

Green Berets with 2nd Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne), and Explosive Ordnance Disposal Specialists with 25th Infantry Division conduct clearing procedures while evacuating simulated casualty during Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center rotation 23-01 training exercise on Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, November 7, 2022 (U.S. Army/Ryan Hohman)



Special Operations Forces Institution-Building From Strategic Approach to Security Force Assistance

By Kevin D. Stringer

The Ukrainian Special Operations Command (UKRSOCOM) and its subordinate tactical units have emerged as significant contribu-

tors to the defense of Ukraine in the face of ongoing Russian aggression. Conducting a full range of both conventional and special operations

missions—including mobile defense, guerrilla operations, direct action, and support to resistance in occupied areas—UKRSOCOM displays the qualities of a rapidly maturing special operations organization currently being tested in the crucible of combat. A contributing element to the development of UKRSOCOM as an institution was

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an experimental U.S. Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR) advisory approach, based on an earlier initiative with Belgium, that aimed to establish a framework for developing and sustaining special operations forces (SOF)'s institutional capabilities at the national level.

As background, U.S. SOF invested years in advising and assisting European partners to build and deploy special operations tactical units of excellence to campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, as well as counterterrorism actions globally. Unfortunately, while U.S. SOF concentrated on advising at the tactical level, they ignored the institutional level. Gradually, many European states realized they possessed an insufficient strategic SOF institutional framework for sustaining forces and organizing national and coalition operations in an emerging near-peer threat environment. This situation reconfirmed a recurring problem within broader U.S. security force assistance (SFA)—a tendency to build a force without first establishing the necessary institutional framework.¹ Maintaining SOF capability requires establishing the defense institutional systems that can contribute to SOF development. By 2014, certain European policymakers recognized the requirement for strategic-level SOF structures to address a deteriorating European security environment and to better manage and employ scarce SOF human and material resources.² Beginning in 2016, SOCEUR, in collaboration with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Special Operations Headquarters (NSHQ), pioneered a SOF institution-building (SOFIB) advisory approach, nested within the broader U.S. security cooperation (SC) concept, to support specific NATO Allies and select partners in their development of special operations command (SOCOM)-like structures intended to unify various national units while providing SOF-specific institutional functions for a more effective and sustainable force. Given the inherent joint nature of SOF, these SOFIB insights offer the joint forces recommendations on SFA activities in the future.

This article highlights the SOFIB approach and its nesting within the U.S. SC and SFA framework. It then shows how SOFIB reconceptualizes SFA from its heavy tactical application, as seen in Afghanistan, Somalia, and Syria, and shifts efforts to national- and institutional-level defense assistance for capable European allies and partners. It then illustrates the application of SOFIB through the representative but differing cases of Belgium and Ukraine, while providing an overview of the supporting SOCEUR and, in the case of Ukraine, NSHQ strategic advisory efforts, using SOFIB objectives as a framework of analysis. The article then provides overall joint lessons learned concerning SOF transformation at the national level that can inform SFA best practices for the future.

SC, SFA, Foreign Internal Defense, and SOFIB

SOFIB is nested within the overall U.S. SC and SFA framework but differs from SC and SFA generic activities with its concentration on SOF as well as its advising focus at the national and institutional levels. SOFIB also differs from foreign internal defense (FID) because of its stronger accent on peacetime engagement at the institutional level to prepare for both internal and external threats. SC is a broad range of programs and activities that the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) executes on behalf of the U.S. Department of State as well as “all [DOD] interactions, programs, and activities with foreign security forces (FSF) and their institutions.”³ It could thus be any advisory program or mission between the United States and another country. The United States pursues SC for a number of reasons, with one being to support the institutional development of foreign security organizations.⁴ This last motive is actually SFA, defined as “the set of DOD activities that contribute to unified action by the [U.S. Government] to support the development of capacity and capabilities of FSF and their supporting institutions.”⁵ In contrast, FID, defined as the “participation by civilian agencies and military forces of a govern-

ment or international organizations in any of the programs and activities undertaken by a host nation government to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to its security,” is traditionally a SOF mission with a strong focus on internal threats. SOFIB falls more readily within the SFA space rather than that of FID, given its stronger emphasis on peacetime engagement at the institutional level to prepare for both internal and external threats.⁶

Traditional SFA has not been without problems.⁷ Most approaches seem to concentrate too much on the tactical level, to include training and equipping, as opposed to more valuable SFA programs, which address “higher-order questions of mission, organizational structure, and personnel.”⁸ Major SFA failures in Iraq and Afghanistan have led to serious questions about its efficacy as an instrument of U.S. national security policy.⁹ In these two countries, the United States invested billions of dollars as well as the human resources to support two decades of training and advising the security forces—only to watch them collapse in the face of so-called Islamic State or Taliban offensives.¹⁰ On a spectrum of partner development, traditional SFA seems to best describe U.S. activities with weak states such as Afghanistan and Somalia, whereas security “defense cooperation” better characterizes advising capable allies and partners to improve their combined operations.¹¹

One example of this delineation can be found in Ukraine. Although Russian actions are dangerous for Ukraine in the current war, Ukraine is not a weak state, and its military has capabilities; hence, U.S. assistance aims to improve national warfighting competencies often “through . . . ideational assistance.”¹² This latter emphasis characterizes the SOFIB methodology for peer or proficient SOF partners. The SOFIB approach aligns with the view that at the strategic level, U.S. advising objectives may achieve the greatest returns by emphasizing the development of more sophisticated headquarters functions and staff efficiencies, which enable upper-tier partner



Belgian special forces sniper team identifies targets 2,000 meters away, September 11, 2018, during International Special Training Centre High-Angle/Urban Course, at Hochfilzen Training Area, Austria (U.S. Army/Benjamin Haulenbeek)



Belgian special forces sniper teams fire on long-range targets from elevated shooting range during International Special Training Centre High-Angle/Urban Course, at Hochfilzen Training Area, Austria, September 30, 2020 (U.S. Army/Patrik Orcutt)

interoperability.¹³ Furthermore, with capable allies and partners, the accent is on liaison, consulting, and advisory activities as opposed to training, exercises, and support. The result of such a strategic- and national-level advisory effort is the aspirational pinnacle of security force effectiveness—combined, joint, and inter-agency integration and effectiveness.¹⁴

SOFIB Requests for Support and SOFIB Objectives

In 2016, SOCEUR received requests from several European countries for assistance with establishing SOF command structures and organizations

at the national level appropriate for their state security missions and military cultures. Both the changing European security environment and NATO pressure contributed to the need for SOF transformation and reform. For the environment, the rise of Russia as an adversary and Islamic terrorist attacks in Europe catalyzed national military discussions about the role and organization of SOF. Additionally, NATO encouraged member states to make structural reforms to their SOF beginning in 2013. The primary aim was to address SOF shortfalls, particularly in SOF command and control capabilities.¹⁵

In creating these strategic organizations, the European SOF counterparts aimed to achieve a mix of four general SOFIB objectives:

- SOF autonomy, defined as the national SOF institutions' achievement of a greater degree of independence from the respective military services. This goal endeavored to elevate an integrated SOF organization within a national defense hierarchy to increase SOF independence and reduce subordination to the conventional land, sea, and air services. The generic issue is that without a unique



SOF command or proponent, conventional military services are often uninterested in SOF as a joint entity, with the resultant underemployment or misuse of SOF capabilities.

- Joint and interagency SOF integration, defined as the establishment of unity of command for joint SOF elements as well as the creation of greater connections to other relevant national agencies. This aspiration intended to consolidate often distributed SOF joint functions under one command while structurally enhancing interagency collaboration through the elevation of permanent

SOF representation and expertise to the general or joint staff level.

- SOF operational command and control (C2) capabilities, defined as the creation of a SOF national-level headquarters element with a core SOF organization and staff. The goal was to establish a C2 capability for NATO, regional, or coalition constructs while taking control and oversight of SOF readiness, capability development, and operational employment.
- SOF service-like competencies, defined as man, train, and equip functions, in order to better manage SOF recruitment, improve retention, own budget resources, and control SOF-specific procurement.¹⁶

Given the above objectives, and the fact that this type of strategic advisory effort was neither a standard SOCEUR nor a standard U.S. Special Operations Command mission, SOCEUR reorganized an existing staff division in 2016 to support a group of prioritized countries on their journeys to establish national SOCOM-like entities. Belgium and Ukraine serve as illustrative vignettes of the SOFIB application. To note, the respective U.S. country team senior defense officer (SDO) and office of defense cooperation (ODC) facilitated the SOFIB requests from both Belgium and Ukraine but were not directly involved in the advisory process.

Belgian Special Operations Command Initiative

In 2016, the Belgian Ministry of Defense published its *Strategic Vision for Defence* through 2030. This national security document led to the creation of the Belgian SOCOM and initiated the start of a larger SOF change project. Prior to the publication of this strategic guidance, Belgian SOF capabilities were centered on a single tactical formation that was increasingly underresourced for an expanding joint and interagency mission set. Key considerations for this transformation included the increasing relevance of irregular warfare, the use of Belgian SOF for homeland security and counterterrorism operations, the require-

ment to protect Belgian citizens abroad, and the rise of Russian aggression on the Eastern European periphery.¹⁷ The *Strategic Vision* mandated a transformation of Belgian SOF to include:

- establishment of a SOF command to better manage special operations
- investments in a Tier 1 special forces group to include a personnel expansion of its core elements
- conversion of the two airborne para-commando battalions into Ranger-like units with specialized enablers—air assets, counter-improvised explosive device experts, and military working dog teams
- acquisition of several short takeoff and landing (STOL) aircraft specific to SOF
- participation of Belgian SOF in a composite special operations component command (C-SOCC), together with the Netherlands and Denmark, to meet NATO SOF operational C2 requirements.¹⁸

A critical element of this change was the creation of a to-be-defined SOCOM to oversee the command and development of Belgian SOF. This step would also provide a national-level mechanism for better connecting to Belgian intelligence, law enforcement, and diplomatic agencies.

The Belgian SOF project team requested SOCEUR advisory support to discuss the overall SOF transformation and the specifics of the Belgian Special Operations Command (BELSOCOM) requirement. The U.S. national interest in supporting this initiative was the opportunity to greatly enhance the SOF capabilities of an important NATO Ally for future combined, coalition, or Alliance operations, as well as potential SOF burden-sharing in regions of mutual importance. A unique aspect of this and other SOFIB advisory efforts was its strategic and iterative, rather than instructional and tactical, nature, given the peer-to-peer SOF relationship. Belgian SOF possess high levels of expertise and capability; hence the advising relationship could be likened to that of collaborative partners in a consulting or executive

coaching arrangement. The initial workshop focused on the topics of project setup and management, to include governance. An early recommendation was the need to structure the steering committee with general officer-level sponsorship and appropriate interagency representation to ensure a successful outcome. Through the exchange, both teams agreed that a Belgian-specific doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership (and education), personnel, and facilities (DOTMLPF) framework would serve as a good structure for this complex transformation.

After analysis and acknowledgment of potential Belgian organizational and political resistance, key U.S. design recommendations were to establish a unified joint SOF command and staff on par with the land and air component commands, directed by a one- or two-star general officer. Interestingly, this U.S. proposal mirrored that of a Belgian think tank brief, which advocated the creation of a flag officer-led SOCOM, light enough to lead national special operations activities yet robust enough for the C-SOCC contribution.¹⁹ If this step was too great, the U.S.-recommended interim stage was the stand-up of a SOF directorate, subordinated to the chief of defense, to facilitate the transition. A secondary U.S. recommendation was for the definition of what a Belgian para-commando unit should accomplish for SOF tasks, and the identification of the capability gaps within its existing mission sets, organization, training, and equipment. The U.S. advisors cautioned against simply copying either the U.S. Ranger Regiment or the British Special Forces Support Group model, considering them inappropriate for Belgian needs. Additionally, both the Belgian and U.S. teams agreed to conduct further analysis on the integration of SOF air assets into the new structure. For the latter point, the Belgian *Strategic Vision* authorized a specialized SOF aviation capability consisting of four small STOL aircraft, primarily for SOF insertions and extractions in austere environments.²⁰ Given that these assets were totally new in the force structure, would require some level of joint integration with the

conventional air force, and would introduce greater joint complexity for even a very capable peer, the SOCEUR team recommended a separate and more detailed follow-up meeting with a U.S. SOF air advisory team.

Belgian Special Operations Command Outcomes

Ultimately, Belgian defense leadership accepted the majority of the Belgian project team's transformation recommendations, and the outcomes of this case provided instructive SOFIB lessons for U.S. SOF. The selected Belgian generic model of SOF organization comprises a SOCOM integrated in the general staff, with the SOF tactical units placed under a regimental (brigade)-level headquarters and maintained under service jurisdiction for readiness purposes.

BELSOCOM emerged as a small, embedded special operations directorate within the general staff, led by a colonel (foreseen to be a brigadier general). BELSOCOM is the SOF advisor for the chief of defense and the larger defense staff. It serves as the central hub for all SOF matters and is responsible for aligning the national SOF structure to defense requirements. BELSOCOM is the primary point of contact for all joint, combined, and interagency cooperation. BELSOCOM also conducts strategic foresight activities and contributes to the planning and direction of all special operations.²¹ Explicitly, BELSOCOM is "designed to facilitate cross ministry cooperation and ensures Ministry of Defense and General Staff policies, programs, budgets, strategies, and regulations account for, and enable the development, sustainment, and employment of, Belgian Special Operation Forces."²² BELSOCOM assists the newly created Special Operations Regiment in fields such as the strategic planning of SOF capacity (included in the NATO defense-planning process), planning the future employment of SOF, and the procurement of SOF-specific items. The then Belgian minister of defense, Steven Vandeput, reiterated that BELSOCOM is the crucial integrating element in the new SOF regiment's environment. He stated:

Together with the creation process of the Special Operations Regiment, a Special Operations Command . . . was set up in mid-2017. Although the SO units don't directly come under the SOCOM, the latter can be considered as the Belgian center for expertise for special operations. Because of its place in the defense structure, SOCOM is the point of contact for international and interdepartmental cooperation concerning special operations. SOCOM is also in charge of drafting the Composite Special Operations Component Command project where Belgium, with the Netherlands and Denmark, is developing a deployable SOF HQ that can be made available to NATO.²³

At the tactical and operational levels, the SOF organization remained under the auspices of the Belgian Land Component Command. The existing conventional Light Brigade, under the leadership of a colonel, was rebranded and converted to the Special Operations Regiment, composed of the Special Forces Group, the 2nd Commando Battalion, the 3rd Parachute Battalion, the battalion-level 6th Communication and Information Systems Group, and related training centers. Much more than just a name change, this alteration initiated a series of changes in multiple dimensions. The Special Operations Regiment now commands all special operations land forces and is entrusted with their permanent training, instruction, and personnel management.²⁴

For NATO purposes, BELSOCOM led the creation of the C-SOCC with its Dutch and Danish counterparts. The genesis for the C-SOCC concept occurred in the fall of 2013, when during a NATO SOF commanders' conference in Norway, the delegates of four nations were invited to a sidebar meeting with an NSHQ representative. At the time, NSHQ was looking for ways to increase NATO SOF C2 capacities. The idea was to generate more special operations component commands (SOCCs) to support NATO's operations.²⁵ A SOCC is a headquarters formation of 70 to 150 personnel who provide an organic, rapidly deployable C2 node for NATO contingencies.



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky presents state medals to Ukrainian Special Operations Forces during ceremony, July 29, 2022, in Odesa, Ukraine (Ukrainian Presidential Press Office)

The initial objective was to prepare a C-SOCC for a NATO Response Force (NRF) commitment. To succeed, it needed high-level ministry of defense support, and in 2017, the defense ministries of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Denmark signed a letter of intent, formalized in 2018 with a memorandum of understanding, that facilitated the endeavor. According to the Special Operations Regiment's commander:

The project team had to overcome many obstacles to include the identification of common procedures, establishment of ways to share classified information, and the creation of[a] multi-year training schedule

to build the capacity. . . . With regard to staffing, positions had to be distributed in a balanced manner between the three nations, with the key positions rotating according [to] a fixed schedule.²⁶

The new BELSOCOM construct was instrumental in allowing the Belgian defense ministry to successfully execute this initiative. Eventually, after having conducted multiple exercises under the scrutiny of NSHQ, the C-SOCC was declared fully operational in 2020; it became the NRF SOCC in 2021.²⁷ Thereafter, it remains a core SOF C2 node for future Alliance or coalition requirements.

In light of the SOFIB objectives, the BELSOCOM case demonstrates the challenges of SOF organizational transformation. For SOF autonomy, Belgian SOF (BELSOF) did not become their own service but gained a higher degree of self-sufficiency under the Belgian Land Component. For integration, the creation of BELSOCOM as a special operations directorate offered a central node for interagency interactions. This decision follows best practice in that SOF perform exceptionally well when supporting a comprehensive interagency effort.²⁸ BELSOCOM also provides the project core for SOF operational C2 capabilities in the form of the trinational C-SOCC.



Belgian paratrooper assigned to Special Forces Group, Special Operations Regiment, performs freefall jump under supervision of jumpmasters assigned to CE Para training center, on Chièvres Air Base, Belgium, April 19, 2022 (U.S. Army/Pierre-Etienne Courtejoie)

BELSOCOM's placement within the general staff serves as an initial step to its development of service-like functions. This important implementation step created a double challenge. On the one hand, the SOCOM had to find its place within the general staff, and on the other hand, the relationship between the SOCOM and the services had to be clearly and iteratively defined. In essence, although not all SOFIB objectives were fully met, the interim result produced a more strategic and capable SOF construct for Belgian national security, as well as enhanced interoperability

and collaboration with its U.S., European Union, and NATO partners.

In this case study, U.S. SOFIB, as a more refined and strategic form of SFA, contributed to this outcome with U.S. advisors serving as “sparring partners” and “consultants” for a peer ally. With this enterprise effort, the overall BELSOF capability is poised to provide policymakers with an expanded range of scalable, immediately available, and increasingly sophisticated joint options that can be employed as an initial response to a variety of crises or as a complement to

other national, international, or inter-departmental capabilities. BELSOF is committed to continually challenging and reinventing itself to remain effective and relevant—especially in the new security environment, seemingly subjected once again to Great Power competition.²⁹

Ukrainian Special Operations Command Endeavor

In contrast to Belgian SOF's longstanding membership and efficacy within NATO and its high level of interoperability with Allies, particularly

the United States, Ukrainian SOF had a very different starting point for its institution-building endeavors. As an offspring of the Soviet Union's special forces (Spetsnaz), Ukrainian SOF inherited a Soviet-style hierarchy and a culture and mindset that were not conducive to integration with Western special forces units. With U.S. assistance, Ukraine undertook efforts to modernize its SOF in the early 2000s, but by 2009 the project was halted due to a lack of Ukrainian political support. As early as 2008, the Ukrainian general staff and ministry of defense had attempted to develop a consolidated and independent SOF service within the Ukrainian armed forces, but the government rejected this initiative. From 2008 to 2015, a special operations directorate operated within the general staff as a coordination and advising element, with special forces dispersed across different services and branches of the Ukrainian armed forces and mostly misused as "elite" infantry.³⁰

Catalyzed by Russian aggression in Crimea and the Donbas in 2014, Ukrainian political leadership initiated several NATO-supported defense and security reforms, which included specific mandates to transform its SOF. In 2015, the general staff and ministry of defense developed and signed a concept for the formation and development of the SOF and simultaneously established UKRSOCOM.³¹ Two enduring institution-specific challenges during this period were the dispersion of SOF capabilities and responsibilities across a number of military, intelligence, and internal security organizations, and the residue of the earlier Soviet-style culture.

In 2016, Ukraine's parliament passed a law creating the Special Operations Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (UKRSOF) as a separate and independent service within the armed forces, with the appropriate consolidation of existing special forces units under one command.³² This decision allowed the genesis of a U.S. SOFIB advisory initiative tasked with assisting with the development of UKRSOCOM and the transformation of its subordinate units

into NATO-compatible forces. Because this transformation is ongoing as of this article's publication, as well as affected by the continuing war with Russia, the next sections cover only the 2017–2019 period.

In 2017, upon mutual agreement, UKRSOCOM requested an initial SOCEUR advisory team to conduct a SOFIB scoping workshop. This initiative aligned with U.S. national interests to support Ukraine as a developing European partner as well as to counter Russian aggression on Ukraine's eastern front. Although the valuable SOFIB experiences from Belgium and another NATO country aided preparation for this initial engagement, there were a number of issues that emerged in hindsight. In general, this advisory mission was much more complex than the BELSOCOM collaboration because of both the Ukrainian starting point and the U.S. and Ukrainian shortcomings in the advisory relationship. Additionally, there were notable differences between working with a longtime, interoperable NATO Ally versus an emerging, non-Alliance partner. U.S. mission analysis determined that the initial advising stage would concentrate heavily on UKRSOF force design, force generation, and SC requirements. Unknown to the well-meaning U.S. advisors, Lithuanian SOF had already been in place since 2014 in an institutional advisory role and were dual-hatted to represent the NSHQ in Ukraine in 2015. Lithuania had assisted UKRSOCOM with the development of a SOF development plan circa 2015–2016, but this proposal was totally overlooked in the U.S. SOFIB effort.³³ Aspects of the Lithuanian proposal eventually seeped into the overall plan, but this oversight cost valuable time and understanding.

For force design, the collaborative session, conducted with Lithuanian SOF participation, produced a high-level concept of five components. First, it proposed new staff configurations and education at the UKRSOCOM level. Second, it recommended restructured units and staffs at the three primary subordinate SOF regiments—the 3rd, 8th, and 73rd. Third, it articulated a process to link special forces qualification at

the Ukrainian 142nd Training Center to regimental manning. Fourth, it urged that force generation through a revised qualification course become an essential element in staffing the regiments and UKRSOCOM with SOF-qualified personnel. Finally, the SOFIB sessions identified the necessity for a heavy SC component, in both education and equipment, for transforming UKRSOCOM. This SC element was significant for the SOFIB effort for both political and interoperability reasons. Geopolitically, the provision of U.S. SOF equipment and training was intended to wean UKRSOCOM from its Russian legacy, while simultaneously increasing interoperability with both U.S. and NATO forces.

For the American advisors, knowledge in special forces organizational design within a NATO context, special forces qualification program management, and SC became essential to providing the right guidance and advice in this initial SOFIB phase. Unfortunately, on the first point, SOCEUR advisors were often unfamiliar with NATO doctrine and standards, resulting in Ukrainian SOF's receiving force design inputs that were compatible to, but not fully in line with, NATO doctrine and standards. This gap required adjustments in later years to meet NATO certification standards.

For the Ukrainian special forces qualification course, the SOFIB design did not consider several critical elements. Most significantly, the personnel intake, output, and retention calculations were off, resulting in a manning plan that did not fully achieve its objectives. Additionally, a 6-month qualification course, followed by additional advanced skills training, proved unsustainable when juxtaposed with Ukrainian SOF deployment requirements against the Russian-supported separatist regions. Finally, the program did not include an instructor qualification component. Thus, when trainers attrited, the United States was left with the responsibility of training the next set of instructors.

Finally, security assistance was based on U.S.-generated tables of organization and equipment, which were inaccurate.

Equipment deliveries for Ukrainian SOF units were not timed to coincide with development priorities, nor was the United States aware of the Ukrainian requirement to certify equipment for use. As a result of this requirement, SOF equipment (such as boats) sat idle for extended periods of time (over a year) while awaiting certification.

The main partner challenges were threefold. First, UKRSOCOM's lack of English-language skills at the senior level made the use of qualified interpreters essential to overcome the communication barrier. This condition introduced a cumbersome element in all interactions; it expanded the time required for discussions and placed emphasis on interpreter quality, given the institutional level of the discussions. Second, the UKRSOCOM point of departure for transformation created a much longer time horizon for institutional change. Unlike Belgium, with its highly proficient and established NATO SOF force, Ukraine was just at the beginning of its SOF institutional journey. This situation meant that SOCEUR SOFIB efforts would require strategic patience through several U.S. command cycles and over consecutive fiscal years. Third, UKRSOCOM lacked "jointness." A SOF air component did not exist, and the maritime component had been decimated by the Crimean invasion with the loss of its basing, equipment, and personnel. These circumstances would necessitate a multiyear SC package for reviving, equipping, and training these joint elements. On the U.S. advisory side, one main cultural SFA bias needed to be overcome. The Afghan and Iraqi SFA experiences had reinforced the tendency to provide U.S. solutions and models that were wholly inappropriate for partner forces. This troubling trend leads to suboptimal outcomes, especially at the institutional level, where a partner does not have the culture, staff capacity, or resource capabilities to sustain a U.S.-inspired force model. As U.S. SOFIB advisors rotated on the UKRSOCOM initiative, this cultural issue was closely monitored.

As the discussions progressed, a further significant issue to address was the need to nest SOCEUR SOFIB efforts

within a broader NATO framework and context to avoid duplication of effort. In response to Russian aggression, NATO had reinvigorated its support to Ukrainian defense and security reforms, which the Alliance defined practically through the partnership planning and review process (PARP) and more recently established comprehensive assistance package (CAP) for Ukraine.³⁴ Operating within the frameworks of the PARP and CAP, NSHQ rendered advice and assistance to Ukrainian SOF development, guided by Ukraine's initially stated aim of achieving full NATO interoperability by 2020. Alongside NSHQ's organizational contributions, several Allies—Poland, Lithuania, the United Kingdom, and Estonia, to name a few—were also engaging Ukrainian SOF through various bilateral and multilateral formats. SOCEUR, in discussions with NSHQ, recognized that without coordination of these efforts, duplication and inefficiencies would impede Ukrainian SOF development.

Recognizing the risk of redundancy, SOF representatives from eight nations, including the United States, convened at NSHQ in November 2017 to design a unified approach to supporting Ukrainian SOF development.³⁵ The group began by simply sharing engagement schedules. As the meeting progressed, participants reprogrammed conflicting events and realigned activities to achieve greater synergy. NSHQ did not have a mandate to compel nations to continue this sort of collaboration, nor did the attendees have the authority to subordinate their national efforts to a collective cause.

Yet the benefit of this cooperative approach was clear to all. The group thus devised the term *multinational SOF advisory team* (MSAT) and unofficially declared that all Allies engaged in supporting Ukrainian SOF development would coordinate via the MSAT mechanism. The MSAT would meet quarterly, along with its Ukrainian SOF counterparts, to analyze progress, synchronize activity, and update the development plan. For its part, NSHQ maintains the mutually agreed SOF development plan and ensures that the plan is linked to the

PARP and CAP. Though imperfect and still evolving, the MSAT approach helps ensure that allied support, including U.S. SOFIB, to Ukrainian SOF development, tactical through institutional, is coherently accounted for and executed.

Within the SOFIB framework of autonomy, joint and interagency integration, operational C2 capabilities, and service-like competencies, the UKRSOCOM transformation highlights the challenges of SOF institutional change. Overall and while still ongoing, the UKRSOCOM transformation shows moderate progress toward the generic SOFIB objectives, albeit over a longer time horizon and with the commensurately longer commitment of U.S. and NATO resources.

For SOF autonomy, despite the naturally occurring organizational friction and inertia, the Ukraine parliamentary





Belgian special forces advise Nigerian soldiers during class on ground movement and attacking an objective, at Camp Po, Burkina Faso, on February 20, 2019, during Flintlock 19 (U.S. Army/Richard Bumgardner)

decision in 2016 provided the necessary political impetus and authority to allow the creation of a true SOF service component, commanded by a general officer. For joint SOF integration, the rebuilding of the 73rd Maritime Special Purpose Center and the development of a SOF air component are multiyear projects, and the construction of joint cooperation and a joint culture is expected to proceed slowly over the years.

In terms of SOF operational C2 capabilities, UKRSOCOM is at a nascent stage, but it has made progress with the NATO certification of a Ukrainian special operations land task group for a future NATO NRF-SOCC under a designated lead nation.³⁶ This Polish and Lithuanian SOF-supported achievement is significant for NATO SOF interoperability; the November 2002 NATO Summit in Prague established the NRF to replace the

Allied Command Europe Mobile Force. The NRF includes land, maritime, air, and special operations components ready for immediate evacuation or crisis response operations around the globe.³⁷ Ukraine's achievement, as part of its SOFIB process, allows it to contribute to NATO missions within the NRF framework.

Finally, UKRSOCOM develops its SOF service competencies steadily through the implementation and application of SOFIB partner advice and the accompanying SC packages in the areas of personnel, training, and equipment. A good example of the latter is the SOCEUR SOFIB advisor recommendation to UKRSOCOM to provide temperature-controlled, weather-resistant U.S. Alaska tents, mounted on concrete pads, to ensure the health and well-being of UKRSOF candidates attempting the SOF qualification course.³⁸

Although weapons may seem more important, the procurement of the tents via SC monies increased the pass rate of Ukrainian special forces operators, which enhanced the overall combat readiness of the organization. For a formation of approximately 6,500 personnel, with fewer than 2,000 operators, force generation plays a significant role for strategic success.³⁹ Yet the provision of these tents raises broader questions about this type of U.S. security force assistance: Is SOFIB using a systems approach for facilities and other DOTMLPF themes? Are the tents merely a one-off transaction or an interim step toward an enduring facilities solution, alongside specific range requirements, roads within the training areas, firebreaks, and other needed infrastructure requirements? Is multiyear funding secured for these developments? Such questions emphasize

the need for a long-term and deliberate perspective for SOFIB and more generic U.S. SFA efforts.

Lessons Learned on SOF Transformation and Implications for Future SFA

The Belgian and Ukrainian SOF institutional transformation cases are representative of a larger SOFIB group of countries and demonstrate five lessons learned for potential future U.S. SFA activities.

There Must Be a Focus on National-Level Organizational Transformation. Political willpower and legal foundations are needed for such change.⁴⁰ A parliamentary decision in the case of Ukraine and a policy-level mandate for Belgium created the necessary legal and policy parameters for SOFIB. The effort is not solely a military activity; hence, it requires a broad range of U.S. advisors—officers, noncommissioned officers, and government civilians—who are both innovative and politically astute.⁴¹ The development of SOCOM-like structures with allies and partners occurs in a dynamic national political-military environment, and U.S. advisors must be cognizant of the political dimensions of such SFA initiatives.

General Officer-Level Sponsorship and Involvement Are Necessary. If flag officer representation is not available, the existing bureaucracy will tend toward inertia and not implement the necessary changes. In both case countries, defense leadership designated an appropriate leader—a major general in Belgium, a lieutenant general in Ukraine—to catalyze the effort. For the United States, this requirement implies a reciprocal general officer focus and commitment over multiple command cycles. The current 2-year rotational command cycle for U.S. general officers is not conducive to such long-term and deliberate SFA initiatives. If changing this rigid U.S. personnel policy is unrealistic, then the general officer transitions need to be better managed to provide continuity for these long-term SFA initiatives.

There Must Be Highly Qualified Joint Staff Officers From All Partner Countries. Selected officers from the

partner country serve as the primary interface with U.S. joint advisory teams. Fortunately, both Belgium and Ukraine selected the best of their joint SOF talent pool to lead their respective efforts. This prerequisite applies equally to the U.S. advisor profile, which needs further refinement. Foremost, U.S. officers who conduct such SFA operations require joint expertise and experience because SOF by nature is a joint force in both the U.S. and foreign contexts. Although the maritime and air SOF components of many allies and partners are underdeveloped, they must be considered in an institutional construct, which requires that the advisors understand how a joint force should function. This situation means that advisors must come to the engagement already fully joint professional military education II-qualified—a condition regularly not met on geographic combatant command and component staffs.

Equally, cross-cultural interpersonal skills and experience are critical for successful advisory communication and relationship development because SOFIB in Europe is often more iterative and collaborative rather than instructional. This observation reinforces the lessons of earlier U.S. advisory experience in the Middle East, which confirmed that cross-cultural competence is crucial for success.⁴² This view also aligns with the DOD description: “An advisor’s primary purpose is to create professional relationships that will inspire and influence their counterparts, and their counterparts’ organization, to become more effective and accomplish their missions, while putting in place sustainable processes that will endure beyond their tour as an advisor.”⁴³

Finally, SC knowledge and project management skills round out the advisory profile. In fact, these latter knowledge areas are often the most challenging to develop. This reflection implies potentially incorporating these themes in core joint professional military education. Another possibility would be to increase the role of the country team SDO or ODC in providing this knowledge. The main

concern with this option is the limited bandwidth of the SDO and ODC for engagements. Particularly in the Ukraine case, the military element of the country team was already managing a large portfolio of programs and activities, and while well informed on the SOFIB activities, its members were not participatory in the process due to other commitments.

There Must Be Design Tailoring.

A national SOF institution requires a pattern based on a unique state context and its political-military characteristics; foreign and U.S. models may be useful for the iterative discussion but should not necessarily be replicated.

Due Diligence/Information on Earlier or Parallel Efforts Is Required. As demonstrated by the UKRSOCOM case study, the United States needs to discover, acknowledge, and align with earlier, existing, or potential Allied or coalition efforts ongoing within an SFA initiative to avoid duplication, repetition, or the crowding out of other SFA providers. Rather than taking a unilateral approach, U.S. efforts may work better within a collaborative construct or may not even be needed. In the end, U.S. SFA and the narrower SOFIB are about effective outcomes, not solely actions. This objective requires host nation cooperation and, importantly, U.S. strategic patience.⁴⁴

SOFIB takes on significant importance for the future because as irregular and hybrid warfare becomes more prevalent, the relevance of SOF increases.⁴⁵ Allied and partner nation SOF can be sustainable and operationally effective in a near-peer environment only if they exist within a proper institutional framework. U.S. SOFIB advisory efforts are essential to this objective. SOFIB is also about innovation, which encompasses an alteration of core organizational tasks and is a product of interrelated reforms in personnel management, professional military education, training, doctrine, and modernization. For such change to have impact, it must be embedded and incentivized in the organization’s way of doing business.⁴⁶ Both these aspects also inform changing the broader U.S. SFA

approach from a tactical to institutional focus with the provision of well-qualified advisors, who enable a partner or ally to transform to a more effective military organization. **JFQ**

Notes

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