



## Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) changed the way we, at U.S. Army Central (USARCENT), engaged with our partners and redefined our engagement strategy. For over a year, we ceased all face-to-face partner activities in the Middle East, and by March 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic had significantly degraded our partnership activities in support of the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) Theater Campaign Plan. Specifically, we were unable to sustain regional partnerships in the Middle East because of travel restrictions and our partners' need to focus on their national pandemic response. The result was the loss of placement and access required to facilitate the U.S. defense posture and enable USARCENT's freedom of movement and action in the region. The risk of losing years of progress toward building rapport, trust, and mutual benefit was staring down on us.

## Searching for a Solution

In order to mitigate further degradation in partner relationships, we desperately searched for answers to important questions: How does one safely conduct a global conference spanning eight time zones? What system and technology are common across a dozen foreign partner organizations? How do we get partners excited about a multilateral intelligence discussion? In order to find a solution, we decided to take a chance and leverage technology born from the pandemic. By late fall of 2020, the USARCENT G-2 augmented its engagement strategy with virtual enhancements, including the creation of the Virtual Land Forces Intelligence Conference, using Microsoft Teams.

We were uncertain how our partners would react. To our surprise, we learned they were excited and exuberant about

virtual engagements and conferences. "The Intelligence Conference was a great opportunity to share information and stay connected. We at [Ministry of National Guard] MNG look forward to continuing this relationship and look forward to upcoming conferences," said Saudi Arabian Brigadier General Majed Al Osaimi, incoming deputy intelligence director of the Saudi Arabian Ministry of National Guard.<sup>1</sup> Not only did they respond positively, but our last two conferences also led to more feedback and contributions to our intelligence partnerships than ever before. During a Senate Armed Services Committee posture statement in April 2021, GEN Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., Commander, USCENTCOM, said, "While many events were cancelled due to COVID-19, partners remain committed."<sup>2</sup> The USARCENT G-2 remains committed to our intelligence partners and used these virtual events as proof.

Key strategic documents codify the importance of maintaining essential partnerships in order to secure U.S. national interests abroad. In March 2021, the White House released the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, identifying *partnerships* as a priority for the U.S. Government.<sup>3</sup> The National Defense Strategy identifies "enduring coalitions and long-term security partnerships, underpinned by our bedrock alliances and reinforced by our allies' own webs of security relationships" as a line of effort.<sup>4</sup> Before the 2021 transition of the U.S. Administration, the Secretary of the Army and the Chief of Staff of the Army signed the inaugural *Army Strategy for Allies and Partners*, making allies and partners within the Service a priority.<sup>5</sup> The Army's senior intelligence officer published her four priority lines of effort, one of which is the commitment to strengthen our relationship with allies and partners. In his April 2021

posture statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee, GEN McKenzie affirmed his commitment to allies and alignment to the new Interim National Security Strategic Guidance.<sup>6</sup> USARCENT's direction on partnership is no different. In support of USCENCOM, USARCENT's partnership program in the Middle East is based on a tiered system focused on access, basing, and overflight. To execute this guidance, we developed the Theater Intelligence Engagement Strategy (TIES).

**Senior Leader Engagements (SLE)** – The USARCENT G-2, intelligence, SLEs focus on CG-directed contact with our priority access-focused partners. The frequency is based on direct guidance from the USCENCOM and USARCENT CGs. The level of engagements is based on each individual country's intelligence organization, but ideally the primary partner is the land domain G-2. In the past, SLEs have been conducted up echelon and down echelon based on the need to sustain or improve access.

**Military Engagement** – Military engagement in the USARCENT focus area is the most visible and requested aspect of the support from our regional land domain partnerships. This pillar of the TIES focuses on intelligence doctrinal and tactics development. This supports the growth of intelligence organizations within our regional partner formations. The USARCENT G-2 TIES includes the Army's ASAP tools, personnel exchanges, and PME as a component of military engagement.

**Interoperability** – The interoperability pillar focuses on developing common training goals to communicate and execute the intelligence warfighting function bilaterally. Partner system architecture within the region is relatively immature based on relatively new intelligence organizations at all levels from tactical to strategic. This pillar includes Army ASAP tools, advise and assist, armaments cooperation, and exercises; and collective training.

**Intelligence Sharing** – The final pillar of the USARCENT G-2 TIES is intelligence sharing. While there are unique agreements in place that allow USARCENT to share through delegated authorities, USARCENT G-2 primarily shares finished intelligence. This sharing is mainly a means to create a common understanding of similar threats.



Theater Intelligence Engagement Strategy Pillars

## Creating the Necessary TIES

In 2018, the USARCENT G-2 created an intelligence engagement strategy to apply USCENCOM's and USARCENT's theater security cooperation guidance to partnerships within the region. In 2019, we focused this strategy on four pillars:

- ◆ Senior leader engagements.
- ◆ Military engagement.
- ◆ Interoperability.
- ◆ Intelligence sharing.

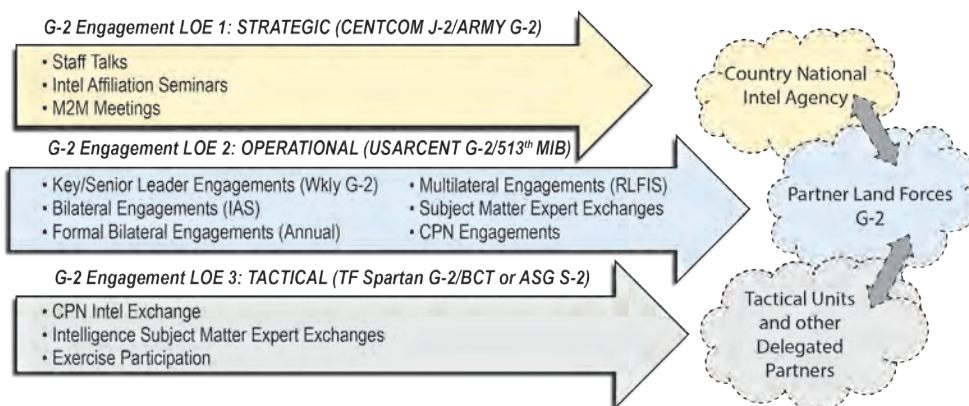
These pillars are in line with current security cooperation tools identified in the *Army Strategy for Allies and Partners*.<sup>7</sup> The first pillar, senior leader engagements, emphasizes ensuring predictable, relationship-focused engagements between the USARCENT G-2 and the land forces equivalent senior intelligence representative. Next, our military engagement pillar encompasses activities that build Army-to-Army relationships and facilitate increased understanding of organization, tactics, and doctrine. Third, the interoperability pillar harnesses technology and relationships to execute the intelligence warfighting function at the speed of war with our partners. Finally, the intelligence sharing pillar enables the sharing of finished releasable intelligence under the guidance and authority of the country embassy teams and USCENCOM J-2.

During the development of the partnership strategy, we identified factors that affected its execution: physical distance from our headquarters to our partners', our regional partners' military intelligence force capacity, and USCENCOM and USARCENT command guidance on gaining and maintaining access in the region. First, the physical distance of USARCENT, headquartered at Shaw Air Force Base, South Carolina, was addressed by the delegation of

intelligence partnership activities to forward down-trace units. We managed this delegation of the engagement authority from the USARCENT G-2 staff and validated it during our weekly theater intelligence battle rhythm events. Additionally, the TIES program documented the alignment of the appropriate echelon of U.S. Army intelligence organizations with the relevant partner land domain organizations. The second factor affecting the USARCENT G-2 strategy was our partners' intelligence capacity. Through our experience, we realized that the U.S. Army's intelligence footprint could overwhelm a partner's capacity quickly and unintentionally. Finally, the need to gain and maintain access in support of the commander's guidance was the most important influence on the TIES. The commander's guidance directed the use of relationships between partners to enable the broader theater partnership plan. The critical task was to deconflict engagements with other theater Service components and the USCENCOM J-2. This was executed by "echeloning" the engagements into tactical, operational, and strategic levels, while identifying specific activities and partners for each echelon. We created an intelligence engagement program that—

- ◆ Gave partners routine and predictable access to the USARCENT intelligence enterprise.
- ◆ Gained familiarity with intelligence exchanges to include receiving finished U.S. intelligence.
- ◆ Advanced federated/distributed intelligence through partners at the speed of war.

Overall, this strategy served us well in the region with land domain intelligence partners, before the pandemic, leading into early 2020.



USARCENT G-2 Engagement Lines of Effort

## The Pandemic

The pandemic had a universal degradation on USARCENT partners; however, the pandemic did not degrade regional threats to U.S. and partner interest in the Middle East. To compound the problems, regional governments had to respond to their internal demands on resources and the re-allocation of military intelligence personnel to respond to the pandemic. The impacts on the defense forces, and specifically on the intelligence professionals across the Middle East, highlighted common themes within our region. Themes included the degradation of intelligence partnership activities, decreased access to networks and connectivity challenges, and the balancing of internal security and pandemic response requirements against maintaining a common intelligence picture of the regional threats. We quickly worked on solutions to adjust the TIES program to meet these pandemic-driven challenges.

At the onset of the pandemic, we decided to reassess our own TIES program. The most direct impact on the program was the degradation of partnerships from cancelling in-person partner engagement activities. Before the pandemic, regional partners preferred in-person bilateral and multilateral events to manage the intelligence capacity. Once the pandemic restrictions were in place, we cancelled all planned in-person events because of the constraints that government policies imposed, limiting travel. Our answer to the degradation of engagements was a virtual connection with partners using existing unclassified and classified network tools to augment in-person events when regional restrictions allowed. While we identified virtual engagements early on as an answer to the problem, a network tool that our regional partners could use was not as clear.

A number of network connectivity challenges were identified when transitioning to a virtual program during the pandemic. While the USARCENT G-2 TIES accounted for virtual connectivity options, it did not initially account for other challenges identified during the pandemic:

### ◆ **Unclassified domain.**

The intelligence warfighting function is rarely executed over unclassified commercial applications; however, during the initial stages of the pandemic, the unclassified domain was the only way to communicate with partners in some cases.

### ◆ **Network tool standardization.** Unclassified network tools such as Microsoft

Teams were not standardized nor had they been tested with partners before the pandemic.

◆ **Language barriers.** The user-interface language of the unclassified network tools was a problem, although we benefited from our intelligence partners having a fairly good command of the English language.

◆ **Security.** Partner national security structures severely limited the use of network tools. Our partners' host nations restrict the use of unclassified network tools such as Microsoft Teams.

Virtual events benefited most partnered nations whose intelligence forces were challenged both to meet their national pandemic response and to provide intelligence to their own land forces during times of uncertainty and attack escalation. Experiences during the first virtual multilateral event and a series of virtual subject matter expert exchanges demonstrated that partners sometimes preferred the virtual options for three reasons:

◆ **Balance.** Partners were able to manage their intelligence engagement time against the needs of their national response to the pandemic.

◆ **Attendance.** The ease of attendance allowed for larger audiences, and very little funding and travel were required. The only limitations were room restrictions during the pandemic.

◆ **Senior engagement.** In addition to higher attendance numbers, more senior-ranking officials participated. We found that partner senior intelligence officers viewed shorter events as more focused, less resource-intensive, and a better use of their time. From our experience, we rarely hosted the actual partner land domain G-2 (colonel equivalent) during the in-person symposiums (5-day event), but during the virtual conference (3-hour event), three-fourths of the invited senior G-2s were in attendance.



## The Sustains

While the pandemic forced a change to the USARCENT G-2 TIES program, not all the changes were seen as temporary. We decided to apply two lessons from the pandemic to future intelligence engagements. Before COVID-19, the USARCENT G-2's capstone multilateral event was the Regional Land Forces Intelligence Symposium. However, the pandemic made any in-person multilateral event unrealistic. Using a series of government-provided tools, we were able to connect virtually with our intelligence partners. Conducting a bilateral engagement in this way was quite simple; but how do you scale this to allow multiple partners and have meaningful engagement discussions with senior intelligence professionals? We decided to host a virtual event to mimic the Regional Land Forces Intelligence Symposium based on emerging academic experience on large-scale virtual conferences. This event was the Virtual Land Forces Intelligence Conference. While it was limited to an unclassified forum, it allowed maximum engagement with partners.

The second lesson we will continue to include in the TIES is to complement virtual events with bilateral in-person intelligence activities between the theater G-2 and partners. Partners in the region, because of security and network usage concerns, have long preferred in-person bilateral events. The pandemic was a forcing function to push our partners through these challenges. While the theater G-2 benefits from a theater network called the CENTCOM Partner Network (CPN), partners have not fully embraced the network. The CPN is a collateral network designed to provide a platform for bilateral operations between partners. The theater G-2 was able to capitalize on the partners' need for intelligence partnership during the pandemic to reinforce the use of CPN at the G-2 echelon. Over the course of the pandemic, partners started to appreciate the ease of CPN video teleconferences when weighed against the competing national pandemic response requirements. Going forward, in-person partnership activities will be augmented by a larger virtual presence.

The Virtual Land Forces Intelligence Conference and virtual augmentation to in-person bilateral events validated the strength of USARCENT's commitment to partners in the USCENTCOM region during a challenging time. The positive reception of these events by all those involved led to their incorporation in the TIES. The Virtual Land Forces Intelligence Conference will now augment the annual Regional Land Forces Intelligence Symposium. Additionally, virtual bilateral events will complement in-person events. These two additions to the strategy reinforce existing bilateral events,



### USARCENT Virtual Land Forces Intelligence Conference

On 27 October 2020, 11 partner nations and 12 U.S. intelligence organizations, comprising more than 60 attendees, virtually connected in the first Virtual Land Forces Intelligence Conference. The USARCENT G-2 hosted this 3-hour virtual conference with the intent to reaffirm USARCENT's commitment to existing regional partners amid the global pandemic. This reaffirmation was necessary because of the almost universal reduction in military-to-military partnerships across the globe resulting from COVID-19. USARCENT designed the event to replicate an in-person symposium, as close as possible, with materials, presentations, and speakers. The intent was to "conduct a multilateral partnered conference to discuss virtual intelligence operations under COVID-19 conditions in order to advance federated/distributed intelligence support to warfighters, while assuring existing foreign intelligence USARCENT's commitment to relationships within the Middle East."

All partners attended using Microsoft Teams, a connectivity tool for unclassified virtual communications. Representatives included senior intelligence professionals from Australia, Bahrain, Canada, France, Jordan, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, New Zealand, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Several U.S. organizations were represented, including the Department of the Army G-2, U.S. Army Intelligence Center of Excellence, U.S. Central Command, and U.S. Army Intelligence and Security Command. Major General Chris Field, Australian Army, USARCENT Deputy Commanding General for Operations, opened the event with a discussion about the impact of COVID-19 and the evolving nature of operations due to COVID-19. He also presented his perspective, as an Australian military commander, on serving as part of a coalition. USARCENT is fortunate to have a coalition leader within its formation. His appointment to a senior position highlights the importance both the Australian and the United States leadership place on allies and their input into the overall USARCENT strategy. Following Major General Field's opening remarks, attendees discussed the strategies their organizations and nations have taken to overcome COVID-19-related impacts. During the conference, the partners provided an overview of their organizations and the way in which their specific organizations fit into their nation's COVID-19 response strategy, specific efforts to maintain partnerships with allies during the crisis, and their way forward in a COVID-19-dominated environment. A highlight of the conference was a panel presentation led by a team from the National Defense University. The panel led a discussion on the impacts of COVID-19 in the land warfare domain. Through this discussion, common regional concerns and interest were identified, confirming the need to continue virtual connectivity events like this Virtual Land Forces Intelligence Conference in the future. The second Virtual Land Forces Intelligence Conference occurred on 23 and 24 March 2021, covering emerging threat trends in the region. The event was expanded to cover 2 days and allow more partner participation.

multilateral events, and partnerships through virtual forums, which support the overall USARCENT intelligence engagement strategy. USARCENT will continue to strengthen partner relationships in the Middle East region through a robust bilateral and multilateral program augmented by virtual engagements.

## Conclusion

The USARCENT G-2 took restrictions from the COVID-19 pandemic and turned them into opportunities for increased success. We used available tools to change a situation that could have stopped our TIES completely into a plan to engage more robustly with our partners. Moreover, the broader USARCENT staff incorporated virtual engagement across other warfighting functions, giving the headquarters seamless and persistent connection to allies and partners. Virtual integration fostered low-cost, wide participation events, which enhanced the relationships that COVID-19 restrictions threatened, and underscored USARCENT's commitment to our partners at all times. Going forward, USARCENT will maintain the virtual connection opportunities to overcome the tyranny of distance regardless of the circumstances. Distributed intelligence, engagement, and mission command are the way our future Army will do business. ✨

## Epigraph

Nikki Glanton, "U.S. Army Central hosts inaugural virtual intelligence conference," U.S. Army Central, 31 October 2020, <https://www.usarcent.army.mil/News/Article/2401108/us-army-central-hosts-inaugural-virtual-intelligence-conference/>.

## Endnotes

1. Glanton, "Inaugural Virtual Intelligence Conference."
2. *Posture Statement of General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., Commander, United States Central Command before the Senate Armed Services Committee 22 April 2021*, U.S. Central Command, 19, <https://www.centcom.mil/ABOUT-US/POSTURE-STATEMENT/>.
3. White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (Washington, DC, 3 March 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.
4. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America*, n.d., 9, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.
5. Department of the Army, (U) *The Army Strategy for Allies and Partners (ASAP) 2020* (Secret) (Washington, DC, 30 October 2020).
6. *Posture Statement of General Kenneth McKenzie*.
7. Department of the Army, *Army Strategy*, foreword.

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