

Musicians of Mars: Attaining Interagency Consensus on Perpetual War in Afghanistan

by Robert H. Gregory, Jr.

There is still a tendency in each separate unit... to be a one-handed puncher. By that I mean the rifleman wants to shoot, the tanker to charge, the artilleryman to fire.... That is not the way to win battles. If the band played a piece first with the piccolo, then with the brass horn, then with the clarinet, and then with the trumpet, there would be a hell of a lot of noise but no music. To get harmony in music, each instrument must support the others. To get harmony in battle, each weapon must support the other. Team play wins. You musicians of Mars... must come into the concert at the proper place and at the proper time.¹

—Major General George S. Patton, Address to 2nd Armored Division, July 8, 1941, Fort Benning, Georgia

I applied for the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) Interagency Fellowship Program while sitting on a cot in a tent at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, in October 2016. I had only a few hours of internet connectivity before going into “the box” to train for high-intensity combat against a mechanized enemy formation augmented by irregular forces. At the time I was a squadron executive officer in a unit preparing to deploy to eastern Afghanistan for an advisory mission. Five months later, while advising the Afghan National Army 203rd Corps G-3 in Gardez, I received notification that I would report to Washington, D.C., in the summer and start a fellowship assignment in the Office of Afghanistan Affairs, a.k.a. “the Afghanistan desk,” at the State Department. It seemed a perfect fit, given my fresh experience in Afghanistan.

The abrupt transition took me from a remote outpost at 7,000 feet in Afghanistan’s Hindu Kush Mountains to the center of Afghanistan strategy and policy deliberation in Washington. I departed Afghanistan in May 2017, stopping briefly at Bagram to be “read on” to sensitive compartmented

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information, a key prerequisite for starting the fellowship. Ironically, I learned far more about Afghanistan—from a foreign policy standpoint—while in Washington than when in the Hindu Kush, though my recent experience and context proved invaluable in the assignment.

Prior to reporting for duty at the State Department, I attended an introductory fellowship meeting at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, with 42 Army officers that were to be assigned to 21 partner agencies. In the meeting, a senior Army leader stressed that interagency fellows were “ambassadors for the U.S. Army.” This accompanied a gentle reminder that officers should not “go native” while at other agencies but should be “value added” and cultivate expertise to enable the Army’s capacity for interagency coordination in subsequent assignments. This was good guidance, but it did not fully capture the functional expectations of being in the program.

Upon arrival at the State Department, my office viewed me as a representative from the Department of Defense, not just the uniformed military services or Army. In practical terms, this meant that my boss expected me to quickly establish a network of contacts within the Office of the Secretary of Defense Policy Staff (OSD-P)—a largely civilian staff—and gain a deep understanding of their inner workings, deliberations, authorities, and decisions in relation to Afghanistan. In the spirit of fostering greater interagency coordination, my office further expected that I would do the same with the National Security Council (NSC), the Joint Staff, United States Central Command (CENTCOM), Joint Special Operations Command, NATO’s Resolute Support Headquarters in Afghanistan, and the intelligence community.

Fortunately, my experience in OSD-P as an intern during the summer of 2001 provided an early glimpse of interagency processes. My assignment for OSD-P included assessing what actions the U.S. government should take given

the Taliban’s harboring of Al Qaeda. At the time, there was a lack of consensus among the interagency on this matter. Ironically, seventeen years later, I found that the interagency still lacked consensus on the finer points, such as how to proceed with a peace process if the Taliban renounced terrorism and cut ties with terrorist groups. There was no endgame.²

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Given the size of the Department of Defense in relation to other departments of the executive branch, some fellowship positions entailed interagency coordination at the highest levels of government. This was particularly evident on the Afghanistan desk, which consisted of around a dozen desk officers divided into teams of four that focused on political-military, political, and economic matters. The desk also had one person covering reconciliation efforts. The fact that the U.S. had about 10,000 troops in Afghanistan and that the President previously tweeted about withdrawal on nine occasions only amplified the high-level context, frequency, and substance of interagency coordination.³

Country Desks at the State Department

The State Department expects country desk officers to be the foremost U.S. government subject matter experts on their assigned country and portfolio of issues. This requires knowing U.S. policy positions on country-related issues, why the United States holds these positions, and quickly developing recommendations for adjustments to policy when necessary. The work of a country desk officer at the State Department consists of: 1) serving as a resource to Washington principals, 2) advocating State’s position at interagency meetings, 3)

communicating with overseas U.S. diplomatic Posts, 4) communicating with other countries' embassies in Washington, and 5) supporting Washington visits and overseas trips.

Desk officers draft and clear papers to staff, inform, and guide Washington principals. These include information memos, actions memos (recommending a decision), meeting agendas, readouts of meetings, talking points, action request cables (typically a request for an Embassy to make an “ask” of the host nation or deliver a message), speeches, ghost-written emails, demarches, press points, Congressional testimony, non-papers (typically left behind in meetings but not “officially” attributable to the U.S. government), reports to Congress, and NSC papers and plans. When drafting any of these items, a desk officer must obtain “clearance” from other offices when mentioning issues that overlap with other portfolios. This gives the other office a chance to ensure that the paper adequately and accurately addresses their issues. Likewise, desk officers must “clear” papers from other offices. The volume of clearance requests is quite significant for the Afghanistan desk given that nearly 40 countries have troops in Afghanistan and the international community provides significant funding for security and development efforts. Papers for the NSC typically require interagency clearance. Some items, such as NATO speeches or joint ministerial statements, may even require international-level clearances.

The NSC facilitates interagency interaction in four meeting formats.

Desk officers provide staffing support for foreign policy discussions at every echelon, up to and including Presidential-level meetings. Within the State Department, the “7th floor” refers to the area where the Secretary, Deputies, and Under Secretaries sit and employees use the

phrase as shorthand to represent Department leadership. Desk officers must be able to quickly answer questions from their Assistant Secretary, the 7th floor, or White House staff on matters they cover. Papers written by desk officers must have the officer’s name, email address, office phone number, and mobile phone number listed on the “clearance page” at the end of any paper. This facilitates direct consultation with desk officers on time sensitive matters. The 7th Floor staff, a.k.a. “the Line,” often call directly to the drafter of a paper to clarify or confirm the paper’s subject matter. Calls usually came shortly before key meetings with foreign officials. The purpose of calls ranged from clarification on how to pronounce a name to confirmation of the rationale for asking another country to start or stop a particular action.

The 7th Floor also housed the State Department Operations Center (referred to as Ops), manned around the clock ever since the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in April 1961. Naturally, Ops made frequent calls to desk officers for country desks where the United States was at war. If the Line is unable to reach someone, Ops can get creative—a possibly apocryphal anecdote from the 1990s tells of them flashing a message on the jumbotron at a Redskins game to get in contact with a diplomat in attendance.⁴

The NSC and Interagency Policy Coordination at the State Department

The NSC facilitates interagency interaction in four meeting formats. At the lowest level, the NSC hosts sub-Policy Coordinating Committee (sub-PCCs) meetings. Desk officers typically attend sub-PCCs. The purpose of sub-PCCs is to get working-level consensus on how to layout decisions and agenda items for subsequent discussion and action by senior officials. At the next level, NSC Policy Coordinating Committee (PCCs) meetings, typically attended at the

Assistant Secretary level, encompass discussion of matters shaped during prior sub-PCC meeting threads. Desk officers prepare annotated agendas and talking points in support of PCCs and attend as note takers. Desk officers must provide the 7th floor with a readout of the PCC, cleared by the Assistant Secretary, the same day as the meeting. When appropriate, Deputies Committee meetings build on PCCs. To support these meetings, desk officers prepare briefing materials used by the Deputy Secretary or his or her designate. At the top of the interagency coordination process, the President chairs NSC Principals Committee meetings and the Secretary of State attends.

The State Department consists of regional and functional bureaus, each with Assistant Secretaries, Ambassadors-at-large, or Directors—each reporting through Under Secretaries to the Secretary of State. In 1947 George Kennan established State’s Policy Planning Staff (S/P) as its first director. In 1950, this office authored NSC-68, the famous strategy that militarized Cold War competition and guided American foreign policy for half a century.⁵ Secretary Tillerson reinvigorated S/P, empowering its small staff to anticipate, reappraise, and devise major policy decisions.⁶ Secretary Tillerson favored small group decision-making and believed that S/P should *develop foreign policy* while the regional bureaus should *execute foreign policy*. Naturally, regional bureaus had significant expertise and continued to provide direct input on major foreign policy decisions. This resulted in parallel policy development processes. S/P sought to implement the “Policy Planning Process,” abbreviated “P3,” which was shrouded in secrecy to prevent “leaks.” Two Army colonels had significant influence within S/P, and “P3” had similarities with the Army Design Methodology and the Military Decision Making Process. Ultimately, S/P focused on major foreign policy decisions with significant feedback and input from the regional bureaus.

The Afghanistan Desk and the Development of the South Asia Strategy

I arrived on the Afghanistan desk during a period of transition. Internally, the State Department was undergoing then-Secretary Tillerson’s “redesign” initiative, which entailed streamlining functions and eliminating certain “special envoy” positions with direct reporting to the Secretary. One such position was the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, or SRAP, established by Richard Holbrooke in 2009 and replicated in foreign ministries throughout the world thereafter. That summer, the Afghanistan and Pakistan desks folded back into the larger Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, led by a deputy in the absence of an Assistant Secretary. Externally, there were interagency deliberations on the Administration’s strategy for Afghanistan—the President rejected NSC Principals’ proposals on two previous occasions. The interagency (largely State, CIA, and DoD) was preparing a third pitch, this time with three options: a) an enduring regional approach with the goal of reconciliation with the Taliban, b) a privatization of the war effort, or c) withdrawal.⁷

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On Friday August 18, 2017, President Trump met with his national security team at Camp David to review the three Afghanistan strategy options and select a way ahead.⁸ The Afghanistan desk political-military team drafted points for Secretary Tillerson to use in the meeting. These points stressed that “Option A” was the best strategy because it demonstrated to the Taliban that they could not wait us out on the battlefield. Option A was “conditions-based”

and eliminated the “arbitrary timelines” of the Obama administration’s strategy. The Secretary of Defense and National Security Advisor also advocated the conditions-based approach. Over the weekend, the President tweeted: “Important day spent at Camp David with our very talented Generals and military leaders. Many decisions made, including on Afghanistan.”⁹

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Behind the scenes, starting after the meeting at Camp David, the State Department and NSC initiated a “rollout sequence” whereby the Vice President, Secretary of State, and other key administration officials made phone calls or in person engagements with foreign heads of state in accordance with a Microsoft Excel execution matrix that tracked backwards from “H-Hour,” the time of the President’s speech announcing the strategy. The private “rollout” had to be harmonized with the content of the President’s speech, and this required State Department coordination—via the NSC—with the President’s speechwriter. The “final version” of any speech is the one delivered, and the final version had to track closely with what we previewed with allies and partners.

The following Monday, on August 21, 2017 at 9:00 p.m., President Trump addressed the nation from Fort Myer, announcing the new strategy, saying: “Conditions on the ground, not arbitrary timetables, will guide our strategy from now on.”¹⁰ Trump acknowledged that the strategy was a departure from his earlier positions on Afghanistan: “My original instinct was to pull out, and historically I like following my instincts, but all of my life I heard that decisions are much different when you sit behind

the desk in the Oval Office.”¹¹

Prior to the speech, the Afghanistan desk transmitted an “action request” cable to “All Diplomatic and Consular Posts” (ALDAC) with talking points outlining the new strategy. Over the following weeks, we consolidated the private international responses to the ALDAC cable as reported by U.S. Posts. We grouped the responses into categories that enabled us to tailor subsequent diplomatic engagements and “asks” in relation to funding and troop requests. Many allies were concerned how the new strategy would impact NATO’s Combined Joint Statement of Requirements. Following the President’s public speech and receipt of the private talking points in the ALDAC, the international community eagerly awaited additional details regarding the strategy.

On October 3, 2017, Secretary Mattis testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee and further outlined the new strategy, revealing the previously classified acronym “R4+S,” which stood for “regionalize, realign, reinforce, reconcile, and sustain.”¹² “Regionalize” meant taking a comprehensive view to resolving the war that included India, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and China. “Realign” meant shifting advisory efforts below the Afghan National Army Corps headquarters level. “Reinforce” entailed sending 5,000 additional U.S. troops and asking allies for additional commitments as well. “Reconcile” involved bringing the Taliban to the negotiation table in an “Afghan-led, Afghan-owned” process. Lastly, “sustain” referred to the strategy being “politically, fiscally, and military sustainable” over the long term. It was a quiet acknowledgement that America’s all volunteer force—formed in the aftermath of Vietnam—could *sustain war indefinitely* with modest troop commitments and low casualties. But the President’s August 21, 2017 speech left a way out, cautioning, “Our patience is not unlimited.”¹³

Interagency Routines

Although foreign policy decision-making may occur in a small group setting, execution of foreign policy is often a highly public, fluid, and open affair. The legislative branch and news media have significant feedback mechanisms and points of influence on foreign policy. This is by design in a representative democracy. Interagency coordination is critical when dealing with Congress and the news media. No administration wants to look uncoordinated in these forums. In addition to the Afghanistan strategy review, our office sorted through new sanctions legislation, prepared for confirmation and budget hearings, drafted responses to media inquiries, dealt with hostage matters, arranged numerous trips to Kabul and Islamabad by senior officials, and coordinated requests for additional troops and funds from allies and partners.

Sanctions Against Russia and “Collusion”

On August 2, 2017 President Trump reluctantly signed the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) amid a domestic political climate where his detractors made daily accusations that campaign officials had colluded with Russia in the lead up to the elections.¹⁴ The bill had overwhelming bi-partisan support in Congress and its aim was to punish Russia for interference in the 2016 Presidential election. The Afghanistan desk navigated prior Russia sanctions during the Obama administration in 2014. This involved coordination with the Treasury Department for an annual issuance of licenses that allowed the Department of Defense to continue acquiring Russian-made spare parts for Afghanistan’s Russian-made helicopter fleet. Given this recurring licensing effort, the Afghanistan desk political-military team anticipated new complications from the 2017 sanctions.

In early August, shortly after CAATSA

legislation passed, the DoD’s lead contractor—Leidos— threatened to pull all its personnel and equipment out of Afghanistan if the DoD did not renew the maintenance contract for Mi-17s. Secretary Mattis discussed this issue with Secretary Tillerson and the task of determining how best to proceed trickled down the chain to the Afghanistan desk political-military section. I had a 48-hour suspense to solve the problem by way of a two-page memorandum and get it cleared through State and the interagency. I reached out to State colleagues in the Economic Bureau and Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation to help draft the memo. During the “clearance” process, lawyers insisted that the memo should explicitly state that the President

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had to delegate authority to the Secretary of State before the State Department could adjudicate whether certain transactions triggered the sanctions. It was theoretically possible to seek a Congressional waiver for the sanctions, but this required a joint resolution of Congress for approval and seemed unfeasible as a course of action given the domestic political climate.

On August 24, 2017 the U.S. Army renewed a \$787 million Leidos contract with the stipulation that Leidos not purchase Russian-made spare parts until the U.S. government determined whether such transactions would be subject to sanctions.¹⁵ This was only a temporary solution. Leidos could keep fixing Mi-17s with previously purchased parts, which would eventually run out. As a former squadron executive officer, I found it ironic that part of my work at the State Department entailed keeping track of the maintenance status of Mi-17s, by tail number, and getting updates from the Office of the Secretary of Defense Policy Staff on parts with long lead times, spare parts bench stock,

frequently used parts, and—most importantly—parts manufacturers and purchasers. In addition to DoD efforts to maintain Afghanistan’s helicopter fleet, the NATO Support and Procurement Agency played a role in the effort and our allies also posed questions about the sanctions. We continued pressing the NSC for an answer on whether the President would sign a delegation letter.

On September 29, 2017 the President signed a memo delegating authority to the Secretary of State, Secretary of Treasury, and the Director of National Intelligence to implement specific sections of CAATSA. This led to a further series of State-internal actions and decisions related to Mi-17 spare parts transactions as the Afghan Air Force transitioned to U.S.-made helicopters. The State Department published public guidance on CAATSA on its website and held a press briefing to explain how State would implement the sanctions.¹⁶

The Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell was an international, interagency, and non-governmental coordination mechanism.

Critics of the Trump administration argued that the President was not enforcing CAATSA as Congress intended. State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert highlighted State’s report to Congress on CAATSA implementation during a January 2018 press briefing, saying that it had deterred “several billion dollars in Russian defense acquisitions.”¹⁷ The news media zeroed in on this argument and emphasized that the legislation was about “countering,” not “detering,” and that no transactions had yet been sanctioned.¹⁸ Debates surrounding U.S. foreign policy towards Russia persisted in light of their interference in the 2016 Presidential election.

Hostage Affairs and Pakistan

The Afghanistan desk political-military section also covered hostage affairs. The Taliban-affiliated Haqqani network held several western hostages, including U.S. citizen Caitlin Coleman and her Canadian husband, Joshua Boyle, along with their three children born in captivity. The Haqqanis kidnapped the couple in October 2012 while they were backpacking in Ghazni Province in eastern Afghanistan. Other hostages included two American University professors, American Kevin King and Australian Timothy Weeks, kidnapped in Kabul in August 2016. Another American, Paul Overby, went missing in May 2014, though journalists did not reveal his identity until January 2017, at the request of his wife, Jane Larson.

The Afghanistan and Pakistan desks interfaced with the State Department’s Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs and the FBI’s Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell. On June 29, 2015, President Obama signed Executive Order 13698, forming Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs and the FBI’s Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell to coordinate “all instruments of national power” for the purpose of hostage recovery activities.¹⁹ The Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell held recurring meetings to synchronize efforts to bring home U.S. citizens. Part of these efforts entailed interfacing with foreign governments, such as Canada (the Boyle case) and Australia (the Weeks case), and even private companies, such as the one hired by American University in Kabul for post-recovery support. The Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell was an international, interagency, and non-governmental coordination mechanism. The Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell also facilitated meeting with the families of U.S. hostages in order to explain what the U.S. government was doing to bring their loved ones home safely. In this context, I met with Jane Larson on several occasions and she expressed a

keen interest in the new South Asia strategy and the Administration's position on hostage matters.

In September 2017, American intelligence officials had new and credible information on the whereabouts of the Coleman-Boyle family. Analysts located them in Northwest Pakistan. By mid-October, the highest levels of the U.S. government faced a critical decision point—attempt a unilateral military incursion into Pakistan from Afghanistan to rescue the hostages or share the intelligence with Pakistan and ask them to act. On the one hand, a military raid into Pakistan similar to the operation resulting in the death of Osama Bin Laden was risky and would humiliate and infuriate Pakistan. On the other hand, the Haqqanis might be tipped off if the United States shared intelligence with Pakistan on the hostages. Either option could spark execution of the hostages. The Administration opted for hard diplomacy backed by the threat of military action. David Hale, the U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan, delivered the message to Pakistan: “Resolve this, or the United States will.”²⁰

The Pakistani military reacted quickly, closed in on the captors, and rescued the hostages. In the aftermath, Pakistani authorities claimed that U.S. intelligence officials alerted the Pakistan military that the Coleman-Boyle family's captors had *crossed into Pakistan from Afghanistan*. This contradicted U.S. statements that the Haqqani network held the hostages *captive in Pakistan*.²¹ I participated in the interagency after action review in the months following the rescue and learned of the extraordinary challenges faced by compartmentalization of information and faulty planning assumptions. The plan for post-recovery support did not take into account the fact that the hostages had a vote in the process. Joshua Boyle preferred to take his family directly to Canada rather than board on a U.S. aircraft headed for a military base in Afghanistan. State Department consular officers in Islamabad took over post-recovery support when the Department

of Defense plan fell apart.

Tensions remained with Pakistan. On January 1, 2018, President Trump tweeted: The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies & deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools. They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more!”²² Following media speculation that the tweet had accelerated NSC interagency processes, NSC spokesperson Michael Anton stated: “This action is being taken after months of careful interagency review. Any suggestion to the contrary is false.”²³

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Interagency Routines and the Role of Congress in U.S. Foreign Policy

In addition to passing legislation, Congress influenced U.S. foreign policy by way of ratifying treaties, confirming nominations, and approving budgets. During my time on the Afghanistan desk, we prepared for four significant Congressional hearings. First, on September 12, 2017, John Bass, the Administration's nominee for U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. It was less than a month after the President announced the South Asia Strategy, and we anticipated that the Senate would use the hearing as a forum to seek greater clarity on our strategy in Afghanistan.

Next, on November 8, 2017, our senior bureau official, Alice Wells, and her United States Agency for International Development (USAID) counterpart, Greg Huger, testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee. The topic was “The President's Plan for Afghanistan and Pakistan: Objectives and Resources,” and the

discussion centered on USAID's fiscal year 2018 budget request for assistance to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Congress has the "power of the purse," and execution of foreign policy requires Congressional buy-in.

Later, in another display of interagency harmony, Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan and Assistant Secretary of Defense Randall Schriver testified jointly before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on February 6, 2018. The Afghanistan desk's political-military section coordinated with the OSD-P in preparation for the hearing and the topic was familiar—the Administration's strategy for Afghanistan. Prior to the various Congressional hearings, the desk drafted background papers covering issues we expected Congress to ask about and facilitated a "murder board" with hard questions in order to prepare for the testimonies. The desk also drafted the opening statements and ensured they could be read aloud in less than five minutes.

While this drama unfolded, the desk continued with its routines.

On Tuesday March 13, 2018, the President announced via Twitter that he was replacing Secretary Tillerson with Mike Pompeo, who was then Director of the CIA. Hours later, Steve Goldstein, Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, told the news media that Trump's action came as a surprise to Tillerson. Following these remarks, the White House immediately fired Goldstein too. State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert, a former *Fox News* correspondent, took on Goldstein's role in an acting capacity as the dust settled.

While this drama unfolded, the desk continued with its routines. That same day, the CENTCOM commander, General Joseph Votel stopped by the State Department for his recurring meeting with our senior bureau

official to coordinate on Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia, and other matters. I sat in as a note taker for the desk, a standard sort of duty as a political-military desk officer. The State Department coordinated on Afghanistan matters at multiple echelons within DoD. This included CENTCOM, Resolute Support headquarters, Joint Special Operations Command, the Joint Staff, and OSD-P. Different topics required coordination at different levels. At the top, OSD-P cautioned against State coordination at lower echelons, but it was often necessary for particular topics. For example, the main U.S. government interlocutor with Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, General Bajwa, was General Votel, and these interactions had to be synchronized with diplomatic interactions with Pakistan's civilian leadership.

On April 12, 2018, Secretary-designate Pompeo testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, seeking a confirmation vote. In order to prepare for Secretary Pompeo's confirmation hearing, we examined the 652 page Congressional record for Secretary Tillerson's January 11, 2017 confirmation hearing. Subsequent to the various hearings, the desk drafted answers to "Questions for the Record," or QFRs, sent by Congress following the in-person hearing. As a point of reference, Tillerson and Pompeo each had over 1,000 QFRs associated with their confirmation hearings. Naturally, the preponderance of questions involved regions where the U.S. military was forward-deployed. The Line had a twelve-hour time standard for answering QFRs, so this translated into *two hours to draft*, two hours to clear laterally with other offices, two hours to clear internally within the office, two hours for the staff of S/P, the Deputy Secretary, and Under Secretary for Political Affairs to clear, two hours for the "Front Office" or senior bureau leadership to clear, and two hours for Front Office staffers to package and submit to the Line. By this point, the desk was a well-oiled machine when it came

to answering questions and churning out papers on the South Asia strategy.

Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky typically submitted numerous QFRs on Afghanistan in various hearings and repeatedly called for the U.S. to end its involvement in Afghanistan. Senator Paul initially threatened to block Pompeo's confirmation, but later voted in support after receiving private "assurances" from the Administration on the Afghanistan strategy.²⁴ Of course, desk officers followed these developments closely and remained prepared to layout and assess all policy options for decision makers whenever needed. Our offices had stacks of files from previous Afghanistan strategy reviews to draw on. It is America's longest war—our files dated back to the era of floppy disks. With Secretary Pompeo confirmed by the Senate, we dusted off the old files in preparation for whatever might come.

More Routines: Trip Paper, Troop Requests, and Funding

Another routine aspect of work on the Afghanistan desk was preparation for overseas trips or visits by foreign officials in Washington. Secretary Tillerson, Deputy Secretary Sullivan, Ambassador Nikki Haley (U.S. Representative to the United Nations), and Vice President Mike Pence all visited Afghanistan within a span of several months in late 2017 and early 2018. On top of this, our senior bureau official, Alice Wells, visited Kabul, Islamabad, New Delhi, Tashkent, Dushanbe, Riyadh, Doha, Oslo, and Brussels on a recurring basis. Meanwhile, Afghan Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, Afghan National Security Advisor Hanif Atmar and other officials visited Washington on occasion and often sought meetings with the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and other Administration officials. The desk coordinated with Posts and drafted schedules, meeting agendas, talking points, speeches, information papers, and press guidance in support of the various trips and

visits. Country desks referred to this sort of staff work collectively as "trip paper." Trips frequently generated the requirement for as many as twenty papers. When senior foreign officials visited Washington, the desk also supported, but the volume of paper was typically less.

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Finally, while clearing papers from other country desks, we typically added two or three talking points for high level meetings with foreign officials to ask for additional troops or funds in support of our efforts in Afghanistan. To do this efficiently, we referred to three spreadsheets that everyone in the political-military team had posted in their offices. The first chart showed the number of troops each country contributed to the Resolute Support Mission, and this helped us draft a sentence along the lines of "thank for your contribution of X troops in Afghanistan." The second chart was a simplified version of NATO's Combined Joint Statement of Requirements that allowed us to write a sentence urging countries to fill critical required manning shortages. The third reference was a spreadsheet with columns that listed, by country, financial contributions to security and reconstruction efforts, past pledges, and new requests. There were two major internationally-managed security funds: 1) the Law and Order Trust Fund, managed by the United Nations Development Program, and 2) the Afghan National Army Trust Fund, managed by NATO. The UN Development Program fund focused on the Afghan Ministry of Interior while the NATO fund kept the Ministry of Defense afloat. The second and third spreadsheets enabled the State Department to raise "asks" during high

level meetings with foreign officials and stay in harmony with DoD requests made through separate channels.

Having a solid working relationship with [State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research] counterparts was critical for desk officers.

Lessons Learned

The interagency fellow on the desk from the previous cohort departed several months prior to my arrival, but he left behind detailed continuity files. My predecessor suggested connecting with think tanks and the academic community to leverage outside expertise on Afghanistan matters. The State Department was walking distance from George Washington University, Georgetown University, the United States Institute of Peace, the Brookings Institution, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies. These venues often had roundtable discussions that pertained to Afghanistan. My predecessor also provided a list of contacts that he consulted with on a weekly basis. I noticed that most of these worked in the intelligence community, and I quickly reached out. Coming from a U.S. Army cavalry organization, I was familiar with the important dynamic between intelligence and operations at the tactical level.

At the strategic level, embassy reporting shaped diplomatic engagements and gave insight on international reactions and potential reactions to U.S. actions. Behind the scenes, embassies often provided early warning of foreign efforts to undermine U.S. influence and objectives. In addition, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) provided independent analysis to inform

foreign policy decisions. INR also coordinated with the intelligence community to ensure that intelligence and counterintelligence activities supported and were informed by foreign policy. In this secondary role, INR often assessed the second and third order effects of other U.S. agencies' collection activities or operations. This entailed, for example, highlighting that collection activities at a particular location might have the unintended consequence of triggering suspicion by a neighboring nation that is not the target of the collection effort.

Having a solid working relationship with INR counterparts was critical for desk officers. At most, INR had no more than three to five analysts covering each country. INR made up for their small size by leveraging expertise throughout the entire intelligence community, and bringing in experts from other organizations. They sought out certain agencies on certain topics. For example, when it came to assessing if another country was providing weapons to the Taliban, they reached out to the Defense Intelligence Agency. If a concern involved signals intelligence, they would bring in someone from the National Security Agency. If we needed to know the status of ISIS-Khorasan, the U.S. military sent J2 representatives from the Joint Task Force in Bagram that was leading the fight against ISIS. INR also reached out to colleagues in allied intelligence agencies, and the British, Canadians, Germans, and French helped us with several important matters. Interagency coordination and collaboration was a powerful tool, particularly for organizations much smaller than the Department of Defense.

Country desks performed variations of a familiar process on a recurring basis. The workload increased when producing background papers and meeting agendas for major events such as trips abroad, visits to Washington, Congressional testimony, and NSC-led strategy reviews. Whenever there was a short-fuse deadline for a large volume of work, my office

leadership held a quick huddle to hash out who would write on each topic, our internal deadlines, our external deadlines, how we would coordinate with DoD and/or the Embassy (in one push or separately by topic), and how we would “clear” and batch papers. Version control, compilation, and getting clearances sometimes stalled the process, but the Afghanistan desk was repeatedly able to turn packages of up to twenty papers in a single work day while simultaneously clearing similar quantities of papers for other offices. Some events, such as preparing for the Secretary of State’s confirmation hearing, called for “all hands-on deck” to churn out information papers, talking points, or answers to QFRs. Fortunately, there was no PowerPoint. Plain English—with complete thoughts and sentences—sufficed.

After several iterations of familiar processes, I became comfortable with how the State Department operated and the importance of interagency coordination in the development and execution of foreign policy. The U.S. Army tackled repetitive processes with “battle drills” and “standard operating procedures,” and there were similarities at the State Department. Students at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College learned about interagency coordination and NSC processes in a classroom setting from instructors in the Department of Joint, Interagency, and Multinational Operations. The CGSC Interagency Fellowship magnified my understanding of interagency processes through “hands on” experience. Interagency fellows connected with members of their cohort in other agencies—this was often the quickest way to navigate the federal bureaucracy to find the correct person to consult with on a particular issue. Washington is the ideal location for interagency coordination given the centralization of federal agencies headquartered in the nation’s capital.

Ultimately, interagency coordination—and staff work in general—is about people and processes. Resolving issues if often entails

tracking down the right person and talking with them face-to-face. Building and maintaining personal relationships is sometimes the only way to tear through the bureaucracy of the U.S. government in order get things done. Interagency processes can be learned in the classroom but the relationships that grease these processes can only be developed in person. Working for another agency in the national capital region is an excellent opportunity for senior field grade officers to forge these professional bonds.

The U.S. Army’s initiative to stand up five Security Force and Assistance Brigades (SFABs) in the active component (and one in the National Guard) increased the demand for field grade officers across the force. As a result, the 2018 cohort of the CGSC Interagency Fellowship program had only 18 officers. SFABs are purpose-built for advising and will likely support the war effort in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future. Their secondary mission is to expand into combat brigades, should the need arise. From an institutional perspective, SFABs’ can generate combat power faster than tapping into the personnel “surge” capacity resident within the Army’s Trainees, Transients, Holdees and Students account. Interagency fellowship positions reside in the Trainees, Transients, Holdees and Students account, and these shrank as the Army prioritized manning the new SFABs.

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Conclusion

The CGSC Interagency Fellowship program must adapt by narrowing its focus. One way to do this is to align fellowship positions with the priorities of the National Security Strategy (NSS). Fellowship priorities should be reexamined on an annual basis since the NSS is

an annual document. In broad terms, having interagency fellowship positions at the State Department supports the December 2017 NSS' objective to ensure military power is "fully integrated with our allies and all of our instruments of power."²⁵ More specifically the latest NSS lists China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea as competitors. The State Department offices that cover these countries should continue to have fellowship positions unless there are already military officers assigned to these offices as part of a military detail or other exchange program.

The U.S. Army is headed down a path where its officer corps will be unfamiliar with interagency processes and grow disconnected from how things work in Washington at the highest levels of U.S. government decision-making. As the U.S. Army prioritizes "operational" assignments, other services, such as the U.S. Navy, will eagerly fill the void as they seek to expand interagency capacity. Ironically, I learned more about the development of military strategy and the inner workings of the Pentagon by observing and interacting with the Department of Defense from the perspective of an outsider than I did while serving in military units. Having an "outside" vantage point offers insights that are not possible while serving within an organization. The U.S. Army should take a measured approach when leaving interagency positions vacant.

State Department country desks for Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan—places where U.S. troops are in combat—offer interagency fellows a significant opportunity to shape and witness the course of U.S. foreign policy from behind the scenes. Great power competition occurs in periphery areas, just as the "Great Game" played out for the British Empire in the nineteenth century.²⁶ Although the NSS focuses less on terrorism and more on great power competition, it asserts that the U.S. will continue to promote peace and security in Afghanistan.

The Office of Afghanistan Affairs is at the forefront of managing great power competition and it offers a significant opportunity for high level interagency coordination, as outlined in this article. Within this office, there is currently a vacant position for a senior field grade Army officer—preferably with recent experience in Afghanistan—from a combat arms branch, the military intelligence branch, or the strategist functional area. A small group of career foreign service and civil service professionals are eager to welcome a military officer that can write on a deadline, give frank assessments, translate military jargon, and navigate Washington bureaucracy. Perhaps someone reading this article is interested. Mars' orchestra awaits. **IAJ**

For more information on U.S. Army Fellowships contact your branch manager or the CGSC Interagency Fellowship program manager at usarmy.leavenworth.tradoc.mbx.cgsc-interagency@mail.mil.

The views and opinions expressed in this article do not reflect official policy or the position of any agency of the U.S. government. Nothing in the contents should be construed as asserting U.S. government authentication or endorsement of the author's views.

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