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Army Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs)

What Is Security Force Assistance (SFA)?

Security Force Assistance (SFA) is defined as “unified action to generate, employ, and sustain local, host nation or regional security forces in support of a legitimate authority.” By definition “security forces include not only military forces, but also police, border forces, and other paramilitary organizations, as well as other local and regional forces.” SFA involves organizing, training, equipping, rebuilding, and advising foreign security forces (FSF).

Title 10, *U.S. Code*, Chapter 16, governs the Department of Defense’s (DOD’s) SFA activities. Each year, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) modifies, eliminates, or creates new SFA authorities and authorizes funding for Geographic Combatant Commands (GCCs) to conduct SFA activities.

Background

In the past, Special Forces units handled the majority of SFA missions, but the growing requirement for SFA over time resulted in conventional forces assuming a more active role in conducting SFA missions. Conventional forces SFA missions were normally assigned to a Brigade Combat Team (BCT), the Army’s principal warfighting organization. Because of the nature of SFA missions, BCT leadership—officers and senior and mid-grade noncommissioned officers (NCOs)—were typically deployed to conduct SFA missions, while most junior NCOs and soldiers remained at their home station. This situation, while practical from a resource perspective, created a number of readiness concerns for the nondeployed BCT soldiers remaining at home station, as well as the home station units who were responsible for these junior soldiers while their leadership was deployed on SFA missions. One such concern is with leadership stripped out of the BCTs for the SFAB mission, the remaining soldiers were limited to training at individual and squad level only, resulting in a lower level of unit readiness. In addition, nondeploying units who were temporarily assigned the nondeployed soldiers were required to make accommodations for these soldiers, which had residual readiness impacts on hosting units.

Establishment of SFABs

As originally designed, SFABs are to be capable of conducting SFA from the strategic (such as Ministry of Defense) to tactical (brigade and below) level. In May 2018, the Army announced it would establish six SFABs—five in the Active Component and one in the Army National Guard (ARNG). SFABs were originally intended to consist of about 500 soldiers (*BCTs consist of between 4,400 to 4,700 soldiers depending on type*), primarily in senior grades and encompassing a range of Military Operational

Specialties (MOSs). The Army also planned to establish a Military Advisor Training Academy at Fort Benning, GA, to conduct a six-week course on relevant topics and skills.

The Army has also established a command element—the Security Force Assistance Command (SFAC)—within U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) at Fort Bragg, NC, to conduct training and readiness oversight of the SFABs. The SFAC is commanded by a Major General.

Originally, the Army planned for SFABs to be expanded, if the need arose, into operational BCTs capable of conducting major combat operations. In this case, SFAB personnel would serve as cadres who would accept the expansion of personnel and equipment required to transform the SFAB into a BCT. The newly manned and equipped BCTs would then be trained up to conduct their respective combat missions.

Based on CRS discussions with the SFAC, the Army is placing less emphasis on the SFAB’s secondary mission—to serve as a cadre to create new BCTs—and instead intends for SFABs to actively participate in SFA operations during conflict, thereby potentially making SFABs unavailable to serve as cadre for newly created BCTs. If this is the case, it could prove impractical to use SFABs as a means to create new BCTs, which calls into question the Army’s ability to rapidly expand in the event of crisis.

SFAB Organization

According to the *SFAC Information Book, Volume Seven, 2021*, provided to CRS by the SFAC, SFAC Headquarters consists of 82 soldiers and Department of the Army Civilians. Each SFAB is commanded by either a Colonel or Brigadier General (some Colonels are promoted to Brigadier Generals while serving as SFAB Commanders and remain in command) and is composed of approximately 816 soldiers. SFABs are broken down into 60 multifunctional teams consisting of four to eight soldiers each, with teams categorized as either

- Maneuver Advising Teams;
- Field Artillery Advising Teams;
- Engineer Advising Teams; and
- Logistics Advising Teams.

The SFAC notes that all SFAB soldiers are volunteers recruited from other Army units, much in the manner Army Special Forces recruits personnel. Individuals designated for key SFAB leadership and staff positions must have previously successfully commanded or served at the level they are being recruited for. Those recruited for SFAB leadership positions are also subject to a Selection and Assessment evaluation to determine if they are suitable for SFAB service.

SFAB Stationing

According to the Army, SFABs are based at

- 1st SFAB—Fort Benning, GA;
- 2nd SFAB—Fort Bragg, NC;
- 3rd SFAB—Fort Hood, TX;
- 4th SFAB—Fort Carson, CO;
- 5th SFAB—Joint Base Lewis –McChord, WA; and
- 54th SFAB (Army National Guard)—battalions in Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Texas.

Current SFAB Mission and Role in Operations

According to the Army and discussions with the SFAC

SFABs are uniquely capable of advancing America’s relationships across the globe. During competition, SFABs build trust, interoperability, and partner capacity. In crisis, SFABs enable the Joint Force and interagency team to quickly respond by enhancing coordination efforts. In conflict, SFABs enhance coordination with partners and can expand to full mission capable brigades.

Presently, SFABs are operating across all Geographic Combatant Commands (GCCs). SFABs serve to professionalize security assistance and cooperation missions. As permanent organizations with a standing mission, SFABs focus on the advise, support, liaison, and assess aspects of SFA, which frees up BCTs and other conventional units from conducting these operations on an ad-hoc basis.

SFAB Regional Alignment

According to the Army, SFABs are regionally-aligned to GCCs as follows

- 1st SFAB—U.S. Southern Command;
- 2nd SFAB—U.S. Africa Command;
- 3rd SFAB—U.S. Central Command;
- 4th SFAB—U.S. European Command;
- 5th SFAB—U.S. Indo-Pacific Command; and
- 54th SFAB (Army National Guard)—globally focused.

SFAB Training

In addition to training at the Military Advisor Training Academy, many SFAB members receive cultural training and language familiarity training. Soldiers also receive training on foreign weapons, advanced medical training, driver training, and survival, evasion, resistance, and escape (SERE) techniques.

Equipping SFABs

Soldiers in SFABs are issued standard personal equipment (weapons, protective masks, etc.) and a variety of tactical wheeled vehicles armed with crew-served weapons (.50 caliber and 7.62 mm machine guns) for force protection. In addition, SFABs are to have command, control, communications, computer, and intelligence, surveillance,

and reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities. The SFAC noted the SFAC and the SFABs are incorporated into the Army’s Modernization program and are modernized in the same manner as BCTs and other Army combat formations.

Selected SFAB Activities

SFABs Refocusing on Large-Scale Combat

The Army has recently begun to shift SFAB focus to large-scale combat operations. To support this shift, SFABs are conducting validation exercises, evaluating if SFABs can operate with partners and allies in conflict situations. Reportedly, the 1st SFAB completed an exercise at Ft. Benning, GA, in February 2023 to ensure SFAB soldiers could “carry out their mission with foreign security forces in conflict.”

4th SFAB

Reportedly, the 4th SFAB maintains a presence from the “Baltics to the Black Sea,” focusing on interoperability with NATO allies designed to build capability and capacity. As of September 2022, the 4th SFAB had 19 teams of military advisers operating in 10 European countries. Reportedly, 4th SFAB advisers are involved in training the Ukrainian Armed Forces outside of Ukraine and plan to continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

5th SFAB

Reportedly, since the unit was first activated in 2020, the 5th SFAB has established “partnerships with six nations in U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, including Japan, Indonesia, Mongolia, Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines.” In Mongolia, SFAB NCOs helped to establish an NCO education system and SFAB soldiers also worked with the Royal Thai Army on combined arms training with Stryker infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs). The 5th SFAB is also said to be working with partner nations to support their training at the Joint Pacific Multi-National Readiness Center in Hawaii.

54th SFAB

Reportedly, the Army National Guard’s 54th SFAB, activated in March 2020, conducted its first ever combatant command mission by deploying to Honduras to support SFA activities.

Potential Issues for Congress

- If the SFAB’s original secondary mission to serve as cadre to form new BCTs is no longer practical, how does this affect the Army’s ability to generate additional forces in the event of a crisis?
- Are SFABs able to meet current and predicted GCC SFA-related operational demands and are GCCs sufficiently funded to conduct SFA operations?
- Based on previous SFAB deployments and associated lessons learned, what types of modifications have been made to the SFAB’s organization, equipment, and training?

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