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## Optimize Maritime Security Cooperation

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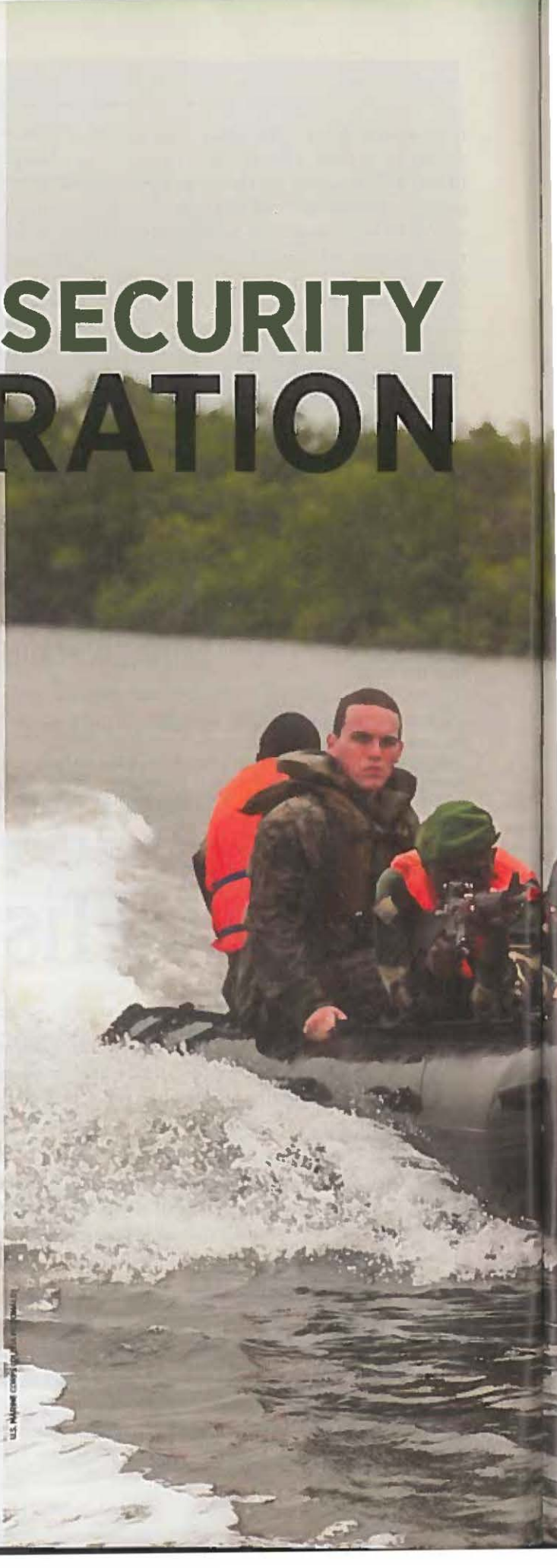


# OPTIMIZE MARITIME SECURITY COOPERATION

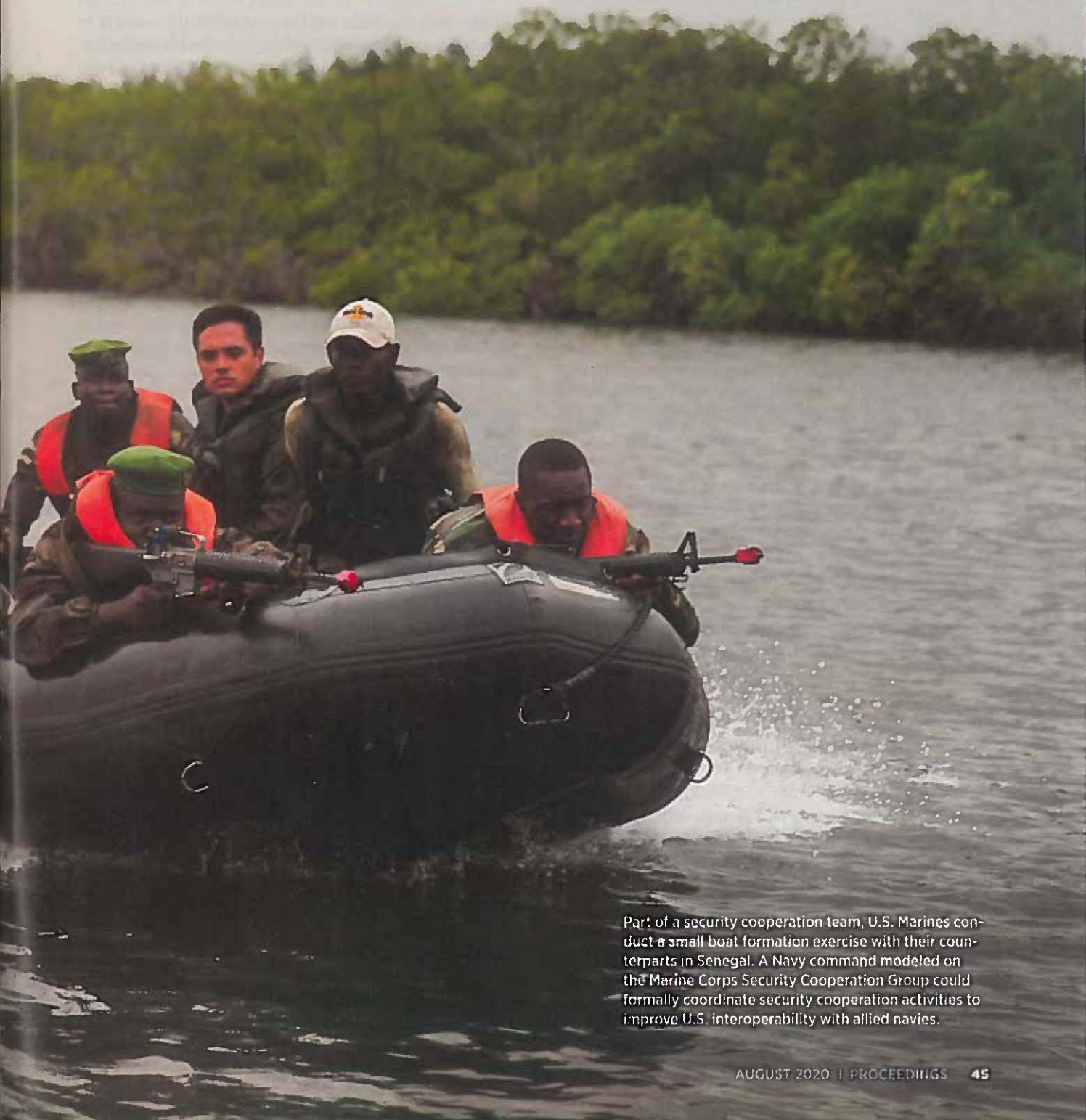
BY MAJORS ERIC HOVEY AND  
JASON HOTALEN, U.S. MARINE CORPS

**T**he drawdown of U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan has not engendered a more peaceful or stable world order. Rather, the United States' post-Cold War dominance in the maritime domain is increasingly beset by challenges. In the Middle East, the U.S.-supported 33-nation maritime coalition has been stymied in developing a coherent response to Iranian aggression. In the Pacific, the United States' longstanding relationship with the Philippines has grown increasingly strained, a fact demonstrated by President Rodrigo Duterte's threat to nullify a 21-year-old bilateral military cooperation agreement.<sup>1</sup> In Africa, South Africa hosted a trilateral naval exercise with Russia and China for the

U.S. Marine Corps photo by [unreadable]



**Partnerships based on cultural understanding and shared interests can bolster U.S. national security. Two case studies provide insights.**



Part of a security cooperation team, U.S. Marines conduct a small boat formation exercise with their counterparts in Senegal. A Navy command modeled on the Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group could formally coordinate security cooperation activities to improve U.S. interoperability with allied navies.

first time in 2019, burnishing China's credentials as an international naval power.<sup>2</sup> In each case, strategic setbacks were not the result of a shortfall of military power or lack of modern equipment; rather, they represent an inability to outpace competitors in partnership building, otherwise known as security cooperation.

Maritime security cooperation builds and maintains alliances that facilitate the access, intelligence, and burden-sharing U.S. naval forces require to support timely and sustained forward operations. While modernizing for direct conflict with Russia and China may be the most urgent requirement for the Navy and Marine Corps, conflict between great powers often unfolds in the peripheries. Because the U.S. military cannot patrol every potential flashpoint, a more structured approach to maritime security cooperation is essential for the Navy and Marine Corps to have the partnerships and access necessary to maintain peace through strength or to prevail in combat when deterrence fails.

### INSIGHTS FROM TWO AFRICAN CASE STUDIES

The continent of Africa has strategic significance in the maritime domain: The Strait of Gibraltar, the Suez Canal, the Bab el-Mandeb strait, and the Mozambique Channel are all critical junctures through which much of the world's energy resources and commerce flows. Because U.S. adversaries recognize the importance of controlling or projecting influence over these vital waterways, analyzing U.S. influence and partnerships within Africa is relevant to the larger question of how the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps can counter Russia and China.<sup>3</sup>

Existing maritime security cooperation operations with two key African partner nations illustrate both the successes and challenges of the current U.S. approach.

**Senegal.** Senegal is actively involved in land-based U.S. security cooperation activities, but U.S. efforts aimed at increasing Senegalese capability in the maritime domain have been less fruitful.<sup>4</sup> The Senegalese discomfort with "maritime security" is based on a fraught history of maritime security cooperation with the European Union (EU) and—importantly—on a fundamental conflict of interest between Senegal and the EU with regard to migration.

**Morocco.** The United States' close ties with the Kingdom of Morocco extend back to the founding of the republic, with Morocco being the first country to recognize the United States. U.S.–Moroccan cooperation in the maritime domain is strong and predicated largely on shared interests in promoting regional stability.<sup>5</sup>

These two countries demonstrate that a one-size-fits-all approach to security cooperation is not feasible, because every nation's unique historical and cultural circumstances shape its security cooperation relationship with the United States. But their case studies suggest two takeaways with overarching application:

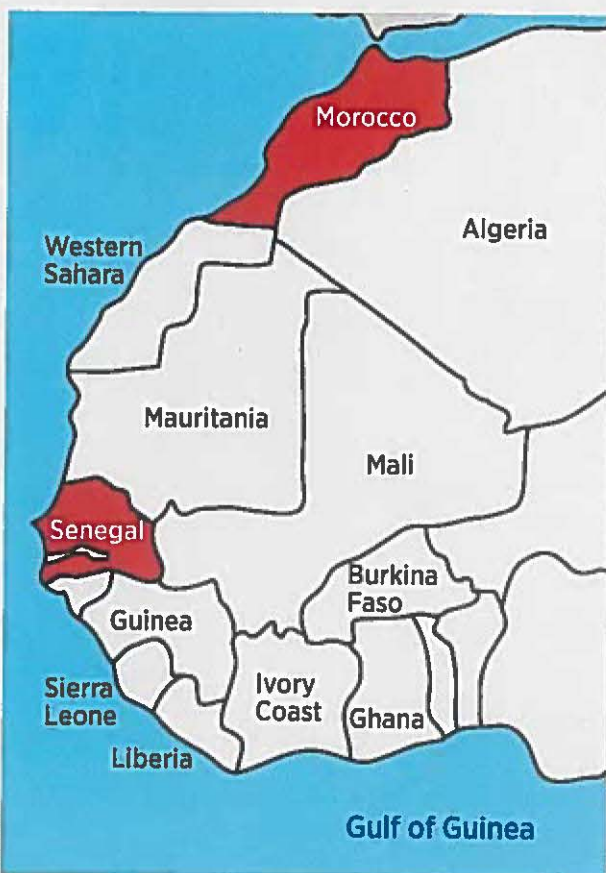
- The Navy and Marine Corps must build their cadres of military personnel with regional security and language training and use them to evaluate, prioritize, and maintain maritime security partnerships.

- Continued U.S. naval dominance is predicated on focusing maritime security cooperation programs on actors/institutions with whom the United States has overlapping interests.

### SENEGAL: OBSTACLES TO SUCCESS

Dating back to 2005, maritime security discussions in Senegal have been inextricably linked with migration. An exponential increase in the number of Senegalese migrants transiting to Europe by way of the Canary Islands led EU leaders to declare a state of emergency, and the EU quickly moved to interdict migration routes. This included heavy patrolling of West African waters by European navies, as well as the provision of modern patrol craft and training for Senegalese forces.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the EU began explicitly linking the provision of development aid to countries' cooperation in accepting the return of unwanted migrants.<sup>7</sup> These activities all shared the goal of preventing unwanted migration of West Africans to Europe; however, they were couched in the terminology of combating the human trafficking and victimization of migrants.



Understanding the cultural and economic significance of migration in Senegalese society is critical. Fully 4 percent of Senegal's population lives and works abroad, and the money sent home by them accounts for between 10 percent and 14 percent of Senegal's gross domestic product.<sup>8</sup> For many Senegalese families, economic migration is a matter of survival, and young men who migrate and support their families are respected and admired.<sup>9</sup> All of this has created a strong cultural norm whereby the highest ambition of many young men is to migrate.

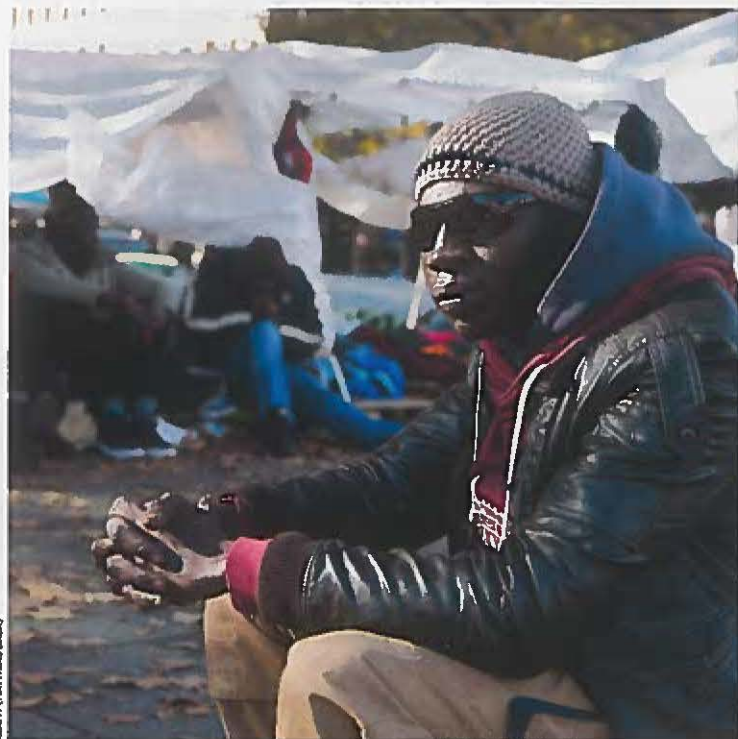
Ultimately, migration (and the income it generates) is a fundamental and existential interest for Senegal. Because U.S. efforts to expand maritime security cooperation closely resembled EU countermigration efforts in substance (donation of vessels and provision of training) and language (combating illicit "trafficking"), they could be interpreted as targeting Senegalese migration to Europe. Such an interpretation creates a fundamental conflict between U.S. objectives and Senegalese interests.

This interplay of migration with maritime security issues demonstrates how cultural memory and values can create obstacles to U.S. efforts. Without an understanding of the cultural and economic significance attributed to migration by Senegalese society and of the history of EU maritime security cooperation activities in West Africa, one would not know that "maritime security" and "countertrafficking" carry a weight of meaning that could be received with antipathy by would-be Senegalese partners.

### MOROCCO: AN ENDURING PARTNER

The Kingdom of Morocco provides a benchmark for successful maritime security cooperation, beginning in 1777, when Sultan ben Abdullah encouraged U.S. vessels to visit Moroccan ports, and continuing to this day with numerous military and economic exchanges. Morocco has executed bilateral live-fire exercises with the U.S. Navy and also hosted the opening ceremony of Phoenix Express 2019, a multilateral U.S. Navy-led exercise. These exercises, along with Morocco's designation as a Major Non-NATO U.S. Ally and the 2004 U.S.-Morocco Free Trade Agreement, benefit both countries. The United States gains access and influence with a capable partner that straddles the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, while Morocco's regional influence is bolstered by U.S. military equipment and economic agreements.<sup>10</sup>

The U.S.-Morocco relationship reflects the evolving security and economic needs of both countries. U.S. policymakers partnered with King Hassan II during the Cold War, despite his brutal internal crackdowns, because supporting his reliably pro-U.S. regime served larger U.S. aims for countering Soviet influence.<sup>11</sup> The close ties persisted after the Cold War, although U.S. interests shifted toward counterterrorism while the Moroccan government remained focused on regime stability. U.S. policy empha-



ALAMY PHOTOGRAPHY/ALAMY

Understanding a partner nation's cultural and economic values is critical to the success of maritime security efforts. In Senegal, for example, economic migration is an existential interest, and the negative association of maritime security operations with European countermigration efforts may have undercut U.S.-led efforts. A program designed around issues of common concern (such as illegal fishing) could be more successful.

sis has again shifted, to great power competition, but the consistent overlap with Morocco for regional stability has facilitated a strong relationship.<sup>12</sup>

The U.S.-Morocco case study underscores two points: First, strong security relationships depend on perceived mutual interests, and second, maintaining the relationship with a key U.S. Africa Command partner serves U.S. interests vis-à-vis great power competition.<sup>13</sup>

The first point highlights the need for military regional experts to analyze and make sense of each nation's interests, avoiding conflicts and seeking alignment to the maximum extent possible. For example, the United States recognizes neither Morocco's claim to Western Sahara nor the Algerian-backed secessionist claims of the self-declared Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic—an imperfect compromise that nonetheless allows the United States to pursue engagement with both Morocco and Algeria.<sup>14</sup> Any actual or perceived recognition of an independent Western Sahara is a red line for the Moroccan government, as demonstrated by its cancellation of African Lion 2013 after the U.S. State Department questioned human rights monitoring in Western Sahara.<sup>15</sup> The



Morocco has executed multiple bilateral exercises with the U.S. Navy, increasing the ability of U.S. and Moroccan maritime forces to work together to address security concerns and increase stability in the region. The Royal Moroccan Navy frigate *Mohammed VI* sails here with the USS *Harry S. Truman* (CVN-75) during exercise Lightning Handshake.

cancellation signaled that recognition of Western Sahara is an existential security issue for the Moroccan government that trumps the security cooperation relationship with the United States.

Because even the strongest security cooperation relationships can be undermined if there is a mismatch of interests, it is critical that the Navy and Marine Corps have the appropriate expertise to navigate the red lines.

The second point is that maintaining a strong U.S.-Morocco relationship is relevant to the United States' larger competition with Russia and China. Morocco's continued partnership with the U.S. Navy, as well as its support to large-scale exercises such as African Lion, means greater access and interoperability with the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps. In addition, the Moroccan military budget is one of the largest in Africa, and much of it goes toward U.S. weapon programs (as opposed to Russian/Chinese competitors), including an upgrade of their fleet of M1A1 Abrams tanks valued at roughly \$1.26 billion.<sup>16</sup> In short, the relationship gives the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps increased influence with a reliable security partner and comes at the expense of Russia and China.

## A WAY AHEAD

These case studies speak to the relevance of maritime security cooperation to counter China and Russia and offer insights into how the United States can dominate in this arena. The Navy and Marine Corps first must deepen their bench of sailors and Marines with regional education and language skills and then use them to focus maritime security programs and activities on those actors and institutions whose goals and interests most closely align with those of the United States and who stand to benefit from U.S. programs.

Senegal and Morocco underscore the first point. In Senegal, the negative historical association of maritime security operations with countermigration may have undercut U.S.-led efforts, which suggests that a security cooperation program designed around issues of common concern (such as illegal fishing or drug interdiction) could be more successful. No such negative associations exist in Morocco, but this historically strong relationship could be quickly derailed by mention of Western Sahara. Unfortunately, educational and career opportunities for sailors and Marines with regional and language expertise are limited, which stymies the services' ability to assess, prioritize, and sustain maritime security cooperation operations.

There are several steps the Navy and Marine Corps can take to optimize their cadres of sailors and Marines to support maritime security cooperation. Many officers and staff noncommissioned officers already attend the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) for various masters' programs, so opportunities exist to partner with the newly created

Defense Security Cooperation University (DSCU) in common subject areas, akin to the existing relationship between NPS and the Defense Acquisition University (DAU).<sup>17</sup> Just as a student in the NPS program management program can receive DAU accreditation, an NPS student in the regional security studies program should be able to apply academic credits toward DSCU accreditation. Foreign students, such as those in the International Military Education and Training Program, could be paired with NPS students for research projects that reflect bilateral interests and real-world combatant command challenges.

Another step the Navy and Marine Corps can take is to adopt each other's best practices for their respective security cooperation workforces. The Navy lacks a dedicated security cooperation course—the five-day Maritime Engagement and Crisis Response course covers security cooperation among multiple topics—but could create one, or perhaps establish a command modeled on the existing Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group (MCSCG), to formally coordinate its security cooperation activities. The missions managed by the MCSCG and its Navy counterpart would both improve U.S. interoperability with allied navies and facilitate bilateral sea denial and sea control operations.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, the Marine Corps should follow the Navy's lead and create a primary military occupational specialty to support career management of foreign area officers (FAOs), its regional and language subject matter experts. A small, board-selected FAO community, akin to the 8059/8061 air/ground acquisitions field, would provide a dedicated cadre of expertise to prioritize and support global maritime security cooperation efforts.

A more structured maritime security cooperation workforce would support a critical best practice: focusing security cooperation programs and activities on actors and institutions that share U.S. interests. The Navy and Marine Corps must judiciously allocate limited maritime security cooperation resources, which takes time and regional expertise. They must not only identify key partner nations across each combatant command, but also ensure these relationships are sustained against rising influence from Russia and China. A dedicated maritime security workforce with regional and language training would prioritize and maintain these partnerships.

There is no better time to implement these policy changes: The Navy and Marine Corps already are adjusting the organization, equipping, and training of their forces to meet the demands of the *National Defense Strategy*, and a stronger, more structured maritime security workforce would complement this effort. The ability of allies to help or hinder military operations is clear: from France's support to the U.S. Continental Navy during the Revolutionary War, to the disruption of U.S. war plans during Operation Iraqi Freedom caused by Turkey's re-

fusal of access for U.S. forces. Enhancing the maritime security cooperation workforce and formalizing operations in this domain are the best ways for the Navy and Marine Corps to develop the partnerships they need to deter and defeat great power adversaries.

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■ **MAJOR HOVEY** is an intelligence officer and graduate of the Naval Postgraduate School. His operational experience includes tours with the Marine air combat element (HMM-265), ground combat element (V18), and 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit. He recently completed language study at the Defense Language Institute, where he studied French.

■ **MAJOR HOTALEN** is a logistics officer and graduate of the Naval Postgraduate School, where he studied national security affairs with a focus on Sub-Saharan Africa. His prior experience includes tours with Marine Corps Systems Command and BLT 3/6, 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit, where he served as BLT logistics officer. He is a graduate of the Defense Language Institute and speaks Portuguese and French.