Abstract

This article introduces the US Aid to Security Sector Actors (USASSA) dataset, the product of a collaboration between academic researchers and the nonprofit Security Assistance Monitor. In addition to providing the most comprehensive source of data on US security assistance, the USASSA dataset transforms detailed information about how security assistance funds are spent into aid and recipient typologies that can be used to conduct more sophisticated analyses of how this foreign policy tool is employed, its utility, and its limitations. Our data clearly show not only the magnitude and geographic reach of US SSA, but also its diversity. While some SSA is akin to humanitarian aid, other types of assistance blur the line between foreign aid and proxy warfare. We demonstrate the utility of the dataset’s typology of aid types with an analysis of factors affecting variation in the amount and type of aid provided to different states.

Over the past two decades, there have been tremendous advances in the availability and quality of data on development, humanitarian, and governance aid; and these advances have enabled significant progress in empirical research on the myriad impacts of this aid. The same is not true for military aid. Although security assistance is a substantial and growing component of the foreign policy toolkits of powerful states, and security aid could have more severe unintended consequences than other forms of aid, multiple barriers to collecting comprehensive and detailed data on security assistance have stymied research in this area. Does providing security assistance to fragile states like Mali increase or decrease the risk of civilian harm? Does assistance provided during an armed conflict affect peacebuilding after war termination? What are the effects of military aid provided to a state’s security forces during governance transitions? Are security sector reform and defense institution building programs effective? These questions and many more can only be adequately explored if scholars have access to high quality data.

In this article we introduce a new dataset, the product of a collaboration between academic researchers and the nonprofit Security Assistance Monitor, that aims to consolidate all publicly available information from official sources about unclassified US security aid provided to foreign militaries, police, and other security sector actors between 2000 and 2019. While details on many security assistance activities are available from government reports and NGOs, much of the more granular information is not consolidated and coded in a way that would allow for systematic analysis. Security assistance authorities fund a wide range of activities, including training and equipping militaries for combat, law enforcement training, building special forces units, defense institution reform, humanitarian assistance, counterproliferation initiatives, and English language courses. Moreover, US security assistance is provided to a range of security sector actors within countries: police forces, army units, civilians in defense ministries, air force pilots, and border guards, among others. In addition to providing the most comprehensive source of data on US security assistance, this dataset transforms detailed information about how security assistance funds are spent into aid and recipient typologies that can be used to conduct more sophisticated analyses of how this foreign policy tool...
is employed, its utility, and its limitations.

Interest in security assistance has surged due in part to the United States’ massive and costly efforts to train and equip state security forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also in response to the apparent effectiveness of Western security aid to Ukraine, and growing awareness of security force capacity-building on the African continent. We believe this dataset can advance scholarship and inform important policy debates. In the remainder of this article, we introduce readers to the US security assistance landscape and briefly describe some of the unique challenges to collecting comprehensive data on security aid. We then explain how the dataset was created and provide descriptive statistics. Next, we demonstrate the utility of the data by exploring whether the provision of assistance is constrained by legal prohibitions on providing security aid to governments that commit human rights abuses. We conclude with a discussion of the need for this dataset and the ways that it could advance research.

US Security Sector Assistance

The United States is by far the largest provider of security assistance worldwide. Security assistance managed by the State Department, often implemented by the Department of Defense (DoD), is authorized under Title 22 of the US Code. The DoD is given similar authorities under Title 10. Security assistance may also be authorized in the annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and funded in Defense appropriations bills. Various agencies of the US government and the armed forces use different terms for the vast array of programs\(^\text{11}\) that provide military training, equipment, advising, and education to foreign security forces. We use the broad terms security assistance, security sector assistance, and military aid to encompass all such programs.

The United States has provided some form of security assistance to at least 179 of the 193 United Nations member countries over the past twenty years. Between 2000 and 2019, the US delivered security assistance worth over 340 billion USD, an average of $17 billion a year, to foreign governments and their security sectors.\(^\text{22}\) All figures exclude security assistance amounts under classified programs like 10 U.S.C. §127e Support of Special Operations to Combat Terrorism. Spending on training and equipping foreign security forces, defense institution building, law enforcement training, and a wide range of other activities funded by security assistance programs increased more than 350% in real terms between 2001 and 2007. At the same time, the proportion of funding managed by the Department of Defense versus the Department of State shifted from 8% DoD, 92% State in 2000, to 62% DoD, 38% State in 2007.

Unfortunately, there are significant obstacles to collecting comprehensive, detailed data on the incredibly vast and complex assortment of legal authorities and funding authorizations that comprise the US security sector assistance enterprise. Despite the significant sums budgeted for foreign security assistance, and an increasing reliance on this tool in US national security strategy, reporting, monitoring, and evaluation requirements for security assistance are far less stringent than those placed on economic aid (Marquis et al. 2016; Miller and Mahanty April 14, 2020). As a result, even Congress, which has a mandate to provide oversight of the security assistance programs they authorize, does not have access to a comprehensive picture of how the funding they allocate is spent.

Security assistance funds managed by the Department of Defense are particularly challenging to track due to frequent changes in accounts and programs, poor recordkeeping, and laxer requirements for reporting than State Department programs (Isacson and Kinosian 2017; Serafino 2016; U.S. Government Accountability Office 2018). After 9/11, Congress granted dozens of new security cooperation authorities to the Department of Defense, giving the DoD a greatly expanded role in building the capacity of foreign forces, increasing not just the amount of funding for these activities, but the number of state recipients as well (Epstein and Rosen 2018). The majority of new DoD security assistance authorities were originally designed to be temporary programs to address immediate threats. In practice, many programs have endured. In a series of reports, the Congressional Research Service bemoans the difficulty of obtaining data on security sector assistance
programs, noting that inconsistent Congressional notification requirements make it impossible to get a “full
and authoritative accounting” of US security assistance funding around the world (Serafin 2014, 26), and
that the ambiguity built into DoD programs in particular makes it “difficult to understand what, specifically,
the DoD is doing to build partner capacity” (McInnis and Lucas 2015, 1).

This project is an attempt to provide researchers, policymakers, and the public with a full accounting of US
security sector aid spending across the globe, and to delve into the specifics of what goods and services are
being provided to which security sector actors with these funds.

The USASSA Dataset

The US Aid to Security Sector Actors (USASSA) dataset aims to consolidate all available official data
on US aid provided to foreign militaries, police, and other security sector actors between 2000 and 2019.
Recognizing that, unlike other types of foreign aid, comprehensive information on security assistance was
not easily accessible to policymakers or the public, in 2014 the Center for International Policy (CIP) founded
the Security Assistance Monitor (SAM) program to collect and analyze information on US security sector
assistance programs worldwide. SAM compiles its data11SAM data are licensed under the Creative Commons
CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 License from government documents including, for example, Congressional appropriation
bills, budget justifications, and reports from the US State Department, Department of Defense, Congressional
Research Service, and Government Accountability Office. Some government reports are obtained through
Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests.

The Security Assistance Monitor’s data are easily searchable via interactive dashboards on SAM’s website
and extremely useful for getting a macro-level view of aid amounts provided to countries over time, or drilling
down into specifics on aid types and recipients for a particular country. In addition to media outlets, it is
not uncommon for policymakers and even military officials to turn to the Security Assistance Monitor for
information on US security aid programs. However, the data are not widely used for academic analyses
because the most detailed information is not comprehensive (i.e., available for all programs, countries, and
years), and valuable information is lost at higher levels of aggregation (e.g., the country-year level of analysis).
To remedy this, we set out to produce a dataset that would be better suited to academic research and, in
particular, quantitative analyses.

This collaboration between academic researchers and staff from the Security Assistance Monitor:

1. combines all publicly available official data into a comprehensive, global dataset at the country-year
level of analysis, including observations for all United Nations member states in every year from 2000
to 2019
2. expands and verifies SAM’s existing data with additional information collected from government do-
cuments, media reports, and secondary source material;
3. codes qualitative information contained in SAM’s records, and supplemental sources, into categorical
variables useful for quantitative analyses; and
4. provides a complete bibliography of sources

Data Set Construction

To create the dataset, we began with the raw data the Security Assistance Monitor had collected about US
foreign security assistance programs worldwide at two levels of analysis. Each of the almost fifteen thousand
observations at the recipient-program-year level identifies the recipient country or region, delivery year, the
amount of aid in US dollars, and the security assistance program under which the aid is provided. Each of the
23,878 observations at the line item level of analysis (observations for a subset of the recipient-program-year
level data representing just under 50% of total security assistance provided between 2000 and 2019) contains
a short description of the security assistance “item” provided, and a source material reference, in addition
to aid amount, recipient, year, and program information. An item could be a material object or objects (a
tank, weapon system, or uniforms); a training activity, military exercise, or educational course; or a direct
service provided by American personnel like demining or transportation. We discuss these different types of
These two sources of data were reconciled to create one dataset with comprehensive data at the line item level. Security aid amounts for which we had information about the recipient, program, and year, but no matching line item details, were retained as observations with missing information in the item description. The university research team, composed of a faculty principal investigator (PI) and student research assistants, then created two additional variables for each observation—aid type and recipient type. Aid type is a categorical variable with twelve categories specifying the nature of the assistance item provided. Recipient type classifies the individual, unit, or agency to which the assistance was provided.

Coding aid type and recipient type

The PI, a lead graduate student RA, and three undergraduate research assistants conducted a preliminary round of coding for aid type between May and August 2021. In this round of coding, there were only five aid type categories and coders used only the information SAM staff had recorded to determine which aid type category to code. Working with these data, and in discussions with staff at the Security Assistance Monitor over the course of the next year, the PI refined and expanded the aid type categories and developed recipient type categories. The aid type categories and abbreviated operational definitions are listed in Table 1. The seven recipient type categories are (1) ground forces, (2) air forces, (3) naval/riverine forces, (4) police, (5) special forces/internal security units, (6) civilians (including general population, government ministers, and civil servants), and (7) unspecified security forces or multiple branches of the armed forces. The complete codebook is provided in Appendix A.

Beginning in 2022, the team began to recode the aid type and recipient type variables according to the new operational definitions. Working program by program, the team used the item descriptions and the original source materials referenced by SAM to determine the aid and recipient type for each “item” provided within a given security assistance program. If the original source documentation did not provide enough information to code the aid and recipient type, the coder would conduct an internet search for additional documentation using the name of the security assistance program, recipient country, year, and keywords from the item description (when available). These searches provided a range of supplemental sources including documents from the Africa Center for Security Studies, Congressional Research Service, Defense Security Cooperation Agency, White House archives, and Washington Office on Latin America. Appendix B contains a complete bibliography of sources referenced by the Security Assistance Monitor in compiling their data, and additional sources used by the research team.

Some programs were simple to code. After reviewing the source documentation, we determined, for example, that all of the aid provided in the Developing Country Combined Exercise Program was aid type seven, joint exercises. However, the majority of security assistance programs include hundreds of different activities. For these programs there are typically significant amounts of aid with no description of the good or service provided. Other observations have uninformative descriptions. Within the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, for instance, education, combat training, security sector reform, and law enforcement assistance were all provided with the description “Stabilization Operations and Security Sector Reform”. For these observations, we had to refer to multiple sources and code each country in each year separately. In Kyrgyzstan in 2015, IMET funded combat training, while IMET funds provided assistance to law enforcement in El Salvador in 2018. Both were reported as “Stabilization Operations and Security Sector Reform” (U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Department of State 2015, 2019).

In order to minimize human error in recording aid and recipient categories for each observation, ensure consistent coding across observations, and simplify efforts to code additional years of data in the future, the faculty PI and lead graduate research assistant used the manually coded data to create a script to automate coding of the full dataset in Stata software (version 17). Each line of code in the script codes multiple observations by matching as few keywords as possible to accurately identify the aid or recipient type within a particular program. The script for coding all of the individual observations in the line item dataset will be released with the data, providing complete transparency about coding decisions. In addition, researchers will
be able to modify the script to make different decisions about how to code observations. A researcher may, for example, want to code the provision of weapons, ammunition, and weapons delivery platforms/vehicles separately from the provision of military uniforms, facilities, and operational expenses. Although doing so is not a trivial undertaking, and not all item descriptions will allow for this distinction, modifying the script to accomplish this will be much more efficient than recoding each of the 7,550 observations currently coded as “material support” by hand.

Description of Datasets

There are two versions of the USASSA dataset. In the first version, each observation is an item (or items) of US security aid provided. Variables from the Security Assistance Monitor identify the country or geographic region that received the assistance, funding amount in US dollars, fiscal year in which the aid was spent, security assistance program under which the aid was authorized, an item description (when available), and a footnote indicating the original source of the data. To these variables, we added a standardized version of the country name based on the International Organization for Standardization (ISO)-3166-1 standard, numerical country codes from ISO-3166-1 and the Correlates of War project, a variable identifying the managing agency (DoD, DoS, or joint), and our aid type and recipient type variables. There are 32,008 observations. 1,472 observations list a region (e.g., Central Asia or East Africa), rather than a specific country, as the aid recipient. 1,114 observations, representing just over $30 billion dollars (9%) of security assistance, identify the aid recipient as “Global”. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for the line item dataset.

In the second version of the dataset, the unit of observation is the country-year. This dataset includes observations for all member states of the United Nations in every year from 2000 to 2019. One variable records the total amount of security assistance a country received in a given year. Additional variables specify the amount of assistance the country received in each of the thirteen aid type categories, the amount of assistance provided to each recipient type, the amounts provided under Department of Defense and Department of State authorities, and the amount provided under each of the security assistance programs in operation between 2000 and 2019. The data clearly show not only the magnitude and geographic reach of US security sector assistance, but also its diversity.

Table 3 contains descriptive statistics for the aid type and recipient type variables in the country-year dataset.

The 192 countries in the dataset received an average of $78.8 million in US security assistance a year from 2000 to 2019, with wide variation in the amount of aid provided across countries and across time. Countries receiving the highest amounts of aid tended to receive most of this aid in the form of material support (weapons, vehicles, ammunition, supplies, and operational expenses) and military training. Security assistance provided to Afghanistan accounted for almost $90 billion (30%) of all US security assistance to specific countries over this time period. More than $76 billion (63%) of this aid was provided as material support or military training. Another $4.7 billion was provided to support law enforcement and counternarcotics operations. The US spent just over $2 billion, 2.2% of total security aid to Afghanistan, on security sector institution-building.

In comparison to Afghanistan, Iraq received significantly smaller amounts of aid. The US provided about $33 billion in total security aid, all but $3 billion in the form of military training and material support, between 2000 and 2019. Other countries in the top 5% of security aid recipients include Colombia (up to $1.4 billion/year in military training, material, and counternarcotics aid); Egypt (approximately $1.3 billion/year in material aid); Israel (over $2 billion/year in material and train and equip aid); and Pakistan (up to $1.9 billion/year in military training, material, and counternarcotics aid). We create two additional variables to measure the amount of aid countries received in two composite categories likely to be of interest to researchers: lethal aid and nonlethal aid. The lethal aid variable measures the amount of assistance provided in the material support, military training, and train and equip aid categories. Nonlethal aid includes security sector reform, military education, humanitarian aid, counterproliferation programs, and aid categorized as “other/non-specified nonlethal assistance”. The distinction between lethal and
nonlethal aid is imperfect. Within the lethal aid category, for example, the material support category includes weapons, ammunition, and tanks, but also includes the construction of military facilities and funding for troop salaries. Our reasoning is that this category is meant to distinguish types of aid that are most likely to increase the capacity of the state to use deadly force and/or to make the use of force by state security forces more lethal. Nonlethal security assistance is not meant to increase the state’s capacity to use deadly force and it would be difficult for states to use it for this purpose. Scholars who wish to create their own composite categories can easily do so.

Figure 1 shows how the number of countries receiving aid, and the amounts of lethal aid and total security assistance provided changed over time between 2000 and 2019.

The data reveal several interesting patterns. The United States has provided some form of security assistance to at least 179 of the 193 United Nations member countries over the past twenty years. But the claim that the United States “trains and equips almost every military in the world” is not entirely accurate (Reveron 2016). Between a third and two-thirds of countries receive some form of lethal aid from the United States each year.

Early in the War on Terror, the number of states receiving lethal aid from the United States actually declined, from 82 states in 2000 to just 66 states in 2002. After 2005, the number of states receiving military training and material support began to climb, reaching a peak of 139 states in 2007. In addition to the number of states receiving lethal aid, the average amount of lethal aid states received, and the ratio of lethal aid to total security assistance also sharply increased after 2005. Whereas lethal aid accounted for just 16% of the security assistance states received from 2000 to 2004, lethal aid averaged 66% percent of total aid between 2005 and 2019. In 2017, lethal aid made up 83% of security assistance; 106 states received an average of 129 million dollars in material support and military training and just 5.3 million in all nonlethal categories of aid combined.

Potential uses of the USASSA data

Over the last several decades, a voluminous literature has developed around the effectiveness and unintended consequences of development aid, but scholars have only recently begun to investigate the impacts of foreign military aid. In our review of the literature, we could find only two original research studies on the impacts of foreign military aid published in the top 15 political science and international relations journals between 1990 and 2010 (Blanton 1999; Maniruzzaman 1992).

Fortunately, academic interest in security assistance has risen sharply over the past ten years. Recent studies have investigated whether security sector aid buys influence over recipients’ foreign policy behavior (Martinez Machain 2021; Sullivan, Tessman, and Li 2011); the relationship between military aid and civilian targeting during armed conflict (Darden 2019; Jadoon 2018); the impact of US security assistance on state repression (Dube and Naidu 2015; Martinez Machain 2023; Omelicheva, Carter, and Campbell 2017; Sandholtz 2016; Sullivan, Blanken, and Rice 2020); and the relationship between US military training and coup risk in recipient countries (Savage and Caverley 2017). The expansion of US security assistance as a counterterrorism tool has also prompted a flurry of increasingly sophisticated investigations into the effects of US military aid on terrorism (Bapat 2011; Boutton 2019; Danzell, Kisangani, and Pickering 2019; Kim, Li, and Sandler 2019; Neumayer and Plümper 2011).

Most studies, however, focus on a narrow subset of security assistance (e.g., training at the School of the Americas or the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program), or treat all military aid as equivalent—even though some security assistance is closer in character to what both scholars and policymakers have traditionally defined as humanitarian aid, while other types of assistance blur the line between foreign aid and proxy warfare. Lump sum and dichotomous aid/no aid approaches do not account for the possibility that particular kinds of military aid, or aid to different types of recipients (e.g., law enforcement versus military forces), have distinct impacts. Nor can we explore whether different factors drive the provision of various types of aid.
Preliminary evidence from a handful of studies that have attempted to disaggregate security aid types suggests that these distinctions matter. One example is provided in the literature on the association between military training and coup risk in recipient countries. In a widely-cited study based on data on the number of foreign military officers trained under two programs—International Military Education and Training (IMET) and the Combating Terrorism Fellowship Program—Savage and Caverley (2017) conclude that American foreign military training sharply increases the probability of a military coup attempt in the recipient country (543). However, when McLauchlin, Seymour, and Martel (2022) are able to conduct a broader analysis with data on all US security assistance programs that fund military training, they find that only training provided under the IMET program (which accounts for just 30% of expenditures and 13% of trainees worldwide) is associated with higher coup risk. Another example is provided in a study by Omelicheva, Carter, and Campbell (2017) who explore the effects of security assistance on civilian targeting by state security forces during intrastate conflicts. They, too, disaggregate US military aid by program. The results are complex. The total amount of US security assistance is negatively correlated with civilian deaths. However, some individual programs, including Foreign Military Sales and the Combating Terrorism Fellowship Program, are associated with increases in atrocities.

Although these studies provide important insights, they tell us little about why security assistance programs have disparate effects. Variation in outcomes could be due to differences in the types of aid provided across programs, or the security sector actors that are the primary recipients of aid from different programs. Differences in outcomes could also be at least partially endogenous if particular security aid programs target recipients with certain characteristics, or allocate aid based on existing conditions in recipient countries. To demonstrate the utility of the new data, we explore how one particular factor—human rights violations by state security forces—affects the amount of security assistance the US provides, and whether the relationship varies across types of aid.

**Human Rights Conditions and Security Assistance in the Post-9/11 Era**

Section 502B of the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) directs that “no security assistance may be provided to any country the government of which engages in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights”. Despite this restriction, critics maintain that the US routinely provides security assistance to countries that engage in gross human rights violations, even when patterns of abuse are acknowledged by the State Department. The academic literature on the impact of human rights conditions on US foreign aid is mixed. In one of the first systematic explorations of this question, Cingranelli and Pasquarello (1985) find that countries in Latin American are less likely to receive US military aid if State Department country reports identify them as major human rights abusers. Other studies have found that human rights violators are less likely to receive US military aid only in particular time periods (Demirel-Pegg and Moskowitz 2009; Lebovic 1988; Poe and Meernik 1995).

Table 4 displays results from our analysis of the relationship between human rights abuses and US security assistance to UN member states from 2001 to 2019. In the first model, the dependent variable is the natural log of total security assistance. The second and third models disaggregate security assistance into lethal and nonlethal aid. In the final two models, aid is further disaggregated into the amount of security assistance provided as material support and the amount provided for defense institution-building and security sector reform (SSR). As our measure of human rights violations, we use a version of the Political Terror Scale (Gibney, Cornett, and Wood 2009) based on codification of information from US State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices. Countries are coded annually based on the prevalence of political imprisonment, torture, extrajudicial killings, and other types of political violence by states against their citizens. While most studies use an average of Political Terror Scale (PTS) scores based on Amnesty International and State Department reports, we are specifically interested in how patterns of abuse acknowledged by the US State Department affect US military aid allocations.

We control for conditions that would increase the need for security assistance by including an indicator of ongoing armed conflict from UCDP/PRIO (Pettersson et al. 2021), and the number of individuals killed in terrorist incidents in each state (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism...
The models also control for the level of globalization (Gygli et al. 2019), size of the population, and GDP per capita of the country (World Bank 2019). The US may have more economic and strategic interests in larger, more globalized countries, while wealthier countries may be less likely to receive military training and weapons as aid because they can afford to purchase these goods and services. To more directly account for US strategic and economic interests we include a dummy variable indicating formal allies of the US (Leeds et al. 2002), the natural log of US troops stationed in the country (Allen, Flynn, and Martinez Machain 2022), and the natural log of total trade between the US and the potential aid recipient (The Growth Lab at Harvard University 2019). We lag all independent variables by one year on the expectation that the provision of aid in year \( t \) is affected by values of the explanatory variables in year \( t-1 \). All models contain a lagged dependent variable to control for autocorrelation and year fixed effects to account for changes over time that affect all potential aid recipients. Robust standard errors are clustered by country.

Results

Many of the factors in our models have the effects we anticipate and most effects are consistent across different categories of security aid. Countries experiencing ongoing armed conflict do not receive greater amounts of security aid, but all types of security assistance increase with the total number of individuals killed in terrorist incidents in the country. All else equal, countries in a formal alliance with the United States, and more globalized countries, get larger amounts of security assistance. The volume of trade between a potential aid recipient and the United States is also positively correlated with the amount of security assistance provided, although the effect is greatest for material support and is not statistically significant for nonlethal aid. The amount of security assistance provided declines with both GDP per capita and, more surprisingly, population size. The number of US troops stationed in a country is not a significant predictor of the amount of security assistance a country will receive after controlling for aid received in the previous year.

Our main focus in this analysis is the impact of human rights abuses on the provision of US security assistance. Here we see some significant differences across aid types. Figure 2 displays predicted levels of lethal and nonlethal security aid by score on the Political Terror Scale based on US State Department human rights reports. Countries coded 1 are considered to be under secure rule of law. Each successive level represents a higher prevalence of physical integrity violations by state agents. The most highly repressive regimes are coded 5. In these countries, political imprisonment, torture, extrajudicial killings, and other forms of state terror have expanded to the entire population (Gibney et al. 2022).

The data reveal two notable patterns. The first is that state repression, no matter how severe, does not disqualify countries from receiving security sector assistance from the United States. On average, the US provides higher amounts of both lethal and nonlethal aid to states that earn a score of 2 or 3 on the Political Terror Scale than to states under secure rule of law. Second, unlike nonlethal aid, lethal aid is higher for even the most repressive states. States that earn a score of 4 or 5 on the PTS can expect to receive significantly more US aid in the form of military training and equipment than countries under secure rule of law. Looking more specifically at material support, a similar pattern holds; states at levels 3, 4, and 5 on the Political Terror Scale receive more material support than countries in which political imprisonment, torture, and extrajudicial killings are rare or nonexistent. Levels of funding for Security Sector Reform, the category of security assistance specifically intended to improve security sector oversight and accountability, do not match this rise in lethal aid to the most repressive states, possibly because governing regimes in these states are not willing participants in reform efforts and the US has more pressing security concerns in these states. The result however, is that states in which security forces engage in torture, extrajudicial killings, and other physical integrity violations at the highest frequency receive larger amounts of the types of aid that make the use of force by state security forces more lethal and less aid for legal institution capacity building, strengthening civilian control of the military, and accountability initiatives.

Conclusion

Despite the significant sums committed to foreign security assistance, and an increasing reliance on this tool to counter a wide range of perceived threats to national interests, we know much less about this foreign policy
instrument than either economic aid or direct military intervention. This project is an attempt to provide researchers, policymakers, and the public with as full as possible an accounting of unclassified US security sector aid spending across the globe, and to delve into the specifics of what goods and services are being provided to which security sector actors with these funds. Our data clearly show not only the magnitude and geographic reach of US security sector assistance, but also its diversity. While some US security assistance is more akin to humanitarian aid or global security cooperation initiatives, other types of assistance blur the line between foreign aid and proxy warfare.

Why is comprehensive, detailed data on US security assistance so important? Extant studies of security assistance typically rely on aggregate amounts of military aid, or focus on aid provided by a specific program. These approaches cannot account for the possibility that particular kinds of military aid, or aid to different types of recipients, have distinct impacts. Although the security sector assistance included in this dataset is all provided by one donor, it is likely to have significant substantive impacts on governance, stability, political violence, interstate conflict, and a range of other phenomena of interest worldwide due to the magnitude and reach of this aid. The United States provides significantly more security assistance to many more countries than any other state. Up to 93% of countries receive some level of security assistance from the US. And scholars estimate that total US security aid worldwide is far greater than the aid provided by China, the UK, France, and Russia combined, although reliable data on security assistance provided by other states is much more difficult to obtain (Carrozza and Marsh 2022). Moreover, a large number of low and middle-income countries, as well as fragile and conflict-affected states, receive very high amounts of US security aid relative to government revenue, and relative to the amount of international aid they receive for development. In some years, a handful of low and middle-income countries received more security assistance from the United States than Official Development Assistance from all OECD donor countries combined. Examples include Pakistan, Colombia, Egypt and Peru. And, unlike other forms of aid, security assistance is disproportionately channeled to one of the most powerful institutions in many nondemocratic countries—the military.

As we enter a new era of great power competition, it becomes increasingly critical to understand how this foreign policy tool is employed and its effects. Advances in understanding the utility, risks, and limitations of this policy tool require a comprehensive source for detailed data on the amounts of various types of security assistance provided and the recipients of that assistance over time. We see these data contributing to advances in research in three broad categories: (1) security aid impacts in recipient countries and regions; (2) the effects of security assistance on US national security and international relations; and, (3) the determinants of variation in the magnitude, modalities, and recipients of security sector assistance. Examples of questions that could be explored include:

- Are some forms of security assistance more effective at building partner capacity than others?
- How do political, strategic, and economic factors explain differences in the portfolio of security aid of various types that a country receives?
- Can aid for institutional capacity building improve respect for human rights?
- Is the risk of civilian harm greater when lethal aid is provided to certain kinds of security forces?
- How do different types of security aid impact civil-military relations in recipient states?
- How do the amounts and types of security assistance the US provides, and the distribution of this aid across countries, change with shifts in national security priorities?

This project compliments recent data collections and coding efforts focused on security assistance provided by China (Carrozza and Marsh 2022) and US foreign military training (McLauchlin, Seymour, and Martel 2022). We hope the availability of these data will spur more advanced research on security assistance as a foreign policy tool just as better data on alliances, sanctions, and the use of military force have advanced our understanding of those policy instruments.

Data availability statement

Data for this article are available on the authors’ website and online at:
References


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