

# A Whole-of-Government Approach to Leveraging Our Most Strategic Asset – Allies and Partners

by **Max Nauta**

*Perhaps the most impressive testimony to the extraordinary quality of the Marshall Plan came from Winston Churchill, whose active participation in the shaping of modern history made him acutely aware of the likelihood that the altruistic reasons given by a major power for supplying aid to another nation are merely a cover for sordid intentions. The Marshall Plan, in Churchill's judgment, was 'the most unsordid act in history.'*<sup>1</sup>

Strategic competition is most successful as an unsordid act. The State Department understood this when it developed the Marshall Plan in 1947. This is because of the asymmetric nature of competition. It is competition between status quo and revisionist states, between democracies and authoritarian states. The U.S. views the current international rules-based order as a win-win game. We succeed through the achievements of our allies and partners. On the other hand, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia view the international rules-based order as a zero-sum game. They try to succeed at the cost of the international community's success.

Our partners and allies are our most significant asymmetric advantage in strategic competition. However, we often fail to appreciate or communicate that. Sometimes, we fail for external reasons, such as competitors sewing distrust to undermine U.S. credibility. Sometimes, we fail because of internal causes, such as conflicting messages from the interagency community or failing to listen to our allies and partners. How do we counter competitors' malign influence, unify interagency efforts, and leverage the strengths of our allies and partners? The Marshall Plan was resilient to disinformation, projected a unified message, and leveraged the strengths of our allies and partners.

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How do we replicate the successful, unsordid influence of the Marshall Plan?

The author presents a solution to these challenges through a case study on the Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force—Southern Command (SPMAGTF-SC) that deployed to Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) from 2015 to 2020 to strengthen partnerships and address shared challenges in the region. The study’s problem statement is that the PRC and Russia have significantly increased their influence in LAC in ways that jeopardize U.S. influence and threaten democratic governance. The PRC and Russia exploit the ambiguity of the gray zone through predatory, opaque lending practices and disinformation campaigns. Through transparency, U.S. Forces, Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) counters PRC and Russian gray zone activities. By fostering a climate of trust and transparency, SOUTHCOM reduces the ambiguity of the gray zone, which exposes the malign nature of their influence. SOUTHCOM promotes trust and transparency in LAC by strengthening partnerships through military cooperation activities.

The author found that integrating partner nation (PN) officers into SPMAGTF-SC exponentially strengthened partnerships at a relatively insignificant cost. First, he found a strong positive correlation between integrating PN officers and strengthening partnerships. He then compared these findings with relevant theories on narrative and culture to illuminate why integrating PN officers strengthened partnerships to the degree it did. In doing so, he found that this correlation was causation.<sup>2</sup> To explain this causation, he developed the concept of a shared regional narrative (SRN) based on the principles of mutual contribution and equal ownership. The principles of the SRN make these findings generalizable to other regional theaters and the interagency community and provide a model for a whole-of-government approach in strategic competition. In this article, the author

offers a model for a whole-of-government approach that is resilient to disinformation, projects a unified message, and leverages our most significant strategic asset—our allies and partners.

## How do we replicate the successful, unsordid influence of the Marshall Plan?

This article consists of three parts. The first part introduces the study. This includes SPMAGTF-SC, the regional challenges, and the purpose of the study. The second part reviews the research, findings, and how they apply to the interagency community. Finally, the third part offers three recommendations for how the joint force and interagency community can leverage our allies and partners through a whole-of-government approach. These recommendations are:

1. Integrate allies and partners in the planning and execution of diplomatic, information, and military activities.
2. Incorporate the principles of mutual contribution and equal ownership for a whole-of-government approach to strategic competition.
3. Use this case study as an educational example for operations in the information environment, strategic competition, and how the interagency community can better leverage military support for shared objectives.

## Background

### *What is SPMAGTF-SC and why do a Case Study on it?*

The SPMAGTF-SC deployed to LAC from 2015 to 2020 to work with partner nations through mutually beneficial engagements, such as security cooperation training and humanitarian

and civic assistance projects, while being on standby to respond to natural disasters and humanitarian crises.<sup>3</sup> Every year, the task force deployed to Central America for six months during hurricane season (i.e., June to November). The SPMAGTF-SC totaled approximately 300 Marines and Sailors organized into a ground, air, logistics, and command element. Its mission, duration, formation, and funding remained relatively unchanged.

**...integrating [Partner Nation] officers provided asymmetric ways and means to achieve theater strategic objectives...**

The author conducted a case study on SPMAGTF-SC for two reasons. First, he believed integrating PN officers provided asymmetric ways and means to achieve theater strategic objectives in SOUTHCOM's resource constrained AOR. Second, the author's experience deploying with this task force in 2016, 2018, and 2019 provides credibility and an essential perspective in investigating this proposition.

The author believed that integrating PN officers provided asymmetric ways and means to achieve theater strategic objectives because their integration correlated with an exponential increase in the quantity of military engagements and PNs it conducted those engagements with. The SPMAGTF-SC 15, 16, and 17 were U.S.-only task forces. Each deployment conducted twelve to fourteen military engagements with four PNs: Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Belize. Through these military engagements, the SPMAGTF-SC 15, 16, and 17 successfully built partner capacity and demonstrated U.S. commitment, but at a constant rate. There was no year-over-year increase in military engagements or PNs.

The SPMAGTF-SC 18 integrated one PN

officer to become the first multinational task force. The task force's deputy commander was a lieutenant colonel from the Colombian Marine Corps. Without any significant increase in cost, duration, or U.S. personnel, the SPMAGTF-SC 18 increased the quantity of military engagements from fourteen to twenty-five and the number of PNs from four to ten.

The following year, the SPMAGTF-SC 19 integrated ten PN officers from Colombia, Brazil, Peru, Chile, Argentina, Belize, and the Dominican Republic. The task force conducted multiple subject matter expert exchanges, developed original exercises, and implemented a robust key leadership engagement (KLE) plan. Again, without any significant increase in cost, duration, or U.S. personnel, the SPMAGTF-SC 19 increased the quantity of military engagements from twenty-five to fifty-four and the number of PNs from ten to eleven. While the mission, funding, duration, and U.S. staffing remained relatively unchanged from 2015 to 2019, the task force's influence grew exponentially in correlation with integrating PN officers.

The second reason for conducting this study was because the author's experience with the SPMAGTF-SC 16, 18, and 19 provides credibility and an essential perspective for investigating this correlation. Strategic competition is inherently challenging to assess because its effects occur over an extended period. The author's experience provides four years of observation of the SPMAGTF-SC's evolution from a U.S.-only task force to a multinational task force. As the supply officer of the SPMAGTF-SC 16, he assisted in developing the purpose, mission, and mission essential tasks. This provided a foundation for the mission, activities, and desired effects.

In 2018, he was the liaison officer to the U.S. embassy in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Here, he observed the transition from a U.S.-only task force to a multinational task force, its messaging

through the embassy’s staff and country team, and the associated overlapping efforts throughout the interagency community.

As the KLE coordinator of the SPMAGTF-SC 19, the author coordinated and accompanied the commander on all KLEs, which included meetings with the U.S. embassy and PN leadership of most countries in the SOUTHCOM AOR. He was responsible for the task force’s liaison officers to the U.S. embassies in Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Belize, who maintained a reliable assessment of those PNs and their relationship with the U.S. embassies. Finally, the author’s responsibility for integrating the ten PN officers into the SPMAGTF-SC 19 provided a personal appreciation of their perspectives—although some sentiments may have been lost in translation when they made him practice Spanish in return for their practicing English. The author’s first-hand perspective offers a qualitative assessment that cannot be attained from a report. He can attest that the interest and contributions of the PNs were genuine.

### ***Why Should the Interagency Community Care about SOUTHCOM Military Activities?***

First, the SOUTHCOM problem set is an interagency problem set, and SOUTHCOM’s military activities help provide a solution to this interagency problem set. Second, we cannot mirror-image our U.S. construct (i.e., diplomatic, information, military, and economic) on competitors and partners. SPMAGTF-SC’s military activities had effects in the information and diplomatic spheres.

The SOUTHCOM problem set is that the PRC and Russia have significantly increased their influence in LAC in ways that jeopardize U.S. influence and threaten democratic governance. If given the freedom to maneuver in LAC, the PRC and Russia will continue to destabilize the economic and democratic foundations of the region, imposing costs on the U.S. and

discrediting its international credibility. They exploit the ambiguity of gray zone activities through predatory, opaque lending practices and disinformation campaigns.

The PRC conducts predatory, opaque lending practices in support of their One Belt One Road initiative. From 2002 to 2022, PRC trade with Latin America and the Caribbean grew from \$18 billion to \$450 billion. The PRC employs heavily subsidized state-owned enterprises to underbid on infrastructure projects, which include deep-water ports in seventeen countries in the region; several projects related to the Panama Canal; installations in Southern Argentina within proximity of the Strait of Magellan and Antarctica; and 11 PRC-linked

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space facilities—more than any other geographic combatant command’s AOR.<sup>4</sup> PRC-linked space facilities in Argentina and Chile are managed by an agency subordinate to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).<sup>5</sup> Twenty-nine of the thirty-one countries in LAC have existing PRC telecommunication infrastructure. Five of those are Huawei’s 5G technology. There are “twelve countries using PRC-created Safe City programs that provide persistent surveillance and give PRC [state-owned enterprise] technicians access to government networks.”<sup>6</sup> PRC investments create debt traps. Logistics infrastructure projects create physical access. Space and telecommunications infrastructure projects create cyber access and surveillance vulnerabilities. The infrastructure and economic weight of these activities make an unavoidable dependence.

The PRC then leverages this dependence to pressure the region towards their anti-democratic agenda. Seven of the remaining

thirteen countries that recognize Taiwan are in LAC. Nicaragua switched diplomatic allegiance from Taiwan to the PRC in December 2021 and has “engaged with the PRC in bilateral talks for a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement.”<sup>7</sup> Honduras broke relations with Taiwan in March 2023. Further, the PRC is the largest perpetrator of illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, logging, and mining in the region.<sup>8</sup> LAC cannot protect itself against these PRC-perpetrated illegal activities when the PRC has no genuine interest in preventing them, and LAC has no influence over the PRC. The PRC’s malign influence in the region erodes the foundations of fair trade, security, and democratic values.

Russia spreads disinformation in the region to impose costs on the U.S. Russia spreads disinformation and false narratives through “RT en Español” and “Sputnik Mundo.”<sup>9</sup> Except for Russian, Spanish is the most propagated language on RT.<sup>10</sup> At a low cost, Russia’s disinformation campaign promotes instability and undermines democracy in LAC.<sup>11</sup> Russia imposes costs for the U.S. in the region to detract its focus from Europe.<sup>12</sup>

**Russia tries to attract any country that feels slighted by the U.S. while taking advantage of lingering historical fears of U.S. and Western imperialism.**

Russia tries to attract any country that feels slighted by the U.S. while taking advantage of lingering historical fears of U.S. and Western imperialism.<sup>13</sup> Russia has garnered Nicaragua’s support as one of seven countries to vote against a UN resolution condemning Russia for its invasion of Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> Mexico’s President, Andres Manuel Lopez, characterized NATO’s military aid to Ukraine as immoral.<sup>15</sup> Argentina’s President Alberto Fernandez offered his country as a gateway for Russian investments in Latin

America.<sup>16</sup> In 2008, 2013, and 2018, Russia sent nuclear-capable T-160 Backfire bombers to Venezuela. And in 2013, 2019, 2020, and 2021, Russian military aircraft repeatedly violated Colombian airspace.<sup>17</sup>

The SPMAGTF-SC countered PRC and Russian malign influence by conducting military engagements to strengthen partnerships. Nested under SOUTHCOM’s Ends, Ways, and Means, and in agreement with doctrine on strategic competition, the SPMAGTF-SC’s military engagements built trust and confidence, assured and strengthened allies and partners, shared information, coordinated mutual activities, and maintained access and influence.<sup>18</sup> Trust sets the conditions for transparency, exposing PRC and Russian malign influence.

The interagency community should care because strengthening partnerships and building transparency is not a military-specific activity. The joint force competes through campaigning, which requires aligning these military cooperation activities with the other instruments of national power in pursuit of strategic objectives.<sup>19</sup> The asymmetric nature of strategic competition requires a whole-of-government approach. The SPMAGTF-SC is an example of leveraging the military instrument of national power to support the NSS’s goal of a “free, open, prosperous, and secure international order.”<sup>20</sup> A goal shared by the whole interagency community.

### *A Low-Cost Solution*

The study aimed to investigate whether the SPMAGTF-SC provided a low-cost, asymmetric solution to PRC and Russian malign influence. Did integrating PN officers into the SPMAGTF-SC 18 and 19 strengthen partnerships to a higher degree than the SPMAGTF-SC 15-17? If so, why did integrating PN officers strengthen partnerships? Was integrating PN officers into the SPMAGTF-SC an asymmetric way to counter PRC and Russian malign influence in

SOUTHCOM's resource constrained AOR? And lastly, are these findings generalizable to other geographical regions and the rest of the interagency community?

## **Research, Findings, and Generalizability**

To answer these questions, the research was broken into two parts. The first part was quantitative, investigating whether integrating PN officers strengthened partnerships. This was done by examining the degree to which each SPMAGTF-SC deployment strengthened partnerships and correlating that data with the quantity of integrated PN officers. The second part was qualitative and attempted to answer why integrating PN officers strengthened partnerships. Was this correlation a causal relationship? This was done by comparing the findings from the first part with theories on narrative and culture.

### ***Did Integrating PN Officers Strengthen Partnerships?***

Strengthening partnerships was measured through military engagements and KLE primary source evidence. Military engagements are a means to strengthen partnerships. Therefore, strengthening partnerships was first measured through the quantity and total value of military engagements conducted by the task force. The value of military engagements was determined by duration, quantity of personnel involved in engagements, level of engagements (i.e., squad-level, service chief-level, etc.), and SOUTHCOM's posture statements. The quantity and value of military engagements correlated with the amount of integrated PN officers. This was then complemented by KLE primary source evidence that directly measured strengthening partnerships.

The aggregate of circumstantial evidence indicated that integrating PN officers caused an increase in the degree to which the SPMAGTF-

SC strengthened partnerships in the region. While remaining a U.S.-only task force from 2015 to 2017, the SPMAGTF-SC had no significant increase in military engagements. Integrating PN officers, on the other hand, correlated with a two- to five-fold year-over-year increase in the quantity and value of military engagements, an increase in the number of PNs the task force conducted military engagements with, and an increase in the amount of integrated PN officers for the subsequent year. Additionally, every integrated PN officer created the opportunity for a KLE with that PN.

**...every integrated partner Nation officer created the opportunity for a key leader engagement...**

SPMAGTF-SC 19 conducted thirteen KLEs with ten different PNs. The SPMAGTF-SC Commander, Sergeant Major, and Colombian Deputy Commander met with PN service-level leadership (i.e., PN Navy G-3/5, Chief of Naval Operations, or Minister of Defense). As the KLE coordinator, the author attended all engagements. To guard against potential bias, all findings were corroborated with the KLE trip reports. Before meeting with PN personnel, the KLE team met with the Security Cooperation Office, the Defense Attaché Office, and the U.S. Embassy representation to synchronize messaging.

During these KLEs, PNs expressed interest or commitment to conduct more military engagements, increase the quantity of IPNOs for the current or future SPMAGTF-SC iterations, and participate in planning conferences. Some examples include Argentina's invitation for Marines to conduct cold weather training in Antarctica, Chile's cold weather training in Patagonia, and even discussions on hosting and basing future iterations of the SPMAGTF-SC. This expressed interest in military engagements and cooperation activities indicates

strengthening partnerships. With over ten years of security cooperation experience in the Indo-Pacific, European, African, and SOUTHCOM theaters, the author strongly believes that PN senior leadership's interest in strengthening partnerships during these KLEs was sincere.

Further, PNs confirmed their commitment to strengthening partnerships by acting on the interests expressed during KLEs. One example of this was the Colombia humanitarian assistance and disaster relief exercise. This two-week exercise included approximately two-thirds of the SPMAGTF-SC personnel, the deployment of the air combat element's CH-53s, and a jungle warfare course developed by the integrated Colombian officers. The exercise was proposed near the beginning of the deployment at a KLE in May and executed towards the end in October.

### **...integrating PN officers into the task force in 2018 and 2019 exponentially strengthened partnerships...**

By becoming a multinational task force, the SPMAGTF-SC increased the quantity and value of military engagements, the number of PNs it conducted military engagements with, the amount of integrated PN officers, and the degree to which it strengthened partnerships. At a relatively insignificant cost, integrating PN officers into the task force in 2018 and 2019 exponentially strengthened partnerships in LAC.

#### ***How did Integrating PN Officers Strengthen Partnerships?***

The findings from the first part were compared against theories on culture and narrative to answer how integrating PN officers strengthened partnerships. The asymmetric aspects of culture are explained through Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions.<sup>21</sup> The author's initial assumptions were that the U.S. shared

more cultural values with PNs in LAC than the PRC and Russia, and that the U.S.'s closer cultural values were an asymmetric advantage in strengthening partnerships. Surprisingly, both these assumptions were wrong.

Out of Hofstede's six cultural dimensions, the U.S. aligned closest with LAC only in the Long-Term Orientation and Indulgence-Restraint dimensions. The PRC aligned closest with LAC in the Power Distance and Individualism-Collectivism dimensions. Russia aligned closest with LAC in the Masculinity-Femininity and Uncertainty Avoidance dimensions.

Even more surprising, the U.S. misalignment in the Power Distance and Individualism-Collectivism dimensions provided an advantage in strengthening partnerships. The U.S. low Power Distance value is advantageous in developing multinational organizations. Conversely, the PRC and Russia's high Power Distance value is a disadvantage in developing multinational organizations. The U.S. high Individualism-Collectivism value (less shared values between the U.S. and LAC) is an advantage over the PRC's and Russia's low Individualism-Collectivism value (more shared values between the PRC, Russia, and LAC). A high Individualism-Collectivism value is a strength in working with another culture, regardless of that culture's Individualism-Collectivism value.

After reviewing the literature on narrative, the author developed the concept of an SRN. An SRN is a narrative with mutual contribution and equal ownership from all PNs, among which it is shared. In 2018 and 2019, the task force developed an SRN by integrating PN officers and becoming a multinational task force. This resulted in three primary findings. First, the planning and development of an SRN in cooperation with PNs exposes U.S. blind spots and increases the narrative's accuracy, legitimacy, and will. Second, by integrating partners to communicate an SRN,

the multinational task force fostered a sense of ownership in our partners and strengthened the narrative's meaning, identity, and content. Third, the SRN is an asymmetric advantage because an authoritarian regime like the PRC or Russia cannot replicate it.

Integrating partners in planning an SRN effectively identifies and addresses the U.S. blind spots because of its two underlying principles: mutual contribution and equal ownership. Mutual contribution includes the partner's participation in the planning and execution of the SRN. Equal ownership makes the partner's involvement optional. Therefore, by participating, the partner accepts to be represented by the SRN. This incentivizes the partner to identify and address U.S. planning considerations that do not accurately represent them (i.e., U.S. blind spots). If the U.S. fails to address the identified blind spots, which could result from biases, mirror imaging, groupthink, etc., then the partner may decline the invitation to participate. This serves as a forcing function for the U.S. to either acknowledge its blind spots or accept the partner's refusal to participate.

Integrating PN officers in the execution (i.e., the task force's deployment) improves regional expertise and empowers our partners. This strengthens the meaning, identity, and content of the narrative. Integrating PN officers is a low-cost solution to building cultural expertise, improving cross-cultural communication, and strengthening partnerships. Often, the U.S. views burden sharing in terms of financial contributions. This perspective deprives our partners of the opportunity of responsibility when they lack the financial resources. Integrating them, however, serves as an alternative method, thus empowering them to address our shared regional challenges.

An SRN is an asymmetric advantage because an authoritarian regime cannot replicate it. The SRN requires mutual contribution and equal ownership from all PNs with which it

is shared. This would require an authoritarian regime to cede authority over PNs, elevating them to an equal status. This is contradictory to the revisionist state nature of authoritarian regimes. While an asymmetric disadvantage for the PRC and Russia, the SRN is an asymmetric advantage for the U.S..

**Integrating PN officers in the execution (i.e., the task force's deployment) improves regional expertise and empowers our partners.**

*How are These Findings Applicable to the Joint Force and Interagency Community?*

The first part of the research found that by integrating PN officers, the task force significantly increased the degree to which it strengthened partnerships and countered threats within the region. For the joint force, the relevance of this is straightforward. But what about the interagency community? Here, we turn to the second part of the research, which answered how integrating PN officers strengthened partnerships. The three primary findings are:

1. Integrating partners in planning an SRN is a forcing function to identify U.S. blind spots.
2. Integrating partners in the execution of an SRN instills partner ownership.
3. Culture is asymmetric, complex, and requires a holistic understanding.

The SRN is generalizable to the joint force and interagency community through its principles of mutual contribution and equal ownership. The SRN may not be suitable or feasible for every situation or organization. Instead of replicating the SRN, the joint force and interagency community can develop activities



built on the principles of mutual contribution and equal ownership. Integrating partners in the planning and execution of that activity will yield the same advantages of addressing blind spots, improving regional expertise, and empowering our partners. In strategic competition, the principles of mutual contribution and equal ownership provide a method for leveraging our most strategic asset—allies and partners—as the asymmetric advantage that they are.

## **Integrating allies and partners helps identify U.S. blind spots...**

### **Recommendations**

How do we counter malign influence, unify interagency efforts, and leverage the strengths of our allies and partners? How do we replicate the successful, unsordid influence of the Marshall Plan? Presented here are three solutions. First, the joint force and interagency community should integrate allies and partners in the planning and execution of diplomatic, information, and military activities. Second, the joint force and interagency community should identify their overlapping efforts in strategic competition and incorporate the principles of mutual contribution and equal ownership for a whole-of-government approach. Third, practitioners in the joint force and interagency community should utilize this case study as an educational example of strategic competition, operations in the information environment, and how the interagency community can better leverage military support for shared objectives.

#### ***1) Integrate Allies and Partners in the Planning and Execution of Diplomatic, Information, and Military Activities.***

The joint force and interagency community should integrate partners consistent with the principles of mutual contribution and equal ownership. Integrating allies and partners helps

identify U.S. blind spots, instills partners with a sense of ownership, and is an asymmetric advantage. Empowering our allies and partners is a low-cost and effective solution to building cultural expertise, improving cross-cultural communications, and strengthening partnerships. The principles of mutual contribution and equal ownership are generalizable to other task forces, geographic theaters, and the rest of the interagency community.

The joint force should integrate PN officers into staff like the SPMAGTF-SC to remain the security partner of choice throughout the region. This answers the U.S. Forces Joint Staff's JDEIS request for research on strategic competition in the Western Hemisphere with desired research objectives of "How the U.S. can remain the security partner of choice throughout the region within the scope of the NDS and SOUTHCOM strategy," and "Identify asymmetric ways and means to achieve U.S. strategic objectives given region is a resource constrained AOR." Integrating partners is a low-cost and asymmetric way to strengthen the U.S.'s position as the security partner of choice.

This could be replicated by recreating a task force like the SPMAGTF-SC, incorporating the SRN and its principles into an existing organization, or designing them into a new organization. Recreating the SPMAGTF-SC would be the simplest and most effective solution, but it is also resource-intensive. However, the second solution would be inexpensive yet still effective. Consider the following example. Rather than re-creating the SPMAGTF-SC, the joint force could incorporate the SRN and its principles into the JTF-B. Since the JTF-B already had many of the same capabilities and was co-located in Honduras, it would require significantly fewer resources to augment the JTF-B with the necessary support yet still effectively leverage the benefits of the SRN and its principles.

In addition to existing task forces, the

SRN and its principles should be considered in designing new organizations operating in strategic competition. For the USMC, this may look like integrating PN officers into the headquarters elements of Marine Littoral Regiments or Marine Expeditionary Units. Other opportunities could be joint interagency task forces or the Army's Multi-Domain Task Forces. Integrating PN officers would be minimal cost with substantial effects in strategic competition. Any task force operating in strategic competition should consider incorporating the SRN and its principles as part of its design.

Lastly, this is generalizable to other echelons of command and geographic theaters. Combatant commands should integrate partners in the planning of their command narrative. Integrating PN liaison officers into planning a command narrative protects against mirror imaging and is a forcing function to address these blind spots. Finally, leveraging our allies and partners based on mutual contribution will strengthen the command narrative's positional advantages of legitimacy and will.

The State Department and interagency community should integrate allies and partners in the planning and execution of diplomatic and information activities. Where a task force or the SRN may not be feasible, this can still be employed through mutual contribution and equal ownership. Activities that leverage these principles will still set the conditions to identify blind spots, instill partner ownership, and improve cultural expertise and cross-cultural communications.

Are there opportunities for integration in the U.S. embassy's country team? What about the U.S. Agency for International Development or the crisis action team? Could the Department of Commerce or Department of Agriculture integrate partners in planning committees? Could the embassy's public affairs or political-military section integrate partners through a policy development or community relations

task force? The author is familiar and impressed with the versatility of the U.S. embassy environment—no two embassies look the same. The embassy environment is a treasure trove of untapped talent. The interagency community should capitalize on that talent to find new and ingenious ways to leverage the strengths of our allies and partners, and then share those practices with the rest of the community!

**The State Department and interagency community should integrate allies and partners in the planning and execution of diplomatic and information activities.**

## *2) Incorporate the Principles of Mutual Contribution and Equal Ownership for a Whole-of-Government Approach to Strategic Competition.*

Joint Concept for Competing (JCC) asks, "How should the Joint Force, in conjunction with interorganizational partners, compete in support of U.S. Government efforts to protect and advance U.S. national interests, while simultaneously deterring aggression, countering adversary competitive strategies, and preparing for armed conflict should deterrence and competition fail to protect vital U.S. national interests?"<sup>22</sup> The joint force and interagency community should compete in support of U.S. Government efforts through a whole-of-government approach based on the principles of mutual contribution and equal ownership.

Integrating interorganizational partners into a whole-of-government approach based on mutual contribution and equal ownership will yield the same benefits as integrating allies and partners into the multinational task force. Planning competition activities through a whole-of-government approach will serve as a forcing function for interorganizational

partners to identify and address their blind spots. The execution of competition activities through a whole-of-government approach will instill interorganizational partners with a sense of ownership. Finally, a whole-of-government approach is necessary to succeed in strategic competition.

Planning competition activities through a whole-of-government approach will build a shared understanding of interagency strategic approaches, identify interagency-shared objectives, and address blind spots. Interorganizational partners support national strategic objectives through organization-specific strategic approaches. A whole-of-government approach will build a shared understanding of interorganizational partners' independent strategic approaches and help identify shared objectives.

**A whole-of-government approach will identify the shared objectives and coordinate the differing means in a complementary manner.**

SOUTHCOM strengthened partnerships through military engagements. Strengthening partnerships affected the informational and diplomatic spheres, overlapping with the interagency community's objectives. Military engagements, however, were SOUTHCOM's means to strengthen partnerships. Interorganizational partners will likely employ different means to achieve our shared objectives. A whole-of-government approach will identify the shared objectives and coordinate the differing means in a complementary manner. Coordinating the means for complimentary effects will require assessment from across the interagency community, which is how the community will identify and address each other's blind spots. When interorganizational partners fail to justify

their activities in support of achieving shared objectives, the interorganizational partner either fails to communicate a potentially successful plan or the plan is riddled with bias and errors. Both cases indicate potential blind spots. In the former, the partner may have failed to understand the audience's strategic approach and communicate how that plan would support it. In the latter, the plan contained errors identified by the interagency community. In both cases, the blind spot must be identified and addressed. A whole-of-government approach based on mutual contribution will serve as a forcing function to identify and address these blind spots. The execution of competition activities through a whole-of-government approach will enable a holistic understanding of the operating environment, focus resources, and instill a sense of ownership.

The third primary finding from the research found that culture is asymmetric, complicated, and requires a wholistic understanding. Every interorganizational partner has a unique perspective of the operating environment. Only through a whole-of-government approach can we build a complete understanding. Due to the complex nature of culture, understanding the environment is resource-intensive. Where there are shared objectives, such as understanding the environment, there are shared requirements, such as assessing the environment. This is an opportunity for the joint force and interagency community to focus resources supporting shared objectives. A whole-of-government approach would focus the interagency community's limited resources for the requirements (i.e., assessment of the environment) that support shared objectives (i.e., understanding the environment). Failing to do so wastes resources through duplicative efforts. And just like with the SPMAGTF-SC, integrating interorganizational partners into a whole-of-government approach to strategic competition will instill a sense of ownership.

Strategic competition requires a whole-of-government approach because it is a competition between nations. First, no single U.S. instrument of national power can compete with a competitor's whole-of-government efforts. Second, no single U.S. instrument of national power can compete with a competitor's same instrument of national power—that incorrectly assumes they employ the same construct (i.e., mirror imaging). Third, each instrument of national power's effects bleed into the other spheres, as demonstrated through SPMAGTF-SC's effects in the diplomatic and informational spheres.

A whole-of-government approach based on mutual contribution and equal ownership will be difficult. Developing the Marshall Plan was slow, tedious, and confrontational. However, those challenges are worth the benefits of addressing blind spots, building a shared understanding, and leveraging the strengths of the entire interagency community. Strategic competition requires a whole-of-government approach, and it is ideally suited for the approach's slow, methodical, deliberate planning.

### ***3) Use this Case Study as an Educational Example for Operations in the Information Environment, Strategic Competition, and how the Interagency Community can Better Leverage Military Support for Shared Objectives.***

Strategic competition requires a more whole-of-government approach. A whole-of-government approach requires interagency cooperation, coordination, and understanding. Joint force practitioners must understand how military activities affect the information and diplomatic sphere. Interagency practitioners must understand how the military instrument of power can support their efforts.

The joint force should use this case study as an educational example for operations in the information environment and strategic

competition. JP 3-04, *Information in Joint Operations*, JDN 1-22, *Joint Force in Strategic Competition*, and *Joint Concept for Competing* were all published within the last year. These publications indicate a change in mindset. The introduction of inherent informational aspects makes information a responsibility of all forces, not just information forces. Similarly, strategic competition has implications across the total force. Information and strategic competition are less tangible than most military activities. This case study provides a concrete example for introducing these intangible disciplines.

The interagency community should use this case study as an educational example to better understand how to cooperate and leverage the military's capabilities. The military instrument of national power includes foreign humanitarian assistance, protecting human rights (i.e., women, peace, and security), and promoting stability and security. The SPMAGTF-SC strengthening partnerships is just one example of how the U.S. military and State Department can succeed through cooperation. By understanding the military's capabilities, the interagency community can better leverage the military to support shared objectives.

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## **Conclusion**

The U.S. successfully contests PRC and Russian malign influence by working by, with, and through allies and partners. Integrating PN officers from Colombia, Brazil, Peru, Chile, Argentina, Belize, and the Dominican Republic into the SPMAGTF-SC 18 and 19 exponentially strengthened partnerships in LAC at a relatively insignificant cost. Through strengthening

partnerships, SOUTHCOM built trust and fostered a climate of transparency. Transparency reduces the ambiguity of the gray zone that the PRC and Russia exploit. Through integrating PN officers, SPMAGTF-SC strengthened partnerships and countered PRC and Russian malign influence in the region.

The author found that integrating PN officers strengthened partnerships through the SRN. Integrating partners in planning an SRN is a forcing function to identify U.S. blind spots. Integrating partners in the execution of an SRN instills partner ownership. This is built on the underlying principles of mutual contribution and equal ownership. These principles are generalizable to the joint force and interagency community.

The author offered three recommendations for the joint force and interagency community from these findings. First, the joint force and interagency community should integrate allies and partners in the planning and execution of diplomatic, information, and military activities. Second, the joint force and interagency community should identify their overlapping efforts in strategic competition and incorporate the principles of mutual contribution and equal ownership for a whole-of-government approach. Third, practitioners in the joint force and interagency community should use this case study as an educational example of strategic competition, operations in the information environment, and how the interagency community can leverage military support for shared objectives.

The U.S. government must embrace an unsordid mentality to succeed in strategic competition, as was done when the Marshall Plan was developed. The U.S. government can accomplish this by integrating allies and partners through a whole-of-government approach founded on mutual contribution and equal ownership. This case study proposes a method for leveraging our most important strategic asset—our allies and partners—as the asymmetric advantage that they are.<sup>23</sup> **IAJ**

## NOTES

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