International Competencies for the Defense Acquisition Workforce

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America's ability to shape the world this century will depend on the quality of its leaders. Yet the nation is producing too few future leaders who combine substantive depth with international experience and outlook. So, too, managers with a broad strategic vision in a rapidly changing world are in short supply. Excerpt from the 2003 RAND Corporation study, "New Challenges for International Leadership"

Although countless articles and papers have been written about the post-Cold War, post-Sept. 11, 2001, changing dynamics of global affairs, the literature and dialogue are sparse concerning the international competencies of the U.S. government officials who have an active role in these changing dynamics. The 2003 RAND Corporation study, "New Challenges for International Leadership," highlights that important point, stating:

> The United States confronts a world that is both networked and fractured, both full of promise and full of danger. The global role of the United States in the century ahead will require both breadth and depth. It will demand deep understanding of particular languages and cultures, including those from whence danger might arise, as well as broad, strategic perspectives on the economic and political forces that will shape the world.

The statement summarizes the fact that global interconnectedness is required for successful governance. The purpose of this article is to describe that with such changing global dynamics, it is imperative that the civilian sector of the U.S. government develop and sustain a training program to reflect a growing demand for international competency in governance operations. Expanding the curricula of the International Acquisition Career Path (IACP) for the defense acquisition workforce is a positive step in this direction.

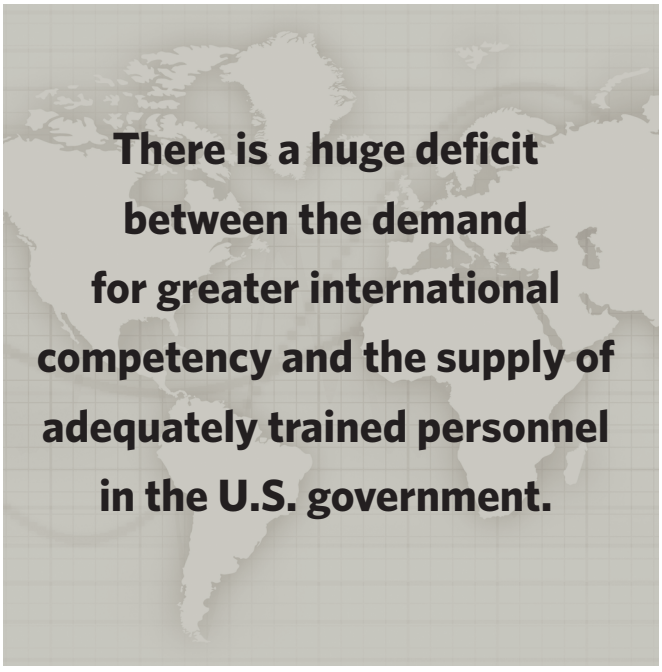
International Competencies

The first question to ask when confronting the competencies issue is what is a competency? Daniel Spikes and John Stroup, experts in the field of federal executive leadership, define competency as a "constructed image of a particular skill set of behaviors that can be synthesized under a single heading." They would further define international competencies as subsets of "multi- or cross-cultural knowledge, foreign policy, protocol and etiquette, and ambiguity of expectations." With those definitions serving as a baseline, the second question to ask is what is the current state of U.S. government civilian leadership in the field of international competency? The answer is unsatisfying. Michael Rawlings, an instructor at the Federal Executive Institute, states that 75 percent of U.S. civil service members whose job responsibilities had U.S. policy implications reported that their work has international implications. Yet pulling data from a similar Federal Executive Institute survey, he writes that 60 percent of U.S. civil service and senior executive service employees said that they received no formal training for international projects, and that more than 67 percent rated their proficiency at a two (on a scale of five) on a range of critical executive competencies. According to Stroup, those competencies include culture, customs, and history; knowledge of international government operations and officials; best practices for international work, travel, and living; and expectations of international government executives.

A Huge Deficit

Within the defense acquisition workforce, the pattern is quite similar, if not more pronounced. In 2009, the program management career field population for the DoD components totaled 13,422 civilian and military personnel. (In this article, DoD components are defined as Army; Navy; Air Force; and the Fourth Estate, which is composed of all DoD organizations, agencies, and field activities not belonging to one of the military departments.) Of that number, slightly over 400 positions, or 3 percent, of the program management component of the defense acquisition workforce, are identified and coded Level III in international acquisition, qualifying them to conduct and manage international acquisition programs. International training remains optional, or assignment-specific, for the remaining 120,000 members of the defense acquisition workforce not in the program management career field.

Clearly there is a huge deficit between the demand for greater international competency and the supply of adequately trained personnel in the U.S. government, and the Department of Defense is no exception. Unfortunately, the deficit is not just noticed by scholars; it is also noticed by key U.S. allies, often to a negative effect. Yoon-kee Chung, a South Korean government executive who was a visiting



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executive-in-residence at the Federal Executive Institute for approximately 18 months, commented on this deficit:

> The United States is a super-large country, and the scale of its territory makes it difficult for people living there to understand how well the world is networked, which is obviously observable outside of the United States. Global perspective is critical to being a member of the networking world, because no country can stand alone in this international network. Ignorance or indifference to international affairs and foreign culture can have significant consequences.

A New Perspective

To rectify this issue, what needs to be done? First and foremost, it is beneficial to *think internationally*. More than 25 years ago, European experts devised seven core competencies agreed upon for successful international management. Developing a common set of core competencies has been vital in increasing the level of cooperation and integration throughout Europe over the last few decades. In fact, those core competencies have proven so successful that they have been adopted by the U.S. Foreign Service. The seven competencies are:

- Be open minded
- Be innovative
- Possess integrity
- Possess social skills
- Possess communication skills
- Be result driven
- Possess knowledge at different levels.

It would be easy to misinterpret international competencies as being domestic competencies, but there are stark differences. Professor Joyce Osland, a professor of management at San Jose State University specializing in global leadership, women's leadership, and intercultural competence, noted, "The term 'global' encompasses more than simple geographic reach in terms of business operation. It also includes the notion of *cultural reach* in terms of people and *intellectual reach* in the development of a global mindset." That means that developing international competencies does not just involve acquiring new skills; rather, it means acquiring new skills *and perspectives*. Such international perspectives can add great value to how DoD, through its defense acquisition workforce, does business at home and abroad.

The Need for International Competencies

At this opportune time, there is a substantial increase in both the supply and demand for increased development in international competency. On the supply side, note that from a 2007 Federal Executive Institute poll, 65 percent of U.S. federal executives indicated an interest in learning more about the role of the United States in international affairs. Fifty-five percent polled indicated interest in learning more about the international economic system and its global impact, and 47 percent wanted to learn more about the image of the United States in the world. The poll went on to add that 68 percent wanted to increase their knowledge on cross-cultural sensitivities, 50 percent on international protocol and etiquette, and 54 percent on developing international negotiation skills.

On the demand side, noted journalist Roxana Tiron of The-Hill.com reported that President Barack Obama has ordered an extensive interagency review of export controls, and Rep. Howard Berman, the chair of the House Foreign Relations Committee, said that he will introduce legislation to overhaul the present system. Defense experts are confident this new effort will succeed, as it is a top-down initiative rather than a bottom-up one. If the system truly does change, it will be incumbent upon the defense acquisition workforce, along with other cabinet-level departments, to implement any new reforms.

Where to Get Training

Where would it be possible to acquire these aforementioned international competencies, especially for those in the defense acquisition workforce? The answer lies with the Defense Acquisition University and its IACP classes. In addition to the many months of required program manager training, the IACP currently requires three one-week resident courses: Multinational Program Management (PMT 202), International Security and Technology Transfer/Control (PMT 203), and Advanced International Management Workshop (PMT 304) to attain Level III Program Manager-International Acquisition (PM-IA) certification. All three courses emphasize relevant U.S. international policy and law, but the curricula falls short in one regard, as the courses provide the information predominantly from a U.S. viewpoint.

That said, it is now time to consider moving beyond the bounds of Level III PM-IA certification to an executive level of training by providing professional development opportunities. At that proposed new level, learning the perspective of foreign policy, negotiation, and law would be emphasized, but from other national perspectives. The value added would be that international competency in such areas as program management, international agreements, technology transfer, and export control would help expedite U.S. agreements and projects/programs with international partners as well as advance U.S. interests. By having trained, educated, and experienced acquisition executives with international perspectives, the defense acquisition workforce could meet the needs of a globally changing world, all the while maximizing U.S. national security.

The Need for Training

Changing global dynamics that have led to increasing global interconnectedness now make it imperative for the U.S. government to develop and sustain a professional development program to meet a growing demand for international competency in governance operations. Expanding the curricula to the executive level along the IACP can be a positive step

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in accomplishing that goal. As a final rebuttal, Spikes and Stroup state from their work, "Competencies for Success in International Leadership in Challenging Times:"

> Let us put to rest the notion that a federal manager can do his or her work without the international skills, knowledge, and temperament required to do the public sector work. As our results show, 75% of the respondents incorporate some international factors into their work and responsibilities. To garner and enhance these capacities, we also must first adopt a culture of management training. The development of international capacities must become an integrated goal among leaders across government. As the results demonstrate, federal executives and their agencies also should take international competencies seriously because senior officials in the public sector perceive the need for it.

As the president is seeking new reforms on export controls, and as international cooperation is increasingly required in the defense acquisition world, the United States needs to remain globally competitive, relevant, and secure in this area. The threat of the United States being left behind and dominated in the global arena is far too great a risk to bear. Therefore, it is necessary for U.S. government executives to adapt to an international environment. Not doing so comes at great risk to our overall national security.

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