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The New Theology: Building Partner Capacity

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In a recent Foreign Affairs commentary, Secretary Gates again extolled the virtues of "building partner capacity" (BPC) — a cornerstone of contemporary defense policy and a key mission area in the QDR. The common Pentagon narrative on BPC holds that in a world where terrorists, insurgents, cartels, mobs, and proliferators pose fundamental security hazards, the best defense is local. In short, *we don't fight ourselves; we make others better at fighting for us.* At its foundation, BPC posits that training and equipping foreign security forces is a cheaper and more effective way of extending U.S. influence into areas where it is otherwise difficult to do so. A note of caution is in order. There is precious little room for error in BPC, as the distinction between true partner and unreliable mercenary picket is less clear than most appreciate.

Today, in an era of declining discretionary defense resources, finding efficiencies is essential. "Cheaper" and "more effective" are popular concepts. After all, the secretary already warned that the resource "gusher" is off indefinitely. Thus, competing DoD choices will soon become zero sum propositions. Key among them — the tension between investing in prevention via BPC and hedging against prevention's failure through prudent investment in contingency response. In the current environment, one's gain may be the other's loss. Thus, caution is warranted when deciding where and how to proceed with BPC.

The allure of BPC is natural. In theory, preventing future commitments or reducing their size — all by empowering others to act on our behalf — is far superior to repeating the last decade's more direct approach. The seductiveness of this reasoning, however, rests on a number of questionable assumptions. First, we can reliably determine who our partners should be and what the BPC boundaries are between defense and non-defense activities associated with them. Second, the primary barrier to partners acting effectively is a lack of capacity. And finally, once empowered with fresh capacity, partners — new and old — will pursue policies consistent with our interests and values. Each point is debatable.

BPC will be important to our persistent war against extremists and criminal networks. However, there are no silver bullets. For BPC to work the US must identify and durably ally with dependable partners; close behind a clearer division of BPC labor needs to be ironed out between Defense and other agencies.

On the first point, perhaps the principal lesson from Iraq, Afghanistan and the wider War on Terror is that reliable partnerships are ephemeral and context dependent. Further, today BPC is a

Defense initiative. However, in truth, the persistent fight against violent "irregulars" ultimately transcends Defense and the current conception of a war on terrorism. Indeed, in an era of networked threats, composed of atomized, super-empowered actors, police and intelligence services are simply better equipped for the next phase of the so-called "long war." There are no reasonable military solutions for Faisal Shazad (aka Times Square) or Umar Farouk AbdulMutallab (aka Christmas Day).

The military is quite useful in penetrating un- and under-governed territory. Not coincidentally violent extremists collect there as well. Finding and building partners in these environments inevitably leaves American soldiers with a range of unpalatable choices — unilateral punitive intervention; partnering with conveniently friendly tribes, warlords, and militias, building capacity parallel to weak standing governments; or raising legitimate governments and security forces from scratch where none existed in the first place.

All engender significant hazards. The first leaves the U.S. with ceaseless management challenges. The second purposefully creates powerful alternatives to the state. And, finally, the third is a decade-plus undertaking of indeterminate results. Pick your poison.

As for the second assumption — that the general lack of capacity itself is the problem, this posits that enhanced capabilities and training alone in the hands of the right partners will push them toward taking greater responsibility for protection of mutual interests. This includes our physical security. Realistically, it also implicitly acknowledges that the absence of action may also reflect the absence of will. The latter may be truer than policymakers recognize.

In response to capacity shortfall arguments, a BPC approach seeks to incentivize activism through material and political rewards. In reality, however, harmonizing interests or incentivizing behavior running counter to self-interest is problematic. After all, the "existential" decisions of foreign governments are far likelier to be made nearer to their capitals than ours.

Striking at the heart of the third assumption, many prospective partners may appear at face value to be useful combatants for our dirtiest little wars. However, they may also adopt methods or pursue objectives that are anathema to U.S. interests and values in the process. In this regard, expediency holds treacherous prospects for blowback.

Given the unpredictability of the contemporary environment, we cannot be certain that an ounce of BPC prevention is worth a pound of long-term cure. There are too many variables, too many wild cards. A more preventive BPC approach is potentially a cost effective way to secure common interests. It may also lower our profile and indirectly expand our influence. It does, however, skirt the boundaries of pop defense theology based more on faith than on fact. Thus, an abundance of caution and conservatism is warranted going forward.

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