

# America's Strategy Is Outrunning Its Force

## Why the Military's Diplomatic Corps Is in Dire Need of Reform

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In May 2021, I competed in a Department of Defense–sponsored disruptive ideas competition on the campus of the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. Standing in front of a wide range of great minds including Socos Labs' Vivienne Ming; the Center for New American Security's Ainikki Riikonen; William J. Perry Fellow Dr. Joe Felter from the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University; and the Deputy Commander of US Strategic Command, Lt Gen Thomas Bussiere, USAF, I sought to convince the panel that the strategy with which the Department of Defense (DOD) uses to guide employment of its military diplomatic corps—referred to officially as its foreign area officer (FAO) corps—has become increasingly disjointed with the nature of global security today and is at risk of hampering America's national security strategy writ large.

More than a year later, the gap between our nation's strategic ambitions and the organization and design of the forces and capabilities employed to realize them remains stark. In short, while Washington takes its first steps in a strategic competition against Moscow and Beijing, our force design is continuing to fall out of orbit with the nation's strategy. These force-design problems are especially salient within the DOD's FAO corps, which serves as the DOD's maneuver element in the global strategic competition for allies, access, and influence in strategic regions of the world. From the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea and beyond, often working in lockstep with the Department of State and US embassies in foreign capitals, the military's FAO corps serves in key posts undertaking sensitive security cooperation activities to help build the capacity and advance the capabilities of partner nations, such as ongoing efforts in Ukraine. FAOs serve as senior defense officials and defense attachés in embassies, acting as the eyes and ears of the Secretary of Defense and combatant commanders while also serving as the diplomatic touchpoint with foreign militaries and ministries of defense.

The personnel who serve as FAOs are military experts, competitively selected from a broad range of functional communities, such as pilots, infantry officers, intelligence experts, logisticians, and the like. Trained over a multiyear pipeline,

they are certified diplomats and versed in more than one language, tasked to advance the defense interests of America and our allied nations abroad. The sensitive nature of their mission highlights why a disconnect between America's grand strategy and the way FAOs are trained and employed risks the exact institutions these officers are tasked to protect: America's unmatched global network of alliances and partnerships.

I am not the first person to highlight problems afflicting the FAO corps. Last April, for instance, Col Andy Hamann, the US Air Attaché to France, who previously served as the Senior Defense Official and Defense Attaché (SDO/DATT) to Morocco, published an article calling for sweeping changes to how SDO/DATT billets are managed by the Pentagon.<sup>1</sup> Among several serious problems, Colonel Hamann accused the DOD of misusing key FAO billets, assigning officers to serve as SDO/DATTs in strategically important locations who “lack FAO training, lack FAO experience, and are new to a diplomatic role”—in direct violation of Secretary of Defense Policy.<sup>2</sup> Congress has also taken recent action to address shortfalls and failings within the military's FAO corps. Included within the text of the 2022 National Defense Authorization Act are identical accusations that the Pentagon continues to assign unqualified personnel to critical posts that FAOs are deliberately trained to fill. Exercising its oversight authority, Section 1322 of the National Defense Authorization Act tasks the Secretary of Defense to undertake, in partnership with a federally funded research center, a comprehensive assessment of the ways in which FAOs “are recruited, selected, trained, assigned, organized, promoted, retained, and used in security cooperation offices, senior defense roles in US embassies, and in other critical roles of engagement with allies and partners.”<sup>3</sup>

How exactly does the design of the FAO corps today diverge from national strategy and the patterns and structures of the global security environment? What are the major shortfalls of the FAO corps as an institution today? What reforms must be made to better organize, train, and equip this force to build and sustain America's partnerships and alliances over the coming decades? In this article, I argue that no clear strategy exists today that employs the military's diplomatic force in a way that is coherent, unified, and relevant with today's strategic reality. Up until March 2022 when it was finally updated, the most current DOD guidance for the FAO corps was published in 2007, still referred to the “Global War on Terror,” and was written amid America's unipolar moment.<sup>4</sup> While a new version has come out with some welcomed changes, including the formation of a “FAO Council,” clearer roles and responsibilities for the oversight of Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) staff, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, and military departments, among other key stakeholders, as well as a more succinct

definition of what joint effects a FAO brings to the field for better utilization by other DOD elements, the document cannot serve as a standalone solution capable of modernizing the FAO program for the era of strategic competition.<sup>5</sup> In addition to undertaking a comprehensive review of the strategy and implementation guidance that links the function of the FAO corps to its wider institution, I recommend that the Pentagon consider three additional actions for modernizing the employment of FAOs for today's challenges.

First, rather than being employed rigidly within the boundaries of combatant commands, FAOs should operate within the boundaries generated by changing regional patterns of security interdependence, referred to as *regional security complexes* (RSC) by academics Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, a concept to be discussed in more detail later.<sup>6</sup> With this, both the focus of individual FAOs and the professionalization of the corps writ large will better attuned to the threats and security interests of our partners and, therefore, better postured to identify opportunities to build and grow alliances more broadly. Such an approach will also better align with Washington's cultivation of strategic minilateral partnerships, such as the emergent I2U2 quad, comprised of India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States.<sup>7</sup> Up until the recent inclusion of Israel within US Central Command (CENTCOM), this quad would have transcended three different combatant commands.<sup>8</sup> They are all linked, however, by the changing realities of their security interests, from the Suez Canal to the Strait of Malacca. Failing to employ FAOs in a way that follows contemporary patterns of security interdependence misses the looming fight entirely.

Second, the OSD must review the institutional differences and similarities between the Army, Navy, and Air Force FAO programs, and identify best practices worth expanding across other departments while standardizing needlessly divergent elements. The updated DOD Instruction 1315.20: Management of the DOD Foreign Area Officer Program does this to a degree in terms of its standardization of a singular definition of a FAO and the unification of program oversight into a single overarching council. Yet left unaddressed, for instance, is the operational definition each military branch uses to define what constitutes regional expertise, with the Army cultivating and employing FAOs along regional boundaries that align with how the Department of State operates, and the Air Force strictly adhering to combatant command boundaries. This seemingly mundane concept creates wider issues with the way we as an institution design and employ FAOs, in synch or out of step with strategy. Both the Army's and Air Force's definitions of what constitutes a "region" of the world diverge from the academic programs offered at the Naval Postgraduate School, one of the few

DOD-sponsored institutions tasked with educating future FAOs. A standard definition aligned with national strategy is urgently needed.

Lastly, on the subject of training and education, the OSD should also undertake a review to better align training with strategy. Such a review should look at both the pipeline training and professional military education (PME) programs FAOs undertake to determine how effective these programs are at cultivating the necessary skill sets for FAOs to succeed in a multipolar global environment and identify opportunities to better align FAO education, training, and professional development with American strategy and their intended function. Other critics have argued for similar changes to the career field. For instance, in a 2021 article in *Military Review*, LT COL Agustin Dominguez and MAJ Ryan Kertis, USA, argued that while the importance of language as a technical skill has proliferated widely across other DOD careers, the core function of FAOs is not to serve merely as interpreters or as Foreign Service Officers wearing a uniform but instead as *military leaders* and *strategists* who are well-versed in joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational (JIIM) skills necessary to support a variety of customers within the DOD and embassy.<sup>9</sup> This article will briefly walk through this problem in three sections, first discussing the disconnect between the global security environment, America's strategic response, and the philosophy underpinning the FAO corps today. It will then propose a vision as to what an effective, modern FAO corps would look like, concluding with a short list of recommendations and action items. Given the timing of the rollout of the Biden administration's *National Security Strategy*, and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's *National Defense Strategy*, the timing for major change across the FAO corps is now, with political will growing to support any effort toward defense innovation.

### **The Strategy-Reality Disconnect**

Since the landmark publication of the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* began to highlight the role that America's global network of alliances and partnerships would play in upholding a rules-based international order, the United States has made significant forward progress, both theoretically and practically, in rolling out a global strategy to check Russian and Chinese expansionism. While plenty of criticism remains focused on concepts such as "integrated deterrence" or "integrated campaigning," the tangible development by Washington of minilateral cooperative institutions in key regions of the world, such as the Australia–United Kingdom–United States trilateral security pact known as AUKUS; the Indo-Pacific Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, comprised of the United States, India, Japan, and Australia; as well as the I2U2 Quad, highlight an emerging effort by the United States to cultivate multilateral mechanisms intended to act either as

starters for antihegemonic coalitions, as traps designed to entangle revisionist powers such as China and Iran in wider regional networks in an effort to dilute their unilateral influence, or both.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, US success in rallying material and political support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression highlights the continued importance of America's role in uniting allies and deterring the expansionist ambitions of rising powers who see vulnerability and opportunity in multipolarity. Given the significantly different global security environment that exists today compared to 2007, how does the FAO corps diverge from national strategy and the patterns and structures of the current global security environment?

The primary difference rests with the polarity of the global system. In 2007, the world was strictly unipolar, meaning that no other global power existed that was capable of challenging America's superpower status. According to Elbridge Colby, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development to Pres. Donald Trump and architect of the 2018 *National Defense Strategy*, this gave America a degree of leeway in terms of how it chose to allocate resources and forces abroad in reaction to deteriorating security problems. Without a serious challenger, Colby contends, the United States could "afford to cover down everywhere and have resources to spare."<sup>11</sup>

Today's reality is more ambiguous, and FAOs are a high-demand asset that the DOD can no longer afford to spare. Whether or not the world truly is multipolar, meaning that two or more powerful great powers are emerging who could challenge US hegemony, matters less than the perception that such a situation exists. Indeed, such a perception may have driven Russian president Vladimir Putin to invade Ukraine while he thought the opportunity existed. Russia's state-owned news agency, *RIA Novosti*, included a direct reference to this reality in an editorial by Petr Akopov published immediately after Russian troops rolled onto Ukrainian soil, but it was quickly taken down after their invasion was blunted. Now described as a premature victory lap, Akopov wrote that Putin's invasion of Ukraine meant that "a multipolar world has finally become a reality . . . this is a conflict between Russia and the West, this is a response to the geopolitical expansion of the Atlanticists, this is Russia's return of its historical space and its place in the world."<sup>12</sup>

Colby contends that in a multipolar world, America can no longer squander its energy, blood, and resources in "forever wars" of limited strategic importance to our core national interests, and that America's "wealth, suffering, and willpower must be jealously safeguarded."<sup>13</sup> As such, America's strongest currency will be the credibility of US security commitments, yet Washington will also face a world where states hesitant about cooperating with the United States on any range of issues will have more options to hedge against it or align with an adversarial

power.<sup>14</sup> FAOs will be exquisitely important here, operating squarely at the “contact layer” between the United States and foreign military forces. In reaction to the changing nature of the global security environment, both the Trump and Biden administrations began rolling out significant internal reforms and regional initiatives designed to tilt the regional balances of power in its favor. The Abraham Accords, negotiated in secret by the Trump administration, and the AUKUS security pact, and the I2U2 Quad are key examples here.<sup>15</sup> Yet as mentioned previously, a disconnect within the DOD remains regarding emerging US security initiatives and the Pentagon’s posture to support these undertakings. For instance, I2U2, a mechanism for furthering digital infrastructure, logistics, and transregional security cooperation across the Indian Ocean region—up until the recent absorption of Israel into CENTCOM—would have transcended European Command (EUCOM), Central Command, and Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM).<sup>16</sup> However rather than developing career paths for FAOs that would bring a military officer to US missions in Abu Dhabi, Jerusalem, or New Delhi, or among staff assignments between CENTCOM or INDOPACOM Headquarters, the current philosophy underpinning the regional specialization of FAOs is likely to continue sending Arabic-speaking FAOs to repeat tours in CENTCOM while spreading FAOs who speak Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, and Korean across the wider Indo-Pacific, losing an opportunity, as an example, to align the wider Indian Ocean region’s shifting security patterns with America’s wider strategic approach.

A more effective approach to employing such a low-density, high-demand asset like a FAO would be to guide their regionalization and deployment on Buzan and Wæver’s Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) rather than by other bureaucratic methods. RSCs, accordingly, are defined by the patterns of security interactions between a given group of states that are so interlinked and interdependent on one another that “their national securities cannot reasonably be considered apart from one another.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, RSCT effectively does what the Unified Command Plan (UCP) tried to do: break up the global commons into strategically relevant, bureaucratically surmountable pieces. Unlike the UCP, however, RSCs can flex or evolve based on structural security-related variables such as the number of superpowers or great powers in the world or on the securitization of certain issues that help or harm interstate relations. Boundaries of RSCs, however, do not change so wildly in a short period of time that a slow-moving bureaucratic organization such as the DOD would be unable to keep up. RSCT also pays serious attention to the evolving security interactions between regions, getting after a DOD priority to better understand and adapt to transregional problem sets.

For instance, one could argue that the security linkages between the Persian Gulf, a subcomplex of the wider Middle East RSC, and East Asia were relatively miniscule prior to 2004. However, waning US and Western consumption of fossil fuels since then, combined with the growing energy appetite of rising economies such as those of India and China, means increasingly stronger linkages between the Persian Gulf and the Indo-Pacific are a transregional issue that will generate security issues that the United States and other world powers cannot ignore. Similarly, China's reliance on Middle East oil as well as the US Navy to protect maritime shipping lanes undoubtedly generates anxiety in Beijing on how long Beijing will choose to remain vulnerable to the US military for such a critical driver of China's economy. Both the Persian Gulf and East Asia remain their own independent RSCs, yet their transregional interactions are strategically relevant and measurable. Aside from the disconnect between the strategic security environment and the philosophy guiding the employment of FAOs, other internal bureaucratic obstacles within the FAO corps remain that could be effectively addressed if an RSC-like employment strategy were adopted. Indeed, such a policy would better link FAO employment to emerging US strategy.

### **Organizing, Training, and Equipping a FAO Corps for Strategic Competition**

A FAO corps that is effectively postured to compete within and across RSCs against regional and great powers requires an updated approach for how we as an institution recruit, select, train, employ, and retain the best possible talent for an increasingly critical mission. Today, military departments retain significant flexibility in the ways they manage, develop, and often employ their FAOs, sometimes in ways that are effective and meeting the needs of DOD but also in ways that conflict with other departments or at odds with OSD policy. Yet, as it stands, published guidance continues to generate follow-on problems within the management of the force as well as in their training and education. Prior to the forthcoming results of the Congressionally mandated review of the FAO program, the two immediate priorities of internal DOD reform of the program should focus on first, a review of the strategy and relevant implementation guidance underpinning the DOD Directive 1315.17, DOD Instruction 1315.20, and any other related guidance as it relates to the current *National Security Strategy* and *National Defense Strategy*, and to publish any relevant updates as determined by the OSD; and second, to conduct a review of the training and certification standards, training pipeline, and PME programs for FAOs to ensure that the military diplomats we

are cultivating over decades-long careers continue to be strategically relevant, professionally credible, and retained.

### ***Unity of Effort and the Need for a Guiding Strategic Approach***

Without hampering the flexibility and core principle of “decentralized execution” afforded by doctrine to military departments and chiefs of staff, the adoption of an RSC-centric approach to organizing, training, and equipping the FAO corps will have an immediate impact on one of the most divergent interpretations of standing guidance, namely the conflicting definitions of what constitutes a strategically relevant “region.” The recently published DOD Instruction 1315.20, for instance, uses the term *region* repeatedly without linking its definition to any wider strategic vision or priority. In a positive step, the word *transregional* finally makes an appearance.<sup>18</sup> Yet the confusion and lack of standardization continues to reverberate into department-level policy. For instance, the Army has nine regional designators for its FAOs, one being a generalist, while the Air Force has only six, with one generalist too.<sup>19</sup> The Naval Postgraduate School’s Regional Security Studies degree lumps several regions into four main curricula: Middle East, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa; East Asia and the Indo-Pacific; Western Hemisphere; and Europe and Eurasia.<sup>20</sup> Yet even these definitions make it difficult to ascertain exactly which nations are included in which region. Israel for instance, again serving as a key regional power and security factor for many Persian Gulf states in the Middle East, is left out of the school’s Middle East curriculum. One can argue that a broad definition allows for the flexibility of a Sailor, Airman, Soldier, Guardian, or Marine to specialize themselves in a way they deem relevant to US interests, yet there are still significant implications at the operational level regarding the mechanisms the DOD uses to guide and employ these military diplomats in line with published strategic guidance. Additionally, several institutional philosophies of what constitutes a region are actively at play across the DOD, each with counterexamples that contradict each another. For instance, if we determine that regions critical to the specialization and focus of FAOs are formed by geographic territories with a shared language and common history, such as is the case with South America, then this would suggest that both US Africa Command (AFRICOM) and INDOPACOM should each be broken up into two or three regions each. If regions are generated by logistical concerns or geographic contiguity, as is the case with AFRICOM, then it would have made sense to include Israel in CENTCOM years ago, while also chopping Egypt off to AFRICOM.

While this line of reasoning may seem pedantic and an obvious oversimplification of the complex bureaucratic reality faced by any organization attempting to



match its fiscally constrained and resource-limited reality with the mission of bounding global security, its primary purpose is to remind the reader that our definitions of *regions* are subjective and socially constructed and ought to be linked more to strategic necessity than based merely on budgetary constraints. Indeed the boundaries of CENTCOM today have changed drastically since the region's formation was ordered by Pres. Ronald Reagan in 1982, with the Horn of Africa being absorbed by AFRICOM, and the Levant now fully relinquished by EU-COM.<sup>21</sup> Nor do the regional specializations or employment of FAOs have to wait for an updated UCP; the Secretary of Defense has the authority now to realign the regional focus of FAOs to match the reality of American strategy. Indeed, such a realignment may generate some benefits to the challenges facing the DOD today, such as the helping balance strategic relevance of the employment of forces with limited budgets, or by helping prioritize critical billets for FAOs to fill while leaving open less important ones for other officers to fill.

### ***Strategically Relevant Training and Professional Education***

Another implication from updating and enforcing OSD guidance for the FAO corps to be better aligned with US strategy will be the cascading impact on training and PME. Fundamentally, a US strategy to compete against Russia, China, or other would-be hegemonies in defense of a rules-based international order must be supported by FAOs who are professionally capable of supporting said strategy, whether it manifests in transregional, minilateral coalitions, or in other forms. As such, the realignment of the FAO corps must be sequentially followed with an update to the institutions and programs charged with training and retaining FAOs.

Yet the effective selection, training, and retention of FAOs is limited aggressively by several structural factors not common to other military specialties. For instance, to ensure that FAOs, who at the pinnacle of their career may serve as the Secretary of Defense's personal representative in a foreign embassy, have the requisite leadership and defense experience to serve as credible advisors ambassadors and foreign military officers, officers are not eligible to apply to serve as a FAO until at least 7–10 years into their general military career, according to USAF standards.<sup>22</sup> This limit also cuts in half the total length of time that an officer may be potentially available to the DOD for professional training and career growth as a newly certified FAO, creating a tense balance between being in training and being of operational use to the DOD (add to this the additional time it takes to cultivate true regional and language expertise for officers who do not have prior experience in a second language).

While a natural response to these time limits would be to better recruit officer candidates early on who are already versed in the politics, culture, and language of

strategic regions of the world either through family ties or previous educational experience, the DOD is limited in the promises it can make to would-be military recruits on whether or not they would be able to serve as FAOs if they sign a 7–10-year contract for general service first. Another proposed option has been to expand FAO opportunities to the enlisted ranks, and while this avenue is worth serious consideration, many foreign partners and allies are extremely rank conscious, and the lack of a commissioned officer representing US interests in bilateral discussions, for instance, risks sending the wrong message. Thus, instead of attempting to pull the timeline of accession for FAOs forward, current ideas being discussed in the Pentagon include options for career retirement waivers for FAOs serving past the 20-year retirement mark.

The immediate challenge to an RSC-driven employment strategy, or a strategy that prioritized cross-combatant command FAO assignments, would be how to balance the training requirements to spin an officer up on the politics, history, or language of another area outside of the one in which they already specialize. For instance, given the changing security interdependence of the Persian Gulf and South Asia, and the growing importance of the Indian Ocean region as a crucial battleground for US and Chinese influence, strategically relevant CENTCOM FAOs over the next decade ought to also be familiar with the politics and history of South Asia (and technically, Afghanistan and Pakistan remain firmly entrenched in CENTCOM) to include India, and may benefit from understanding some degree of Hindi or Mandarin. Yet becoming fluent in a second language is already hard—let alone becoming proficient in a third language—for officers who do not hail from a multilingual household. The best policy in this case would be for the DOD to better take advantage of America's wide diversity and to better recruit, retain, and vector officers with critical cultural and language skills into the FAO corps. For instance, officers coming into the DOD who already speak Russian or Ukrainian could be sent to learn Mandarin instead, to cultivate a critical corps of transregional strategists within the DOD who are capable of maneuvering in between, and providing key insight on, one of the world's most pivotal bilateral alliances.

Additionally, while the priority of effort for the education of junior FAOs should be to cultivate some degree of regional depth (either in language, on-the-ground experience, or both), a more effective PME program that spans the length of a FAOs career should empower FAOs, through various incentives, to widen their regional focus in ways that are strategically relevant to US interests. The Air Force's Language Enabled Airman Program, as an example, has offered up space-available classes to its members who are already proficient in one strategic language to gain familiarization in a second relevant language.<sup>23</sup> Opportunities to

expand education must also go beyond language and culture and can also include JIIM skill sets highlighted by Lieutenant Colonel Dominguez and Major Kertis's previously referenced article, participation in foreign PME, national security seminars at civilian universities, or other professional certifications.<sup>24</sup> Whatever reforms of the FAO career field as a force, or to its training and PME pipeline, must remain grounded in Colby's earlier warning about multipolarity, namely that the United States cannot afford to cover down on every problem or waste its critical treasure and energy on issues that are not core national interests. Therefore, the US FAO program should develop a prioritized list of high-demand, transregional skill sets, similar to the already established Strategic Language List, to inform active FAOs of how they can guide their own career development in ways that are relevant to the DOD. Incentives to broaden one's language, education, or other professional focus could include pay bonuses, assignment opportunities, or related benefits so long as it contributes to the cultivation of a force more strategically attuned to the regional patterns of security as they relate to US interests. The efficient and effective cultivation of talent, underpinned by America's strategic advantage of cultural and linguistic diversity, is strategically linked to our future success in the coming era of strategic competition. Such an effort is especially urgent in the shadow of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

### **Action Steps**

The silver lining here is that, outside of Congressional action or authorities required for major institutional reform, the Secretary of Defense already has wide latitude to undertake many of the necessary reforms needed to realign the force posture of its FAO corps with national strategy and changing regional patterns of security interdependence. The political timing is ideal too, with a forthcoming publication of a *National Security Strategy*, and the already approved *National Defense Strategy* making its way around Congress, and an already Congressionally mandated review of the FAO program, the Pentagon has a salient window of opportunity to make overdue structural change relatively quickly. In line with the issues laid out previously, this article recommends several immediate action steps for the Secretary of Defense, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, and Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness to undertake:

1. Immediately undertake a comprehensive review of all strategic and implementation guidance of the FAO program to determine if the intended function of the program and its underlying employment strategy aligns with current US strategy. If not, publish updated guidance.
2. In coordination with Joint Staff and military department heads, review all applicable FAO program guidance and identify best practices worth stan-

andardizing across every branch and eliminate redundancies of conflicting policies where appropriate to ensure a unity and quality of effort in how FAOs are organized, trained, and equipped.

3. Conduct a comprehensive review of the entire FAO selection, training, employment, development, and retention program to ensure that the personnel and readiness programs underpinning the FAO corps matches the performance and capability requirements as determined by national strategy, while also taking full advantage of America's unique diversity.

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