



FS KNOW-HOW

Maximizing the Value of the Political Adviser Function

BY JOHN D. FINNEY AND ALPHONSE F. LA PORTA

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has made support of crisis operations a hallmark of her “transformational diplomacy” initiative. Toward that end, President Bush’s Fiscal Year 2009 budget submission seeks funding to fill 1,100 new Foreign Service positions within the State Department, including 150 slots earmarked for political-military or foreign policy adviser positions in military commands within and outside combat areas.

This move to greatly strengthen the political-military function — like parallel efforts to enhance on-the-ground support in post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction, to improve the civilian-military coordination in national security policy implementation — is to be warmly encouraged. By the Political-Military Affairs Bureau’s count, as of January there were 26 foreign policy or political adviser positions allocated to the offices of the four service chiefs in the Pentagon, six U.S. regional combatant commands (USPACOM, USEUCOM, etc.), four functional combatant commands (USSOCOM, USSTRATCOM, etc.), 12 major component commands, several subordinate commands in combat zones, and NATO headquarters and its key subordinate commands. Another 17 State officers are assigned to military education and training institutions and action officer positions in the Pentagon.

In addition to its intention to increase these numbers in Fiscal Year 2009, the Political-Military Affairs

Here are some practical tips to help POLADs work effectively with military commanders.

Bureau is renegotiating the State-Defense Exchange Agreement to provide for the assignment of more uniformed officers to the State Department, easing restrictions imposed by former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Under the 2008 Iraq-Afghanistan supplemental appropriations bill Congress passed in July, a down payment will be made on the expansion of the political adviser function with the establishment of 10 new positions to be filled in next summer’s assignment cycle. One major new political adviser position will be re-established at U.S. Coast Guard headquarters and one position will be reserved for a management analyst position in the POLAD office of the PM Bureau here in Washington. The remainder of the positions are likely to be spread among operational commands, including the Marine Corps expeditionary force headquarters and other forward-deployed U.S. forces.

The demand for Foreign Service officers will not be sated with this modest expansion, however. Regional combatant commands, such as US-

SOUTHCOM in Miami, seek to integrate over a dozen new officers into their functional staffs, mostly in development and humanitarian assistance functions. DOD’s new command for Africa, USAFRICOM, is also requesting a substantial number of Foreign Service detailees as it commences full operations on Oct. 1.

In addition, an effort is being made to staff specialized functions in regional commands below the political adviser level, especially in intelligence coordination.

POLADs as Diplomat-Warriors

Until the current emphasis on transformational diplomacy in the post-9/11 environment advocated by Secretary Rice, political advisers formed a subculture within the larger political-military function. Their work has long been considered arcane, rendering those assigned to such positions uncompetitive in the annual promotion sweepstakes. The tide may be turning, however, as the growing importance of civilian-military cooperation has boosted demand within the military for the skills Foreign Service personnel and other civilians bring to operations requiring the integration of all elements of national power. These include stability and reconstruction, peacekeeping/peace enforcement, counterinsurgency and crisis-intervention missions.

Writing in these pages in September 1998, Ambassador Howard K. Walker, then vice president of the



National Defense University, predicted: "A new type of leader will be required to manage these crises in the 21st century. I call these hybrids soldier-diplomats and diplomat-warriors. They are soldiers who can also think like diplomats and diplomats who can think like soldiers." He went on to declare: "Diplomat-warriors will need to understand and appreciate why and how the military can be used to achieve diplomatic objectives and what operational constraints the military faces in trying to achieve those objectives."

Walker's commentary referred primarily to the need for foreign ministries to work with their defense ministry colleagues to develop a joint curriculum for the cross-training of civilian and military officers. But in so doing, he touched on a key theme that Robert Murphy's 1964 autobiography, *Diplomat Among Warriors*, addresses in depth: the ability to influence and shape the thinking of a military commander or defense policymaker on a "close up and personal" basis and promote the value of military and diplomatic cooperation. Political advisers are in a unique position to develop and apply such expertise.

Here are some tips to facilitate the process.

Bringing Added Value

Essential to a political adviser's effectiveness is mutual trust and confidence, a military truism that characterizes the close relationship that should exist between a civilian foreign policy adviser and his or her commander (and key staff). Without frequent access, and immediate entrée when necessary, it is difficult to penetrate the phalanx of senior military officers. Thus, the most successful POLADs are those who are integral members of the command group, participate in key decisions and almost always travel with the commander.

**Foreign Service
political advisers
should think of
themselves as
diplomat-warriors.**

Advice for current POLADs: If you rarely travel with your commander and do not participate in most policy and coordination meetings, something is fundamentally amiss in your advisory relationship.

To gain the trust and confidence of military commanders, POLADs must be able to contribute significantly to the overall mission. Regional expertise, cultural knowledge and language proficiency are essential capabilities, as are top-notch analytical and communication skills (both oral and written). The military places a premium on teamwork, so effective political advisers need to be proficient in working collaboratively with staff members. In brief, respect and support from the military commander are not extended automatically or freely. POLADs must earn them.

Advice to POLADs: Become very familiar with the military decision-making process to better understand that approach to problem-solving, and learn to employ its principal tenets in advising commanders on the political and diplomatic dimensions of their military responsibilities.

Shared perceptions of the political adviser's role and the interaction of civilian and military affairs should be reflected in how a POLAD and his or her staff are treated in the headquarters. Dr. James Bergeron, political

adviser to the commander of NATO Strike Forces in Naples, has commented that in light of today's complexities, it is necessary to import the interagency frame of reference into a major combat command's daily operations. The incorporation of civilian mid-level officers from many agencies (not only the State Department) into the joint staffs and special mechanisms, such as the joint interagency coordinating group on counterterrorism, must occur.

It is also desirable to import non-official thinking into the commander's decision-making process through the political adviser's relations with non-governmental organizations, especially those operating in military or humanitarian crisis areas, as well as think-tanks and academic institutions. Even if the commander does not accept specific recommendations, such outside counsel will inform and broaden headquarters planning. Much of this intellectual cross-fertilization can be accomplished informally, but only if sanctioned by a commander who is open to advice and information from outside his immediate command chain. A skilled POLAD can facilitate this valuable process.

Advice to POLADs: A good working relationship with the J9 or its equivalent, responsible for interagency and NGO coordination at most senior commands, is essential in this regard.

Rank and Reach-Back

Although it does not supplant a close and personal relationship with one's commander, rank is important, as those in the POLAD community can attest. The world of our military colleagues is very hierarchical: generals talk to generals and colonels talk to colonels. Accordingly, State must not assume that lower-ranking officers, however knowledgeable and articulate, can be effective political advisers to military commanders — especially



at senior levels.

This factor makes doubly unfortunate the trend over the past two decades for the size of the Senior Foreign Service and the FS-1 cohort of promotable officers to decline, thus decimating State's ability to fill political adviser and other civilian positions in the defense establishment. As such positions are expanded, there should also be an expansion of the Senior Foreign Service ranks.

Together with these elements favoring success in working within the military system, Foreign Service officers assigned to military organizations must understand that they are valued by their principals for their "reach back" into U.S. embassies, the State Department and other agencies within the national security policy community. They must be able to communicate rapidly and effectively with ambassadors and embassies overseas, network with foreign diplomatic and multilateral organization representatives, and provide succinct and easily assimilable briefs on current events, underlying trends and policy issues. To do these things successfully requires experience, a factor not always appreciated in the world of Foreign Service assignments.

Likewise, it is important for political advisers to work skillfully within the military staff system, particularly to earn the confidence of the policy and planning staff (J5) and, as appropriate, the intelligence and operations directorates (J2/J3), as well as the Joint Staff in the Pentagon.

Advice to aspiring POLADs: A good commander will expect no less than superlative performance in all of these areas, so act early in your tenure to demonstrate your value-added.

Training

POLADs deserve proper training before assignment to military commands. Ideally, those working at the

The growing importance of civilian-military cooperation in the post-9/11 era has boosted DOD's demand for the unique skills FSOs possess.

most senior commands should, like the commanders they are advising, be graduates of the National Defense University or the service war colleges. Lower-ranking Foreign Service personnel assigned to operational or tactical commands should have the benefit of courses at the Joint Forces Staff College or similar institutions.

POLAD training should also furnish opportunities to sharpen regional or country knowledge, update language fluency and gain full appreciation of the mission of the military command and U.S. goals, objectives and programs involved.

Advice to POLADs: The U.S. military is the most highly trained in the world and expects key players to be properly prepared and ready to contribute significantly to the overall effort from beginning to end of assignment. As part of your preparation, learn about the values, tradition and culture of the military institutions and colleagues you will be advising.

Institutional Loyalty

One complex and potentially sensitive issue is the question of allegiance. Some would argue that POLADs and State exchange officers

retain an obligation to report to department offices and bureaus, especially as they are increasingly assigned lower in the chain of command and perhaps have less political-military experience. On the other hand, the essence of a political adviser's effectiveness is his or her ability to function as a "personal and confidential" adviser to the commander. An insistence on formal reporting back to State is highly unwise and detracts from the necessary relationship of personal trust and confidence.

Together with the ability to provide confidential advice goes loyalty. This nexus can be broken if a Foreign Service officer, who is already suspect because of his or her civilian status, is seen to be reporting in any formal sense to State or other agencies in Washington. While we would not argue that no contact with home base be allowed, such relationships should be transparent to one's commander and must be handled tactfully so as not to violate confidences.

The fact that the commander writes a political adviser's performance evaluation (supported by a reviewing statement from a senior officer in the State Department or an embassy) testifies to the need for a strong, mutually respectful relationship, a factor that should be recognized and rewarded in State's performance evaluation system.

Advice to POLADs: A strong performance evaluation by a general officer will be noticed by Foreign Service performance boards, whether for purposes of promotion or performance pay. So work closely with your commander and immediate staff on this crucial annual obligation.

The United States national security system, in the face of insistent calls for fundamental reform and the demands of a new international security environment, is evolving toward a more integrative or "blended" ap-



proach, as evidenced in recent public statements by Sec. Rice, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Deputy Secretary of State John D. Negroponte. Political advisers and other State officers serving in defense organizations have an important responsibility to bring the two institutions closer together, bridge misperceptions, resolve misunderstandings and create a more solid basis for increased effectiveness and teamwork in the conduct of military operations and the pursuit of common policy objectives. This is a tall order, but well worth the effort required.

To the degree the department is successful in obtaining greater resources for the political-military function, there will be added opportunities to improve this vital collaboration.

***The Foreign Service
can make an expanded
POLAD system work.***

With the proper vision, commitment and tools to do the job, the Foreign Service can make an expanded POLAD system work, both at the policy level and in the field. ■

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The authors' article, "Integrating National Security Strategy at the Operational Level: The Role of State Department Political Advisers," will be published soon in a new book by the U.S. Army War College Institute of Strategic Studies.



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