

Back to the Future: *FEMA's Role in the Era of Strategic Competition*

by **Kevin Lawhon**

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In the 1985 cult classic, *Back to the Future*, Marty McFly goes back in time to 1955 and has an opportunity to change the future. In one scene, he leaves his friend, Doc Brown, a note, warning him of his imminent demise in 1985.¹ When McFly returns to the present day, he witnesses Doc Brown's attempted murder, but Brown survives because he was wearing a bullet-proof vest. Doc Brown read McFly's note and heeded his warning.

Our current security environment feels a lot like that movie. Russia is resurgent with visions of regional hegemony in Eastern Europe. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is led by a cult-of-personality with a plan to remake China socially, economically, and militarily. The names have changed from Stalin to Putin and from Mao to Xi, but it feels like we have been here before.² Like McFly, our National Security apparatus is working to harness the lessons of our past, with the aim of providing a better future.

The Defense Department is re-tooling for Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) against a near peer. The Army Brigade Combat Team is out as the unit of action. Echelons at Division and above are gaining key Anti-Access Area Denial (A2AD), Fires, Air Defense, Space, and Cyber and Electronic Warfare capabilities.³ Key enablers are being consolidated at the Division, akin to the Army of

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Excellence Force Structure of the late 1970s and 1980s.⁴ The Marine Corps is embracing its historic role in Distributed Maritime Operations, Contested Littoral Operations, and Expeditionary Advance Base Operations.⁵ The Army's capstone doctrine, *Field Manual 3-0, Operations* revives lost arts such as wet gap crossings, dispersion, denied communications, and contested deployment.⁶ These are only a few examples of DoD's modernization initiatives. What is old is new again. Just as the Department of Defense is evolving and changing to meet tomorrow's threats, so too are our partners at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

From Civil Defense to All Hazards Planning

FEMA was born during the last era of strategic competition, with a dual mandate for emergency management and civil defense. In fact, the Agency's original logo bears the Latin inscription "*Pace Ac Bello Merita*" or "Service in Peace and War." When President Carter established FEMA in 1979, federal authorities for disaster response and civil defense were spread piecemeal through the Federal government. Carter sought to consolidate those functions into a single agency. The civil defense portion of FEMA's mandate fell out of vogue during the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) negotiations. SALT "created a conflict between the desire to advance U.S. civil defense, and the desire to avoid upsetting the delicate strategic balance" with our Soviet competitors.⁷ The Reagan Administration attempted to re-invigorate Civil Defense through National Security Decision Directive 26, which sought to enhance strategic deterrence through a balance of strategic forces, capabilities, and Civil Defense.⁸ Congress stifled the administration's budget request supporting the implementation of the Civil Defense portion of the policy.

In response, FEMA gradually transitioned to an All-Hazards planning approach,

flexible enough to address, "the full range of emergencies from small, isolated events to the ultimate emergency—war. The transition to an All-Hazards approach unfolded over the next decade. The concept firmly took root after Hurricane Andrew, during the Clinton Administration, under FEMA Director James Lee Witt."⁹ As the Cold War waned and strategic competitors slumbered, natural hazards and domestic terrorism became focal points for FEMA planning. The United States' current threat environment layers natural hazards, terrorism, cyber threats, and Nation-State threats, necessitating a change in the way FEMA does business – and perhaps a re-examination of aspects of Civil Defense. As Dr. David McIntyre, Dean of the Bush School of Public Service remarked, "All-hazards is a great way to build firemen, but it is not necessarily a great way to prepare strategies."¹⁰ As the pendulum swings back towards strategic competition, FEMA is rising to the occasion.

Emerging Threats

Threats from our strategic competitors are becoming more credible and persistent. In addition, the frequency of natural disasters is increasing. FEMA is challenged to do more with less.¹¹ Three recent examples highlight FEMA's evolution in response to these challenges.¹² First, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 and the associated cyber and nuclear saber rattling served as a catalyst for introspection in the Emergency Management Community.¹³ Did it have the right policy and coordination mechanisms in place to address threats to the homeland from a Nation-State? Did it fully understand the vulnerabilities and interrelationships of physical and cyber infrastructure? In this case, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was tagged to serve as Lead Federal Agency (LFA) to coordinate domestic preparedness and response. Since its inception Post 9/11, DHS intentionally kept its

department level staff lean and empowered its subordinate agencies. As a result, DHS turned to FEMA for an organizational construct to exercise their role as LFA. FEMA formed the Unified Coordination Group (UCG) with one of its National Incident Management Assistance Teams (IMATs) as the core. IMATs consist of an experienced disaster response cadre and a Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO) who normally deploy to Stafford Act disasters to lead interagency efforts. The IMAT led interagency efforts to answer the questions above and coordinate a response in the event of escalation.¹⁴

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A second example of emerging threats presented itself in February of 2023, when several flying objects violating U.S. airspace were downed by U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM). This incident drove home the idea that “the homeland is not a sanctuary.”¹⁵ But it also revealed vulnerabilities in our decentralized response framework. FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell stated, “the decision of when and where it might land or be shot down involved our states, locals, and even Tribal Nations.”¹⁶ Did we have the same mechanisms to share intelligence across the federal interagency and down to the State and local level, in the same way the DoD is able to share intelligence from the Strategic to Tactical level? Did we have the right points of coordination and collaboration? Did we have a coherent way to address threats we hadn’t planned against? Did we have a way to share necessary information with the public?

Finally, the simultaneous occurrence of Super Typhoon Mawar and the Chinese sponsored *Volt Typhoon* cyber-attack in Guam in May of 2023

offer a preview into the future. Our competitors will continue to seek asymmetric opportunities, with activities that remain under the threshold of armed conflict, like natural hazards, to attack in our moments of vulnerability.¹⁷ Guam and the Central Marianas Islands are pivotal to the ability of the U.S. to project power in the Pacific. The Cyber community’s ability to defend against and FEMA’s ability to recover from threats to Guam directly impact the DoD’s ability to respond regionally. Do we really understand what comprises a complex catastrophe with national implications? Do we have the right systems in place to handle a complex catastrophe? Can we ensure “fort to port” power projection? Was FEMA postured to lead the interagency to respond to such a catastrophe with minimal Defense Support of Civil Authorities (DSCA)?

These three incidents represent a pendulum swing back towards FEMA’s civil defense roots. They are not neatly packed into the all-hazards planning model or the parameters of the Stafford Act. Yet FEMA has a role to play because these types of incidents have National Security implications and exceed the ability of State, Local, Tribal, and Territorial (SLTT) governments for response.

An Evolving FEMA

Russia’s aggression toward Ukraine isn’t the first incident in recent memory where FEMA has been asked to lead. The ebola crisis, the southwest border, and Operation Allies Welcome all represent Non-Stafford Act incidents where FEMA played a key role.¹⁸ As non-Stafford response requirements become more frequent, FEMA is standing up a Non-Stafford Act IMAT to ensure we have the right policy and coordination mechanisms in place to address threats to our homeland. Under Presidential Policy Directive #44, Enhancing Domestic Incident Response, an LFA other than FEMA can execute response to a domestic incident in a situation where they have the most statutory

authority to act.¹⁹ The challenge is that FEMA is uniquely built to operationalize Stafford Act Authorities, where other federal agencies (OFAs) are less equipped to do so. The Non-Stafford IMAT gives OFAs an experienced cadre of response operators from FEMA to assist them as they lead. One might think of the IMAT as an Immediate Response Force of the Interagency. It provides a rapidly deployable capability that can conduct initial triage and management of an incident until a purpose-built task force arrives.

FEMA also resurrected planning for threats perpetrated by nation-states. These planning efforts initiatives include Kinetic Strike planning, a Cyber Consequence Management Playbook, and a Nation State Desk Reference Guide. These efforts were informed by historical Cold War documents from the 1970s to the 1990s, including Major Emergency Action Guides (MEAGs), Federal Civil Emergency Action Guides, Federal Preparedness Circulars on continuity of government, and other civil defense documents. Many of these documents were retrieved from previous FEMA employees and the Library of Congress by the USNORTHCOM and FEMA Planning Staffs. MEAGs were essentially decision support templates that provided decision criteria, triggers, and timelines associated with catastrophic events to senior leaders. They were adapted for the contemporary threat environment, but many of the principles in the Cold-War era documents remain extant. These FEMA documents provide a sort of doctrinal template (DOCTEMP) to be used by Federal, State, Local, Tribal, and Territorial planners as they wrestle with contemporary threats beyond the All-Hazards framework.

FEMA also continues to build relationships with mission partners in USNORTHCOM, INDOPACOM, the National Guard Bureau (NGB), and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) to better understand the vulnerabilities and interrelationships of our physical and cyber infrastructure. According

to the Government Accountability Office, “the private sector owns the vast majority of the Nation’s critical infrastructure and key resources— roughly 85 percent.”²⁰ There is accepted recognition among FEMA, CISA, and NGB that our state and local governments have the best in-depth understanding of our critical infrastructure, the right relationships with privatized infrastructure owners, and are generally best postured to secure from and respond to threats. To better understand the public-private partnership landscape, FEMA and CISA facilitate and participate in Tabletop Exercises (TTX) such as those that take

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place annually during the NGB’s All Hazards Planning Conference. FEMA recognizes that one of the best hedges they have against risk in the critical infrastructure space is to bring stakeholders together in collaboration and proliferate best practices. For example, FEMA Deputy Administrator Erik Hooks visited his home state of North Carolina in early 2023 to better understand the inner workings of the North Carolina Joint Cybersecurity Task Force (JCTF). The JCTF integrates law enforcement, emergency management, NC National Guard cyber specialists, local government information technology (IT) strike teams, State IT/cyber specialists, and federal agencies. The JCTF leverages the idea of collective response authorities and capabilities across boundaries to combat a cyber threat that doesn’t respect political geography. FEMA is uniquely positioned to observe best practices like the JCTF and share them for common good.

Another critical best practice FEMA is working to share is intelligence and information sharing at echelon. FEMA established Emergency Support Function 14: Cross-Sector Business and Infrastructure as a part of the National Response Framework (NRF) in 2019. FEMA published *Information Sharing: A Guide to Private-Public Partnerships (P3)* in September 2023.²¹ This guide acknowledges the fact that our national economy and industrial base are vital to peer competition and our ability to respond to threats. In the same way that DoD shares intelligence from national to tactical, the P3 guide encourages collaboration and information sharing to reduce risk to private sector organizations vital to our economic interests.

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The attack on a Duke Energy sub-station in Moore, NC in December 2022 illustrates the importance of this type of collaboration.²² This particular sub-station serviced Moore County, which is a major population center near Fort Liberty, NC. Fort Liberty is known as a power project platform and houses much of the DoD's immediate response capability. The attack left over 35,000 citizens without power for several days. A preponderance of those citizens had some association to Fort Liberty. While the attack did not directly affect Fort Liberty, it impacted a significant number of military-affiliated families in a way that could have affected readiness of rapid response forces, had it been prolonged or compounded. The intent of the attacks remains a matter of investigation, but the outcome highlights a vulnerability that can be addressed through improved P3 cooperation.

In addition to information sharing efforts,

FEMA is working to improve the way it plans for unforeseeable events. Historically, FEMA builds All Hazards Plans (AHPs) at the Regional Level. AHPs are akin to a Combatant Command (CCMD) Campaign Plan (CCP). They provide a general outline for how the agency intends to implement the NRF within a specific geography. Incident specific details are left to the supporting annexes in an AHP, much the same way threat specific Contingency Plans (CONPLANs) or Operations Plans (OPLANs) are nested with a CCP. FEMA's AHP are robust and adaptable, but there is a growing awareness that it is impossible to develop all-encompassing plans for everything from natural hazards to pandemics to nation-state threats. This is especially true, given the capacity limitations of its planning cadre. Instead, FEMA developed an experienced core group of crisis action planners. These planners undergo additional training on planning methodologies, giving them the agility to plan rapidly "on the fly," allowing FEMA to rapidly adapt deliberate AHPs to the circumstances of the immediate crisis.

FEMA is also working to ensure the U.S. has the right systems in place to handle complex catastrophes. These incidents combine natural and manmade hazards or threats in a way that, "causes extraordinary levels of mass casualties, damage, or disruption severely affecting the population, environment, economy, public health, national morale, response efforts, or government functions."²³ We saw a glimpse of these types of incidents in the Summer of 2023, when Typhoon Mawar struck the island of Guam, followed closely by a Chinese state sponsored cyber-attack called Volt-Typhoon. The island was already crippled due to the storm. The cyber-attack further compromised the island. It is no secret that Guam plays a strategic role in U.S. power projection in the Indo-Pacific. A tandem cyber-attack and natural disaster, without a doubt, disrupted the US ability to respond regionally. FEMA is actively collaborating with the DoD

on the topic of Defense Critical Infrastructure (DCI) to better define lead and support roles in complex catastrophe scenarios. FEMA Senior Leaders have engaged on topics from strategic ports (Los Angeles, Pearl Harbor, Military Ocean Terminal Sunny Point, Military Ocean Terminal Concord), rail, and critical utilities to make sure DoD can continue to project power from “port-to-fort.” Likewise, FEMA sustains its relationship with USNORTHCOM for the purposes of early warning and ballistic missile defense and continues to invest in its relationship with INDOPACOM as the threat picture in that region evolves.

The Work Ahead

Joint Doctrine draws a very clear distinction between Homeland Defense (HD) and DSCA.²⁴ In practice, the line between HD and DSCA is blurry. This will be especially true in the circumstance of complex catastrophes. On America’s worst day, HD and DSCA will likely occur simultaneously and compete for the same resources, leading to a management of shortfalls, vice adjudication of available resources. The active component of our Armed Forces is the smallest it’s been since World War II, which means an increased reliance on National Guard and Reserve forces to fulfill force flow requirements for contingency and operations plans.²⁵ Those are the same forces we traditionally rely on to fulfill DSCA missions. The first area FEMA should invest effort is establishing a framework and process, in concert with the DoD and Interagency, to help leaders and policy makers have thoughtful conversations about the risks and tradeoffs associated with employing DoD forces for DSCA, HD, and other contingency operations. In absence of a framework, our leaders and policy makers will be, “left instead to make politically sensitive policy and organizational decisions on the fly.”²⁶

Those conversations become easier when FEMA is less reliant on the DoD for resources.

This is the second area where FEMA should invest effort. FEMA and State Emergency Management Agencies rely heavily on Active Duty and National Guard elements for response. During the COVID-19 pandemic, 89 percent of Mission Assignment obligated funds went to support DoD/U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Mission assignments.²⁷ From 2005 to 2014, 72 percent of the Disaster Relief Funds obligated toward mission assignments (\$6.1B) funded DoD efforts. Those mission assignments were focused on transportation, airlift and evacuation support, search and rescue, logistics, mass care and medical support, mass fatality management, and public works and engineering. These figures do not include NGB service members employed on State Active-Duty Status to meet the demands of non-Stafford emergencies.²⁸ The Secretary of Defense is the only cabinet level official that can decline a Mission Assignment from FEMA under the NRF. Such declinations are rare, but they pose significant risk to domestic consequence management if DoD is mobilized.²⁹

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Alternatives to DoD support exist, but DoD is a responsive alternative that comes with structure and Unity of Command, rather than the messier Unified Coordination associated with civil authorities working across echelons and jurisdictions. FEMA must work with SLTTs to develop alternatives to DoD and National Guard support for resilience in the event of a partial or full mobilization of DoD in response to crisis. During World War II and the Cold War, the Nation relied on volunteer organizations like the Civilian Defense Corps, Civil Air Patrol, and Ground Observer Corps to perform Civil Defense functions at home, while the DoD

focused abroad. These volunteer organizations were managed at the Federal level and had an established organizational structure and chain of command similar to the military. This provided the Unity of Command and effectiveness necessary to respond to a disaster, without taxing DoD resources.³⁰

FEMA should also further explore how it supports National mobilization and contested deployment.

Fortunately, there is a framework in place to identify and organize emergency management resources. The National Incident Management System (NIMS) includes the NRF and the Federal Interagency Operation Plans (FIOP). The NRF outlines the concept of Emergency Support Functions, or major lines of effort that need to be considered during the lifecycle of an event. FIOPs focus on the prevention, protection, mitigation, response, or recovery phases of Emergency Management. With the NRF, FEMA uses a concept called resource typing to help group together like capabilities for the purposes of emergency response.³¹ The DoD uses a similar model. The CH-47 Chinook and the CH-53 Sea Stallion are both described as a “rotary wing heavy lift” resource type, implying some level of like capability. In addition to resource typing, States and Territories use Emergency Management Assistance Compacts (EMAC) to complement federal disaster response resources.³² EMACs allow states and territories to pledge their internal resources to one another in times of crisis. FEMA and the emergency management community of practice should examine the DoD resources they call upon the most and look for alternative resource types in the civilian emergency management or private sector. As similar resources are identified, they should build those agreements into EMAC.

Those agreements don’t preclude access to DoD support, but they do provide decision makers and emergency managers a broader menu of options to choose from in times of resource scarcity.

FEMA should also further explore how it supports National mobilization and contested deployment. The *Pax Americana* gave us an opportunity to focus on domestic incident response, but FEMA has several latent authorities and responsibilities in the event of a National Security Emergency (NSE) as defined by Executive Order 12656. FEMA is responsible for coordinating with the Department of Defense for mutual civil-military support during national security emergencies. They are also for, “implementation of policies and programs for efficient mobilization of Federal, State, local, and private sector resources in response to national security emergencies.”³³ Homeland Security Policy Directive-5 (HSPD-5) gives the Secretary of Homeland Security responsibility to prevent, prepare, respond to, and recover from terrorist attacks, major disasters, and other national emergencies. FEMA functionally manages those authorities on behalf of the Secretary through the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and the NRF.³⁴

As threats get closer to our doorstep, it’s important that FEMA should consider revisions to the NRF and NIMS that acknowledge a “Reverse DSCA” scenario. In this scenario, DoD is the LFA, executing mobilization or Homeland Defense, and FEMA, as well as other Departments and Agencies, are in supporting roles. To make that scenario more tangible, we’ll consider two specific examples that might impact priority theaters. The Island of Oahu is a lynchpin for projecting U.S. power in the Indo-Pacific. If Pearl Harbor’s port facilities were rendered inoperable due to enemy attack, who would mobilize resources to recover the port or facilitate transition to the Port of Honolulu for civil-military co-use? It’s very likely that all assigned and apportioned DoD forces will be

mobilized and headed toward whatever threat destroyed Pearl Harbor in the first place. Likewise, Military Ocean Terminal Sunny Point (MOTSU) is “the nation’s largest ocean terminal for military munitions,” and the largest military port on the East Coast.³⁵ It is an understatement to say that MOTSU is key to mobilization in Europe. If the rail lines servicing MOTSU were destroyed by a threat originating from Europe, who bears responsibility for their restoration? Response and recovery for these two scenarios would have fallen to the Civil Defense Corps or similar organization in a bygone era. Based on the existing statutory authorities, FEMA is best suited to fill the void left in their absence.

Mark Twain is often credited with the observation that “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes.” We are a generation removed from the Cold War, and therefore it is tempting to see emerging national security threats as new and novel. But if we examine the longer arc of history, we will observe familiar patterns of behavior from our near peer competitors. It is important that we reflect on past precedent to decide how we will respond as a nation. History is like McFly’s note to us; if we pay attention, it might save us from an unnecessary fate in the future. There is reason to be optimistic about DoD and Interagency modernization and cooperation. We are adopting Cold War era concepts and adapting them as appropriate. But we should not waste time patting ourselves on the back. There is more work to be done as we prepare for the future. **IAJ**

Notes

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