The Army has established an admirable foreign area officer (FAO) program with a commendable goal: to create officers who “combine professional military skills with regional expertise, language competency and military-political awareness.” In theory, these skilled officers would serve the Army in a variety of important and sensitive positions on high-level staffs, as attachés in U.S. Embassies and as advisors to foreign militaries.

In support of the program’s goal, the Army has made a number of improvements over the past few decades. For example, it enables graduate education, language training and regional immersion for FAOs. As a result, fully trained FAOs—with balanced academic, linguistic and operational skills—have become essential staff members.

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The lack of planning to sustain FAOs, however, causes a loss of capability in the population. Without attention to maintaining the operational and linguistic skills of its FAOs, the Army will squander a strategic asset.

To be relevant to a senior staff or a foreign military, an Army FAO must combine competencies in Army and joint operations with cultural and language skills suitable for diverse international environments. The reality of the FAO program, however, is that it does not often produce officers who are able to maintain these skills. Currently, most officers recruited into the FAO program lack operational experience following company-level command at around the eighth year of service. After three to five years of FAO training, these officers possess a basic level of language fluency, a civilian master’s degree and travel/living experience in their assigned region. These same officers have now lost three to five years of important tactical and operational experience, however. Furthermore, upon completion of training, most FAOs report to mandated assignments in the Pentagon, geographic combatant commands or U.S. Embassies. These assignments, which typically last for three years, add to the time away from operational units, making FAOs even less relevant.

Unfortunately, when they return from nonoperational assignments, FAOs often lack the opportunity to bring skill-specific operational experience to U.S. Army units. Although brigade-and-above deployed headquarters would benefit from a foreign area operations and planning officer, there are no permanent positions in these headquarters. Instead, FAOs deploy in a haphazard manner as individual augmentees to deployed headquarters. Often, these augmentee officer assignments have been more a matter of chance than a deliberative process of assigning the appropriately skilled officer to a position. Moreover, many units receive FAOs whose skills are imperfectly relevant to the deployment, such as the instances of non-Arabic-speaking FAOs serving in Iraq on military transition teams or as staff officers at a headquarters. A well-rounded Army officer with the appropriate language and cultural skills

The Army’s Foreign Area Officer Program:
To Wither or to Improve?

By LTC Daniel E. Mouton

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To be relevant to a senior staff or a foreign military, an Army FAO must combine competencies in Army and joint operations with cultural and language skills suitable for diverse international environments. The reality of the FAO program, however, is that it does not often produce officers who are able to maintain these skills. Currently, most officers recruited into the FAO program lack operational experience following company-level command at around the eighth year of service. After three to five years of FAO training, these officers possess a basic level of language fluency, a civilian master’s degree and travel/living experience in their assigned region. These same officers have now lost three to five years of important tactical and operational experience, however. Furthermore, upon completion of training, most FAOs report to mandated assignments in the Pentagon, geographic combatant commands or U.S. Embassies. These assignments, which typically last for three years, add to the time away from operational units, making FAOs even less relevant.

Unfortunately, when they return from nonoperational assignments, FAOs often lack the opportunity to bring skill-specific operational experience to U.S. Army units. Although brigade-and-above deployed headquarters would benefit from a foreign area operations and planning officer, there are no permanent positions in these headquarters. Instead, FAOs deploy in a haphazard manner as individual augmentees to deployed headquarters. Often, these augmentee officer assignments have been more a matter of chance than a deliberative process of assigning the appropriately skilled officer to a position. Moreover, many units receive FAOs whose skills are imperfectly relevant to the deployment, such as the instances of non-Arabic-speaking FAOs serving in Iraq on military transition teams or as staff officers at a headquarters. A well-rounded Army officer with the appropriate language and cultural skills...
would serve as an essential enabler in a deployed headquarters or on a transition team. Due to staffing shortfalls, however, which persist more than nine years after 9/11, it is still easier to get a non-Arabic (or non-Pashto or non-Urdu) foreign language speaker to Iraq or Afghanistan than an officer with the most appropriate skills.

Notably, the Chief of Staff of the Army’s FAO assignment policy only requires a 100 percent fill rate for validated FAO positions in certain headquarters. The 100 percent fill rate does not require the exact FAO specialty, however. Thus a 100 percent fill-rate organization like U.S. Central Command may receive 100 percent Middle East-experienced FAOs, but due to staffing shortages, there may be few remaining officers to fill transition teams, augmentee taskings, or other validated billets in Iraq or Afghanistan. Often, Latin America- or Asia-specific FAOs support deployments that are arguably more appropriate for a Middle East specialist.

In the meantime, the staffing situation does not appear to be improving. For all of the officers between year groups 1996 and 2001, the FAO branch is short approximately 260 officers. Furthermore, a recent staffing review of the numbers of accessed FAOs compared with enduring requirements (that is, those not connected to Iraq or Afghanistan deployments) revealed that many year groups were below 50 percent strength. As a further reminder that the Army is still adapting to the post-9/11 world, two of the most critically short FAO regions are the Middle East/North Africa and South Asia. Arguably, both areas should have an excess of capacity, so that both permanent positions and deployment opportunities correlate with the Army’s officer talent pool as well as national security requirements.

Recently, the Chief of Staff of the Army allowed midcareer FAOs to compete on the annual command selection list (CSL) for command of military transition teams (MiTTs)—advisors to Iraqi or Afghan units. This opportunity would grant great operational relevance and experience to the FAO community. During the 2010 CSL board, 381 FAOs were eligible to compete; after eliminating noncompetitive candidates, only three officers—less than 1 percent of the available pool—were selected for MiTT command. Since the Army CSL selection rate is exponentially greater for non-FAOs, the board results suggest two conclusions: One is that the seasoned FAO population lacks the kind of operational experiences that both pervade the post-9/11 Army and are valued by selection boards; the second is that the selection board and the Army as a whole lack the appropriate guidance from the Chief of Staff of the Army as to how the FAO career path can serve the Army’s requirements. Consequently, the recent board results suggest that greater senior leader interest and a more aggressive pairing of FAOs with skill-specific deployments would inject a needed infusion of mission relevancy into the FAO corps.

Army officers who enter the FAO program receive tremendous initial language training. The training is good enough for these officer trainees to deploy to their regions and actively take part in negotiations or integrate into a foreign military. Many FAOs, however, reach the height of their language ability when they complete this initial language training at the Defense Language Institute (DLI). Since the Army lacks an institutional language-sustainment program for its FAOs, these officers are unable to improve on, let alone maintain, the baseline language ability that they achieved during the six to 18 months of language immersion at DLI. Unless an FAO learns a commonly spoken and easily practiced language, such as Spanish, or works within the intelligence community, there is no easy path for further language training after initial entry into the FAO program. The service’s expectation is that officers will conduct sustainment training and language advancement on their own.

This practice misunderstands the nature of language, however. Language, as a means of communication, requires a two-way transfer of information. The most effective way to train, improve in and learn a language is through communicating with a speaker who both possesses greater ability in that language and understands how to teach it. Thus with extended assignments away from a region and without planned retraining through DLI or alternate language immersion programs, these officers will inevitably lose much of their baseline language ability. [Editor’s note: In December, DLI stood up a language training detachment in Stuttgart, Germany, that will, in part, support follow-on language training.]

To improve the FAO program, the Army should consider the following recommendations. First, increase region-specific deployment opportunities for FAOs with units conducting either exercises or operations. For instance, FAOs assigned to Pacific Command need to spend time supporting units in either Korea or the Philippines, or units that deploy to major regional exercises such as Exercise Cobra Gold in Thailand. This model is even easier to follow for Middle East FAOs, who would deploy to Iraq as part of Operation New Dawn, or South Asia FAOs, who would deploy to Operation Enduring Freedom. If an FAO cannot deploy to an operation within his region, he needs meaningful staff assignments at the division or corps level in support of Operation New Dawn or Operation Enduring Freedom.

The second recommendation concerns language sustainment. There are some successful models to follow. The State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency fund regular language-sustainment training for their career members. Thus FAOs could rotate through some of the preestablished U.S. government training locations. Another alternative is to allow FAOs to train at language facilities located in the region. For example, Foreign Service officers assigned to U.S. Embassies can study a language at a local language program. Scores of U.S. undergraduate and graduate students master Arabic at Middle Eastern universities every year; there do not appear to be many compelling reasons to prevent FAOs from following a
similar path. In addition, these locations have a number of useful advantages in that they are very low cost in comparison with U.S. schools, and they allow an FAO to cultivate greater cultural knowledge and experience.

A final point is that it would be helpful if the Army were to assign core, operational missions to its FAO community. Through their various assignments, FAOs can become involved in a number of diverse but important activities such as human intelligence collection, high-value target selection, political-military estimates, policy work, security assistance in support of foreign internal defense, civil-affairs functions and psychological-operations messaging. The need for a core mission assignment raises an obvious comparison to the Army’s Special Forces (SF) model, in which a junior captain, from any basic branch, becomes an SF officer upon completion of the SF Qualification Course. Again, it would be helpful if there were guidance as to whether FAOs would assume an operational skill set, which would be valued across the Army, or if they would continue to belong to their basic branches.

If FAOs were to remain a part of their basic branches, however, these officers would benefit from returning to their original branches for some form of retraining. This retraining could follow a pattern similar to the precommand orientation courses that branches provide to senior officers who have spent several years outside of their branch while serving on major staffs. An orientation course should cover major changes in weapons systems, branch-specific and unit tactics, and doctrinal changes. If the various Army branches are unable to absorb the costs of retraining officers, the combatant commands may consider funding branch retraining of officers reporting to U.S. Embassies. Regular orientation will be particularly valuable to officers who serve as security assistance officers in foreign embassies in support of a host-nation military. These militaries expect these U.S. officers to provide advice on weapons-system acquisition as well as doctrinal developments. Regardless of how this occurs, an operationally current FAO would be invaluable to our regional security strategies and security cooperation goals as outlined in the guidance for employment of the force and the combatant commands’ theater campaign plans.

The Army has come a long way in establishing a professional FAO program that supports service and joint requirements. It must refocus the program, however, and provide the guidance, assignments and resources to make the program more relevant to the ongoing operations in which our military is engaged.

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