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GNSI Decision Brief: The National Guard's State Partnership Program in Strategic Competition

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GNSI DECISION BRIEF

The National Guard's State Partnership Program in Strategic Competition

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The National Guard’s State Partnership Program in Strategic Competition

Introduction

Both the National Security (NSS) and National Defense Strategies (NDS) make it clear that the US is “in the midst of a strategic competition” with Russia and China. Both documents highlight the strengths the US has in this competitive environment, notably its allies and partners. The NSS states, “The United States’ unrivaled network of allies and partners protects and advances our interests around the world—and is the envy of our adversaries.”ⁱ The US employs a variety of methods to maintain this invaluable network. One expanding method is the National Guard’s State Partnership Program (SPP). The SPP establishes formal relationships between State National Guard units and foreign militaries to share experiences and skills to address security challenges. Created in 1993 to support the new democracies emerging in Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the SPP has expanded to include every US state and territory, who have entered into 88 partnerships with 100 nations (Some having multiple partners).ⁱⁱ For example, Texas is the only state with three partners: Egypt, Chile, and a shared partnership with Nebraska and Czechia.ⁱⁱⁱ Figure 1 shows the global reach of the SPP participating nations.

This expansive program allows the National Guard to work directly with allied or partner forces in exchanges or

Members of the SPP and the Strategic Competitors

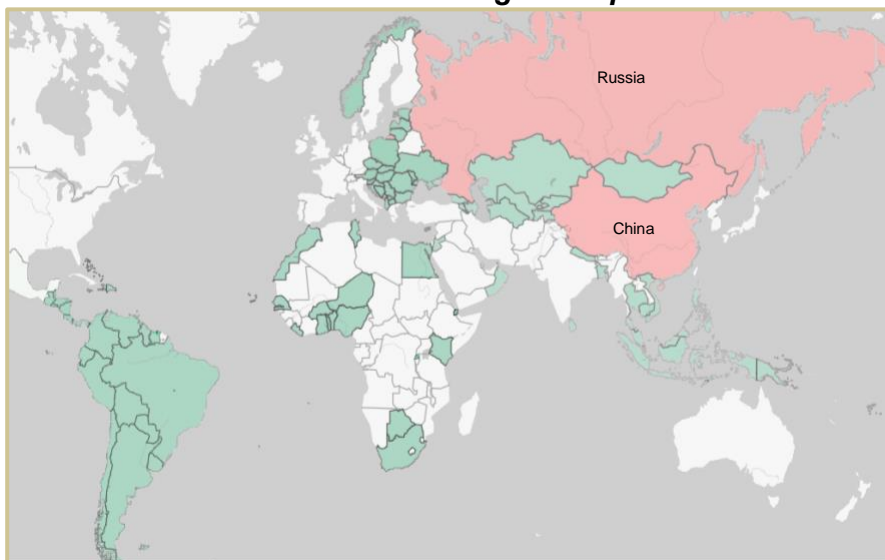


Figure 1: Green Represents SPP participants while red represents strategic competitors of the United States. Information from the [National Guard Bureau](#) and the [NSS](#). Note: Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Venezuela currently have dormant relationships.

training exercises. Typically, these events involve a small number of US service members working with partner forces for several weeks. In 2018, then Chief of the National Guard Bureau (NGB) General Joseph Lengyel described the program: “The SPP is an innovative and cost-effective security cooperation program...Guard units conduct military-to-military engagements with partner nations in support of defense security goals and leverage societal relationships to build personal bonds and enduring trust...the goal of the SPP is developing and maintaining important security relationships between the United States and other nations sharing a long-term view of common interests.”^{iv}

Fostering Relationships for the Future

Earlier this year, US Central Command Chief of Staff [Major General David Doyle](#) declared, “Our [existing and new partnerships] are our best opportunity to out-compete China... The Chinese relationships [around the world], we observe, are transactional in nature. They stand in stark contrast to America’s relationships [which] are long-term and values-based, and we try to make them mutually beneficial...”^v The importance of allies and partners is clear and the SPP works to foster those relationships. The SPP has developed new partnerships with nations who may have previously been reluctant to engage with the US on security initiatives.^{vi} Sending an SPP mission of a small team of Guard members for a short-term exchange is a far lower threshold for the host nation to accept compared to sending an active-duty battalion with hundreds of soldiers. This aspect of the SPP makes it a useful method to engage with nations in the competitive regions of the world.

Additionally, on an SPP mission, soldiers and airmen of the National Guard share valuable skills, best practices, and lessons learned about a variety of challenges, from natural disaster relief and infrastructure construction, to drug smuggling, human trafficking, and other criminal activities. This includes sharing expertise from their civilian careers. During these exchanges, National Guard members gain insight on partner nations’ standard operating procedures while enhancing interoperability between units.

This provides Guard personnel with unique perspectives and establishes long-term interpersonal relationships. These relationships extend to the senior leaders of the state National Guard and the partner nation. In 2022, this point was evident when senior Ukrainian military leaders called their counterparts in the SPP, the California National Guard leadership, within an hour of the Russian invasion asking for help and weapons. In response, the California Guard stood up its joint operations center to coordinate Ukrainian efforts with US European Command and the Pentagon.^{vii} As seen with Ukraine, this program has yielded results. The SPP missions have developed some partners from security consumers to security providers as seen with the co-deployment of National Guard units with their SPP partners to Iraq and Afghanistan.^{viii} Some partners have even credited their National Guard counterparts with helping them achieve the standards to enter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.^{ix}

The Power of Partnerships

The Center for Army Lessons Learned noted, “The SPP is designed to provide a consistent, enduring global presence, established through professional, institutional, and personal relationships.”^x Personal relationships have even been called the SPP’s “secret sauce.”^{xi} National Guard members can build long-term, trust-based relationships because they typically serve in the same state their entire career while active-duty service members move every few years. Mr. Ed White, the foreign policy advisor to the Chief of the NGB, General Daniel Hokanson, noted, “The SPP is a key component to building strong... partnerships... which is something our competitors struggle to do.” It’s these face-to-face interactions that create lasting relationships. Cultural understanding and fellowship between nations are highly effective in creating what Dr. Joseph Nye coined as “soft power.” He defined it as “its [country employing soft power] culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them...), and its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and [a] moral authority).”^{xii} It’s these intangible gains between partners that can make the difference between a deep trusting relationship and one that is based on transactions or coerced out of fear.

The SPP is an important component in building relationships through security cooperation. In 2023, General Hokanson outlined that through the SPP the Guard performs or enables 20-30% of the nation’s security cooperation missions with 1% of the US security cooperation budget. He stated, “I don’t think you can find a better value than the SPP.”^{xiii} The commander of US Southern Command in 2020, Admiral Craig Faller, explained to Congress the benefits of the SPP, “Most of our exercise support for our major exercises comes from State Partnerships, and that is something that we depend on as our force provider... we are seeking to get Guard partner reps established in every embassy as part

of our embassy country teams...Cyber is a particular area where some States are excellent.”^{xiv} Also in 2020, the US Ambassador to Egypt explained, “The SPP adds a new dimension to this partnership by increasing capabilities to closely cooperate on a range of key strategic areas, including flight operations and maintenance, cyber defense, logistics, and humanitarian and disaster assistance.”^{xv}

The Iowa-Kosovo Example

In 2011, Kosovo and Iowa established an SPP relationship focused on exchanges with the Kosovo Security Force. More than 70 engagements were completed over the first four years. As the partnership evolved, they started to explore cooperation in private and non-DoD sectors. Kosovo’s police force and Iowa’s law enforcement agencies began conducting training on drug interdiction, highway safety and other issues; a sister-state agreement between Iowa and Kosovo was signed; educational exchanges were made at the high school and college levels.^{xvi} Kosovo even opened a consulate in Iowa.^{xvii} In 2015, then Chief of the NGB General Frank Grass noted, “The Kosovo/Iowa partnership is a comprehensive approach that combines security cooperation with public and private collaboration across multiple sectors, including education, public safety, business and agriculture.”^{xviii} Moreover, Senator Joni Ernst, who served in the Iowa National Guard on SPP missions with Kosovo said, “I know a number of those officers that I worked with a decade ago -- I have seen them rise through the ranks and we continue to stay in close contact...those partnerships are very, very valuable.”^{xix} The depth of these relationships makes it far more difficult for a competitor to develop similar ties with a country, denying them access.

SPP and the Long Game

Some skepticism remains about the direct impact of the SPP: “information on SPP activities [has been] incomplete and inconsistent, and [there is] no common agreement on the type of information collected with the combatant commands.”^{xx} It’s hard to measure the intangible benefits of relationships built through the SPP. In the end, policymakers cannot ask more from this program than it can provide. It is one foreign policy tool among many and neither Russia nor China have anything remotely similar. As one author suggested, “The SPP has the potential to act as an irregular warfare tool capable of countering China’s influence in the Caribbean and worldwide. The program seeks to support...the geographic combatant commands by developing enduring relationships with partner countries and carrying out activities to build capacity, improve interoperability, and enhance US access and influence...”^{xxi} The SPP has allowed for a US presence in nations without the undesirability and cost of permanent basing or large troop numbers resulting in interactions that foster the acceptance of US values, broadens cultural understanding, and counters competitors.

Decision Points

- What criteria should measure the success for the SPP when many of the benefits are intangible and relationship based? Colonel Scott Humphrey, Chief of the International Affairs Division at NGB, suggested that the relationship itself, “sometimes might be enough.” He noted that, “[NGB has] a fairly nascent program of...looking at assessing and measuring the effectiveness of our program... [we are working] on what those metrics look like.”^{xxii}
- Could the SPP be used as an instrument of denial against Chinese or Russian intrigues or influence in a nation?
- As new partnerships are developed, they should make strategic sense. As General Lengyel noted in 2018, “In forming these new relationships, economic, demographic, and military size were some of the factors considered so the partnerships would be advantageous for both sides. Small states such as Maryland partnered with Estonia. Illinois, with its large Polish-American community, matched up with Poland. Oil states such as Oklahoma and Azerbaijan were aligned together, while the state of Georgia teamed up with the country of Georgia.”^{xxiii} What criteria should drive the pairing of nation and state going forward? How could increasing Chinese or Russian influence in a nation effect this decision?
- There have been concerns about the “Integration [of SPP missions] with Priorities of Combatant Commanders and Ambassadors” and the “Encroachment [of SPP missions] on DOS and USAID Responsibilities.”^{xxiv} How can the SPP be better integrated with other US foreign policy actors and engagement methods to best mutually support US strategy in an environment of strategic competition?
- Should the National Guard and DoD look to expand the SPP to already established US allies like the United Kingdom, France, or Japan? Would the return on investment be negligible in these cases?

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