

# Strengthening Alliances

## International PME Programs Yield Layers of Strategic Benefit

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The Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of the Air Force have identified the strengthening of US alliances as a top, strategic priority. As specified in his guidance memorandum to all Department of Defense personnel in October 2017, US Secretary of Defense James Mattis lays out as one of his three lines of effort to “strengthen alliances and attract new partners.”<sup>1</sup> The Secretary of Defense further states that “history is compelling on this point: nations with strong allies thrive, while those without stagnate and wither.”<sup>2</sup> In the five USAF priorities outlined in 2017, the focus on “strengthening alliances” appears again.<sup>3</sup> While the desired end state of strengthened alliances is clear, the ways and means by which this end state is achieved are varied and at times less well-defined. The roadmap to a strong, strategic alliance between nations touches all the instruments of national power: diplomacy, exchange of information, military cooperation, and economic ties. Strengthening alliances is not the sole responsibility of the Department of Defense, but within it some of the “ways and means” include

international military exercises, foreign military sales, personnel exchanges, international military education and training, and diplomatic military representation through a defense attaché. In order for the USAF to advance the USAF Secretary's strategic priorities—and for allied nations like Brazil and El Salvador to advance the mutual priorities of their senior leaders—all of the aforementioned activities should be reviewed and bolstered. The focus of this article is international military education and training; our thesis is that international professional military education (PME) programs provide unique benefits to improve trust, foster cooperation, and strengthen international military alliances. For these reasons, international PME programs should be promoted and expanded.

The remainder of this article is based on the authors' experiences and observations in international PME programs in the US, Brazilian, and Salvadoran Air Forces, with a focus on their tenure as cadre at the Inter-American Air Forces Academy (IAAFA) on Joint Base San Antonio—Lackland. Some of those experiences are conveyed and put in the context of US strategic priorities with a conclusion outlining the unique benefits that PME exchanges provide in advancing strategic priorities.



### *Attracting New Partners*

International PME programs offer a unique opportunity for engagement, especially for less traditional or emerging US allies. While longstanding US allies participate in nearly every type of education and training program delivered by the US Department of Defense, several nations remain hesitant to commit to technical and combat training hosted by the US military. Either due to the perceived negative appearances from their own societies or the risk of agitating a non-aligned neighbor, many countries desire US training but weigh the benefits with perceived consequences. For these “on-the-fence” nations considering closer ties with the US military, PME programs offer a “less militant” version of US military education and training.

A case study to elaborate on this point is the emerging engagement between the US and Nicaragua. The IAAFA teaches over more than 30 technical training courses spanning aircraft maintenance, logistics, cyber, intelligence, air base defense, and special reactions team (aka SWAT). In addition, IAAFA teaches two PME courses for captains and NCOs. Nicaragua had not sent students to IAAFA for five years but sent students in 2017 (11 students) and 2018 (27 students) to attend the US training academy. Most of the initial contingent of Nicaraguan students attended IAAFA's two PME courses. As their instructors, we received personal insight into the new interest in sending Nicaraguan military members to the US training academy. Nicaraguan military members engage in a wide range of activities that span beyond the scope of responsibility of the US military; their tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) and their civil-military relations (CMR) contrast significantly to the TTPs and CMR of the US and other allied militaries. Additionally, many leaders in the Nicaraguan military remain skeptical of the rapprochement between the US and Nicaragua. For these reasons, PME courses (especially PME courses of short duration, like the 8-week courses at IAAFA) were an attractive first step toward greater mil-to-mil engagement in education and training. PME courses develop skills such as critical thinking, teambuilding, and communication that are more broadly applicable for developing NCOs and officers, even when a country may not fully align with US training in more technical courses. When embarking on the long process of developing stronger ties between two nations still skeptical of each other, PME exchanges can provide an important first step toward greater engagement.



### *Fostering Cooperation*

International PME programs, due to their duration and incorporation of teambuilding activities, generate an environment for patience and understanding. Inherent to the curriculum of any PME program is the focus on breaking down barriers and building up teams. This can take place in physically demanding team obstacle courses or the collaboration between team members to produce a critical analysis presentation on a security issue. Through a PME experience, students

broaden their perspectives and are challenged to hone critical thinking and effective communication. In the classroom environment, with international military peers, and with the guidance and mentorship of trained instructors, a PME classroom can yield a level of active listening, patience, and understanding that generates a strong foundation for key elements of a strong alliance: respect and trust. Furthermore, the international students selected to attend in-residence PME at a US training academy are not selected solely for their accomplishments as an infantryman, intelligence analyst, pilot, or engineer, but (typically) for their demonstrated leadership and potential to assume a senior leadership position later in their career. This is a well-documented fact in the registry of distinguished alumni at several US training academies (e.g., the Inter-American Defense College, Air Command & Staff College, and the Inter-American Air Forces Academy, to name a few). In other words, the foundation of respect and trust employed as a student in an international PME program lays the groundwork for cooperation for years to come, improving the potential to broker strong alliances.



While the authors cannot personally testify that their PME students immediately turn the trust gained in a PME classroom into a new international alliance, there are numerous anecdotes of former students using the contacts made in the classroom to effectively plan and execute combined operations and future international engagements. As the first of two examples, we point to recently expanded engagements between the US and Peruvian Air Forces built on PME student exchanges. The Peruvian Air Force has sent NCOs and officers to the IAAFA PME courses for several years (in fact, IAAFA was founded in 1943 at the request of the then—Chief of Staff of the Peruvian Air Force); however, only about 3-4 percent of IAAFA students over the last three years have come from Peru. Due to positive feedback from PME graduates and their influence with their leaders, the Peruvian military invited a USAF team to conduct a subject matter expert exchange (SMEE) focused on USAF PME methodologies in 2017. The SMEE involved the participation of recent Peruvian IAAFA graduates and included tours of Peruvian military training academies. Not long after the SMEE, the Chief of Staff of the Peruvian Air Force was invited to participate as a guest of honor overseeing the graduation of an IAAFA class. His interest resulted in the formal request to train 100 Peruvian NCOs in IAAFA's PME courses over the next year—vastly surpassing the 2-3 NCOs per year taught in previous years. In a very short amount of time, the level of engagement with Peru has surged, plotting a path for greater cooperation between

regional allies. This effort started with connections made in a PME classroom and the authors are excited to see it continue and spread into other positive, alliance-strengthening activities in years to come.

As a second example to illustrate the unique ways international PME exchanges sow the seeds for lasting cooperation, we highlight the role these courses play in the development of USAF officers. Whether participating as a USAF captain in the Spanish-language Squadron Officer School at IAAFA or as a student of foreign PME as a field grade officer, international PME exchanges provides invaluable developmental opportunities for future senior leaders in international affairs. As the Secretary of Defense and the USAF articulate the need for strengthening alliances, the Airmen on the “front lines” of this effort work in US embassies as security cooperation officers or defense attachés. A vital tool to the development of future officers to work in these capacities is their participation in programs that hone their awareness of regional security issues while simultaneously building trust and fostering cooperation with allied nation militaries. There is no better “prep course” for future foreign area officers and international affairs leaders than being a student in an international PME program.

### *Creating Regional Dialogues*

International PME programs, due to their use of non-attribution in academic classroom settings, opens dialogues and break down misperceptions between rival militaries. During the early days of an international PME program students are “feeling each other out” to assess who is going to get along well with whom—who can be “trusted” and who can not. Naturally, national pride is a strong element of this “forming” and later “storming” phase of teambuilding. There comes a point, however, for most of the students, where national identity diminishes and extended personal interaction develops camaraderie and trust. At this stage in a PME course, the “non-attribution” academic environment in embraced and constructive dialogue emerges. The openness of this dialogue is critical in breaking down the stereotypes and misperceptions that are so prevalent among many nations—especially among those with a conflicted and violent past. Topics that are either highly sensitive or taboo—that in normal interaction between rivals would be off limits—are discussed on a base of trust. This trust, either on a personal level or at least in the rules of academic non-attribution, allows the students to focus more on the academic value of an argument and less on the national flag on a colleague’s uniform. In the most positive of outcomes, international PME students begin to breakdown some misinformed stereotypes and create an opening for continued regional dialogue that, even if it doesn’t lead to forming an alliance, reduces tension between neighbors and rivals.

The authors have observed positive dialogue grow out of a number of PME classes. To provide one example we turn to a regional PME mobile course conducted in Central America. The course had students from the armed forces of the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, and the US. The students analyzed and presented regional security issues of their choosing. One team presented on the 1969 “Soccer War” between El Salvador and Honduras, a conflict that is still sensitive in both countries, for senior personnel in their armed forces. During the presentations, the four Honduran officers and four Salvadoran officers disputed the accounts of the conflict and tensions began to rise. In the environment of the PME classroom, however, each side was able to hear the other’s perspective and agree on a common point: the brief conflict from 1969 was not a part of their own military experience and there was little value in dwelling on a past conflict between neighbors. They agreed to “bury the hatchet” and plot their own trajectory for positive military cooperation. The setting of an international PME classroom served as a small venue to what is uncommon elsewhere: a place to set aside past perceptions and begin crafting new partnerships.

## Conclusion

Military exchanges that send NCOs and officers to study alongside international allies are invaluable in bolstering trust and cooperation. Strong alliances are built over time. They need a favorable environment and an enduring commitment by the nations involved. While the enduring commitment is often out of the control of our militaries—more dependent on national economies and international politics—a favorable environment for alliances can be maintained between national militaries by continuing to invest in trust and cooperation. This is the business that we are charged to advance by our leaders—to build strong alliances—and international PME programs are vital to carrying out our orders. □

### Notes

1. Department of Defense, *Guidance from Secretary Jim Mattis* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 5 October 2017), <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/GUIDANCE-FROM-SECRETARY-JIM-MATTIS.pdf>.
2. Ibid.
3. “Air Force Senior Leaders Unveil New Priorities,” AF.mil, 2 August 2017, USAF News Article, <http://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/1264852/air-force-senior-leaders-unveil-new-priorities/>.



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