Influence by Design: Reassessing U.S. Military Advising

Description

The Irregular Warfare Initiative (IWI) Editorial Team is proud to present the second installment in our series featuring leading thinkers in the irregular warfare community critically engaging with recent IW-related publications. Curated by IWI editors Barbara Elias and Lewis Fraser, this series goes beyond traditional book reviews. Contributors are encouraged to challenge ideas, draw connections to their own expertise, and explore how the works shape broader debates in the field.

Introduction: Rethinking U.S. Military Advising

After the failure to build a sustainable Afghan military that could survive without U.S. presence, many scholars and practitioners now argue that U.S. efforts to build foreign militaries are nearly predestined to fail and should rarely, if ever, be undertaken. In *Training for Victory: U.S. Special Forces Advisory Operations from El Salvador to Afghanistan,* Frank Sobchak pushes back against this view, arguing that *â??â?¦we have not failed because advising our allies is too hard; weâ??ve failed because we have never taken it seriously â?¦Building foreign militaries is a difficult, long-term, and often thankless endeavor. But it is not impossibleâ?• (2024, 177).* To support his argument, Sobchak examines five cases of U.S. military advising: El Salvador during the Cold War, and the Philippines, Colombia, Iraq, and Afghanistan during the Global War on Terror. While cases like Colombia and El Salvador are considered successes by some scholars, Afghanistan is widely seen as a failure. Sobchak seeks to understand why some advising efforts succeed while others do not. He tackles this challenging analytical problem with a clear research design and well-researched case studies offering new empirical detail on important U.S. advising missions.

Existing explanations attribute security force assistance outcomes to structural conditions or the providerâ??s use of strategies like carrots and sticks or military-to-military socialization to encourage local compliance. Sobchakâ??s work broadly supports the findings of researchers who argue that human contact between militaries generates more influence for security force assistance providers. His contribution lies in demonstrating that advising missions vary greatly in their design across cases, and this variation makes some more successful than others at generating influence. Within the U.S. special operations forces (SOF) communityâ??the military organization most frequently engaged in

advisingâ??so-called â??SOF truthsâ?• shape beliefs about how special operations forces should be built and maintained. Despite this shared reference point, in practice, U.S. SOF advise differently across cases. Sobchak leverages variation in the design of military advising missions to determine which are more effective. The implications are important for policy: if certain kinds of advising missions are correlated with better outcomes, security force assistance providers have some control over whether the outcome mirrors Afghanistan or more closely resembles El Salvador.

The Role of Human Relationships in Advising

Military advisors serve the interests of the states that send them by exerting influence, and sometimes even control, over local military institutions and operations on the battlefield. Advising hinges on human contact and personal relationships between advisors and their local counterparts. Advisors use these relationships to transfer useful knowledge to counterparts, as well as to persuade them to adopt the sending stateâ??s preferred course of action. SOF advisors have long hypothesized that strong, enduring relationships are the key to success. Drawing on these folk theories, Sobchak identifies five factors, or independent variables, that strengthen advisor-counterpart bonds: (1) consistency in advisor-counterpart pairings, (2) language and cultural skills, (3) a low partner-to-advisor ratio, (4) the ability of advisors to organize host-nation SOFâ??not only by training but also by shaping military institutions, and (5) combat advising, which grants credibility and therefore battlefield control to advisors.

Sobchak also carefully conceptualizes and measures the dependent variable of military effectiveness. He defines it through four factors (three skill-based indicators and one battlefield performance indicator): *â??(1) fighting without advisors present, (2) fighting at night, (3) conducting multi-day combat operations, and (4) consistently defeating enemy forces in combatâ?• (2024, 14).* Night operations and sustained combat require significant technical skill, making these particularly useful indicators. Empirical scholars of conflict will appreciate Sobchakâ??s precise conceptualization and measurement across the qualitative case studies, rich with detail which could inspire new quantitative indicators of military effectiveness.

The key analytical challenge, of course, is determining causation: do the variables that Sobchak identifies actually drive the observed outcomes? Structural conditionsâ??such as host-nation receptivity to external influenceâ??vary widely, meaning advising strategies are just one factor, â?¦and maybe not even the most important one. To address this, Sobchak employs a comparative case study method, analyzing cases where U.S. SOF built partner forces from scratch. This approach enhances comparability across cases by reducing the impact of historical legacies, ensuring similar partner force characteristics, and maintaining consistency in U.S. advising methods, since conventional forces tend

to have less experience and interest in advising partner forces and therefore may be less skilled. His cases draw on extensive original interviews with U.S. SOF advisors, and his attention to detail allows him to reconstruct valuable military history across the casesâ??an important contribution for our understanding of understudied cases, such as U.S. advising in the Philippines.

Assessing Causal Claims and Limitations

Contrary to conventional wisdom, Sobchak finds that combat advising is not necessary for strong relationships with local partners and does not correlate with success. In fact, it can have downsides, as U.S. advisors may become overly focused on combat missions instead of letting local forces operate independently. Sobchak also finds that fluency in the partnerâ??s language is not essential, although he relies on the self-assessment of advisors with limited language skills who may not have been able to fully notice areas of disconnect. Advisors with fluency in the local language believed it provided them with a significant advantage in building relationships. As one advisor put it: â??When it comes down to â??Should I share this tidbit of intel, fuel, ammo, or gossip about internal office politics?â?? It is the one who gained rapport who gets it, and the one who doesnâ??t never knowsâ?• (*2024,* 183). Sobchak argues, however, that advisors can still build deep and enduring bonds in the presence of a language barrier if they maintain connections with local counterparts and repeatedly return to work with them over a long period of time. These strong relationships enhance compliance with influence requests. Sobchak therefore places more weight on consistency in advisor-counterpart pairings compared to language skills. Low partner-to-advisor ratios also matter significantly. Perhaps most important, Sobchak finds, is the ability to organize partner forces. In cases where advisors encountered less resistance from host-nation forcesâ??not just due to interest alignment but also other factorsâ??they were more successful in implementing reforms to improve military effectiveness.

Despite its strengths, Sobchakâ??s approach does not fully resolve causal inference challenges. He does not control for key host country characteristics, and one of his core variablesâ??the ability of U.S. SOF to organize partner forcesâ??is itself shaped by the design of the advising mission as well as other, unobserved factors. Why were U.S. forces more successful in organizing partner forces in some countries than others? Was it a resourcing issue, or did variation in host-nation receptivity play a role? Unraveling this puzzle is crucial for future research and the design of future SOF advising efforts. It is also essential to determine appropriate policy recommendations; whether the observed advising successes can be attributed to the design of U.S. advising missions or are based on fundamentally unalterable host nation characteristics leads to different recommendations for allocating U.S. security assistance across partners.

The Case of Ukraine

A clear example of the importance of defense institutionsâ??including both SOF-specific institutions as well as their integration with broader military and civilian structuresâ??comes from Ukraine, a case I have studied extensively. The example of Ukraine reinforces Sobchakâ??s point that the ability to organize local forces is crucial for advising success and a carefully designed advising mission can create better outcomes. After 2015, Ukrainian SOF (UKRSOF) transformed from their Soviet-legacy spetsnaz roots into a highly trained and professional force, thanks to extensive involvement from NATO countries, particularly the U.S. Armyâ??s 10th Special Forces Group, and NATO Special Operations Forces Command. NATO allies prioritized institution-building. Advisors determined early on that training alone would be insufficient without institutional reform; in other words, â??there would be no â??random acts of touching,â?? or â??RATS.â??â?• NATO advisors, backstopped by U.S. senior advisors, engaged high level stakeholders to push for major reforms, including the establishment of Ukrainian SOF as a separate service to ensure its independence.

At the same time, even the best advising mission faces significant challenges to building institutionsâ??and sustaining them over time, especially after external advisors have departed. In other words, the outcome can depend on factors beyond Sobchakâ??s model. Despite these efforts and clear successes, Ukrainian SOFâ??s operational and strategic-level institutions remained less developed. In the first year after Russiaâ??s invasion, SOF fought as elite infantry alongside conventional forces or reinforced weaker units, leading to high attrition. In Ukraineâ??s crowded and competitive SOF landscape, UKRSOF must continue proving its relevance to other military organizations, especially without foreign advisors in country to advocate for continued institutional reform.

The â??Sovereignty Clockâ?•: Influence Decay Over Time

One of Sobchakâ??s most intriguing observations is what he terms the â??sovereignty clockâ?•â??the fact that receptivity to U.S. influence decays over time in host countries with an active advising mission. Across his case studies in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Philippines, U.S. forces initially faced little resistance and were able to organize SOF effectively. However, this initial warm welcome eventually turned to resistance or even hostility from the host nation. In the Philippines, for instance, civilian authorities grew wary of U.S. advisors after their U.S.-trained SOF were involved in a 2003 coup attempt, and obstructed U.S. efforts to develop SOF institutions. If the â??sovereignty clockâ?• is widespread, it presents a challenge for dominant theories of U.S. influence in security cooperation. The â??carrots and sticksâ?• approach assumes powerful states can coerce compliance, yet Sobchakâ??s

cases highlight how local sovereignty limits U.S. leverage over time. Meanwhile, the â??socializationâ?• approach suggests sustained advising builds stronger relationships, and by extension influence, which is self-reinforcing over time. However, Sobchakâ??s cases indicate that prolonged U.S. presence can actually breed resistance. *Future research should better incorporate analysis of influence strategies over time to see whether states can successfully prevent the â??sovereignty clockâ?• from running out.*

Implications for Future Advising Missions

Sobchakâ??s findings offer critical insights for practitioners and scholars alike. First, while structural factors matter, the design of advising missions can significantly influence outcomes. Even when required by strategic necessity or lack of foresight to work with less-than-ideal partners, U.S. military organizations have the agency to craft an intervention that has a better chance of succeeding. Army Special Forces can take care to be sure that advisors are carefully selected for the mission, abstain from pushing the boundaries and taking over for the local military, and maintain relationships with counterparts through additional rotations in country or through remote advising. Second, institution building is difficult but can result in long-term payoffs through the creation of local host-nation forces that can operate more effectively today and *sustain themselves even after advisors depart*. Senior SOF advisors should work on building local SOF institutions; this requires an advising force that can operate at a higher echelon and with civilian political leaders. Third, the â??sovereignty clockâ?• suggests that security cooperation efforts potentially face diminishing returns, meaning the United States must plan for inevitable host-nation resistance and develop strategies to either achieve its goals quickly or sustain influence beyond an initial window of receptivity.

While these findings are valuable, caution should be taken in drawing broad conclusions from them. What works for local SOF organizations constructed from scratch (the scope of Sobchakâ??s study) may not necessarily work for the host nationâ??s conventional forces, where recruiting, training, and equipping at scale becomes difficult given factors like inequality. It is reasonable, though, to expect factors important for interpersonal influence in the SOF context, like consistency in advisor-counterpart pairings, to improve advising of conventional forces. Moreover, we should avoid conflating success at building partner military effectiveness with the achievement of desired strategic outcomes more broadly. From the case studies, it is unclear whether successful capacity building translated uniformly into desired outcomes for the United States. El Salvador ended in a negotiated settlement with the rebels, which begs the question whether such an agreement could have been reached before 12 years of fighting and violence against civilians claimed many lives. Afghanistan ended in a U.S. defeat. Iraq, Colombia, and the Philippines have experienced shaky domestic politics and government repression, with U.S.-advised forces sometimes contributing to instability even as they provided stability in other

ways by defeating insurgent groups or fighting them to a draw. Meanwhile, U.S. influence arguably declined over time in Iraq and the Philippines and is now nonexistent in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, history suggests that security force assistance will continue to be an indispensable tool of U.S. policy. Understanding how to do it as best as possible is essential. On that front, *Training for Victory* provides an important contribution to scholars and practitioners alike.

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