

Lessons-Learned from Assignment to the Least-Known Component of the Security-Assistance Enterprise

by MAJ Mike Kiser

U.S. military forces need capable partners today and, more importantly, in tomorrow's multinational battlespace. There is precedence for this partnering, as the Army has joined with allies and partners for operations and training around the globe for more than 245 years.

Most officers are familiar with the more conventional forms of security assistance as conducted through traditional military transition teams (MiTTs) or the recently established security-force-assistance brigades (SFABs). In addition, Special Forces detachments have long played a role in the larger security-assistance and cooperation environment.

A lesser known but long-serving component of the security-assistance and cooperation enterprise is the Security Assistance Training Management Organization (SATMO), headquartered at Fort Bragg, NC. SATMO has served as a force provider for more than 50 years to every combatant command (COCOM) and is the assigned brigade-level headquarters under the U.S. Army Security Assistance Command (USASAC) and the Army Materiel Command.

SATMO's mission is to help develop partner capacity and promote interoperability in every geographic combatant command (GCC). SATMO supports, resources and manages more than 70 forward-stationed teams that provide a mixture of technical, tactical and academic assistance to partner nations based on requirements from foreign military sales (FMS) cases or GCC-generated security-cooperation education and training (SCET) team requests.

TAFT teams

Most teams are filled with senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs), senior warrant officers and post-key-developmental-billet captains or higher officers. The SATMO mission of training partner forces and interacting with foreign military leaders requires a high level of maturity to operate independently out of an embassy with much lower levels of supervision than is common in the Army – the Army assumes that people holding senior rank have the requisite maturity to succeed in this assignment.

The most common of these teams that Army officers will serve on are the technical assistance, fielding and training (TAFT) teams. SATMO currently operates more than 40 TAFTs distributed throughout every COCOM, with officers serving as detachment commanders or advisers in the Caribbean or in countries as varied as Colombia, Georgia, Taiwan, Estonia and Saudi Arabia.

A broadening assignment to SATMO provides officers the chance to develop as leaders in unique multinational and joint operating environments while serving at the operational level. This article will provide lessons-learned on some of those challenges to help prepare officers headed to an assignment with SATMO.

One of the toughest challenges in a SATMO assignment is adapting one's leadership style to best suit the environment. The size of a TAFT can vary dramatically but is generally between two and 10 Soldiers. Unlike more conventional SFABs or MiTTs, where everyone generally has the same occupation specialty or background, TAFTs are composed of technical experts and are almost always tailored to support the COCOM's desired outcomes, priorities and objectives for that country based on the COCOM's respective campaign plan.

As an example, the Guatemala TAFT, by its approved table of organization, includes an Armor Branch major, a Special Forces captain, an automotive-maintenance warrant officer, a watercraft-engineer warrant officer, a light-wheeled-vehicle mechanic sergeant, a radio operator/maintainer sergeant, an infantry sergeant and a watercraft-operator sergeant. The warrant officers are generally between chief warrant officer two and chief warrant officer four in rank, and the NCOs are all typically sergeant first class or master sergeant.

The small size of the typical TAFT team and the senior ranks of all the members require a different leadership style than what the typical officer uses while serving as a company commander, battalion-operations officer or executive officer. Large organizations naturally tend toward a more formal approach, but the training-meeting formats used in a conventional brigade combat team, for instance, tend to be more cumbersome when leading a small team of senior NCOs and officers.

The ground TAFT in Columbia, for example, consists of only two field-grade officers: one Armor Branch lieutenant colonel and an Infantry Branch major. Synchronizing training and operations for them can occur through simple conversations and does not require a battle-rhythm event with a fixed agenda or slide presentation.

Finding the balance between the formal and the informal in a small-team environment is not something the conventional officer track normally prepares an officer for, but it is essential in a SATMO assignment.

Since TAFTs are designed to work for a COCOM, this creates some natural tensions within the organization as well, as a team's priorities in support of the campaign plan are set by the local Office of Security Cooperation (OSC) or equivalent, but the team's administrative priorities – such as the requirements in Army Regulation 350-1, **Army Training and Leader Development** – remain under the purview of SATMO and USASAC. This can lead to situations in which a team leader has to negotiate more with his/her superiors than is normal in the Army to help the leadership at Fort Bragg and Redstone Arsenal, AL – where USASAC is based – understand the country team's priorities and for the country team to understand SATMO and USASAC priorities. When conflicting priorities and deadlines exist, it is up to the team leader to facilitate negotiations between organizations to shift deadlines and ensure that all aspects of the mission can be accomplished.

Being forward-stationed on an unaccompanied tour in a COCOM is not the same as a deployment. TAFT team members typically live in close quarters, with some TAFTs all living in the same house and normally without amenities, such as a post exchange, that “war on terrorism” veterans would associate with a deployment. Life support comes almost exclusively off the local economy – meaning the quantity, quality and diversity of products differs from what a service member typically expects.

Soldiers will often be tempted to act out given the remoteness of both family and the immediate chain of command during a SATMO tour. There is easy access on the local economy to both potential sexual partners and alcohol. In most of the partner nations, the U.S. dollar has more purchasing power compared to what Soldiers are used to, and this tends to increase the sense of temptation. Team leaders must be aware of any risky situations and hold violators of the Army Values immediately accountable. Any senior leader not showing the required maturity needs to be dealt with and reassigned immediately.

To be successful, team leaders need to find a way to maintain the right amount of professionalism while still giving subordinates and peers space to relax and be away from work, despite literally living in the room next door. The personalities on the team will play a large role in determining what the balance looks like for each TAFT.

Command, support relationships

Another challenge for officers is adjusting to the joint and interagency environment that embassy teams are normally built from. The command relationships for a TAFT are much more complicated than the traditional line and block charts at divisional units. As an example, Figure 1 illustrates the command and support relationships for the Guatemala TAFT.

Often the team's in-country priorities will be set by the OSC for that country and based on FMS or SCET training requirements, but SATMO and USASAC remain the organizational headquarters for awards, evaluations and other administrative requirements.

Officers, particularly those serving as detachment commanders, need to be aware of the inherent frictions these command and support relationships can create and work to mitigate them to achieve mission success. They need to be able to tactfully communicate to both SATMO and OSC the effects any given policy will have on a mission. It is the SATMO team commander's responsibility to explain what they can and cannot do, based on the inherent authorities of the FMS case or SCET advising mission, Army regulations and command guidance.

Since SATMO is an economy-of-force mission for the Army, TAFT commanders also need to be honest brokers of when they think a mission is no longer necessary. The maturity and experiences SATMO officers gain will help them identify when a mission should be ended or modified. That honest assessment will help convey to both the SATMO commander and the OSC commander the organizational transitions (along with associated decisions, transitional tasks and risks) in both space and time.

Although Department of Defense (DoD) assets, TAFT team members are part of the embassy staff and are required to follow the local State Department regulations. For example, in-country travel (both personal and official) needs to be cleared through applicable administrative Army channels and the embassy's regional security office (RSO).

Each RSO will have slightly different procedures, but in Guatemala the RSO requires a detailed email, known as a travel locator, of the planned route, personnel traveling, hotels being used for overnight stays and similar details, provided at least 48 hours before all travel. Even though the RSO is not in the chain of command, it serves as one of the lead force-protection authorities for the U.S. government in the country and its travel restrictions cannot be ignored – even if the RSO is inherently more risk-averse than what the DoD chain of command is willing to underwrite.

Officers serving as TAFT or detachment commanders need to ensure that training plans are built and executed with a specific capability in mind. The exact capability will be identified in an FMS case, funded by Title 22 dollars, and should be identified on the team's approved SCET request. The SCET provides the team's mission and composition, and it describes the deployment's desired outcomes. It is important to note that an SCET is generally approved for three years at a time, meaning that detachment commanders need to think beyond a single Officer Evaluation Report cycle and look at how a capability can be generated or improved over the mission's duration.

There also exists an inherent tension between the execution of the SCET or FMS cases that generated the original mission and the COCOM's campaign plan that stems from the different times at which they are written and updated. The COCOM campaign plan is a living document normally updated annually or biennially to reflect changes within the area of responsibility. The SCET or FMS is a document that is often not updated until it is pending a renewal, which can be anywhere between three to five years.

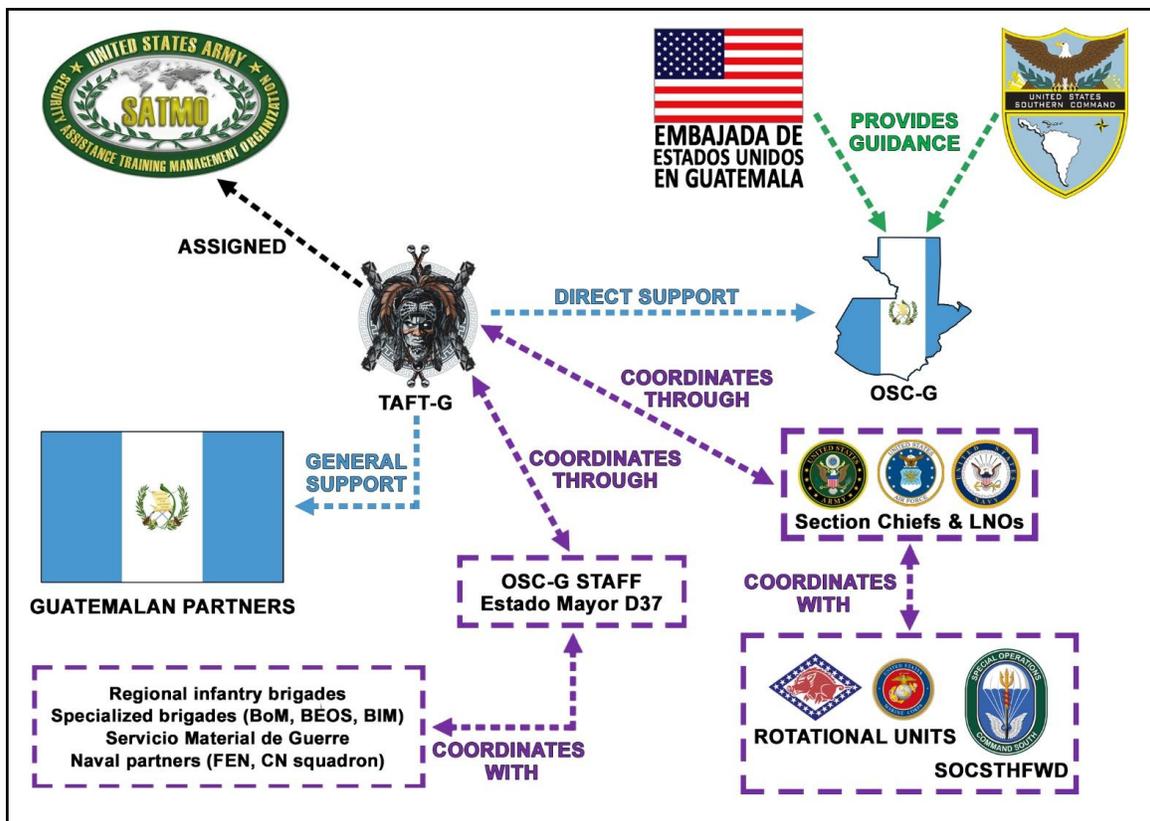


Figure 1. Command and support relationships for the Guatemalan TAFT, or TAFT-G.

Mission changes

Sometimes the COCOM or OSC staff deems irrelevant the capability or outcome originally designated in the SCET or FMS case – or in need of modification because of changed circumstances. This leads to a potentially contentious

situation. The detachment commander has a document, which was originally approved through the COCOM staff and authorized at DoD level, that tells him or her that the mission is to generate a specific capability in the country. In an FMS case, that document might also represent a legally binding contract with the partner nation.

In most cases for SATMO teams, DoD has directed that the Army (supporting command) provide a team with a defined mission and capabilities to the COCOM (supported command) to support an approved SCET or FMS case. Even if you look only at the Army's internal support relationships, there is a 50/50 chance the parent unit's (SATMO and USASAC) priorities are supposed to supersede those of the supported unit (OSC and COCOM).

While the COCOM as the "supported" command or its in-country representative, OSC, might be directing a change of mission, they do not inherently have that authority per doctrine outlined in Field Manual 6-0, **Commander and Staff Organization and Operations**. In such cases, it is critical for the detachment commander to remember that the team exists as an enabler to U.S. government priorities within the partner nation. While a team might execute discrete tasks in support of defined effects as per the doctrine outlined in Joint Publication 3-0, **Joint Operations**, the team ultimately exists to support the COCOM's desired outcomes and objectives, under which the OSC's effects and the team's tasks are ultimately nested.

Failing to recognize this dynamic can lead to significant setbacks in the larger security-cooperation program. Therefore the detachment commander has an obligation to support the COCOM and OSC priorities where they diverge from a potentially outdated SCET or FMS case to achieve the larger security-cooperation outcomes and partner-nation capability development.

Detachment commanders also have an obligation when the OSC or COCOM directs a change of mission to advise the SATMO commander at Fort Bragg about the change of mission and the extent to which his team can support the change of mission. Detachment commanders also make a recommendation on the extent to which SATMO and USASAC should resource the mission going forward.

A subtle change of mission (for example, changing the primary partner-nation unit the team supports) is a relatively low-impact change, particularly if the new partner-nation unit is expected to fill a similar role to the previous one.

A more drastic change of mission that could involve changing the composition of the team (such as asking a logistician-heavy team to advise on the installation and operation of an air-defense network) requires much more coordination and ultimately requires a new SCET or FMS case to be approved at DoD level because SATMO and USASAC can only fill billets based off those in approved SCETs and FMS cases. Detachment commanders need to be able to communicate this to OSC chiefs to help set realistic expectations about how quickly the team can change its composition to support a new mission set.

Cultural, geographical considerations

In addition to the constraints and ambiguities imposed by working in the joint and interagency environment, detachment commanders also must work within the national and organizational cultures of the partner nation. Each partner nation has a distinct national culture that shapes the environment in which SATMO teams operate. For example, teams in Eastern Europe and Ukraine must account for how their countries are influenced by historic relationships with Russia, which could now shape their worldview.

Teams operating in Central and South America likewise need to account for how their actions could be perceived as imperious and potentially cast the U.S. government in a negative light because of the history between those countries and the United States. For example, U.S. interventions in support of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet or the Nicaraguan Contras are never far from mind in the U.S. Southern Command area of responsibility.

All these geopolitical considerations require that detachment commanders find an approach to partnering with the host nation that accounts for national sensibilities and avoids negative exposure to the U.S. government. Unlike the common deployment experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan, SATMO teams most often work with mature militaries that have entrenched organizational cultures. Detachment commanders must therefore learn the nuances of those cultures to generate the social capital needed to be effective partners and advisers. Falling into the mental trap of "the American way of business is the best way of business" will only lead to frustration and a lack of results.

As an example, most Eastern European, Central and South American armies are extremely officer-centric. Tasks that American military officers normally associate with NCO duties are routinely performed by lieutenants and captains. Decisions an American captain might make as a company commander are often made at lieutenant-colonel or colonel level. Also, those armies make distinctions between enlisted soldiers that we are not used to.

There are generally two broad categories for rank in Central and South America that Americans are familiar with: *sargentos*, which are NCOs, and *trupos*, which are the junior enlisted. There is also another category of *especialista*. Most Americans would interpret *especialista* as an indication of a Soldier's military-occupation specialty (MOS) because it translates as "specialist" and is usually used in the context of "specialist in aviation," for example.

This, however, would miss two important points of nuance. The first is that you cannot be an *especialista* unless you have committed to being a career soldier. Thus an *especialista* private can have an indefinite enlistment, something not possible in our Army.

The second nuance is that the soldier's specialty often falls outside his or her MOS. For example, an infantry NCO can also be an electrician. This results from the fact that these militaries need to internally source many functions our Army has grown used to outsourcing over the years such as electrical work, carpentry and duct work.

Soldiers who are not *especialistas* are normally short-term enlistees or conscripts. In some countries, these short-term enlistees have the ability to end their own contract, which is unheard of in our Army.

Another organizational difference is that most of these armies do not have the same concept of institutional training our Army does. Instead, the equivalent of initial-entry training (IET) and advanced individual training (AIT) occurs at the unit of assignment. While most units have a systemic approach to their IET equivalent, AIT equivalents are much more informal and can best be described as occurring through on-the-job training. Thus, soldiers' formal military training might be completed in as little as 60 days of IET before they assume a full-time role as members of a unit. There is also often no equivalent to ongoing professional education such as NCO academies.

This lack of formal institutional training poses several challenges when working to develop partner capacity. One of the biggest challenges, due to differing educational and socioeconomic conditions, is that the baseline capacity for individual soldiers and units is subject to incredible variance across the partner nation's military. Teams thus must have the ability to individually adapt the sophistication and complexity of the training, which is tailored to each unit, to keep them engaged. It also means that training designed to help professionalize the partner-nation military must be incorporated into other events and done in a way that does not offend the partners and cause them to disengage from training.

SATMO must thus tailor presentation and training methodologies for each country with its own unique nuances based on its history. In Guatemala, there is little public trust in the military after the 1960-1996 civil war – a war ripe with human-rights violations. Accordingly the military has more restrictions placed on it. For example, the Guatemalan military may only purchase repair parts from Guatemalan manufacturers and may never have a budget that projects further out than one year. The ability to spend that money is also heavily restricted by mandatory congressional notifications, making it exceedingly difficult to reallocate money to address emergent circumstances.

The military must also document every action it undertakes (personnel reassignments, trainings, operations, etc.), and this has led to a cumbersome process known as *oficios*. An *oficio* is more than just an operations order or equivalent. It is the authorization to conduct any event with the partner nation and is often granted only at general-officer level. All partner training in Guatemala is authorized by the country's Chief of Defense, Guatemala's equivalent of the United States' Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This means that training requests need to be submitted for coordination 30-45 days ahead of time to give the process time to work.

Each country will have its own nuances like this that detachment commanders must be aware of and work within local concerns.

After accounting for the various forms of friction inherent in the environment, the bottom line is that the desired capabilities for the partner nation outlined in the SCET or FMS case need to be developed in a sustainable manner.

The detachment commander should ensure that training is designed to develop a cadre of qualified trainers and that the advising component of the mission is focused on improving the host-nation systems.

Success means that the team's presence is no longer required by the partner nation. This requires the detachment commander to value qualitative measures more so than in a traditional unit. It does not matter how many soldiers you train. It matters that you trained the right people who have the correct rank and position in the partner military to subsequently train their own replacements. This is the best way to develop interoperability and sustained capabilities for future coalition operations.

A great example of this is driver's training for motorized counternarcotics units in Guatemala. Initially the SATMO team focused on training the actual drivers; however, the team quickly noticed a trend in the partner nation's requests to train more and more drivers. Upon closer investigation, the team learned that the drivers were all short-term enlistees who could essentially walk off the job; soldiers leveraged their newly learned driving skills for commercial driving jobs, creating an immediate shortage of trained drivers in the unit.

The team adapted to this by creating a master driver's program focused on training career NCOs how to safely conduct basic and advanced driver's training courses. This placed the onus on training end-level users in the Guatemalan military while reducing the training audience to a smaller, more mature cadre. This allowed American advisers to focus on the quality of the training rather than quantitative targets.



Figure 2. U.S. SATMO team members train host-nation NCOs how to safely conduct basic and advanced driver's training courses. (U.S. Army photo by MAJ Mike Kiser)

Takeaway

An assignment to SATMO is inherently different from the typical experiences an officer acquires on a conventional track, but it is a valuable broadening assignment. It forces officers to work in an environment they might not normally be comfortable in and learn to operate with less supervision than they might be used to. It provides an experience in the joint and interagency environment and helps officers better see how the embassy team supports a holistic whole-of-government approach in a situation where DoD is not the lead agency. It provides the opportunity for officers to serve their country and make a difference in ways they previously never imagined.

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Acronym Quick-Scan

AIT – advanced individual training

COCOM – combatant command
DoD – Department of Defense
FMS – foreign military sales
GCC – geographic combatant command
IET – initial-entry training
MITT – military transition team
MOS – military-occupation specialty
NCO – noncommissioned officer
OSC – Office of Security Cooperation
RSO – regional security office
SATMO – Security Assistance Training Management Organization
SCET – security-cooperation education and training
SFAB – security-force-assistance brigade
TAFT – technical assistance, fielding and training
USASAC – U.S. Army Security Assistance Command