

# COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

## *POLICY INNOVATION MEMORANDUM NO. #56*

*Date:* June 8, 2016  
*From:* Joshua Kurlantzick  
*Re:* Reforming the U.S. International Military Education and Training Program

The International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, which provides U.S. government funds to members of foreign militaries to take classes at U.S. military facilities, has the potential to be a powerful tool of U.S. influence. IMET is designed to help foreign militaries bolster their relationships with the United States, learn about U.S. military equipment, improve military professionalism, and instill democratic values in their members. For forty years, the program has played an important role in the United States' relations with many strategic partners and in cultivating foreign officers who become influential policymakers. Although the program's funding is relatively small, it could have an outsize impact on the United States' military-to-military relations with many nations. Yet IMET today is in need of significant reform. The program contains no system for tracking which foreign military officers attended IMET. Additionally, the program is not effectively promoting democracy and respect for civilian command of armed forces. A 2011 Government Accountability Office (GAO) study found that most IMET programs did not include material on human rights and democracy. Although some U.S. policymakers now want to expand IMET to include officers from a broader range of developing nations, such as Myanmar, the program should be revamped before it is enlarged. The reforms should include more effectively screening IMET candidates, developing a system to follow the careers of IMET alumni, and institutionalizing coursework on professionalism, human rights, and democracy in IMET's curriculum.

### *THE SITUATION*

Launched in 1976, IMET supports training for foreign military personnel from "allied and friendly nations." It designates funding for members of foreign militaries to take courses at technical schools, colleges, universities, and professional schools affiliated with branches of the U.S. armed forces. Most of the courses are categorized as either professional military education, which focuses on broad leadership training, or technical classes, which teach students skills specific to military occupational specialties. When it was founded, IMET focused on boosting foreign militaries' relations with the United States and educating armed forces about U.S. weapons. Reforms initiated in the 2000s were supposed to refocus IMET to include more coursework on military professionalism, human rights, and the role of a military in a democracy. Funding for IMET is delivered on a country-by-country basis. It is only a small portion of overall U.S. security assistance to most countries. About 120 countries, mostly lower- and middle-income developing nations, receive IMET funding each year.

## THE STAKES

IMET is only a small portion of U.S. security assistance, but many policymakers believe the program is more effective at boosting foreign militaries' ties to the United States than other types of aid. IMET creates personal relationships in a way that other types of security aid cannot, and the program often includes men and women who later ascend to the ranks of colonel or general. For more than four decades, the program has played a role in bonding foreign and U.S. officers, and in cultivating U.S. influence in strategically vital nations. In a 2014 study, political scientists Jonathan Waverley and Jesse Savage found that U.S. military training "increases the [foreign] military's power relative to the [civilian government] in ways that other forms of military assistance do not," because of the prestige accrued and bonds formed among officers.

Recognizing IMET's promise, Congress has increased IMET funding 70 percent since 2000; in fiscal year 2016 IMET was allocated \$108 million. However, IMET's importance makes it even more critical that the program be reshaped to function in the best interests of the United States. A 2014 study by the National Defense University found that the majority of IMET graduates are never contacted by the U.S. military again. This lack of information makes it difficult for U.S. policymakers to identify foreign military leaders who could be liaisons for future military-to-military relations or to assess IMET's utility at all. A lack of institutional memory also makes it hard for the Pentagon and U.S. arms manufacturers to find IMET graduates who were trained on U.S. weapons systems. In addition, IMET's admissions processes and curriculum do not sufficiently emphasize military professionalism or the importance of democracy and human rights. According to interviews with officers from a range of countries, few IMET courses focus on the role of a military in a democracy. Moreover, several U.S. government audits have found that screening of candidates for past abuses is minimal. Yet history suggests that allowing foreign officers who have committed abuses into IMET, with the rationale that the training will influence them to act more humanely, has proven a false hope. During the Cold War, IMET welcomed Burmese, Indonesian, Pakistani, Thai, and Egyptian senior officers who had demonstrated histories of abusive behavior. There is no evidence that they returned home and behaved differently. Instead, the United States should choose the most professional and least abusive candidates to come to IMET, rather than hoping that IMET will radically reverse officers' qualities.

Failing to utilize IMET to promote respect for democratic rule and civilian command harms U.S. interests. In countries such as Thailand, Egypt, and Pakistan, continued military involvement in politics weakens civilian governments and stokes instability, making these states unreliable strategic partners over the long term. In addition, continued involvement in politics undermines these militaries' professionalism and their ability to actually fight wars. For example, the Thai armed forces have more generals per capita than any other military in the world, largely so they can effectively stage regular coups. The Thai army has performed poorly in its most recent military encounters, including an ongoing counterinsurgency effort in southern Thailand dating to 2001.

Although U.S. training programs cannot be expected to dramatically determine political dynamics in foreign countries, failing to use U.S. training to emphasize respect for democratic institutions sends a message that assistance does not distinguish between abusive and law-abiding militaries. In addition, if foreign military leaders attend IMET and then intervene in politics back home, their history of U.S. education undermines U.S. rhetorical support for democracy. Foreign officers' U.S. training is impossible to hide. For example, the international media quickly discovered that leaders of coups in Mali in 2012 and Honduras in 2009 had attended IMET-funded programs.

## HOW TO PROCEED

Given IMET's importance, it is critical that the program better serve U.S. interests and foster U.S. values. The Department of Defense should revamp how participants are selected for IMET, how IMET attendees are tracked, and how U.S. leaders use IMET in bilateral relations.

- *Follow and support IMET alumni.* The Department of Defense should develop a comprehensive system for tracking IMET alumni. Such a system would allow the U.S. government to track which graduates have been promoted and could help defense attachés at U.S. embassies cultivate relationships with foreign militaries. The Department of Defense also should provide three to five million dollars in seed funding to create an IMET alumni association. The association would sponsor events where IMET alumni could interact with U.S. diplomats and military attachés.
- *Make IMET more selective.* Once a country is approved to receive IMET, defense attachés at U.S. embassies should play a more active role in prequalifying IMET enrollees. The Department of Defense should assign attachés overseas who have experience vetting IMET candidates. Better screening would actually defuse congressional and human rights criticisms of IMET for funding abusive officers, and make it less likely that Congress would suspend IMET funding for a particular country. This prequalification should include a thorough analysis of proposed participants' records for apolitical professionalism. In nations where the military has a long record of rights abuses, it may be necessary to open IMET spaces only to those below a certain age.
- *Employ instructors from other democracies.* To emphasize respect for human rights and a civilian chain of command, at least 5 percent of IMET's funding should be earmarked for foreign instructors from the militaries of countries, such as Brazil, that recently made a successful transition to democracy.
- *Use IMET more as both a carrot and a stick.* Although U.S. law already prohibits IMET funding for a country where a "duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup," the legislation has many loopholes. Most obviously, a U.S. president can choose not to call a military takeover a coup, and maintain IMET funding. Congress should rewrite legislation to make it impossible to provide IMET funds to a military that deposes an elected government. To be sure, cutting off IMET could be counterproductive for short-term strategic relations with that nation. However, taking this risk is necessary. Suspending IMET allows the United States to send an important signal to citizens of that country that Washington does not tolerate coups. In these young democracies, cultivating public support for U.S. policy is critical to sustaining bilateral relations in the long-term. Moreover, in the post-Cold War era, military regimes from Egypt to Thailand have proven themselves highly incapable of handling modern, globalized economies and security challenges, from violence in Sinai to Thailand's macroeconomic policy. A potential short-term chill in a bilateral relationship is worth the prospect of helping end regimes that undermine regional security and prosperity. In addition, when elected governments are quickly restored, as happened after the 2006 Thai coup, the United States resumes IMET funding; evidence suggests that military relations are then revived at the same level as before the coup.

## BUILDING SUPPORT

Reforming IMET so that U.S. leaders can track graduates will improve the program's effectiveness and might also make it easier for U.S. defense companies to find foreign customers. Anecdotal studies of foreign officers who have attended IMET suggest that they have positive views of bilateral relations with the United States. Comprehensively tracking these graduates would give the Pentagon an important database of potentially pro-U.S. officers. Changing some of IMET's focus to better promote rights and professionalism will be harder than implementing the reforms designed to monitor alumni. Some U.S. policymakers may resist the idea of barring soldiers with records of abuses from getting IMET funds, arguing that the United States should not turn down opportunities to influence foreign military leaders. Yet vetting IMET participants would actually make it less likely that Congress would totally cut off IMET funds for any nations. The United States also has many other tools that it could use to influence authoritarian regimes—even military leaders who have committed abuses—without providing them the prestige afforded by IMET. Many of those tools can be maintained even if a foreign military has staged a coup, allowing the United States to preserve influence with a coup government even while cutting off IMET.

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