



Photo by Hank Shiffman

The Pentagon and its environs.

THE UNITED STATES UNIFIED COMMAND PLAN

by Lieutenant Colonel Marcus Fielding, Australian Army

“Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals so that security and liberty may prosper together.”

– Dwight D. Eisenhower,
President of the United States, 1960

Introduction

The United States of America is the only country that divides the globe into five geographically based military commands. Three of these ‘geographic combatant commands’ (GCCs) cover the east, west, and south compass points from the continental United States. The fourth GCC covers the continent of North America for homeland defence and civil support purposes. The fifth GCC encompasses the energy resource rich South-West Asia region.

The four GCCs, other than that covering North America, currently have almost 450,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines allocated or assigned to them – that is, over 30 percent of the total active duty US armed forces.¹ This array of forces represents a significant ‘forward’ presence of US military power throughout the world.² And the Unified Command Plan (UCP) is one of the key strategic documents signed by the President of the United States that establishes and authorizes this presence. The command arrangements that the UCP institutes are significant, and the document, at a scant 17 pages in length, warrants awareness and understanding, particularly given the prevalence of coalition operations friendly powers conduct in concert with the US armed forces.

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Yet today, little is known within coalition military circles about the UCP, and what it means for how coalition forces mesh with those of the US armed forces. In light of the limited awareness about this key American plan, this article will attempt to provide an overview of the UCP's inception and evolution, and how it is applied by the various GCCs. The GCCs are then considered in the broader context of US foreign relations.

Evolution of the Unified Command Plan

In the wake of the Second World War, the resultant distribution of US armed forces around the world, coupled with recognition of the need for unified effort between services, precipitated a requirement for the Pentagon to recast the delineation and command of wartime theaters – principally in Europe and the western Pacific. In 1946, the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued the first version of the UCP,³ establishing seven geographically based unified combatant commands.⁴ While two of these commands were established for occupation forces (European Command and Far East Command in Japan) the remainder foreshadowed the need to defend and protect the US against emerging Soviet power.⁵

To meet evolving requirements, the UCP has been revised and re-issued 20 times since 1946. Over the course of these revisions, the original seven relatively small, geographically-based, unified commands have evolved into five that are now contiguous, and they cover the face of the globe.⁶

While a number of historical and geo-strategic circumstances have shaped the evolution of the UCP, it is only since the enactment of the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 that the UCP has been driven formally by directives found in higher policy documents. These include the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, the National Military Strategy, and the Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan.⁷

Given a growing library of strategic policy documents, the UCP has become a lesser known document over time, but its underlying significance should not be ignored, as it represents the organizational 'ways' that the US Department of Defense (DoD) seeks to achieve national strategic 'ends'. Beyond the formal policy documents, internal DoD influences have also shaped the evolution

of the UCP. For instance, issues such as competing service interests, the degree of authority entrusted to combatant commanders, debates on geographic versus functional organization, and concerns over concentrating power in too few commands have all affected the evolution of the UCP.

Unified Combatant Commands Today

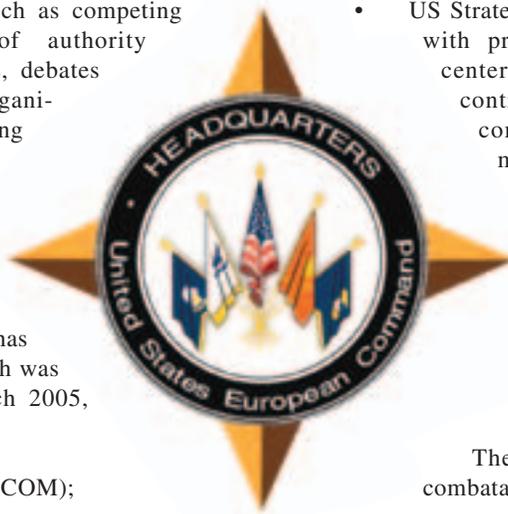
The net effect of all these factors has resulted in the current UCP, which was signed by the President on 1 March 2005, designating the following five GCCs:

- US Northern Command (NORTHCOM);
- US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM);
- US European Command (EUCOM);
- US Central Command (CENTCOM); and
- US Pacific Command (PACOM).⁸

The global coverage of the five GCC areas of responsibility reflects the contemporary reality that the US armed forces have a global presence that affects how and where the coalition forces deploy, and, frequently, how they operate as well. After all, the United States has stationed or deployed an average of over 20 percent of its active duty forces in foreign lands over the last 50 years. Indeed, in 2004, the United States had a uniformed military presence in over 140 countries.^{9,10}

In addition to the GCCs, since the mid-1980s, the UCP has also progressively designated 'functional' combatant commands that are required to support the GCCs, organizing capabilities that are more efficiently and effectively managed centrally. In the 2002 UCP, the following functional combatant commands are designated:

- US Transportation Command (TRANSCOM) – tasked with providing strategic air, land, and sea transportation to the Department of Defense;
- US Special Operations Command (SOCOM) – tasked with commanding all active and reserve special operations forces, US Army psychological operations, and civil affairs forces. US Special Operations Command has also been designated as the supported combatant command for the global war on terrorism;¹¹



- US Strategic Command (STRATCOM) – tasked with providing the command and control center for US strategic forces, and it controls military space operations, computer network operations, information operations, strategic warning and intelligence assessments, as well as global strategic planning; and

- US Joint Forces Command (JFCOM) – responsible for transformation, experimentation, joint training, interoperability, and force provision.¹²

The responsibilities assigned to the combatant commanders are as follows:

- deterring attacks against the US, its territories, possessions, and bases, and employing appropriate force should deterrence fail;
- carrying out assigned missions and tasks;
- assigning tasks to, and directing coordination among, the combatant command's subordinate commands, to ensure unified action in the accomplishment of the combatant commander's assigned missions;



- planning for and executing military operations as directed by the President or Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) in support of the National Military Strategy; and

- maintaining the security of, and carrying out, force protection responsibilities for the command, including assigned or attached commands, forces, and assets.

Geographic combatant commanders are responsible within their Areas of Responsibility (AOR) for a range of additional tasks including the following:

- planning, and, as appropriate, conducting the evacuation and protection of US citizens and nationals and designated other persons, and reviewing emergency action plans within the commander's geographic AOR;
- providing for US military representation to international and US national agencies, unless otherwise directed by the SECDEF;
- providing the single point of contact on military matters within the AOR;

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- providing military assessments of security assistance programs;
- ensuring coordination of regional security assistance matters with affected chiefs of US diplomatic missions;
- carrying out advisory, planning, and implementing responsibilities relating to security assistance within the commander's assigned security assistance area;
- assuming combatant command, if necessary, within the commander's general geographic AOR, or as directed by the SECDEF;
- when directed by the SECDEF, commanding US forces conducting peace or humanitarian relief operations within the AOR;
- providing the single DoD point of contact within the AOR for countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction;
- exercising force protection responsibilities within the AOR; and
- planning and conducting military security cooperation activities within the assigned AOR.¹³



Engagement seeks to build better security relations with the countries in the GCC AOR, endeavoring to build trust and habits of cooperation.¹⁷ 'Security cooperation' is the DoD term used to describe how a GCC engages with foreign armed forces. Security cooperation includes a series of activities with foreign armed forces, intended to (1) improve information exchange and intelligence to help develop a common threat assessment; (2) build defence relationships that promote specific US security interests; (3) develop allied and friendly military capabilities for self-defence and multi-national operations; and (4) provide US forces with peacetime and contingency access to a host nation.¹⁸

Under the construct of security cooperation, GCCs develop theater security cooperation plans that synchronize a wide range of activities, including:

- combined training, exercises, education and experimentation;
- conferences, seminars and visits;
- humanitarian assistance; and
- support for regional security studies centers from two of the GCCs.¹⁹

With such an extensive range of responsibilities that often involve high-level interaction, geographic combatant commanders, not surprisingly, report directly to the SECDEF and to the President. They are also required to provide testimony or 'posture statements' annually to the House and to the Senate Armed Services Committee of Congress.¹⁴ The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is required to conduct a biennial review of the UCP to examine the missions, responsibilities (including geographic boundaries), and force structures of each unified combatant command.

Applying the Unified Command Plan in the Geographic Combatant Commands

With the authority vested in them by the UCP, the geographic combatant commanders consider a raft of US strategic policy documents, as well as a host of other factors to derive theater strategies for their Area of Responsibility. This strategy definition process is undertaken, cognizant of other instruments of US national power – particularly diplomatic and economic instruments. To help ensure a successful process, each GCC has an appointed foreign policy advisor from the US Department of State (DoS) to assist in integrating the theater strategy with the broader US foreign policy. The GCC theater strategies that emerge from this process are classified, but some aspects of them are released into the public domain.¹⁵ A GCC theater strategy typically encompasses the management of US military resources assigned to the unified combatant command, as well as 'engagement' with other nations in the AOR.¹⁶

Additionally, within the rubric of security cooperation is a group of 'security assistance' programs, by which the US provides defence articles, military training, and other defence-related services by grant, loan, credit, or cash sales in furtherance of national policies and objectives.²⁰ Most US diplomatic missions include a DoD security assistance team that manages the program, and which is responsible to both the US ambassador and the geographic combatant commander.²¹

In summary, with the authority vested in them by the government-mandated UCP, geographic combatant commanders consider a range of inputs to derive a theater strategy and a theater security cooperation plan. These two products are the principal drivers for the day-to-day activities the GCCs conduct, in order to support the US national strategic goal of peaceful and cooperative relations with other nations.

Geographic Combatant Commands in the Broader Context of US Foreign Relations

In developing their theater security cooperation plans and activities, the GCCs must remain cognizant of the role that US military power plays within the broader context of US foreign policy. US national power is derived from a wide range of sources, but in application, it distills into diplomatic, economic, and military instruments. The US Department of State, and its collection of diplomatic missions throughout the world, are the primary means by which the United States relates to and engages with other nations.

With the DoS role in mind, the UCP requires the geographic combatant commanders to coordinate their efforts with the heads of the US diplomatic missions in the countries contained within their AOR. The sheer size of the five GCC AORs, however, means that this coordination requirement can be daunting. For example, the US Pacific Command (PACOM) AOR includes 43 foreign countries – of which 37 have an accredited US diplomatic mission or US ambassador.

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The GCC’s task to coordinate their actions with the respective diplomatic missions is complicated by the fact that their AORs do not align with the geographic regions by which the DoS and the National Security Council are organized.²² These different geographic boundaries, and the resultant organizational structures, present the GCCs with significant challenges as they seek to carry out their complicated and expansive mandates.²³ It is between these and other organizational boundaries – such as national borders – that transnational security threats and entities like al Qaeda sometimes find sanctuary.²⁴ For coalition partners having to work with these large and complex organizations, it is important to appreciate these organizational differences.

Indeed, the degree of difficulty in coordinating regional efforts between DoS and the GCCs is complicated even further by the myriad of other US government ‘players.’ The US DoS estimates that more than 30 separate US government agencies operate outside the US around the world. The US diplomatic missions host these agencies, but the degree of coordination typically depends upon the informal relationships developed. Even within DoD, there is scope for friction, as well as the need for significant coordination. For instance, almost all US diplomatic missions have an assigned defence attaché, who is responsible, not to the GCC, but to the Defense Intelligence Agency. While a degree of informal liaison and coordination occurs between the defence attaché and the GCC, their relationship is not formalized, and the defence attaché is not able to represent the geographic combatant commander within the US diplomatic

“The US diplomatic missions host these agencies, but the degree of coordination typically depends upon the informal relationships developed.”

mission.²⁵ For coalition planners seeking to interact with the GCCs or the defence attachés, it is important to grasp this distinction.

In light of the concerns that emerge from such complicated arrangements, some commentators argue that the US DoD organizational structure is better placed to work transnational and multilateral security issues, and that the GCCs should become regional interagency commands.²⁶ Indeed, the US DoD is already establishing joint interagency coordination groups at each GCC.²⁷ Notwithstanding the challenges faced and the difficulties experienced in managing the interagency and interdepartmental relations, the UCP and the GCC structure is likely to remain a feature of the US DoD organizational landscape for some time to come. For potential coalition partners, an understanding of these issues is crucial in order to be able to work effectively with American allies in an interagency environment.

Conclusions

The UCP has been the framework against which America’s Department of Defense has arrayed and commanded forces around the globe for nearly 60 years, and it authorizes the ‘ways’ that the US DoD seeks to achieve US national strategic ‘ends’. The increasing prevalence of joint, multinational, and interagency operations that the GCCs grapple with on a routine basis point to the need for America’s allies and potential coalition partners to have a greater understanding of how the GCCs are organized, and where they fit into the broader context of US foreign relations. Indeed, as the US seeks to engage further with other nations on a wide range of issues related to security and the global war on terrorism, those seeking to work with US agencies need to have a sound appreciation of how those US departments and agencies are organized, and how they interact. For potential coalition partners, that means understanding the GCCs and the document that establishes them, and from which they draw their authority – the Unified Command Plan.



NOTES

1. This figure includes approximately 170,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines assigned to *Operation Iraqi Freedom*. Based upon figures from the US Department of Defense, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports. At <<http://www.dior.whs.mil/diorhome.htm>>, accessed 2 February 2005.
2. For a historical analysis of US troop presence around the world between 1950 and 2000, see T.Kane, *Global U.S. Troop Deployment, 1950-2003*, at <<http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/cda04-11.cfm>>, accessed 11 March 2005.
3. The first iteration of the UCP was actually entitled the ‘Outline Command Plan.’
4. A unified combatant command is a military command which has broad, continuing missions, and which is composed of forces from two or more military departments.
5. The commands were European Command, Pacific Command, Far East Command, Atlantic Command, Caribbean Command, Alaskan Command, and Northeast Command. See Ronald H. Cole, Walter S. Poole, James F. Schnabel, Robert J. Watson, and Willard J. Webb, *The History of the Unified Command Plan 1946-1993*, (Washington D.C: Joint History Office, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1995), pp 11-13.
6. This evolution and expansion is attributed broadly to the following nine factors:
 - the effort to contain the spread of communism;
 - the perceived requirement to fill the influence vacuum, resulting from the defeat of the USSR, as the source of communist ideological influence;
 - responses to significant events around the world;

- the diversification of perceived threats to national security;
 - the effect of globalization and efforts to counter transnational threats, such as drug trafficking and piracy;
 - the progressive reduction of available US armed forces – particularly since the mid-1970s;
 - the increased capability to strategically project force enabled by advances in technology;
 - the requirement to ensure access to energy resources – particularly in South-West Asia; and
 - the increasing ability of non-state actors to use force to achieve their objectives, and the increased effort to prosecute the global war on terrorism.
7. The first National Security Strategy was issued in 1987, and the most recent version is dated 2002. The first National Defense Strategy was signed by SECDEF on 1 March 2005. The first National Military Strategy was published in 1992, and the most recent version was signed in 2004, but it has not been officially released. The Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan is a classified document that provides planning guidance to the combatant commanders and to the Service Chiefs in order to accomplish tasks and missions, based upon current military capabilities.
 8. US Northern Command was established in 2002. US Southern Command was established in 1948, but it was originally named Caribbean Command. US European Command was established in 1952. US Central Command was established in 1983, but it can trace its lineage to Naval Forces Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean Command, established in 1952, Strike Command, established in 1962, Readiness Command established in 1972, and the Rapidly Deployable Joint Task Force, established in 1980. US Pacific Command was established in 1947, and it absorbed the original Far East Command in 1957. The open source web sites for each of these geographic combatant commands is available through <http://www.defenselink.mil/>
 9. See T. Kane, Global U.S. Troop Deployment, 1950-2003, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/cda04-11.cfm>, accessed 11 March 2005.
 10. Based upon figures from the US Department of Defense, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports. At <http://www.dior.whs.mil/diorhome.htm>, accessed 2 February 2005.
 11. See article at <http://usinfo.state.gov/cgi-bin/washfile/display.pl?p=/products/washfile/geog/nea/iraq&f=03010701.prq&t=/products/washfile/newsitem.shtml>, accessed 24 February 2005.
 12. US Transportation Command was established in 1986. US Special Operations Command was established in 1987. US Strategic Command was established in 1992, but can trace its lineage to Strategic Air Command, established in 1946, Alaskan Command, established in 1947, Continental Air Defense Command, established in 1954, North American Air Defence Command, established in 1957, Aerospace Defense Command, established in 1975, and Space Command, established in 1985. US Joint Forces Command was established in 1999, but can trace its lineage to Atlantic Command, established in 1947, which absorbed North East Command, established in 1956, and America Command, established in 1993. The open source web sites for each of these functional combatant commands is available through <http://www.defenselink.mil/>.
 13. President of the United States, *Unified Command Plan 1 March 2005*, The White House, Washington D.C.
 14. These testimonies are largely available at <http://armed-services.senate.gov/>. The testimony of the Commander European Command, given on 1 March 2005, is available at <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2005/March/Jones%2003-01-05.pdf>. The testimony of the Commander of Pacific Command to the Senate Armed Services Committee of Congress in 2004 is available at <http://www.pacom.mil/speeches/sst2004/040923senate.shtml>
 15. Most of the five GCCs currently have placed versions or elements of their regional strategies into the public domain on their websites. US Central Command's theater strategy is available at <http://www.centcom.mil/aboutus/strategy.htm>, US Pacific Command's regional strategy, termed a 'strategic concept,' is available at <http://www.pacom.mil/about/pacom.shtml>, US European Command's regional strategy is available at <http://www.eucom.mil/Command/index.htm?http://www.eucom.mil/Command/Strategy/strategy.htm&2>, and US Southern Command's theater strategy is available at <http://www.southcom.mil/home/>.
 16. Some pundits have described military engagement as 'showing off your sticks and feeding them carrots.'
 17. The extant reference for GCCs to conduct 'Theater Engagement Planning' is dated 31 May 2000, and it is available at http://www.dtic.mil/cjcs_directives/cdata/unlimit/m311301.pdf.
 18. Security cooperation is formally defined as 'All DoD interactions with foreign defense establishments to build defense relationships that promote specific US security interests, develop allied and friendly military capabilities for self-defense and multinational operations, and provide US forces with peacetime and contingency access to a host nation.' Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 1-02 Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, accessed at <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/index.html> on 14 Feb 2005, 14 February 2005.
 19. US European Command supports the Marshall Center in Oberammergau, Germany, and US Pacific Command supports the Asia-Pacific Center of Security Studies in Honolulu, Hawaii.
 20. Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 1-02 Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, accessed at <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/index.html> on 14 Feb 2005, 14 February 2005.
 21. Security Assistance programs administered by the US Department of Defense include: Foreign Military Sales and Foreign Military Construction Services (approximately USD 10-12 billion annually); Foreign Military Financing Program (approximately USD 4-5 billion annually with the majority going to Israel and Egypt); Leased Defense Articles; Excess Defense Articles; International Military Education and Training (approximately USD 90 million annually); and Directed Drawdown. Other programs administered by the US Department of State include: Economic Support Funds (approximately USD 2 billion annually); Peace Keeping Operations (approximately USD 90 million annually); International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement; Nonproliferation, Anti-terrorism, De-mining, and Related Programs (approximately USD 350 million annually); and Commercial Export Sales Licensed Under the Arms Export Control Act. Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), *Security Assistance Management Manual*, Department of Defense 5105.38-M, dated 3 October 2003, at <http://www.dsca.mil/samm/Chapter%201%20Security%20Assistance%20Overview%20change%201.pdf>, accessed 14 February 2005.
 22. The US Department of State's delineation of regions is available at <http://www.state.gov/countries/>. These geographic regions are also the basis upon which the regional policy coordination committees of the US National Security Council are organized.
 23. In particular, in contrast to the Department of State's regional boundaries, GCC AOR boundaries exist between Israel and the Arab countries, and between India and Pakistan. Although increasing the coordination liability between the Departments of State and Defense, these boundaries appear to be a deliberate way to build some flexibility into the UCP. If major conflicts were to occur in either of those two potential flashpoints, a relatively minor AOR boundary adjustment could allow the affected countries to be incorporated into the US Central Command AOR, or into the US European Command or US Pacific Command AORs, depending upon the capacity of each Command to manage the conflict at the time. This rationale was touched upon in D. Priest, *The Mission: Waging War and Keeping Peace with America's Military*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), p 73. An alternative rationale is that Israel is more politically, militarily, and culturally aligned with Europe. See <http://www.defenselink.mil/specials/unifiedcommand/change.html>, accessed 10 March 2005.
 24. Physical and legal jurisdictional boundaries that have been created include those between nation states, and within each nation state there have been created a plethora of organizational boundaries. The main thrust of allied coalition efforts against transnational security threats is arguably to overcome and to transcend these boundaries. The transnational criminals or terrorists are able to exploit the results of globalization, and have developed a relative advantage in the organizational/functional domain.
 25. In some foreign countries, a US defence representative is appointed with seniority over the defence attaché. This is the case in Japan, wherein the Commander US Forces Japan is the US Defense Representative.
 26. See, for example, J. Carafano, Missions, Responsibilities, and Geography: Rethinking How the Pentagon Commands the World, accessed at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/bg1792.cfm>, 23 February 2005.
 27. See http://www.jfcom.mil/about/fact_jiacg.htm, or <http://www.ndu.edu/ITEA/storage/600/Fact%20Sheet%20JIACG%20-%20Jan%2005.pdf>, accessed 16 March 2005.