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“The United States Needs a Strategy for (Human) Security Cooperation”

Linda Bishai and Laura Cleary

The U.S. Military would never plan to fight a battle without a strategy for achieving its goals, but an informed strategy is exactly what is missing in efforts to promote human security and democratic governance.

The global strategic picture for the United States has shifted from an emphasis on counterterrorism to an emphasis on great powers and peer competitors.¹ Common to both strategic frameworks is the appreciation of the additional strength gained from strong partnerships and increased interoperability with friends and allies. U.S. funds for military training and equipment to allies have increased steadily since the turn of the century.² Yet, lessons from counterterrorism efforts in partner nations (PNs) demonstrate that defense and security-oriented kinetic actions, in the absence of governance and civilian protection in the PNs, end with reduced physical security, increased mistrust, and anti-government grievance.³ In essence, poor governance, pronounced inequality, and marginalization of communities provide the fertile soil in which extremist groups grow. Kinetic counterterrorism actions exacerbate these dynamics.

In 2017, Congress mandated that the Department of Defense (DOD) capacity building for PNs must promote “the observance of and respect for the law of armed conflict, human rights, the rule of law, and civilian control of the military.”⁴ More recently, the DOD has published a comprehensive action plan to implement new civilian harm mitigation and response procedures across the defense spectrum, including as a component of security cooperation programs.⁵ These required approaches signal recognition that respecting the rights and security of civilians during military operations leads to “better strategic outcomes.”⁶ Currently, this mandate is being addressed through a coursework requirement on the basics of international human rights law instruments. If human rights are to become integral to the security paradigms of PNs, then we recommend that prior to U.S. engagement, DOD establish a baseline assessment of human rights in PNs, and integrate human rights training across the curriculum, rather than as a separate module.

Congressional insistence on human rights and rule of law training should be seen as more than just an attempt to ensure that U.S. partners and allies refrain from abuses. Rather, it should be considered as an integral component of U.S. goals to increase professionalism and respect for democratic values in

¹ U.S. National Security Strategy

² It should be noted that while the overall trend in funding has been upwards, there was a reduction in money obligated in fiscal year (FY) 2020 due to the Covid pandemic. See the Department of State and Department of Defense, ‘Foreign Military Training and DoD Engagement Activities of Interest, 2020–2021. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/foreign-military-training-and-dod-engagement-activities-of-interest-2020-2021/>; Foreign Assistance.gov Dashboard. Available at: <https://www.foreignassistance.gov>.

³ Christy Grace Provines, “Counterterrorism is Increasingly About Winning Hearts and Minds,” *Columbia Journal of International Affairs*, August 3, 2017, <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/online-articles/counterterrorism-increasingly-about-winning-hearts-and-minds>; Marc Summers, “The Failing Response to Violent Extremism in Africa – and the Need to Reform the International Approach,” *Just Security*, September 19, 2022. Available at: <http://www.justsecurity.org>.

⁴ Title 10, Section 333 (C)(2)(A); The Department of State shares responsibility for the promotion of human rights in partner nations during security cooperation activities and uses slightly different authorizing language.

⁵ Dan E. Stigall and Anna Williams, “An Improved Approach to Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response: The Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan (CHMR-AP),” *Articles of War*, Lieber Institute, West Point, August 25, 2022, <https://lieber.westpoint.edu/dod-issues-civilian-harm-mitigation-response-action-plan/>

⁶ Stigall and Williams, “An Improved Approach.”

an increasingly competitive and anti-democratic global environment.⁷ We argue here that although there is doctrine and legal authority for promoting the democratic values of respect for human rights, the rule of law, and good governance, and there are tactics, in the form of professional modules integrated into required PN courses, there is still no strategy for the promotion of human rights. If a key goal is to promote democratic values through security cooperation activities, then our security cooperation personnel need to have specific knowledge of the obstacles to achieving this goal, as well as understand available options for surmounting them. Currently, there is awareness that success in this arena has been limited, but there is no strategy to plan, coordinate, and achieve the mandated goals.⁸ We propose a two-pronged strategic approach for DOD security cooperation and a long-term inter-agency approach to expanding human rights promotion among allies and partners. First, DOD should use an assessment framework to regularly track adoption of human rights principles, and second, better integrate human rights approaches across all security cooperation and assistance activities.

At present, there is no framework. We recommend DOD investment in the development and deployment of adaptable assessment frameworks that can provide both baseline snapshots and continued monitoring of the environment in a PN or region. An awareness of local receptivity to human rights values is necessary to ensure effective promotion of human rights through security cooperation. A regularly repeated assessment can provide DOD personnel with a more nuanced understanding of changes in the operational environment over time, the tactics that will prove most effective, and criteria by which success can be measured. One prototype framework developed for this purpose focuses on four categories that clarify whether conditions for successful outcomes in promoting respect for the rule of law and human rights are present in a PN's military.⁹ The categories—political willingness, absorptive capacity, political stability, and respect for the rule of law and human rights—are evaluated through a series of scaled indicators based on outputs from a combination of existing data sets, key stakeholder interviews, and site visits. No snapshot of a social environment can be complete or predictive, but having deep knowledge of these issues in a PN over time allows for integrated efforts between the DOD, the Department of State, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) that tailor the messaging, training, level of engagement, and equipment to maximize results.

Second, it is important to elevate the significance of respect for a human rights approach by removing it as a separate module in the security cooperation training curriculum. This recommendation does not reflect any dissatisfaction with the quality of the material or capability of the trainers currently utilized by the DOD; however, a quick scan of the core security cooperation text shows that the module on human rights is oddly misplaced in a curriculum that almost exclusively focuses on equipment, budgeting, and procurement.¹⁰ This placement conveys that it is a required element—added but not valued. Pedagogical experts recommend that such overarching concepts as human

⁷ "Freedom House (2021), Freedom in the World: the Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule." Available at: [The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule | Freedom House](#); DCDC (2018); DCDC (2018), *Global Strategic Trends: The Future Starts Today*. London: Crown Copyright. Available at: [Global Strategic Trends – The Future Starts Today - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁸ Emily Knowles and Jahara Matisek, "Is Human Rights Training Working with Foreign Militaries? No One Knows and That's O.K.," War on the Rocks (May 12, 2020); Stephen Watts, Kimberly Jackson, Sean Mann, and Stephen Dalzell, *A Developmental Approach to Building Sustainable Security Sector Capacity in Africa*, RR-2048-AFRICOM (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 2018).

⁹ Linda Bishai and Austin C. Swift. *Assessment Framework: Conditions for Success in Human Rights Training in African Security Cooperation (HR-TASC)*. IDA Document NS D-14356. (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2020).

¹⁰ <https://www.dscu.edu/greenbook>

rights be mainstreamed to enhance understanding of how they apply broadly and in multiple situations.¹¹ This incorporates the subject into design, implementation, and evaluation of training that may be about other skills as well. Mainstreaming human rights concepts might mean that civilian protection scenarios are built into training about perimeters and checkpoints, or that a joint operation is disrupted during war games by fictional political unrest that requires highly informed responses to respect the rights and responsibilities in play. Importantly, both approaches require humility and self-inclusion by U.S. personnel. Engagements with partners and allies offer valuable opportunities for learning and knowledge-building for the United States and should not be viewed as one-way transfers of capability.

Experts have argued for greater specificity in the conceptualization and operationalization of democracy and human rights, care in the development and use of measures, and more attention to the kinds of inferences that they make possible.¹² As outlined above, assessment frameworks can provide the user with greater clarity and help to identify more opportunities to engage PNs on human rights in a way that is more likely to be successful. The aim of that training should be the preparation of individuals to understand, assess, and effectively promote the practice of human rights within a human-security paradigm, and with reference to civil-military relations writ large.¹³ In developing such training, consideration needs to be given to the context in which those rights should be observed and upheld. As with any strategy, the first question that needs to be addressed is, ‘What is the objective?’ Typical objectives may include:

- Promotion of human security in the PN
- Advancement of democracy/respect for democratic values
- Military professionalism in order to
 - Enhance contributions to peacekeeping operations (PKOs)
 - Stabilize and improve civil-military relations within the PN

While the advancement of human rights is integral to the attainment of any of these larger objectives, the training of the military is neither the most important nor the sole condition that must be met to achieve them. Let us examine each of these objectives in turn.

Human Security

The term human security was coined by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 1994 and has been embraced within the policies of nations, including the United States, and the strategies and programs of international organizations. Human security approaches focus on the elements that allow individuals and communities to survive and thrive.¹⁴ While a number of allies and partners have incorporated the rhetoric of human security within their policy pronouncements and governance metrics, they have not necessarily undertaken the structural and cultural reform of security institutions necessary to guarantee it. A hard security mentality, here understood as an emphasis on the use of force and an insufficient consideration of the rule of law, still permeates the planning, conduct, and evaluation of PN internal security operations. Human rights training may sensitize the military to the notional rights and wrongs of their conduct, but unless the same training is given to all

¹¹ “What is gender mainstreaming,” European Institute for Gender Equality, <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/what-is-gender-mainstreaming>

¹² Todd Landman, “Democracy and Human Rights: Concepts, Measures, Relationships,” *Politics and Governance*, 6:1, 2017, p. 1–12.

¹³ Bishai and Swift. *Assessment Framework: Conditions for Success in Human Rights Training in African Security Cooperation (HR-TASC)*.

¹⁴ UNDP (1994) *Human Development Report 1994*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available at http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/225/hdr_1994_en_complete_nostats.pdf.

who are involved in directing, resourcing, and working alongside the military internally, then only marginal gains, if any, will be achieved. Human rights training as a ‘tick box exercise’ will not work; it needs to be embedded within a whole-of-government or whole-of-society approach to security. The human security approach, in other words, recognizes that human rights cannot exist without civilian protection, and security cannot exist without the legitimacy conveyed by civilian rights and responsibilities.

Democratization

The same conclusion is true if the ultimate aim of training is the advancement of democracy. Although there are variations in the particular rights emphasized and the constitutional structures that provide for governance generally, “democracy and human rights are grounded in the shared principles of accountability, individual liberty, integrity, fair and equal representation, inclusion and participation, and non-violent solutions to conflict.”¹⁵ Most significantly for human security-oriented cooperation is the commitment to civilian management of the military in order to ensure that sovereign power resides in the will of the people. Different types of democracy, however, place emphasis on different combinations of rights. So, the question posed above has a bearing on the type of training to be provided, its content, and its intended audience.

Military Professionalism

Military professionalism is a critical element for stable civil-military relations and the consolidation of democracy. In civil-military relations theory, the subordination of the security services to civilian control is justified on the basis that civilians, be they elected or working for those who are, have a legal authority and are uniquely accountable under the law and to the electorate.¹⁶ Within this context military professionalism may mean that the forces have been recruited, educated, trained, and promoted in such a way as to accept civilian supremacy, oversight, the rule of law, and professional norms.¹⁷

Human rights training within a human security orientation can contribute to higher levels of professionalism, but countries often take a different path to achieve that end. For countries transitioning from military rule to democracy the tendency is to deploy the armed forces on a PKO in the hope that they will learn to be professional somewhere else, a process referred to as ‘diversionary peace’.¹⁸ It is assumed that troops will learn democratic civil-military relations and professional norms through ‘osmosis’ from other troop-contributing nations with more established democracies. The reality is rather different. Countries contributing the greatest percentage of troops to UN PKOs are themselves either in the early stages of democratic transition or are exhibiting signs of hybrid democracy. If a state has succeeded in consolidating its democracy, its troop contributions decline.¹⁹

¹⁵ Landman, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁶ Laura R. Cleary and Roger Darby, “Introduction: Change within Context,” *Managing Security: Concepts and Challenges*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), p. 9.

¹⁷ Military professionalism is at the heart of civil-military relations theory, but authors tend to define it in very different ways. Morris Janowitz in the *Professional Soldier* (1968) defined professionalism in terms of a special skill set, a sense of group identity and a system of internal administration. The formulation used in this paper is derived from Thomas C Bruneau & Floriana Cristiana Matei, “Towards a New Conceptualisation of Democratization and Civil-Military Relations,” *Democratization*, 15:5, 2008.

¹⁸ Kai Michael Kenkel, “Stability Abroad, Instability at Home? Changing UN Peace Operations and Civil-Military Relations in Global South Troop Contributing Countries,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, 42:2, 2021, p. 232,

¹⁹ Timothy J. A. Passmore, “Democratization and Troop Contributions to United Nations Peacekeeping,” *Armed Forces and Society*, 48:2, 2022, p. 274–301.

There is evidence to suggest that armed forces that respect human rights in their own domestic context also observe those rights when deployed overseas.²⁰ The focus of human rights education, therefore, should be upon how adherence to those rights contributes to improvements in civil-military relations, here understood as the relationship between the military, government, *and the people*. The placement of human rights training within a broader civ-mil curriculum may contribute to greater stability and security within the PN, and by extension improve the reliability and professionalism of troops on PKOs.

This leads us to conclude that contextual awareness matters for U.S. security cooperation and that the setting of objectives that reflect that context is imperative. Numerous studies of defense transformation and security sector reform programs have concluded that success is more likely if the PN owns the process and the outcomes.²¹ Ownership means more than simply the consent of a Defense Minister, Prime Minister, or President for a security cooperation initiative to proceed. It relates to the extent to which wider government, society, and the armed forces acknowledge the importance of and are willing to support the program over time. As we have argued throughout this article, training the military on human rights in isolation may prove counterproductive. Western efforts to professionalize African armed forces are likely to fail if the curriculum runs counter to the dominant culture (social, organizational, and political) of their nation.²² We emphasize here that it is necessary to consider how best to generate a ‘critical mass’ for reform both within the armed forces and across the wider government and society.²³ Building an evaluation of PN political will and social environment into a human rights assessment framework is a critical requirement. Generating that critical mass takes time; a resource that is too often downplayed. Achieving the types of strategic objectives outlined above takes longer than the three years a Combatant Commander or Senior Defense Officer may be in post. Addressing the ‘psychology of militarism’ and successfully ‘disarming the collective or societal mind’ can take generations.²⁴ It is for this reason that we advocate a strategic, inter-agency approach to the advancement of human rights in PNs.

We have argued here that to achieve the overall goal of human security for the United States and its allies and partners, as described in national security documents, we need to take a strategic approach to promoting human rights and democratic values in our security cooperation engagements.²⁵ In addition to implementing iterative knowledge-building assessments of whether conditions are conducive to these values, it is critical that they be mainstreamed across all training, diplomatic, and development engagements. Opportunities to model, support, assess, and learn about good practices in human security and governance should be sought and shared across the DOD and the inter-agency space. Giving our security cooperation personnel the resources and operating environment to pursue human security as a strategic goal will make it far more likely to yield the expected benefits, both in

²⁰ C. Ruffa, “What peacekeepers think and do: An exploratory study of French, Ghanaian, Italian, and South Korean armies in the United Nations interim force in Lebanon.” *Armed Forces & Society*, 40:22, 2014, p. 199–225; Monalisa Adikhari, “Breaking the Balance? The Impact of Peacekeeping Deployments on Civil-Military Relations,” *International Peacekeeping*, 27:3, 2020, p. 369–394; Kenkel, *op. cit.*

²¹ Laura R. Cleary, “Triggering Critical Mass: Identifying Factors for a Successful Defence Transformation,” *Defence Studies*, 11:1, 2011, p. 43–65.

²² Joseph Soeters and Audrey Van Ouystel, “The Challenge of Diffusing Military Professionalism in Africa,” *Armed Forces and Society* 40:2, 2014, p. 257.

²³ Cleary, *op. cit.*

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 50

²⁵ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 2022. Available at: www.whitehouse.gov; US Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy*, 2022. Available at: <https://www.defense.gov/Spotlights/National-Defense-Strategy/>.

strengthening the effectiveness of our security partnerships and the civilian-military relationships in our PNs.

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