What I Learned from Being a Planner in an Advisory Command: Reflections from the Security Assistance Group â?? Ukraine

Description

â??Plans are worthless, but planning is everything.â?• General Eisenhowerâ??s famous words echoed in my mind as I embarked on a challenging six-month stint with the Security Assistance Groupâ??Ukraine (SAG-U), a US military organization established to coordinate training and equipment deliveries for Ukraine. This experience would significantly influence my perspective on military planning.

As I dove into my role at SAG-U, I quickly realized that planning isnâ??t a one-size-fits-all endeavor. The unique environment of an advisory command threw two major curveballs our way: working with a third major actor (our partner force) and lacking direct command and control over combat forces. Our tried-and-true methods like the military decision-making process (MDMP) and joint planning process (JPP) still held up. But we had to adapt. I found myself placing a much greater emphasis on understanding the motivations and capabilities of all actors involved and considering a wider range of options than was typical.

SAG-U, established in November 2022, is no ordinary military outfit. As a three-star headquarters, our job was to coordinate security force assistance to Ukraine, supporting the training and equipping of their armed forces.

This meant diving deep into understanding Ukraineâ??s specific military needs and the operations they could feasibly undertake. Our planning efforts werenâ??t just internal exercisesâ??they guided the international community through the International Donor Coordination Center and provided crucial advice to our Ukrainian partners. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg wasnâ??t exaggerating when he said our work was â??making a real difference on the battlefield every day.â?• Achieving that impact required us to rethink our approach to planning.

The Unique Challenges of Advisory Planning

My time with SAG-U was eye opening. Advisory planning throws planners into a three-way operational environment that balances U.S., adversary, and partnered forces, which complicates even the most

basic steps of military planning. Take mission analysis, for instance. Normally, intelligence sections would analyze enemy forces, and plans sections would assess friendly capabilities. But whoâ??s responsible for analyzing the partner force? Our traditional staff structure didnâ??t have a clear answer.

In an ideal world, there would be open and honest communication with partners. Reality, as I quickly learned, is messier. Cultural differences, operational sensitivities, and topics like casualty figures often led to inaccuracies that could throw our entire planning process off kilter. Then thereâ??s the elephant in the room: lack of direct control. We werenâ??t issuing orders to the Ukrainians; we were aiming to achieve military objectives indirectly through our partner. This required our planning to be particularly adaptable and forward-looking.

Adapting on the Fly: Our Approach at SAG-U

Faced with these challenges, we had to get creative. Instead of relying on a standalone staff section, we formed an ad hoc operational planning team (OPT). This collaborative approach allowed us to tap into the expertise of our intelligence (J2), operations (J3), and planning (J5) directorates, giving us a more holistic view of the situation. One of our first steps was a design session to frame the operational environment. We dug deep into understanding Ukraineâ??s likely desired end state and available resources, treating this analysis with the same depth we usually reserve for our adversaries. This session highlighted some implicit biases and assumptions we in SAG-U had about our partners. Most of us walked away from this session realizing we had taken our understanding of the Ukrainians for granted and resolved to apply a comparable amount of rigor and energy to understanding our partners.

Information on our partner force was crucial, but often harder to come by than intel on the adversary. We got lucky in some waysâ??the similarities between Russian and Ukrainian military structures gave us a starting point. But we still had to adapt, using historical planning factors for Soviet forces as a baseline for understanding Ukrainian capabilities.

A key asset in our planning process was the expertise of our Foreign Area Officers (FAOs). Their in-depth knowledge of the region and language skills proved invaluable. The FAOs helped us understand nuances like the importance of colonels in Ukrainian planning and the commander-centric nature of their units. This insight allowed us to tailor our approach, emphasizing commander-to-commander meetings over staff-to-staff coordination.

Advisory planning forced us to reshuffle our priorities. We found ourselves dedicating at least 50% of our planning timeline to mission analysisâ??a significant increase from the usual 30-50% in a two-actor environment. But it wasnâ??t just about crunching numbers. We had to dig into qualitative aspects like

doctrine, leadership, training, and risk tolerance. These elements were critical in preventing what we call â??mirror imaging,â?• which is the dangerous assumption that our partners think and operate just like we do.

The 2023 Ukrainian offensive drove home the importance of truly understanding our partner force. Despite having access to Western hardware, the Ukrainians seemed hesitant to attempt high-risk maneuvers, such as combined arms breaches, that could result in heavy casualties of up to 50%. This reluctance caught many Western observers off guard. It was particularly surprising given Ukraineâ??s earlier willingness to execute bold and risky moves, like their fall 2022 offensives. Yet we only knew if our mission analysis was correct in hindsight. How important were recruitment concerns? How confident were the Ukrainians in Western equipment and training? Were earlier bold moves a paradigm shift or just an aberration from the norm? Were we mirror imaging? Did we fully understand the changes to the physical terrain? It was a stark reminder that effective advisory planning must consider these nuanced factors to align operational expectations with our partnerâ??s realities.

Embracing New Approaches

We realized that traditional planning processes werenâ??t always up to the task in this complex environment. Designed to address defined problems, MDMP and JPP become frayed when a third major actor is involved. Planners should, therefore, incorporate aspects of design thinking and red teaming into their approach. Exercises like the â??Four Ways of Seeingâ?• (see Table 1) can help understand the different perspectives and create a comprehensive analysis for planning.

Table 1: The Four Ways of Seeing, Adapted for Three Actors

	Enemy	Partner	Friendly
Enemy	How does the enemy view itself?	How does the enemy view the partner	How does the enemy view the friendly force?
Partner	How does the partner view the enemy?	How does the partner view itself?	How does the partner view the friendly force?
Friendly	How does the friendly force view the enemy?	How does the friendly force view the partner?	How does the friendly force view itself?

Without direct operational control, we had to shift our focus from depth to breadth in our planning. Instead of a few highly detailed plans, we aimed for a wider range of less detailed options. This approach allowed us to be more adaptable as situations evolved. We narrowed our focus to three key scenarios: a success scenario, a failure scenario, and what we considered the most likely outcome.

This gave us clear starting points for future detailed planning, allowing us to adjust as more information became available. To illustrate this approach, we used a diagram like the one depicted below. This visual representation helped us conceptualize the range of possible outcomes for Ukrainian operations and plan accordingly.

Image at â?¯AM

To overcome the lack of direct command and control, we tailored our plans to provide our advisory commander with the essential information for effectively guiding our partners. This meant including streamlined concepts of operations and focusing on the key concerns of Ukrainian brigade and corps commanders. Additionally, we expanded our planning scope to include elements not typically found in traditional operational planning. We pinpointed specific training and equipment needs for the Ukrainians and forecast their potential personnel and equipment lossesâ??tasks we were accustomed to doing for our own units but not for a partner force. This comprehensive approach served a dual purpose: it informed the organization of future training requirements and highlighted the need for timely equipment donations and deliveries.

Conclusion

In a time when something new is seemingly valued over the old, traditional military planning processes still hold up as useful, if imperfect, tools even in the context of advisory planning. My experience with SAG-U demonstrated that staff working within an advisory command need to adapt to account for an additional major actor and the lack of direct command and control over friendly units. Planners can effectively navigate these challenges by emphasizing mission analysis and considering a wider range of options for future scenarios. Doctrine is a guideline. As such, it allows for deviations to account for unique circumstances. Staff officers should use that freedom and adapt planning to fit the context.

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Main Image: During a working trip to Kharkiv region, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy visited the frontline command post of the defenders of Kupyansk and presented state awards (President of Ukraine via flickr)

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