

MIL to MIL

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, FEB 6 2011

One of the most under-studied, and perhaps most over-promoted, aspects of American foreign policy is the so-called Mil to Mil Relations, the cultivated ties the US military has with foreign militaries. These Mil to Mil Relations consist of military training and liaison exchanges, joint exercises, and senior level consultations. American military schools welcome foreign military students with the explicit purpose of building long term personal relationships between American and foreign officers. American units team-up with foreign military units in regularly scheduled bilateral and multilateral maneuvers that promote inter-operability and personnel familiarization. And common sightings in the corridors of the Pentagon are military officers of other countries in for briefings or on their way to joint planning exercises.

Each of the American armed services has a series of nations in which it is the dominant American military representative and is especially close to its counterpart. The US Navy is particularly close to the Royal Navy although they were long time rivals. It is also very friendly with the French and Japanese navies. Not surprisingly, the US Army has exceptional ties with the German and South Korean armies. The US Air Force gets along well with the Israeli air force among others. Senior officers like the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, currently Admiral Mullin, often take on as a personal task the maintenance of ties with the military leadership in places like Pakistan and Russia. But no country is left totally off the list with a colonel here or general there becoming the best buddy link to say the Rwandan Army or the Rumanian Marines.

Come a crisis, like the current one in Egypt, and the Mil to Mil lines will be buzzing. We want inside information, reassurances about troop actions, and perhaps some special favors from the Egyptian military many of whose officers have trained in the US and whose senior leaders know ours from frequent visits (The Egyptian Chief of Staff was in Washington when the crisis began). The US military sells much of what it does routinely in faraway places on the advantages it gets in these moments. All the free US training, free access to US military equipment, and free guidance on how to be a world class military supposedly earns credit with the receiving militaries and the individual officers that can be cashed in when the need arises. Old friends supposedly will help even when their governments grow hostile or the locals riot against it. These separate relations pay off when official ones are strained or blocked. There is a back door as well as a front one for America to use.

But I am a skeptic. Militaries are nationalistic organizations. They love their flags. If the conflict is with the US, I suspect that military ties, no matter how faithfully tended, will not yield much. Moreover, the ties between the militaries, if they do work, likely undermine civilian control, an American principle, on both ends. The foreign government should worry about the loyalty of military commanders who are so friendly with Americans. Are they too much influenced by the US? Will they try to take over power from civilians? On our end, how many state departments do we have or want? Who speaks for the US? Do we want the US military tied closely to other militaries, especially those that are corrupt or brutal as many are? Finally, is this worth all the effort? What does it cost to cultivate foreign militaries and what does it buy? We know too little about the extent of Mil to Mil relations, and especially about their value. What is their role in US foreign policy?

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Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.