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## Our Untapped Reserve And Necessity for Strengthening National Security Through Foreign Language Proficiency: "Do You Speak \_\_\_\_\_?"

中文	1,213,000,000*
Español	329,000,000
English	328,000,000
العربية	221,000,000
हिन्दी	182,000,000
বাংলা	181,000,000
Português	178,000,000
русский язык	144,000,000
日本語	122,000,000
Deutsch	90,300,000
+ 6000 more	+ 4,000,000,000

*\* Number of total speakers worldwide; Source: Ethnologue*

### Abstract

Foreign language proficiency and cultural competence are vital instruments of U.S. national security. They offer a lens into the mind of what is deemed 'foreign' to one's native environment - thoughts, ideologies, intentions, cultures, and stereotypes. They provide the means to understand, and subsequently the knowledge to appropriately respond in a variety of situations, at every tier of human society - individual, family, organizational, governmental, and international. For governments, they are instruments of cultural diplomacy and soft power, offering a means to engage other governments, international organizations, and non-state actors, in the interest of national security. Governments in the twenty-first century are faced with unconventional security risks that have materialized into acts of terrorism against the West, and particularly the United States as witnessed on September 11, 2001. The calamities of such terrorism-related events underscore the necessity for a stronger reserve of these two instruments. Greater emphasis and resources have since been given to these instruments through U.S. government language initiatives, programs, and scholarships, as well as through the ongoing missions of many educational, independent, and not-for-profit organizations committed to the promotion of foreign languages. There is however still a gap in foreign language capabilities and the security threats that face the United States, particularly in lesser taught critical languages. In this paper, I argue that foreign language proficiency and cultural competence are vital to national security, summarize briefly the initiatives aimed at strengthening these instruments, supplement already established strategies through personal experience with language, and offer recommendations and propose an initiative for strengthening our reserve of language proficiency and cultural competence.

## Introduction

In September 2001, the United States was attacked on an unprecedented scale. The languages and cultures of the persons, groups, and organizations behind these attacks were starkly different from those in the United States. Ironically, the ERIC Clearinghouse for Language and Linguistics published a paper in that same month entitled, "*What We Can Learn From Foreign Language Teaching in Other Countries.*"<sup>1</sup> Conducted by the Center for Applied Linguistics, the study summarizes the successes of foreign language education in other countries on the widely accepted notion that the United States has significant progress to make in this arena. Across the Atlantic, the European Union had designated 2001 the *European Year of Languages*, whose purpose was to "use an awareness and education policy to encourage the people of the European Union to learn several foreign languages."<sup>2</sup> The coincidence was important.

There are an estimated 7000 to 8000 languages spoken in the world with global population over 7 billion. Language is an important means of communication, yet it also possesses an inherently dividing force among peoples. Evolutionary biologist Mark Pagel describes this dual polarity of language at a Global TED Conference in 2011 in Edinburgh, Scotland.<sup>3</sup> "Language is a piece of social technology for enhancing the benefits of cooperation, for reaching agreements, for striking deals, and for coordinating our activities." On the contrary, he posits that "we [also] use our language not just to cooperate, but to draw rings around our cooperative groups, and to establish identities, and perhaps to protect our knowledge, and wisdom and skills from eavesdropping from outside."

It is the latter definition to which we must also give particular importance, in an effort to better understand our global neighbors. The United States has an inherent advantage with English as the de facto world language; however, the United States also has an opportunity to adopt a policy of multilingualism. A land of immigrants and perhaps home to the largest population of immigrants in the world, the United States has an opportune moment to harness its heritage and diversity to strengthen foreign languages and cultural competence. The policy of multilingualism has benefited many countries, including those within the European Union, a regional government whose 27 member countries speak 23 official languages.

The United States has an alarmingly small reserve of fluent speakers of foreign languages among its population, especially in the critical lesser taught languages. Universities, companies, and government agencies are in desperate need of qualified speakers to further their academic missions, market strategies, and domestic and foreign policies. In 2005, the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) reported that 50% of European Union citizens consider themselves fluent in at least two languages compared to 9% in the United States.

Using a picture of a Chinese man in front of a chalkboard translating his native language into English as an example, Pagel further asserts that "these different languages impose a barrier.

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<sup>1</sup> Center for Applied Linguistics / ERIC Digest. 2001. *What We Can Learn From Foreign Language Teaching in Other Countries*. Pufahl, Ingrid, Rhodes, Nancy C., Christian, Donna. Available: [http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/digest\\_pdfs/0106-pufahl.pdf](http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/digest_pdfs/0106-pufahl.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> European Council & Parliament. 2000. *European Year of Languages 2001*. Available: [http://europa.eu/legislation\\_summaries/education\\_training\\_youth/lifelong\\_learning/c11044\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/lifelong_learning/c11044_en.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Pagel, Mark. 2011. TED Conferences LLC. *How Language Transformed Humanity*.

Our modern world now is confronting us with a dilemma. And it is the dilemma that this Chinese man faces, whose language is spoken by more people in the world than any other single language, and yet he is sitting at his blackboard converting Chinese phrases into English language phrases. In a world in which we want to promote cooperation and exchange, in a world that might be dependent more than ever before on cooperation, to maintain and enhance our levels of prosperity, his actions suggest to us that it might be inevitable that we have to confront the idea that our destiny is to be one world with one language.”

### **Acknowledging the Need: Government Initiatives, Landmark Studies, and Progress**

In 1999, an eleven-member task force was appointed to define content standards in foreign language education in the United States, the product of which was the “*Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.”<sup>4</sup> Deemed an “unprecedented consensus among educators, business leaders, government, and the community on the definition and role of foreign language instruction in American education,” the report identified five key goals for instruction success and offers the following Statement of Philosophy:

*“Language and communication are at the heart of the human experience. The United States must educate students who are linguistically and culturally equipped to communicate successfully in a pluralistic American society and abroad. This imperative envisions a future in which ALL students will develop and maintain proficiency in English and at least one other language, modern or classical. Children who come to school from non-English backgrounds should also have opportunities to develop further proficiencies in their first language.”*

In 2004, the National Language Conference was held at the University of Maryland from June 22-24, co-sponsored by the U.S. Department of Defense and the Center for Advanced Study of Language. The conference brought together over 300 people from federal agencies, academia, educational systems, language experts, and researchers. Experts from other countries were also present to share strategies of language policy in their home countries. The impetus for the conference was the acknowledgement of the “greater need for citizens with foreign language competence to help respond to requirements of the 21st century and the Global War on Terrorism, the increasing globalization of industry, and the need to provide government services to a diverse and multilingual population in the United States.”<sup>5</sup> It was recognition of the importance of these two instruments across academia, industry, and government, and created momentum for much-needed actions.

The initial findings of the conferees were:

1. Increasing language skills and cultural awareness are national requirements that will be filled primarily at the state and local level

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<sup>4</sup> American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Inc. 1999. *Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Available:

[http://www.actfl.org/files/public/StandardsforFLLexecsumm\\_rev.pdf](http://www.actfl.org/files/public/StandardsforFLLexecsumm_rev.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. 2004. National Language Conference Results Announced. Available:

<http://www.defense.gov/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=7506>

2. There is a need for greater coordination within the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary educational system and a need for coordination at the national level
3. A national language strategy should be affordable and encompass both bottom-up and top-down initiatives
4. The rich population of multilingual Americans found in our heritage communities need to be invited to participate in this national initiative
5. The population needs to be aware of career opportunities for those possessing language skills, and these skills should be recognized as valuable in today's business and governmental environment
6. An increased government and industry emphasis on the value of foreign language competency is necessary to spur the allocation of resources for education and also to attract students to study them

Less than a year later on February 1, 2005, Under Secretary of Defense David S. Chu published a white paper entitled "*A Call to Action for Foreign Language Capabilities.*" A compelling argument in response to the "urgent need for a national strategy on foreign languages and cultural competency," the white paper summarized the interdisciplinary discourse from the National Language Conference 2004 at the University of Maryland just 8 months prior, and includes seven broad actions to address the need. In the executive summary section on page 4, the vision reads:

*"Our vision is a world in which the United States is a stronger global leader through proficiency in foreign languages and understanding of the cultures of the world. These abilities are strengths of our public and private sectors and pillars of our educational system. The government, academic, and private sectors contribute to, and mutually benefit from, these national capabilities."*<sup>6</sup>

One year later on January 5, 2006, President George W Bush introduced the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI), a comprehensive federal program aimed at addressing the crucial need for enhanced foreign language proficiency in a select number of critical languages among U.S. citizens. Coordinated by the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Defense, and the Director of National Intelligence, the initiative has three main objectives that aim to increase the number of:<sup>7</sup>

1. Americans mastering critical need languages and starting at a younger age
2. Advanced-level speakers of foreign languages, with an emphasis on critical languages
3. Teachers of critical need languages and the resources for them

A large focus of the initiative is on languages deemed "critical-need" to national security, which include Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Russian languages, and Indic, Persian, and Turkic language families, among others. It is no surprise that several of these languages are the official languages of countries with which the United States has less than strong relations. The interagency partnership "focuses federal resources and expertise to strengthen critical

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<sup>6</sup> Chu, David S. 2005. *A Call to Action for Foreign Language Capabilities*. Available: [www.deomi.org/CulturalReadiness/documents/White\\_Paper\\_National\\_Foreign\\_Language\\_Capabilities.pdf](http://www.deomi.org/CulturalReadiness/documents/White_Paper_National_Foreign_Language_Capabilities.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of State; U.S. Department of Education; U.S. Department of Defense; Director of National Intelligence. 2006. *National Security Language Initiative*.

language capacity across key components of the K-16 pipeline.” 65.5 million USD and 114.4 million USD were appropriated through the NSLI in fiscal years 2007 and 2008, respectively, for a variety of language programs among all four government agencies.<sup>8</sup> Specific programs that received funding include the following (in millions USD):

	FY 2007	FY 2008
<b>Department of Education</b>		
Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP)	24	26.5
Advancing America Through Foreign Language Partnerships	0	0
Language Teachers Corps	0	0
E-Learning Language Clearinghouse	0	0
Teacher-to-Teacher Initiative	0	0
<b>Office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI)</b>		
STARTALK	4.9	12
<b>Department of Defense</b>		
Expanding K-16 Pilot to 3 Programs	3	3
Expanding the National Language Flagship Program	11.3	11.2
National Language Corps	6.5	6.5
<b>Department of State</b>		
Intensive Summer Language Institutes	6	9
Gilman Scholarship Enhancement	1.1	1.1
Fulbright Student Program Enhancement	1.5	1.5
Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant Program (FLTA)	5	5
High School Teacher Exchange	0.9	1.5
High School Summer Language Institutes	1.3	5
High School Semester and Year Abroad	0	3.6

*Source: National Security Language Initiative (NSLI) Budget Information*  
<http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/competitiveness/nsli/funding.html>

The organization receiving the largest appropriation of funding was the Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP), which received a total of 50.5 million USD in fiscal years 2007 and 2008. The primary source of federal education funding for K-12 foreign language best practices and innovation, the program “provides grants to establish, improve, or expand innovative foreign language programs for elementary and secondary school students.”<sup>9</sup> The program eventually involved 55 charter schools, school districts, and states, and furthered the study of critical languages for several years.<sup>10</sup> On February 19, 2011, all funding for the FLAP program was cut in the U.S. House HR1 bill, as part of the over 60 million USD budget reductions in an

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Education. 2009. *National Security Language Initiative Budget Information*. Available: <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/competitiveness/nsli/funding.html>

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Education. 2012. *Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP)*. Available: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/flap/index.html>

<sup>10</sup> Koebler, Jason. 2012. *Education Funding for Foreign Language Cut*. US News Education

effort to fund the government through the end of the fiscal year 2011.<sup>11</sup> “What this cut does is pull the rug out from these programs,” says Martha Abbott, executive director of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL).

STARTALK, the sole program under the NSLI for the DNI, focuses primarily on engaging summer programs that “strive to exemplify best practices in language education and in language teacher development, forming an extensive community of practice that seeks continuous improvement in such criteria as outcomes-driven program design, standards-based curriculum planning, learner-centered approaches, excellence in selection and development of materials, and meaningful assessment of outcomes.”<sup>12</sup> The multi-week programs are available in nearly all 50 US states for both students and teachers in critical languages, and are hosted in partnership with select elementary schools, high schools, universities, and other academic language centers.

The National Language Flagship Program is a national initiative that is setting out to “change the way Americans learn languages through a groundbreaking approach to language education for students from kindergarten through college.”<sup>13</sup> The Language Flagship fulfills its mission through Flagship Centers and Flagship Partner Programs. As of 2011, there were 26 Flagship Centers and Programs (over 20 university affiliated programs), 10 overseas Flagship Programs, and 3 K-12 Flagship Programs. Languages taught in these programs include Arabic, Chinese, Hindi and Urdu, Korean, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, Swahili and Turkish.

Unlike other programs focusing solely on the teaching and learning of foreign languages, the National Language Service Corps (NSLC) is a civilian organization comprising members that already possess foreign language expertise and volunteer to provide their skills in times of emergency. A federal program within the Department of Defense, the NSLC is the first-of-its-kind organization that addresses the nation’s need for “involving people with fluent language skills” in matters of importance to the national security and welfare of the United States.<sup>14</sup> The NSLI programs under the Department of State are primarily scholarships and exchange programs, receiving less appropriation from federal funding compared to the other agencies.

In 2008, the Center for Applied Linguistics conducted a national survey on foreign language enrollment, instructions, and programs in the United States, entitled *Foreign Language Teaching in U.S. Schools: Results of a National Survey*.<sup>15</sup> The results were less than stellar, and include the following conclusions:

1. Foreign language instruction remained relatively stable at the high school level from 1997 to 2008 but it decreased substantially in elementary and middle schools

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<sup>11</sup> Asia Society. 2011. *Foreign Language Assistance Program on the chopping block: a major threat to K-12 language instruction in the US*.

<sup>12</sup> STARTALK. *About STARTALK*. Available: <http://startalk.umd.edu/about>

<sup>13</sup> The Language Flagship Program. 2012. *About Us*. Available: <http://www.thelanguageflagship.org/about-us>

<sup>14</sup> National Security Language Corps. 2008. *About Us*. Available: [http://www.nlscorps.org/Forms\\_Kernel/AboutUs.aspx](http://www.nlscorps.org/Forms_Kernel/AboutUs.aspx)

<sup>15</sup> Center for Applied Linguistics. 2008. *Foreign Language Teaching in U.S. Schools: Results of a National Survey*. Available: <http://www.nhalliance.org/news/center-for-applied-linguistics-releases-survey-res.shtml>

2. There were inequities in access to foreign language education. Languages were offered in smaller percentages of rural schools and schools whose students were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds
3. The teaching of French, German, Japanese, and Russian decreased at both the elementary and secondary levels. However, the teaching of Arabic and Chinese increased at both the elementary and secondary levels
4. Nearly one third of public elementary and secondary schools with language programs reported that language teaching had been negatively affected by the No Child Left Behind Act
5. The disparity between public and private elementary school language offerings increased exponentially, with private schools offering languages at much higher rates
6. The shortage of language teachers was so severe that some schools were seeking alternative sources of teachers, such as agencies that provide teachers from other countries, commercial language schools, and foreign governments that send teachers to the United States
7. Language teachers at both the elementary and secondary levels were integrating national and state language standards into their teaching more than they did a decade earlier and using the target language in the classroom more frequently
8. More language classes were using authentic literature from the target culture than before

### **Solutions & Recommendations To Strengthen Foreign Language Proficiency**

The blueprint for strengthening foreign language proficiency and cultural competence in the United States has been drafted, but it is far from complete. Acknowledging the importance of these two instruments is the first step, and has been accomplished. Significant progress has been made through the comprehensive NSLI initiative and programs such as STARTALK, the National Language Flagship, Intensive Language Summer Institutes, and scholarships and exchange programs, among others. However, government agencies, companies, and academic institutions benefiting from these programs represent only a fraction of the U.S. population. Several of these programs are “band aide” approaches, particularly for language programs that start at the university level. This approach attempts to compensate a foreign language policy that lacks adequate investment in elementary schools, a system that the European Union accomplishes effectively. Programs started at an earlier age are more effective and sustainable, such as the K-16 Oregon Model, a Chinese Flagship Center that operates in partnership with the University of Oregon and Portland Public Schools. In fact, it is the policy of the European Union that EU citizens attain fluency in two foreign languages in addition to their first language.

Scientific research supports that second language learning (2L) is easier at a younger age. The study of language should not be limited by funding and availability of resources. Rather, nature’s biological clock should be leveraged effectively to truly achieve language proficiency at the right time. Dependency on these types of programs, while very important for generating interest and momentum, are only as effective and sustainable as the funding that supports them. As with the elimination of funding with the FLAP program in 2011, many schools that were once benefiting from federal resources to further foreign language study were forced to continue their missions and programs on less money and resources. Furthermore, foreign language education policy in the United States is lagging compared to its European counterparts.

Critical languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and Urdu should be as commonly available in American classrooms in the same manner that Math and Science are compulsory subjects in our K-16 educational system. Foreign language study should become the rule as a core subject in U.S. schools, and not the exception. The European Union places a very high priority on foreign languages as evident in their policies. We can learn from Europe, whose foreign language education policy mandates compulsory foreign language education beginning in the youth, wherein some EU countries begin at age 8.

It is against this backdrop that I supplement the recommendations put forth by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) and propose an initiative for improving foreign language proficiency in a more systemic and sustainable manner. Of the many studies that have offered insightful research and recommendations, the CAL has offered what I consider a comprehensive and structural framework in its study on foreign language education in other countries<sup>16</sup>:

1. Start language education early
2. Learn from others (countries)
3. Conduct long-term research
4. Provide stronger leadership
5. Identify how technology can improve language instruction
6. Improve teacher education
7. Develop appropriate language assessments
8. Designate foreign language as a core subject
9. Take advantage of the sociolinguistic context

Embracing these important characteristics and drawing on my personal experience with foreign language learning, I propose the Language Lab (LL) initiative in K-12 schools. The objective of the LL is to provide an immersive environment for the study of foreign languages and cultures in schools throughout the United States. The model is very similar to manner in which K-12 schools have gyms for physical activity and music rooms for playing instruments. LLs will serve as an environment to study languages. Initially, LL programs can be started as pilot programs at schools with a select number of students either before or after traditional school hours, ideally as part of after school programs. Local residents of the community with foreign language expertise, as well as fully certified private and public language teachers and professors, can volunteer to teach introductory language content in one-hour sessions three to five days a week at a particular school; the focus would be towards elementary and middle schools to promote early age 2L learning. Volunteer LL instructors will submit a course curriculum proposal for approval to the school's administration, and will not be subject to the local and state education bureaucracy as the instruction will not require modifications to the education curriculums. Each program will have a teacher sponsor, and the program will meet all school policies, as dictated from local and state education boards. The advantage of LLs is that they will not require substantial funding and resources, but rather the expertise of volunteer foreign language speakers, their time, a physical classroom, and technology. It is a model that will be limited only by the interest and time of volunteers, and not by the

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<sup>16</sup> Center for Applied Linguistics / ERIC Digest. 2001. *What We Can Learn From Foreign Language Teaching in Other Countries*. Pufahl, Ingrid, Rhodes, Nancy C., Christian, Donna. Available: [http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/digest\\_pdfs/0106-pufahl.pdf](http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/digest_pdfs/0106-pufahl.pdf)



availability of dollars. The goal of these pilot programs will be primarily to provide exposure to foreign languages and cultural competence at an early age, which is the first recommendation the CAL made in its study.

Over the long term, the operating framework of LLs will expand to leverage technology and the decentralization of language learning resources. This platform of LLs will reach beyond the four walls of a classroom to bring together foreign language teachers, native speakers, and linguists in classrooms throughout the K-12 system, and will consist of the following key components:

1. Language Lab (LL) classrooms (on site in schools)
2. LL Instructors, Teachers, and Professors (remote and on-site)
3. LL Students
4. LL Web-based curriculum (including learning resources and assessments)
5. LL Video Conference Technology (two-way)
6. LL Pals Among Different Countries (i.e., similar to the concept of 'Pen Pals')
7. Encouragement of Individual Out-of-Classroom Study
8. LL National Language Proficiency Assessment (NLPA)

The implementation and operation of LLs in K-12 schools in the United States have the potential to significantly increase the exposure and understanding of foreign languages and cultures to much larger numbers of students. The majority of these students do not have the opportunity to attend STARTALK summer programs, or take part in the National Language Flagship program, or participate in an exchange program in a foreign country. LLs will transcend the barriers of limited funding and resources to bring the world of language and culture to U.S. schools through the diverse heritage and peoples of the United States that comprise our communities. They possess the knowledge of their native language, which could be the first foreign language of elementary school children throughout the country. This decentralized model of foreign language resources – including certified and volunteer foreign language teachers and instructors – enables the United States to tap into a reserve of underutilized knowledge.

Another advantage of this program is its feasibility and long term benefits. In fact, I was fortunate to have benefited from a similar program as an eighth grade student that enrolled in an optional before-school German language course. It was an informal pilot program from the local high school to promote the study of the German language among middle school students. It was a one year introductory course taught by my high school German teacher. It was my first formal exposure to a foreign language, and it planted a seed for what eventually became a strong personal and professional interest. Taught in a classroom trailer rather informally with a white board, a conventional projector, and a textbook, my fellow eighth grade classmates and I began learning the German alphabet, grammar, syntax, and of course inverted word order. It was the beginning of a newly discovered passion for foreign languages.

I continued the study of German through all four years of high school, attended a six-weeks German language program called the Georgia Governor's Honors program my junior year, and concluded with Advanced Placement German my senior year. As an engineering student in college, I continued my study of German, attended an 8-week summer language program in Munich, Germany, and eventually worked in Berlin for a government agency for six months.

Experiencing first-hand the benefits of fluency in another language through study, work, and travel, I decided to enroll in introductory Arabic and Chinese in college as well, and developed self-study regimens for these languages outside of the classroom following these courses.

Through my personal experience of learning foreign languages, I offer the following recommendations and lessons that greatly benefit my study of foreign languages, and which I believe can be applied for anyone interested in learning a foreign language:

1. Create an immersive language environment for oneself
2. Practice with native speakers
3. Practice for at least 20-30 minutes a day
4. Diversify one's language resources
5. Read media, watch news, and listen to songs of the language one is learning
6. Watch movies in the language one is learning
7. Be passionate about learning another foreign language
8. Set milestones for one's language learning objectives

The feasibility of LLs then, coupled with CAL's characteristics and my personal recommendations, has the potential to build a stronger reserve of foreign language proficiency and cultural competence among U.S. citizens at a very grassroots level. Even an informal approach with initial pilot programs regarding content, instruction, and assessment has the raw potential to plant a seed of interest into our younger generation. A seed that has the potential to benefit not just the students that learn a second and third language, but also the universities that they will later attend, the international companies that will hire them, and the government agencies that will leverage their skills to further important domestic and foreign policies. Language Labs will serve as an important supplement to already established foreign language initiatives and programs, particularly those from the National Security Language Initiative and university programs.

### **Necessity for National Security: Reserve of Language Proficiency in the US**

It is clear that language proficiency and cultural competence enable understanding, communication, and cooperation among different cultures and peoples. At the individual level, they enable friendships, enrich professional skills, and increase competitiveness in the job market. Studies show that proficiency in a foreign language also increase standardized test scores and academic potential. At the organizational level, they create a more diverse workforce, encourage more ideas and collaboration, and create opportunities for companies expanding to new customers and markets beyond their borders. At the government and international level, they facilitate political agreements, strategic interests, and diplomacy. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz addressed the importance of foreign language proficiency and cultural competence with reference to U.S. national security. "The greater our ability to communicate with people, the easier the burden on our troops and the greater the likelihood that we can complete our missions and bring our people home safely. Even better, the greater our linguistic skill, the greater the possibility that we can resolve international differences and achieve our objectives without having to use force."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. 2004. National Language Conference Results Announced. Available: <http://www.defense.gov/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=7506>

In this statement, Secretary Wolfowitz alludes to linguistic skill as an instrument of power without the use of force. It is arguably a paradigm shift of thinking in the context of conventional means of resolving international conflict through non-military power. It is simultaneously an oversimplification to state that a more multilingual population will resolve all international conflict alone. It is rather a delicate balance of the soft power of language proficiency and hard power of force that will serve the interests of U.S. national security.

The U.S. 9/11 Commission Report cited foreign language deficiencies within the U.S. intelligence apparatus, exposing the nation's language shortfalls, and also proposed recommendations for strengthening this capability. "The CIA Director should emphasize developing a strong language program, with high standards and sufficient financial incentives."<sup>18</sup> The report also mentioned that specific agencies lacked the sufficient translation capabilities to timely detect threats. "The FBI did not dedicate sufficient resources to the surveillance and translation needs of counterterrorism agents. It lacked sufficient translators proficient in Arabic and other key languages, resulting in a significant backlog of untranslated intercepts."

In the Senate confirmation hearing on CIA Director Leon Panetta's nomination to succeed Robert Gates as the U.S. Secretary of Defense on June 11, 2011, U.S. Senator Daniel Akaka asks Panetta on his thoughts of foreign language capabilities.<sup>19</sup> "I am a big believer in language training, and in getting our people to not only speak the language, but to understand the culture of the countries that we are dealing with. I have to tell you that it is important to our national defense to have that capability." Recognizing the importance of these capabilities, Panetta also draws the link to national security. "At the CIA, I have developed a requirement for analysts, for those that are operations officers, to have a language capability. It makes them not only a better individual. It makes them a better intelligence officer to have that capability. At the Defense Department, we also need to encourage greater language training so that they understand not only the language but the cultures of the countries they are involved with. Having that capability makes us much better at doing our job."

Foreign language proficiency is not a new topic for Senator Akaka. In fact, Senator Akaka has held seven oversight hearings on the need to strengthen the U.S. government's foreign language skills, calling for a comprehensive strategy. On May 12, 2012, Senator Akaka held what he called his "final hearing" on the topic, which was entitled "*A National Security Crisis: Foreign Language Capabilities in the Federal Government*." During the hearing, Senator Akaka makes strong assertions on the importance of this capability "to our national security and our economy."<sup>20</sup> Recalling the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of September 11 the previous year, Senator Akaka asserts that many agencies within the federal government, including the Federal Bureau of

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<sup>18</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report. 2004. *Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*.

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Senate Confirmation Hearing. 2011. *Akaka questions Leon Panetta, confirms support for Defense Secretary nominee*. Available: <http://akaka.senate.gov/press-releases.cfm?method=releases.view&id=f6eff552-57d9-4544-bd5f-34d25306b1ca>

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Senate Hearing. 2012. *A National Security Crisis: Foreign Language Capabilities in the Federal Government*. Akaka, Daniel Senator.

Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of State, and the Department of Defense, must invest time and funds in appropriate training of critical languages.

“As U.S. businesses of all sizes look to expand, they need employees with the foreign language skills and cultural knowledge to access overseas markets. Our national and economic security is closely linked to how well our schools prepare students to succeed in a global environment. Experts indicate that learning languages starting at the K-12 levels develop higher language proficiency than those starting in college. The Federal government must partner with schools, colleges, and the private sector to address this ongoing challenge at its root cause: our nation's failure to adequately invest in language education, starting at early ages. Even in a difficult budget environment, we must fund important international education and foreign language study programs to build the pipeline to a 21st century workforce, including the Foreign Language Assistance Program.”

At the U.S. Department of State, foreign language proficiency and cultural competence are in the DNA of the organization. Mastery of these two skills is crucial for Foreign Service officers that represent the United States and its interests abroad at posts throughout the world. Meeting these requirements though has proven difficult for the State Department in recent years. In a Government Accountability Office study entitled “*Persistent Staffing and Foreign Language Gaps Compromise Diplomatic Readiness*,” the reality of shortfalls in foreign language capabilities was all too clear as evident in the numbers. Of the 739 Foreign Service specialists in language-designated positions, more than 50% of them do not meet the requirements.<sup>21</sup> In Afghanistan and Iraq, two countries with which the United States has recently been engaged in war, gaps were among the highest with 73% and 57% of language-designated officers in these regions not meeting the requirements, respectively. For areas of strategic interest, particularly the Near East and South and Central Asia, 40% of officers in language-designated positions did not meet requirements.

## **Conclusion**

United States national security has always drawn its strength from conventional means of hard power through its unprecedented military and economic strength. Modern security threats though are challenging these conventional approaches. The changing nature of war, terrorism, and conflict are becoming more decentralized, fragmented, and binary in cyber space. The enemy is no longer an army on the battlefield, but rather an army of enemies dispersed through cyber space with complex ideologies. Soft power instruments such of foreign language proficiency and cultural competence are necessities for U.S. national security, and must be leveraged with hard power strategies to achieve its interests. The U.S. blueprint for sound foreign language capabilities and cultural competence has a foundation with government initiatives and a plethora of fragmented non-government strategies, but still lacks a comprehensive national language strategy and tools to build upon this foundation. The United States must recognize the strategic importance of these instruments to our national security. All appropriate organizations and federal agencies within the U.S. power apparatus – Department of Defense, Department of State, Department of Education, and the Intelligence Community – must have a strong reserve of fluent speakers of foreign languages to fill its ranks,

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<sup>21</sup> Government Accountability Office. 2009. *Persistent Staffing and Foreign Language Gaps Compromise Diplomatic Readiness*. Ford, Jess T.

especially in critical lesser taught languages. Our national security depends on it. The gap in foreign language capabilities and the security threats that face the United States must be filled. Adelphi University President Dr. Robert A. Scott presents a sobering assessment of where the U.S. stands with regards to our foreign language capabilities. "We have a critical national need to know other cultures and to be competent in communicating with other people. These are not new needs. We have heard many calls to action to address these needs... We have made so little progress and have prepared so many globally illiterate [citizens] because universities, states, businesses, and the federal government have been inconsistent in their priorities... So it is past time for a renewed focus on our role as members of the world community. Last call; it is time for action."<sup>22</sup>

As a student, diplomat, professor, or working professional – I encourage you to act. The beauty of foreign language learning is that it does not require government funding. A genuine interest to learn is essentially the primary prerequisite. Enroll in a foreign language class in middle school and high school. Apply for any of the NSLI programs that are most suitable to your interests and education, such as a STARTALK program or a Critical Language Scholarship. Participate in a study abroad program as an undergraduate or graduate student. If you are unable to participate in formal language programs, leverage the internet and the vastness of foreign language learning resources it offers. Read foreign news, listen to foreign language podcasts, watch foreign films, and make friends with native speakers of the language you are studying. The opportunities truly are endless. For those of you that possess foreign language expertise, I encourage you to share your knowledge with others. Start a Language Lab (LL) in your home city and help build a stronger reserve of foreign language proficiency from a very grassroots level. Attaining fluency in a second and third foreign language is a very rewarding experience and skill. It will benefit your friendships, your academic experience, your career, and your government should you decide to pursue public service. What will your action be?

#### *About the Author*

*Jameel Khan is a consultant with Huron Consulting Group Inc., a professional services firm based out of Chicago, IL. Prior to consulting, he worked for the German government in Berlin with the federal investment agency Germany Trade & Invest GmbH, a non-profit organization in the German-American business community, and a multinational company in operations management. Outside of work, he has academic interests in cultural diplomacy, foreign languages, and business strategy. He has attended Institute of Cultural Diplomacy conferences in Berlin (USA Meets Germany Young Leaders Forum 2008, International Symposium on Cultural Diplomacy 2009) and the National Science Foundation-sponsored INNOVATE Conference 2009 in Vietnam and Taiwan. Fluent in German and his native English, he also speaks elementary Arabic, Chinese and Urdu, and is the author of two personal blogs on international travel and socio microeconomic insights. Jameel is a graduate of the Georgia Institute of Technology in 2009 (B.S., Industrial Engineering; Minor, International Affairs).*

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<sup>22</sup> Chu, David S. 2005. *A Call to Action for Foreign Language Capabilities*. Available: [www.deomi.org/CulturalReadiness/documents/White\\_Paper\\_National\\_Foreign\\_Language\\_Capabilities.pdf](http://www.deomi.org/CulturalReadiness/documents/White_Paper_National_Foreign_Language_Capabilities.pdf)