

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY
NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

DO REGIONAL UNIFIED COMMANDERS HAVE TOO MUCH INFLUENCE IN
U.S. FOREIGN POLICY?

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The changing nature of the global environment and related potential revisions to the CINC and DoD organizational structure afford a timely opportunity to examine key aspects of the CINC mission. This paper will examine the thesis that the CINC organizations have become too influential in the foreign policy of the United States.

Status of U.S. Foreign Policy

U.S. military operations in Afghanistan resulting from the September 11th attacks, and the involvement of many foreign governments as both allies and potential enemies have once again emphasized the need for an effective and comprehensive foreign policy. The threat to U.S. interests both from attacks on U.S. soil and against U.S. embassies, corporations and individuals overseas, certainly provide impetus for organizing and implementing our foreign policy in the most effective manner.

Economic interdependence and its world leadership role compel U.S. involvement in every part of the world. German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer stated the problem of the U.S. and other Western countries diplomatically ignoring many countries, such as Afghanistan. “Once and for all we have to learn from our mistakes of the ‘90s. We no longer can accept these black holes of collapsed states or these situations of despair.”¹ Questions are being raised here and abroad about whether the reactive, sporadic and ever-shifting U.S. approach to foreign policy is itself a pressing problem.²

This is not to say that diplomatic and engagement efforts by State and DoD have been completely ineffective and thus the cause of the rise of terrorism against the U.S. It does imply, however, that improvements to the current system must be made. In supporting Secretary Rumsfeld’s effort to transform the military, DoD Comptroller Dov

¹ Jackson Diehl, “Flights of Foreign Policy,” The Washington Post, 26 Nov 01.

² Ibid.

Zakheim, speaking from a financial management viewpoint of foreign affairs, used a metaphor of a drunk looking for a door key under the light. "All you can do is expand the size of the light-think laterally, not just directly in front of you."³ Perhaps the light needs to be expanded to review the interrelated functions of military, economic, and political roles of the CINCs with a goal of strengthening its military effectiveness while leaving foreign relations to the designated diplomatic experts in that field.

Goldwater-Nichols Act

The Goldwater-Nichols Reorganization Act of 1986 was the most sweeping legislation related to DoD reform since the National Security Act established the Department in 1947. The purpose of Goldwater-Nichols was to improve U.S. warfighting capability by enhancing the legal authority of the Chairman of the Joint Staff and directing the President to establish unified and specified combatant commands to perform military missions.⁴ The Act also delineates a chain of command, running from the President to the Secretary of Defense to the CINCs. Nowhere does the text of this, or any subsequent law, provide CINCs a political or foreign affairs mission.

Obviously, no law can prescribe exactly what methods may be utilized to achieve the prescribed primary mission. Also, a national strategy which includes foreign engagement, through, among other things, military to military contacts is not being challenged as being part of a CINCs responsibilities. What must be questioned are the methods and extent of the military aspects of engagement and the potential detriment of uncoordinated efforts on the effectiveness of the U.S. foreign policy team.

³ Vernon Loeb, "Not Just Writing Checks for the Military," *The Washington Post*, 2 January 2002, A11.

⁴ Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, Public Law No. 99-433, Title II, Section 162.

Gordon Lederman describes in his book on Goldwater-Nichols, a pluralistic policymaking process of balanced tensions in the military and contends that Goldwater-Nichols was an attempt to bring DoD back towards a more centralized, geographical, and generalist model.⁵ The net effect of the Act on the organizational tensions may have swung the pendulum too far, however, as CINCs increasingly attempt to assert their influence.⁶ Goldwater-Nichols also bolstered the CINCs' influence on the budgetary processes. This major role may divert the CINCs' attention and staff capacity to budgetary issues from their primary responsibility, warfighting, which requires extensive knowledge of events and operations in their regions.⁷ The budgetary diversion is in addition to the overload of responsibilities faced during an actual military operation.

While many point to the CINC organization as a main contributor to the success of the Desert Storm campaign, critics point to the deficiencies of the strategic air plan which was developed in Washington D.C. outside direct CINC control and without official administration input on political objectives. Many other factors and viewpoints on this issue may have come into play, but the CINC's inability to internally handle all the aspects of a military campaign, its primary responsibility, should cause concern.⁸

Despite huge personnel and financial resources, CINCs are challenged to adequately prepare for all regional military contingencies. Extending the CINC mission into the foreign policy aspects of both military and non-military functions in the region seems dubious. Already that involvement may adversely impact military effectiveness and inadvertently contradict the coordinated foreign policy efforts of other agencies.

⁵ Gordon Lederman, Reorganizing the Joint Chiefs of Staff, The Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1999, 4.

⁶ Ibid, 110.

⁷ Ibid, 97.

CINC Engagement Activities

The extent and impact of CINC involvement in foreign affairs is extensive. The three-part article produced by Washington Post writer Dana Priest in September 2000 provides an excellent summary. The article detailed the extensive travels and meetings of four regional CINCs, described by the Post as “modern-day equivalents to the Roman Empire’s proconsuls—well-funded, semi-autonomous, unconventional centers of U.S. foreign policy...who have exerted more political influence abroad over the past three years than most civilian diplomats.”⁹

The Goldwater-Nichols Act was enacted during the Cold War when military requirements did not include the peacekeeping, operations other than war and nation-building missions that have increased over the past decade. These missions have expanded the diplomatic and political roles involving military actions and the CINCs have filled, what former Central Commander General Anthony Zinni and current Pacific Commander Admiral Dennis Blair deem, a political void.¹⁰ The Post article relates the four regional CINCs in place in early 2000 believed that U.S. relations abroad suffer because the Pentagon’s leadership foolishly shuns deep contact with the State Department and that the National Security Council is too small and ineffective to bring together competing bureaucracies.¹¹ What it doesn’t say is that perhaps the CINCs’ rising involvement is contributing to that lack of coordination.

Perhaps more alarming is the fact that the CINCs have used their power in ways that go well beyond the basic premise behind engagement. European Commander

⁸ Ibid., 99.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

General Wesley Clark in Bosnia and Kosovo “used the autonomy and resources that have devolved to CINCs to push NATO troops toward a nation-building role. He and his subordinates acknowledged that in Bosnia, much of what they did was off the books, the broadest interpretation of the military annexes to the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords.”¹²

General Zinni’s diplomatic missions, including his efforts involving U.S. policy towards Pakistan, has now landed him in an official diplomatic role at the behest of his friend, former General and current Secretary of State, Colin Powell. “You’ll see what pushing and prodding is when Tony Zinni gets on the ground,” Powell stated when announcing Zinni’s mission to Israel, as he hopes that Zinni’s blunt manner will succeed where traditional diplomacy failed.¹³ The unsuccessful nature of Zinni’s mission to date is not evidence that he is a poor diplomat. He follows a long line of former military men who have turned to diplomacy, however, his assignment alone is evidence of experience gained while in command of a region’s military operations, not its political affairs.

According to the Post, “the CINCs command so much respect in their theaters and in Washington that they often shape foreign relations strategy. But their philosophies on building alliances abroad, developed over long military careers, sometimes clash with civilian views.”¹⁴ This was the case with Admiral Blair’s insistence on resuming military to military contacts with Indonesia despite the U.S. Ambassador’s resistance.¹⁵

In addition to personal CINC involvement at the highest levels of foreign governments, CINCs also promote a strategy of engagement that involves assets provided

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Lee Hockstader and Thomas Ricks, “Mideast About to Meet an Unknown Quantity; for Retired Gen. Zinni, Cast in role of Soldier-Statesman, This Could Be a Strength or a Weakness,” The Washington Post, 25 November 2001, A28.

¹⁴ Priest, 30 September 2001, A1.

¹⁵ Ibid.

by DoD, State, Coast Guard. Not all efforts are properly coordinated with other agencies and are sometimes duplicative or counterproductive.

The essence of CINC engagement is contained in their Theater Engagement Plans, or TEPs. TEPs are designed to provide the CINCs with a strategy for supporting their respective Prioritized Regional Objectives and the planned sets of specific activities associated with the engagement effort in that theater for each fiscal year. The acknowledged shortfalls of TEPs and the engagement mission are documented through the Joint Staffs enlistment of a RAND Corporation study on how to improve TEPs.¹⁶ According to the study, CINCs attempted to formally recognize the engagement mission in the mid 1990s by defining engagement-related activities in a narrow peacetime operational context. “The limits on resource support for TEPs in the Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan are clear in that the engagement mission is not a basis for the assignment of forces. Engagement also has incomplete links to the broader components of the Joint Strategic Planning System and Planning Programming and Budgeting System processes, thereby resulting in an inability to compete for resources in the major decision forums.”¹⁷ RAND concluded that engagement was not properly integrated into the total CINC mission or budget or linked to the formal DoD decision making process.¹⁸ It also notes difficulties in coordinating assets provided by other federal agencies such as State and Justice Departments.¹⁹

The RAND report specifically acknowledges its intent is not to question the mission, but to improve the TEP. Some of its results, however, when examined from a

¹⁶ Roger Brown, Leslie Lewis, and John Schrader, Improving Support to CINC Theater Engagement Plans, Phase I, (Arlington, VA: RAND Documented Briefing, 2001).

¹⁷ Ibid, 12.

¹⁸ Ibid, 50.

broader perspective, do question the extent and viability of the engagement mission. The haphazard use of resources emphasizes the divide between the intent of Congress and civilian leadership and the actual implementation of the CINC mission.

Among the primary tools used by the CINC in accomplishing engagement plans are the CINC Initiative Fund, DoD appropriated funds which come directly to the CINC from the Chairman of the Joint Staff,²⁰ as well as security assistance funding, a State Department Foreign Operations appropriation. While Congressional oversight of the security assistance program, which includes the International Military and Education and Training (IMET) funding as well as the Foreign Military Sales program, is stringent, operations conducted under U.S. Code Title 10, which outlines DoD functions, are much more ambiguous to civilian scrutiny. There is no reliable accounting of the hundreds of millions of dollars the CINCs spend each year, and the Pentagon intentionally keeps its classified, piecemeal version of their budgets away from Congress.²¹

The separation of the two types of programs was emphasized in 1992 when Congress cut funding to Indonesia's IMET program. The Pacific Command worked around the restrictions by allowing U.S. special forces to train Indonesia's special forces through the Joint Combined Exchange Training Program funded by Title 10 funds.²² Similar efforts outside of Congressional legislative restrictions, if not within their intent, are professional military to military training exchanges conducted with countries such as Pakistan, which has been on IMET sanctions for several years.

¹⁹ Ibid, 17.

²⁰ U.S.C. Title 10, Section 166a.

²¹ Priest, 28 September 2001, A1.

²² Priest, 30 September 2001, A1.

The questionable oversight afforded CINC programs and the establishment of a military officer as the leading diplomat in many countries would seem contrary to the Constitutional ideal of civilian control of the military. While there are checks on a CINC's military power, there are few limitations on a CINC's personal contacts and foreign policy efforts made through various engagement tools unless specific direction is received through the National Command Authority. CINC's do retain a civilian Foreign Policy Advisor on their staffs, whose job includes "ensuring that military objectives are in harmony with U.S. political goals."²³ The importance of such coordination of policy is evident by the creation of such a position, however the degree of influence these civilian staff advisors have on four star generals and admirals is questionable.

Interagency Process – Who is running the show?

Perhaps the biggest problem associated with CINC engagement programs are the duplicative and counterproductive nature of various efforts funded by different agencies. Efforts to incorporate TEPs with State Department Mission Performance Plans have failed over the past several years as interagency coordination has been severely lacking in the engagement process. The turf-conscious Pentagon discourages the CINC's from direct contact with other agencies and the Clinton administration itself found it easier to win funding from a Republican-controlled Congress for foreign policy initiatives handled through the Pentagon rather than the State Department.²⁴

Joint Pub 1 states, "The formal U.S. interagency structure in foreign countries operates under the lead of the U.S. ambassador and the country team. The U.S. ambassador is ordinarily the lead agent for interagency operations abroad that are

²³ U.S. Pacific Command internet site, <http://www.pacom.mil/staff/FPA/mission.htm>.

²⁴ Priest, 28 September 2001.

essentially nonmilitary in nature but requires military participation...²⁵ While this sets forth official DoD policy, the reality or interpretation of actual engagement efforts often results in CINC leadership and decision making. The role of the ambassador and the State Department in particular as the official primary envoys of U.S. foreign policy seems to be usurped as the power of the CINCs grow. The increased prestige and heightened diplomatic orientation of the CINCs makes them rivals to the State Department.²⁶

As previously stated, security assistance funding comes from the State Department which distributes the funding according to Congressional approval. The utilization of this funding, however, is strongly influenced by the CINC who controls access to theaters and countries for security assistance teams as well as arranging for deployment of foreign students to the U.S. CINCs also play a large role as advocates for foreign military hardware and technology transfers.

As Congress continually reduces the State Department and civilian foreign aid budgets, the CINCs have enjoyed increased funding, unscrutinized by Congress.²⁷ The CINCs spend \$50M a year on four foreign study institutes for U.S. and foreign officials, with another \$20M a year for conferences that include non-military topics such as environmental degradation, medical care, mine clearance, piracy, drug trafficking and policing.²⁸ Such non-military missions are also funded through the Foreign Operations appropriation and similar efforts often lack the coordination necessary to utilize the relatively minimal State Department funding effectively. CINC schools, such as the Marshall Center in Germany, may provide valuable training to foreign officers but do not

²⁵ Joint Publication 1, "Joint Warfare of the Armed Forces of the United States," 14 November 2000, VI-4.

²⁶ Lederman, 97.

²⁷ Priest, 28 September 2001, A1.

²⁸ Ibid.

coordinate its training programs with any similar programs taught in U.S. schools and funded through security assistance.

“Diplomats in Foggy Bottom for years have wrestled with popular and political indifference to their priorities. Now, as congressional funding for overseas missions increasingly favors the Pentagon’s regional CINCs, ...semiautonomous generals and admirals abroad find themselves taking on tasks previously handled by civilians. They too are confronting the limits of American engagement and attention spans overseas.”²⁹ As 20 American ambassadors attested to The Washington Post’s series, no U.S. official other than General Zinni in the Central Command region spent more time trying to build relationships with nations where virtually none existed, including Seychelles or other favorite stops of the CINC.³⁰ Utilizing a uniformed commander may be respected by foreign governments traditionally dominated by the military, but is this the message we want to be sending to emerging or struggling democracies?

Where does this leave the State Department and its diplomatic role?

William Harrop, a former U.S. Ambassador and former Inspector General of the Department of State, offers that fundamental reforms are required to equip the U.S. diplomatic system for the challenges of the 21st century.³¹

First, he addresses the continued decline in the international affairs funding account which has fallen since 1992, making up just one percent of the proposed budget for 2001.³² He agrees with the aforementioned belief that the evolution of a world towards greater interdependence requires greater diplomatic efforts, which coincides with

²⁹ Dana Priest, “An Engagement in 10 Time Zones,” *The Washington Post*, 29 September 2001, A1.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ William Harrop, “The Infrastructure of American Diplomacy,” in *Taking Charge*, RAND, Report MR-1306/1-RC, 2000, 284.

the CINC belief that it must fill a diplomatic void. It would seem apparent, however, that a diplomatic void be filled by a diplomat.

Harrop believes decentralization is beneficial by placing control of a country with professionals stationed in that country. “Look to ambassadors to coordinate the programs of the various agency representatives under their authority, and to set priorities among American purposes ... require ambassadors to act as the president³³ representative and chairperson of an interagency team, not just as officials of the State Department.” He concludes with a call for the NSC to exert interagency coordination and to strengthen the link between the departments of Defense and State, especially between ambassadors and their staffs and regional military commanders in chief and their staffs.³⁴ These ideas, especially the need for additional financial resources, are the consensus among foreign policy workers, including State Department personnel here at the National War College.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the U.S. needs to look at its foreign policy apparatus and institute corrections. If the State Department and others involved in foreign affairs policymaking are not resourced or allowed to do the jobs for which they were trained, the growing need for diplomatic solutions will fall upon CINCs and their staffs. This is primarily through default as they are more readily available, despite the fact that their mission, training, or objectives do not include the political viewpoints necessary to conduct foreign policy.

The increase of CINCs participation in foreign policy may not have been intentional attempts to usurp the State Department’s mission, but in reality the CINCs have become extremely powerful and influential in that role. The Constitution of the

³² Ibid, 285.

³³ Ibid., 291.

United States provides for the civilian control of the military and neither it nor the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 states any specific role for the U.S. military in the area of foreign policy. With only the Secretary of Defense between themselves and the President in the national command structure, CINCs have enormous power and resources to conduct foreign operations as they see fit. Since ambassadors are assigned by country, vice region, it is difficult for any single ambassador to control the coordinated activities of the CINC or even specific operations within their country given the increased status of CINCs among foreign governments. The uncoordinated efforts involved in the engagement process and the diversion of CINC attention from military operations to budgetary and foreign affairs issues indicate a need for reform.

While transformation issues are being discussed, an alternative to the current Unified Command Plan, according to senior defense officials, “would be to permanently move command of the war to a top officer in Washington who would seek to oversee military activity in various regions and coordinate it with efforts of the State Department, the Justice Department and even the Immigration and Naturalization Service.”³⁵

This example, or similar alternative plans, while specifically intended to address the warfighting function of the CINCs may provide the impetus to also address a foreign affairs problem. The administration and Congress must consider supplementing CINCs with greater political support by empowering State Department officials by assigning regional Assistant Secretaries of State in the field, increasing funding for international affairs, and refocusing CINC efforts on its intended mission – to protect the United States and its military interests abroad.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Thomas Ricks, “Military Overhaul Considered,” [The Washington Post](#), 11 October 2001, 1.

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