

# Defining 'Partner of Choice'

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*The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.*

## Key Points

- USCENTCOM applies the term “Partner of Choice” (PoC) as part of the US strategy to leverage greater influence over key partner nations and other Great Power Competitors.
- In Great Power Competition (GPC), the US struggles to build sustainable capacity amongst its partners.
- US efforts have been too transactional in scope, focusing primarily on short-term capability generation (training and equipping), rather than on enduring capacity-building strategies that self-replenish from a deeper reservoir of institutional support.
- There appears to be a difference between USCENTCOM’s notion of ‘partnership’ within PoC and its practice of PoC.
- USCENTCOM’s PoC approach to Egypt, Turkey, and KSA indicate an over reliance on a transactional PoC approach.
- An effective PoC relationship must allow a partner to make its own decisions to serve its self-interest and comply with clearly defined rules.
- GPC is at its core an ideological competition between states. China’s rise and Russia’s resurgence require the US to realign its foreign policy toward strengthening relations and bolstering democratic states. Security assistance is a tool to do so.
- A review and an update of the notion of PoC is required. By doing so, the relationship can step up from a ‘product of choice’ to a true PoC.

## Introduction

USCENTCOM applies the term PoC as part of the US strategy to support those who align with the US approach to the region – stability and security, leverage greater influence over key partner nations and other Great Power Competitors. Successful partnerships result in partner nations that are likely to support US diplomatic, informational, military, and economic interests in a region. One of USCENTCOM’s published priorities, “Competition with China and Russia,” is described:

*Through stronger MIL-to-MIL relationships, and remaining the security partner of choice, USCENTCOM helps the US maintain its competitive advantage over Russia and China in the region with countries most susceptible to Russian and Chinese malign influence.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> USCENTCOM Priorities, “Competition with China and Russia,” March 2021.

Currently, USCENTCOM primarily pursues PoC objectives through security cooperation (SC), foreign military sales (FMS), and access basing and overflight (ABO). No doctrinal definition of PoC exists. However, PoC is commonly used in commercial contexts to describe a similar scope of relationship:

*“Partner of choice” describes a long-term partnership in which parties have made a significant investment for their mutual benefits. Such a relationship includes both rational and emotional elements, and focuses less on transactional requirements (i.e. price) and more on guidance and advice.<sup>2</sup>*

Within USCENTCOM efforts to become a PoC, include numerous long-term relationships through military institution and capacity building. In recent years however, USCENTCOM appears to center on transactional-type relationships that require key partners to buy ‘US only’ military systems despite US export restrictions and regardless of the partners’ self-determined needs. While still a relationship, the ‘transactional form’ is defined as: “of or relating to an attitude in which personal interaction revolves around cost and benefit.”<sup>3</sup>

This paper examines differences between USCENTCOM’s notion of ‘partnership’ within PoC and the application of PoC through three case studies. By exploring the US’ PoC approach towards key partners, USCENTCOM will avoid SC strategies that do not match organizational intent and prevents overly transactional approaches that may weaken its standing with those nations.

## Case Studies

### Egypt: Strategic Needs from the PoC and US Tactical Understanding

USCENTCOM has built a strategic partnership with Egypt over several decades. For over thirty years, the US has provided Egypt military training and equipment to assist with Egyptian and Middle Eastern security.<sup>4</sup> Egypt now has one of the most significant military forces in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and the most extensive inventory of effective weapons. Amid a growing perception of intensified domestic and regional security threats, Egypt, under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, has made considerable investments to modernize and train its armed forces.<sup>5</sup>

In the 2000–2009 period, Egypt's major arms supplier was the US. This accounted for 75% of Egypt's total arms imports. Arms deals were primarily funded through significant military aid. Each year, Egypt received about \$1.3 B from the US for arms procurement. From 2010–2019, Egypt began the process of diversifying military procurement as there are concerns that the US offer to modernize the air force will not meet the Egypt’s strategic needs;<sup>6</sup> and arms imports from the US fell to only 23% of Egypt's total arms imports. Excluding arms deals paid for by the US through military aid, Egypt signed 75 agreements with 15 different suppliers between 2010–2019. Moreover, from 2014–2019, Egypt placed at least 54 orders to procure major arms. Over this period, Egypt strengthened its arms trade relations with Germany and Russia and developed its connections

<sup>2</sup> InSync.com.au, “How to Become a Partner of Choice,” Aug 2021, <https://insync.com.au/insights/how-to-become-a-partner-of-choice/> (accessed August 27, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Dictionary.com. Transactional. (n. d., (accessed April 22, 2021). <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/transactional>

<sup>4</sup> FP Insider Access, “Egypt and America: 5 Things You Need to Know”, <https://foreignpolicy.com/sponsored/egypt-and-america-5-things-you-need-to-know/>, (accessed April 22, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Alexandra Kuimova, “Understanding Egyptian Military Expenditure,” October 2020, SIPRI Background Paper, October 2020, (accessed April 22, 2021). <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

with China, France, and Italy. Egypt acquired three S-300VM air defense systems with 190 surface-to-air missiles and 50 MiG-29 combat aircraft with 225 air-to-air missiles from Russia. Egypt's comparatively high level of arms procurement continued into 2019–2020. Egypt signed new major arms deals for Su-35 combat aircraft from Russia, MEKO-A200 frigates from Germany, and FREMM frigates and AW-149 and AW-189 helicopters from Italy.<sup>6</sup>

US assistance to Egypt has long played a central role in Egypt's economic and military development, growing strategic partnership, and regional stability. Since 1978, the US has provided Egypt over \$50 B in military and \$30 B in economic assistance.<sup>7</sup> The assistance provided to Egypt through various programs facilitates the development of its armed forces. It enables Egypt to purchase multiple systems of various tenderers who are not necessarily connected with the US. If the US does not provide Egypt with improved air to air capabilities, Egypt will risk sanctions in order to acquire them elsewhere.

The Egyptian military undertook drastic measures to counterbalance its country's dependency on US military equipment. Towards the end of 2018, it increased purchases of military hardware from European countries and Russia.<sup>8</sup> One month after the news of the sale broke in March 2019, then-US Secretary of State Pompeo redflagged the deal and warned of the need to impose sanctions under CAATSA. In response, several members of the Egyptian parliament protested these sanctions would be considered as unacceptable interference in Egypt's sovereign arms procurement decisions. The deal was justified as part of the country's efforts to diversify weapons suppliers. Yet for the Egyptian military, the Su-35 deal represents more than a diversity effort. The deal serves as a chance to negate the effects of repeated US rejections of its attempts to purchase tier-1 US military hardware.<sup>9</sup>

The acquisition of any military hardware is guided primarily by a rationale that links a country's perception of its military needs to the identified means for defense. For the Egyptian military, this is a major stumbling block. The air-to-air missile restrictions have put Egypt's entire F-16 fleet at an overwhelming disadvantage should it engage in aerial combat with any air force in the region armed with beyond-visual-range (BVR) missiles. This significant tactical disadvantage likewise it reinforces Egypt's principal weakness in past wars: ineffective air power. Furthermore, the US has long denied Egypt advanced heavy air superiority fighters, which has restricted the range and capability of the Egyptian Air Force. Nor have these restrictions been limited to US hardware. When Egypt requested the French Rafale, the US and Israel applied pressure on France to downgrade the air-to-air missile available to Egypt to the 80km MICA missile instead of the 100km Meteor missile.<sup>10</sup> While Turkey has also recently pursued a Russian arms deal, triggering CAATSA sanctions, the Egyptian case differs significantly. Egypt sees its Su-35 purchase as necessary after decades of requests and rejections for US tier-1 hardware.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Alexandra Kuimova, "Understanding Egyptian Military Expenditure," October 2020, SIPRI Background Paper, October 2020, (accessed April 22, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> US Department of State, "US Relations With Egypt", January 5, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-egypt/> (accessed June 2, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Ali Dizboni, Karim El-Baz, "Understanding the Egyptian Military's Perspective on the Su-35 Deal", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 15, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/understanding-egyptian-militarys-perspective-su-35-deal> (accessed July 16, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Ali Dizboni, Karim El-Baz, "Understanding the Egyptian Military's Perspective on the Su-35 Deal", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 15, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/understanding-egyptian-militarys-perspective-su-35-deal> (accessed July 16, 2021). <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

The Egyptian military is focused at least on two strategic threats which are of concern for boosting its aerial capabilities. The first is discovering an extensive gas field in the Egyptian exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the eastern Mediterranean. To effectively secure its EEZ, Egypt would need an effective aerial fleet with a larger fuel capacity than its F-16 to support its operating naval units. The second is the threat posed by the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Negotiations over the dam's operation and regulation have not led to any legal agreement between Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia. Should Egypt resort to a military option, the Air Force must counter the Ethiopian aerial threat. Therefore, Egypt assesses the Su-35 deal rather as a lesser evil to remedy a lack of aerial capabilities. However, the weight of concerns also suggests that the US could encourage Egypt to reconsider the Su-35 deal by offering suitable alternatives without compromising Israel's qualitative military edge. Egypt's military would likely find an acceptable option outside of the advanced F-35 places recently procured by Israel. Instead, Cairo would probably see older, but efficient systems from KSA and Qatar fit their demands.<sup>11</sup>

The US has a history of projecting mixed messages towards what it thinks of its key partners. While the US approved an arms sale worth nearly \$200 M to Egypt, it vowed to press human rights issues after a US activist reported his family had been harassed. President Biden vowed a tougher stance on human rights after his predecessor courted Egyptian President al-Sisi, whom Biden reportedly called "my favorite dictator" in part for his cooperation with Israel.<sup>12</sup>

The threat of imposing sanctions on Egypt could also severely impact US relations with the Egyptian military. This may include a reorientation of the military leadership towards eastern military educational institutions after decades of investing in Egyptian military leadership. Furthermore, linking matters of political differences such as the human rights record, democracy, and good governance to cooperation with the Egyptian military institution has not changed Egyptian policy, but instead, it has only increased tensions. Managing military relations with Egypt requires a limited, pragmatic approach to enable the US to advance its interests in Cairo in times of GPC. Egypt is still eager for increased military cooperation with the US. However, the Egyptian leadership will continue to focus on increasing its capabilities. If not with US arms, then via deals with Russia or China. Cairo perceives itself as indispensable strategic US ally in the Middle East. It shares US goals of peace and stability in MENA. Mutual military cooperation goes beyond transactional military hardware purchases, as Egypt grants the US preferential logistical access through its airspace and the Suez Canal, which is fundamental for sustainable US presence in the Arabian Gulf. Likewise, Cairo, amongst few other Middle East military powers, has the capability to effectively counter Iran's regional influence.

The current approach to the PoC should be changed and adapted to meet the strategic requirements of the partner. The US should re-evaluate its partnering policies through better understanding of Egypt's strategic needs. The US planning process is generally limited to a 5-year period with a tactical focus based on FMS. To better understand the needs of partners, the country teams' and SC teams' planning process should reset to form a medium-term and preferably with a long-term view (at least 25-year).<sup>15</sup> Such an approach would provide a meaningful vision for USCENTCOM's SC and GPC strategies.

Thus, the US' short-term vision, excessive focus on transactional capacity building through weapons' sales, and rigid restriction on partners' buying systems from competitors, actually threatens US PoC status with Egypt.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> "US sells \$200m in weapons to Egypt despite human rights abuses", February 17, 2021, *Aljazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/17/us-sells-200m-in-weapons-to-egypt-despite-human-rights-abuses> (accessed April 22, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> CSAG determined a 25-year strategic outlook to match China's 'long view' is required.

USCENTCOM's notion of a PoC appears to be derived from a commercial context. It focuses on the supplier-customer relationship. It is interesting to note that partnerships are not centered on transactions, but rather about the rationale, emotions, and perceived length of the relationship. To retain its customers and win others, any serious company must tell the truth about its products. The supplier-customer premise should not drive MIL-to-MIL dialogues and diplomatic engagements. The equipping must be completed at the time desired; with the required level of interoperability to fulfill desired needs to support the PoC notion. Doing so, the relationship can step up from a 'product of choice' to a true PoC.

### **Turkey: Challenges Facing Cooperation with a NATO Partner**

Turkey has been a strategic US ally and NATO member for almost 70 years. The US has built this relationship over time through extensive NATO collaboration, military education and training, and weapon systems' sales. Further, the US has maintained several thousand troops in Turkey, specifically operating Incirlik Air Base, since the early 1950s. However, this relationship is currently strained largely due to Turkey's posturing and weapons purchases from Russia.

Turkey recently purchased the Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile system despite strong US/NATO objections. Such a purchase tests the resiliency of PoC focused such that the quality of US product ensures partner nation decisions. For years, the US government warned Turkey about the danger such a decision would pose to NATO interoperability efforts, especially concerning common air defense.<sup>13</sup> Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, Ellen Lord said, "Turkey's purchase of the S-400 is inconsistent with its commitments to NATO and will have a detrimental impact on Turkish interoperability with the alliance."<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, DoD argued that the S-400 system could retrieve valuable intelligence while in close proximity to the F-35. This would compromise F-35 stealth capabilities. Before the deal with Russia, Turkey had not only been on track to buy more than 100 F-35s to replace its F-16 fleet, it was also a co-producer of the F-35.<sup>15</sup> Despite US and allied objections, senior Turkish leadership continued to argue that having both the S-400 and F-35 would not involve a "compatibility" issue or threaten the US or NATO. Subsequently, on July 12, 2019, S-400 parts started arriving in Turkey. That same month, DoD announced its decision to discontinue Turkey's role in the F-35 program.<sup>19</sup>

Since 2009, the US has also been in talks with the Turkish government regarding the sale of Patriot air and missile defense systems. Turkey has rejected those offers. The US Congress, meanwhile, has presented a united front in its response to Turkey's S-400 purchase with bipartisan support for sanctioning Ankara. The FY 2020 National Defense Authorization Act included a provision titled, "Limitation on Transfer of F-35 aircraft to Turkey" (Title XII—Section 1245), which formally prevents any transfer of F-35 to Turkey so long as it possesses the S-400 systems. The Act further calls on President Biden to implement the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) of 2017. CAATSA requires that the President sanction countries that acquire military equipment from Russia.<sup>20</sup> While Turkey apparently is having talks with Russia on procuring a second batch of S400s, US Secretary of State Blinken said, "it's also essential going forward that Turkey, and for that matter, all US allies and partners, avoid future purchases of Russian weaponry, including additional S-400s."<sup>16</sup> Such actions

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<sup>13</sup> Georgy Sanders, "The Great Unwinding: The U.S.-Turkey Arms Sale Dispute", March 17, 2020, Center for Strategic & International Studies, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/great-unwinding-us-turkey-arms-sales-dispute> (accessed April 22, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>19</sup>

*Ibid.* <sup>20</sup>

*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Al-Arabiya news*, "US says Turkey should refrain from new purchase of Russian weapons," April 28, 2021, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/04/29/US-says-Turkey-should-refrain-from-new-purchases-of-Russian-weapons> (accessed June 2, 2021.).

and a statements signals an all or nothing approach, and the US considers PoC zero-sum/transactional relationship with Turkey and other nations.

Since the S-400 purchase, Erdogan talked with Russian President Putin about Su-35 and Su-57 fighter aircraft and observed these aircraft firsthand at the August 2019 Moscow Air Show. Furthermore, Ankara has also set ambitious goals of creating an indigenous, fifth-generation Turkish fighter, with Erdogan claiming the aircraft will be flying by 2023. While these efforts may help Erdogan appease his domestic audiences (possibly concerned about the fallout of participation in the F-35 program) they are no more than ambitious, albeit unrealistic, goals for the Turkish defense industry.<sup>17</sup>

Turkey's decision to acquire S-400s is likely intended to strengthen its defense capabilities. However, other actions affect the dynamics of relations between Turkey and the US, and create a significant distance between the US and its key regional partner. Through better understanding of partners' long-term objectives, and longerterm planning for future investments, the US should offer its PoC the flexibility to make decisions in their own national interest within clearly defined rules.<sup>23</sup> The US' approach of this relationship will define Turkey's future decisions. Turkey is a vital ally. Turkey and the US are members of the same alliance: NATO. Future developments could create jurisprudence vis-à-vis other NATO members, but also within future alliances in the Middle East in particular.

Turkey, angered by congressional reactions to Ankara's S-400 purchase and the possibility of US sanctions, threatened to close two important NATO installations in Turkey: Incirlik airbase and the Kurecik NATO radar base "if necessary." Secretary of Defense Esper reacted to Erdogan's statements from December by questioning Turkey's commitment to the broader alliance.<sup>18</sup>

The loss of the F-35 program marks a major blow to Turkish manufacturers, which produced 937 parts. Turkey had been one of eight countries involved in the joint production of the F-35 program and a partner since the program's inception. Lockheed leadership has stated that Turkey has consistently been an affordable, reliable international partner in the program and that if it were not for the government-to-government political issues, the company would not have any issues with their production. Eight Turkish companies, produced parts for the fuselage, landing gear, and cockpit display of the plane. The US has stated that this loss will total "around \$9 B over the life of the program" for Turkey.<sup>19</sup>

Regarding ABO, Turkey's Incirlik Air Base is once again at the center of debates over Ankara-Washington relations. During times of tension between Ankara and Washington, Incirlik Air Base was commonly used by the US for operations in the Middle East and has always been a bargaining chip for Turkey. Around 100 miles from the Syrian border, the base has been used under the Defense and Cooperation Agreement between Turkey and the US since March 1980. If Turkey close off the base to the US, it would likely trigger the de facto end of the Turkish-US 'operational alliance' and lead Washington to abandon Ankara as a regional partner.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>23</sup>

*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Georgy Sanders, "The Great Unwinding: The U.S.-Turkey Arms Sale Dispute", March 17, 2020, Center for Strategic & International Studies, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/great-unwinding-us-turkey-arms-sales-dispute> (accessed April 22, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

### Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: A Turning Point in its Privileged Relationship with the US

The US has maintained a strong economic relationship with KSA since its unification in the 1930s. Despite tensions over US support for Israel, and the subsequent oil embargo in the 1970s, the relationship endured. US military support to KSA grew substantially after Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution, reaching its peak in the 1990s during the first Gulf War. USCENTCOM views KSA as a strategic ally for both deterring Iran and GPC influence in the region. The US has helped build KSA's military into a regional power through joint training and weapons sales.<sup>20</sup> The Kingdom became the world's largest arms importer from 2014–2018, accounting for 12% of its imports, an increase of 192% over the 2009–2013 period.<sup>21</sup> In 2018, the US continued to supply the bulk of arms to KSA, accounting for 88% of all arms sold. Sales to KSA include major arms, such as armored vehicles, guided missiles, aircraft, artillery, and ships. Arms deliveries to KSA in 2014–2018 included 56 combat aircraft from the US and 38 from the UK. In both cases, the aircraft were equipped with cruise missiles and other guided weapons. Planned deliveries for 2019–2023 include 98 combat aircraft, seven missile defense systems, and 83 tanks from the US, 737 armored vehicles from Canada, five frigates from Spain, and short-range ballistic missiles from Ukraine.<sup>22</sup>

Although KSA has continually demonstrated its support to the US, President Biden issued a temporary freeze on pending arms sales to KSA and the UAE as part of an effort to end the civil war in Yemen. In one of its first major foreign policy announcements, the US administration paused the implementation of recent Trump-era weapons deals, including the sale of munitions to KSA and F-35 fighter jets to the UAE. Since Washington's decision, pressure has mounted on other Western countries to not sell arms to Riyadh and its allies.

As a result (according to Russian news) KSA has decided to buy weapons and ammunition from Russia, following the temporary US FMS suspension. Riyadh also plans to buy the S-400 missile system and Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets.<sup>23</sup> The Russian media also asserted US Patriot missile defense systems' inability to intercept Houthi drones that attacked Aramco refineries in eastern Saudi Arabia was another reason why Riyadh turned its back on the US.<sup>30</sup> The Saudi Air Force has a fleet of 200 F-15 fighter jets and KSA is expected to face strong US resistance to these planned arms purchases from Russia.<sup>24</sup>

Should KSA decide to change the main supplier of its military equipment to Russia and or China, such a change would not only affect the long-term relationship between the US and KSA, but also would likely modify US-KSA relationships with the other GCC members. KSA is currently at a turning point to choose a PoC in accordance with its strategic needs.

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<sup>20</sup> Council on Foreign relations, "US-Saudi Arabia Relations," December 7, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-saudi-arabiarelations>, (accessed April 22, 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Pieter D. Wezeman, "Saudi Arabia, armaments and conflict in the Middle East," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, December 14, 2018, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2018/saudi-arabia-armaments-and-conflict-middle-east> (accessed August 27, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Mersiha Gadzo, Alia Chughtai, "Saudi Arabia: The world's largest arms importer from 2014-2018," Aljazeera, May 13, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/5/13/saudi-arabia-the-worlds-largest-arms-importer-from-2014-2018> (accessed June 2, 2021).

<sup>23</sup> Emad Almarshahi, "Saudi Arabia seeking to buy weapons from Russia," Hodhod, February 1, 2021, <https://hodhodyemennews.net/2021/02/01/saudi-arabia-seeking-to-buy-weapons-from-russia/> (accessed June 20, 2021).<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI) is prepared to move forward with product development and weapon system projects should Western embargoes limit those efforts.<sup>25</sup> During the Dubai Airshow in November, a representative of KSA nationally owned SAMI said:

*We have signed more than 25 agreements with foreign partners, so we have multiple opportunities to acquire alternative technologies from other partners where there are no limitations if the US blocks us, we still have the opportunity for almost any of the products and any of the weapon systems to get it localized through our partnerships. Opportunities can be European, Asian, South African, and Far East sources.*<sup>26</sup>

Currently, Russia is not an optimal partner for KSA, even as KSA agreed to buy Russian S-400 air defense systems during King Salman's visit to Moscow in October 2017. The Kingdom signed a memorandum of understanding to develop Russian equipment locally. Business with China is possible for KSA and it is one of potential sources of partnerships.<sup>27</sup>

KSA seeks to acquire or gain access to top-tier US defense technologies using a combination of government-to-government engagement and active lobbying tied to the legislative branch.

*KSA can and will work to reduce the effect of arms export controls tied to sensitive or leading-edge technologies. Undoubtedly, it will not achieve all the objectives it hopes to achieve or secure the kind of access [it] feels are critical. It is just the nature of the US arms control regime writ large, and the reality that the US — like any country — will seek to preserve its technological edge.*<sup>28</sup>

"China, much like Russia, also presents the challenge of destabilizing the US-KSA relationship at a time when US strategic competition is clearly focused on those two countries."<sup>36</sup> The KSA example presents a need for a significant re-approach to the PoC policy. KSA is the US's main partner in the region. Any drifting from this partnership could endanger all efforts in influencing Gulf country politics.

## Analysis

In 2015, the US Congress recognized the value of SC and supported massive growth of security assistance programs for partners and allies. However, despite funding this perennial national security policy and strategy tool, the US has struggled to build sustainable capacity amongst its partners.<sup>29</sup> **The position of this paper that is due to security assistance efforts, PoC has been far too transactional in scope.** The tactical focus primarily rests

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<sup>25</sup> Agnes Helou, "Amid Western arms embargoes on Saudi Arabia, SAMI has a backup plan", Defense News, January 14, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/industry/2020/01/14/amid-western-arms-embargoes-on-saudi-arabia-sami-has-a-backup-plan/> (accessed July 16, 2021).

<sup>26</sup> Agnes Helou, "Amid Western arms embargoes on Saudi Arabia, SAMI has a backup plan", Defense News, January 14, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/industry/2020/01/14/amid-western-arms-embargoes-on-saudi-arabia-sami-has-a-backup-plan/> (accessed July 16, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>36</sup>

*Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Tom Shepard, "Strategic ends, not tactical means: better ways to build partners capacity", July 25, 2017, War Room, US Army War College, <https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/articles/strategic-ends-not-tactical-means-better-ways-build-partner-capacity> (accessed April 22, 2021).



on capability generation in the near term (training and equipping). Some may argue that the length of time involved in training and equipping efforts translates to a strategic approach, but CSAG argues that delivering on enduring capacity-building strategies requires self-replenishing aspects from a deeper reservoir of institutional support such as military education and information sharing each partner needs.<sup>30</sup> A SC and FMS focus on strengthening immediate capabilities is understandable, especially when partners are dealing with ongoing security threats and there are risks to information sharing. However, a lack of long-term strategic gains means the effects of US efforts only focus on the imminent danger and cannot generate long-term results. Doing the tactical well isn't always an asset, especially when building a systemic capacity among US regional cooperative security partners. Building its partners' capacities to tackle problems abroad (such as terrorism and general instability) may be the US' 'strategy of choice.' Still, the US is not approaching this choice strategically. Instead, it takes a short-term, tactical capability-building approach. This is problematic.<sup>39</sup> **It creates a dynamic in which the US is constantly rebuilding capabilities consumed by current operations.** According to Tom Shepard, "The US lacks both the physical and intellectual means to build institutional capacity."<sup>31</sup> USCENTCOM neither is identifying the "upstream" activities required to institutionalize outcomes within the partner countries nor is it acting in a timely manner to generate the desired effect.<sup>41</sup>

Today, USCENTCOM contributions to build up a partner's military capabilities should address counterterrorism concerns and state fragility challenges through the lens of global and regional competition. The environment of geopolitical competition is at its core an ideological competition between states. China's rise and Russia's resurgence require the US to realign its foreign policy toward strengthening relations and bolstering democratic states. SC is a tool to do that. It supports the US' closest partners and fosters more close relationships with other states. The US decision, for instance, to provide military aid to the UK through the lend-lease program in the 1940s was not a simple military consideration, but a foreign policy consideration with enormous consequences. This occurs today when a country accepts US military equipment or enters into an extensive acquisition process that connects their national interests to the US'.

## Conclusion

Operationally, the US appears unable to recognize its partners' force-generating requirements and fails to leverage US force-generating expertise that could build partners' capacities. PoC should be understood as an opportunity to be explored for future engagement and cooperation. Providing US partners with options to choose the best offer under the individual national interests is a fundamental right of every state. Furthermore, the 'partnership' aspect of PoC should support diversification when cooperation opens other opportunities such

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>39</sup>

*Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>41</sup>

*Ibid.*

as support through service packages and products in the context of interoperability and cooperation. The Egypt example emphasizes this aspect.

The KSA and Egypt (in addition to Israel) present the leading partners for the US in the Middle East. Any disruption within these relationships will significantly affect policy decisions. In this context, ABO is a significant emerging challenge that could affect future operations in MENA. Regarding Turkey, it is crucial to establish rules and a clear possibility to meet demands. If competitors like Russia and China fulfill partners' needs and become the PoC, future options will decrease. If Turkey does not find a satisfactory solution for the restoration of its air fleet, it will explore possibilities offered by Russia and China. In this case, Turkey could drift even further away from its NATO allies. In order to avoid this development, the notion of PoC should enable flexibility and mutual understandings.

One of the main challenges for USCENTCOM is how to align the definition of the "Competition with China and Russia" with the PoC policy. In order to maintain its competitive advantage over China and Russia in the region, USCENTCOM must address the needs of the partners in the region. If partner needs are not addressed, they will be ultimately forced to search for solutions from more pragmatic partners willing to fill capability gaps. In order to achieve USCENTCOM's desired SC goals, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of what exactly PoC means and how best to strengthen partnerships.

While the scope of this paper focused on examining the differences between USCENTCOM's notion of 'partnership' within PoC and the application of PoC, future research should investigate how USCENTCOM can advise national leaders, and coordinate with the Department of Commerce and DoS on generating strategies for meaningful and enduring relationships. Additionally, research must be conducted about best practices placing national interests at the center of these relationships and preventing partners from going to others for these capabilities.

#### **Recommendations for US / USCENTCOM**

- The USCENTCOM CDR should advocate for PoC in terms of 25-year plus strategies.
- PoC should be one of the six USCENTCOM priorities and a designated line of effort.
- To complement country teams' assessments, involve CENTCOM SNRs and embassies to define CENTCOM AOR partner countries' medium and long-term needs.
- Define "Partner of Choice," in close coordination with Department of Defense and State Department, and elaborate rules for compliance. CENTCOM must develop a more pragmatic, flexible, and agile approach to achieve unique partner of choice status for a country.
- CENTCOM should conduct a "competitive landscape" study of Russian and Chinese FMS equipment and services packages.