

## For More Effective Irregular Warfare, Bring Back the MAVNI Recruitment Program

### Description

With an annual budget in excess of \$300 million and an immersive, full-time approach to instruction, the Defense Language Institute is rightly regarded as one of the nation's premier foreign language instruction programs in rigor and throughput. But how effective is that world-class language training when it comes to developing rapport with partners for security force assistance? Not very, according to a [data analysis published in November 2022](#) at the Modern War Institute.

According to this analysis, which included interviews with service members who participated in Special Forces training and advisory missions in Iraq, Afghanistan, El Salvador, Colombia, and the Philippines, most interviewees described language skills as inessential for effectively developing the capacity and capability of foreign security forces. Some even cited the risks of non-fluent speakers attempting to build rapport in ethnolinguistically diverse nations or regions, describing, in one case, a US Army officer in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Hands Program who in a well-intentioned but gauche bid to build rapport with an Afghan Tajik, addressed him in Pashto rather than Dari. Instead of fostering goodwill, the effort was counterproductive and he was instead castigated for "speaking the language of the enemy."

The interviews revealed one exception to the general findings: the partner force development effort in Colombia from 2002, when that nation's *Comando Conjunto de Operaciones Especiales* was established, to 2016. US Special Forces advisors there were able to leverage greater language fluency, including a more significant proportion of native speakers, to collaborate successfully, and even develop a norm of communicating in Spanish without the help of an interpreter.

As Paul J. Angelo put it [in his book](#) about US security assistance efforts in Colombia and Mexico, "Although the transmission of capabilities doesn't require proficiency in host-nation languages, the United States makes a considerably more compelling case for being the *partner of choice* by tailoring security assistance to local conditions. Cultural and linguistic competence signals respect, empathy, and solidarity — qualities that collectively build camaraderie, engender loyalty, and facilitate access."

Other factors color the picture of success in the above case study: Spanish is an easier language to master and more commonly spoken in the US; and Colombia lacks the ethnolinguistic diversity that

can make communicating in other parts of the world politically fraught. The paper goes further: excepting the Latin America-focused 7th Special Forces Group, “No [Army SF] group has strong enough language skills to add significant value in an advisory mission.” This research appears to show that, while communicating with partner-nation troops in a native language is an asset, doing so poorly, or without the proper cultural context, can become a liability.

## Shortfalls of Language Training

Given the difficult, arduous, and time-consuming process of developing high-level foreign language proficiency in adults, the finite [resources available to impart language training](#), and the inevitable lag between the emerging need for proficiency in specific languages and the surge in training to meet that need, training non-native speakers in foreign languages is, at best, an insufficient approach. In light of the 2022 National Defense Strategy’s emphasis on [“fluency in critical languages”](#) to develop deeper knowledge and understanding of both friends and adversaries and the requirement to be a “trusted defense partner” in Africa, Europe, and the Indo-Pacific, the Defense Department cannot afford to leave a vital resource for building language and cultural proficiency on the table.

Mavni languages

The [Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest \(MAVNI\)](#) was a Defense Department program begun in 2008 in which “[legally present non-citizens](#)” possessing certain high-demand skills, including specific medical training and proficiency in one of 50 DoD-identified languages, could enlist for periods of three or four years in exchange for an expedited path to US citizenship. The program was forced into hiatus following the 2009 terrorist attack at Fort Hood (the shooter, Army Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan, was an American-born US citizen, but as [court documents](#) would later attest, “many people thought he was a MAVNI soldier because he had a foreign-sounding name”). The program resumed in 2012 and ran until 2016, at which point it was closed indefinitely to new applicants pending review. [The fiscal year 2019 John McCain National Defense Authorization Act went further](#), effectively eliminating the program by requiring MAVNI enlistees to enlist directly to jobs employing their “critical skill or expertise.” Nearly all of these jobs, such as [as linguist positions, have a US citizenship prerequisite](#). MAVNI came to a halt with more than 4,000 recruits “in limbo” awaiting action from the US government; their cases were only [resolved last year following litigation](#).

## MAVNI Recruitment Program Success Stories

During its relatively brief active period, MAVNI enabled numerous successes, both in turning out exemplary troops and in accomplishing the mission of delivering linguistic and cultural competency to the armed forces. In 2012, a MAVNI Army enlistee from Nepal, Sgt. Saral Shrestha, was named the service's Soldier of the Year. The same year, Kenyan-born MAVNI soldier Augustus Maiyo took first place in the Marine Corps Marathon. [Capt. Anna Davalos](#), born in Moscow, joined the Army Reserve through MAVNI as a certified registered nurse anesthetist, supporting stateside medical response during the COVID-19 pandemic and recently deploying to United States Hospital Kuwait.

MAVNI's intent was achieved through contributions from professionals like Indonesian-born [Army Sgt. Aditya Utoyo](#), a native Bahasa speaker, who was hailed as "one of the most valued participants" at Exercise Gema Bhakti 2022 in Jakarta, where he served as interpreter and cultural expert for US forces. A MAVNI airman, [Dino• Dannawi](#), has used his fluency in eight Arabic dialects to serve as an interpreter for Air Force Special Operations Forces at joint exercises including Eager Lion in Jordan.

MAVNI ended amid intensifying political polarization in the United States around immigration. Despite countless examples of MAVNI contributions, one foreign agent was identified and apprehended. Ji Chaoqun, a Chicago resident and Chinese national, enlisted in the Army Reserves under MAVNI in 2016 and [he was sentenced this year to eight years in prison](#) for providing information to PRC intelligence organizations. Advocates for MAVNI argue the [rigorous screening systems already established within the program](#) "systems that [some have criticized as unduly exacting and burdensome to candidates](#)" worked exactly as intended in this case. The continuous monitoring applied to MAVNI troops [uncovered a bad actor's true intent](#) and kept him from using his position for harm.

But the damage was done nonetheless. As the US military grapples with a historic recruiting crisis that has forced the various service branches to revisit numerous exclusionary policies in order to increase the enlistment-eligible population, the foreign-born remain critically underrepresented in the ranks. [They make up nearly 14% of the US population](#), but only about [3-4% of first-term recruits](#). And MAVNI, a critical pathway to citizenship that would leverage these vital language skills and cultural knowledge, remains effectively closed to this segment of the population, barring congressional intervention.

The time to act to restore MAVNI is now, for three pressing reasons.

## Strategic Priorities: Partnerships

First, the intent behind MAVNI closely aligns with the Defense Department's current strategic priorities. The [2022 National Defense Strategy](#) (NDS) places a foot-stomping emphasis on improving relationships and interoperability with allied and partner militaries, promising to treat alliances and partnerships as "a center of gravity" for the strategy overall. To this end, the NDS continues, "We will strengthen major regional security architectures based on complementary contributions; combined, collaborative operations and force planning; increased intelligence and information sharing; new operational concepts; and our ability to draw on the Joint Force worldwide." Effective partnerships require effective communication, grounded in mutual understanding. The gray zone operations that emerge as a particular focus in the NDS demand carefully built and well-established relationships, rather than fickle surges of investment and interest.

Language fluency supports that goal, often with the bonus of engendering goodwill, fostering mutual understanding, and capturing nuance in today's complex and dynamic security environment. Retired Lt. Gens. John Mulholland and Benjamin Freakley, who communicated with the author for this piece, recall a MAVNI recruit from Kenya who deployed with the US Army's 3rd Special Forces Group only to find himself operating in a village near where he was raised, and thus was able to develop a uniquely warm rapport between its residents and the unit.

As this anecdote suggests, SOF units may benefit most from the talent brought in by a MAVNI-like program as they conduct security force assistance, foreign internal defense, and other unconventional warfare missions, and work with partners to develop "robust resistance" to strengthen the barrier of deterrence against near-peer threats like Russia and China. Moreover, efforts to make deploying special operations units [leaner and more self-sustaining](#) also strengthen the argument for programs like MAVNI as it could add greater language proficiency to units and free operators from long language-learning pipelines, thus enabling them to focus on other mission-relevant tasks and training.

## Language as Force Multiplier

A second argument for restoring MAVNI is the growing awareness among military leaders of the force-multiplying impact of native speakers, and the emergence of initiatives seeking new ways to employ them. One example is the Air Force's Language Enabled Airman Program (LEAP), an outgrowth of the Air Force Language and Culture Center that was established in FY13 but has risen in prominence in recent years and now boasts more than [3,600 airmen and Guardians proficient in some 90 languages](#). The program harnesses "language-enabled, cross-cultural scholars who can operate seamlessly with partner nation military forces and civilians around the world," and will, for example, embed an airman whose first language is Tagalog with a Marine Corps team deploying to the Philippines, thus opening "a floodgate" of mutual understanding and goodwill.

More recently, a cohort of LEAP scholars born in Ukraine, Russia, Kyrgyzstan and other Eastern European and Central Asian countries worked together over two weeks to [produce a faithful translation of Zov](#), a disillusioned Russian soldier's memoir of the war in Ukraine. First published on social media in 2022, the account was rife with technical language and slang terms that thwarted online translation machines. This demonstrates not only the value of written foreign language fluency in addition to spoken, but also the reality that, even with leaps forward in artificial intelligence and machine learning, there is no substitute for nuanced human language and cultural fluency.

The Army, in recognition of critical recruiting shortfalls and operational needs, last year rolled out a new [Foreign Language Recruiting Initiative](#) offering prospective recruits with a non-English primary spoken language to receive English-language training prior to attending basic combat training, potentially removing a barrier to some otherwise qualified enlistees.

At the practitioner level too, the call is growing to harness and foster available language skills to support the complex and information-heavy operations that are central to warfare today. In a 2021 [Proceedings article](#), Lt. Seth A. Steber and Chief Petty Officer Aaron D. Utsler argue the Navy must better harness foreign language proficiency in order to excel at information warfare, saying the service is under-invested in routinely training its members in particularly useful languages. This piece, however, depends heavily on foreign language training as a solution to shortfalls, which we have already seen to be a flawed approach.

The same year, Navy Cmdr. Collin Fox, himself a Defense Language Institute graduate, argued [in Proceedings](#) specifically for a reinstitution of MAVNI to address the sea services' language woes, saying that only harnessing native language proficiency would achieve the desired effect of shaping conflict in emerging theaters in real time. Fox also argued that former US interpreters, such as the ones who undertook great risk to support US troops in Afghanistan, would be ideal candidates for a MAVNI path to service and citizenship.

## Living Out Our Values

This polemic leads to the third reason that Congress and the US military should act to restore MAVNI: in an operational environment with an ever-increasing emphasis on information and image-projection, US treatment of immigrants sends a profound message to the world about who we are and what we stand for. Margaret Stock, an attorney who built the MAVNI program while serving as an Army officer, said in an interview with the author that the Chinese government, which initially opposed the MAVNI program to the point of targeting Stock in social media posts, has viewed its end under a cloud of suspicion as a propaganda victory. The PRC can now play up the undercurrents of xenophobia to feed

a narrative that Americans cannot be trusted and sow internal division in the United States. “It’s to their interest to have everybody in America think everybody who’s Chinese is dangerous,” Stock said in the interview.

Beyond Chinese-US relations, a primary American strength and asymmetric advantage lies in its ability to welcome the foreign-born, extend to them the full benefits and opportunities offered by this country, and become stronger by integrating their skills and experience. As technological parity with near-peer competitors looms, what will continue to distinguish the US is our ability to become stronger through diversity. While non-citizen underrepresentation in the military ranks is a numbers problem amid a recruiting crisis – the Army also [reestablished accelerated naturalization](#) for Lawful Permanent Residents last year as it continues its push to bring in more enlistees – it is more meaningfully a perception problem. A renewal of MAVNI would demonstrate the US military’s true commitment to the goals described in the NDS regarding deeper investments in allies and partners. It would also send a message to immigrants that their knowledge is valued and integral to the country’s success on the battlefield and beyond.

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*Main image: U.S. Marines hold American flags during a naturalization ceremony hosted at the Community Center on Camp Foster, Okinawa, Japan, Feb. 23, 2023. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Alex Fairchild)*

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