

The State of State: A Proposal for Reorganization at Foggy Bottom

by Matt Armstrong

The past decade has seen the U.S. government expand its activities around the globe in response to complex and stateless threats. In the face of these challenges, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen, and members of Congress have all called for increasing the resources and capabilities of the State Department to roll back what Gates has termed the “creeping militarization” of foreign policy. But efforts at reform are hindered by an institutional structure rooted in a 19th-century view of the world.

The days of traditional diplomacy conducted behind closed doors are over. The democratization of information and means of destruction makes a kid with a keyboard

potentially more dangerous than an F-22. Addressing poverty, pandemics, resource security, and terrorism requires multilateral and dynamic partnerships with governments and publics. But the State Department has yet to adapt to the new context of global engagement. The diverse threats that confront the U.S. and our allies cannot be managed through a country-centric approach. For State to be effective and relevant, it needs to evolve and become both a Department of State and Non-State.

Currently, State’s structure impedes its efforts to develop coherent responses to pressing threats. The vesting of authority in U.S. embassies too often complicates interagency and pan-regional coordination and inhibits the effective request for and distribution of resources. No less significant, the structure also implicitly empowers the Defense Department’s regionally focused combatant commands, like Central Command, as alternatives to the State Department. Compounded by years of

About the author

Matt Armstrong is an advisor and consultant on public diplomacy and strategic communication to the Departments of Defense and State, Congress, NATO, and others.

managerial neglect, and a lack of long-term vision, strategic planning, and budgeting, the State Department requires high-level patches and workarounds to do its job adequately.

State's ineffectiveness has created voids filled by other agencies, notably the Pentagon. The Department of Agriculture (USDA) has also sought to move in on the space left by State. USDA in late 2009 asked that funds be transferred from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and State Department for projects in Afghanistan. Such a move would further dilute State's efficacy, sow confusion, and widen gaps between requirements and actions in foreign policy.

Fixing the Old Hierarchy

The last major reorganization of the State Department was in 1944. That reshuffling was internally driven, and today's change could occur within the bureaucracy's walls as well. But the complexity of the department today likely requires a major realignment of fundamentals, something on the order of magnitude of the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986. That landmark legislation shifted the Defense Department's operational focus from the services (Army, Navy, Air Force) to the regional commands (Central Command, Pacific Command, etc.).

Foggy Bottom's regional bureaus are, on their face, like the Defense Department's combatant commands. But in reality, they are merely support staff for the embassies (the "country teams"). If Defense were to mimic State's structure, it would be akin to making European Command subservient to individual U.S. military bases in Europe.

Each of State's regional bureaus are led by an assistant secretary who reports to the

under secretary for political affairs. (The under secretary also has other responsibilities, such as overseeing development and implementation of U.S. government policies with the United Nations and its affiliated agencies, as well as the fight against international narcotics and crime.) The under secretary, in turn, reports to the Secretary of State. By contrast, the combatant commander, the assistant secretary's ostensible counterpart in Defense, has a direct line to the Secretary of Defense.¹

The State Department's hierarchy was fine for another era when issues were confined within state borders by local authority, geography, and technology. But in recent years, the structure's flaws have become conspicuous. The department's ability to respond to crisis is fragmented and sclerotic. When successes do happen, they tend to be the result of individuals working around or outside the bureaucracy. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has circumvented the current system with crisis-specific czars called Special Representatives. These Special Representatives, like Richard Holbrooke for Afghanistan and Pakistan, operate like super ambassadors with regional powers that should reside – but don't – in the regional bureaus.²

For State to be a viable national security actor, the old hierarchy must be flattened and power should be redistributed. It is hard to imagine isolating a combatant commander by reducing his rank to three-star general and having him report to a four-star general – who then decides what the Secretary of Defense should be bothered with.

Why do we allow such a structure at State? Instead, each regional bureau should be empowered with leadership from a dedicated under secretary who reports directly to the secretary. This would make regional bureau

leadership functionally equivalent to combatant commanders in rank and access to senior leadership.

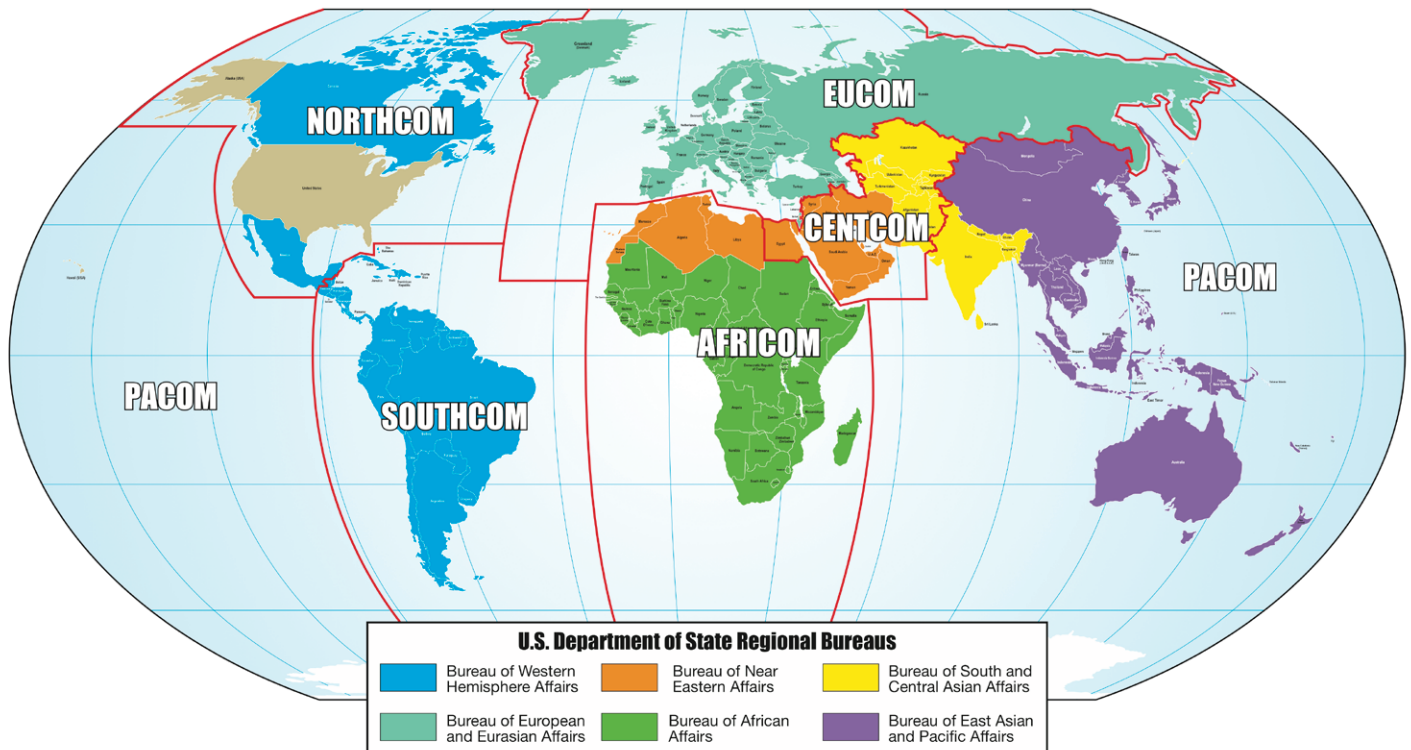
Recalibrating the leadership would help build congressional confidence toward increasing State's resources, enhance the department's interagency role, facilitate integration as interagency authorities are matched up, and ultimately begin a shift toward greater balance between State and Defense. The regional bureau under secretaries would act and be seen as the high-level authorities that the U.S. requires, and likely become viable alternatives to the combatant commanders.

The geographic breakdowns of the State Department and the Defense Department must also be synchronized to facilitate greater government coordination. State's six regional

bureaus – Western Hemisphere, European and Eurasian, Near Eastern, African, South and Central Asian, and East Asian and Pacific – only loosely align with the seven combatant commands (the Pentagon splits the Western Hemisphere into two commands).

There are a few, but significant, differences. For example, the State Department includes North Africa in its Near East Bureau, while Central Command, which covers the Middle East, includes only Egypt among North African countries (Libya, Algeria, and Morocco, among others, fall under the African Command). Another difference: the Near East Bureau's eastern border is Iran, and thus does not include Afghanistan, Pakistan, or the other -stans, which fall under the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs; all those countries fall under Centcom in the Defense Department.

U.S. Department of Defense Commanders' Areas of Responsibility



Note: State of Alaska assigned to NORTHCOM area of responsibility. Forces based in Alaska remain assigned to PACOM.

Source: Department of State

The under secretaries, like the Defense Department's combatant commander, must be career officers. These positions require tremendous depth of experience within the State Department and across agencies and should not be politically appointed.

Some critics opposed to empowering the regional bureaus argue that only the ambassador can serve as the president's personal envoy. Besides implying that the rest of the State Department does not represent the president, the distinction is a historical artifact from a time when communications were slow. Each regional bureau under secretary should be empowered with the same plenipotentiary authority to represent the president that America's ambassadors possess.

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The creation of new regional under secretaries should prompt the reevaluation of other under secretary and assistant secretary offices. Certainly the under secretary for political affairs, to whom the geographic bureaus would no longer report, should be downgraded. There will certainly be a ripple effect as roles and responsibilities are shifted and realigned.

To be clear, a macro-regional design must not result in the elimination of embassies or consular posts, or any other reduction in physical, diplomatic (public or traditional) presence abroad. Some may argue that international postings are redundant in an

interconnected era, but any such drawdown would be a massive blow to our public diplomacy, as studies have shown that connectivity in the virtual world is stronger when reinforced by real-world interactions.³

Climbing the Hill

As with Goldwater-Nichols, Congress will likely need to be involved in any major shake-up of the State Department. But unlike the Pentagon, State has not actively cultivated and engaged key Hill leadership or staffs. The historic lack of communication between State and Congress is emblemized by the fact that State has one congressional liaison office on Capitol Hill (in the basement of a House office building) whereas the Defense Department has eight (four on the Senate side and four on the House side). The relationship between the Defense Department and the Armed Services Committees is substantially more interactive than that of the State Department and the relevant committees. As a result, the State Department is essentially a black box of unknown workings and products, inhibiting the cultivation of a congressional constituency.

Over the decades, Congress has at times been suspicious of the State Department. At the beginning of the Cold War, Congress restricted domestic dissemination of the State Department's public diplomacy products because of concerns over the department's "Communist infiltration and pro-Russian policy" (according to the Democratic chairman of the House Rules Committee in 1946) and the "drones, the loafers, and the incompetents" that comprised its staff (according to the Republican chairman of the House Appropriations Committee in 1947).

Since 9/11, the State Department has done little to earn the confidence of Congress, which

resisted expanding the department until the election of President Obama. The department's own inspector general has found significant systemic failures in many areas, including in its efforts to reorganize its nonproliferation bureau. Under the Bush administration, State's senior leadership abrogated critical responsibilities that were subsequently taken up, if reluctantly and clumsily, by the Defense Department, notably in the areas of public diplomacy but also in reconstruction and development.

The State Department's inaugural Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR), underway now, is a platform not only for changing the country focus but also engaging Congress. The QDDR is modeled on the Defense Department's Quadrennial Defense Review, which examines the Pentagon's strategic capabilities and requirements based on the threats and challenges today and tomorrow. The QDDR should take up the reorganization proposed here.

Realignment will not be easy. It requires the committed support of the president, the secretaries of state and defense, the National Security Council, and Congress. But the potential benefits are considerable. Adjusting the focus of the State Department from country

to region would permit the secretary of state to exercise more effective leadership and oversight over the instruments of power. It's the logical step to take in a new era of stateless challenges, and a demonstration to the world that U.S. power does not always have to wear combat boots.

Matt Armstrong is an advisor and consultant on public diplomacy and strategic communication to the Departments of Defense and State, Congress, NATO and others. He is a principal with Armstrong Strategic Insights Group, LLC, and publishes the blog www.MountainRunner.us.

1 The under secretary for political affairs is the most senior Foreign Service Officer in the State Department and is the third-ranking official in the department, below the Secretary and the Deputy Secretary.

2 In addition to Special Representatives, the new senior advisor for innovation, attached directly to the Secretary's office, should arguably reside within either the under secretary for public diplomacy and public affairs or the under secretary for democracy and global affairs, but understandably does not because of issues of capacity and capability.

3 See Nicholas A. Christakis and James H. Fowler, *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives* (Little, Brown & Company, 2009).

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Progressive Policy Institute
1301 Connecticut Avenue
Suite 450
Washington, DC 20036

Tel 202.525.3926
Fax 202.525.3941
Email info@ppionline.org
www.progressivefix.com