

Partners, Not Proxies

Capacity Building in Hybrid Warfare

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THE ISSUE

- Security partners operate on the front lines of hybrid warfare environments.
- The United States and its allies lack a coherent approach for integrating partners into civilian-led, competitive strategies against rivals who leverage hybrid warfare tools.
- A principled approach to selecting and investing in partners, rather than casting them as proxies, will increase U.S. and allied strategic action and operational effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

The United States, Canada, and their allies are grappling with how best to build security partner capacity in hybrid warfare environments. In a resurgence of competition between states, actors such as China, Russia, and Iran increasingly use tools ranging from disinformation and cyberattacks to economic coercion and proxy warfare to further their interests. They conduct activities that incur low costs and suffer little reputational or accountability blowback while doing so. In this environment, there is a broad spectrum of threats with which the United States and its allies must contend, often with significant ambiguity. Policy and legal frameworks have not kept pace with the evolving threats. This poses challenges for how allies engage and sustain security partnerships.

Based on CSIS's prior work on [gray zone competition](#), "hybrid warfare" is defined as "an effort or series of efforts intended to advance one's security objectives at the expense of a rival using means beyond those associated with routine statecraft and short of means associated with direct mili-

tary conflict." Informed by CSIS's research on [security-sector reform](#), "capacity building" includes training, advising, equipping, exercises, education, exchanges, and institution building of partner security forces.

The United States, Canada, and other like-minded allied countries and democracies—referred to henceforth as "the allies"—incur higher risks in using these tools, as they must do so in accordance with their principles, global norms, taxpayer accountability, and pursuit of strategic aims. As the allies seek to compete with rivals that do not play by the same rules, there may be a strong policy impulse to bypass accountability checks in working with partners. In fact, these are the very situations in which the allies should distinguish themselves, harnessing their principles as an asymmetric advantage.

The allies should not lose sight that their laws, principles, and values are [strategic advantages](#) in hybrid environments. Competitors' autocratic, deceptive, and extra-legal hybrid tactics can create significant challenges for allied foreign policy. However, responding in like manner will change the

character of the allies, diminishing their appeal not only to other countries but to their own citizens. Thus, even as the allies engage in hybrid tactics, they should do so in accordance with their principles.

As the allies seek to compete with rivals that do not play by the same rules, there may be a strong policy impulse to bypass accountability checks in working with partners.

Security partnerships are only one important tool for competing in hybrid environments, but they are often overused and emphasized in allied strategies—particularly those led by the United States—when non-security tools may be better fit for purpose. In fact, an integrated campaign approach that elevates information, diplomacy, economic incentives, and private-sector and civil society engagement tools will be far more effective than using security tools alone in countering rivals' hybrid activities. Focusing on a selective and principled approach to security capacity building will help identify targeted opportunities to buttress this broader, integrated campaign approach.

The CSIS Cooperative Defense Project conducted more than 40 individual interviews and convened a virtual private workshop with a diverse range of experts to understand the current approach to capacity building, uncover the implications of conducting these activities in hybrid environments, and illuminate recommendations for how to pursue partnerships in a principled manner.

WHY HYBRID ENVIRONMENTS ARE CHALLENGING

States such as Russia, China, and Iran seek to increase their own power and influence by leveraging fissures and gaps in both the countries they seek to influence as well as rivals they compete against, often by deploying tools and techniques that fall below the threshold of conventional war. Defining the context in which rivals operate, and the threats that they pose, helps provide a better understanding of the hybrid environment in which the allies and partners operate.

PERMISSIVE AND EXPLOITATIVE CONTEXTS

Fragile states that face internal security challenges—or, in more extreme cases, civil wars—are highly susceptible to hybrid warfare threats. Political instability and warring

local factions in countries such as Syria and Yemen make for permissive environments where actors such as Russia and Iran have the ability to operate with near impunity and pose significant challenges to the allies and their partners. Similarly, in states where power and influence are contested by external actors—Lebanon, for instance, where Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United States have all had varying levels of involvement over the years—rivals using hybrid tactics are able to fill pockets of power vacuums and increase their influence in a world that is becoming more conflict-prone. States with governance challenges or authoritarian leanings, even if they are fairly stable in comparison to the likes of Syria and Yemen, can still provide opportunities and leverage for rivals.

Changes in technology may also be harnessed in exploitative ways for hybrid warfare activity. As actors such as Russia and China improve their technological capabilities, they are able to devise ways of consolidating power, shoring up influence, and challenging competitors that are increasingly advanced, ranging from tracking and surveillance methods to more kinetic applications, which, even when below the threshold of conventional war, are precise and effective.

On a global level, ongoing geopolitical, economic, and normative shifts in the international system contribute to greater pervasiveness of hybrid warfare activity. With U.S. hegemonic power diminishing, the international system is becoming increasingly multipolar, with China and Russia emerging as competitors to the United States, while other states including Iran and North Korea are vying for more regional influence to counteract the influence of the United States and its allies.

The decline of U.S. power can be attributed to several key factors. Increased domestic constraints, particularly in light of the global financial crisis beginning in 2008, and the after-effects of nearly two decades of continuous conflict since the September 11, 2001 attacks have rendered the United States weaker than the pre-9/11 era. Additionally, the seismic political shifts caused by recent U.S. election cycles and resultant shifting of priorities have led to a U.S. withdrawal from leadership in many facets of the international system, leaving long-standing alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in doubt and causing allies such as Germany to scramble and fill the leadership void. Relatedly, the war-weariness of the U.S. public has resulted in a decreased willingness to use conventional warfare capabilities and a higher likelihood of using hybrid warfare tools.

EVOLVING THREATS

Previous CSIS work on hybrid warfare threats or “gray zone” approaches details a number of tools being deployed by actors such as Russia, China, and Iran to consolidate power and challenge U.S. and allied influence. Some of the most important and relevant tools to this study—as it pertains to contexts where the allies and their partners may seek to build partner capacity—are as follows:

Disinformation and Misinformation Operations

Information is perhaps the most important tool to be leveraged in hybrid warfare contexts, and competitors have honed their abilities to manipulate and weaponize information to wield power, gain influence, and counter allied narratives. Iran [deploys information](#) internally, to maintain the government’s primacy by tightly controlling and disseminating content and information within the country, and externally, at times, to project an outsized image of Iranian power and influence and at other times to paint itself as a passive victim of the U.S. sanctions regime. Meanwhile, Russian [troll farms](#) and Chinese [propaganda, leveraging social media](#) to influence global audiences, [chip away](#) at allied legitimacy and narratives.

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Political and Economic Coercion

Russia has exercised political coercion against the allies most effectively in the form of [election interference](#), leveraging the aforementioned troll farms to influence domestic voters in favor of certain candidates or sow discord within political parties. China also has leveraged practices that are coercive in nature, particularly in the form of the [Belt and Road Initiative](#) (BRI), to expand its base of influence and exploit deals with participant countries—its “[debt-trap diplomacy](#)”—to shape their policies toward Chinese benefit and interests. Both types of coercion work to erode the status quo, shifting the balance of power previously enjoyed by the allies, and increasing opportunities for rivals using hybrid tactics.

Cyber and Space Operations

As rivals advance their technological capabilities, they are able to pose a threat to the allies in the form of tactics such as cyberattacks and space operations. Russia, China, and Iran have been actively launching major [cyberattacks](#) against allied and partner interests over the past decade, with targets ranging from banks and businesses to academic institutions and government agencies. Hybrid [space operations](#) include actions such as jamming GPS signals and transmitting fake GPS signals, also known as “spoofing.” These tactics have been used by both Russia and China outside of combat with increasing aptitude and may become tools of choice for other actors as well, particularly with the increasing availability of commercial signal jamming technology.

Proxies and State-controlled Forces

The use of proxies and state-controlled forces to undertake kinetic action below the threshold of all-out war has been an important hybrid warfare tool throughout history and has become much more pervasive in current hybrid warfare environments. Russia’s “[little green men](#)” in Ukraine, Iran’s “[axis of resistance](#)” militia and paramilitary network throughout the Levant, and China’s “civilian” [fishing boats](#) contesting in the South China Sea are all examples of varying levels of rivals’ support for or command and control of proxy forces.



Servicemen take part in the joint multinational military exercise “Noble Partner 2018” at Vaziani training center.

Photo by: VANO SHLAMOV/AFP via Getty Images

LEVERAGING COVID-19 TO AMPLIFY AUTHORITARIANISM

The global health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has widened the space for authoritarianism and a civil-military imbalance, augmenting rivals' capability to use coercive tools under the latitude granted by military crisis response, emergency laws, and extraordinary powers to battle the pandemic. Shutting down protests under the guise of preventing the assembly of large groups, quelling dissent and censoring information under the guise of countering false information and rumors that create panic, and heightening tracking and surveillance under the guise of contact-tracing and preventing the spread of the virus are all ways in which a number of authoritarian governments, to include those in Moscow and Beijing, are increasingly leveraging the pandemic to consolidate power.

Additionally, rivals are also leveraging the crisis to attack U.S. credibility and improve their own image. China's image has markedly improved through its portrayal as having successfully tackled the Covid-19 threat and assisting other countries in their efforts to much fanfare. At the same time, it has belied attempts to cover up the severity of the disease within its borders and the extreme measures it took to contain the spread of the virus. In addition to broadcasting a sanitized image of China, Beijing has also focused its information efforts on promulgating an anti-U.S. narrative—perhaps in response to accusatory anti-China narratives within the United States—including in an animated video published by state media outlet New China TV and shared widely on social media. The video has garnered millions of views on YouTube and on the official Twitter account of the Chinese Embassy in France. Moreover, slow and uneven efforts by the United States to respond to the Covid-19 crisis domestically and to pursue avenues of international cooperation creates an opportunity for China to amplify its information campaign.

ROLE OF PARTNERS IN HYBRID WARFARE ENVIRONMENTS

Partners operate on the front line of hybrid warfare environments. Yet, their role and relationship within allied plans for campaigning against hybrid warfare threats is largely undefined. Through a network of global security partnerships, the allies build interoperability and facilitate access and influence that keeps threats further from their borders. Increasing emphasis in U.S. and allied capitals on the need to achieve [strategic and fiscal return on investment](#), to [weigh risks appropriately](#), and to ensure

that [defined outcomes and objectives](#) are met in security partnerships has heightened scrutiny of the value of such relationships. Central to these questions is the role of professionalism within the partner security force—particularly what the allies are seeking to achieve with building partner capacity, and how. In the post-9/11 era, the best practice for engaging security partners was not to create a mirror-image but rather to work with the partner to define professionalism on their terms in order to facilitate meeting shared security objectives such as countering terrorism, enhancing border security, and protecting internal security while maintaining realistic expectations about what the partner could deliver. In practice, however, allied efforts often fell short of even this best practice, as donor and partner expectations have often been misaligned (e.g., U.S. and coalition experiences with partners in Syria).

Moreover, while the allies have worked diligently to ensure that partner capacity-building activities are conducted in accordance with international humanitarian law, the narrow approach of the last 20 years neglects critical issues within the scope of professionalism, including values and guidelines reinforcing principled military ethos, healthy civil-military relations, respect for the rule of law, [incentives and structures for recruitment and promotion](#), and efforts to reduce corruption and predatory behavior. Such issues may be even more pronounced in hybrid warfare environments, where both state and non-state actors may seek to undermine the legitimacy of partner security forces, reinforce predatory and corrupt tendencies of the partner security force or government, and subvert goals and activities of the allies in support of the partner.

In defining the role for partners in approaches to hybrid warfare, the allies must resist the temptation to cast partners as proxies. Under a proxy framework, the allies would risk assuming that they can maintain control over a local security force, heightening the potential for principal-agent dilemmas and prompting moral hazard and conflicts of interest (i.e., becoming implicated in the choices partners make, such as the United States enabling support to Saudi Arabia's controversial campaign in Yemen). It risks devolving to a model of security relationships that mirrors tactics used by competitors such as China, Russia, and Iran and is blind to global norms and allies' advantages. Conversely, treating local security forces as partners plays to the allies' strategic advantages, enabling more effective choices about where allied and partner interests, objectives, and expectations are aligned and where to focus collective action through clear and upfront communication and ideally enabling a

bilateral compact with the partner. It enables a thoughtful assessment of why working with the partner is the optimal choice, accountable to allied strategic goals and domestic fiscal responsibilities. It also allows for a more deliberative process to ensure that partner support is well integrated into the allies' broader strategy and is transparent to allied legislatures and civil society, bolstering public support for the partnership. Further, it generates an *esprit de corps*, sense of partner autonomy, and bond of trust based on principles and military professionalism that can bolster operational effectiveness. A partnership approach also involves hard choices about when to curtail or end the partnership when interests and choices diverge but provides a stronger basis to inform these tradeoffs than a proxy relationship would. Ultimately, a partnership approach will produce better, more sustainable outcomes than a proxy approach.

To counter hybrid warfare challenges, the allies must emphasize partner competencies that are largely civilian based and often underutilized and under-resourced, such as local governance, justice, civil society, media, and private-sector organizations. The allies will need to craft security partnerships to be supportive of civilian efforts within the partner country to avoid "securitization" of the approach when tools more fit for purpose should be used. This will require a substantial shift in allied focus and investment, when historically, there has been ambivalence about engaging local civilian governance and overemphasizing the role of security partners and how much they can deliver on allied political objectives.

Within a campaign approach for hybrid warfare and in support of civilian authorities and tools, partner security forces can play important security roles. They can improve information sharing with the allies about contextual features of the hybrid warfare environment, including elite power structures and sources of competitor influence and control. Partner security forces can extend state sovereignty and territorial control, acting under the authority of the civilian-led government. By buttressing civilian authorities and extending state presence to remote or contested areas, partner security forces can strengthen resilience against competitor penetration and malign influence. Finally, in cooperating with the allies, partner security forces join a network of law and norm-abiding allies and partners that pursue common interests in a principled and professional manner.

CHALLENGES FOR SECURITY CAPACITY BUILDING

As allied "donor" countries seek to build the capacity of "recipient" partner countries to tackle hybrid warfare threats, obstacles on both the donor and recipient sides prove to complicate accomplishing shared goals. While many of these challenges exist in conventional partnership environments as well, aspects of the hybrid warfare environment can potentially exacerbate them or allow them to have an outsized impact on objectives and results.

INTERNAL DONOR CHALLENGES

Challenges from the perspective of the allies include those pertaining to individual countries as well as those that impact the donor alliance network more broadly.

State-level Donor Challenges

Individual state-specific challenges include political considerations and questions of political will within the domestic context. Within the United States, in particular, the appetite, or the lack thereof, within the political leadership and the broader citizenry is a major determinant of the level of resourcing and involvement the United States can dedicate toward partner capacity-building programs. Of late, drastic changes in domestic priorities and inconsistencies in policies and agreements have also contributed to diminishing the credibility of the United States as a donor, by extension impacting the credibility of the allies overall. The lack of credibility is exacerbated by the murkiness surrounding the authorities of security-sector assistance to execute capacity-building programming as well as the lack of agility and flexibility of those authorities to adapt to evolving needs midstream.

State- and Alliance-level Donor Challenges

At the state and broader alliance levels, challenges such as bureaucratic hurdles and variance in oversight standards complicate capacity-building efforts with partners. In both contexts, bureaucratic hurdles can cause delays in planning and implementation, a critical disadvantage if threats are time sensitive and dynamic, as they often are in hybrid environments. Meanwhile, variance in oversight standards could at best complicate evaluations and progress measurement in partner capacity building and could at worst allow less favorable partner elements to leverage the uncertainty to lower standards in matters ranging from hard capacity to upholding human rights norms. Additionally, on both the state and alliance level, the party—civilian

or military—with whom the decision rests to choose the partner has implications for the nature of capacity-building programming, particularly as to whether elements of the programming may be unnecessarily securitized.

Alliance-level Donor Challenges

Challenges on the donor alliance level include a lack of coordination among donors in partner countries, which can lead to repetition of efforts or inefficient allocation of resources at best and countervailing efforts or important areas of partnership slipping through the cracks at worst.

There may also be disagreement among allied countries as to the nature and level of the threat to be tackled alongside the partner country; in Syria, in the last two years, this played out with European countries prioritizing the Islamic State threat, whereas the United States and Gulf countries focused instead on countering Iran.

Additional challenges include variation in perception of partner legitimacy, in terms of the partner's relative authority in the territorial area of control and, relatedly, its resonance among the local population and governance (or even informal governance) structures. These varying perceptions of legitimacy could contribute to disagreements between allies on how best to approach building the partner's capacity and inconsistencies in executing assistance programming. This challenge is intensified if, for instance, some donors deem the partner as likely to manipulate the permissive environment toward interests that may go against the principles upheld by the alliance

network. Principles such as open society, transparency, and accountability pose their own unique challenges to the donor alliance; principles can be a vulnerability insofar as they impose costs and conditions on partners, which may lead to partners seeking out less restrictive arrangements with rivals such as Russia and China.

PARTNER CHALLENGES

From the partner angle, several key challenges pose risks to successful capacity-building programming with the allies. Of these, perhaps one of the most significant is incongruity between the partner and the donor, particularly where the two are misaligned on goals, expectations, and the perception of threats from competitors. If not clarified and ironed out early on in the partnership, mismatched objectives and approaches can create mismatched benchmarks for success and lead to grievances at unmet partner expectations down the line, and perhaps even result in partners working at cross-purposes with the allies, either of their own volition or after having their disgruntlement leveraged by the hybrid actor. Divergence between partners and donors due to this mismatch can significantly jeopardize capacity-building efforts, particularly in contexts where donor flexibility is limited.

The aforementioned partner legitimacy challenge is another obstacle to successful capacity building. This challenge can be exacerbated in particular by entrenched corruption within partner states, which is difficult to tackle for even the most earnest partners. This is particularly true in contexts where the state may not be the sole powerbroker in the political system and where other internal and external actors have a stake in maintaining patronage networks and infrastructures for fraud, nepotism, and profiteering. In contexts with multiple powerbrokers, partners may also have trouble claiming credit for their successes and building their capacity if rivals attempt to sow confusion as to who is responsible.

Finally, the question of principles is a challenge in the partner context as well as the aforementioned donor perspective. In addition to the availability of and temptation to turn toward easier “unprincipled” alternatives to what partners may perceive as excessively high standards imposed by the allies, adherence to the latter may actually prove to be risky for partner countries. Partner willingness to be more open and transparent could make them vulnerable to potential intervention by rivals in the form of information operations, cyberattacks, and proxy warfare. Without the



Nigerian army chief of training and operations Major General Samuel Adejumo (C) listens to a discussion between British Col. Neil Salisborn (L) and U.S. Col. Sue Sandusky.

Photo by: PIUS UTOMI EKPEI/AFP via Getty Images

right capacity-building measures implemented in a timely manner, to reinforce partner resiliency to such attacks. Without the right capacity-building measures implemented in a timely manner, to reinforce partner resiliency to such attacks, this could be devastating for more vulnerable partners.

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IMPLICATIONS FOR SECURITY CAPACITY BUILDING

The challenges inherent to the hybrid warfare environment, in addition to the specific vulnerabilities present within the allied network as well as the states chosen as partners, have implications for building partner capacity to withstand hybrid warfare threats from the likes of Russia, China, and Iran. These implications are as follows:

RISK OF PERVERSE OUTCOMES

If the allied decision to partner with a country to build the partner country’s capacity is driven solely by the desire and objective to compete and gain supremacy over rivals, this emphasis on competition may skew and warp the intended outcomes. For instance, a U.S. desire to counter Iranian proxy influence in Lebanon in the shape of Hezbollah has heavily skewed its capacity-building efforts toward the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Meanwhile, other security agencies such as the Internal Security Forces and the General Directorate of Security—the latter, in particular, seen as having ties to Hezbollah—have either been neglected, willfully not engaged, or seen as not acceptable. They are, therefore, able to operate with a level of impunity that countervails U.S. gains through the LAF in Lebanon.

UNEVEN ADHERENCE TO TRANSPARENCY

Variation and lack of clarity around allied transparency standards and assessments can result in uneven partner adherence to transparency. Partnerships particularly susceptible to such inconsistencies are those that are very transactional in nature, possibly because the need for expediency and the presence of competitors results in a relaxing of standards within some aspects of the alliance.

Pakistan, for instance, is a longtime ally of China but has entered into partnerships of convenience with the United States where there was a mutual benefit to be gained. Because of the history of uneven standards applied by the United States and because of the narrowly scoped nature of the partnership, Pakistan is able to avoid transparency in certain areas while exhibiting just enough in others to keep the partnership afloat.

PERSISTENT ENGAGEMENT: CREDIBILITY OR INEQUITY?

Although continued, longer-term donor engagement with specific interlocutors within partner countries can strengthen the capacity-building partnership and improve mutual credibility between the donor and the recipient, there is a risk that such a relationship can create or exacerbate inequities within the partner country. An overemphasis or bias on the part of the allies toward working with certain political elites or “easy to work with” military units in partner countries may have inadvertently skewed the relationship. For instance, in Colombia, this bias resulted in the empowerment of certain military units over other elements of government, the securitization of capacity-building efforts, and an uneven U.S. understanding of local narratives and threat perceptions that may have hindered objectives in the partner country.

INCENTIVE TO DO THE BARE MINIMUM

The narrow and inflexible manner in which capacity-building authorities and programmatic planning processes are structured in the alliance network—particularly in the United States—may incentivize partners to accomplish merely the bare minimum to keep resources flowing. Partners may be satisfied with succeeding just “enough” for continued engagement without realizing actual success. For instance, Mali has benefited from receiving significant U.S. capacity-building assistance geared specifically toward counterterrorism efforts; however, since terrorist activity is limited to a small pocket of the country and does not affect Bamako’s core interests, the Malians do not have an incentive to tackle the issue head on.

NAVIGATING UNSAVORY ELITES

Many of the fragile countries vulnerable to hybrid warfare threats suffer from governance breakdowns. When the allies deem them priority capacity-building countries, there is sometimes no choice but to engage with partners that may be less than ideal. In many partner contexts, such as Iraq, for example, the allies have to navigate partnerships that may involve warlords, militia leaders, and entrenched political elites with histories of corruption, patronage politics, and

even human rights violations. In such cases, the donor network has to devise some form of conditional assistance; without incentives and deterrents built into capacity-building partnerships, conflict and instability will likely persist despite the presence of a partnership.

GUIDELINES FOR A PRINCIPLED APPROACH

Partners will be vital to the allies' ability to compete effectively in hybrid warfare environments. Pursuing partnerships through a principled approach provides the allies with an asymmetric advantage in contrast to rivals that resort to autocratic, deceptive, and extra-legal tactics. Allies' laws, principles, and values are strategic advantages in hybrid warfare. Investing in partners rather than casting them as proxies will increase allied strategic action and operational effectiveness. The allies should select, design, and pursue security partnerships based on the following guidelines:

- **Be the Partner of Choice:** The allies should be the partners of choice. They should be reliable, committing up front to common outcomes and objectives defined with the partner, with clear communication as to expectations, red lines, duration of the partnership, and steps that will be taken if the partner makes choices that depart from a principled approach (e.g., undermining legitimate civilian authorities, human rights violations, or extra-legal actions). They should provide quality training, advising, and equipment to enable interoperability with the allies and other partners and sustainment to provide actual military capability. They should be transparent with the partner, civilian authorities, and public about the purpose of and expectations for the partnership.
- **Select Partners to Increase "Portfolio Strength":** The allies are fortunate to have a strong network of partners. In seeking new or strengthened partnerships in hybrid warfare environments, the allies should be more selective of partners, seeking fewer, higher-quality partners to fortify collective strengths important for competition in hybrid warfare environments, such as good governance and transparency. Partners should be selected for these attributes and incentivized to make choices that reinforce them. Recognizing that some partnerships will be transactional, the allies should calculate risk thresholds and diminishing returns at the outset and be upfront with the partner to avoid unmet expectations that may do more damage to allied and partner interests than the value of the transactional relationship. If a high-quality partner cannot be found, then allies should determine whether to intervene militarily at all.
- **Identify Sources of Partner Legitimacy:** Partner capacity to perform security missions and political will to complete them are essential ingredients for successful security partnerships. Partner legitimacy is paramount in hybrid warfare environments in terms of how the civilian authorities and population view local security forces and, relatedly, the partner's relative control of territory. As competitors seek to discredit, corrupt, and alienate security actors that do not accord with their interests, partner legitimacy will be an important source of resiliency. Defining thresholds and criteria for determining legitimacy in particular country contexts will be important for the allies to decide where best to place their engagement and investment. Working with the partner in parallel to identify ways to regulate corrupt actors within the partner's governance system will also be important to strengthening legitimacy.
- **Plan and Execute Capacity Building Jointly:** Allies should work directly with partners to identify outcomes, objectives, milestones, and conditions for capacity building. This serves to strengthen the basis of the partnership, distinguishes it from a proxy relationship, clarifies intent and expectations, and gives the partner ownership of the consequences of working with the allies—and vice versa. Ideally, the security partnership can be codified in a bilateral compact spelling out these terms. It also serves as the basis for the allies to address partner transgressions and to off-ramp the relationship if the partner deviates from the joint plan. Capacity-building plans should be made as transparent as possible to sustain political support through transitions in government in allied and partner countries and to hold them accountable to strategic, fiscal, and principle-based goals.
- **Engage the Partner at the Right Level When Political Choice is Involved:** Even in transactional relationships, the allies may have to ask the partner to operate in new territorial areas, build relationships with new or difficult local actors, or refrain from taking actions in order to achieve common goals. These decisions may transcend

the operational authority of the partner, particularly in contested environments where the partner's sources of legitimacy are threatened. The allies should seek to engage the partner at the right level where political decisions can be made, such as when the partner may have to assume short-term risk to accomplish shared objectives. Such engagement will necessarily involve not only allies' military commanders but, more importantly, its diplomats. It will require close coordination among allied civilian-military leadership, identification of incentives to persuade the partner, and a credible explanation of what withdrawing allied support will mean if the partner says no or deviates from agreed-upon next steps.



Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers train at the Kabul Military Training Center (KMTC) on the outskirts of Kabul.

Photo by: SHAH MARAI/AFP via Getty Images

- **Integrate Security Partnerships into a Campaign Approach:** Security partnerships should be nested within an adaptable campaign approach to compete with rivals in support of civilian capabilities. Partnerships should not be planned or executed in siloed security or operational communities but rather fully integrated to achieve political outcomes and objectives and tailored for specific hybrid warfare environments. This includes designing and implementing military and intelligence information operations in support of civilian public diplomacy and strategic communications to counter disinformation and misinformation from rivals. Information should be elevated as a “good” to subvert rivals’ agenda by encouraging open and transparent societies and

strengthening the role of and communication with civil society. Necessarily, a campaign approach will need to adapt over time to changes in the environment, allies’ priorities, and rivals’ tactics and behavior. Allies accordingly should take a long-term view to the return on political investment in security partners.

Pursuing partnerships through a principled approach provides the allies with an asymmetric advantage in contrast to rivals that resort to autocratic, deceptive, and extra-legal tactics.

In addition, the allies should take several concrete steps to be more strategic and effective in working together while capacity building in hybrid warfare environments:

- **Clarify Definitions, Interests, and Comparative Advantages:** The allies are not on the same page in defining what constitutes hybrid warfare or capacity building, complicating efforts to work together, deconflict, and avoid duplication or the undermining of each other’s activities. At a minimum, the allies must decide where hybrid warfare poses risks to individual state interests and where they can work most usefully together to reduce their vulnerabilities. This should also include a shared calculation of where each ally can bring its relative comparative advantage in planning, resourcing, partner engagement, and deployment of specific capacity-building tools in support of a civilian-led integrated approach to countering rivals. The allies will have to exercise humility to be transparent with each other about where they have shortcomings and where other allies may be better suited for a mission, capability, or task.
- **Identify How Burden-sharing Creates Opportunities:** Burden sharing enables allies to optimize for their comparative advantages based on political, economic, cultural, operational, and informational capabilities. It not only makes fiscal and strategic sense, but it also can open opportunities for future combined approaches to planning, resourcing, and execution. For example, pooled donor funds used for northeast Syria stabilization enabled coalition civil-military operations to proceed even as direct U.S. political and fiscal support waned. This model could be replicated in terms of its bureaucratic and financial structures for other contexts.

- **Create Dynamic Campaign Approaches:** Hybrid warfare environments will move swiftly past static coalition plans, as competitors routinely test the boundaries and thresholds of what the allies will abide, including coercion of partner institutions, disinformation and misinformation operations, and cyber intrusions. The allies must create dynamic campaigns with an adaptable mandate for partners that can flex to the evolving threats from competitors while bound by the guidelines discussed above. Combined allied planning for campaign design and monitoring and evaluation of its implementation will be important to calibrate priorities and investments over time.
- **Invest in “Frontline” Allies to Build Their Capacity-building Competencies:** Allies with first-hand experience countering hybrid warfare threats domestically may be well suited to lead capacity building with security partners in other hybrid warfare environments. Investing in those allies and giving them a leading role with partners thus can leverage proven strategies and tools. For example, Canada’s cooperation with Latvia and Lithuania has strengthened the Baltic allies’ ability to provide capacity building in Ukraine, thereby also reinforcing NATO’s collective strength and competencies, which can be applied in other theaters.

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