



# Global Competency as National Security: Exploring the Global Affairs Education- Security Nexus

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*Abstract: This article reviews prominent definitions of global competency, explores the available (though limited) current evidence for its potential benefits, and offers recommendations for framing an understanding of the salience of global affairs education within theories of national security and related practice. The article identifies three potential pathways through which global competency benefits security. First, global competency—especially through phased primary, secondary and tertiary educational models—may contribute to a stronger and more competitive workforce in direct and indirect ways, in turn enhancing a country’s innovative capacities and economic and military power and resilience to shocks. Second, global competency can serve as a form of public diplomacy, in turn supporting a country’s soft power and global influence. Third, global competency can strengthen domestic institutions, combatting dis/misinformation about global issues and reducing vulnerability to malign actors who aim to leverage inaccurate and fear-based messages about the world to influence and destabilize foreign electorates.*

**E**ducation is increasingly understood by experts as a matter of national security. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 2020, Nicholas Eberstadt and Evan Abramsky rang alarm bells that “America’s education crisis is a national security threat,” arguing that “[a] better-educated citizenry means a more productive economy and thus greater military potential.”<sup>1</sup> Former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has similarly warned that

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Eberstadt and Evan Abramsky, “America’s Education Crisis is a National Security Threat,” *Foreign Affairs*, Sept. 20. 2022.

education could be the “greatest national security challenge,” and together with Joel Klein, highlighted the importance of US education reform for national security.<sup>2</sup> The devastation of COVID-19 to education systems in the United States and around the world only further heightened concerns that setbacks for education would have knock-on national security impacts.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, education has been linked to most of the components necessary for delivering on a modern conception of national security, from its role in supporting economic development, to addressing climate risks, to bolstering democracy and preventing violent extremism.

A critical component of these conversations is the role of *global affairs* education as a specific avenue for bolstering national security. Awareness of—and knowledge about—contemporary global issues, or “global competency,” can play a critical role in supporting a nation’s foreign policy and national security objectives. This type of learning can be developed through various stages of life and through a variety of methods. For example, knowledge about the world may be fostered during school-age, at university level, or graduate education either through formal programs, specific courses, or even individual resources in a classroom setting. It can also be fostered in the informal educational space spanning the online information environment, through international travel and study abroad activity, executive education, media and popular culture and beyond.

Political science and international relations theory and scholarship surrounding the study of national security has not, however, tackled this question head-on through research that explicitly explores these connections. Theory that informs security debates has so far offered little focus on the connections between national security and a nation’s global competency. Although some work has been undertaken in theory and practice related to education’s impact on workforces and especially the military, this work does not yet focus specifically on how a population’s knowledge about the world might impact its security objectives.

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<sup>2</sup> “U.S. Education Reform and National Security,” *CFR Independent Task Force Report*, 2012, Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/event/us-education-reform-and-national-security-report-cfr-sponsored-independent-task-force>.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Lieberman, “America’s School Buildings Are Crumbling, and It’s a National Security Issue,” *Ed Week*, Mar. 2023.

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Despite this relative lack of attention within political science, various analysts have made linkages that different educational initiatives help inform people about the world. These experts have considered everything from global and regional history to international institutions, to issues of international security, trade, and development, to an understanding of international geography, languages, and cultures. All might provide benefits for those concerned with a nation's security. These ideas are mapped and presented in this article as an entry-point for those interested in conducting further research and inquiry into these connections.

Given modern understandings of national security, soft power, and strategic competition in international affairs, how does a national public's awareness of global affairs influence voting outcomes, business engagement, leadership pipelines, and other factors, in turn impacting a nation's security? If the links between citizens' knowledge about the world and their overall security remains underexplored in foreign policy research and practice, current scholarship and practice may miss the potential to identify educational interventions that could result in security strength.

Although metrics are limited, current research offers a window into how much people know about the world. It suggests that citizens in many countries likely score poorly in their understanding of the world around them, including those with an otherwise developed educational and national security infrastructure. Indeed, most educational systems in the United States and in many settings around the world suffer from challenges of outdated curricula on world affairs, underinvestment in both global learning and awareness as a national educational objective, and other challenges.<sup>4</sup>

Potential benefits from countries investing in and expanding global affairs education could be wide ranging. Research that reviews education's role in security often suggests that educational attainment can be important in wider geopolitical races. This research cites, for example, China, among

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<sup>4</sup> See discussion in "Teaching the Globe: Opportunities and Challenges to Teaching Global Topics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," Penn State University, <https://cgs.la.psu.edu/teaching-resources/k-12-resources/cgs-professional-development-workshops/teaching-the-globe-opportunities-and-challenges-to-teaching-global-topics-in-the-21st-century/>; and Stephen Walt, "America's IR Schools Are Broken," *Foreign Policy*, Feb. 20, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/02/20/americans-ir-schools-are-broken-international-relations-foreign-policy/>.

other countries is outpacing the United States on educational attainment scores, which may shape future geopolitical competition.<sup>5</sup>

In the next twenty years, India may well surpass the United States in the number of working-age people with higher education.<sup>6</sup> How global affairs education might specifically play a role in future geopolitical competition remains an under explored dynamic which could impact how citizens engage with the world and shape national and global outcomes, making global competency a critical factor in security analysis and forecasting.

At present, the United States fares relatively poorly on existing global competency metrics. How might scholars and practitioners frame and understand the role(s) education can play in national security to pursue further research, intervention, and practice? And what could a stronger agenda to support global competency look like?

### **The State of Global Competency in the US and Around the World**

Scholars across international relations, security studies, and education policy debate definitions of “global competency” and related concepts. There is no one definition of the term. Education scholar Fernando Reimers defines global competency as “the knowledge and skills that help people understand the flat world in which they live, the skills to integrate across disciplinary domains to comprehend global affairs and events, and the intellect to create possibilities to address them.”<sup>7</sup> This definition highlights the importance of interdisciplinarity for teaching about global issues as well the fact that effective global affairs education requires building skills in addition to advancing knowledge. The term is sometimes conceptualized to also include the ability to drive ethical action. Harvard’s Graduate School of Education describes “global competence” as, “the capacity to understand ourselves as well as people living in contexts different to our own; to make sense of the global issues of our times and take action toward

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<sup>5</sup> Eberstadt and Abramsky, “America’s Education Crisis is a National Security Threat.”

<sup>6</sup> “With 1.4 billion learners, India emerges as an education giant to watch,” Holon IQ, 2019, <https://www.holoniq.com/notes/1-4-billion-learners-india-is-an-education-giant>.

<sup>7</sup> Fernando Reimers, “Global Competency: Educating the World.” *Harvard International Review*, vol. 30, 2009, p. 23.

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societal well-being and sustainability; and to do so effectively and ethically in today's digital landscapes.”<sup>8</sup> Scholars Shea N. Kerkhoff and Hiller A. Spires discuss a related term, “global literacy,” which they define as the “[c]ritical consumption and creation of multimodal texts about global issues.”<sup>9</sup> While terms and definitions across scholarship differ, this work has helped advance inquiry and interest among scholars on the diverse merits of global affairs education.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD's) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) measures global competence across three metrics with an additional normative component: capacity to examine local, global and intercultural issues; to engage in open, appropriate and effective interactions with people from different cultures; and to act for collective well-being and sustainable development.<sup>10</sup>

The concept of global competence relates also to a connected idea of “global citizenship,” although this, too, is a term lacking strong definition and clarity in many of its common usages. Its use often draws on an understanding of how individuals should act based on values-driven principles of active internationalism, and thus, it often connects to issues of morality beyond the focus of this article. Nonetheless, the term is important to discuss briefly given its connection to wider debates and literature about global competency.

The global NGO Oxfam defines “global citizenship” as the “social, environmental, and economic actions of individuals and communities who recognise that every person is a citizen of the world.”<sup>11</sup> Political scientist Luis Cabrera refers to global citizenship as individuals’ “global duty to contribute directly to human rights protections and to promote rights-enhancing political integration between states.”<sup>12</sup> Scholarship focused

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<sup>8</sup> “Global Competencies,” Harvard University, <https://pz.harvard.edu/50th/global-competencies>.

<sup>9</sup> Shea Kerkhoff and Hiller Spires, eds., *Towards an Overarching Definition of Global Literacies* (Routledge, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> “PISA 2018 Global Competence,” Program for International Student Assessment, OECD, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> “What is Global Citizenship?” Oxfam, n.d., <https://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/who-we-are/what-is-global-citizenship/>.

<sup>12</sup> Luis Cabrera, *The Practice of Global Citizenship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 4.

substantially on global citizenship and its connection to global competence when, a little over a decade ago, a lively debate and scholarly interest was borne in academic studies of the impacts of student study-abroad programs on students' global perspectives. These travel abroad programs and visits to another cultural context enhanced students' perspectives, learning outcomes and a variety of other personal goals.<sup>13</sup>

But, even if policymakers and analysts were to prioritize “global citizenship,” it remains a challenge to scale approaches that develop this by moving students around the world through travel as a primary means of advancing this goal. These activities are expensive and require material and institutional resources. They are not accessible to all students. Thus, various forms of virtual exchange have emerged, such as the “Global Cities” platform at the high school level that connects classrooms from across the world for in-class discussion and connection via Zoom. These forms of in-person exchange remain important, but attention to and studies of other forms of global affairs learning beyond those that virtually or physically place students in another country setting remain limited. Nevertheless, virtual and in-person exchange are important ways that people—especially young people—learn about the world. They are just one pathway. People absorb information about the world in many ways, all of which would need to be explored to gain a fuller picture of how much people know about the world around them, and what can be done to enrich this knowledge.

The latest PISA global competence study took place in 2018 that asked, “[A]re students ready to thrive in an interconnected world?” It found significant disparities in global awareness among different countries. According to their surveys, students in Albania, Greece, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal, and the United Arab Emirates had the highest levels of awareness of global issues—far higher than the OECD average—while students in Argentina, Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Romania, Saudi Arabia and Viet Nam reported the lowest levels.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> C.M. Ferrari and J.B. Fine, “Developing Global Perspectives in Short-term Study Abroad: High-Impact Learning through Curriculum, Co-curriculum and community,” *Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective*, vol.10, no. 1 (2016), p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> OECD, 2018, and PISA 2018 results.

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Although the United States did not participate in the assessment of global competence, a 2019 Council on Foreign Relations survey on US adults' knowledge of the world, in partnership with National Geographic and Gallup, found that US adults are poorly equipped with knowledge about the world. Just 30 percent of those surveyed said they learned about foreign policy in school.<sup>15</sup> Only six percent of respondents answered at least 80 percent of the global knowledge questions correctly. According to a 2022 Pew Research Survey, less than half of Americans can identify the flag of the second most populous country in the world, India. Indeed, US students' scores on geography tests have been declining since 2014, and a 2002 Roper poll of geographic knowledge among citizens from nine different large democracies, found that the United States came in second-to-last place.<sup>16</sup> Further, rates of foreign language study in the United States are lagging, falling far behind countries in Europe, many of which host national mandates for foreign language learning.<sup>17</sup>

Other divides in global knowledge fall between developed and developing nations. Where there are not studies that explicitly review the link between global competency and these nations' security, the fact that developing nations generally score poorly on global competency tests while they also suffer from weaker security environments merits further inquiry into what is driving both weaknesses, and how they may interconnect. Adults in developed countries are more likely to be aware of global issues such as climate change, where awareness rates in North America and Europe were over 90 percent and highest in Japan (with over 99 percent), but lowest in India (35%), Egypt (25%) and Liberia (21%).<sup>18</sup> This data indicates that global competency is associated with a nation's power, and may contribute to a nation's economic and military might, reflect it, or both.

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<sup>15</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, *National Geographic*, and Gallup, 2019, pp. 4-5.

<sup>16</sup> *National Geographic*, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Kat Devlin, "Most European Students Are Learning a Foreign Language in School While Americans Lag," Pew Research Center, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Tien Ming Lee et al., "Predictors of Public Climate Change Awareness and Risk Perception around the World," *Nature Climate Change*, 2015, pp. 5, 1014-20.

## Global Competency's Benefits: Connections to National Security

Just as scholars and practitioners debate definitions of global competency and related terms, they also debate understandings of “national security.” Conceptions of security in the international relations and foreign policy literature have expanded over time from more limited definition focused on military might to wider understandings that incorporate broad economic, social, and political factors. New understandings consider multiple factors that can shore up a country’s stability and resilience to threats and shocks—including “climate security,” “cyber security,” and “institutional security,” among others. In the past, the category of “fragile” (i.e. insecure) states was limited to those facing threats to their national borders or institutional collapse through civil war or similar crises. Today, fragility may affect any number of countries including those not currently facing civil war or widespread institutional breakdown, but face a variety of social, political, economic, or environmental weaknesses that may thwart their ability to bolster citizens’ security now or in the future.

In the 1990s, scholars debated whether to expand conceptions of national security to consider climate issues. (For example, political scientist Marc Levy raised the question in *International Security* in 1995, “Is the Environment a National Security Issue?”).<sup>19</sup> Today, the concept of climate insecurity is near-universally acknowledged.<sup>20</sup> Further, domestic policy concerns and questions of economic resiliency are increasingly considered relevant to a nation’s security—an idea public policy scholar Joseph Romm raised in 1993. For example, he described a growing acknowledgment of “domestic drug use and the international drug trade, America’s growing dependence on imported oil, and America’s declining economic competitiveness” as factors contributing to US conceptions of national security.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Marc Levy, “Is the Environment a National Security Issue?” *International Security*, vol. 20, no. 2 (1995), pp. 35-62.

<sup>20</sup> For example, most major powers’ military strategies acknowledge climate and environmental concerns. This is visible for example in the recently launched U.S. Army Climate Strategy, see [https://www.army.mil/article/253754/us\\_army\\_releases\\_its\\_climate\\_strategy](https://www.army.mil/article/253754/us_army_releases_its_climate_strategy).

<sup>21</sup> Joseph J. Romm, *Defining National Security: The Nonmilitary Aspects* (Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1993).



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Today, national security and military actors engage heavily across a wide swath of sectors, reflecting this broadening conception of security. The role of data, technology and the private sector are a growing concern, particularly given the rise of artificial intelligence and its transborder implications. As legal and policy scholars Andrea Monti and Raymond Wacks argue in their book *National Security in the New World Order*, information remains a critical component of national security with newfound opportunities and threats arising with the proliferation of data and technology.<sup>22</sup> Although Monti and Wacks' model focuses particularly on digital information and the importance of information gathering and information protection for government actors, it connects to the wider imperative that a nation's information context is itself a critical component of shoring up national security. Though more study is needed to confirm the link, just as the absence of data, knowledge and information can undermine a nation's security, the expansion of knowledge and information about the world may make a nation more secure.

### **Global Competency as National Security: Exploring Three Pathways**

*Enhancing national competitiveness through more effective business and government leaders.* Educated citizenries can enhance a nation's security not least by providing pathways for more educated and, therefore, more potentially effective, political, and military actors responsible for developing and implementing policies. Beyond this direct pathway, education could play a wider role in shoring up a nation's security by also enhancing the nation's overall competitiveness and resilience. For example, supporting innovation in business and enhancing a nation's economy, in turn, make a country more secure from threats that can be exacerbated by economic insecurity.

Scholars working through the lens of management science find that exposure to and engagement with global information and networks are important for ensuring that business and government innovate to remain competitive. They write, "Innovation is increasingly the outcome of global

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<sup>22</sup> Andrea Monti and Raymond Wacks, *National Security in the New World Order: Government and the Technology of Information* (London: Routledge, 2021).

networks that connect geographically dispersed knowledge centers.”<sup>23</sup> Though much of the literature on organizational innovation comes from business and management science, public sector research and practice is increasingly drawing on these findings. For example, in their book *Megacommunities*, Marc Gerencser and coauthors explore how exposure to global communities of public-private partners to tackle challenges such as HIV/AIDS in India, rainforest preservation in South America, and community safety activities in Harlem, New York, collaboration with global actors and interests was vital to help policymakers collaborate with other actors to identify solutions.<sup>24</sup> They write, “What is required are leaders who know how to identify the vital interests they share with others, who are prepared to seek the benefits from which all can gain.” This suggests that an awareness of the global ecosystem of interests and issues (alongside the global actors who are working to tackle them) is necessary for a policy actor in a domestic setting to identify creative and effective potential solutions beyond business-as-usual policy responses.

Management scientists and business advisors today promote the role of a “global mindset” as an integral function for more effective leadership that could help a business have stronger outcomes. For example, writing in *Harvard Business Review* in 2019, Nataly Kelly argues that business success today requires success in global markets, and “avoiding cross-cultural mishaps.”<sup>25</sup> Arizona State University’s leadership education programs call for developing a global mindset, stating, [A]s we move further into the Fourth Industrial Revolution, globalization of business becomes increasingly more common. More organizations have cross-cultural environments, and business leaders must understand diverse cultural, political, and business customs.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Marcelo Cano-Kollmann, Thomas J. Hannigan, and Ram Mudambi, “Global Innovation Networks: Organizations and People,” *Journal of International Management*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2018), p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Marc Gerencser, Reginald Van Lee, Fernando Napolitano, and Christopher Kelly, *Megacommunities* (St. Martin’s Griffin, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Nataly Kelly, “5 Ways to Foster a Global Mindset in Your Company,” *Harvard Business Review*, July 2019.

<sup>26</sup> “Developing a Global Mindset,” Arizona State Thunderbird School of Management (n.d.), <https://thunderbird.asu.edu/thought-leadership/insights/developing-global-mindset>.

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Indeed, a study of more than 42 US business leaders found that more than 80 percent of those surveyed believed that “issues of globalization are important to [your] business.”<sup>27</sup> The authors found that through comparing a sample of textbooks on international business from the 1980s to the early 2000s, there is a growing focus in training for business leaders on the nature and “role of globalization.” This supports the claim by Avninder Gill and Sherif Lashine that, “in order to survive in today’s world of business a business graduate must be trained in—and constantly update his/her knowledge in—the issues of globalization.”<sup>28</sup> Management scientists have insisted that global awareness is necessary for business success not just among leaders, but also across an organization’s ranks even without a specifically identified international component in their position description.<sup>29</sup> This includes the need for people across firms to be updated in “social, cultural, and political changes in the global environment.”<sup>30</sup>

If global competency can promote more successful business, it follows that it may enhance national security by also contributing to innovative material and technological development. Both are necessary for military and other policy actors to advance their work. Technological advances in artificial intelligence by US firms that draw on global knowledge and networks have helped military actors “streamline operations, enhance decision-making, and increase the accuracy and effectiveness of military missions.”<sup>31</sup> When private sector actors can innovate, they in turn can develop tools that public sector officials can leverage to improve military effectiveness or even diplomatic effectiveness, which play a clear and direct role in bolstering a nation’s security.

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Engle and Edward Kossakowski, “Awareness and Impact of Globalization on Everyday Business: Perceptions of International Corporation Business Executives in the United States.” *International Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Change Management*, vol 4 (2004).

<sup>28</sup> Avninder Gill and Sherif Lashine, “Business Education: A Strategic Market-oriented Focus,” *The International Journal of Educational Management*. 2003, pp. 17, 188.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Beth Stanek, “The Need for Global Managers: A Business Necessity.” *Management Decision*, vol. 38, 2000, p. 232.

<sup>30</sup> Mohamed Ehab and Sherif Lashine, “Business Education,” p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Cohen, “AI in Defense: Navigating Concerns, Seizing Opportunities,” *National Defense*, 2023, p. 1.

*Expanding Soft Power.* A nation's soft power is also likely influenced by a national public's degree of global awareness. Soft power was prominently defined by American political scientist Joseph Nye, and later built upon by other scholars. It is seen broadly as the ability to obtain preferred outcomes without resorting to coercive measures.<sup>32</sup> The concept highlights the importance of national power by influencing outside of the wielding of a nation's economic or military might. While applications of soft power are many and diverse, one important element includes its importance for the related concepts of "public diplomacy" and "cultural diplomacy." They view a nation's influence through the lens of cultural influence and intercultural exchange.<sup>33</sup>

This article proposes that a nation's cultural and public diplomacy, and in turn its soft power, is improved by the presence of more globally literate leaders as well as a more globally literate public. Considering the importance of global competency for leaders, Stephen Walker and Akan Malici have argued in their analysis of US presidential foreign policy mistakes, presidential mistakes in the domain of international politics, "can be, and often are, more costly and deadly than in any other policy area."<sup>34</sup> Although studies on leaders' global competency is limited, work by John Pfeiffer in his aptly titled piece "How Not to Lose the Trade Wars by Cultural Gaffes," explored how US executives lost strategic advantage in negotiations with Japanese counterparts. US leaders were "totally unprepared to bargain with the Japanese," faring poorly in negotiations saying, "When it comes to understanding the other culture, they [the Japanese] are light-years ahead of us [the US]," because Japanese leaders spent years studying US politics and culture, while American businesses programs did not devote the same attention.<sup>35</sup>

Relatedly, in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks, former US Education Secretary Richard Riley and former US Senator Paul Simon

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<sup>32</sup> Joseph Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

<sup>33</sup> M.M. Zamorano, "Reframing Cultural Diplomacy: The Instrumentalization of Culture under the Soft Power Theory," *Culture Unbound*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2016), pp. 165–86.

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Walker and Akan Malici, *U.S. Presidents and Foreign Policy Mistakes* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 6.

<sup>35</sup> John Pfeiffer, "How Not to Lose the Trade Wars by Cultural Gaffes," *Smithsonian*, 1988, p. 4.

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argued that “America’s ignorance of the world is now a national liability.” This statement was referenced by *Al Jazeera* in a 2004 article titled, “American Ignorance is a Security Risk.” Cited experts suggested that the unprecedented terrorist attacks indicated the importance of “U.S. military personnel, diplomats, and business executives who speak more foreign languages, and who understand global crises not only from an American vantage point, but also from those of our allies and adversaries.”<sup>36</sup>

As former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has argued, global public opinion can play an important role in shoring up or damaging a nation’s security, contending that “...national security strategy depends upon securing the cooperation of other nations, which will depend heavily on the extent to which our efforts abroad are viewed as legitimate by their publics.”<sup>37</sup> If a public and its leaders are viewed as globally illiterate, this can have damaging impacts on global public opinion. Similarly, a Brookings Report on U.S. Public Diplomacy, led by Kristin Lord, called for the “sharing of knowledge regarding . . . foreign cultures” as a core recommendation for advancing US public diplomacy, and in turn, US national security.<sup>38</sup>

A nation’s awareness of global issues can be reflected not just in global cultural exchanges but also at the voting booth. As President Jimmy Carter’s former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski argued, “We are a democracy. We can only have as good a foreign policy as the public’s understanding of world affairs.” Brzezinski’s statement underscores how a prominent policy advisor believed that a globally unaware public can damage a country’s reputation worldwide. And yet, with few academic studies and policy activities that can confirm this link through focused studies, efforts to promote public understanding of world affairs as a policy priority are likely to remain limited.

*Combatting disinformation and bolstering democracy.* A final issue highlighted here is the importance of global competency for bolstering a

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<sup>36</sup> “American Ignorance is a Security Risk,” *Al Jazeera*, 2004.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Gates, Remarks to the 2008 U.S. Global Leadership Campaign Tribute Dinner, July 15, 2008.

<sup>38</sup> Kristin Lord “Voices of America: U.S. Public Diplomacy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” Brookings Institution, 2008, p. 18, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/11\\_public\\_diplomacy\\_lord.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/11_public_diplomacy_lord.pdf).

nation against the threats of fear-based mis- and dis- information based on inaccurate information about the world. The threats of mis- and dis- information for national security have been well documented.<sup>39</sup> The spread of misleading information about the COVID-19 crisis, for example, led to poor outcomes for health security in a range of settings.<sup>40</sup> Countries with more educated populations fared best among those studied. Analysts have cited the spread of mis- and dis- information by Russian actors about the war in Ukraine, yet another example of the potential security threats brought by mis- and dis- information about global affairs issues.<sup>41</sup>

W. James Potter describes media literacy as “a set of perspectives that we actively use to expose ourselves to the media and interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter,” calling this “multidimensional and a continuum.”<sup>42</sup> In investigating US media literacy, Potter identifies a trend unfolding whereby news organizations are increasingly prioritizing hyper-local information over global stories in response to users’ preferences. This is damaging media literacy, or the ability of media consumers to interpret world news accurately. Media and information literacy have expanded as policy priorities in many settings, given the evidence of their importance for securing citizens against a range of threats—particularly from the threat of foreign influence through malign social media campaigns. Literacy initiatives, such as the “learn to discern” program in Ukraine, have helped

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<sup>39</sup> See W.L. Sługocki and B. Sowa, “Disinformation As A threat to nNational Security on the Example of the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Security and Defence Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2021), pp. 63-74; T. Norri–Sederholm, E. Norvanto, K. Talvitie–Lamberg, A. Huhtinen, “Misinformation and Disinformation in Social Media as the Pulse of Finnish National Security, in E. Moehlecke de Baseggio, O. Schneider, and Tibor Szvircesev Tresch, eds., *Social Media and the Armed Forces: Advanced Sciences and Technologies for Security Applications* (Springer 2020); and S. Lewandowsky, W.G.K. Stritzke, A.M. Freund, K. Oberauer, and J.I. Krueger, “Misinformation, Disinformation, and Violent Conflict: From Iraq and the ‘War on Terror’ to Future Threats to Peace,” *American Psychologist*, vol. 68, no. 7 (2013), pp. 487–501.

<sup>40</sup> Roozenbeek et al., “Susceptibility to Misinformation about COVID-19 Around the World,” *Royal Society of Open Science*, vol. 7, no. 10 (2020).

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, discussion in Aaron Erlich and Calvin Garner, “Is pro-Kremlin Disinformation Effective? Evidence from Ukraine,” *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2023), pp. 5–28, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/19401612211045221>.

<sup>42</sup> W. James Potter, *Media Literacy* (SAGE publications; 9<sup>th</sup> ed., 2021).

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alleviate some of the security threats brought by misinformation, helping advance accurate awareness about global politics and history.<sup>43</sup> This educational model is being replicated now in multiple country settings as a security intervention, although further research into the effectiveness of such interventions and models for scaling them will be necessary. Among solutions for combatting mis- and dis- information, which include responsibilities for policy actors and media and technology companies, is a clear consensus about the role that educators play in improving people’s literacy—including their ability to navigate online information (“media literacy”). As Brookings Institution’s Daniel West has argued, “[h]elping people become better consumers of online information is crucial as the world moves towards digital immersion.”<sup>44</sup> This education is necessary, West contends, to bolster national security among other outcomes, making education about the world important as a backstop against a nation’s vulnerability to falsified information. Improved educational outcomes writ large, alongside targeted education about global issues, may both be necessary to optimally bolster a nation’s security.

### Recommendations

Given the importance of global affairs education for national security, what strategies exist to improve a nation’s global competency? Here are four initial recommendations and an agenda for further research.

1. *Progress and consolidate definitions and understanding of global competency through the academy and among global affairs institutions and practitioners.*

As outlined, no national or global consensus exists on the definition and necessary components of “global competency.” Although organizations such as the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment offer useful conceptual tools for exploring meanings of the term and programming that might support it, improved scholarly consensus around the critical

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<sup>43</sup> Maria Haigh, Thomas Haigh, and Tetiana Matychak, “Information Literacy vs. Fake News: The Case of Ukraine,” *Open Information Science*, vol. 3, no. 1, (2019), pp. 154-65.

<sup>44</sup> Daniel West, Brookings Institution, 2017.

components of a global affairs education, and what it means to be “globally competent” will help advocates harmonize approaches, identify best practices, and optimally collaborate. This undertaking could inform the development of stronger consensus around metrics, such as the PISA global competency scorecard, to help countries aspire to improvements based on clearer national and international goals and metrics.

2. *Improve data collection on the state of global competency.*

Relatedly, advocates could support developing improved data collection on global competency to appeal to policymakers who may be compelled by stronger evidence of literacy gaps alongside greater documentation of the security-global competency nexus. Triangulation of data sources, such as public knowledge tests and surveys and ad hoc scholarly studies, offer a glimpse into the state of global competency in a nation and worldwide. However, they do not offer optimally comprehensive and comparable data. Cross-national collection that looks across the learning life-cycle from young learners in primary school settings, to university level, to lifelong learning and beyond could help paint a fuller picture of the status of global competency, enabling advocates to point out weaknesses and interventions to better target gaps.

Governments and non-profits could work together to invest in and advance a comparative global index (such as the OECD global competence assessment) that could expand to reach all countries to help monitor progress. This collaboration could also help create incentives for countries to perform well, through recognizing high performers on annual metrics, and the sharing of best practices among those nations that perform well through spotlighting advances or events to share what works well.

3. *Embed global competency into formal institutions across the lifecycle.*

Proponents may also be able to encourage the embedding of global competency into formal institutions. For one, the civic education movement has failed to bring an adequate focus on global institutions and issues starting with young people in school-age settings. Action at this level is



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likely necessary as a critical starting point to enable the lifelong learning of and engagement with global affairs.

At the secondary-school level in the United States, leading organizations convening civic educators reveal an outsized focus on education about US institutions. Resources for US social studies programs to bring global knowledge and awareness into curricula remain relatively scarce. This gap is perpetuated by limited and outdated state educational standards shaping school-aged learning environments in the United States. Unlike many other countries that impose national educational standards that can shape population-wide outcomes, US educational standards are determined at the state level. These standards tend to prize education about local and national-level civic issues over learning about contemporary developments, global forces, institutions, and affairs.

California's social studies standards,<sup>45</sup> for example, place important emphasis on global history, but lack sufficient focus on contemporary global affairs. Public school teachers who face constrained resources must meet these standards and outdated metrics that fail to equip them with adequate training and incentives to go global in the classroom.

When public schools don't teach global affairs, elite private schools and colleges pick up the slack. This neglects the vast majority of the public and reinforces a foreign policy elite of leaders which over-represents elite views at the expense of the broader public's preferences. It also perpetuates distrust of foreign policy makers in turn.<sup>46</sup>

In the United States, educators must first contend with the state standards system, where legislators and advocates must place heightened pressure to reform the current system to prioritize global issues. Teachers must then be equipped with adequate training and resources to teach global affairs. Business leaders should give greater attention to global affairs knowledge sharing and training in executive education and lifelong learning programs

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<sup>45</sup> California State History-Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools, <https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/histsoescistnd.pdf>.

<sup>46</sup> See discussion of these critiques in Jalina Porter, "The State Department's Lack of Diversity is Bad for U.S. Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy*, Feb. 28, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/28/race-diversity-state-department-blinken-biden-us-diplomacy/> and Salman Ahmed et al., "Making U.S. Foreign Policy Work for the Middle Class," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/09/23/making-u.s.-foreign-policy-work-better-for-middle-class-pub-82728>.

to enhance innovation and competitiveness in the American workforce. Non-profits working to improve US educational systems can do more to focus on global affairs as a civics issue that requires redress.

The study of foreign affairs could also be given a firmer foothold in US higher education. In Europe and the United Kingdom, students can major in international relations and even pursue doctoral studies as a respected and defined field of its own in many contexts in Europe and the United Kingdom. In the United States, the discipline is more commonly nested inside political science programs. This fails to recognize its unique contours and importance as a distinctive discipline. Educational policy leaders could also develop, pilot and scale cross-school initiatives to require college-aged students to gain survey knowledge about world events through core curriculum courses or extracurricular required activities. They could even consider developing certifications for university students who become literate in world events, while also working to incentivize graduate study in global affairs through programs such as national funds to support global policy studies. The U.S. State Department's Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowships Program exists to fund studies of languages and cultures, which could be expanded in the number of students it supports and/or through an expanded mandate to cover wider forms of globally relevant study.

#### 4. *Promote global competency through informal channels*

Another route to support global competency could be through informal channels. Strategists have long lauded the role of influential cultural leaders in education. For example, leaders have drawn on the power of celebrity and influence campaigns to promote girls' education in STEM.<sup>47</sup> Similar influence campaigns could promote global affairs learning through public awareness campaigns and influencing activities. These efforts could also leverage the proliferation of technology that make connecting with others around the world easier than ever. For example, peer-to-peer language learning platforms and other initiatives connect students with peers in other countries through online classroom exchanges (such as the "United Planet"

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<sup>47</sup> Karen Panetta and Katianne Williams, *Count Girls In* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2018).

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and “Global Cities” virtual student exchange programs).<sup>48</sup> Meeting young people where they are, identifying the social media platforms that are most salient among their generations, and other activities can help boost the impact of these efforts.

### Conclusion

A public’s awareness of global affairs, or global competency, can have substantial impacts on a nation’s security. The links between global affairs education and national security should not be underestimated—especially given an early exploration’s indications about potential payoffs. Even small investments in educational programs have proven to have significant impacts in other sectors,<sup>49</sup> supporting gains in everything from enhancing GDP to preventing violent extremism. Further data gathering to confirm the security-global competency nexus would be valuable to draw more attention to the issue on the policy table. For the United States, evidencing the nexus could help draw newfound focus on global affairs as a specific field of educational activity given the limited focus on global affairs in US state educational standards, and the rising importance of complex global issues for national security and prosperity. Although the challenges facing the achievement of global competency in the US and worldwide remain significant, deeper exploration of the global affairs education and national security nexus might unlock a more robust national security agenda in the years to come—especially if advanced by enhanced collaboration between academics, policymakers and global affairs practitioners.



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<sup>48</sup> See United Planet, <https://www.unitedplanet.org/virtual-exchange>; and Global Cities, <https://www.globalcities.org/>.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, the evidence on the impact of investing in education for a nation’s GDP as discussed in Harry Patrinos, “How Educational Spending Translates Lifelong Returns,” World Bank, 2023, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/education/investing-tomorrow-how-educational-spending-translates-lifelong-returns> and for bolstering against the threats of terrorism in Madiha Afzal, “A Global Effort to Counter Extremism Through Education,” Brookings Institution, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-global-effort-to-counter-extremism-through-education/>.

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