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What Works Best When Building Partner Capacity and Under What Circumstances?

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Summary

Purpose of This Research

The United States has a long history of helping other nations develop and improve their military and other security forces. U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) efforts with a goal of building partner capacity (BPC) continue in earnest in the contemporary era and will remain prominent defense activities in the future. However, changing economic realities and the ongoing reductions in overall defense spending related to the end of more than a decade of war will affect the funding available for these initiatives. How can DoD increase the effectiveness of its efforts to build partner capacity while also increasing the efficiency of those efforts? *What can the history of U.S. BPC efforts tell us about which approaches to capacity building are likely to be more or less effective under different circumstances?*¹ Answering this question is the principal ambition of this report. The goal is not only to provide satisfactory answers about correlates of effectiveness but to do so from a firm base of evidence.

¹ Note that this report addresses only the effectiveness of the approaches in terms of BPC outcomes. Although many of the factors related to effectiveness also have implications for efficiency, we do not address that topic here, and it remains an important area for future research.

Data and Evidence

This report considers and compares historical case studies of U.S. efforts to build partner capacity in order to generate a base of evidence to inform policy discussions and investment decisions. We compare the results of U.S. BPC efforts since the end of the Cold War for 29 selected partner nations (PNs).² By examining 20 years of data on 29 systematically selected countries, we were able to build a solid foundation of evidence on the effectiveness of different features of capacity-building efforts under different conditions and in different contexts.

Each country case is divided into between two and four chronological phases. These phases served as the unit of analysis for the study. The average length of a phase is eight years, though some are shorter or longer. The length of each phase was determined holistically at the discretion of the individual case analyst. Phase changes do not reflect small-scale changes or changes on a single factor; rather, they indicate significant shifts and events affecting many factors (or perhaps a smaller number of particularly important factors) in the overall case. Each case also includes a baseline phase, from which we derived baseline outcome data. Taken together, the “actual” data phases, the null phases (in which no capacity building occurred), and the baseline phases total 100.

Each of these 100 phases represents a row in the project database. For each non-baseline phase, the data rows include scores for roughly 75 factors or variables.

Of the 100 phases, 38 are null or baseline phases, and 62 are “real” numbered phases in which the United States conducted BPC activities with discernable intent. In 55 of those 62 phases, at least one of the primary objectives was a form of capacity building—that is, relationship building or securing access was not the only primary objective, and efforts included some kind of earnest attempt to build

² To protect the sensitivity of some details of the partnerships, this report does not list the 29 selected partners. However, we do rely on examples drawn from the less sensitive of the 29 cases, as well as examples of other partnerships with which the authors are familiar. The full case studies are available in the controlled-access companion report.

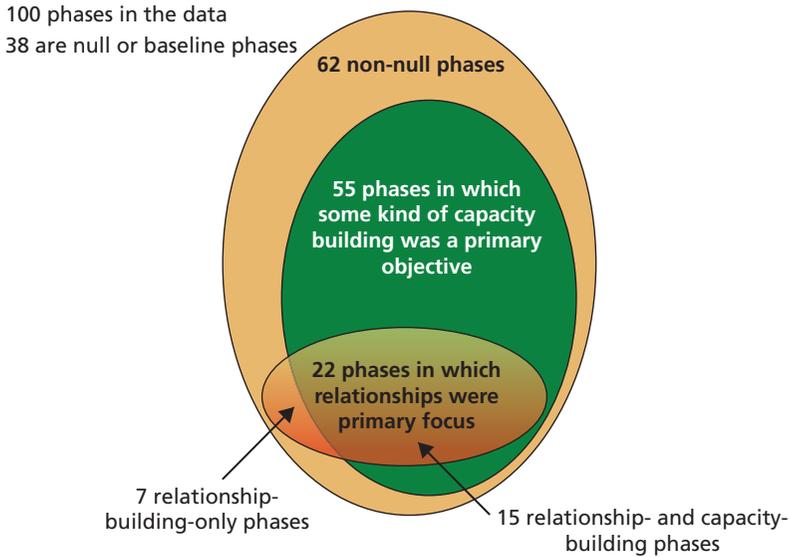
actual capacity. (In the other seven phases, relationship building or access was the only discernible objective).³ These 55 phases in which capacity building was a goal, then, constituted the analytic core of our analysis, which sought to discern the effectiveness—in different contexts—of different BPC efforts in actually building capacity. A total of 22 phases have relationship building or access as a primary objective; this set includes the seven phases noted previously, in which relationship building or access is the only objective, as well as 15 phases in which some sort of capacity building is a primary objective but relationship building or access is also a primary objective. Considering the 55 phases in which capacity building is an objective and removing phases in which relationship building or access is *also* a primary objective leaves a data subset of 40. These 40 phases represent “pure” efforts to build capacity. Most analyses in this report rely on either the $n = 55$ or the $n = 40$ subsets. Figure S.1 presents a Venn diagram of the various subsets of phases.

For each phase, we identified a set of *inputs* within a certain *context* that produced certain *outcomes*.⁴ Patterns of these input, contextual, and outcome factors constitute evidence in the study. For each phase of each case, we measured approximately 75 different input, contextual, or outcome factors.

³ Although it may seem tautological to have to ask whether or not the BPC objectives in our case studies actually involved capacity building, it is not. We recognize that U.S. BPC activities are employed in pursuit of a variety of foreign policy and national security objectives. Usually, at least one of those objectives is some sort of increase in a partner’s defense capacity; sometimes, however, BPC tools and funds are offered in pursuit of a different objective, such as persuading a partner to allow access by U.S. forces (e.g., basing rights, overflight rights, land transit rights) or otherwise improving the relationship between the partner and the United States in pursuit of a foreign policy benefit *without actually building any capacity*.

⁴ Input factors include BPC expenditures, activities, and contributions made by the United States, the partner country, or other partners, along with any relevant details of those activities. Context factors describe the environment (writ large) in which BPC activities are conducted and can include features of the partner nation (e.g., the strength of its economy, its baseline defense capability) or characteristics of its neighbors or region (e.g., level of regional security threats, correspondence between partner goals and U.S. goals). Outcome factors describe the results of BPC activities in the described contexts; in these cases, the outcomes of interest concern whether or not capacity was built and how much.

Figure S.1
Venn Diagram of the Subsets of Phases in the Data



Each case includes a detailed narrative and a host of factors scored across the different phases, supporting two types of analyses: single-case lessons learned with discursive examples and comparative or aggregate analysis across phases and cases.

This evidence either supports or fails to support a collection of hypotheses, with each hypothesis represented by one or more factors.

Findings

Most of the project hypotheses are based on received wisdom on BPC effectiveness, drawn either from other scholarly sources or from conversations with BPC stakeholders and practitioners. As such, most of these hypotheses received empirical support from the comparative evidence gathered for this study. What varies, however, is the strength of the correlations observed and, thus, the strength of support offered by the evidence. The following key findings are based on our analysis.

Matching matters: BPC is most effective when U.S. objectives align with PN objectives and when BPC efforts align with the partner’s baseline capabilities and absorptive capacity.

This single prominent observation inspired the central metaphor of this report: find the right ladder, find the right rung. The historical cases show that BPC is effective when the capacity being built meets the interests of both the partner country and the United States (the right ladder) and when the BPC activities are a good match for the partner’s baseline capability in that area and its capacity to absorb new materiel, training, and so on (the right rung).

Context matters: Certain characteristics or features of PNs make BPC more likely to be effective.

Specifically, the following properties are associated with greater effectiveness in BPC, historically:

- PN invests its own funds to support or sustain capacity
- PN has sufficient absorptive capacity
- PN has high governance indicators
- PN has a strong economy
- PN shares security interests with the United States.

Independent of PN context, there are several factors wholly under the control of the United States that correlate strongly with BPC effectiveness.

These factors, which are strongly endorsed by our analyses, are as follows:

- spending more money on BPC or undertaking more BPC initiatives
- consistency in both the funding and implementation of these initiatives
- matching BPC efforts with PN objectives and absorptive capacity
- including a sustainment component in the initiatives.

BPC is complex, but we found that there are some clear best practices for those conducting BPC, clear best traits for desirable partners, and clear best practices for recipient partners. The results demonstrate that when all three have been followed, effectiveness has ensued. *That is, if BPC is consistently funded and delivered, supported and sustained, well matched to partner capabilities and interests, and shared with a partner that supports the effort and is healthy economically and in terms of governance, prospects for effective BPC are very good.* The results also suggest that BPC can still be effective when only some practices are followed or when only some conditions are met. BPC done well, done consistently, and matched to partner absorptive capacities and interests can be effective even when the partner is not particularly robust in any dimension at the outset.

The strongest and most consistent correlations, however, are for factors at the seam of U.S. and PN control: factors related to the alignment of interests and the matching of capacity-building activities to PN objectives and to the ability of the PN to absorb and retain the materiel and training provided.

The criticality of these seam or matching factors inspired the overriding metaphor for the study, “find the right ladder, find the right rung.”

Recommendations

The study findings suggest several clear recommendations for DoD both in the future planning and execution of BPC and in investing in the creation and maintenance of BPC capabilities.

Where possible, choose partners that have or can adopt the attributes, characteristics, or behaviors that are associated with effective BPC.

We recognize that, sometimes, foreign policy imperatives or the nature or location of a threat dictate or force priorities when choosing partner nations. However, when there is flexibility in partners and priorities, choose partners that have or will adopt contextual factors associated

with BPC effectiveness. Specifically, when all else is equal, give preference to countries

- that are willing to invest their own funds to support or sustain capacity
- that have sufficient absorptive capacity
- that have high governance indicators
- that have strong and healthy economies
- whose broad strategic interests predominantly align with U.S. interests in the region.

Regardless of the partner or context, choose BPC goals and activities to correspond with what the partner wants or needs and what it is capable of absorbing.

As noted, strategic imperatives can compel partnerships in which the partner lacks some of the attributes that were prioritized in the first recommendation. Whether working with ideal partners or suboptimal partners, prospects for effective BPC increase dramatically when specific BPC objectives align with specific partner interests (independent of broader alignment with U.S. interests) and when the specific BPC activities conducted are well matched to partner baseline capabilities and absorptive capacity. Find the right ladder, find the right rung!

For continued BPC effectiveness, the United States should build or maintain partner capabilities in the following ways.

- *Plan BPC activities to match both U.S. and PN needs and objectives.* Finding the intersection between U.S. and PN objectives is easy in some instances and quite tricky in others—especially when the intersection of interests is limited or nuanced. Planning and coordinating BPC activities to meet U.S. and PN objectives (and thus maximize prospects for success, both in BPC and in broader policy) is nontrivial. Such capabilities are and remain essential.
- *Identify baseline PN absorptive capacity and match BPC activities to what the partner can absorb.* Matching activities to PN baseline capabilities and absorptive capacity is also critical. DoD must

have the capability to conduct needs assessments, identify baseline partner capabilities, and determine PN forces' initial levels of absorptive capacity (including equipment, organizational characteristics, readiness, the extent of existing training, technological sophistication, education, language abilities, and doctrine) to be able to optimally plan and match BPC activities to PN needs.

- *Build ministerial capacity and otherwise develop absorptive capacity.* Ministerial capacity (the capability of a partner's ministry of defense or ministry of interior to plan for and manage the partner's military and security forces) is foundational for other forms of capacity. Further, we found that ministerial capacity can be improved even when PN absorptive capacity is generally low and that ministerial capacity building can, itself, improve a partner's absorptive capacity even when baseline absorptive capacity is low. Such increases could enable future capacity building in other areas. These capabilities should be central to the future BPC toolbox.
- *Consider sustainment capabilities in BPC planning.* Sustainment considerations are highly correlated with long-term effectiveness in the 29 cases discussed here. Whether it involves building a separate logistics capability or funding stream or expanding existing programs and capabilities to facilitate sustainment, effective BPC requires sustainment.