
Military Advisors, Service Strategies, and Great Power Competition

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Abstract

United States professional military advisors play a critical role across the spectrum of conflict within the various services' strategies in support of the overall National Defense Strategy. In an era of great power competition, the role of advisory forces within the shadow of large-scale conflict, provide a crucial edge for the US military services fulfilling their strategic role. Within each of the services' unique strategies - the Army's multidomain operations, the Marine Corps expeditionary advanced base operations nested within the Navy's broader littoral operations in a contested environment, and the Air Force's forward projecting agile basing concept - advisors from across the force support developing doctrines with conducting interoperability, providing access, and building relationships with allies and partners across key regions in great power competition. Even so, within each of these services, there is room for maximizing the utility of the advisory forces' support to the service strategies.

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Introduction

Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph F. Dunford Jr., made a solid case that the U.S. military's center of gravity is its alliances and partnerships, arguing partners and allies provide the "freedom of action" providing the U.S. military the platforms from which to project power, ready-made footholds across the globe "cheating time and space."¹ Former Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper highlighted in his 2019 review of the National Defense Strategy 2018 how allies and partners are "an unmatched advantage" that the United States has that adversaries do not while the previous National Defense Strategy 2018 emphasized the pillar of strengthening alliances and building partnerships.² Indicative from the interim National Security Strategy of 2021, few broad sweeping changes occur between the last four administration's national security goals, less a change in principles and more differences in semantics with broadly defined principles such as protecting the homeland, emphasizing economic and trade relations, cyber and information domains, and global challengers. In the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance of 2021, allies and partners still maintain their prominence and importance.³ Likewise, as the secretary of defense Lloyd J. Austin III conducted a review of the National Defense Strategy, he commented that America's allies are a "strategic advantage our competitors cannot match...If we take our allies for granted, we squander our greatest strategic asset; we must rebuild and modernize our alliances and partnerships."⁴ The published fact sheet for the classified 2022 National Defense Strategy further reinforces the focus on collaboration and "integrated deterrence" through "unmated network of Alliances and partnerships."⁵ The evolving National Defense Strategy inherently benefits from formal advisory formations who directly support the various service strategies and developing doctrines with conducting interoperability, providing access, and building relationships with allies and partners in great power competition.

The purpose of this article is to provide a critique of the advisory role, function, and employment within the various military service strategies and how they support the larger national security interests, concluding with recommendations on how to maximize advisory impacts and support to the National Defense Strategy. The methodology for analysis is twofold: First, examines each of the service's emerging strategies for reference to allies and partners while also identifying aspects of the strategies

supported by or wholly reliant on host nation activity; second, examines the current services' conventional, large-scale advisory formations and employment to identify where and how they support the various strategies. In conclusion, recommendations are provided for ways to maximize and improve military advisory support to the national strategy. In an evolving era of Great Power competition, the role and demand for advisory formations across the spectrum of security and conflict is rapidly expanding, directly influencing foreign policy and relations. This analysis is limited to large-scale advisory efforts, historically a weak point in U.S. national security efforts, images of failed advised forces from South Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan haunt U.S. military advisory history. Recent events in Ukraine revealed the strategic impacts properly applied advise and assist activities can have with U.S. allies and regional partners, promoting U.S. strategic interests. With the ongoing evolution of possible accession of Sweden and Finland into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the role of advisory efforts in serving as the bridge between partnered militaries in time of competition for better preparation for war only rises in importance.

Due to the scope and scale of this topic, the analysis is limited to the large-scale conventional, professional advisory forces. The special operations community has excellent advisory capability, most notably in the U.S. Army's Special Forces and the United States Marine Corps' Marine Raider Regiments, however, advisory operations are not their sole function.⁶ The special operations forces play the critical role in the 2020 Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy.⁷ Additionally, when addressing scope and scale of advisory activities, the special operations forces remain focused on traditionally advising smaller, more select partner special operations-type forces (such as partner's scouts, rangers, special forces, and airborne, generally "elite" units) or train partner forces for resistance–guerilla–activities in an unconventional warfare situation. During competition, these events largely occur as Joint Combined Exchange Training opportunities.⁸ While these efforts play a major part in military advisor contributions to national security, the demand for large-scale advisory and assist support far outstrips the capacity of special operations forces. Large-scale partner military capacity and capability building largely rests with the United States conventional advisory forces within the service strategies in support of the National Defense Strategy. This is largely due to limited capacity of the specialized forces, demanding

operational tempo, and lengthy training timelines, leading to a growing reliance on conventional forces to focus on large-scale capacity building efforts for partner conventional militaries in support of the National Defense Strategy.⁹

With allies and partnership importance consistently identified within national strategic literature, the United States military conventional professional advisory forces play a critical role in large-scale, habitually sustained advisory efforts. Historically, conventional military units, especially within the U.S. Army, have undertaken these sorts of advisory missions for partner conventional militaries, however, previously this was a more ad hoc methodology. Recently, with the organization of new, permanent advisory-focused formations, has evolved into a codified, professional advisory cadre within the conventional forces specifically designed, trained, and organized to conduct security force assistance on a large-scale for partner capacity throughout their defense apparatus.¹⁰ The Army's Security Forces Assistance Brigades within the Security Forces Assistance Command, the Marine Corps Advisor Companies within the Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group, and the Air Force's Combat Aviation Advisors, support these efforts through improving interoperability, access, and critically relationship-development efforts through overall capability and capacity-building. The advisory formations provide a foot in the door, allowing U.S. military to know who key players are, and having established relationships with them and key organizations within their forces. Through these relationships avoiding "cold starts" of personal relationships to achieve access, or affiliations for shared processes and understanding between forces when strategically needed. By having these, it also supports deterrence efforts by displaying these habitual actions, requiring a competitor to evaluate impacts of deterrence efforts to their goals, plans and desires, potentially even requiring them to expand resources in efforts to counter or circumvent U.S. advisory activities.¹¹ Additionally, especially in the case of the Army, they can increase readiness and allow for improvement of lethality of the force by taking advisory mission requirement burdens from other forces, relieving the pressure on the force. In large part, advisory activities importantly support the various services' emerging doctrines and strategies by supporting the pillar of strengthening alliances and building partnerships.

An examination of the Army and Marine Corps service strategies both reveal areas advisory activities directly support the services efforts, and in some measure, these activities even impact the United States Air Force's growing emphasis on "agile basing."¹² For the Army partnership and alliance building support is the role of advisors supporting the Army Strategy 2018's efforts to develop multidomain operations. For the Marine Corps it supports the Commandant's support for expeditionary advanced basing operations and the idea of a stand-in force nested with the Navy's shift towards littoral operations in a contested environment.

The U.S. Army Application

For the Army, multidomain operations focuses within the contested domains defined by land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace with Army actions to address with a "rapid and continuous integration of all domains" for deterrence in competition, and if deterrence fails to "penetrate and dis-integrate enemy anti-access and area denial systems" allowing to "exploit the resulting freedom of maneuver...and consolidate gains to force a return to competition on terms more favorable to the U.S., our allies and partners." The core tenants are threefold: calibrated force posture, multidomain formations, and convergence.¹³

Army service strategic literature is conspicuously scant on the details of inclusion and interaction with allies and partners beyond scattered phrases. The Army Strategy 2018 and its companion Army Modernization Strategy touch on allies and partnerships but with little more than casual reference without details, recycling phrases from the National Defense Strategy of 2018 without adding any deeper or service-nuanced application. The Army literature is even less inclusive or descriptive of the role of allies and partners much less how the Army supports those efforts. When mentioned, allies and partners reference usually come in the same statements including "interoperability," "deter aggression," and providing the U.S. military "competitive advantage," or in a list of forces to work with that typically includes "Joint Force" as well.¹⁴

However, when given even a limited focus in the Army Strategy 2018, it directly emphasizes how advisors are a critical effort. The Army Strategy's line of effort entitled "Strengthen Alliances and Partnerships" directly tied into advisory efforts with the intent to "achieve appropriate levels of

interoperability with allies and partners and prioritize security cooperation and security assistance resources. This will enable us to strengthen existing alliances and partnerships and seek new strategic partners”, with focus of advisory formations supporting train and equip missions, exercise support, relationship building and sustainment.¹⁵ Though not explicitly tied to advisors in the Army’s evolving operational literature, this advisory mission contributes to the Army’s role in competition below threshold of conflict “[B]y defeating the adversary’s attempts to destabilize regional security and by deterring armed conflict through a series of mutually reinforcing actions.”¹⁶ The advisors play a crucial effort in being the linchpin in the combined environment of partners and allies during competition as preparation for effectiveness during conflict. As that conduit between the U.S. military and the partnered force, advisors’ work “left of bang” pays large dividends in deterrence and in conflict.

A vocal critique of the Army’s evolving operational doctrine comes directly from the perspective of the allies in a United Kingdom think-tank study. Allies and partners are far more crucial to multidomain operations than the Army’s current literature alludes to generally in passing reference. Due to U.S. military force strength limitations, proximity, and speed of events, allies and only limited forward presence the United States’ forces will bear the initial and most intense burden of conflict, and without saying, they live within the area of competition.¹⁷ While Army’s operational development has been moving apace and even within the U.S. joint force the study notes, “Engagement with partners and allies, however, has not been carried out at the same pace.”¹⁸ Even General Robert Brown, then commander of United States Army Pacific, commented on the importance of allies when addressing lessons from the experimental multidomain task force set up in the Pacific for two years. He said, “allies and partners have a much bigger role,” saying that the U.S. Army needed to include them more combined operations.¹⁹ In this, advisory operations could fill the gap, providing the connection for interoperability in training during competition and in action during conflict. Potentially, increased, and appropriate use of advisors with allies and partners, developing relationships, preparing the theater, training, and incorporating multidomain operational concepts address Brown’s and the United Kingdom think-tank study’s critiques of multidomain operations. While this does not change the doctrinal or conceptual concerns or issues with

the developing operational concept, it could help address in execution some of the issues identified.

The Security Forces Assistance Brigades serve as the Army's primary conventional contribution to large-scale partner capacity and capability building. Since their inception and with their ongoing utilization, these advisor brigades have been employed to Africa, Pacific and Europe exercises, Latin America, and even exercises in the Caribbean basin. Security Forces Assistance Brigades conducted combat advisory missions in Afghanistan prior to the United States' withdrawal, and are continuing to increase in use globally.²⁰ They are slowly relieving conventional infantry brigades of most advise and assist rotations, and also freeing up special operations forces to focus on other mission sets, as in Colombia.²¹ Across all Geographic Combatant Commands, these advisory brigades have supported efforts to improve partners and allies in support of both service and the national strategy.

The Security Forces Assistance Brigades achieve this through capacity-building in partners in an organize, train, equip, rebuild, and advise construct. They support organizing partners to create, improve, and integrate doctrinal principles (such as supporting North Atlantic Treaty Organization interoperability), organizational structures, capability constructs, and personnel management. Provide training to create, improve, and integrate training, leader development, and education at the individual, leader, collective, and staff levels. They support equipping to integrate material and equipment solutions into the partner forces, including advising in procurement, fielding, accountability, and maintenance through life cycle management. Also rebuild (or create if non-existent) improve and integrate facilities and supporting infrastructure to support sustainability and longevity of institutions trained. Lastly, they advise to provide subject matter expertise, guidance, advice, and counsel to foreign security forces while carrying out the mission assigned to the unit or organization.²²

While there are other ongoing conventional advisory efforts within the Army outside the Security Forces Assistance Brigades, these can be considerable drains on combat readiness. These include advisory rotations such as those of infantry brigade combat teams to the Joint Multinational Training Group–Ukraine and the advise and assist brigade rotation to

support the counter-Islamic State mission in Iraq. As absolutely beneficial missions, these deployments still take away from combat units' training, focus, and preparation for combat readiness.

The Marine Corps and Naval Application

The Marine Corps, nested within the Navy's service strategy documents—in contrast to the Army—have re-occurring references to “treaty allies” and partners and how they interplay with the efforts to counter-aggression and deter opponents. Like the Army, there is direct application of advisory missions to contribute to the service strategy. The Navy's concept of littoral operations in a contested environment is essentially the Navy application of the Army's multidomain operations, for the Navy the contested domains include seaward, landward, airspace, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic.²³ While developing partnerships and strengthening alliances is not expressly mentioned in the Navy's concept of littoral operations in a contested environment it is crucial for the Marine's expeditionary advanced base operations (EABO) aspect of littoral operations.

Expeditionary advanced base operations is centered around creating small, temporary bases to “increase friendly sensor and short capacity while complicating adversary targeting”, through establishment of temporary, small forward bases, networked for naval and Marine coordination across the littorals and the sea at low cost, providing the necessary forward presence of assets and capabilities, such as anti-aircraft and ship missiles, forward arming and refueling points for aircraft, and intelligence gathering equipment and “enables persistent Scouting, Fires, Protection, and Sustainment.”²⁴ This concept further supports the Marine Corps vision of a “stand-in force” that will occupy these bases, which create “tactical dilemmas that adversaries will confront when attacking our allies and forces forward. Stand-in Forces will be supported from expeditionary advanced bases and will complement the low signature of these austere bases with an equally low signature force structure comprised largely of unmanned platforms that operate ashore, afloat, submerged, and aloft in close concert to overwhelm enemy platforms...empowering allies with the ability to defend their own national territory and interests”²⁵ This is a method the Marines can contribute to an initial escalation, which can be provided directly by advisors with partner

forces or supported by advisory missions used to prepare pre-conflict, setting the stage for the execution as needed.

Through advisory missions during competition phase prior to conflict, these bases could be determined, selected, provided pre-staged equipment and supplies, with rehearsals for occupation as “treaty allies and partners will create opportunities for the advance reconnaissance, selection, survey, and preparation of advanced basing, and, in some cases, prepositioning of assets and sustainment.”²⁶ The EABO Handbook writes,

deterrence is greatly enhanced as US [*sic*]and partner nations create the conditions that will enable the EABO concept to be employed in combined operations. Prepositioning of forces and materiel, developing relationships with partner forces and local vendors, exercising EABO skill sets, and integrating inside and outside force capabilities before conflict, is essential to ultimate success,” and it is “for host nation forces to expand the capacity of U.S. forces with their own platforms and capabilities to achieve a coordinated and combined defense.”²⁷

This both prepares the allies, partners and the U.S. joint forces for conflict in the contested littoral environment, but it also can contribute to active, credible deterrence, facilitated by Marine, or even Army for a truly joint operation, advisors. In both the Navy’s littoral operations and the Marine’s advanced basing concept, allies and partners buy-in, coordination, and interoperability is required. Advisory operations play directly into the requisite relationship building, training, and support to this theater engagement and preparation from the Marine Corps.

While the Fleet Marine Force continues to conduct most conventional security force assistance missions during its support to theater security cooperation plans, largely from afloat Marine Expeditionary Units, the Corps’ codified, formalized advisory formations are still being organized and yet to be implemented fully. The primary formal advisory formation is the Marine Corps Advisor Company, which is composed of Marine Corps Advisor Teams. The advisor companies and their subordinate advisor teams are far more limited than the Army’s Security Forces Assistance Brigades in scope and support. The Marine advisor team is designed to advise partner forces at the brigade or higher level, and the Marine advisor

companies are structured to replicate a standard Marine Corps battalion staff structure to provide the command and staff section advisor pairs to their partner force command and staff.²⁸ The Marines continue to contribute in these efforts across Africa, Europe, and the Pacific. The Marine Corps has a rich and extensive heritage in advising and assistance and holds strong potential for further strategic impact within the Naval and Marine Corps maritime strategies.²⁹

The Air Force Application

The Air Force strategic literature is most similar to the Army's generic and occasion casual reference to partners and allies, mostly concerning political necessity for basing rights to support their move towards distributed operations with adaptive basing and temporary forward air bases, with limited reference to incorporating them in action.³⁰ The Air Force sees multidomain operations as air, space, and cyberspace realms for their competition and conflict.³¹ Air Force associated studies conducted by the RAND Corporation, however, detail the evolving adaptive, or agile, basing concept in response to competition and conflict, with far more reference to the roles of host nations, allies, and partners in the concept.

Like the Navy and Marine expeditionary advanced basing operations, is the Air Force's agile basing concept. This idea is rooted in the persistent sensor threat from peer competitors. In a contested air space, Air Force operations must be flexible and adaptive across the exceeding ranges of modern combat and rapidity of opponent response, distributing its forward forces across multiple smaller bases.³² With technological abilities to strike airbases without first having to defeat the U.S. Air Force in the air requires spreading out the forward air forces across multiple bases, increasing potential targets, challenging intelligence gathering, and increasingly resiliency in friendly forces.³³

Mostly focused on supporting the short-ranged fighters operating within the opponent's engagement zones, operating in "Austere forward arming and refueling points...open up for only hours at a time so that fighter and mobility aircraft teams could use them before an enemy could detect their location and coordinate a missile attack", essentially hopping from temporary base to temporary base for expedient rearming and fueling between strike missions.³⁴ The Air Force strategy intends "This

combination of agility and dispersal would infuse great uncertainty in the weapons release decisions of enemy commanders...data just an hour or so old would create a possibility that their warheads would hit empty dirt rather than targets of value.”³⁵ The Air Force no longer possesses the luxury of returning to the same bases in a forward engaged environment.

Ideally, the Air Force would receive access to pre-select, pre-coordinate, and rehearse its adaptive basing concept in competition below the conflict threshold, both as a display of deterrence to adversaries, while also practicing for application in case of escalation to conflict.³⁶ An analysis identified approximately 163 potential airbases in the Western Pacific that could possibly support the requirements for the necessary fighters and associated support transport plans for these sorts of adaptive basing operations.³⁷ Under coordinated advisory type operations, subject matter experts with local authorities could confirm this analysis.

Additionally, RAND concluded the Air Force sorely lacks the required security forces to protect multiple, temporary distributed bases and historically will rely on partner or local forces to provide the physical security while on ground.³⁸ This is a situation applicable for advisory operations as combat multipliers with a small partner force. Though not explicitly mentioned in Air Force strategic doctrine, the necessary relationships and coordination with allies and partners to see this implementation is another ideal application for advisory missions. In this case, a combination of Air Force personnel from their Combat Aviation Advisors special operations squadrons’ advisory force conducting advisory operations possibly with the Army or Marine teams in areas the Air Force is interested in applying adaptive basing is an ideal use, truly joint operations. Considering the current emphasis by the Air Force to disband their organic Combat Aviation Advisor formations, this would then lead the Air Force to fully rely on other services for advisory activities and benefits to the force.³⁹ The wide-ranging advisory missions concurrently impact all service strategies and developing doctrine, while also supporting a national emphasis on strategic partnerships and alliances. Through their contributions to interoperability, access, and relationships building, advisors are directly supporting the preservation of American strengths in allies and developing partnerships in great power competition. These advisors developed relationships, in-country

experiences, and site reconnaissance provides opportunity to benefit the United States Air Force's developing strategy of adaptive basing concept.

A Cautionary Warning

Advisory efforts are not a silver bullet to the successful application of the services and the national strategy but are only a part of the whole. Even within the part they can play, there is still no guarantee of success. Much of the advisory effects supporting the strategies relies on the personal, human dimension. Inherent in all human actions is unpredictability.⁴⁰ Building rapport, having habitual relationships, knowing the right people in the right places to facilitate access, established interoperability, and close ties could suddenly be broken, terminated, or insufficient due to counter actions, shifting realities, or even outright deceit. There are multiple cautionary examples of this, from coup undertaken by security forces trained by advisors, to the years of blood and treasure poured into advising a force that failed or refused to fight when tested. This most recently exemplified in Afghanistan, but even before that with the Iraqi Army outside of Mosul in 2014 and before that with Vietnamization.⁴¹

In Conclusion: Maximizing Advisor Utilization in Support of the Strategies

For the Army, there does not appear to be a need to increase the number of units, though there are critical elements of the Security Forces Assistance Brigades organization and approach that must be maintained and several paths to possible improvement. Preserving and emphasizing the regional alignment of the advisory brigades is critical. The transitory nature of service in a Security Forces Assistance Brigade, however, remains a challenge to the benefits of relationship-building and expertise.

The Army must maintain the professionalization of the advisors and the selectivity of their acceptance, to include the requirements for assignment to an advisor brigade, for example ensuring advisors have already successfully completed the role in which they will serve and advise at in the brigade. Another challenge is the predominant rank top heavy structure, and the lengthy training. However, all these challenges are crucial to the sustained success and continued performance of these organizations. In fact, the nearly two-month long Combat Advisor

Training Course at the Military Advisor Training Academy could benefit from even more extensive education to include more language and regional-affiliated training based on advisor's follow-on assignments.⁴²

The week-long Security Forces Assistance Brigade screening and selection process should become even more refined and robust, evolving with lessons learned. Potentially, advisors could even become a career field with a specific track, similar to operationalizing the Foreign Area Officer functionality. There would need to be dual offered career paths to allow for continued volunteers from the service. Personnel management must preserve volunteering as the means to fill units. The Army would have to make a choice for senior ranking positions since temporary assignments at the lower advisory ranks allows for career broadening experience open to all, but for senior noncommissioned officer advisory roles or field grade command positions levels in the organization, advisory duty becomes a functional area or career field track, building on past experiences. Much like Special Forces traditionally staying within a regionally-aligned Group, advisor brigades should exercise a methodology that manages repeat advisory assignments for career tracked soldiers keeping them in a region to continue developing relationships and cultural, linguistic expertise. The Army must maintain career progression and benefits to advisory assignments with senior level encouragement and supported by the highest echelons of the service, manifested through personnel and talent management to preserve career professionals' interests and desirability of volunteer assignments. Without the right volunteers in the right places, with the right experience, education, and expertise, advisory missions will be unable to maximize their positive effects in support of the service and national strategy regardless of the best of intentions.

For the Marine Corps support to maritime strategy and the National Defense Strategy, the key is altering force management prioritization approach. The Corps should follow the Army's approach to advisory unit force management, whether it is Army Special Forces, Security Forces Assistance Brigades, or Civil Affairs, to some degree the Army involves all its components. There are regular Army Special Forces Groups, Security Forces Assistance Brigades, and Civil Affairs battalions and there are Army National Guard Special Forces Groups and an advisor brigade while the United States Army Reserve has multiple Civil Affairs units. In contrast, the Marine Corps has placed in its entirety Marine Corps Advisor

Companies in its reserve component. This is a critical limitation fundamental to the maximized utility of these advisory elements in support of the strategies. While traditional Marine security force assistance and theater security cooperation events benefits the strategies, the sidelining of the Marine Corps Advisor Companies as solely a reserve component organization minimizes the Corps' one formation specifically designed to support interoperability and makes it more intermittent and thus harder to develop long-standing, habitual relationships with partners and allies that could lead to access.

For the Air Force, born of inherent joint reliance, the largest improvement for them is to increase efficiency with the pre-established advisory formations in the other services. While still capitalizing on the Air Force advisors organic to the service, the branch should look for more opportunities to take advantage of relationships, activities, and access developed by the other services' advisors, or request use of these advisors to leverage for Air Force desired partner and ally partnership goals. Critically, the Air Force should reverse their intention to disband the Air Force's organic advisor formations.

Advisory efforts spread across the full spectrum of conflict as the U.S. military understands it. A National Defense University 2015 study listed Security Forces Assistance as a "key strategic activity."⁴³ From competition to contingency to outright conflict, advisors play a role, and they do this through their support to the services' and national strategy by being that direct link to the U.S. military's crucial allies and partners, providing relationships, enhancing interoperability, and supporting measures to obtain and maintain access through those enduring relationships, possibly even contributing to deterrence as well.⁴⁴ A full understanding of how these efforts fit in, what they offer, and how they can be maintained and even improved, is important for uniformed and civilian leadership as we continue into an era of Great Power Competition.

Endnotes

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 - ¹⁴ *Army Modernization Strategy*, 1 and 3 and *Army Strategy*, 3. For the purposes of clarity, "Joint" refers to activities involving multiple US Department of Defense

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