Building the Capabilities and Capacity of Partners: Is This Defense Business?

BY JAMES Q. ROBERTS

The new defense strategy, "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense," released in January of this 2012, makes clear the mandate for the Department of Defense to continue, in fact to increase significantly, its abilities to improve the capabilities of partners around the globe. In his cover letter to the guidance, President Barack Obama directs us to "join with allies and partners around the world to build their capacity to promote security, prosperity, and human dignity." Likewise, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, in his preface, stresses that the department will focus on "strengthening alliances and partnerships across all regions."

This is not traditional guidance for the Department of Defense. Such guidance usually focuses on how to fight and win the nation's wars. But after more than ten years of combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and in these times of impending steep fiscal reductions the utility of partners who can share the burden of defending their countries individually, and their regions collectively, has come to the fore. This guidance displays the degree to which the department in general, and the Geographic Combatant Commanders in particular, have come to recognize the value in helping partners improve their capability to govern their own territories.

These efforts to help partners defend themselves, and by extension defend us, are gaining greater acceptance across the defense department, within the Executive Branch, and within the Congress. They are evolving from being considered a collateral duty, or a "nice to do if you have the time" – to becoming a principal component of our Phase Zero military activities. During Phase Zero the department conducts military operations and activities designed to shape the strategic environment, build local solutions to security challenges, and decrease the chances of our having to deploy major force packages later on in the crisis. The strategy parallels the well-proven household adage "a stitch in time, saves nine."

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Partner capability building is not cheap. But, when contrasted to the costs of deploying U.S. forces for combat operations costs pale by comparison. By way of example, DoD has spent approximately $2 billion during the six years that Section 1206 resources have been available for equipping and training partners. For the surge in Afghanistan we spent $30 billion to deploy 30,000 troops for 18 months – or $1 million per man. Preparing others today to be able to govern and defend their territory may result in our not having to deploy major conventional formations to confront instability or associated threats tomorrow. This approach holds the promise of being far less expensive in both U.S. blood and treasure.

Additionally, the new defense strategy recognizes the continued threat that al-Qaeda (AQ) terrorists and other non-state actor threats represent, and the importance of capable partners in those fights. "For the foreseeable future, the United States will continue to take an active approach to countering these threats by monitoring the activities of non-state threats worldwide, working with allies and partners to establish control over ungoverned territories, and directly striking the most dangerous groups and individuals when necessary."

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The key goal of this approach is to deny the use of ungoverned spaces to the terrorists and other illegitimate non-state actor networks by enabling the host nation government to expand the footprint of its governance to match the footprint of its sovereignty. If the global footprint of governance could match the footprint of sovereignty there would be no ungoverned territories. Malign non-state actors could only bed down with the compliance of the hosting government, thereby shifting solutions back to a more traditional foreign policy calculus between states. The strategic objective is to close as many ungoverned spaces as possible – squeezing the malign networks into fewer and ideally less hospitable safe havens.

Recent experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan make clear that the preferred solution is for partner forces to conduct the lethal component of operations, whenever possible. When the partner takes the shot, he is displaying his sovereignty to his own population and to the enemy. He is seen as governing. When he relies on us to do so, on his behalf, he forfeits his political legitimacy, and permits the enemy to brand him as little more than a puppet of the United States. He is judged incompetent and incapable – easily described by his enemies as unworthy of leading, his claims of legitimacy undercut by his reliance on the U.S. to kill his fellow citizens.

We are recognizing the utility of developing partners who we can equip, train, and enable with a small, tailored U.S. force package. However, once such forces have been built we have also learned that their capabilities tend to atrophy unless the effort can be sustained. In most instances we rely on U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) to conduct these training, equipping and advisory missions. However, we are also discovering that SOF, and the Department of Defense, lack many of the requisite authorities for well-structured capacity building and for providing the necessary strategic enablers to make these advise and assist missions what they could and should be. Although some would argue that the Department of State's Foreign Military Financing (FMF) authority could meet these requirements, even that program does not include all the necessary tools and flexibility required.

In this post-Cold War era, in which non-state actor threats can attack our homeland from the distant valleys of the Hindu Kush, the building of partner capacity is no longer just a foreign policy nicety. It is becoming an integral component of national defense. Although operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan have severely degraded the AQ core, regional AQ affiliates have grown in scope and capability, taking advantage of ungoverned spaces and weak governments.

Regrettably, the authorities for this capacity building work are lagging behind the requirements. It is time that the Department of Defense and the Geographic Combatant Commanders obtain the requisite tools in their own kit bags. This year the Department of Defense, in close cooperation with the Department of State, requested and obtained from the Congress a new "pooled fund" authority known as the Global Security Contingency Fund.

Advertised as being able to meet current and emerging partner capacity building needs, the fund lacks much of what this article argues is needed. It is top down driven by the Department of State, does not envision long term small scale engagement with partners (it is a 3-year authority now), and lacks many of the key requirements such as minor military construction authority, logistics and service support, and other tools to provide support for the partner. Most importantly, although up to 80% of the funds in the pool will come from DoD; the Combatant Commanders will have little voice in where and when it will be applied.

Therefore, I argue that Combatant Commanders should no longer have to depend on Department of State authorities and resources to serve as the vehicle through which they try to accomplish this emerging core defense task. Nor should we force them to cobble together programs by demanding that they understand and leverage the two-dozen authorities that could be employed in this mission area. Even when expertly managed, this patchwork of authorities provides incomplete solutions and results in less than optimal, and in some cases dysfunctional, capacity building programs.

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This article will describe a more deliberate and complete capacity building model, one that would permit the U.S. military to work hand in glove with partners to develop, deploy, employ, and sustain their capabilities for the years to come. Let's start with some core considerations.

First, these programs must be multi-year. In fact, some may need to span a decade, or more. The length of the program is directly linked to the nature of the threat, the expanse of the un- (or under-) governed spaces, and most importantly, the ability of the partner to absorb the training, equipment (and its maintenance), the enablers, and the concepts governing the execution this type of network centric warfare against a mobile and morphing non-state actor enterprise. The partner must also demonstrate the political will and skill to unite or reunite his populations.

The desired end state is to build an enduring partner capability, one that he can sustain over time, with only periodic help from us. Understanding his ability to absorb, and tailoring projects to that absorption ability over time, is our current greatest shortfall. None of our current authorities are steady and long term enough to meet this need. Finally, the partner must know that we are serious in this relationship. The program cannot be subject to stops or delays, just because a senior from the State Department needs a "deliverable" for some other nation, half way around the globe, because we must zero-base our FMF programs each year, or because the Congress can not seem to pass an appropriations bill on time.

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Partnership is all about building a relationship. Relationships require patience, a steady hand, and predictability, from both parties. Security assistance programs that are zero-based each year may seem more efficient from a management perspective. However, telling your partner that you loved them last year, but they did not make the grade for this year's programs is no way to build his confidence, or to indicate that you have their best interests at heart.

Second, strategic patience will be required. Some partners may progress quickly, others much more slowly. Our assistance must combine defense education, defense institutional reform, personal and governmental accountability, human rights, and counter-corruption lessons as well as the training of the tactical forces and the headquarters staffs to manage them. We should provide equipment, maintenance, spare parts, minor associated construction, and training for each of these to ensure the partner can achieve some degree of autonomy. We need an authority to provide a variety of key enablers as well – transportation, services, supplies, intelligence, and the like.

The goal is to leave behind a security sector capability for governance – legitimate governance – that can reach to the far corners of the partner's territory, and can develop and maintain the support of the recipient nation's population. In standard counterinsurgency terms, these forces must be able to isolate the insurgents (or other malign actors) from the population, by gaining that population's allegiance and support.

Third, each program will be unique – a "one-size fits all" approach will ensure failure. The U.S. forces conducting the programs will need language, regional and cultural skills. They will require political acumen, along with technical and tactical prowess. We are talking about sustained engagement, tailored specifically to the needs and capabilities of each partner. Careful and frequent assessments will be necessary to continually adapt the program, sometimes going over old ground again, because it did not sink in the first time. At other times the team may need to jump forward, or directly provide key enablers, based on tactical conditions or enemy threats or vulnerabilities.

Fourth, regional approaches involving multiple partners may be required. The enemy non-state actor network moves across borders with impunity. To close the empty spaces may require the cooperation of several regional states. They may be disinclined to do so, particularly at the beginning. Success likely will require long-term engagement with each partner independently, and may necessitate the building of a regional structure where none exists. If a regional institution is not feasible then a degree of trust and a pattern of limited cooperation may be all that can be achieved.

Fifth, political will varies greatly between partners, and will ebb and flow within partner national political structures. Only a long term sustained commitment will attenuate the fluctuations and periodic lack of political will. Turning away from the weak-kneed partner only further weakens him, and cedes space to the enemy. We must do our best to set aside frustrations when partners do not behave as we would, or as we would like them to. Patience and sustained but subdued political pressure are the best approach.

Sixth, we must recognize that good enough is indeed good enough. Our usual approach is to remake the partner in our image – "to be like Mike." But in reality most partners do not want to, and usually cannot, measure up to our expectations. Nevertheless, in most instances some rudimentary partner capabilities, applied consistently over a long period of time can degrade the threats adequately to keep them localized and incapable of strategic reach. That is good enough for our purposes. Low technology solutions that the partner can sustain (with just a little help) pay much better dividends than high tech systems that cannot be maintained or absorbed.

The next portion of this paper will describe a cycle for the development of partner capability and capacity. Capability is the "what" and capacity is the "how much" of what we are trying to build. This cycle is will require tailoring for each partner – and may require repetition of several, or even many, of its phases. Each phase requires an attendant authority. The focus must be on building relationships between trainers and trainees, while avoiding arrogance and hubris – not easy tasks even for seasoned special operators.

Phase One: Assessment of the Partner Nation's Forces

This is perhaps the most critical step in the process, for it will determine the pace and content for all of the follow-on activities. During the assessment the Security Force Assistance (SFA) team must judge both what is needed and (most importantly) at what pace the partner can absorb the training, equipment, education, doctrine, and institutional development assistance. The assessment phase will likely require several weeks of concerted effort by a knowledgeable and skilled team with regional, cultural, technical and language skills. During this phase many partners will inflate their current capabilities, in an effort to avoid embarrassment, and to appear better than they are. Their national leadership will likely focus on the high visibility, high price toys they use as the gauge of their relationship with the United States. "We want F-16's, because you gave them to our neighbor to the East last year."

Overcoming these hurdles is not easy, but F-16's are not of much use against an indirect enemy who is living among the population and mobilizing them to combat the host nation forces and institutions using terrorist and insurgent tactics. Getting buy-in on the nature of the threat and the causes of current instabilities is part of this early phase.

> ***"we want F-16's, because you gave them to our neighbor to the East last year"***

The assessment team must be able to see through these ruses, yet do so without calling the partner's bluff. At the same time, the team should be evaluating the operational environment, including the weather, terrain, and the society as a whole, and the nature of the enemy or enemies. There are other intangibles that must be collected as well. What is the literacy rate of the population? What is it for officers, non-commissioned officers, and troops of the partner nation forces? What levels of mechanical or technical expertise are the norm? What are the ethnic, tribal, or religious distinctions in the armed forces? In the government? In the society? What is the current public perception of the partner forces? Thugs? Corrupt kleptocrats? A tribe apart? Brutal suppressors of the slightest opposition? All (or none) of the above? Determining which host nation units and organizations are our best bets for partnering is a core requirement of this phase.

DoD photo by Pfc. Brian Chaney, U.S. Army (released)

A U.S. Army soldier assigned to Charlie Company, 703rd Brigade Support Battalion, 4th Advise and Assist Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division walks with Iraqi soldiers during a road march as part of a training exercise at Al Asad Air Base, Iraq, on May 4, 2011.

Phase Two: Basic Training, Equipping, and Educational Engagement

Although our lexicon talks of equipping and training, it is my opinion that we would be better served to start with training, then proceed to equipping. Conducting combined training would permit the team to continue assessing the partner force, round out their views of capabilities and absorption rates, and most importantly create demand for the new equipment. If the partner understands the training concepts, integrating the equipment into the concept is far simpler.

Delivering even minor quantities of equipment in advance of the associated training usually results in neglect of the equipment at best. Worse is immediate graft and corruption by unscrupulous partners who sell end items or associated spares, tools, etc., for personal gain, or who are directed by their officers or political leaders to do so. Having gear sit in warehouses or parking lots while waiting for the trainers to arrive is dysfunctional and undermines our credibility – from the outset.

The types, technical sophistication, and quantities of equipment we provide must be tailored based on the above assessment results. For many partners, less sophisticated, more rugged, and less complex equipment is far more efficient than trying to outfit them with current models of U.S. gear. As a general matter, our equipment is too high tech and too dependent on fastidious maintenance, to be very useful in much of the Third World. For complex machinery like airplanes and helicopters, using systems with which the partner is already familiar, is often the most effective way to build or improve a capability. Alternatively, providing them gear we used 20, 30, or even 50 years ago may also be an efficient way to proceed.

As we train units at the tactical level, we should engage in parallel with the partner headquarters and ministry levels. The goal is to ensure the ministry leaders and senior officers understand the intent of our capacity building efforts, and recognize what these forces can and cannot achieve. Ensuring the chain of command appreciates how to employ the new capabilities reduces chances for miscalculations, and may decrease the impulse to disband the units, just because the chain of command does not understand or trust what they have been up to.

Phase Three: Combined Training

Once the partner capability has been developed and can conduct rudimentary operations, we need to increase their understanding and confidence by conducting a series of combined training exercises that test capabilities at increasing levels of sophistication – at the squad, platoon, company, and where possible battalion levels. Advancing from one to the next of these levels of training will require more skill of the officer and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO) corps, better planning, better communications and coordination, improved logistics, etc. Once the partner force has displayed skills in these scenarios, we can move on to the next phases.

Phases Four and Five – Advising and Assisting, Providing Strategic Enablers

These are not integral to traditional capacity building programs, but are absolutely essential if we are going to help a partner confront a current threat or instability in his territory or region. At the same time, they represent a shift away from peacetime engagement and training, to enabling partner military operations. At this point the stakes go up for the partner forces and for the trainers, who now become combat advisors. Providing such advice is an inherently political decision that the President must make, even when the advisors are not intended to participate directly in partner led combat operations.

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It is for these reasons I argue that advising and assisting and providing strategic enablers should not be an integral component of a legislative capacity building authority, although that authority should recognize that these follow-on tasks might be required. Instead, for partners who are under direct pressure from malign actors, the Geographic Combatant Commanders should request authorities to conduct advise and assist missions, or the Secretary of Defense can provide such authorities in advance through the publication of Execute Orders.

Phase Four: Advise and Assist

For the operator, advising and assisting come naturally and are a normal outgrowth of the combined training they have been conducting with the partner force. In many ways combat is what the training has been all about, so from an operator's viewpoint, this is when the fun begins – it is what they came to do.

But for the policymaker such a transition is not to be taken lightly. All of a sudden activities which were in the benign realm of helping a partner improve his capabilities have shifted to hunting bad guys down, and killing them. Additionally, U.S. forces, who formerly were just part of the training landscape are now on the edge of combat, perhaps in the middle of it. For Washington it is all about risk. So Washington will place appropriate constraints on forces doing the advising and assisting – from the size and types of weapons and equipment they deploy with, to how far forward they may go with their partners. Depending on the environment other constraints can come into play as well. Each advise and assist mission will be subject to a variety of factors. No single model can be prescribed. Some may meet a War Powers notification threshold.

Phase Five: Provide Strategic Enablers

Once the parameters of the advise and assist rules have been developed there is a second set of U.S. resources that must be addressed. I refer to these as the strategic enablers – those capabilities that will serve as combat multipliers to the partner's basic tactical capability. In this group are such things as intelligence and intelligence sharing, intelligence and operations fusion and coordination, long-range communications, close air support, and tactical and operational airlift. Some partners may not need the full menu, but if the partner does not have a key enabler – or it has not yet been adequately developed – the Combatant Commander needs to provide it.

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Other considerations may include weather and mapping support, medical evacuation and general medical support, employment of unmanned aerial systems, or other key capabilities. As with advising and assisting, these resources need to be tailored to the partner nation, the threat, their willingness to permit basing, their capabilities, availability of U.S. assets, and other local and regional political military considerations.

Although providing such capabilities is generally not of high risk to the U.S. forces participating, the risk is not zero. Furthermore, providing such assets further commits U.S. policy in support of the partner, and comes with its own Washington-based political baggage. I can hear colleagues from the Hill asking me now, "What? You've given these guys all this training and support and they still can't find Mr. X? Who is incompetent here, them or you?"

Phase Six: Assess Capabilities, Provide Booster Shots

Whether the partner is in combat or just preparing for it, we must improve our ability to assess how we, and they, are doing. Measuring outcomes in this business is not easy. Our system is designed to assess outputs – so we can quickly determine what gear and how much of it we have provided. There are endless annual reports to Executive Branch leaders and Congress on virtually all of these types of programs, describing what we provided to whom, when, and for how many dollars.

But the key question is not what did we give the partner? Instead the questions are: What did he do with it? Could he absorb it? Make it his own? Take care of it? If so, did his capability actually improve? If it did, why? What worked? What didn't? How can we make it better? How can he? These are all key questions that repetitive and detailed assessments must address.

Part of this assessment process must be determining why and how quickly the partner capability degrades upon the cessation of U.S. support. Such an analysis would allow us to determine a sort of "mean time between failures" rate for partner capabilities. Once armed with that data, we could design follow-on programs to address shortfalls. This follow-on capability should be integral to the basic train and equip authority mentioned above. The concept is similar to "booster shots" in the medical field.

Once the partner capability has been built, it will (with certainty) begin to atrophy, at various rates, and due to various causes. To think otherwise is naïve. The Geographic Combatant Commanders should have the authority and resources to design a program of revisits, with the intent of sustaining the capability, despite the partner's inability to do so by themselves.

The revisit may take many forms; specialized training, key spare parts for weapons or support systems, revising tactics, adjusting enablers, replacing combat losses, adapting tactics to enemy changes, et cetera. But it must be tailored to the partner, and timely enough to preclude the capability degrading to the point of requiring a complete redo.

The Bottom Line – What's In It for Us?

These assessments will help us know how the partner is doing. That is important, for all the reasons I have described. But the most important measurement is somewhat subjective, yet it goes to the core of why DoD should undertake these projects. The important question is what U.S. forces did not have to deploy, because the partner was able (enough) to address threats in his nation and region.

The key measure of effectiveness and of the return on our investment is not what we did for the partner, or what he did on his own. Our key judgment must be what we did not have to do, because he was able to do it for himself, and by extension, for us. These programs are all about reducing risks to U.S. forces, achieving economies of scale, and putting our partners to the front.

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This how they are fundamentally different than traditional security assistance programs, whose intent is to win friends, influence regional politics, and advance U.S. foreign policy. Those programs should continue to be the purview of the State Department. But if we are developing partners to do missions so U.S. forces do not have to, – that should be Defense business – run with Defense authorities. PRISM

State Department

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton providing remarks at the Word Bank, with USAID's Deputy Administrator Don Steinberg and World Bank President Robert Zoellick looking on.