



# BUILDING DURABLE CIVILIAN-MILITARY RELATIONSHIPS



## THE CHALLENGE

U.S. partner nations vary significantly in the strength, resiliency, and maturity of their civilian-military relationships. At one extreme, military forces and the broader defense sector dominate in power, influence, resources, and decision making. In contrast, countries with vibrant and accountable civilian leadership manage the state's legitimate monopoly on the use of force and provide oversight of the military through institutional checks and balances. In between, many countries grapple with establishing suitable governance practices between civilian and military institutions.

A common concern among leaders is how to best professionalize and strengthen the military while making it accountable to democratically elected civilian leadership. In countries that experience institutional fragility or contested governance, there can be concern that if security forces are strong enough to address significant threats, few barriers exist to prevent them from assuming control over the state. This concern has given birth to the discipline of civil-military relations, a broad subject encompassing the entire range of relationships between the military and civilian society at every level. Civil-military relations focuses on effective

control or direction of security institutions (armed forces, police, and intelligence agencies) by the highest elected or appointed civilian authorities in nation-states. Effectiveness is understood as the capability and capacity to fulfill roles and missions that are designated or assigned by elected and appointed civilians. Healthy civil-military relations create the foundation for institution building and institutional capacity building to effectively address the security challenges facing the nation.

The state of a U.S. security partner's civil-military relations is one of the most overlooked determinants of the efficiency and effectiveness of that partner nation's armed forces. The population's perception of the legitimacy of the military and its control by democratically elected representatives is paramount. To exercise effective control and oversight, a partner's elected officials require not just official authority over security forces, but also a high degree of technical knowledge and familiarity with defense issues. Conversely, security forces must be accustomed to sharing information with and accepting supervision from civilians. This allows partner governments to debate and determine national security priorities, set defense budgets, assign distinct

- THE CHALLENGE
- STATE OF THE FIELD
- WHY ICB MATTERS FOR CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS
- ICB BEST PRACTICES FOR CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

## ABOUT ISG

The Institute for Security Governance (ISG) – situated within the Defense Security Cooperation University (DSCU) – is the Department of Defense's Center of Excellence for Institutional Capacity Building (ICB). As a component of the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), and one of its primary international Security Cooperation schoolhouses, ISG is charged with building partner institutional capacity and capability through tailored advising, education, and professional development programs grounded in American values and approaches.

This document is intended to frame the challenges, possibilities, and best practices associated with ICB for civil-military relations and ISG's role as integrator, implementer, and partner within DoD's security cooperation community.



THE CHALLENGE

STATE OF THE FIELD

WHY ICB MATTERS FOR CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

ICB BEST PRACTICES FOR CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

## THE CHALLENGE (CONT.)

security and defense tasks to different institutions, and provide effective oversight over security forces.

The absence of such knowledge, practices and relationships, makes states less effective across the board. These capacity gaps limit a country's ability to effectively govern and perform diverse missions such as border control, maritime security, and counterterrorism.

## STATE OF THE FIELD

In a world experiencing violent conflict, massive displacement, and institutional fragility – further exacerbated by the global pandemic – how can effective civil-military relations help mitigate these risks and their consequences?

Studies have shown that security sector assistance is most effective at reducing political violence when conducted in the presence of close contact and oversight between domestic national security personnel and international advisors, when there is an enduring long-term commitment, and when train and equip activities are integrated into a broader political strategy. Enhancing civilian oversight and financial transparency of security sector initiatives also helps to avoid exacerbating violence, especially when implemented alongside complementary

Other gaps that commonly persist are a lack of professionalization of military forces, limited strategic planning ability, and mis-aligned warfighting capabilities or limited mission sets. Gaps such as these can create coordination challenges and jeopardize trust with civilian counterparts who may not have any experience understanding and addressing defense issues.

socio-economic strategies that address grievances at the heart of the violence.

The U.S. takes on the role of a convener – bringing together civilian and military leaders to plan, problem solve, and learn together. Structured conversation and exercises build knowledge and consensus of partner nation's defense priorities, national security strategy, threat assessment, and other related issues. This consensus building process strengthens both civilian confidence and knowledge in these areas. It also fosters a sense of partnership and shared mission between civilian and military leaders.

When the results of these processes are open to the public, the social contract between a partner nation and its citizens is strengthened.

*“Fundamentally, civilian control is not a fact but a process.”*

—Richard H. Kohn,  
Military Historian



## WHY ICB MATTERS FOR CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

Effective civil-military relations can dramatically enhance a partner nation's likelihood of reliably planning, developing, acquiring, manning, employing, and sustaining capabilities of mutual interest with the U.S. over the long term. Institutions are only as effective as their capacities to fight for resources, articulate challenges, plan for the future, and adapt. When civil-military relations are robust, resilient, and right-sized, there is a

clearly defined role for security institutions and they are appropriately trained and equipped for the missions they undertake in support of those defined roles. It is also important that elected officials appropriate sufficient resources for those defense and security roles and missions, and that they exert transparent and accountable oversight.

- THE CHALLENGE
- STATE OF THE FIELD
- WHY ICB MATTERS FOR CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS
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## ICB BEST PRACTICES FOR CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

The U.S. prioritizes engagement with willing partner nations working toward positive civil-military relations that are aligned with U.S. values and interests. Capable institutions are not luxuries, they are fundamental elements of national security. A central focus of the U.S. institutional capacity building approach to civil-military relations includes assistance with military professionalization, development of defense planning, leadership capacity building, and approaches to interagency communication and coordination.

A successful capacity building approach facilitates knowledge, skills, and relationships that develop durably over time and across many different forms of civil-military engagement. To do this effectively, a multi-step process

is followed that begins with assessment of the threats facing a partner nation and their institutional capacity for mitigating those threats. This requires analysis of the specific roles, missions, and resources of various security institutions. Strategy and plans are then developed accordingly, prioritizing specific courses of action and identifying opportunities to engage the interagency and improve coordination between organizations. Strategic communications about plans and actions are essential throughout this process to ensure ICB efforts are transparent to a broad audience and all participants. Finally, regular assessment, monitoring and evaluation of these engagements is essential for accountability and informs the ability to adapt as dynamics change.



While ISG engages directly with a partner nation, the Institute also coordinates assistance with U.S. government partners in Washington, D.C. including the Department of State, DoD stakeholders, and civilian and military colleagues from agencies and departments on Embassy Country Teams. Engaging the U.S. Government's interagency to plan and deliver ICB helps model healthy civilian-military approaches to problem solving for partner nations. U.S. Security Cooperation Officers (SCOs) often find themselves engaging with Ministry of Defense civilian staff, national security political appointees, and even a Prime Minister's office as they seek to understand the unique problem context and interests of a partner nation to coordinate effectively with U.S. security cooperation implementers.

Civil-military relations is a broad topic and covers many technical issues and functions. For example, DoD's Regional Centers organize influential convenings for partner nation military staff and civil servants and host excellent courses on a wide variety of topics ranging from defense issues for parliamentarians to security strategy development. ISG works to build partner institutional capacity regarding civil-military relations at several levels, ranging from U.S.-based training courses to in-country advisory teams. ISG builds tailored courses focused on partner needs, such as women's leadership in the military and broader security sector or effective disarmament and reintegration of former combatants. Whenever possible, ISG first assesses each partner nation's civil-military needs and gaps.

## WHAT IS INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING?

Institutional Capacity Building programs, overseen by DSCA, encompass Security Cooperation activities that directly support U.S. ally and partner nation efforts to improve security sector governance and core management competencies necessary to effectively and responsibly achieve shared security objectives.

### ILLUSTRATIVE PARTNER INSTITUTIONS FOR ICB

Partner nations' civilian and military organizations focused at the strategic and operational levels such as Ministries of Defense and Interior, intelligence services, law enforcement organizations, military services, and legislatures.

### ILLUSTRATIVE ICB DOMAINS

- ◆ Strategy & Policy
- ◆ Resource Management
- ◆ Human Resource Management
- ◆ Acquisition & Logistics
- ◆ Force Management
- ◆ Law & Human Rights

## PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE ICB

### STRATEGICALLY DRIVEN

Driven by U.S. interests and values. When integrated early into Security Cooperation (SC) planning, ICB supports strategic dialogue about the partner's capability and will to execute a specified role.

### PROBLEM FOCUSED

Assesses shortfalls in institutional performance that may impede partners' ability to execute role. Considers appropriate entry points for engagement and the enablers and inhibitors of change.

### PARTNER CENTRIC

Avoids the projection or imposition of U.S. models, which may not fit a partner's specific context. Responsive to partners' priorities and their unique political and institutional dynamics.

## MOVING FROM PROBLEM TO SOLUTION



## ICB OFFERINGS

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**ADVISING & CONSULTING**  
Present partner with possibilities for institutional improvements or reform and assist with approaches tailored to partners' political and institutional context for change.
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**EDUCATION & TRAINING**  
Equip partners with the knowledge, skills, tools, and expertise to design and implement solutions.
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**CONFERENCES & SEMINARS**  
Engage partner stakeholders, explore country best practices, and help create space for progress.

### SELECT SERVICES

- ◆ Resident/non-resident advising & consulting
- ◆ Multi-stakeholder workshops
- ◆ Tabletop Exercises (TTX)
- ◆ Resident courses
- ◆ Mobile engagement / training teams
- ◆ Senior Leader Engagement

## ICB PLANNERS AND IMPLEMENTERS

- ◆ Defense Institute of International Legal Studies (DIILS)
- ◆ Defense Technology Security Administration (DTSA)
- ◆ Institute for Security Governance (ISG)
- ◆ Regional Centers



## QUESTIONS ABOUT ICB?

Questions or comments about this Smart Sheet or any ICB topic?

Ask an ISG expert about any ICB question at:  
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