

# The Lesson of the Security Force Assistance Brigade in Africa

## Find the Authority to Compete and Win

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*Don't measure yourself by what you have accomplished, but by what you should have accomplished with your ability.*

—John Wooden

Employment of the security force assistance brigade (SFAB) in Africa has not gone as smoothly as one might hope or expect. The U.S. Army designed this premiere security cooperation unit to relieve strains placed on brigade combat teams (BCT) to fill security cooperation mission requirements and to provide a force that was specifically manned, trained, and equipped for the train, advise, and assist mission. On 12 February 2020, when the Pentagon announced the 1st SFAB would deploy to Africa, the spokesperson stated that this specific design “allows them to perform this important ‘great power competition’ role more effectively and more efficiently than conventional units.”<sup>1</sup> However, when putting the SFAB into action conducting security cooperation activities in Africa not tied to contingency operations, the authorities necessary for SFAB to achieve its intended

effects were not appropriately considered and therefore remain inadequate.

The failure to recognize this issue leaves operational-level leaders and planners combing through existing authorities to find ways to gainfully employ SFAB forces. “Get to yes” has become thematic among leaders trying to keep the SFAB actively engaged with partners. While there are preexisting Title 10 and Title 22 security cooperation cases the SFAB is supporting to advise and train partners, they are limited in scope and duration. In the space between, rather than having the flexibility to leverage SFAB’s maximum capabilities, designed as they are for an advisory and training role, staffs are limited to planning episodic event after episodic event, most of which must legally fall below the threshold of actual advising or training. What is required is an adjustment to how the U.S. Army views employment of the SFAB in non-contingency areas and in the context of competition, as well as a push from strategic leaders to develop the appropriate authorities to facilitate the employment of the SFAB to its maximum utility.

## The Context of Competition

The 2017 *National Security Strategy* (NSS) signaled a significant shift in the focus of U.S. national security policy, and interim strategic guidance from President Joseph Biden appears to hold the same theme.<sup>2</sup> The NSS acknowledged the return of “great power competition,” citing increases in Russian and Chinese influence regionally and globally.<sup>3</sup> It warned that adversaries are fielding military capabilities designed to deny the United States “access in times of crisis and to contest our ability to operate freely” in an effort to diminish our geopolitical advantages.<sup>4</sup> The supporting 2018 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) went further, stating clearly in the introduction to its unclassified summary that “inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.”<sup>5</sup> The NDS stressed that to succeed in the emerging security environment, the Department of Defense (DOD) will have to “out-think, out-maneuver, out-partner, and out-innovate” all other actors in the competitive space.<sup>6</sup> To accomplish that, the 2018 *National Military Strategy* (NMS) articulated five mutually supporting mission areas as the principal ways the joint force operates across the continuum of conflict. In the context of security cooperation, there are two key mission areas: assure allies and partners, and compete below the level of armed conflict (with a military dimension).<sup>7</sup> The NMS also acknowledges that building a strong, agile, and resilient force requires better interoperability and enhancing the combat lethality and survivability of our allies and partners.<sup>8</sup>

In line with the assessment of U.S. strategic leaders, China and Russia continue to expand their influence in Africa specifically. China’s military presence in Africa continues to increase steadily. While China bases its Belt and Road Initiative on economic opportunities and expansion, its projects support Chinese military access to the region.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Russia is

reasserting its influence in Africa, beyond just military equipment sales and donations that generally characterized its efforts through most of the last decade.<sup>10</sup> Since 2015, Russia has concluded military cooperation activities with twenty-one African countries and openly sought permission to establish bases in six.<sup>11</sup> There is likewise media reporting that Russia has offered African countries International Military Education and Training-style programs for training African military members in both their home country and Russia,

and operating training programs via private security contractors such as Wagner.<sup>12</sup> This is all in addition to a known and significant Russian military and private security contractor presence in Libya and the Central African Republic.

In support of the shift emanating from the NSS, NDS, and NMS, and to address expanding Chinese and Russian military presence globally, the U.S. Army developed the multi-domain operational (MDO) concept as part of the 2018 *Army Modernization Strategy*. MDO postulates that the current strategic environment is typified by a state of continuous competition by great powers. It is built on the expectation

competitors will challenge the United States in all domains, employ layers of standoff, and leverage the competitive space to achieve their operational and strategic objectives.<sup>13</sup> MDO seeks to compete below the threshold of armed conflict, penetrate and disintegrate enemy standoff, exploit the resultant freedom of maneuver, and return to competition on favorable terms.<sup>14</sup> U.S. Army literature states that executing MDO requires three tenets to change how the Army postures physically, organizes its formations, and employs its new capabilities.<sup>15</sup> These tenets are a calibrated force posture, multi-domain formations, and convergence.<sup>16</sup> The calibrated force posture is most applicable in the context of discussing employment of



(Graphic courtesy of Freepik, [www.freepik.com](http://www.freepik.com). Composite graphic by Beth Warrington, Army University Press)





the SFAB and is described as “the combination of forward presence forces, expeditionary capacity, access to joint, national and partner capabilities, enabled by sufficient authorities.”<sup>17</sup> The SFAB is perfectly suited to contribute to forward presence, expeditionary capacity, and access to partner capabilities. It is not, however, presently enabled by sufficient authorities.

## SFAB Entry into Africa

Sen. James Inhofe, then chair of the Armed Services Committee, drafted a letter to then Secretary of Defense Mark Esper on 9 April 2018 asking him to assess the feasibility and suitability of assigning an SFAB to U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM) to meet current and future security cooperation and partner capacity building requirements.<sup>18</sup> As early as 2017, there was some expectation that the SFABs would be regionally aligned in the same way Special Forces groups are; however, Inhofe’s letter is among the first official documented pushes to bring the SFAB to Africa.<sup>19</sup>

Sgt. 1st Class Jack Lincoln, an advisor with 2nd Battalion, 2nd Security Force Assistance Brigade, conducts preliminary marksmanship instruction February 2021 with soldiers from the Djiboutian Battalion d’Intervention Rapide. (Photo courtesy of Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa Combat Camera)

The concept was simple, the BCTs from the regionally aligned force (RAF) struggled to maintain readiness while harvesting teams from the ranks of their officers and noncommissioned officers to fill security cooperation requirements all over Africa. On the other hand, the SFAB is specifically designed for the advise, train, and assist mission commonly assigned to an RAF and therefore should be perfectly suited to take the place of an RAF in filling requirements. This represents the beginning for missing the mark on maximizing the utility of the SFAB in Africa as a part of a calibrated force posture to compete in the region. Inhofe’s letter illustrates the focus was on BCT readiness, which should have been

an incidental benefit to the institutional Army. The recognition of what an SFAB could and should bring to the competitive space was neither recognized nor facilitated as a priority of the transition.

Prior to 2020, the U.S. Army only deployed the SFABs to Afghanistan and Iraq to partner with Afghan and Iraqi forces in support of contingency operations. In that context, SFAB was funded partly by overseas contingency operations funds and had a broad scope of activities they could conduct without the need to seek separate authorities for each effort. For example, 4th SFAB's fiscal year (FY) 2020 activities in Afghanistan presumably fell under the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF) appropriation and related authorities.<sup>20</sup> The ASFF allows the DOD to provide assistance to Afghan forces in the form of training, equipment, supplies, sustainment, infrastructure, advising, and capacity development.<sup>21</sup> This kind of freedom is ideal for what the SFAB was trained, manned, and equipped to do. It gives flexibility and allows for leaders on the ground to use the disciplined initiative they built over years of successful Army careers to guide the application of two years of training specifically for the advise, train, and

assist mission. Finally, it allows for continuous presence and persistent engagement with the partner.

In Africa, on the other hand, the SFAB fell in on existing Title 10 and Title 22 programs. The bulk of these were Title 10, section 333 (Building Partner Capacity Cases). These cases are relatively limited in scope, compared to what the SFAB was accustomed to in Afghanistan. The drafting of the cases also predated the announced allocation of the SFAB to

USAFRICOM, so they were designed without taking into account unique SFAB capability, structure, or continuous presence in support of great-power competition. Nonetheless, beginning in the third quarter of FY 2020, following interruption by the outbreak of COVID-19, existing programs facilitated SFAB strategic placement and their engagement with partners. Prior to September 2020, section 333 cases had cross-fiscal year authority, meaning that an FY 2019 case with remaining funds could continue into FY 2020. However, a new interpretation of the Economy Act by the DOD's Office of General Counsel prompted the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) to publish policy memorandum DSCA 20-47.<sup>22</sup>

The new interpretation and subsequent policy memorandum voided cross-fiscal year authority and required the de-obligation and return of funds for services not provided at the end of the fund's period of availability.<sup>23</sup> As a result, defense services support from DOD personnel (civilian salaries, training, temporary duty travel, etc.) cannot legally be extended beyond an appropriation's period of availability, which is the end of the fiscal year in most cases.<sup>24</sup> The immediate impact on the SFAB was the loss of roughly 60 percent of Southern European Task Force-Africa's (SETAF-AF) plan for SFABs employment, starting on 1 October 2020. Compounding the issue was a delay in notification of FY 2021 programs to Congress. Before section 333 programs can be funded, they must be notified to Congress, and the first tranche of FY 2021 programs were not notified and cleared until 22 December 2020. Once notified, it typically takes two to three months for funds to then be available for execution of the case. The reinterpretation of the Economy Act, while unique and impossible to foresee, laid bare the reality that the SFAB is not employed any differently than units pulled from BCTs were before them. They are reliant upon episodic cases subject to annual notification, and therefore potential delays, meaning that while the Army may maintain the SFAB physically postured forward, there is a cyclical, self-induced, functional separation from their partners.

## Getting to Yes

While it has been demonstrated that every tier of security strategy, all the way down to the newest Army Operational Concept, recognized and drove a

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shift in priority to interstate competition below the threshold of armed conflict, the SFAB is still not in the optimal position to compete and win in that context. By not recognizing the need for and seeking the appropriate authorities to operate effectively in the competitive space, the Army is not maximizing the potential of the SFAB. Despite the lack of appropriate authorities, and recognizing the strategic urgency of keeping the SFAB on-ground and engaged on the continent, operational-level leaders and staffs have gone to work. In between the episodes of congressionally notified training, the U.S. embassy country teams, SETAF-AF, and USAFRICOM are left walking, and so far effectively, a legal tightrope of what the SFAB can do. The options include using the SFAB under congressionally notified Title 10, section 321 authority for existing exercises, conducting traveling contact team activities left unfilled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and military-to-military engagements under the authority of theater commander's activities. Of note, traveling contact teams, military-to-military, and theater commander's activities are meant to focus only on familiarization and interoperability and build no capacity for the partner. So the SFAB, in the interim between cases, is prohibited from doing exactly what it was built for and is most effective at doing. In practice, this has proved confusing and

Staff Sgt. Dane Francis with Alpha Troop, 3rd Squadron, 2nd Security Forces Assistance Brigade, observes a Senegalese soldier fire an M16A4 rifle 11 June 2021 during Exercise African Lion 21 in Tan Tan, Morocco. (Photo by Spc. Brandon Malcolm, U.S. Army National Guard)

frustrating to the host nations, as the SFAB remains forward-deployed but only sporadically engages the partner force.

## Finding a Solution

Immediately following the first deployment of the SFAB to Afghanistan, Brig. Gen. Scott Jackson, then 1st SFAB commander and now the Security Forces Assistance Command commander, stated that the success of the SFAB proved that the Army "got it right" with standing them up.<sup>25</sup> If the Army wants to continue to get it right, adjustments to existing authorities or the establishment of new ones is the best way to accomplish the mission. For the last decade, vague strategic guidance and failures at the policy level predisposed Army staffs to devise their own solutions to security cooperation.<sup>26</sup> In the current geopolitical environment, the achievement of strategic effects requires the engagement of strategic leaders at the highest levels to set the right conditions.

Title 10, sections 322 and 321, and all-new authorities dominate most conversations about how to best employ the SFAB in Africa in the future. It is therefore worth discussing each as a possible solution. Title 10, section 322 (Special Operations Forces: Training with

of section 322.<sup>31</sup> At first glance, it seems disingenuous to send a unit whose very purpose it is to advise, train, and assist a partner, yet state that their primary purpose is not to advise, train, and assist but rather to train themselves to do so. However, upon deeper evaluation,



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Friendly Foreign Forces) is better known as the Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) program. It is designed to train U.S. special operations forces (SOF) in their mission-essential tasks, particularly foreign internal defense and unconventional warfare.<sup>27</sup> During JCET, SOF train with military and other security forces of friendly foreign nations to build SOF capability to conduct combined operations in an unfamiliar environment, develop language skills, and gain familiarity with regional and local geography and culture.<sup>28</sup> Building and maintaining military-to-military contacts, gaining regional access, improving interoperability, and enhancing partner-nation forces counterterrorism abilities are all considered to be incidental benefits.<sup>29</sup> While this sounds perfect for employment of the SFAB, there is one major issue with employing it under section 322 authority: SFABs are not SOF. During his time as chief of staff of the Army, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley made this point numerous times as the SFAB was first standing up. It is highly unlikely that strategic leaders will want to change that now.

Title 10, section 321 (Training with Friendly Foreign Countries: Payment of Training and Exercise Expenses) is intended to provide training opportunities for general purpose U.S. forces in countries in which the forces may one day have to operate and improve interoperability with allies who may contribute to coalition operations, as well as provide training opportunities for the armed forces of the host countries.<sup>30</sup> It stipulates, “any training conducted ... shall ... support the mission essential tasks for which the unit of the United States armed forces participating in such training is responsible,” which is very similar to the language

a satisfactorily convincing argument can be made. The overwhelming majority of the countries in Africa where the SFAB would be employed are secure, and relative to places like Iraq and Afghanistan, generally safe. This affords the SFAB the ability to focus its interactions on training, advising, and assisting the partner force. As a result, the SFAB sharpens skills and builds experience that will flatten the learning curve in less permissive environments when the need arises.

Training with friendly foreign countries under section 321 is expected to indirectly contribute to developing the military capabilities of partners to enable them to conduct missions that are U.S. security strategy priorities.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, training with friendly forces provides strategic access during peacetime or a contingency operation and builds relationships that promote U.S. security interests.<sup>33</sup> Section 321 fills most of the SFAB needs and generally parallels section 322 as the conventional Army’s equivalent. However, there is one critical piece in the text of this authority that makes it different and potentially troublesome. Paragraph (e), which describes interactions with Congress, is starkly different for each authority. Paragraph (e) of section 322, titled “Reports,” directs that “not later than April 1 of each year, the Secretary of Defense shall submit to Congress a report regarding training during the preceding fiscal year for which expenses were paid under this section.”<sup>34</sup> In contrast, paragraph (e) of section 321, titled “Quarterly Notice on Planned Training,” directs that “the Secretary of Defense shall submit to the appropriate committees of Congress a notice setting forth the schedule of planned training engagements pursuant to [section 321] during the calendar quarter first following the calendar quarter in which such notice is submitted.”<sup>35</sup>



Put plainly, section 321 requires approval of each activity ahead of time, while section 322 does not. There are three significant impacts this has on employing the SFAB under this authority. First, it means that SFAB activities are again tied to congressional notification, and therefore subject to delays. Second, it restricts the combatant commander's freedom of maneuver in the competitive space to address emerging requirements or opportunities identified by the SFAB. Finally, given historical instability on the continent, if the SFAB is employed in a country that destabilizes or experiences an unfavorable regime change, the SFAB cannot simply shift to the combatant commander's next priority. If use of section 321 is to be the future of the SFAB, paragraph (e) should be amended to reflect the same reporting requirements in section 322. Should section 321 in its current form become the SFAB vehicle of choice, it is likely to result in gaps of effective engagement and delays in exploiting opportunities to out-partner or outmaneuver global competitors.

The best answer to achieving the maximum effects of the SFAB to enhance partner capacity in support of U.S. strategic priorities and to maintain presence

Staff Sgt. Marissa Vandenheuvell, Security Forces Assistance Brigade (SFAB) signal advisor, Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), and a member from the Armed Forces of Djibouti (FAD) Battalion d'Intervention Rapide (BIR) go over radio operations in a HMMWV at the BIR compound 21 October 2020. The BIR is a FAD advanced infantry battalion, trained and equipped by CJTF-HOA. Its primary mission is to train and serve as a quick reaction force to accomplish specified tasks directed by its higher command in the Djiboutian army. (Photo by Tech Sgt. Dana J. Cable, U.S. Air Force)

and engagement as a part of a calibrated force posture is the development of a new authority. The SFAB is unique in its capabilities, design, and mission and should therefore receive a separate DOD appropriation and accompanying authorities. The Global Posture and Cooperation-Activities and Training Fund (GPC-ACT) should be presented to Congress as a separate DOD appropriation, with accompanying authorities allowing combatant commanders to employ the SFAB, or similar non-SOF units, to provide assistance to partners in the form of training, advising, and capacity development. Employment of the SFABs under the



GPC-ACT will not preclude them from supporting Title 10 and Title 22 cases, but would eliminate their dependence upon them for placement and access. Unlike the ASFF or previous iterations of the Europe Deterrence Initiative, which were funded by overseas contingency operations, the GPC-ACT should be funded against DOD's base budget and projected in multiyear periods.<sup>36</sup> This will help in preventing interruptions, and demonstrate commitment to our partners. The GPC-ACT should be broken down into budget activity groups corresponding to each combatant command allocated an SFAB with sub-activity groups corresponding to training, advising, and capacity development. All activities in each country should require the approval of the secretary of defense and the concurrence of the secretary of state. Lastly, reports to Congress should be required quarterly for all activities conducted under the GPC-ACT in the preceding quarter to provide sufficient oversight.

## The Imperative to Support Strategic Objectives

Addressing the global security landscape, Biden's *Interim National Security Strategy*, published 3 March 2021, states that "we cannot pretend the world can simply be restored to the way it was 75, 30, or even four years ago. We cannot just return to the way things were before. In foreign policy and national security, just as in domestic policy, we have to chart a new course."<sup>37</sup> In a paper published less than two weeks later, the chief of staff of the Army emphasized the need to persistently build relative positional advantage by cultivating a strong network of allies and partners.<sup>38</sup> He noted that U.S. partnerships are a decisive advantage in competition, but our ability to maintain this advantage is not preordained in this era's contest for regional and global leadership.<sup>39</sup> What he

termed the DOD's Global Landpower Network is the foundation for global competition, creating inroads and maneuver space for joint and whole-of-government strategic engagement.<sup>40</sup> His description of the SFAB's role is worth noting at length:

During competition, SFABs build trust, interoperability, and partner capacity. In crisis, SFABs enable the Joint Force and interagency team to quickly respond by enhancing coordination efforts. In conflict, SFABs enhance coordination with partners and can expand to full mission capable brigades.<sup>41</sup>

In order for the SFAB to fulfill its desired role in competition, crisis, and conflict, it is incumbent upon U.S. strategic leaders to develop and employ more appropriate authorities for SFAB activities globally. Recognition of this necessity is important; acting on it is a strategic imperative. In the coming years, competitors will work to build their own relationships with our partners. In the developing global security environment, a lack of authorities leading to episodic or inconsistent engagement and presence of the SFAB will provide the functional and physical space adversaries require to separate us from our partners at critical moments. Worse yet, when tied to legislative cycles, these gaps become predictable, and therefore exploitable as part of an adversary's operational design. At a minimum, Title 10, section 321 should be amended to allow the combatant commander, with the approval of the secretary of defense and concurrence of the secretary of state, to employ the SFAB as needed and require appropriate reporting of all activities. To realize the full potential of the SFAB in support of strategic objectives, new authorities are necessary to compliment the design of the SFAB and allow it to effectively and efficiently fill its role in the return of great-power competition. ■

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## Notes

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