

# Security Cooperation in a Strategic Competition

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## ISSUE

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For this project, RAND Corporation researchers examined the current role of security cooperation efforts as a tool in the emerging strategic competition among the United States, the Russian Federation, and the People's Republic of China. The team did not assess the effectiveness or measure outcomes of security cooperation efforts but rather sought to identify how, where, and to what degree the three major competitors—plus Australia, Japan, India, and several countries in Europe—are using security cooperation.



## APPROACH

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The project team reviewed all available sources of information—including media reporting; professional journal articles; and official government statements in English, Russian, Chinese, and other languages—to develop the best-possible open-source portrait of the security cooperation activities of the countries that lead and usually fund such activities. The team also examined third-party analyses and, where publicly available, official national security strategies and documents to understand how each country viewed the goals of its security cooperation efforts. Finally, members of the project team traveled to six countries that are generally the junior partner in security cooperation activities (and assessed two other such countries in depth) to understand how the security cooperation competition is playing out on the ground. Research for this report was completed in late 2019, and the analysis is supported by the data available at that time.



## CONCLUSIONS

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- *Russia and China enjoy some comparative advantages over the United States with some clients.* For example, neither state typically sets any political or ethical preconditions on cooperation—meaning their security cooperation efforts face fewer constraints than those of the United States. In addition, those countries can offer cheaper (but still decent quality) products and competent military training and engagement.
- *Nonetheless, the United States and its partners and allies play the dominant role in global security cooperation.* Security cooperation remains a U.S. strategic advantage in scope, quality, and multilateral alignment.
- Persistent commitments leave the U.S. security cooperation portfolio somewhat misaligned to the demands of the strategic competition, even if legacy commitments serve important U.S. interests. Many U.S. security cooperation activities are still overwhelmingly directed at the Middle East and South Asia.

- *The strategic competition is playing out primarily in day-to-day contests in the space below the level of armed conflict.* U.S. security cooperation programs must address this space and support the United States' broader geopolitical goals of reassurance, capacity-building, relationship maintenance, and partner engagement.
- *U.S. partners and allies are major players in security cooperation.* Australia, Japan, India, and especially leading allies in Europe each conduct significant and growing security cooperation efforts targeted to the strategic competition, and those efforts in turn offer opportunities for synergy with U.S. efforts.
- *Many critical countries are determined to avoid taking sides in the emerging strategic competition; U.S. security cooperation strategies will have to respect this fact.* The prevalence of strategic hedging and the existence of strongly established doctrines of nonalignment were among the most-consistent findings from the focus countries. This preference for hedging creates strict limits on what many countries will agree to do in explicitly laying the groundwork for high-end conflict; as a result, security cooperation collaboration in many lower-end areas is far more feasible.
- *The countries using security cooperation as a tool in strategic competition have not made their efforts generalized or global but, for the time being, are focused on a handful of countries.* These include Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Jordan, Kenya, Malaysia, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Vietnam, and the Pacific Island states.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop targeted programs for the priority countries in the competition over security cooperation.
- Develop expanded programs for security cooperation in nonmilitary areas. The United States often will have more success in security cooperation areas that do not imply direct coordination for possible conflict, such as the following:
  - continued and more-frequent senior-level visits, official exchanges, and other symbolically important hallmarks of deepening security relationships
  - humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, as well as exercises focused on this area
  - support for maintenance, operations, upgrades, technical training related to transport aircraft, and mobility assets (e.g., Thai, Indian, Algerian, and Egyptian C-130 aircraft)
  - domain awareness capabilities, especially for the maritime regions of Asia
  - education and training relationships, including English-language programs
  - development of Air National Guard elements of State Partnership Programs.
- Research new ways to streamline U.S. policy for security cooperation activities. Arms transfers are the basis for larger relationships and can create operational ecosystems that cement partners in security cooperation. Continued difficulty caused by U.S. arms transfer policies could become a much bigger strategic danger as Chinese systems become more competitive.
- Combine security cooperation activities with engagement strategies. Because the security cooperation competition is part of a larger competition for influence in target states, security cooperation activities must be nested in broader U.S. competitive strategies.



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