

Creating More Effective Foreign Security Forces Advisors

Selecting and training for strategic impacts

by Capt James Kokjohn

“In the years ahead, some of you will serve as advisors to foreign aid missions or even to foreign governments ... In many countries, your posture and performance will provide the local population with the only evidence of what our country is really like. In other countries, your military mission, its advice and action, will play a key role in determining whether those people will remain free.”¹

This was the guidance President John F. Kennedy gave to the next generation of military leaders in 1962. Nearly six decades later, not much has changed. The Marine Corps remains forward deployed and in constant contact with our partners, allies, and adversaries. Its legacy of security cooperation (SC) missions dates back to the Banana Wars and has been vital to our history.² SC is “all Department of Defense (DOD) interactions, programs, and activities with foreign security forces (FSF) and their institutions” and includes “DOD-administered security assistance (SA) programs.”³ SC develops partnerships that enable partners and allies to act in support of aligned U.S. national objectives.⁴ For this article, any reference to FSF advisors is uniformed personnel that participates in SC missions per this

>Capt Kokjohn is a Communications Officer serving as the OIC for the 11th MEU’s Amphibious Communications Detachment. He is a 0571 Foreign Security Forces Advisor and spent one year advising the Saudi Marines and Naval Special Forces.

definition. The Marine Corps has been generally successful at SC but can do better. The Marine Corps needs to create a more robust selection process for advisor billets and develop a program to train them to advise at the institutional level to better serve U.S. strategic interests.

The selection and training for FSF advisors is inadequate to meet the mandate set by President Kennedy and the needs of the current operational envi-

ronment. The current selection process for FSF advisors does not have a structure and rigor commensurate with its sensitivity. It could be argued that it is not even a selection process at all. The 0570 FSF Advisor and 0571 Advanced FSF Advisor MOSs identify Marines that have completed the required training (0570) or a six-month advisor tour (0571), but neither certification indicates the Marine’s aptitude to be an advisor.⁵ Currently, the only requirements to receive the 0570 MOS and fill an advisor billet are the completion of Regional, Cultural, and Language Familiarization 101 on *MarineNet* and the Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group’s one-month Marine Advisor Course (MAC).⁶ Neither requirement evaluates the individual’s temperament for advising a foreign partner. The current model for selecting Marines to fill these billets is no different than was done in Vietnam, where every technically and tactically proficient Marine is seen as equally capable of advising.⁷ This attitude contradicts *MCDP 1*, which states that we must acknowledge “all Marines of a given grade and occupational specialty are not interchangeable and should assign people to billets based on specific ability and temperament.”⁸ Tactical and technical proficiency does not directly translate into a capable advisor. LtCol Michael Zachea recounts a common trend he saw with American advisors of all Services



The Marine Corps needs a more robust screening and advisor training program. (Photo by Sgt Ian Leones.)

in Iraq in 2004, where “the Americans often said and did things that worked against our mission.” He recalls that the mission was going to be more difficult “if the example we provided was not worth emulating.”⁹ As President Kennedy said, the advisors are the face of the U.S. military and the American people where they are stationed. It is not uncommon for Marine lieutenants and captains to advise or work closely with FSF colonels and generals. Failure to select the right individuals with the appropriate “ability and temperament” is a critical vulnerability to our efforts at advising and building partnerships.

Once Marines are selected to fill an advisor billet, they are inadequately trained for advising above the battalion level, a problem that exists across the joint force. DOD civilians have programs to prepare them for advising at the ministerial and Service component level, but there is not an equivalent program for uniformed service members.¹⁰ The only program that exists for training Marine Corps FSF advisors is the MAC. This course is intended to create universally deployable advisors at the tactical level (non-commissioned officers and company-grade officers) by focusing on battalion unit training management, cross-cultural skills, and foreign weapons familiarization.¹¹ Advisors assigned to regimental advising and

above, such as U.S. Military Training Mission in Saudi Arabia (USMTM), still go to the MAC and are trained as tactical-level advisors. Advisors to missions like USMTM include field-grade officers up to the rank of colonel. Field-grade officers do not need to be taught unit-level training management; they need in-depth preparation specific to their mission at higher echelons.

The Marine Corps’ focus on tactical-level training results in an incomplete and ineffective FSF. Every Marine comes from a Service with more than two centuries of history that has shaped its doctrine, organization, training, ma-

The Marine Corps’ focus on tactical level training results in an ... ineffective FSF.

teriel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities. The countries where Marines conduct security cooperation do not have the same ingredients that are necessary to man, train, and equip a capable fighting force. The training missions in Saudi Arabia and Iraq offer two examples of the adverse effects of

focusing on individual and small unit skills.

There are approximately 140 U.S. advisors in Saudi Arabia with USMTM as part of a training and advising presence dating to 1977.¹² Despite the decades-long commitment, Saudi Arabia has more than 850 international military students in the United States at any given time.¹³ Though many of these school seats are provided for diplomatic purposes, it also indicates a probable gap in Saudi training capacity. This suggests that four decades of advising has failed to create an effective institutional training and education system in Saudi Arabia, a key partner in countering Iran in the Middle East.

The collapse of the Iraqi military in the face of the Islamic State shows the strategic risk of tactical focus. Six months after the Islamic State took Mosul in 2014, the Iraqi government announced that they had discovered 50,000 “ghost” soldiers: men who existed on the payroll but did not exist at all or were never present for duty.¹⁴ While this specific event is as much part corruption as ineffective military leadership, the fact that a military allowed the equivalent of four divisions to appear on paper is a testament to the need for advisors at the institutional level.

The Marine Corps needs to utilize a more robust screening process to determine eligibility and suitability for advisor billets. At the most basic level, all advisor billets must be voluntary.¹⁵ The refrain of “bloom where you are planted” does not apply to advising. Advisors are vulnerable to culture shock, and the less willing they are to be immersed in a new culture, the more jarring the shock will be and the longer it will take to recover. While volunteering for these assignments should be a prerequisite, it is not the only one. The Marine Corps and joint force have several options for selecting the most qualified advisors. At the lower levels, units can conduct boards and panel interviews to help screen candidates for short-term assignments.¹⁶ Unit-level boards are useful for short-term assignments, like theater security cooperation (TSC) teams from a MEU. Commanders should select the most qualified and capable Marines to

stand in front of partner forces because failure could be disastrous. For example, Americans tend to be more task-focused than some other cultures that are much more relationship-focused.¹⁷ If a Marine assigned to a TSC mission becomes too task-focused at the expense of building the relationship, the event may be executed as planned but at the risk of ruining a partner's perception of Americans.

For long-term or high-level assignments, Plans, Policies, and Operations and International Affairs Branch at Headquarters Marine Corps should conduct boards or delegate the authority to an organization like Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group. The Defense Attaché Program offers a model for these boards. Because the current fitness report system does not provide the appropriate information to identify suitable candidates, the boards should require command endorsements and letters of recommendation.¹⁸ Commanders and leaders who work with Marines that want to advise have a better understanding of their temperament and ability to adapt to another culture. Some suggest the development of a cultural intelligence assessment that assesses the innate characteristics that best serve the mission.¹⁹ The DOD already uses a similar concept with language learning ability through the Defense Language Aptitude Battery. A robust selection process for advisors provides the Marine Corps with a more readily trainable and deployable force than currently exists.

Once the appropriate Marines are selected for the advisor effort, they are inadequately prepared for the level at which they are advising. Forces that come off the ship for short TSC engagements are well equipped for the technical and tactical instruction, as it is often part of their day job. For those selected for long-term billets advising above the battalion level, they are grossly unprepared. LTC Bill Nance, an Army advisor who has served with USMTM, advocates for training that prepares advisors at the institutional level. A baseline of which is effective and sustainable professional military education and training.²⁰ The Marine Corps,



Training for Marine advisers has been shaped by the experiences of training combat advisers for deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan. (Photo by LCpl Michael Nerl.)

if not the joint force, needs to develop a training program that prepares advisors for the Service level. The knowledge base exists with programs like the Ministry of Defense Advisors program, which pairs DOD civilians and contractors with “with foreign counterparts to build ministerial core competencies such as personnel and readiness, logistics, strategy and policy, and financial management.”²¹ The core competencies of a Service headquarters effects its ability to man, train, and equip a force. All too often, the answer for security cooperation is to conduct short-duration subject matter expert exchanges that may build trust and show commitment but do not build capacity or capability for the partner nation. Advisors with an understanding of the core competencies of a Service headquarters can help develop sustainable practices that, in the long-term, create capable militaries.

There are several reasons why the Marine Corps could argue against these changes. The *National Defense Strategy* focuses on long-term strategic (great power) competition.²² The Marine Corps has whole-heartedly embraced this under the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*.²³ Because of the shift to great power competition, some will argue that the Marine Corps no longer needs to focus on advising, seeing it as a skillset for

small wars and counterinsurgencies like Vietnam and the Global War on Terrorism. The Marine Corps must focus on the peer fight, but it cannot abandon lower priority regions entirely. Building partner capacity is an economy of force mission that allows the United States to place a greater burden for security on our partners and allies.²⁴ This mission also serves the *National Defense Strategy* and *Commandant's Planning Guidance* by creating partners that bring more to a coalition than just access, basing, and overflight rights.

Critics of these changes may see it as an attempt to create more foreign area officers (FAOs) or regional area officers (RAOs). These proposed changes are not meant to produce more FAOs and RAOs, nor is it meant to replace them. FAOs and RAOs are low-density, high-demand personnel that provide cultural expertise to their respective commands. They bring years of language and cultural training in a specific region to bear. The proposed changes do not seek culture and language experts but instead seek to identify and develop personnel with the awareness and character traits to be more effective advisors. Most security cooperation missions do not need full culture and language proficiency provided by FAOs and RAOs but need advisors with an



Tactical-level advisers are valuable; however, the joint force needs better training to advise partners at the institutional level of their militaries. (Photo by 2nd Lt Grace Jenkins.)

“open, curious, respectful, and flexible personality.”²⁵

The Marine Corps needs to re-evaluate the way it selects and trains individuals for advisor billets by creating a more robust selection process and developing a program to train personnel to advise at the institutional level to better serve U.S. strategic interests. The Marine Corps must ensure that it selects Marines with the right “ability and temperament” to serve as advisors. Additionally, the Marine Corps, in conjunction with the joint force, must develop a program to better train uniformed personnel to advise at the institutional level and help create sustainable practices for our partners. These efforts align with the *Commandant’s Planning Guidance* and the *National Defense Strategy* by preparing our partners and allies to serve as active members of a coalition. Also, these recommended changes will augment existing FAO and RAO programs. The ultimate end state is to create strategically minded individuals that can serve U.S. interests.

Notes

1. President John F. Kennedy, “*United States Military Academy Commencement Address*,” (commencement address, United States Military Academy Commencement, West Point, NY, June 1962).

2. Brian Kerg, Anthony King, and Michael Murray, “How Marine Security Cooperation Can Translate into Sea Control,” *War on the Rocks*, (September 2019), available at <https://warontherocks.com>.

3. Office of the Joint Chief of Staff, *JP 3-20 Security Cooperation*, (Washington, DC: 2017).

4. Ibid.

5. Mike Chapman, “Twelve Cups of Tea,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: April 2019).

6. Headquarters Marine Corps, *NAVMC 1200.1D, Military Occupational Specialty Manual*, (Washington, DC: 2018).

7. Ronald E. Hays II, *Combined Action: U.S. Marines Fighting a Different War August 1965 to September 1970*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University, 2019).

8. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997).

9. Michael Zacchea, *The Ragged Edge: A U.S. Marine’s Account of Leading the Iraqi Army Fifth Brigade*, (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press Incorporated, 2017).

10. Staff, *19-06 Advising at the Senior Level*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2019).

11. United States Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group, *Marine Advisor Course Quick*

Outlook FY20, (Fort Story, VA: Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group, n.d.).

12. Staff, “United States Military Training Mission,” United States Central Command, (n.d.), available at <https://www.centcom.mil>.

13. Staff, “Saudi Military Trainees to Be Expelled from U.S. after Florida Shooting: CNN,” *Reuters*, (January 2020), available at <https://www.reuters.com>.

14. Staff, “Iraq Says It Found 50,000 ‘Ghost Soldiers’ on Payroll,” *Reuters*, (December 2014), available at <https://www.reuters.com>.

15. “Twelve Cups of Tea.”

16. Ibid.

17. Brian Steed, *Bees and Spiders: Applied Cultural Awareness and the Art of Cross-Cultural Influence*, (Houston, TX: Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co., 2014).

18. “Twelve Cups of Tea.”

19. James Long, “What’s Your CQ? How to Develop ‘Cultural Intelligence’ in the US Military,” *Modern War Institute*, (September 2019), available at <https://mwi.usma.edu>.

20. Bill Nance, “Getting Advising Right: The Army Needs a Fundamentally Different Approach to Building Partner Force,” *Modern War Institute*, (August 2019), available at <https://mwi.usma.edu>.

21. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, “Ministry of Defense Advisors (MoDA),” Defense Security Cooperation Agency, (n.d.), available at <https://www.dsca.mil>.

22. United States Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, DC: 2018).

23. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).

24. Mara Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

25. “Twelve Cups of Tea.”

