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Foreign Influence on International Military Students, With a Focus on the Portuguese Armed Forces ^[1]

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: An earlier version of this piece was published on Jul 31, 2023, in *Marinho Media Analysis* [here](#). In addition to bibliographical research, this piece draws from exclusive interviews with experts and key government officials.

The defense of territorial integrity, national sovereignty and, indeed, the political regime of a given State are tied to the armed forces. Said forces are also linked to issues involving ontological security and national identity. For these reasons, influences on the armed forces can have repercussions on all previously mentioned aspects; it is especially relevant to pay attention to the military's top brass and to those who could end up holding such positions. The subject matter of this piece is of considerable interest to States' institutions that both send and welcome military students from abroad.

International military education and training

The Armed Forces of a given country can be influenced by several bodies from foreign states, within a number of contexts. In this regard, we have an influencing state and a target state. Among others, training and education comprise the influence activities that this piece underscores.

For example, training is one of the activities enabling the United States to wield influence over the security sector in Africa. This activity changes the thought process of trainees so that it lines up with the United States' preferences. Military partners that have been influenced with prolonged effects over time, relative to what they think and want, require less monitoring and motivation to bring about U.S. interests. China's military education programs enable it to hold sway over various parts of the world, especially in Central and South Asia, the Middle East, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe and Latin America. In this context, the purpose of College of Defense Studies courses is to lead foreign students to understand and respect China.

In principle, international military training entails risks for both the host country and the one sending trainees.


In the fields of training and education, this ability to influence foreign military personnel and future leaders is of interest to several countries, such as China. Regarding the Sino-American competition, some experts point out that the prestige, as a qualitative advantage of military education in the U.S., calls for continuous work so as not to start diminishing. Currently, in said country, a few private schools with military training programs, due to their ties to China, warrant particular attention from the U.S. Government, given the influences to which future American military leaders are subject.

Defense diplomacy and soft power

In the international sphere, defense diplomacy serves to promote bilateral and multilateral cooperation and to develop training and education at military schools and academies, as instruments of soft power 📄. Because this type of power takes several years to be consolidated, its results are not immediately achieved, but its effects are profound and have a lasting effect on foreign societies (Omelicheva, et alii Spring 2017, p. 129).

For example, military relations between the United Kingdom and Pakistan are looked at as representative of the Armed Forces' use of soft power, most notably the Royal Military

Academy of Sandhurst. The British Army's values and standards are also present at the Pakistan Military Academy. Defense diplomacy is designed to influence the partners' position and, in this respect, the defense attaché is noteworthy. A House of Commons / Defence Sub-Committee document acknowledges that the U.K.'s network of defense attachés contributes to this country's influence worldwide.

In general, for a country welcoming trainees, foreign military training can be an important part of foreign policy in the long term, and, in particular, a significant segment of Security Cooperation relationships. Concerning the State that sends its military personnel, said training type corresponds, first of all, to an aspect of foreign policy and, secondly, to a defense policy instrument  .

In principle, international military training entails risks for both the host country and the one sending trainees. Civil or military higher-education institutions of various countries could be infiltrated by foreign spies posing as students. For instance, according to the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), foreign intelligence services are interested in gathering information at U.S. universities, with the aim of gaining military advantages, among others, and, to such end, said services turn to foreign students and visiting professors.

In an exclusive interview, General (Ret.) Valença Pinto, Chairman of EuroDefense Portugal and the Portuguese Armed Forces' former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, considers that, broadly speaking, international military training and education are highly relevant, especially as part of alliances. According to the General, these training and education activities enable exchanging information, experiences and mutual knowledge, as well as developing interoperability. To prevent negative impacts, in terms of foreign influence stemming from the education and training given to a country's military personnel abroad, destinations need to be diversified as well as thoroughly and carefully selected. Additionally, military personnel need to be adequately prepared to remain alert and be resilient with regard to activities involving harmful influence wielded at the teaching/training establishments hosting them.

According to officials interviewed for this work, there needs to be coordination in relation to objectives of any military exchange and training program with regards to both the receiving and sending countries, and a proper understanding of those countries' specificities, diversity in the geopolitical and cultural spheres, as well as the differences in equipment and organization standards.
