



LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL SECURITY

Language has been a critical element of national security since WWII. For most of the past half-century, such requirements for language generally reflected the bilateral world that emerged from WWII. The last two decades have drastically altered that environment, as our national defense strategy was forced to account for “uncertainty” and “unpredictability,” beyond the traditional focus on specific threats from specific countries.¹ This has led to significantly heightened requirements for language in national security.

The worldwide scope of defense and IC responsibilities entails more language requirements: more missions (e.g. CYBER, SOCOM, COIN), languages and language-enabled professionals; integration of advanced technologies into the language workflow; and the performance of higher-order communication tasks in FL. For example, only a Pashtu-speaking soldier can calm a nervous village elder; only sophisticated big-data language technologies can process billions of language texts; only a linguistically and culturally sophisticated diplomat can represent the US to antagonistic audiences.

Over the past decade, a number of Congressional hearings and GAO reports have stressed the criticality of language to national security and well being, repeatedly focusing on the shortfalls across the IC, DoD, DoS, and DHS, despite more significant policy focus and investment.² The criticality of language for national security is shown, for example, by the establishment of General Officer-level Senior Language Authorities in the DoD, ODNI, CIA, FBI, NSA, DIA, and the Combatant Commands; the National Security Language Initiative, established in January 2006 to foster interagency coordination to improve the nation’s capacity in languages; and the Center for Advanced Study of Language, a DoD-funded UARC, established in 2003 to tackle pressing applied research problems in language, culture, and cognition and national security.³

The criticality of language to national security is persistent and growing, as witnessed by the shift in strategic emphasis to the Pacific Rim with its growing conflict over the China Sea, the spreading crises in Africa, the recent Russian and East European developments, and the as well as ongoing SIGINT and HUMINT needs to meet world-wide political upheavals and terrorism underlining the uncertainty and unpredictability of the future of national security.

¹ 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review Report, p.1.

² See, for example, United States Government Accountability Office, Reports and Testimonies. *Departments of Homeland Security, Defense, and State Could Better Assess Their Foreign Language Needs and Capabilities and Address Shortfalls*. GAO-10-715T, Jul 29, 2010. <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-10-715T>. Further detail was provided to the Senate Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, during the hearing, “A National Security Crisis: Foreign Language Capabilities in the Federal Government,” May 21, 2012.

³ For example, DODD 5160.41E establishes the Senior Language Authorities; DODI 5160.70 provides additional specifications for their roles and responsibilities.