# Streamlining US Army Security Cooperation: Why Coordination is Key to Global Influence

## Description

Coordination can mean the difference between success and failure in any military operation. Operation Eagle Claw, the ill-fated 1980 hostage rescue mission in Iran, famously exposed the dangers of disjointed efforts between military servicesâ??leading to major reforms in how US special operations forces and the larger joint force operate together today. A similar problem is unfolding in Army Security Cooperation efforts right now with both conventional and irregular partner nation forces.

Despite having three complementary organizations (Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs), Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF), and the National Guard Bureauâ??s State Partnership Program (SPP)), these units often operate independently and miss opportunities to operate more efficiently and draw on their unique strengths. Imagine a situation where an SFAB team unknowingly conducted the same training in the same city as a State Partnership Program, while just across the border, an ARSOF detachment struggled with a logistics challenge the SFAB could have helped solve. This is not fiction, but one of many repetitive scenarios that both authors have observed in 50 years of experience across multiple combatant commands. If only this multitude of Security Cooperation efforts had been coordinated in advance across time, space, and purpose.

Centralized Security Cooperation coordination ideally occurs within the combatant commandsâ?? campaign plan management construct, but this mechanism is often ineffective and lacks transparency between the Army service component commands (ASCC), theater special operations commands (TSOC), and National Guard SPP. This coordination deficiency prevents unified action to generate, employ, and sustain foreign security forces, thus inhibiting Army effectiveness towards achieving US national security objectives. The US Army must streamline its command and control structure and more efficiently synchronize activities within its different areas of operations.  This article explores solutions to better integrate these effortsâ??because when it comes to building partnerships and strengthening deterrence, the Army can no longer afford to let its left hand operate without knowing what the right is doing.

## A â??3-2-1â?• Structural Dilemma

Traditional Army force structure and command and control relationships unnecessarily inhibit the Security Cooperation enterpriseâ??s agility. The title (a â??3-2-1â?• Structural Dilemma) refers to the reality that ***three*** distinct Army organizationsâ??SFABs, ARSOF, and SPPâ??typically report through ***two*** different operational commands (ASCCs and TSOCs), each supporting a ***single*** geographic combatant command. Although there are similarities between SFABs, ARSOF, and SPP unitsâ??such as regional alignment and their role as advisorsâ??their focus in execution differs across conventional forces and irregular forces. Security Cooperation is a broad umbrella that includes both Security Force Assistance (SFA) and Foreign Internal Defense (FID). As the name implies, FID deals with support to host nation programs and activities to free and protect its society from internal, irregular threatsâ??subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, and terrorism. On the other hand, SFA typically focuses on external threatsâ??for example, conventional military aggression by a neighboring country. While SFA is a subset of Security Cooperation, it is not a subset of FID, nor is FID a subset of SFA. Likewise, conventional Army units like the SFABs and SPP focus on SFA, while ARSOF specialize in FID.

Further confusing matters, the Armyâ??s three operational organizations for Security Cooperation typically deploy in support of two different operational, sub-unified commands both supporting a given geographic combatant command. Hereâ??s what this looks like. Army service component commands (like US Army Central) employ the SFABs while simultaneously *monitoring* deployed State Partnership Program units without *directing* them. Conversely, TSOCs (like US Special Operations Command Central) employ ARSOF units such as Special Forces detachments and Civil Affairs teams, which are rarely synchronized with counterpart units within the ASCCs in the same geographic area of responsibility. These units further suffer from receiving their requirements from disjointed channels which typically come to TSOCs and ASCCs from individual country team Security Cooperation Officers located in the US embassies and aligned with the State Department mission. While there are mechanisms in place to reconcile differences between US embassies and the geographic combatant commands, this process does not always unfold as planned, and the different Security Cooperation organizations operate in silos. The result is that the Armyâ??s Security Cooperation units are not unified in purpose and limited resources fail to provide the greatest returns to both the foreign security forces and US joint forces.

The lack of synchronization between the combatant commands and country teams is unique and may come at an even higher level. A country teamâ??s integrated country strategy may not necessarily align with the DoDâ??s National Defense Strategy or the combatant commandâ??s campaign plansâ??or vice versa. Country teams and geographic combatant commands will certainly nest their campaigns with current national level strategies to legitimize their approach, but misalignment of priorities, redundancy, and inadvertent disruption of efforts are likely to ensue when the elements of the Security Cooperation enterprise operate independently and without full awareness of each other.

Under this arrangement, combatant commands have limited ability to develop or assess clearly defined Security Cooperation objectives against interagency or national-level strategies. Likewise, it becomes difficult to translate US approaches into bilateral or multinational exercises or develop cross-cutting measures of effectiveness for US efforts. For example, many combatant command campaign plans today aim to enhance their partner nationsâ?? ability to resist Chinese and Russian predatory behaviors and integrate them for contingency planning. But if elements from the SFAB, ARSOF, and SPP are operating independently through country teams or stove piped component commands, there is no coherent way for combatant commands to have a true account of partner nationsâ?? potential contributions or the effectiveness of US activities to date.

Synchronization is a challenging task even in the best of circumstances, especially short of conflict where the operating environment and intended effects are not always so clear, and there are more actors at play than the military alone. The fact that adjacent units often lack a common operating picture makes the problem even worse. While many combatant commands hold cross-component meetings to discuss Security Cooperation activities, they are often more episodic exercises of process with performative meetings that give false hope of meaningful synchronization happening. This false sense of coordination is harmful and undermines real integration of Security Cooperation efforts that could actually lead to a strategic edge over adversaries. If unaddressed, the current construct will continue to frustrate progress even as new units and commanders come in with high hopes of enacting change.

## Align the Campaign in the Land Domain

To address this structural problem, three potential solutions can improve synchronization in the Armyâ??s Security Cooperation enterprise:

1. Establishing a regionally-aligned task force;
2. Appointing a sub-unified command as the coordinating authority for regional Security Cooperation efforts; and
3. Aligning the Security Force Assistance Command under US Army Special Operations Command as an â??advisor division.â??

A regionally aligned task force would provide the command and control relationship and strategic understanding to prioritize military training and assistance in ways that are responsive to partner needs and overall US national security goals. The closest example today is the Southern Europe Task Force Africa (SETAF-AF) under US Africa Command and US Army Europe and Africa. SETAF-AF is a standing conventional US Army headquarters that employs only conventional Army assets to meet

theater Security Cooperation objectives across Africa. Empowering a similar task force to coordinate and synchronize Security Cooperation across SOF, SPP, and conventional forces in a critical region would enable the application of the Armyâ??s existing Security Cooperation units to develop a campaign of integrated, coordinated, and sequenced efforts.

If establishing a regional task force is untenable, the next logical option is to use existing structures underneath the combatant commands. Determining whether the coordinating authority or supported command for Security Cooperation would be either the TSOC or ASCC depends on the combatant command but should be made consistent across all geographic commands. Accomplishing this change could be sub-regional or by country within a Combatant Commandâ??s area of responsibility, allowing for a consistent regional focus to guide activities in support of the campaign plan, even if individual units still operate in their relative stovepipe. While there are existing structures within the combatant commands, generally in the J5, they are too far removed from the action on the ground and function more as a high-level planning team. Someone must be in charge of the complete package of SPP, SFAB, and SOF SC activities.

Lastly, from a US Army Title 10 force provider perspective, aligning the Security Force Assistance Commandâ??currently a 2-star division-level command element within the US Army Forces Commandâ??under the 3-star US Army Special Operations Command as an â??advisor divisionâ?? could offer the combatant commands regionally aligned Army forces for Security Cooperation under the supported command or coordinating authority. This reorganization requires the Army to maintain the integrity of the conventional SFAB teams but would maintain a critical capability enabling the conventional force to focus on lethality and readiness. While SFAB teams have capabilities that are separate and distinct from the ARSOF elements, there is a natural overlap where capabilities are mutually supporting across externally focused SFA and internally focused FID.

An SFAB is comprised of maneuver, fires, engineer, and logistics teams with resident subject matter expertise. Imagine a situation where a TSOCâ??s irregular warfare campaign has a Special Forces team working with a partner nationâ??s elite force who happen to control artillery as a direct support asset. SFAB fires teams can train the partner fires battalion working with SOF to enhance the lethality of the elite force as well as the cannon unit. The SFAB logistics team can likewise assist with building the tooth to tail support required for sustained operations across echelons. SFAB maneuver teams are also ideal for working with higher level partner headquarters such as the creation of a combined command to conduct counterterrorism.

While the maneuver team focuses on building the headquarters, the SOF teams focus on building the unit of action. The maneuver team also has conventional maneuver leaders that can assist with tactical training of the conventional forces. If we layer on SPP quarterly engagements that focus on improving

the collection management of the partner, we begin to realize the compounding benefits of coordination at the end user level with an assigned command. All these actions expand access and influence with our partners, which could prevent competitors from conducting similar engagements that ultimately damage US interests.

Instituting one of these three constructs or a hybrid of these options will synchronize the operations, activities, and investments of the disparate military organizations. This benefits the US by enabling states to secure themselves from internal and external threats and helps build relationships that may support long-term access, overflight, and posture in ways that asymmetrically set the theater through the human environment.

## Hands Untied: Unleashing the Full Potential of Army Security Cooperation

Thriving in todayâ??s operational environment requires a more comprehensive approach to the Armyâ??s Security Cooperation that overcomes its disjointed approach to the complex realities of strategic competition. Modifying the US Armyâ??s structural approach to Security Cooperation can improve operational effectiveness, optimize interoperability with partners, improve posture for crisis or conflict, and advance US national security objectives alongside interagency partners. Without addressing the Armyâ??s structural limitations for implementing Security Cooperation, combatant commands are more likely to continue operating with one hand tied behind their backsâ??or without full awareness of the combined strengths of the components at its disposal.

---

*LTC Messenger is an SF Officer, served in 5th SFG, SOCCENT and is currently in command of 3D SQDN, 2 SFAB.*

*CW5 Carey Hyde is an SF Warrant Officer and has served in 5th SFG or SOCCENT for the last 25 years.*

*The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton Universityâ??s Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.*

*Main Image: 2nd Security Force Assistance Brigade assists partner nations with live-fire exercise in Senegal (Sgt. Ricky Gavilan DVIDS)*

*If you value reading the Irregular Warfare Initiative, please consider supporting our work. And for the best gear, check out the IWI store for mugs, coasters, apparel, and other items.*

**Date Created**
2025/04/24