

# AMERICA'S COMMAND STRUCTURE

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, SEP 7 2009

The United States maintains both functional and geographic joint military commands to provide for America's security globally. These commands report directly to the president (the Commander in Chief) via the Secretary of Defense, have representation from all US armed services, and are commanded by four star officers once called Commanders in Chief (CINCs) but in recognition of the president's role that are now referred to as Combatant Commanders (COCOMs). I think the geographically based commands should be eliminated with one exception, replaced in part by additional functional commands. As some may know, I stand against our willingness to manage global security as well as our own, a willingness allowed by our great military power relative to others and the encouraged free riding of nearly all our "allies". I do believe that our geographically based commands contribute to both our over eager military posture and slow to adapt military doctrine.

The command structure grew out the success of unified operational commands in the Second World War and initially included the European and Pacific commands. When NATO was being created the commander of US forces in Europe, a US Army general, was slated to become Supreme Commander Europe, the commander of NATO forces on the continent. The parallel naval command, Supreme Commander Atlantic, much to the unhappiness of the British, became the domain of the US Navy and found an analog in the US Command structure, US Atlantic Command. Pacific Command was a natural evolution from the war in the Pacific. Central Command was established during the oil crisis in the 1970s to watch over the Middle East. It is now responsible for supervising the operations of US forces in both Iraq and Afghanistan. This was then followed the establishment of Southern Command for South and Central America and Northern Command, a post 9/11 creation, for North America. Most recently, Africa Command was carved out Pacific, Southern, and primarily, European Command.

With the end the Cold War the NATO Atlantic Command evolved into Allied Command Transformation as the US Atlantic Command evolved into US Joint Forces Command which is responsible for joint concepts and training and which is one of our functional oriented elements of the National Command Structure. The other functional commands are US Transportation Command which is responsible for inter-theater air, sea and ground transport, US Strategic Command which is responsible for nuclear forces, space and information operations and which evolved from the Cold War's Strategic Air Command, and US Special Operations Command which has global responsibility for the development and operations of US commando type forces.

The six geographical commands have three main faults. First, the commands become lobbyists for promoting security concerns in their area. After all, if there were no concerns then why have a command. The commands all create lists of security threats in their areas and plans to counter them. Every part of the globe becomes strategic for the US. The geographic COCOMs demand attention and resources back in Washington, hindering the prioritization of threats and the husbanding of forces. Second, the COCOMs compete with our diplomats for local attention, working with the advantage of resources (ships, planes), big staffs (Pacific Command for example has 1500 people in its headquarters staff and Central Command 3500), and often influential partners in the form of local militaries who seek the favor of the COCOMs for their own gain. They become our regional Viceroy's. Third, they lock too much of our thinking into a short term regional focus that is too often reactive and that underplays generic issues.

We can retain Northern Command, properly relabeled North America Command, to focus on the protection of the continent in coordination with Canada and Mexico. In the place of the others there should be military operations

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command—Strategic for nuclear weapons and long range strike, Special Operations for small scale raids and counter-insurgency operations including the training of foreign militaries, and Conventional War the traditional clash of armies and navies. The later would likely involve the expansion of the existing Joint Forces Command. Instead of ten commands there would be five.

The benefits of this reorganization would be significant. The draw of foreign operations would be reduced with the weighing of needs confined to the Joint Chiefs and the Joint Staff. Conventional operations would have a centrally placed advocate and a global perspective. Gone would be the practice of making the regional commander and staff the managers of wars as they break out unexpectedly in their areas. Instead the search would be for the best commanders by the type of operation encountered. Wars are distinguished by type rather than by region. The regional expertise need not be lost as there could be specialized task forces or study centers for its cultivation, but the operational expertise would be strengthened with proponents for each type worrying about advancing their specialized skills. The real regional expertise would lie with the diplomats who, after all, train in language and culture.

There is an additional important benefit. Regional security would fall more naturally upon locals. The Europeans would not have the excuse of thousands of well trained and equipped American troops to relieve themselves of the responsibilities of thwarting local aggression. Asians would not have the shield of an American fleet to protect themselves from lingering regional hatreds. And both Europeans and Asians would see more clearly their need to deal with chaos in the Middle East and Africa where they are linked by land or resource needs and past colonization.

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**Harvey M. Sapolsky** is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.