

Purpose

This paper provides a summary of the lessons FAO branch and proponent learned after the 2015 Area of Concentration (AOC) realignment, which among other things, merged all of the former 48C AOC with most of the former 48E AOC. The intent is to identify any trends – positive or negative – that resulted from the 2015 AOC realignment, particularly as they relate to the intended outcomes. Ultimately, the lessons identified should inform a subsequent discussion among the FAO Council of Colonels and General Officer Steering Committee (GOSC) in order to leverage these lessons learned as the branch merges 48D, F, H and I into a single area of concentration (AOC), 48P. This merger will also impact the 48E AOC with the return of the Central Asian countries and associated billets.

BLUF – Foreign area officers (FAOs) in the 48E AOC have a broader level of knowledge of the entirety of Europe, but it has come at the expense of developing a cadre of FAOs with Russia expertise and experience. The 2015 AOC realignment diluted the focus in initial training and officer management across the expanded 48E AOC. Rather than focusing on Russia, and the states of the former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact, 48Es are now responsible for understanding the space from Lisbon to Vladivostok.

Background of the 2015 AOC realignment

The main problem that the 2015 AOC realignment sought to solve was the viability of the 48D AOC. As it was then structured, the 48D AOC suffered the highest attrition rate of among all areas of concentration. Most current and former 48Cs and 48Es refer to the 2015 AOC realignment as the “48C-E merger” because they view the merger of these two AOCs as the most important aspect of the 2015 AOC realignment. However, it is important to realize that merging Cs and Es into a single AOC was a second-order effect made necessary by the solution to the original problem the AOC merger sought to solve – a lack of available officers for critical assignments due to high attrition.

The 2015 AOC realignment combined the entire former 48C AOC with most of the former 48E AOC. 48E billets located in the states of Central Asia, along with those in ARCENT and CENTCOM that support them, were transitioned to the 48D AOC. Due to a mismatch of billet and rank structures in the 48D AOC at the time, promotion rates to O5 and O6 among 48Ds tended to be lower than the Army competitive category and 48 career field averages. The austerity of many 48D billet locations, coupled with comparatively few CONUS or staff assignments, contributed to high rates of early retirement.

Prior to the 2015 realignment, FAO branch and FAO Senior Leader Division (SLD) assignment officers experienced tremendous difficulty in filling critical in-country positions in the 48D AOC. This issue eventually rose to the attention of Chief of Staff of the Army, General Ray Odierno, given the importance of these positions in the Global War on Terror, which had primacy among competing priorities in the National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy at that time.

Moving the Central Asian countries and associated billets from the 48E to 48D AOC without any subsequent realignment would have left the 48E AOC with only 10 countries. FAO Proponent therefore included the merger of the remaining 48E countries with all of the 48C countries into a single 48E "EUCOM" AOC as part of the 2015 AOC realignment. The intent of this merger was to avoid the small-AOC dynamics and problems that FAO Proponent sought to solve with the 48D AOC. Creating one, large 48E AOC also had the benefit of eliminating what was colloquially known as the 'Checko' (48C/E) countries – those that fell within the 48C AOC but were often filled by 48Es due to the Slavic language, cultural, and historical linkages, and in some isolated but high visibility cases, the unwillingness of 48Cs to serve in them.

Issues and Lessons Learned

Issue #1: Availability of 48Es and 48Ds for assignment to critical billets

Discussion:

Prior to the 2015 AOC realignment, the relatively small size of the 48D AOC rendered it uniquely vulnerable to a shortage of available officers due to attrition because most in-region assignments were hardship duty and unaccompanied. Incorporating billets in and associated with Central Asia grew the available billets in the 48D AOC, improving its resiliency to the impacts of promotion and retention trends.

Lessons & Implications:

The alignment of Central Asian billets to the 48D career field was intended to provide more opportunities for FAOs in the 48D AOC. However, both the FAO enterprise and the organizations that utilize FAOs never fully instituted the changes needed to implement the AOC realignment.

FAO proponent never fully shifted the focus of training to develop Russian speaking 48Ds, and instead prioritized/valued in-region training (IRT) experience in South Asia over experience in the former Soviet Union (FSU). As a result, HRC was forced to continue to fill most of the billets in and associated with Central Asia with Russian-speaking 48Es.

Additionally, CENTCOM did not fully transition the Central Asian billets on its Joint Manning Document (JMD) to 48D positions until 2019. In practice, CENTCOM never reached the point where they were fielding these positions with 48Ds, and instead used Russian-speaking 48Es to fill most of the jobs.

Issue #2: Initial accession and training of new FAOs

Discussion:

After the 2015 AOC realignment, FAO proponent made a deliberate decision to remove low density / low utilization languages ('boutique languages') from the initial training of newly-accessed FAOs in favor of increasing the focus on key languages based on billet authorizations.

Languages such as Greek, Polish, Czech, and Slovak were reduced in favor of strategic languages, such as Russian, French, and Serbo-Croatian.

With the cessation of training new FAOs in low density languages, FAO proponent closed the in-country in-region training (IRT) sites associated with these languages. As a result, the number of 48Es – and particularly the number of non-Russian speaking FAOs – conducting IRT at the George C. Marshall Center (GCMC) in Garmisch, Germany increased.

Lessons & Implications:

The elimination low density language assignment and training for new FAOs has increased the number of Russian speaking 48Es in the AOC – as of early 2022, approximately 70 percent of all 48Es at the O-4 and O-5 level have Russian as their control language. This represents a net increase in the number of Russian speakers compared to the total number of FAOs in the 48E AOC prior to the 2015 AOC realignment.

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The expansion of the geographic reach of the 48E AOC also required the 48E FAO Program Director to adjust the training program of instruction to include a much wider array of European security issues and countries. The impact of the increased size and scope of the 48E AOC logically reduced the focus of new FAOs in IRT on FSU countries and the Russia problem set. A reduced focus on the Russian problem set has caused a mindset shift among new some new FAOs. New Russian-speaking 48Es trainees take great liberty with the “European FAO” concept, choosing not to recognize their Russian language training as a primary instrument for their utilization. As such, new Russian-speaking 48Es are keen to view all of Europe, to include former 48C territory, for potential first utilization tours.

Issue #3: Assignment trends

Discussion:

Before the 2015 AOC realignment, FAOs from the 48C and 48E AOCs often experienced ‘cross-pollination’ due to both DoD institutional and European geopolitical reasons. First, the fact that 48C and 48E FAOs shared – with the notable exception of the Central Asian countries – the same Army Service Component Command and Combatant Command led to 48Cs and 48Es being assigned to billets in these headquarters with responsibilities outside of their primary AOCs. Additionally, in the decades after the Cold War, the traditional ‘line’ between 48Cs and 48Es became more and more blurred as FSU/Warsaw Pact countries became members of NATO and the European Union.

Anecdotal evidence over the last eight years seems to indicate more willingness to assign non-Russian speaking 48Es into some Russian language billets, particularly in the arms control and security cooperation realms. There have also been several Russian-speaking 48Es – across all grade plates – assigned outside of Russian-speaking, or even Slavic-language countries in the expanded 48E AOC. Lastly, there is a desire among some 48Es that despite having Russian as their control language, they can – in many cases do aspire – to serve in countries outside of the FSU/Warsaw Pact.

Lessons & Implications:

The ability to assign non-Russian speaking 48Es into formerly Russia-coded billets and Russian-speaking 48Es into non-Russian billets has provided FAO branch and SLD more flexibility in their ability to assign officers across the breadth of the consolidated 48E AOC. Additionally, the fact that 70% of the 48E population has Russian as its control language logically means that many of these Russian-speaking 48Es will necessarily serve in non-Russian language coded billets. In some cases, however, this has resulted in a mismatch of units' preferred knowledge, skills and attributes of the officers assigned to them and what FAO branch has sent to them.

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The new AIM process for assignments does provide 'hiring' organizations and units to choose officers with the desired attributes, assuming such officers are both available and willing to go to those assignments. The full implementation of the Assignment Interactive (AIM) process for all FAO assignments other than attaché positions now gives moving officers an equal vote in their assignment. While this has obvious upside for moving officers, it effectively takes the ability to truly manage and properly utilize 48E talent out of the hands of HRC career managers. Instead, the onus for developing and cultivating expertise on the Russia problem set rests solely on individual officers, and to a lesser extent, senior FAOs that control the hiring process for organizations that employ FAOs.

Issue #4: Reduction in regional and Russian expertise

Discussion:

The 2015 AOC realignment placed a clear priority on developing a billet structure in each AOC to ensure their viability as a career field. The development of regional expertise in each AOC was considered, and the analysis that drove the realignment concluded that the proposed realignment would be able to do both. FAO Proponent recognized – in a 2014 information paper on the pending AOC realignment – that simply merging all of the 48E and 48C countries into one AOC would create an AOC too large for any FAO to develop region-wide expertise. Moving the Central Asian countries to 48D was deemed a sufficient mitigation measure.

Moreover, FAO Proponent argued that less focus on Russia and a broader understanding of Europe writ-large was a reasonable trade-off given the increased focus on security cooperation and building partner capacity in the post-Cold War, Global War on Terror security environment. In the immediate aftermath of Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and subsequent annexation of Crimea, FAO Proponent considered halting the merger of the 48E and 48C AOCs, but Army leadership directed that the FAO branch execute and live with the decision for at least a couple of years.

The 48E Russia training program traces its lineage to the old U.S. Army Russia Institute (USARI) in Garmisch, which ran a world-class program focused on Russia and the Soviet Union. After the end of the Cold War, the USARI morphed into the current George C. Marshall Center (GCMC), where the majority of 48Es were and still are based for their in-region training.

In the 1990s, newly-accessed FAOs experienced a training program based on the old USARI program of instruction. The newly established GCMC inherited both the instructors – including dedicated language instructors – and curriculum of the old USARI. One notable addition to the 48E training program in the 1990s was the opportunity for a months-long immersion as liaison officers with the Russian military in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina. This experience provided 48Es in training a remarkable experience to gain insights into the structure, culture, and capabilities of the Russian military.

After the 9/11 attacks and prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014, EUCOM was considered a ‘security assistance’ Combatant Command (COCOM) and not a warfighting one. This was logical, given the demands of the Global War on Terror, as well as the broader bilateral relationship with Russia at that time. Most 48Es who completed their IRT after 9/11 and through 2015 focused on building host nation capacity to produce capabilities that could be deployed in support of counter-terrorism operations. Many 48Es who went through IRT in the era defined by operations in Iraq and Afghanistan therefore logically spent large portions of their year of regional training conducting multiple three-month in places like Ukraine, Georgia, Central Asia and even Iraq, focusing on building partner capacity and capabilities to support NATO operations.

Lessons & Implications:

There has been a degradation in Russian expertise among the 48E AOC community writ-large, but the root causes of this degradation precede the 2015 AOC realignment. The merger of 48Cs a 48Es into one AOC has, however, exacerbated and accelerated this degradation of Russia expertise among the 48E community primarily through the mismanagement and misuse of existing Russia expertise among the 48E population by not prioritizing the assignment of Russian-speaking 48Es to Russian-coded 48E billets.

The 2015 AOC realignment has shifted the focus in initial training and officer management across the expanded 48E AOC. The sheer size and scope of the expanded 48E AOC predictably led to a lack of focus on Russia among many 48Es, as they are now expected to have a depth of knowledge across the entire EUCOM AOR, which encompasses over 50 countries and complex organizations such as NATO, the European Union, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. As a community, 48Es do have a broader depth of knowledge of European security issues and are more grounded in security cooperation programs and processes, but this has come at the expense of a cadre of 48Es with deeper expertise of Russia and the Russian problem set.

Conclusions

Foreign area officers (FAOs) in the 48E AOC have a broader level of knowledge of European security issues and institutions, but as a community, have less expertise on Russia and the Russian problem set. Moving forward, FAO Proponent and FAO Branch will need to establish the knowledge and skills expected of 48Es in general, and Russian-speaking 48Es specifically, and ensure proper alignment of the training program and subsequent assignments of these

48Es to develop this skill set. The establishment of U.S. Army Europe’s “Russian Way of War” course under the leadership of GEN Cavoli – a graduate of the USARI-influenced 48E training program of the 1990s – is an important addition to the initial training of new 48Es.

Additionally, the assignment process will present challenges for FAO branch and senior FAO leaders to ensure the development of Russia expertise in the 48E population. For all its benefits for the officers moving, the new AIM process has taken away the ability of FAO branch to truly manage talent and ensure the development and utilization of Russia expertise via successive assignments for the Russian-speaking population of 48Es. The onus for that development is squarely on individual FAOs now, with senior FAO leaders having some influence via focused mentorship and their role as ‘hiring ‘managers’ for organizations that employ 48Es.

