, “Not every country does this effect, most don’t.” Partner nations often operate under their own human resource systems, which may diverge from US practices. In some cases, countries lack mechanisms mandating additional service obligations upon receipt of US-funded education. As another interviewee highlighted, “They can just take their four-year education that we just paid for and go on to the civilian sector.”

Likewise, personnel turnover within partner nations’ militaries presents a formidable challenge. Not all partner nations possess the capacity to retain and apply the knowledge and skills acquired by alumni from the United States. It is imperative for partner nations to prioritize professionalization efforts and ensure the continued maintenance and utilization of US-procured platforms.

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35 Military, Thailand, interview with the author.
36 Military, Georgia, interview with the author.
37 Civilian, Colombia, interview with the author.
38 Military, Colombia, interview with the author.
39 Military, Georgia, interview with the author.
Discussion and Recommendations

RDFP and IMET activities serve as crucial avenues for partner nations to gain insight into the workings of the United States and its perspectives on global issues. Engaging in these educational programs fosters a deeper understanding of both the United States and other nations, thereby facilitating communication within interoperable, collaborative teams. As one respondent underscored, “I think it takes that decades-long relationship-building to really benefit influence later on.”

These education and training activities provide partner nations with access to a wealth of previously unencountered knowledge. Many partner nations hold US education and training in high esteem due to its competitive nature. By participating in these activities, partner nation candidates gain invaluable insights and skills that they can apply in their respective countries, ultimately contributing to progress and advancement. The educational process also acquaints partner nations’ militaries with US values, such as human rights, and the role of the military in American society, gradually influencing people’s perspectives and thought processes. In this way, RDFP and IMET activities play a crucial role in influencing “them with our values, and they bring them back and it spreads out.”

Moreover, irrespective of the degree of acceptance by partner nations, American values are ingrained in US products, and these embedded ideals are disseminated alongside the products themselves. As the same participant emphasized, “We sell products. We also bring with it our values and norms.”

Assessing the effectiveness of these educational activities poses significant challenges. While many US personnel interviewed perceive positive outcomes from RDFP and IMET activities, measuring the correlation between these activities and potential future decision making and partnerships with the United States proves exceedingly difficult. Unlike the business sector, where monetary compensation can be quantified to gauge return on investment, assessing returns for security cooperation education and training is not as straightforward. Instead, returns in international security cooperation are often intangible and nonmonetary.

Identifying returns on investment in international security cooperation entails evaluating the extent to which partner nations align with US strategic objectives. This alignment may manifest in various ways, such as granting US military access to regional ports, airfields, and training facilities during peacetime and contingency operations. Additionally, cooperation with interoperable missions, such as par-

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40 Military, Thailand, interview with the author.
41 Military, Colombia, interview with the author.
42 Military, Colombia, interview with the author.
ticipating in disaster response efforts, peacekeeping operations, and maritime security initiatives, provides further insight into the quality of partnership and alignment with US priorities.\footnote{Zach Gold, Ralph Espach, Nicholas Bradford, and Douglas Jackson, “A better way to measure returns on U.S. security cooperation investments,” in Defense One (June 2021), https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/06/better-way-measure-returns-us-security-cooperation-investments/174742/} Moreover, assessing the degree of military contributions from partner nations in times of conflict or crisis can also offer valuable indicators of the effectiveness of security cooperation efforts.\footnote{Desmond Walton, Security cooperation: The key to access and influence in the Asia-Pacific. (Washington, DC; Center for a New American Security, 2016).}

Education and training activities yield short-term returns that are more readily identifiable, while long-term effects may not manifest for decades, if at all. Short-term outcomes are easier to track, often occurring shortly after the completion of education and training. These may include alumni receiving promotions following their US education, partner nation servicemembers acquiring new technical skills such as flying or repairing fighter jets, or alumni from countries like Thailand and Ethiopia developing curricula for their military schools based on their US training.

In contrast, long-term returns are influenced by factors such as the integration of US-based military curriculum into partner nation cadets’ education, which gradually shapes their decision-making processes and behaviors over time. However, assessing the impact of these long-term changes is challenging due to the cumulative nature of human relationships and the unpredictable effects of intervening factors. The complexities of human psychology further complicate efforts to track, record, or measure behavioral changes accurately.

History is replete with examples of shifting alliances, where former US allies have become adversaries. These historical precedents underscore the inherent uncertainty in predicting the future behavior of partner nations, despite the depth of relationships cultivated through education and training activities.

Nonetheless, RDFP and IMET activities serve as foundational pillars for burgeoning US-partner nation relationships. These programs not only establish a knowledge base and foster personal and professional connections but also serve as gateways to additional opportunities. In an era marked by great-power competition and the presence of multiple superpowers, RDFP and IMET activities emerge as strategic tools to cultivate and sustain connections, reaffirming US presence in the Indo-Pacific region where neither alliance against the United States nor China exists.

RDFP and IMET activities serve as ongoing reminders of US soft power and co-optive influence, which can induce changes in behaviors and attitudes through attraction. For nations gradually opening their doors to the United States, these
Strategic Alliances and Educational Empowerment

programs represent an initial entry point—for example, Laos—while for countries with established US relationships, they offer avenues for further engagement and deepening ties. Additionally, RDFP and IMET activities serve as tools for managing relationships between the United States and its partner nations, allowing for customization based on factors such as national objectives, policies, and assistance priorities.

Despite any short- or long-term ROIs, the United States should anchor RDFP and IMET activities in long-term objectives, necessitating comprehensive, forward-looking strategies. Partner nations have the potential to send their officers for US PME and explore additional educational avenues, reinforcing US cultural values and thought processes, thereby aiding in the attainment of specific US goals. To nurture partnerships and maximize ROI, the United States should prioritize the following areas.

**Continuous support of professional military education**

The United States can sustain ongoing support for partner nations’ professional military development, whether conducted within the United States or in the partner nation itself. To achieve lasting impact, the United States should provide training for various echelons of leadership within partner nations’ militaries. By influencing perspectives, mindsets, and organizational cultures, collaborative responses toward the United States can be fostered. Therefore, it is imperative for the United States to continue offering RDFP and IMET opportunities to both military personnel and civilians.

Given the enduring nature of relationship and partnership building, the United States should advocate for the involvement of junior and mid-level personnel—individuals poised to become future leaders. Simultaneously, efforts to cultivate relationships should span across different branches of partner-nation services.

Supporting partner nations’ academic institutions holds promise for yielding significant returns, particularly as it impacts a cohort of future cadets—prospective officers and engineers. The United States can aid partner nations in designing and refining curricula and courses, as well as in developing their doctrine and institutional capacity. For instance, Ethiopia’s Cadet Academy relies on outdated doctrines dating back 20 years. The United States can play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between past, present, and future capacity.

Despite the educational offerings extended by the United States to partner nations, the full effects of this education necessitate additional real-life interactions and exchanges between the two parties. As one respondent emphasized, “We need more real-life interactions between us. The education is very good but we need to
take a targeted effort to connect education with real-life interactions so to see the results of the education.”

**Tailored education and training for partner nations**

While the United States can offer both in-person and virtual courses, the decision on the course format should be made judiciously, considering the target audience, partner nations’ circumstances, and the objectives of the courses. In-person education and training opportunities are particularly effective for individuals in influential positions. Many senior-level officials often juggle numerous responsibilities, and virtual training may not command their full attention amidst their busy schedules. As one interviewee commented, “A lot of people that have influential positions, they are really busy. They will not take that on because that’s just the culture of Thailand. They do work really hard, and if they’re going to be here in the country, they will most likely end up doing their current job.”

Designing courses tailored to reflect partner nations’ social and political structures can better meet their specific needs. Not all countries possess the same social and political frameworks as the United States. For instance, in Thailand, the military does not command units like the Border Patrol Police, despite their significant role in Thai security and border affairs. Therefore, adapting course content to align with the local context can enhance partner nations’ perceptions of the United States.

Seminars can initiate discussions on topics that are neutral yet relevant to regional issues. In Southeast Asia, subjects concerning regional security and threats, such as peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, maritime concerns, cyberwarfare, and counterterrorism, could serve as potential discussion points.

The relevance of the course content to regional or international issues plays a pivotal role in piquing the interest of partner nations for further courses. Additionally, when the United States addresses critical topics aimed at higher-level audiences, it may incentivize partner nations to send influential individuals to participate. The involvement of leadership figures, in turn, fosters broader impacts across the partner nation’s military hierarchy.

RDFP and IMET programs should reassess the level of flexibility granted for course selection. While the IMET program predominantly focuses on PME courses, it does offer more flexibility compared to RDFP. However, RDFP faces challenges as many of its courses remain unchanged year after year, making it difficult to address emerging issues. As one participant emphasized, “Receiving the same list of

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45 Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.
46 Military, Thailand, interview with the author.
courses that have been the same for the last three years. It will be a good thing if we look at every year based on country, strategy, team priorities and then we can support modernization by changing the catalog if it’s needed.”

Regarding course design, such as seminars and workshops, the United States should consider integrating the concepts of democratic principles and human rights alongside other course content, rather than offering them as separate courses.

**Utilization of Mobile Training Teams**

The United States can expand the use of mobile training teams (MTT) to reach a wider audience in partner nations. In Ethiopia, for instance, many non-Tigrayans have been deprived of RDFP and IMET opportunities for three decades. Ethiopia requires extensive education for its officers, but budget constraints prevent sending all officers to the United States. By aiding in curriculum and instructor development and enhancing institutional capacity, the United States could significantly benefit the host country.

Another advantage of deploying MTTs is the potential for partner nations to share course resources widely. Instead of sending a limited number of individuals to study abroad in the United States, partner nations could reach a broader audience and reduce costs by utilizing locally retained materials, equipment, and translations from MTTs. This approach may also enhance female participation, particularly among women who may be ineligible for US study due to lower ranks or insufficient English proficiency. By expanding the audience reached, the United States can increase its long-term relationship impact. As one respondent remarked, “If they could create a team and come down as an MTT, you touch more people.”

Military academic institutions like the Defense Acquisition University (DAU), Defense Institute of International Legal Studies (DIILS), Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC), Joint Special Operations University (JSOU), Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), and others could deploy additional MTTs to train partner nations’ military and civilian professionals.

**Train-the-trainer programs**

Numerous education and training initiatives prioritize meeting predetermined quotas rather than aligning with partner nations’ specific requirements. We propose implementing “train-the-trainer” programs to better address the education and training needs of partner nations. As one individual emphasized, “A lot of things

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47 Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.
48 Civilian, Colombia, interview with the author.
that we need to focus on are what we call Train the Trainer programs. It’s one thing to train them, but another thing for their corps to be able to train themselves on what they just learned.”

**Continuous support during political turmoil in a partner nation**

When the United States identifies violations of human rights or democratic principles in a partner nation, it suspends RDFP and IMET educational and training activities in those countries. These programs are reinstated when the offending countries demonstrate progress in addressing these issues. For instance, during the political unrest in northern Ethiopia involving possible human rights violations by Tigrayan rebels, federal forces, and Eritrean forces, the United States halted all foreign assistance to the country—except for humanitarian aid—and imposed sanctions. Similarly, after a coup d’état in Thailand in 2014, RDFP and IMET activities were suspended until 2019.

While suspending these programs in response to a partner nation’s violation of fundamental American values, human rights, and democratic principles is justifiable, it may also strain US partnerships with other nations. The cessation of US security cooperation funding to Ethiopia due to internal conflicts and violence has halted security assistance since 2020, further impeding Ethiopia’s ability to maintain air mobility. This interruption in security cooperation activities risks undermining longstanding collaborations between the United States and Ethiopia, potentially requiring significant time to rebuild trust and stability in the partnership.

In response to internal social and political unrest in partner nations, the United States could consider offering selective program options. For instance, while suspending lethal training, it could maintain educational and cultural exchanges. Rather than completely withdrawing security assistance, the United States could continue promoting its human rights and democratic values. This approach would afford partner nations the opportunity to learn and appreciate the importance of these values. As one respondent stressed, “If we are trying to build democratic values and human rights behavior, shutting our doors is probably not the right answer. We need to open our doors more and share more of these values, to give more culture, more experience from a U.S. perspective so that they learn and understand the benefits of it and why it’s important.”

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49 Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.
50 Military, Thailand, interview with the author.
Inclusion of females

Providing courses tailored to lower-ranking officers could foster greater participation among female military professionals. Currently, there are relatively few women in high-ranking military positions. To address this gap and enhance the capacity of female military personnel, the United States should offer more entry-level courses. Given the growing importance of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, additional options should be extended to female military professionals in partner nations. As one respondent suggested, “If they don’t have females to go with the criteria of every course . . . we need to offer options so that young officer females can have an opportunity.”

Support for English

The requirement for candidates to demonstrate a certain level of English proficiency to participate in education and training programs in the United States serves as a crucial threshold. While the aim is to select candidates who can establish strong bonds with the United States over time, some qualified individuals miss out on opportunities for RDFP and IMET activities due to inadequate English proficiency. Partner nations may overlook capable and deserving candidates simply because they lack the necessary English skills, leading to the repeated selection of the same individuals who meet language requirements. Moreover, variations in English proficiency testing scores across countries can exacerbate gender disparities in candidate selection. Consequently, the English proficiency requirement may impede the attainment of US goals and objectives. As one participant mentioned, “Some of the instructors who have had large exposure to U.S. PME and IMET funding obviously spoke English very well and they were trying to make it a point to the rest of the class … English is kind of the way of the future and it’s important to learn English so that we can better interoperate.”

To address this challenge, the United States can take several approaches. Firstly, RDFP and IMET programs can collaborate with other government initiatives, such as the DOS’s English Language Fellow Program and Peace Corps language programs, to provide targeted language assistance tailored to military and civilian personnel in partner nations. Secondly, these programs can leverage existing language training centers within partner nations to enhance English proficiency among the target population. Lastly, if candidates’ English proficiency falls short of US

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51 Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.
52 Military, Thailand, interview with the author.
Hurstandards, MTTs can conduct localized training sessions to support their language development efforts.

Additionally, the United States should carefully assess the level of flexibility granted for candidates’ English test score waivers. Should the English requirement be stringent to ensure candidates’ educational success in the United States, or should the United States offer more waivers to include a broader range of candidates, rather than accommodating only a small number of officers with English proficiency?

**Cultural sensitivity**

Understanding partner nations’ cultures is crucial for the United States to effectively engage with them and achieve mutual objectives. Without a deep understanding of partner nations’ cultures, engagement between nations remains superficial and may lack authenticity. As one respondent highlighted, “If you just sit down and go to business right away, like they understand that, we’re like that, . . . it kind of comes across as imposing. If you come across as imposing right away, which we’re already known for, we must recognize this about ourselves, then you’re going to get the minimum from whatever you’re talking. Cultural understanding . . . it’s a helpful tool.”

When presenting a US agenda to partner nations, cultural sensitivity is paramount. For instance, when advocating for an increase in enlisted personnel in a partner nation, the approach must consider the partner nation’s cultural context. Otherwise, the request may be perceived as an imposition from an external source, potentially undermining the partnership. As noted by the same respondent, “In the United States military, we have strong enlisted and non-commissioned officers, like Sergeants. There is a strong corps of that. In other militaries, they don’t, and we try to impose that, and it doesn’t necessarily work. It’s a slow-moving thing. But we do impose is kind of a harsh word, but we do want to promote our values.”

Understanding and respecting partner nations’ cultures is essential, particularly when promoting gender equality through initiatives like the WPS agenda. While the United States may perceive gender disparities and seek to address them, partner nation perspectives may differ. In some cultures, women may feel content with their societal roles and perceive protection within their cultural context.

Recognizing these cultural and religious differences is crucial, especially when there is potential disagreement between the United States and partner nations.

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53 Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

54 Military, Colombia, interview with the author.
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Without this understanding, US efforts to promote gender equality may be met with resistance and could inadvertently cause resentment. As one participant aptly expressed, “It’s weird when you tell someone they are not treated fairly when they think they are treated fairly. It can come across as offensive, like who are you to tell me?” The United States must approach such issues with cultural sensitivity and humility. Cultural competence and effective cross-cultural communication are essential for pursuing strategic objectives while respecting partner nations’ perspectives.

While advocating for American values, the United States should avoid imposing its beliefs and practices on partner nations. Instead, it should engage in respectful dialogue and collaboration, fostering mutual understanding and partnership based on shared goals and values.

Delicate diplomacy

Effective diplomacy requires a nuanced approach when engaging with partner nations, considering their unique priorities and values that shape their governance. These priorities may not always align with those of the United States, leading to potential conflicts and unpredictable outcomes in terms of ROI. In the current era of great-power competition, not all partner nations seek alignment with the United States; some, like Thailand, prefer to maintain neutrality.

Attempting to impose US viewpoints, particularly regarding relations with major powers like China, can elicit resistance from partner nations wary of being coerced into taking sides. As one interviewee highlighted, “Thailand constantly says they don’t want to pick a side. It’s very difficult to present information that shows China in a negative light because they have the perception that we are trying to force them to choose, but at the same time, I think it’s important to try to get that across.”

Partner nations may also have differing levels of awareness and understanding compared to the United States, particularly in areas like information operations and cybersecurity. While the US prioritizes cybersecurity due to growing threats, some nations may inadvertently share sensitive military information through platforms like WhatsApp. This variation in practices may stem from differing threat perceptions or insufficient awareness about cybersecurity.

As one interviewee stated, “Obviously we had some growing pains because both sides are trying to understand how this is going to work and what it’s going to look

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55 Military, Colombia, interview with the author.
56 Military, Thailand, interview with the author.
like, but . . . we’re getting better and better.”\textsuperscript{57} This underscores the importance of fostering mutual understanding and cooperation through diplomatic efforts, recognizing and respecting partner nations’ perspectives while advancing shared interests.

To strengthen partnerships, the United States can identify shared concerns with partner nations while subtly promoting its own interests. By addressing regional challenges and providing support for capacity-building initiatives such as training and education, the United States can foster mutual understanding and collaboration.

For instance, the United States is working with Thailand to enhance its maritime domain awareness, enabling the country to better combat Chinese illegal fishing activities in its territorial waters. Additionally, the United States aims to assist Thailand in bolstering its border security capabilities, modernizing its military, and addressing regional issues of mutual concern. Through these efforts, the United States can advance its strategic objectives while also supporting the security and development goals of its partner nations.

\textit{Learn from partners}

The United States can also gain insights from partner nations, as some countries may excel in areas where the US faces challenges. As one participant noted, “I would argue that Jamaica is possibly better than we are when it comes to gender equality in the workplace. Just my observation, which was kind of surprising because, in the United States, we tend to think we’re the best at everything.”\textsuperscript{58}

\textit{Demonstrate through showcase}

In the future, the United States could demonstrate its values and principles through tangible examples. To promote women’s participation, for instance, the United States could spotlight real-life female military personnel who excel in various roles, such as being a mother, a soldier, and a pilot. By showcasing these examples, the United States can inspire women in partner nations and demonstrate their potential as individuals.

\textit{US accountability}

The United States should enhance accountability for its decision-making processes when engaging with partner nations. Establishing long-term goals, conducting annual reassessments of plans, and closely monitoring program direction could

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{57} Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.
\textsuperscript{58} Military, Colombia, interview with the author.
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aid the United States in making informed decisions in the future. Additionally, the United States must exercise greater caution when providing training to foreign militaries. It should carefully consider what content to teach, who should receive training, how training should be conducted, and what outcomes align with US interests. As one respondent aptly put it, “When you train a foreign military, we have to pay attention to what we’re training on, what are the effects, what are the outcomes that we’re trying to accomplish, and make sure that we don’t get stagnant in our training.”

Challenges arise when the United States provides equipment to partner nations that they are not yet capable of managing. For instance, in 2017, the United States granted Ethiopia the C-130 aircraft. However, Ethiopia lacked trained personnel to operate and maintain the aircraft to US standards until the United States conducted training sessions. While air mobility is crucial for Ethiopia’s peacekeeping efforts, this delay and the country’s lack of proficiency with long-range equipment hindered its ability to achieve self-sustaining command-and-control capabilities.

When the United States provides a product to a partner nation at a higher classification level, it bears the responsibility to ensure that the partner nation securely and effectively utilizes the product. However, regular monitoring of this usage often falls short. Statements such as “We give them something that is at a higher classification level, we have a responsibility to ensure that is protected. I don’t think we do that,” and “It’s very difficult, and it’s also very important” confirm the necessity of this accountability.

Furthermore, the United States must exercise caution to prevent the empowerment of individuals who may misuse their authority. Empowering the wrong individuals can lead to exploitation and abuse. As one participant warned, “If you empower them too much, it can be abused. . . . If you don’t manage misinformation and just go silent, then you’re losing the war, you’re losing the struggle for your people, for public support. So, we have to be careful, because that could turn into obviously how to manipulate people in a nefarious way.”

Efforts by the United States to more accurately discern partner nations’ needs would streamline the decision-making process and enable a clearer understanding of the support the United States can provide. Numerous uncertainties persist, underscoring the need to address these gaps. As echoed by the previous participant, “I can’t even say what exactly they need yet. Those requirements are still being flushed out.”

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59 Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.
60 Military, Colombia, interview with the author.
61 Military, Colombia, interview with the author.
62 Military, Colombia, interview with the author.
Educating security cooperation officers and local employees

The data reveals a recurring turnover among US security cooperation personnel in partner nations, disrupting the consistency and coherence of security cooperation efforts. As an interviewee witnessed, “The majority of the folks we have, we have a pretty constant turnover here.”63 New US personnel often encounter a learning curve as they familiarize themselves with their roles, leading them to rely heavily on local employees who possess extensive experience and knowledge regarding RDFP and IMET activities, including course offerings and candidate information.

To enhance the continuity of security cooperation efforts, regular job training for US personnel would be beneficial, enabling them to better understand their tasks, anticipate challenges, and achieve objectives effectively. While the United States lacks direct control over candidate selection, consistent communication of US preferences by personnel often prompts partner nations to make adjustments. For instance, US efforts to recruit more female candidates in Mexico raised awareness among Mexican military leadership about the importance of gender diversity. The US ODC in Mexico actively monitors alumni promotions and career advancements to assess Mexico’s utilization of RDFP alumni in alignment with national objectives.

Tracking and maintaining detailed records of alumni placements upon their return to their respective countries can provide valuable insights for ongoing program evaluation. Increased reliance on local employees, coupled with robust tracking mechanisms, can contribute to the long-term assessment and enhancement of RDFP and IMET activities.

Mandatory years of required service after RDFP and IMET

Not all partner nation militaries mandate a specified period of service upon completion of educational opportunities. Some candidates opt to pursue higher-paying positions in the private sector after benefiting from their education. To address this issue, the officio should consider implementing a requirement for RDFP and IMET candidates to commit to a certain number of additional years of service upon program completion. As one personnel suggested, “Put a system in place where they are legally obligated to serve an additional xx number of years, and if they don’t do that, then we just cut it out . . . everything we do in the end, let’s be honest, it’s about us, how does this help us. . . . Make sure that we get back what we want.”64

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63 Military, Georgia, interview with the author.
64 Military, Colombia, interview with the author.
Patience needed for the United States

The United States must exercise patience when expecting ROI, particularly long-term ROI, from RDFP and IMET activities. Long-term returns often manifest as intangible benefits and necessitate a considerable time frame to become apparent. The factors contributing to long-term ROI are frequently subtle and not immediately discernible. Encouraging partner nations to embrace different values and principles is a gradual process. Many partner nations, for instance, are gradually moving towards adopting US perspectives on gender equality and equitable treatment. Although progress may seem slow from the US standpoint, incremental improvements are occurring. As one respondent astutely noted, “For someone... all of a sudden they have to change their whole way of looking at people... you can’t expect somebody to just accept... when they haven’t for the rest of their previous 40 or 50 years of their life. We just need some patience. We’re not very patient.”\(^{65}\) Recognizing the time required for mind-set shifts, the United States should adopt a long-term outlook and afford partner nations ample time to evolve their perspectives and practices.

Creating a win-win situation

The desires of the United States and partner nations often align. While the United States seeks to assess the effectiveness and ROI of RDFP and IMET activities, partner nations also prioritize their own ROI, seeking to understand the benefits derived from their partnership with the United States and participation in US education and training activities. For instance, when the United States suspended security cooperation funding following Thailand’s coup d’état in 2014, Thailand allocated its national resources to send professionals for US education and training. When foreign professionals study in the United States, they not only enhance their résumés but also deepen their knowledge of military-related subjects. Partner nations’ investment of their national funds in educating their professionals underscores their focus on ROI. In essence, partner nations aim to cultivate a new knowledge base and foster connections with the United States. As one participant observed, “I think their goal is also the relationship piece.”\(^{66}\)

Therefore, the United States should tailor RDFP and IMET education and training activities to establish a mutually beneficial scenario. While partner nations forge partnerships and absorb US advanced technology and operational methods, the United

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\(^{65}\) Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

\(^{66}\) Military, Thailand, interview with the author.
States can reciprocate by learning from partner nations’ best practices. As one respondent highlighted, “They’re learning from us and we’re learning from them, so it’s good.”

**Conclusion**

American values of democracy, human rights, and civilian control over the military are fundamental pillars of US security policy. Across the Indo-Pacific region, many nations understand that engaging in security cooperation with the United States entails embracing these values and adhering to US expectations regarding civil-military relations. However, not all nations in the Indo-Pacific readily embrace these values, and some “have accepted this conditionally, albeit sometimes begrudgingly.” In this context, RDFP and IMET activities serve as forms of soft power that can help address hesitations and reluctance by imparting fundamental concepts that define the US approach and fostering common ground.

Geopolitical and geoeconomic uncertainties persist in the Indo-Pacific region, underscoring the importance of robust networks among allies and partners for a successful long-term Indo-Pacific strategy. Allies and partners who share common values can play a pivotal role in mitigating differences during conflicts and promoting regional security and stability aligned with US interests. For instance, nations like South Korea, Japan, or the Philippines have the potential to influence non-aligned countries such as Indonesia, nudging them closer to the United States and bolstering support for US values and objectives in the region.

Quantifying the ROIs of security cooperation efforts poses significant challenges due to their inherently immeasurable nature. However, the quality of these returns can be assessed by evaluating the extent to which partner nations align with US strategic objectives. ROIs can manifest in both short-term and long-term outcomes. Short-term returns are often more tangible and observable within a relatively brief timeframe, whereas long-term returns are typically intangible and may require decades to fully materialize.

Despite the challenges in measuring the return on investment (ROI) of RDFP and IMET activities, these educational and training initiatives serve as highly effective strategic tools for the United States in strengthening alliances and partnerships. They offer invaluable opportunities to cultivate personal and professional relationships, which are instrumental in fostering cooperation and alignment with US objectives. Additionally, shared understanding of doctrines, military culture,

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67 Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.
national culture, and business practices enhances efficiency and productivity in collaborative efforts. As emphasized by a security cooperation military personnel, “It’s not 100% effective but as far as U.S. objectives, it is one of the most effective and cheapest tool for us to use to promote our values and our doctrine.”

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69 Military, Colombia, interview with the author.