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For video commentary from
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(Ret) Frank McKenzie, please go to:
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The National Guard’s State Partnership Program in Strategic Competition

Introduction

Both the National Security (NSS) and National Defense Strategies (NDS) make it clear that the US is “in the midst of a strategic competition” with Russia and China. Both documents highlight the strengths the US has in this competitive environment, notably its allies and partners. The NSS states, “The United States’ unrivaled network of allies and partners protects and advances our interests around the world—and is the envy of our adversaries.”ⁱ The US employs a variety of methods to maintain this invaluable network. One expanding method is the National Guard’s State Partnership Program (SPP). The SPP establishes formal relationships between State National Guard units and foreign militaries to share experiences and skills to address security challenges. Created in 1993 to support the new democracies emerging in Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the SPP has expanded to include every US state and territory, who have entered into 88 partnerships with 100 nations (Some having multiple partners).ⁱⁱ For example, Texas is the only state with three partners: Egypt, Chile, and a shared partnership with Nebraska and Czechia.ⁱⁱⁱ Figure 1 shows the global reach of the SPP participating nations.

This expansive program allows the National Guard to work directly with allied or partner forces in exchanges or

Members of the SPP and the Strategic Competitors

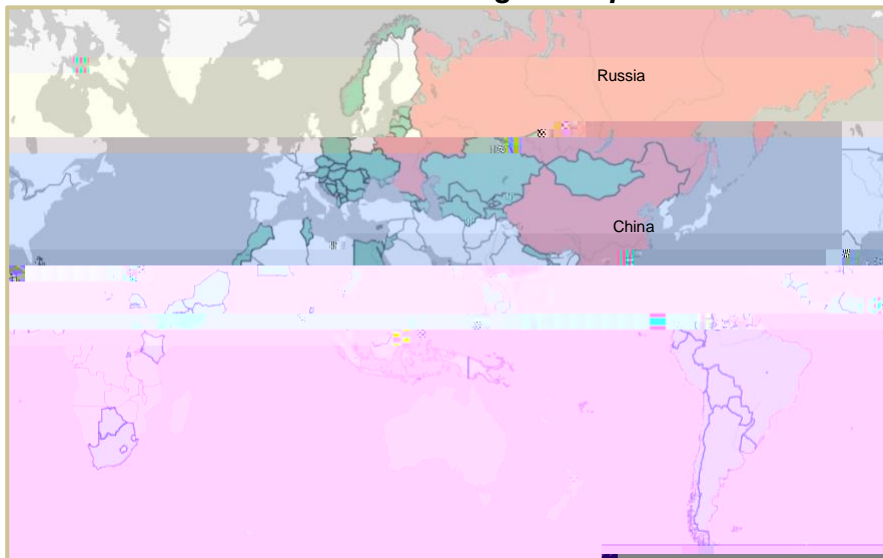


Figure 1: Green Represents SPP participants while red represents strategic competitors of the United States. Information from the [National Guard Bureau](#) and the [NSS](#). Note: Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Venezuela currently have dormant relationships.

training exercises. Typically, these events involve a small number of US service members working with partner forces for several weeks. In 2018, then Chief of the National Guard Bureau (NGB) General Joseph Lengyel described the program: “The SPP is an innovative and cost-effective security cooperation program...Guard units conduct military-to-military engagements with partner nations in support of defense security goals and leverage societal relationships to build personal bonds and enduring trust...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.”^{iv}

Fostering Relationships for the Future

Earlier this year, US Central Command Chief of Staff [Major General David Doyle](#) declared, “Our [existing and new partnerships] are our best opportunity to out-compete China... The Chinese relationships [around the world], we observe, are transactional in nature. They stand in stark contrast to America’s relationships [which] are long-term and values-based, and we try to make them mutually beneficial...”^v The importance of allies and partners is clear and the SPP works to foster those relationships. The SPP has developed new partnerships with nations who may have previously been reluctant to engage with the US on security initiatives.^{vi} Sending an SPP mission of a small team of Guard members for a short-term exchange is a far lower threshold for the host nation to accept compared to sending an active-duty battalion with hundreds of soldiers. This aspect of the SPP makes it a useful method to engage with nations in the competitive regions of the world.

Additionally, on an SPP mission, soldiers and airmen of the National Guard share valuable skills, best practices, and lessons learned about a variety of challenges, from natural disaster relief and infrastructure construction, to drug smuggling, human trafficking, and other criminal activities. This includes sharing expertise from their civilian careers. During these exchanges, National Guard members gain insight on partner nations’ standard operating procedures while enhancing interoperability between units.

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