

Time to Rethink Our Global Command Structure?

David Passage

The beginning of a new Administration, particularly one which offers the prospect of significant departures from recent policies, offers an opportunity to re-think existing institutional structures and practices. This is particularly so, coming nearly two decades after the end of the Cold War, the Fall of the Wall, the triumph of the Eagle over the Bear, and the incorporation of many former opponents [Warsaw Pact members] into the West's principal security alliance, NATO.

Added to this mix is President Obama's excruciating need to achieve economies clear across the US Government's operating spectrum to finance domestic economic recovery and our ongoing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Defense spending is the largest single non-entitlement element in the USG budget. It will be under incredible pressure over the next several years. We need to re-equip our armed forces with hundreds of billions of dollars worth of materiel and munitions to replace what has been expended in those two conflicts. Vehicles of all types are worn to the point of barely being worth repatriating to the US; we are flying the wings off our aircraft, the rotors off our helicopters, and are using much of the remainder of our military equipment to within inches of its programmed life. And we have yet to calculate the ultimate cost of restoring our capacity to deal with other contingencies waiting out there in the high grass to rise up and bite us and our friends and allies.

And as every reader of *SWJ* knows, the way to sensibly wring economies out of existing budgets and institutional structures is not by across-the-board cuts: it's to re-examine and terminate – ax – whole programs.

EUCOM, PACOM and CENTCOM have clear, well-defined and unquestioned war-fighting missions as well as robust force structures to support them. SOUTHCOM and the newly-formed AFRICOM do not and should not. Might this not be a good time to take a new look at our existing global military command structure?

SOUTHCOM

SOUTHCOM is a holdover from an earlier era in which it played a much more active role in the conduct of our relations with Latin America than it does today or is likely to in the future. During the first four decades of its existence, SOUTHCOM supported our national interest in preventing Soviet-sponsored takeovers in the Western Hemisphere such as had occurred in Eastern Europe following the defeat of Hitler. To be sure, the threat was real: the US received a serious wake-up call in May 1948 when Soviet-backed communist insurgents briefly seized control in Colombia (among other things, trapping Secretary of State George Marshall, who was

in Bogota for an OAS ministerial meeting). The coup was undone within days, but it fueled the conviction that Washington needed to strengthen Latin American militaries to deal with internal subversion or potential outside intervention.

“And the rest is history,” as the saying goes. Over the next three decades, US-supported military regimes toppled elected civilian governments in virtually every country in Latin America – Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Panama, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala – excepting only Mexico and Costa Rica (which abolished its own armed forces at least partly out of suspicion that they, too, might ultimately threaten a democratically-elected civilian government).

And although US policy began changing during the 1970s, US economic development aid to Latin America actually declined during the 1980s, 1990s and early part of the 21st century. But our military assistance grew – first, to counter growing narcotics trafficking from Andean countries, and then, particularly after 9/11, to counter the growing threat of terrorism throughout the hemisphere.

But here’s the question for President Obama’s national security team: is a military response the right (let alone the best or most cost-efficient) way to deal with narco-trafficking or terrorism? For those are now the primary rationales for a four-star military command with Latin America as its sole area of responsibility. To their credit, the two most recent SOUTHCOM commanders, Gen. Bantz Craddock and Adm. James Stavridis, have acknowledged the greater role non-military USG agencies need to play in SOUTHCOM’s AOR and have sought to re-shape SOUTHCOM’s mission to include more interagency components and participation. But the simple fact is that SOUTHCOM’s is primarily a training mission – whether for CI, CN or CT, and humanitarian assistance after hurricanes come ashore, volcanoes blow their stacks, or floods wipe out roads and bridges, schools and hospitals. This does not require a four-star military command. Relying on US military forces for what should otherwise be nation-building missions also sends the wrong political signal: it suggests that the US - which would never turn to its military for what are essentially law enforcement missions inside the US - believes other countries should, inside their own national borders. Is that what we mean to convey?

There are doubtless some who might argue that while the region seems steady enough for the moment, one never knows what might be needed to deal with a Hugo Chavez run rampant, or an Evo Morales in Bolivia, a Rafael Correa in Ecuador, a reversal of fortunes by some future Colombian government against the FARC or a Peruvian government against the MRTA or Sendero Luminoso. But the days when an American government used US troops to intervene as we have in the past on behalf of perceived US national interests (most of which, historically, appeared to have been for the benefit of a small number of US companies operating in that region) are behind us. There is nothing the US can use armed force against a Hugo Chavez for that would not uncontestably and demonstrably make matters worse – and not just in terms of the bilateral US-VE relationship. The likelihood of another “Just Cause,” “Urgent Fury,” or “Uphold Democracy” is pretty slim – and a standing 4-star geographic command for Latin America is much more likely to psychologically and politically exacerbate our problems in that region than ameliorate them.

AFRICOM

The incentive to create AFRICOM came from several sources. First, the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, incorporation of many former members of the Warsaw Pact into NATO, building a new relationship with Russia and elements of the Confederation of Independent States, and turmoil in the Balkans and trans-Caucasus, required EUCOM's full-time attention. Dealing with the two-thirds of Africa not in CENTCOM's AOR was a serious distraction, leading several EUCOM commanders (including, notably, President Obama's new national security adviser, Gen(R) James L. Jones) to recommend creation of a stand-alone command with exclusive responsibility for Africa. Similarly, CENTCOM, faced with the requirement to prosecute wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan, found its responsibilities in East Africa and the Horn just as distracting. In addition, there was a degree of pressure from Congress: as a State Dept and NSC official dealing with Africa during the late 1980s, I heard, on several occasions, members of the Congressional Black Caucus say "the US simply doesn't care enough about Africa" to give that continent what every other geographical part of the world had – its own dedicated US military command. And finally, there was an evident growing inability of African governments to maintain law and order within their own borders, leading to fears about failed or failing states whose declines could ultimately threaten US national interests and those of our principal friends and allies. Problems in the Niger River delta, Darfur, the Horn, Central Africa and elsewhere, fueled a growing consensus that the US needed to do more to strengthen African governance and development – and might ultimately even have to use military force to protect national or humanitarian interests there.

But while there are obvious nation-building and humanitarian assistance needs in Africa, few stood up to seriously question whether military assistance was the right response. The State Department signally failed to press Congress to consider better approaches to address Africa's needs such as strengthening the US Agency for International Development and providing it with adequate resources.

Thus, AFRICOM was stood up on October 1, 2008 despite strong and publicly-expressed objections from many African leaders, the clear unwillingness of virtually all African countries to host AFRICOM on their soil, the much greater cost of using US military personnel for nation-building operations, and notwithstanding the obvious political and psychological drawbacks of tasking uniformed personnel with executing what should be civilian development activities.

Yes, there are enormous development needs in Africa; and yes, the US has significantly neglected that continent; and yes, the US military has people (many of them in the Reserves) who can accomplish virtually anything that needs to be done in the nation-building repertory. That's not the issue! I yield to no one in my respect for what the US military can do, and as a US Ambassador and Chief of Mission/Charge d' Affaires, I've on numerous occasions turned to my regional combatant commander for help in defending and advancing US national interests in the countries and regions I was serving – including activities which might otherwise have been performed by USAID and NGO/PVO civilians.

The issue is whether uniformed military personnel *should* be used for that purpose. Does the US really want to project a military face toward a continent that already suffers from a surfeit of

them? Do we really believe economic development and internal security structures (e.g., civilian and civilian-led police forces) should be built with help from the US military? Is that what we want *Africans* to think we believe? If so, shame on us!

We don't permit our military to train our own police and law enforcement personnel and do economic development work in the US. Why do we think this should be done by our military in Africa? (Yes, I know the role the US Army Corps of Engineers played in building our roads and waterways in the early years of our republic, and of the National Guard in protecting us during domestic emergencies – but that's not what we're talking about here: we're talking about nation-building, which should primarily be the responsibility of civilian institutions like USAID and PVOs and NGOs.)

Rethinking the US Global Command Structure

To repeat, EUCOM, PACOM and CENTCOM have clearly-defined and unquestioned war-fighting missions and force structures to support them. SOUTHCOM and AFRICOM do not and should not. Military training programs and humanitarian assistance missions do not/not require four-star commands with exclusive responsibilities for those two AORs. In a world of unconstrained resources, having them might be nice (although having them also sends political signals that increasingly handicap our ability to secure our overall national interests and objectives in those two regions).

If one did not want to burden EUCOM with the two-thirds of Africa for which it was once responsible, or CENTCOM with the remaining third, or PACOM with the islands off Africa's east coast, or NORTHCOM with the remainder of the western hemisphere – one might create a new command whose principal function was training and humanitarian assistance. Keep the US Army's regionally-focused Special Forces groups dedicated to Africa and Latin America and all the services' FAO programs, but ax the two four-star stand-alone commands for those regions. SOUTHCOM is a holdover from an earlier era we have now put behind us; AFRICOM should never have been created in the first place.

Secretary Gates is going to have to wring every last conceivable efficiency and economy out of the US defense budget to help pay for ongoing activities in Iraq and Afghanistan and programs in countries like Colombia and elsewhere. President Obama is going to expect him to review all US defense activities in order to achieve these economies. The US needs to get back to the point where it turns to its military to perform tasks which only a trained, professional, military can do. The US armed forces have amply demonstrated, to everyone's satisfaction, that they can do this in a way no other country's military force can. But the US military should not be asked to do all the other things the US might want or need to do to advance our national interests in the world in which we live. Economic development and nation-building should be done by civilians, properly trained and properly resourced. We should not ask our military forces to do them just because they can and just because they will. It's time to return to basics – and time to rationalize our existing global military command structure. Both geopolitically and geostrategically, this is a good time to take a new look.

Ambassador (ret) David Passage is a 33-year veteran of the US State Dept who served in Europe, Asia, Central and South America, Africa, and lived in the Middle East/South Asia before joining the Foreign Service. Most of his career was spent in politico-military affairs, including two full PCS details to DOD (with MACV/CORDS in Vietnam and as POLAD to SOCOM) and one to the NSC. He was Deputy Chief of Mission/Charge d’Affaires in El Salvador at the height of that country’s civil war in the 1980s, a US negotiator during the successful effort to get the 36,000-man Cuban expeditionary force out of Angola in the late 1980s, and Coordinator of Andean Affairs during the development of “Plan Colombia” and the change in policy which permitted the US to begin assisting Colombia to deal with its twin internal insurgencies in addition to the counter-narcotics campaign.

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