A Syrian Free Army (SFA) officer meets with the platoon leader of 4th Platoon, Company A, 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, during a coalition patrol of the deconfliction zone at a combat outpost near Al-Tanf, Syria, 23 December 2024. Coalition and SFA officers discussed civilian movements, potential malign actors in the area, and the state of the combat outpost. These type of engagements enable coalition and partner forces to maintain security and stability within the combined joint operations area. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Fred Brown, U.S. Army)

Security Force Assistance as a Tool of Strategic Competition

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Security force assistance (SFA) is an indirect tool of competition that has often been used during periods of heightened strategic rivalry. When Athens launched the Sicilian Expedition to capture Syracuse during the Peloponnesian War, Sparta countered by dispatching Gen. Gylippus and a small contingent of Peloponnesian soldiers to train the Sicilian city-state's forces, who repulsed the Athenians.[1] In the wake of the Seven Years' War, France sent military aid to the American colonists to obliquely weaken its long-standing rival, Britain.[2] And during the Cold War, both the United States and the USSR eschewed direct confrontation in favor of proxy wars, which required substantial inflows of SFA by both sides.[3] Today, Washington and Beijing are adhering to this pattern by dangling SFA in front of prospective partners in a bid to vie for influence worldwide.[4]

The strategy of binding international partners to Washington through an intricate constellation of SFA programs will continue to remain a pillar of U.S. national security.[5] Accordingly, it is imperative to discern if SFA is a viable approach for furthering U.S. interests and what conditions make SFA programs successful. However, while many practitioners and scholars believe that states provide SFA to gain influence, this assumption is rarely systematically interrogated.[6] In fact, a review of recent SFA literature fails to provide strong evidence that SFA—and more specifically, U.S.-backed SFA—translates into foreign policy influence.[7] The mixed results are likely due to the fact that most analyses focus almost exclusively on U.S. SFA endeavors in a vacuum.[8] While scholars suggest that the United States should have more influence in country A where it trains twenty officers in comparison to country B where it only trains five officers, the reverse is often true. Knowing that an adversary trains thirty officers in country A and zero officers in country B would be helpful in better interpreting these results. This omission is particularly problematic because the United States often employs SFA to reduce the influence of its geopolitical rivals.[9]

A more nuanced understanding of SFA should contextualize the SFA process in a highly competitive environment between great power rivals. Drawing on new scholarship presented at a security seminar for scholars and practitioners, this article helps make sense of the complex web of factors that impact SFA's efficacy as a tool of competition. First, it delves into three main political goals associated with SFA: building partner capacity, enhancing international influence, and "spoiling" strategic adversaries' security designs. Second, it discusses the two broad ways that suppliers use SFA to gain influence in a recipient state, emphasizing principal-agent dynamics and socialization. Finally, it introduces a conceptual model that national decision-makers can use to align ways and means with ends.

SFA Goals in Strategic Competition

States provide SFA to recipient states for a myriad of reasons. Three significant political goals associated with SFA are building partner capacity, gaining influence in and over the recipient state, and spoiling strategic adversaries' abilities to accomplish their security-related goals. The ostensible goal for most U.S. SFA programs seems straightforward: to build the warfighting capacity of U.S. partners so they can address mutually shared security concerns.[10] SFA allows the United States to make cost effective investments in partners so they—and not Washington—can address security threats directly whenever and wherever they emerge.[11] Not only do allies and partners increase the sheer number of soldiers and firepower available to confront strategic threats, allies and partners also often possess key local knowledge and insights that Americans do not. Likewise, they can often take the fight to the enemy when the United States is constrained from taking direct action itself.

Building partner capacity is successful as long as the SFA provider has sufficient money to equip and train the recipient state and both the SFA provider and recipient are sufficiently aligned—not only at the strategic level but also in terms of their goals for SFA. Many historical cases of SFA show that strategic alignment between the United States and its partner is a necessary but insufficient condition for partner capacity building to succeed. Strategic alignment means that the United States and its partner share a common understanding of an acute strategic threat. Such threats include both foreign states and nonstate actors such as terrorist organizations. When the United States and a partner share a common adversary, SFA can be quite successful as the historical cases of Turkey in the 1950s, the mujahidin in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and present-day Ukraine highlight.[12] Nonetheless, despite sharing a common adversary, the United States endeavors to cultivate indigenous partner forces in

Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan were all met with varying degrees of failure.[13]

SFA failed in these cases because while the United States and its partners were aligned at the strategic level, their specific goals for SFA were not aligned. While the United States wanted to build the capacity of its partner forces, its partners did not. Regimes have to balance both internal and external threats. Internal threats are often more likely to lead to regime change than external aggression or mass uprisings.[14] Therefore, many countries—even those participating in SFA relationships—implement coup-proofing strategies to undermine their military's effectiveness and domestic influence. Due to coup concerns, South Vietnamese leaders sidelined U.S.-trained officers despite their military competence.[15] Indeed, SFA is particularly likely to fail to accomplish capacity building in cases where large numbers of U.S. forces are on the ground.[16] If the partner can rely on U.S. forces to defend against the external threat, the partner can focus exclusively on the internal threat. This threat prioritization incentivizes the partner to purposely weaken its military in direct contradiction to the U.S. goal of improving the military's effectiveness.

While building partner capacity is an inexact science that requires astute expertise at the operational and tactical levels, at a macro level, it is a relatively straightforward endeavor if both the SFA provider and recipient are aligned. The more complex task for the SFA provider, however, is using SFA as a tool to influence the recipient state to become more aligned with the former. Indeed, building partner capacity has no chance of success until the provider and recipient states are aligned. Therefore, SFA providers must often start with using SFA as a tool to influence.

States often provide SFA as a tool to gain influence in and over the recipient state.[17] Influence not only allows the provider to pursue successful partner-capacity building but also enables the SFA provider to secure other geopolitical benefits such as overflight, basing, port call rights, political support at the United Nations or other international institutions, access to natural resources and markets, etc. These political concessions are important to enable countries to build wealth and to stage and project power throughout the world.

The United States and other SFA providers sometimes prioritize political influence over building partner capacity even when the latter's goal is to increase its military strength and expertise. For example, the United States provided SFA to Ethiopia from the 1950s to the 1970s predominantly to maintain a communications base, overflight rights, and access to port facilities in Ethiopia, not to build their army's capacity. In fact, the United States wanted to provide the minimum SFA necessary to maintain its communication base and other Ethiopian concessions.[18] One could argue that the Canadian experience in Tanzania in the 1960s is another example of where the SFA provider had more conservative military-capacity-building goals than its partner. The United States and the United Kingdom encouraged Canada to provide SFA to Tanzania to reduce communist influence in the country. Canada, however, was hesitant to provide too much military equipment to the Tanzanians, despite the latter's repeated requests, for fear that it would be used by FRELIMO (*Frente de Libertação Moçambique*, or Mozambique Liberation Front) against Portugal, their NATO ally who was clinging on to its colonial possessions in Africa, especially Mozambique.[19] These examples highlight that while SFA can be used to gain

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Soldiers attached to Task Force Armadillo help Syrian Free Army soldiers deliver supplies to providers at the Shaam Clinic in Rukban, Syria, on 8 January 2025. During their visit to Rukban, the patrol met with clinic providers to receive a status update on the area and address local concerns. The coalition advises, assists, and supports partner forces to ensure the lasting defeat of the Islamic State and radical extremist ideologies. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Fred Brown, U.S. Army)

influence in a recipient state, rivalry between providers can make such influence more difficult to achieve exactly when it is most desired—during times of great power competition.

Sometimes a prospective recipient state's preferred SFA provider is a strategic adversary. When a strategic adversary exerts near monopolistic control over the recipient state's foreign policy decisions, using SFA to gain political influence in and over such a recipient state is unrealistic. However, an SFA provider can still play the role of "spoiler" in this case. For example, during the Kennedy administration, the 101st Airborne Division provided parachute training to Malian troops despite the fact that the Eastern Bloc, predominantly represented by Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, was Mali's preferred SFA provider at the time. The Malian soldiers were excited and impressed to receive this training that the Soviets would not provide them.[20] The 101st Airborne Division's SFA was certainly only one small factor that led to a souring in the Soviet-Mali relationship and Mali's realignment with the West. Nevertheless, such small-scale investments can make recipient states reevaluate their relationship with their primary SFA provider. At a minimum, by providing a recipient state a realistic outside option, the primary provider loses some leverage over its recipient state. For instance, after Washington cut nearly $5 million in arms sales to Bangkok following a 2014 coup, Beijing happily filled the vacuum with condition-free military assistance.[21] This move put the DOD on the defensive, adding stress to an already delicate situation in which the United States wanted to both support democratic ideals and maintain access to critical basing

infrastructure in Utapao. Given competition, the SFA provider simply cannot exact as many political concessions from the recipient state, and the recipient state gains the ability to make more independent foreign policy decisions. In short, even a small amount of SFA can undermine a strategic adversary's ability to keep a recipient in line—at least without a more substantial and expensive investment.

States that use SFA to "influence" or to "spoil" are both using SFA for the same purpose: to shift a state's alignment. The only difference is one's perspective. When a provider uses SFA to influence a recipient, the focus is on more closely aligning the recipient with itself. When a provider uses SFA to "spoil" a strategic competitor's strategy, the focus is on breaking a recipient state's alignment with one's competitor. As alignment is a prerequisite to successfully build partner capacity, the next section will focus primarily on how SFA providers rely on principal-agent dynamics and socialization to shift alignment. While we will primarily use the word "influence," providers can use these same tools to "spoil."

Tool of Influence: The Principal-Agent Model

The first way of conceiving of the problem is the principal-agent model. The SFA provider (principal) gives equipment, training, and advice to the partner (agent) but can never be sure that the partner will use this SFA in accordance with the provider's intentions.[22] The provider can use different methods to monitor what the partner is doing with the SFA and structure rewards and punishments in a way to incentivize the partner to use SFA in accordance with the provider's intentions.

In terms of monitoring, the placement and function of advisors is critically significant. Optimizing advisor missions requires considering command echelon and engagement type (e.g., training, advising, or accompanying). Notably, the United States is most adept at monitoring agent compliance when advisors are strategically stationed at pivotal information hubs such as when they are embedded within partner-force headquarters where information is centralized and disseminated.[23]

Regardless of monitoring opportunities, the United States is often unsuccessful at structuring rewards and punishments in a way to force partner compliance. For example, in the aftermath of 9/11, U.S. SFA still flowed to Pakistan despite Islamabad's tacit support for the Taliban. More recently, a parallel dynamic unfolded when the Biden administration tried to persuade Israel to exercise greater restraint in Gaza, notwithstanding the annual provision of approximately $3.8 billion in aid to Tel Aviv. Compliance can be very expensive for the partner due to domestic politics, coup risks, etc., and yet, at least a wealthy provider like the United States should be able to pay the price.[24] There are two main reasons why the provider may fail.

First, a provider's domestic politics may prevent it from providing its partner the necessary rewards or punishments. For example, diaspora politics could prevent the United States from sanctioning a noncompliant partner. In contrast, establishing human rights criteria—such as those reflected in the Leahy Law—could prevent the United States from providing the rewards necessary to enforce compliance on other issues.[25] Similarly, although Canadians initially saw the 1966 coup in Ghana as a success story for Western SFA in the face of Eastern Bloc competition, the Canadians later considered the reputational costs of being associated with coups to be too high.[26]

Second, a provider needs to have monopolistic control over at least part of the SFA market to have the leverage necessary to meaningfully threaten or to actually punish a partner for noncompliance. In a competitive market, the partner has the advantage because if a provider puts any political conditions on the SFA, the partner can obtain similar SFA from another provider that does not make SFA similarly contingent.

To achieve monopolistic control, providers need to consider the "goods" they are providing their partners. Some scholars argue that the United States should only provide commodity-style goods such as tactical-level training or 155 mm shells to aligned partners because these SFA markets are competitive and give the United States no leverage for influence. In contrast, sophisticated goods such as advanced weapons platforms and joint-level training enjoy less competitive markets.[27] Drilling down further, joint- or operational-level training is less competitive for certain military branches like the Air Force and Navy, which are more heavily dependent on advanced weapons platforms, whereas Army training and education—even at the operational and strategic levels—is more competitive.[28] Certainly, not every partner needs these sophisticated goods. Some argue that the United States should simply

not seek influence where there is no demand for these goods.[29] The counterpoint is that if the United States exits the SFA commodity market, this market in turn becomes less competitive for U.S. strategic adversaries. Therefore, the United States may benefit from remaining in the commodity market if only to prevent a strategic adversary from gaining monopolistic control over a partner.

While the United States and other major strategic competitors may be in search of a winner-take-all outcome, smaller providers use a strategy of differentiated goods to increase their likelihood of achieving influence while managing risks in the SFA "marketplace."[30] There are two strategies providers use in response to the competitive environment: they either embed themselves within the host nation's institutional processes or avoid long-term commitments and the associated risks by pursuing shorter-term activities with a lighter footprint. The former approach will likely lead to more trust and influence with large sunk costs, while the latter affords the provider more flexibility and entails less investment. In contemporary West Africa, France tends to adopt the former approach whereas Britain and Belgium tend to adopt the latter approach.[31]

Tool of Influence: The Socialization Approach

Whereas the principal-agent model takes a very economic approach to influencing partner behavior, others have suggested the socialization approach as an alternative. Whereas in the first approach, a provider cannot expect its partner to comply once the money stops, ideally socialization is a little more "sticky" and creates more longtime loyalty.

The general idea is that through military training and education and other personal contacts between the SFA provider's and recipient's military members, the recipient's military members develop personal relationships with the provider's military members, may be socialized into adopting their provider's worldview, and form a positive attachment to their provider. The recipient's military members subsequently rise to high-level positions within their state. From there, they have the desire and ability to align their state's foreign policy more closely with their SFA provider.[32]

There are three "pathways to failure" in the case of competing SFA providers.[33] First, the provision of alternate goods takes away from each provider's leverage and limits the provider's access to host-nation forces. Second, a rival provider can use a set of social strategies and messaging that explicitly challenges the other provider(s). Finally, these alternate material and ideational options create divisions within the recipient officer corps that lead to host-nation efforts to reinforce cohesion by removing one of the providers.

These dynamics are evident in the competition between Canadian and Chinese aid to Tanzania between 1965 and 1970. The Canadians believed that SFA could build personal rapport among Tanzanian officers and serve as a tool of social influence through which their beliefs and preferences could be shaped to align with the West. The Canadian's initial efforts to shape force planning and defense governance were implemented using an iterative process in which policies would be drafted by the Canadians, then sent to key Tanzanian defense leaders for review before adoption. This "incremental socialization" facilitated political buy-in by the Tanzanians and the Canadians faced little resistance. However, in 1967, Chinese SFA in the form of training and equipment such as tanks and artillery began to increase.[34]

Both the Chinese and Canadians encouraged resistance to the other in their training of the Tanzanians. For the Canadians, this meant emphasizing the poor quality of Chinese arms and equipment. For the Chinese, this meant discussions of "politics" and the distribution of Communist reading material. Ultimately, this resulted in divisions among the Tanzanian officer corps. In the end, Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere selected China over Canada as his country's primary SFA provider in order to reinforce his military's cohesion. Military relationships alone cannot secure strategic alignment; strategic alignment requires political support and a whole-of-government approach.[35]

Nevertheless, military leader preferences in recipient states can also give one provider an edge over another.[36] Evidence challenges the widely held assumption that officials who attend professional military education in a provider state have an equal likelihood of rising to positions of influence upon return to their sending countries.[37] Recipient states have a large amount of autonomy in choosing participants in the process through which foreign military officials are selected for educational exchange programs. Case studies of Ghana and Tanzania in the 1960s show
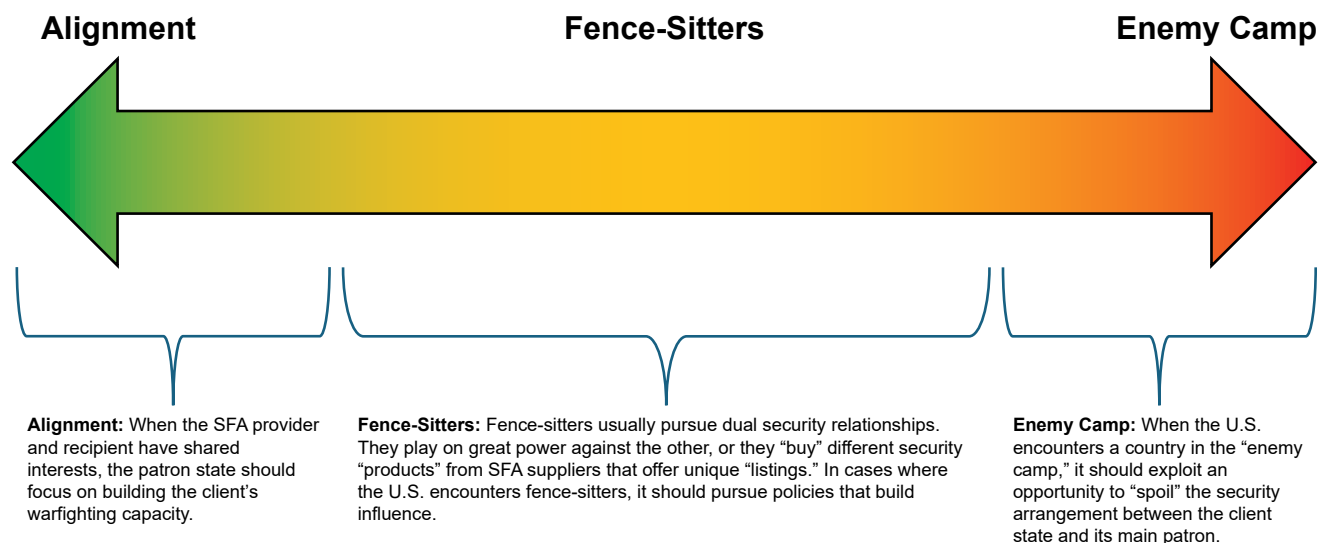
Chief Warrant Officer 3 Yagmur Saylak, Logistics Advisor Team 1610, 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade, teaches a group of Senegalese soldiers how to complete a vehicle inspection form on 5 March 2020 in Dakar, Senegal, during a class on preventative vehicle maintenance and vehicle recovery. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

that participants are more likely to rise to positions of authority if their state's leadership attended training provided by the same sponsor.[38]

While these papers highlight some of the recipient state's dynamics that affect outcomes in a competitive socialization environment, more work also needs to consider how competing socialization experiences affect individual military leaders. Indeed, in a U.S. government-sponsored survey of U.S. international military students, over 80 percent said that they had also received military training and education from another provider.[39] Ugandan Gen. Muhoozi Kainerugaba Museveni, a graduate of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and the U.S. Army Command and Staff College, tweeted his support for the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.[40] Was this simply a failure of Western socialization? Or, did the military courses he attended in Egypt, China, Israel, and South Africa socialize him in a different direction?[41]

While academics often conceptualize the SFA relationship through a principal-agent model or socialization lens, in practice, providers can and probably do employ both approaches simultaneously. Nonetheless, it may be useful to consider the potential limitations of each approach in a particular context. For example, where domestic politics may limit the application of effective incentivization structures, a provider may need to rely more heavily on socialization to achieve its objectives.

What Does "Winning" Look Like?

Using SFA as a tool of indirect competition is undoubtedly a tricky endeavor. First, national security decision-makers must agree on the main goal of SFA given the particular recipient state: building partner capacity, gaining influence over the recipient state, or spoiling a strategic competitor's designs with respect to the recipient state. A recipient state's position on the alignment spectrum will largely dictate which goal is feasible.

On the far end of the spectrum (see the figure), where the provider and the recipient goals are in lockstep, we have *alignment*. At the other end of the spectrum, when the prospective recipient state is strongly aligned with

Alignment   **Fence-Sitters**   **Enemy Camp**

Alignment: When the SFA provider and recipient have shared interests, the patron state should focus on building the client's warfighting capacity.

Fence-Sitters: Fence-sitters usually pursue dual security relationships. They play on great power against the other, or they "buy" different security "products" from SFA suppliers that offer unique "listings." In cases where the U.S. encounters fence-sitters, it should pursue policies that build influence.

Enemy Camp: When the U.S. encounters a country in the "enemy camp," it should exploit an opportunity to "spoil" the security arrangement between the client state and its main patron.

(Figure by authors)

Figure. Alignment Spectrum

one's competitor, the state inhabits the *enemy camp*. The vast space in between the two poles is comprised of nonaligned *fence-sitters*, who hedge against both providers. These recipient states either play one provider against the other, using the implicit threat of political realignment as bargaining leverage to extract more concessions or more freedom of action, or they participate in SFA relationships with both providers.

Alignment. In cases where the United States forms an SFA relationship with a state (or a nonstate actor) that shares Washington's strategic threat-perception and desire to build its military capacity, the United States should use SFA almost exclusively to build partner capacity. In these circumstances, the United States should transfer articles of equipment and military training that enable the recipient state to directly address the shared security concern. "Winning" comes down to the battlefield effectiveness of the recipient force. Are they damaging U.S. strategic adversaries more efficiently in terms of political and economic costs than the United States could without them? Certainly, if the United States desires a long-term, stable relationship with these types of recipient states and nonstate actors, it may use SFA to also maintain influence with subsequent generations of recipient leaders.

Fence-sitters. The case of fence-sitters presents a far more complex and realistic problem set, since it is

rare to find instances where SFA providers and recipients have perfectly overlapping threat perceptions and goals for SFA. Dealing with fence-sitters requires an approach that focuses less on building partner capacity and more on influence building. This is because fence-sitters represent "battleground" states. The United States should employ SFA policies that are not necessarily optimized to increase a fence-sitter's military capacity but are instead aimed at garnering support and winning influence. "Winning" means maintaining and improving alignment with less resources than it costs strategic adversaries to do the same. One of the most vital lessons of the Cold War is that the United States should never be on the wrong side of the cost curve vis-à-vis strategic competition.[42] At the same time, the United States should be cognizant that fence-sitters will require the heaviest investment in tools of influence to remain competitive with strategic adversaries. If the United States withdraws from this competition, it will likely lose its expeditionary power projection advantage over its strategic adversaries.

Enemy campers. The last category, enemy campers, presents strategic opportunities for the United States. While these states may be unwilling to cozy up to Washington, the United States can nonetheless introduce uncertainty into the security relationship between the enemy camper and its preferred SFA provider. The

United States should focus on "getting its foot in the door" to act as a spoiler by using a variety of low-cost, low-commitment SFA options. SFA, along with other diplomatic and economic programs, puts pressure on Washington's adversary to invest more heavily in its recipient states or risk losing their alignment altogether. The United States should be aware that their strategic adversaries will apply the same tactics to disrupt the benefits that the United States derives from its SFA relationships.

Conclusion

Security assistance providers routinely use SFA not only to address shared local threats but also to frustrate their adversaries' strategic plans. This trend is particularly evident during periods of increased competition between great power rivals. While the security assistance enterprise is often rife with contradictions and misadventures, there are several key takeaways that policymakers should bear in mind when crafting SFA packages.

First, SFA providers must achieve a degree of influence over their recipient states before they can effectively build the latter's warfighting capacity. SFA providers and recipients rarely have perfectly aligned goals. Therefore, SFA programs should include tools of influence via the principal-agent model and socialization.

Second, practitioners should appreciate the utility of both the principal-agent model (i.e., carrots and sticks) and the socialization approach. Academics often take an either-or approach when examining SFA. Isolating variables is, after all, an important aspect of building models to glean theoretical insights; however, practitioners have no such luxury in the daily execution of security assistance. During an intense standoff between Manila and Washington over the status of the Visiting Forces Agreement in 2020, for example, the United States relied on a combination of transactional penalties as well as the U.S. military's decades-long relationship with the Armed Forces of the Philippines to maintain its presence in the country.[43]

Finally, understanding the SFA continuum is crucial to aligning ways and means with ends. Policymakers should regularly reevaluate recipient states and determine where they exist on the spectrum. When the United States provides assistance to countries that already share U.S. goals, it can focus almost exclusively on building partner capacity. However, when a prospective recipient is a fencer-sitter or in the enemy camp, then Washington should prioritize gaining influence. Doing so will allow the United States to maintain (or ideally enhance) political alignment in the case of the former and spoil the plans of a strategic competitor in the case of the latter. ■

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27. Jonathan D. Caverley, "The Political Economy of Arms Transfers," paper presented at the Third Annual West Point Department of Social Sciences Seminar, International Security Seminar 2024: States, Societies & Security in the 21st Century, West Point, NY, 7–8 February 2024.

28. Erin Lemons, "Exploring the Influence of Leadership Preferences and Balancing Decisions on Foreign Military Education Outcomes," paper presented at the Third Annual West Point Department of Social Sciences Seminar, International Security Seminar 2024: States, Societies & Security in the 21st Century, West Point, NY, 7–8 February 2024.

29. Caverley, "The Political Economy of Arms Transfers."

30. Alex Neads, "Understanding Competition and Control during Security Force Assistance," paper presented at the Third Annual West Point Department of Social Sciences Seminar, International Security Seminar 2024: States, Societies & Security in the 21st Century, West Point, NY, 7–8 February 2024.

31. Ibid.

32. For example, see Carol Atkinson, *Military Soft Power: Public Diplomacy Through Military Educational Exchanges* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 1–18; Machain, "Exporting Influence," 316–20.

33. Joyce, "Exporting Might and Right."

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Lemons, "Exploring the Influence of Leadership Preferences."

37. For example, Atkinson, *Military Soft Power*; Machain, "Exporting Influence."

38. Lemons, "Exploring the Influence of Leadership Preferences."

39. Heather Moxon, Ellen Plants, and Lam Huynh (members of the FMF [Foreign Military Financing] and IMET [International Military Education and Training] Assessment, Monitoring, and Evaluation Team, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, U.S. State Department), interview by author, 29 July 2022.

40. Muhoozi Kainerugaba Museveni (@mkainerugaba), "The majority of mankind (that are non-white) support Russia's stand in Ukraine," Twitter (now X), 27 February 2022, https://twitter.com/mkainerugaba/status/1498094460580016128?lang=en; "UPDF Leadership," Uganda People's Defence Forces, accessed 4 February 2025, https://www.updf.go.ug/who-we-are/leadership/.

41. "UPDF Leadership," Uganda People's Defence Forces.

42. Brands, "Contesting the Periphery," 77.

43. Andrea Chloe Wong, "Duterte's Back-Down on US Forces in Philippines," The Interpreter, 15 September 2017, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/duterte-s-back-down-us-forces-philippines.