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Assessing Security Cooperation as a Preventive Tool

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Summary

The Policy Question

Since 2005, U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) policy documents have asserted that security cooperation (SC) can be used to help prevent instability and reduce fragility in partner states. This premise—the preventive hypothesis—has become an important aspect of U.S. global strategy and a strategic pillar for the U.S. Army. The premise has been accepted as intuitively true and backed up by important case studies and numerous anecdotes. Our research had the purpose of assessing empirical support for the preventive hypothesis.

Because the preventive hypothesis underpins U.S. policy goals and applies across all security sectors, we use a modified definition of SC as “activities undertaken by the U.S. government to encourage and enable international partners to work with the United States to achieve security sector objectives.”

Using the information provided in policy documents, we explicitly specified the preventive hypothesis. Then, based on the empirical linkage between states’ high fragility levels and the incidence of major unrest or instability, we focused on the correlation between SC and reduction in state fragility. We compiled data on SC based on the U.S. Agency for International Development’s Greenbook,¹ which captures most foreign assistance (including SC) expenditures, as well as the For-

¹ U.S. Agency for International Development, *U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants, Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945–September 30, 2011*, Washington, D.C., 2012, known popularly as the USAID Greenbook.

eign Military Training Report, Government Accountability Office and DoD reports to Congress, and data from DoD's regional centers. We included only concessional aid (e.g., grants), not sales of equipment or services. To assess changes in state fragility, we used the State Fragility Index developed by the Center for Systemic Peace and widely used in the conflict and development communities.

We developed country-year observations using 107 countries from 1991 to 2008, ending up with almost 1,300 observations. While most SC is based on multiple U.S. interests, such as improved access and influence, we excluded only countries where SC was least likely to be motivated by prevention of instability. We normalized expenditures across countries by using SC per capita and by logging the data. We also used standard statistical methods to control for the diversity of countries and other factors that would affect fragility over time independent of SC. Finally, because SC does not produce instant results, we assessed its correlation with partner fragility five years after SC was provided. We also conducted case studies of a dozen countries to gain a more nuanced and rich understanding of the impact of SC in these countries.

Findings

Our findings support the preventive hypothesis. We found that on average SC has a statistically significant relationship with reduction in fragility. The one-year effect is small, with most of the impact concentrated at the low end of expenditures per country, and there are diminishing returns from increased expenditures. It is possible that SC over time could have more significant results. We also found that the correlation of SC with reduction in fragility is nuanced and depends on conditions in the recipient country:

- SC was more highly correlated with reduction in fragility in states with stronger state institutions and greater state reach.
- SC was not correlated with reduction in fragility in states that were already experiencing extremely high fragility.

- SC was more highly correlated with reduction in fragility in more-democratic regimes; the more democratic the regime, the greater the correlation of SC and reduction in fragility.
- The concentration of low state reach, authoritarian regimes, and relatively high levels of fragility in the Middle East and Africa meant that the positive correlation of SC and reduction in fragility was least pronounced in those regions; Latin America, Asia Pacific, and Europe had the best effects.

Some types of U.S. SC are more highly correlated with reductions in state fragility than others. Nonmateriel aid, such as education, law enforcement, and counternarcotics aid, were more highly correlated; provision of materiel aid, even though it forms the majority of U.S. SC, was not correlated with reducing fragility in recipient countries. This outcome may stem from the fact that materiel aid is often focused on goals other than reducing state fragility, such as strengthening relationships, improving U.S. military access to a country, and improving capabilities for external defense.

We did not find development aid from the United States or other developed countries to have a statistically significant effect on the effectiveness of U.S. SC. That may be due to the fact that much development assistance goes to the most fragile states and, based on recent trends in understanding the effect of development aid, because development aid appears to work on longer time frames than security aid.

Implications

Our research has established a statistically significant correlation between U.S. SC spending and improvement in the recipient country's fragility, but many unknowns remain concerning the preventive hypothesis. The effect was weakest in countries with high fragility scores and thus most at risk of state failure, and greatest in those where instability and state failure are highly unlikely. This suggests that SC may be better at "reinforcing success" or preventing backsliding than in halting a country's decline into instability.

Education offers the greatest impact in terms of categories of SC in reducing fragility. This finding supports the general idea that investment in human capital has large payoffs. But education is also the smallest of the categories we examined. There may be a ceiling as to how effective such programs might be if these programs were to be expanded. The finding that law enforcement and counternarcotics programs appear to have better results than traditional train and equip efforts needs to be examined more closely to determine whether their success stems from being well integrated into broader whole of government efforts.

Our findings suggest that, in situations of high fragility, SC is not sufficient to stave off instability, because highly fragile partner states are not able to use SC effectively. This point highlights the importance of prevention. In such cases, as well as in cases of partners lacking state reach, a more-coordinated aid program of development and security aid and a focus on institution building may be a better approach. In some cases of low state reach, development assistance, with its long-term focus, may be a better tool than SC.

The high correlation of small amounts of SC with a reduction in fragility and the fact that returns diminish rapidly with increased investments points to intriguing insights, such as the possibility that it is the fact of U.S. involvement itself—with its diplomatic and political backing—rather than its form or size that had the greatest impact on state fragility.

With judgment, the results of our study can be used for decision-making concerning the type of SC to provide on the basis of state characteristics. Our findings may provide better grounds for expectation management when it comes to provision of SC to highly fragile states. Our findings also may be of interest to SC planners at geographic combatant commands.

Our results suggest that training and education efforts make a real contribution to reducing fragility and preventing conflict. The Army's increased focus on SC, as shown by designating brigades for SC and aligning these units along regional lines, is a step that is in accordance with greater U.S. conflict-prevention efforts. Increased emphasis on low-footprint special operations forces efforts to build partner

capacity is also in line with the preventive hypothesis that is supported by our study.