

The Case for Allies and Partners

Building and sustaining relationships

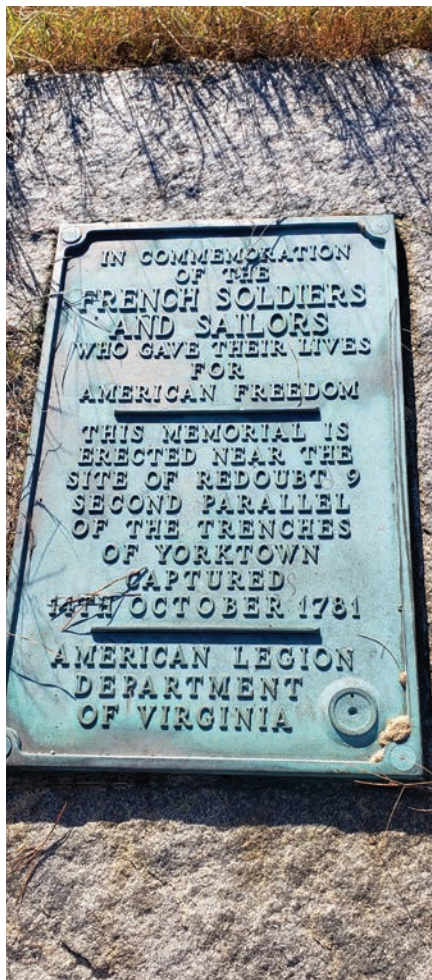
by BGen Sean Salene

Mark Twain is reputed to have said, “History does not repeat itself, but it rhymes.” Since our War of Independence, we have relied on other nations to help us achieve our security objectives. French troops, ships, and financial support were critical to our victory at Yorktown in 1781 (approximately 600 French gave their lives, either on land or at sea, to win that pivotal battle). In later wars of the 20th and early 21st century, the armed forces of the United States relied upon its many allies and partners to defeat tyranny, contain communism, fight terrorism, respond to crises, and enable collective security around the globe. As we move forward in the 21st century, the United States will continue to need its allies and partners to deter aggression and defend our shared interests in the context of at least two authoritarian rivals. Existing and emerging strategic guidance points to the value of allies and partners—which could be decisive in deterring the next war. To be more effective in implementing that guidance, Marines should deliberately consider how to approach building and sustaining our relationships before the next crisis or conflict occurs. One approach begins with a review of a common theme in strategic guidance, follows with personal preparation to better implement the guidance, and considers the resources available to help us better work with our Nation’s network of allies and partners to deliver interoperability necessary for the common defense.

Common Theme

In March 2021, the President signed the *Interim National Security Strategic*

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A marker “Commemorating the French Soldiers and Sailors who gave their lives for American Freedom,” Yorktown Battlefield, National Park Service, taken on a tour with the author’s family in October 2021. (Photo provided by author.)

*Guidance.*¹ That guidance identifies national security priorities, to include the protection of the security of the American people, notes an enduring interest in expanding economic prosperity and opportunity, and highlights our commitment to “realizing and defending the democratic values at the heart of the American way of life.”² Importantly, the President’s guidance notes that we cannot do this alone: “For that reason, we will reinvigorate and modernize our alliances and partnerships around the world.”³

While neither the 2022 *National Defense Strategy* nor *National Military Strategy* has been released at the time of this article’s writing, recent public comments by senior defense officials suggest that the value of allies and partners will be central to both. “Succeeding through Teamwork” is one of the three strategic priorities of Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III. He casts our allies and partners as a force multiplier, linking our success in facing complex challenges across the globe to how closely we work with them to secure our common interests and promote shared values. Importantly, Secretary Austin also notes our limitations, and how our allies and partners can help:

We cannot meet our responsibilities alone, nor should we try. Rather, we will consult with our allies and partners and, when appropriate, we will act together ... making us stronger as a team than the sum of our individual parts.⁴

Secretary Austin has also called the concept of integrated deterrence a new way to approach deterrence. Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, Dr. Colin Kahl, has discussed integration

in terms of being integrated across domains, theaters of competition, and the spectrum of conflict. He also noted the concept of integrated deterrence included being “integrated across our allies and partners, which are the real asymmetric advantage that the United States has over any other competitor or potential adversary.”⁵ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen Mark A. Mil-

Service Maritime Strategy also notes, “alliances and partnerships remain our key strategic advantage,”⁸ and calls upon the Services to “strengthen and expand our network of relationships to ensure our success in competition, crisis, and conflict.”

Here, the value of Naval Expeditionary Forces in general, and the stand-in force in particular, is acute. Our forward

extension of the Fleet—will be first on the scene, first to help, first to contain a brewing crisis, and first to fight if required to do so.⁹

There are opposing views on the value of allies and partners. Some take the view that many do not have high-end capabilities or that interoperability is hard to achieve. It is difficult to objectively measure the return on investment in security cooperation, and we may risk entanglement or dependence on others that could limit our freedom of action. However, the Secretary of Defense has already given his view that we cannot fulfill our responsibilities on our own. We do not have the capacity to be everywhere all the time. Our allies and partners have capabilities and authorities we do not. They provide access, basing, and overflight permissions that we will need to deter, and if necessary, to fight. In many ways, we are playing an away game. If we think about it differently, we can turn our key strategic advantage of allies and partners into a decisive one—to defeat an aggressor’s strategy.

Maj Timothy A. Ornelas noted in his excellent October 2021 *Gazette* article that the People’s Republic of China’s active defense strategy con-

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ley, noted in Congressional testimony that our allies and partners are the keys to maintaining the international rules-based order and peace and prosperity for the United States and the globe. In facing security challenges, the Chairman added the important point that working with allies and partners can help them help themselves by building capabilities, interoperability, and relationships:

Doing so allows us, our allies, and partners to counter the coercion of our strategic competitors, the malign activity of regional threats, and meet the varied security challenges state and non-state actors, terrorism, climate change, and pandemics or any other threat that may emerge. We are stronger when we operate closely with our allies and partners.⁶

For the Naval Services, the Secretary of the Navy specifically calls upon us to strengthen alliances and partnerships in response to strategic competitors who pursue confrontation and coercion:

Our Department will strengthen military-to-military relationships with existing allies, leverage specialized allied experience in regional operations, and expand and deepen our partnerships with like-minded democracies around the world.⁷

Following our Secretary’s guidance will enable the Navy and the Marine Corps to operationally integrate allies and partners into our concepts to support deterrence. In the same vein, the Tri-

deployed and stationed are already on scene to do the strengthening and the expanding of our network of allies and partners—day in and day out—inside our adversary’s weapons-engagement-zone in campaigning, crisis, and conflict. They do not need a strategic lift to get to the point of need alongside allies and partners to deter malign behavior *because they are already there*. As the Commandant has said,

in crisis prevention and crisis response, the Fleet Marine Force—acting as an



A Marine F-35B Lightning II with Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 211, Carrier Strike Group 21 “The Wake Island Avengers” aboard Her Majesty’s Ship Queen Elizabeth demonstrates the global reach and interoperability of the U.S. and U.K. armed forces and the deterrence and defense capabilities of the NATO Alliance. (Photo by 1stLt Zachary Bodner.)

tains the concepts of effective control and localized war. He argued the presence of U.S. military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific “would require Chinese military planners to account for the potential for multiple dilemmas in a conflict.”¹⁰ Following this thought, and in line with our guidance on allies and partners, we should play to our key strategic advantage by working with our broad network of allies and partners, adapting the Chinese concept of networks and connections known as *Guan Xi*.¹¹ Doing so “directly challenges the PLA’s ability to control the scope, duration, and means of a conflict by introducing a complex adaptive system of cooperation underpinned by a competitive advantage that the CCP cannot replicate.”¹²

Defeating an adversary’s plans and strategy is a strength of stand-in forces. Stand-in forces provide the joint force the capability “to disrupt an adversary’s plans at every point on the competition continuum,”¹³ the stand-in forces’ theory of success. As stated in the *Concept for Stand-in Forces*, “In day-to-day activity, SIF deter potential adversaries by establishing the forward edge of a partnered maritime defense-in-depth that denies the adversary freedom of action.” To operationalize the concept, “the impact of working with allies and partners cannot be overstated; it is key to undermining the adversary’s plans and is a primary reason stand-in forces’ presence must be persistent.”¹⁴ For deterrence to work, two actors must believe the defense is credible: the aggressor and the ally or partner being defended.¹⁵

Personal Preparation to Implement

To begin, Marines should first think. We can apply our tried and true leadership principle to “know yourself and seek self-improvement”¹⁶ as we consider an effective approach to working with a specific nation or group of nations. We are an elite, storied organization, but this does not mean we are gifted with all the answers. If we accept that premise, we can approach our relationships with a sense of humility that authoritarians lack. In the context of working with allies and partners, an approach open to learning from others can model our

values. Where our resources are limited, we may find synergy, as was recently seen in the Royal Navy’s historic, global deployment of *Queen Elizabeth*, with American Marines and Sailors aboard. Seeking to understand the needs of our allies and partners, and where and how we can build our relationship, can lead to achieving shared objectives.

Next is reading and listening. Self-study will help gain an initial understanding of an ally or partner’s perspective and create a hypothesis of where the shared space of cooperation exists. Actively listening to our allies and partners will help us test our initial hypotheses and build our knowledge. One Commandant of the Marine Corps Fellow noted recently that “candid, clear, and respectful communication is especially important when discussing divergent views and disagreements between each other’s interests.”¹⁷ This will help us engage in dialogue, a search for truth, as we consider the position of others and the goals they profess. Language can sometimes be a barrier but putting oneself in the shoes of the other is a technique that helps overcome that barrier. Our Commandant captured this sentiment in a recent interview when

allies and partners. For me, participation in Exercise COBRA GOLD in 2019 provided a powerful illustration.

Illustrative Example

The 38th iteration of the annual theater security cooperation event known as COBRA GOLD took place in February 2019 in the Kingdom of Thailand. As one of the largest theater security cooperation exercises in the Indo-Pacific, and an integral part of the U.S. commitment to strengthen our engagement in the region, COBRA GOLD 2019 provided the opportunity for approximately 29 nations to improve capabilities to

plan and conduct combined and joint operations; build relationships among participating nations across the region; and improve interoperability over a range of activities, including enhancing maritime security, preventing and mitigating emerging disease threats, and responding to large-scale natural disasters.²⁰

How Marines approached supporting the staff exercise was important. While the U.S. staff trainers were pre-disposed to running a standard planning process for a typical scenario with a fictitious

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he talked about working with allies and partners, suggesting an approach that begins by asking, “what are you trying to do, and how can we help you get there faster?”¹⁸

Finally, working shoulder-to-shoulder on a shared objective can deepen understanding and build interoperability. Understanding, as our doctrine states, is the highest class of knowledge. It “allows us to anticipate events—to recognize in advance the consequences of new or impending developments or the effects of our actions,”¹⁹ which in turn can unlock opportunity. Multi-national exercises provide excellent opportunities to better our understanding of our

country that progressed from steady state to crisis to conflict, our Thai three-star leader had a different idea. He professed his intent to apply a philosophy he learned from Thai kickboxing. He preferred to start slow and keep options open. He wanted to preserve the ability to go fast and hard but only if needed. His approach would delay any potential kinetic activity to the last moment, to enable a softer hand of diplomacy to work. In his mind, this would better fit the coalition of nations in his area than would a textbook response.

After hearing our Thai leader, it was important to translate his intent into staff action for the play of the problem.



Photo taken of COBRA GOLD 2019 STAFFEX members, Kingdom of Thailand, February 2019. Note the Thai STAFFEX Commander is second from right, in the first row. (Photo provided by author.)

As the commander for the staff exercise, it was our duty to listen to him. Second, it was important to every other Thai that we strove to meet the intent of our shared commander in the exercise. Third, it was important for the other participating nations to observe how Americans treated their hosts.

Adaptation caused us to slow down the planning process. We could have sped up, but that would likely have resulted in a dynamic familiar to many participants in multinational planning: the best English speakers step forward to work with American planners, while those who speak English less well stay on the outside. This would have created two groups of people learning at different speeds with different outcomes, with one group learning far less than the other. A better way was for the Marines to adapt the planning process to the environment and the hosts, slow down, and instill pauses into the staff rhythm to cross-level and enable questions and answers so that all learned. While slower, listening, installing feedback loops, and ensuring that all participants were part of the planning better met the objectives of the exercise—to build relationships and interoperability. It also served to educate the Marines, Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen on the U.S. side of an alternate, and Thai, way to solve the staff problem.

At the conclusion of the exercise, one Thai participant noted that the Marines' approach was different than working with the Chinese. The Chinese were pedantic, it was relayed, and often dictated the course of their exercises with less give-and-take. In the broader scheme of things, being our best selves as Americans—listening, treating others with respect, compromising on methods, and achieving shared objectives—contrasted well with an authoritarian approach.

Resources

There is no dearth of unclassified resources available to Marines who work with allies and partners, from encyclopedic data produced by the State Department and CIA to deep analysis produced by academic and think tank communities in the United States and overseas. Our Service's professional journal is also a rich resource. From 2ndLt Kayla Olsen's article on emotional intelligence²¹ to BGen Bill Bowers, Col Thomas Wood, and Dr. Jim Holmes on the U.S.-Japan alliance making for a "stronger home team"²² to deter aggression, our journal is full of insights we can leverage to prepare for our own engagements.

Additionally, the Marine Corps has a broad and diverse body of foreign

expertise in the International Affairs Program. This program,

identifies, develops, and manages a professionalized cadre of subject-matter experts in regionally-focused political-military affairs who will possess advanced education in regional security studies, regional experience, and advanced linguistic skills. The program prepares Marines to serve as leaders, principle staff, planners, and advisers on capabilities for assignments on tactical, operational, and strategic-level staffs, joint and combined assignments, and for duty with interagency organizations in order to improve MAGTF plans, operations, security cooperation, and intelligence efforts.²³

Currently, hundreds of foreign area officers, regional affairs officers, and foreign area staff NCOs (FAS) serve in embassies and organizations across the world, focused on gaining and maintaining relationships with our allies and partners.

There are approximately 872 Marines in the Corps today who have been trained and educated to provide perspectives, and lessons learned, to assist in strengthening partner relationships. This number also includes our Personnel Exchange Program graduates who are embedded at all levels of partner forces. These foreign area officers, regional affairs officers, foreign area staff NCOs, and Personnel Exchange Program are in the fleet or supporting establishments ready to assist units and individuals preparing for an upcoming exercise or engagement. There is also knowledge and experience in our current and former Marine Security Guards. Finally, there are fleet experiences from those who are stationed overseas with our allies and partners, have previous experience from their civilian lives, or deploy with them. For example, Marines and Sailors of VMFA-211 will undoubtedly return to their home station with new perspectives to share from their experience being aboard the Royal Navy's *Queen Elizabeth* as an integrated element of the Carrier Strike Group in 2021. Gaining and sharing their lessons, as with all who have foreign experience, is valuable. Finally, leaders at all levels will likely find that their Marines will

learn and grow in the process of working with allies and partners, providing them potentially life-long benefits.

Conclusion

Winston Churchill is quoted as saying, “the only thing worse than having allies is not having them.”²⁴ Perhaps he was being humorous, but long experience in our recent wars has shown we cannot surge trust when a crisis occurs. While effective military-to-military relationships do not automatically translate into political decisions to align with the United States in crisis, the absence of effective relationships makes a conflict more likely to occur and our ability to succeed in it less.

It is incumbent upon us to successfully approach our allies and partners to make a strategic advantage decisive in the concept of integrated deterrence. Therefore, we should think, read, listen, and act with a sense of humility as we work with allies and partners to enable the theory of success in *A Concept for Stand-in Forces*. Marines have long known the value of the *Strategic Corporal*. All of us can model our values as we approach our relationships with allies and partners—our “greatest strategic asset.”²⁵ With respect, discipline, and our values to guide us, we can employ the talents of our most precious resource, our people, to their best effect to deter aggression and set conditions to win if deterrence fails.

Notes

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2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III, *Message to the Force*, (Washington, DC: March 2021).
5. Jim Garamone, “Concept of Integrated Deterrence Will Be Key to National Defense Strategy, DOD Official Says,” *DOD News*, (December 2021), available at <https://www.defense.gov>.
6. U.S. Senate, *Statement of General Mark A. Milley, USA, 20th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs*

of Staff, Department of Defense Budget Hearing, (Washington DC: June 2021).

7. Secretary Carlos del Torro, *One Navy-Marine Corps Team: Strategic Guidance from the Secretary of the Navy*, (Washington, DC: October 2021).

8. Department of the Navy, *Advantage at Sea*, (Washington, DC: December 2020).

9. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).

10. Maj Timothy A. Ornelas, “China’s Active Defense Military Strategy,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: October 2021).

11. “An individual’s social network of mutually beneficial personal and business relationships.” Quote available at <https://en.wikipedia.org>.

12. Ibid.

13. Headquarters Marine Corps, *A Concept for Stand-In Forces*, (Washington, DC: December 2021).

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15. Ibid.

16. Staff, *RP 0103: Principles of Marine Corps Leadership*, (n.d.), available online at <https://www.tecom.marines.mil>.

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20. Staff, “Exercise Cobra Gold 2019 to Kick Off on February 12, 2019,” U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, (January 2019), available at <https://www.pacom.mil>.

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23. Staff, “International Affairs Branch (PLU), Headquarters Marine Corps, Plans, Policies & Operations (PP&O),” Marine Corps (n.d.), available at <https://www.hqmc.marines.mil>.

24. Staff, “The Big Three,” National World War II Museum, (n.d.), available at <https://www.nationalww2museum.org>.

25. *Interim National Security Strategy*.



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