

SECURITY FORCE ASSISTANCE in a Time of Austerity



Special operations Marines observe Armed Forces of the Philippines soldiers during jungle movement

U.S. Navy (Troy Latham)

By GENE GERMANOVICH

The Nation's debt and the nearly inevitable decline in the U.S. defense budget have unleashed a debate on exactly what military capabilities and missions require reduction or elimination. To date, the public dialogue has centered largely on cuts to big-ticket procurement and modernization programs (for example, the Joint Strike Fighter) and overseas defense posture (for example, Army brigades in Europe). Defense commentators have yet to sufficiently address how budgetary pressures will limit the military's ability to conduct the wide array of security cooperation activities central to advancing strategic objectives as outlined in national-level documents and combatant command campaign plans. Arguably the most resource-intensive and fiscally complex type of security cooperation is security force assistance (SFA), which is focused on training, equipping, and advising foreign security forces in order to increase their capacities and capabilities. Since this set of activities is continuously highlighted as a key national security tool in strategy documents

and policy issuances, a closer examination of SFA in a time of austerity is appropriate.

Although SFA is often an effective tool that limits the possibility of regional conflict, its costs—some apparent and others hidden—are likely to prohibit the Department of Defense (DOD) from continuing to build, at current levels, the capacity of many dozens of foreign security forces around the globe. A more focused approach is needed to target limited resources at long-term, enduring SFA efforts with key nations in each strategically important region. Limited SFA missions may continue as economy of force ventures, but scarce resources should be carefully allocated to those critical partners in each geographic combatant command's (GCC) area of responsibility that can provide the greatest return on the U.S. Government's dollar. Defense leaders have a choice: conduct SFA in many places and risk spreading resources (time, money, and forces) ineffectively, or focus on fewer high-priority nations.

This article begins with an overview of SFA as a national security tool and provides a

broad accounting of SFA costs, both apparent and hidden. The conclusion offers recommendations to scope the global SFA effort through stricter prioritization of missions and more creative use of defense resources. An important assumption is that DOD funding for the global SFA effort will remain constant or decrease marginally in an increasingly challenging fiscal environment—as implied by DOD strategic guidance issued by the President and Secretary of Defense in January 2012: “Whenever possible, we will develop innovative, low-cost, and small-footprint approaches to achieve our security objectives, relying on exercises, rotational presence, and advisory capabilities.”¹

This guidance reaffirmed the 2010 National Security Strategy and reinforced the importance of working with allies and partners to build their capacities. What is new is an overt focus on selecting a limited, more efficient set of defense tools, including SFA, to advance strategic objectives.

SFA as a National Security Tool

Over the last decade, building the security capacity of allies and partners has become a pillar of U.S. national security strategy. The U.S. Government, with the Department of State and DOD at the forefront,

Gene Germanovich is a Strategy and Policy Consultant at Booz Allen Hamilton. Over the last 6 years, he has advised U.S. Government clients on national security strategy, defense policy, and security cooperation issues.

has made a strategic investment in training foreign security forces, providing arms, and mentoring rising leaders and organizations. Defense doctrine and policy refer to this set of activities as Security Force Assistance. What distinguishes SFA from other forms of security cooperation is that “SFA activities must directly increase the capacity or capability of a foreign security force or its supporting institutions.”² While many engagements with foreign security forces contribute tangentially to a partner’s capacity or capability (for example, multinational exercises or intelligence-sharing), it is DOD policy that only activities whose “clear and express” purpose is building capacity or capability are considered SFA.³ DOD Instruction 5000.68, “Security Force Assistance (SFA),” outlines the desired outcome:

*SFA activities shall be conducted primarily to assist host countries to defend against internal and transnational threats to stability. However, the Department of Defense may also conduct SFA to assist host countries to defend effectively against external threats; contribute to coalition operations; or organize, train, equip, and advise another country’s security forces or supporting institutions.*⁴

The intent behind SFA is that by assisting its partners in establishing competent, responsible, and effective security forces, DOD contributes to U.S. Government efforts to prevent regional conflict that threatens American interests and potentially requires U.S. intervention. For example, starting in 2002, the U.S. military has assisted the Philippine armed forces in enhancing their counterterrorism capacity through the provision of training and equipment, thus obviating the possibility that Washington would need to conduct a large-scale counterinsurgency effort to fight al Qaeda–affiliated groups in the southern Philippines.⁵ The Secretary of Defense’s theater-level guidance directs many similar SFA efforts in each of the GCC’s areas of responsibility. By law and policy, GCCs are to plan and execute capacity-building activities in coordination with or under the auspices of State Department programs.

Although previous and current U.S. administrations have held opposing views on a number of policy issues, SFA was adopted as a strategic tool by the George W. Bush administration and wholly endorsed and continued by President Barack Obama’s national security

apparatus. In its National Security Strategy, the Obama administration states:

*Our strategy goes beyond meeting the challenges of today, and includes preventing the challenges and seizing the opportunities of tomorrow. This requires investing now in the capable partners of the future. . . . These kinds of measures will help us diminish military risk, act before crises and conflicts erupt, and ensure that governments are better able to serve their people.*⁶

The case of the Philippines demonstrates the promise of SFA. Though they still exist and have a capacity to disrupt, Abu Sayef and other terrorist organizations based in the southern Philippines no longer pose an immediate threat to Southeast Asian allies or U.S. interests. In early 2012, the Philippine air force conducted an air strike that killed 15 militants, including one of the group’s leaders. This operational success was made possible in large part by American training and advice

Other DOD funding sources for SFA efforts include operations and maintenance accounts for limited purposes only as explicitly authorized by law, such as deploying civilians to advise ministries of defense and training foreign militaries in support of counterdrug missions. Much broader in scope, State Department programs include Foreign Military Financing and the Global Peace Operations Initiative.

SFA-related funding sources account for the monetary cost of equipment transfers and the operational cost of advise-and-assist missions. Despite a plethora of complex legislative authorities and funding streams, capacity-building dollars are well-tracked by the State Department, Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), Defense Security Cooperation Agency, and GCCs.

The Hidden Costs of SFA

While in-theater operational costs are apparent, the more difficult accounting relates to hidden costs, some monetary and others

Congress essentially mandated an improvement in joint education and experience, using promotion as the leverage

over the last decade, which has led to the continual improvement in the intelligence capabilities of the Philippine armed forces.⁷

The Apparent Costs of SFA

In a noncombat environment, SFA is theoretically inexpensive—especially when compared against the cost of U.S. intervention: billions of dollars, casualties, and domestic and international political ramifications. SFA missions are funded through a variety of programs administered by the Department of State or DOD, often through a patchwork of funding streams with associated legislative authorities. For example, consider DOD’s primary authority and funding source to provide training and equipment to a foreign security force for the purposes of counterterrorism, known as Section 1206. Fiscal year 2011 cases totaled \$247 million, ranging from \$300,000 to train Albanian forces for a deployment to Afghanistan to a \$44 million package to prepare troops from Uganda and Burundi for counterterrorism missions in Somalia.⁸ Compared to the cost of military intervention, or even other portions of the defense budget, capacity-building of a foreign security force seems fairly low cost.

not. Many of these hidden costs are incurred by U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) and the military Services, which are tasked with organizing, training, equipping, and deploying an array of units and forces to conduct SFA in support of the GCCs.

Institutional Costs of USSOCOM.

Although USSOCOM’s most publicized mission is to synchronize planning of global operations against terrorist networks, special operations forces (SOF) have partaken in what is known as “the indirect approach” for many decades, primarily training and advising foreign security forces to counter internal security threats. These SFA efforts have generally been long-term engagements that require instructors with highly specialized advising skills, fluency in one or more foreign languages, and well-honed knowledge of the culture and history of a particular region or country. The institutional costs of providing such specialized forces include investing in years of language training, procuring SOF-particular equipment such as nonstandard aviation platforms, developing doctrine, and including SFA curriculum at institutions such as the Joint Special Operations University.

Recall the case of the Philippines, a mission primarily executed by SOF. While this ongoing operation itself has had a manageable cost, the SOF personnel who led it took years to develop the skill set required to execute the mission effectively.

As a result of intense requirements associated with Afghanistan, Iraq, and the global counterterrorism mission, SOF continues to conduct SFA globally but focuses on non-permissive environments compelling a small American footprint. With national guidance documents emphasizing SFA, defense leadership has turned to its general purpose forces (GPF) to cover down on a significant portion of SFA requirements around the globe.

Infrastructure for General Purpose Forces. Although generally not as immersive as SOF, GPF advise-and-assist missions still require familiarity with methods of instruction, cultural sensitivity, and at least minimal knowledge of a particular country, in addition to the functional skill set being taught. While DOD has made increasing investments in Foreign Area Officers who possess these skills, GPF by definition remains a broadly qualified force without in-depth expertise in any one area such as SFA.

A common approach to preparing GPF for SFA missions is to send U.S. personnel through an institution that provides a pre-deployment training program centered on basic advising skills. For example, when a team of helicopter pilots is assigned a mission to train a partner nation’s air force, it may prepare by attending the Air Force’s Air Advisor Academy to learn how to provide instruction to a less developed air force. The rationale behind this method, utilized similarly by each of the military Services (as shown in the table), is that the Air Force cannot afford to create an entire unit of helicopter trainers, but it can provide GPF pilots with a requisite level of cultural knowledge and familiarity with methods of instruction.

The more SFA missions conducted, and the more diverse they are in purpose, the greater the required throughput and associated cost of preparing U.S. forces. While 1206, Foreign Military Financing, or Global Peace Operations Initiative funds may account for the cost of using helicopter pilot trainers once in theater, they do not cover the salaries, domestic travel, facilities, and curriculum development efforts of the Air Advisor Academy.

Table 1. Military Service Organizations That Train Advisors

Service	Organization	Mission Summary
Army	162 nd Brigade, Fort Polk, LA	Provide training to U.S. personnel in advisor skills, combat skills, and SFA skills
Navy	Maritime Civil Affairs and Security Training Command	Prepare U.S. forces to execute civilian-to-military operations and military-to-military training in support of security cooperation and security assistance requirements
Marine Corps	Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group	Conduct assessments, planning, related education, and training for U.S. personnel, and advisory support to ensure unity of effort in building partner nation security forces
Air Force	Air Advisor Academy	Provide U.S. advisors with predeployment training that includes mission training, culture training, and combat skills
Coast Guard	U.S. Coast Guard Training Center Yorktown International Mobile Training Branch	Provide Coast Guard personnel training in counterterrorism, force protection, survival skills, and advanced training in their specialty fields to prepare them for technical training and consulting with partner nations

Larger scale SFA efforts with standard military units (as opposed to small, highly tailored teams of advisors) also have associated posture costs. If implemented, the U.S. Army’s envisioned Regionally Aligned Brigade—a sizeable force construct used to service dozens of SFA requirements in each of the GCC’s areas of responsibility—will require significant expenditures on facilities, particularly if based in theater. The Marine Corps’s Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force (SPMAGTF) for Security Cooperation construct is already in place, an example being the SPMAGTF operating out of Naval Air Station Sigonella in Italy. This SPMAGTF for Security Cooperation is a rotational force of hundreds of Marines who train African security forces in peacekeeping and counterterrorism. Individual training activities conducted by SPMAGTF are funded through the GCC, State Department, and partner nation funding sources. The cost of deploying the force and basing it in Italy, however, is borne by the Marine Corps.

An additional institutional cost is OSD and Joint Staff funding and manpower for organizations such as the Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance, which serves as a source of SFA expertise and

captures and disseminates lessons learned from SFA missions.

The Planning Penalty. One of SFA’s unique features is the diverse set of missions, with examples including training pilots for functions associated with a Federal Aviation Administration–like organization, providing night vision goggles to enhance the capabilities of an elite counternarcotics unit, and advising a ministry of defense in how to build a personnel payment system. Making the planning effort more complex is the milieu of legislative authorities and funding streams, which is unlikely to change due to congressional resistance to a simpler legal framework. Thus, unlike a more standard deployment (for example, a carrier battlegroup), GCCs spend considerable resources to justify, plan, fund, and assess individual efforts. Military Services incur the same planning penalty as they organize, train, equip, and deploy GPF forces to conduct SFA.

Furthermore, an insufficient number of Security Cooperation Officers (SCOs) at many Embassy Country Teams increases the planning burden on GCCs and their Service components. SCOs serve as the primary interlocutor among GCCs, the State Department, and host nations. Without an adequate

**Airman interviews
graduate of Air Advisor
Course in Iraq to ensure
school is meeting
operational needs**

U.S. Air Force (Randy Redman)



SCO structure (some Country Teams have only one), GCCs risk conducting activities unlinked to State Department objectives, and must dedicate more time and effort to administrative issues such as obtaining visas. On many occasions, staffs are stressed to a point where planning time for logistics and funding precludes attention to optimizing the nature of the training, equipment transfer, or advisory support itself.

Stressing the Force for Leadership. SFA's least visible cost—and arguably the most taxing one—is not one measured in dollars. Working with foreign security forces requires a level of maturity, experience, and skills most frequently found in the senior ranks of officers and staff noncommissioned officers. Difficult to cultivate in mass and capped by legislation, mid- to senior-level leaders are a treasured resource. To provide a disproportionate level of senior leadership for SFA missions, the Services routinely pull leaders from nondeployed units that are in predeployment training for another mission. To illustrate, consider a Marine Corps infantry battalion. The Marine Corps routinely sends captains (O-3) and above from U.S. home stations to train foreign security forces. In their absence, a nondeployed unit's leadership is degraded,

with potential consequences to morale, safety, and preparedness. In the worst case, the infantry battalion could be called to respond to a crisis while its key leaders scramble to return from their temporary SFA assignments.

Scoping the Security Force Assistance Effort

The following recommendations are designed as specific policy prescriptions that adhere to the spirit of recent DOD strategic guidance by more appropriately scoping DOD's global SFA efforts. In addition to stricter prioritization at the theater level, decisionmakers should emphasize several emerging SFA concepts that will result in more efficient and effective use of defense resources.

Refine Theater-level Guidance. An inadvertent consequence of defense leadership's continual focus on SFA has been an undue amount of GCC concentration—some of it directed by OSD and some self-generated—on capacity-building in countries where other forms of military-to-military engagement are sufficient for achieving strategic objectives. To supplement broad strategic guidance, OSD should issue more detailed theater-specific guidance that precisely conveys where U.S. forces will engage with

allies and partners, and for what purpose. To date, this type of guidance has generally entailed an all-of-the-above approach to working with a large set of critical partners in each GCC's area of responsibility.

Given budgetary pressures, it is becoming imperative to provide greater specificity to GCCs on where they should focus on enduring capacity-building efforts versus maintaining more routine military-to-military ties. Criteria for determining where SFA is a plausible course of action that will promote U.S. national security interests includes linkages to high priority war plans, host nation appetite, the ability to harness limited interagency resources, and sustainability. Absent these necessities, the focus should remain on security cooperation efforts short of capacity-building.

Synchronize Efforts of Special Operations and General Purpose Forces. To optimize division of labor, GCCs and their Service components should increase coordination and synchronization of efforts with the GCC's theater special operations commands. The military Services lack SOF institutional legacy of working with foreign security forces, and GPF are by nature less adept at this mission set than



U.S. Army (Peter D. Lawlor)

Navy technician and Uruguayan EOD robot operator engaged in training coordinated by Maritime Civil Affairs and Security Training Command

USSOCOM-trained advisors. But the global demand for SOF, who will be the last forces to leave Afghanistan and are required for the counterterrorism fight into the foreseeable future, necessitates that GPF partake in DOD global SFA efforts.

A promising construct for SOF-GPF collaboration is one whereby GPF train partners in basic skills and, when the foreign security force has matured, hand the effort over to SOF to conduct advanced individual and small unit training. In some cases, once SOF has concluded the advanced training, the partner nation's military may be ready for sustainment training via large-scale multinational exercises shepherded by U.S. GPF. A continuing SOF-GPF dialogue is beneficial throughout the capacity-building process.

SOF-GPF synchronization and an explicit division of labor, where warranted, reduces the amount of time and level of effort the Services need to dedicate for training U.S. personnel for SFA missions, while mitigating the worldwide demand for SOF. This integrated approach also provides the foreign security force with the most suitable trainers at each stage of capability development.

Focus on Regional Security Organizations. Assistance to regional security organizations, currently emphasized to various degrees by each of the GCCs, has continuing merit and financial advantages. For example, the State Department-funded Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance program involves U.S. forces training African partner nation militaries and providing the equipment needed to support peacekeeping operations and counterterrorism efforts in the Horn of Africa region. Another variation of this model, often referred to as the “train-the-trainer” approach, is the Colombian Marine Corps Regional Training Center in Covenas, Colombia. Originally a venue for U.S. Marines to train with Colombian marines, the training center is now a regional destination for Latin American naval infantry forces, with Colombia in the lead. Over several decades, this center has nurtured regional cooperation among historically suspicious neighbors while enhancing the capacity of foreign security forces to conduct counterdrug operations.

Investing in regional training organizations presents several fiscal benefits. At multinational training centers, the United States can train more foreign security forces

in the course of one deployment. Working with multiple foreign security forces at one location reduces predeployment training requirements, intra- and inter-theater travel, and operational costs on the ground. Where feasible, the train-the-trainer approach serves as an SFA force multiplier: the United States can slowly reduce its SFA level of effort while one or more mature partners take the lead for training security forces. Finally, U.S. foreign policy benefits when the security forces of a region develop collective solutions based on interoperability and trust.

Send Qualified Security Cooperation Officers to the Right Countries. To alleviate the burdensome planning requirements associated with SFA missions, OSD should work with the State Department to engineer a modest increase in the number of SCO personnel at U.S. Embassy Country Teams. Many defense analysts have suggested increasing SCO presence worldwide, particularly in African nations where the gap is most acute, but to date little action has been taken due to the associated manpower and funding costs. A more manageable solution is to increase SCO presence only in each GCC's high-priority countries where DOD leader-

ship determines the SFA effort should be most comprehensive. Some positions could be realigned from Europe, where the SCO presence remains relatively strong as a result of the Cold War's legacy of security assistance.

Among planners and commanders, SCOs are recognized as a pivotal component of the U.S. Government's effort to enhance the capabilities of foreign security forces. Given their location at American Embassies, SCOs are in an optimal position to synchronize a GCC's vast array of U.S.-led security cooperation activities, including capacity-building efforts, which are ongoing in many partner nations. Recognition of the SCO as a central coordinator for SFA missions is a positive development that has led to a growing emphasis on improving SCO training prior to their tours at Country Teams. In addition to adding a modestly higher number of SCOs in high-priority nations, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency and military Services should continue to improve training available to these key individuals.

Conclusion

There are two counterarguments to the case for more carefully scoping the DOD worldwide SFA effort. First, SFA is an effective lever in the defense and foreign policy toolkit. Combatant commands provide training, equipment, and advice to foreign security forces in order to curb the need for direct U.S. intervention, develop future coalition partners, enhance operational access and posture, and support diplomatic objectives. Scaling back on the number of SFA efforts may entail operational risk. This counterargument has merit but should be considered in a broader context: DOD conducts myriad security cooperation activities beyond SFA. The defense toolkit also includes multinational exercises, intelligence cooperation, senior leader engagement, and many similar shaping activities. These military-to-military interactions also serve both defense objectives and diplomatic endeavors and should be continued to the extent possible. Additionally, scaling back on the number of SFA efforts would result in a qualitative enhancement of the highest priority missions.

The second and related counterargument posits that the cost of SFA—even considering the institutional commitments by USSOCOM and the Services—is lower than those of regional conflict or unchecked transnational threats that risk forcing the Nation to engage in combat operations. While this perspective also

has appeal, today's fiscal pressures necessitate reductions in nearly every area of the defense budget with precious few exceptions such as cyberspace capabilities and ballistic missile defense. Without stricter prioritization and more creative utilization of resources dedicated to SFA, policymakers risk spreading resources (time, money, and forces) ineffectively.

In a world where weak states and transnational actors pose a threat to U.S. interests and several regional powers are emerging as competitors, DOD's global SFA mission, if properly integrated into broader U.S. Government efforts, is a wise strategic endeavor that is generally cost-effective. But if GCCs lack the guidance to scope their SFA efforts, the inevitable endstate is a high number of sub-optimal SFA missions—with USSOCOM and the Services scrambling to prepare U.S. forces for an overly diverse set of advise-and-assist requirements in a difficult budgetary environment. A better result would be focused high-priority efforts in each region of the world that have a chance to deliver the same kinds of results witnessed in the Philippines. In today's age of austerity, tough choices must be made and lower-cost, innovative concepts must be adopted. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹The White House, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: The White House, January 2012), 3. Emphasis in original.

²DOD Instruction 5000.68, "Security Force Assistance (SFA)," October 27, 2010, 2.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Department of Defense (DOD) *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: DOD, February 2010), 28.

⁶*National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC, The White House, May 2010), 27.

⁷Simone Orendain, "10-Year US Counterterrorism Support Paying Off: Philippine Military," *Voice of America*, February 16, 2012, available at <www.voanews.com/english/news/asia/10-Year-US-Counterterrorism-Support-Paying-Off-Philippine-Military-139434983.html>.

⁸Nina M. Serafino, *Security Assistance Reform: "Section 1206" Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2012), 20–26.



NEW
from **NDU Press**

for the
**Center for Strategic Research
Institute for National Strategic Studies**

Strategic Forum 279

**Trust, Engagement, and
Technology Transfer:
Underpinnings for
U.S.-Brazil Defense
Cooperation**
By E. Richard Downes



As Brazil's power and international standing grow, so does the importance to the United States of a close relationship with Brazil. Among emerging powers, Brazil is politically and culturally the closest to the United States. For this South American neighbor, defense technology has become a critical aspect of strategic reorientation and force modernization. According to author E. Richard Downes, sharing U.S. defense technology, including know-how, would strengthen U.S.-Brazil relations.

The two nations have taken initial steps to strengthen defense relations, including the 2010 Defense Cooperation Agreement and the first U.S.-Brazil Defense Cooperation Dialogue. Full implementation of 2010 agreements, pursuit of a shared vision of deeper defense cooperation, and development of a bilateral plan to advance the transfer of defense technology (and knowhow) based on Brazil's National Defense Strategy can improve defense collaboration and provide each country with important benefits.



Visit the **NDU Press** Web site
for more information on publications
at ndupress.ndu.edu