



SPEAKING OUT

Expeditionary Sidekicks? The Military-Diplomatic Dynamic

BY GERALD LOFTUS

We still refer to one sub-component of the political cone as “pol-mil” — as if, by putting “political” first, we indicate its primacy over the military. Civilian control of the military has always been a byword of democracies, as we never tire of lecturing military officer corps from around the world. Yet a look at our current military-diplomatic relationship should give us pause.

Speaking at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 12, General David Patraeus hailed Ambassador Ryan Crocker as “my great diplomatic wingman.” The term’s Air Force origins denote a trusty sidekick, hovering slightly behind “Top Gun.” Granted, Iraq is a unique situation; thankfully, most U.S. ambassadors do not have four-star generals commanding troops in a war zone in their countries of assignment. But the overall attitude toward diplomacy within our national security structure typified by this quote is still troubling.

We are used to a defense attaché and perhaps a military assistance officer as part of the embassy country team, where the ambassador is in charge. But increasingly, Foreign Service officers find themselves in subordinate relationships to the military, especially as the “expeditionary” model is expanded. Combatant commanders have long had Foreign Service political advisers and, more recently, also operate Joint Interagency Cooperation Groups, with representatives from foreign affairs and other agencies. Now POLADs are present at subordinate

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commands and in the offices of service chiefs. And AFRICOM, the newest geographic command, expects to use diplomatic and development experts for a third of its headquarters complement.

Going Through the Motions

Without a doubt, the U.S. military values diplomatic expertise. But the relationship can be one of checking boxes, not of acting on civilian expertise. Carl von Clausewitz’s dictum, “war is merely the continuation of politics by other means,” has become a staple of military culture, so war-game planners frequently write scenarios with just a nod to diplomatic niceties before cutting to: “Diplomacy has failed; send in the military.”

If the post-9/11 era really is to be characterized by long, global wars, we must be particularly wary of the dangers of focusing obsessively on notions like expeditionary diplomacy, to the exclusion of our core competency. War zones are military turf, and in that kind of expeditionary environment, the “pol” will always be wingman to the “mil.” Even in such FSO billets as Provincial Recon-

struction Team leader, what is the nature of authority when the PRT is embedded in a larger military unit?

Recall that in the Red Army, the political commissar could contravene decisions taken by military professionals. Happily, there are no signs of that on our side, nor would we want the tail to wag the dog in that manner. But why should the world’s leading democracy accept an increasing militarization of its diplomatic engagement with the world?

Though the expeditionary diplomat/soldier amalgam may appeal to writers like Robert Kaplan, it presupposes that Iraq and Afghanistan are not one-off circumstances. If expeditionary (as opposed to what — desk-bound?) is to be the new ideal, where (and what) is the next expedition? David Jones pointed out several fallacies behind the headlong rush to jettison traditional diplomacy in his Speaking Out column in the July-August 2006 *FSJ* (“Run, Lemmings, Run”). Exposed one-officer posts, with a company of security contractor outriders, to perform “transformational diplomacy” — is that the new paradigm? How does that help the U.S. deal with the rest of the world?

Washington on the Rhine

When I attended National Defense University (1998-1999), I was part of a student body comprised largely of colonels and senior civilians. But I was conscious of who was missing. Where were the rising GS-14s of the Treasury Department, who might one day deal with America’s increasing



indebtedness to China? Or the stellar scientists from Agriculture, whose work on dry-land farming might be crucial to sustaining our food supply?

When the premier federal institutions of learning are those designed for professional military education, that tells us something about our national priorities. This is not new: the panic over Sputnik in the 1950s led to the National Defense Education Act, and the same period saw further billions spent on the Eisenhower Interstate and Defense Highways. Though NDU and the other war colleges, to their credit, also study the other elements of national power, including diplomatic, economic and informational resources, the stress is inevitably on national security in the classic Defense Department sense. The fact that FSOs are “embedded” in classes for some diplomatic leavening does not alter the fact that these institutions remain war colleges.

The superstars of the U.S. official presence overseas are, let’s face it, not the 190 or so ambassadors accredited to conduct bilateral relations, but the four-star geographic combatant commanders of EUCOM, CENTCOM, PACOM, SOUTHCOM and AFRICOM. For their full-spectrum approach to their respective areas of responsibility, the Pentagon wants the various commands to fund such programs as “Building Global Partnerships” and greatly expand the Commander’s Emergency Response Program. This is not your \$5,000 “Ambassador’s Self-Help Program” disbursing grants for village schools; we are talking about many millions of dollars here.

In a May 13 *Washington Post* article, Walter Pincus quotes a Senate Foreign Relations Committee report: “As a result of inadequate funding for civilian programs ... U.S. defense agencies are increasingly being granted authority and funding to fill

21st-century challenges demand more of the FS than to be sidekicks to the armed forces.

perceived gaps ... weakening the Secretary of State’s primacy in setting the agenda for U.S. relations with foreign countries. Some foreign officials question what appears to be a new emphasis by the United States on military approaches to problems that are not seen as lending themselves to military solutions.” Indeed. Generals are naturally assertive about their role in their areas of responsibility.

Stuttgart and the U.S. European Command are actually on the River Neckar, but a “Washington on the Rhine” outlook can develop there or at any of the overseas commands. In their quest for greater unity of effort, combatant commanders lament the bureaucratic barriers to their centralizing interagency coordination. Some of them would like to “mature” the interagency process to the regional level (see “Extending the Phase Zero Campaign Mindset,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, Issue 45, 2nd Quarter 2007). But how do you do that when there are some 50 U.S. ambassadors in Africa, but only one four-star general?

Here’s the rub: when you establish and fund regional combatant commands, they must “do something” about crises in their bailiwick. As the U.S. launches another continental-sized mission in AFRICOM, we should consider what Andrew Bacevich, in his 2005 book *The New American Militarism*, said regarding the 1980s growth of CENTCOM activities in its Mideast domain: “As the U.S.

military profile in the region became ever more prominent, the difficulties with which the United States felt obliged to contend also multiplied.”

This is not just a matter of historical interest. The establishment of AFRICOM — how it is to be configured, where headquartered and with what missions — is a live issue. Is it to be a classic geographic combatant command, with the force structure that comes with four-stardom? Maybe not. Will it move from collocation with EUCOM in Germany, from which it was created, to Africa? Probably, but where? Throughout the continent there is clear reluctance to host a foreign military presence.

And what missions will AFRICOM undertake? Maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea’s oil shipping lanes is a strategic interest, as is transnational terrorism across the Sahel. But African publics and governments have already begun to complain that U.S. engagement is increasingly military, pitting 50 U.S. ambassadors and their self-help programs against a brand-new U.S. commander for whom Africa is his sole job description.

Stake Out the Core Turf: Diplomacy

Some analysts argue that the unprecedented size, resources and strategic reach of the U.S. military give us a comparative advantage in power projection, similar to the one China has in producing cheap products for the world, or the European Union has in unifying a continent. The strength of the U.S. military is undoubtedly a prime asset, but as Thomas Barnett recently wrote in *Esquire* (“The Americans Have Landed,” June), the danger is that “the poised hammer makes everything suddenly look like a nail.”

Does the U.S. need “expeditionary diplomacy?” Perhaps, but not as its

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default posture, unsuited as it is to solving the myriad problems that don't fit a Foreign Legion stance.

The vast majority of the world's 193 countries do not qualify as war zones. True, not all of them are completely stable or developed, and many are not democracies. But they still constitute sovereign nations in the generally accepted sense, with boundaries, capitals, elites and economies. This non-expeditionary world — about 180 countries — is the *diplomatic* “area of responsibility,” where the Foreign Service works to advance American interests.

In the “Rest of the World” (to use Pentagon parlance), basic social structures and norms do not exist or are exceedingly shaky. In those places, the host government cannot (or will

not) provide perimeter security for the embassy, let alone ensure a safe working environment for diplomats to do their jobs. Nor can the Marine security guard detachment. And as we are learning in Iraq, the costs of hiring private security companies to do the job go far beyond dollars and cents. It is in these relatively few extreme environments that the military can and should take the lead — and where our diplomatic presence should be kept lean until conditions permit peacetime operations.

So by all means, let imaginative Army majors produce and debate papers on “armed diplomacy” at places like Leavenworth's Combat Studies Institute. Meanwhile, the non-expeditionary core of the Foreign Service should take the lead in con-

fronting climate change, mass migrations and the implications of the colossal U.S. currency reserves in foreign hands, to name just a few of the serious threats we face.

Let me be clear: Political-military issues, including counterterrorism and expeditionary forays in war zones, will remain important. But they should not blind us to the many other challenges that demand much more of the Foreign Service than to be sidekicks, diplomatic wingpersons to the armed forces. ■

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