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Thinking on Innovation, Industry, and International Security

Research Note

Monday, September 25, 2023

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Restructuring security assistance around services and software?

American security assistance has long resisted substantially on training and weapons. The training does not always stick, and for Ukrainians more recently, the advice has been unhelpful (see, for example, reporting by Julia Shapero). The weapons are mostly highly valued, in comparison to those of Russia and China, though not always well suited to local conditions. After reading Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds' latest report at RUSI, I offer two ideas for moving security assistance from advice and hardware to services and software.

Idea #1: Outsourcing staff work to volunteers abroad

Watling and Reynolds note that mobilization in Ukraine has provided lots of infantry and software developers, but left a shortage of staff officers, whose skills require time to develop in martial situations. Moreover, if “eliminating strategic overload” is important in everyday business (Felix Oberholzer-Gee), it is probably all the more important in war and war industries. Conveniently, NATO nations have legions of retired staff officers who spent years crunching spreadsheets in cube-farms in Baghdad and Kabul, and some of what they learned could translate. Moreover, the present war has brought many examples of volunteer organizations providing military services (Vivian Salama). Assuredly Northern Virginia's constellation of services firms can figure out how to do this profitably. Amongst that industry's competitive discriminators dynamic capabilities, for reconfiguring resources to address rapidly changing environments (David Teece, Pisano, and Shuen).

Idea #2: algorithmic imagery analysis for drones to map minefields

“Amputations were the most common form of surgery in Afghanistan in the 1980s” (R. Kaplan), and Soviet and Mujahideen proclivity for landmines carried on to Putinists and Taliban. Mine clearance is a priority for security assistance (see reporting by W. Malden), and the importance should be obvious. If anything, as Watling and Reynolds note, Russian minefields have been getting deeper. So comes their direct suggestion: algorithmic imagery analysis software for drones to rapidly map minefields—for a more sophisticated and automated solution than Igor Klymenko's initial idea (see the article by Margaret Osborne), Again, somewhere between Loudoun County and Santa Clara County someone can help figure this out—if no one does so in Lviv or Kyiv first. If MRAPs were the right-of-boom solution, is this part of it left-of-boom? (See my 2021 book). One challenge, as Shyam Sankar, chief technology officer of Palantir, noted in an editorial in the *WSJ*, is that “militaries generally don't understand software.” So, perhaps this could become an open-source project, in what Shashank Joshi in *The Economist* recently called the “deepening civilian involvement in war.” Alas, by the tide of technological development towards the democratization of destruction, this was inevitable.

References and Further Reading

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