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Unlikely Routes: Stronger Militaries by Transforming Military Education

By **Malik Ahmad Jalal and Agus Yudhoyono*** –

“I hope our wisdom will grow with our power, and teach us that the less we use our power, the greater it will be.”

The words of U.S. philosopher-president Thomas Jefferson adorn the walls of Jefferson Memorial Library at West Point Military Academy. They reflect the ethos that mastering warfare will not be sufficient to guarantee the pre-eminence of an army. Rather, it is the wisdom acquired by mastering all forms of knowledge that enables a country to project power through non-military means, which will ultimately determine supremacy. This article identifies the key factors that have led the U.S. Army to develop leadership that takes into consideration the political, social, and economic aspects of a conflict to devise a nuanced military strategy.

There have been instances when the U.S. military did not live up to Jeffersonian ideals, but in the past 200 years there have also been outstanding American generals who have exemplified the tradition of utilizing force judiciously. Gen. George Marshall was an equally great diplomat as he was a general. He foresaw that a broken and wounded Europe could not be healed by another Treaty of Versailles forced upon the defeated powers, but by forging a common vision for a prosperous future. As architect of the European Recovery Plan, Gen. George Marshall set the foundation for peace that has led to the European Union.

Most recently, when sectarian violence spiraled out of control in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus turned conventional military thought upside down in devising a counterinsurgency doctrine. Instead of a search-and-destroy mission, the U.S. military protected the local population to create pockets of security and used diplomacy and patronage to wean support away from al-Qaeda. In addition to an extra 24,000 troops, the judicious use of the tribal system and collaboration with community leaders resulted in the success of the surge.

We believe the factors that created the leadership that led to this success are:

The World is West Point's Training Ground

Every year an estimated sixty non-U.S. students join West Point to train with American cadets. Therefore, success at the Academy requires collaboration across cultural and ideological divides.

This cross-cultural training continues after West Point as the U.S. Army sends officers to work with the leadership of a diverse set of countries. As a result, individuals have a unique opportunity to understand new cultural and political contexts and develop strong relationships that last long into their careers. One such example came when General Musharraf of Pakistan conducted a coup in October 1999. His first call was not to the U.S. State Department, but to Gen. Anthony Zinni. This shows that working with international leaders gives U.S. officers an unparalleled education in diplomacy and cross-cultural leadership.

Expanding Knowledge and Nurturing Continuous Learning

The U.S. government dedicates a significant portion of its annual defense expenditure to the training of its military. Evidence of this is the fact that the U.S. Military Academy has a student-faculty ratio of only six to one, resulting in extensive interaction between students and instructors. In addition, longer duration of training than that of developing country armies allows every cadet to study military science, two years of a foreign language, and subjects as diverse as engineering and liberal arts (including recitation of poetry!).

Post-West Point, U.S. Army officers have extensive learning opportunities such as the Advanced Degree Program to achieve master's or doctorate degrees and the elite one- year National Security Fellows Program. Lt. Gen. Tad Oelstrom USAF (ret.), Director of the National Security Program at the Harvard Kennedy School, points out that the National Security Fellows gain exposure to the wealth of experience at institutions such as Harvard University and the Council on Foreign Relations and then take this knowledge back to their operational roles. These opportunities as well as a formal framework that encourages officers to advance their educational qualifications helps sustain the quest for further knowledge.

Infusing Critical Thinking

The system of education at West Point nurtures a critical mind where acceptance of ideas is won through analytical discourse of facts and reasoning of argument. For example, a second-year cadet is currently writing an essay on the lessons of My Lai. By openly discussing one of the darkest events of U.S. military history, West Point allows its cadets to develop the independent and critical thinking that is necessary to ensure that cadets internalize these values for the long-term and the army is adaptive to a changing environment.

Today's information age has transformed the challenges faced by modern armies. New technologies are empowering non-state actors to pose unpredictable threats. It is important that all armies learn key lessons from the way the United States conducts its professional military education to prepare for the challenges of a transformed security environment.

We offer three recommendations for other countries to benefit from the U.S. experience.

Recommendation 1: The United States should increase cross-country participation for cadets and officers from developing countries through joint exercises and greater opportunities to study with U.S. and other militaries.

Why: Such programs improve understanding between militaries, demonstrate positive American values to foreign officers, and give them access to a world-class education that they might not otherwise have.

How: This can be accomplished by expanding the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program to include a greater number of foreign military officers. Executive programs should be introduced for the top ranking officers from developing countries to study with the U.S. National Security Fellows.

Recommendation 2: Armies should build a solid intellectual foundation by reforming current military training curricula to expose officers to a wider range of subjects. The duration of cadet training should be increased and officers incentivized to seek educational opportunities throughout their careers.

Why: Increasing long-term educational opportunities is important because two years of training may not be sufficient to infuse a new set of values or achieve in-depth knowledge of a wide range of subjects. In addition, if officers believe their military careers will suffer by pursuing educational training this will prevent them from participating in continuous education opportunities.

How: Armies should increase the duration of training at the military academies to a total of four years. They should also re-frame the curriculum to increase emphasis on the social and political aspects of security, not only concentrating on tactical military strategy. A formal framework should be instituted with authorized periods of leave for education without penalizing their military careers.

Recommendation 3: Countries should develop a long-term commitment to educational growth by providing opportunities in a meritocratic system. Learning should be encouraged through debate and discourse methodology rather than a rote learning method.

Why: A meritocratic system of selection and promotion of officers would ensure that the more competent officers rise, thus providing incentives for other officers to also upgrade their skills and knowledge. Methods of learning through classroom discussions and debate allow students to deepen and internalize their understanding much more effectively than through rote learning. This will further equip the cadets with critical thinking skills.

How: The profile of the selection process should be raised and made prestigious, with only the most competent officers being selected. A greater portion of teaching should be conducted through case studies with cadets taking different positions and arguing from those vantage points.

Conclusion

Wars are no longer about defeating an enemy army and subjugating a local population. They are increasingly about eliminating threats from non-state actors, which cannot be achieved without the support of the local population. If developing countries fashion the training of their officer cadre on the U.S. model, they will create a military leadership capable of meeting the complex and multi-dimensional security challenges. More importantly, such an education would instill in their officers the limitations of military power, and this might just deter future military interventions and indirectly contribute to growth of democracy in developing countries.

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