
From the Ground Up: The Importance of Preserving SOF Capacity Building Skills

Whitney Grespin
Sloan Manor, whitney.grespin@sloanmanor.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss>
pp. 37-47

Recommended Citation

Grespin, Whitney. "From the Ground Up: The Importance of Preserving SOF Capacity Building Skills." *Journal of Strategic Security* 7, no. 2 (2014) : 37-47.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.7.2.5>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol7/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Strategic Security by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

From the Ground Up: The Importance of Preserving SOF Capacity Building Skills

Abstract

The last decade of international engagements marks a shift in the way that the American military fights wars and mitigates conflict overseas. Although America has long had an affinity for creative destruction and cycles of force buildup and tear down, it is increasingly apparent that such an approach is not a viable option for the U.S. military's path ahead. After a decade of costly conflict with large conventional forces and an abundance of direct action operations, the American way of war is evolving towards less muscle, more mind.

To this end, the specialized training, mentoring, and capacity building skills that Special Operations Forces (SOF) receive must remain a priority in an era of fiscal austerity and streamlined resources. It is easier to strengthen security forces than to strengthen governance and the drivers that combat instability. As SOF returns to a focus on partner capacity building programs rather than direct action missions, the lessons learned of the last twelve years of international security assistance programs must be embraced and codified rather than allowed to atrophy, as is often the case when the United States military reorients its attention to new policy priorities. Reliance on external nations and allied partners, coupled with the strategic direction to employ innovative, low-cost, and small-footprint indirect approaches to prevent conflict, have made SOF a resource of choice for both Combatant Commanders and military strategists.

Introduction

The last decade of international engagements has illustrated a marked shift in the way that the American military fights wars and mitigates conflict overseas. The Department of Defense's (DOD) activities in the coming years will continue to build on these changes through a concerted emphasis on three pillars of initiative. The 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) articulates these pillars in a commitment to protecting the homeland, building security globally, and projecting power and winning decisively.¹

The second tenet of the QDR—building security globally, “in order to preserve regional stability, deter adversaries, support allies and partners, and cooperate with others to address common security challenges”—is already guiding the transition away from wide-scale conventional warfare and troop usage to more targeted and nuanced special operations-type activities and training programs.² The driving force behind this move to enable partner nations is that it is easier and cheaper to augment an existing security force than it is to combat instability and improve governance in a foreign land.

For much of its history, the broader DOD community had little interest in security assistance activities, as they were regarded as neither a military mission, nor as a contributor to national security. This perspective changed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks as defense officials began regarding the defeat of terrorist threats from the countries they emanate from as vital to U.S. national security. However, the lack of United States capabilities in less commonly known languages and dialects, cultural sensitivity, and country specialization culminated in the realization that foreign military and security forces, centering around host nation partnerships, would have to take the lead in conducting such activities, and would likely need training from U.S. forces to do so.

While Special Operations Forces have long specialized in producing units that are specifically dedicated to long-term “security force assistance” (SFA) efforts, conventional service forces historically have not.³ Reliance on external nations and allied partners, coupled with the strategic direction to employ innovative, low-cost, and small-footprint indirect approaches to prevent conflict, have made SOF a resource of choice for both Combatant Commanders and military strategists. Along with the recent attention from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, SFA is “directly linked to counterterrorism strategy and is key to engaging underdeveloped and undergoverned nations (often referred to as “weak

¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review 2014* (Washington, D.C.: OSD, 2014), V, available at: http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014_Quadrennial_Defense_Review.pdf.

² Ibid.

³ “The responsibility for conducting security force assistance has long resided with the special operations community. The U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) was established in 1987, and the U.S. Code (Title 10, Subtitle A, Part I, Chapter 6, Section 167) identified foreign internal defense (FID) as a special operations activity. The term “security force assistance” did not exist when SOCOM was established. Nevertheless, “foreign internal defense” refers to activities that support a host nation’s internal defense and development strategy and most closely mirror what is considered SFA today”; Livingston, Thomas, *Building the Capacity of Partner States Through Security Force Assistance*, CRS Report R41817 (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, 2011): 31, available at: <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R41817.pdf>.

or fragile states”) in a preventive national security strategy.”⁴ While all branches of the military engage in security cooperation projects with foreign allies to some extent, it is the SOCOM that is quickly gaining a monopoly on the game.

SOF in a Cyclical Context

Although America has long had an affinity for creative destruction and cycles of force buildup and tear down, it is increasingly apparent that such an approach is not a viable option for the U.S. military’s path ahead. Recent threat trends have demonstrated that menaces to the American military and homeland are largely the opposite of the Cold War mentality of State versus State, and it is now instead smaller, non-state entities rather than large, nuclear ones who will be the most common agitators.

After a decade of costly conflict with large conventional forces, the American way of war is evolving towards less muscle, more mind. For all the advances made in the Iraq war and reinforced by the American experience in Afghanistan, it could easily be argued that the most important shift was that conventional forces became more SOF-like. Conventional forces have historically provided the bulk of the nation’s military powers through the major categories of land, naval, aviation, and mobility forces. They consist of combat and support elements from all branches of the military, “excluding all units dedicated to special operations and nuclear deterrence.”⁵

Military Operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan led SOF to conduct more direct action operations as the general purpose forces took over the security assistance programs. This is a fundamental shift in responsibility for the conventional forces, as special operational forces have historically specialized in enabling partner nation foreign military capacity through the teaching of technical fighting and military administration skills while mitigating destabilizing drivers of conflict. Conventional forces, in turn, have largely been responsible for supporting SOF in these missions with logistical support. During the wars of the last decade, the superior tactical capabilities of many SOF units were called upon to execute surgical strikes so heavily that the broader “train, advise, assist” (TAA) tasks that were so necessary in building (or rebuilding) partner nation capacity fell largely to conventional, general purpose forces.

As the intelligence community begins to refocus its efforts after the wars from targeting and capture/kill missions to more classical intelligence functions, the U.S. military’s SOF leadership is also seeing a public call to redirect their assets from focused kinetic operations to the overarching traditions for which their special training, operating, and advising skills were originally intended. These traditions—in addition to hostage rescue and kinetic operations—include civil affairs, foreign internal defense, security force assistance, preparation of the environment, special reconnaissance, military information support, and other unconventional warfare capabilities.⁶ SOCOM has also declared a current focus

⁴ Livingston, *Building the Capacity of Partner States*, 31.

⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to the President and the Congress* (Washington, D.C.: OSD, 1999): Chapter 5, available at: http://www.fas.org/man/docs/adr_00/chap5.htm.

⁶ USSOCOM Public Affairs, “U.S. Special Operations Command Fact Book 2014”, *USSOCOM*, 2014, available at: www.socom.mil, 14.

on expanding the global SOF partnership through strengthened regional interaction and enterprise alignment to support the Special Operations network.⁷

Another example of the redirection of assets from direct action to training and advising is that the surges of recent conflicts were about more than just putting troops on the ground. Instead, these missions focused on a far more dramatic intellectual shift towards understanding the human terrain. When delivering a keynote address at 2013's National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) symposium, SOCOM Commander Admiral McRaven discussed the continued importance of this approach when he assessed that, "Successful warfare depends on dominance of the human domain."⁸ This was supported by another SOF veteran at the symposium who remarked, "It's pretty obvious that we're not going to kill our way to victory, but there is going to be continued direct activity." That direct activity of a few elite units is largely a way to buy time to allow persistence in the complementary indirect activities that the wider SOF community excels in.

The contrast between SOF specialties and the skills of conventional troops was succinctly summed up by Dave Whitmire, CEO and President of contracting firm K2 Solutions, Inc. and a decorated combat veteran with twenty-eight years of Special Operations experience, when he explained, "SOF answers the essay questions... conventional forces answer multiple choice questions." SOF goes beyond "who, what, where, and when", and invests time and energy into analyzing the "why". With the context derived from that exercise combined with a generally mature pedigree, SOF seeks to address the drivers of instability as holistically as possible.⁹

DOD leadership recognizes the value of this carefully honed craft, and recommended in the 2014 QDR that resources be allocated to, "grow overall SOF end strength to 69,700 personnel" in an era when many personnel counts are being pared down.¹⁰ Although SOF is not taking a direct hit in the current era of fiscal austerity, all of the conventional force functions that support these operations will have new constraints, and SOF will likely feel that. After all, the oft-cited SOF Truth 5 is, "Most special operations require non-SOF assistance."¹¹

Improved technological surveillance and targeting capabilities have led to a remarkable increase in targeting identification and direct action precision, but what SOF troops receive explicit and intentional supplementary training for is the human-level, on-the-ground interaction with local residents. The role that SOF assets fulfill as trainers, for example, has existed for decades in regions where stability requires augmented capabilities. Areas of instability are not diminishing, though they are changing.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ McRaven, William H. ADM, "Keynote Address: Persistent Engagement in the New Strategic Environment," *National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) Symposium*, Washington, D.C., January 28-30, 2013.

⁹ According to a 2013 SOCOM demographic overview, the typical Special Operator is married and has at least two kids, has 8 years' experience in the General Purpose Force, and is an average of 29 years old for an enlisted serviceman, or 34 years old if serving as an officer. This operator has attended multiple advanced tactical schools, is well educated, and is likely to hold a college degree.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review 2014*, 37.

¹¹ USSOCOM, "SOF Truths," *SOCOM*, available at: <http://www.socom.mil/Pages/SOFTruths.aspx>.

According to a SOCOM announcement posted in March of 2014, countries of interest for the U.S. military in the relatively near future include an “initial dataset [of] Jordan, Djibouti, Burma, Honduras, Iran, Morocco, Nigeria, Trinidad & Tobago, Burkina Faso, S. Sudan, N. Korea, and China (Guangdong).”¹² Building on awareness of conditions in locales of interest such as these is dependent on core SOF capabilities. As stated by the Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and Assistant Secretary of Defense, Honorable Michael Lumpkin, during the NDIA’s 2014 gathering, “This approach is wholly consistent with ... routing terrorist networks wherever they arise. Such a model relies far less on kicking in doors than building partner capacity, [and] this increased emphasis on the indirect approach reflects the realities of our times.”¹³

Why Capacity Building?

The military has recognized the utility of applying aspects of a more comprehensive and traditional development model to build host nation capacity, and throughout the past decade—see the activities of Provincial Reconstruction Teams and outcomes of Commander’s Emergency Response Program—has followed the lead of development groups in assessing the efficacy of using money as their own non-kinetic weapons system to affect the change that they want to see.¹⁴ This practice gained popularity in the last decade, during which time the military embraced spending money to deter combatants from fighting by investing in efforts that resulted in job creation, infrastructure investment, increased educational attainment, and other stabilizers for broader human security interests. In short, promoting development and stability has proven to be a lot cheaper than sending soldiers.

Some might say that it is paradoxical to expect a soldier to do “non-soldiering” work that crosses into development, but in reality these efforts are all stability

¹² USSOCOM, “Statement of Work (SOW) USSOCOM Joint Intelligence Center Special Operations Command (JICSOC) Geospatial Data on Countries of Interest for Which There is a Critical Need But Non-Existent Data,” *TIME*, March 27, 2014, available at: http://timedotcom.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/fbo_revised_hgis_sow20mar14.pdf.

¹³ Lumpkin, Michael, “Keynote Address: Seamless SO/LIC: Government and Institutional Partnerships, Supported by Industry, for Global Engagement,” *National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) Symposium*, Washington, D.C., February 10-12, 2014.

¹⁴ “A provincial reconstruction team (PRT) is an interim civil-military organization designed to operate in semi-permissive environments usually following open hostilities. The PRT is intended to improve stability in a given area by helping build the host nation’s legitimacy and effectiveness in providing security to its citizens and delivering essential government services”; Center for Army Lessons Learned, “Commander’s Emergency Response Program,” *United States Army Combined Arms Center*, September 2007, available at: <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/call/docs/07-34/07-34.pdf>; “The Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP) enables local commanders in Afghanistan and Iraq to respond with a nonlethal weapon to urgent, small-scale, humanitarian relief, and reconstruction projects and services that immediately assist the indigenous population and that the local population or government can sustain. The Department of Defense (DOD) defines urgent as any chronic or acute inadequacy of an essential good or service that in the judgment of the local commander calls for immediate action. Prior coordination with community leaders increases goodwill. With most small-scale projects (less than \$500 thousand [K]), CERP is a quick and effective method that provides an immediate, positive impact on the local population while other larger reconstruction projects are still getting off the ground”; Center for Army Lessons Learned, “Commander’s Emergency Response Program,” *United States Army Combined Arms Center*, February 15, 2014, available at: <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/call/docs/09-27/ch-4.asp>.

operations whose doctrine has long been enshrined in U.S. military guidance.¹⁵ As per official doctrine, “The primary military contribution to stabilization is to protect and defend the population, facilitating the personal security of the people and, thus, creating a platform for political, economic, and human security.”¹⁶ While SOF are undeniably soldiers, their skill sets and missions tend to be more holistic in that they are often integrated across disciplines and demonstrate an understanding that the true success of their efforts will be based on the durability of the gains that are made. An investment in partner national capacity building now is a down payment against terrorist attacks and costly ground engagements in the future, but capacity building is not just buying somebody a gun; it’s the development of the underlying institutions, and the ability to make gains sustainable.

If the U.S. military establishment can get partners to improve their governance then there will be less physical space for malign actors to operate in, or out of. As one panelist on an NDIA panel addressing Special Operations LIC partnerships stated

“[w]e’re pivoting away from the direct approach to rely much more heavily on the indirect approach. The reason is, if the partner can close even a portion of the undergoverned space... with his authorities... then we are actually in a much better place than if we can close most of his empty space for him but are then forced to leave.”¹⁷

In these undergoverned spaces, state presence throughout society is weak and the majority of citizens may not recognize the state’s monopoly on the use of force. In turn, legitimate state-affiliated institutions that fulfill the public’s expectations fail to exist in these environments leading to difficulties in building a reputable security force.¹⁸

Basic state functions that assert government authority, like border security, become imperative as economies grow. Overland and maritime transit routes that allow untaxed agricultural products also host gunrunners, drug smugglers, and human traffickers. As Mr. James Roberts from the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for SO/LIC once observed, “If you build a net of governance it will catch all of your malign actors, or at least the great majority of them.”¹⁹

¹⁵ The Defense Technical Information Center provides the definition that, “Stability operations are various military missions, tasks, and activities conducted outside the US in coordination with other instruments of national power to maintain or reestablish a safe and secure environment, provide essential governmental services, emergency infrastructure reconstruction, and humanitarian relief.”

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 3-07: Stability Operations* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, September 29, 2011): 23, available at: http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_07.pdf.

¹⁷ Chatham House Rules, “Panel Presentation: SO/LIC Partnership Policies, Authorities, and Strategies,” *National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) Symposium*, Washington, D.C., February 10-12, 2014.

¹⁸ Whitney Grespin and Michael D. Rettig, “The Spaces in Between: Mitigating Threats in Undergoverned Spaces,” *The Small Wars Journal*, October 17, 2013, available at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-spaces-in-between-mitigating-threats-in-undergoverned-spaces>.

¹⁹ Roberts, James, “Panel Presentation: SOF and the Indirect Approach to Conflict Prevention,” *National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) Symposium*, Washington, D.C., January 28-30, 2013.

Resources and attention should be focused on key economic and transport hubs that can determine whether actors will play local or global role. Reasons to engage in illicit activities will always exist, but it is in the interest of threatened states and the wider international community to ensure that ease of access is restricted.²⁰

Consistency of effort in capacity building programs starts with clearly defining an end state that plainly illustrates what matters, and why. This very definition dictates how to measure advancements and, most importantly, indicates what can reasonably be considered 'good enough.' In many of the recent contexts that the U.S. has tried to facilitate good governance, it should be kept in mind that America had the luxury of confronting and resolving race, gender, and major social issues over the course of decades, and the recent emergence of 'occupy' movements proves that even the American system is still in the midst of addressing class issues.

Yet, there is often an expectation for emerging states to address all these transitions in a few short years, combined with the ever present threat of insecurity and war hanging over their heads on a daily basis. This reality needs to be taken into account when considering what to classify as 'good enough' and how SOF capacity building efforts may be complemented by other United States Government (USG) assistance within partner nations.²¹ Such assistance commonly takes the form of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) assistance, Department of State training and education programs, or a myriad of other special interest efforts undertaken by various USG entities.

Furthermore, the idea of a 'good enough' end state can't be constructed from the outside looking in. As Nobel Prize winning author Albert Camus wrote in *The Plague*, "Perhaps the easiest way of making a town's acquaintance is to ascertain how the people in it work, how they love, and how they die."²² Much of the international community, as outsiders, has difficulty understanding that the roles and the rules have governed our partner nations for decades, if not centuries. Rear Admiral Brian Losey, Commander of Naval Special Warfare Command (NAVSPECWARCOM), addressed the increased importance of cultural competency training requirements through his assessment that, "If all you're going to show up with is a gun [then there are a lot of things] you're missing... Sensitizing our force to the idea that the population is important and bringing something to that environment is important [for the human component]."²³

²⁰ Grespin and Rettig, "The Spaces in Between: Mitigating Threats in Undergoverned Spaces."

²¹ "Capacity building is the process of creating an environment that fosters host-nation institutional development, community participation, human resources development, and strengthening managerial systems"; Colonel Kenneth J. Crawford, "Partner Nation Capacity Building: Setting Conditions for Success," *Center for Army Lessons Learned*, March 2011, available at: http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/call/docs/11-23/ch_2.asp.

²² Camus, Albert, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (1948), available at: http://evankozierachi.com/uploads/The_Plague_by_Albert_Camus.pdf.

²³ Losey, Brian RDML, "Panel presentation: USSOCOM Component Commander Panel," *National Defense Industrial Association's Special Operations Forces Industry Conference (SOFIC)*, Tampa, Florida, May 19-22, 2014.

Focused TAA efforts are just as valuable tactically as they are strategically. Former U.S. Army Green Beret Jim Bourie explained,

“The toppling of the Taliban by a handful of SFODA’s [Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha, or the basic element/team of SF operations] partnered with the Northern Alliance sent shockwaves through the conventional military. Now [significant engagements] could be won with 50 men and airpower.”²⁴

This remarkable achievement clearly illustrated the strategic value of SOF forces, and has encouraged increased integration of SOF skillsets into broader operational planning across the spectrum of capacity building initiatives.²⁵

Limitations

As Vice Admiral Bill Sullivan stated at a U.S. Global Leadership Coalition panel held in Washington, D.C. in 2011, “Talk is cheap and it takes resources to get something done.”²⁶ Yet even after threatened budget cuts and the imminent scaling back of support for SOF operations, Admiral McRaven observed in February of 2014 at the 25th annual NDIA SO/LIC symposium that, “We’re 1.7 percent of the budget... for 1.7 percent you get a pretty good return on the investment.”²⁷ An investment in the training, advising, and mentoring capabilities of SOF personnel is a force multiplier in terms of the outcomes of subsequent programs that those personnel are expected to facilitate.

Linda Robinson, Senior International Policy Analyst at RAND, extrapolated on this subject through her explanation that, “People [the taxpayer] have to understand that they’re not buying into a welfare program for Country X. Once you train the trainers, you are moving on.”²⁸ By continuing to invest in SOF capability to effectively and efficiently deliver training, the U.S. military is ensuring that the students of SOF personnel become trainers themselves. This multiplies the number of students who can be reached through the initial input into “train the trainer” programs.

Funding to train and equip foreign military forces was broadly formalized and augmented in 2006 through Section 1206 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2006. This authorization, “provides the Secretary of Defense with authority to train and equip foreign military forces for two specified purposes—counterterrorism and stability operations—and foreign

²⁴ As quoted in Whitney Grespin, “The Quiet Professionals: The Future of U.S. Special Operations Forces,” *The Diplomatic Courier* September 20, 2013, available at <http://www.diplomaticcourier.com/news/topics/security/1803-the-quiet-professionals-the-future-of-u-s-special-forces>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Sullivan, Bill VADM, “Panel Presentation,” *U.S. Global Leadership Coalition Conference*, Washington, D.C., July 12, 2011.

²⁷ McRaven, “Keynote Address: Seamless SO/LIC.”

²⁸ Robinson, Linda, “Panel Presentation: SO/LIC Partnership Policies, Authorities, and Strategies,” *National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) Symposium*, Washington, D.C., February 10-12, 2014.

security forces for counterterrorism operations.”²⁹ Although Section 1206 authorization had been extended through FY2017—a credit to its importance in an era of elastic priorities—the FY2014 NDAA further ensured the durability of these efforts by expanding beyond the previous prescription that, “assistance for counterterrorism (CT) purposes was limited to foreign military forces and non-military maritime security forces,” and CT assistance now includes all types of security forces.³⁰ This swift reauthorization vastly increased the potential scope of SOF skill application.

Beyond potential long-term financial limitations, the political risk and volatility of public support for such missions are challenges that SOCOM must overcome as it expands its international reach. The issue of vetting who to train both institutionally and individually is a valid, and complex, issue. Stimson Center analyst Russell Rumbaugh was recently quoted as pointedly observing about the recipients of sensitive skill training that,

"Those guys, however, are not Americans. What happens when they take their skills and do something we don't like, like kill priests, or run a sectarian war, despite the efforts SOCOM is taking to avoid such outcomes?... You can see the flaw baked in."³¹

This is an instance in which it would be highly informative to look at the lessons learned from vetting and integration programs from the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) to ensure that the systems designed by SOF and other USG capacity-building personnel are maintained in the years ahead, so as not to lose the institutional ability to overcome such obstacles.

It must be recognized that this sort of assistance and security force capacity building is inherently political in that it results in an intentional allocation of resources that is determined by external stakeholders. For this reason, it is essential that capacity building programs take into account what unintended consequences may result from these types of capacity enhancing training schemes. Evidence of this includes unsanctioned skills transfers from former military personnel to foreign nationals on a one-to-one basis, and is visible up through leadership levels such as in recent high-profile cases ranging from foreign-supported Egyptian military leaders to the American-trained Malian coup leaders.

Malian officer Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo, for example, led a renegade military faction to depose Mali’s democratically elected president in March of 2012 after having visited the U.S. repeatedly to receive professional military education at the expense of the USG.³² This approach worked for Sanogo up until

²⁹ Serafino, Nina, *Security Assistance Reform: ‘Section 1206’ Background and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report RS22855 (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, 2014), available at: <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RS22855.pdf>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Sandra Erwin, “In Game of Strategy, SOCOM Outsmarting Conventional Military,” *National Defense*, March 18, 2014, available at: <http://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/blog/Lists/Posts/Post.aspx?ID=1447>.

³² Craig Whitlock, “Leader of Mali military coup trained in U.S.,” *Washington Post*, March 23, 2012, available at: http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-03-23/world/35447186_1_amadou-haya-sanogo-military-schools-malian.

the coup at which time the U.S. denounced his actions and immediately cut off the roughly \$600,000 per year funding that had been allocated for Malian military training.³³ Furthermore, billions of dollars have been funneled to the training and capacity building of the Egyptian military, both before and after Mubarak's fall from power.³⁴ Two decades earlier another instance of abuse of this training occurred when President Yahya Jammeh, after completing military police training in Alabama in 1994, returned to his home in the Gambia to lead a successful coup. He has been in power ever since.³⁵

Even with persistent engagement and regular collaboration, these training partnerships do need to be continuously evaluated to ascertain whether they remain appropriate. It is important that security assistance partnering continues and that policy does not become risk averse. This is especially true following recent international incidents where the U.S. determined that skills derived from security assistance training were misapplied against both civilians and misconstrued adversaries.

Daniel Silverberg, former Deputy General Counsel for the House Foreign Affairs Committee, speaking at the same SO/LIC conference as Admiral McRaven early last year, summed up the challenge succinctly,

“Everyone is onboard that instability is a driver of terrorism, and in that respect [insecurity] is a SOCOM mission. Instability is highly contextual... whatever it is doesn't lend itself to a uniform solution, [and] development is political; you kind of end up picking winners or losers by who you give resources to.”³⁶

In short, it is easier to strengthen security forces than to strengthen governance and the drivers that combat instability.

Representative Mac Thornberry, Vice Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, agreed with Silverberg's sentiment at the conference, “There are risks to foreign military training, but we can't do it all ourselves. We have to understand and acknowledge that other entities may not do it as well as we do, but maybe they just have to do it 'good enough'.”³⁷ Nearly a century after its authoring, it is increasingly evident that T.E. Lawrence had it right when he advised that host nations lead their own fights when he wrote in his *Twenty Seven Articles*, “Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better [they] do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them,

³³ Joshua Keating, “Trained in the U.S.A.,” *Foreign Policy*, March 28, 2012, available at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/03/28/trained_in_the_usa?page=full.

³⁴ John Norris, “Is American Training Too Many Foreign Armies?,” *Foreign Policy*, January 28, 2013, available at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/01/28/is_america_training_too_many_foreign_armies?page=full.

³⁵ Keating, “Trained in the U.S.A.”

³⁶ Silverberg, Daniel, “Panel Presentation: Aligning USSOCOM's Global SOF Development with U.S. Strategy,” *National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) Symposium*, Washington, D.C., January 28-30 2013.

³⁷ Thornberry, Mac Rep., “Panel Presentation: Interagency Cooperation,” *National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) Symposium*, Washington, D.C., January 28-30, 2013.

not to win it for them.”³⁸ It is critical that international forces remember that they are there to train, advise, and assist efforts as is appropriate to the host nation environment—not commandeer them in an effort to have those missions mimic their own.

Conclusion: Looking Ahead

The international community’s experience after the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and as the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) continue their exits from Afghanistan has taught them much in a short period of time. If there is a lack of a functioning government that can provide a basic rule of law to its citizens and a dearth of military capacity to protect that nation and its borders, then in reality the international community is bequeathing that state with little more than a military possessing an increased ability to abuse its people and take advantage of its augmented abilities. The military needs to ensure that the recipients of such training programs have a respect for the rule of law and the concept of power sharing, rather than imparting sensitive skills to groups that will merely sit and watch the hourglass, waiting to capitalize on the imminent departure of the international community. As Major General Michael Repass of Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR) once stated, “No one nation can do it all, but every nation can do something.”³⁹

Given the prices that were paid to learn these lessons, it is vital that the capabilities learned over the past decade do not deteriorate. Admiral McRaven suggested that this sentiment extends beyond U.S. military opinion when he addressed thousands of SOCOM supporters and said, “The American people do not want to see a degradation of the Special Operations community.”⁴⁰ As Representative Mac Thornberry challenged a defense industry audience in January of 2013,

“Are we incorporating the lessons learned over the past decade at a very high price of blood and treasure into our training and into our doctrine, or are we going to put it up on the shelf and say, ‘Hey if we need to get back to that someday it’ll be there?’”⁴¹

Retaining this institutional knowledge and maintaining its applicability a variety of international engagements is as much the responsibility of private industry entities who are contracted to deliver training and SOF support services as it is of its customer, the USG.

With Thornberry’s warning heeded, SOCOM Deputy Commander Lieutenant General John Mulholland issued a clear reminder via remarks in February 2014 that, “This isn’t new stuff... this has been our bread and butter since we first existed... what is new is the coherence that we’re able to bring by virtue of

³⁸ T.E. Lawrence, “Twenty Seven Articles,” *Brigham Young University Library*, 2009, available at http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_27_Articles_of_T.E._Lawrence.

³⁹ Repass, Michael MG, “Panel Presentation: SOF and the Indirect Approach to Conflict Prevention,” *National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) Symposium*, Washington, D.C., January 28-30, 2013.

⁴⁰ McRaven, William H. Admiral, “Keynote Address,” National Defense Industrial Association’s Special Operations Forces Industry Conference (SOFIC), Tampa, Florida, May 19-22, 2014.

⁴¹ Thornberry, “Panel Presentation: Interagency Cooperation.”

[relationships].”⁴² Special Operations Command South (SOCSOUTH) Commander, Brigadier General Sean Mulholland, echoed this sentiment as he said, “Partner relationships are the heart of what we work to build every day.”⁴³ Such consistent messaging goes beyond talking points for figureheads at public events; it speaks to the truth of SOF priorities and preparations for the years ahead. Admiral McRaven reinforced this approach yet again at the May 2014 NDIA Special Operations Forces Industry Conference when he explained, “The global SOF network is not a thing; it’s a way of doing business.”⁴⁴ These partnerships and capacity building efforts are not one-off whims; they are carefully considered, long-term engagements.

Given the expectations of what mission essential capabilities will be moving forward with less attention on direct action and more effort put into understanding and shaping the human domain, the importance of maintaining intercultural communication skills and capacity building competencies will be key in efforts that are designed to build partner capacity and mitigate the need for future interventions. As SOF returns to a focus on facilitating partner capacity building programs rather than undertaking frequent direct action missions to promote national security interests, the lessons learned of the last dozen years of international security assistance programs must be embraced and codified rather than allowed to atrophy. Reliance on State-to-State partnerships and the network of global special operations forces, coupled with official guidance to apply resourceful approaches to prevent instability and grow global security, necessitate that institutional capacity carefully accumulated and curated over the past decade does not wither.

The ability to instill democratic values in underdeveloped societies, facilitate close training of allied militaries, conduct persuasive military intelligence support operations, or impose a semblance of order in a foreign society fragmented by internal conflicts or ravaged by systemic insecurity: none of these are easy tasks, but they are necessary. The ongoing need for these specialized skills highlights why it is appropriate to preserve the unique abilities the U.S. Special Operations Forces, and demonstrates that making a small investment in the strength of partner foreign security forces now can save blood and treasure down the line.

⁴² Mulholland, John LTG, “Panel Presentations: Regional Strategic Goals of SO/LIC Partnerships,” *National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) Symposium*, Washington, D.C., February 10-12, 2014.

⁴³ Mulholland, Sean BG, “Panel Presentations: Regional Strategic Goals of SO/LIC Partnerships,” *National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) Symposium*, Washington, D.C., February 10-12, 2014.

⁴⁴ McRaven, “Keynote Address (SOFIC).”