

Partnerships, Persistence, Potential: The National Guard's Role in Security Cooperation

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Abstract: *On April 15, 2024, Major General Janeen L. Birckhead presented a talk to the students at Towson University on partnerships and the National Guard's role in security cooperation. The Towson University Journal of International Affairs was a proud organizer and co-sponsor of this event. What follows is a transcript of her comments, which have been lightly edited for length and readability.*

Keywords: *International Partnerships, Maryland National Guard, Sister Cities, Bosnia Herzegovina, Estonia, Serbia, Ukraine*

Good evening. Thank you for allowing me to join you this evening. This university is a shining light for Baltimore, and I am honored to have been invited to share my insights about International Partnership.

It's a timely, complex topic, and I admire the *Towson University Journal of International Affairs's* editorial board's work in bringing complicated but important issues to the student body.

Civilian and public partnerships play a crucial role in our country's defense. Partnerships, relationships, and connections are the focus of my thoughts tonight.

It's human nature to love our independence, but it's also human nature to want to connect, to reach out to others. In your dorms, your apartments, your homes – you strike a

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balance with your neighbors. This is the basis of partnerships. So, if you watch your friend's dog for a weekend, you know you can later call on that friend for a favor. If you are hurt or threatened, whether it's a party gone bad, a bike ride gone wrong, a relationship soured... you want to trust that someone will have your back. You hope that their response will be appropriate, helpful – *and not make things worse*. Perhaps, you will be wary about what you will owe for that help!

We all have experience with relationship building like this. Over time, you communicate, you share experiences, you deepen the relationship. Although this is an oversimplified metaphor, it nonetheless applies to how I would like you to think about international relationships, too. Just like your relationships, they involve trust. And just like your own relationships, that trust is developed over time.

With international partnerships, you'll size up the pros and cons – and ultimately, you may conclude that the risks and downsides are more than balanced by the long-term benefits of the relationship. Yes, that's simplistic. But we must analyze the challenges and benefits that exist in international partnerships just as in our own.

Today, I'd like to explore in particular the military's role in international partnerships as part of our nation's use of its instruments of power. Partnerships play an important role in ensuring that Army forces are prepared to execute any mission given to them successfully, but they are only one part of America's overall foreign policy. Our nation weaves diplomatic strategies, military strategies, informational strategies, and economic strategies (DIME) to meet our global goals. No strategy stands alone. DIME is shorthand for a balanced set of strategies – to include those of the Maryland National Guard.

I'd like to start with some of my personal insights from my journey to understand the power of partnership, developed during 30 plus years in uniform. My motivation to join the military initially came from receiving a scholarship for ROTC. In high school, my mother challenged me to compete for a four-year scholarship to become an officer in the U.S. Army and, ultimately, in the Maryland National Guard. Once I was selected for a scholarship, it was hard to turn down such a great opportunity. As a young officer, I focused on developing my own competence and confidence – as did all of my peers. It takes 30 years to grow a General, so here I am 30 years later—the State's 31st Adjutant General.

The Adjutant General has a unique role, leading a joint operating and generating force at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. The Adjutant General heads the Military Department and Executive Department for the State, and exercises powers and duties under the Militia Law of Maryland. As the Adjutant General, I am responsible for the combat readiness of 5,000 plus soldiers and airmen who live and work in our local communities.

On a day-to-day basis, each State's National Guard answers to its Governor as its commander-in-chief. The Governor can call the National Guard into a non-federal, "state active duty" role in response to state priorities. However, the National Guard is also subject to federal activation at any time, in which case they would fall under the command of the President of the United States.

The National Guard also partners with one or more foreign countries through the National Guard State Partnership Program. For example, Maryland's partners are Bosnia-Herzegovina and Estonia. In this way, the Maryland National Guard assumes strategic, bilateral relationships with foreign partners.

As an operating force at the tactical level, Maryland National Guard servicemembers are subject to activation. Most recently, small teams have been activated to support local authorities in a State Active-Duty status, which has recently involved responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, safeguarding our democracy, supporting overseas deployments, and assisting with the state's response to the recent bridge collapse. The events of recent years have tested our resilience, adaptability, and dedication.

Outside of a State Active-Duty activation, Maryland National Guard units train regularly at the tactical level as a generating force for potential federal activation in response to Global Force Management Allocation Plan requirements for combatant commanders worldwide. And the list of responsibilities goes on and on. The role of the Adjutant General is to balance this myriad of requirements.

The Adjutant General also deals with "capital P" political issues, regularly engaging with local, state, and federal executives and legislators. Navigating politics is challenging, as the Adjutant General must remain apolitical, support the Governor's priorities, and advocate for the best interests of the organization.

I have commanded at every level, deployed, and completed the U.S. Army War College. Over my years of participating in exercises in Germany and Japan as a young officer, I developed a good sense of the value of partnerships. However, my seminal experience with international partners occurred in 2004, when I mobilized to serve as a Leader in the office of Review for the Detention of Enemy Combatants.

Later, in 2011, I deployed to Kabul, Afghanistan, to work as the Deputy Operations Officer for Security Partnering with ISAF – the International Security Assistance Force. This

experience was an eye opener, wherein I learned about trust. Trust, earned or not, is the basis of partnering.

A little over a year ago, I served in a dual role as Commander of Maryland's Army National Guard and Deputy Commandant at the Army War College in Pennsylvania. The War College is a grad school for senior U.S. military officers (selected from the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marines – Active, Reserve, and Guard) and for eighty senior foreign military officers. For a year of studies, U.S. and foreign officers work on academic projects and planning exercises: they play ball together; their families socialize together; they form bonds that last for years. Some discover the bonds are there when they find themselves together again in a multinational training event or deployment. These trusting bonds that I observed at the Army War College matched what I experienced with the State Partnership Program.

The Maryland National Guard has a long-term relationship with the eastern European countries of Estonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Further, I have personal connections with their military leaders – connections that I keep alive with regular contacts and visits to their respective countries, which I have been completing since the early 1990s. For example, in November of 2023 Governor Wes Moore hosted a reception at the Annapolis Government House to celebrate fifty combined years of security cooperation between the Maryland National Guard and Bosnia-Herzegovina and Estonia. The Estonian Ambassador, each country's Minister of Defense, and attachés from both Embassies were present at the reception.

Connections at the international level have major implications. And yet, at their most fundamental level, they are '*human connections.*'

I'd like to now spend a few minutes addressing America's dance with international partnerships. The story starts from the earliest days of our nation, but I'll start this one in 1927.

Ninety-seven years ago, Charles Lindbergh was a young U.S. Air Mail pilot and a Captain in the Michigan National Guard in the St Louis area when he became the first to make a non-stop solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean from New York City to Paris. Those were still the early days for air flight. Others tried and were met with airplane crashes or went missing over the Atlantic. But when Lindbergh reached Paris, circling the Eiffel Tower for a little extra flair, he became an instant international celebrity, mobbed by crowds of hundreds of thousands. Some four million showed up to see him a month later in a New York City parade.

He was quickly promoted, skipping several steps to become Colonel in the Army Reserve's Air Corps. Congress awarded him the Medal of Honor and *TIME Magazine* declared him Man of the Year. Over the course of the next decade, he used his fame to promote air mail, assess the nation's aircraft development, conduct recruiting for the US Army Air Corps, design a pilot's watch, create the concept for what others would develop into the first heart-lung machine, inspect the rising power of Nazi Germany's Air Force. In 1940, Lindbergh's fame helped spur the nationwide movement to stay out of the European troubles. He was the face and voice of the isolationist movement – the America First Committee – and was compelling in arguments against the Lend-Lease bill to help England and the proposal of a U.S. neutrality pact with Germany.

Americans at the time remembered well the devastation of WWI. While the U.S. lost more than 100,000 young men, our delayed entry into the war meant that U.S. fatalities were a tiny percentage of the over five million Allied military personnel that died. Those terrible memories and the compelling rhetoric of this superstar made isolationism increasingly popular – until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor deflated the idea. Suddenly, Lindbergh's isolation seemed less appealing, and his affinity for Germany became suspect for many Americans, too.

Instead, the United States now saw the wisdom and value of a more engaged approach to world affairs, one built on trust rather than fear, and partnership rather than isolation.

The tension between looking inward and partnering with others has been a push-pull phenomenon in the US foreign affairs before Lindbergh, and after. His fame in promoting it was a new twist, but the idea was certainly not new. Does America best take care of itself by drawing into itself, and casting off foreign entanglements, or by engaging with other nations who share our interests? This was a constant tension in American politics.

You can hear that tension today in the debates about how much to help Israel with respect to Hamas and Iran, how much weapon support to send to Ukraine's fight against Russia, how much commitment to make to Taiwan to ward off threats from China. Since World War II, when our nation emerged as a global leader; through the Cold War, when our nation helped others to blunt the influence of the USSR; in the Middle East since September 11, 2001, as our nation expended its resources to fight non-state terrorism: throughout seventy-five years full of political debate, the nation skewed toward engagement and collective preparation to protect human life, economic prosperity, and freedom.

The nation's broad-stroke goals and strategies are published by each Administration in the National Security Strategy, or NSS. Invariably, these publications identify our national interests as safeguarding our homeland and our democracy, confronting threats to global stability, and advancing American influence and partnerships. I think you'd find it interesting to pull up the National Security Strategy for several Presidents to see which threads are pulled through and where the emphasis changes. The distinction between one Administration and the next and the next after that is a matter of degree.

Do we seek to extend American influence globally in order to make our nation more secure? Or do we seek international partnerships to compete with major autocratic powers that would undermine global stability and diminish our economic security? We live in an era of passionate political intensities, but we probably agree that the role of U.S. government is to protect the American people, preserve our way of life, promote our prosperity, preserve peace through strength, and advance American influence in the world.

Our allies and partners add significantly to our own strengths when we use and apply our powers in combination. So, it is the American way of foreign affairs to be a global leader while expecting others to share responsibility, to pursue cooperation with shared responsibilities and burdens.

The current National Security Strategy recognizes that our overarching priority is to advance America's vital interests: freedom, security, prosperity, and democratic values. The strategy to protect those U.S.-specific interests is to lead with our values. This leadership is affected by working with allies and partners and with *all* those who share our interests, Together, we work to pursue increased global cooperation and help each other to fulfill our shared responsibilities.

When we talk about America's strength - our competitive advantage - we include America's network of alliances and partnerships. Mutual responsibility, shared burdens, shared principles, and shared institutions have enabled seventy-five years of stability, prosperity, and growth.

To meet those overarching national goals, there is a National Military Strategy and a Maryland National Guard Strategy, each nested in the higher strategy that guides actions and priorities at every level. Maryland assumes a critical role in training our own Soldiers and

Airmen and deploying them to support current military operations abroad. In addition to the current deployment of members of our Air Wing, however, the Maryland National Guard importantly also plays key roles in international military partnerships, and our capacity to extend influence for these enduring partnerships is notable.

More than participating in any Military exercise, Maryland's contribution to the State Partnership Program (SPP) has provided a larger foreign policy return on investment than any other security cooperation program within the National Guard's catalog. The SPP boasts eighty-nine partnerships established with 106 partner nations across all six geographic commands. Relative to other programs, SPP is the most cost-effective option, costing less than 1% of the \$6 Billion Security Cooperation budget. Moreover, 20 to 30 percent of all Combatant Command (COCOM) engagements are SPP.

International military-to-military partnerships play a crucial role in promoting regional stability by enhancing the capabilities of partner nations. Through regular and recurring exchanges, training, and combined exercises, Maryland's military personnel extend the influence of the United States, build relationships and trust, and share both burdens and responsibilities. We learn from one another, and we prepare to coordinate and cooperate against state and non-state threats.

To offer these new learning opportunities to the U.S. and partner nations alike, the U.S. created the State Partnership Program in 1993. Maryland's relationship with Estonia also dates to 1993, making it one of the original partner countries.

The Cold War ended when the USSR split up, thus changing the calculus on the European continent. Estonia, once a republic of the USSR, looked west and worked to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2004. During those interim years,

though, Maryland's National Guard forces established working relationships and developed interoperability of communication and common operational language and expectations. As a result, Estonia later participated in NATO-led military and peacekeeping operations.

Estonia-U.S. relations demonstrated the value of security cooperation based on mutual understanding and trust among partner nations. This trust ultimately benefitted Estonia with regional stability, but also provided the U.S. with the benefit of a shared responsibility in the face of threats to fellow NATO countries. For example, Estonia deployed forces to Afghanistan, working as I did as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

The U.S. has also learned from Estonia's well-developed and potent foundation of cyber knowledge and cyber defense. Motivated by cyber-attacks from Russia, Estonia is now a leader among NATO countries, sharing information and strategies from its Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence. Maryland has two primary cyber units that support federal missions – the 175th Cyber Operations Squadron and the 169th Cyber Protection Team. These units are integrated into the U.S. Cyber Command's mission to defend the nation against malicious foreign cyber actors, and they do so by conducting full-spectrum cyberspace operations to disrupt, degrade, and defeat foreign adversaries that target the US and its allies. Thus, as is demonstrated by Estonian and American cyber defense operations, partnership is most effective when it is centered upon mutual support.

The State Partnership Program (SPP) is an integral component of the National Defense Strategy (NDS) and European NATO policy, contributing to the strategic objectives of the United States. For example, Bosnia-Herzegovina is a nation that rose from the bitter war among regions of the former Yugoslavia. However, since its partnership with Maryland in 2003, Maryland has supported Bosnia-Herzegovina's goal to join NATO. Further, just this month,

members of Maryland's 175th Infantry Battalion focused on one of the country's remaining capabilities gaps as they move closer to the readiness and capability levels NATO requires. These instances exemplify the alignment of objectives, capacity building, and regional engagement that can be attained through persistent partnerships.

Overall, the State Partnership Program's alignment with the National Defense Strategy and European NATO policy enhances its effectiveness in promoting security cooperation, building partner capacity, and contributing to regional stability and security. The SPP has proven to be a valuable tool in advancing broader national security goals. As such, we will continue to stand with Bosnia Herzegovina as it makes strides towards NATO membership.

The aforementioned are far from isolated cases of the benefits of trusting partnerships. As part of the Army's Global Force Management plan, the Maryland National Guard has provided support to every Combatant Command (COCOM) on every continent, including Antarctica. Though there are countless contributions I could mention, highlighting a few should provide a good perspective.

Firstly, Maryland's combined training events with Estonia are focused in two broad areas: cyber operations and increasing civil-military engagements between sister cities and civilian institutions, like yours. To act upon this focus, Maryland establishes training events with Bosnia-Herzegovina to develop interoperability among their forces, NATO's, and the U.S.' for effective multinational land and air operations. Responding to their needs and their requests, Maryland has offered improvements to their ability to stage and move troops and logistics, airspace management, staff development, and access to airfields and range for training purposes.

As the Maryland National Guard works hand in hand with its partner nations and within the Defense Department's larger State Partnership Program, the promise of continued future

international partnership is apparent. This promise includes the benefit of mutual understanding and respect and the opportunity to build upon shared interests and shared burdens. Further, this promise is demonstrated even beyond the military environment. For example, diplomatic expansion has permitted Maryland and Estonia to establish eight “sister cities” (respectively: Annapolis and Tallinn, Salisbury and Tartu, Cumberland and Viljandi, Bel Air and Narva, Ocean City and Pärnu, Charles County and Jõgeva County, Oakland and Valga, Westminster and Paide). Events and exchanges between these sister cities are run by their respective city councils or volunteer groups. Past exchanges have explored future commerce relationships, such as those which are pursued through the Maryland-Bosnia-Herzegovina Council, which was established most recently in November to create economic opportunity and partnership. Also, this Fall the Annapolis Film Festival will partner with the Sarajevo International Film Festival – one of the largest film festivals held in Europe. As you can see, the partnerships grown out of military-to-military or military-to-civilian opportunities extend well beyond the scope of military engagement, even expanding to produce mutual diplomatic, informational, and economic benefits.

Within this discussion of partnership strategy, however, it is important to mention also the influence of civilian actors. Never forget that U.S. military priorities, missions, and resourcing are set by civilian leaders. They set the goals, shape the strategies, and ensure that military actions meet legal and ethical standards. They influence the scope and conduct of military operations, including rules of engagement and treatment of civilians and prisoners of war. Further, we must not underestimate the extent to which government decisions on use of force, troop deployments, and duration of military engagements are influenced by citizen attitudes as well.

From this discussion, then, we can derive a multitude of lessons regarding the nature of international partnerships. To demonstrate and apply these lessons, we might return to my original oversimplified metaphor that compared state partnerships to your own friendships and personal relationships. Recall that I mentioned trust, costs, and having your partner's back, as these principles tend to guide the trajectory of all meaningful cooperative partnerships. Long-term engagements are also required to produce meaningful results, as is a willingness to tailor activities to *the other partner's* needs in addressing *their* security challenges. Relatedly, clear communication channels and regular coordination meetings are vital to the functionality of these tailored activities. Finally, a level of flexibility and adaptability is needed to allow the partnership to remain relevant. As such, a flexible partner must maintain consciousness of the changing security environments and evolving partner needs in order to then adjust priorities accordingly.

In the event that the previous lessons are carefully considered, the state partnerships that will result, such as those attained through programs like the State Partnership Program (SPP), will be extensively and mutually beneficial. Included in these benefits is the potential for enhanced security cooperation and closer military-to-military relationships. Capacity-building is also a beneficial outcome, as partnerships help support nations in building their military capabilities. Interoperability allows partners to collaborate effectively, while the enhancement of cultural understanding promotes mutual trust and respect between the partners. Partnerships for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response (HA/DR) are beneficial in that these relationships facilitate timely assistance to affected populations and support disaster relief efforts. Finally, state partnerships generate diplomatic benefits that strengthen bilateral relationships between the United States and partner nations.

As we conclude our discussion with presentation of some benefits of partnership, it is worth acknowledging that the National Guard has a wealth of resources at its disposal to foster productive relationships with domestic, foreign, and community partners. Through the deployment of available initiatives, the National Guard, including the Maryland National Guard, is taking a leadership role in strategic cooperation with the SPP program. We are conducting Joint Training Exercises that encourage military collaboration, trust-building, and interoperability, along with public diplomacy and cultural exchange activities that promote people-to-people connections and a better understanding between the National Guard and foreign partners.

In today's era of strategic competition, it is imperative that we utilize all available tools of national power in multifaceted ways to stay ahead of our competitors. As a critical component of our nation's defense infrastructure, the National Guard similarly strives to adapt alongside our competitors, though its role still must be clearly defined and redefined as needed during this adaptation process. We remain steadfast in our dedication to bridging the gap between our communities and the frontline defenders of the nation.

With that in mind, I urge you to be engaged citizens. We need you to be wise about the tension revolving about *how* and *how much* engagement is right for the United States. It is my opinion that our future is tied to the promise of international partnerships, and it is my hope that you will consider and apply this promise in your own civic engagement.

Good luck to you with your future endeavors and thank you for listening.