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Bad Idea: Making SOF the Sole Train, Advise, Assist Provider

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America's special operations forces (SOF) serve as the tip of the spear in places many Americans may well like to [forget](#). Historically, from Vietnam to Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and the Sahel, SOF have been the go-to resource provider for train, advise, and assist (TAA) missions with U.S. partner security forces around the globe. Highly trained in capabilities exceptionally relevant for many U.S. security partners, such as counterterrorism, foreign internal defense, and counter proliferation, SOF are often the tool of choice, particularly in complex security environments where the United States wishes to have a low footprint. Given U.S. budgetary pressures and SOF proficiency, aligning TAA missions solely with SOF arguably would allow conventional forces to focus on warfighting capabilities essential for meeting challenges from China, Russia, and North Korea.

This instinctual reflex reflects an underlying bias among several of the military services that TAA, and more broadly, security cooperation, is a specialized task removed from core military functions. Although the U.S. Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard released an integrated [Maritime Security Cooperation Policy](#) in 2013, and the Air Force has an active deputy under secretariat for international affairs, most of the services have yet to articulate publicly how they might make structural adjustments to meet increasing global demands from combatant commands and policy-driven requirements for training and exercising with partners. In contrast, the Army has announced its intent to [establish](#) six security force assistance brigades (SFABs) to train foreign military units in conventional light infantry tactics, thereby enabling other conventional brigades to remain intact to focus wholly on other mission areas. However, none of the services are prepared to meet the [requirements](#) of the security cooperation workforce mandate of Section 1250 of the FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act, which envisions a more strategic and holistic approach to security cooperation with allies and partners to confront 21st century challenges. Instead, prevailing incentive structures in the services that

reward training, education, and professional tracks for “actual” warfighting capabilities downplay the growing importance of security cooperation as a core defense function.

Security cooperation often lags on services’ priority lists behind operational requirements. This distinction is a false dichotomy, as security cooperation is instrumental in meeting core operational priorities, such as deterrence, and ensuring U.S. forces’ access for crises and contingencies. Yet, from a strategic planning and workforce development perspective, the services have yet to prioritize security cooperation let alone the narrower mission set of TAA. In resourcing tradeoff debates internal to DoD and with Congress, aligning security cooperation missions, and particularly the TAA components of these missions, to SOF may be too convenient. However, such siloing would be short-sighted for at least four reasons.

First, TAA missions often require conventional capabilities, not only to meet partners’ security cooperation requirements (e.g., maritime security, border security, and short-range missile defense), but also due to force protection requirements for the U.S. forces conducting the TAA mission, particularly in high conflict-prone areas. Focusing solely on SOF for these missions would send the wrong resource demand signal to the services for their force planning. Second, siloing TAA within SOF reinforces misconceptions about combat missions versus TAA missions, and the level of risk SOF may be exposed to in performing TAA. The deaths of three Green Berets performing a TAA mission in Niger in October highlights this reality. Third, relying on SOF for global TAA missions places greater demands on these elite forces at a time when SOF capabilities are also needed for irregular warfare, information operations, and hybrid operations vis-à-vis China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran. Even with SOF growth since 9/11, stretching SOF blunts the sharpness of the tool through back-to-back deployments that stress personnel and their families. Finally, lashing the TAA mission to even elite forces such as SOF excuses the services from strategically planning and resourcing for TAA and security cooperation more broadly at a time when the United States is increasingly integrating this tool into its global playbook. Beyond the counterterrorism-focus of today’s war fights, building security cooperation in emerging domains such as cyber, space, and electronic warfare should be pursued in parallel with plans for U.S. forces for tomorrow’s potential war fights. Cooperation in these domains might include leveraging civilian talent of the Guard and Reserve, as well as DoD civilian personnel and contractors. Otherwise, America will be ill-prepared for countering threats to its interests in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East in the years to come.

DoD should recognize the vital role SOF can and should play in performing TAA. However, DoD should also prioritize, plan, and resource identified conventional forces to provide TAA and security cooperation functions in support of salient defense and national security objectives. Even in an era where scrutiny of the value of allied and partner security contributions grows more acute, no future security challenge can be met by U.S. might alone. The U.S. military must be prepared to shape, deter, defend, fight, and stabilize alongside allies and partners. It is time for the services to fully recognize and resource security cooperation not as an enabling, specialized function, but as an integral tool to achieve core military objectives.

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