

Commentary: Shut Down the US Combatant Commands

Move Would Cut Redundancy, Aid Diplomacy

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Defense News recently reported on a Pentagon plan to consolidate its six regional commands into four. The proposal would dissolve Africa Command and split it between European and Central Commands, and combine Southern Command and Northern Command. The action would shed thousands of civilian and military positions and help the Defense Department comply with the budget caps squeezing its topline. But consolidation isn't enough. The Pentagon should close all of the commands.

Other Pentagon offices can accomplish the commands' few important functions. The commands have become less accountable alternatives to embassies, predictable sources of threat inflation and insatiable consumers of military resources.

The 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act, an effort to limit the military services' independence, gave the regional commands control over deployed US forces. They plan and manage relations with foreign militaries, humanitarian assistance and war. Pacific Command deals with most of Asia. Central Command handles the Middle East and parts of South Asia, including Afghanistan and Pakistan. European Command is largely an offshoot of NATO's headquarters. Africa, long split by Central and European Commands, got its own command in 2008 — though it still shares European Command's headquarters. Northern Command was created in 2002 to manage the military's homeland defense efforts, and Southern Command handles South America.

There are also functional commands dealing with strategic nuclear weapons, transportation and special operations forces, which we would keep.

There is plenty of room to trim. The regional commands collectively employ more than 15,000 military personnel, civilians and contractors. They are also flag officer magnets. Pacific Command alone has five four-star jobs, plus a full-up platoon of three-, two- and one-star

generals and admirals. Each service also maintains subordinate commands to deal with the combatant commands — an additional bureaucratic layer.

The proposed consolidations are especially sensible. Northern Command is still searching for a mission. The National Guard, the Department of Homeland Security, the intelligence community and state authorities already compete to combat a few terrorists. Southern Command, meanwhile, deals largely with homeland security-related problems such as drugs and illegal immigration. And, with odds of a major war in Europe now minuscule, that region's command has time to plan actions in Africa.

Still, trimming is not enough. There are several reasons to shutter the regional commands.

First, they are redundant. When there is actual fighting to do, we create new commands under three- or four-star officers to manage combat in theater. Nominally, these headquarters are subordinate to the regional commanders, but effectively they report directly to Washington. Such was the case in Korea, Vietnam and Iraq, and still is in Afghanistan. Whatever support the regional commands provide in war could easily be supplied by the Joint Staff.

The Joint Staff can also incorporate the commands' planning functions and regional expertise. There, assessments of threats can be weighed without pressure to give each regional commander his own menace to combat. Military attachés at embassies or the commanders of nearby US forces can manage relations with local militaries.

Second, the commands are essentially lobbies for US involvement in their regions. Their commanders turn threats to regional stability into threats to American security. Their job is to be on watch, not to sound the all clear.

Third, the commands drive up force requirements, and thus costs. Like children drafting Christmas lists, they request troops, ships and future capabilities that others buy. Washington nonetheless treats their vast appetites as outputs of military science. Admirals and congressmen hoping to buy something can usually wave a combatant commander's list of unmet requirements.

Finally, the commands crowd out the civilians assigned to deal with regional issues — ambassadors, US Agency for International Development officials and trade representatives. The commands offer a separate and often competing source of US authority. Few local officials mind having their concerns addressed by a four-star arriving with an entourage on their own transport aircraft. The commander can arrange for a National Guard engineer battalion to build roads or a school, a visit by a Navy hospital ship or Air Force search-and-rescue training. And because all of the gifts tend to come through the local military, they can harm local civilian authority.

Closing down our commands would save far more than their substantial budgets. It would prevent the accumulation of cost-driving force "requirements." It would help US diplomats manage the cacophony of official American voices articulating our regional policy. It would limit our tendency to fear any region that lacks US meddling and might even encourage the idea that the world is not entirely ours to command.

