The Army’s recent strategic shift from a two-front, “fight and win” Army to the Regionally Aligned Forces’ (RAF) “shape and prevent” (and so “win” by not fighting) has, unsurprisingly, caused consternation from all corners of the security birdcage. Despite the many lessons learned after a decade of unconventional warfare, counterinsurgency, and what most observers conclude was a general failure of COIN operations to succeed in dealing with the human element, the military industrial complex still clings to the traditional force-on-force conception of future threats. Hawks scream that RAF puts America at risk by ignoring the looming (always, looming) threat of China and a resurgent Russia; Doves coo that RAF stands for the insidious militarization, American style, of every country on the African continent with no benefit to American security. Some even pass RAF off as a “brilliant” attempt to justify the continued relevance of a bloated defense budget.

Both ends have it wrong. The Regionally Aligned Forces concept is certainly not business as usual, but is also the result of a sobering truth: leveraging national military power to secure our vital interests in today’s threat environment cannot be business as usual. At its most fundamental, RAF is a troop delivery platform, designed to provide habitually aligned forces quickly to Combatant Commanders responsible for unpredictable threats all over the world. But it can’t stagnate at that – we are already experts at the science of warfare, we now need to be artists. The art of RAF lies in the constant enhancement of the human experience and human judgment of both our regional partners and our own forces. Indeed, at recent AUSA Annual Meetings, senior Army leaders repeatedly emphasized that RAF success depends on “person to person” engagements. In a 2014 joint statement to Congress on Army Posture, the Chief of Staff and Secretary of the Army wrote that we need to “build trust” and “develop relationships,” and in the Army’s 2014 Strategic Guidance for Security Operations, they wrote that security cooperation “is primarily a human endeavor (that) goes far beyond providing military equipment or technology.”

Human engagement is the crux of RAF. It is a visionary concept of military security cooperation that embraces the lessons of the past decade – a recognition that it is not enough to provide weapons and ammunition to our partners and teach them how to set a better L-shaped ambush. We must help them understand not just how and who to shoot, but who not to shoot. We have to teach them how to care for the sick and wounded, and why the humane treatment of prisoners of war or detainees is a strategic multiplier. Though our primary goal is always to win the conventional fight, RAF recognizes that to prevent a fight before it starts, we must equally emphasize the goal to build leaders in foreign militaries who have a healthy respect for institutions, understand the necessity of a disciplined force under
democratic control, and who embrace sacrifice, not entitlement.

RAF is innovative and it can even be revolutionary, but it doesn’t need to spawn a revolution. We can both fight and win the nation’s wars with our conventional forces, and prevent and shape to minimize the number of future battlefields. But innovation requires change, even incrementally. We must:

- **Focus on the middle, internally.** Having culturally attuned Soldiers is good, but we don’t need an Army of cultural Jedi. We just need a lot more than we have now. Nearly 40% of the Army is of the enlisted rank of Specialist and below, and we lose much of that population to attrition. If we try to train everyone, we waste valuable time and skills. Better to focus instead on the middle – give our midrange NCOs and officers longer tours of duty, and allow them to return to a regionally aligned “home base” after short, professionally-developing tours elsewhere. RAF is less about what it is, and more about what it can be, and focusing on the “middle” will pay dividends as RAF matures.

- **Focus on the middle, externally.** Visiting every African nation is valuable, but why go to Comoros, the Gambia, and Madagascar when we could go to Mali three times? Find the most stable governments and those with the most (or potentially the most) regional influence and focus our efforts on them. Assist in building stable African institutions, and then let those institutions stabilize the region. Focus on the quality of our engagements, not the quantity.

- **Focus on soft, not SOF, power.** Civil affairs units, Judge Advocates, doctors and nurses, military police, and the bottomless resource that is the National Guard and Reserve must be leveraged to maximum effect. They are cheaper to deploy, suitable for short-term engagements, particularly well-suited to espouse the value of institutions and, perhaps most importantly when we talk “people to people”, show up without guns. With soft power focused on national police, gendarmes, care-providers and attorneys, we can focus on building the integrity of those internal institutions the host nation’s citizenry deserve. This leads to internal stability, which leads to fewer insurgencies and fewer forums for Transnational Criminal Organizations to thrive – and ultimately to greater security for America.

- **Change our internal mindset.** RAF can’t just be about how we deploy troops, it has to be why we deploy them. The default mindset for Army leaders should be REF instead of RAF – with Regionally “Engaged” rather than Regionally “Aligned” Forces, the emphasis is clear: Make your partner nations better through repeated and meaningful engagements. We accomplish this using small numbers of American trainers who live and work with our partner nations, even for short periods of time. Use those culturally sensitive forces who understand the value of engaging with humility rather than hubris.

- **Manage Expectations and Define Success.** Both the Army and those who fund it like numbers and results, but success is difficult to quantify (and, unfortunately, when the Army can’t find a way to quantify a task, we look for tasks we can quantify). Success in RAF is proving a negative (No insurgencies! No coups! No war violations!), and we must resist the urge to quantify success in number of engagements, number of soldiers trained, or number of countries visited. Look instead to the integrity and transparency of foreign systems: Is the Army accountable to civil leadership? Are both leaders and soldiers held accountable for their actions? Do civilians trust their institutions?

RAF is innovative, but for innovation to mature into something truly useful it requires experimentation, dedication, and creativity. By changing assignment patterns, allowing our core junior leader base to develop long-term relationships with partner nations, and utilizing the existing resource of soft power, the Army can satisfy the old and the new. We can, in fact, both prevent and shape to deter warfare and still fight and win when we need to. Do we have the patience to get there?

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