

Demystifying *the Interagency Process and* Explaining *the Ambassador's Role*

by **Ronald E. Neumann**

"He'll sit here, and he'll say, 'Do this! Do that!' And nothing will happen. Poor Ike—it won't be a bit like the Army. He'll find it very frustrating."

— President Truman after Eisenhower was elected¹

This article is designed to be an introduction to the interagency process and its application in the field for those unfamiliar with the subject.²

Characteristics of the Process

One great obstacle to understanding the interagency process is the tendency, particularly in the U.S. military, to refer to “the interagency.” To be a fussy linguist for a moment, when “interagency” is used as an adjective to describe a “process,” for example, how paper is handled and decisions are made, it suggests to the unwary or uninformed that there is a thing called the interagency that can be identified as separate. There is no such thing. Grasping that is the beginning of understanding.

In fact, there is not one process but many—formal, informal, and personal. There are a great number of actors in this process, too many for any sort of effectiveness. Cabinet departments, agencies, divisions, and services will all want to play in any discussion that somehow touches on their interests. Everyone wants a hand on the steering wheel, and most want a foot on the break, which is to say they insist their group must concur in order for action to happen. Only a few drivers will be trying to use the gas pedal to get things done.

Membership in the interagency process is flexible depending on the issue at hand, so it cannot be depicted on an organizational chart. Sometimes those new to this area are surprised to discover

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that the interagency process also includes them. If you are in the U.S. government and your issue is part of an interagency decision, then you or, more accurately, your parent agency is part of the process.

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Because there are so many potentially involved in any interagency decision, the process tends to have certain characteristics. One characteristic is that the process is far better at reaching consensus than at resolving disputes. If everyone agrees, then the organizations can act. But if there is disagreement among cabinet departments, then no one is in charge or able to resolve a dispute unless the issue goes to the President. Since cabinet secretaries dislike referring their disputes to the President, they do not raise many issues and the issues simply linger.

Additionally, many arguments are not among cabinet agencies but within them. State Department organizations will argue with each other. The organizations within the Department of Defense as well as the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) have an enormous ability to fuss with each other and prevent reaching a decision on its own position even before it tries to coordinate with others.

Often one will hear calls to “put someone in charge,” and sometimes a central coordinator or “czar” will be appointed to move some issue along faster. This solution almost never works because such appointed czars are really only coordinators and lack control over agency budgets. Since they do not control the money, they cannot control the action. As a result, one is left with a process that is slow and made for

indecision unless the President personally drives an action. But presidents have many issues to worry about, and the number of interagency coordination or policy issues they can handle is very limited.

Terms and Definitions

Several terms come up in discussions about the interagency process; therefore, it is useful to define them. A meeting of the principal cabinet officials, often with a few others included, is called a National Security Council (NSC) meeting if the President is chairing it. A so called Principal’s Committee meeting is the same group without the President. Usually a Principal’s Committee will be chaired by the National Security Advisor.

The next rung down is the Deputy’s Committee (DC). Sometimes it is really the deputy secretaries of the cabinet departments who attend. Often the members, depending on the subject, will actually be at the undersecretary level, occasionally lower. The role of the DC is to shape issues for decision above, but it often fails to do so. The DC can ratify a consensus but not make a decision when there is disagreement. Hence DCs, which often require extensive paper preparation and staff time, frequently do not resolve to do more than have another meeting. The problem is not new. As the late Under Secretary of State Kantor said many years ago when briefing the staff on a just completed DC, “That meeting was as feckless as it was indecisive.”

Many proposals have been made to reform the NSC, particularly after the Iran-Contra scandal when the NSC ran illegal actions, and currently when it seems to overshadow State, Defense, and JCS. The problem with most proposals for reform legislation is that they ignore the fact that every President reshapes the NSC to suit his preference and, to some extent, that of his National Security Advisor. This is unlikely to change. However, one can be

fairly certain that the current NSC has been so criticized that the next president will change its organization. Whether that will make it better or just different is another question.

The Embassy's Central Role in Interagency Coordination

There are now more than thirty departments and agencies of the U.S. government operating overseas. The number of deployments, programs, and the sheer size of the U.S. government, plus the lack of a single decision maker below the President, make it essentially impossible to achieve real interagency coordination in Washington. For that reason the role of the embassy becomes key for interagency coordination abroad, and the U.S. ambassador has particular authority to play a central role.

Embassies should be understood as platforms hosting every civilian and many military representatives of the U.S. government in a particular country. Often the State Department contingent will be a minority of the staff. Somewhat oversimplified, the embassy's mission is to manage all aspects of policy. It is often said, sometimes somewhat dismissively, that State Department officers' main role is to "observe and report." This is true, but may miss the point that reporting is an active, not passive role in two senses. In one sense, reporting focuses not just on what is happening on the ground, but also on whether policies are working. If something affects policy success, including military operations, it is appropriate for embassy reporting. This can be a point of friction with some military officers who feel that it is their "lane." The counter argument, as I once discussed with General George Casey in Iraq, is that losing a war has policy significance. General Casey agreed. In another sense, embassy reporting is also a base and vehicle for recommending policy change, both fine tuning it and suggesting major alterations. This is different from just analyzing information for

policy makers. Reporting is part of what makes an embassy a player in the policy formulation process. It is a significant and historical role for diplomats.

One significant point about embassy work is that its mission never ends. Some individual tasks will be completed; however, managing relations with the host country and addressing the many multinational issues that the host nation may be involved in are a continuing

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operation. Embassy work has no defined end state because relations among states are ongoing. Military deploying to a particular country must understand that the embassy will be there before they arrive in country and will remain after they leave. That may well make the embassy's perspective on a given mission different from a deployed unit's perspective.

A small matter of language may be worth a note. Military briefing charts and slides often refer to a Foreign Service officer as the Department of State representative. Like their military counterparts, Foreign Service officers hold their commissions by act of Congress and represent a separate service. They are properly referred to as FSOs or embassy liaison officers or representatives. Although true, one would never see a United States Marine Corps liaison officer referred to as a United States Central Command representative on a briefing chart.

The Ambassador

The ambassador in his or her country of assignment has a particular importance in interagency coordination and the broadest grant of authority in the federal government. Whether

a career FSO or a political appointee, the ambassador represents the President and not the Department of State. Since the administration of President Eisenhower, a newly arrived ambassador receives a letter of instruction from the President that grants him or her authority over all U.S. government personnel, including military, not under authority of a combatant commander.

Note that the distinction is not military versus civilian, but in the chain of command. A defense attaché reporting to the Defense Intelligence Agency is under ambassadorial authority as is a temporary military mission sent by the JCS. Only those in a combatant commander's direct chain of command are outside ambassadorial

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authority. And just to add further confusion, some positions may be dual-hatted and fall into both. Thus the head of an office of military cooperation, responsible for overseeing military sales and training to a foreign nation, would fall under the ambassador's authority but might be dual-hatted by the regional commander as the senior defense representative at post. A certain amount of dexterity and common sense is required of anyone in this position of having multiple commanders.

It is this grant of authority and the ambassador's position of being the President's representative that form the basis for coordinating all aspects of U.S. government policy in his or her country of assignment. Not surprisingly, this is more complicated than the statement alone would suggest. Every agency and even many sections at an embassy must pay attention

to some higher headquarters, in addition to the ambassador. Electronic communications make such cross-cutting instructions easy to deliver and agencies still control their own budgets.

Nevertheless, a good ambassador has a strong hand to play. Ambassadors can expel someone from the country or deny entrance of U.S. government employees but not private U.S. citizens. The ambassador is authorized to see all instructions and communications of every section and agency in the embassy (with some CIA exceptions). While most ambassadors have neither the time nor the wish to read the vast flow of communications with a post, the authority to do so is a hedge against hidden programs.

But the real tool of the ambassador is the increased visibility over what happens in country compared to the vast bureaucracy of the federal government in Washington. However large the group of agencies and departments at post—collectively called the country team—they are smaller and more unified than their headquarters in Washington. Most embassies will have a weekly “country team meeting,” essentially a staff meeting of all agency heads and section chiefs. This is a chance for the ambassador to catch up on what everyone is doing and provide direction. Such meetings can be boring show-and-tell occasions or seminars on the major policies and priorities the ambassador and country team are pursuing. Whether they are boring or spirited will depend largely on the ambassador.

Relations with a Combatant Commander: How to Wage War While Keeping the Peace

The major exception to the ambassador's authority over U.S. government personnel is the separate authority of a combatant commander over all those in the chain of command. Thus wherever military personnel or units are present under such authority, there will be two chains of

command. This situation is frequently lamented, and many ideas have been offered to improve it, but absent legislation and for the foreseeable future, it is likely to remain unchanged.

Because there is no single individual in charge until one reaches the President, cooperation and coordination between the ambassador and the combatant commander and their staffs is absolutely essential. Ultimately, this becomes a function of personalities. However, understanding a number of points can help.

While authorities for decision are different, there are no separate “lanes” or areas where the other authority does not need information and, importantly, does not have a right to a particular point of view. In Afghanistan, I understood that General Karl Eikenberry (then Commanding General of Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan) was entitled to a point of view on areas such as the justice sector and economic development or governance, because if those areas were handled badly, the results would be felt directly in military operations. By the same logic, I was entitled to express views on the security sector, operational-level military operations, and even some tactical operations because they affected what I could do politically. Anyone who has dealt with the friction about night raids in Afghanistan will understand that the issue is simultaneously political and military. Whatever views prevail over a specific issue, the answer should never be that “this is a military (or civilian) matter and none of your business.”

In a situation where there are many deployed forces, it is important to interagency cooperation to note the differences in the lengths of the chain of command. While the military generally delegates more, its chain of command is frequently much longer than that of a civilian counterpart. For example, in a provincial reconstruction team (PRT) in Afghanistan, the PRT’s military commander would likely report

to a maneuver commander, who would report to a divisional or regional commander, who would report to the International Joint Command (IJC) at Bagram. The IJC reported to the

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commanding general of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), who in turn reported to NATO. Each level of command has a staff whose many tasks rarely include increasing the speed of passing information. By contrast, the FSO providing political advice in the PRT had a chain of command that ran only through one intermediate office before being passed to the ambassador or his deputy. If the ambassador reacted to some adverse development quickly, the commander of the ISAF could easily be surprised, and the PRT commander at the low end of the chain could get “burned” as a result. This becomes even more the case if the ambassador passes information to Washington in a way that produces fallout on the commanding general before he is aware of the issue. The answer is not to try to control information but to be aware of the differences and manage how information is used to enhance cooperation

Because there are so many situations and so few established procedures for resolving differences, the role of personalities is critical. Civilian and military officers must work to understand the view point of the other side. They must be flexible in trying to find pragmatic solutions over assertions of unilateral authority. And when they disagree, they still need to stay civil.

Cultural Differences

Getting along and reaching agreed solutions can be easier if each side understands a bit more about the culture of the other. A frequent criticism from the military is that civilians are too slow to get to action. The civilians respond that the military is determined to rush to failure. Each may be right in a given situation, but there are real reasons for the culture each brings to a discussion. In an oversimplified sense, a military officer is trained to identify a problem, solve it, and move on to the next task. Defining the desired end state is often critical to getting the solution right.

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The civilian background is frequently one of dealing with issues that have no end state. Economic development, encouraging democracy, or bilateral relations of the U.S. with another nation are all examples of things that continue indefinitely. There is no mission completed point. This background conditions civilians to see many problems as things to be managed rather than solved, such as trying to prevent relations from moving into conflict and looking more to incremental progress than to single solutions. Both approaches have value. There are times when the civilians really do need to get something decided. And there are times when forcing a decision may create more long-term difficulties than it is worth. Neither approach has a total monopoly on virtue.

A frequent problem, particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq, was the slow pace of getting enough civilians into the area. There

are many reasons for this, including Presidents who did not ask for resources and Congresses that did not provide them. Here I want only to note the small size of the State Department staff. Although it has expanded nearly 50 percent since 2006, it still numbers only 13,860 Americans of all ranks.³ Of these, only 8,039 are FSOs. They are deployed in 275 posts in 190 countries. Additionally, it is important to understand that aside from a small number in training, State personnel are fully deployed. There is no reserve that can be fielded in an emergency.

Despite several years of discussion, the idea of a deployable reserve in a Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization has led to only a small increase in planning staff available for short-term deployments. As of this writing, if there is again a need for a rapid civilian augmentation in a conflict or post-conflict situation, the probability is that the need will not be met.

Two other cultural differences are worthy of brief note. One is the use of planning and mission statements and the other is the post-Benghazi problem of security. Planning is a major part of military operations, and it is a very strong tool. It is closely allied with delegation in mission accomplishment. Neither is true of the State Department or, for that matter, most civilian organizations involved in the interagency process. Embassies and domestic State Department organizations are tiny by comparison with military staffs. There are very few people available for planning and not much takes place in a formal sense.

The culture is also different with respect to the use of planning. There is no civilian counterpart to the mission statement or, at least in theory, to the delegation given to military organizations to carry out a mission. The speed of communications, the Washington tendency to micromanagement, the pace of change, and the short chains of civilian command have combined to create a culture in which broad

goals too often give way to tactical direction from Washington. There are a great many things wrong with this, but it is important to learn how to work within the system as it is, rather than to spend too much time bemoaning the fact that it is not different.

The vehemence and length with which the investigation of Benghazi has gone on has had a paralyzing effect at senior levels in Washington. Fear of casualties has reached new heights and led to instructions to embassies to avoid risk. This is not a function of Foreign Service culture. In a recent survey, over half of active-duty State Department employees believed that post-Benghazi it is more difficult for employees to effectively engage overseas.⁴ There is some push-back, but until the political atmosphere calms, change will be difficult. This, too, may cause friction in interagency collaboration in the field when embassy officers are prevented by their security rules from leaving the embassy or a military base to do a job.

Conclusion

Virtually everything about interagency collaboration and process is frustrating in practice. Some are the inevitable result of being a large government. Many processes have been built up over time and are deeply embedded in agency and bureaucratic culture, both military and civilian. Various changes have been discussed, some for years. Until there is change, effective policy and bureaucratic action requires mastering the process as it is, just as successful military action has to deal with terrain as it is. Success in either requires study. This article may be a small starting point for those new to the issue. **IAJ**

NOTES

- 1 Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power, the Politics of Leadership*, Signet Books, 1964, p. 9.
- 2 The article is adapted from a lecture delivered to the U.S. Army's Captains Career Course at Fort Benning, GA, March 2, 2015.
- 3 Numbers as of January 2015.
- 4 "American Foreign Service Association News," *The Foreign Service Journal*, Vol. 92, No. 3, April 2015, p. 73.