

CHIEF-OF-MISSION AUTHORITY: A POWERFUL BUT UNDERUSED TOOL

THE STATE DEPARTMENT SHOULD CAPITALIZE ON THE PRESIDENTIAL MANDATE GIVEN TO EVERY COM TO STRENGTHEN THE COUNTRY TEAM MECHANISM.

BY EDWARD PECK

Representatives of more than 30 federal agencies are currently stationed in U.S. embassies, where they manage and advance their particular organization's agenda based on instructions from headquarters. When their efforts are coordinated under the country team umbrella, they can achieve great things, but this happens far less often than it should.

Edward L. Peck, a Foreign Service officer from 1956 to 1989, was chief of mission in Baghdad from 1977 to 1980 and ambassador to Mauritania from 1983 to 1985, among many other postings. In 1974, he won AFSA's William R. Rivkin Award for Constructive Dissent by convincing the Department of State to change the rules for joint caption telegrams worldwide, in order to clarify and protect the chain of command from the Secretary of State to ambassadors. (He may also be the only officer to win a grievance against the State Department and go on to an ambassadorship.) In addition, he proposed and compiled the first "Ambassador's Handbook" in 1973.

Ambassador Peck lectures at FSI and other U.S. government institutions on the subject of "Advocacy and Dissent" and does other public speaking and writing. A former retiree representative on the AFSA Governing Board, he is a longtime member of the Awards Committee.

That gap between theory and practice should not surprise anyone familiar with organizational behavior in the general sense. But there is an additional problem that is specific to the conduct of international relations. In Washington, during the formulation phase of the foreign policy process, the various agencies are more or less equal. None can give orders to, nor will they ever accept them from, other agencies. As a result, communication lapses can occur, with one agency failing to discuss with or even inform others about what is being planned and where. Meaningful direction and supervision must come from higher levels: the National Security Council, the Cabinet and, ultimately, the president.

In foreign affairs, the consequences of such lapses show up overseas in the form of haphazard policy implementation. Without meaningful direction by a higher authority in the field, U.S. foreign policy risks being hamstrung at best, and counterproductive at worst. This is where the State Department, by capitalizing on the presidential mandate given to every chief of mission, can be most effective. Regrettably, however, State has failed to make the best possible use of this unique role.

How We Got Here

Prior to World War II, few government agencies had overseas representatives. Such employees basically had

two functions: observe and report. Accordingly, ambassadors needed few formal authorities in their dealings with non-State Department officials.

The Cold War generated a plethora of proactive programs: political and economic reporting, development assistance, cultural relations, military cooperation, intelligence collection and analysis, etc. It soon became evident that one agency could be busily working toward goals that ran counter to what another agency in the same country was trying to accomplish. This was partly the result of the organizational problems mentioned above, compounded by the lack of clear instructions as to who was in charge of what, and to what extent.

In an effort to improve the coordination of implementation, President Dwight Eisenhower initiated the current practice of giving each ambassador direct, written authority over the activities of all in-country executive-branch personnel, except for those under an area military commander. (Formerly known as commanders in chief, or CINCs, those leaders are now referred to as combatant commanders, or CoComs.)

Ever since the passage of the Foreign Service Act of 1980, the letter has been addressed to chiefs of mission rather than ambassadors (see the next paragraph), but with the same clear objective: to inject a level of command and control at the implementation end of foreign policy that is difficult to maintain at the formulation stage. Each president has used slightly different wording, but the basic delegation of authority for the conduct of relations remains unambiguous.

It may be useful to clarify the distinction between ambassadors and chiefs of mission. Individuals formally representing their nation abroad have an internationally recognized diplomatic title: ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary. From an operational perspective, an AEP's functions are concentrated on dealing with the host government. By contrast, American chiefs of mission are also charged with responsibility for the management of all internal operations.

The two titles are required for two reasons. First, the leader of a U.S. delegation to an international conference, for example, may be given a temporary title as ambassador, but is neither an AEP nor a COM. Because of this situation, both the president's letter and the law refer only to the responsibilities and authorities of COMs; neither document explicitly mentions ambassadors. Second, and of perhaps greater significance: While all AEPs are also

chiefs of mission, some COMs are not AEPs — but they are given precisely the same managerial authorities.

The COM's Mandate

Extracts from pertinent portions of the president's letter are compelling. "As chief of mission, you have full responsibility for the direction, coordination and supervision of all United States government executive-branch employees. ... You have the right to see all communications to or from mission elements, however transmitted ... As chief of mission, you are not only my personal representative, but that of our country."

This is an extraordinary mandate. The letter goes to some length to insure inclusion of all personnel, in all functions and locations. The import of the last phrase cited above is unambiguous: Chiefs of mission work directly for the president, because the president says they do.

In the Foreign Service Act, the section on COM authorities and responsibilities uses language identical to that in the president's letter. Of even greater potential significance, the sentence introducing that section of the law begins: "Under the direction of the president ..." (emphasis added). Note that it does *not* say "under the direction of the Secretary of State."

There is solid, indisputable logic behind the establishment of a direct link to the president. If chiefs of mission worked for the Secretary of State, they would be on the same organizational level as their overseas counterparts from other agencies, who also report to their respective Cabinet secretaries. Despite being the most senior Cabinet member, the Secretary of State lacks any authority over his or her colleagues.

The Secretary of State's Role

To establish the COM-Secretary of State relationship, the president's letter says, "Please report to me through the Secretary of State. Under my direction, the Secretary of State is, to the fullest extent provided by the law, responsible for the overall coordination and supervision of U.S. government activities and operations abroad." This sentence is the key to the entire exercise. If properly employed, it gives the Secretary, and therefore the department, an unparalleled mechanism for affecting the full range of our actions abroad.

The Secretary cannot be placed between the president and the COM on an organization chart, nor presented as occupying such a position. To do so would not

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only vitiate the intent of the letter and the law; it would eliminate the direct linkage to the president that is the single, sine qua non basis for COM authority. The stronger and more publicly emphasized that connection, the stronger the Secretary of State's role. Yet an understanding of this basic fact is neither as widespread nor accepted as it should be, even within the State Department.

In any event, it is relatively easy to announce, but very difficult to impose, one agency's authority over others. The National Security Act of 1947 is an illustration. It gave the director of the Central Intelligence Agency control over the intelligence budgets of all other agencies. A potentially important concept, it was doomed to fail.

Attempts to amend the rigid, hierarchical rules of

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organizational behavior by placing relatively equal agencies in a permanent superior-subordinate relationship are unlikely to succeed. It is for this reason that considerable effort has been expended in the White House and on Capitol Hill to make it clear that chiefs of mission work directly for the president. Yet State has consistently made insufficient use of that exceptional leverage.

Where State Fails

Giving the Secretary of State control of the only channel for instructions to COMs provides the department with the means for a significant impact on the implementation of policies, across the board. The role of the COM should logically be strengthened and supported at

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all times and in every possible way, but it very seldom is. In fact, it is often ignored, and frequently undercut.

Those who have served as chiefs of mission are perhaps most familiar with the problem. Solid backing from State in a difference of opinion with another agency's representative, for example, cannot be depended upon. Messages from the department on the subject, often distributed to other agencies, sometimes dismiss legitimate concerns in an offhand manner. Similarly, cables addressed to chiefs of mission, often prepared by individuals not in the proximate chain of command, do not always convey the impression that the COM's authorities or views are of particular importance. If State does not treat chiefs of mission as personal representatives of the president, especially in open communications, it cannot expect others to do so — or respect their authority in the interagency process.

Consider for a moment the self-evident and highly instructive answers to two questions. If the COM's authorities were given to the senior military officer, would there be a discernible change in the manner in which the recipients would attempt to carry them out? And would DOD not make every possible effort to elevate its status, expand its role and make maximum use of its newfound authority?

Many years ago, I learned that a regional bureau assistant secretary, a former political-appointee COM, had written all his chiefs of mission (with copies to other agencies) instructing them that they worked for and took their orders directly from him. I was unsuccessful in getting him and the department to understand that the letter greatly weakened his role, as well as State's, by undercutting the COM's direct link to the president.

This brings up an important related point. The embassies with the heaviest concentration of agencies and activities are often, logically, in the larger, more strategically important countries. If it is located in a pleasant place, the embassy is frequently headed by a political appointee who, despite other abilities and accomplishments, knows very little about who does what, how the system works, or what its procedures, problems and mechanisms are. The result is a further diminution of the primordially important role given to COMs, and

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the reasons why it was given in the first place: to improve coordination of our policies and programs abroad.

Some Corrective Measures

- The small, somewhat marginalized Office of COM Authority, currently in the Bureau of Administration, should be expanded, made a part of, and report to the under secretary for political affairs, with a major role in following issues related to post management as they arise.

- State personnel, especially but not exclusively in regional bureaus, should be fully briefed on the importance of supporting the direct relationship between the COM and the president.

- A compilation of documents on COM authority should be in the hands of every regional assistant and deputy assistant secretary, as well as office directors, their deputies and desk officers, and should be used as a measuring stick on all instructions to COMs, from whatever office or agency.

- State reps assigned to DOD training facilities should make extensive presentations on this important topic. Military personnel have little trouble understanding a chain of command.

- FSI should include an explanatory presentation on the role of the COM in all of its interagency training programs.

- All entering Civil Service and Foreign Service employees should receive briefings on the subject and its importance in the effective performance of the department's responsibilities.

- Chiefs of mission or the Secretary of State, depending on the circumstances, should equip every chargé d'affaires with a letter delegating the maximum possible derived authority for the interim management of the post. This very basic procedure has never been instituted.

- COMs, in particular those who are non-career, should receive extensive, detailed and specific instruction on their mandated authorities and responsibilities, as well as a reality check on their limitations.

Taking these and related steps will improve and facilitate the ability of chiefs of mission to achieve national objectives. Without them, the ongoing erosion of State's management of our foreign relations will likely accelerate. ■