

Creating an Environment for Peace, Stability, Confidence



By William S. Cohen, December 1999

This past October, I witnessed one of the largest and most dramatic displays of peacetime military cooperation in the world. In Egypt, roughly 74,000 service members from 11 nations participated in the biennial Bright Star training exercise sponsored by the United States. I watched as an Italian ship offloaded a British troop transport under American air cover, for a mock amphibious assault that included Egyptian, French, Greek, Dutch, and Jordanian forces, among others. The size and complexity of such an operation requires far more than the ability to surmount differences in language. It requires far more than the ability to coordinate the movement of forces or share and operate complex weaponry and equipment. Indeed, exercises such as Bright Star require the forces of participating nations -- from the front-line soldiers to the commanding generals to the civilian ministers of defense -- to develop an understanding of their allies' plans, their tactics and techniques, and their behavior in stressful battlefield situations.

The lessons from Bright Star are invaluable to achieving the interoperability that is so essential to the readiness of any coalition. Readiness, in turn, is the core of deterrence. However, Bright Star and similar exercises also yield increased levels of trust, confidence-building, and rapport that far outlive any operation. Those are the intangibles that often prove helpful to America's diplomacy during times of international tensions or crises. In the Department of Defense (DoD), we refer to them as "force multipliers," and they can make substantial contributions to success during times of war. In fact, they can spell the difference between success or failure -- victory or defeat.

The recent victory of Operation Allied Force in the Kosovo conflict is tangible proof of the value of military-to-military engagement. Half a century of training and preparation by NATO forces allowed our alliance to mobilize and prepare with unprecedented speed and efficiency, and to execute a war plan that was versatile, precise, and devastating. Despite efforts to divide the alliance, our forces and our nations maintained a united front, and we prevailed convincingly. Fifty years of multinational joint exercises gave us those force multipliers -- shared resolve, a tradition of robust dialogue, and a deep commitment to cooperation -- that resulted in an alliance victory.

America's military engagement promotes regional stability and deters aggression and coercion on a daily basis in virtually every region of the world. To do so, DoD employs a wide variety of means, including: forces permanently stationed abroad; forces rotationally deployed overseas; forces deployed temporarily for exercises, combined training, or military-to-military interactions; and programs such as defense cooperation, security assistance, International Military Education and Training (IMET), and international arms cooperation. Our wisest and most cost-effective actions are those that create an environment that encourages peace, discourages violence and instability, and builds confidence.

At the same time, we also use our resources to help diminish threats, counteract factors that lead to instability, and lessen the potential severity of conflicts that may arise. Such preventive measures include:

- Reducing or eliminating nuclear, biological, or chemical capabilities through our support of diplomatic initiatives such as the U.S.-North Korean Agreed Framework and technical assistance programs such as the Cooperative Threat Reduction program with Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan;
- Discouraging arms races and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction through monitoring and enforcing arms control agreements such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Missile Technology Control Regime;
- Preventing and deterring terrorism and reducing U.S. vulnerability to terrorist acts through DoD efforts to enhance intelligence collection capabilities and protect critical infrastructure;
- Reducing the production and flow to the United States of illegal drugs by means of DoD support to the joint interagency task forces operating along our coasts and southern border.

Relatively small and timely investments in targeted endeavors such as these can yield disproportionate benefits, often mitigating the need for a more substantial and costly U.S. response later.

Finally, military-to-military engagement also works through the power of example. In his famous speech at West Point, General Douglas MacArthur said that "the soldier above all prays for peace, for he must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war." We want our counterparts to know that America believes in being ready for war, but never eager. America believes in resolving disputes through diplomacy and international institutions whenever possible. America believes that stability is served by transparency and civilian control of the military. America believes in the use of international norms and regimes to encourage peace and stability, such as non-proliferation, freedom of navigation, and respect for human rights and the rule of law.

All Americans can be proud of both the professionalism and the readiness of our armed forces. Our military men and women are indeed impressive, and I consider them America's finest ambassadors. They let our foes know that America is a formidable and dominant foe. They let our friends know that America is a strong and reliable ally.

Republican Williams S. Cohen was the United States' 20th Secretary of Defense during Democratic President Bill Clinton's second administration from 1997 to 2001.