

## Securing the Nation One Partnership at a Time

America's alliances and partnerships around the globe give the United States an unmatched advantage over our competitors. Maintaining and nurturing those relationships does not happen overnight but is a product of an enduring effort to build trust and confidence between nations. Twenty eight marks the 25th anniversary of the National Guard's State Partnership Program (SPP), and it is worth reflecting on the important contributions the SPP makes in enabling the US and its allies and partners to provide security and stability around the world.

The SPP is an innovative and cost-effective security cooperation program that connects the National Guard with the militaries of partner nations around the globe. Guard units conduct military-to-military engagements with partner nations in support of defense security goals and also leverage societal relationships to build personal bonds and enduring trust. The SPP is not designed to make other militaries self-sustaining. Rather, the goal of the SPP is developing and maintaining important security relationships between the United States and other nations sharing a long-term view of common interests.

As outlined in the National Defense Strategy (NDS), strengthening and evolving our alliances and partnerships is a secretary of defense priority as we look to meet shared challenges and potential threats. The National Guard is playing an integral role in this effort. At the request of US ambassadors in foreign countries, the National Guard forges its unique SPP relationships by integrating its activities with the strategic goals of combatant commands and chiefs of US missions. With the recent announcement of the partnership between Brazil and New York, the SPP currently partners with 81 nations and is a scalable and adaptable program preserving critical partnerships as well as developing new ones with nations that are ready to partner for a more secure future.

### **A Volatile Security Environment**

Geopolitical changes in the last decade have brought greater concern over strategic competition. The United States is still the most capable military in the world, but our adversaries seek gaps and seams to exploit weaknesses, some through non-kinetic means, including the so-called

gray zones of warfare. We are seeing strategies that use all instruments of national power to compete within every aspect of the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic spheres. China is now a dominant player in the global economy, which has allowed it to increase spending for the People's Liberation Army and assert territorial claims in the South China Sea. Russia seeks to revise the international order and change longstanding universal norms through force and unconventional means that combine military action, coercive economic tools, diplomacy, and disinformation campaigns. Iran and its Revolutionary Guard Corps are attempting to dominate the Middle East through support of rogue organizations and their own military operations. Despite recent developments, security on the Korean Peninsula remains an international concern. Nonstate actors throughout the world with more sophisticated capabilities present new dangers abroad and in the homeland. All of these threats differ in geography and scale, making unilateral action a risky proposition that would stretch the capabilities of the US and its military. Without allies and partners, these threats become more difficult to deal with. In a competitive world with diverse threats, the US must attract and work with allies as a means of achieving a competitive advantage and decisive edge.

### **Standing Together: The Value of Alliances**

Like-minded nations committed to collective defense provide a number of critical benefits—particularly strong economies so essential to security. When putting an economic value on our partnerships and alliances, the aggregate GDP for the US and our European and Pacific allies is \$44.4 trillion, two and a half times the US GDP alone. Additionally, 13 of the top 20 militaries in the world are close US allies with a total of \$1 trillion in defense spending and approximately four million personnel. Beyond direct military and economic power, allies offer additional perspectives on courses of action, provide diplomatic and political support in international forums, contribute essential logistical and transit hubs, and, as a collective group, add legitimacy to the use of military force. This level of political, economic, and military might is underwriting the ability of our alliances to share the burdens of promoting global peace and security.

Allies and partners are force multipliers in terms of manpower, capabilities, and resources. Ultimately, in any armed conflict, allies and

partners training together regularly substantially increase their combat capability. However, working with others is not always easy. While states may share common interests, they don't always have identical values or views. Nonetheless, the benefits of engaging allies and partners far outweigh the cost or occasional disagreement. Successful alliances share burdens and invest time and effort in creating enduring relationships. They are built on cultural understanding and a respect for each other's sovereignty. Alliances based on such characteristics are far more effective than those that are transactional, coercive, or intimidating. The SPP promotes healthy, enduring partnerships committed for the long term, beyond the completion of initial objectives. East-Central Europe after the fall of communism serves as a great example.

### **Founding of the State Partnership Program**

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a number of states chose a path toward democratization and integration when Eastern Europe broke free of authoritarian rule. The US sought to assist these states in reforming their militaries as a means to institutionalize democratic processes, promote respect for the rule of law, and reinforce healthy civil-military relations. The best way to create a Europe whole and free was to ensure new democracies built the institutions and capabilities that would support their individual reform efforts.

In 1992, US European Command initiated military-to-military engagements to assist in reforming the militaries of former Soviet-controlled republics and Warsaw Pact countries through an initiative called the Joint Contact Team Program (JCTP). The National Guard played a central role in these engagements. Each country desired to form reserve-based forces to promote democratization through civilian control of the military while also appearing less threatening to Russia. The National Guard had the additional advantage of being well suited to cooperate on issues such as disaster management, search and rescue, military education, and civil-military relations, areas of particular interest to the emerging democracies. The SPP, an outgrowth of the JCTP, signed its first partnerships in April 1993 with Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania partnering with Maryland, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, respectively.

In forming these new relationships, economic, demographic, and military size were some of the factors considered so the partnerships would

be advantageous for both sides. Small states such as Maryland partnered with Estonia. Later, Illinois, with its large Polish-American community, matched up with Poland. Oil states such as Oklahoma and Azerbaijan were aligned together, while the state of Georgia teamed up with the country of Georgia. In the case of Iowa's partnership with Kosovo, increased ties spawned the opening of Kosovo's first foreign consulate in Iowa, which helps foster economic and business ties.

In each of these partnerships, the SPP went well beyond military aspects benefitting both partners in other sectors of society. The SPP currently has nine partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region that focus on broad and diverse engagements such as peacekeeping training, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, search and rescue exchanges, noncommissioned officer development, and medical exchanges. State partnerships have also flourished in Latin America, with 24 nations participating in the program. Currently, the SPP has relationships throughout the world with nations such as Togo, Belize, Tonga, and Kyrgyzstan, creating opportunities for future engagement and mutual assistance.

### **The Broader DOD Strategy**

The US National Defense Strategy provides three key elements in its efforts to strengthen alliances: uphold a foundation of mutual respect, responsibility, priorities, and accountability; expand regional consultative mechanisms and collaborative planning; and deepen interoperability. The Department of Defense has multiple tools to achieve these objectives, including security assistance; security cooperation; military-to-military leader and staff engagement; promotion of regional cooperation; participation in multinational exercises; and agreements on facilities, basing, and transit of forces. The operational National Guard is fully integrated with the National Defense Strategy through these activities as a part of the joint force and adds a unique contribution through the SPP. At a time when resources are being shifted and readiness is essential for strategic competition, the SPP provides DOD with a scalable and tailored approach to security cooperation and partner enhancement.

Regardless of geographic location, the National Guard consults and coordinates with combatant commanders, US country teams, and the host nations to understand the full range of issues affecting the partner nation. SPP events are led by the respective state adjutants general, who seek maximum impact of the SPP engagements by developing a

program that is in the interest of both countries. In addition, the majority of SPP partner nations have National Guard Bilateral Affairs Officers (BAO) living in the partner nation, participating in the development of an embassy's engagement plan, and ensuring SPP events that are conducted by combatant commands are consistent with the ambassador's intent.

One strategic benefit resulting from the SPP is many of our partners who began as security consumers evolved into global security providers. Seventy-nine times, our partners have co-deployed with the National Guard in Afghanistan and Iraq. For example, the Illinois and Poland partnership is one of the most robust and successful security cooperation partnerships in Europe. Poland and Illinois signed their partnership in 1993 with the goal of professionalizing Polish forces, bringing their forces up to NATO standards, and providing peacekeeping training. Poland was accepted as a member of NATO in 1999, and since the beginning days of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Poland has co-deployed with the Illinois National Guard multiple times and contributed thousands of troops. Today Polish forces along with the Illinois National Guard are at the forefront of US deterrence and assurance activities in East-Central Europe.

Beyond the number of exercises, deployments, and military-to-military events, another striking feature of the SPP is how it cultivates personal relationships that enhance, influence, and promote access. Nowhere was this more evident than when Russia illegally annexed Crimea and fomented an armed conflict in eastern Ukraine. Chiefs of defense from Ukraine and other states bordering Russia were quick to engage with their partner adjutants general, providing invaluable information to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and informing the US response.

## **The Future State Partnership Program**

The SPP is future focused and adaptive to geopolitical changes. As we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the SPP, we have seen the program evolve from assisting nations in developing more modern and professional militaries functioning under civilian control to partnerships that look to deepen interoperability with complementary capabilities and forces. Beyond the military benefits, we have witnessed the fruits of these relationships as they help the United States maintain and grow its alliances across the globe through enduring and personal relationships. What began as a program of 10 partnerships in Eastern Europe has

spread across five continents and currently encompasses approximately one-third of the nations in the world.

The National Defense Strategy's priorities include expanding Indo-Pacific alliances and partnerships, fortifying the trans-Atlantic NATO alliances, forming enduring coalitions in the Middle East, sustaining advantages in the Western Hemisphere, and supporting relationships to address significant terrorist threats in Africa. Our state partnerships are located in all of these strategic regions as a part of the "long game." For instance, the Indo-Pacific region will continue to play an important role in the global security environment. Encompassing three of the most populous nations in the world (China, India, and Indonesia), two of the three largest economies in the world (China and Japan), and home to several of the largest militaries in the world, this vast area and its partnerships and alliances will be paramount in ensuring a stable and peaceful region. The African continent with its vast population and resources is also a potential area for future partnership growth.

As the security environment continues to change, the State Partnership Program will adjust and develop accordingly. In a recent example from the evolving cyber domain, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania worked with their National Guard partners in Maryland, Michigan, and Pennsylvania respectively in a USEUCO-hosted cyber defense exercise preparing for a cyber incident that requires a multinational response. In working with partners that can assist in other regions of the world, Serbia and its partner, the Ohio National Guard, travelled to Angola to conduct a trilateral medical exchange. These are just a few compelling examples that show the SPP serves as a cost-effective strategy that enhances security capabilities while promoting essential pillars of a free and democratic society.

In its initial stages, the SPP forged relationships in Europe that still exist today and are stronger than ever. In our wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, our partner nations co-deployed with their partner states leveraging forces and capabilities where the sum was greater than its individual parts. The SPP will preserve the building blocks of its foundational partnerships while continuing to forge partnerships that are every bit as important as developing next-generation weapons. The importance of allies and partners that share common values and interests was succinctly described by Defense Secretary James Mattis when he stated, "nations with strong allies thrive, while those without stagnate and wither." The National

Guard has a unique role in this process through the SPP, one that provides a high return on investment. We work with our partners not only as one military to another but also as American citizens to partner citizens. When we establish partnerships this way, employing the full range of skills resident in the National Guard, we are preparing ourselves, our allies, and our partners to confront the full range of threats and in turn create a more secure future in the twenty-first century. **SSQ**

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