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Leveraging Naval Diplomacy to Reinforce Economic Programs and Compete with China

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NPS NRP Executive Summary

Leveraging Naval Diplomacy to Reinforce Economic Programs and Compete with China

Period of Performance: 01/01/2022 – 12/31/2021

Report Date: 02/19/2023 | Project Number: NPS-22-N094-A

Naval Postgraduate School, National Security Affairs (NSA)



NAVAL RESEARCH PROGRAM
NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

**LEVERAGING NAVAL DIPLOMACY TO REINFORCE
ECONOMIC PROGRAMS AND COMPETE WITH CHINA
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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Student Participation: No students participated in this research project.

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Project Summary

To counter rising Chinese influence, the United States Navy (USN) must plan and implement its overseas operations and diplomatic activities to maintain and strengthen U.S. alliances and partnerships. This study's core question is, "How can the USN leverage its operations and activities to reinforce U.S. economic programs and enhance U.S. influence?" Using fieldwork, interviews, and desk research, the research team examined USN activities, U.S. economic programs, and host government security interests in "indicator" countries in their respective regions: Chile in Latin America and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the Middle East. The project's core finding, which has not been emphasized by previous research, is that the standard U.S. understanding of building capabilities and relationships, based on conventional assets for warfighting and deterrence within a robust alliance like NATO, frequently does not match partner nation security priorities outside of that context. In countries such as Chile and the UAE, where the operative concepts are economic development, international prestige and autonomy, and internal stability, platform sales and training are insufficient for building enduring, influential alliances and partnerships. The study recommends that U.S. security cooperation efforts more creatively consider how to feed into partner nations' highest-priority issues, such as technology transfer and regional leadership roles and recognition. It notes that this type of engagement will require careful grappling with unique local political contexts and challenges, and consideration of how these intersect with U.S. government policy priorities, American values, and nonmilitary lines of effort, especially when these touch on sensitive questions of internal stability and domestic security.

Keywords: *naval diplomacy, maritime security cooperation, economic cooperation, allies, partners, influence, great power competition, strategic competition, capacity-building, foreign military sales, training, naval operations, prestige, reputation, China, Belt and Road Initiative, BRI, Chile, United Arab Emirates, UAE*

Background

Over the last fifteen years, China has been extending its global engagement through economic activities, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and increasing security cooperation with partner states. China's growing global presence has prompted concerns that the United States' relative power and influence could diminish, leading U.S. policy makers to reorient towards strategic competition (White House, 2017; Department of Defense, 2018).

To counter rising Chinese influence, the United States Navy (USN) must plan and implement its overseas operations and diplomatic activities to maintain and strengthen U.S. alliances and partnerships (Department of Defense, 2020). This mission is central to Topic Sponsor (OPNAV N3/N5) lines of effort, naval component priorities within geographic combatant commands, and Navy sections within country teams. Effective partnership-building also requires a whole-of-government approach that incorporates the United States' superior military assets, including maritime security cooperation, with U.S. economic and diplomatic programs.



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However, we lack roadmaps for how to effectively and efficiently couple naval activities and security assistance with economic programs. Existing research on sea power tends to marginalize naval diplomacy compared with the deterrent and compellent aspects of forward-deployed naval forces (e.g., Rowlands, 2012; Till, 2009). Conversely, most work on security cooperation and partner capacity-building has yet to emphasize the maritime domain (e.g., Reveron, 2016; Ladwig, 2017; Paul et al., 2013). Moreover, although recent research has developed promising comparative lessons on successful security cooperation and influence, it has focused narrowly on single regions and/or forms of operations (Meierding & Sigman, 2021; Ralph, 2021; Darnton, 2017). This project broadens the scope across regions and forms of USN engagement, while foregrounding the specifically maritime and naval aspects of influence-generation and partnership-building.

Our core question is, “How can the USN leverage its operations and activities to reinforce U.S. economic programs and enhance U.S. influence?” Using the comparative case study method, the research team examined USN activities, U.S. economic programs, and host government security interests in “indicator” countries in their respective regions: Chile in Latin America and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the Middle East. These are neither regional giants nor microstates, so findings from the cases are likely to be broadly generalizable. These are also states that have historically aligned more strongly with the United States than China, but are not steadfast U.S. partners in all domains. They therefore constitute important test cases for assessing whether USN engagement can move the needle on U.S. influence, in times of rising strategic competition.

To conduct the case studies, the research team consulted official U.S. government and host country documents, country reports, news sources, and quantitative data sets. Team members traveled to the host countries and interviewed U.S. country team members, partner nation flag officers and other officials, and leading experts. The research team simultaneously drafted separate case studies assessing the impacts of USN activities and U.S. economic activities on U.S. influence. They conducted a comparative analysis of the cases to identify the most productive U.S. naval and economic lines of effort and ways to overcome potential obstacles to interagency coordination.

Findings and Conclusions

The project’s core finding, which has not been emphasized by previous research, is that the standard U.S. understanding of building capabilities and relationships, based on conventional assets for warfighting and deterrence within a robust alliance like NATO, frequently does not match partner nation security priorities outside of that context. In countries such as Chile and the UAE, where the operative concepts are economic development, international prestige and autonomy, and internal stability, platform sales and training are insufficient for building enduring, influential alliances and partnerships.

In Chile, naval cooperation with the United States remains robust, limited only by resource constraints—primarily economic on the Chilean side—and available assets and organizational bandwidth from the United States. Chile has long-term ambitions for fleet modernization and shipbuilding, and for global



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presence and prestige including across the Pacific; however, its primary security challenges are onshore and domestic, requiring institutional capacity-building across services and between uniformed and civilian leaders. Meanwhile Chinese economic and political inroads in Chile are concentrated in the private and civilian sectors. We recommend that the USN frame security cooperation efforts to contribute to Chilean economic development, prestige, and jointness and institutional capacity, and to preempt potential civil-military ruptures on questions of international alignment.

In the UAE, the supply of U.S. maritime security cooperation exceeds local demand, due to the small size of the UAE navy, the limited contributions that naval assets can offer to address the country's leading security concerns, and the navy's existing capacity to perform the core operations required of it. The UAE is also attempting to develop its indigenous defense industry, especially in the maritime domain, limiting navy and coast guard interest in foreign military sales. We recommend that the USN concentrate its maritime security cooperation in high-profile activities that enhance the UAE navy's reputation before domestic and international audiences, or that facilitate the UAE's transition to a post-hydrocarbon economy. The latter include collaboration in defense industrial research and development and strengthening the UAE's status as a leading transshipment center.

Chile and the UAE will continue to engage with China, given strong incentives to diversify their partnerships and offset perceived dependence on Washington, especially while anticipating U.S. retrenchment or resistance to selling advanced weapons systems. U.S. planners including within OPNAV N3/N5 (Topic Sponsor), naval components of combatant commands, and country teams, should not assume that historically strong military-to-military relationships are permanent firewalls against political pressures and Chinese economic ties, or that military relationships will automatically deliver political influence. Continued engagement is required.

To maximize efficiency and effectiveness, we recommend that Topic Sponsor (OPNAV N3/N5) and other security cooperation actors, such as the broader Navy Foreign Area Officer community, more creatively consider how to support partner nations' highest-priority issues, such as technology transfer and regional leadership. This will require careful grappling with unique local political contexts and challenges, and consideration of how these intersect with U.S. government policy priorities, American values, and nonmilitary lines of effort, especially when these touch sensitive questions of internal stability and domestic security.

Recommendations for Further Research

The study recommends that U.S. security cooperation efforts more creatively consider how to feed into partner nations' highest-priority issues, such as technology transfer and regional leadership roles and recognition. It notes that this type of engagement will require careful grappling with unique local political contexts and challenges, and consideration of how these intersect with U.S. government policy priorities, American values, and nonmilitary lines of effort, especially when these touch on sensitive questions of internal stability and domestic security. To implement these recommendations effectively in individual



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countries, U.S. naval commands and country teams require detailed knowledge of partner nations' leading security and economic concerns, as well as the local political context and challenges. These assessments may be conducted by country teams or external subject matter experts.

Implementing the country-level recommendations for Chile will involve carefully tracking the fragile and fluctuating political situation and not only seeking out affordable yet visible avenues for ongoing Chilean Navy engagements with the US Navy, but also identifying a broader range of stakeholders on issues of jointness, civil-military coordination, and defense and technology development whose perspectives and interests could affect Chilean decisions about international alignments.

Implementing the country-level recommendations for the United Arab Emirates (UAE) will require a deeper investigation of the viability of collaborating with the Tawazun Economic Council (the organization responsible for UAE defense procurement), engagement with UAE flag officers and other government officials to identify the areas of technical collaboration that are most attractive to them, and further examination of DP World's current activities, assets, and interests to determine whether they can be treated as a trusted partner.

Because a core conclusion of the project is that local political context is crucial for effectively targeting security cooperation outreach, one productive line of future research would extend the comparative analysis conducted in this project to other cases, to assess the findings' generalizability and scope conditions. In particular, this research should focus on identifying host countries' leading security cooperation interests. Foreign military sales is often assumed to top this list, but our project determined that prestige and economic development are often more attractive than platforms and capacity-building. Future research should especially focus on countries with lower levels of economic and military development than Chile and the UAE, or with more challenging political and ideological environments for U.S. partnership, since both factors might increase the temptations of Chinese partnerships and dilute U.S. influence.

Another line of future research might revisit Chile and the UAE two or more years after the initial study, in order to follow up on implementation of any recommendations and to evaluate how domestic political and economic shifts, evolving regional security challenges, force modernization efforts, and alterations to China's economic, diplomatic, and security initiatives might modify or re-validate our conclusions about the path to durable U.S. influence.

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Acronyms

| | |
|-------|---|
| BRI | Belt and Road Initiative |
| FAO | foreign area officer |
| OPNAV | Office of the Chief of Naval Operations |
| UAE | United Arab Emirates |
| USN | United States Navy |

