



Major Karen Deloria, Japanese-language trained foreign area officer assigned to U.S. Forces Korea, talks live on air on American Forces Network about Army foreign area officer opportunities, Camp Humphreys, South Korea, January 25, 2023 (U.S. Army/Patrick Bray)

# Five Truths for Foreign Area Officers

By Michael L. Burgoyne and Albert J. Marckwardt

Colonel John Collins served in the U.S. Army through three wars and went on to be a revered military strategist and scholar. He founded the Warlord Loop, an organization of defense and security thinkers that remains active today. In 1987, Collins captured five “truths” regarding special operations forces. In so doing, Collins helped define the principles and attributes of special operations forces, which had been misunderstood by the larger conventional military. Foreign area officer (FAO) is another often misunderstood specialty in the military that would also benefit greatly from an exploration of its own truths. This is

especially important given the ongoing debate about its future.

Until its most recent (2022) iteration, Department of Defense Instruction (DODI) 1315.17, *Military Department Foreign Area Officer FAO Programs*, succinctly defined FAOs as “commissioned officers with a broad range of military skills and experiences” who “have knowledge of political-military affairs; have familiarity with the political, cultural, sociological, economic, and geographic factors of the countries and regions in which they are stationed; and have professional proficiency in one or more of the dominant languages in their regions of expertise.” FAOs manage

and guide the foreign engagement of one of the most powerful organizations on the planet—the Department of Defense (DOD). FAOs are in effect the Pentagon’s diplomats.

Although FAOs serve on combatant command staffs, Service component command staffs, Service staffs, the Joint Staff, and in other policy positions, they are best known for working out of Embassies abroad as attachés or security cooperation officers. Understanding FAO roles and capabilities is essential if senior leaders are to effectively employ these highly trained officers for maximum strategic effect.

In an apparent paradigm shift, the 2022 DODI 1315.20, *Management of the DOD Foreign Area Officer Program*, attempts to minimize the importance of regional expertise in exchange for broadening the roles and capabilities of FAOs. The new instruction focuses on FAOs as “strategic effects operators” in lieu of

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their traditional regional focus and boasts expansive terms like “transregional,” “multidomain,” and “multifunctional.” These changes reflect the growing ascendance of arguments for generalized FAOs that question the value of language and regional expertise within the appropriate skill sets. In addition, these arguments frequently advocate for more flag officer opportunities to the FAO corps and increasing FAO visibility among the Services.

Given language’s obvious inherent value in the field of international relations, it has become a target of proponents of a more generalized rather than a specialized FAO. Dismissively labeling language as a nice-to-have “enabler,” one study proudly proclaims that “FAOs do not require language training to become effective.” This claim exists despite a comprehensive report on the FAO program by the Institute of Defense Analyses (IDA) emphasizing that “language-enabled, regionally adept, and culturally adroit officers” provide significant strategic value. In place of language and deep regional expertise, opponents make the argument that FAOs’ real skill is interagency fluency and expertise in security cooperation. While these skills are certainly part of the FAOs’ toolkit, their preeminence conveniently opens the door for the globally employable FAO.

With language reduced to a mere accoutrement, the regional alignment of FAOs has also come under fire. Critics called into question a regional focus as incongruent with globalized threats. Others expressed deep confidence that FAOs working outside of their region of specialization had the “required skill set and experiences to quickly understand the bilateral relationship.” While these questionable claims focus on redefining the FAO skill set, the former commander of U.S. Africa Command, retired Lieutenant General William “Kip” Ward, publicly emphasized the need to “introduce more generalism among FAOs” in order to address the “limited upward mobility past the rank of colonel.” For the most ambitious of FAOs, this concept bears the possibility of reaching previously unattainable flag-officer ranks. For the Services, this concept allows for FAO

employment across a broad range of assignments focused on Service priorities without the cumbersome burden of managing regional expertise.

While it is certainly appealing, we argue this strategy comes at an expense. The generalized FAO cannot hope to match the strategic value of a regionally focused FAO program. Advocates of the generalized FAO will trumpet adaptability, interagency fluency, and a broad cultural awareness. However, the implementation of the generalized FAO concept will result in an objective degradation of DOD’s understanding of the international security environment and its ability to strategically shape it.

There are five key truths that define and serve as the bedrock of understanding an effective FAO program. First, FAOs excel in the gray zone between peace and war where the adversaries of the United States prefer to compete. Second, FAOs are armed with invaluable networks in the regions in which they operate. Third, FAOs provide unparalleled regional geopolitical understanding and expertise to the military. Fourth, FAOs benefit from deep cultural and language knowledge that enhances communication. Last, FAOs are inherently joint and interagency officers, despite being trained and managed by the Services.

## The Five Truths

**1. FAOs Are Most Effective in the Gray Zone Between Peace and War.** In their white paper *Unrestricted Warfare*, People’s Liberation Army officers Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui assert that the “new principles of war” include “using all means, including armed force or nonarmed force, military and nonmilitary, and lethal and nonlethal means to compel the enemy to accept one’s interests.” Likewise, Russian actions over the past two decades have focused on achieving victories while remaining below the threshold of a war with Western powers. Some incorrectly conclude that the National Defense Strategy’s focus on Great Power competition means a return to major-theater war against peer competitors. While this undesirable outcome is possible, Great Power competition is most likely to

manifest itself in insurgencies, proxy wars, and the competition for allies. FAOs are tailor-made for these challenges and are especially valuable in countries without a robust U.S. military presence.

FAOs are highly effective players in the gray zone. FAOs facilitate the sale of weapons and the provision of training that make the United States the security partner of choice in critical states and regions. For example, FAOs operating overseas were critical in negotiating Japan’s purchase of F-35s and the delivery of Javelin missiles to Ukraine prior to the most recent Russian invasion. FAOs are also critical in the negotiation of the Status of Forces Agreements and Acquisition and Cross-Service Agreements that make U.S. force projection possible. Moreover, FAOs cultivate and preserve the networks that counter current and emerging transnational threats posed by terrorists and criminal organizations that have been supercharged by globalization. FAOs were critical in working with interagency partners and the Colombian government in supporting the Colombian Ministry of Defense through Plan Colombia in confronting three designated terrorist organizations: the United Self-Defenders of Colombia (AUC), the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People’s Army (FARC), and the National Liberation Army. These efforts forced AUC and FARC to negotiate a peace agreement with the Colombian government.

**2. Networks Cannot Be Built After a Crisis Begins.** Countries aren’t important until they are. In 2009, Honduras hit the headlines and dominated the attention of the White House because of the removal of its president. It would have been difficult to predict that the small Central American nation would create such turbulence. Likewise, Georgia—12,000 kilometers away in the Caucasus—was the scene of a major international crisis when Russian forces invaded South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008. In both cases, FAOs were already in place and leveraging their networks to inform policymakers, negotiate on the ground, and generate options. Year after year in their regions, FAOs build robust networks among military and defense leaders, security thinkers,





Then-Rear Admiral Todd Squire, director for international engagement, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, speaks about security cooperation during Joint Foreign Area Officer Course, January 26, 2016 (U.S. Army/Patrick Bray)

political and economic elites, and other influential actors. FAOs—posted throughout the world in Embassies, major commands, and the interagency community—provide a powerful network that helps move DOD’s giant gears to accomplish policy objectives. These networks cannot be built overnight; they are the product of years of cultivation.

**3. FAOs Are Regional Experts, Not Generalists.** FAOs pass through a robust training pipeline including language training, a master’s degree in international relations, and in-region training to build specific expertise. During training, FAOs travel to multiple countries to better understand regional policy issues, security challenges, and defense institutions. Once this training is complete, FAOs can confidently engage with foreign military leaders, colleagues from the Department of State, and senior U.S. policymakers. While a select few will rise to the general officer ranks—requiring a generalist perspective—the vast majority will retire as field grades. In fact, the limited opportunities for promotion are a feature and not a bug of the program, as they encourage candor. Army Lieutenant Colonel Alex Vindman’s actions while assigned to the National Security Council

illustrate how FAOs are empowered and obligated to provide their expertise and speak truth to power. Vindman’s willingness to set aside his personal ambition and advocate for policies that he believed were in the interest of the United States represents a core FAO attribute.

**4. Language and Culture Provide FAOs’ Unique Access.** FAOs speak at least one language from their focus region. Language acquisition is a critical component of the program, and a significant investment in time and resources is made to accomplish professional-level competency. This goes beyond simple communication. Understanding the language of a foreign partner provides a window into how that culture thinks and what it values. Even in linguistically diverse regions, fluency in one or two languages provides invaluable insights and expands an FAO’s regional network. As Nelson Mandela is often attributed with stating, “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart.” Although FAOs frequently find themselves acting as interpreters, they are not, as interpreting is a specialized skill. Nonetheless, effective communication is the bedrock for achieving success in a

foreign country, and FAOs do their language and cultural homework.

One of the godfathers of U.S. foreign area officers, Vernon Walters, described it this way: “The vast majority of the peoples of the world are moved by human relationships and by personal feelings of friendship or hostility.” As such, one must understand “other peoples’ history, literature, culture and even poetry; in a word, all things that make them what they are.” A 2017 Government Accountability Office report on the Department of State’s foreign service officers (FSOs) found that “effective diplomacy requires the ability to communicate clearly and persuasively with host-country interlocutors and local populations in their languages.” It further highlighted that “foreign language is a key skill for [FSOs] to advance U.S. foreign policy.” FAOs are unique within DOD in understanding the language and cultural ecosystem of their regions—an understanding they can leverage to carry out defense priorities more effectively. Consequently, this gives DOD better access and a perpetual footing inside each country where FAOs serve.

**5. FAOs Are Raised by Their Service but Operate in the Joint and Interagency World.** FAOs, unlike the Department of

State's FSOs, begin their career as tactical-level officers within their parent Services. This gives FAOs a unique advantage over their counterparts in other agencies—they have the tactical foundation to communicate with foreign militaries. Army FAOs, for example, are selected after approximately 10 years in their Service branch. FAOs must show competency at the tactical level before applying for the program. Once trained, FAOs primarily serve the joint force. The Services generally act as the FAO force providers to the joint force and interagency community.

However, the Services many times attempt to integrate FAOs into their tactical units and organic structures. For example, FAOs were previously used as cultural experts at the Joint Readiness Training Center or as worldwide individual augmentees in staff assignments at tactical units. The IDA study in 2013 strongly recommended against the misutilization of FAOs in roles that “can lead to deterioration of FAO regional-specific skills, including language proficiency.” This is especially true given that FAOs have a smaller utilization window than their FSO counterparts, since they begin midway through their career.

The reality is that FAOs should rarely serve in Army divisions, on ships, or in fighter squadrons. Rather, FAOs perform their optimal role in Embassies, at combatant commands, and as policy advisors. Much like Army Special Forces exceed their organic capabilities when properly employed to train indigenous partners, FAOs in their regions provide exponential effects when leveraging their capabilities. When FAOs operate outside of their regions, without their language skills and their developed regional networks, they are less likely to generate the strategic impact they can have in their intended focus region.

## A Way Ahead

As with any unit or weapons system, senior leaders must understand the advantages and limitations of FAOs when employing them. FAO policy and utilization must rest firmly on these five truths. As IDA observed, FAO mismanagement “tends to limit Service and Depart-

ment return on investment in the skill acquisition and development of FAOs.” Cross-regional assignments should be done out of necessity, not by design. Not every FAO is a multilingual, multicultural Vernon Walters. Those with general-officer potential should be managed as an exception, and human resources should not be optimized to create opportunities for the entire FAO population to reach flag rank. To address global threats and to support global campaign plans, a more useful tactic would be to reinvigorate global communications platforms for FAOs to increase collaboration across areas of responsibility.

When these five truths are considered, DOD increases the utility of its FAOs and can gain outsized strategic effects from a small number of highly specialized officers as an economy of force mission in an area with minimal presence. In the current global security environment, marked by revisionist powers, rising challengers, and amplified transnational threats, it is imperative that the value of FAOs is maximized. **JFQ**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Collins, “The Warlord on Special Operations Forces,” *War on the Rocks*, September 10, 2013, <https://warontherocks.com/2013/09/warlord-on-special-operations-forces/>.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Defense Instruction (DODI) 1315.17, *Military Department Foreign Area Officer FAO Program* (Washington, DC: DOD, April 8, 2005), 3.1, <https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/portals/138/dodd%20131517%20mildep%20fao%20prgms.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> DODI 1315.20, *Management of the DOD Foreign Area Officer Program* (Washington, DC: DOD, March 25, 2022), 3.1, <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/131520p.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> William Ward, Thomas Galvin, and Laura Varhola, “A New Strategic Approach to Managing Our Foreign Area Specialists,” United States Africa Command, May 2011, <https://www.africom.mil/article/8293/a-new-strategic-approach-to-managing-our-foreign-a>; Timothy D. Mitchell, Jr., *The Army FAO Training Program: Time to Break More Glass*, Strategy Research Project (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2013), 37, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA589872>.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell, *The Army FAO Training Program*, 18. Mitchell's viewpoint is supported

by Agustin Dominguez and Ryan Kertis, “A New Foreign Area Officer Paradigm: Meta-Leadership and Security Cooperation,” *Military Review*, May–June 2021, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/May-June-2021/>.

<sup>6</sup> Amy A. Alrich, Joseph Adams, and Claudio C. Biltoc, *The Strategic Value of Foreign Area Officers* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, August 2013), 48, <https://www.ida.org/research-and-publications/publications/all/t/th/the-strategic-value-of-foreign-area-officers>.

<sup>7</sup> Dominguez and Kertis, “A New Foreign Area Officer Paradigm.”

<sup>8</sup> Michael Vane and Daniel Fagundes, “Redefining the Foreign Area Officer's Role,” *Military Review*, May–June 2004, 17, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070612052027/http://usacac.leavenworth.army.mil/cac/milreview/download/English/MayJun04/vane.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Mitchell, *The Army FAO Training Program*, 36.

<sup>10</sup> Ward, Galvin, and Varhola, “A New Strategic Approach to Managing Our Foreign Area Specialists.” Ward's sentiments are echoed by Mitchell.

<sup>11</sup> Alrich, Adams, and Biltoc, *The Strategic Value of Foreign Area Officers*, iv.

<sup>12</sup> Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, February 1999), trans. Foreign Broadcast Information Service, <https://www.c4i.org/unrestricted.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Frank Hoffman and Andrew Orner, “The Return of Great Power Proxy Wars,” *War on the Rocks*, September 2, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/the-return-of-great-power-proxy-wars/>.

<sup>14</sup> Alrich, Adams, and Biltoc, *The Strategic Value of Foreign Area Officers*, vi; Ward, Galvin, and Varhola, “A New Strategic Approach to Managing Our Foreign Area Specialists.”

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Joseph and Adam McBeth, *Research Handbook on International Human Rights Law* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2010), 447.

<sup>16</sup> Vernon Walters, *Silent Missions* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1978), 618.

<sup>17</sup> Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Department of State: Foreign Language Proficiency Has Improved, but Efforts to Reduce Gaps Need Evaluation*, GAO-17-318 (Washington, DC: GAO, March 2017), 1, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-17-318>.

<sup>18</sup> Alrich, Adams, and Biltoc, *The Strategic Value of Foreign Area Officers*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Vane and Fagundes, “Redefining the Foreign Area Officer's Role,” 18; Daniel Mouton, “The Army's Foreign Area Officer Program: To Wither or to Improve?” *Army Magazine*, March 2011, 21, [https://www.aria.org/sites/default/files/FC\\_Mouton\\_0311.pdf](https://www.aria.org/sites/default/files/FC_Mouton_0311.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Alrich, Adams, and Biltoc, *The Strategic Value of Foreign Area Officers*, iv.

<sup>21</sup> Alrich, Adams, and Biltoc, 48.