

# Foreign Area Officers

## The Roles of an Indispensable Asset in the Army's Competition and Allies' and Partners' Strategies

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**I**n August 2018, I arrived in Côte d'Ivoire to serve as the senior defense official/defense attaché. Unfortunately, my predecessor had left several months earlier, and my first order of business was to begin reestablishing relationships

with the host-nation military members. One of my first meetings was with the Ivoirian military chief of defense, and that hour-long meeting was in French. The meeting went well, but he had one request; he wanted the United States to conduct another joint



combined exchange training exercise in his country. His main desire was to expose his soldiers to the “most professional, most experienced, and most lethal Special Forces in the world.”<sup>1</sup>

I left the meeting and began discussions with my combatant command headquarters on how to fulfill the request. This experience is not unlike any other meeting a foreign area officer (FAO) has experienced. FAOs work in all ranges of military activities and operations, which sometimes change on a whim. My experience was in a stability environment. Some prior examples of other FAOs conducting similar actions include when Col. Joseph Stillwell served as a military attaché in China during the Sino-Japanese War in 1937 and when Brig. Gen. Jack Leide reported on events unfolding in Tiananmen Square in 1989. From Stillwell’s time in China in the 1930s to my time in Côte d’Ivoire in 2018, U.S. Army FAOs have represented the secretary of defense, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the chief of staff of the United States Army (CSA), the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the director of the Defense Security Cooperation Agency in embassies throughout the world.

The CSA’s Paper #1, *Army Multi-Domain Transformation Ready to Win in Competition and Conflict*, and Paper #2, *The Army in Military Competition*, establish the CSA’s vision of how the Army will transform to adapt to the joint operating environment of 2040.<sup>2</sup> As the Army executes these visions, the FAO Branch stands prepared at the point of the spear to be the strategic enablers of this vision in Army and joint units and at over 150 U.S. embassies worldwide. FAOs are at the forefront of engaging in great-power competition alongside U.S. allies and partners. Every day, FAOs are setting the conditions on the ground and providing the long-term relationships the Army needs to win in the joint operating environment.

Over the past seventy-five years, FAO Branch has adapted its selection criteria, systems, and training pipeline to better prepare FAOs to serve the Army with distinction. Therefore, whether working with allies and partners through expanding the landpower

network by engaging and training, equipping and enabling, advising and assisting, or demonstrating core competencies such as combined exercises or power projection reform, FAOs are trained and prepared to enable the Army’s vision and mission.<sup>3</sup>

The FAO career field has made improvements over the past seventy-five years, creating better strategic enablers for the Army. Additionally, there have been changes to the training pipeline that a previous CSA attempted without fully understanding the prescribed long-term effects while also suggesting a few minor additions. FAOs play important roles in military competition and in shaping the military strategies of allies and partner strategies.

## Famous FAOs

Historically, the United States has significantly benefited from two men who acted as a French FAO and a Prussian FAO, respectively—Marquis de Lafayette and Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben. These two men represented their nation’s military and diplomatic corps while providing security assistance to our Continental Army and acting as soldiers/statesmen. They did this through training by day with their foreign counterparts and dining by night with the senior leaders. They did this in a language other than their native tongues, in a foreign culture, and by understanding the vocabulary and experiences of privates as well as the general officers of a foreign military.

One of the most admired general officers that the FAO career field attempts to emulate is Gen. Joseph Stillwell. Stillwell served in China before and during the Second World War and was credited with working effectively from the lowest private to ambassadorial ranks. Like Lafayette and Steuben, Stillwell immersed himself in a foreign army, understanding the culture, language, history, geography, leadership, strategies, and the nuances and differences between his military and the military of the host nation he was serving. His ability to do this and then communicate to his senior leaders quite possibly laid the groundwork for the future establishment of the FAO Functional Area 48 (FA48).

**Previous page:** Capt. Louis Cascino, a foreign area officer from the Office of Security Cooperation in Gabon, addresses members of the Gabonese Armed Forces 9 December 2016 during the graduation ceremony of a five-week counter illicit trafficking course at Camp Mokekou, Gabon. (Photo by 1st Lt. Monica Witt, U.S. Marine Corps)

## Who Are These Strategic Enablers? What Do They Do, and Why Is Their Training So Necessary?

“Like unicorns and wood sprites, rarely seen yet often discussed, the military’s Foreign Area Officer corps is among the least understood of the many secondary officer career fields.”<sup>4</sup> FAOs are the Army’s forward-deployed strategic enablers “grounded in the profession of Arms; deliberately accessed, trained, educated and developed to provide leadership and expertise in diverse organizations in [the Army], joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational environments; who advise senior leaders as regional experts; and who

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offer unique warfighting competencies—cross-cultural capabilities, interpersonal communications, and foreign-language skills—that are critical to mission readiness of the Army in today’s dynamic strategic environment.”<sup>5</sup> FAOs serve primarily in joint billets throughout the world such as the Joint Staff, U.S. embassies, and the National Security Council; in all geographic combatant commands (GCC) and Army Service Component Commands (ASCC); and in such Department of Defense agencies as the Defense Intelligence Agency, Defense Security Cooperation Agency, and Defense Threat Reduction Agency, while also serving in institutional and operational Army billets.

## Strategic Enablers of Military Competition and Allies and Partners

FAOs primarily serve the Army through their forward presence embedded daily with U.S. allies and partners and are stationed throughout the world at U.S. embassies. Through their forward presence and assignments within the interagency, joint staff, and as foreign liaison officers to our allies, FAOs enable the Army’s operations, activities, and actions to advance or impede military competition. FAOs do this by understanding partners’ and allies’ motivations and capabilities, understanding the operational environment, building military-to-military relations, and enabling capacity building to improve our allies’ and partners’ interoperability with the United States.<sup>6</sup> FAOs enable GCCs and ASCCs to assist our partners during times of crisis, disaster, and humanitarian needs through their roles as the representatives of the secretary of defense, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and CSA to our partner nations throughout the world. FAOs also work in regional security structures such as the African Union, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, NATO, the European Union, and Western Hemisphere Institute for Security to understand relationships and enable interagency coordination. FAOs also assist with providing the Army with a greater understanding of foreign militaries’ capabilities.<sup>7</sup>

## Selection to the FAO Functional Area

FAOs are recruited from Regular Army branches at the rank of captain once they have completed their key developmental billet. Officers desiring to transfer into the FAO functional area (FA) do so through the Voluntary Transfer Incentive Program (VTIP). The average selection rate of the 948 basic branch officers who requested to be transferred from 2016 to 2020 was only 41 percent, or 390 out of 948.<sup>8</sup>

After selection into the FA, new FAOs are assessed into one of the eight areas of concentrations (AOC): 48B (Western Hemisphere), 48D (South Asia), 48E (Europe/Eurasia), 48F (China), 48G (the Middle East/North Africa), 48H (Northeast Asia), 48I (Southeast Asia), and 48J (Sub-Sahara Africa). In September 2022, FAO Branch will consolidate 48E, 48H, 48I, and 48D to create Asia-Pacific (48P). This





will ensure FAOs are best positioned to support the *National Security Strategy*, *National Defense Strategy*, GCCs, and Army priorities while enhancing understanding of global power competition and the Russia/China problem set.

Once assigned an AOC, new FAOs complete the same level of training that the Language and Area Training Program (LATP) officers completed in 1945: language training, an in-region training program, and a master's degree to prepare them for an assignment in their AOC. This training pipeline requires a minimum of two-and-one-half to four years of training and is regularly critiqued for being too long and too expensive. Still, it is ultimately a worthwhile investment for the Army because it prepares FAOs for military competition with another nation or collaboration with our allies and partners.

### FAO Training Pipeline

When the Army deploys a single strategic enabler forward, it should have complete confidence that the soldier is highly qualified and trained. The FAO training pipeline, established in 1945, has stood for

U.S. Army Lt. Col. Chris Pateras (*left*), foreign area officer in Bogotá, Colombia, details the daily routine of cadets enrolled at the military college with Colombian Army Brig. Gen. Eduardo Enrique Zapateiro (*second from right*), director for Colombian military cadets, 18 August 2016 at The Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina. (Photo by Sgt. Brian Calhoun, U.S. Army National Guard)

seventy-five years as the measurement of training for our strategic enablers. FAOs must have the language skills necessary to communicate in the country of their assignment. These language skills are not just the essential-for-survival level skills; they are at the nuanced cultural level, requiring a 3/3/2 on the Defense Language Proficiency Test.<sup>9</sup> Some FAOs often serve as interpreters for our senior Army leaders during their key leader engagements or translators for the president of the United States. Understanding and translating language nuances is vital for a FAO to enable communication between our Army general officers and their partner-nation counterparts. Language is a crucial pillar of being a successful FAO; however, language fluency is not the only core aspect of developing a skilled FAO.



The in-region training year, which can be as short as three months but generally is up to twelve months, is the cornerstone of a FAO's training pipeline. Upon achieving fluency in a foreign language, FAOs live and travel throughout their AOC. This year of travel and research allows each FAO trainee to improve and use their language skills with native speakers while exposing the FAO to foreign domestic and international policies, interagency personnel, and processes at U.S. embassies abroad.

The culmination of the two-and-one-half to four-year program is a master's degree at a civilian institution designed to bring together the history, culture, religion, geography, politics, and defense lessons learned into a one-year intensive study on the FAO's assigned region.

Over the past seventy-five years, the FAO Proponent Office added two other pillars to the FAO training pipeline. These pillars are the Joint Foreign Area Officer Course (JFAOC) and Intermediate Level Education. Intermediate Level Education has been an Army requirement for generations, while JFAOC became a FAO Proponent Office requirement started around 2010 to ensure FAOs were

Col. Greg Ebner (center), head of the Department of Foreign Languages at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, assists Spc. Tauhid Davis with his Arabic assignment 6 July 2016 at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center in Presidio of Monterey, California. Ebner attended the institute in 1996–1997 as part of his training to become a foreign area officer and returned on a ninety-day developmental assignment at the institute's Continuing Education Directorate. (Photo by Patrick Bray)

well-grounded in their career field. JFAOC brings together FAOs from four services to provide a basic orientation to the FAO career field and familiarize FAOs and their family members with aspects of a FAO career.

Upon completion of the five-pillared training program, FAOs are assigned to their first tour. This assignment ranges from an assistant Army attaché or security cooperation officer at a U.S. embassy to a country desk officer at a combatant command or ASCC, or to the many different agencies that deploy forces globally.

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command and reading, learning, and executing U.S. Army doctrine at the tactical level to reading, learning, experiencing, and advising U.S. Army leaders at the operational and strategic levels. Over their next two decades, from senior captain to general officer, FAOs will continue to develop their tradecraft per the Department of Army Pamphlet 600-3, *Officer Professional Development and Career Management*.<sup>10</sup>

Before World War II, the first attachés lacked a formal training program compared to the current five-pillared FAO training pipeline, and “many officers considered attaché duty a career dead-end.”<sup>15</sup>

After the Second World War, in 1945, the U.S. Army established the LATP “to provide officers with high-level staff potential with knowledge of language and areas to form sound intelligence estimates and

“ Foreign area officers have quickly moved from finishing company command and reading, learning, and executing U.S. Army doctrine at the tactical level to reading, learning, experiencing, and advising U.S. Army leaders at the operational and strategic levels. ”

During the rest of their careers, FAOs will advise senior civilian and military leaders, enable geographic combatant commanders to execute their campaign plans, and facilitate setting the theater for ASCC commanders. FAOs do this by assisting the CSA with winning in competition through ensuring the United States remains the security partner of choice, collaborating with allies and partners daily, establishing presence and posture through agreements and understandings, upholding U.S. national interests, and sharing intelligence and understanding of the joint operating environment.<sup>11</sup>

## Seventy-Five Years of Institutional Changes

The first U.S. military officers assigned to FAO-type assignments served in 1899 when the United States sent permanent military attachés to the United Kingdom, France, Switzerland, and Russia.<sup>12</sup> Over the next fifty-seven years, the United States expanded military attaché assignments to sixty-seven other nations, with “166 Attaché posts in 71 countries: 68 Army, 45 Navy, and 53 Air Force personnel.”<sup>13</sup>

In the years before the Second World War, the U.S. Army had military attachés assigned in several strategic posts around the world. These officers reported to the “Military Intelligence Division (MID) of the War Department General Staff (WDGS) in Washington.”<sup>14</sup>

to provide command decisions.”<sup>16</sup> The LATP was renamed the Foreign Area Specialist (FAST) Program in 1953 and managed in the same fashion as the LATP until 1972.

On “March 10, 1972, to acknowledge the collaboration with security assistance, the Department of the Army Chief of Staff approved a merger of the Military Assistance Officer Program (MAOP) and FAST to form the Foreign Area Officer Management System (FAOMS). As the year closed, FAOMS identified an estimated 900 positions for the consolidated program.”<sup>17</sup> On 19 June 1972, Gen. W. C. Westmoreland said, “The consolidation of the two programs resulted from their basic similarities. Each is concerned with developing top-quality officers to serve worldwide in command, staff, advisory, and attaché positions requiring them to have area expertise, linguistic proficiency, socio-economic and political awareness, and a sound professional military background.”<sup>18</sup> Compared to the nine hundred officers identified in the new FAOMS system of 1972, today, there are 1,174 Army FAOs.<sup>19</sup>

From 1972 to 2012, the Department of Defense; Headquarters, Department of Army (HQDA) G-35 FAO Proponent Office; Army G-1; and Human Resources Command made four significant changes that significantly prepared FAOs to be better strategic enablers for the U.S. Army. First, in 1997,

the Army G-1 made the FAO Branch a single-track career field, which ended the dual-track and officers changing back and forth between their basic branch and FAO assignments. This increased the readiness rate of FAOs, increased promotion rates by eliminating FAOs competing with basic branch officers, and

colonel ranks. This resulted in significant manning gaps throughout the branch. The U.S. Army transitioned in 2011 from the legacy functional designation board process, for transfers from FAOs' primary branch to an FA, to the VTIP. The VTIP process allows the FAO FA to be more selective in its selec-

“ We tried to equate the acquisition process of a foreign area officer (FAO) to [that of a] major weapons system. It takes years, and it is not until a FAO reaches more senior positions that their true impact is felt. ”

assigned officers to the FAO Branch, which permanently established a pool of officers who can now serve multiple FAO assignments and perfect their trade skills.

Next, in 2007, the Department of Defense established the senior defense official/defense attaché position at a majority of U.S. embassies throughout the world. This change established a clear chain of command at the embassy instead of the two separate, sometimes competing offices, the Defense Attaché Office and Security Cooperation Office. This change drove the third change by HQDA in 2012, which further developed and established a professional development timeline in the Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-3. This timeline established the need for FAOs to serve in multiple assignments as attachés, security cooperation officers, staff officers, and culminate as a fully trained and experienced Army FAO colonel. This new guidance eliminated the possibility of officers staying their entire career in one assignment area, which created stovepiped FAOs who could not work in all aspects of the joint operating environment.

The Human Resources Command conducted the last significant change in 2011, which drastically changed how new FAOs were selected. Under the FAOMS program, officers were somewhat randomly chosen for overseas assignments, then decades later (from 1985 to 2011), they were selected through a functional designation board. Both methods lacked adequate screening of candidates resulting in poor talent management of FAOs at the major to lieutenant

colonel ranks. This resulted in significant manning gaps throughout the branch. The U.S. Army transitioned in 2011 from the legacy functional designation board process, for transfers from FAOs' primary branch to an FA, to the VTIP. The VTIP process allows the FAO FA to be more selective in its selection of new candidates “because it is better able to take into consideration special skills, not in an officer's performance file ... The application process allows officers to advertise themselves and vie for the branch or functional area of their own choosing.”<sup>20</sup> This resulted in the FAO FA recruiting a higher quality of officers that achieved one of the consistently highest promotion rates to major.<sup>21</sup>

### **FAOs Need to Contribute to the War Effort: A Strategic Gap in Understanding the FAO Functional Area**

FAOs and infantry officers are not equivalents in the Army. They each serve the Army in two very different but equally important ways, and their skill sets are not interchangeable, especially at the O-5 (lieutenant colonel) and above levels. During the Iraq and Afghanistan war periods, Gen. George W. Casey questioned the relevancy of the FAO FA's contribution to the war effort.

From 2008 to 2010, Casey “was frustrated that while we were an Army at war, we had FAOs spending years in training and not committing to the war effort.”<sup>22</sup> At the same time, a domino effect of an increase in Army FAO requirements from 2003 to 2008 combined with FAOs filling Worldwide Individual Augmentation System taskers created a shortage of available FAOs.<sup>23</sup> Fewer FAO officers selected for promotion to major after selection through the functional designation board process further complicated this situation. This domino effect led to “the Army's

decreasing ability to fill Joint FAO billets and caught senior Army leadership by surprise, drawing attention to the average 40-months of time FAOs spent in Trainees, Transients, Holders and Students (TTHS) status during their initial training period.<sup>24</sup> This led Casey to direct a review of the FAO training pipeline and to order the FAO Proponent Office to find ways to reduce the time FAOs spent in training.

The review looked at potentially creating an online version of the Joint Military Attaché School and reducing the civilian graduate school time. This effort also resulted in an “all officers must deploy to a war-zone concept,” which was understandable given the Army’s needs during two major wars. However, this resulted in FAOs pulled out of their region of specialty and placed into an area of concentration they had no familiarization with or training. While it was important for FAOs to support the war effort, this attempt to reduce the training pipeline and the requirement that all officers deploy to a war zone displayed a lack of understanding of FAO missions and how to deploy them strategically. Stillwell was not taken from China to serve in Germany during the Second World War; instead, strategic leaders recognized his skills, relationships, and cultural understanding as a strategic weapon best used in the AOC he was trained.

This CSA-level focus brought into question the ability to adjust the time FAOs spent in training. Since Casey questioned the length of the FAO training pipeline, the FAO community has tweaked the five-tiered training pipeline to address some of the senior Army general officers’ concerns. Primarily, the branch reduced the length of time a FAO spends in graduate school from eighteen or twenty-four months to twelve months. Overall, through all of these changes over the past seventy-five years, the FAO Branch’s training pipeline has evolved to create FAOs who become indispensable assets, are directly on the point of the Army’s strategies, and are fully capable of enabling the execution of the Chief of Staff Papers #1 and #2.

## Conclusions

It takes over one decade to develop one FAO colonel professionally. “We tried to equate the acquisition process of a FAO to [that of a] major weapons system. It takes years, and it is not until a FAO reaches more senior positions that their true impact is felt.”<sup>25</sup>

FAOs are people, but their training and experiences make them strategic weapons that must be deployed and managed as such. Any future changes to the FAO training pipeline should continue to be reforms that are a part of a FAO “proponent-driven change that is deliberately planned, analyzed, and executed in the best interests of the Army and also the entire FAO career field.”<sup>26</sup> Changes, such as reducing the five-pillared training program, or consolidating or creating new areas of concentration, have decades-long effects that sometimes outlast a recent strategy change. A training pipeline that has existed for seventy-five years has proven its worth not only within the U.S. Army but also throughout the entire Department of Defense. Any future adjustments to that pipeline should continue to be cautiously and judiciously approached. Trying to create quickly trained, half-certified, or “part-time” FAOs only results in a less than qualified FAO providing questionable strategic guidance to our senior leaders.

One slight change to this training pipeline should be the mandatory attendance of all FAOs to Joint Professional Military Education, Phase II (JPME II). Fifty-nine percent of FAO billets are joint, and one would think that almost all FAOs would be 3L, joint qualified officers. However, as of 2020, only 26 percent of Army FAOs were 3A, joint duty assignment, qualified. Only 12 percent had attended JPME II, a majority of which were at the numerous military war colleges.<sup>27</sup> Attending JPME II, such as the Joint and Combined Warfighting School, before a joint assignment would give Army FAOs the joint planning experience that a majority of them lack. Other courses that can serve FAOs are the Army War College’s distance learning Defense Planners and Defense Strategy Courses. If FAOs were to attend these three courses during their major to lieutenant colonel years, they would be better prepared to integrate with other joint and Army staff officers on operational planning teams and in other staff functions.<sup>28</sup>

FAOs are primarily known and recognized for their specialty by Army colonels through generals, not privates through majors. Rank plays a significant role in how Army senior leaders perceive a FAO; an Army FAO major is often briefing two- to four-star generals, ambassadors, deputy or assistant secretaries, and host-nation chiefs of defense. These FAO majors become colonels and generals, possessing the culmination of almost two decades of training and regional



and interagency experience that no other Army officers have, making them indispensable assets to the Army and strategic enablers of the CSA's military competition and allies and partners strategies. ■

*The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Army Human Resources Command, the Department of the Army, or the U.S. government.*

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## Notes

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