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Building Capacity or Undermining Stability? Reconsidering US Security Sector Assistance in Fragile States

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the post-9/11 era, U.S. foreign policy has placed an increasingly high level of emphasis on Department of Defense (DoD)-led security sector assistance (SSA) in fragile states. This strategic shift has been motivated by the theory that "power vacuums" and instability serve as breeding grounds for hostile nonstate actors that could threaten U.S. national security. "Building partner capacity" or "security force assistance," as these efforts have come to be called, are now a major aspect of American military engagement abroad. However, SSA has been marred by a record of failure. U.S. support to fragile state militaries has often been associated with human rights abuses, coups, large-scale corruption, and failure to perform effectively on the battlefield. In recognition of these failings, both Congress and the DoD have recently been placing an increased emphasis on pairing SSA with "institutional capacity building" (ICB) activities, which are intended to help partner states develop modern, high-functioning military institutions capable of effectively utilizing U.S. assistance while respecting the rule of law.

However, ICB is unlikely to increase the success rate of SSA because fragile states inherently lack the enabling sociological factors to enable sophisticated collective action through modern institutions. For the foreseeable future, ICB efforts are unlikely to have a meaningful effect on partner states' underlying sociologically determined capacity for creating effective militaries that respect human rights and civilian control.

Consequently, the United States should abandon the current SSA-centric strategic approach to regional stability and counterterrorism that assumes capable security forces can be created in fragile states through concerted U.S. efforts. SSA should be reserved as a tool for bolstering key regional partners with effective pre-existing institutions and reasonably strong capacity to utilize U.S. assistance effectively. Where American national security is genuinely threatened by non-state actors in fragile states, the U.S. should rely on over-the-horizon strike capabilities instead of persisting in futile efforts to create effective local security forces.

Security Sector Assistance: A Fraught Endeavor

For the better part of a century, the U.S. has provided aid to foreign militaries around the world on a massive scale. Broadly, this aid can be grouped according to two categories: (1) arms sales to foreign governments,

and (2) provision of training, advice, technical/legal assistance, logistical support, or materiel to foreign militaries and paramilitary security forces. This report focuses on the latter of these two categories, often called "security sector assistance" (SSA), a term encompassing a dizzying constellation of programs and legal authorities. Despite the complexity of this policy space, two broad paradigms of SSA stand out:[1]

1. **"Traditional" security sector assistance:** Frequently dating from the Cold War, most "traditional" SSA programs were created to bolster the ability of U.S. allies to act as regional stabilizers and balance against the geopolitical influence of adversarial powers.

2. **"Building Partner Capacity" (BPC):** Largely created after the 9/11 attacks amidst anxieties about transnational terror groups operating freely from "power vacuums," most BPC programs were established with the goal of creating capable security forces in relatively fragile states that are not traditional U.S. allies.

Most U.S. government SSA programs are administered by either the Department of State (DoS) or DoD. In the parlance of U.S. national security policy, DoS-run programs are usually termed "security assistance" (SA) while DoD-run programs are referred to as "security cooperation" (SC). Today, most "traditional" SSA programs fall under the umbrella of DoD-administered SA, while BPC programs are mainly within the domain of DoD-administered SC. In recent years, the DoD has increasingly used the term "security force assistance" (SFA) in addition to—or in place of—BPC.

The Evolution of SSA: From Cold War Allies to Frontier "Partners"

Following the successful but ad-hoc Lend-Lease program in support of the Allies during World War II, geopolitical competition with the Soviet Union provided the impetus for the U.S. to expand, codify, and institutionalize a permanent system for disbursing military aid. The basic legal framework for the contemporary arms trade and SSA regimes still relies on two major pieces of Cold War-era legislation: the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (FAA) and the Arms Export Control Act of 1976 (AECA). These laws,

and subsequent amendments, established a system for selling and transferring arms. The main programs are Foreign Military Sales (FMS), Foreign Military Financing (FMF), Direct Commercial Sales (DCS), and Excess Defense Articles (EDA). The legal framework created by the FAA and AECA also led to the creation of "traditional" (i.e., pre-9/11) SSA programs such as International Military Education and Training (IMET), International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE), Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining and Related Programs (NADR), and Peacekeeping Operations (PKO).

Often dubbed "Title 22 programs" in reference to the section of the U.S. Code where they are authorized, these efforts are largely the responsibility of DoS (though some are administered by DoD on DoS's behalf). Throughout the Cold War, the primary purpose of these programs was to help regional allies balance against the Soviet Union and other communist powers in key arenas of geopolitical competition, such as Western Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf. Infamously, U.S. training was also made available to military officers from various anti-communist Latin American dictatorships through the Army-run School of the Americas. Many of those officers were subsequently involved in coups and atrocities against civilians, including the assassination of Archbishop Óscar Romero and the massacre of over 800 civilians at El Mozote during the Salvadoran Civil War.[2]
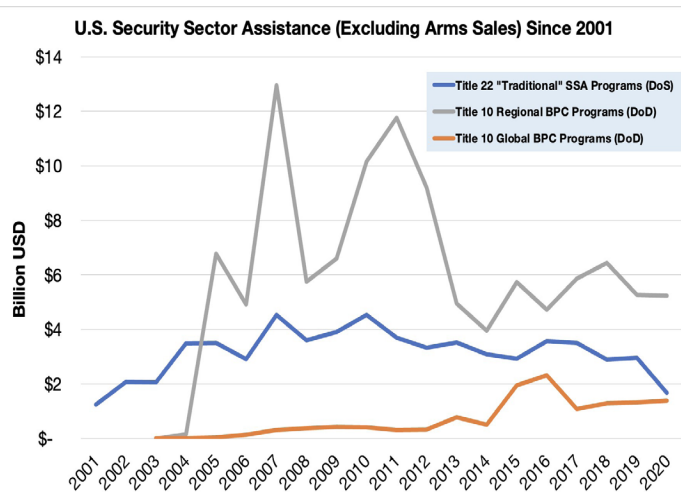
As great power competition waned in the post-Cold War era, U.S. national security officials became increasingly preoccupied with the dilemma posed by terror groups operating from the territory of fragile and failed states. The 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), released just weeks after the 9/11 attacks, identified "threats emanating from the territories of weak and failing states" as a major emerging trend.[3] The 2001 QDR linked this threat to the "diminishing protection afforded by geographic distance."[4] The implication was clear: weak governance anywhere in the world posed a threat to national security. A new age of transnational terrorism had arrived, enabled by global communication and transportation networks. Nearly a decade later, defense secretary Robert Gates called failing states "the main security challenge of our time."[5]

In response, U.S. policymakers have increasingly

sought to wield SSA as a remedy for weak governance and poor security institutions in nations that are not traditional U.S. allies but are nonetheless viewed as pivotal theaters in the War on Terror. Beginning with the 2006 QDR, the DoD came to describe this new SSA paradigm as "building partner capacity" (BPC). [6] Over the past two decades, Congress has authorized a significant number of new SSA programs aimed at strengthening the military capabilities of fragile states, largely under the sole authority of the DoD, pursuant to Title 10 of the U.S. Code.

Some BPC programs are designed to address a specific threat in a particular country or region and are usually tied to a major ongoing U.S. operation, with prominent examples including the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund, the Iraq Security Forces Fund, and the (now obsolete) Afghan Security Forces Fund. There are also "global" BPC programs that can be used to provide training or other assistance at the discretion of the regional Unified Combatant Commands (CCMDs) with the approval of DoD leadership. The broadest and most flexible global BPC program is authorized by 10 U.S.C. 333 ("Foreign Security Forces: Authority to Build Capacity") and is often simply called "global train and equip" or "Section 333." Other major global programs include the Combatting Terrorism Fellowship Program, the Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund, and Global Lift and Sustain. While the landscape of BPC programs and authorities is complex and ever shifting, the goal remains the same: enable the U.S. military to create partner forces capable of establishing security and disrupting the operations of hostile nonstate actors.

Figure 1

U.S. Security Sector Assistance (Excluding Arms Sales) Since 2001

In the wake of 9/11 and the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, spending on Title 10 DoD-led BPC activities rapidly overtook "traditional" Title 22 DoS-led security assistance. Title 22 outlays have generally hovered between $2 billion and $4 billion per year since 2001. Meanwhile, regional Title 10 outlays exceeded Title 22 outlays in every year since 2005. Regional Title 10 assistance reached its highest levels from 2007 to 2013, likely reflecting efforts to consolidate gains following the 2007 Iraq troop surge, as well as the Obama administration's attempts to shift responsibility for Afghan counterinsurgency missions to local security forces following the troop surges of 2009-2010. Assistance to partners in the fight against ISIS has kept regional Title 10 spending levels elevated, albeit down from the highs seen during the Bush II and Obama administrations.

While originally a negligible portion of SSA programming, spending on assistance provided under DoD's global Title 10 authorities has dramatically increased since 2014. Due to their flexibility, authorities such as Section 333 have increasingly been used by CCMDs to provide training and other assistance to a wide range of non-traditional partner nations, largely in the Middle East, Africa, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe. By 2020, global Title 10 BPC spending had nearly converged with spending on Title 22 assistance. With U.S. assistance to Afghanistan ending after the August 2021 Taliban takeover and the war on ISIS winding down, global Title 10 programs like Section 333 are likely to make up an ever-larger share of DoD's SSA activities, particularly given concerns about the proliferation of terror groups beyond the Middle East.

SSA in Fragile States: Fleeting Successes, Many Failures

In the post-9/11 BPC paradigm, SSA is a particularly fraught endeavor because U.S. assistance is intention-

ally flowing toward many "fragile states" with poorly functioning institutions. While there is no single standard for identifying a "fragile" or "weak" state, there are numerous political, economic, and social factors that are often collectively viewed as indicators of state fragility. The Fund for Peace, a think tank that produces the widely cited Fragile States Index, quantifies state fragility by comparing 12 metrics such as security and repression, factionalization of political elites, state legitimacy, adherence to the rule of law, poverty, and internal migration pressures.[7]

Fragile state militaries often have poor technical proficiency and bureaucratic capacity. In this environment, creating positive outcomes from military assistance is enormously challenging. Critics have noted the tendency for U.S. SSA efforts in fragile states to produce so-called "Faberge egg" militaries– "expensively built…but easily broken by insurgents."[8] The two marquee SSA projects of the post-9/11 era—the attempts to create effective, self-sustaining militaries in Iraq and Afghanistan—ended in disastrous failure at the hands of insurgent groups relying on basic weaponry and lacking advanced training.

There are many reasons why SSA in fragile states can fail to produce well-functioning militaries. Such states often cannot afford the expensive maintenance required to service U.S.-provided military equipment. Performing the necessary maintenance may also be too technically challenging for the recipient military, and American maintenance contractors cannot always be brought on site as an alternative.[9] Consequently, American-provided equipment often goes underutilized.

Alternatively, U.S. materiel and funding may simply be stolen. SSA typically features a sudden infusion of cash and valuable equipment into many extremely poor societies, creating immense incentives for corruption and theft. U.S.-backed security forces in Afghanistan were notorious for the prevalence of "ghost soldiers" invented by corrupt officers to pocket funds meant to pay soldier salaries.[10] Hundreds of thousands of small arms provided to the Afghan and Iraqi militaries are unaccounted for, and many were likely stolen and sold on the black market.[11]

Fragile state militaries may focus more on repressing political opponents of the regime than on protecting against external threats, and often lack respect for civilian control of the military. With respect to the question of SSA's effect on political stability, research has found discouraging results. Despite billions of dollars and years of engagement, a RAND Corporation study of American SSA activities in Africa found no statistically significant overall improvement in incidences of political violence since the end of the Cold War.[12] Recent SSA efforts in the Sahel countries of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have not been able to halt a major increase in extremist violence.[13]

Moreover, SSA sometimes has the perverse effect of undermining stability and good governance by enabling recipient militaries to increase violent repression of political enemies. In nations where the rule of law and commitment to human rights norms are weak, U.S. assistance can simply empower military dictatorships. Research has found that increases in military aid in fragile, post-conflict states are causally linked to increased frequency of human rights abuses.[14] There is also correlational evidence that states receiving U.S. military assistance do worse on human rights metrics.[15] For instance, American-trained and equipped forces loyal to Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni have been accused of extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, and torture.[16] Political repression, in turn, often begets further radicalization and militancy. This dynamic has been observed in Kenya, where backlash against heavy-handed counterterrorism operations by U.S.-trained forces has served as a major recruiting boon for al-Shabaab.[17]

Given the poor state of civil-military relations in many fragile states, SSA can also shift power to security forces at the expense of elected civilian authorities. In extreme cases, U.S.-trained military officers have deposed civilian governments. Since 2008, U.S.-supported militaries have attempted nine coups in West Africa alone (at least eight of them were successful): three in Mali, three in Burkina Faso, and one each in Guinea, Mauritania, and the Gambia.[18] This association holds beyond these cases, with one study of U.S. military training in 189 countries from 1970-2009 finding subsequent increases in the probability of coups.[19] By emboldening recipient militaries to undermine civilian control and increase violent repression, SSA efforts often exacerbate the very instability they are meant to solve.

Institutional Capacity Building to the Rescue?

In recent years, the manifest failings of SSA efforts have begun to spur nascent reform efforts. U.S. policymakers are increasingly grappling with the realization that equipment, funding, and training cannot be effectively utilized by weak defense institutions with poorly developed norms against repression and corruption. In an attempt to overcome these challenges, the national security community has coalesced around a new concept: ICB.

The DoD describes ICB as any activities that "directly support partner nation efforts to improve security sector governance and core management competencies."[20] This definition encompasses both "governance" issues (e.g., respect for human rights and civilian control) and "management" issues (e.g., bureaucratic capabilities necessary for operating a modern military). Through the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), Congress mandated that all Section 333 BPC activities must be accompanied by a "program of institutional capacity building" to help recipient nations manage a modern military organization.[21] The 2018 NDAA also required DoD to provide training on the law of war, human rights, the rule of law, and civil-military relations.[22] More recently, the 2022 NDAA required all CCMDs to incorporate ICB into their security cooperation strategies.[23]

The DoD has also been undertaking efforts to improve the professionalism and sophistication of its security cooperation efforts. The Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), which manages many of the DoD's foreign assistance programs, has created the Defense Security Cooperation University (DSCU) to improve the management skills of DoD civilians and service members who work on security cooperation.[24] In 2019, DSCU established the Institute for Security Governance, a dedicated academic center for the development of ICB practices.[25] The Army has also created dedicated Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs) for each geographic CCMD, allowing security cooperation activities to be carried out by military units with specialized training and a sole focus on the BPC mission.

The Deep Roots of Dysfunction: Why ICB is Unlikely to Succeed

While admirable, these efforts rely on the problematic assumption that failed SSA efforts in weak states stem primarily from problems of implementation. By presenting ICB as the missing ingredient to an otherwise successful SSA recipe, policymakers are evading the harder first-order question: practically speaking, does the United States have any ability to "fix" weak, corrupt, and repressive military institutions at all? Based on the available evidence, it appears unlikely that the deeply-rooted sociological factors that contribute to state fragility–weak institutions, underdeveloped norms, or corruption–can be altered by U.S. intervention in any meaningful way, at least not within a strategically-relevant timeframe.

What Makes States Fragile?

An effective and law-abiding military is just one example of the numerous sophisticated institutions that constitute modern bureaucratic states. Nobel laureate economist Douglass C. North famously defined institutions as "humanly devised constraints…that create order and reduce uncertainty."[26] The constraints may be informal (taboos, customs, traditions, social sanctions) or formal (laws, regulations, policies), but either way are intended to create predictable patterns of behavior to improve the capacity for cooperation. A properly functioning institution must solve the "collective action problem" first described by Mancur Olson.[27] Namely, although a group may achieve the optimal outcome by working together, individual members of the group have strong incentives to "free ride" on the efforts of others. For example, militaries are most effective when properly trained, but individual officers may be tempted to steal training funds and hope their actions go unnoticed. If enough funds are stolen because the "free-riding" corrupt officers go unpunished, fewer soldiers receive training and military effectiveness suffers.

Collective action problems are addressed most effectively when there is an enforced set of implicit norms or explicit rules for punishing free riders, reducing incentives to defect from the collective mission and undermine the group. A large amount of interdisciplinary research in political science, economics, and

sociology has examined the question of how institutions capable of sustaining collective action develop. Often, informal norms are entirely sufficient. In a notable example, 11th-century Maghrebi Jewish traders managed to conduct sophisticated commercial transactions across thousands of miles in the absence of a formal legal system for enforcing contracts of resolving disputes.[28] Informal enforcement systems rely on the ability of the wronged individual(s) to identify the norm violator, who is then subjected to proportional social sanction (shunning, loss of reputation, or even violence) by their immediate community. This normative system is often called "weak reciprocity," and is prevalent among tightly knit ethnic, religions, or tribal communities where norm violators can be easily identified and punished.

However, norms of weak reciprocity cannot sustain sophisticated collective action at higher levels of aggregation (such as entire governments or societies), where many interactions happen between complete strangers, who frequently share few to no common group affinities that could serve as channels for informal sanction. This, in theory, is when the role of the state becomes important. As a third-party institution with no religious, ethnic, or clan commitments, agents of the state can disinterestedly enforce neutral rules that mediate interactions between individuals connected only by the loose ties of common citizenship.

Substantial scholarship indicates that state institutions capable of sophisticated collective action are possible only when norms of "weak" reciprocity are replaced with norms of "strong" reciprocity.[29] In a society characterized by strong reciprocity, norms dictate that *disinterested strangers* should punish norm violators as a matter of principle, even if they were not personally wronged. This normative framework is also called "altruistic punishment" because enforcing norms becomes, on some level, an "altruistic" act by third parties.[30] Strangers can thus better cooperate on the basis of trust created by the knowledge that their relationship is backstopped by recourse to neutral arbitration (i.e., the state and the rule of law), and they do not need to rely on complex confidence-building measures or maintain the ability to exact reciprocal retaliation if wronged.

Societies governed by systems of weak reciprocity typically do not possess this normative framework that allows for the state to serve as a neutral enforcer. Where norms of "altruistic punishment" aren't widely present, the state is not trusted to be impartial, and political actors may not believe it is desirable (or even possible) for the state to act as a disinterested third party. Consequently, governance in less-developed societies is often characterized by "clientelism" or "neopatrimonialism," in which the state is co-opted by self-interested parties to distribute material benefits in exchange for political support.[31] This does not make the state "illegitimate" or mean that it does not operate according to a set of rules, but it does mean that the "formal" state system often simply reproduces the informal structures of weak reciprocity, limiting its effectiveness.

Viewed through this lens, many of the pathologies of militaries in weak states can be understood simply as rational responses to locally prevailing societal norms. For instance, many fragile-state militaries exhibit signs of "coup proofing" measures designed to ensure the loyalty of security forces. In societies where no norms dictate that the military should operate as a neutral actor subject to the rule of law, political leaders are rightly sensitive to the threat posed by opportunistic officers. In response, officers are frequently promoted based on political, ethnic, or clan affinity rather than merit.[32] Military command structures may also be hierarchical, with junior officers given limited initiative and situational awareness. This may hinder efforts to coordinate large-scale coup attempts, but also limits battlefield effectiveness. Moreover, many instances of military "corruption" are not crimes of opportunity, but calculated payments to buy off key actors within political systems that operate according to a clientelistic logic of weak reciprocity.

Can Weak Institutions be Fixed?

The entire enterprise of SSA in weak states, including newfound efforts to emphasize ICB, rests on the premise that it is possible to turn weak institutions into strong institutions through the concerted application of U.S. assistance. Unfortunately, the available evidence casts significant doubt on this assumption. There is no academic consensus on why certain societies have not developed highly functioning institutions, but suggestive evidence points to several factors, none of which are easily altered through U.S.

policy.

Firstly, many fragile states are postcolonial societies where systems of indigenous governance were destroyed by imperial powers, who left behind low-quality extractive institutions.[33] The corrosive institutional effects of a century (or more) of colonial maladministration are not easily reversed. Secondly, there is evidence that the likelihood of altruistic cooperation, and thus the ability to sustain highly functioning institutions, varies strongly with "fluid" intelligence (i.e., intelligence that is not based on factual knowledge).[34] Beyond widespread illiteracy—itself a major barrier to developing bureaucratic capacity—certain measures of population-wide average intelligence are depressed in many fragile states, likely due to a combination of influences such as malnutrition and higher infectious disease burdens, both of which negatively impact adolescent brain development.[35] Thirdly, many fragile states govern societies characterized by strong kinship ties and high rates of endogamy (marriage only within one's clan grouping, including cousin marriage). Research has suggested that clan-based societies are more likely to enforce norms through "weakly reciprocal" acts of shaming and revenge-taking, rather than relying on "altruistic" enforcement of neutral rules.[36]

These are unlikely to be the sole factors preventing the emergence of the most advanced forms of collective action in fragile states, including modern and effective security forces. However, they do clearly demonstrate how broad patterns of institutional weakness are rooted in extremely deep sociological factors that are not amenable to being altered on timescales that are strategically meaningful for U.S. interests. Efforts to suppress infectious disease and eliminate food insecurity, for instance, would almost certainly improve the conditions for institutional development. But the returns to such efforts would likely come decades in the future, as generational cohorts less affected by malnutrition and disease age into adulthood. Likewise, family structures are not entirely immutable, but evidence suggests that they are extremely deeply conserved social phenomena with origins in pre-modern economic patterns.[37]

Moreover, the historical success record of U.S. security cooperation activities broadly matches these theoretical expectations. A 2015 RAND Corporation study of U.S. BPC activities concluded that successes were most common where partner nations "demonstrated political cohesion and capability sufficient to exercising legitimate governance in their respective territories."[38] In contrast, "instances in which BPC efforts were least successful relative to overall strategic aims tended to occur in fragile, weak, or war-torn states that lacked the capacity for legitimate governance."[39] In other words, BPC successes were largely possible only where partner nations already had decently functioning state institutions. The list of failures cited by the RAND Corporation–Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Mali, and the African Union Mission in Somalia (ANISOM)–is replete with examples of nations with levels of institutional weakness varying from moderate to extreme.

In contrast, the best-known post-World War II security cooperation success stories–Germany and Japan–were highly advanced industrial societies with comparatively high levels of state capacity. More recently, Ukraine has so far been highly effective in utilizing U.S. security assistance and training in prosecuting its defense against Russia's 2022 invasion. While by no means free from corruption or clientelism, Ukraine retains a reasonable amount of bureaucratic capacity from its time as the industrial heartland of the Soviet Union and the legitimacy of the elected government is not widely in question. Moreover, Ukraine's successful utilization of military assistance is taking place against the backdrop of an existential external threat, in stark contrast to the internal security missions (e.g., counterterrorism and counternarcotics) most relevant to fragile state beneficiaries of many SSA efforts.

Toward a Limited Strategic Role for SSA

Given both theoretical expectations and the empirical record, the United States should abandon building the capacity of fragile state military forces as a major strategic goal of its SSA approach. There is very little evidence that SSA efforts, even when combined with a focus on ICB, are likely to succeed in creating effective, law-abiding militaries in societies where underlying sociological conditions are not conducive to the development of strong state institutions. Those conditions—poverty, hunger, disease, and endoga-

mous family structures—are unlikely to be meaningfully altered by U.S. policy interventions within a reasonable timeframe, if at all. Ultimately, military institutions in fragile states are weak for the same reasons all institutions in fragile states are weak, and U.S. assistance to the security sector alone, even assistance that is attentive to local political and cultural dynamics, does nothing to solve the challenge of state fragility writ large.

In fact, military aid to fragile states likely undermines U.S. security interests in many cases. Recipients of SSA frequently intensify their efforts to repress internal political rivals or depose civilian governments they dislike. This creates rather than reduces violence and instability, and breeds resentment that may increase sympathy for terrorist causes. Similarly, lost or stolen U.S. armaments frequently find their way into the hands of hostile actors and sustain the economy of violence that characterizes many fragile states. Consequently, military aid can ironically be incredibly corrosive to stated U.S. foreign policy objectives such as conflict stabilization, nonproliferation, counterterrorism, and good governance.

Implementing the Shift to Limited SSA

Proposals for reforming SSA policy frequently center around a common suggestion: curtailing DoD's independent security cooperation activities and returning primary responsibility for most foreign military engagement to DoS.[40] This is an understandable suggestion given DoS's reputation for greater sensitivity to concerns around political stability and human rights, as well as the department's role in providing "traditional" Title 22 security cooperation to established U.S. allies.

However, the misguided provision of SSA to fragile states is fundamentally a problem of policy, not of the division of responsibilities within the American foreign policy bureaucracy. Even if programs such as Section 333 were transferred to DoS's jurisdiction, the top-level imperative to deliver risky assistance to fragile states would remain unchanged as long as top policymakers present SSA as a key bulwark against the emergence of safe havens for hostile nonstate actors. Moreover, it is unclear that DoS would subject proposed SSA efforts to substantially stricter scrutiny than DoD. Indeed, a substantial amount of DoS-ad-

ministered Title 22 security assistance currently flows through the IMET and NADR programs to problematic recipients such Niger, Somalia, and South Sudan.[41] DoS also has a spotty record of enforcing "Leahy Law" restrictions against providing foreign aid to military units accused of human rights abuses.[42] Finally, DoS does not have a strong institutional culture of conducting "operational" activities and program management, and might need to continue relying on DoD for implementation assistance regardless of each organization's responsibilities on paper.[43]

Instead of simply shifting full responsibility for SSA back to DoS, a more fundamental transformation of U.S. security cooperation policy is necessary. Rather than a corrective for poor institutions and "power vacuums," U.S. foreign policy officials must begin to understand that SSA in fragile states rarely results in positive outcomes and frequently leads to deterioration of governance and stability. To realize this altered approach to SSA, this report makes four major policy suggestions:

1. **Create an index of state fragility to guide SSA decision-making.** While there is no universally accepted measure of "institutional strength," the U.S. government should establish an evidence-based index of state fragility for use in identifying potentially risky SSA recipients. This index can be modeled on existing efforts such as the Fund for Peace's Fragile States Index and the Cato Institute's Arms Sales Risk Index, while also incorporating insights from non-public intelligence assessments. At minimum, the index should consider factors such as:
   - State capacity and bureaucratic sophistication
   - Political legitimacy of the *de jure* government
   - Civilian control of the military
   - Prevalence of corruption
   - External security threats
   - Recent history of civil war

2. **Restrict SSA activities in states that fail to meet minimum standards for institutional quality, with exceptions requiring presidential-level approval.** Given the lack of evidence that SSA is effective in fragile states,

U.S. policy should restrict the provision of SSA to states which fail to meet a minimum threshold of institutional quality on the U.S. government's state fragility index. Establishing a bright line rule requiring White House approval for SSA efforts in states that fail to achieve a certain level of institutional quality would bring needed scrutiny to an overly opaque and decentralized process, allowing high-level policymakers to halt proposed SSA with an unfavorable risk-reward ratio. The minimum level of institutional quality should be determined by the National Security Council (NSC) with approval from the president and calibrated to reflect the administration's risk tolerance. This policy should likely exempt SSA activities in support of peacekeeping missions in fragile states, particularly when the recipient is a multinational force with no local political interests.

3. **Revoke DoD's independent authority to conduct SSA and establish an interagency approval process.** Much of the most problematic DoD SSA in fragile states is conducted by geographic CCMDs, with perfunctory approval from the Secretary of Defense. This decentralized process lacks sufficient checks and balances, with little thought given to questions of political stability, state capacity, or human rights. The White House should re-centralize foreign military aid governance by requiring all SSA efforts be approved by a working group consisting of representatives from, at minimum, DoS, DoD, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The working group should be responsible for evaluating both the benefits and risks of proposed SSA activities, while ensuring no SSA flows to states failing to meet the minimum fragility index cutoff established by the NSC.

4. **Increase non-military aid and diplomatic engagement in fragile states.** While SSA is unlikely to be an appropriate tool for improving governance and stability, diplomatic engagement and development aid should play a larger role in America's approach to fragile states. The United States can play a valuable role mediating political disputes, negotiating settlements, suggesting institutional reforms, and strengthening civil society—all of which can help stabilize societies without perversely strengthening the hand of security forces that are frequently brutal and incompetent. U.S.-provided development aid can also help eradicate extreme poverty, hunger, and severe infectious disease, all of which serve to hamper the development of strong governing institutions and modern societies.

What about Counterterrorism?

The criteria above would likely preclude the U.S. from providing SSA to a substantial number of nations where it has recently engaged in BPC activities, particularly those focused on counterterrorism in Africa and the Middle East. Those who hold to the original justification for BPC might argue that ceasing to bolster the militaries of local proxies would leave the U.S. vulnerable to threats metastasizing from the world's poorly governed spaces, or else require deploying U.S. troops to conduct counterterrorism missions directly.

These objections are not compelling. First, contrary to the assumptions that have guided most of U.S. strategy in the War on Terror era, there is no strong evidence of an upward trend in threats from non-state actors relative to any other period in modern American history.[44] Most of the terror groups that have triggered the increased U.S. emphasis on BPC in the Middle East, the Sahel, and Sub-Saharan Africa have never conducted a successful attack on the U.S. homeland. On the contrary, "lone wolf" terror attacks have become increasingly common in the internet age and denying a terror group physical territory by strengthening regional security forces does nothing to address this threat.[45] Moreover, there is substantial evidence that U.S. security cooperation may actually increase the risk of terrorism by generating resentment against political repression by corrupt and trigger-happy militaries. In the rare cases where a genuinely imminent threat does emerge, the U.S. should rely on over-the-horizon counterterrorism actions conducted by U.S. forces directly.[46]

Conclusion: A Better Strategy for SSA

Despite its drawbacks in fragile state contexts, security cooperation can be a valuable tool for advancing other core U.S. interests. In particular, U.S. assistance can effectively bolster the military capabilities of key allies and partners to balance against bids for regional hegemony by revisionist states and can also increase partner interoperability with U.S. forces. There are numerous key U.S. partners—the Baltics, Poland, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and others—whose militaries serve as key linchpins of regional stability and deterrence. Crucially, these states already have the capacity to effectively utilize U.S. funding, equipment, and training, precluding the need for costly and time-consuming ICB efforts. Done right, SSA can be a key enabler for a U.S. grand strategy of offshore balancing, equipping second-tier powers to take increased responsibility for regional security and allowing the U.S. to retrench from its expansive forward-deployed military posture.

Such a strategic reorientation would effectively end the era of SSA in fragile states. That said, there is no reason for the U.S. to pull back from nonmilitary forms of engagement with less-developed countries. A renewed focus on development aid aimed at alleviating hunger, lowering the burden of infectious disease, and spurring economic growth would undoubtedly have positive spillover effects in the realms of security and governance. Yet it may be decades before those spillover effects manifest in the form of an institutional environment capable of sustaining good governance and a modern, law-abiding security apparatus. Until that time, the U.S would be wise to avoid the temptation to conjure capable militaries where they likely cannot exist.

Endnotes

1   SSA terminology is often broad and poorly defined, with numerous overlapping terms describing similar concepts. For one attempt to categorize SSA programs according to the "traditional" and "BPC" paradigms, see Kathleen J. McInnis and Nathan J. Lucas, "What Is 'Building Partner Capacity?' Issues for Congress" (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, December 18, 2015), https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R44313.pdf, 9-11.

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