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An Evaluation of Security Force Assistance Brigades' Role and Capacity to Advance U.S. Security Interests Abroad

Public Summary

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Overview

The Department of Defense (DoD) sponsors strategic evaluations of security cooperation programs and activities pursuant to 10 U.S.C. § 383 and DoD Instruction (DoDI) 5132.14, “Assessment, Monitoring, and Evaluation Policy for the Security Cooperation Enterprise.” The Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Global Partnerships and the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) commissioned the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) to evaluate the effectiveness of the Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs), as defined by their ability to effectively fulfill Combatant Command (CCMD) requirements. The evaluation examines SFABs’ role in the wider U.S. security cooperation enterprise, in different Areas of Responsibility (AORs), and with specific partner nations (PNs). Finally, the evaluation explores SFAB organizational structure and its impacts on operations and effectiveness, timely for charting the way forward on U.S. national security as the pivot continues from the Global War on Terror to great power competition to mitigating risk in posture limited theaters. This strategic evaluation looks at the SFAB in this specific geopolitical context utilizing two case studies: one each from the 4th and 5th SFABs, with the former aligned to the U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) and the latter to the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM).

Security Force Assistance Brigades Background

The U.S. Army stood up the first SFAB in 2017 to support training and equipping the Afghan National Army as part of U.S. counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan. In 2019, the SFABs transitioned to focus on Multi-Domain Operations and Large-Scale Combat Operations (LSCO). This new focus reflected the U.S. National Security Strategy’s shift to great power competition and conflict planning more likely to resemble more traditional territorial defense against conventional armed forces. In conjunction with the move to LSCO, SFABs moved from U.S. Central Command to supporting five geographic CCMDs with different strategic environments. The SFABs expanded to work with partners across the competition continuum, learning new operating procedures, increasing their understanding of interagency cooperation, and expanding their cultural, linguistic, and soft skills training, while also being prepared to fight and win in conflicts in cooperation/coordination with partners. By building the capacities of partner forces who are likely to be the first line of defense against military threats, SFABs seek to demonstrate the commitment of the U.S. Armed Forces and the U.S. Government to materially and meaningfully support allies and partners.

Evaluation Questions

In response to the Evaluation Questions posed by OSD and DSCA, the evaluation team found:

- **What is the role of the SFAB in the U.S. military? What role is the SFAB training allies and partners to accomplish or undertake?** SFABs have varying levels of overlap with other security cooperation activities. SFABs appear to have a more persistent presence and the ability to work at multiple echelons within a partner nation security force.

- **How effective have the SFABs been in enhancing the capacity of partners and allies as they have evolved?** Through anecdotal reporting there are some stories of incremental improvement in partner *capacity*. However, the study showed widespread recognition of the increased positive impact on bilateral and multinational *exercises* when SFABs were paired with partner forces prior to, during, and after the engagement.
- **Are the SFABs structured to meet U.S. national security objectives effectively? What challenges have they faced in structure and implementation?** Changes to structure, training, and resourcing could improve SFAB effectiveness in meeting U.S. national security objectives. Lack of manning, recruiting challenges, limited opportunities for specialized training (past the Army's 54-day Combat Advisor Training Course (CATC) and online learning options), and soldier insecurity regarding promotion paths following time in the SFAB, all pose challenges to the institution. Note: Collected data indicated that SFAB soldiers would benefit from modernizing CATC offerings by focusing on territorial defense operations, cultural competencies, and regional/partner force-specific training.

Evaluation Scope and Methodology

This twelve-month evaluation explored whether the SFABs are designed and equipped to achieve their mission – and whether they have been effective to this end – by assessing the 4th and 5th SFABs' contributions, security cooperation authorities, and strategic impacts on allies and partners. The intended outcomes of the evaluation were to provide an evidence-based assessment of the SFABs' ability to fulfill CCMD requirements effectively; to provide recommendations to enhance the SFABs' ability to contribute to national security objectives; to contribute to the DOD's broader assessments, monitoring, and evaluations (AM&E) efforts with evidence-based research; and to document the return on investment of a significant DoD initiative.

This evaluation used a mixed-methodology approach that collected qualitative primary source data supported by quantitative and secondary source data from DoD AM&E efforts since the authorization of NDAA 2017. Methods included a literature review of 130 unclassified documents and articles; field site visits, key informant interviews, and group discussions with United States and partner nation officials and military personnel; and a quantitative survey of SFAB advisors. Altogether, a total of 246 individuals participated in interviews and group discussions, while 146 respondents completed the survey.

Conclusions

This evaluation presents the following conclusions:

- **SFAB Contributions to the Security Cooperation Enterprise:** The SFABs operate in an important and relatively unique security cooperation space, but stakeholders undervalued and misunderstood SFABs' potential contributions to the security cooperation enterprise.

- **SFAB Effectiveness While Deployed:** SFABs provide demonstrable value to partner nations, CCMDs, and U.S. Embassy Country Teams, each for different reasons. However, planning difficulties, operational shortfalls, and a heavy reliance on partner willingness and capacity combine to limit the overall impact of the SFABs while deployed.
- **SFAB Organization:** Perceived training gaps and reliance on variable security cooperation funding authorities for deployments have led to inconsistencies and some frustrations within the organization. However, the diversity and quality of personnel, paired with flexible mission sets, make the SFABs adaptable, flexible organizations with strong potential.

Recommendations

The evaluation team provided recommendations that are intended to inform future DoD decision-making about the SFABs:

- The SFABs should sustain key practices, such as persistent presence, adaptability to evolving requirements, and engagement across all layers of partner nation forces while enhancing communication of SFAB capabilities to other stakeholders.
- The SFABs should sustain their role across the operational spectrum, continue providing valuable assessments for planners and partners, maintain strong relationships, and amplify their impact on exercises. They should do so while addressing areas for improvement, such as the inability to execute long-term planning with partners due to unclear deployments, unclear tasking, and the ad hoc nature of in-country security cooperation coordination that limits their overall impact.
- The SFABs should sustain their ability to navigate transitions and adapt to changes in external dynamics and their selection of seasoned professionals and technical experts. They should do so while focusing on improving areas, such as the need for specialized training, and attempting to mitigate the risks associated with deploying under multiple funding authorities.

Evaluation Results

In accordance with DoDI 5132.14, “Assessment, Monitoring, and Evaluation Policy for the Security Cooperation Enterprise,” the Department will consider recommendations and lessons learned from this evaluation to adjust policy, programs, and resource allocations.

Key Findings

SFAB Role and Purpose

- **SFABs maintain a persistent presence.** SFABs are among the few conventional armed forces designed to stay in country or theater for extended, direct engagements. SFABs have immediate on-the-ground access to key decision makers at multiple levels within partner forces, as well as up-to-date knowledge of the necessary procedures for moving personnel and resources within an AOR.
- **SFABs can move assets within their AOR quickly to adapt to updated requirements.** SFABs can more easily and quickly surge or change training plans than other units due to their “hub and spoke” model and flexibility in size and composition. This flexibility also allows for matching peer and competitor capacity to deploy small teams rapidly.
- **SFABs can integrate with partner security force institutions at multiple echelons.** Individual teams partner with tactical and operational-level units, and battalion headquarters representatives can liaise with command staffs and host nation decision-makers up to the general officer level.
- **U.S. Government stakeholders are largely unaware of the full spectrum of SFAB capabilities.** Many external stakeholders are unfamiliar with the concept of the SFAB organization. This lack of awareness by senior personnel in the U.S. security cooperation space negatively impacts SFAB best use.

SFAB Performance and Partner Nation Engagement

- **Stakeholders perceive that the conflict continuum has room for SFABs beyond strategic competition.** Stakeholders further clarified the role of SFABs in a full conflict continuum and how best to operationalize advisors for future combat roles.
- **SFAB assessments are valuable to partners and planners.** Given the SFABs’ placement and access to partner forces, the teams often bring context and insights on partner nation political-military developments and requests for support, allowing other stakeholders to better frame requirements. Therefore, any SFAB-produced assessments can facilitate a world-wide common operating picture when uploaded into Socium, the DoD security cooperation knowledge management system of record.
- **SFABs maintain and deepen relationships with allies and partners.** SFABs maintain relationships with partners while Embassy staff deal with various near and long-term issues; other units engage episodically around a single topic, and all benefit from the networks built and sustained by SFAB presence.
- **SFABs amplify positive impacts of exercises.** Stakeholders agree that the persistent engagement, intentional pre-training, and accompanying of partner security forces by

SFABs throughout the exercise life cycle has resulted in better impacts on participation and learning.

- **SFABs’ impacts are hindered by a lack of long-term vision on deployment staffing.** Due to the rotation of specific types of teams within the Force Packages (FP) – or deployment of SFAB to an AOR – resource limitations at the brigade, and a lack of communication regarding deployment plans with partners, longer-term institutional integration of SFAB expertise has yet to be achieved.
- **There is a lack of clarity on who is responsible for SFAB tasking.** At times, SFAB advisors find it difficult to decipher who holds final decision-making authority on their activities.
- **Ad-hoc security cooperation coordination in country limits the intentional use of SFAB.** SFABs reported the opportunistic nature of their coordination. Through “right place, right time” meetings, some of the best examples of layering the varying deployment times, authorities, and expertise of the various units come about.
- **SFAB success is overly reliant on partner capacity and buy-in.** Partner forces' appetite to exchange with, learn from, and engage with the SFAB on both personal and professional levels can vary significantly.
- **SFABs have unique access and placement that benefits the entire U.S. security cooperation enterprise effort.** Stakeholders reference the unique insights, access, and placement of SFAB teams. In cases with an unwilling political partner, SFAB relationships can benefit the USG effort during crisis and provide line of sight of security forces that may not be available elsewhere.
- **Planning, coordination, and communication take longer than those unfamiliar with SFAB may expect.** Deliberative planning, coordination, and communication with higher command can take significant time, especially in partner nation forces with limited bandwidth to engage with foreign armies.
- **SFABs’ physical distance from partners and lack of informal engagements decrease positive impacts.** SFAB advisors sometimes lodge great distances from their partners requiring long drives and reducing overall time spent together. This distance limits relationship building between partners and advisors.
- **The changeover in deployments and breaks in continuous relationships with PNs result in lost access and negatively impact the mission.** Reliefs in place (RIPs) for SFABs complicate the dynamics with the partner force. SFABs also send teams with different

capabilities, furthering limiting continuity of efforts that require longer time horizons to build partner capacity.

SFAB Structure

- **Career pathways for advisors are unclear and perceived negatively.** Advisors face uncertainty pertaining to their career path and raised questions about how future raters may interpret their time at an SFAB, which could negatively affect their viability for promotion. More importantly, as word of mouth is the best form of recruitment for the organization, advisors need to see positive returns on their joining to spread helpful messaging to would-be volunteers.
- **The organization has experienced significant transitions in response to changes in the external environment.** The SFAB has weathered changes (the decision to expand geographically) and addressed new problem sets (moving away from counterinsurgency). However, external pressures, like the Army Force Structure Transformation (ARSTRUC) process, the competition for resources, and the ever-increasing demand for SFAB support have affected SFABs' internal organization and Security Force Assistance Command (SFAC) command structure.
- **Recruitment and utilization of mid-career soldiers leads to an organization based on the advisor's motivation and personality.** Advisor experience varies significantly across and within AORs. The SFAB's ability to complete the mission is often highly dependent on partner interpretations of advisor experiences, and, to a lesser degree, on the advisors' personalities and motivation.
- **SFABs lack specialized training.** Many SFAB personnel are concerned about the shortage of follow-on specialized and accessible AOR and partner-specific training, above the aforementioned CATC and online courses, for their personnel. As SFAB advisor combat experience dwindles, it will become even more crucial for advisors to have negotiations skills, cultural competency, and additional theater preparation.
- **SFABs deploy under multiple authorities.** Questions about SFAB funding authorities are a constant concern across the Security Cooperation enterprise. As SFABs deploy under multiple authorities, which are determined by the CCMDs, there is always the risk of unintentionally operating outside of a specific authority.