



Reclaiming Foreign Policy

by Bob Krzewinski

IMAGINE THE GOVERNMENT telling the public it is doing everything it can to fight street crime, while behind the scenes the local police department is helping to train bands of muggers and rapists. Not so far-fetched, when you consider a little known U.S. law that until late last year permitted the U.S. armed forces to establish their own foreign policy in the form of the Joint Combined Exchange and Training (JCET) program.

Established in 1991, the JCET program allowed the military to send special operations forces on foreign exercises as long as the primary purpose was to train U.S. soldiers. While some of the military operations complied with the letter of the law, a study by the Washington Post found that scores of other missions have been used to help foreign armies fight drug traffickers, to teach counterinsurgency efforts, and to share U.S. military expertise in exchange for access to top officials.

To many, the biggest concern about JCET was the lack of civilian oversight. Passed into law in 1991, the JCET program was for the longest time exempt from many Congressional and White House restrictions. In the process, JCET operations had been established in over 110 countries, almost completely free of public debate or government foreign-affairs officials. In effect this led to military personnel, not the President or Congress, establishing military agreements with governments that would be prohibited otherwise, largely due to human rights and international law violations.

When actual JCET operations are reviewed, the depth of the problem can be fully appreciated.

Remember the condemnation of Pakistan by the U.S. after the explosion of nuclear weapons in that Asian country last year? While it may have seemed like the U.S. was going to do all in its power to isolate the country, in reality JCET exercises with U.S. troops on Pakistani soil continued unabated. Not to pick favorites, the U.S. military had also in the past assisted Pakistan's archenemy, India, by training members of that country's army in close-quarters combat and sniper skills.

Then there is Columbia. While the Clinton administration placed a near-total ban on the training of Colombian military personnel—due to that military's involvement in drug-related corruption and its record of killing human rights activists, civilians and politicians—U.S. JCET operations were taking place there on a routine basis. Even when the U.S. “decertified” Columbia for military assistance in 1996 and 1997 due to a failure to cooperate with official U.S. anti-narcotics policy, U.S. troops continued to train the Colombian army

in “shoot and maneuver” techniques and counterterrorism.

And let's not forget Indonesia. Since 1991, the U.S. military has conducted 41 training exercises with that country despite a Congressional ban on training Indonesian officers. Most of the U.S. exercises with the Indonesian military involved the elite Kopassus troops, whom U.S. officials have accused of involvement in the kidnapping and torture of political activists.

Even China was in line for JCET activities. According to *Defense Week* magazine, U.S. military officials “discussed in principle” possible joint training with Chinese forces. Under current law, China is prohibited from participating in traditional U.S. military programs due to human rights violations.

While a fairly new Federal law, the Leahy Amendment, supposedly ended U.S. financial support to any foreign military units known to have committed gross human rights abuses, as of mid-1998 there were still loopholes that allowed JCET operations free from civilian oversight. In late 1998 a change to the Leahy Amendment, called the Sarbanes language (after Senator Paul Sarbanes of Maryland), began to take shape. The Sarbanes modification acted to increase Congressional oversight of JCET with a requirement for full disclosure of JCET activities. More importantly the Sarbanes language helped prohibit JCET operations with countries that are otherwise prohibited from receiving U.S. military assistance due to human rights abuses.

This move to increase civilian control over foreign policy even affected our state. Specifically, Michigan based AV Technologies had been attempting to sell anti-riot vehicles to Turkey, a country notorious for internal repression against Kurdish citizens and also a JCET partner. Bowing to human rights concerns, Secretary of State Albright recently approved the AV Technologies sale but placed a restriction against the vehicles in any Turkish region where there have been credible reports of human rights abuses. While not a total ban, Amnesty International calls such a restriction “unprecedented” and a step in the right direction.

These days it seems somewhat rare to commend Congress for doing something right but letters, calls and e-mails to Congress are needed to commend that body for placing greater civilian control over JCET. With such Congressional foreign policy oversight, there is a greatly reduced chance for our military forces to aid corrupt and human-rights abusing foreign governments. More importantly, Congress needs to continually hear that human rights indeed must be a priority in foreign affairs. Letters to Congress can be sent to Senator Abraham or Senator Levin, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C. 20510. For the U.S. House, the address is U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515. For telephone calls contact the Capitol switchboard at 202/224-3121 and ask for your legislators office. E-mail addresses can be found at thomas.loc.gov.

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