

# Fundamentally *Restructuring Interagency Operations* for Future Success

**by Ryan Hilger**

***"The whole thing was uncoordinated and did not get us very far. The upshot is that in the ninth year of the war we are starting from scratch."***

***Ambassador Richard Holbrook***

Ambassador Holbrooke's lighthearted comments about the ongoing stabilization and reconstruction operations in Afghanistan in December 2009 belie how poorly the U.S. has managed nation building not only in Afghanistan, but also in other places over the course of the half-century.<sup>1</sup> For the past twenty years, the U.S. has embarked on operations that challenged the ascendancy of the military as the prime provider for nation-building efforts. These operations have required the cooperation of many branches of government to be successful. But lately, getting the Department of State (State), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Department of Defense (DoD), and a host of other organizations to cooperate effectively toward a common goal remain elusive. A decade of ad hoc arrangements in Iraq and Afghanistan has only underscored the need for Congress to undertake a sweeping reform of the national security apparatus. Nation building, in this context, encompasses peacekeeping, capacity building, stabilization and reconstruction operations, and traditional nation building. Future security challenges will only require increased interagency cooperation, not less.

The following three recommendations should be implemented to fundamentally change how interagency cooperation works abroad:

- Congress should legislatively expand the combatant command (CCMD) structure to reflect the need for continual interagency planning and integration.
- The President should grant the National Security Council (NSC) the authority for oversight and direction of interagency operations abroad.

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- The professional education system should be reformed and expanded to produce a cadre of experienced interagency professionals ready to advance the nation's interests abroad.

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### **Expansion and Reorganization of the Geographic Combatant Commands**

The streamlining of the military chain of command in the Goldwater-Nichols Act in 1986 administratively removed many of the barriers to effective joint operations. The invasion of Panama in 1989 validated and cemented the operational effectiveness of these changes. Removing service chiefs from the operational chain of command freed them to focus on the long-term issues of training, readiness, recruitment, and procurement instead of fighting with other services to control short-term operations, as happened in Grenada in 1983. The ability of a combatant commander to exercise operational control of all branches of the military within his areas of responsibility without having to deal with service chief infighting to accomplish the mission so fundamentally altered the way the U.S. fights that its success bears repeating.

In 2007, DoD stood up the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) as the newest geographic CCMD, with a function-based, interagency structure at its core. The success achieved in interagency coordination, namely with State and USAID, has been significant. General William Ward, a previous commander of AFRICOM, noted that instead of strictly interagency, "USAFRICOM might be better termed interagency-oriented because of its design

charter that emphasized support to an integrated '3-D' approach of diplomacy, development, and defense activities."<sup>2</sup> The AFRICOM approach recognized the contributions of other agencies as mutually supportive of U.S. goals in the region. As a result, the organizational structure of AFRICOM looks very different from other CCMDs. AFRICOM has been organized around functional capabilities, instead of the more typical directorates, complete with a mix of civilians, including a few from outside the DoD, and military leaders at all levels. Day-to-day interagency interaction and cooperation produces more effective working relationships and better unity of effort toward the common objective.

However, the AFRICOM model should not be implemented across the remaining geographic CCMDs. Instead, AFRICOM should be viewed as the prototype for interagency integration and improved upon. The geographic CCMDs could be reorganized as follows. First, Congress should establish a post-ambassador position of Chief of the Regional Mission above the military combatant commander. This new Chief of the Regional Mission reports to and is directly accountable to the NSC, thus ensuring that neither the Secretary of State nor Secretary of Defense can maintain operations within that department alone. The NSC would grant the regional chief the authority to conduct specified operations in support of the national interest without obtaining explicit approval from the President, thus granting a degree of autonomy and flexibility to U.S. foreign policy. This post-ambassador also helps current ambassadors by providing advice, mentorship, and guidance on issues that, at present, get lost in the shuffle of the millions of cables coming into State yearly. An arrangement similar to this may have prevented the catastrophe that befell the U.S. mission in Libya that resulted in the death of the Ambassador and three other Americans. The Chief of the Regional Mission would have

a closer connection to the Secretary of State and NSC than the individual ambassadors currently enjoy.

The military officer, the combatant commander in the present system, then assumes the dual role of Deputy Chief and the military combatant commander. The combatant commander would only assume command when directed by the NSC to conduct major combat operations in the area of responsibility. This approach reflects the growing need to demilitarize foreign policy and aid, reaffirms the desire for civilian control of foreign policy, and brings the two primary foreign policy entities together under the same organizational structure. It also reflects the underlying assumption that all combatant commanders must be well versed in political- and civil-military relations to succeed at their jobs. The combination of agency efforts, especially from Defense and State, will remedy the chief complaint of the U.S. Chief of Mission in Afghanistan that “the lack of a single, unified chain of command was a core problem leading to weak management oversight.”<sup>3</sup>

Such a model worked extremely well on a micro-scale during the crisis in Greece from 1947–1949 when the U.S., at Britain’s behest, intervened to save Greece from communist influence. President Truman assigned Paul A. Porter to study the problems in Greece and provide recommendations. His incredibly comprehensive, yet exceptionally succinct, report formed the basis of the organizational structure for the American Mission for Aid to Greece—a case study in its own right. After resolving a few personnel problems in early 1948, the mission began to achieve rapid success. The working relationship of Ambassador Grady and General Van Fleet, his subordinate, could not have been better. These “officials set aside the parochial interests of their agency in favor of the interests of the overall U.S. mission to Greece” on countless occasions, such as Greece’s military campaign in the north, debates

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over the type of government to establish, and the decision that all communications with U.S. agencies stateside, including Defense, pass through the ambassador.<sup>4</sup> In the end, the mission to Greece was a success, and the U.S. sent only 100 combat troops, who never deployed outside the embassy walls. Such selfless cooperation, recently seen in the relationship between General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker in Iraq, proves that different agencies can work in harmony toward a national objective if given unity of command and strong leadership, which in turn helps produce unity of effort.

However, “[the] chain of command, as it currently stands, will inevitably exert a countervailing force on interagency coordination,”<sup>5</sup> as seen in the early 1980s as the probable passage of Goldwater-Nichols Act loomed over the military. The service chiefs at the time balked and lobbied Congress against the passage of Goldwater-Nichols, citing disastrous scenarios for U.S. national security and victory for the Soviet Union. With the benefit of hindsight, none of those scenarios played out. The U.S. military managed to slowly integrate into a more effective joint force, whose prowess went on display in 1991 with Operation Desert Storm. The sweeping changes here will be met with similar criticisms should Congress introduce formal legislation commensurate with these recommendations. Indeed, General David Petraeus, one of the most celebrated generals in

the last few decades, sees the difficulties with such an approach.

State is never going to put an ambassador under a general, and DoD is never going to put a general under an ambassador. So you have to resolve to work together. You have to make way and pull together and be joined at the hip. You have to have unity of purpose as the bottom line.<sup>6</sup>

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While General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker achieved remarkable success in Iraq, the U.S. cannot jeopardize success in complex operations by pinning its hopes on the personalities of two individuals. A similar approach in Afghanistan produced damaging results to the coalition efforts when the senior U.S. civilian and military leadership failed to cooperate. To correct this, Congress has the ability, just as they did in the 1980s, to legislatively force cooperation.

Congress should expand the existing CCMD organizational structure to include permanent positions for the following agencies under existing directorates: State; USAID; the Departments of Agriculture, Treasury, Justice, and Homeland Security; and the Central Intelligence Agency. Additional temporary positions should be available for other federal agencies as needed. All geographic demarcations across agencies should be standardized under the current unified command plan. Bringing all relevant agencies into the CCMD structure leverages the capacities, infrastructures,

resources, and strategic planning abilities of the military with the expertise of the other departments, who generally have far fewer resources.<sup>7</sup> Agencies should be compelled to part with some staff at regional bureaus in favor of rotational tours at the new interagency commands or hire additional personnel to meet the demand. This process will provide interagency experience for personnel at varying levels of their careers, not unlike the military structure, while preserving the regional expertise that members develop during a lifetime of service. To forcefully change the culture in the civilian agencies, promotion into the senior executive or foreign service should be tied to the completion of interagency tours. Like the run up to the passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act, agencies will likely resist this change vehemently. But few, if any, officials would say now that the reforms implemented by Goldwater-Nichols were less efficient than before or detrimental to national security since. Legislatively forcing interagency cooperation by reorganization will, in time, produce substantially better results.

Congress should provide for the establishment of regional security councils within each interagency command. Modeled after the NSC and its interagency policy committees, it will ensure that each agency has equal status in the decision-making and planning processes. As Whitaker, et al. note, “[different interpretations] must be openly addressed to enable the group to collaborate effectively, refine core policy issues, and achieve a consensus policy document.”<sup>8</sup> Having regional experts discuss regional problems as equals, each understanding his or her agency’s capabilities, strengths, and weaknesses, will help develop truly interagency solutions to difficult national security problems. This approach also relieves the burden on the NSC and the President to bear the brunt of the planning and decision-making, which would now be done closer to the problem.

## Providing Oversight and Accountability

The spectacular failure of post-conflict reconstruction and interagency cooperation in Iraq under the direction of L. Paul Bremer highlights the need for a responsible, accountable entity with executive powers below the President to oversee non-combat operations. By appointing L. Paul Bremer as a Presidential Special Envoy, he became accountable to no one but the President. In this case, the President becomes the single-point failure for U.S. national security policy. President Bush was very reluctant to intervene in subordinate matters, giving Bremer unprecedented autonomy and authority with little to no required reporting or accountability. The implosion of high-level interagency efforts came when the “U.S. military forces in Iraq learned of the unilateral disbandment of the Iraqi army—the cornerstone of all U.S. security planning—through a cable news report, [which] is indicative of the disconnect between the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and the U.S. military command.”<sup>9</sup> Having an accountable entity in charge above the local ambassador would have prevented the issuance of CPA Orders 1 (de-Baathification) and 2 (disbanding the Iraqi army). Secretary of State Colin Powell would not have allowed it.

At present, the U.S. does not have a formal system in place to prevent this from happening again. In fact, “under the current system, only the President has the decisive authority necessary to require interagency coordination for contingency relief and reconstruction operations.”<sup>10</sup> However, the President does not have the time to provide sufficient oversight and force the day-to-day cooperation necessary to harmonize operations and achieve unity of effort, nor should that burden be placed solely on him.

In his various testimonies before Congress

and in both of his books, *Hard Lessons: The Iraq Reconstruction Experience* and *Applying Iraq’s Hard Lessons to the Reform of Stabilization and Reconstruction Operations*, Stuart Bowen espoused the need for a central office with executive authority to oversee stabilization and reconstruction operations, a new U.S. Office for Contingency Operations (USOCO), as he defined it. Designed primarily to be a lead agency to coordinate the efforts of the DoD and State, USOCO would not have much of an organic capability to conduct nation-building operations.

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The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) represents the domestic equivalent to the proposed USOCO. DHS brings together the domestic agencies to improve homeland security and disaster response and coordinates the efforts of agencies at the federal, state, and local levels to a given end—effectively domestic nation building. However, a decade after its creation, the overall success of DHS remains in question. The Heritage Foundation recently concluded that DHS suffers from “too much triumphalism and not enough recognition of the pressing challenges in building the homeland security enterprise that the nation needs. The report does not acknowledge how overcentralization, complacency, and misguided politics have thwarted the efforts to address the challenges

laid out by the 9/11 Commission.”<sup>11</sup>

These words could be easily written a decade following USOCO’s implementation. USOCO would only work if Congress legislatively placed command of DoD and State resources directly under USOCO’s control, a move that both departments would ferociously fight and makes little sense. Such a relationship would likely prove untenable and caustic. Departments and agencies would engage in constant bickering about who will provide funding, training, personnel, logistics, etc. for a given operation, which would degrade the nation’s ability to advance national security interests abroad.

Without a legislative mandate, USOCO would merely be another level of bureaucracy with neither the authority nor the resources to carry out its mission. Both State and DoD would have no reason to acquiesce to the orders of USOCO, unless it was in the interest of the department, knowing that USOCO would lack the ability to compel them to do so. When a group already exists that is better suited to the task, implementing a new agency to coordinate nation building would not be in the best interest of U.S.

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The NSC must take the lead and be given the authority and responsibility to manage non-combat operations. The practice of appointing a single agency to lead operations, such as Defense in Iraq, does not work. A senior NSC official observed that “*lead agency* really means *sole agency*, as no one will follow the lead agency if its directions substantially differ

from their organizational equities.”<sup>12</sup> The NSC agencies work together in the field and at the regional commands toward the common objective and prevent a single agency from putting too heavy a Defense or State approach into practice. Contingency and operational plans developed at the interagency command level can be analyzed, refined, and approved by a similar group of individuals to ensure that national interests, not agency interests, are being advanced. The NSC can then provide a set of solutions and recommendations for presidential decision that better encapsulates a whole-of-government approach and wields all elements of national power.

However, this structure would not be without problems. Those with years of experience working closely with the NSC state that the “hierarchy of interagency committees complain that the system is ineffective, ‘byzantine,’ and stultifying.”<sup>13</sup> Reform of the NSC structure is tangentially related to the problem of broader interagency cooperation, but the archaic structure should be reformed to meet the needs of the twenty-first century in parallel with these recommendations. Such reform would require legislative action, given that many of the current organizational problems in the NSC stem from legislation.<sup>14</sup> Such a grand bargain for national security reform would be hard to accomplish, but would be worth the effort. Nevertheless, the NSC remains the best candidate for overseeing daily interagency operations when explicitly granted the authority by the President to do so.

### **Educating a Cadre of Interagency-Savvy Professionals**

Most analyses of interagency operations identify education, specifically outside the DoD, to be a significant hindrance to further integration. Indeed, “most federal agencies put little or no effort in education, preferring instead to send their professionals to shorter training

courses or to depend on mentoring and on-the-job training for skill acquisition.” Culturally, these agencies do not have the personnel depth and management systems to provide for significant graduate and professional education outside the agency without negatively impacting career paths and agency manning.”<sup>15</sup> The military has taken great steps to developing a well-educated joint force, overcoming many of the above obstacles in the process. Other government agencies should now be included in this effort.

The joint professional military education (JPME) system now required by law has greatly benefited the military. While the joint education system still lacks a true “jointness,” just like the rest of the Goldwater-Nichols Act, few would say that it has set the U.S. military back. Implementing a similar program within the civilian agencies of the government will help in passing on lessons learned, ensuring members have the required knowledge that agency heads believe necessary, and understanding the roles of the agency beyond their insular bureau or department. At the more senior levels, national security professional education should be standard across the government, military forces included. The National Defense University would likely be the best organization to undertake an interagency curriculum, likely a JPME Phase III, to train leaders to act as a joint, interagency force and employ all the tools of national power. Students from all branches of government, including the military, would then be required to attend this program prior to assuming a directorate-level position in an interagency command. Currently, there are few civilian agency students at defense schools, and rarely does a military officer rotate into an interagency assignment. Broadening the programs in place will ensure a cadre of national security professionals knowledgeable about each agency, their capabilities and resources, and the mistakes of the past. It also provides a low-pressure forum for officials from all agencies to interact and develop the camaraderie necessary to build unity of effort. Making these interagency assignments and professional education a required milestone for promotion would further signal the shift toward interagency, vice intra-agency, national security professionals.<sup>16</sup>

## **Conclusions**

Over the past half-century, the U.S. has undertaken more nation-building operations than traditional wars. Failures have ranged from minor, such as Haiti, to catastrophic, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, with a scant few successes, such as Greece. “Continuing to do business the way we have over the past eight years and expecting a different outcome is not efficient, or even rational.”<sup>17</sup> Congress should legislatively restructure the geographic CCMDs to force agency integration by creating a Chief of the Regional Mission position, incorporating agencies into the existing geographic CCMD structures, and establishing regional security councils. Additionally, Congress should strongly recommend to the President to designate the NSC as the accountable leader of non-combat operations abroad and expand and enhance the education system for national security professionals across the government. With a paucity of resources for the foreseeable future, the nation cannot afford to continue ad hoc interagency operations and expect even a modicum of success. Informal reform has not worked. It is time to force agencies to work together to advance national interests. **IAJ**

## Notes

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