



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

Helping Others Help Themselves

Bruce Boevers

The United States, our allies, and our partners face a spectrum of challenges, including violent transnational extremist networks, hostile states armed with weapons of mass destruction, rising regional powers, emerging space and cyber threats, natural and pandemic disasters, and a growing competition for resources. The Department of Defense must respond to these challenges while anticipating and preparing for those of tomorrow. We must balance strategic risk across our responses, making the best use of the tools at hand within the U.S. Government and among our international partners. To succeed, we must harness and integrate all aspects of national power and work closely with a wide range of allies, friends and partners. We cannot prevail if we act alone.¹

Recognizing the requirement for the United States to succeed “by, with, and through” our allies, friends and partners, the Department of Defense has taken several actions to improve Department capabilities to conduct Security Force Assistance (SFA) activities. Most recently, DoD has designated U.S. Special Operations Command as joint proponent for SFA and there is an implementing DoD Instruction in the staffing process now. Current emphasis on SFA is critical, if indeed not overdue. Several factors have led us to this point.

Existing and developing threats, as listed above, when coupled with some discernable trends, force the U.S. military to rethink how it will do business in the future in response to these factors. In short, because the Joint Force will not be able to deal with all challenges unilaterally, it will have to act in concert with partners around the world. The ability to do so contains the implied mission to develop the capabilities and capacities of those foreign security forces. Although the United States has been engaged in assisting foreign partners for years, it is now time to develop a broad-based construct that encompasses all components of the Joint Force and that integrates all available “tools” for working with others. The era of niche mission areas and “stovepipes” or “cylinders” of excellence is over.

Before examining the factors influencing the evolution of SFA, it is useful to take a closer look at what exactly SFA entails. According to Army Field Manual 3-07, Stability Operations, Security Force Assistance (SFA) encompasses all **“unified action to generate, employ, and sustain local, host nation or regional security forces in support of a legitimate authority.”** The definition is broad by design, with an eye toward expanding the narrow mindsets associated with previous SFA-like missions:

¹ U.S. Government, Department of Defense, National Defense Strategy, Washington, D.C., June 2008, p. 1.

- **Unified action** comprises joint, interagency, intergovernmental and multinational community activity in cooperative effort with non-governmental organizations, international organizations, and private companies to ensure and support unity of effort in SFA.
- **Security forces** include not only military forces, but also police, border forces, and other paramilitary organizations at all levels of government within a nation state, as well as other local and regional forces.
- Forces are developed to operate across the spectrum of conflict -- combating internal threats such as insurgency, subversion and lawlessness (Foreign Internal Defense (FID)), defending against external threats, or serving as coalition partners/peacekeepers in other areas.
- To be successful, SFA must be based on solid, continuing assessment and include the **organizing, training, equipping, rebuilding and advising** of the forces involved. As an integral component of SFA, it is critical to develop the institutional infrastructure to sustain SFA gains.
- The resulting forces must possess the capability to accomplish the variety of required missions, with sufficient capacity to be successful and with the ability to sustain themselves as long as required.
- **Legitimate authority** could be as direct as a host nation's constitution or U.N. mandate, but it could also include a presidential finding or other less traditional authority.

Operational Environment

General. In addition to the National Defense Strategy quote above, many other strategic- and operational-level guidance and planning documents and doctrinal publications outline the threat environment and related security challenges facing the United States. These security challenges array broadly into three basic categories: threats posed by hostile decentralized, non-nation state networks, rogue states with regional aspirations, and finally, the potential re-emergence of a peer or near peer competitor. The United States must be able to engage, confront, deter and defeat all of these security challenges; none of these threats can be neglected in the strategic planning process.

Networked, non-nation state threats lack the capability and capacity to directly challenge the U.S. conventionally. That makes them no less dangerous. The Al Qaida attacks in New York and Washington demonstrated that a determined enemy can inflict spectacular damage on the U.S. homeland without sophisticated weaponry or force structure. Elements of the networked threats exist in failed or failing states, in ungoverned regions of weak states, and even within the borders of America's partner states and allies -- modern, western, liberal democracies. To defeat these threats we must engage all the areas where they reside and gain sustenance.

Rogue states, while unlikely to achieve near peer status with the United States will nonetheless pose meaningful challenges to U.S. security, especially as countries such as North Korea and Iran continue to proliferate WMD. Helping neighboring states develop security capability makes them less vulnerable to the intimidation of rogue states. Capable neighbors may even repress the negative behavior of the rogues.

Finally, there is always the possibility that some *larger nation state or coalition of states* with interests divergent from those of the U.S. may emerge as a global competitor in the more traditional sense. This possibility cannot be ignored. The U.S. must remain prepared to face a near peer competitor in an environment of high technology across all domains (air, land, sea, space and cyberspace).

Trends. Emerging challenges to U.S. interests are influenced by several trends that have significant impact on SFA requirements:

Failed and failing states. Both official and unofficial sources in the international community list a significant number of failed or failing states around the globe.² While such states and ungoverned areas may have been dismissed in the past as insignificant, the terrorist attacks of 2001 show that they represent challenges that must be addressed. It is therefore in the U.S. national interest to engage and partner with specific states in order to develop their capability and capacity to improve governance and better defend themselves.

Irregular Warfare (IW). In IW, especially in counterinsurgency and FID operations, external security forces cannot “win” the war; they can only set the conditions that enable the host nation to “win”. In order to set these conditions, the host nation’s security forces must be capable, competent, confident and committed. Those forces must be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the population and must be an extension of an equally legitimate government.

Alliances and Coalitions. Enabling alliance partners is a key element of the U.S. engagement strategy. Developing partners’ capabilities and capacities benefits the interests of both the United States and the partner, and engenders a spirit of cooperation between them. As alliances such as NATO expand, prospective members must be assimilated as fully functional alliance members. In many cases, that will require existing members of the alliance to reach out and assist partners in the development of the required capabilities and infrastructure. This was a key element of the alliance’s Partnership for Peace Program (PfP) of the 1990s. Similarly, when military action is necessary, but alliance participation is not possible, the U.S. may build “coalitions of the willing”. Unfortunately, recent experience has displayed a dichotomy in participation. Some of the most capable partners worldwide prove unwilling to participate, while some of the most willing need assistance in building requisite capability.

Peacekeeping requirements. The demand for third party peace operations (PO) will continue to be significant in the future. The nature of peace operations has changed over the past decades. PO have evolved from the traditional, United Nations Chapter VI “blue helmet” missions to

² See for example Foreign Policy, The Failed States Index 2008, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4350, accessed 27 Jan 2009.

include Chapter VII peace enforcement, peacemaking, peace building and conflict prevention. The complexity of these missions requires more advanced capabilities than many countries now possess. It is therefore in the U.S. interest to develop these capabilities in other countries in order to ease the requirement for U.S. forces' direct participation.³

U.S. force structure. Restrictions on force size since the end of the draft have constrained, *de facto*, the ability of the U.S. military to conduct multiple unilateral military operations in response to every threat. U.S. force structure is simply too small for unilateral action except under very strict parameters. Force structure decisions were based on the view that future conflicts would be fought as a member of a coalition or in conjunction with host nation forces. In the foreseeable future, there simply will not be another 600 ship U.S. Navy, a 100 wing USAF or a 20 division Army. Major combat operations therefore require the participation of partners in constellations of coalitions.

Within the U.S. force structure, responsibility for SFA-type activities has been pushed into the Special Operations community. As a result, U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) developed a premier training and advisory capability oriented on unconventional warfare (UW) and foreign internal defense (FID). Recent experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, however, have demonstrated the need for trainers and advisors in quantities beyond SOF capacity and in mission areas beyond traditional SOF expertise. Exacerbating the situation, U.S. SOF are spread thin by assignments to other high value missions and to training and advising in SOF-specific missions in support of the Long War. As a result, more general purpose forces will be engaged in SFA than was the case before OIF/OEF. **The bottom line is that all elements of the joint force will engage in SFA: all Services, all components, sometimes in combinations not seen in past operations.** The choice of forces will depend on political sensitivity, required skill sets, extent of the operation and other factors.

Need for SFA

The challenges outlined above clearly demonstrate an enduring requirement to develop the capabilities and capacities of foreign security forces (FSF). FSF require the capability and capacity to deal with their own nation's security needs, with the additional ability to participate in peace operations, and to operate with other partners as coalition members.

SFA is not a new concept. The United States has conducted SFA in various forms for many years. In the years following World War II, these efforts were probably best represented by the Military Advisory Assistance Groups (MAAGs)⁴ that were established in key countries around the globe. In the intervening years, that effort shrank, both in nature and in scope, especially after the Vietnam War. Legislation limited the military's ability to deploy advisors and to develop police and other domestic security forces.

³ For a good discussion of this issue, see Michael O'Hanlon, "Expanding Global Military Capacity for Humanitarian Intervention", in Gott, Kendall, ed., Security Assistance: U.S. and International Historical Perspectives, Ft. Leavenworth, KS, Combat Studies Institute, 2006.

⁴ Also Military Assistance Groups, Military Assistance & Advisory Groups, Military Assistance Commands, Military Groups (MILGPs), and a host of other monikers.

SFA activities since Vietnam have focused on development of foreign tactical units and the delivery and support of major weapons systems⁵. The situation we face today varies greatly in size and scope from that of the Cold War. Traditional security cooperation programs could have been enhanced to adapt to the new reality, but since they had sufficed in a peacetime environment, they were left as *status quo*. In the current and future environments we need trainers and advisors capable of developing both service and ministerial infrastructure; we need new ways of acquiring and transferring equipment; and in surge situations, we need to be able to do all of the above on a massive scale. These requirements do not fit the “business as usual” assistance models.

In the recent past, U.S. emphasis has been on “train & equip” missions (think Bosnia Train & Equip, Georgia Train & Equip, etc.) Unfortunately, “training and equipping” individuals and tactical units is a short-term expedient at best. It fails to recognize that many individuals and units may require continued advice in order to internalize lessons learned in training. Additionally, without even basic infrastructure systems, such as personnel, intelligence, logistics, planning, etc., tactical units have no method of sustaining themselves in the long run. In sum, training and equipping individuals and units represents a myopic view of security force assistance. It attempts to solve SFA challenges with a linear/mass resource approach, fails to address the essential operational and strategic levels, and fails to recognize that SFA demands a systematic approach.

The situations in Iraq and Afghanistan provided epiphanies for those tasked with development of the security forces in those locations. In Afghanistan, the main security apparatuses had to be organized from almost nothing⁶. Security infrastructure which had been dismantled courtesy of years of civil war and more recent application of U.S. airpower had to be rebuilt, and new Afghan units needed to be advised after they deployed to the field following initial training. Similarly, in Iraq, then-LTG David Petraeus reported, “I talked about ministry capability being absolutely crucial. But it was recognized some months back that we can develop all the battalions, brigades, divisions and ground forces, and police, and so forth, in the world, but they’ve got to be supportable and supported by the Ministries of Defense and Interior to ensure eventual self-reliance and transition to complete Iraqi control.”⁷ Similarly, equipment programs in both Iraq and Afghanistan relied on purchases and donations of systems other than U.S., thereby “busting” traditional American security assistance paradigms. These extensive requirements begged for solutions much broader and deeper than those in the normal kitbag of the U.S. military.

⁵ Post Vietnam SFA activities have by and large been shoved into the niche domains of FID under the purview of SOF and very narrowly defined Security Assistance programs with its own Byzantine bureaucracy.

⁶ In fact, the Afghan-proposed Soviet style organizations had to be dismantled and replaced with a more streamlined, functional organizations.

⁷ Wright, Dr. Donald P. and COL Timothy R. Reese, On Point II, Transition to the New Campaign: The United States Army in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, May 2003-January 2005, Fort Leavenworth, KS : Combat Studies Institute Press, 2008, p. 453.

To be effective, Security Force Assistance must be an integral part of a comprehensive, whole of government approach to nation building. Building military capability and capacity without requisite governmental reforms can lead to military control of the government. If anything, establishment of a first-class military to the detriment of civilian government may have been at the heart of some of the restrictions on military assistance programs that evolved over the years.

Tools. Tools used for SFA are currently located in a number of different authorities. To make effective use of the tools, SFA planners and practitioners must integrate them from a variety of sources. These programs are of only marginal value if they are not integrated in a well thought out campaign plan that links all aspects of building and sustaining security force capability and capacity.

Many of the tools currently available for SFA reside in the Title 22 authorities of the **Security Assistance** programs: the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended and the Arms Export Control Act of 1976, as amended. Equipment available through SA programs is almost exclusively U.S. manufacture; one of the stated purposes of these programs is, in fact, support of U.S. industry. Unfortunately, American equipment may not meet the requirements of our partners, and may not be sustainable under their budget constraints. SFA therefore needs to have the ability to access other equipment sources in addition to traditional security assistance. Similarly, much of the security assistance training conducted abroad is equipment-specific or very short-term as conducted by Mobile Training Teams (MTTs). Additionally there are restrictions on the target audiences of the training and on conditions under which it may be given (e.g. non-combat).

Other **security cooperation** programs include exchanges, exercises, regional centers, National Guard State Partnership Program, and joint combined exchange training (JCET), to name but a few. Synchronizing these activities has been a major challenge in the past and it will become even more so unless new paradigms are developed.

In conjunction with the Global War on Terror and current operations in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, Congress has granted specific authorities to conduct SFA activities in those areas. It has authorized the training of police and combat advising in Iraq and Afghanistan and other specific programs in other countries. These limited authorities, located in the National Defense Authorization Act, are temporary measures that must be renewed in each new authorization bill. They therefore present planning challenges for organizations engaged in SFA activities. Planning by “exceptions to the rule” is not an enduring solution to the security challenges facing the United States.

To be truly effective, various SFA authorities and resources should be rationalized and integrated through revised legislation. To date, no one has been willing to step up to the plate and force the issue, so SFA practitioners continue to “muddle through” using the disparate programs available.

Conclusion

The true challenge of SFA is getting the U.S. Government as a whole, and specifically the U.S. military to embrace the situation facing it. The array of security challenges, coupled with force structure issues, requires that U.S. forces engage “by, with and through” foreign security forces. Expanded SFA capability, capacity and sustainability within the U.S. forces are urgently required. It is increasingly clear that U.S. forces require the capability to conduct SFA activities across a wide range of specialties, many outside narrow confines of tactical training. Planning directives require a level of steady-state engagement activities, but there is also a requirement to be able to surge capacity in support of critical, emergent missions. Finally, there needs to be a plan to sustain the SFA effort throughout both steady-state and surge conditions.

This overall SFA approach does not invent any new program, mission or operation. It instead provides a framework for the necessary integration and synchronization of many related activities in support of existing mission sets (e.g. unconventional warfare, FID, counterinsurgency, etc). Unless and until the United States develops the required mindset and associated implements to execute successful and enduring SFA, we place future military operations at risk. As John Nagl offered in a slightly different context, “we only need to do this better if we want to win.” Do we want to win?

Bruce Boevers (Old Eagle) is a retired Army colonel. As a Security Assistance Officer, he helped develop the Estonian Defense Forces after independence (a task that would have been totally unsuccessful without Stan’s able assistance) and served one year in Afghanistan as a ministerial-level advisor after retirement. In addition to traditional infantry command and staff assignments in Korea, Germany and the U.S., he served on four country teams abroad, in the Strategy, Plans and Policy directorate of the Army staff, as the Chief of European Operations for the Defense Intelligence Agency, and on the personal staffs of the Chief of Staff, Army and two Secretaries of Defense.

This article represents the personal opinions of the author and not necessarily those of the U.S. Army, Department of Defense or U.S. Government.

This is a single article excerpt of material published in Small Wars Journal.
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2009, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license and per our Terms of Use. We are in this together.



No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: comment@smallwarsjournal.com

Visit www.smallwarsjournal.com

Cover Price: Your call. [Support SWJ here.](#)