



Staff Sgt. Jeremy Mireles, 5th Security Force Assistance Brigade Maneuver Advisor Team 5211, suggests a ground maneuver for Tentara Nasional Indonesia Angkatan Darat Soldiers during JPMRC 23-01 at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, Nov. 2, 2022. Security force assistance brigades (SFABs) engage with partners and allies to deter adversaries from edging closer to conflict. (U.S. Army Photo by Spc. Aleksander Fomin)

Security Force Assistance Brigades: The Future of Interoperability

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Following the events of Sept. 11, 2001, counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and stability operations in Iraq and Afghanistan became the focus of significant attention for nearly two decades.

This incident left a cultural mark on a generation of Army leaders and Soldiers. While the geopolitical climate remains ever-evolving, and a great power competition is no longer a perceived possibility, the Army must shift from its expertise in limited contingency operations to build upon its relevance in large-scale combat operations (LSCO) (Buerskens & Pfaff, 2021).

To achieve success in LSCO, brigade combat teams (BCTs), the Army's unit of choice for "a combined-arms, close combat force" (Department of the Army, 2022, para. 4-96), must focus their efforts on manning, equipping, training, and preparing their units for potential global conflicts in the future (Department of the Army, 2022).

While BCTs focus on winning in LSCO, U.S. global interests require persistent engagement with partners and allies during competition to deter our adversaries from edging closer to conflict. This is where the security force assistance brigades (SFABs) come in.

As the conventional U.S. Army's security force assistance (SFA) experts, SFABs operate persistently with conventional partner forces to build credibility, increase combat power, and provide forward power projection that may deter threats from flirting with incursions into regions the U.S. deems crucial to global stability (Department of the Army, 2022).

Relevancy in LSCO

With relatively short historical information to pull from, the Army continues to struggle with the idea of the SFABs and their relevancy, specifically in conflict. Pockets of organizational leaders remain unconvinced, which unfortunately impacts SFAB manning.

BCT leaders often don't allow their Soldiers to attend the assessment and selection course to compete for slots in an SFAB. Furthermore, some branch managers want to retain qualified leaders, and often interfere with the process by convincing qualified personnel that being assigned to an SFAB would hinder their progression. While it's hard not to empathize with these concerns, it is even harder to convince those who have them they're wrong or misguided.

SFABs in Action

Five active-duty SFABs align with five geographic component commands (GCCs), all under the tactical control of the Army service component commands supporting these GCCs.

However, the Army's primary concern with the future of armed conflict dwarfs the SFABs' global success. The competition space, while significant, fails to garner the attention, funding, and resources commanded by conflict-minded audiences. To convince the force SFABs are relevant in conflict, they should consider the importance of partnering in competition.

When the U.S. competes in the global theater, operations aim to prevent malicious enemy action, prepare the ground for armed conflict on favorable terms when deterrence fails, and mold the operational environment with partners and allies in ways that advance strategic

goals and policy objectives (Department of the Army, 2022).

In other words, the SFABs set the conditions to either deter conflict in a region through SFA or help pave the way for the BCTs who will deploy to close with and destroy the enemy.

Should deterrence fail, the SFAB is a relevant force in transitioning from competition to crisis and conflict phases. While this has not occurred during an actual conflict, the demonstration of SFAB capabilities in conflict scenarios has.

In the winter of 2022, the 3rd SFAB from Fort Cavazos, Texas, deployed to the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, California, to participate in the first LSCO-based exercise in the organization's history.

While this rotation to the NTC was not perfect, it enabled the enterprise to build upon the core competencies necessary to create interoperability between members of multiple SFABs while

simultaneously liaising with U.S. maneuver formations to achieve tactical objectives.

More recently, SFABs have had success during warfighter exercises. The 5th SFAB assumed the role of a response cell during I-CORPS' Warfighter Exercise (WFX) 23-01 at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, and the 3rd SFAB did so with III-CORPS during WFX 23-04 at Fort Cavazos, Texas. During each WFX, the SFABs were in position for more than 90 days. They added value in the conflict space in many ways:

- Established direct liaison to a force with intimate knowledge of the area of operations (AO)
- Able to observe and direct fires in the deep area and control the deconfliction between partner force units and coalition forces land component command elements
- Gave insights into the host nation's will and maintained strong ties with the U.S. Embassy

The Importance of Interoperability

To maximize combat strength and have a deterrent effect in a theater, military units must be able to fight as



Advisors assigned to the 3rd Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB) and the Task Force Three participate in training at the National Training Center on Fort Irwin, Calif., Feb. 18, 2022. This rotation to the center created interoperability among SFABs while liaising with U.S. maneuver formations to achieve tactical objectives. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Jonathan Vitale)

a cohesive team integrated with the joint force, allies, and partners. Interoperability is “the ability to act together coherently, effectively, and efficiently to achieve tactical, operational, and strategic objectives” (Department of the Army, 2022, p. 4-18).

Furthermore, the SFAB “improves interoperability by providing teams to advise partner-nation forces across all warfighting functions. It advises at the battalion, brigade, division, and corps levels” (Department of the Army, 2022, p. 4-88). During armed conflict, the GCC may direct SFABs to liaise and provide support activities to further enable multinational operations (Department of the Army, 2022).

There are three interoperability dimensions: technical, procedural, and human (Gamble & Letcher, 2016). While U.S. armed forces may understand their doctrine, systems, and procedures for executing the combined fight, partner force does not.

The SFABs bridge this gap during the competition through subject matter expert exchanges; persistent partnership that increases trust, confidence, and capacity; and shared experiences at regional training exercises (such as Eager Lion or Bright Star) or a partner force’s successful exercise at a U.S. Combat Training Center.

Throughout these activities, some SFABs advise, support, liaise, and assess partner forces during the competition. They remain persistently present with their partners and prepared to enter the conflict. Individual advisors provide a technical, procedural, and human balance. Success in armed conflict depends on executing interoperability, and the unit that



Staff Sgt. Annora Borja, Logistics Advisor, Maneuver Advisor Team 5211, gets a lesson on Indonesian camouflage techniques from the Tentara Nasional Indonesia Angkatan Darat at JPMRC 23-01 at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, Nov. 02, 2022. (U.S. Army Photo by Spc. Aleksander Fomin)

ensures conventional interoperability at the joint and multinational levels is the SFAB.

Conclusion

While many leaders have mixed feelings about SFABs, the capabilities they bring to the fight are inarguable. If the future of the Army depends heavily on a conflict-prepared force, the SFABs stand ready to deliver.

Positioned regionally to enable the BCTs, SFABs provide a clear picture of any AO from which they may operate. As the Army’s conventional SFA experts, SFABs are the catalyst for success in the future of armed conflict and interoperability. ■

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