The Promise and Peril of the Indirect Approach

BY BRIAN M. BURTON

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States has pursued a wide range of military activities abroad intended to degrade, dismantle, and defeat the al Qaeda organization and its network of loosely affiliated Islamist extremist groups. A disproportionate number of these efforts—in terms of manpower, materiel, money, and media attention—focus on two countries: Afghanistan and Iraq. In both instances, the United States toppled existing hostile regimes and is attempting to rebuild institutions of security and governance from the ground up. However, these intensive and expensive efforts at state-building are not necessarily the most important from the standpoint of understanding the future direction of U.S. strategy against violent Islamist extremist groups. Instead, U.S. strategy against transnational terrorist groups abroad is increasingly focused on a concept commonly referred to as the *indirect approach*.

As first publicly elaborated in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), the indirect approach in the campaign against al Qaeda and its affiliates emphasizes "working with . . . and through partners" using "persistent but low-visibility presence" to build up the security and governance capacity of at-risk partner states.[1] The United States has long used various forms of security assistance as a key instrument of its foreign policy, but the new emphasis for counterterrorism-oriented assistance is on building partner capacity: improving the security and governance capabilities of partner states to defeat al Qaeda–affiliated groups and to stabilize weakly governed areas to prevent their being used as safe havens by militants.

This indirect approach to building partner capacity against al Qaeda–affiliated groups has been implemented in various places as part of the broader war on terror since 2002. Despite the Barack Obama administration's repudiation of the "global war on terror" as an organizing principle for U.S. national security strategy, the indirect approach to building partner capacity through security force assistance has

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been elevated to new prominence in American defense policy over the past 4 years based on arguments that it is more effective and sustainable in the long run than a strategy of large-scale, direct U.S. intervention. The Department of Defense (DOD) 2008 *National Defense Strategy* stated,

> **through the indirect approach, the United States is effective in building the capacity of partner states to counter terrorist groups and improve their ability to secure and govern themselves**

"Arguably the most important military component of the struggle against violent extremists is not the fighting we do ourselves, but how well we help prepare our partners to defend and govern themselves."[2] It continued:

> *Working with and through local actors whenever possible to confront common security challenges is the best and most sustainable approach to combat violent extremism. Often our partners are better positioned to handle a given problem because they understand the local geography, social structures, and culture better than we do or ever could. . . . [W]e will help build the internal capacities of countries at risk. We will work with and through like-minded states to help shrink the ungoverned areas of the world and thereby deny extremists and other hostile parties sanctuary. By helping others to police themselves and their regions, we will collectively address threats to the broader international system.*[3]

The 2010 QDR highlighted similar themes. It emphasized security force assistance—that is, "'hands-on' efforts, conducted primarily in host countries, to train, equip, advise, and assist those countries' forces in becoming more proficient at providing security to their populations and protecting their resources and territories"—as a key means to improve the capacity of partner states.[4] It continued, "For reasons of political legitimacy as well as sheer economic necessity, there is no substitute for professional, motivated local security forces. . . . By emphasizing host nation leadership and employing modest numbers of U.S. forces, the United States can sometimes obviate the need for larger-scale counterinsurgency campaigns."[5]

The key assumption behind this preference is that through the indirect approach, the United States is effective in building the capacity of partner states to counter terrorist groups and improve their ability to secure and govern themselves. It is necessary to test this assumption through an analytical framework to assess the broad outcomes of U.S. efforts. It is critical that outcomes are not confused with input or outputs. *Inputs* are simply the resources used to execute a program, while *outputs* are the direct products of a given event, such as the number of foreign troops who have been through a U.S. military training program. *Outcomes* are best defined as "the effect of outputs" on participant countries or "changes in program participants' behavior, knowledge, skills, status, and/or level of functioning."[6] Success can only be determined through the examination of outcomes. Determination of cost-effectiveness weighs outcomes against inputs, but the aim of this article is simply to determine whether successful outcomes have been achieved through this strategy.

Of course, success in these cases is not easy to judge. There are few agreed-upon metrics to evaluate progress, and even definitions of what constitutes a successful outcome are open to debate. Furthermore, the building partner capacity framework can overstate the ambitions

of U.S. military security cooperation abroad. Security force assistance may be intended to serve simpler means, such as establishing relationships between the U.S. military and members of the security forces in developing countries. Should future U.S. military operations become necessary in or around any given country, close ties to local security forces could facilitate easy access to basing and supply facilities and other services. The cultivation of military-to-military or military-to-government ties in countries where none previously existed might therefore be considered something of a success in and of itself.[7]

U.S. security assistance also has a track record of establishing some forms of dependency in partner countries, arguably by design in order to ensure that the partner states have strong incentives to maintain the favor of the United States. The maintenance of U.S.-provided security capabilities tends to require a persistent or recurrent American support presence, which in turn serves to produce strong relations between the U.S. military and local security forces. The quality and capabilities of host nation security forces (particularly the Sahel states of Africa, which range among the poorest and least developed in the world) are so low in some cases that even the most basic and minimal training constitutes an improvement, even if it is temporary and sustainable only with persistent American assistance. Simply preventing a deterioration of host nation security and governance capacity might then be considered a successful outcome.[8]

While acknowledging these nuances, this article proceeds from the assumption that U.S. efforts to build partner capacity intend to measurably improve the ability of partner states to secure and govern their territories. Every engagement must be judged in accordance with its own stated objectives, but these objectives can be generalized across cases. Militarily,

American security force assistance in the indirect approach framework should produce two key outcomes: a clear degradation of the targeted terrorist and insurgent group's manpower and capabilities, and a demonstrable improvement of the security capabilities of the host nation force to counter militant forces. These outcomes are best measured by assessing the ability of the host nation to conduct and sustain security operations in contested areas and degrade militant control, influence, and activity over these areas. Where there is a clearly identifiable organization that is the target of U.S. and host nation efforts—such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), an Islamist militant group in the Philippines—improved security capabilities should have some demonstrable effect on the group, such as attrition of personnel through combat deaths or defections and a reduction in militant attacks. In cases where building partner capacity is conducted mainly as a preventive measure, improved security force capabilities should deter the formation of militant groups and the execution of attacks.

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In addition to the development of security force capabilities, another key outcome the United States seeks through the indirect approach is the strengthening of the host nation's political governance capacity to combat insurgents and terrorists both through security operations and undertaking reform measures designed to undercut popular support for militants. A key assumption in U.S. policy toward

states to which it provides security assistance is that improving security capacity will increase the willingness of these states to act in ways that serve American objectives. Specifically, host nations are expected to seek to extend their sovereignty throughout their territories and combat terrorists and insurgents on their soil. They should not passively allow militants to establish safe havens through inaction, nor should they be willing to reach political accommodation with the most extreme al Qaeda–linked factions of an insurgent group, though partnerships of convenience with less radical elements may be productive. At the same time, they must govern in a sufficiently "good" way as to "win the population" rather than alienate it.

The development of effective, responsive host nation governments that provide reliable services and decisive leadership has long been identified as a key element to successful counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns.[9] As former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates acknowledged, "The United States . . . recognizes that the security sectors of at-risk countries are really systems of systems tying together the military, the police, the justice system, and other governance and oversight mechanisms" and institutions.[10] While all U.S. allies against al Qaeda cannot be expected to function as models of liberal democracy, the third and final necessary outcome from U.S. efforts should be that host nations improve their capacities for effective and responsive governance. This will enhance their legitimacy and reduce popular support for militant terrorist or insurgent groups.[11] Concretely, this entails reducing corruption within security forces and local governance institutions and undertaking political and economic reforms that target underlying drivers of internal conflict. Counterproductive trends include increasing corruption and further entrenchment of unjust preexisting governance and judicial structures that help drive resistance to the duly constituted government.[12]

This framework can be tested against two cases where the indirect approach has been implemented since 9/11—in the Philippines and the African Trans-Sahel "core countries"[13]—to assess the broad outcomes relevant to host nation security and governance capacity and effectiveness. These cases represent examples of the indirect approach that have been ongoing in some form since the early days of the war on terror. They also represent somewhat different applications of the indirect approach. The Philippine effort is a focused, sustained effort in one country that is now regarded as something of a success in countering a specific al Qaeda–affiliated militant group despite early troubles. The Trans-Sahel effort is a regional-level program that has yielded more ambiguous results in a preventive action against a more amorphous potential terrorist threat.

The Philippines

Since February 2002, hundreds of U.S. troops have been persistently engaged in providing training, advice, and noncombat assistance to the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) that is mainly intended to counter the ASG, which is linked to the regional al Qaeda affiliate organization Jemaah Islamiyah on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao and several smaller islands. Today, the U.S. security force assistance effort in the Philippines is widely regarded as a successful application of the indirect approach.[14] The Philippine example was even held up as a model in the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review:

> [S]*ince 2002 U.S. forces have trained and advised elements of the Philippine armed forces working to secure areas of the southern Philippines that had been a haven for*

the Abu Sayyaf terrorist organization and other terrorist elements. Over the past eight years, U.S. forces and their Philippine counterparts have trained together. . . . As their equipment and skills have improved, Philippine forces have patrolled more widely and more frequently, bringing security to previously contested areas.

This model is being applied elsewhere to good effect.[15]

Yet even in this apparently successful case, U.S. forces are slated to remain indefinitely, and the southern Philippines remains a trouble spot for militancy and poor governance in Southeast Asia.

The Philippines has long been wracked by insurgency and terrorism, but after the 9/11 attacks, the presence of an al Qaeda–linked terrorist group spurred more active U.S. security force assistance programs. The core American objectives in the Philippines are to neutralize the ASG and other al Qaeda–linked militants on Philippine soil while extending the reach of the Philippine government to prevent these militants from exploiting ungoverned territory to plan attacks against U.S. interests. The U.S. approach since 2002 has emphasized three main lines of operations: building the capacity of the AFP to secure its territory by providing training, assistance, and support; civil-military operations to improve humanitarian conditions and governance; and information operations intended to play on the success of the first two activities to help enhance the population's perception of government legitimacy.[16] In what has become widely known as Operation *Enduring Freedom–Philippines* (OEF–P), U.S. Special Forces numbering in the hundreds have focused on training Philippine units in counterterrorism and COIN tactics, providing communications

and intelligence support, and engaging in civil-military and information operations intended to wean the population from sympathies for the militants.[17] As one participant described it, "The heart of the strategy is based on building relationships, reinforcing legitimate institutions, building security force capabilities, sharing intelligence and information, developing focused civil-military programs and aggressively promoting local acts of good governance."[18]

Following the surge of troops for the Balikatan 2002 exercise, the American presence has comprised approximately 600 U.S. Army Special Forces conducting counterterrorism training and civil-military operations, along with an influx of approximately $1.6 billion in military and economic support funding.[19] The basic model for U.S. training and advising is through small-unit interaction with dozen-man U.S. Special Forces Operational Detachment Alphas (ODAs). Approximately nine ODAs were deployed to Basilan Island in 2002 with a focus on developing Philippine Light Reaction Companies as rapid-response units for counterterrorism. In particular, there was an emphasis on promoting proactive small-unit patrolling and intelligence-gathering among the Philippine unit skills that were previously not well developed.[20]

One notable feature of OEF–P has been the emphasis on civil-military action intended to alleviate local deprivations and improve the legitimacy of the government. U.S. military personnel have carried out many of these activities on Basilan and areas of Mindanao where lack of effective governance facilitated militant sanctuaries. One of the most visible civic actions that U.S. troops participate in is the medical civic-action program (MEDCAP), in which American medics treat maladies afflicting the local populace. One OEF–P commander asserted, "The medical programs were vital [as was] gaining the

confidence of the local people as well as enhancing force protection as the local residents would often provide information about potentially dangerous areas." Also, American forces participated in numerous small-scale building projects such as "repairing a mosque, repairing schools, repairing small bridges [and] establishing a water supply."[21] However, while U.S. forces have generally perceived these types of operations as effective, some observers have noted that they tend to be directed from the top down with relatively little understanding of or input from the local populations who are the targets, with the result that critical infrastructure and health needs go unfulfilled despite American good intentions.[22]

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U.S. security force assistance to the AFP has substantially degraded ASG manpower and military capability; thus, it is unlikely that these pose a strategic threat to the Philippine government. ASG strength declined from approximately 1,000 men in 2002 to between 200 and 400 by 2006.[23] Its significance as an independent guerrilla organization has sharply deteriorated. Concerted, localized security efforts such as the Basilan operations in the Balikatan 2002 exercise appear to have had the most significant effect in rooting out concealed ASG cells.

The ASG has not been eliminated, however, and remains able to perpetrate acts of terrorism and facilitate transnational al Qaeda influence in the region. Under new leadership in the middle of the decade, ASG appeared "to have gained new effectiveness as a terrorist organization" through

high-profile bombing attacks against civilian targets. These attacks include the involvement in the 2002 Bali bombing and a ferry attack in 2004 that killed 194 people and remains the deadliest act of maritime terrorism to date. Another troubling development has been the strengthening of ASG linkages to factions of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), Indonesian Jemaah Islamiyah, and Manila-based Rajah Solaiman Movement terror group despite U.S. efforts to bolster AFP capabilities to secure its territory and patrol the sea lanes between the Philippines and Indonesia. The ASG was driven from Basilan Island in the wake of the 2002 Balikatan exercise, but it moved into territory held by sympathetic factions of the MILF on Mindanao and Jolo. Several MILF bases are believed to be sites used by the ASG to plot attacks in collaboration with these other militant organizations.[24] The ASG has demonstrated that it is still capable of carrying out attacks and maintaining a climate of fear across the southern Philippines.[25] Examples include an April 2010 raid on the city of Isabela on Basilan that involved coordinated bombings and shooting attacks by apparent Abu Sayyaf members dressed in police uniforms.[26]

The indirect approach in the Philippines does appear to have achieved some success in reshaping the way the AFP approaches counterterrorism and counterinsurgency. A RAND study found that:

> [The Balikatan exercises] *underscored to participating officers that development assistance often goes hand-in-hand with military operations, especially in terms of the potential favorable impact on the attitudes of the local population. . . . [T]he military has now created a new division that is specifically dedicated to CMO [civil-military operations] efforts—the*

*National Development Support Command.
The rationale behind the unit is that the
best way to defeat a terrorist insurgency
is to provide people with what the rebels
cannot: roads, bridges, businesses, houses,
schools, electricity, medical centers, and
medicines—in short, better governance.*[27]

These "hearts and minds" efforts by the
AFP to produce more effective and responsive
governance, with American support, appear to
have some effect in increasing local intelligence
tip-offs, which enable more effective security
force operations to eliminate ASG leaders and
cadres. Civil-military operations are conducted
in conjunction with sweeps and other offensive
actions that have apparently been effective in
degrading ASG's manpower, if not its ability to
carry out periodic bombing attacks.[28]

The effects of U.S. security assistance on
the AFP, however, have been somewhat lim-
ited. ODAs focus mainly on training smaller
units deployed to Mindanao and Basilan, and
substantial U.S. security assistance funding
has not addressed problems in AFP supply and
logistics capabilities. Despite the improvement
in individual units' combat abilities, the over-
all sustainability of AFP operations is question-
able. Philippine troops are rarely well equipped,
and the country's defense spending is limited.
Additionally, the AFP has significant issues with
corruption and lack of professionalism within
the ranks. These factors have contributed to an
environment in which the organizational reforms
necessary to institutionalize lessons learned from
U.S. training and assistance are rarely taken.

From a broader political standpoint, the
results of U.S. assistance have been mixed. The
Philippine government has willingly accepted
American support, but it is widely believed that
it is less interested in targeting ASG than the

larger insurgent groups, such as the MILF and
the Communist New People's Army, which
it views as posing more significant threats.[29]
Additionally, despite the apparently positive
reception U.S. troops have received in the areas
where they are actually assisting, their presence
is politically controversial among citizens and
some lawmakers in Manila, generating scattered
protests that Philippine politicians can exploit.[30]

> corruption within the military and
> government remains a pervasive
> problem that undermines both effective
> governance and legitimacy in the eyes of
> local populations

The government as a whole is still rela-
tively weak and fearful of a coup attempt by
military commanders, which is not unreason-
able given military leaders' treatment of the
force as personal power bases and fiefdoms
and the precedents for military intervention
in politics.[31] Corruption within the military
and at all levels of government remains a per-
vasive problem that undermines both effec-
tive governance and legitimacy in the eyes of
local populations who are targeted by mili-
tant groups and the government for support.[32]
Despite the military's improved understand-
ing of the necessity for better governance to
counter militants, follow-on civilian author-
ities assigned to hold and control the areas
cleared by AFP operations "fail to discharge
their responsibilities in a meaningful and
decisive manner."[33] The penetration of the
central government's writ (particularly the
legal justice system) and infrastructure into
the Muslim areas of Mindanao and the south-
ern islands therefore remains fairly minimal.

Nigerien soldiers practice field tactics during Operation Flintlock 2007, part of an interactive exchange with U.S. military and State Department's Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership

Economic development is weak at best, with poverty levels exceeding half the local population and most businesses forced to pay bribes to government officials; human rights abuses remain a significant problem across the southern Philippines; and, most concerning from a U.S. perspective, the government does not appear to be particularly dedicated to ameliorating this situation.[34] The government as a whole has not fully embraced the types of reforms recognized as necessary to consolidate improved governance in its troubled regions.

In sum, OEF–P success remains at best "incomplete," as former commander David Maxwell wrote in 2004.[35] While the Philippines has been a willing counterterrorism partner to the United States for the most part, U.S. assistance has not been able to change some of the more pernicious aspects of the Philippine government and military institutions that impede more comprehensive success against ASG and more capable governance. U.S. assistance, perhaps because of its success in degrading the ASG and advancing limited improvements in the AFP, may actually enable the Philippine government to continue to avoid more significant governance reforms to address the drivers of conflict.

The African Sahel

The countries of the Sahel feature significant swaths of terrain that can be considered ungoverned. State capacity is generally weak, infrastructure is undeveloped, and international borders are poorly marked and monitored. These states experience ethnic strife stemming from tensions between the settled population and traditional nomadic tribal groups such as the Tuareg that still move

through the region. These factors combine to create conditions of insecurity and conflict that can be exploited by extremist groups.[36]

U.S. policymakers have become increasingly fearful that al Qaeda could exploit ungoverned spaces and state weakness in the Sahel to establish a recruiting, training, and planning presence in the region. In prepared testimony for a 2005 House of Representatives hearing, Rear Admiral Hamlin Tallent, then Director of Operations for U.S. European Command, asserted, "In many areas of the Sahara Desert (Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad) there is very little military or police presence, and often no central government influence."[37]

Terrorist attacks such as the Madrid train bombings were seen as harbingers of future militant activities emanating from the trans-Sahara region.[38] Africa was also found to be the source of up to one-quarter of the foreign fighters attacking U.S. troops in Iraq.[39] Militant groups participate in sporadic attacks on local government outposts and occasionally target Western tourists.

The most attention-grabbing shift, however, occurred in early 2007 when the Algerian Salafist Group for Call and Combat (*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat,* or GSPC) declared itself al Qaeda in the Islamic Mahgreb (AQIM). The GSPC had previously vowed allegiance to Osama bin Laden in 2004, but this action produced more consternation among U.S. policymakers because it seemed to provide clear evidence of al Qaeda's spreading influence to affiliated regional groups.[40] Despite being largely driven from Algeria, the organization has managed to reconstitute cells in the Sahel countries. AQIM continued the GSPC pattern of attacking local security forces and targeting Westerners for kidnappings.[41]

The United States has set the prevention of al Qaeda havens in the region as the main objective for its operations in the Sahel. Primary strategic goals of U.S. security force assistance include improving the capabilities of the security forces of the Sahel states and improving their ability to cooperate with one another to secure currently unguarded territory and borders.[42]

The Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI) was the first significant security force assistance activity that the United States launched in the region after 9/11. It was a Department of State–funded program begun with less than $7 million in 2003 to promote regional antiterrorism cooperation. U.S. Army Special Forces and Marine units rotated through Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad to engage in small-unit training of rapid-reaction companies established to "stem the flow of illicit arms, goods and people across borders and to preclude terrorist organizations from seeking or establishing sanctuaries in the Sahel."[43] As the International Crisis Group reported, "The goals are ambitious but the day-to-day activities are often rather mundane." PSI sessions focused on training units of 130 to 150 soldiers in marksmanship, "communications and teamwork," and first aid, culminating in 2-week field exercises in the desert for each group.[44]

An expansion of U.S. training efforts occurred in June 2005 as part of Exercise Flintlock 2005, which was planned by U.S. European Command to provide additional basic training functions in skills such as marksmanship, land navigation, human rights, medical skills, and small-unit tactics.[45] The exercise marked the beginning of a new phase of U.S. involvement, which was renamed the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP). The partnership is an interagency effort of the State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and DOD that as of 2009 covered programs in

Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia. The DOD element, dubbed Operation *Enduring Freedom–Trans-Sahara* (OEF–TS), was initially managed by U.S. European Command and then taken over by U.S. Africa Command in 2008. Under OEF–TS, persistent low-level U.S. security force assistance is supposedly complemented by enhanced political and development aid.

OEF–TS includes many of the same elements of military training as the PSI, with an added emphasis on countering militant ideologies and promoting good governance and institutional development through civil-military operations performed by specialized teams provided by U.S. Special Operations Command.

> it is unclear that U.S. assistance to the Sahel security forces has had much of an impact on AQIM and other affiliated militant groups in the region

Military Information Support Teams consist of three- to eight-person groups that support U.S. Embassy–led public diplomacy efforts through media productions, notably radio and newspapers, aimed at countering violent extremism. Civil-Military Support Elements provide basic humanitarian and governance development services, including activities such as MEDCAPs performed in the Philippines, to help bolster the legitimacy of the host nations. U.S. Africa Command documents emphasize all OEF–TS activities as supporting elements of State Department and USAID governance capacity-building and economic development efforts under the overarching TSCTP program.[46]

Building partner capacity in the Sahel countries is particularly difficult because they are so lacking in resources and capabilities that military trainers have little to build on.[47] Key enablers such as reliable transportation remain extremely limited even in the wake of U.S. efforts to provide all-terrain trucks capable of navigating the region's terrain and poor infrastructure. Transportation is particularly crucial given the land area and extensive borders of the Sahel states. The security forces' lack of mobility is one of the main factors preventing them from exerting control over large swaths of territory.

This in turn points to the broader problem of U.S. military efforts to build the capacity of host nation security forces in Africa, specifically the emphasis on training for tactical proficiency without cultivation of support capabilities and institutions necessary to sustain and advance the tactical capabilities. In one sense, this is understandable given the low baseline of Sahel military capacity. As one U.S. trainer commented in late 2008, "This is a long-term effort. This is crawl, walk, run, and right now, we're still in the crawl phase."[48]

There have been small successes for U.S. objectives in the region, notably Malian military attacks on suspected AQIM bases in 2009 and the establishment of a joint military relationship involving Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger in April 2010.[49] However, the sustainability of tactical-level improvements is highly doubtful unless equal attention is paid to developing institutional and logistical capacity. Notably, assessments of the annual Flintlock exercise have not identified clear, lasting improvements in the security capacity of the states since its inception in 2005.[50]

Perhaps most significantly, it is unclear that U.S. assistance to the Sahel security forces has had much of an impact on AQIM and other affiliated militant groups in the region. The core American goal since the initiation of the PSI has been to prevent the emergence of an al Qaeda–linked terrorist presence in the Sahel, but incidents over the past year such as

the kidnapping and killing of Westerners and attacks on security forces suggest that militant activity has not been deterred by U.S. assistance to this point.[51] Recently, an expansion of attacks in northern Nigeria using remote-detonated bombs has provided further evidence of the resilience of Islamist insurgent forces in the region and their links to al Qaeda affiliates.[52]

The most positive aspect of the Sahel countries has been their willingness to attempt to confront terrorists and militants on their soil. Generally, governments and security forces welcome U.S. security assistance and the benefits that come with it. Though it may not be entirely fair to judge a long-term program only a few years in, there have been few changes to the underlying political dysfunction, economic destitution, corruption, and lack of professionalism that have typically hindered progress.[53] Additionally, U.S. assistance has been periodically interrupted due to the occurrence of coups and other political upheavals (as in Mauritania and Niger). The periodic movement away from democracy by the Sahel states indicates the limits of the U.S. ability through security-focused assistance to effectively cultivate better governance among its partner states that focuses on providing effective services to the people to undercut terrorist or insurgent groups' appeal and recruitment. Some reports suggest that U.S. assistance provides incentives for partner governments in the region to act irresponsibly. By trumping up the al Qaeda threat, partner governments are able to get added American support when their more immediate interest is in quashing more legitimate opposition elements such as minority Tuareg nomads or Sufi Muslim groups.[54]

Most concerning of all, however, is the fear that U.S. assistance may in some cases attract the al Qaeda presence or influence that the United States seeks to avoid. Though likely coincidental, it is worth noting that the emergence of Sahel-based militant groups with more direct ties to al Qaeda came after, not before, the PSI and Flintlock 2005 exercise. As RAND analyst Lianne Kennedy Boudali notes, AQIM propaganda regularly plays up U.S. security force assistance programs as evidence of American occupation of Islamic lands, and local media frequently speculate suspiciously about the purpose of U.S. activities.[55] The U.S. military is concerned about the issue of local perceptions of the legitimacy of the Sahel governments and American assistance efforts and has begun attempting to track public opinion through third-party polling services.[56] Yet some analysis already suggests that the populations of the Sahel do not look favorably on the American role in their countries, believing that the militant Islamist presence in the region is overstated and that the United States is primarily concerned with securing its own economic interests. As the International Crisis Group put it, the people of the Sahel "expect that military interventions are designed not for their benefit, but for the benefit of those who intervene."[57]

Some of these perception problems, which may create more sympathy for militants or antipathy toward the United States, are supposed to be alleviated through State Department–led and USAID-led counter-radicalization efforts, governance development, and economic development initiatives. However, Government Accountability Office audits have revealed an overall lack of strategic coordination to ensure that DOD, State, and USAID programs under the TSCTP are concurrent and mutually reinforcing.[58] Even if the imbalance between civilian and military assistance was corrected, the small-scale indirect approach to building partner capacity in the Sahel is likely to generate some level of suspicion and resentment within local populations, though the full implications of this perception problem are unclear.

U.S. Navy (Michael Larson)

Soldiers show children how to play with yo-yos during humanitarian mission in the Philippines, September 2007

Implications for Policymakers

It is difficult to argue that the indirect approach has achieved more than limited outcomes. Terrorist groups have been degraded and host nation militaries' tactical capabilities have been improved, but more expansive and lasting defeat of militant organizations and governance development in partner states has been elusive. While the cases examined in this article could be considered in their relatively early stages, there are as yet few indications of imminent progress toward the more far-reaching objectives of this strategy.

Yet the indirect approach to building partner capacity continues to hold significant appeal, and its employment in a wide variety of cases, including cases beyond the counterterrorism-focused efforts described here, is only likely to expand over time. Since the use of the indirect approach will probably continue, policymakers should have a clear understanding of its limitations. Three issues in particular stand out when examining the preceding case studies.

First, political strategies to leverage security force assistance to achieve desired outcomes are insufficiently emphasized by U.S. policymakers and implementers of the indirect approach. Influencing the host nation to behave in certain ways conducive to countering terrorist and insurgent forces is a necessary precondition to building partner governance capacity. Security force assistance has been provided in these cases, and likely other cases as well, mainly out of fear of what would happen if the United States did not support these host nations. Relatively little thought has been devoted to seeking quid pro

quo arrangements to ensure that partner governments are truly willing to reform themselves as the United States helps develop their military capabilities. Failure to do so could risk worse outcomes in which American security assistance to regimes with questionable legitimacy and unwillingness to reform drives increasing support for Islamist militancy within populations that the United States seeks to help. Improving integrated security and governance capacity-building and conflict prevention preparations was a high priority for Secretary Gates, who proposed a "shared responsibility, pooled resources" concept to link DOD, State, and USAID programs targeting at-risk countries and regions.[59] The establishment of a pooled-funding pilot program called the Global Security Contingency Fund is meant to serve as a proof of concept for this proposal, but policymakers still need to consider both the short- and long-term consequences if a U.S.-backed partner government did not cooperate on governance reforms or demonstrated a lack of willingness to address the underlying causes of a militant challenge.

Second, rigorous assessments of outcomes from efforts to build partner capacity are lacking, or at least not widely available. This is somewhat understandable given the difficulties involved in analyzing outcomes versus inputs and outputs and the desire to keep these operations out of the headlines. Yet senior policymakers must have a clear understanding of what can reasonably be expected from indirect approach capacity-building efforts and whether they are advancing national security objectives. Combatant commands and units in the field currently conduct after-action reviews and other assessments, including polling, to gauge host nation government legitimacy and popular views in the United States.[60] However, there appears to be no standard method across the U.S. Government for assessing program success.

A unified State, USAID, and DOD assessment framework would be most desirable and in keeping with the whole-of-government imperatives of effective capacity-building. Such a framework should focus on holistic outcomes, such as degradation of militant groups and improvement of the host nation's ability and willingness to govern effectively and responsibly. Some might argue that it is still too early to truly determine success or failure in these post-9/11 efforts, but an assessment framework should be useful for detecting and tracking progress (or lack thereof) when it actually occurs.

Finally, while the indirect approach is intended to reduce the need for large-scale U.S. military involvement in counterterrorism and COIN operations in host nations, the course of indirect approach missions in the Philippines and trans-Sahel Africa does not suggest any easy off-ramps to disengagement once initiated. U.S. involvement has tended to surge with a major exercise such as Balikatan 2002 or Flintlock 2005, then plateau somewhat higher than the pre-exercise level of effort. While these are still small-scale security force assistance efforts that are sustainable for an extended period, the overall trend is increased levels of involvement or, more fundamentally, a persistent U.S. presence that never seems to depart. Secretary Gates and other U.S. officials emphasized the importance of long-term commitment to reassure and support partner governments.[61] Without disputing the importance of that type of commitment, it is worth considering possible implications for perceptions of the United States and partner governments and for the future of the U.S. military force structure in a world where U.S. military engagement, even if indirect in nature, continually spreads to new at-risk countries and does not eventually retract. Policymakers should always be cautious about expansions of American involvement that are

linked to open-ended objectives and underdefined outcomes, lest the small-scale indirect approach spiral into the type of large-scale direct action it is supposed to avoid.

The indirect approach, then, carries both promise and peril. As its prominence in American strategy grows, there is much more work to be done to understand the effects of efforts to build the security and governance capacity of partner states and to ensure that these efforts benefit U.S. national security. **PRISM**

Notes

[1] *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) *Report* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense [DOD], February 6, 2006), 11–12.

[2] *National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: DOD, June 2008), 8.

[3] Ibid., 8–10.

[4] *QDR Report* (Washington, DC: DOD, February 2010), 26.

[5] Ibid., 27–28.

[6] Jennifer D.P. Moroney et al., *A Framework to Assess Programs for Building Partnerships* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009), xv.

[7] I am indebted to Robert Kaplan for this observation.

[8] I am indebted to Adam Grissom for this observation.

[9] See Sir Robert G.K. Thompson, "Basic Principles and Operational Concepts of Counterinsurgency," in *American Defense Policy*, ed. Mark E. Smith and Claude J. Johns (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), 267–268; Kalev I. Sepp, "Best Practices in Counterinsurgency," *Military Review* (May–June 2005), 9–10.

[10] Robert M. Gates, "Helping Others Defend Themselves," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 3 (May–June 2010), 4.

[11] This concept figures prominently in U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine. See Field Manual 3–24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, December 2006), 1-21–1-22.

[12] Ibid., 1-23, 1-28–1-29.

[13] The Trans-Sahel core countries are Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.

[14] See, for example, Jim Michaels, "Philippines a Model for Counterinsurgency," *USA Today,* March 30, 2011; Thom Shanker, "Elite U.S. Force Stays Put in Philippines," *International Herald Tribune*, August 21, 2009; "Front-line Vets: Drawing Lessons from a Rare Success," *The Economist*, January 28, 2010.

[15] *QDR Report*, February 2010, 28.

[16] Gregory Wilson, "Anatomy of a Successful COIN Operation: OEF–Philippines and the Indirect Approach," *Military Review* (November–December 2006), 6.

[17] Andrew Feickert, *U.S. Military Operations in the Global War on Terrorism: Afghanistan, Africa, the Philippines, and Colombia,* RL32758 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, August 26, 2005), 15–16.

[18] Brian Petit, "OEF–Philippines: Thinking COIN, Practicing FID," *Special Warfare* (January–February 2010), 11.

[19] See, for example, Norimitsu Onishi, "Curbed in Towns, Islamists in Philippines Take to Forests," *The New York Times*, September 26, 2009.

[20] David S. Maxwell, "Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines: What Would Sun Tzu Say?" *Military Review* (May–June 2004); and Maxwell, "Commander's Summary of Operation OEF–P," unpublished manuscript, May 5, 2002.

[21] See Petit, 12–15; Wilson, 7–8; David P. Fridovich and Fred T. Krawchuk, "Winning in the Pacific: The Special Operations Forces Indirect Approach," *Joint Force Quarterly* (1st Quarter, 2007), 26.

[22] See International Crisis Group (ICG), *The Philippines: Counterinsurgency versus Counterterrorism in Mindanao*, Asia Report No. 152 (Brussels: ICG, 2008), 22–23.

[23] Larry Niksch, *Abu Sayyaf: Target of Philippine-U.S. Anti-Terrorism Cooperation*, RL31265 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, January 24, 2007), 4; Zachary Abuza, *Balik-terrorism: The Return of the Abu Sayyaf* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, September 2005), 27.

[24] See ICG, *The Philippines*, 7–10; Niksch, 3–7, 14–15.

[25] See, for example, John M. Glionna, "Philippine City Lives in Constant Fear," *Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 2009.

[26] Jim Gomez, "Nine Dead as Muslim Militants Attack Philippine City," Associated Press, April 13, 2010; Marlon Ramos, "Eight Dead in Basilan Clashes, Bombings," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, April 13, 2010.

[27] Peter Chalk et al., *The Evolving Terrorist Threat to Southeast Asia: A Net Assessment* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009), 140–141.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Pia Lee-Brago, "RP, U.S. Renew Security Alliance," *The Philippine Star*, November 13, 2009; Pia Lee-Brago, Roel Pareno, and Aurea Calica, "DFA: RP Must Continue to Reap Benefits from Visiting Forces Agreement," *The Philippine Star*, August 30, 2009.

[31] Chalk, 147.

[32] Ibid., 147, 183.

[33] Ibid., 143–144.

[34] See Angel Rabasa, "Case Study: The Sulawesi-Mindanao Arc," in *Ungoverned Territories: Understanding and Reducing Terrorism Risks*, ed. Angel Rabasa et al. (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007), 117–123; Thomas Lum, *The Republic of the Philippines and U.S. Interests*, RL33233 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, January 3, 2011).

[35] Maxwell, "Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines."

[36] See Lianne Kennedy-Boudali, "Examining U.S. Counterterrorism Priorities and Strategy Across Africa's Sahel Region," Testimony before Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on African Affairs, November 17, 2009, 1; William P. Pope, Statement before the Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Nonproliferation of the Committee on International Relations, U.S. House of Representatives, 109th Cong., 1st sess., March 10, 2005, 11.

[37] Hamlin B. Tallent, Statement before the Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Nonproliferation of the Committee on International Relations, U.S. House of Representatives, 109th Cong., 1st sess., March 10, 2005, 19. See also Jon Gambrell, "AFRICOM Commander Sees Nigeria Terror Link," Associated Press, August 17, 2011.

[38] Craig S. Smith, "U.S. Training African Forces to Uproot Terrorism," *The New York Times*, May 11, 2004.

[39] Eric Schmitt, "As Africans Join Iraqi Insurgency, U.S. Counters with Military Training in Their Lands," *The New York Times*, June 10, 2005.

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[41] Kennedy-Boudali, 2–5.

[42] Tallent, 22–23.

[43] ICG, *Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction?* Africa Report No. 92 (Brussels: ICG, 2005), 30.

[44] Ibid. See also Phillip Ulmer, "Special Forces Support Pan-Sahel Initiative in Africa," Armed Forces Press Service, March 8, 2004.

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[52] Adam Nossiter, "Islamist Threat with Qaeda Links Grows in Nigeria," *The New York Times*, August 17, 2011; Gambrell.

[53] Kennedy-Boudali; Schmitt.

[54] See, for example, ICG, *Islamist Terrorism*, 33–34; Nicholas Schmidle, "The Saharan Conundrum," *The New York Times Magazine*, February 15, 2009.

[55] Kennedy-Boudali, 8.

[56] Author interview with Operation *Enduring Freedom–Trans-Sahara* program manager.

[57] ICG, *Islamist Terrorism*, 35. See also Scott Baldauf, "Al-Qaeda Rises in West Africa," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 27, 2009; David Gutelius, "Examining U.S. Counterterrorism Priorities and Strategy Across Africa's Sahel Region," Testimony before Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on African Affairs, November 17, 2009.

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[59] Robert M. Gates, "Options for Remodeling Security Sector Assistance," Memorandum to the Secretary of State, December 15, 2009; Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification, Volume 2: Foreign Operations, FY 2012* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2012), 61, available at <www.state.gov/documents/organization/158267.pdf>.

[60] Author interview with U.S. Africa Command official, April 30, 2010.

[61] Gates, "Helping Others," 6; Shanker.