



Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

TESTIMONY

STATEMENT BEFORE THE SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE ON DEFENSE REFORM

November 10, 2015

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Reed, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Major national security re-organizations often come only after a major military disaster when the problems become blindingly apparent. Your decision to convene this series of hearings attests to your foresight and determination not to wait until a national catastrophe to act, but to actively seek out potential reforms now that could improve the Department of Defense's (DoD) ability to deal with current and future security challenges. It is appropriate for this Committee to undertake a fundamental assessment of the DoD's organization and consider measures for improving its ability to conduct core functions related to strategy formulation; contingency planning; preparing forces and developing needed capabilities; and conducting military operations.

This Committee was the driving force in formulating sweeping organizational changes across the DoD three decades ago. The resulting Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 was a watershed event in American military history and has had a profound impact on the U.S. defense establishment. It addressed the major problem of its day: the lack of sufficient inter-Service cooperation or "jointness," especially at the operational-theater level.

While Goldwater-Nichols has had a major positive impact on improving operational jointness in the field—to the point that America's rivals seek to achieve similar proficiency in inter-operating forces from different Services—I think that the scorecard is mixed when it comes to organizational arrangements in the Pentagon. Three decades on since the historic enactment of Goldwater-Nichols, we should consider whether our current command structure and organizational arrangements remain appropriate for the world we live in today. There are strong grounds for arguing that new legislation is needed to ensure the DoD is effectively organized to address current and future security challenges. In my testimony today, I will highlight some of the problems with DoD's current organizational design and then offer a handful of reform ideas that could merit further exploration going forward. My testimony today is based on first-hand observations of the Department's strategy formulation, as well as operational and force planning processes I gained while serving in the Pentagon as a deputy assistant secretary of defense for plans and participating in four Quadrennial Defense Reviews.

Problems with our Current System

The United States faces a far more diverse set of threats than it did in 1986. Where once we squared off against a single superpower adversary, today we confront a far wider array of threats including a rising, militarist China; an irredentist Russia; regional hegemonic aspirants like Iran; shaky nuclear-armed states like North Korea and Pakistan; emboldened terrorist groups like al Qaeda; and barbaric quasi-states like ISIL. We face new functional challenges as well, like cyber attacks, anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) challenges, and hybrid warfare. Our effectiveness dealing with these modern threats is hindered by our Cold War organizational structure. Too often our responses to these threats have been too slow, too reactive and regionally stove-piped. Our current system is optimized for dealing with discrete military problems that can be addressed with temporally short, intense conventional operations confined to the area of responsibility of a single Regional Combatant Command. It is less suited to deal with protracted operations, unconventional warfare, and multiple threats that span the boundaries of the Unified Command Plan's map. Contingency planning is largely the responsibility of the Regional Combatant Commands, which leads to a tendency to look at security challenges through a regional rather than global lens. Thus, many see China as Pacific Command's issue, Russia as European Command's, ISIS is Central Command's, and so forth, when in fact we require globally integrated approaches to wage effective long-term strategic competitions against these actors.

While Goldwater-Nichols strengthened the role of the Chairman as principal military adviser to the President and Secretary of Defense, and improved the quality of officers assigned to the Joint Staff, it fell short of creating an effective "global brain" at the center of the defense establishment—a central control entity that can assess all of the military threats and opportunities we face, prioritize resources and actions needed to address them, and sequence global operations over time, *with the needed directing authority to make it all happen*. There is no central military entity today that has the authority to prioritize efforts across regions and produce something analogous to the very simple—but highly effective—strategy General George Marshall articulated for dealing with Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan upon U.S. entry into World War II: "win in Europe, hold in the Pacific."

In the current system, the Combatant Commands and Service Chiefs do not "work" for the Chairman, but for the Secretary of Defense and Service Secretaries. Thus, the Chairman has to rely on his convening powers to get things done. The Chairman is unable to play the role of "decider" between the competing demands of the Combatant Commands and to hold the Services accountable as force providers. Consequently, he must resort to cumbersome processes and coordination mechanisms aimed at reconciling the competing demands of the Combatant Commands and Services. These processes are laborious and time-consuming. They tend to result in lowest common denominator compromises where everyone can agree while major issues often going unresolved.

By making the Chairman principal military adviser to both the President and the Secretary of Defense, Goldwater-Nichols inadvertently undermined civilian control and blurred the distinctions between the Secretary's and Chairman's responsibilities. In theory, the Secretary of Defense is the ultimate power and decision authority within the Department of Defense on any matter where he chooses to act, as well as the President's principal assistant for national defense. Goldwater-Nichols established the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as

“principal military adviser to the President” with the intent that he would be a non-parochial “ally” of the Secretary of Defense. In reality, however, this has created a situation where, *de facto*, the Chairman has two bosses, one of whom also serves at the pleasure of the other. This matters less in terms of the actual relationships between Secretaries and Chairmen, which have generally been cordial, than it does in terms of the peculiar organizational relationship between the Secretary’s staff in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Staff. Joint Staff officers principally view themselves as serving the Chairman in his role as principal military adviser to the President. Only secondarily do they tend to see their role as supporting the Secretary. And few see the Joint Staff as institutionally supporting OSD. While the Secretary has statutory responsibilities to oversee the deliberate plans of the Combatant Commands, he lacks dedicated military advisers to challenge those plans or generate alternatives. The Joint Staff could be a source for such alternative plans, but in practice it is reluctant to offer second opinions to the Combatant Commands’ plans. The Chairman’s statutory responsibility as principal military adviser to the President has led, moreover, to an excessive duplication of staffing functions between the OSD and the Joint Staff. Where you have an OSD policy expert, that person will almost inevitably have a counterpart on the Joint Staff. In Interagency meetings, this means DoD will normally have two seats at the table with possibly two conflicting viewpoints, which either becomes a source of frustration for others or an organizational seam others can exploit.

While Goldwater-Nichols improved the quality of the officers who are assigned to the Joint Staff—they tend to be some of the most outstanding officers from each of the Services—the vast majority are skilled operators (ace pilots, ship captains, and brigade commanders) who aspire to higher command assignments when they return to their Services. Their promotions are still determined by their Services rather than the Chairman, which tempers their non-parochialism while serving on the Joint Staff. Too few of these officers, moreover, come to the Joint Staff with deep educational backgrounds in military history, strategy and war planning experience. Too often Services will assign to the Joint Staff an officer with high promotion potential who excelled as a tactical commander but has no staff officer experience, rather than a highly qualified strategist or planner who is unlikely to be promoted to O-7. The kinds of officers who naturally gravitate toward staff jobs and might be best qualified to formulate strategy and develop imaginative plans also tend to be iconoclastic. Sometimes they are promoted as general or flag officers despite their maverick streaks, but more often they retire from O-5/6 staff jobs. Finally, requiring every general and flag officer to be joint qualified may have contributed to the growth of joint headquarters staffs and resulted in too many “ticket punches” rather than a creating smaller, more elite corps of highly qualified joint staff officers.

Goldwater-Nichols empowered the Unified and Specific Commands as the exclusive warfighting institutions of the Department of Defense and succeeded in improving jointness at the operational level. Few could have imagined, however, how the role of the Regional Combatant Commands would evolve over the past several decades. Increasingly, the Regional Combatant Commanders’ peacetime “Pro-Consul” political-military functions have diverted their time and attention away from their statutory responsibilities planning for or conducting regional combat operations. The reality now is that Combatant Commanders often make only cameo appearances in actual wars before the Department of Defense establishes new *ad hoc* commands devoted to warfighting as was done in Iraq and Afghanistan, thereby freeing the Regional Combatant Commanders of their combat duties.

While they play critical roles in political-military peacetime engagement, it is arguable that they have also grown preoccupied with so-called “Phase Zero” activities relative to preparations for actual warfighting and war termination.

While Goldwater-Nichols was widely seen as shifting power from the Services to the Combatant Commands in 1986, over time the system has also tended to empower the Regional Combatant Commands relative to the Functional Combatant Commands. For example, Special Operations Command has played a leading role in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as in wider global counter-terrorist operations over the past fifteen years. But the Regional Combatant Commands have resisted any accretion in SOCOM’s command responsibilities in global terrorist operations, limiting its role to “synchronizing” operations across Combatant Commands, while stopping well short of directing authority over other commands. Similarly, Regional Combatant Commands have resisted moves to give SOCOM greater flexibility in moving special operations forces and assets between theaters, preferring to “own” their forces rather than depend on a Functional Command to provide forces to them when they are needed. Strategic Command has experienced similar problems in integrating global strike and cyber warfare capabilities into the contingency plans of Regional Combatant Commands, whose preferences for forces and capabilities assigned or apportioned to them may be prioritized over those controlled by a Functional Combatant Command.

This imbalance between Regional and Functional Combatant Commands also manifests itself in resource allocation and force planning decisions that subordinate global priorities to regional ones. The steady proliferation of A2/AD capabilities around the world threatens the effectiveness of many traditional elements of our regional forward presence, ranging from short-range combat aircraft operating from bases close to a potential adversary, to large surface ships, to expeditionary ground forces that require access through traditional ports and airfields. In the face of growing A2/AD threats, power projection capabilities like SOF and global surveillance and strike systems that can penetrate and operate in denied areas are among the most viable power projection options available to us. They are, moreover, globally fungible and can therefore help to deter or defeat aggression in multiple areas of the world. Thus, from a global perspective they should be highly prioritized. But in reality there is a confluence of interests between the Regional Combatant Commanders who tend to favor capabilities and forces that will actually reside in their theaters and confer political-military benefits through their visible presence, and the Services, which continue to acquire capabilities and forces that are heavily dependent on relatively permissive operating conditions. In this case, the global perspective of the Functional Combatant Commanders appears to be receiving inadequate weight in the Department’s deliberations.

Finally, headquarters staffs, especially OSD and Joint Staff, have simply grown too large over time and the normal processes too cumbersome. There are always compelling reasons for adding new staff and offices as pressing issues emerge, but once they are added it is difficult to divest those functions later on. Although large staffs enable leaders to ensure that no issue area goes uncovered, they reduce organizational agility and hamper effective decision-making. Large staffs, moreover, contribute to excessive coordination and labyrinthine processes. And in a system where the coordination process normally requires the concurrence of the major players, the process tends to favor keeping things just as they are or making only marginal changes that are acceptable to everyone. Rarely is someone’s ox gored or do clear winners

and losers emerge, especially when it comes to resource allocation. And increasingly in the Department of Defense, when senior leaders want to get something done, they must work around the existing processes rather than through them. Secretaries of Defense have to find innovative “out of band” solutions to procure MRAPs, to produce real options in a QDR that the normal bureaucratic process would kill, or to develop alternate military strategy ideas like the 2006-2007 Surge.

Recommendations

Mr. Chairman, as you and members of this Committee deliberate about possible changes in the organization of the Department of Defense, I would offer a handful of interrelated reform ideas that could help to address the problems I have outlined. All of these ideas would require detailed analysis to fully understand their strengths and avoid outcomes that might inadvertently leave us worse off. It is also difficult, if not impossible, to consider these proposals in isolation from one another. Enacting one but not another is likely to lead to greater problems than either maintaining the current system or adopting wholesale changes.

Replace the Joint Staff with a True General Staff

I believe the time has come to reconsider the merits of creating a true General Staff. I think this would have the greatest organizational impact addressing many of the problems we currently face. The Goldwater-Nichols Joint Staff aimed to establish an independent central staff that would be less beholden to the Services, but it fell short of a General Staff in three main ways. First, officers assigned to the Joint Staff normally return to their Services and their future promotions are still controlled by their Services. Second, despite the quality of the officers assigned to the Joint Staff, they are not trained as an elite strategy and planning staff cadre. Third, the Joint Staff and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff lack directing authority one would expect a General Staff to have, resulting in cumbersome processes aimed at achieving consensus across the Services and Combatant Commands rather than having a decider who can make hard choices.

In the 1980s, broaching the topic of a General Staff was considered taboo--too radical, “un-American,” and a political non-starter. I believe that the strongest arguments AGAINST the establishment of a General Staff are that it could lead to: (1) the over-concentration of power within the military; or (2) burying alternative courses of action or isolating civilian leaders from alternative military viewpoints. These risks, however, are not insurmountable and could be addressed explicitly in the design of a General Staff. I believe that the inability of the current system to formulate effective strategies and imaginative plans, the lack of directing authority invested in the current Chairman and Joint Staff, and other potential benefits that a General Staff offers make an option that has long been seen as heretical worth exploring.

The main purposes of a General Staff would be to assist senior leaders to:

- Identify global threats and opportunities;
- Formulate globally integrated, resource-informed strategies;

- Develop initial concept plans and offer alternative plans;
- Conduct mobilization planning; and
- Determine needed capabilities across the Joint Force.

The last function would be particularly important to ensure adequate investment in interoperable command and control, and communications systems that serve as the technical glue binding the Joint Force. The General Staff should also be the advocate for globally fungible power projection capabilities like SOF, global surveillance and strike, space and cyber capabilities, nuclear forces and global mobility assets that can swing between theaters to deter, deny or punish regional aggressors.

The General Staff would assume the role of the military's global brain to develop cross-regional military strategies and initial concept plans for various contingencies. It should have the authority to decide between the competing demands of the Combatant Commands and to direct them to take preparations or actions consistent with direction or orders coming down from the President or Secretary of Defense.

Unlike the Regional Combatant Commands organized by geographical area, a General Staff might be organized around missions or issues. For example, the General Staff might assign Flag Officers with responsibilities for a particular high-level issue (e.g., a major potential adversary or key mission like counter-WMD) to develop both the overall strategic approach and initial plans that could cross-cut the various Combatant Commands and draw forces and capabilities from the various Services as appropriate. The General Staff would also play a key role in devising and validating innovative joint concepts of operation.

The General Staff should ideally be reduced in size relative to the current Joint Staff. It should be streamlined to focus on inherently military tasks while shedding political-military and policy functions (e.g., bilateral defense relations, NATO policy, arms control) where it currently duplicates functions performed by OSD. It should, however, provide technical military advice to support OSD as needed.

A General Staff would be comprised of elite officers selected at the O-4/5/6 level from the various Services on the basis of rigorous exams, interviews and their performance in operational- and strategic-level wargames. Following their highly competitive selection they would enter into an intense professional military education course centered on strategy formulation and war planning where they would be responsible for developing alternative plans and concepts of operation. Officers would remain in the General Staff for the remainder of their military careers and their advancement would be determined solely by the head of the General Staff; thus, they would not be beholden to their original Services in formulating strategy, developing plans, and determining needed capabilities and forces. Force management and manning levels would have to be worked out with the Services in advance. General Staff officers should also be eligible to compete for General and Flag Officer assignments both within the General Staff and across regional and functional joint operational commands and Joint Task Forces. Over the course of their careers as General Staff officers, they should rotate between the General Staff and assignments in the field to maintain operational currency.

To address some of the historic concerns, the General Staff should be required to develop ranges of options and alternative courses of action rather than single “point” solutions. The Congress should ensure adequate channels exist for Service Chiefs and Combatant Commanders to surface dissent or alternative courses of action to the Secretary and President if they judge it necessary. Similarly, the General Staff should foster a culture in which superiors’ ideas and opinions are routinely challenged.

In sum, a General Staff would help to improve strategic and operational planning competence and would represent a globalist perspective to formulate truly integrated, cross-regional and competitive strategies. With directing authority on behalf of the Secretary of Defense over the Combatant Commands and Services, it would be far less encumbered by current coordination processes and the penchant of the current system toward concurrence in order to drive needed changes. It would also be more likely to identify problems and challenge the status quo as it would not be beholden to the Services and would be more empowered than the current Joint Staff in making hard choices between competing demands.

Replace the Chairman with a Chief of the General Staff

A Chief of the General Staff would be the highest-ranking military officer and report only to the Secretary of Defense. I see merit in the Chief of the General Staff being interposed between the Secretary of Defense and combatant commanders in the chain of command to assist the Secretary in oversight of operational commands in the field. This would give him the authority to influence operations and activities around the world to a far greater degree than the Chairman can today.

The Chief of the General Staff would be principally responsible for formulating military strategy, developing concept plans, and directing global force allocation and application. He would have both decision and directive authorities the current Chairman lacks. The Chief would play the critical role of global integrator and decider between competing military demands consistent with guidance from the President and Secretary of Defense. He should have a deputy from a different Service who would bring complementary military expertise and help to ensure that no single Service is perceived as dominating the General Staff. Both the Chief and the Deputy should serve four-year terms that are staggered so that they do not normally retire at the same time, thereby ensuring continuity.

To address Congress’ historical concerns about the over-concentration of power invested in this individual, the Chief of the General Staff should not be the principal military adviser to the President (unlike the current Chairman) but should be under the direction and control of the Secretary of Defense and provide military advice to the President through the Secretary of Defense. The President, however, might be authorized a principal military adviser to assist in assessing the strategies and plans produced by the Department of Defense. Such an adviser would ideally be a recently retired or serving general or flag officer who would, by assuming this position, be ineligible for promotion or command and thus not beholden to any organization within the Department of Defense. I have in mind the role played by Admiral William Leahy during World War II when he came out of retirement to serve as the personal Chief of Staff to President Franklin Roosevelt.

Retool the Regional Combatant Commands

Complementing central control organizational changes, Congress might also consider consolidating and retooling the Regional Combatant Commands. The existing six Regional COMBATANT Commands (Northern Command, Southern Command, European Command, Africa Command, Central Command and Pacific Command) could be consolidated and reestablished as three or four Regional Command Headquarters. One possibility might be to keep Pacific and Central Commands but combine Northern and Southern Commands, as well as Africa and European Commands. A more radical idea might be to organize these consolidated Regional Commands around the three major oceans of concern (Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans) rather than continental landmasses.

The major change in the Regional Commands, however, would occur below the headquarters level. The existing Service Component Commands would be disestablished and replaced with Joint Task Forces focused exclusively on warfighting preparation or execution. In many respects, this would simply acknowledge what has already become a reality: the current Regional Combatant Commands do not normally conduct operations, but rather farm them out to subordinate Joint Task Forces or commands.

Joint Task Forces would serve as the principal joint operational command elements worldwide. For example, a Joint Task Force Headquarters might be established to plan for operations in a certain area of the world. A headquarters planning staff would be formed and operational elements from the appropriate Services and SOCOM would begin joint training and work-ups in preparation. When ordered to deploy, the Joint Task Force would move forward and scale up. While in theory the Joint Task Force Commander might report directly to the General Staff, as a practical matter for effective span of control it probably would make more sense for him to report through a Regional Command. The Regional Command would take responsibility for supporting the Joint Task Force in the field, especially in terms of logistics, handling requests for forces and other support from the Services and other commands, thereby freeing up the JTF Commander's time and energy to focus on operational planning and warfighting.

Conclusion

As this Committee deliberates on potential ideas for further reorganization it is important to remember that reform cannot substitute for adequate funding, nor can it compensate for inadequate leaders. Reform cannot ensure a perfect strategy or a brilliant plan for every crisis. And reform alone cannot generate ready and combat capable forces armed with the best equipment. But organizational reform could help to ensure that increases in funding will be more wisely allocated, that good leaders can work through a functional system rather than around a dysfunctional one, that competent strategists and planners can provide senior leaders with better options, and that the Services can more effectively develop unrivalled forces and capabilities.

The ideas I have proposed today are unlikely to garner an outpouring of support from the Department of Defense institutionally (although various officials might personally support them). You will hear from many quarters that these ideas are too radical and unnecessary, and more marginal changes will be offered as an alternative. Indeed, that was the majority

reaction to defense reform ideas thirty years ago. Nevertheless, I believe that to deal with the diverse range of threats we are likely to face for the foreseeable future, we need major organizational changes, not modest, inoffensive tweaks to the system. It will be difficult if not impossible for the Executive Branch to reform itself. If change is going to happen, it will need to come from the Congress just as it did with Goldwater-Nichols.

About the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) is an independent, nonpartisan policy research institute established to promote innovative thinking and debate about national security strategy and investment options. CSBA's analysis focuses on key questions related to existing and emerging threats to U.S. national security, and its goal is to enable policymakers to make informed decisions on matters of strategy, security policy, and resources.