



Staff Sgt. Brandon Gallup, 1st Battalion, 5th Security Force Assistance Brigade, facilitates an after action review 27 August 2020 with Royal Thai Army (RTA) leadership from the 11th RTA Infantry Division at Sriracha Training Area, Thailand. (Photo courtesy of the Royal Thai Army)

# Thinking outside of the Sandbox

## Succeeding at Security Force Assistance beyond the Middle East

Lt. Col. Jahara “Franky” Matissek, PhD, U.S. Air Force

Maj. Austin G. Commons, U.S. Army

The bulk of American military training programs over the past two decades has primarily centered on building security forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, with the United States spending \$128 billion on those two countries alone.<sup>1</sup> Such security force assistance (SFA) activities in the Middle East have been a revolving door, (re)building partner security forces nearly from scratch every year. The guiding framework for SFA in these two countries has been the strategic objective of making partner forces effective enough to conduct counterinsurgency (COIN) and/or counterterrorism (CT) missions—all without U.S. advisors having to oversee their activities.<sup>2</sup> This idea rose to codified prominence in 2009 with then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates

advocating for the indirect approach of building partner forces to deal with security challenges.<sup>3</sup>

Such a narrative has translated into American

**Lt. Col. Jahara “Franky” Matissek, PhD, U.S. Air Force,** is as an assistant professor in the Department of Military and Strategic Studies and serves as the director of research at the Strategy and Warfare Center at the U.S. Air Force Academy, Colorado. He is a senior pilot that deployed to Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan, as an E-11 instructor pilot serving as the director of operations and commander of the 451st Expeditionary Operations Support Squadron in 2020. He has a PhD in political science from Northwestern University, a 2020–2021 Military Fellow with the Project on International Peace and Security at William & Mary College, and is a Department of Defense-funded Minerva researcher who studies foreign military training programs.

**Maj. Austin G. Commons, U.S. Army,\*** is a company commander and advisor team leader in the 5th Security Force Assistance Brigade at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington. During his career, he has served in operational assignments with the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), the 1st Cavalry Division, the 75th Ranger Regiment, and U.S. Army Alaska. He has completed multiple combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. He holds a BS from the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New York, and an MA from the U.S. Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island. \*Commons is the primary author of this article.

and allied special operations forces increasingly relying on the “by, with, and through” approach to training host-nation special purpose forces to conduct COIN/CT. In many cases, by, with, and through enables partners to target actors and groups who are perceived as a national security threat to U.S. interests.<sup>4</sup> While effective at creating highly capable niche military units such as the Iraqi Golden Division and ten Afghan special operations kandaks, the creation of such elite forces has caused neglect of regular army units in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> Residing outside of the focus and monitoring of Western military advisors, conventional forces in Iraq and Afghanistan succumb to the pathologies of corruption and patronage. In many cases, soldiers are loyal to their unit commanders for parochial reasons such as religious sect, political party, and/or tribe/clan/kinship rather than to the government of Baghdad or Kabul. This can be frustrating to the average advisor who views the military as a professional organization that is *supposed to be* apolitical and meritocratic. Yet, in the armies of most countries in the Middle East, societal norms and culture influence military behavior, translating into security institutions serving narrow purposes and interests, and in which professionalism can be considered a dangerous trait to display.<sup>6</sup> This is because such demonstrations of capability and effectiveness appear threatening to political elites and senior government officials.

After years of “pushing a rope,” it has become abundantly clear that most militaries in the Middle East will not adopt American military institutions, let alone liberalized forms of democratic governance. This can be vexing for U.S. military leaders and policy makers, as SFA planners provide utopian-looking PowerPoint slides and white papers with objectives and lesson plans on how SFA will be organized and implemented. For many advisors, no matter how much proper planning and preparation is undertaken with doctrinally correct lines of effort, host-nation forces inevitably fall short of the standards expected by their American counterparts. It is in this planning phase that many advisors improperly believe that a foreign military unit will adapt to their Western military institutions and training programs. Difficulties with achieving desired end states when building partner capacity is why Lt. Gen. Charles T. Cleveland, then U.S. Army Special Operations commander, used to describe “BPC [building partner capacity] efforts as random acts of touching.”<sup>7</sup>

Advisors from the U.S. general purpose force, ad hoc advisory elements such as military transition teams, and specifically trained advisory units such as the Army's security force assistance brigades (SFAB) have often returned from tours in Iraq and Afghanistan exasperated by their experiences. Many of these advisors discover near the end of their deployment that the security forces they worked with still lack proficiency.

States to cultivate alliances and security partnerships around the world. In this context, SFA remains a viable means of maintaining the necessary level of engagement and influence while empowering allies and partners to take on local and regional security threats. Great-power competition occurs as a fight for influence in the "unquiet frontier," smaller periphery nations located along the seams between global powers.<sup>12</sup>

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For those lucky enough to do a follow-on deployment with the partner forces they worked with on a previous tour, their frustration will grow into rage when they learn the unit has likely regressed. Such frustration is understandable, as the Iraqi army collapsed against a much smaller Islamic State fighting force in 2014, and in 2021, the Afghan National Army struggles to defend their checkpoints and convoys against the growing power and influence of the Taliban and the Islamic State Khorasan.<sup>8</sup> These disappointments are commonplace despite the typical senior officer engaging in the time-honored annual tradition of saying that this time their SFA efforts have finally made progress and taken root.<sup>9</sup> Worse, even when their efforts are successful, such as they were during the wide-area security and advise, assist, and enable missions with Kurdish militias in the Iraq-Syria region, progress was strategically upended and credibility undermined by a hasty 2019 withdrawal of U.S. forces.<sup>10</sup>

Despite these disappointments, SFA continues to be relied upon as an instrument of power, especially for demonstrating commitments to partner governments and forces that genuinely want to absorb security assistance to improve its military effectiveness. As outlined in the 2017 *National Security Strategy*, this takes on a particularly important focus as the Department of Defense attempts to pivot from COIN/CT to great-power competition.<sup>11</sup> Competition for influence against China, Iran, and Russia requires the United

To effectively conduct SFA in these frontier regions, military advisors working in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, peripheral Europe, or the Indo-Pacific will need to be judicious about what lessons to take from years of experience in Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. military needs to closely evaluate the advising culture it has developed in these two conflicts and be prepared to evolve and adapt to new challenges. These challenges are especially important with the creation of SFABs, specifically designed to conduct the advise, support, liaise, and assess mission in the area of responsibility of each geographic combatant command.<sup>13</sup> Such a shift toward the advise, support, liaise, and assess paradigm is meant to move beyond the narrow scope of the train, advise, and assist mission in Afghanistan, describing a more expansive view of what advisors do, particularly in the area of security cooperation with partners who have near-peer military capabilities.

Successful conduct of SFA outside of the Middle East requires American advisors to be comfortable with narrower objectives, goals, and outcomes driven by the host nations themselves, along with a true adoption of the philosophy of mission command. At the same time, advisors need to be prepared to accept more risk as the conditions of a highly active insurgency as experienced in Afghanistan and Iraq are substantially different from the operating environment in other nations. This is especially important in the COVID-19 era, which has brought





substantial challenges to how SFA advisors develop and maintain relationships with allied and partner forces.

## A New SFA Paradigm: Different Context Means Different Advising

Military advisors with experience in Iraq and Afghanistan may have become engrained with a “thinking inside the sandbox” mentality. Such experienced advisors need mental flexibility that allows them to be comfortable narrowing the scope of their mission and objectives when working with partner forces in other regions. This is due to a significant difference in the strategic context: the United States is not trying to simultaneously nation-build and fight an insurgency in the Indo-Pacific or Africa. Where the objectives in recent wars have been to build security forces capable of shouldering the bulk of daily fighting from the United States and its allies, the objectives in other regions of the world will likely be much more limited to the confines of demonstrating strategic resolve and

Staff Sgt. Joshua Eckhardt, an infantryman and training advisor with 1st Battalion, 5th Security Force Assistance Brigade, trains on room-clearing procedures 26 August 2020 alongside a Royal Thai Army squad in Chachoengao, Thailand. (Photo courtesy of the Royal Thai Army)

helping a partner develop some modicum of deterrence capabilities in the era of great-power competition. This translates into competing for relationships and influence with host-nation officials and delivering on security assistance and cooperation promises.

During the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, American military advisors faced the overwhelming task of building a conventional force nearly from the ground up while engaged in an ongoing fight against insurgent forces. Because the security forces of Iraq and Afghanistan were being rebuilt from scratch, American and allied advisors were responsible for every facet of training and equipping military forces as well as supporting them on the battlefield. Every stage

of training—from basic training for newly recruited soldiers to educating senior officers at command and staff colleges—had American or allied money and people behind it. When employed in combat, Iraqi and Afghan units frequently relied on support from American airpower, artillery, transport, and logistics. This showed especially in the 2014 setbacks the Iraqi army suffered as the U.S.-led buildup created a brittle force of combat units without the necessary supporting framework of logisticians, engineers, and intelligence personnel.<sup>14</sup> Corruption and graft among officers at all levels further hampered the equipping and sustainment of Iraqi units.<sup>15</sup> The Iraqi army had been trained and equipped to fight but not to support itself in doing so. When faced with the daunting task of building a new national security force in Afghanistan after 2001, U.S. and allied advisors found themselves with the time and resources to build only the “tooth” and not the “tail.” The Afghan National Defense Security Forces (ANDSF) are no better in 2021, where logistics are the biggest impediment to maintaining forward presence and in being able to defend ANDSF checkpoints. No amount of SFA will compel ANDSF logistics personnel to take their jobs seriously enough to not pilfer the supplies.<sup>16</sup>

Given the fact that American advisors have been working to build host-nation security forces while these same forces are actively engaged in a fight for control of their countries, the instinct to attempt a full-scale overhaul is understandable. American advisors deploying to countries in the Indo-Pacific and Africa, however, will not face the task of building new security forces while in combat and must resist attempting the wholesale reconstruction of host-nation forces. This is not to say that either region is not without its specific challenges such as the militaries in Libya, Mali, Philippines, and Somalia; each have their own specific pathologies that make defense institution building difficult to codify in the long term.<sup>17</sup> However, it does mean accepting that the military structures and models in place are there for a reason, and as an advisor, it is necessary to maximize the potential within the given military system, whether for U.S. political purposes, lack of SFA resources, or host-nation capabilities.

While abilities among armed forces in Africa or the Indo-Pacific vary considerably, many current or likely U.S. partners at the edges of potential conflict already

have well-established military institutions, typically referred to as tier one militaries. Rather than going into a country with the mindset that the host-nation armed forces must be overhauled, American advisors are far more likely to find themselves employed in assisting with marginal improvements and in finding ways of maximizing efficiencies, especially at the staff levels. This can be attributed not only to the existing capabilities in an established military but also to the fact that U.S. advisors will be there at the pleasure and invitation of a host nation that might request specific focus areas for their American guests. Within this context, an advising force must invest substantial time in learning the structure of the partner/ally security forces. This is because advising will primarily focus on process improvements, such as planning capabilities, but with marginal gains. Furthermore, U.S. advising objectives at the operational and strategic levels might be less focused on improving the capability of a host-nation military than they are on improving interoperability and security relationships with particular countries. For example, the Japan Self-Defense Force is a capable, professional, all-volunteer military force that does not require SFA. However, both the Japan Self-Defense Force and the United States could benefit from senior American advisors working with Japanese brigade and division staffs on more complex staff processes such as multi-domain targeting or operational design. Focusing on more sophisticated headquarters functions with upper-tier partners enables better integration and interoperability with these allies and partners in the event of an armed conflict against a common adversary. SFA missions such as this will require a substantial shift in the mindset of American advisors drawing on their firsthand experience of working with the Iraqis and Afghans. Advisors working with more capable allies and partners will need to be prepared to emphasize the “liaise” mission more heavily than the “advise” or “support” missions.

While American advisors and the services that they are drawn from are primarily focused on large-scale combat operations and combined arms maneuver, advisors also need to be prepared to adjust their mission and objectives for the needs of a partner force that may not be focused on conventional force-on-force combat. Many U.S. allies and partners around the world, such as the Republic of Korea or the Baltic states, are indeed

focused on defending against a conventional military threat. This might mean focusing on ways of increasing the deterrence capabilities of these partner forces. However, many U.S. partners in this and other regions have historically employed their militaries in other ways. Using their forces to deploy elsewhere in support of UN peacekeeping operations, some Indo-Pacific militaries are focused more heavily on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, a state of affairs that will likely continue in a region increasingly threatened by global climate change. In other instances, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand face internal security threats, employing their militaries for COIN/CT operations and law enforcement roles.

More importantly, U.S. advisors must be cognizant of the history, tradition, and culture surrounding the institutions and employment of host-nation armed forces and tread carefully in countries where the military has previously been a tool of repression for authoritarian regimes. The varying roles and responsibilities of military forces in different partner nations require deliberate engagement at the political and strategic levels prior to employing advisors to signal that the U.S. military is present for truly noble purposes. In some cases, this will require American military advisors to eschew combined arms maneuver in favor of the logistical and medical training so integral to humanitarian and disaster relief efforts. Moreover, advisors will need to become more comfortable with host-nation forces that focus on their own objectives rather than American national security interests. In this complicated sociopolitical milieu, American interests can be indirectly achieved with partnerships via newfound relations that establish long-term dialogue and influence.

In recent conflicts, eagerness to hand off the war to a host-nation security force often resulted in American advisors pushing their Iraqi or Afghan partner forces toward American-designated objectives. Advisors often struggled to align host-nation force objectives with their own, as factors such as corruption, competing tribal or personal loyalties, or a simple lack of capability could stymie a partner force's ability to achieve an objective. However, in an environment where "handing off the fight" to the host nation is not the mission of a U.S. advisory force, advisors must be more comfortable with enabling the host nation to pursue their own objectives. This is because great-power competition

requires empowering allies to take ownership of their domestic and regional security considerations in support of a more robust regional security architecture; the American advisor presence signals a strategic willingness to support and enable such actions. Organizing joint training programs and exercises in this framework can solidify their willingness to take ownership of defense institution building on their own terms so that it becomes self-sufficient once advisors depart.

### **"One Captain, One Team, One Country": Mission Command and Risk Acceptance**

To conduct effective SFA in these frontier states, the U.S. military needs to fully embrace the principles of mission command at the strategic level to enable advisors operating at the tactical levels. This enables them to improvise and adapt to a dynamic and ambiguous context where Chinese and Russian officials may be creating a hypercompetitive environment to provide SFA. Commanders who properly exercise mission command philosophy in this perplexing environment give their subordinate leaders wide latitude to accomplish the commander's intent as the subordinate sees fit, providing the subordinate leader the flexibility necessary to adapt to the situation on the ground and seize fleeting opportunities.<sup>18</sup> Decentralized COIN operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, in which companies and platoons conducted independent operations out of small outposts, often represented tactical application of mission command. However, the overall strategy and mission of defeating insurgencies while building host-nation security forces capable of independently securing their own countries remained uniform across those regions. The essential job of an infantry company commander in Mahmudiya District, Iraq, was little different than that of a company commander two thousand miles away in Dara-I-Pech District, Afghanistan, not to mention both had to maintain constant vigilance against insider attacks.<sup>19</sup> However, those same two captains leading advisory teams in Singapore and Thailand might have two fundamentally different missions depending on a variety of factors.

The differences might include the form and shape of security relationships of each country with the United States. This can be further broken down into what the host nation has asked American advisors



to do and what mandate advisors have in providing different types of aid and training (i.e., lethal versus nonlethal assistance). Matters can be further complicated by virtue of host-nation relationships with competitors (e.g., China, Russia); internal conflicts and security challenges; the professional and political foundations of each country's security forces; and the unique history, culture, and politics of each state. The

those roles were filled at times by the donor unit's less capable leaders. However, the Army is currently on the right track to improve its security assistance endeavor, manning its SFABs with officers and NCOs who have completed key leadership assignments and advertising these units as a broadening assignment for high performers. It must persist in this effort to recruit top talent by maintaining SFABs as a cov-



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SFAB employment model of “one team, operating semi-autonomously in support of a country led by a single officer” requires comfort with the philosophy of mission command scaled up to the strategic level.<sup>20</sup> It means giving freedom of movement and decision-making space to tactical-level advisors to make strategic-level decisions; otherwise, advisors might find themselves engaging in ad hoc arrangements that undermine the purpose of their mission.<sup>21</sup>

Successful mission command, according to Army Doctrine Publication 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, relies on seven elements: competence, mutual trust, shared understanding, commander's intent, mission orders, disciplined initiative, and risk acceptance.<sup>22</sup> Most of these elements require particular considerations in the context of the advisory mission. To ensure competence and set the groundwork for mutual trust, advisors need to be drawn from the top-performing leaders of the military at all levels, from junior noncommissioned officers (NCOs) to senior field grade officers. Rather than creating an advisor functional area, the most tactically proficient personnel with demonstrated leadership ability need to rotate between advisory units and the rest of the operating force. The qualities that make an officer or NCO a good leader of American troops are the same ones that make a good advisor to foreign troops.

Ad hoc advisory efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan (e.g., military transition teams) were sometimes treated as economy of force missions, which means

eted assignment for high performers and prevent it from becoming a dumping ground for the mediocre. A similar effort is underway in the British military with the creation of the specialised infantry group, which mirrors many aspects of the American SFAB approach, attracting their most talented officers and NCOs to advise foreign forces. The emergence of the specialised infantry group presents another avenue for SFABs to excel at advising by cooperating with a close ally on codifying best practices and coordinating advisor missions to maximize influence and partnerships that can counter China and Russia.

Senior commanders of advisor units should be comfortable with a degradation in shared understanding as advising in-country becomes a highly fluid and dynamic experience. In many cases, immediate decisions and actions might be required by forward deployed leaders that cannot wait for the lengthy routing of staff summary sheets and memorandums for record. As described in numerous interviews with foreign military personnel, waiting on approval from a faraway chain of command is precisely what makes American advisors look weak to foreign military leaders.<sup>23</sup>

With advisor teams spread out to multiple countries across a geographic command, battalion- and brigade-level commanders will be unable to develop the deep situational understanding necessary to make decisions on the minute details of a mission. They must trust the judgment of their subordinate officers and NCOs who are immersed in the operational



environment daily. Furthermore, commander's intent issued to subordinate leaders will need to account for a broader variety of stakeholders. A captain charged with executing a colonel's intent must also balance that against the goals and objectives of the U.S. ambassador and interagency country team. Senior commanders must issue intent that is broad enough to be tailored to the integrated country strategy that each ambassador is charged with carrying out. Taken a step further, leaders on the ground could even be issued commander's intent that specifically authorizes them to reasonably deviate from that intent in support of the country team's objectives (i.e., exercise disciplined initiative). This might even include giving financial authority and discretion to a certain dollar amount and enabling the authority of advisor decisions to signal conditionality to partner forces when they cross "red-lines." Finally, applying mission command to successful SFA missions will require senior commanders to reexamine and adjust their acceptance of prudent risk.

Advisors engaging in SFA missions in other regions of the world outside of Iraq and Afghanistan will often need to be comfortable with lower levels

Sgt. Christopher Huffman, a combat medic specialist advisor assigned to 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade, and Sgt. Paul Hatch, a wheeled vehicle mechanic assigned to 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade (role-playing an international forces soldier), move a simulated casualty to safety 14 August 2019 during the Advisor Forge training exercise at Fort Benning, Georgia. (Photo by Pfc. Daniel J. Alkana, U.S. Army)

of force protection while working with host-nation counterparts. One of the most painful memories of advising in Iraq and Afghanistan has been the problem of insider attacks, where trained host-nation soldiers have turned their weapons on their American advisors in "green on blue" attacks.<sup>24</sup> While U.S. military tactics and techniques have evolved to partially mitigate the threat of insider attack, such as the use of "guardian angels" to provide overwatch protection to advisors, these tragedies loom understandably large in the minds of military leaders up and down the chain of command. Engagements between American advisors and host-nation militaries are accompanied by robust security details, and photographs of Afghan officers with their American advisors nearly always depict the



American wearing body armor and helmet, while the Afghan counterpart wears none.

While every SFA mission begins with a detailed analysis of the local threat and resources available to determine the protective posture required, there may be a temptation among senior advisors to revert to what they became accustomed to during multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. Being mentally prepared to accept a certain level of risk with force protection applies across the most mundane details of a military advisors' work—where they live, how they travel, what they wear, if and how they are armed, etc. A force protection posture in the Indo-Pacific or sub-Saharan Africa that resembles what military advisors have adopted in Iraq and Afghanistan will only serve to alienate partner forces in much safer countries. This also translates into advisors getting cellphones that operate in any given country, with WhatsApp installed, so that they can stay in constant communication with partner forces and provide real-time updates to their advisor team and leadership. While some may see this as a security violation, this is the harsh reality of any advising mission, and partner forces will want to develop a relationship with their advisor through text messages and group threads. Partaking in such activities will signal an advisor's willingness to develop interpersonal relationships with ally and partner forces for the greater good of the mission.

## Conclusion

As the United States continues to emphasize great-power competition, its Armed Forces will undertake an increasing number of military advisory missions as the Nation vies to maintain global influence.<sup>25</sup> The future of successful SFA engagements outside of the Middle Eastern sandbox is increasingly dependent on a nimble advising force that can tailor mission sets in alignment with the U.S. national security interests of empowering partners and allies. This requires breaking free of the mental traps of operating in failed states where state-building collided with

fighting an insurgency. It means reemphasizing the importance of working with already capable military partners that will have their own institutionalized way of conducting affairs.

American advisors will need to become comfortable assisting capable partners with making marginal improvements, especially in less glamorous areas such as logistics, maintenance, and record-keeping details (e.g., administrative work). They will need to accept the goals and outcomes of the host nation to a far greater degree than they might have during a massive COIN campaign. Additionally, the senior commanders of American advisor units will need to fully embrace mission command to allow junior advisors the flexibility to modify the execution of their mission to better integrate with the U.S. country team's objectives.

Finally, the model of deploying small advisor teams across a geographically broad area of operations will require no small amount of risk acceptance by the senior leadership of the U.S. military. Advisors accustomed to an entourage of armored vehicles and infantry squads from their experience in previous operations will ultimately fail in their new mission if they are unable to accept prudent risk to build genuine trust with their partner force. Without authentic trust at the leading edge between advisor and partner, any security force assistance mission, and ultimately, the strategic partnership within which it occurs, has limited chances of success. Advisors and their senior leaders need to get comfortable with the uncomfortable, such as conducting SFA through WhatsApp, and start thinking outside of the sandbox because strategic competitors are unrestrained in their desire to box out American influence. ■

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