Using Theater Security Cooperation To Develop Strategic Leaders

By COL David W. Pendall

A deeper appreciation and interaction with U.S. Embassies, offices of defense cooperation and our defense attachés, which serve as our resident national platforms in partner nations, can also serve to broaden and develop strategic leaders in our Army. A program to identify, select and repetitively place our highest potential officers for short immersive tours into these platforms should be pursued.

With a reduction of forward-deployed forces, there is an elevated importance of developing an experienced officer corps tuned into partner nation and regional security issues. The ability to routinely place officers in an in-country setting as a matter of professional development is increasingly valuable.

Security Cooperation And Capacity Building

Our security cooperation programs play an important role in our national security strategy, with 768 security cooperation officers (SCOs) operating in 148 countries. The SCOs are positioned to support and interact with partner militaries on a daily basis as well as interface closely with the U.S. Embassy staff and country team. The Defense Attaché Office (DAO), also resident within each SCO team, is led by a colonel or general/flag officer as the senior defense official, and has extensive interaction with the U.S. ambassador and other resident U.S. government elements, as well as with the geographic combatant command (GCC). SCO mission areas include foreign military sales activities; humanitarian projects in 82 countries; international students from 141 countries attending U.S.-sponsored training and educational events under international military education and training (IMET) activities; and support to the regional education centers such as the Marshall Center (Germany), Africa Center (Washington, D.C.), and the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (Hawaii), to name a few.

The Army should expand officer presence within the defense attaché teams and offices of defense cooperation to broaden and develop regional experience. The immersive and substantive experiences these can offer are significant and include:

- The opportunity to observe U.S. foreign policy and instruments applied in country and the influence of the United States in the region through the eyes of the partner nation (TV, newspaper, Web, personal interaction).
- Understanding the partner nation’s domestic and foreign security structures and systems as well as the supporting physical and informational infrastructure that enables regional access.
- Understanding security issues in a country and the greater region as viewed by the host country and the U.S. government, and an ability to discern differences in views and why they may be different, as well as where mutual concerns exist.
- Understanding foreign military sales and IMET, especially in light of the Army’s regionally aligned force constructs.
- Familiarization with foreign military education systems and the qualities of partner military forces, including their senior headquarters staffers.
- Interaction with the embassy country team on a formal and informal basis.

A program of selected assignments would assist in professional broadening, allow officers to consider and evaluate trade-offs for potential use of military capabilities within a specific nation’s security situation, observe firsthand the importance of efforts to prevent and shape, and witness whole of government application in foreign policy.

To be clear, there is no suggestion to create a “foreign area officer light” or “shake and bake” attachés, but there is a real imperative to ground our operators—our future battalion, brigade and senior leaders—in the intricate details and security interests of specific nations and the broader regions that matter to the United States. The Army should select high-potential officers to develop and refine their understanding of land force employment considerations and gain a strategic context for land power within an overall whole of government approach in a specific environment.

Any established immersive program must fit within the parameters of a GCC’s theater security and cooperation plan and Army service component command (ASCC) engagement programs. Officers could be deployed for less than one year, with a program of three- to six-month tours being optimal, especially if the officer follows the immersion with a professional career course at the Command and General Staff College or the U.S. Army War College, or through any number of interagency fellowships or degree programs. Officers should have the opportunity to participate in immersive programs at numerous points in their careers—as captains, again as majors and again as lieutenant colonels. These actions would be part of an ongoing effort to professionalize and credential the officer corps of the 21st century.

In summary, the ability to place our officers in these platforms will contribute to their professional intellectual development, advance professional growth in strategic thinking, provide exposure to non-Army dominant security structures, develop peer leadership and influencing skills, and provide an immersive experiential event.

Losing Developmental Opportunities

In a question-and-answer session following his keynote speech at a Washington, D.C., think tank, Chairman of
the Joint Chiefs of Staff GEN Martin E. Dempsey raised the issues of losing our experienced junior leaders to the return to normal and losing the network of relationships and team-building skill forged from our last 10 or so years at war. GEN Dempsey said, “Today, you can’t find a lieutenant that hasn’t been partnered with somebody from USAID [the U.S. Agency for International Development] or the Department of State or Justice or any number of other agencies of government. … The question I actually ask myself now is how in the world will we maintain that relationship. … All of my soldiers are going to go back to Fort Hood and Fort Bragg and Fort Lewis, and all the State Department folks are going to go back to Foggy Bottom, and never the twain shall meet unless we do something about it. … As a leader development issue, I think we owe it to ourselves and our nation to do something about that.”

Cautions and Criticisms

As with any initiative that challenges the status quo and current structures, there are challenges and counterarguments to consider. Most are bureaucratic in nature, either holding the current promotion system and career progression timelines as constraints to such a proposal, or highlighting the fact that augmenting the embassy and SCO platforms with the short-term placement of officers would place undue burden on the administrative processes of already small staffs. Other arguments center on the logistics and life support constraints in supporting additional personnel as well as the burden SCOs may be forced to undertake in order to train these officers to not misrepresent the United States or U.S. interests when interacting with a host nation or non-governmental players in country.

To alleviate concerns and mitigate perceived training shortfalls, the emphasis on selecting and preparing these officers should reside within regionally aligned force headquarters in direct coordination with the regional ASCC and GCC. Selection of the right officers matters. Selected officers should flow from home station, through the ASCC, then through the combatant command for orientation and review of program goals as well as in-country task specifics, and then into the designated SCO/embassy.

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The operating environments of the 21st century create different security frameworks and force employment considerations from those experienced in the past. While different, the expectations of our Army and the military as a whole remain constant: provide a return on our nation’s security investment. To do that means implementing an institutional approach to developing strategic leaders to serve, advise, collaborate and lead across the U.S. government and its allies, as well as placing those developed senior leaders in positions to produce security in context with the security dilemmas and national interests at stake. One way to achieve this goal is to fully use the national security platforms in 163 nations around the world—our State Department embassies, our security cooperation offices and our defense attachés. In this way, officers will be more intellectually equipped to fully maximize educational experiences across the spectrum—Command and General Staff College, U.S. Army War College, academic or interagency fellowships, internships, and self-study toward advanced degrees. Even more valuable, through this program of regular returns to our embassy, security cooperation and attaché platforms, officers with the greatest potential will be increasingly knowledgeable in interagency and joint security policy issues and have a greater perspective as peer leaders among non-Army organizational leaders and staff.

We should continue to support and develop our best officers by using our theater security strategies. From experiences gained outside our Army but within a national security construct, these leaders will be enabled and empowered to internalize a broader thought framework. This will ultimately build a cohort of strategic Army leaders with the enhanced capacity to serve at the highest levels of our Army and within joint and interagency positions as our nation expects and demands.

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