REPORT

PREVENTING TRAIN AND DEFEAT IN FUTURE CONFLICTS:

Institutionalizing the Lessons Learned During Afghanistan to Prevent Another Two-Decade Exercise in Futility

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ABOUT

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INTRODUCTION

The war and nation building effort in Afghanistan cost the United States an estimated $975 billion between 2001 and 2019, with an average annual cost of over $54 billion.[1] When indirect costs including veterans care, Homeland Security spending, and debt interest are added, the Afghanistan campaign will cost taxpayers an estimated $2.5 trillion, including approximately $12.5 billion annually for the next 40 years as we continue to pay for veteran disability and care.[2]

And it was a failure.

One of the major efforts the United States undertook as part of the nation building effort in Afghanistan was the complicated mission of security force assistance. The Department of Defense defines this as a "set of DoD activities that support the development of the capacity and capability of foreign security forces and their supporting institutions."[3] These foreign security forces are not limited to the military; they also include police, border security, and other paramilitary organizations. Under this rubric the United States and its allies tried to help the new government of Afghanistan organize, train, and equip a new military and police force.

A few disclaimers at the beginning are in order. The United States should do everything possible to avoid engaging in nation building. The chance of success even under ideal conditions is small and, even if successful, the significant costs of that success are likely to outweigh the benefits. That being said, each new generation of elected officials seems to decide it is smarter than its predecessor and thrusts the United States headlong into another protracted overseas morass. It is for this reason that the agencies responsible for carrying out nation building efforts must make the best preparations possible to enable them to carry out their orders. A successful nation building effort requires an approach that encompasses the whole government. Our nation's elected leaders must not rely only on the military as they have during our

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[1] Neta C. Crawford, Brown University, *United States Budgetary Costs of the Post-9/11 Wars Through FY2019: $5.9 Trillion Spent and Obligated* (November 14, 2018), 5. https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2018/Crawford_Costs%20of%20War%20Estimates%20Through%20FY2019.pdf

[2] Jonathan Bydlak, Institute for Spending Reform, *Rethinking Afghanistan: A path to put America first by ending our longest war* (December 11, 2019), 16. https://rethinkingafghanistan.org

[3] "Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance," Joint Chiefs of Staff. https://www.jcs.mil/Directorates/J7-Joint-Force-Development/JCISFA/ (accessed March 25, 2020)

recent wars.[4] Instead, many agencies, including the Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and Department of Agriculture, must be involved from the beginning if there is to be any hope of success.

When conflicts do include a nation building effort, it is essential that the security force assistance mission be done properly. When it's not, the conflict could go on for years longer than it otherwise would have, resulting in significantly more lost lives and higher costs to the U.S. taxpayer. Security force assistance should help the host government build stable and effective organizations that match their security needs and that are capable of independently attending to those needs. With that in mind, the military advisors we send should work with their host nation counterparts to build a force capable of providing the necessary security rather than building a miniature version of the U.S. military that is incompatible with the host nation's security needs and that it cannot afford.

The U.S. has engaged in security force assistance missions for over a century in countries all over the world. Despite all that experience, we have a mixed record advising host nation forces in the post-World War II era, with a largely successful effort in Korea but notable failures in Vietnam and Iraq.[5]

A primary reason for the failures is that U.S. organizations and personnel involved in the security assistance missions lacked knowledge and understanding about the environment in which they were operating. (Even the success in Korea resulted more from luck than strategy. More on that later.) A second and closely related reason is that in each conflict the American advisors lacked historical knowledge about similar efforts before theirs. When the nation building project in Vietnam ended, for instance, American military leaders wanted nothing more than to turn their back on that painful experience and say the United States would never again engage in another,[6] and they scrapped the temporary institutions they had established to prepare military advisors during the conflict. All the lessons learned during the conflict and security force

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[4] *"U.S. Lessons Learned in Afghanistan": Hearing before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 116th Cong., 3 (January 15, 2020) (testimony of John Sopko, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction). https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/testimony/SIGAR-20-19-TY.pdf

[5] A note on methodology: The United States deploys military advisors all over the world in the normal course of military and diplomatic relationships. This report focuses on post-World War II deployments because it's only after World War II that American troops started to work with a host government to reshape its entire military while major combat operations were simultaneously underway.

[6] Colin Powell, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 147; Octavian Manea, "The Philosophy Behind the Iraq Surge: An Interview with General Jack Keane," *Small Wars Journal*, April 5, 2011. https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/726-manea.pdf

assistance mission disappeared when the temporary institutions did—and all the lessons learned during Vietnam had to be learned from scratch again when the U.S. involved itself in yet another nation building effort, this time in Iraq.

This history is repeating itself in Afghanistan. Interviews and government reports indicate that American advisors were hampered over the course of the two-decade-long conflict by their lack of knowledge.

A December 2019 *Washington Post* report on the status of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan revealed previously unreleased interviews with military and civilian officials that made clear the war in Afghanistan was doomed from the outset and just how many people knew it. Retired Army Lieutenant General Douglas Lute summed up the main source of failure saying, "We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan—we didn't know what we were doing."[7] And the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction (SIGAR) has analyzed the U.S.'s effort to help the Afghan government establish an effective security force. The most recent report found that "the U.S. government was not properly prepared from the outset to help build an Afghan army and police force that was capable of protecting Afghanistan from internal and external threats and preventing the country from becoming a terrorist safe haven."[8] This lack of preparation has had a cascading effect on the overall coalition effort in Afghanistan, according to SIGAR, because "security is necessary to the success of all other aspects of reconstruction, including economic development, building government capacity, and stabilization."[9]

The U.S. advisors lacked the knowledge necessary to be successful in Afghanistan despite a previous, nearly 30-year effort by the U.S. Agency for International Development between 1950 and 1979 when the agency provided economic assistance to the country in the form of construction projects and civil institution building. The Americans involved in that effort had plenty of opportunity to observe Afghan society and business methods and they learned many lessons during that time. These were

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[7] Craig Whitlock, "At War With the Truth: U.S. officials constantly said they were making progress. They were not, and they knew it," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/

[8] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons From the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* (September 2017), ii. https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-17-62-LL-Executive-Summary.pdf

[9] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, 1 [see note 8].

duly recorded in a 1988 report—and quickly forgotten.[10] John Sopko, the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, said that much of the information captured then remains relevant and could have had a positive impact while crafting the Afghanistan strategy in the early 2000s, but his organization "could not find anyone at USAID or the Department of State who was even aware of the report's existence, let alone its findings."[11]

Now, after 18 years of the newest round of efforts in Afghanistan, time is likely running out to achieve anything that resembles long-term success. One opportunity that does exist, though, is to take advantage of the lessons learned this time, properly institutionalize them, and ensure the United States military is better prepared the next time it is called upon to conduct a security force assistance mission, which, if done correctly, would allow for a smoother theater exit in the future.

The single biggest lesson that can be learned from the painful experience in Afghanistan over the past two decades—and from our conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq—is that the United States needs to be much more selective about when we take on the security needs of other nations. The mission is extremely difficult and should only be undertaken when all other reasonable options have been exhausted. That said, the military doesn't control when or where our nation will engage in security force assistance missions—elected officials decide that. But it can control how it prepares for future missions. Since civilian leaders are likely to continue engaging the U.S. in nation building efforts, prudence dictates that the Pentagon take the steps now to make sure the services are prepared to assume the responsibilities that come with that. They should ensure the hard-learned lessons from past security force assistance missions do not have to be learned all over again, and that people who are capable of working with foreign troops are in place from the outset. What we have learned from those past missions is that success depends on three things: establishing the institutions necessary to prepare for and conduct the mission, selecting the right personnel to carry out the mission, and setting up security forces appropriate for the host government.

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[10] Maurice Williams, et al., *Retrospective Review of US Assistance to Afghanistan: 1950-1979* (October 31, 1988). http://www.afghandata.org:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/azu/14011/azu_acku_ds371_4_w555_1988_w.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

[11] *"U.S. Lessons Learned in Afghanistan": Hearing before the Senate Subcommittee on Federal Spending Oversight and Emergency Management, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs*, 116th Cong., 3 (February 11, 2020) (testimony of John Sopko, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction). https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/testimony/SIGAR-20-26-TY.pdf

To a degree, Pentagon leaders seem to have taken this to heart. They have created permanent institutions meant to retain and build upon the lessons advisors learned during security force assistance missions with Iraqi and Afghan forces. Having permanent units focusing on the advisor role during peacetime in the same way an infantry unit or aviation squadron prepares for their wartime task could make a difference during the next conflict by having experienced advisors ready at the outset. Taking this a step further, the United States must rethink how it arms partner forces.

With that in mind, this paper explores the failures of U.S. security force assistance missions and focuses on ways in which the services can better prepare themselves to do their part in future missions if and when called to do so.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE SECURITY FORCE ASSISTANCE MISSIONS

The United States' spotty security force assistance record can in part be attributed to a lack of understanding about the culture and history of host nations.

Afghanistan is an excellent example of where understanding history and culture would have benefitted the United States' security force assistance mission. It is a multiethnic state that sits between Central Asia and South Asia. Article Four of the 2004 Constitution of Afghanistan specifically names 14 ethnic and tribal groups who are all considered Afghans.[12] As of 2013, the Pashtun people make up a plurality of approximately 42% within the Afghan population. The rest of the population is composed of Tajiks (27%), Hazaras (9%), Uzbeks (9%), Aimak (4%), Turkmens (3%), Baloch (2%), and other groups (4%).[13] The tribal nature of the population means that many of these ethnic groups comprise several subgroups. The majority of Pashtuns for example, divide themselves into two main tribes, the Durrani and Ghilzai.[14]

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[12] The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, ratified January 26, 2004. http://www.afghanembassy.com.pl/afg/images/pliki/TheConstitution.pdf

[13] "The World Factbook: Afghanistan," Central Intelligence Agency, updated August 22, 2013. https://web.archive.org/web/20131012023403/https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html

[14] Martin Ewans, *Afghanistan: A Short History of Its People and Politics* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 5.

Multiple languages accompany the multiple cultures. The two official languages of Afghanistan are Dari (the Afghan version of the Persian language Farsi) and Pashto.[15] Dari predominates in the northern provinces of Afghanistan while Pashto is mainly spoken in the south. Thirty other minor languages are spoken throughout the country.[16]

Cultural and language barriers create serious challenges in forging an effective centralized government. Sarah Chayes, a former special advisor to former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen, who spent eight years working in Afghanistan, believes "a sense of local autonomy and grass-roots self-government has been a strong component of Afghans' sense of national identity."[17] Others view the culturally fractured nature of Afghanistan in a different light. "Despite the bonds of Islam, a sense of national unity has thus always been weak, except when an unusually strong leader has appeared or the nation has come together when threatened by an external enemy," according to historian Martin Ewans.[18]

The Afghan people have plenty of experience dealing with foreign invaders. Unfortunately for them they live right in the middle of what has been termed a "highway of conquest."[19] From the time of Alexander the Great's occupation of the region in 330 B.C., the people living there have been subjected to an endless series of conquests, migrations, and invasions. Several times their lands have been absorbed into foreign-led empires.[20]

Westerners created the current borders of Afghanistan, largely without regard for the cultural or tribal dynamics of the region. The modern state of Afghanistan traces its origins to the Great Game of the 19th century during which the Russian Empire from the north and the British Empire from the south vied for control of the region. As both empires expanded toward one another, leaders on both sides feared clashes where their interests would literally collide. They solved this problem by creating the state of Afghanistan through a series of agreements in the late 1800s to serve as a buffer

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[15] The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan [see note 12].
[16] "The World Factbook: Afghanistan" [see note 13].
[17] Sarah Chayes (author), interview with Dan Grazier, November 25, 2019.
[18] Ewans, *Afghanistan*, 11 [see note 14].
[19] Christian Caryl, "Bury the Graveyard: If you want to figure out a way forward for Afghanistan, fake history is not the place to start," *Foreign Policy*, July 26, 2010. https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/07/26/bury-the-graveyard/
[20] Ewans, *Afghanistan,* 17 [see note 14].

between their empires.[21] Evidence of this can be seen on the map today. The Wakhan Corridor, which sticks out like a finger pointing to China from eastern Afghanistan, occupies a narrow strip of mountainous territory between Tajikistan, once part of the Russian Empire, and Pakistan, once part of British India. At its narrowest point, the corridor is only eight miles across. This served the interests of the Russians and the British by ensuring their territories never physically touched.[22]

The internal politics of Afghanistan is a delicate balance of the varied interests of its subcultures, with the leaders of each competing for their place in the decision-making hierarchy. This creates a complex tapestry that all policies designed by American forces should have taken into account. Any nation building effort that ignored this history and the tribal nature of Afghan society would be—and was—doomed to fail from the outset.

The United States' spotty record can also largely be attributed to its one-size-fits-all approach to building foreign security forces. Mohammed Ehsan Zia, the former Afghan minister for rural rehabilitation and development, summed up the problem well in a statement revealed in the "Afghanistan Papers." He said, "There was a one size fits all approach in terms of assistance. Foreigners read Kite Runner on [the] plane and believe they are an expert on Afghanistan and then never listen. The only thing they are experts in is bureaucracy."[23] A better understanding of the history and culture of Afghanistan would have helped the architects of our policies there create effective policies geared specifically for the unique situation on the ground.

Instead, the U.S. did what it usually does: Work to create the partner nation's security force in our own image. This approach can be effective only if our partner faces the same threats the American military is designed to fight, a highly unlikely scenario. The U.S. military is optimized to wage a conventional war against other major states. In organization, equipment, and warfighting functions, the American military services perform best when it deploys in large formations far from our own shores with highly sophisticated weapons. Such a model often does not work for the partners U.S. troops advise, as they are unlikely to undertake a trans-oceanic military campaign.

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[21] Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia* (New York: Kodansha International, 1990), 5-6.
[22] Hopkirk, *The Great Game*, 499 [see note 21].
[23] "Mohammed Ehsan Zia, Lessons Learned interview, 4/12/2016," *Washington Post,* December 9, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/documents-database/share/pdf.html?document=background_ll_04_xx4_04122016

Perhaps the most successful American effort to build up a foreign nation's military force occurred in the Republic of Korea. The U.S. began working with South Korea to build its military capacity shortly after the end of World War II. In the five years after the Japanese surrender, the U.S. sent South Korea Army advisors and more than $500 million in military aid.[24] Before June 1950, the South Korean security forces focused mostly on fighting the leftist insurgents who were working to destabilize the country.[25] This focus meant South Korea was unprepared to fight a conventional war against the mechanized force that smashed through the 38th parallel on June 25, 1950. The United States' larger effort following the North's invasion proved much more successful, and for a very important reason. Following the beginning of the Korean War, the U.S. Army's Korean Military Advisory Group worked with South Korea to build the Republic of Korea Army into an effective fighting force. South Korea needed a military capable of fighting another state wielding a modern army equipped with tanks, artillery, and armored fighting vehicles.[26] This task fell entirely within the skillset of the American soldiers assigned to it: They had an opportunity to craft the South Korean army in their own image, and in this case, what came naturally turned out to be the proper course of action. Nearly 70 years after the North Korean invasion, South Korea today is a prosperous and independent republic.

The same cannot be said about Vietnam. The U.S. spent more than $141 billion in an attempt to do the same thing, but we achieved far less success.[27] President Harry Truman first began sending American military advisors to Vietnam in 1950 during the French Indochina War. This support continued at various levels until the last American troops departed in March 1973 under the terms of the Paris Peace Accords. During that period, the United States worked to build up the conventional military power of the South Vietnamese state.[28] Army Colonel David Hackworth spoke about the futility of creating the South Vietnamese army in our own image, saying "it has not been

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[24] Pil Ho Kim, "Guns Over Rice: The Impact of US Military Aid on South Korean Economic Reconstruction," *International Development and Cooperation Review*, vol. 9, no. 1, (2017): 37. https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/u.osu.edu/dist/2/20360/files/2017/04/GoR-final-w0lqqp.pdf

[25] Robert K. Sawyer, *KMAG in Peace and War*, (Washington: Center of Military History United States Army, 1988), 25. https://history.army.mil/html/books/030/30-3/CMH_Pub_30-3.pdf

[26] Sheila Miyoshi Jager, "Iraqi Security Forces and Lessons From Korea," Strategic Studies Institute Newsletter, December 2006. https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/iraqi-security-forces-and-lessons-from-korea/

[27] "U.S. Spent $141-Billion in Vietnam in 14 Years," *New York Times*, May 1, 1975. https://www.nytimes.com/1975/05/01/archives/us-spent-141billion-in-vietnam-in-14-years.html

[28] James H. Willbanks, "The Evolution of the US Advisory Effort in Viet Nam: Lessons Learned," *Journal of Conflict Studies*, vol. 29 (April 2009): 133. https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/JCS/article/view/15238

tailored or designed to fight the guerrilla in this type of warfare and we have given them a lot of sophisticated equipment, helicopters, sensor devices, radars, complicated vehicles, other complicated equipment that the Vietnamese are just incapable of using, incapable of maintaining."[29]

The Vietnamese communists, on the other hand, engaged in the war in all of its dimensions. They attacked the South Vietnamese state diplomatically, economically, ideologically, and then militarily.[30] The primary threat to the survival of the South Vietnamese state came from North Vietnam-supported communist insurgents within their own country rather than from a modern mechanized army. The North Vietnamese only adopted a conventional military strategy after U.S. forces had largely departed.[31] The fall of Saigon in 1975 proved that the U.S. efforts to build the capabilities of the Republic of Vietnam's army were for naught.

In Iraq, the U.S. deployed teams of advisors to train and assist Iraqi security forces and spent $25 billion building up the Iraqi Army after toppling Saddam Hussein and disbanding his army in 2003. That army collapsed when it faced its first test after the rise of ISIS.[32] Even more has been spent in Afghanistan, and that army continues to struggle against Taliban forces and will continue to rely on support from America for the foreseeable future, largely because we built it in our own image rather than helping them build a force suitable to the realities of Afghanistan.

ADVISOR INSTITUTIONS IN THE SERVICES

If Pentagon leaders had heeded the lessons of the past, they could have been in a better position to be successful in Afghanistan. The Pentagon should have institutions capable of effectively working with foreign security forces in place before a conflict even begins. Those institutions are essential to learning lessons during nation building efforts, retaining those lessons so they can be used in future efforts, training personnel for future efforts, and having the expertise necessary to assist host nations from the outset.

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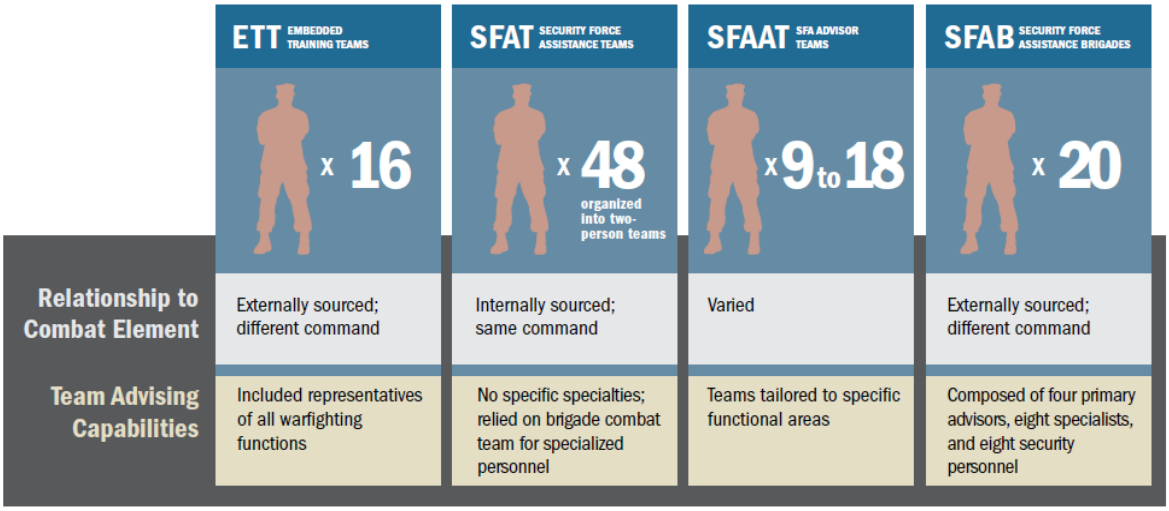
[29] David Hackworth and Julie Sherman, *About Face: The Odyssey of an American Warrior* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 782.
[30] Peter Macdonald, *Giap: The Victor in Vietnam* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1993), 207.
[31] G.H. Turley, *The Easter Offensive: The Last American Advisors, Vietnam, 1972* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1985), 49.
[32] David Zucchino, "Why Iraqi army can't fight, despite $25 billion in U.S. aid, training," *Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 2014. https://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-iraq-army-20141103-story.html

But it doesn't.

Instead, the United States cobbles together temporary teams of poorly prepared people—some of whom are ill-suited for the role—as it becomes more and more evident over the course of a conflict that security force assistance teams are necessary. This was the case in the Afghanistan conflict. Because the services did not have any units that specialized in working with a host government to build an effective security force, military leaders had to improvise. The United States Army and Marine Corps advising efforts evolved over the last 18 years as they learned what worked and what didn't. Overall, though, the various experiments nearly always failed. They were either short-staffed or were diverted from their mission to perform peripheral assignments. And even when the teams had all the personnel they needed and were allowed to focus on the task at hand, the effectiveness of temporary units staffed in an ad hoc manner remains in doubt.

FIGURE 1

COMPARISON OF FIELD ADVISING TEAM MODELS



Source: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

At first, beginning in 2003, the Army and Marine Corps created Embedded Training Teams to train and advise Afghan security forces. These were 16-person teams comprised of officers and senior enlisted personnel drawn from a cross-section of combat arms, intelligence, and logistical support military occupational specialties. The advisor teams were embedded with the Afghan units rather than attached to any U.S. combat brigade. They worked directly with their Afghan counterparts to build core

security skills, and to provide them access to U.S. resources like close air support and casualty evacuations.

The teams faced significant challenges in these efforts, however. The Defense Department inspector general and SIGAR found that the teams often struggled because they were understaffed. Some teams deployed with less than 50% of their authorized personnel. This impacted their effectiveness as advisors in significant ways. American troops could only move off-base when there were enough of them to provide the necessary security. When there were not enough personnel available, the advisors could not accompany their Afghan counterparts into the field.[33] As a result, they were often unable to assess how their partners performed, or to make any necessary adjustments in training.

Moreover, the advisor teams and the Afghan security forces they were assisting fell under different commands, and faced significant bureaucratic obstacles to success as a result. The advisor teams fell under the command of a headquarters unit in Kabul, far from the battlefield they were operating on,[34] while their Afghan counterparts fell under the command of the Afghan brigades responsible for the area of operations. Such an arrangement goes against the long-held military principle of unity of command, where a single commander directs all the forces toward a common purpose within a designated region. Without unity of command, advisors did not receive clear direction and often had to improvise their own missions. Forces frequently ended up working at cross purposes, and often did not receive the support they need because of difficulties in coordinating operations.

In one notable incident in 2009, an insurgent force numbering around 150 ambushed a Marine advisor team and 80 Afghan soldiers and border police.[35] The team tried to call in air and artillery support, but because of the separate chains of command it did not come in time. The onslaught continued for more than two hours before help arrived, by which time the enemy had killed four Marines and eight Afghans, with

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[33] Department of Defense Inspector General, *Report on the Assessment of U.S. and Coalition Plans to Train, Equip, and Field the Afghan National Security Forces*, SPO-2009-007 (September 30, 2009), 38-39. https://media.defense.gov/2009/Sep/30/2001712296/-1/-1/1/SPO2009-007_final.pdf

[34] "Coalition Joint Task Force Phoenix," Globalsecurity.org. (accessed March 27, 2020) https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/dod/cjtf-phoenix.htm

[35] Dan Lamothe, "Heroism in ambush may yield top valor awards," *Marine Corps Times*, August 2, 2010. https://web.archive.org/web/20110514004614/http://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/2010/08/marine_moh_080110w/

another three Americans and 19 Afghans wounded.[36] The battle was so fierce, and the actions of the advisor teams in the area so extraordinary even as their divided command structure failed them, two Americans—then-Corporal Dakota Meyer and Captain William Swenson—were awarded the Medal of Honor.[37]

The divided command structure also meant the advisors often struggled to obtain the logistical support they needed. Troops in the field, no matter what their job, need to eat, sleep, rearm, and take care of casualties. Unlike the combat units in the area, the advisor teams did not have their own on-site support personnel. As a result, SIGAR found the advisor teams often spent as much time, if not more, making arrangements for their own needs as they did advising the Afghan forces, describing these efforts as "ad hoc" and a distraction from "their primary responsibility to advise the Afghans."[38] This challenge became even greater because headquarters units routinely pulled team members out of the field to fill staff positions in Kabul.[39]

Starting in 2009, the Army and Marine Corps shifted the advisor model to one they called Security Force Assistance Teams. Rather than deploying the advisor teams as entities separate from the U.S. brigades that were otherwise responsible for the activities in a geographic region, the security force assistance teams were full members of a deploying combat brigade. The teams were much larger than the embedded training teams, typically made up of 48 people: 24 field grade officers and 24 noncommissioned officers. Once in Afghanistan, the security force assistance team personnel would pair off into 24 two-person teams to advise the Afghan forces on specific warfighting functions. The teams would be assigned to a U.S. brigade during the pre-deployment training phase. The brigade commanders had full responsibility for the advising efforts in their area of operations, and had to provide the logistics

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[36] Jonathan Landay, "'We're pinned down:' 4 U.S. Marines die in Afghan ambush," McClatchy, September 8, 2009. https://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24554149.html

[37] William Rosenau et al., CNA Corporation, *United States Marine Corps Advisors: Past, Present, Future*, DRM-2013-U-005404-Final (2013), 61. https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/138/Hip%20Pocket%20Briefs/CNA,%20USMC%20Advisors%20Aug2013.pdf; Landay, "'We're pinned down,' [see note 36].; Elizabeth Chuck, "Medal of Honor awarded to Army captain who 'did things that nobody else would ever do'," NBC News, October 15, 2013. https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/medal-honor-awarded-army-captain-who-did-things-nobody-else-flna8C11400483

[38] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Divided Responsibility: Lessons From U.S. Security Sector Assistance Efforts in Afghanistan* (June 2019), 15. https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-19-39-LL.pdf

[39] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Divided Responsibility*, 10 [see note 38].

support for the teams. This was meant to reduce two key obstacles to effectiveness experienced by the embedded training teams.[40]

There were challenges under this model too, however. The Army's and Marines' ability to fill the staffing requirements for the security force assistance teams, particularly at the officer level, was severely taxed; both services were struggling just to staff their regular combat brigades at the time. The additional staffing requirements of the advisor teams meant that personnel had to be pulled from other positions within the Army and Marines at the last minute.[41] When the process worked properly, individuals would know for months in advance of an advisor assignment.

Often, however, the process didn't work properly and people would be informed just days before they were to report to training.[42] Not only that, but the teams would often deploy without going through the entire training program together, impacting the team's cohesion.[43] To be successful on the battlefield, the members of any unit need a common level of understanding and mutual trust, which is much easier to build in training than under the pressures of combat.[44]

The next evolution in the security force assistance process came in 2012 when the leaders of the coalition decided that on January 1, 2015, they would transition to Afghan-led security. This required yet another shift in the advising effort. The Army and Marine Corps responded by creating Security Force Assistance Advisor Teams. These were nine to 18 person teams that, like the model before it, would augment U.S. combat brigades. The advisory focus moved away from training skills at the individual and unit level to working with Afghan leaders and organizations to improve their capacity to perform in key functional areas necessary for leading and supporting Afghan forces. The teams would work with Afghan headquarters elements to make them better at command and control, logistics, and intelligence.[45]

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[40] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Divided Responsibility*, 16 [see note 38].
[41] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Divided Responsibility,* VIII [see note 38].
[42] Author's note: I was assigned to two advisor teams. I was informed of my first assignment more than two months before my report date. That deployment was cancelled before we departed. The next year, I was assigned to another team after it had already been formed and began training. I had to report three days after being notified of my assignment.
[43] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Divided Responsibility*, 17 [see note 38].
[44] Government Accountability Office, *Iraq and Afghanistan: Actions Needed to Enhance the Ability of Army Brigades to Support the Advising Mission*, GAO-11-760 (August 2011), 15. https://www.gao.gov/new.items/d11760.pdf
[45] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Divided Responsibility*, 19 [see note 38].

The new model of advisor teams faced many of the same challenges as their predecessors in that they lacked clear direction from higher headquarters, so they often had to create their own missions rather than acting as part of an overall unified effort.[46]

Also in 2012, the Marine Corps stood up the Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group to be a permanent command to oversee the training of Marine advisors.[47] These advisors are assigned to Marine Corps Advisor Companies to focus on working with partner forces at the brigade or higher level. Marine Corps leaders plan on eventually having four such companies mostly made up of officers and staff non-commissioned officers with functional area expertise in operations, intelligence, fires, logistics, and communications.[48]

Finally, in February 2017, the Army, too, announced it was creating permanent organizations that would specialize in advising foreign forces. They called the organizations Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs). "They are the day-to-day experts combatant commanders need to train, advise and assist our partners overseas, but they can serve also as a standing chain of command for rapidly expanding the Army," said the Army's chief of operations at the time of the announcement.[49] Each of six planned security force assistance brigades will consist of 800 personnel with a brigade staff of 80 people who will work to sustain the efforts of the advisor teams, rather than having the teams work through an outside unit for their logistical needs. Three advisor brigades are active, and three are in the process of standing up.[50]

The Army tested this new concept by deploying an advisor brigade to Afghanistan in 2018. The brigade split into 58 teams of advisors, working with 30 Afghan battalions

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[46] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Divided Responsibility*, 24 [see note 38].
[47] Shawn Snow, "Counterinsurgency is Here to Stay: Marines Plan to Double Foreign Military Training Adviser Group," *Marine Corps Times*. October 10, 2018. https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2018/10/10/counterinsurgency-is-here-to-stay-marines-plan-to-double-foreign-military-training-adviser-group/
[48] David V. Ready, "Marine Corps Advisor Companies," *Marine Corps Gazette*, September 2019, 18. https://mca-marines.org/wp-content/uploads/Marine-Corps-Advisor-Companies.pdf
[49] U.S. Army, "Army creates Security Force Assistance Brigade and Military Advisor Training Academy at Fort Benning," Press Release, February 16, 2017. https://www.army.mil/article/182646/army_creates_security_force_assistance_brigade_and_military_advisor_training_academy_at_fort_benning
[50] Billy VanCuren (Lieutenant Colonel, United States Army), interview with Dan Grazier, September 17, 2019.

in 15 brigades.[51] The advisor teams assisted the Afghan Army units in everything from the proper employment of mortars to establishing an effective maintenance plan for their vehicles.[52] A U.S. soldier deployed alongside the security force assistance brigade described how the American advisors worked with the Afghan maintenance personnel to go through pre-combat checks of the vehicles, particularly the IED-hunting route clearance vehicles. "If they hadn't done that, [the Afghans] would have petered out within 72 hours, they would have culminated. But these guys built in the capacity for the Afghan corps to support multiple and simultaneous brigade operations over a six-week offensive and it just wouldn't have happened without the SFAB on the ground."[53] Another security force assistance brigade deployed to Afghanistan in the spring of 2019.

Aside from their immediate utility in the present conflict, these organizations serve an important function. Namely, they provide a living repository for the lessons learned about advising foreign troops during the war on terror. Although two organizations—the Center for Army Lessons Learned and the Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned—currently serve as collection points for after action reports and other materials that can inform decisions about training and operations based on the experiences of others, individuals who are interested in reviewing and learning from any of the materials have to wade through them on their own while they also scramble to complete the required pre-deployment tasks.[54] The Army's security force assistance brigades and the Marine Corps' security cooperation group will be populated with people whose business it is to focus on the advisor mission and pass their knowledge and experience directly to those who come behind them, making for a much more efficient and effective process.

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[51] U.S. Department of Defense, "Success of First SFAB in Afghanistan Proves 'Army Got it Right,' Commander Says," Press Release, May 8, 2019. https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/News/Article/Article/1842220/success-of-first-sfab-in-afghanistan-proves-army-got-it-right-commander-says/fbclid/IwAR3OQSmiIbrNa6ZjwkfYmNWpGQS2UVvFhWwUZNsM-LWjFfEvXsWgJBX39GA/

[52] James MacKenzie, "New U.S. Training Unit in Afghanistan Faces Old Problems," Reuters, August 17, 2018. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-usa-training/new-u-s-training-unit-in-afghanistan-faces-old-problems-idUSKBN1L20D1

[53] Daniel Markert (Colonel, United States Army), interview with Dan Grazier, September 16, 2019.

[54] Michael Benvenuto, "Why the Center for Army Lessons Learned is more relevant than ever (and how NCOs can harness this resource)," *NCO Journal* (September 2018). https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-D101-c01fbd8c4d56857a304a60228d1a2fa5/pdf/GOVPUB-D101-c01fbd8c4d56857a304a60228d1a2fa5.pdf

Army leaders are already mulling the post-Afghanistan future of the security force assistance brigades to determine whether it has a place within the organizational structure. General Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said he wants to assign a security force assistance brigade to a geographic region.[55] This would allow the security force assistance brigades to focus their education and training efforts during peacetime. Lieutenant Colonel Billy VanCuren, a member of a working group charting the future of the security force assistance brigades, says in the future individual brigade members could be assigned to a specific country to create a small cadre of individuals with a focus on that country. They would then study the language, culture, and history of their area so that when the brigade deploys, it will "have the requisite language expertise somewhere inside that formation."[56]

One proposal is to assign each security force assistance brigade as the fourth brigade of an Army division. By being permanently collocated with a division, security force assistance brigade soldiers could train with the other brigades as advisor teams to familiarize the whole organization with the role they play. This level of peacetime training integration would force the division and brigade staff to figure out what they need to do to support the advisor teams to make them successful during wartime. As General George S. Patton said about training, "a pint of sweat will save a gallon of blood."[57] It is much better to work through these issues before a conflict than to have to deal with them on the fly during active combat, as happened during Afghanistan. Security force assistance brigade personnel would also be able to draw from the division's resources to train with the other brigades to maintain their core combat skills like patrolling, employment of fires, and casualty handling.

Such proposals are not without criticism. Army Lieutenant Colonel Bill Nance has written that the Army is continuing to focus on advising foreign forces at the small-unit level, and that doing so produces short-term successes but fails to help the host nation build the schools and institutions it needs to independently train their own forces. He writes that the security force assistance brigades "seem intent on continuing this trend, with a heavy emphasis on combat-arms officers and NCOs

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[55] Richard Sisk, "The Army Is Preparing to Take its SFAB Mission Global, General Says." *Military.com*. May 9, 2019. https://www.military.com/daily-news/2019/05/09/army-preparing-take-its-sfab-mission-global-general-says.html

[56] VanCuren, interview with Dan Grazier [see note 50].

[57] George S. Patton, *War As I Knew It* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947), 405.

[noncommissioned officers], and training heavily focused on tactical formations."[58] He proposes a modified and expanded version of the existing foreign area officer program, where volunteers leave their primary career track to become what the Army calls "Soldier Statesmen."[59] Foreign area officers typically spend years attending graduate-level language and cultural programs. They then serve an overseas tour as a defense attaché, a political-military staff planner, or a security assistance officer.[60] Their realm is the ministerial and institutional level, so they are already well-positioned to work with partner forces to build their capacities there.

A balance must be found between small-unit training and institution building. Moving forward, the security force assistance brigades could serve both functions, working to advise and assist forces at the small-unit level during the early phases of a conflict while senior members of the brigade work with their host nation counterparts at the higher levels to establish the military schools and training institutions necessary to prepare their forces without U.S. assistance. Both of these efforts can and do take place simultaneously. The key to long-term success is ensuring proper coordination between the two.

SELECTING THE RIGHT PEOPLE FOR THE MISSION

No matter how advisor teams are organized, without the right people with the right knowledge, the mission is doomed to fail. The advisor teams require people who are equal parts statesmen and soldiers. Individuals plucked away from other jobs to fill this role just to meet personnel quotas are unlikely to be effective advisors, so volunteers should be the norm. They must have the aptitude and enthusiasm for the mission, and they must be properly educated so they understand the culture and history of the people with whom they will be working.

These are lessons the U.S. has had to learn over and over again each time our nation engages in a security force assistance mission. In 1940, the Marine Corps published the *Small Wars Manual* based on the decades of experiences Marines gathered during

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[58] Bill Nance, "Getting Advising Right: The Army Needs a Fundamentally Different Approach to Building Partner Forces," Modern War Institute, August 29, 2019. https://mwi.usma.edu/getting-advising-right-army-needs-fundamentally-different-approach-building-partner-forces/?fbclid=IwAR3rmlVi-quMSnKNNXc1tG2YSYtVrOg-IV5KhMTzBhADEhKgxkcgnu_-pZ8

[59] "Foreign Area Officer Program." U.S. Army Human Resources Command, July 12, 2019. https://www.army.mil/standto/2019-07-12

[60] "What is a FAO?" Foreign Area Officer Association. http://www.faoa.org/FAO-What-is-a-FAO (accessed March 27, 2020)

the "Banana Wars" of the early 20th century, when the United States sent forces to protect political and business interests throughout Central America and the Caribbean. A key lesson learned during those conflicts was that all ranks must "be familiar with the language, the geography, and the political, social, and economic factors involved in the country in which they are operating."[61] And as William Harris noted when writing about the experiences of American advisors during the Korean War:

> As a representative of the American way of life, as a persuasive advocate of his country's modern equipment and tactical doctrine, as partner in a global system of achieving security for the entire free world, he is called upon to demonstrate a variety of talents—patience, tact, linguistic ability, and superior professional knowledge, among others. In all that he does, he must make a supreme effort to understand people and traditions often vastly different from his own.[62]

Unfortunately, these lessons were not implemented in Afghanistan.

Recruitment and Retainment

During the war in Afghanistan, the services generally relied on a process of directed assignments to fill advisor teams, and throughout most of the early years, the Army and Marine Corps deployed hastily assembled teams of individuals with little or no previous experience advising foreign troops. In the Marine Corps, staff would set advisor team personnel quotas that the line units would then have to fill. Individuals were then generally selected by the line units based on their availability. An advisor team requiring a mix of combat and support specialties would pull infantry personnel from several different regiments, and logistics personnel from the Marine Logistics Group. Personnel with different ranks, experiences, levels of training, aptitude, and enthusiasm for the mission were cobbled together and sent to train as part of an ad hoc unit for only a short amount of time before deploying. There was too little time for them to learn what they needed to become proficient at a complex and nuanced

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[61] U.S. Marine Corps, ed., *Small Wars Manual* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1940), 41. https://www.google.com/books/edition/Small_Wars_Manual/cECPk8EwB4oC

[62] William H. Harris, "Forward" in *Military Advisors in Korea: KMAG in Peace and War*, Robert K. Sawyer (Washington: Center of Military History, 1988), iii. https://www.koreanwar2.org/kwp2/cmh/military_advisors_in_korea_kmag.pdf

mission, let alone to learn to trust each other enough to become a cohesive and effective team before deploying.[63]

The Army followed a similar pattern. "Forming up advisory teams on an ad-hoc basis, as the need arises, has proven to be detrimental to an advisory effort that needs to field proficient host-nation forces on the battlefield," wrote John Friberg, an Army special forces officer who worked as a counterinsurgency advisor in Afghanistan.[64] Individuals were assigned to advisor teams because they happened to be available at the right time, not necessarily because they had an aptitude or proven ability to work well with foreign forces.[65] People involved in the process today told POGO that the haphazard manner of selecting advisors has hampered success in Afghanistan.

The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction recommends the Pentagon create a combat advisor career path to improve recruitment and provide the ability to track service members with advising experience as they move through their assignments. Under the current system, most combat advisors return to their regular duties upon completion of their overseas deployment, and their experiences are largely lost. SIGAR recommends assigning many of these people to the advisor training centers where they can help educate and train new advisors.[66] Even something as simple as creating a permanent badge for soldiers to wear on their uniforms could go a long way toward making service as an advisor more attractive. James Cunningham, a SIGAR senior analyst and Army veteran, says that would at least demonstrate the Army's institutional commitment to the mission.[67]

Training

Once the services identified the individuals to serve as advisors, the team leaders faced the challenge of forging everyone into a cohesive unit while simultaneously preparing to tackle a complicated and potentially dangerous overseas mission. But the military had no effective method in place of accessing and teaching the lessons learned from past missions.

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[63] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Divided Responsibility*, 11 [see note 38].
[64] John Friberg, "Learning from our Mistakes in Selection and Training of Military Advisors," SOFREP.com, January 14, 2016. https://sofrep.com/news/military-advisor-selection-and-training/
[65] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Divided Responsibility*, 11 [see note 38].
[66] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Divided Responsibility*, 36 [see note 38].
[67] James Cunningham (Senior Analyst, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction), interview with Dan Grazier, September 17, 2019.

Instead, especially during the early years of the war, the services tended to prepare advisor teams as they would any unit going into combat rather than as one with a highly specialized mission. Higher headquarters would provide them with a basic outline for training in the form of pre-deployment checklists and then leave the team leadership to schedule training events and arrange for the necessary support. The checklists were generic and better suited for units with a largely combat role. As a result, a great deal of the advisors' pre-deployment training mirrored training that combat units underwent before their deployments, including how to deal with improvised explosive devices and conduct first aid, and what the rules of engagement were. While these were all useful skills, the services were slow to incorporate serious language and cultural education into that training, violating their own known best practices. Soldiers destined for a 2009 advisor tour in Afghanistan criticized the 72-day training program they had gone through at Fort Riley in Kansas. It included 93 combat survival events and only 12 events related to mentoring and advising foreign troops. And according to post-deployment surveys, many Afghan ministerial advisors reported receiving no formal advisor training at all prior to their deployments.[68] Some also believed the course was "too Iraq-centric" and did not prepare them for what they faced in Afghanistan.[69] SIGAR reported one former advisor describing his pre-deployment training at Fort Riley as "100 percent irrelevant to advising," and another saying that his training "was relevant to combat [operations] but lacked anything to do with mentoring."[70] As a result, the people sent to work with the Afghans often lacked the necessary skills to be effective advisors.

The services did eventually take steps to improve the pre-deployment training that advisors received. For example, to teach future advisors the basics of language and Afghan culture, the Marine Corps established a partnership with San Diego State University in 2006. Marines spend four to eight weeks on campus with native Dari speakers learning how to speak, read, and write the language sufficiently enough to establish a rapport with their Afghan partners.[71] One Marine officer we interviewed deployed three times as an advisor. Before each tour, he studied the appropriate language. He said the quality of the training he received improved each time, but

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[68] Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance, *Ministerial-Level Advisor Training Effectiveness Study: Phase I Initial Impressions* (October 2010), 22. https://info.publicintelligence.net/JCISFA-MinisterialAdvisors.pdf

[69] Department of Defense Office of Inspector General. *Report on the Assessment of U.S. and Coalition Plans to Train, Equip, and Field the Afghan National Security Forces* [see note 33].

[70] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Divided Responsibility*, 13 [see note 38].

[71] "San Diego State University" Language Training Centers. https://www.dodltc.org/centers/san-diego-state-university (accessed March 31, 2020)

stressed that perfect fluency was not necessary as long as he could understand the basic tenor of the conversations he had through the interpreters.[72]

As the focus shifted away from small unit advising to building long-term capacities in 2015, the Department of Defense also created several specialty courses to make more effective advisors at the ministerial level. For example, the Pentagon established a 10-day Senior Leader Advising Training course, where future advisors gained relevant knowledge and skills necessary for effective advising at the ministerial level.[73]

The most robust language and cultural education came from the Afghanistan-Pakistan Hands Program (AFPAK Hands). Admiral Mike Mullen, then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called for its creation in 2009 as a means of building a cadre of experts in the region to help senior coalition leaders as they dealt with the political complexities of their mission and to better advise their Afghan partners. Personnel who were assigned or who volunteered for the program received the combat skills training that all deploying service members receive, but they also went through an intensive 16-week language course and an additional week of seminars on the history and culture of their assigned region and on the fundamentals of counterinsurgency warfare. They deployed overseas for a year-long tour where they polished their language skills through immersion while performing their role as advisors. At the end of that deployment, they came home for a stateside tour working on Afghanistan and Pakistan policy issues and to receive more language and cultural education. They then completed a second overseas tour before resuming their previous careers upon their return. The total service commitment for AFPAK Hands personnel was nearly four years.[74]

The program is due to sunset this year as the Pentagon continues to draw down its efforts in Afghanistan and as the Army steps up the security force assistance brigades. While it was a good faith effort to remedy the weaknesses in language and cultural proficiency, the program suffered in implementation. Some participants in the program thought their overseas commanders used AFPAK Hands improperly. One

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[72] Mark Peckham (Major, United States Marine Corps), interview with Dan Grazier. September 30, 2019.
[73] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces: DOD Lacks Performance Data to Assess, Monitor, and Evaluate Advisors Assigned to the Ministries of Defense and Interior*, 19-03 AR (October 2018), 11-12. https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/SIGAR-19-03-AR.pdf; NATO Joint Force Training Centre "Focus on Training." http://www.jftc.nato.int/index.php/organization/what-we-do
[74] James Hamblet, "AFPAK Hands (APH) Program," Joint Staff Presentation. http://pksoi.armywarcollege.edu/default/assets/File/ISAF-DOCS_AFPAK_Hands_Program.pdf

reported being assigned to a desk in Afghanistan to prepare PowerPoint slides rather than being out working with Afghan troops as he had been trained.[75]

Others reported having a better experience, with one saying his commander had employed him on missions ranging from "village stability operations up to the ministerial level."[76] Another problem was that those who chose to become AFPAK Hands paid a price in their career for their participation. Promotion boards tended to look unfavorably upon participants.[77] In 2014, for example, Army colonels participating in the AFPAK Hands program were selected for promotion at a rate of only 3% compared to 40% across the rest of the Army.[78] This discouraged others from volunteering for the program.[79]

Language and cultural education serve to make the military better at the person-to-person level of warfare. It is the basic element of soft power. Having our own people with the ability to converse with their host-nation counterparts helps smooth over misunderstandings and build the level of trust necessary to accomplish the mission. Yet because military bean-counters cannot quantify personal interactions and the level of relationships formed in the way they can count bombs dropped and weapons seized, it's difficult to gain a clear picture of the effectiveness of these efforts. The increased resources devoted to language and cultural training throughout the past two decades of war show that leaders recognized how important it is to have people with that expertise. Scrapping such programs also shows that we are on the cusp of repeating past mistakes.

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[75] J.P. Lawrence, "A decadelong program to 'turn the tide' in Afghanistan is ending, long after military shifted its focus," *Stars and Stripes*, August 17, 2019. https://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/a-decadelong-program-to-turn-the-tide-in-afghanistan-is-ending-long-after-military-shifted-its-focus-1.594651

[76] VanCuren, interview with Dan Grazier [see note 50].

[77] Waldo Freeman and Joseph Adams, Institute for Defense Analyses, *Force Management Decision Process*, NS P-8662 (August 2017), A-5. https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/f/fo/force-management-decision-process/p-8662.ashx

[78] U.S. Army Human Resources Command, "Briefing to General Odierno," July 10, 2014, 8. http://the-military-guide.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/235750833-HRC-Brief-to-CSA-10-JUL-2014-v140710-0730-v5-1-w-hyperlinks-pptx.pdf

[79] J.P. Lawrence, "A decadelong program to 'turn the tide' in Afghanistan is ending" [see note 75]

PROVIDING THE AFGHANS SUPPORT THEY CAN'T AFFORD OR MAINTAIN

Providing a host nation government with security forces it cannot support on its own or that do not match its security needs sets the host nation up for failure. Yet doing so is an American tradition, and one that was repeated in Afghanistan.

As part of the security force assistance mission, the U.S. has spent over $13.7 billion providing the Afghan government with equipment in an effort to create a modern military force. Afghanistan received 600,000 weapons like rifles and grenade launchers, 163,000 radios, 76,000 Humvees and mine resistance vehicles, and 208 helicopters and airplanes, among much else.[80] Unfortunately, a great deal of the equipment the U.S. provides to the Afghan government is for a military force it cannot possibly hope to sustain independently, and arguably doesn't need given the rudimentary technology of its insurgent foe. In fact, SIGAR found that "providing advanced weapons and management systems to a largely illiterate and undereducated force without also providing the appropriate training and institutional infrastructure created long-term dependencies, required increased U.S. financial support, and hampered efforts to make the ANDSF [Afghan National Defense and Security Forces] self-sustaining."[81] And given that the $4.8 billion Afghan defense budget for 2020 is already funded almost entirely by NATO members, it is clear that long-term Afghan independence is not even a consideration.[82]

Many of the equipment decisions were made without input from Afghan government officials.[83] Afghan leaders understand in a way no outsider can how their forces fight, the lay of the land in which they must operate, and available resources they have to sustain a military force. Despite this, Afghan concerns were often ignored. "The Afghans were informed and directed, not asked or consulted," said Army Lieutenant General Daniel Bolger, who took command of the combined Security Transition

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[80] Government Accountability Office, *Some Improvements Reported in Afghan Forces' Capabilities, but Actions Needed to Enhance DOD Oversight of U.S.-Purchased Equipment*, GAO-19-116 (October 2018), 6. https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/695012.pdf

[81] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Divided Responsibility*, IX [see note 38].

[82] Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Justification for FY 2020 Overseas Contingency Operations Afghanistan Security Forces Fund* (March 2019), 5. https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2020/fy2020_ASFF_Justification_Book.pdf

[83] *Department of Defense Appropriations Bill, 2017 Report*, S. Rep. No. 114-263, at 229 (2017). https://www.congress.gov/114/crpt/srpt263/CRPT-114srpt263.pdf

Command in 2011. "Afghan leaders made reasonable requests and were told 'it's not part of the plan.' [But] what plan?"[84]

The coalition had originally planned to arm Afghan troops with better-suited recovered or donated Soviet-era weapons.[85] Many Afghan troops already knew how to use them, so training would have been simplified, and these kinds of weapons are far less expensive and easier to maintain than their American equivalents, so it would have reduced the strain on the Afghan government's budget and support services.[86]

But spare parts for foreign weapons and equipment are categorized by the U.S. government as nonstandard service items and cannot be acquired through the existing Department of Defense supply chain; putting nonstandard equipment in the hands of Afghan troops would have complicated U.S. efforts to support their military and police forces.[87] So the initial plan was altered, in part to accommodate those short-term U.S. logistical challenges.

Some of the equipment decisions have been made with more parochial interests in mind. Consideration for the American defense industry was put ahead of the capabilities and needs of the Afghan security forces and the character of the fight it faces.

The clearest example involves helicopters for the Afghan Air Force. Then-Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey, and numerous experts all recommended supporting Afghanistan's continued use of Russian Mi-17 helicopters. The Russian helicopters were relatively inexpensive, easier to maintain than the Blackhawk that was the U.S. alternative, and able to fly at higher altitudes than the Blackhawks, a critical capability in the mountainous regions of Afghanistan. Moreover, the Afghan Air Force had been flying Mi-17 helicopters since the 1980s and was accustomed to flying and maintaining them.[88] Some in Congress, led by the Connecticut delegation, were unwilling to see

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[84] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Divided Responsibility*, 73 [see note 38].
[85] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Divided Responsibility*, 70 [see note 38].
[86] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, 155 [see note 8].
[87] Ernest B. McAllister, ed., *The Management of Security Cooperation*, 39th ed. (Wright-Patterson Air Force Base: Defense Institute of Security Cooperation Studies, 2019), AB-19. https://www.discs.dscu.mil/documents/greenbook/24_Greenbook_39_0_Complete.pdf
[88] Mark Thompson, "Whirlybird-Brained: U.S. Making Wrong Chopper Choice for Afghanistan," *Center for Defense Information*, June 25, 2019. https://www.pogo.org/analysis/2018/06/whirlybird-brained-us-making-wrong-chopper-choice-for-afghanistan/

tax dollars go to Russian helicopter manufacturers instead of American companies, so Afghan troops are getting UH-60 Blackhawks. The Afghan Air Force is not capable of repairing and maintaining Blackhawks, which will make them reliant on the American military or American contractors for support. And Blackhawk helicopters cost $6,070 for every hour flown, nearly double the cost of an Mi-17, which not only presents a significant additional expense but also means that the Afghan Air Force is unable to operate totally independently.[89]

Much of the new equipment the United States provides is also inappropriate for the Afghan army, as it is far beyond what Afghan troops can sustain on their own. They don't have the ability to repair Humvees, for instance, which has left Afghan soldiers exposed to more frequent accidents.

Furnishing the Afghan security forces with equipment that is beyond the nation's budget and capabilities and is inappropriate to the terrain or the fighting style of the enemy is bad for both the Afghan and the American governments. While it may have made the process easier in the short-term for the American troops involved and more profitable for the American contractors, it did little to ensure long-term success for Afghanistan. Afghanistan is no more able to fight its enemy now than it was before America stepped in to "help." They are perhaps even worse off because continued American aid money and a military and civilian presence is critical to the basic functionality of the Afghan military. For the U.S., that means there is no realistic alternative for an American military and civilian presence.

CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTATION

Not everyone agrees about the right course of action moving forward, and as a result there are challenges to creating the institutions and systems that will ensure the success of the security force assistance mission in the future. At the conclusion of any war, elected and military leaders are often accused of simply preparing to fight the

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[89] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Afghan Air Force: DOD Met the Initial Date for Fielding UH-60 Helicopters, but the Program Is at Risk of Not Having Enough Trained Pilots or the Capability to Maintain Future UH-60s*, 19-18-AR (January 2019), 14. https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/SIGAR-19-18-AR.pdf; R. Randall Padfield, "Colombian Op Does Well With Russian Rotocraft," AINonline, January 23, 2008. https://www.ainonline.com/aviation-news/aviation-international-news/2008-01-23/colombian-op-does-well-russian-rotorcraft; James Durso, "Overpriced Afghanistan Helicopter Upgrades Amount to a Subsidy for Contractors," *The Hill*, January 21, 2018. https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/369786-overpriced-afghanistan-helicopter-upgrades-amount-to-a-subsidy-for

last war as they look to the future. It would be more accurate to say that leaders prepare for the last successful war they fought. As happened after Vietnam, some national security leaders have wanted to turn their backs on the kind of messy nation building efforts that have now come to define the first two decades of the 21st century. "We are not likely to have as our next fight a counterinsurgency," said Admiral James Winnefeld, the then vice-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in 2011 at the very height of the war in Afghanistan.[90]

National security discussions in Washington today are dominated by the subject of a potential major clash against other great powers with the kind of high technology weapons that reap the most rewards for the military-industrial-congressional complex. President Barack Obama's 2015 National Security Strategy included references to "Russia's aggression" and the threat of "China's rise."[91] President Donald Trump said China and Russia "challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity" in his 2017 National Security Strategy.[92] While the United States should prepare to confront any threat we face, preparations must be balanced to span the entire spectrum of conflict.

A principal reason behind the focus on great power competition is simple: Building a military force capable of fighting large-scale conventional wars against other great powers requires massive expenditures to develop and purchase the necessary weapons. This is not to suggest our nation's elected and military leaders actually want to fight those wars, but they certainly don't mind spending taxpayer dollars gearing up for them. The Senate's version of the fiscal year 2020 national defense authorization would provide $750 billion to the Department of Defense, with the greater portion of that going toward purchasing weapons and equipment with little or no value for a counterinsurgency campaign. The bill would authorize $10 billion to buy 94 F-35s and $24.1 billion to buy 12 Navy ships.[93] The Pentagon requested a total of $143.1 billion for weapons procurement for 2020 and another $104.3 billion for further research

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[90] Ty Cobb, "Good-Bye Counter-Insurgency; Hello Air-Sea Battle," *Harvard Law School National Security Journal*, November 29, 2011. https://harvardnsj.org/2011/11/good-bye-counter-insurgency-hello-air-sea-battle/

[91] Barack Obama, *National Security Strategy* (February 2015), 4. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf

[92] Donald Trump, *National Security Strategy* (December 2017), 2. https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf

[93] Senate Armed Services Committee, *FY 2020 National Defense Authorization Act Executive Summary* (May 22, 2019), 7. https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FY%202020%20NDAA%20Executive%20Summary.pdf

and development.[94] By comparison, the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund receives a pittance at $4.8 billion and a great portion of that will be spent purchasing American-made weapons.[95] There have been recent efforts to curtail programs and offices within the services not devoted full-time to preparing for or conducting large-scale industrial war. For example, in 2018, then-Secretary of the Army Mark Esper reportedly wanted to shutter the Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute at the Army War College. The institute "has been the chief coordinating organization infusing doctrine, training, education, and operations with best practices needed to effectively conduct complex missions in states and regions threatened by, or currently experiencing, conflict, terrorism, and other grave threats to security," according to an open letter signed by 75 current and former national security officials and other experts in an effort to save it.[96]

As of 2019, the institute remains open, but that does not mean future Pentagon officials won't take aim at it again. The Army's security force assistance brigades and the Marine Corps' Security Cooperation Group will likely face similar budget perils as memories from Iraq and Afghanistan begin to fade over time. Despite the recent trend of ever-increasing defense budgets, there will be a time when the purse strings will tighten. This will force the services to make hard choices about the programs that will receive funding. Decades of evidence shows that when those in charge of defense budgeting are given the choice of buying an instrument of hard power like a new helicopter or paying for an instrument of soft power like a security force assistance brigade, they will almost always buy the new helicopter.[97]

The security force assistance brigades are one of the signature initiatives of Milley's tenure as Army chief of staff. Many of those opposed to their creation believed that the next chief of staff would take steps to get the Army out of the advising business and cancel the program. But Milley was promoted to chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which will likely protect the security force assistance brigades for at least

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[94] Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, Department of Defense, *Fiscal Year 2020 Budget Request* (March 2019), 18. https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2020/fy2020_Budget_Request.pdf

[95] Senate Armed Services Committee, *FY 2020 National Defense Authorization Act Executive Summary*, 12. [see note 93]

[96] WOTR Staff, "Save the U.S. Army's Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute: An Open Letter," *War on the Rocks*, August 8, 2018. https://warontherocks.com/2018/08/save-the-u-s-armys-peacekeeping-and-stability-operations-institute-an-open-letter/

[97] "Mulvaney: This is a 'hard power budget'," CNBC, March 16, 2017. https://www.cnbc.com/video/2017/03/16/mulvaney-this-is-a-hard-power-budget.html

another four years because his successor will not be inclined to cancel a signature achievement while Milley still serves in a superior position. This provides an opportunity to refine the concept. Still, a future chief of staff could decide that the Army does not need advisor brigades.

Another potential source of resistance could come from those who stand to profit from an extension of our overseas wars. Just since 2009, the United States has spent approximately $104 billion for contractors to support operations in Afghanistan. Private security contractors account for a significant proportion of the outsider presence in Afghanistan. Overall, private contractors far outnumber uniformed troops in Afghanistan. In the first three months of 2019, 28,189 contractors worked in Afghanistan.[98] Aside from security, the Pentagon uses contractors to perform a large portion of the necessary support functions like transportation, intelligence analysis, construction, base support, and much else.[99] All of this is big business, and there is little incentive to actually complete the mission as the contractors would be working themselves out of a job.

People advocating for our sustained presence in Afghanistan even tout the financial benefits. "Bear in mind that that $1 trillion we often talk about, we paid most of that money to ourselves. We didn't pay that to the Afghans," said Peter Bergen, the vice president of New America's Global Studies and Fellows at a February 5, 2020, Center for Strategic & International Studies event titled "Making the Case for Sustained U.S. Engagement in a Transitioning Afghanistan." "That was money we paid our soldiers, our contractors, our companies."[100] An example of an American company making money from our continued presence in Afghanistan is AM General, the manufacturer of military Humvees. In 2017, AM General received a $459 million contract to provide 2,090 Humvees to Afghanistan through February 2023.[101] The company's executive chairman, retired Army Lieutenant General Jack Keane, advocated for extending our

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[98] Congressional Research Service, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007-2018*, R44116 (May 10, 2019), 17. https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44116.pdf

[99] Moshe Schwartz and Jennifer Church, Congressional Research Service, *Department of Defense's Use of Contractors to Support Military Operations: Background, Analysis, and Issues for Congress*, R43074 (May 17, 2013), 2. https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R43074.pdf

[100] Peter Bergen, "Making the Case for Sustained U.S. Engagement in a Transitioning Afghanistan," Center for Strategic & International Studies, February 5, 2020, 48:58. https://www.csis.org/events/making-case-sustained-us-engagement-transitioning-afghanistan

[101] Connie Lee, "AM General to provide humvees to Afghanistan through FMS contract," *Inside Defense*, September 7, 2017. https://insidedefense.com/daily-news/am-general-provide-humvees-afghanistan-through-fms-contract

involvement in Afghanistan at a January 28, 2020, Heritage Foundation event.[102] He failed to mention his company's interest in a protracted presence.[103]

Combatting these challenges requires determined leadership both in the corridors of the Pentagon and in the halls of Congress. The United States can ill-afford another protracted nation building effort. The best possible policies and processes need to be put in place now to ensure the services are prepared to conclude a future mission in as rapid a manner as possible. To that end, policymakers need to take into consideration the true motives of those providing them with advice so that special interests are not prioritized over national interest.

CONCLUSION

Whether we like it or not, the United States will almost certainly find itself engaging in more nation building efforts than the conventional wars of the World War II or even the Operation Desert Storm variety. Military historian and theorist Martin van Creveld questions whether great powers can even fight conventional wars anymore, writing, "the effect of nuclear weapons, unforeseen and perhaps unforeseeable, has been to push conventional war into the nooks and crannies of the international system; or, to mix a metaphor, into the faults between the main tectonic plates, each dominated by the superpowers."[104]

That may or may not be the case, but what is indisputable is the simple fact that the United States has engaged in more "small wars" than it has great-power conflicts. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the United States has only fought two officially declared wars, but has used military force overseas approximately 50 times in undeclared wars.[105] If the military is to take the lead in nation building efforts because the State Department and other federal agencies lack either the resources or the will to do so, policymakers and military leaders must make sure the services have the wherewithal to enable the United States to prevail across the entire spectrum of

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[102] Jack Keane, "Making the Case for America's Mission in Afghanistan," Heritage Foundation, January 28, 2020. https://www.heritage.org/middle-east/event/making-the-case-americas-mission-afghanistan

[103] AM General, "AM General Announces General (Ret.) Jack Keane Has Joined the Company as Executive Chairman," Press Release, October 26, 2016. https://www.amgeneral.com/am-general-announces-general-ret-jack-keane-has-joined-the-company-as-executive-chairman/

[104] Martin Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 11.

[105] Congressional Research Service, *Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2020*, R42738 (January 13, 2020). https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42738.pdf

warfare, and not just in the narrow and highly unlikely band of a conventional war against a peer state. To ensure we don't have to learn these lessons all over again during the next nation building effort, Congress should protect the permanent security force assistance institutions, which are vulnerable to the vagaries of changing bureaucracies, by rejecting any future Pentagon plan that would scrap them. Incentives must be put in place to attract the right people to tackle the most difficult and delicate missions associated with building up our future partners, and proper training must be provided to those people to ensure they can effectively accomplish the mission.

The evolution of advisor teams and training clearly demonstrates how the services learned over the course of the Afghanistan conflict.

And decisions about the type and composition of weapons delivered must be informed by the needs identified by host nation leaders rather than by parochial domestic interests. American companies should be able to benefit from U.S. security assistance, but only when their contributions match the needs on the ground. Poor countries that are technologically less advanced than the United States do not have the need for, nor the ability to purchase or maintain, the kind of weaponry capable of defeating an industrialized power. Those nations need basic weapons that are easily maintained, can be operated without years of training, and that do not rely on an extended logistics network. Prioritizing contractor profits over meeting the equipment needs of the host nation will result in higher long-term costs for U.S. taxpayers, as supporting the unnecessary weapons systems will cost more than the host nation can afford. Ignoring these points will result in future wars that drag on for decades, draining us of both blood and treasure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **The United States should avoid undertaking nation building efforts**. But if civilian leaders continue to expect the military to, the Army should maintain and refine the Security Force Assistance Brigades. Congress should rapidly squelch any effort to curtail these formations.

- **The services should create combat advisor career paths** to improve recruitment and provide the ability to track service members with advising experience as they move through their assignments.

- **The Pentagon should expand language and cultural programs.**

- **Future military advising efforts should focus primarily at the ministerial level.**

- **The services should take care to ensure the security force assistance mission is tightly integrated** with the combat role at all levels to ensure unity of command.

- **Anticorruption efforts must be a centerpiece of all plans and policies** to prevent the services from empowering bad actors and undermining the overall effort.

- **The outcome of U.S. efforts must be reported transparently** to ensure all the key stakeholders can weigh in properly on necessary policy adjustments.

- **Parochial concerns should not cloud military aid decisions.** The U.S. government must consult, and largely defer to, purchasing the weapons and equipment that make sense from both a military and budget perspective for the host nation.

- **Policymakers and the public at large need to take into consideration the financial motives of the defense experts providing them with advice about the course and scope of our conflicts.** Lengthy deployments and the looser purse strings associated with the purportedly temporary funding vehicles like the Overseas Contingency Operations fund provide opportunities for profiteers to put their own interests ahead of the national interest.

- **The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) should improve the collection and transparency of executive branch lobbying forms** (SF-LLL) by posting them on a centralized, public, searchable website within three days of receiving

them. OMB should create a system to allow agencies to post the short-form (SF-LLLShort) on the same centralized, public, searchable website within 48 hours of any meeting between an entity seeking a federal award and an executive branch employee.

- **Congress should expand executive branch lobbying reporting requirements in the SF-LLL form** to include any oral or written communication, including email or other electronic types of communication, between an entity attempting to seek a federal award and an executive branch employee.

- **Off-budget accounts like Overseas Contingency Operations funds should be used rarely**, and no longer than a year or two into any potential conflict until the Defense Department can predict and plan for the costs as part of the normal budgetary process.