

Rethinking the Geographic Combatant Commands

by Edward Marks

Over the many years of the Cold War the United States military created a set of organizations called unified Geographic Combatant Commands (GCCs). They arose out of WWII and grew in size, complexity, and resources over the years to meet the Soviet challenge. Although this historical period is now over we are left with the GCCs, whose continued usefulness should be open to question.

Are the GCCs still a useful organization, or should they be significantly modified if not eliminated? Do they still make a positive contribution to U.S. national security or have they become obstacles to better national policy and programming? Have they outlived their usefulness? These are difficult questions, and answers that propose significant organizational change would be even more difficult to implement.

The combatant command “community” consists of two types, four global/functional commands such as Transportation Command (TRANSCOM) and Strategic Command (STRATCOM) and six geographic commands such as the European (EUCOM) and Pacific (PACOM) commands. The origin of the geographic organizations was the two global warfighting commands of World War II in the Pacific and in Europe. After the war, these commands were formalized as regional unified combatant commands, and eventually joined by SOUTHCOM for Latin American in 1963, CENTCOM for the Middle East in 1983, NORTHCOM in 2002, and then in a final burst of bureaucratic momentum, AFRICOM for Africa in 2007.

The importance and increasingly prominent role GCCs played in American foreign policy grew over the years as the contest of the Cold War wound its way to its conclusion. The end of the Cold War did not alter this trend as the Goldwater-Nichols reform of the defense community consolidated the geographic commands as operational organizations, and confirmed that U.S. military activity outside the U.S. territory was no longer a sporadic activity, confined to wartime, but now a normal activity

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pursued everywhere in the world. This activist role was then expanded further after September 11, 2001, with the consequent decision to consider countering the terrorist threat essentially a military task, and the involvement in two long-running wars which have morphed into military occupations involving counter-insurgency, post-conflict reconstruction, nation-building and economic development.

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During this period, the military services have increasingly become the default option for U.S. government action and response. This attitude has both fostered and been driven by the resourcing disparity in the federal bureaucracy, a disparity which has grown since 9/11, Afghanistan and Iraq. With approximately a \$600 billion defense budget plus war costs compared to a significantly less than a \$100 billion diplomatic and foreign aid budget, we are dramatically under-resourced on the non-military side of the equation. This disparity is evidenced by the enormous growth in GCC activities, as well as the creation of a new GCC for Africa. In other words, since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. government has responded to the changing security and political environment by buying more and larger hammers.

The geographic commands have essentially two tasks: war planning and fighting, and military engagement programs. Both tasks remain, and will always remain, fundamental responsibilities of the Department of Defense and the military

services.

However while the war planning and fighting responsibility obviously remains uniquely a duty of the Department of Defense and the military services, the engagement programs no longer can be handled as a discrete military activity. In today's world, military engagement programs with other countries can only be seen as part of the overall engagement activity of the U. S. government. The so-called "nexus" of security challenges – terrorism, narcotics, smuggling, international criminal networks, etc. – can no longer be managed as single agency programs but must be integrated into "whole of government" programs.

Unfortunately the character of the geographic commands militates against effective whole-of-government engagement programs and therefore coherent foreign policy. First of all, the "stovepiped" organizational structure and perspective of the federal bureaucracy is an obstacle in itself to a comprehensive interagency approach. Among the federal government stovepipes DoD is notable for its robust character in general, its increasingly dominant role in national security matters, and the disparity of resources compared to other agencies. This disparity is reinforced by the unfortunate tendency for our political leadership to consider the military services the default mode in national security. Called upon, DoD – with the geographic commands as its agents – responds with alacrity if not always enthusiasm and in doing so, tends to sweep aside other agencies and departments. This is true even when senior political leadership does not consciously direct a unilateral military approach, as was the case in Iraq and for a while the so-called "war on terrorism."

The rich and available resource base of the military services – money, personnel, and equipment – stems of course from the undeniable resource requirements of war fighting. A number of other problems and challenges – such as natural disaster emergencies, post-conflict reconstruction, and nation building – also require

the extensive use of resources. Unfortunately the fact that these are essentially non-military tasks does not trump the temptation to use existing DoD resources to provide a quick response, not necessarily the correct or most effective response. That the military may not be the most appropriate organization to perform these tasks is irrelevant; they exist, are available and can react quickly. Once they are engaged they tend to continue with these tasks as it is difficult and time consuming to transfer the responsibility to civilian organizations as yet ill-equipped or non-existent. Bureaucratic as well as political inertia takes over.

Another problem with the GCCs arises from the changing character of the international environment and of current national security threats. The rigidly regional organization of the GCCs no longer comfortably fits with today's world. For instance, we are constantly being told that one of our major security challenges is international terrorism, and yet the lead for planning (and often conducting) military counterterrorism campaigns falls on the shoulder of Special Operations Command – a global, functional command. Another major security challenge is monitoring and securing weapons of mass destruction (WMD), a task that falls to another global, functional command – Strategic Command. In other words, the GCCs are not designated as the lead military organization for managing our two primary military challenges.

The other large bundle of duties which occupy much of the time, staff, and resources of the GCCs – security assistance and such – is pursued with little strategic vision, although generally with extensive strategic verbal justification. Engagement programs appear to be largely used as “walking around money” for geographic combatant commanders, their staffs, and military representatives in embassies. In any case, well-funded engagement budgets lead to much activity because they can be done, not because they should be done, in a pre-emptive version of “counting sorties” instead of seeking results. Examples of

both of these types of activities were noted by the author when he attended the annual security assistance “planning” conference at PACOM in the early years of this decade. There was no sign of any “strategic” planning (nor any presence by flag or general officers) but instead a scramble by each office and section chief to obtain funds for *their* “clients.” Commanders making high visibility visits during which they announce new or additional security assistance and exchange programs are common phenomena.

Finally, the regional perspective perverts both the war planning and fighting and military

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engagement tasks conducted by the GCCs. The GCCs argue that their regional perspective is their primary virtue, that no one else in the U.S. government so successfully pursues this important aspect of current developments. However, in this attitude the GCCs have it wrong. Strict geographic regionalism is not in fact how the world is organized. Two major trends are moving us today – globalization on one end and localism on the other. Of course somewhere along this continuum there are regional developments and trends, but they are generally either sub-regional (e.g. The Horn of Africa) or cross regional lines (e.g. Pakistan-India).

Despite these questions about the continued usefulness of the geographic combatant command model, DoD moved to create a new GCC, AFRICOM or Africa Command. Since the original announcement of AFRICOM, its creation has produced a disjointed, and occasionally embarrassing, series of explanations of everything from its strategic justification, to

physical location, to organizational make-up. AFRICOM will never be able to overcome its unfortunate name in a region where the most toxic charge is “neo-colonist”. More important is that a serious strategic justification for the new organization has never been produced. In the absence of effective government in the majority of African countries, the local military organization is often a serious obstacle to true security and development and yet AFRICOM proposes a full spectrum program of engagement with no discussion or consideration of whether this is a good idea. Every task now listed on its website, a grab bag of miscellaneous tasks, could be more easily and cheaply pursued by and through the traditional military assistance program implemented by American embassies. And many, viewed soberly, should probably not be done at all. AFRICOM appears to be an organization in desperate search of a mission even though its reach, ambition, energy, resources, and unfortunate imperial title are making it the face – a military face – of the United States in Africa.

The harmful results of this GCC approach to engagement can be seen in the activities of AFRICOM with respect to military assistance and engagement. According to a recent Stimson Center report, the implementation by AFRICOM of the relatively new (and very large) DoD Section 1206 Train and Equip program is being pursued in accordance with different priorities and policy rational than the traditional (and actually smaller) Foreign Military Financing program administered by the State Department. The Defense Department believes that strengthening states to control their territory best prevents an Al Qaeda toehold on the continent. It’s ‘Building Partner Capacity’ mission flows from that belief. The State Department, by contrast, finds arming most African governments to be counterproductive for our democracy, development, and human rights agenda and, by extension, for the counterterrorism mission. Instead, development spending is its priority in Africa. Coordination is wholly lost between the

defense and diplomacy/development sides of the equation, with resulting strategy schizophrenia. Which approach is best is not the point here; what is important to note is that an energetic, well meaning, well financed and stovepiped GCC staff is working independently, with the result that the two departments are pursuing stovepiped programs.

The combination of extensive resources – money, staff, and personal airplanes – combined with wide-ranging authority has too often seduced the geographic commanders into playing the role of American political-military viceroys. In doing so, the commanders and their staffs have contributed significantly to the oft-noted militarization of American foreign relations. As experienced a commentator as retired Marine General Anthony Zinni, a former geographic commander himself, has commented on the outsized role of regional military commanders on the international scene and the resulting military face which the U.S. presents to the world. In international affairs, the civilian departments and agencies appear to be experiencing the difficult situation faced by mice forced to share a bed with an elephant. With the best will in the world, the elephant hogs the available space – especially if he is a restless sleeper. So to do the GCCs take up too much space in American international relations.

Proposal for Change

But if the GCCs are too big and obsolete, what could replace them? The path to reform would be to separate the two portfolios. The war planning and fighting mission would go to two or perhaps three Standing Joint Force Headquarters (SJFHQ) – located in Hawaii, on the East or West Coasts, or perhaps in Florida where they could use the existing facilities built for Pacific Command, Southern Command and Central Command. If DoD insists that adequate war planning requires each geographic region to have its own SJFHQ, so be it, but these would be significantly downsized organizations from their

present incarnation.

Whether two, three, or six, each would be equipped with the staff and associated resources necessary to pursue war planning and assigned operational responsibilities, including the staffing, training, and deployment of Joint Task Forces for designated operations. In a sense, they would be GCCs “Lite,” focused on the mission of war fighting and still reporting to the President through the Secretary of Defense.

Withdrawn from these SJFHQs, the military engagement mission would be re-assigned to a new, unified support organization, located somewhere in the U.S. but preferably in the Washington area in order to be in close proximity to the Department of State, USAID, the intelligence community and other pertinent parts of the U.S. government. Within DoD this “engagement command” (Foreign Military Sales, Section 1206, etc) would report directly to the Joint Staff while operating downstream in support of beefed-up military representation in American embassies. This arrangement would recognize the essentially bilateral character of military engagement programs while providing for greater integration with coherent, overall foreign policy.

The functional combatant commands would not be affected by this proposed change. STRATCOM, TRANSCOM and SOCOM would be retained as presently constituted. Each has a mission relevant to today’s security environment. JFCOM might usefully combine in some way with the military ‘Schoolhouse,” or at least the “joint” elements of it, although a recent announcement by Secretary of Defense Gates would appear to indicate that he feels the military could get along without it.

These changes would probably produce some staff savings, certainly at senior officer levels, and in operating costs if the current half dozen GCC headquarters are reorganized into smaller and more focused SJFHQs. More important, however, would be the gain from greater integration of the military engagement program into the broader whole-of-government of the United States.

In sum, the geographic combatant commands are obsolete – large, expensive, and clumsy bureaucratic organizations unsuited for the security challenges we face today. They obstruct efforts to obtain the kind of flexible, adroit, adjustable military capability that the current Secretary of Defense talks about. They have served their time and finished their mission, and, like good and faithful servants, need to step aside. While this proposal from outside the professional military community may at first be unwelcome, perhaps it could serve as the impulse for a discussion of the subject. After all, a pearl begins with the insertion of a grain of sand into an unsuspecting oyster. **IAJ**