

The air advisor mission aims to make it so the good guys can win a fight without American troops in harm's way.

In the summer of 2009, a small special operations team from Air Force Special Operations Command's 6th Special Operations Squadron hit the ground in the West African nation of Mali.

Attached to Joint Special Operations Command Trans-Sahara under US Special Operations Command Africa, their mission was clear: Train and equip the country's nascent armed services to battle back against regional terror groups, such as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), that were steadily and violently gaining ground on the continent.

The 6th SOS team arrived in country at a time when the Pentagon and USAF leaders were learning painful lessons in counterinsurgency and irregular warfare on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan. Terms, such as "building partnership capacity" or BPC missions, were also coming into vogue among

senior military leaders, including the air service's senior brass.

But to air advisors in Mali and teams deployed to Africa, Central Asia, and other hot spots, the Pentagon's rhetoric on COIN, IW, and BPC boiled down to one main objective: Train foreign forces to fly and fight now, so US forces would not have to in the future.

With the Iraq War now over and DOD entering the endgame in Afghanistan, Pentagon leaders are doubling down on BPC operations, dramatically expanding the number of countries where those missions take place, and increasing the personnel dedicated to them.

Military planners at US Special Operations Command anticipate fielding 4,500 soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines into more than 100 countries to conduct bilateral and joint training operations, including the air advisor mission, the Pentagon's Fiscal Year 2015 budget plan states.

In May, President Obama announced the creation of a new "Counterterrorism Partnership Fund," which will set aside roughly \$5 billion specifically to train and equip foreign forces to combat terror groups worldwide.

The fund will finance a foreign-led counterterrorism force via "a network of partnerships from South Asia to the Sahel" underwritten by American military training and equipment, Obama said during a May 28 speech at West Point.

"We have to develop a strategy that matches this [terrorism] threat, one that expands our reach without sending forces that stretch our military too thin, or stir up local resentments," according to Obama. "We need partners to fight terrorists alongside us."

On the AFSOC side specifically, airmen are taking their hard-earned experience from building up Iraqi and Afghan air squadrons to various



USAF photo by MSgt. Russell E. Cooley IV

Left: USAF special operations airmen disembark from a Russian-built Mi-17 at Eglin AFB, Fla., during a capabilities demonstration. Right: Malian troops secure the landing zone as a CV-22 lands during Exercise Flintlock 08, the first time the AFSOC Osprey was deployed overseas.



“rougher neighborhoods” across the globe, with particular focus on Africa and South America, the chief of plans for AFSOC’s Air Warfare Center, Lt. Col. Michael Grub, said. “The demand has always been there, but [there] has been a shift in focus” from the initial spike in focus on air advisor missions beginning in late 2000 to the missions envisioned for the post-Iraq, post-Afghanistan era, Grub said.

AFSOC planners are looking to shift away from the “short term,” counterterrorism-driven air advisor missions that defined much of the command’s BPC operations during the Iraq and Afghan wars, he said. Taking a page from counterinsurgency operations,

the postwar air advisor strategy under construction by him and others is a “long-term, [more] permanent” plan that goes beyond teaching foreign air forces how to fly and fight, Grub said.

But while the air advisor mission inside the Air Force is expanding, operators with the 6th SOS and other AFSOC units will have to do more with less, as service leaders continue to cope with across-the-board budget cuts tied to sequestration.

In an attempt to handle those looming budget cuts, service leaders are looking to transition some of the air advisor mission from AFSOC and move it to conventional units in the Air Force. General-purpose squadrons are

already beginning to take some of the mission load off AFSOC, with USAF planning to stand up a new air advisor corps made up entirely of conventional Air Force units by 2016.

PHASE ZERO

Air Force advisors, as well as other US special operations units working the foreign internal defense mission, make their home in what is known as “Phase Zero” or preconflict conditions.

Their job, according to Grub, is to work hand-in-hand with partner nations’ forces, “giving them the capabilities to take care of themselves” before the bullets and bombs start flying. “What you are trying to do is get

THE FUTURE OF AFSOC'S AIR ADVISOR MISSION

By Carlo Muñoz

them [prepared] with the right kind of equipment and training,” he said. Team members from 6th SOS deployed to Mali in 2009 were tasked with training the Mali air force to operate and maintain their fleet of BT-67 transport aircraft, while schooling MAF fusilier commandos, who provide ground security for Malian air bases, much like USAF security forces.

Air advisors with the 6th SOS have drilled Malian military personnel through various combat scenarios, including a downed aircraft where indigenous forces conduct the planning and coordination to locate the aircraft, deploy air and ground forces to the location, and rescue the surviving crew members.

While these missions are not the headline-grabbing variety of special operations exploits, they remain a staple of SOCOM’s mission set. Security force assistance (SFA) and foreign internal defense (FID) operations, the terminology for the air advisor and other similar missions, continue to be

“instrumental in providing access” to global hot spots for US special operations teams “and is critical to preserving [SOCOM’s] worldwide readiness posture,” according to DOD’s budget justification plans.

But as the Pentagon’s counterterror strategy became more and more focused on finding and targeting top terrorists, the skill sets and capabilities taught by US air advisors followed suit. While this effort has produced short-term victories against al Qaeda and other extremist groups at the hands of US-trained foreign air forces, the long-term goal of preparing partner nations’ forces for Phase Zero of a conflict was diluted.

In the post-Iraq, post-Afghanistan world DOD is now contemplating, air advisor units in AFSOC are trying to get back to their core mission set, according to Grub. “It’s a [strategic] shift in what we have been doing in the past two wars,” he said. Long-term fixes are critical to success in air advisor operations.

“We [are] not there to win the war for them,” Grub said of AFSOC’s future air advising plans.

“BANG FOR THE BUCK”

Shifting from the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan to the vast, ungoverned regions in Africa, South America, and elsewhere presents “very different challenges” to the current cadre of Air Force operators conducting the air advisor mission, Grub said.

The biggest enemy facing foreign forces in places like Africa and South America is the wide swaths of ungoverned geography that allied forces cannot reach, due to a lack of air mobility. If an indigenous counterterrorism force cannot get to the enemy’s location to carry out a mission, other capabilities are rendered useless. Many of the early US-led aviation FID missions concentrated on getting foreign forces attuned to the intricacies of moving men and materiel in and out of those ungoverned regions.



USAF photo by Capt. Justin Brockhoff

While a foreign air force may request training and support on advanced platforms, such as unmanned intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance aircraft or fixed wing fighters, “they probably don’t need to have [those] capabilities,” in many cases, according to Grub. Return on investment, as he put it, is the name of the game for American air advisors when working with partner nation forces. And there is no bigger bang in the aviation FID mission than air mobility.

“[More] mobility is absolutely what I would give” foreign air forces working alongside their American counterparts, Grub said. Aside from the logistical challenges of operating in places like the Trans-Sahara, American air advisors must also attempt to strike a delicate balance in the tactics and techniques they school allied forces in and the ability of those forces to take those lessons onto the battlefield.

Those myriad skills are only eclipsed by the types of missions Air Force operators train foreign forces in—ranging from counterterrorism and counternarcotics missions to preventing illegal animal poaching. Finding that right mix of combat skills and mission sets is all part of the art of FID, said Grub, adding that the trick to the air advisor mission is to find “the right [capability] set for

their problems and getting them to a [US] standard” of operating.

But as the aviation FID mission has evolved, so have the capabilities of the partner nation forces, according to Grub. US air advisors have expanded the aviation FID mission to include ISR and tactical strike operations in recent years. Grub said the ISR and tactical strike mission could “eclipse the mobility mission” in terms of the core capabilities taught by American air advisors to some foreign air forces.

“In years past it was mostly mobility, [with] a little bit of ISR, a little bit of light strike,” Grub said. But, as the US increasingly tries to put an indigenous face on those operations, those skill sets will become more prevalent in future aviation FID operations.

The decrease of mobility training missions, coupled with ramped up focus on ISR and strike capabilities, reflects AFSOC’s budget woes as much as it

does its partner nations’ abilities to conduct such missions. Service leaders slashed the number of air mobility and strike platforms in the AFSOC’s Fiscal 2015 budget plan, cutting 10 strike and mobility aircraft over the next four years. Aside from aircraft, overall funding for the air advisor mission is being reduced, to cope with departmentwide budget reductions.

“As a result of sequestration and additional fiscal constraints, current budget forecasts through FY19 show a decline in investment on BPC activities, which is consistent with an overall decrease in the Air Force budget,” said Maj. Jason Herring, division chief for irregular warfare in the Air Staff’s strategic plans directorate.

Service officials declined to comment on specific funding levels for AFSOC’s future air advisor operations, but noted the Air Force “is assessing ... how to effectively and efficiently

Left: Col. Garry Moore (c), Capt. Elizabeth Peters, and Maj. Mike Hampton (r) discuss deployed medical support issues with a Chilean air force officer in Santiago, Chile. Right: A US service member jumps from the cargo door of a C-145A aircraft during a military free-fall exercise aimed at demonstrating the new capability for the aircraft.



organize, train, and equip our service” for the aviation FID mission, according to Herring.

One solution USAF is looking at to preserve air advisor operations is by taking some of them out of the hands of AFSOC and placing them into regular service squadrons and wings.

SOF VS. GENERAL PURPOSE

In October 2012, Air Force officials signed off on a plan that would evolve AFSOC’s air advisor mission into a new, more conventional era.

As part of the service’s irregular warfare roadmap, service leadership directed the establishment of “a permanent general-purpose force air advisor capability” by Fiscal 2016. After spending a decade standing up the Iraqi and Afghan air forces, the scope and demand for the US air advisor mission had gone beyond what AFSOC could handle alone.

“One of the most significant observations from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq is that [USAF] needs an institutional air advisor capability,” Herring said. “As operations in Afghanistan wind down, the need for air advisors and personnel trained to support security cooperation will not end.”

Foreign internal defense and security force assistance have always been a point of pride for US special

operations forces. SOCOM and its service components were named the executive agent for SFA ops in mid-2000. That said, “many of the skill sets required to improve the aviation enterprise of partner nations reside in the conventional force,” Herring said. “If partner nations are going to be able to employ airpower to counter violent extremists and other irregular threats, they need assistance in developing their support capabilities,” predominantly the domain of the regular Air Force, he added.

The move mimics those taken by the Army, which is in the midst of standing up its own “regionally aligned brigades” tasked with working with foreign militaries on stability, security, and training operations. The first of those brigades assigned to Africa Command went operational in 2013.

Air Force leaders stood up a new Air Advisor Academy “to train and educate general-purpose force airmen in support of air advisor missions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and around the globe,” stated Herring. “This capability will continue to ensure that the Air Force has a trained and ready air advisor force to support” aviation FID operations in the future.

To that end, members of the 818th Mobility Support Advisory Squadron have carried out aviation FID operations in Chad, Nigeria, and most recently

Uganda, in support of Air Force components attached to Special Operations Command Africa (SOCAFRICA). In Colombia, members of the 571st MSAS have assisted local air forces in air advisor operations there, according to Grub.

While AFSOC units will continue to take the lead on the more advanced aspects of the air advisor mission, Grub noted the 818th and 571st have lightened the load Air Force special operators are carrying on aviation FID operations. “The ability to complement combat advisor skills with conventional specialties will pay long-term dividends in the service’s ability to increase interoperability with coalition partners,” Herring commented.

But budget woes could scuttle this burgeoning partnership between AFSOC and Air Force conventional units. If spending projections hold, service leaders will have to shutter the Air Advisor Academy just as the first cadre of graduates are scheduled to enter the force, Grub said.

Despite budgetary and strategic challenges, he remained confident the mission would endure in some form. “We are on a pretty good track,” he said. “We can [still] go in and do a lot of good.” ■

Carlo Muñoz is a defense and national security correspondent based in Washington, D.C. He has covered US military operations in Afghanistan, South America, Cuba, and the Asia-Pacific. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, “Operation Dama-yan,” appeared in April.



TSgt. Joshua Tippy, a loadmaster air advisor from the 818th Mobility Support Advisory Squadron, discusses loadmaster operations with members of the Cameroon air force at Doula, Cameroon. The 818th has carried out advisory missions in Chad, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Uganda in support of Special Operations Command Africa.