A couple summers ago, I arrived in Asia as a Naval Officer at my second duty station. A tiny island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, Guam had the easy living, tropical climate feel and all of the pitfalls that come with that: slow drivers, small roads, endless downpours followed by scorching sun and plenty of bugs.

After only 2 months on the ground, I packed up and deployed to another country, leaving my girlfriend and halfway-unpacked house behind. Needless to say, my girlfriend was unhappy. We had been doing long distance for months before I got to Guam and I was immediately ripped away from her after she was finally getting used to being around me again. Upon landing, talk about a culture shock! As I walked around the city for the first time, I was surrounded by a sea of Asian faces, standing at least a head height over almost everyone else. Makeshift trucks called ‘Jeepneys’ shuttled people around and small scooters weaved in and out of traffic, with whole 4-person families riding on them.

Not only did the culture present a steep learning curve, but my job at the US Embassy also demanded instant knowledge and results. Being the only US Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technician in the country, I got bombarded with several projects right off the bat, all involving how to mitigate an explosive problem of some sort. One of them was handed to me by the guy that I replaced. He had been working on bringing an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) laboratory to the country to help their forces with the growing IED problem they were experiencing. IEDs were killing local soldiers and police in growing numbers
and without the ability to exploit the devices and determine how they worked and by who they were being made, the forces could do little to stop the deadly problem. What followed was a rollercoaster of peaks and valleys as I worked between the local military system and our own bureaucratic system fraught with paperwork nightmares.

Fast-forward several months, a C-130 lands in a not-so-friendly area of the country. Out comes some highly trained, intelligent EOD operators eager to make a difference. In tow, they brought some of the most cutting edge, high-tech exploitation equipment you can find on the market today. We set up the mobile, expandable tent-like structures on the helicopter pad on a base and got to work. Slowly, enemy IEDs begin filtering their way through our lab, while we simultaneously trained the local forces how to safely exploit them. Trust was gained, and soon our make-shift team of young and old, experienced and newbies, local and American EOD operators were rolling through one explosive device after another. Of course, there was plenty of beer drinking and karaoke singing involved, as local tradition demands.

The 60-day pilot phase comes and the forces ask us to stay; they’re beginning to map their bomb-maker network and are able to save their troops lives by adjusting their tactics when they encounter IEDs. But for some reason, the US EOD command can’t grasp our success and wants to pull the lab back to Guam. Sometimes leadership is tough in the Navy.

Now I’m back for my second deployment and the IED lab is still running strong. The end result: lives are being saved on the ground level but sadly no
one at the higher levels of government and military understands the concept. But the EOD partnership between our two countries continues to save lives.