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US Security Cooperation: Panacea or Siren Song?

By Luke R. Donohue

Synopsis

Security Cooperation as a military concept or doctrine in US strategic thinking must always bear in mind the needs of the US partners if burden-sharing is to be an effective strategy.

Commentary

HOW CAN the United States ensure that its Security Cooperation investments - defined as activities to encourage and enable international partners to work with the US to achieve strategic objectives - will strengthen Indo-Pacific regional security? The 2015 National Military Strategy suggests the US military faces a critical moment of truth: military spending decreasing right at the time it faces increasingly agile and adaptive threats. Further, the strategy argues that the era of both competitors and partners benefiting from decades of US-provided economic and defence security may be coming to a close and it is time for partners to share the burden of security.

However, the means to accomplish a burden-sharing strategy remain finite and the risk for miscalculation continues to rise. Budget challenges, an emergent China, and a belligerent North Korea all shape regional defence posture. The US Department of Defence and Services leadership must consider how best to strike a balance in maintaining military readiness to “fight tonight,” and build partner readiness and resolve.

Avoiding the siren song

As Security Cooperation continues to gain prominence as the strategic solution to find such a balance, it is only with the right leadership, renewed purpose, and unity

of effort that Security Cooperation can produce the desired result. Without these, the Security Cooperation enterprise will continue answering the siren song of fix-all authorities hampering the US and its partners in establishing a new architecture that achieves shared security.

Secretary of Defence Ashton Carter, in his comments at the 14th Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2015 in Singapore, stated that to achieve a strong, capable, and connected regional architecture that allows Asia-Pacific peoples and nations to prosper and rise, the architecture must be action-oriented, inclusive and transparent. It is no longer tenable to exclusively prepare the US military to “fight tonight,” and not considering the security needs, interests, and contributions of partner nations. The Defence Department can, and must, strengthen security and ensure stability in the Indo-Pacific region by instituting an agile and inclusive Security Cooperation strategy that supports both the US and partner nations.

The challenge in establishing an inclusive strategy is how to best leverage the patchwork of treaty alliances, regional constructs, and emerging partners to create a viable and long-lasting architecture. It is the very network of nations in this proposed architecture that must shape the application of the Security Cooperation tools. In such a diverse theatre with many historical cleavages, it is essential that the US attentively listen and pragmatically respond to a partner “demand signal” on what capability and capacity it wants, understanding what it can absorb, and the leverage areas of mutual interest.

In order to do so effectively, the US must articulate the plan of action by country, region, domain, and function to ensure the best application of resources towards building employable partner capability.

Guiding principles

As the US moves to establish an architecture comprising enabled security providers, the enterprise must remember this is not solely about arms sales and agreements, rather the proper application of Security Cooperation tools and authorities to shape a viable security architecture. At Shangri-La, Secretary Carter laid out the guiding principles framing the direction and providing guidance to plan and execute Security Cooperation in support of a regional architecture.

The architecture must “Reaffirm the guiding principles and rules,” that have maintained peace and stability since the end of WWII. The Security Cooperation enterprise must understand these principles and rules as they drive our national level policy decisions. If the Security Cooperation enterprise fails to do so, this challenges US credibility and reduces Security Cooperation efficacy.

Firstly, regional institutions, such as ASEAN, merit additional US focus and resources to support multilateral approaches to security. The US recognises the centrality of regional institutions in contributing to stability and security in the region and the more it invests in their efficacy in being a security provider, the more effective the strategy becomes.

Former US Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel commented that as political,

economic and security trends across Southeast Asia evolved, “the Obama administration is responding to the strong interests from leaders and publics for increased security cooperation, economic engagement, and support of ASEAN efforts to adhere to rules and norms in support of regional security and prosperity”.

Secondly, the treaty alliances remain the cornerstone of any architecture going forward. Japan, South Korea, and Australia are forging ahead in exporting security in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief, Peacekeeping, Counter Piracy and Maritime Security capacity building. Here in lies the opportunity to partner with them to further export security in other areas as well - from arms export to cyber security. The US must embrace partners who demonstrate a willingness to share in the security burden, and together lay the groundwork for a burden-sharing architecture. “Strengthening relationships” to “enhancing the capacities of the regional security architecture,” fall flat if the US strategy lacks the cohesion necessary to apply and sequence resources effectively on balance with partner interests.

Thirdly, the US must consider how to employ the range of Security Cooperation resources on properly shaping militaries and building specific capabilities to share in our security commitments in region. In Asia, achieving this is even more challenging as there is not a NATO-like security alliance, or a unifying threat, yet. Focusing efforts on building partner employable capability will build partner nation confidence, and work to establish partner resolve to contribute within the desired architecture.

Standing shoulder to shoulder

Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey wrote in Foreign Policy: “In Asia, states are rapidly expanding their militaries while territorial disputes heighten the risk of miscalculation...Traditional power-on-power relationships will shape Asia’s future and ultimately determine whether it becomes the economic engine of the 21st century or a zone of interstate conflict.”

In Asia today, there is never a more important time to establish unity of effort within our enterprise and with our partners. Resources are finite; ensuring we build the right capabilities requires investment in building partner capabilities on balance to our own in order to reduce risk. Achieving this will resolutely reaffirm our alliances, solidify emerging relationships, and be seen as a US standing shoulder to shoulder with the region.

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