No Such Thing as a Perfect Partner

The Challenges of "By, With, and Through"

By Emily Knowles

In recent military campaigns against violent non-state actors, many states have reduced the risk to their own forces by conducting airstrikes or supporting allies rather than placing their own forces on the ground.[1] Small teams of special operation forces (SOF) and military advisers, as well as military training teams and intelligence support units, have supported host-nation security forces in doing the bulk of front-line fighting against groups like al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and al-Qaeda. In some theaters, such as the campaign against the Islamic State, this has extended to include intensive air and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) support. In other theaters, support may be limited to training and equipping local partners without conducting joint operations—like the support that the UK provides to Kenyan forces through the British Peace Support Team (Africa). This is a trend that the Oxford Research Group calls "remote warfare,"[2] although it goes by many other names, including "surrogate war,"[3] "light-footprint,"[4] "low-intensity war,"[5] and "by, with, and through."[6]

This article draws on field research conducted in Afghanistan (2017), Iraq (2017), Mali, (2018) and Kenya (2018) as well as a series of expert roundtables held in London between 2017–2019, and interviews held with militaries, diplomats, and civil society in Mali (2019) and Somalia (2016–2018). The purpose of the effort was to identify changes in military engagement following the drawdowns of large international military operations in Iraq (2011) and Afghanistan (2014) and to highlight the strategic implications of a shift towards remote warfare. This included considering the impact on mandates like the protection of civilians, transparency, and accountability, and long-term prospects for peace.

One of the things that surfaced quickly throughout the research was that remote warfare is not a specific approach to military operations in the same way that counter-terrorism,[7] counter-insurgency,[8] or peace support operations[9] are, nor are these activities guided by an overarching "remote warfare" or "by, with, and through" strategy.[10] While militaries might have specific units dedicated to some of these tasks—such as the American Security Force Assistance Brigades[11] or the British Specialised Infantry Group[12]—many other elements of training, advising, and assisting or conducting expeditionary warfare alongside local units are carried out by a range of regular, elite, and special forces. Air support increasingly falls to drone pilots as well as more traditional forms of air power,[13] while intelligence sharing and targeting support can be provided by

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many different agencies. Remote warfare is therefore less of an approach and more of a spectrum of support relationships between international militaries and their partners.[14]

Similarly, there is no one driver of the trend but rather a few key factors that have increased the incentives for engaging in this way. Part of the picture involves the way in which technological innovation—particularly the rise in drone technology—has enabled western states to replace the need for boots on the ground in some theaters.[15] When coupled with air superiority in these same environments, which has historically been used to avoid the deployment of ground troops, it is clear that technology is creating opportunities for modern militaries to substitute out intelligence and strike capabilities that might once have put troops in the line of fire.[16] The U.S. drones program is perhaps the most high-profile example, but others include the UK's strike against the Islamic State propagandist and British citizen Reyaad Khan, who was killed in Syria in August 2015,[17] or the June 2019 U.S. cyber attacks against Iranian military computers that were aimed at disabling the systems that control missile and rocket launchers.[18]

Another driver is the perceived security threat of safe havens and the related weakness of local partners in the regions where terrorist groups tend to thrive. In the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, then-British Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, predicted the emergence of a "future in which unspeakable acts of evil are committed against us, coordinated from failed states in distant parts of the world." [19] The strategic imperative of denying terrorist groups safe haven in fragile or failed states has been a pivotal part of the military and political rationale linking U.S. and allied military action against violent non-state groups back to core national security concerns of preventing further attacks on their soil.[20] As then-commander of the NATO Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan General John Nicholson said in his February 2017 evidence

to the U.S. Senate, "Our mission was to ensure that Afghanistan would never again be a safe haven for al-Qaeda or other terrorist groups to attack America or our allies and partners. That mission has been successful for 15 years, but it is not over."[21]

Other drivers are more case-specific. For example, in a conference organized by the Peace Research Institute Oslo in December 2018 on small-state provision of security force assistance (SFA), many of the conversations focused on how states could ensure that they were good allies and partners for major military powers.[22] Providing troops to coalition missions such as NATO Resolute Support in Afghanistan or the air campaign against the Islamic State are a few examples where participants spoke of signaling their support to the U.S., while many interviewees in Mali cited showing support to the French as a component of why they were contributing to the EU Training Mission.[23] In the UK's 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), the government committed to "focus on areas of comparative national advantage valued by key allies, especially the United States, such as our intelligence capabilities and highly capable elite forces."[24] This was echoed in the 2015 SDSR which stated, "our special relationship with the US remains essential to our national security. It is founded on shared values, and our exceptionally close defence, diplomatic, security and intelligence cooperation."[25]

Following large-scale military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, some countries have also experienced increases in legislative scrutiny of military operations and shifting attitudes towards the costs in both blood and treasure of military engagement. In the UK for example, because remote warfare can offer the government military options that don't require recourse to Parliament under the War Powers Convention, it makes it an attractive option for risk-averse governments that fear losing a vote.[26] The government's failure to gain parliamentary authorization for the principle of military

Instructors from the European Union Training Mission in Somalia (EUTM) take Somali National Army (SNA) soldiers through training drills at Jazeera Training Camp in Mogadishu. AMISOM (Raymond Baguma, 25 March 2015)

action in Syria on August 29, 2013 has compounded this fear. While research suggests that it is far from clear that the 2013 Syria vote was a marker of parliamentary pacifism,[27] the acceleration of today's information age has certainly opened up military activities to greater debate and raised the risks for governments hoping to carry out discreet operations.[28] Low popular support for, or awareness of, enduring NATO commitments in Afghanistan was one of the factors that interviewees in Kabul cited for frustration on the ground, while extreme political risk aversion was cited as leading to very low appetites for accepting casualties on the NATO side.[29]

No Such Thing as a Perfect Partner
International Burden Sharing

It would be wrong to suggest that the template for working by, with, and through local partners is a new phenomenon. Wars have been fought alongside and integrated with allies and partners since antiquity.[30] The arming and supporting of rival factions reached fever pitch in the Cold War, when proxy wars enabled great powers to clash indirectly and—crucially—below the threshold for nuclear retaliation. However, contemporary operations have moved on from these past templates of waging war, not least in terms of international parties' restricted reach and influence over the forces they fight alongside, who are partners rather than merely proxies.

In addition, military operations now include a growing number of actors; both local and regional partner forces, international organizations like NATO, and coalitions of local, community, or substate allies like the Peshmerga or Syrian Democratic Forces. In these "coalitions of the willing," where the mission determines the coalition rather than the other way around,[31] partnerships can be fluid, ambiguous, and complex. These ad-hoc coalitions

do not possess any international legal personality, nor are they recognized as legal persons within the states' domestic legal systems, unlike more traditional alliance structures such as the UN or NATO.[32] They also challenge the way that militaries are set up to run operations, with multiple red-card holders who can opt their national forces out of particular activities, multiple sets of rules of engagement, and varying risk appetites.[33]

However, it is far from clear that the current approach to sharing the burden of operations across coalition partners is working. In Kabul in March 2017, only the American contingent had expeditionary rules of engagement that allowed them to accompany the troops that they were training.[34] Stringent restrictions on troop movements had a huge effect on the ability of troops to get out and build relationships with the people that they were meant to be supporting. One described how going to the Afghan MOD—which is down the road from Resolute Support Headquarters (HQ)—would require them to be accompanied by armored cars and given cover. Even walking to the U.S. Embassy, which is opposite Resolute Support HQ, would have required top armor and escort.[35] Interviewers were told that 25 percent of advisors could not currently advise because they did not have force protection.[36]

It also appeared that the act of pledging troops was more important to some contributing countries than the question of what they would be doing when they got there. Indeed, some countries had not fully honored their pledges, with only around 12,000 of the 15,000 NATO places that had been promised actually filled in March 2017.[37] The change from earlier points in the mission seemed stark. Interviewees talked about how staff who had been out in Afghanistan before the drawdown and were then deployed back as part of Resolute Support asked why no one was speaking to their old contacts. The conclusion seemed to be that the current contingent had not been able to build those relationships because they could not get meaningful access to their local partners.[38]

This appears to be a problem shared by other western troops. While interviewing recent returnees from the British training mission to AMISOM in Somalia, it was clear that troops were very aware that if anyone had got shot the mission could have been ended as a result. However, this led to a dilemma on the ground for those that wanted to have a meaningful effect and saw that they would not be able to do so on their current permissions. Some recounted how they had operated outside of their authorities in order to do their jobs—obviously a high risk considering the potential implications had anything gone wrong.[39] In a recent article for the British military outlet the Wavell Room, a soldier described how only two British personnel routinely went out into Mogadishu, and that these were the Chief J3 and J4 advisors for the European Union (EU) Training Mission.[40] While signaling support for allies is not necessarily a bad reason to join a coalition, if everybody is signaling rather than meaningfully engaging in a mission then chances of success seem slim.

Lead nations can also introduce dynamics into coalition partnerships that prove problematic for their allies. Negative public perceptions of the U.S. drones program in countries like the UK and Germany have led to huge political sensitivities around providing intelligence support or access to national facilities.[41] For example, U.S. Col Patrick Ryder told the *Guardian* that the U.S. and the UK had consulted each other regarding the targeting of Junaid Hussain, a British computer hacker, adding "both governments will continue to coordinate efforts to eliminate violent extremist organisations."[42] Lieutenant-Colonel Nicholas Mercer, the British Army's chief legal adviser in Iraq in 2003, said the confirmation of a British link to Junaid Hussain's death raised "disturbing questions."[43] This is particularly true when you consider the fact that, while the UK has admitted involvement in

this successful strike against Junaid, it has kept very quiet about whether or not it was similarly involved in the first strike attempt which missed its target, instead killing three civilians.[44]

In March 2019 a German court ruled that Germany was not doing enough to ensure that the U.S. was respecting international law in its use of Ramstein military base to conduct drone strikes. The German airbase provides the U.S. with a satellite relay station and personnel, which was enough for the court to declare that Germany played a "central role" in the strikes and therefore had an obligation to protect the lives of the Yemenis who brought the case after their relatives were killed.[45] In September 2017, a week-long protest against the U.S. drones program drew over 5,000 people to Ramstein.[46] While the German government often maintained that it had "no knowledge" of U.S. operations taking place at the base,[47] their assumption that the U.S. has not violated German or international law was found by the court to be based on an "inadequate investigation of facts."[48]

Risk Reduction or Risk Transfer?

The March 2018 British Army Field Manual *Tactics for Stability Operations Part 5: Military Support to Capacity Building* notes that one of the advantages of using capacity building as part of combat operations is that it allows UK forces to overcome "the problems of achieving sufficient mass" when British troops cannot be deployed in combat roles.[49] However, while there may only be a "'light footprint" of western troops involved in operations, the commitment required from local troops remains considerable. Attrition rates for local military partners have been extremely high in contemporary campaigns. The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) does not release official statistics, but the death toll for its troops is estimated at over 4,000.[50] Since 2013, the UN mission in Mali has lost over 200 troops,[51] while the Nigerian army is reportedly burying its

own troops at night to conceal the toll of its fight against Islamist groups in the northeast.[52] Attrition rates among Afghan forces have been consistently sky-high, with 6,700 deaths in just one year.[53] While remote warfare may seem low risk from the perspective of Western capitals, local troops are still paying heavily in these campaigns.

Working "by, with, and through" can also transfer greater risks onto local populations. Many local militaries and armed groups are less equipped to mitigate civilian harm than their international counterparts. For example, senior British military personnel have recounted how Iraqi forces had been deeply traumatized by the experiences of 2014 and in many cases were reluctant to advance without heavier levels of international air support than might otherwise have been used in densely populated urban terrain. The consequences of this can be seen clearly in western Mosul, the final Islamic State stronghold in the city, where around 15 neighborhoods have been completely destroyed. These districts previously housed around 230,000 residents, leaving large numbers of internally displaced people who will not be able to return in the short- to mid-term.[54] The UN estimates that eight out of 10 buildings damaged in Mosul were residential buildings, with 8,475 houses destroyed—more than 5,500 of which were in west Mosul's Old City.[55]

Military coalitions can also be a "race to the bottom" when it comes to opening operations up to scrutiny.[56] The only member of the international anti-Islamic State coalition to consistently concede civilian casualties from its air campaign was the U.S., with other partners hesitant to distinguish their own strikes from those of the coalition as a whole.[57] Empowering local armed groups can also have negative long-term consequences for civilians when those forces are corrupt, abusive, or sectarian. A depressing 23 percent of the violent incidents against civilians recorded over the past 12 years was perpetrated by state forces rather than militia

Devastation after the Battle for Mosul, July 9, 2017. (H. Mourdock)

or rebel groups.[58] In some instances, building the capacity of predatory armed forces feeds a cycle of violence and conflict that contributes to the "forever wars" that define the contemporary international security environment.

For example, local security forces like the Afghan Local Police (ALP) were intended to address the growing problems of insurgency and lack of Afghan National Army legitimacy in the areas where the Taliban were drawing their support. However, reports of abuses against the local communities that they were meant to be protecting were also widespread. A survey of U.S. Special Operations Forces teams mentoring ALP units in 2011 found that 20 percent reported ALP colleagues were guilty of undefined "physical abuse/violence;" a further 12 percent reported bribe-taking. Between one-fifth and one-sixth reported that ALP indulged in salary fraud and theft. A smaller number witnessed rape, drug trafficking, drug abuse, and the selling or renting of ALP weapons and vehicles. Complaints of extortion and illegal taxation are commonplace. Some reports have even described ALP commanders selling the lives of their men: one allegedly accepted bribes equal to $500 per head to murder subordinates and killed six before capture. ALP in Faryab province were accused of raping, looting, and keeping a torture chamber with snakes at the bottom of a dry well.[59]

In 2016/17 the UK spent £0.8 million delivering international humanitarian law (IHL) and preventing sexual violence modules through the EU Training Mission in Mali, with a further £0.87 million allocated for broader military and civilian support (with a focus on infantry, medical, and IHL) for 2018/19.[60] These master's-degree level programs

were optimistically delivered with the aim of professionalizing a force with limited education levels that has been linked to numerous violations including extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture, and arbitrary arrests.[61] The Malian armed forces and the broader Malian government have also been accused of ethnic bias. In central Mali, Bambara and Dogon ethnic armed groups have recently been acquiring heavy, war-grade weaponry—some of which presumed to be coming from the armed forces—that has increased the lethality of localized disputes.[62]

In July 2017, Amnesty International released a report documenting the cases of 101 individuals accused of supporting Boko Haram—often without evidence—who were held incommunicado and allegedly tortured by Cameroonian security forces, including the elite Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR).[63] Created in 2001, the BIR is a special operations unit about 4,500 strong that has received security force assistance (SFA) from France, Israel, and the United States.[64] The BIR and other Cameroonian security institutions received IHL instruction as part of their technical training from the United States.[65] However, this has proven inadequate when it comes to altering heavy-handed approaches to countering terrorism and the politicization of the armed forces.

This is not to suggest that international partners should always cut assistance if their local partners prove to be corrupt or abusive. You can argue that increasing assistance and international presence in some of these environments would allow international partners to better scrutinize and influence behavior. However, there are also obligations that bind states to refrain from providing assistance that might cause or facilitate grave breaches of international humanitarian law.[66] Balancing the two is a dilemma, particularly if you subscribe to the view that donor states tend to overestimate the control they will have over their partners in the first place.[67]

Taking a Peacebuilding Approach to Working with Local Partners

International military partners consistently misdiagnose poor behavior as stemming from a lack of training or capability.[68] There is a related assumption that improving the tactical proficiency of partner forces will address these concerns. While this logic may work in some places, a focus on military effectiveness as a criterion for partnership, or as a metric for success, creates its own dilemmas. This was captured by Frances Z. Brown and Mara Karlin:

> *"…the fact that it uses military criteria to choose a partner for a relationship that often evolves into a political one. If, as Clausewitz famously wrote, "war is a mere continuation of politics by other means," the by-with-through model inverts this dictum, subordinating politics to … choices on the battlefield."*[69]

For example, as soon as the Taliban government fell in 2001, armed groups within Afghanistan began competing for positions and influence. The international community came under immediate pressure to improve security and create the conditions for a transfer of power to a new Afghan administration. However, even as early as 2003, analysts were warning that, "Between September 2001 and June 2002 certain choices were made by national and international decisionmakers that have had long-lasting repercussions for the political process in Afghanistan."[70]

In particular, the perceived capture of the process by powerful warlords who were then able to secure a place in the interim administration was seen as extremely damaging. Rather than pushing for a peace agreement in the sense of having a pact between warring parties, the Bonn process was geared at forging an agreement between leaders of four anti-Taliban groups that had been particularly instrumental to the international coalition that

toppled the Taliban government.[71] As early as 2002, experts were warning that "the Ministry of Defence [has become] a major obstacle to Demobilisation, Disarmament, and Reintegration (DDR) and the creation of the Afghan National Army (ANA)."[72]

Adopting a "winners take all" approach to engaging with local partners can exacerbate fragmentation on the ground in post-conflict societies. In many fragile contexts, governance and control is wielded through loose alliances between powerbrokers such as local strongmen, warlords, and militias.[73] These opaque and sometimes precarious relationships can dictate the development of political coalitions and lead to the intense politicization of armed groups, including the state armed forces. In weak states, the relative military might of different armed groups is one of the most crucial levers of power. In this context, foreign assistance can be an unintentional "kingmaker" as it strengthens parts of a fragmented system that may not serve the population or the stability of the state as a whole.[74] This creates incentives for elites to subvert assistance for their own purposes, while simultaneously engaging in corrupt or predatory behaviors that feed the instability that donors may be trying to address.[75]

In other places, improving the tactical proficiency of units can create "islands of excellence" where small groups of elite forces are both willing and capable of protecting civilians,[76] but fail to deliver positive outcomes over the long-term. Efforts cannot be sustained unless the defense and security sector writ large also shares this ethos, and the political conditions on the ground support compatible values.[77] For example, one of the great international hopes from long-term international engagement in Iraq was the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS)—a multi-ethnic elite unit that showed some promise as a template for the broader security forces.[78] The CTS were largely considered to be a professional, sustainable force by the time international trainers left in 2011.

However, even in the early days after the international withdrawal it was clear that being the exception to the rule of low Iraqi National Army capacity had its downsides. Tasking began to come directly from the Prime Minister's office, mostly for activities not suited to an elite counter-terrorism unit like securing voting centers, guarding convoys, and manning checkpoints. Experienced officers began to be replaced by people with connections to the Prime Minister, and the promotions system began to revert to a system based on loyalty rather than competence.[79] They were also removed from the Ministry of Defense chain of command to sit under its own ministry, but were not allocated money from the Iraqi defense budget.[80] Pouring money into specific units while the rest of the sector remains dysfunctional can contribute to the creation of "Fabergé egg" armies that are expensive to build but easy for insurgents to crack because the military as a whole lacks cohesion.[81] Rethinking this technical approach to remote warfare that prioritizes improving the tactical effectiveness of local troops on the frontlines is essential if the long-term outlook for peace is to improve.

One potential solution has its roots in the increasing focus on the importance of local ownership. In theory working by, with, and through local forces should lay the foundations for locally owned, locally responsive, and culturally attuned approaches to security. The UK's Building Stability Overseas Strategy emphasizes the need for conflict-sensitive international engagement abroad, advising that;

> *"the starting point needs to be … analysing and understanding the situation to ensure that work designed to build stability does not unintentionally make things worse. The chances of success are greatest when the international community gets behind a political settlement that lays the foundations for tackling the causes of conflict in a country."*[82]

In new stabilization guidance issued in 2019, the British government highlights the fact that "externally-backed peace processes and agreements that are significantly misaligned or out of sync with the underlying distribution of power and resources are likely to fail."[83] The U.S. government's 2018 Stabilization Assistance Review notes that "our national experience over the past two decades has taught us that it is not enough to win the battle; we must help our local partners secure the peace."[84] One blueprint would be to approach assistance as a form of peacebuilding for fragmented security sectors, with assistance geared towards improving relationships between the many formal and informal groups that are often providing security in these environments, as well as between the security sector and the civilians that it is there to serve.[85]

This means working with a wider range of groups based on their provision of legitimate, accountable security to the population as a whole. This also means letting go of or deprioritizing more traditional criteria like military effectiveness. Different communities will have different needs and different experiences of insecurity in a rapidly changing conflict or post-conflict environment. It is important to capture these concerns when deciding on the right course of action. For example, groups that are seen as corrupt and abusive in some areas can be seen as a lifeline in others:

> *"I know that people in Kabul are talking about cancelling the ALP, but you don't understand", said a provincial governor, gesturing at the barbed wire along his compound's perimeter. "Without those guys, the Taliban will climb over that wall and cut my head off."*[86]

The dynamics of legitimate and effective security provision will vary both across communities and across time. This is also the case for the dynamics of fear, and perceptions of risk associated with

the courses of action chosen by policymakers. Both require frequent consultation and re-evaluation to make sure that policies adapt to changing circumstances. The international community must be careful to avoid quick assumptions about the extent to which local groups will use their knowledge and links with the community to solve problems and reduce support for violent actors. Just because groups are local, they should not be assumed to be a proxy for local legitimacy. This is where community consultation and detailed mapping become essential to avoid violent competition between different groups vying for assistance. Rather than allowing international actors to set the criteria for group inclusion, this should be a locally led process that is driven by community responses to the question of; who do you support to provide your security and why?

This means adopting a new vision for delivering military assistance in fragile states where success is evaluated against the long-term impact of programs on prospects for peace and security. Peacebuilding metrics could include; the ethnic diversity of course attendance, attendance rates for marginalized ethnicities or genders, hierarchies (informal and formal) between soldiers who attend courses, and the strength of positive and negative interactions between attendees. Efforts to maximize the exposure to each other of units or services who might have poor or problematic relations should be boosted and rewarded, rather than measuring basic attendance figures, or recall of tactical skills and concepts.

This may mean accepting a form of assistance that integrates leaders from the government and security forces but would also include informal actors who hold local legitimacy in providing security. While this creates a messier picture, what is lost in efficiency may be gained in sustainability. Compacts between elite groups and donors are fragile and open to abuse by groups seeking to entrench their own power rather than tackle instability. Fictionalizing a state apparatus and then refusing

to deal outside of it only serves to mask the deep divisions that remain. These agreements often fail to address issues around representation in the security sector, or behavior that prioritizes the protection of some groups over the population as a whole. Using assistance to create opportunities for broad community engagement and wider relationship-building within fragmented security sectors is an approach that is anchored in local realities, starting where actors are, not where third parties want them to be.

Conclusion

Taking a peacebuilding approach to working with local militaries and armed groups means using assistance to fragmented security sectors to increase cooperation between various formal and informal elites in a weak state. This approach places less emphasis on developing conventional military power and more emphasis on facilitating and improving relations between the different factions within the security sector and between the security sector and the civilian population.[87] If international providers help local partners perform better at military tasks without ensuring that the forces have local legitimacy and strong accountability, progress is likely to be fleeting and could actually exacerbate civilian harm and the underlying drivers of violent conflict.

These negative outcomes are not inevitable. In theory, working by, with, and through local forces should lay the foundations for locally owned, locally responsive and culturally attuned approaches to security. Local, national, and regional armed groups have the potential to provide crucial support to peace processes and they bear ultimate responsibility for protecting local populations. Finding a way to support the emergence of legitimate, accountable, and effective local, national, and regional security forces is an essential part of setting the conditions for lasting peace.

However, this cannot happen without policies that account for the fact that these same partners have the potential to be major spoilers or perpetrators of harm. Rather than developing strong procedures to manage these risks and dilemmas, the tendency in western capitals is currently to approach partner operations as a low-cost, low-risk form of war. Debates within western militaries tend to ignore the transfer of risk onto partner forces and local civilians, and local partners and NGOs are often excluded from the international policy debate. Fixing this means doing more than trying to improve the way that international militaries work with local partners. It means adjusting the vision for what success would really mean. PRISM

Notes

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