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WAR AT ARM'S LENGTH: HOW AMERICA CAN BUILD EFFECTIVE PARTNERS THROUGH MILITARY ASSISTANCE

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PANEL DISCUSSION:

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O'HANLON: Hi everyone, welcome to Brookings. Very nice to have you here to celebrate the launch of a great new book, “War at Arm's Length,” by Richard Bennet and Alexander Noyes. Thank you for joining us. I'm Michael O'Hanlon with the Foreign Policy program. My colleagues Mara Karlin and Alex are here at Brookings.

Rick and Alex wrote this book over a period of some thirteen to fifteen years of research. Bob Kagan was once up on the stage describing how it took him thirteen years to finish one of his books, and he was very grateful to Brookings for not firing him along the way. But of course, with Kagan, we got what we bargained for with thirteen years.

We've certainly got what we bargained for with fifteen years of research on this book because what the book tries to do is take the hugely important question of how does the United States work with partner nations to help improve their security forces so they can sometimes do things without us or with minimal American participation.

But they did it through detailed field research, and both of them have extensive experience as well in the US government trying to oversee this from a policy perspective where, by the way, Mara was supervising some of this at the Pentagon during the time period in question. But let me just tell you a couple more things about each of them, then we'll get into the conversation.

The way we'd like to proceed today is I'm gonna ask first Rick and then Alex to tell us a little bit about the book, why they wrote it, what big question they're trying to answer, what big question they think they might have at least partially answered. And by the way, one of the things I like about this book is it does have a parsimonious theory behind it, but they don't try to explain the whole world perfectly with this theory. They avoid the temptation of political science to say, "My theory has to do everything perfectly or it doesn't really count." They have a theory that sort of helps you understand things quite well most of the time, and to me, that's the right kind of accomplishment for a book of this nature.

Rick studied at Yale and then went on to get his PhD at King's College. He's worked with European Command and Central Command in various jobs in his experience, been a scholar at a number of research organizations, including the Wilson Center, Princeton University, and elsewhere, and also now is involved with a startup ZenithFlow, which works on applying some cognitive methods to understanding defense problems and security assistance problems.

He's done field research in at least eleven different countries, including all the countries featured prominently in this book: Colombia, the Philippines, and Georgia. But there are also a number of other countries that are discussed at some level, including Pakistan, Yemen, Nigeria, many of which he's been to as well. And so we're delighted to have him here today. His main home base right now is the University of Maryland. And again, quite a level of experience. And I think this is also a book that originated with his dissertation. So again, it's been a long time in the making and we're getting what we bargained for in terms of all this hard work.

Alex Noyes has been at Brookings now for, I think, three years and is really setting the standard for for rapid productivity, for outstanding research covering a wide array of issue areas. He worked at the Pentagon supervising security assistance for many countries. And let me just remind you, and they'll of course say more in just a second, but let me just remind you, a- as I'm sure most of you appreciate, that security assistance sometimes gets a bad

rap when it's the Nicaraguan Contras or, you know, a government that winds up being overthrown or some kind of another case that's gone awry.

But bear in mind, our work with Ukraine over the decade, really especially after twenty fourteen and prior to Russia's large-scale assault of twenty twenty-two, is to a large extent, along with the bravery and creativity of the Ukrainian people, what's allowed them to fend off these Russian attacks. And even though Afghanistan and Iraq were not the happiest of experiences overall, we've had pretty good successes in certain phases with the Iraqi security forces in particular, although that's not a major focus of this book, and again, they'll say more in just a second.

So this topic is hugely important, especially for a, a United States that has some sixty security partners and allies around the world, but doesn't wanna do the heavy lifting in defense of each and every one of them most of the time. So helping them and enabling them, training them, working with them is really gonna be the goal most of the time.

Mara Karlin is my esteemed and wonderful colleague here. I like to say that even though she worked for six secretaries of defense, she still has a very fun personality. And, a- and that's, and that, and that's proven by the fact that whenever she finishes a stint at the Pentagon, she usually goes off and does semester at sea teaching and on tours around the world, taking her whole family along the way and homeschooling her kids in the process.

These are things that I can't even imagine how to possibly contemplate. I'm not sure we could survive, in my family, a week of this. And, and she's done it twice for a semester. But in addition, she's a professor at SAIS, also with us here at Brookings, and just a wonderful scholar who's written outstanding books on topics including civil-military relations in the United States and the legacy of the big wars of the Middle East for today's American armed forces.

So thank you for letting me try to tee things up a little bit. Without further ado, I'd like to now hand off to Rick.

BENNET: Thank you so much, Mike. Thanks everyone for coming. We're really excited about this book launch and, and excited to, to get some feedback on what's been a, a long time coming in terms of the the amount of work and and thought that's that we've, we've put into this this project.

I'll just try to frame the topic a little bit and, and give a bit of insight into why we wrote the book and, and why this, this matters. So- There's a negative stigma attached to military assistance in general. It, it's got a bad rep. And when you look at large scale projects like Afghanistan, going back to Vietnam if you look at as you mentioned, Nicaragua, if you look at the School of the Americas and, and some of the stigma that, that followed from, from those episodes, you can understand why.

But policymakers continually go back to this well, right? This is a, this is a, a tool in the toolkit that is consistently used. And we wanted to figure out a little bit as to why that, that is the case. What makes it attractive beyond the sense that you're not putting American troops in harm's way in many instances or in s- in some other instances there can be a, a lower price tag to some of these endeavors.

In 2008, I had the opportunity to go visit the Southern Philippines. I went down to Zamboanga and the island of Jolo and through Central Mindanao, and I visited the US Joint Special Operations Task Force that was down there. And just became absolutely fascinated with this, this topic and these dynamics.

You know, this was, Halfway around the world, I, you know, there's a bunch of shipping containers put together with US troops that were down there doing some really intriguing work. And there were all sorts of dynamics when I talked with those personnel from the US and then talked to their counterparts in the armed forces of the Philippines that told similar but s- definitely different stories in terms of, you know, what the needs were, what the priorities were, where their interests aligned and where they didn't.

And this just took me down this path of trying to figure out a little bit more about how the US military works by, with, and through other militaries, and what those principal agent dynamics are and, and how we could use that to understand what it means to project military power. So yes, it's been a long time coming.

I think there's about 130-some interviews that inform the background of the book in terms of both US and partner interviewers interviewees and pretty evenly split between them to try to get both sides of the story. We try to tell the, the story. And there are really two factors that we identify and and, and hone in on for what makes military assistance succeed or fail.

The first is interest alignment and the second is the institutional capacity of the partner's defense institutions. And we can get into a little bit more detail about what we mean by institutions. But it's a lot of the unsexy stuff of of running a military. So the... anything from logistics to hiring and recruiting practices, to promotion practices all of the budgeting and the procurement command and control.

Th- there's, there's a lot that goes into robust defense institutions, and it is often not the focus of the military assistance that is being sent, or at least it certainly doesn't have the, the dollar figures behind it that the equipment does. When we have both factors present we see and observe a much higher likelihood of success.

And by success, we mean both that the partner military improves in its military effectiveness and also that it does so in advancing U.S. national security objectives. When we have interests aligned, but there are not strong defense institutions, we can see partial tactical gains, episodic gains, but it's going to be difficult to sustain in the, in the long term.

When interests are not aligned, even if there are defense institutions, you can run the risk of entrapment or having all of that military assistance go towards ends that do not advance U.S. objectives. And finally, if both are not present we observe failures. So we can kind of walk through you know, in the discussion some examples of that, but hopefully that gives a, a sort of framework for the, the factors.

We open and close the book with Ukraine. It was a little too soon we thought, to do a full-on case as it was still developing. But Ukraine is really the the reason why this went from, you know, sitting on the shelf in terms of understanding the, the research from an academic standpoint and, and now in book form to try to you know, inform some of the ongoing discussions around the topic.

And that is because, you know, Ukraine is an extremely important case of military assistance, not just for the amount of military assistance that the U.S. has, has sent, but it's also, I think, going to inform the next generation of of conflicts where military assistance will be considered as, as an option.

So, you know, with that, I, I, I think I've teed up Alex or, or can hand it back to you, Mike, but Alex, I think you had some thoughts on sort of, some of the policy implications of, of the research.

O'HANLON: Please. Thank you.

NOYES: Yeah, absolutely. Well, thanks so much everybody, for coming out. We didn't offer lunch or even coffee, so appreciate you guys, you guys coming at 2:00 p.m.

on a Tuesday in June. But yeah, really, really happy to be here. Feeling very grateful to, to Mike and Mara and Rick to be up here. Definitely a career highlight and a lot has gone into this, so appreciate you guys. Yeah, I think I'll make two quick points about breadth of military assistance, and then I'll talk about some of the, the main policy implications real quick.

One is that you know, I've been working in this field for about two decades on and off, both in academia and then government, and I was still shocked to learn that we worked with a remarkable one hundred and seventy-nine countries around the globe over the past two decades. That number is, is just a real eye-popper for me.

You know, there's, what, one hundred and ninety-five countries in the world. Ten don't have militaries. So basically like any country that is not a direct adversary we are touching in some way with our, with our military assistance. And that was just a an eye-popping number for me. And then of course, there's the, there's the twenty billion or fifteen billion annually that goes to the military aid piece of this.

If you include foreign military sales and direct commercial sales, it's much larger plus two hundred billion, which again, is just a, a, a kind of crazy number to think about. And then I would also say over the last two decades that I've been working on this issue, I've seen it really increase from like a little niche kind of security cooperation nerd community to actual grand strategy.

So, you know, Mara wrote a fantastic book in 2017. She was ahead of the curve. But I... Especially once you know, the, the full-scale invasion in, in 2022 occurred, I think this became a real, real tool of grand strategy, which it hadn't necessarily been in the past or, or especially not thought that way.

So yeah, Rick did a great job of, of laying out sort of what we see as the two key ingredients to success. That's interest alignment, especially on security issues, and then the institutional capacity of the, the partners. That's the, the... as, as Rick said, the, the really important but kind of unsexy stuff like the defense management and the logistics and human resource management.

So we came up with a, with a bunch of different recommendations. I'm gonna, I'm gonna highlight three or four, and then happy to, to to jump into others if, if folks have questions.

But the biggest one is that I think we need to be a lot more strategic about how and where we deploy this tool. So again, 179 countries.

If you look at some of the funding levels, historically they, they basically stay the same, which suggests that there's a cookie-cutter approach here and not a lot of strategic thought going into each program that takes into consideration the conditions on the ground. And that's of course a painting with a broad brush.

There are exceptions but I think broadly speaking, I feel pretty confident making that, that statement. So the first takeaway is, is we can be a lot more strategic and adroit in how we actually design these type of programs. So a, a rough perhaps crude way to do this, but a, a, a good starting point would be to think about bucketing the, the...

all of the countries in the world that we work with or want to work with into three different buckets that take into account these two key ingredients. So in the, in the first bucket, that would be what political scientists would call, like, the high-high bucket. That's high interest alignment, high institutional capacity.

That's gonna be your, your well-developed countries that probably have very robust defense institutions. The latter two buckets on the, on the end of the spectrum would be the low-lows. So that's gonna be low interest alignment and, and low institutional capacity. That's probably the, some of the poorest countries in the world, which we sometimes do a lot of work with.

Think about Mali or Somalia. And in the middle of that, that second bucket would be a mix of the two. And again, this is broad brush, but you know, the, the second main recommendation that I would make that we make in the book is, is that Especially with the countries that are in the second and third bucket, we should do a much better job of thinking about how we can help them build up the institutional capacity and use smart incentives, both positive and negative.

So at the high, high, at the first bucket, you'll probably have some pretty well-developed countries that probably don't need a lot of our assistance. And then we could probably push the foreign military sales piece, the direct commercial sales piece, maybe a little bit of of, of assistance in the mix there if it makes sense for, for certain reasons.

But in, in the bucket two and bucket three, we suggest strongly that the US think about moving away from what we term a weapons-first approach, which is self-explanatory, and moving it towards an institutions-first policy. Now, doing that in practice would, would would actually incur a lot of pushback as our friends in the Pentagon and, and and former Pentagon officials and State Department officials can, can speak to all too well.

You know, there's a lot of reasons for that, which we can get into. But you know, there's just a inertia there. And, and so the bure- the bureaucratic incentives are to always push more and do more, not to pull back. So that's a, that's a significant hurdle, which we, we talk about how to address.

Okay. Quickly I'm gonna mention two other recommendations, and one is, how do you actually move from an institut- a weapons-first approach to an institutions-first policy? That's really hard and what it means is that we need to do a lot better on building up the capability of the US government to actually do this type of pro-programming.

And so, I see some, some ICB friends and some security sector governance friends. ICB is Institutional Capacity Building. It's about $100 million, or was historically at the Pentagon. I think it's a little bit lower now. And that sounds like a good chunk of money, but when you compare the, the train equip monies, it, it, it pales in comparison.

And then when you talk about the State Department, security sector governance is historically what we have called it there. And then I, I think that's really a drop in the bucket. I think there was a program called the, the Global Defense Reform Program, and I was part of the Security Governance Initiative prior to that.

And GDRP I think was 18 million. And as I said before State Department Title 22 is, is, is over 200 billion. So you guys can do the math. Not, not enough is focused on that. So how do we actually change that? Well, as many in this room know all too well, you really need Congress to mandate it. And on the defense side, we have we, we have a requirement for what's called 332.

That's a institutional capacity building. On the State Department side, we don't have that. And we can talk about whether or not that requirement actually works in practice. But I think to really push the, the bureaucracy to move towards an institution's first approach, we really need Congress to mandate some sort of spending on institutional capacity building and security sector governance.

Briefly, a- and these are getting really nerdy. So, the foreign military financing piece, which is the, the aid piece of the foreign military sales process, that is heavily earmarked every year. It's about 6 billion. Policymakers need flexibility, so I think that, that... tho- unless those earmarks go away, which I don't see happening anytime soon, although I could be wrong we need to, to plus up the foreign military financing piece.

And then ultimately we need to do a much better job on understanding what works and what doesn't, and when we can ramp up and place better bets and when we should we should draw back. So in order to do that, we need to really understand what works and what doesn't. And to do that, we need better assessment, monitoring, and evaluation which is another a pet rock of mine, which I'm happy to, to talk about later on.

But I'll, but I'll stop there.

O'HANLON: Let me ask one clarifying question before going to Mara, and thank you both. You talked about Foreign military financing as a mechanism largely to help people buy weapons, but you also said maybe we sometimes sell weapons too soon. So what y- it sounds like what you want is a more discriminating approach, but not a reduced overall level of effort at selling weapons to other countries.

And you, you wanna reprioritize training and education relative to weapons, but you don't wanna really weaken the weapons side of things. You just wanna be more selective. Is that a fair-

NOYES: Absolutely, yeah. Ma- Rick might have different ideas, but I'll, I'll say quickly that I'm actually quite comfortable with the the amount that we spend on on the assistance piece, on the actual aid piece.

If anything, I think that needs to be plussed up. But how we actually allocate that needs to be fundamentally rethought. And to do this, we think that we should start with institution-building, especially with partners that looks like success might be not, not conducive to success and then sequence that.

So start with non-lethal assistance, help them build up their their capabilities so they can actually receive and use effectively and responsibly the assistance that we give them. And then you know, go ahead with the, with the more sophisticated weaponry. And in, implied in that is a bit of a conditionality or a positive incentive.

But I'll, I'll let Rick jump in, too.

BENNET: No, you, you hit it. It's a sequencing problem. So the there are... We, we talked about conditions for success, but there are, are levers. Defense institution building programming is, is one lever. It takes some time but it is levered. There're also positive and negative incentives so conditions that we, you know, you can put on the assistance.

We found in practice that the conditionality is used a lot less often than you'd think. Part of that may be the relationship building between the countries and, you know, you want to be able to, you know, have a a good partnership. But in instances when the United States has conditioned assistance or turned off assistance for periods of time you can observe you know, instances of, of partner compliance to the, those incentives in the aftermath.

Colombia's a good example of that. So, so yeah, but I, I think ultimately it's a, it's a sequencing issue more than a, a more or less of, of one or the other.

O'HANLON: So as I pass the baton to my good friend Mara, let me remind you that she was the assistant secretary of defense for strategy, plans, and capabilities in the Biden administration, which means she had the most senior job dedicated to developing war plans and war-fighting concepts.

So she certainly understood and thought a lot about what partners and allies would do as part of these overall efforts. So she's the perfect person to turn to for some reflections. Mara, over to you.

KARLIN: Thank you. It is such a treat to be here to get to talk about this superb book. This book is just fantastic, and I wanna articulate two reasons why I think it is so useful It compellingly makes the case for why you should care, and then it gives you a framework for what to do about that.

So there's a couple of us who are real security cooperation nerds who cared long, long ago, right? You did not need to convince us. You've spent literally a decade and a half on this book. You all were there in what I refer to as the before times, right? Before this was talked about vis-à-vis Ukraine or Israel, way back when it was truly not terribly, terribly g-glamorous.

And so they help you understand that maybe you've noticed security cooperation because of these kinds of conflicts, and you're intrigued. They also help articulate that you should care because there's a lot of money involved, right? $200 billion. There's a lot of countries

involved. The book actually says that since 2000, US security assistance has gone to nearly every country in the world, right?

That's astonishing when you think about those numbers. You should also care, frankly, because when we get it wrong, the implications are very real. You know, the case study that is always so loud in my brain here is the US involvement in Vietnam. The US actually had a robust security assistance effort in Vietnam before it then went to wage a war.

It did it for a couple years, and it failed for a whole bunch of reasons And the result is 58,000 American troops died. Untold numbers of Vietnamese died. So if you don't care because of the cost, if you don't care because of how many folks this touches, I hope you do care because when we get it wrong, it matters.

So I think this book, with the qualitative, really serious research, with the data that it illustrates, helps make that point as to why we should really be so, so interested in, in why, i- you know, in, in this issue. Then they really offer this very useful framework, and I think this framework does a masterful job taking some, some issues that the literature had started to walk to but hadn't quite crystallized, and then plussing it up.

And for those of us who've lived some of the case studies that they, that they really get into deeply, I think they're spot on. So you all had articulated these big, big two pieces, right? Are you aligned intellectually with the partner? And what's going on with institutions, right? Are you able to help them build their institutions in a meaningful way?

So this ... Let's take each of these. This first one, and are, are you aligned on why you're doing this and what you are trying to achieve? They have this fantastic case study of US-Pakistan relations not long after the 9/11 attacks. I happened to be the desk officer in the Pentagon working on it, and reading their description, it was, like, so loud, right?

We were so clearly not aligned in terms of the threats that we believed we needed to focus on and the threats Islamabad was trying to focus on. And of course, if you just fast-forward a couple years, that's really quite, quite obvious. You know, and it was hard, especially in a moment of such desperation, to be able to talk through and to acknowledge, frankly, that we were so misaligned, as you all, as you all highlight This other piece on institutions is so important.

It is unsexy and unglamorous, as you know, but it's exactly right. And any of us who has lived in a dysfunctional office, which I'm suspecting is everyone in this audience, right, of course it's relevant for security cooperation, and of course it applies here. If you have a capable institution, as they highlight in this book, right, you've now got a thoughtful way to spend your money.

You know how to absorb that fun- that money. You've got meaningful oversight. You've got accountability. You've got the ability to enable change. All of these things that make so much sense and are frankly not sufficiently applied to the security cooperation world. And their case study of Colombia really just highlights it, I think, in, in, in stereo.

As Alex noted in particular though, a lot of that has gotten forced onto the Department of Defense. It is not naturally going to look at institution building. Frankly, because it is not so glamorous, one is going to be much more ins- interested in a weapons first or maybe even a weapons and training first approach.

But fundamentally, I think they compellingly argue that actually institution first should be our mantra. And so going forward, what I'm curious about as they think through the application of these insights is exactly that bucket that Alex was just talking about, right? Not the folks that are high, high everywhere, right?

If you ... If we're in the same headspace on our interests and we're on the exact same headspace on the need to work with your institutions, that's great. That's butterflies and unicorns, and that's almost never going to happen. Right? And then you'll have the challenging ones, which we'll probably accept as challenging.

What do you do on those where they know they need some reform, but they're not terribly interested in a lot of it. They kind of agree with you on what the threat is and what the mission is, but only sort of because maybe they've defined it somewhat elsewhere. What are the questions that the policymakers need to ask?

What is their spreadsheet, right, their checklist of questions that they need to ask? And then how do they regularly assess those questions to figure out if they're on the right path? So very briefly, I just wanted to say congratulations on a tremendous read, and I hope you all go and buy copies of it.

O'HANLON: Awesome. Let me, if I could, ask you to get into the cases a little bit. And there are a number because you tee up countries like Pakistan and Nigeria and Yemen in the opening of the book, but then you have three major case studies, Colombia, the Philippines, and Georgia. And you say that Colombia is basically a success because the Colombian government wanted to defeat internal violence.

We wanted to stop the drug flow, not exactly the same thing, but close enough. And then the Colombians were very motivated under President Uribe, and also a person who's been on this stage, former Minister of National Defense, Juan Carlos Pinzón Bueno, who's a vice minister and then later minister himself.

This went over a fifteen-year stretch, and Colombia brought down violence by at least three-fourths. So clear success, even if today Colombia is again rather interesting . You can't be expected to solve every problem forever to count something as a success. With the Philippines, you say we helped the Filipinos deal with the Islamist insurgency after 9/11 in particular.

I, I wondered if you were I'll just toss this out as a provocation, if you were a little too demanding of what you expected that relationship to generate because you say we, we saw the limits of the Filipino institutions in that they couldn't do as much vis-à-vis China as we wanted. But isn't that sort of a separate problem?

And didn't they do pretty well with the Islamist insurgency? But you, you can come to that in a second. And then the final case, Georgia, whereas you point out we did have some common interests, but they were mostly concerned about Russia breathing down their neck, and we were more concerned, or at least as concerned, about them helping us in Afghanistan.

We had to even fly Georgian troops back to help defend their own country because they had sort of over-committed to help us with Afghanistan. So that's sort of a mixed case. Anyway,

tho- that's what I s- take out by way of broad summary. Could you please get into a little more detail and also answer my question about the Philippines?

Wasn't that a little more of a success than you potentially argue?

BENNET: Sure. Thanks for the question. I'll, I'll jump in here. For Colombia it's interest- interesting to look at the episodes, the sort of twists and turns of the relationship between Washington and Bogotá over the years.

It did start out as a bit of a mismatch between interests in the sense that all of our or all of the United States assistance was pointed towards the counter-drug problem as you, as you mentioned. And it was really a security issue more than anything else from the Colombians' perspective.

After 9/11 the Colombians' messaging to Washington changed. They, they started they, they termed this new phrase narco-terrorists, and everything was couched in the language of the post-9/11 war on terror. And a lot of the restrictions that had been put in place, there were certain, you know, helicopters that the U.S.

provided that could only be used for the U.S. Trained counter-drug battalions, Those restrictions ended up going away under the Bush administration. And so you, you saw a l- a lot more freedom of of movement from a policy standpoint with the assistance that the U.S. Provided. And once those interests align you really start to see some, some gains.

So can go into a little bit more details there. But to get to your question on the Philippines I'll take the, the point that, that it, it is a little bit of a harsh judgment. The recent years have had a lot more focus from Manila on the institution piece. So I think really in the last ten years, there's been a dramatic increase in focus on institution building within the Defense Ministry.

And and that has had... the Defense Department. And, and that's had a, a huge impact in the period of time that we were looking we focused a lot on this transition from the JSOTF that I had mentioned previously and then moving the U.S. presence from down in Zamboanga up to Manila into the embassy and sort of as that mission wound down, what were the dynamics that, that took place in terms of how the AFP was approaching the the threats that they, they, they faced.

And there was a lot of tactical operational success, but that did not translate to sustained counterinsurgency successes that you would see across, you know, the swath of the Southern Philippines that they were trying to tackle from a, from a security standpoint. It is a very difficult set of conditions in the Southern Philippines in terms of the economic outlook of of some of the barangays that you know, that these these communities that that they were operating in.

They probably deserve more credit. But, but from a, From an institution standpoint, you know, those weak institutions you know, have now started to be, become more robust with, with additional programming that's focused on things like budgeting and procurement and the rest. And that has come at the same time that the country has shifted from counterterrorism to territorial defense.

And so there is a bit of a forcing function there as well as they look to China as a potential threat. We did not deal extensively in the book with the Duterte years in the Philippines. But that is, like, I think important to highlight as well, is that you referenced Petro in, in Colombia you have Duterte in the Philippines.

There are these periods of time when administrations change both the United States and with the partners, and then m-maintain that interest alignment becomes very challenging. And and it's really not a, a problem that can be solved per se. It's more of a problem to be managed.

NOYES: Thank you. Yeah, I'll just quickly add on the Philippines that, you know, we, I think we do end up ultimately calling it a qualified success.

And then Georgia is the qualified failure. So, so we, we do try to give some credit. I'm gonna, I'm gonna say just very briefly on Ukraine, because I think it's a really fascinating case that we open and close with. And I know everybody has been paying a lot attention to this case over the last several years for, for obvious reasons.

But from a military assistance perspective, I think even as someone who's been thinking about long and hard about this, this topic for, for way too long it really did open my eyes on what can be achieved at a strategic level when it's done right. And when we place huge, huge bets and we shift the whole system To actually get that out the door.

You know, Mara, you wrote in twenty seventeen that the security cooperation system was broken, and then I've heard you follow up and say "We didn't fix everything with Ukraine, but we really did move heaven and earth to get that out the door in a way that made a lot, a lot of strategic sense from my perspective."

So for me at least, I think it really did reopen my eyes a-and think about, okay, how can we do this better? How can we learn to place better bets, and how do we actually do that? And Ukraine is of course, we can't replicate everywhere, and we wouldn't want to for many obvious reasons. But I do think it's a really compelling case about when we do this right, when we think about building up the institutions prior to the heavy equipment, and then when it...

when we do reach that point, we really turn it on and place those heavy bets o-on those partners that have the, the high institutional capacity and the high interest alignment, it can really go a long way in helping the US achieve its national interests.

KARLIN: Could I just add a, a point- Absolutely ... that I think further highlights why this book is so worthwhile?

When folks look at Ukraine, I think it's easy to say, gosh, so much progress has been made, obviously because of how hard the Ukrainians have fought, but because they've gotten all this stuff, right? The US system, which traditionally moves really slowly, moved so terribly quickly, and I think the argument in your book that is so convincing is actually it all was because you had a decade or so of groundwork laid of working on building their institutions.

All that not glamorous stuff is what enabled them to take a whole bunch of US platforms and assets and training and actually apply it in a meaningful way.

BENNET: And the, the other point I think that's, that's related to that and that I think we've touched on but, but bears repeating is that in both the case of Colombia and in Ukraine, right, a lot of these reforms are driven by the partner, right?

So, the, you know, the anti-corruption efforts that Zelensky had prior to the further invasion are incredibly important to the to the overall trust in the system that that Ukrainians have. So, it, it, it bears repeating, though, I think that just that a lot of these can gains can be more sustainable when they're not driven by Washington, but rather driven by the partner as well.

O'HANLON: Let me just turn to each of you, maybe starting with Mara and then working down, to add, before we go to the audience for your questions and thoughts to add a couple more cases, whichever you'd like to invoke, and I'll propose a couple of possibilities, but you can do what you wish because we haven't really talked about the post-war security assistance successes after 1945 with NATO or Japan.

I realize your primary focus is on developing countries in the more modern era, but South Korea is a fascinating case, right? Because it was a very poor country when we started to work with it. Obviously, it's come a long way, probably one of the top five, 10 militaries in the world today. So that has to be a big success.

Is there anything to learn from the South Korea case? Some of you may wanna bring up the Israel case. That's a whole different question in the modern era and also in previous eras. But I'll just, you know, put that out there in case somebody wants to touch that hot potato. A- and then, and then finally, I- I'd like to hear a little bit more about Georgia if someone's willing to discuss that, because we know that, you know, in 2008, Russia attacked Georgia, and it had already had these sort of simmering p- you know, people ca- talk about frozen conflicts.

They were more like simmering conflicts and s- just sitting on Georgian territory up in the north. But beyond that, they were thinking of marching on Tbilisi and overthrowing the government And the United States, I think, played a hand in dissuading the Russians from doing that. To what extent was that an outgrowth of some of the security assistance relationships?

And maybe should Georgia therefore be seen as a qualified success i- in, in, in that at least at the broadest level of preserving its sovereignty we helped Georgia do that at a moment of acute distress. Anyway, what- whatever cases you wanna bring in, please do. And Mara, could I start with you?

KARLIN: Sure. I'll, I'll take one that is very relevant if you're following the news right now, which is Lebanon.

Awesome. So, about, oh gosh, yeah, just two decades or so ago the US started a program to build the Lebanese military, a military that had three to five bullets per soldier per year, including training, right? A military that if you went to Lebanon, you didn't see in large swaths of the country. It didn't even have the vehicles to, to get anywhere.

And so the US starts this, this program because there's various shocks that kinda happen inside Lebane- Lebanon and, and regionally. And it makes progress such that over the next two decades, the Lebanese military is able to fill the space, right? You go to Lebanon now, you see the military all over the place.

It can be useful in some important ways, particularly in fighting against Sunni groups that folks kind of all agree is a problem, right? So imagine like Al-Qaeda affiliates, for instance. And about eight, nine months or so ago, it started an effort to disarm Hezbollah, which is not something anyone ever really thought the Lebanese military might be able to do.

Now, it did it in just a certain piece of the geography, south of the Litani River. Events lately have shown that it was definitely not an exhaustive effort, but there was progress made, right? US Central Command has talked about the thous- has talked about the s- thousands and thousands of weapons that the Lebanese military captured from, from Hezbollah.

And I think we're in this really fascinating moment right now because you have a Lebanese military that is decently capable, not nearly as capable as Hezbollah You have a Lebanese government that has stood up and said, "We should only have one armed actor in our state, and it should be the military."

That may not sound like an interesting and controversial statement, but it actually really is a sporty one. And you have a Lebanese, Israeli, and Syrian government who all agree that we should see a certain change here where the government can exert its sovereignty. And yet, somehow operationally, it's just not working, right?

It is just not succeeding whatsoever. Israel doesn't have faith in it. The Lebanese government can't seem to influence either the Israelis to convince them that they're able to, to take this action, nor to get the military to take the steps that they need. And so it's interesting to me because you would look at this on one level and say, "Gosh, that is absolutely not a success," right?

You still have this massive armed group, and yet you do have a military that has, over a period of time, maintained its existence, has the most support of any institution in the whole country, particularly across all sectarian groups, and is very, very slowly taking some important steps. So it's one, one to watch.

O'HANLON: Hmm. Thank you. Awesome. Rick?

BENNET: I'll take the bait on Georgia. Good. So, The Georgia Train and Equip program in 2002 get, gets off the ground and is a, is a focus of our chapter. It's one of those episodes that I think has been undercovered in terms of the the amount of attention. There's been some great work on Philippines and certainly on Colombia.

This episode, for those who aren't familiar this was at a point where Putin and Bush had looked into each other's eyes and you know, were, were on relatively good terms. And there are all these Al-Qaeda affiliated individuals potentially in the mountains of northern Georg- Georgia in the Pankisi Gorge is the, the area.

And these are, you know, mixed in with the native Kists there and these Chechen affiliated individuals as well, going back and forth over the border. And Putin says, "Well, if you have a terrorism problem that can be attacked in Afghanistan, I have a terrorism problem right over there in Georgia, and I should be able to solve that myself as well."

And Washington pushes a an SF group, a special forces team over to to be able to start some training. And it's honestly just the announcement of the training and the

announcement of the US support that gets the Kremlin to back off of a lot of the rhetoric. And so from a-- I guess to, to, to mention a little bit about why we chose these cases and why they're yeah, wh- why we chose them in the, in the first place, it's very difficult to disaggregate the role that the United States has in some of the security outcomes in a lot of the cases where we have large scale efforts to build partner militaries.

Think Iraq, think Afghanistan. You mentioned Vietnam. Like, i- in all these instances, it's hard to say to what extent the partner is driving the security gains or losses you see when you have large scale US footprints there also sort of rolling in the same direction, right? Conversely, we also provide military assistance to all sorts of different countries where they don't actually use that military assistance in combat that we can observe how effective they are as a, as a military.

So we chose cases where there was actually, you know- US working by, with, and through, not engaged in, in combat operations, but also where there was some action there to, to make a better story, first of all but, but also to be able to, to isolate that variable. And in the case of Georgia, we have this, this vignette in 2008 that happens where all of that equipment that and training that we had provided had really...

And the programming had started to focus almost exclusively on counterinsurgency, on population focused counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan and those types of missions. And the Georgians were the first to raise their hands in many instances to to be part of the coalition of the willing in those in those c- contingencies When it comes to 2008, yes, we had to fly them back to to, to Georgia during the invasion.

And we really get a, a close-up of, of how effective this military actually is, and the answer is not terribly when it comes to the territorial defense that that really was the, their primary mission. So i-is it a, is it a complete failure? It's not. I mean, if you look at the at the institutional capacity of the Georgians before you know, at the fall of the Soviet Union to where they were by the time the train and equip program you know, wound down, it's pretty tremendous the the investments that were made in, in their force.

But from a military effectiveness standpoint it's hard to argue that 2008 was anything but a, a failure.

O'HANLON: Thank you.

NOYES: All right, Mike I might come to regret this, but I'm, I'm gonna take the bait on, on Israel as well. Mostly because you know a lot about South Korea, and so I'm not gonna try to-

to to joust with my boss about, about that case. But look, I, I will, I will do a bit of a cop-out here, but also answer the question. I will say in the book, to be clear we do not talk about wealthy countries. All of this is middle and low-income countries. But I will say that if you take the logic behind our framework and you apply it to the case of Israel, you would get the implication that we might wanna think about winding down our aid, and that doesn't mean that we can't go to a foreign military sales model or a direct commercial sales model.

But the aid piece we would probably have to say that we should think about winding that down. So, so I'm, I'm wondering if you know, if, if Rick has any ideas on this or, or anybody

else. But I think that that's the, the logical extension. And I, I don't think it's as controversial now to say as say that as it was perhaps a couple years ago.

And you can also start to, to see the argument that our interests may have started to, to diverge more than they had in the past. And so again, that's the, the logical extension of the argument.

BENNET: Well, I just, I think you have to ask your, ask the questions that the book you know, we'll, we'll stick to the book here.

That the book tries to crystallize, which is does the partner have robust defense institutions? In this case, absolutely. And are our interests aligned? And so that's the, the, the real question that I think needs to be asked and continually asked. And there are lots of ways in which interests are aligned.

And when those missions are aligned, then, you know, the military assistance makes a, a lot of sense.

O'HANLON: Great. Let's go to you, please. And if I could ask you to wait for a microphone, state your name, and really just ask one brief question per person. I wanna take two or three, and then go back to the panel. So we'll start here, Alejandro, back in the ninth row or so right there.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Hello, this is Shota Guinieria, Delphi Global. And I'm asking this question not because I'm Georgian, but because I think the case of Georgia is actually very symptomatic of, of what's the main problem usually with this kind of assistance. And my question would be really brief. You know, why do you think Georgia was a partial failure?

Because it had all the preconditions of the success. Up until Putin actually decided to invade Georgia, the deterrence failed, and everything started to move in the opposite direction. Now the country is actually controlled by Russia, and it's the springboard for Russia's interest in the region while it was the stronghold for the United States' interest in the region 10 years ago.

So what, what, what happened? What do you think were the main reasons of that failure? Thank you. Thank

O'HANLON: you. Let's go up here to the second row if we could, please

AUDIENCE QUESTION: William Winkler, a grad student here at GW for international affairs. You partially already answered my que-- first part of the question, so I'm gonna g- head, head directly to the second part. So when you look at the low lows, for example, especially in the Indo-Pacific, which country would you like to see, especially for the next ten years, that we increase our military aid there?

O'HANLON: And why don't we take one more question from Lynn, and with the hope... Lynn's over here in the first row. With the hope that maybe the apportionment will be one question per panelist, and then we'll come back to you all.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thanks so much, and congratulations to you both on sp- what sounds like to be a splendid book.

My question relates to Taiwan. I understand it's not covered in your book. Where would you place Taiwan in terms of the matrix? Especially in with, with regard to whether interests ali- aligned between the United States and Taiwan. And would you assess military assistance there as a success, success story or not?

Do we have to wait for military action, in a sense, before we can assess whether it's a success story, or is deterrence sufficient? Thank you.

O'HANLON: Great. Should we start with Alex and work this way?

NOYES: Sure. Should I do the low, low or the, or Taiwan, or

O'HANLON: all? Just take whichever one you want, and we'll-

NOYES: Only one

O'HANLON: pick up the pieces- Do them all ... and we'll move right.

NOYES: Yeah. I'll, I'll, Great question, Lynn, and thank you. You know, I think we, we definitely don't address Taiwan, and, and I'll admit the big caveat that I'm in no way an expert on Taiwan. But I, I think my initial reaction would be that I would put Taiwan in high interest alignment, and I would put it in probably mixed to, to high-ish institutional capability.

And I think we are working with the Taiwanese to help build up that capability. But, but again, I, I'm, I'm in no way an expert, and I would like to hear your perspective at some point later, perhaps. But yeah, I think, I think that's where I, I would, I would place it in terms of the matrix. And then in terms of your question about whether or not we can understand the effectiveness of a partner military prior to combat, I think the answer is yes.

And I'll actually give a shout-out to the Defense Security Cooperation University here. Nadia is sitting behind you, and, and they're doing some great work on building out a data set that actually allows us to measure the strength of partner defense institutions. We didn't have the, the luxury of that database, and so we kind of had to make up our own measures for each case.

But hopefully soon we will have we will have such measures. And is it perfect? Of course not. And will combat introduce all sorts of variables that we didn't account for? Absolutely. But I do think there are ways to measure capability that have proven to, to be relatively accurate over the years.

BENNET: Rick I'll take the Georgia... I'm really interested in Mara's answers to the other two questions. Well, and the Georgia t- too is, but on, on the Georgia piece thanks for the r- the question. The political outcomes that we've observed in Georgia currently I don't think are directly tied to the US military assistance, right?

There's all sorts of factors that have that have occurred. So I, I'm not willing to blame the, the military assistance from the US on on sort of the outcomes that we see. However, the, the, the reason we call it a partial failure and, and in the scope of the, the time period that we look at for the chapter we're really honing in on the m- interest misalignment, the divergence between the the two countries in terms of what the priorities were.

So from the United States' standpoint, a really heavy focus on counterterrorism counterinsurgency support. Whereas you know, if you look at both across administrations, if you look at the investments that the Georgians were making, they were in large scale equipment to be able to, to deal with the, the Russian threat.

And so it's not so much that neither of those... It, it's not that one is a, a, a bad interest and, and the other is a good one. It's just that they're not aligned and therefore the type of assistance that we're providing is not you know, aligned to the, the task at hand, if that makes sense.

KARLIN: The country in Southeast Asia in which I would suggest putting more focus on is actually the Philippines.

I, you know, I think the book I think does a really good job in looking through this case study and diagnosing it, but in particular I think US interests are only getting more and more aligned with, with the Philippines, and their military is on the right path as well. And it's a capable military.

It's a military that's willing to do things as opposed to shy away from them. When you look at issues like US military posture, the... Over the last few years, the US military's gotten access to a number of very meaningful sites as well. And so I think that that's, in Southeast Asia, that's the place to double down on.

O'HANLON: Excellent. Well, that was a quick round, so we have time for one more. Let's start with Antoine, and then we'll work our way up and over.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thank you very much. I have a question. You, you talked about the fact that we have to prioritize more, but if I understand our assistance, basically the bulk goes to a handful of countries.

And the rest basically gets what I would say is peanuts, is relatively small amounts of these 197 billion. Sorry, of, of the total not 197 billion. So the, the question is, does that really help the prior- maybe the prioritizing between the major recipients would help, but to go down the line and take a small amount of money away from certain countries, would that not antagonize them and not get us anything?

O'HANLON: And let's go over here to the gentleman right where you are, Ryan, to your left there. And then I'll have one final one in the back left.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Justin Golden in headquarters, Marine Corps. With an institution-first approach, how do you think that impacts the services thinking about archipelagic coastal defense continuum?

Dr. Karlin, your focus on the Philippines and, you know, long history obviously with Georgia deployment program. You know, how does that change the service's outlook? Thanks.

O'HANLON: And let's take one more in the far back. Yeah. Thank you.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Hi. Thanks very much. James Siebens, I'm with the Fim- with the Simpson Center.

Wanted to ask how you sort of disaggregated by goal, right, or mission type, because it seems to me there's a very different set of circumstances for a mission that's intended to improve partner capacity for territorial defense versus one that's intended to, sort of, for an internal defense or counterinsurgency.

And I think it's necessary to m- have different measuring sticks for different kinds of missions. Thank you.

O'HANLON: Mara, you wanna start this round?

KARLIN: Sure. I'll very briefly just tackle that, that good question on the implications for the services of the military departments. I think it's really positive implications because if you're following this formula, you're going to be more likely to succeed.

I mean, we need to remember that security assistance is fundamentally a very selfish endeavor, right? It's gotta be grounded deeply in US national security interests. Ideally, I think it's grounded in the sorts of contingencies that the US military might have to go deal with. And instead, you've got someone else trying to do, trying to do that.

So whether that means that you're now training with them in, in other ways, or they're actually solving some problems that now, say, the Marine Corps does not need to, I, I think that's fundamentally a, a pretty good thing.

BENNET: We tried to have as much variation as possible in terms of the types of missions in order to have the, the maximum amount of coverage of this very large topic of military assistance.

But you do need different to, to look at different things. W-when we focus in terms of the outcome that we're looking at, it's on the military effectiveness of the, the partner. So, things like the integration, responsiveness, skill, and the quality of the, of, of the partner a-as they, you know, display those attributes in the types of activities that they're engaged in is how we try to generalize it.

But the variation was intentional and something that we hope makes the book a little bit more explanatory in terms of of its scope.

O'HANLON: Alex?

NOYES: Yeah. I would just add a, a two-finger and then I'll, I'll move to the, to the other two. But what Rick was saying, you know, this is a bit glib, but I think based in reality that all too often we don't do a good job of actually programming designing the program depending on

the objective, and we just have a bit of a cookie cutter approach and we say, "Okay, we're doing X, Y, Z here, and so we're gonna do that here."

You know, I have a, a, a brief vignette where I was in Nigeria in, in, I think in 2018 and, and I was working on some slides to, to work on procurement reform in Nigeria. And I pulled up the slide deck and everything said Nigeria except the last slide which said Colombia.

KARLIN: Oof.

NOYES: So somebody had forgotten to copy-paste the last one.

So that's a, that's a really disheartening- Oh ... vignette, but al-all-all too accurate in, in my experience. Briefly on the, on the services, I think Mara is absolutely right. We really need, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, to really drastically build up our own ability to help build the institutions of our partners and allies.

And so, we really need the services to be very serious about this. And you will get better returns if, if you do so. And then the, the final comment there in the back. A really good question, and I think you're absolutely right. I think we really do need to fundamentally rethink how and where we we, we apply this tool.

And to, to do so, we're gonna have to have some really difficult and hard conversations with some really long-standing allies and partners. But as we say in the book, I think those are, are really ultimately conversations worth having. And some deft diplomacy and, and smart use of, of positive and negative incentives, I think can help get us there.

But it's gonna be, it's gonna be there's gonna be some, some real, real some, some, certainly some friction there. But again, I think it's, it's a, it's a worthwhile endeavor. And then b- as we close up, and I'll, I'll hand it back to Mike, I just wanted to say thank a- thanks again for an awesome crowd. And big thanks to Sophia and the other RAs, Ali and, and Ryan for, for working the mics.

A lot goes into these things, and big thanks to Fred King who has set up a table back there for some signing. And of course, huge thanks to, to Mara and Mike and Rick. And thanks to you all for a great book, and thanks to you all for being here.

O'HANLON: As books, books are out back