



Marine spots for his teammate, who is firing at distant, static targets on range aboard Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, California, October 2015 (U.S. Marine Corps)

With the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and the subsequent requirement to retrain a partially collapsed Iraqi military and provide advisors to moderate elements of the Syrian opposition, the primacy of the military advisory mission for U.S. forces comes again to the forefront. Though the tradition of military advising efforts is ancient, modern U.S. efforts began with Korea and Vietnam and continue with Iraq and Afghanistan. The military advisory mission has proved cost effective with relatively small footprints and inexpensive technologies, while leveraging foreign partners. These characteristics make the advisory focus both attractive and effective in today's sequestration environment.

While military advising is a core competence for U.S. special operations forces (SOF), the conventional military, with greater resources, continues to be called on to address this persistent and growing requirement; however, it does so with ad hoc organizational and personnel solutions that often achieve suboptimal results. Mainstream military culture resists the strategic significance of military advisors and often relegates this mission to a second-tier status. Hence, the Department of Defense must establish a conventional joint subunified command under U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) focused on the military advisory mission to instill the advisory skill as a core competency for conventional forces and to better support the mission.

Strategic Significance

U.S. advisory activities fall under the umbrella of foreign internal defense (FID) and security force assistance (SFA). At the strategic level, these foreign policy tools are used to reinforce partner nations and engender regional stability.¹ FID supports a host nation's (HN's) internal defense and development to protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to security.² FID has traditionally been the purview of U.S. SOF. SFA consists of military activities that "contribute to unified action by

The Missing Lever

A Joint Military Advisory Command for Partner-Nation Engagement

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the U.S. Government to support the development of the capacity and capability of foreign security forces and their supporting institutions.”³ It falls in the conventional force realm.⁴

In the FID and SFA context, advising is a preventive measure intended to stop the growth of insurgencies before they grow into severe national security threats for HN governments.⁵ By design, such advisory interventions tend to have a small footprint, with military forces providing training, education, and technical assistance to local security forces.⁶ In this role, American advisors can serve as efficient combat multipliers for these partner nations in addressing latent, emerging, or existing threats.⁷

Military advisory missions have strategic significance for the U.S. Armed Forces due to their frequency of occurrence and inordinate effect on emerging or existing security threats in relevant partner nations. These missions provide a low-cost investment with enormous leverage that can positively influence and shape the preconflict phase in threatened states, precluding later, more costly interventions. In 2008, then-U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates illuminated the importance of the contemporary military advising mission in an address to Cadets at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point: “From the standpoint of America’s national security, the most important assignment in your military career may not necessarily be commanding U.S. Soldiers, but advising or mentoring the troops of other nations as they battle the forces of terror and instability within their own borders.”⁸

Gates’s comment reflected the historical record and ongoing national security situation, where military advising forms an integral part of America’s strategy, either on a grand scale as illustrated in Operations *Iraqi Freedom* (OIF) and *Enduring Freedom* (OEF) or in places of smaller, diverse magnitudes, such as Georgia or Mali.⁹ The current world situation—with conflicts erupting throughout Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and elsewhere, as well as budgetary constraints—requires larger numbers of dedicated military advisors, rather than

generalist units, to conduct stability operations and perform peace-building tasks. This world situation suggests that the conventional military will need to cultivate a broad range of advisory skills since America does not have sufficient ground forces to meet all potential commitments and must, therefore, rely on the strategic leverage that foreign troops provide.¹⁰

Current Deficits

In the past, FID and military advising were traditionally the primary responsibility of SOF. Yet, U.S. SOF units have finite numbers of personnel and multiple operational taskings that preclude them from being the sole resource for such global advisory engagements. While expanding SOF might seem like the logical solution, the rigorous selection process for SOF operators, plus their long train-up period, prevents greatly increasing their numbers without affecting their quality. This means the training of foreign forces will become a core competency of both regular and Reserve units of all Services.¹¹

This development trend mirrors the historical experience of Vietnam, where the advising mission eventually exceeded the capability of U.S. Army Special Forces.¹² OEF and OIF have been no exception to this rule. For these campaigns, advisor teams were manned on an ad hoc basis, and the requirement for thousands of mainstream advisors in Iraq and Afghanistan represented a monumental burden and stress for the conventional armed forces.¹³ In light of recent Iraqi military performance, the effectiveness of these conventional force ad hoc advisory teams has come into question. Nevertheless, conventional forces, given their larger numbers when compared to SOF, will continue to be required to bear the load for SFA/FID operations in the future, even though their advisory skills may be inadequate.¹⁴

Unfortunately, the present organizational setup and culture for the military advising mission is sub-optimal. As Secretary Gates acknowledged, the “U.S. military was designed to defeat other armies, navies and air forces, not to

advise, train and equip them.”¹⁵ Neither the conventional Army nor Marine Corps has established an institutional foundation for specialized combat advisor capabilities, which would include dedicated force structure to advise, train, and assist partner nations.¹⁶ Similarly, the mainstream Air Force relies on ad hoc means to assess and train foreign air arms. Air Force component commands and regional staffs possess little expertise in airpower for FID operations and the associated knowledge of operating in less-developed countries.¹⁷ Equally, the conventional Navy only has minimal and immature constructs for addressing the military advisory mission. Currently, only joint SOF have a truly professional military advisory expertise in their profile. Yet SOF cannot be considered a dedicated force structure for this assignment given other mission sets such as unconventional warfare, direct action, and strategic reconnaissance. Additionally, and already noted, SOF units have limited numbers and cannot meet the demand of increasing military advisory requirements found in today’s international security context.

According to Mark Grdovic, a retired senior Special Forces officer and the author of “The Advisory Challenge” and *A Leader’s Handbook to Unconventional Warfare*:

*U.S. advisory efforts have suffered from an inaccurate perception that they are merely a sideshow effort—somewhat important, but not enough to warrant the diversion of resources from the conventional warfighting capability. . . . In order to be effective, advisory efforts must have the same criticality and legitimacy of all other major operational and strategic efforts within the military. No aspects of a military operation demonstrate its importance more clearly than the recruitment, selection and career-management of the operation’s assigned personnel. Recruitment efforts need to be selective and attract only qualified volunteers who possess the unique qualities required of an adviser. During the Vietnam War, General Creighton Abrams observed that U.S. advisers saw themselves as second class citizens in the Army and were treated as such.*¹⁸



Partner-nation members prepare for rifle range during UNITAS Amphibious 2015 at Ilha do Governador, Brazil (U.S. Marine Corps/Ricardo Davila)

This same view permeates the most recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, where despite the necessity, validity, and value of the unconventional advising mission, the mainstream military marginalized the effort and relegated it to a second-tier status.¹⁹

The danger with this marginalization approach is that many of the world's conflicts continue and military advising will be the central tool for addressing these struggles. Yet the Services forget the lessons learned over the past decades and exacerbate the organizational memory loss through defunding advisory-relevant training institutions and discarding advisory experience as a career-enhancing qualification in the personnel system.²⁰ This situation mirrors the Vietnam War, where the mainstream military steadily forgot many of the lessons learned from advising, and this organizational resistance translated into a rejection of the advising mission as a core competence.²¹

To correct such a situation, a joint subunified command is needed. Such an organizational solution takes joint force ownership of the military advisory mission in order to institutionalize such operations within the Department of Defense culture. Equally important, this construct could share lessons learned and be the official proponent for advisory professional education, doctrine, research and applications, and training to keep the military adequately balanced and prepared for future contingencies.²²

The Need for and Benefit of a Joint Subunified Command

This organizational proposal builds on a rich body of Army, Air Force, and think-tank literature focused on institutionalizing the advisory experience within the U.S. military. While these sources offer a number of different structural solutions ranging from keeping the Army advise-and-assist Brigade Combat Team

(BCT) approach²³ to the establishment of a permanent advising training center hub,²⁴ none explicitly calls for a joint subunified command. Such a command is necessary to make the advising mission joint, specialized, and institutionally mainstream.

While individual Service advisory efforts have, to date, brought some success, the current and future conflict environment requires a joint approach. Land component advisory has occupied the bulk of the discussion, but air advisory to HNs is equally important since the control of the aerial dimension is an enduring advantage most nations have over insurgents and terrorist groups. Similarly, as littoralization increases, naval advisory efforts will become paramount. Here, the U.S. Coast Guard will also be of value since it can “train and assist” for coastal patrol, fisheries oversight, and port security missions, roles that correlate well with the responsibilities of navies in developing countries.²⁵



Joint Expeditionary Team advisor teaches Afghan National Army commandos about improvised explosive devices at Camp McCloskey, Afghanistan (DOD)

Equally, a joint military advisory command meets the need for specialization. This is controversial since the Services are loath to move away from general purpose organizations. Reasons for this attitude include institutionalized cultures, budgets, processes, and personnel systems that incentivize a focus only on the main conventional missions for each Service, with all other tasks being viewed as secondary or peripheral. Representative of this perspective on military advisory, two authors wrote, “We believe that discussions to develop a custom-designed advisory force structure to replace the BCTs are moving in the wrong direction. With the proper training focus and enabler augmentation, the BCT structure has the built-in flexibility to perform any mission assigned. There is no need for wholesale force structure redesign.”²⁶ Yet such an approach results in jack-of-all-trade organizations optimized for everything, but truly excellent in no one task.

Unfortunately, considering the history of successful military advising, the mass production of effective advisory skills from generalist forces is illusory.²⁷ As one study noted, “The structure and function of specialized advise-and-assist units—specifically combat advisors—are vastly different than those of large-scale conventional units designed to wage either maneuver warfare or direct counterinsurgency.”²⁸ Hence, adapting a conventional brigade to the advisory mission is still an ad hoc solution to the challenge. Also, advising HN units and institutions requires specially selected and trained personnel to successfully accomplish these missions.²⁹ Finally, from an organizational design perspective, a standing organization, regardless of purpose, would likely produce better results than a temporary organization established in response to an emergency.³⁰ These observations point to the need for specialized joint command for military advisory activities.

To institutionalize this organization, such an entity would be created as a joint conventional force, subunified command under USSOCOM. This placement would embed it within the headquarters with the most advisory experience and allow certain synergies and cost efficiencies to be created. This military advisory subunified command would be led by a general officer, potentially a dual-hatted USSOCOM deputy commander, to oversee the selection, training, deployment, and redeployment of combat advisors.³¹ It would possess a staff and school to develop strategic concepts, create doctrine for combat advisors, and provide formal education and training for their operational employment.³² In addition, advisors would receive further instruction in language proficiency, as well as an in-depth area orientation focusing on religious, cultural, social, and economic concerns.³³ Such a joint military advisory headquarters would provide the necessary



Afghan commando noncommissioned officer gives instruction to junior enlisted commandos at Foreign Internal Defense training in Uruzgan Province, Afghanistan, March 2013 (U.S. Army/Wes Conroy)

unity of command across the Services and combatant commands to achieve synchronization for all advisory activities, while also offering a clearinghouse for advisory experience and lessons learned in regions as dissimilar as Latin America and Eastern Europe. Under current arrangements, this global knowledge transfer among Services and regions is haphazard at best.

The USSOCOM placement would engender more habitual SOF-conventional teaming that would enable the development of deeper advisory expertise, create a cadre of qualified advisory professionals, and facilitate the production of advisory doctrine and common procedures.³⁴ SOF advisory expertise could flow freely into the subunified command. The structure would also remove conventional advisors from mainstream military commands when assigned to advisory missions, thereby reducing issues of acceptance, priority of mission, and integration.³⁵

In addition to the subunified command, the Services would need to support the concept by developing career structures and incentives for advisors. These measures would include creating special skill identifiers for qualified advisors, tracking and managing advisors to use their expertise and avoid filling new advisory requirements with inexperienced personnel, and requiring military advisory

experience for promotion to the senior ranks. Based on the historical reluctance of the Services to embark on such steps, external pressure from the Secretary of Defense or Congress is needed to catalyze this process. The December 2015 announcement by the Secretary of Defense to review the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 would be an ideal opportunity for evaluating the military advisory function and mission as an integral part of the military personnel system and instituting the needed reforms.

Finally, the establishment of a new subunified command to meet either a functional or regional requirement has organizational precedents in the U.S. military experience. While their justifications differ from the proposed joint military advisory command, Alaskan Command, U.S. Cyber Command, and Joint Special Operations Command are current subunified examples in the force structure. Essentially, by standing up such a command, the Department of Defense would both institutionalize and specialize a part of the overall defense enterprise for a recognized and multifaceted mission requirement that continues unabated. The creation of an advisory subunified command would focus efforts on the complex security challenges faced by U.S. partner nations. If their threats are not

properly addressed, then their risks could incubate and ultimately threaten the U.S. homeland. Islamic terrorism and the Ebola virus are but two examples of this phenomenon.

Financing the Command

History has often confirmed that it is not superior weapons but superior organizations that are the most important factor in achieving military success, and often these organizations should be specialized and not all-purpose.³⁶ Yet in an era of declining military budgets, a new, specialized subunified command appears hard to justify. While the establishment of new commands has merit, critics note such a course of action is both costly and resource intensive, with personnel requirements for joint qualified military officers and supporting civilian and contractor staff.³⁷

But there are two strong arguments for approving this business case. First, a military advisory command is an investment in prevention to save on much higher and longer term intervention costs when partner-nation situations get out of control. For example, armed groups of ethnic Chechens confronted the government of Georgia over the Pankisi Gorge region in 2002. To address this subversion, the U.S. Government initiated a \$64 million advisory program for the individual and collective training of four battalions of the Georgian army and delivered a consignment of new or refurbished UH-1 Iroquois helicopters to successfully address this threat.³⁸ To place this expense into context, by June 2006 OIF had already cost 4,500 times as much as the Georgian program.³⁹ Hence, the example illustrates the much smaller investment required for preventive train, advise, and equip missions that often nip emerging insurgencies or conflicts before they get out of control. A subunified command would be able to synchronize such missions globally and share the lessons learned with other regions of the world.

Second, the costs to stand up a subunified command with long-term impact are miniscule compared to several weapons systems currently under development. Scaling back one of these

projects would free up budgetary funds for a joint military advisory command. A good perspective to this approach is comparing the cost of U.S. Joint Forces Command (USJFCOM) to the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program. Closing USJFCOM was part of Secretary Gates's push to eliminate \$101 billion over 5 years in unnecessary organizations and transfer those savings to weapons programs.⁴⁰ While the actual costs of USJFCOM were never exactly determined, the price tag ranged between \$400–\$750 million.⁴¹ These figures pale in comparison to the F-35 program. As of December 31, 2013, the total acquisition cost of the F-35 program was about \$323.5 billion.⁴² This equates to an average procurement cost per aircraft (without engine) of \$89 million.⁴³ Although a joint subunified command would cost less than a full combatant command such as USJFCOM, even taking the high figure for a USJFCOM-like structure of \$750 million would imply reducing the F-35 program by nine aircraft. Such a reallocation is certainly pragmatic and justifiable if the future security environment is more about personnel-intensive partner-nation interactions than technology and high-end warfare. While this question requires a risk-adjusted answer, recent and current events in Syria, Nigeria, Ukraine, and other locations seem to indicate the former state of affairs, rather than the latter.

Conclusions

The future is about working with partner nations and leveraging their capabilities to suppress security threats before they propagate. The main path for achieving this objective is through the military advisory mission. By creating an affordable joint subunified command under U.S. Special Operations Command, the Department of Defense would take a proactive step to reducing latent or emerging global threats. Through this institutionalization and specialization, ad hoc advisory solutions for general-purpose forces would be avoided and the wealth of advisory experience from Operation *Iraqi Freedom*, Operation *Enduring*

Freedom, and other smaller missions would be preserved, transmitted, developed, and enhanced for future advisory endeavors. Overall, this step to a joint advisory command is an excellent financial investment to avoid larger future intervention costs while leveraging other nations' military assets to achieve greater regional and global security objectives. In the end, investment in organizational effectiveness trumps superior weaponry and technology. JFQ

Notes

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³ JP 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, November 8, 2010, as amended though November 2014), 96; and JP 3-22, VI-32.

⁴ McAdam, 55–58.

⁵ Alan J. Vick et al., *Air Power in the New Counterinsurgency Era: The Strategic Importance of USAF Advisory and Assistance Missions* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2006), 70.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ John A. Nagl, "Institutionalizing Adaptation: It's Time for an Army Advisory Command," *Military Review*, September–October 2008, 21–26.

⁸ Robert M. Gates, speech, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New York, April 21, 2008.

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¹⁰ Remi Hajjar, "What Lessons Did We Learn (or Re-Learn) About Military Advising After 9/11?" *Military Review*, November–December 2014, 63–75, specifically 66; and Nagl, 21–26.

¹¹ Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, 2006), 6-3.

¹² Hajjar, 63–75, specifically 64.

¹³ McAdam, 55–58; and Remi M. Hajjar, "Military Warriors as Peacekeeper-Diplomats: Building Productive Relationships with Foreign Counterparts in the Contemporary Military Advising Mission," *Armed Forces & Society* 40, no. 4 (October 2014), 647–672.

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¹⁵ Robert M. Gates, "The Future of U.S. Security Assistance: Helping Others Help Themselves," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 3 (2010), 2–5.

¹⁶ David W. Barno, Andrew Exum, and Matthew Irvine, *The Next Fight: Time for a Change of Mission in Afghanistan*, Policy Brief (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2011).

¹⁷ Vick et al., 139.

¹⁸ Mark Grdovic, "The Advisory Challenge," *Special Warfare*, January–February 2008, 22–28, specifically 28.

¹⁹ Hajjar, "Military Warriors," 647–672.

²⁰ McAdam, 55–58.

²¹ Hajjar, "Military Warriors," 647–672.

²² John R. Moulton II, *Role of Air Force Special Operations in Foreign Internal Defense* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1991); and Hajjar, "Military Warriors," 647–672.

²³ See Philip Battaglia and Curtis Taylor, "Security Force Assistance Operations: Defining the Advise and Assist Brigade," *Military Review*, July–August 2010, 2–9.

²⁴ See Linda Robinson et al., *Lessons from Thirteen Years of War Point to a Better U.S. Strategy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2014); and Hajjar, "What Lessons Did We Learn," 63–75, specifically 72–73.

²⁵ For a discussion of littoralization see David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); FM 3-24, 6-3.

²⁶ Battaglia and Taylor, 2–9.

²⁷ Anna Simons, "Rebalancing U.S. Military Power," *Parameters* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2013–2014), 35–44.

²⁸ Barno, Exum, and Irvine.

²⁹ JP 3-22, VI-33.

³⁰ Pirone.

³¹ For a similar, but more Afghanistan-centric view, see Barno, Exum, and Irvine.

³² Nagl, 21–26; and Moulton II.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ See Robinson et al.

³⁵ Hajjar, "What Lessons Did We Learn," 63–75, specifically 69.

³⁶ Kevin D. Stringer, *Military Organizations for Homeland Defense and Smaller-Scale Contingencies: A Comparative Approach* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 6.

³⁷ Andrew Feickert, *The Unified Command Plan and Combatant Commands: Background and Issues for Congress*, R42077 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, January 3, 2013), 61–62.

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⁴³ *Ibid.*, 16.