

# Strategic Expeditionary Advising

## Exploring Options beyond Afghanistan-Pakistan Hands and Ministry of Defense Advisors

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Since the US-led invasion following the attacks of 11 September 2001, the coalition has faced continuous hostilities in Afghanistan. This conflict has forced the US Department of Defense (DOD) to conduct extended new missions alternatively labeled as, “nation building,” “advising,” and “security force assistance.”<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan presents one of the most well-known examples of this type of expeditionary advising, where the NATO-led mission shifted to one of train, advise, and assist (TAA) on 1 January 2015 and continues today.<sup>2</sup> Unlike similar efforts in Japan, Korea, and Europe following cessation of hostilities in World War II, this twenty-first-century military-to-military engagement takes place in an area with significant ongoing hostilities. In response, the services’ have developed various human resource capabilities to prepare personnel to advise our partner nation’s security and defense forces at the strategic level. Some examples of this effort include attempting to increase overall levels of cross-culturally competent personnel among our expeditionary forces, the creation of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Hands (AFPAK Hands) and more recently, the Ministry of Defense Advisors (MoDA) program. However, Foreign Area Officers (FAO), an Office of the Secretary of Defense—mandated joint program since 2005, have been almost wholly absent from consideration as a human resource tool available to meet the need for strategic advising in Afghanistan. Given the nature of advising positions, which work frequently with our partners at strategic levels in the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and Ministry of the Interior (MOI) or in one of our largest security cooperation offices (SCO) in the world,<sup>3</sup> the failure to consider FAOs for roles involving direct contact with partner nation (PN) militaries, requiring top notch cross-cultural skill sets, endangers mission success to the point of mission failure. This article will briefly review the major programs the services have undertaken to develop cross-culturally capable forces in the twenty-first century to meet these enduring senior advisor requirements, what level of success has been achieved utilizing these new programs in expeditionary advisor roles, and how the Joint FAO community can be utilized to increase mission effectiveness. Ultimately, we will explore why the DOD should utilize FAOs to fill current and fu-

ture expeditionary advisor requirements and why the creation of new advisor programs should be carefully considered in light of past experience.

### **Importance of Cross-Cultural Competence**

To understand how the DOD has responded to the challenge of twenty-first-century advising, we must first look at how the department currently defines the unique skill sets required. Effective engagement with foreign nations requires personnel that are able to successfully communicate, interact, and work with PN representatives to further US national objectives while minimizing any cultural missteps that detract or impede the achievement of those objectives. This level of cultural awareness is commonly referred to as *cross-cultural competence* (3C), which is defined by the DOD as the “set of knowledge, skills, and affect/motivation that enable individuals to adapt effectively in cross-cultural environments.”<sup>4</sup> Generally speaking, 3C refers to the ability to successfully operate across cultures using particular knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAO) germane to effective cross-cultural performance.<sup>5</sup> Given this definition of cross-cultural competence as a set of knowledge and skills, we can infer that cross-cultural knowledge can be learned or acquired, with the right amount of training and motivation. A cross-culturally competent person would not, for example, eat with their left hand in the Middle East or snack on a banana during a meeting in Japan.<sup>5</sup> These examples, while harmless in the United States, may be so repulsive to PN counterparts that it would prevent them from focusing on the message of the engagement and working toward the objective to which the US personnel are attempting to secure commitment. This may ultimately prevent personnel from achieving their strategic goals. 3C is an important foundation for developing the necessary relationships for an effective advisory mission and engagements with PNs because it demonstrates to PN representatives that their culture and traditions are respected, thereby increasing the possibility of developing trust with the partner. Moreover, 3C helps ensure advisors develop a message that the partner will comprehend in the manner intended. Moreover, 3C skill sets sensitize advisors to the increased possibility of miscommunication that exists when working in another culture if the advisor does not carefully construct the message and confirm understanding through appropriate interaction.

Unfortunately, the current expeditionary tasking process for military personnel does not routinely contemplate 3C during the sourcing process, which can lead to a failure to request cross-culturally competent personnel to advise PN representatives. Instead, taskings for expeditionary advisor billets are typically generic or focused on the occupational specialty of the PN representative(s) whom the individual will advise. For example, a coalition infantryman would advise PN infan-

trymen. Some traditional military training and professional military education courses discuss 3C; however, these courses alone are insufficient to consistently produce 3C leaders that are able to affect meaningful PN change. To lessen the training time required to prepare individuals to deploy, 3C requirements are minimized and incorporated into the individual's training spin-up. Typically, the deploying personnel complete advisor training, such as that offered at Fort Polk or Joint Base McGuire, where they undertake 3–6 weeks of 3C familiarization training, depending on the course. As noted, the goal of this 3C training is familiarization, not proficiency, potentially leaving personnel unready for their advisory role. Moreover, one key aspect of effective 3C is that it requires someone to develop empathy for another and take on their point of view, yet most people who receive predeployment 3C training are not volunteers for it but rather “voluntold” or forced to attend. Even though predeployment 3C training is provided to all advisors, someone forced into 3C training may not be as motivated to embrace it, with the end result being a reluctant advisor who is unprepared for their mission.

### **Afghanistan-Pakistan Hands Program**

The Afghanistan-Pakistan Hands (APH) program, created in 2008, was designed to meet the challenge of creating a sizable cadre of regional experts with 3C skill sets. The brainchild of Gen Stanley McChrystal, USA, APH is perhaps the most well-known program of this type.<sup>6</sup> APH's stated goal is to, “create greater continuity, focus, and persistent engagement,” by developing, “a cadre of military and civilian experts who speak the local language, are culturally attuned, and focused on regional issues for an extended duration.”<sup>7</sup> The program develops APH personnel to “engage directly with Afghan or Pakistani officials at the ministerial (strategic and operational) level.”<sup>8</sup> Employment of APH personnel consists of two one-year rotations, with five-month predeployment training prior to each period of service in theater. The two deployments would be broken up by a one-year “out-of-theater” tour at a designated organization with “responsibilities related to” Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>9</sup> Initially, the program established over 200 positions for APH personnel to fill, but US Forces–Afghanistan (USFOR–A) has steadily reduced those numbers, which now stand at just over 100.<sup>10</sup>

On the surface, the APH program makes sense. However, close examination of the program reveals several serious flaws. First, program management was assigned to the Joint Staff Strategic Plans and Policy Directorate (J-5) to provide, “policy, guidance, and oversight of the APH Program by serving as the office of primary responsibility.”<sup>11</sup> While this was likely done as an expedient means to raise the program's profile and thereby obtain the military department's commitment, the placement of a human resources program in the J-5 is a mismatch of roles and re-

sponsibilities that is reflected in the poorly conceived structure of the program. This shows up most notably in the chasm between the APH program's stated goal to have "experts who speak the local language" and the actual training program design that sets a "speaking/listening goal for Phase I training [at] 1 (as measured on the Oral Proficiency Interview)."<sup>12</sup> According to the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) definitions, speaking level 1 implies an elementary proficiency, "able to satisfy minimum courtesy requirements and maintain very simple face-to-face conversations on familiar topics . . . simple, personal and accommodation needs . . . exchange greetings . . . and predictable and skeletal biographical information."<sup>13</sup> A program goal of "1" on the ILR skill level hardly defines "experts who speak the local language." This low bar results in the vast majority of APH personnel remaining dependent upon an interpreter, just like those advisors with no training in the language—thereby significantly reducing the utility and efficacy of a "Hand." This reality undercuts overall "brand" reputation.

The second flaw of the APH program comes about from the poorly conceived selection criteria. Aside from the request for personnel with "previous operation ENDURING FREEDOM/FREEDOM SENTINEL" experience, the remaining criteria are poorly defined and not restrictive enough to serve as useful screening criteria that ensure human resource experts find quality candidates to meet quotas. The desired traits include *communications skills* (the ability to listen and absorb nontraditional concepts), *respectful* (the ability to promote dignity, open-mindedness), *flexibility* (the faculty of thinking in nonrigid and nontraditional manners), *operational competence* (the possession of basic military skills), and *entrepreneurial mind-set* (the capacity to develop problem-solving networks).<sup>14</sup> While all good aspirational traits, almost none of these criteria would bar any officer from filling the requirement. Absent are hard criteria like previous command experience, in-residence professional education, Defense Language Aptitude Battery minimum scores, and so forth.

The third and perhaps most important challenge to the APH program is the expectation for APH personnel to serve in a 44–46-month tour—a long tour for all the services, and especially long for a program that fills no critical career development for officers from the Army or the Navy.<sup>15</sup> The severity of this disconnect is hard to overstate but can be clearly seen in two statistics: the high rate of non-volunteers for the program and low promotion rates for APH personnel. According to the director of Afghan Hands Management Element–Forward in October 2017, Capt Herschel Weinstock, the Army and Navy's APH personnel both suffered promotion rates well below 50 percent to lieutenant colonel—significantly below average.

These low promotion rates lead to a type of “death spiral” for the program. First and foremost, few volunteers come forward, resulting in higher rates of nonvolunteered officers, who then chose to separate or retire rather than serve in the assignment, which then produces low fill rates. Over time, these empty billets then present a dilemma for senior leadership, who must choose to keep a vacant APH billet on the books or convert the billet to another specialty with higher fill rates. The choice has often been to convert the billet away from APH. Surprisingly, this declining level of APH billets comes at the same time that the NATO mission transitioned to TAA, which should argue for an increase in an APH-like skill set since the mission shifted from a kinetic one to that of 100-percent advising. According to the forward deployed program director, this combination has led to a crisis in the program toward the end of 2018. Acknowledging this, Gen. Joseph Dunford, Jr., chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “earlier this year approved ending the program by fall 2020, said Richard Osial, his spokesman.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Ministry of Defense Advisors**

The MoDA program was developed in 2010 in response to operational requirements in Afghanistan and an increased US government emphasis on civilian-led capacity building at the ministerial level.<sup>17</sup> To effectively engage PN colonels and generals, US civilians in GS-13 through GS-15 pay grades are encouraged to apply to the MoDA program to serve in one-year assignments to a specific area of operation. MoDA program advisors support a wide range of key functional areas in the Afghan MOD and MOI, including policy and strategy, resource management, logistics and acquisition, human resource management, and facilities maintenance.<sup>18</sup> The MoDA program was designed to leverage the subject matter expertise of the DOD civilian workforce to address partner ministerial-level development objectives and to provide these civilians with the requisite cultural, operational, and advisory training necessary to ensure that the effort is appropriate and effective.<sup>19</sup> After selection, and prior to deployment, MoDA program advisors assigned to Afghanistan first participate in an eight-week training course that includes professional advisor training, cultural awareness, country familiarization, language instruction, security training, senior-level consultations and briefings, and practical exercises with native Afghan role-players.<sup>20</sup> Personnel selected for the program are afforded the opportunity to extend their deployment or serve in subsequent deployments after reapplying.

The MoDA program’s primary purpose is to address the DOD’s history of carrying out advisory efforts on an ad hoc basis, utilizing military or contract personnel whose functional expertise and advisory skills were not always well matched to address technical processes and gaps in government ministries.<sup>21</sup> To select advisors

to fill International Security Assistance Force requirements, the MoDA program recruits from GS civilians and applicants to the Civilian Expeditionary Workforce.<sup>22</sup> A screening panel reviews résumés for professional experience, advisory skill, education, and international background.<sup>23</sup> Unlike most APH personnel, all MoDA personnel self-nominate (i.e., volunteer) to be a part of the program. To offset any negative impacts of losing a GS civilian for a year, MoDA funds a GS replacement for the duration of the deployment until the GS employee returns to their assignment post deployment. Due to the program's success, MoDA was granted global authority in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2012 National Defense Authorization Act and is currently supporting advisors in the European, African, Pacific, Central, and Southern Command areas of responsibility.<sup>24</sup> While the MoDA program strives to represent a more deliberate DOD effort toward expeditionary advising, as of the publication of this article, there is not a DOD Directive or Instruction currently in place that governs the MoDA program. Without written guidance that establishes policy, assigns responsibilities, and outlines procedures, the MoDA program may not evolve as well as otherwise would be possible. Written guidance would aid MoDA by facilitating a dialogue with other communities, further institutionalizing program support, improving training, and thereby ensuring continued program success to the mission in Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup>

### **Foreign Area Officers**

In 2005, the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) first issued directive 1315.17, "Department of Defense Foreign Area Officer (FAO) Program." This joint policy guidance mandated that each service establish their own FAO program. OSD's vision for FAOs' role is wide-ranging, as seen in this excerpt:

DOD Components shall use FAO capabilities to advise senior US military and civilian leadership, to provide liaison with foreign militaries operating in coalitions with U.S. forces, allies and partners. They shall also use FAOs in the US DOD attaché corps, and support the Department's security cooperation and assistance, intelligence, and political-military affairs staff functions in roles that include planners and advisors.<sup>26</sup>

Other key hallmarks of the program include "competitive selection" for FAOs who are "managed as a professional community with career paths," and perhaps most notably, "education, training, and professional development necessary to attain, sustain, and enhance an in-depth knowledge of international political-military affairs, language, regional expertise, and cultural (LREC) skills."<sup>27</sup> In other words, OSD policy makers envisioned the FAO program as a full-fledged human resource program with an imperative to "recruit, assess, develop, retain,

motivate, and promote a cadre of Officers to meet present and future DOD needs.”<sup>28</sup> The FAO program places development and sustainment of 3C skill sets at the forefront and other traditional specialties as a secondary consideration—a characteristic unique to FAOs in the military departments.

In terms of specific requirements to create a qualified FAO, the directive is explicit. There are four primary requisites:

1. “Qualification in a principal military specialty;”
2. A regionally focused Masters’ degree;
3. Attainment of foreign language proficiency at the 2/2 level or better on the Defense Language Proficiency Test;<sup>29</sup> and
4. “One year of In-Region Training (IRT) or In-Region Experience (identified as duty experience involving significant interaction with host nationals and/or host nation entities in the foreign countries or regions in which they specialize).”<sup>30</sup>

These rigorous requirements come with a high training cost, and the average time to train an average FAO often exceeds three years. Language training programs that develop foreign language proficiency in select service members, such as the Air Force’s Language Enabled Airman Program, have increasingly provided language-enabled personnel for the FAO program, thereby reducing the training timeline. Despite the high training costs and extensive training pipeline, the services responded positively and have rapidly expanded their FAO ranks. As of the end of FY15, the time of the most recent OSD assessment, the military departments collectively tout 2,874 FAOs (2,688 in the active component and 186 in the reserve component), a 12-percent increase over 2014.<sup>31</sup> Today, each military department celebrates the many successes and achievements of their respective FAOs, and senior-level commitment to the program has grown steadily in the last decade. The military departments continue to drive toward the goal of creating the DOD’s “foremost regional experts and foreign language professionals” through programs that develop “professional-level foreign language proficiency, regional expertise, and cultural (LREC) competencies.”<sup>32</sup> These cross-culturally competent warriors, however, have been almost wholly absent from expeditionary advisor missions, despite their robust skill sets.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The DOD has clearly expended a great amount of energy and resources to meet the challenge of conducting strategic-level advising in Afghanistan. However, our review of the major recent efforts, which include ACPAK Hands and MoDA,

shows the challenges of taking an expedient approach toward solving this issue. Given that the FAO program enjoys broad support across all the military departments, the failure to consider it as part of the solution certainly seems like an oversight that should be addressed in the near future. In addition to this general observation, below we propose a series of additional recommendations to improve the possibility of mission success in this critical strategic effort.

1. Identify the key expeditionary advisor billets where FAO skill sets would have maximum impact and utilize FAOs to fill those billets to the maximum extent possible. In our own experience, these would include the US colonel billets directly advising at the senior levels of the Afghan MOD at Resolute Support Headquarters (RS HQ), and our estimate is that less than one dozen would meet criteria that would warrant a FAO as the appropriate fill.
2. Allow for “generic” FAO coding. By *generic* the authors wish to communicate that the billet coding would allow FAOs from any region to fill the position. This may seem to contradict the idea of obtaining a FAO with the right regional skill set, but we recommend generic coding for two reasons. First, the FAO community is relatively small and cannot easily accommodate the creation of a large pool of Dari speakers, as their utility out of theater is very limited due to the small number of countries that speak Dari or a derivative of this language. Second, it is not really required. Given that none of the current solutions produce professional level speakers (3/3/3 on the ILR) in the native language, the priority should be placed on finding those with deep 3C skill sets. FAOs have more depth in 3C than perhaps any other military specialty, since 3C is a significant portion of their initial training. This generic coding would also allow for FAOs to fulfill service deployment requirements in their FAO specialty, rather than any other occupational specialty they may have. Lastly, FAOs’ knowledge of an additional language—even one from another region—allows them a significant advantage when working with a translator, as they are more sensitive to the possible miscommunication that can occur across languages.
3. Require FAO skill sets in key contractor advisor positions. While RS HQ has only relatively few US military senior advisor positions, there are many contract advisors that support the coalition advisors, which far outnumber US strategic advisor positions. The performance work statement (PWS) for those positions currently fails to identify FAO or 3C experience as mandatory criteria, but adding such criteria would represent a



significant additional way to bring retired FAOs into the mission without the impact on active duty forces. Of the 153 Contractor positions in the PWS assigned to advise the MOD and MOI for Resolute Support, only 23 (15 percent) required some degree of 3C skills under the essential qualifications necessary for employment.<sup>33</sup> Those billets requiring 3C were primarily for translators, not advisors. PWSs for contract advisor positions should be revisited and should prioritize hiring personnel with 3C skillsets.

4. Develop additional policy guidance for MoDA. While already a successful program, MoDA would benefit from policy guidance as found in DOD directives and instructions that govern the FAO program. In addition, MoDA should consider targeting civil service series 0130/0131—the identifier for international affairs and international relations—as a core experience required for MoDA. This would favor entry for retired FAOs into these positions and would generally prioritize 3C skill sets over other occupational specialties that do not guarantee 3C.
5. Terminate AFPAK Hands. Due to its limited utility and the negative perception it suffers in the Army and Navy, it may be time to consider focusing those resources elsewhere. Certain positions would need to be filled through other means—flying positions that require high levels of language skills, for example—but these requirements may be better met by changing them to “language-designated positions.”
6. Develop improved measures of 3C skill sets and code positions that require those skill sets, where needed.

In sum, it is time to reconsider how the DOD responds to the human resource challenges of strategic expeditionary advising. While our analysis has focused on Afghanistan, these lessons are equally relevant for other theaters with expeditionary advisor roles, such as Iraq or Syria. As FAOs ourselves, we know firsthand the 3C capabilities resident in this community of experts and hope to one day see better utilization of this skill set going forward. The success of our most critical missions depends on it! 🌟

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### Notes

1. Scott G. Wuestner, *Building Partner Capacity/Security Force Assistance: A New Structural Paradigm*, Letort Paper (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army Strategic Studies Institute, February 2009), <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=880>.

2. US Central Command, “Resolute Support,” February 2018, <http://www.centcom.mil/OPERATIONS-AND-EXERCISES/RESOLUTE-SUPPORT/>.

3. According to the Congressional Research Service, the annual US military aid to Afghanistan currently averages almost USD 1 billion in International Military Education and Training (IMET) and approximately USD 5 billion in DOD aid in the form of the Afghan Security Forces Fund (ASFF). See *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 13 December 2017), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL30588/278>.

4. Allison Abbe, Lisa M. V. Gulick, and Jeffrey L. Herman, *Cross-Cultural Competence in Army Leaders: A Conceptual and Empirical Foundation* (Arlington, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, Leader Development Research Unit, 2007), vii, [http://www.hqda.army.mil/ari/pdf/SR\\_2008-01.pdf](http://www.hqda.army.mil/ari/pdf/SR_2008-01.pdf).

5. Sophie-Claire Hoeller, “25 Common American Customs That Are Considered Offensive in Other Countries,” *Business Insider*, 5 August 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/american-customs-that-are-offensive-abroad-2015-8>.

6. Capt Herschel Weinstock, director of Afghan Hands Management Element–Forward, interview by the author, October 2017.

7. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction (CJCSI )1630.01B, Para 4. “Policy,” 1.

8. *Ibid.*, Para 5.a. “Afghanistan/Pakistan Hands,” 1.

9. *Ibid.*, Para 5.b. “Afghanistan/Pakistan Hands,” 2.

10. Weinstock interview.

11. CJCSI 1630.01B, Para 1.a. “Joint Staff Strategic Plans and Policy Directorate (J-5) Responsibilities,” 1.

12. *Ibid.*, Para 5.b. “Afghanistan/Pakistan Hands,” 2.

13. Interagency Language Roundtable, “Speaking 1 (Elementary Proficiency),” <http://www.govtillr.org/Skills/ILRscale2.htm#1>.

14. CJCSI 1630.01B, Enclosure B, Para 1.e. “The following traits and elements,” 2.

15. By contrast, the Air Force career development includes a “career broadening” tour at the O-4 level that allows for a program like APH and can be seen in that service’s slightly above average promotion rates, which are .5% above average, according to Captain Weinstock, the forward deployed program director in 2017.

16. Stars and Stripes, “A decadelong program to ‘turn the tide’ in Afghanistan is ending, long after military shifted its focus,” August 17, 2019, <https://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/a-decadelong-program-to-turn-the-tide-in-afghanistan-is-ending-long-after-military-shifted-its-focus-1.594651>

17. Department of Defense, “Ministry of Defense Advisors Program Annual Report, Overview and Fiscal Year 2014 Highlights,” 1, [https://defenseoversight.wola.org/primarydocs/1412\\_moda.pdf](https://defenseoversight.wola.org/primarydocs/1412_moda.pdf).

18. *Ibid.*, 2.

19. *Ibid.*, 1.

20. *Ibid.*, 2.

21. *Ibid.*, 1.

22. *Ibid.*, 3.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, 1.

25. *Ibid.*, 2.

26. Department of Defense Directive (DoDD) 1315.17, DRAFT (as of July 2018), “Department of Defense Foreign Area Officer (FAO) Program,” 4.

27. *Ibid.*, 4.

28. *Ibid.*, 8.

29. Interagency Language Roundtable, “Speaking 1 (Elementary Proficiency).”

30. DoDD, 8

31. “Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2015 Foreign Area Officer Annual Program Report,” 5.

32. *Ibid.*, 6.

33. MoD & MoI Performance Work Statement, 2017.

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