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Developing an Assessment Framework for U.S. Air Force Building Partnerships Programs

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Summary

Introduction

The U.S. Air Force has a long history of working with allies and partners in a security cooperation context to build the defense capacities of these nations, acquire and maintain access to foreign territories for operational purposes, and strengthen relationships with partner air forces for mutual benefit. However, it is often difficult to determine whether or how these activities have contributed to the goals and objectives of U.S. national security, DoD, COCOMs, and the services. As is the case throughout DoD, the Air Force currently does not have a comprehensive framework in place by which it can assess the effectiveness of its security cooperation efforts with partner air forces in a deliberate and consistent way.

This monograph outlines an assessment framework that can enhance the Air Force’s security cooperation efforts in a way that reflects U.S. national security interests, DoD guidance, COCOM requirements, and Air Force global priorities. The document identifies relevant Air Force security cooperation authorities, programs, and key stakeholders for those programs. The proposed assessment framework will allow Air Force planners, strategists, and key policymakers to see specifically whether Air Force security cooperation programs and activities are achieving the desired effects as defined in the guidance documents.
Principles of Assessment for Security Cooperation

Assessment is research or analysis to inform decisionmaking. When most people think of evaluation or assessment, they tend to think of outcomes assessment: Does the subject of the assessment “work”? Is it worthwhile? Although this is certainly within the purview of assessment, assessments cover a much broader range and can be quite varied. Assessment is fundamentally action-oriented. Assessments are conducted to determine the value, worth, or effect of a policy, program, proposal, practice, design, or service with a view toward making decisions about changing that program or program element in the future.

In short, the overall goal of assessment should remain the same: Air Force security cooperation assessments should explicitly connect to Air Force decisionmaking. Effective assessment and evaluation can be critical tools for informed decisionmaking and policymaking. Conversely, mismatched assessments can be worse than useless.

Air Force security cooperation assessment activities face a handful of additional challenges that must be overcome, worked around, or otherwise dealt with to achieve full success. These challenges include:

- difficulty in determining causality or linking the activities of specific security cooperation programs to specific advances toward specific end states or outcomes
- paucity of well-articulated intermediate goals
- different assessment capabilities among Air Force stakeholders
- multiplicity of and differing priorities of stakeholders—a single organization can have different “stakes” as a stakeholder in different programs
- security cooperation data tracking systems not organized for security cooperation assessment
- confusing security cooperation terminology
- prevalence of delegating assessment responsibility to subordinate organizations
- expectations and preconceived notions of assessments.
The Hierarchy of Evaluation
Given the explicit focus on assessment for decisionmaking and the need to connect stakeholders and their decisionmaking needs with specific types of assessments, the Air Force needs a unifying framework to facilitate that matching process. That framework, grounded on “the hierarchy of evaluation,”¹ is presented in Figure S.1.

**Level 1: Assessment of Need for the Program.** Level 1, at the bottom of the hierarchy and foundational in many respects, is the assessment of the need for the program or activity. This is where evaluation connects most explicitly with target ends or goals. Evaluation at this level focuses on the problem to be solved or goal to be met, the

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population to be served, and the kinds of services that might contribute to a solution.²

**Level 2: Assessment of Design and Theory.** Assessment of the concept, design, and theory is the second level in the hierarchy. Once a needs assessment establishes that there is a problem or policy goal to pursue as well as the intended objectives of such policy, different solutions can be considered. This is where theory connects ways to ends.

**Level 3: Assessment of Process and Implementation.** Level 3 in the hierarchy of evaluation focuses on program operations and the execution of the elements prescribed by the theory and design at Level 2. A program can be perfectly executed but still not achieve its goals if the design was inadequate. Conversely, poor execution can foil the most brilliant design.

**Level 4: Assessment of Outcomes and Effects.** Level 4 is near the top of the evaluation hierarchy and concerns outcomes and effects. At this level, outputs are translated into outcomes, a level of performance, or achievement. Put another way, outputs are the products of program activities, outcomes are the changes resulting from the projects. This is the first level of assessment at which solutions to the problem that originally motivated the program can be seen.

**Level 5: Assessment of Cost-Effectiveness.** The assessment of cost-effectiveness sits at the top of the evaluation hierarchy, at Level 5. Only when desired outcomes are at least partially observed can efforts be made to assess their cost-effectiveness. Evaluations at this level are often most attractive in bottom-line terms, but they depend heavily on lower levels of evaluation.

The hierarchy of evaluation can be a powerful tool for appropriately matching types of assessment with specific stakeholder needs. Each level of the evaluation hierarchy implies a set of generic security cooperation assessment questions, the answers to which will differ considerably depending on the program’s nature, the authorities of the stakeholders, and so forth.

Table S.1 summarizes the research team’s analysis of the programs, the stakeholders, and the levels in which they are involved.

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² Rossi, Lipsey, and Freeman, 2004, p. 76.
### Table 5.1
Summary of Programs, Stakeholders, and Assessment Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Analysis</th>
<th>Needs Assessment</th>
<th>Design and Theory</th>
<th>Process and Implementation</th>
<th>Outcomes and Effects</th>
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For the first four levels of analysis, stakeholders were conducting activities that could serve as sources of information to answer some of the generic assessment questions. However, as the table indicates, gaps remain, especially in the areas of needs and cost-effectiveness.

Implementing a Comprehensive Assessment Framework

All programs have stakeholders, and they each are guided by specific program authorities. Their authorities, which shape and influence their responsibilities, lead each stakeholder to a certain set of decisions they may make about the program:

- whether it should continue
- whether it is well-conceived given the theory of how the program is supposed to help the Air Force, or other stakeholders, reach their respective goals and end states
- whether the process and implementation of the program is performing adequately or requires revision
- whether the outcomes and effects of the program are meeting expectations
- whether the program is performing on a cost-benefit basis—delivering the expected “bang for the buck.”

The Air Force plays roles in three general categories of security cooperation programs, each of which requires that the Air Force assume different roles for assessment purposes. First, for programs entirely under the Air Force’s authority, assessments across the entire hierarchy of evaluation are possible. The key is to remember that the Air Force should assess only where it has decisions to make about the program.

Second, for Title 10 programs not managed by the Air Force, the Air Force faces no decisions with regard to the need for the program or the quality of its design and theory. Thus, Air Force involvement is likely to center on assessment of the process and implementation (e.g., are we following instructions?) and on outcome (e.g., what percentage of participants graduated from a course?).
Last, Title 22 security assistance programs also can be subject to the full scope of assessments. But again, the Air Force’s role will be limited because other stakeholders have the authority to make the high-level decisions about the need for the program and the fit of its design and theory.

**Recommendations**

The Air Force should incorporate an assessment process at the program level into its current security cooperation assessment process to meet the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) and Air Force needs. Second, it is important that Air Force stakeholders assess security cooperation with the intent to inform decisionmaking. Third, because of the limited assessment guidance and the need for efficient assessment processes, the Air Force should clarify and specify stakeholder assessment roles and responsibilities for security cooperation assessments.

Specific recommendations for implementing the assessment framework include the following:

**Guidance**

- SAF/IA should work closely with OSD to clarify program assessment responsibilities in the Guidance for Employment of the Force. (See p. 126.)
- SAF/IA should include an annex on assessments in the Air Force Global Partnership Strategy. (See pp. 126–127.)
- SAF/IA should consider assigning the responsibilities for data collection, assessment, assessment review, and assessment integration to stakeholders. (See pp. 111–123.)

**Assessment Management**

- Leverage assessment capacity and processes within the Air Force where they already exist. (See pp. 102, 127.)
• Emphasize security cooperation assessments as a focus area for the next annual SAF/IA global partnerships conference. (See pp. 127–128.)
• Ensure that SAF/IA is the assessment integrator, responsible for integrating service assessments with outcome-oriented assessments developed by the COCOMs, for programs involving the Air Force, rather than collecting data on specific programs and activities. (See pp. 117, 128.)
• Consider creating an Air Force Corporate Structure panel, chaired by SAF/IA, devoted to the security cooperation mission. (See pp. 102–103, 117–118, 128.)

Assessment Activities

• Consider a time-phased approach to data collection in which standardized assessment questions are asked to compare and contrast the results. (See p. 128.)
• Ensure that stakeholder objectivity is maintained in the program assessment framework. (See pp. 113, 129.)
• Knowledgebase should be the repository for programmatic assessments.3 (See pp. 53, 129.)

Training

• SAF/IA should consider working with the Air Force’s Institute of Technology’s Center for Operational Analysis, Air University, Air Education and Training Command, and the Defense Security Cooperation Agency to develop a professional curriculum for security cooperation assessments. (See p. 129.)

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3 Knowledgebase is a centralized, useful repository of security cooperation data and guidance managed by SAF/IA.