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## A Short Response to AF-PAK and South Asia Hands

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In his article, *Should AF/PAK Hands be South Asia Hands?*, Lieutenant Munson makes some very good points. I offer a few observations and comments to build his discussion.

First, it has taken us this long to develop the AF-PAK Hands program after we have been at war for 8 plus years. We are clearly learning and adapting but what about *anticipating* (as Cohen and Gooch remind us in *Military Misfortune*)? Clearly we have to win the war we are in and I think AF-PAK Hands can make an important *long term* contribution (long term because it takes years to develop the language and cultural expertise to have the kind of understanding of the politics and culture necessary to be able to effectively advise military leaders and policy makers). I think we should also adapt the SOF truth for a broader understanding – “Competent SOF cannot be created after emergencies occur.” The same holds true for area expertise – you cannot wait for the crisis to occur to begin developing the area expertise necessary to deal with the emergency or the war. One of the important lessons that has been learned since 9-11 is how important cultural, political, and economic understanding and expertise is to political-military operations in the Era of Persistent Conflict.

Given the above, while we applaud and support the AF-PAK hands program (I agree it is the right thing to do – but better late than never), we should be asking ourselves what other “hands” program should there be? Should we have a “Korea Hands” as the outcome to the “Korea Problem” is going to bring challenges as complex as we have ever seen and understanding North Korean culture is going to be critical to dealing with the challenges there. Should we have a “China Hands” program (though perhaps a little different than the China Hands we had in the pre-WWII Marines and in the State Department) anticipating China’s rise to a near peer competitor and at least a regional hegemon? Should we have an “Africa Hands” program as we anticipate the future challenges on that continent? Of course we could go on and call for “Hands” programs around the world. But I think this is an important question. Where should we invest in the language and cultural education and experience of our people now to have the requisite area expertise available when emergencies occur? And then after we have seen the future in our crystal balls how do we manage all these area experts so that they sustain and continue to enhance their expertise and then *be in a position to influence* the planning (and hopefully the policy making) when crises emerge? Sure we have the Foreign Area Officer program but these are a relative handful of personnel and they often develop regional experience but not always detailed country expertise.

This is the catch-22 – how do we develop and maintain this expertise within our relatively small military while still being able to do all the things the military is required to do and that a military person must to advance in his career? (We remain an “up and out” force so if a military member does not meet all the personnel qualifications he/she will not be eligible for promotion and then is required to leave the service after a set number of years – despite the expertise he/she may possess). And since we can anticipate so many challenges around the world how do you prioritize the investments in developing this expertise? Reminds us of the old adage – “he who defends everything, defends nothing.”

My second comment has to do with gaps and seams and regional organization. Lieutenant Munson rightly identifies a weakness in our Geographic Combatant Command (GCC) organization, specifically that Pakistan lies in the CENTCOM AOR and India (and Bangladesh) lies in the PACOM AOR. He argues that we should change AF-PAK Hands to South Asia Hands and look at the interconnectedness of the problem (e.g., taking a more holistic approach). What he does not state specifically but what I infer, is that he is de facto calling for is a South Asia Command that would carve out Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh into a new GCC – or the “South Asia Command” (SACOM). We could talk here about the efficiency and effectiveness of our entire combatant command structure because by definition we create gaps and seams and in some situations cannot take an effective holistic approach to problems because we have created artificial boundaries that are bureaucratically hard to penetrate. (And this leads to the question why have we lumped Asian countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan into CENTCOM which causes some of us to mistakenly believe that Afghanistan and Pakistan are in the Middle East?) The real question is how do you overcome the gaps and seams or how do you prevent gaps and seams altogether? (e.g., by not having a GCC structure??) But I will leave these to others to ponder.

The third and final point results from the two above. If the creation of a broader South Asia Hands program is what is necessary to take a holistic approach to the problem and the South Asia hands represents a “GCC like” focus on a region then perhaps we should ask the question if the GCC should not be the “owner” of “hands programs”. Should not the GCC be the repositories for the area experts that the services should produce? If we are going to develop true area experts from across the services then the place for continued assignments should be overseas in specific countries with rotations to the GCC in a kind of a “Hands Program”.

If the AF-PAK Hands proves to be of value, and I think it will be over time, then we do need to consider using it as a model for all the GCCs to develop “Hands Programs” for countries in their regions where we believe we will need future expertise. Clearly AFRICOM would benefit from having Africa Hands as would PACOM with “Korea Hands” and “China Hands”. But this could also be cost prohibitive from the standpoint of developing separate areas of expertise by military personnel that would be a career long focus on specific regions. There will be a large personnel bill of junior personnel who have to be identified early on their careers and spaces would have to be created along with a large training or “float” account. Many junior personnel would never be able to gain the operational experience of military operations because their focus would be on language and culture, etc. The only way this could be overcome would be through assignment to units that have a regional focus but those are very few in number in today’s military. This would require significant changes in the personnel management system to encourage development of

this expertise and then to manage such expertise over the long term. But given all the positives and negatives I think we should ask ourselves as long as we have GCCs maybe they should be the ones that possess this expertise and then can employ it to support policy making, prior planning, and operations when required. I would think that this is something that we should consider as part of our National Military Strategy as a way to effectively and efficiently support our National Security Strategy.

One last point. To take it a step further, should not the GCC's be those "Hands" for their region? Should the GCC's be the long term experts with personnel having repetitive assignments with the opportunity to develop that expertise and thus be those "Hands" within their region? Again, just a few questions for us to ponder.

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