Defense Security Cooperation University Research Agenda

March 2026

Security cooperation is a cornerstone of the U.S. National Defense Strategy, playing a vital role in defending the homeland, deterring China, increasing burden sharing, and supercharging the defense industrial base. To succeed in helping to restore peace through strength and to achieve the policy goals of the America First Arms Transfer Strategy, security cooperation must be an evidence-based practice. When evidence is properly integrated into policy, planning, and implementation, security cooperation activities become more effective and efficient in advancing U.S. national security.

This Defense Security Cooperation University (DSCU) Research Agenda identifies the most significant evidence gaps in security cooperation. Its purpose is to harness the intellectual power of a growing network of security cooperation scholars to conduct research that delivers the greatest value to practitioners and policymakers.

Existing research has profoundly advanced our understanding of how to design and implement security cooperation activities that support U.S. interests. These insights are not confined to academic discussions. Research equips practitioners with the tools to ask the right questions, interpret the answers, and make informed decisions. While evidence does not dictate how practitioners should act, it empowers them with the knowledge to do their jobs more effectively. From arms sales to training to institutional capacity building, evidence underpins work across the security cooperation enterprise.

Despite this progress, many unanswered questions remain. Security cooperation practitioners recognize the importance of evidence and increasingly demand research to address the challenges they encounter daily. A focused effort is needed—drawing on history and the social sciences—to generate reliable answers and build a cumulative foundation of evidence to help practitioners navigate the complex global environment.

This Research Agenda creates that bridge between innovative research and the concrete problems faced by the security cooperation enterprise. As a living document, the Research Agenda will evolve to address emerging issues and priorities. Practitioners are encouraged to engage with it and identify areas where new evidence can have great impact.

This Research Agenda describes critical evidence gaps around four topics:

1. **Security Cooperation in an Evolving Strategic Context**
2. **Arms Trade and Defense Sales**
3. **Operational and Industrial Burden Sharing**
4. **Managing the Security Cooperation Enterprise**

DSCU welcomes any analysis that advances knowledge on these topics but is particularly interested in research that:

- **Is relevant to the planning and implementation of security cooperation.** Much of the existing research on security cooperation focuses on the strategic level, which is beyond the direct influence of most practitioners. While this evidence is valuable and relevant to the broader practice of security cooperation, there is a pressing need for studies that inform the work of the larger security cooperation workforce. These security cooperation professionals are primarily responsible for planning and implementing programs rather than making high-level decisions about the "what, where, and how much" of security cooperation.
- **Answers questions from many disciplinary perspectives.** To build a robust and reliable evidence base, DSCU seeks focused inquiry from a variety of disciplines, including those not traditionally applied to the study of security cooperation. Fields such as economics, business, marketing, organizational behavior, sociology, psychology, history, and public administration offer novel frameworks and relevant analytic tools that can help enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of security cooperation.
- **Examines international strategies and partner behavior.** Most security cooperation research focuses on the United States. However, America's allies and adversaries have long engaged in arms transfers, training and advising, international military education, and other security cooperation activities. To develop a more generalized understanding of security cooperation, researchers must examine how other countries conceptualize and strategically approach security cooperation, as well as how America's partners perceive and assess their security cooperation engagements with the United States.

1 Security Cooperation in an Evolving Strategic Context

Existing research provides foundational insights on the challenges to successful security cooperation; however, the global context today differs considerably from that on which much of the literature is based. Though shifts in military technology, the character of war, and the strategic environment typically reflect gradual evolution rather than revolutionary changes, it is essential to examine how to adapt existing evidence for today's realities. What are the implications of emerging technologies and warfighting domains, evolutions in warfare, global economic and strategic competition, and U.S. national security strategy?

Potential questions include: are there features of the cyber, space, or maritime domains, or of artificial intelligence and autonomous systems, that require rethinking existing practices around defense sales, burden sharing, or defense institutional development? Are there novel issues—strategic, technical, legal, or normative—when partners face irregular threats that extend into non-military domains? When do security cooperation activities by competitors threaten U.S. interests, and what are optimal responses?

2 Arms Trade and Defense Sales

2.1 Characterizing the Changing Global Market for Arms

To maintain a competitive edge in the global arms trade, it is necessary to understand the dynamics of an evolving market shaped by the emergence of new exporters and military technologies. Significant gaps remain in understanding the market's fundamental characteristics, including the multifaceted interactions among participants—not only governments and industry but also non-state actors and illicit networks—and the resulting patterns of trade and international armament cooperation (both government-to-government agreements and industry-to-government offsets). Research is needed on the drivers of exporter and importer behavior, particularly how states decide which capabilities to acquire and whether to do so through indigenous production, cooperative production, or importation. Of particular interest is how public and government perceptions of major exporters and export systems, such as the U.S. Foreign Military Sales and Direct Commercial Sales systems, develop and evolve over time.

2.2 The Value of Defense Sales

What are the benefits, costs, and risks associated with arms imports and exports? A substantial, though dated, body of literature examines the value of participation in the defense trade for both importers and exporters. Yet the resulting conventional wisdom regarding consequences—such as dependence, leverage, and economic development—is increasingly met with skepticism. Nuanced theoretical investigation and rigorous empirical analysis can clarify the value and implications of defense sales. Important areas of focus include dynamics of dependence and political leverage, the subsidizing effects of defense sales on domestic acquisition (e.g., reductions in per-unit costs), spillover effects on the economy and political system, and the economic, political, diplomatic, and social conditions in which defense sales can become a strategic enabler or liability.

2.3 The Challenge of Constrained Supply

Long-term industry trends have strained the capacity of the U.S. defense industrial base to meet the growing demand for arms from partners, alongside the needs of the U.S. military. Adapting to a world of constrained supply and increasing market competition, while simultaneously expanding production capacity and developing innovative military technologies, requires examination of the defense industrial base in the context of arms production for export. Key knowledge gaps include the scale and structure of the defense industry, particularly non-prime contractors, the levers available to stimulate domestic and foreign investment in production capacity and to encourage new firms to enter the market, and the tradeoffs to international armaments cooperation, including co-development, co-production, third-party licensing, co-sustainment, and third-party transfer. Additionally, research should assess the implications of constrained U.S. supply alongside a growing number of exporters for the prioritization of systems and foreign partners, commercial advocacy and communications, U.S. embassy operations, and arms transfer processes.

3 Operational and Industrial Burden Sharing

3.1 Burden Sharing in Practice

A considerable body of evidence on security cooperation illuminates the obstacles to burden sharing and strategies to elicit partner contributions. However, the implications for practice—how to integrate these insights into the design and implementation of security cooperation activities—remain underdeveloped. This disconnect between theory and practice is most evident in two areas. First, while practitioners now widely accept that it is essential to understand partners to influence their behavior, it remains unclear which characteristics they must account for, how to operationalize them, and the implications for tailoring security cooperation activities in response. Second, because numerous parts of the U.S. government control security cooperation decision-making, it is difficult for practitioners to coordinate and for partners to predict sustained engagement. How can practitioners design engagements to influence partners despite coordination challenges, and how can they align activities to achieve coherent outcomes?

3.2 Security Cooperation and Readiness

To deter aggression and prevail in armed conflict, the United States relies on partners to both deploy force and facilitate U.S. power projection through access to territory and basing, overflight rights, local logistics, and sustainment support. In addition to these operational imperatives, the U.S. is increasingly looking to partners to contribute to defense industrial readiness and resilience through defense sales, co-production, co-sustainment, and supply chain coordination. Yet there remains a critical gap in understanding how various security cooperation activities in periods before conflict lead to meaningful burden sharing, including operational support to U.S. forces and defense-industrial production surges, during times of intensified competition and armed conflict.

3.3 Individuals, Personal Relationships, and Security Cooperation Outcomes

Many security cooperation activities are predicated on the assumption that interactions between American and foreign military personnel can drive broader behavioral and institutional changes within partner militaries and governments. For instance, international military training and education programs provide sustained engagement between U.S. and foreign service members, offering opportunities to share U.S. approaches to national defense alongside American values, interests, and institutional practices. However, frequent turnover of personnel and the inherent complexity of partners' political systems and military bureaucracies raise questions about the causal significance of individuals and their relationships. While there are countless anecdotal examples of relationship-building programs yielding positive, neutral, or even negative results, there is limited evidence of the nuanced effects that shared values, trust, and intellectual interoperability may have in enhancing burden sharing and of approaches to advising, training, and educating individuals that might generate institution-level change.

4 Managing the Security Cooperation Enterprise

4.1 Coordination and Efficiency Across a Decentralized and Distributed Enterprise

The security cooperation enterprise is vast, encompassing numerous components of the executive branch, U.S. embassies, Congress, the defense industry, and close allies. It spans nearly every corner of the Department of War, including the Office of the Secretary, the Joint Staff, military departments, combatant commands, and defense agencies. Authority over policy, resources, planning, and implementation is widely distributed across the enterprise. This complex organizational environment presents substantial obstacles to achieving strategic alignment, process efficiency, transparency, and accountability. Addressing these problems requires closing key knowledge gaps, including the structure of the enterprise; the incentives driving its many actors; the original intent and evolution of rules, regulations, and processes; and pathways to bureaucratic mobilization and institutional change.

4.2 Building a Security Cooperation Profession

Specialized knowledge, skills, and mindsets are necessary for effective security cooperation. However, efforts to develop the security cooperation workforce face significant challenges, including disagreement over what constitutes expertise and a manning system that often treats security cooperation as a temporary assignment rather than a career path. Building a professional, competent, and unified workforce requires understanding the qualities that define exceptional security cooperation practitioners and the barriers to professional development, competency-based education, and strategic retention. It also necessitates identifying how to shift from a culture of compliance and "box checking," where success is measured by task completion, to a professional culture that emphasizes strategic outcomes, critical thinking, continuous improvement, specialized expertise, and collaboration.