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Embracing Non-Traditional Solutions: Evolving Security Cooperation for the Modern Threat Environment

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Embracing Non-Traditional Solutions: Evolving Security Cooperation for the Modern Threat Environment

Jarrett M. Lane—is an Adjunct Research Staff Member at the Institute for Defense Analyses. His work primarily focuses on security cooperation and innovation. In addition to his role at IDA, Jarrett is Founder and Chair of the North Carolina Critical Technologies Alliance, a non-profit focused on promoting growth and development of North Carolina's defense and "deep tech" industries. He previously worked in government affairs and business development at Amazon and AWS. He also served as Chief of Staff at the Section 809 Panel, a defense acquisition reform initiative mandated by Congress. [jlane@ida.org]

Jennifer M. Taylor—is a Research Staff Member at the Institute for Defense Analyses currently serving as co-lead for IDA's security cooperation, institutional capacity building, and allies and partners work. Jennifer has more than 25 years' experience in government, think tanks, and as a consultant, transforming government institutions through strategy, planning, analysis, and implementation. She has a personal commitment to building better government institutions through making connections that were hidden from view. [jtaylor@ida.org]

Abstract

Advancing burden-sharing and enhancing the resilience among partners requires the security cooperation enterprise to open the aperture to a wider array of technologies and solutions. The security cooperation enterprise's near-exclusive reliance on "traditional" solutions covered by programs of record to build partner nation capabilities under-values the criticality of commercial technologies in modern warfighting. Further, neo-primes and early-stage defense technology companies are rapidly developing new military-unique technologies that may not become a program of record but could prove useful to allies and partners.

The increasingly perilous threat environment, compounded by the pace of technological change, means the security cooperation enterprise must accelerate efforts to help partners acquire non-program of record solutions. As the security cooperation enterprise undergoes significant changes (i.e., Defense Security Cooperation Agency's realignment to the Undersecretary of War for Acquisition & Sustainment) now is an opportune time to evolve the Department's approach to security cooperation to leverage these defense technology opportunities.

There are some practical steps that the Department could take immediately. For example, organizations steeped in commercial technology and innovation (e.g., the Defense Innovation Unit) should be formally incorporated into the security cooperation enterprise and resourced to support security cooperation initiatives. However, bolder steps to create entirely new acquisition pathways for allies and partners should also be considered.

Authorities could be revised to allow foreign military financing to be used by all allies and partners to procure certain technologies through direct commercial contracts. Marketplaces of vetted, trusted technologies would allow allies and partners to more quickly acquire new capabilities. Adopting a portfolio-like approaches to aligning partner nation requirements with technical expertise resident in the Foreign Area Officer community could also enable security cooperation organizations to more effectively identify and implement solutions for partner nations.

Background

In fiscal year 2024 alone, the United States transferred $117.9 billion worth of defense articles to allies and partners (Department of State, 2025). The vast majority of what is provided to allies and partners are linked to programs of record and traditional capabilities, meaning the United States military's procurement of those same products and services is baked into the Department of Defense's (DoD) budget, funded by Congress, and will therefore be supported by the defense industry long-term.

Focusing arms transfers on technologies and products covered by programs of record has four distinct advantages. First, technologies covered by programs of record are typically tested rigorously to ensure they meet the U.S. military's own standards and requirements for safety, reliability, operational efficacy, and more. This level of rigor inspires confidence among allies and partners that they are acquiring a high-quality product.

Second, transferring the same technologies developed for the U.S. military to allies and partners helps promote interoperability. Though interoperability with allies and partners is hard to achieve, it remains a goal of the DoD. Common understanding of systems and shared architectures can enable the United States and its allies and partners to fight as a combined force.

Third, because technologies covered by programs of record are typically acquired by the United States for decades, allies and partners that acquire those same technologies are effectively investing in a long-term relationship with the United States. Finally, encouraging allies and partners to acquire technologies covered by programs of record helps bolster the United States' defense industrial base (DIB). Global sales represent an important revenue stream for the DIB and helps ensure the DIB is not exclusively reliant on U.S. military sales to keep production lines running and continue offering associated services (e.g., maintenance, training, etc.).

There are limitations, however, to focusing on technologies covered by programs of record, particularly in the context of helping allies and partners build capabilities and ultimately assume greater responsibilities for burden-sharing. First, the DIB and the foreign military sales (FMS) process are unable to deliver solutions quickly enough to allies and partners. Right now, there is a $250 billion FMS backlog (Zinke, 2026). Though delays cannot be exclusively attributed to the United States—allies and partners have a role in executing sales agreements, too (Gomez, 2024)—delays nonetheless present an opening to adversaries and competitors. Failure to deliver timely, cost-effective solutions to solve allies' and partners' operational problems may lead them to explore offerings from other countries, including China and Russia (Kurilla, 2025).

Second, technologies covered by programs of record may not be best-suited to address new challenges. In the course of the authors' past research and work on the security cooperation enterprise, U.S. military groups (USMILGRPs) highlighted difficulties responding quickly to emergent allied and partner requirements, such as small unmanned aerial systems (sUAS) and counter-drone solutions.

The security cooperation enterprise's difficulties responding to emergent requirements speaks to a broader challenge shared by the U.S. military and its allies and partners: keeping pace with the speed of technological change and adapting to the trajectory of future warfare. Further opening the aperture to non-program of record solutions, including commercially-available technologies, will be critical to helping allies and partners build capabilities that are resilient, sustainable, and effective in the modern environment.

This paper builds upon research conducted by the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA), which was sponsored by the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) in 2024, that explored ways to more systematically and holistically incorporate commercial technologies into security cooperation efforts. This paper broadens the aperture to consider non-program of record solutions overall, including defense-specific capabilities that are not covered by programs of record, and explores opportunities and challenges at the intersection of security cooperation, DoD acquisition, and innovation.

This paper starts by providing an overview of major recent developments in security cooperation policy, particularly at the intersection of defense acquisitions and innovation. It then provides insights into the importance of commercial technologies in modern warfighting and some of the challenges the security cooperation enterprise faces in systematically incorporating commercial technologies into how it builds allied and partner capabilities. The paper concludes with recommendations for the Department and Congress to consider for ensuring the United States is able to offer optimal solutions to allies and partners in a timely, cost-competitive manner.

Recent Policies on FMS

Significant changes are occurring in both the defense acquisition system, the defense industrial base, and in security cooperation. Discerning the opportunities and challenges that these changes present (particularly with respect to allies, partners, and advancing burden sharing) first requires an understanding of major policy changes and initiatives with respect to each. This section provides a timeline of recent major efforts and a brief synopsis of their implications.

- **August 2022: DoD FMS Tiger Team.** Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin establishes a tiger team to address "inefficiencies in the United States' transfer of defense articles and services" to allies and partners. The tiger team is led by the Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment the Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Policy (DoD, 2023).
- **June 13, 2023: FMS Tiger Team Tasking Memo.** Secretary Austin directs implementation of recommendations delivered by the DoD's FMS Tiger Team. Key directives include establishing the Defense Security Cooperation Service (DSCS); steps to improve the efficiency of technology releases; *developing a methodology for facilitating non-program of record transfers*; standardizing FMS contract awards and process maps; incorporating allied and partner requirements into DIB production capacity; and working with the Department of State and Congress on FMS process improvements (DoD, 2023).
- **June 27, 2023: House Foreign Affairs Committee FMS TIGER Task Force.** Just days after the DoD released its FMS Tiger Team recommendations, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul announced an FMS Technical, Industrial, and Governmental Engagement for Readiness (TIGER) Task Force (House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2023). The task force was bipartisan and included representatives on both the House Foreign Affairs and Armed Services committees. The task force was directed to develop legislative fixes (rather than policy and process changes internal to State and the DoD) to the FMS process (House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2024).
- **December 22, 2023: Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act**. Section 873 gave Combatant Commanders more input and authorities pertaining to FMS, including a directive to the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment to work with the Combatant Commanders (among others) to develop a list of systems that would benefit from exportability to support security cooperation objectives. Congress also made Australia and the United Kingdom priorities for expedited FMS case processing and technology transfers.
- **February 7, 2024: FMS TIGER Task Force Report.** The task force's report points to multiple problems in the FMS system including, but not limited to, thresholds for congressional review, lack of accountability within the DoD or State for delays, the DoD undervaluing the benefit of exportability, and lack of transparency and traceability in the

FMS process. Select recommendations included changing Congressional notification thresholds; leveraging the Special Defense Acquisition Fund (SDAF) to stockpile high-demand items and help overcome inherent challenges forecasting future demand; incentivizing security cooperation organizations (SCOs) to help allies and partners acquire the optimal solution, including non-program of record solutions; and creating processes and mechanisms to pre-clear and expedite non-program of record transfers (House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2024).

- **December 23, 2024: Fiscal Year 2025 National Defense Authorization Act.** Section 1210 required the Secretary of Defense to establish the FMS Continuous Process Improvement Board (CPIB). The CPIB is tasked with improving understanding of allied and partner requirements, speeding up technology release reviews, and providing allies and partners with "relevant priority equipment" (U.S. Congress, 2024).
- **April 9, 2025: Executive Order 14268, "Reforming Foreign Defense Sales to Improve Speed and Accountability."** The principal thrust of this executive order (EO) is to make the FMS process faster and, by extension, accelerate growth of the defense industrial base. Consistent with the FMS TIGER Task Force's recommendations, the EO pushes for greater exportability and requires State and DoD to deliver a proposal to Congress regarding changes to notification thresholds (The White House, 2025).
- **November 7, 2025: Memorandum on "Unifying the Department's Arms Transfer and Security Cooperation Enterprise."** Secretary Hegseth directs the realignment of the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) and the Defense Technology Security Administration (DTSA) from the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy (USD[P]) to the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment (USD[A&S]). Realigning DSCA to USD(A&S) ensures foreign demand for U.S. weapons and platforms is factored into the Department's own forecasting and that there is greater cohesion in the front-to-end process (i.e., acquisition through delivery) for weapons and platforms purchased by both the United States and foreign buyers (DoD, 2025).
- **December 4, 2025: National Security Strategy (NSS).** The NSS elevates industrial policy as a core national security imperative. Consistent with EO 14268, the NSS connects weapons sales with strengthening supply chains and economic resilience. The NSS also codifies the concept of burden-sharing and burden-shifting, which offers "more favorable treatment" on arms sales and technology sharing to countries that "take more responsibility for security in their neighborhoods" (NSS, 2025).
- **December 18, 2025: Fiscal Year 2026 National Defense Authorization Act.** Arms sales and transfers policy is heavily featured in this NDAA, alongside numerous defense acquisition reform provisions. Notably, Section 1214 requires the Secretary of Defense to establish an office to support sales of non-program of record systems to allies and partners by October 1, 2026. The office is responsible for coordinating with allies and partners on non-program of record purchases; facilitating industry engagements with foreign customers; developing FMS cases for non-program of record systems; and coordinating internally within the DoD to expedite delivery of non-program of record systems.
- **January 23, 2026: National Defense Strategy (NDS).** Burden-sharing is one of the NDS's four lines of effort; in that vein, the Department will prioritize arms sales and defense industrial collaboration (NDS, 2026).
- **February 6, 2026: EO 14383 "Establishing an America First Arms Transfer Strategy."** This EO builds upon EO 14268 by clarifying that arms sales will be used to

build production capacity for critical weapons. It also requires a sales catalog of priority systems to be marketed to allies and partners. Critically, the EO highlights how arms transfers can help "new entrants and nontraditional defense companies" innovate, grow, and contribute to the DIB (The White House, 2026).

- **February 10, 2026: DSCA and DTSA Realign to USD(A&S).** The realignment creates an organizational structure designed to implement policy directives to ensure the Department's own acquisitions and arms sales reinforce growth of the DIB (Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 2026).

The timeline shows that at the policy levels—both Congressional and within the Executive—there is shared recognition that the FMS system needs reformations to deliver optimal solutions (regardless of whether the solution is part of a program of record or not) to allies and partners in a timely manner. Doing so is crucial to both ensuring the United States remains the premier partner of choice for arms sales, as well as advancing the current strategic objective of enhancing burden-sharing among allies and partners.

What is less clear at this time, however, is the breadth of non-program of record solutions that the Department will consider priorities for helping allies and partners acquire. There are infinitely more non-program of record solutions than there are programs of record. Discernment (i.e., limiting the focus to those that can have the highest impact and are most readily employable both allies and partners) will be critical to meeting policymakers' intent to expedite delivery of optimal solutions to increase burden-sharing.

Further, there is no explicit recognition of the role that commercial-first companies and technologies should play in building allied and partner capabilities. Emphasis on the importance of increasing foreign sales to fuel growth and strengthening of the DIB is clear. Viewed in the context of policy imperatives to grow the DIB, reference to helping "new entrants" sell to allies and partners seems principally targeted at neo-primes and emergent defense technology companies (e.g., growth-stage drone, missile, and maritime systems companies). Commercial cloud, AI, and imagery companies, for instance, can also provide high-quality solutions to allies and partners.

Commercial Technologies and Modern Warfighting

Though the effects of drones tend to garner the most attention in the Russia-Ukraine war, Ukraine's rapid adoption of commercial technologies highlights their importance to building resilient, adaptable militaries that are capable of holding the line against adversaries like China and Russia. Commercial cloud and edge computing proved essential for the Ukrainian government to withstand Russian cyberattacks at the outset of the war (Mitchell, 2022). Fortunately, Ukraine invested significantly in building national-level digital infrastructure—all built with commercial technologies—three years before Russia launched its invasion. The digital infrastructure was not for military or security applications per se. Rather, this infrastructure was designed to modernize civilian agency functions and the citizenry's "user experience" vis-a-vis government services. For example, the digital infrastructure was used to modernize tax reporting, drivers licenses, and entitlement programs. President Zelensky framed this effort as building a "state in a smartphone" (Zelensky, 2019).

That very same infrastructure is now being used by an extraordinary ecosystem of companies, research institutions, and the Ukrainian government to rapidly develop new applications for defense, security, and intelligence functions. For example, apps were developed for Ukrainians to securely report Russian military positions and activities. Ukrainians are integrating commercial off-the-shelf software, data analytics, compute, and artificial intelligence with commercial products (e.g., sensors, small drones, and communications devices) to rapidly

innovate and push new capabilities into the field. Ukrainians are using those same commercial technologies to also optimize employment of munitions and other military systems. For example, commercially-available computer vision models and analytics are allowing Ukrainians to more precisely identify targets and optimize use of critical limited resources like 155-millimeter shells.

Ukraine is not alone in its adoption of commercial technologies to enhance military capabilities. For its part, the United States' military is attempting to do much the same. The fiscal year 2026 National Defense Authorization Act reinforced that the DoD should take a commercial first approach to acquisitions. President Trump's EO, "Modernizing Defense Acquisitions and Spurring Innovation in the Defense Industrial Base" states that the DoD will have a "first preference for commercial solutions" (White House, 2025).

China and Russia are also leveraging commercially available technologies at scale. China's military-civil fusion strategy is core to the People's Liberation Army's (PLA's) modernization efforts (Center for Security and Emerging Technology, 2025). As just one example, the PLA is integrating commercial artificial intelligence into virtually all of its operations—everything from backend enterprise systems, to logistics and command, control, communications, computers, cyber, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C5ISR) (Center for Security and Emerging Technology, 2026). A February 2026 report from the Center for Security and International Studies (CSIS) noted how Russia is integrating open-source and commercial artificial intelligence models like Llama (produced by Facebook parent company, Meta) and Mistral (a French company) into its command and control (C2) architectures (Bondar, 2026).

Evolving Security Cooperation to Promote Commercial Solutions

Helping allies and partners keep pace with technological change, build resilient forces capable of assuming greater ownership of security challenges, and enhancing collective deterrence against China and Russia requires the United States to offer a full suite of potential solutions. Non-program of record technologies are essential in that regard. The role that commercial solutions, specifically, can play in achieving these goals warrants more explicit attention.

To be clear, there are efforts already underway to work with allies and partners on commercial technology applications. For example, the Defense Innovation Unit (DIU) is administering prize challenges for AUKUS (DoD, 2024a). DoD teams are also testing commercial solutions for maritime security in Southeast Asia (DoD, 2024b). However, IDA's research found that the Do currently lacks a broader vision to scale and sustain such efforts (Lane, 2024). IDA's research also revealed four high-level insights that can help the Department close this gap.

First, defense innovation organizations (DIOs) like the DIU do not have the mandate, resources, or infrastructure to consistently support efforts to help allies or partners explore commercial solutions. Second, legal and institutional barriers within the Department inhibit the DIOs' ability to consistently share data with security cooperation entities like DSCA.

Third, as noted above, discernment will be required in terms of what commercial technologies and applications to prioritize. IDA's analysis suggested that commercial compute, data, cyber, and artificial intelligence (e.g., multi-modal and generative) can have the greatest transformative effect for allies and partners. Further, commercial technologies could be most impactful for allies and partners' ISR, measurement and signals intelligence, and maritime domain awareness capabilities, though there are many other high-impact applications worthy of consideration.

Finally, IDA posited multiple potential business models for how the Department could create the organizational structure needed to engage allies and partners on commercial technology adoption. One potential structure proposed by IDA was for DSCA to develop a dedicated team resourced and mandated to lead such efforts, drawing on technical expertise from across the Department.

Given the government's clear intent to open the aperture for allies and partners to acquire non–program of record solutions, this paper revisits and refreshes some of the recommendations first made by IDA in 2024. We will also offer new ideas for consideration as the security cooperation enterprise implements policy and organizational changes, all with the intent of helping position the enterprise to more effectively incorporate commercial technologies into security cooperation activities with allies and partners.

Ensure Commercial Technologies Factor into Organizational Mandates and Design

Congress's recent mandate to create an office focused on non–program of record sales is generally consistent with one of IDA's recommendations to consider a dedicated team within DSCA focused on commercial technologies. Though it is unclear at this time where the office which Congress has mandated will ultimately reside within the Department, many of the practical steps that IDA offered for how DSCA could create such an office may still apply.

First, commercial technologies are an important and impactful subset of non–program of record systems. As such, commercial technologies should be a defined priority for the new non–program of record office. Second, to effectively promote and enable adoption of commercial technologies among allies and partners, the office will need to clearly define its value proposition to industry, allies, and partners alike.

The office could deliver value to commercial technologies and allies and partners by facilitating customer discovery and requirements generation. The office could build and establish relationships and deep understanding of allies and partner needs and help develop procurement strategies and roadmaps for the incorporation of commercial technologies into allied and partner operations. Further, the office could leverage its convening power and create network effects. Specifically, the office can serve as a point of entry for commercial companies interested in selling their technologies to foreign militaries. By leveraging its relationships and understanding of allied and partner requirements, this office can help new, commercial entrants to foreign military sales more effectively break into the market.

Finally, the office will need to cultivate and maintain a new ecosystem of partners, both in industry and government. Commercial technology companies and new entrants to the defense market often do not have the institutional knowledge or mechanisms needed to effectively engage foreign military customers. Helping them develop the internal capacity to do so will be important for the office to succeed in expanding the base of companies participating in the international arms sales market beyond the traditional primes. Consistent with President Trump's EO, "Establishing an America First Arms Transfer Strategy," the office should also work closely with the Department of State and the Department of Commerce to help commercial companies and new entrants navigate international defense markets and connect with customers.

Use Marketplaces of Vetted Commercial Technologies

The DoD invests heavily in validating commercial technologies to ensure their trustworthiness, security, and reliability. It is also parlaying these validation efforts to create internally-facing marketplaces designed to accelerate procurement and adoption of commercial solutions across the Department and the Services. For example, the DIU created a Blue UAS List (which has since transitioned to the Defense Contract Management Agency). The list

includes drones that are compliant and approved by the Department for procurement. Platform One (led by the U.S. Air Force) effectively serves as a marketplace for DoD teams to obtain tools needed for software development. Opening such marketplaces to foreign customers (or creating a foreign-facing marketplaces) could help the security cooperation enterprise more quickly identify potential solutions and potentially accelerate solution delivery.

Modify Foreign Military Financing to Promote American Technology

Currently, Foreign Military Financing (FMF) can only be used by Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey, Portugal, Pakistan, Yemen, and Greece to enter into a contract directly with a defense firm (i.e., a "direct commercial contract", or DCC). Congress could amend legislation allowing any ally or partner to leverage FMF for a DCC, within some limits. For example, permission to use FMF for DCCs could be constrained to acquiring commercial solutions already included in one of the DoD's aforementioned marketplaces.

Another potential constraint could be limiting use to the commercial technologies that the United States government wants to promote abroad the most (e.g., commercial computing service providers, artificial intelligence, or communications technologies) in the context of geopolitical competition with China and Russia.

Leverage Program Acquisition Executives' Insights into Commercial Solutions

Many Program Acquisition Executives (PAEs) are already exploring or incorporating commercial solutions into their programs. However, assuming legislation and policy are implemented as intended, PAEs will be increasing their level of engagement with commercial solutions providers. With DSCA's realignment to USW(A&S), the security cooperation enterprise has an opportunity to glean insights into the commercial technologies being considered, piloted, and adopted across the Department's acquisition portfolios. This can help the security cooperation enterprise identify vetted, trusted solutions for allies and partners' operational needs.

Leverage Allies and Partners to Test Commercial Solutions

As a counterpoint to leveraging PAEs to identify potential solutions, allies and partners may be able to help the Department's acquisition community explore new technologies and applications, too. For example, by leveraging experimentation authorities provided in Section 873 of the fiscal year 2026 National Defense Authorization Act, Combatant Commanders could sponsor experimentation and prototyping of commercial technologies in collaboration with allies and partners. The Combatant Commands and USMILGRPs can gather insights from allies and partners on the efficacy of such commercial technologies, helping inform the DoD's own procurements.

Prepare the Security Cooperation Enterprise to Promote Commercial Solutions

Combatant Commands, Service Component Commands, and USMILGRPs need to be informed on commercial technology applications and key considerations for how allies and partners can effectively adopt them. The Defense Security Cooperation Service and Defense Security Cooperation University can address this need by incorporating additional use cases and guidance into training and education, preparing members of the Defense Security Cooperation Service for considering and implementing different kinds of solutions to allies and partners defense challenges.

As the acquisition community adopts this new mission area, as well, they should be prepared for the unique requirements of allies and partners. This involves earlier integration of allies and partners potential requirements into planning, and considering exportability requirements earlier in the design and adoption of new technologies. This is a mandate for the

Warfighting Acquisition University, to open the aperture for acquisition professional to include potential sales outside of the United States in their certification and coursework.

Final Thoughts

As the acquisition community assumes greater responsibility for oversight and execution of the Department's security cooperation mission, it is critical that security cooperation is not viewed exclusively through the lens of acquisitions and sales transactions. For example, assisting allies and partners in improving their institutional capacity (i.e., policy and strategy, resource management, human resource management, logistics management, military operations, joint concepts, and intelligence) will help ensure they are not acquiring capabilities for a hollow force.

Rather, if arms transfers and institutional capacity building efforts are conducted synergistically, the Department can best reinforce the U.S.'s status as preferred partner (thereby helping position the United States long-term as allies' and partners' key source of weapons and platforms) and enable other countries to take on greater burden sharing.

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Department of Acquisition, Finance, and Manpower
Naval Postgraduate School
555 Dyer Road, Ingersoll Hall
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