The erosion of US global hegemony in recent years is rarely a matter of dispute among American strategists. The United States has lost its preeminence in part because others, most notably China, have caught up, but also because it has overextended itself abroad, leading to budget constraints, rightist populism, and acute political polarization at home.

Washington might be able to slow its decline by responsibly reducing its expansive security responsibilities around the world—something President Donald Trump would no doubt relish—while pushing and enabling its allies and partners to step up. This is a tall order and a delicate balance, one the United States has been trying to achieve for the past quarter century. One vehicle that is well-suited to help the United States address this strategic challenge is security cooperation, defined as all activities conducted by the Department of Defense aimed at enhancing the capability and willingness of US allies and partners to operate in coalition with, or in lieu of, US military forces in response to shared security threats.

Trump’s peculiar view of America’s international alliances notwithstanding, there is an enduring and bipartisan consensus in Washington on the importance of working more closely with its allies and partners. This priority has been codified for decades in almost every high-level security document published by the US
government. In fact, so much emphasis has been placed lately on helping build the military capacity of US partners to share the costs of global security that it has become a staple of American strategic discourse and the *sine qua non* of US strategy moving forward.

But agreement across US government agencies on the need to better communicate and interoperate with partners is altogether different from having a sustainable and reliable system for security cooperation in place that can more effectively leverage America’s extensive web of alliances and partnerships around the globe. My experience in 2018–19 as a Senior Advisor for Security Cooperation in the Pentagon’s Office of the Secretary of Defense for Policy, coupled with years of research and scholarship on US security policy in the Middle East, leads me to believe that this system has yet to exist.

It is convenient, and in many cases justifiable, to assign blame to US partners for the deficiencies of security cooperation, including their hesitancy to take on more responsibilities and their failure to spend more on defense to improve military capabilities. But the unpopular truth is that a major ailment of security cooperation is internal to the United States. This sizeable and exponentially growing enterprise is malfunctioning because the US national security bureaucracy has been in great disorder since the end of the Cold War. If foreign policy starts at home, so does security cooperation.

The key actors involved in security cooperation—the White House, Congress, Department of Defense, and Department of State—do not have a unified understanding of security cooperation: what it’s supposed to achieve, how to use and improve it, and how to tell if it’s working. Moreover, they have failed to coordinate their efforts on various matters including oversight and accountability. Security cooperation relies on bureaucratic partnerships. Yet, these partnerships are broken, and the enterprise is awfully stove-piped as a result of anemic leadership.

What is promising is that more American officials and legislators now recognize the deep and endemic challenges of getting security cooperation right. What is less encouraging, however, is that it will take nothing short of a dramatic culture change across the interagency to fully implement the sweeping and monumental security cooperation reforms that Congress called for in the Fiscal Year 2017 National Defense Authorization Act (FY17 NDAA). And culture changes, especially within the Defense Department, do not happen overnight.
Rising Significance

Security cooperation is as old as the history of war. The idea that a state would help another in its efforts to resist a mutual foe goes back at least as far as the ancient contest between the Greeks and the Persians. Without Sparta’s land prowess, Athens, a naval power, would have been unable to rout the forces of Persian ruler Xerxes. And Xerxes himself understood the value of coalition warfare as he reached across the Mediterranean to urge the Carthaginians to attack the Greek cities in Sicily to prevent them from aiding the Spartans and Athenians.

Since the end of the Second World War, the United States has provided more security cooperation and assistance than any other nation in the world.¹ But the United States was once a beneficiary itself as it fought the War for Independence against the British in the 18th century. With gunpowder in short supply throughout the colonies, the Patriots reached out to Paris for help. French supplies arrived in 1776, ultimately leading American revolutionaries to victory.

During the Cold War, the United States used security cooperation and assistance to stop the spread of global communism. American presidents, particularly Harry Truman and Ronald Reagan, authorized the supply of large amounts of US arms and money to any government and insurgent willing to contain or reverse the advances of the Soviets. The strategy contributed to some foreign policy goals in places like Yugoslavia, Turkey, Greece, the Philippines, Cambodia, Mozambique, Angola, and Afghanistan, but it failed in others including Vietnam, Nicaragua, and Cuba.

The importance of security cooperation catapulted after 9/11. In response to the terrorist attacks against New York and Washington DC, the United States complemented its war campaigns in Afghanistan and later Iraq with ambitious programs to train and equip Arab, African, and Afghan partner forces to join the counterterrorism fight. That effort was put on steroids following ISIS’s assault on Mosul in 2014 and subsequent takeover of a third of Iraq and half of Syria.

With the new 2018 National Defense Strategy, the presumption is that the weight of security cooperation resources has shifted from combating terrorism to deterring threats from near-peer competitors. Though the concept of global power competition requires further clarification and operationalization, it is certain that the Pentagon intends to bolster security cooperation with partner nations, especially those that feel directly threatened by Beijing and Moscow.

A Flawed Business Model

That the United States wishes to increasingly rely on security cooperation to attain its strategic objectives does not mean that it is poised for success. To be
sure, there have been positive achievements in security cooperation in recent years, including Arab and Kurdish military successes against ISIS. But the overall record remains predominantly poor, and the progress has been fragile or tactical because it remains entirely dependent on the continued provision of US support. In most regions of the globe where the United States has sought to train and equip developing partners—such as in Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen—there are numerous instances of US money being totally wasted and equipment ending up in the wrong hands or being used in ways that harm US interests and violate US law.

Each of these examples, among many others, has a unique set of circumstances that might explain why security cooperation fell short. But there is one consistent thread that runs across all these failures: the United States has often used the tool of security cooperation without a coherent policy toward the partner and without a clear end-state. This represents a first-order problem based on unspecified US objectives. Sometimes the United States has operated with greater policy clarity and political acumen, but even in those few cases, it has practically approached security cooperation as an exercise of supplying hardware to its partners and has failed to invest in defense institution building. This represents a second-order problem based on a confused process. Equipment is necessary for US partners’ ability to shoot, move, and communicate. But institutions—defined as the organizations, structures, and people that create, enforce, and apply rules specifically related to the defense of a country—are crucial for the partners’ ability to optimize and sustain these processes and ultimately graduate from US help.

Take Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen, for example. A wealthy nation that spends a whopping 8.8 percent of its GDP on defense (more than any other in the world), Saudi Arabia possesses some of the most advanced, US-supplied weapons systems in the world. And yet, throughout its Yemen campaign, its air force has consistently run out of fuel and ammunition, lacked good intelligence, and performed poorly at targeting—all because the human and technological systems needed to support these requirements are suspected to be either inadequate or absent. Moreover, Riyadh has no national security or defense strategy that clearly identifies its priorities in the world. Its military’s doctrine is immature, its training suspect, and it simply has too few men or women of its own who know how to lead, plan, and fight. That the Saudis are stuck in Yemen, then, should come as no surprise.
But this story is hardly unique to Saudi Arabia. Most underdeveloped US partners lack the defense institutional capacities that enable them to become net security providers and better warriors. So, asking them to step up and meaningfully contribute to multilateral coalitions or peacekeeping operations when they can’t even defend their own people and territory is an unrealistic ask. Giving them more tools—when what they really need is to strengthen and sometimes even build from scratch their entire defense and security sectors—is not going to do them any good. Traditional US security cooperation and assistance programs with less capable partners have fallen short in large part because Washington has not helped its partners build defense institutions.

Congress Intervenes

As security cooperation and assistance significantly expanded after 9/11, so did the role of Congress in overseeing this enterprise and holding its administrators and implementers accountable. Whether it was in Africa, the Middle East, or some other region where the United States was putting out fires, Congress came to appreciate the reality that providing more money and arms was not producing lasting security in conflict zones. Nowhere was this conclusion more evident than in Iraq and Afghanistan. US training and equipment was helping Iraqi and Afghan partners kill many terrorists, but it wasn’t getting them any closer to developing professional, sustainable, and accountable defense and security systems, otherwise known as defense institution building (DIB).4

DIB is the process through which countries lay the organizational, behavioral, and normative foundations of defense. An outgrowth of the post-Cold War European concept of security sector reform, this process is rooted in NATO’s 1994 Partnership for Peace program, which sought to reform the governance mechanisms of the defense and security sectors of former Warsaw Pact states after the fall of the Soviet Union. Within the Defense Department, the Institute for Security Governance, folded this year into the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, oversees capacity building efforts, which are executed primarily by the Defense Governance and Management Team. Other entities and programs that have expertise in DIB include the Ministry of Defense Advisors Program, the Defense Institution Reform Initiative, and the Defense Institute of International Legal Studies. Increasingly frustrated with the results of security cooperation, in December 2016, Congress passed the FY17 NDAA, which called for nothing short of a transformation of how the US government conducts security cooperation with partner nations. Led by the late Senator John McCain and inspired by the educational crusades of several DIB pioneers and enthusiasts—including David Cate, a career defense professional, and Thomas Ross, who served as the first Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Security Cooperation—the reforms had two parts: the first merely sought to simplify
an excruciatingly complex operation by, among other things, consolidating disparate
train-and-equip authorities into a single authority called Section 333, now in a new,
stand-alone Chapter 16 for security cooperation, under Title 10.

The second, game-changing part got to the heart of the security cooperation
challenge: marrying capability development with capacity building. With
Section 333, the Defense Department is now required by law to pursue capacity
building for human rights, rule of law, and civilian control of the military with
foreign partners. Equally profound, the reforms called for the creation of new
and standardized measures to assess, monitor, and evaluate these efforts in ways
that the United States had shockingly never done before, at least systematically.

A Broken Enterprise

Defense analyst Mara Karlin has correctly described Washington as a house divided
when it comes to US military assistance. What’s alarming and less common with
respect to security cooperation is the near total absence of effective leadership
and coordination, starting at the top: namely, the White House.

Since Harry Truman’s administration, US presidents have generally
approached security assistance and cooperation through the narrow prism of
arms transfers. The debate over the years has been limited to which weapons to
provide, how many, and to whom, to promote US interests. Helping partners
build defense institutions and designing mechanisms to assess, monitor, and
evaluate US efforts has not seriously factored into this equation. “Transfer and forget” has
been the unwritten policy for decades. That hasn’t changed with the arrival of the Trump
administration. Trump’s new conventional arms transfer policy has aggressively pushed
for more and bigger sales abroad as a means to create more American jobs at home.

If the conversation about security cooperation in the top levels of the US
government remains centered on equipment and operational training, then the idea and
necessity of integrating DIB into the enterprise will not trickle down through the interagency.

This lack of senior level buy-in, by default or design, has allowed for divergences
and inefficiencies in security cooperation planning across the US bureaucracy. The schism
between the Defense Department and the State Department is most obvious and detrimental.
The Defense Department and the State Department have a shared responsibility for engaging with foreign partner militaries. This partnership usually worked well during the bulk of the Cold War because it benefited from a clear, top-level strategy of containment and a sound division of labor. However, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and especially since 9/11, this joint approach has struggled significantly. The multidimensional nature of the threat of global violent extremism, requiring both kinetic and non-kinetic responses, has elevated the importance of the two departments working together. The outcome, however, has been jurisdictional confusion and turf battles. Lack of visibility into each other's plans and activities has also led to a tremendous amount of overlap on law enforcement, counter-narcotics, counter-proliferation, counter-terrorism, border security, humanitarian assistance, and post-conflict stabilization.

Security cooperation, led by the Defense Department, and security assistance, overseen by the State Department, may be bureaucratically and legally dissimilar, given their separate funds and authorities, but they often target the same foreign policy goals, and logically so. They are supposed to complement each other, but, despite all the legislation and mechanisms calling precisely for that, including the latest Joint Security Sector Assistance Review, ineffective coordination and lack of joint planning between the State Department and the Defense Department has stood in the way. Everybody talks the talk with respect to the need to de-conflict the Pentagon’s Title 10 and Foggy Bottom’s Title 22 authorities and identify programs that are mutually reinforcing, but nobody walks the walk.

After 9/11, Congress gave the US military more funds and authorities to go after al-Qaeda, and later ISIS. In many ways, the generals delivered, decapitating terrorist groups, destroying safe havens and caliphates, and countering money flows. But they achieved these feats almost exclusively with US blood and treasure. Neither the Defense Department nor the State Department was creating reliable and sustainable counterterrorism partnerships in the region, in part because both were failing to incorporate capacity building into their assistance plans. That the two departments have been unable to join forces to address this major deficiency is an important reason for this failure. Another complicating factor is the great uncertainty in the Defense Department over who owns and does what in the field of security cooperation.

The FY17 NDAA reforms assigned the responsibility for oversight of security cooperation in the Defense Department to a single official, the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, who effectively delegates implementation to the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Security Cooperation. The reforms also tasked the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, or DSCA, with managing the enterprise. The roles and responsibilities of the Pentagon’s Office of Security Cooperation (OSC) and DSCA have complemented each other at times, but more often than not, they have been in conflict.
To be clear, OSC and DSCA agree on the merits of DIB and assessment, monitoring, and evaluation. But their views on how to pursue these legal requirements are markedly different. Whereas OSC pushes for the early integration of capacity building in security cooperation programming, DSCA incorporates capacity building much later in the process, in what often ends up being an ad-hoc manner. OSC recommends a patient and holistic security cooperation method that assesses first the partner’s willingness and absorptive capacity before providing it with new equipment. DSCA’s transactional, “trucks-and-guns” approach is much faster, showing insufficient consideration of these basic requirements.

Command and control between OSC and DSCA is another constraining factor in their relationship. OSC is led by a two-star equivalent civilian while DSCA is headed by a three-star general who answers directly to the Pentagon’s Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (the Director of DSCA does not have to report to any of the Under Secretary’s subordinates). Given that the Pentagon’s senior leadership has neither the time nor the inclination to oversee DSCA, a large bureaucracy, DSCA has run its business almost independently.

DSCA has a security cooperation approach that is inconsistent with that of OSC. This affects the latter’s working relationship with the Geographic Combatant Commands, who are in charge of executing security cooperation plans with foreign partner militaries through their Services and Components. The Commands are not blind to the power dynamics between OSC and DSCA, and sometimes exploit them. The generals cannot afford to ignore the Pentagon’s guidance—otherwise, funding for their security cooperation plans would be at risk—but they do have considerable leverage, which OSC cannot match due to relatively weak support from its own senior leadership. It’s not that the Commands do not appreciate the value of defense institution building—they certainly do—it’s just that, as war-fighting entities, they sometimes do not have the luxury to pursue it. Admittedly, it’s difficult to help a partner build defense institutions when people are dying and bullets are flying, as is often the case in the Middle East, for example.

OSC seeks to assist the Commands with sharpening and prioritizing their security cooperation plans by aligning them with the National Defense Strategy. DSCA, however, defers a little too much to the Commands and has room to grow into the honest broker role that is crucial to the success of security cooperation.

Asking the Commands to overhaul their security cooperation approach with partners by integrating capacity development into their plans is a heavy lift, both
culturally and practically. First, most Commands have been accustomed to using security cooperation primarily as a tool to gain access and influence, not necessarily to build effective partnerships with foreign militaries. And since more access and more influence is always better, they have resorted to a “peanut butter spread” approach: a little bit of security cooperation with as many partners as possible, without adequate prioritization. Access and influence, no doubt, are worthy foreign policy pursuits, but they should be viewed as means rather than ends. Furthermore, security cooperation has its own set of objectives, standards, and metrics of success. The Commands are typically wedded to their own planning constructs and processes, which include integrated country strategies and theater campaign plans. They have little interest in what the Department has to offer in terms of security cooperation planning guidance.

Second, neither the Commands nor DSCA have ever done this before, at least methodically and consistently. The Commands do not have the expertise to follow the new guidance, and they are not receiving the proper help from the Department or anywhere else. As the lead on security cooperation workforce development, DSCA is responsible for providing capacity-building training to security cooperation officers abroad, but its efforts have yet to meet the huge demand.

A Way Forward

There’s no question that defense institution building, especially in authoritarian contexts, is incredibly challenging and requires utmost cooperation by the partner. But building and empowering institutions that have the guns, and thus the ability to conduct coups, is not something in which autocrats have an interest. Neither is liberalizing or professionalizing national security ministries and intelligence agencies, because that might undermine favorable clientelistic networks run by the government. Sadly, this is the story of most of America’s Middle Eastern, African, and Latin American partners. Make no mistake about it: defense reform requires political reform.

But there is no way the United States could effectively address any of these real challenges without first dealing with its own. Unfortunately, there hasn’t been much honesty about its own shortcomings in security cooperation. For example, when Iraqi militias loyal to Iran used American Abrams tanks and Humvees to retake the oil-rich city of Kirkuk on October 16, 2017, the United States directed its anger mostly toward Baghdad and did not acknowledge its own failure to clearly communicate to the Iraqi leadership the US expectations and red lines.

The road to recovery starts with remembering why pursuing defense institution building in conjunction with train-and-equip programs is neither a charity nor a luxury—it is a necessity, one that benefits both the partner nation and US interests. Capacity development creates partners capable of responsibly sharing
security burdens and sustains US security investments abroad when every dollar in this challenging fiscal environment counts.

Congress is to be commended for exercising leadership and proposing the far-reaching reforms. But that’s not enough. Members of Congress should perform consistent oversight and insist on accountability by more frequently holding public and closed hearings on security cooperation. They need to ask the commanders, the civilian leaders, and the DSCA director the hard questions, such as what is the desired, specific end state of security cooperation with the partner, and when can it realistically be achieved? Is the partner able to absorb, sustain, and integrate US equipment into its force structure in order to develop the desired military capability? And if it’s unable to do that, or unwilling to address US concerns, what are the risks to ending or conditioning US support? Should there be no attempt to answer these questions in good faith, and security cooperation reforms not be fully embraced by all stakeholders or proceed at a faster pace, Congress should consider punitive measures including deeper budget cuts. Such measures would surely find an ally in President Trump, who is already allergic to foreign aid.

None of this will come easily for a couple of reasons. First, senior staffers and sometimes even Senators are awed by the power of the generals and predisposed to give them everything they need with few strings attached out of a commendable, albeit misguided, sense of patriotism. There aren’t enough strong personalities in Congress, like the late John McCain, who have the knowledge and confidence to smartly challenge US personnel in uniform and are willing to take political risks. Second, security cooperation doesn’t typically sell in Congress because it doesn’t have a constituency. Many members of Congress represent regions where the defense industry is a major employer. Pushing for a more restrained arms transfer policy that might reduce US weapons exports to some partners, for example, could lead to fewer jobs in that member of Congress’s district, which is akin to political suicide.6

Within the executive branch, security cooperation reform will continue to struggle absent a more serious process of joint planning between the Defense Department and the State Department. This might be a pipe dream, given how far apart the two departments are in terms of how they run their operations, but this reality doesn’t make this old objective any less critical. Meeting it will require, first and foremost, both secretaries to stop paying lip service and start exercising leadership. Here, personalities and politics will matter a lot. Only a combined approach works: one that leverages each department’s unique skillset—diplomatic engagement and development assistance in the case of Foggy Bottom, and military cooperation in the case of the Pentagon—and creates a

Pursuing defense institution building is neither a charity nor a luxury—it is a necessity.
joint-planning roadmap for the Pentagon’s Section 333 and Foggy Bottom’s Foreign Military Financing (FMF) that helps to prioritize and guide what each department would request for capacity-building resources. The Defense Department should share five-year security cooperation plans with the State Department to support increased collaboration. Similarly, the State Department should increase its long-term planning capacity across all security assistance accounts to enable the interagency to compare plans in out-years and support respective budget requests.

Despite claims of the militarization of US foreign policy, it’s worth noting that the State Department’s financial equities in international security engagement (a bigger umbrella term) are larger than those of the Defense Department. And yet, there is little visibility into what goes into FMF, for example, let alone USAID’s budget, which is a black hole. There is even less scrutiny of programs such as FMF, which makes US grants seem like entitlement programs for some of the foreign partners, including Jordan, Egypt, and Israel. As keen as Congress is to inspect the Pentagon’s security cooperation activities, it should keep an even closer eye on the State Department’s foreign aid. Formulating a set of reforms of Foggy Bottom’s security assistance that parallel the scope and breadth of those of the FY17 NDAA is a good idea too.

With regard to the Pentagon, the contentious relationship between OSC and DSCA must improve if security cooperation reform is to proceed more effectively. The bottom line is that the roles and responsibilities of each entity must be made crystal clear by Congress or senior Defense Department leadership, especially with regard to the function of certifying DIB with partners. The narrative and necessity of DIB and its associated priority of assessment, monitoring, and evaluation are relatively new, and it will take time for all of the Defense Department’s agencies to acclimate to the new requirements. But DSCA has to show greater commitment to the new way of doing things; otherwise, Congress might transfer its capacity building responsibility, along with training and developing the global security cooperation workforce, to another civilian office in the Pentagon, and ask DSCA to focus on what it does best: processing equipment releases. DSCA leadership might not object to this deal, although it will not admit this publicly.

OSC itself has not been flawless in dealing with a bit of a chicken-and-egg problem. On one hand, the office has lacked top cover to fulfill its mission, as demonstrated by the ongoing failure of the Department’s senior leadership to nominate a successor to DASD for Security Cooperation Thomas Ross, who departed more than two years ago. On the other hand, perhaps it is because the office has struggled at messaging its priorities and responsibilities (since most of the Department seems unaware of them) that it hasn’t received the necessary backing from senior leadership. The obvious lesson for the next DASD (should there be one), then, is that strategic communications should be a priority, along with putting ties with DSCA on the right track, by creating a common picture of what good DIB looks like, among other things.
With regard to DSCA, it might help to put a civilian who is well versed in both security and development assistance in charge of the organization and to assign direct oversight responsibilities to an Assistant Secretary of Defense. That’s because DSCA’s work impacts, directly or indirectly, core defense policy matters, which are the prerogative of civilian leadership in the Pentagon. In 2008, DSCA reported to Joseph Benkert, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Global Security Affairs, and in 2009–2012, it reported to Peter Verga, the Chief of Staff to Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy. It’s worth considering reinstating that model because experience shows that it worked.

The Commands’ engagements in various parts of the world would be better served if the generals also take a more honest and pragmatic look at prioritization. The days of healthy budgets are over and are most likely not coming back. Thus, the wisest strategy is one that focuses on bigger bets in fewer places. The security cooperation objective that is identified by the Commands should not only be strategic, measurable, achievable, and relevant to the National Defense Strategy, but also sensitive to the partner’s own record and place in US national security plans. Not all partners are equal. Those that perform at a high level should be rewarded and, in some cases, prioritized. If it’s obvious that the partner has been taking US preferences less seriously and using US grants to meet its own goals, then revisiting the relationship, or at least the unconditional release of US funds, should be in order.

Last but not least, it is critical to learn from the lessons of the United States’ rich experiences in security cooperation and assistance. Not all experiences have been failures. Colombia, Lebanon, Niger, and the Republic of Georgia have been relative success cases, in large part because the United States has made higher investments in defense institution building. Washington has helped the armed forces of all four countries in recent years not only fight better but also plan, manage, recruit, budget, and solve logistics more effectively. This is why the strategic evaluation of security cooperation, as mandated by Congress, is so key. The Defense Department cannot effectively perform these evaluations if the functions of assessment and monitoring are not standard practice across the board.

**Strategic Security Cooperation**

Thanks to forceful congressional intervention two years ago, the United States finds itself with a tremendous opportunity to overhaul security cooperation—a domain over which the United States should have superiority vis-à-vis its
competitors, but one that has been operating at a fraction of its potential. Fixing the fundamental problems of security cooperation is neither optional nor too late. At its simplest, security cooperation requires a fresh new look by senior leadership in the executive branch. Once that becomes possible, better internal organization and coordination will follow. This tool is too valuable to be constantly, and sometimes exclusively, used as a way to maintain political ties to a partner, pay for a certain favor, or secure access, overflight, and basing. All of these matters are incredibly important to US national security interests, but there are other, more effective assets in US foreign policy, including diplomacy and economic trade, that could be used to achieve these goals.

Had the United States not been in a period of strategic transition, perhaps the risks of ignoring security cooperation reform would have been low. But drawing down militarily in the Middle East and paying more attention to the Indo-Pacific will require that the United States do security cooperation right. That means doubling down on US force multipliers and investing in more powerful and sustainable military partnerships around the world through, among other things, defense institution building. This is not an argument against more arms transfers, but rather for making those transfers count and contribute more directly to US objectives beyond financial profit.

Notes