



# Training Together – A Fundamental Building Block for Pulling Together

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*The paper focuses on the importance of foreign military training. While recognising the significance of professional outcomes of such programmes, the paper highlights the importance of relationship building and acquiring a deeper understanding of the nuances of each other's culture. It argues that this requirement is all the more relevant today when the nature of warfare has changed and collective solutions are more often than not the preferred response mechanism.*

Military operations have existed for centuries wherein armies or fleets of far-flung nations have come together to do battle against a common adversary. Such operations have usually taken time to manifest themselves. This has been necessary, firstly, to work out the politics of alliances and, secondly, to overcome the tyranny of distance. Changes witnessed during the last few decades are, however, compressing this timeline and increasing the propensity to use collations as solutions for security threats.

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The first of these changes is the very nature of conflict itself. Threats have steadily morphed from the traditional “state on state” variety to the more amorphous and diffused “state versus ideology” variety. Conflicts of this nature do not recognise sovereign boundaries and tend to spread their tentacles across vast regions. They capitalise on countries with weak governance and fuel themselves by igniting passions amongst people based on religious and social discord. They use the global commons to their advantage, thereby impacting even those nations that are far displaced from the region of conflict. Under such circumstances, the logic for arriving at a collective solution gains greater traction, and political impediments to doing so are easier to overcome.

Another major change has been brought about by technology or what may be called a “revolution in military affairs” (RMA). Technology has been steadily whittling down the tyranny of distance. Increased range and mobility of forces, ability to remain deployed for long durations in forward positions, dramatic improvements in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, and a steady reduction in the sensor–shooter gap have resulted in compression of the time between action and reaction. In such an environment, it is not unusual to rapidly put together forces from dispersed nations, for countering the emerging security threats.

For such forces to function cohesively there is a fundamental requirement to bring a high degree of predictability in operations. Currently, there exists adequate fog and friction in trying to ascertain the actions of the adversary. These are further exacerbated in irregular warfare where the options available to the opposition are much greater, as they often transgress the boundaries of traditional armed conflict. If uncertainties were also to exist in actions being taken by own forces, the degree of difficulty in effectively employing forces rises by several orders.

An inescapable requirement for combined operations is effective communication at multiple levels. A clear understanding of each other’s operational philosophies at higher levels of planning and adequate knowledge of each other’s tactics, techniques and procedures at the working level are paramount for achieving the required degree of interoperability. While these are commonly spoken of and addressed through a variety of measures, any senior commander would say that the ultimate force multiplier for collective security solutions is a detailed knowledge of the nuances of each other’s culture.

There are many avenues for studying and understanding strategy, doctrine and tactics followed by the armed forces. There is ample open-source literature on the subject, which could be researched by military academics and institutions such as

war colleges; gaps if any are plugged by institutional mechanisms between allied nations that permit the exchange of classified publications and facilitate closed-door presentations. Interoperability is further enhanced by the conduct of combined bilateral and multilateral exercises, where procedures to be adopted are worked out in detail and tested in the real-time exercises with formations of troops, vehicles, ships and aircraft operating together. Kinks identified are ironed out during debriefs and procedures are accordingly modified to undertake seamless operations. Those who have served in the military are well aware of the rigour and detail with which such exercises are planned and executed.

The much more difficult aspect to address whilst formulating collective responses is detailed cultural knowledge of the partners involved. These take time to assimilate and there are no technological shortcuts. It requires staying and studying in distant lands for long durations and effectively using this time to understand the people, their passions and concerns, their faith and religion, their language, idioms and expressions, and their culinary and dressing habits as well as their politics. What better way is there for a military man to do so than training shoulder to shoulder with counterparts in the military training institutes of partner nations? To sweat and toil with them, partake in discussions and exercises, live in common mess decks, eat in common galleys, follow common orders and watch movies together, caters to 24/7 learning, 365 days a year. Such courses provide unmatched opportunities to imbibe not only specific military skills but also the cultural nuances that are so often overlooked.

Benefits of foreign military training extend beyond combined operations into the realm of shaping operations. As mentioned earlier, maritime forces largely operate in the global commons, unimpeded by sovereignty concerns. It is not uncommon to encounter naval ships of distant countries working either collectively or independently in support of their national interests. A vivid example of this is the anti-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa, which witnessed a large number of navies coming together to combat a common menace. However, such commonality of cause is rare. Competing national interests often result in competitive presence at sea with each navy attempting to shape the maritime environment in a way which is tailored to meet their own interests. Under such conditions, military relationships built through training together in different institutes across the globe have the ability to play a prominent role. Friendships forged at such facilities remain while participants ascend to senior positions in their respective militaries. They provide a higher degree of access and a far more nuanced understanding of each other's approach and position. In

doing so, they often throw up opportunities for diffusing potentially volatile situations. These relationships could also be leveraged for obtaining favourable decisions from partner nations in a competitive environment.

However, the prerequisite for effective utilisation of foreign military training in shaping operations is relationship building. It is imperative that the experience for every trainee is made as special as possible. Concern for their wellbeing would necessitate the appointment of sponsor officers/senior enlisted personnel who would need to take over the role of foster guardians. Without diluting the ethos of military training, the programme would need to be structured to provide opportunities for foreign trainees to travel and immerse themselves in the rich cultural heritage. It would require one to go the extra mile to cater to differing dietary habits and to the special demands of their respective faiths, and every possible effort would need to be made to ensure that their stay is a memorable one. On return, it may be hoped that such trainees become advocates to forge closer ties between the two navies and nations and would work towards identifying greater opportunities of engagement.

Foreign military training is therefore not only a commitment that improves military skills of partner nations, but also one that is focused on building relationships. It therefore needs to be planned and executed with considerable thought and precision with a full understanding of the opportunity which it presents. Adequate resources need to be devoted in doing so as penny pinching could be counterproductive. An unpleasant stay for a trainee, even if at the end of the stay he is equipped with adequate skills, would be a lost opportunity with an overall negative impact. It is therefore essential that we remain cognisant of the benefits provided to such trainees by their respective governments and reassure ourselves that they would be adequate to cater for a comfortable stay in our country. If not, adequate support would have to be catered for.

Foreign military training is a rare opportunity for trainers and trainees. In today's increasingly volatile world, militaries in general and navies in particular are often going to find themselves operating in close proximity to one another, either for a common purpose or in competitive roles. Whatever be the dynamics in play at a particular time, personnel manning these assets or their controllers, having trained together either in each other's institutions or in common third-nation facilities, have an opportunity to play a constructive role. The larger the numbers of such personnel, the more favourable would be the likely outcome. It is therefore imperative that we train together with our partners if we are to pull together.