



The Unified Combatant Command System

Centerpiece of the 1986 U.S. Armed Forces Reforms

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Abstract: This article highlights the pivotal nature of the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 regarding reforms made in the armed forces of the United States. The unified combatant command system is often seen as the centerpiece of these reforms. The goal of this study is to examine whether the unified combatant command system, which consists of 11 Joint combatant commands within the U.S. Department of Defense, indeed constitutes the centerpiece of these reforms. To fully answer this research question, the study presented here first examines the modern reforms of the U.S. armed forces to provide a solid foundation for subsequent research. It will be concluded that Goldwater-Nichols was the reform most directly relevant to this study. The majority of the article is then devoted to an examination of the 11 combatant commands, identifying how each contributes to the achievement of the goals laid out by Goldwater-Nichols. The author concludes that these 11 unified combatant commands

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constitute the centerpiece of, and provide the most essential toolset for, the achievement of Goldwater-Nichols.

Keywords: unified combatant commands, Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, military reform, combatant commanders, geographical combatant command, functional combatant command

This article seeks to answer the question of whether the unified combatant command system is the centerpiece of the reforms made by the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 to the U.S. armed forces, the Department of Defense (DOD), and military affairs. These reforms were intended to foster a strong Joint function of the U.S. armed forces to ensure their effectiveness in combat and other operational roles. Therefore, the primary goal of the study presented here is to find out whether the unified combatant command system is the fulcrum of this Joint function. This author's desire to focus on this study was spurred by previous studies that directly or relatedly focused on reforms within the U.S. armed forces and the general national security system of the United States.¹

At present, there are 11 unified combatant commands within the DOD:

- U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM)
- U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM)
- U.S. European Command (USEUCOM)
- U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM)
- U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM)
- U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM)

- U.S. Space Command (USSPACECOM)
- U.S. Cyber Command (USCYBERCOM)
- U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM)
- U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM)
- U.S. Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM)

The first seven of these are geographical combatant commands, each of which focuses on a geographic area of the world and has responsibility for U.S. military forces in that area. The latter four are functional combatant commands, which focus on particular military functions.²

Literature Review

This study is situated within the fields of military and security studies, the military system of the United States, and the general national security system of the United States. For analytic ease and convenience, the literature that informs and anchors this study is divided into five types: general security issues, general military issues, U.S. national security decision-making systems and theories, U.S. military Service branches and unified combatant commands, and the dynamics and frameworks of those combatant commands.

General Security Issues

Understanding the literature on international security issues is very important for this study. When there is a serious security breakdown in another country or in another region of the world, U.S. military forces operating under a unified combatant command may be sent to protect U.S.

national interests and/or international peace. An article by Luke Abbs in the *Journal of Global Security Studies* analyzes the dynamics and impacts of ethnic exclusions and ethnic riots. These kinds of dynamics can morph into irredentism and involve neighboring countries. Consequently, a problem in one country can quickly become an issue involving more than one country. This sort of development increases the possibility of U.S. forces being sent to that part of the world.³ Additional articles in the *Journal of Global Security Studies* by Deborah Avant et al. and Fiona B. Adamson focus on the need for the field of security studies to be made more accessible to and inclusive of more people, in order to make the field more relevant to all.⁴

To offer another example of a general security issue, a Congressional Research Service (CRS) report details the serious problem that *deepfakes* pose to international security. Deepfakes are image files, audio files, video files, and other digital products that are produced by artificial intelligence and which appear to be so real that it is hard to know that they are fake. The existence of deepfakes has the potential to create international conflicts and threaten international security.⁵ Another CRS report highlights the impacts on international security of the renewed great power struggles among the United States, China, and Russia.⁶ Finally, an article by this author in the *Review of Policy Research* focuses on how knowledge in the academic discipline of management can be used to advance the effectiveness of homeland security and the field of homeland security studies.⁷ In addition to these examples, the study presented here is also informed by sources that focus on diplomatic and security processes.⁸

General Military Issues

The second type of literature that informs this study focuses on general military issues. An article by Douglas B. Atkinson, Joshua Jackson, and George W. Williford in the *Journal of Global Security Studies* analyzes how a military rivalry, when placed in a framework of uncertainty, is likely to result in military threats.⁹ The book *Why Nations Act: Theoretical Perspectives for Comparative Foreign Policy Studies* by Maurice A. East, Stephen A. Salmore, and Charles F. Hermann examines the factors that lead countries to take military or nonmilitary action against other countries.¹⁰ An elaborate work on U.S. special operations forces is provided by Jim Frederick in *Special Ops: The Hidden World of America's Toughest Warriors*.¹¹

The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States is an important document regarding U.S. national security. It focuses on the 11 September 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks against the United States and makes recommendations to ensure that such attacks never occur again.¹² A recent study by the U.S. General Accountability Office focusing on military readiness in the United States found that while there was improvement in military readiness between 2017 and 2019, the improvements were uneven among the various Service branches.¹³ The functions and structures of the North American Aerospace Defense Command, which is in charge of the air and space defense of North America, are the focus of numerous publications and websites.¹⁴ Finally, the book *U.S. Defense Politics: The Origins of Security Policy* by Harvey M. Sapolsky, Eugene Gholz, and Caitlin Talmadge offers immensely comprehensive analysis and knowledge about U.S. defense policies and provides a solid knowledge about the military system of the United States.¹⁵

U.S. National Security Decision-Making Systems and Theories

The third type of literature that informs this study focuses on U.S. national security decision-making system and theories. This literature focuses on the highest level of decision making in the White House that impacts where and when U.S. forces are deployed to different parts of the world. The book *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* by Graham T. Allison and Philip Zelikow provides some of the most prominent theoretical models of how national security policies are made at the highest levels in the U.S. government.¹⁶ The functions and structures of the White House Situation Room, as well as its impact on national security decision making, are excellently analyzed by Michael K. Bohn in *Nerve Center: Inside the White House Situation Room*.¹⁷ A recent CRS report focuses on the U.S. National Security Council (NSC) system during the current administration of President Joseph R. Biden Jr.¹⁸

The books *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* by Irving L. Janis and *Groupthink or Deadlock: When Do Leaders Learn from Their Advisors?* by Paul A. Kowert explain how the phenomenon of groupthink can impact the decision-making processes of U.S presidents and their advisers and result in inadequate national security decisions.¹⁹ The book *Presidential Leadership: Politics and Policymaking* by George C. Edwards III and Stephen J. Wayne highlights presidential leadership in national security policy.²⁰ The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff's 2018 *National Military Strategy* is one example of the documents that provide parameters for decision makers dealing with national security policy.²¹

The book *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger* by Bruce Kuklick illustrates how contributions by intellectuals to U.S. national security policy decision making may be uneven.²² The role of the theory of bureaucratic politics in the national security policy decision-making system is provided by Morton H. Halperin in *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*.²³ Finally, *Decisions of the Highest Order: Perspectives on the National Security Council* by Karl F. Inderfurth and Loch K. Johnson provides an in-depth analysis of the national security policy decision-making process at the highest levels of the NSC system.²⁴

U.S. Military Service Branches and Unified Combatant Commands

The functions, structures, and dynamics of the U.S. military Service branches (the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Space Force, and Coast Guard) are presented best by the federal government-run websites for each respective Service and thoroughly analyzed by a host of scholarly and popular publications drawing from both primary- and secondary-source research.²⁵ In addition, many other publications and websites also analyze these functions, structures, and dynamics to illustrate connections between the military Service branches and the United States' various unified combatant commands.²⁶

Dynamics and Frameworks of Unified Combatant Commands

Finally, there is also literature that focuses on the dynamics and frameworks of the unified combatant commands. The DOD's website explains the roles, structures, and areas of responsibility or military functions of all 11 combatant commands.²⁷ The geographical combatant commands are the

focus of the book *Combatant Commands: Origins, Structures, and Engagements* by Cynthia Watson, which offers an elaborate analysis of the historical origins, structure and organization, areas of responsibilities, military achievements, and impacts on U.S. national security of the various combatant commands.²⁸ A CRS report provides important knowledge about the role and impact of the Unified Command Plan, especially in terms of the design and development of the unified combatant commands.²⁹

Three works—*Producing Joint Qualified Officers* by Paul W. Mayberry, William H. Waggy II, and Anthony Lawrence; the Joint Chiefs of Staff's *Joint Officer Management Program Procedures*; and the CRS report *Goldwater-Nichols and the Evolution of Officer Joint Professional Military Education (JPME)*—focus on the education and training of military officers to help them fit into the joint military structure of the unified combatant commands.³⁰ Additional studies by this author analyze various reforms of the U.S. armed forces, including Goldwater-Nichols, as well as subnational entities in the United States, such as the individual states themselves.³¹ Sociopolitical dynamics and geography cause some states to become more essential in the architecture of the armed forces of the country. For an example, 3 of the 11 U.S. combatant commands have their headquarters in Florida: USCENTCOM and USSOCOM at MacDill Air Force Base and USSOUTHCOM in the city of Doral.

The Joint History Office book *History of the Unified Command Plan, 1946–2012* provides a comprehensive history of the Unified Command Plan and the combatant commands, detailing their historical roots, the changes that affected them over the years, and their numerous roles and impacts on U.S. national security.³² An article by Brent French in *Joint Force Quarterly*

focuses on the building of a Joint capacity in the Reserve component of the U.S. armed forces.³³ There are also two innovative CRS reports that use high technology knowledge generated in California's Silicon Valley to imagine how one could connect all the sensors of all the military Services into a single network. The goal of these studies is the development of a Joint network system that can quickly decide which Service's systems, resources, and capabilities would be best suited for a particular military operation or activity.³⁴

Reforms: Background, Structures, and Goals

World War II provided some of the first seeds for the future drive toward reforming the U.S. defense establishment and creating Jointness among the military Services. During the war, U.S. military forces fought in Europe, the Pacific, and other parts of the world, which meant that the Services had no choice but accept some linkages between them. According to Sapolsky, Gholz, and Talmadge, "World War II forced a closer collaboration between the armed services than had existed previously, in large part because of the war's global scope and great intensity. . . . There were invasions to coordinate, priorities to agree upon, and scarce resources to divide."³⁵ The reforms that came after the end of the war were continuously improved and increased, stemming from sources within the government as well as from think tanks and intellectuals who provided new ideas for the armed forces. Intellectuals also provided advisory inputs for U.S. leaders making decisions regarding national security policy through the NSC system.³⁶

The U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983 served as the immediate impetus for the reforms of Goldwater-Nichols. Though the United States

achieved its military goals in Grenada, many U.S. policy makers were not satisfied with level of Jointness achieved by the various Services involved. In the past, similar dissatisfaction had been expressed about U.S. military operations during the Vietnam War.³⁷

To focus on the key goal of this study—to discover whether the unified combatant command system is the centerpiece of the U.S. military reforms made by Goldwater-Nichols—it is essential to review the relevant reforms that impacted and were impacted by the act. This section will examine the background that led to these reforms, the main structures of the reforms, and the goals and policy actions of the reforms. These reforms affected the general U.S. national security system as well as the nation's military Services.

The National Security Act of 1947

The first of these relevant reforms was the National Security Act of 1947.³⁸ The principal factor that necessitated the enactment of this act was the nature of the organization and function of the U.S. armed forces prior to 1947. Before then, the United States had two separate cabinet-level departments handling military affairs: the Department of War, which included the U.S. Army (including the Army Air Forces), and the Department of the Navy, which included the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps. Consequently, the United States did not have a single military establishment in charge of all branches of the Armed Services, which created serious problems in the coordination of military affairs. These problems had been especially glaring during World War II.³⁹

The National Security Act of 1947 created the National Military Establishment (NME), which merged the Department of War (renamed the Department of the Army), the Department of the Navy, and a newly created Department of the Air Force (with an independent U.S. Air Force) into a single department headed by a U.S. secretary of defense. The act also created the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the NSC to provide intelligence and national security advice, respectively, to the president, who serves as commander in chief of the U.S. armed forces. The NME was renamed the Department of Defense (DOD) in 1949.

One goal of the National Security Act of 1947 was to provide a single point of control and coordination for all military affairs of the United States. It achieved that goal by creating one military establishment consisting of three military departments (the Departments of the Army, Navy, and Air Force) and four Service branches (the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force). As a result, the president was now able to oversee military affairs in a single organization, and military affairs became more coordinated through the DOD. The creation of CIA and the NSC also helped create a more comprehensive and streamlined national security system that became vital during the Cold War era that emerged soon after the end of World War II. The DOD, CIA, and NSC were important instruments that helped the United States face the threats and dangers that were posed by the Soviet Union-led Communist bloc.⁴⁰

The Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986

Although the National Security Act of 1947 created a single organization for military affairs and made it easier for the president and the other national

leaders to coordinate military matters, the establishment of the DOD did not solve every problem. Intense inter-Service rivalries—as well as intra-Service rivalries among various combat and noncombat units and commands—continued to be a challenge that hampered optimal effectiveness and the efficiency of the U.S. armed forces. These issues were seen to contribute significantly to the failure of the Vietnam War; the *Mayaguez* incident in May 1975; the failed mission to rescue U.S. hostages in Iran in April 1980; the bombings of the Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, in October 1983; the invasion of Grenada in October 1983; and the ill-fated Navy air attack in Lebanon in December 1983.⁴¹

In 1982, U.S. Air Force general David C. Jones, who was serving as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, declared that reforms in the military were needed.⁴² Though the United States succeeded in its goals during the invasion of Grenada in 1983, the operation exposed serious military problems created by intense rivalries and a near-total lack of communication, coordination, and cooperation among the among the Services. This resulted in unnecessary casualties, delays, endangerments, and mishaps during the invasion. These issues and others like them ultimately led to Congress enacting Goldwater-Nichols in 1986.⁴³

One of the main structural changes made by Goldwater-Nichols was that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff became greatly strengthened as “head of the military and advisor to the President.” Whereas previously the chairman and the four Service chiefs offered consensus military advice to the present, the chairman was now the sole military advisor to the president and was required to “inform the President only of dissenting service chief opinion.”⁴⁴ The power and position of the chairman as the

“preeminent advisor to the president on military affairs” was further increased through the creation of the position of vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a Joint Staff by Goldwater-Nichols.⁴⁵

Goldwater-Nichols also greatly increased the powers and positions of the four-star generals and admirals who served as commanders of unified combatant commands. While combatant commanders were previously required to report to the chief of their respective Service branch, Goldwater-Nichols had them report directly to the secretary of defense and the president, usually through the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The act also stressed the significance of Joint service by giving combatant commanders “the authority and power to call up and deploy forces from the different services” and making Joint service “mandatory for all officers who wished to be promoted to general [or admiral].”⁴⁶

Joint service among the four Service branches has greatly increased due to Goldwater-Nichols. Organizational culture that promotes Jointness has also improved, due largely to the fact that “the military subculture also is incorporating more of a joint orientation.”⁴⁷ According to Jerel A. Rosati and James M. Scott in *The Politics of United States Foreign Policy*, “All senior officers are now expected to complete at least two years of ‘Joint Duty,’” and many have “the opportunity to attend a war college of another service.”⁴⁸

Goldwater-Nichols greatly altered the U.S. military. Before the act was signed into law, the four military Services tended to operate autonomously. Each of the Service branches preferred to create their own individual doctrines, develop and acquire their own weapon systems, plan for wars, make provisions for war support actions, and fight wars. Goldwater-Nichols changed these mindsets and ways of doing things. The drive toward

Jointness resulted in numerous Service bases being shared with units of other military branches and the names of those bases being changed to reflect their Joint use.

On the whole, Goldwater-Nichols has had a positive impact on the U.S. armed forces. It has been noted that the act “created joint commands for operations in the field, the Unified Command Plan.” The Services “organize, train, and equip their people and units to perform their missions” and then “assign personnel and units to the joint combatant commander.” It has also been noted that Goldwater-Nichols “required officers to serve tours outside of their service in order to win promotion.” Due to this and other changes, “the culture of the Defense Department was transformed, its collective mind-set moved from service-specific to ‘joint’, and its operations became more integrated.”⁴⁹

The Homeland Security Act of 2002

Another major reform that followed Goldwater-Nichols was the Homeland Security Act (HSA) of 2002.⁵⁰ The chief factor that led to the creation of this act was the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States. The HSA created the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which brought 22 federal agencies and units together to better protect the United States from the threat of terrorism. This action “represented the most ambitious effort to reorganize and expand the federal government in the area of foreign policy” since the National Security Act of 1947.⁵¹

The Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004

Following the HSA was the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act (IRTPA) of 2004.⁵² Like the HSA, the IRTPA was created in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It mainly focused on the U.S. intelligence community, offering structural changes to help intelligence organizations better cooperate, coordinate, communicate, and work as a team. These reforms were intended to develop more Jointness, as had happened positively in the DOD. This included the creation of the cabinet-level position of director of national intelligence, the establishment of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), and the founding of other intelligence organs and provisions. The director of national intelligence was tasked with coordinating all the organizations within the U.S. intelligence community.⁵³ In the previous arrangement, the director of the CIA had been known as the director of central intelligence, overseeing both the CIA and the whole U.S. intelligence community, which often created conflicts.⁵⁴ The creation of the position of director of national intelligence eliminated that problem, since the director of national intelligence does not also head a specific intelligence organization. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) includes the NCTC as well as other intelligence units.

Concluding Thoughts

The analyses of the National Security Act, the HSA, and the IRTPA that have been conducted in this section of the article are vital to this study. All three reforms, together with Goldwater-Nichols, are very closely related, since they impact the national security system of the United States, of which the armed forces constitute a major component. This section has provided

information about recent reforms to U.S. military affairs and the general national security of the United States.

As can be discerned from examining these reforms, not all are immediately relevant to the goal of this study. The National Security Act achieved its goal of creating one military establishment with the DOD. The HSA and IRTPA mostly focused on reorganizing U.S. law enforcement agencies and intelligence organizations for better protection against terrorism. Therefore, Goldwater-Nichols, which focused on promoting Joint actions among the military Services and greatly strengthened the unified combatant commands, remains the reform that is most directly relevant to this study. The remainder of this article will focus predominantly on the 11 unified combatant commands of the United States.

The Unified Combatant Commands

U.S. Indo-Pacific Command

The geographical combatant command USINDOPACOM was established in 1947 and has its headquarters at Camp H. M. Smith, Hawaii. Its area of responsibility extends from about 322 kilometers (km) off the west coast of the United States, covers the waters and countries of the Pacific Ocean and a significant portion of the Indian Ocean, and includes countries in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, as well as Australia and New Zealand. Like each of the 11 combatant commands, USINDOPACOM is headed by a four-star general or admiral. Due to the fact that most of its region consist of oceans, the USINDOPACOM commander has always been a Navy admiral.

The oldest combatant command, USINDOPACOM has a long and memorable history. The size of its region of responsibility makes it very

important, and the fact that its region includes China, India, and Japan means that its role and power is poised to significantly increase in the years to come. During the presidency of Barrack H. Obama, the United States began the policy of “pivoting” toward the Pacific to significantly increase U.S. military power and presence in the region. This was done to better manage the growing power of China and move some of the United States’ military assets from Europe and the Middle East to the Pacific.⁵⁵

Today, USINDOPACOM commands almost 20 percent of all personnel in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force. As a true Joint combatant command, USINDOPACOM’s major components include four subordinate unified commands—United States Forces Japan, United States Forces Korea, Special Operations Command Pacific, and Special Operations Command Korea—and four component commands—U.S. Army Pacific, the U.S. Pacific Fleet, Marine Corps Forces Pacific, and U.S. Pacific Air Forces. These component commands illustrate the comprehensive and expansive Joint nature of USINDOPACOM as a major unified combatant command of the United States.⁵⁶

U.S. European Command

USEUCOM was first established in 1952. It is responsible for combat and noncombat operations and activities of the U.S. armed forces in Europe, Greenland, and Israel. The headquarters of USEUCOM is at Patch Barracks in Stuttgart, Germany. The four-star general or admiral that commands USEUCOM is dual-hatted, serving also as Supreme Allied Commander Europe, who is the head of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) Allied Command Operations. During the Cold War era, USEUCOM was the

most pivotal regional military command, since the United States was facing grave challenges posed by the nuclear arsenal and Communist ideology of the Soviet Union. USEUCOM still includes many U.S. bases in Europe that were established during the Cold War.

Like all geographical combatant commands, USEUCOM includes components of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force, all of which jointly engage in combat and noncombat operations and activities in the European area. USEUCOM was very active during the period of civil wars and crises that followed the end of the Cold War in 1991. Many of these wars and crises occurred in regions of the former Yugoslavia. Looking ahead, if Russia continues to cause more restlessness in its neighboring countries, USEUCOM may become more active again.⁵⁷

U.S. Southern Command

USSOUTHCOM was established in 1963 and has its headquarters in Doral, Florida.⁵⁸ This geographical combatant command's area of responsibility includes Central and South America and the surrounding waters of those regions, as well as the Caribbean Sea and most countries and territories in the Caribbean region. Like other unified combatant commands, USSOUTHCOM includes components of all branches of the U.S. military and therefore functions as a true Joint command. USSOUTHCOM is in charge of all combat and noncombat operations and activities of the U.S. armed forces in the region. Additionally, it plays a prominent role in handling humanitarian crises and conducting counternarcotic operations in numerous countries.

Since countries in South America, Central America, and the Caribbean are close neighbors of the United States, the activities of USSOUTHCOM are vital to the security of the country. After earthquakes struck Haiti in 2010 and 2021, USSOUTHCOM played an important role in providing humanitarian relief to the country. Through these missions, USSOUTHCOM helps foster positive relations with some of the United States' closest neighbors.⁵⁹

U.S. Central Command

The geographical combatant command USCENTCOM was first established in 1983 and has its headquarters at MacDill Air Force Base, Florida. It is responsible for all combat and noncombat operations and activities of the U.S. armed forces in countries and areas in the Middle East and Central Asia. USCENTCOM includes units of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force, which jointly operate under the command and control of the USCENTCOM commander.

It is important to note that although USCENTCOM's region of responsibility is the smallest of all the geographical combatant commands, almost all the wars and combat operations in which the U.S. military has engaged since 1990 have occurred in that region. Consequently, USCENTCOM has gained the most experience as a joint combatant command during the past three decades. The long, intense experiences of USCENTCOM in joint combat operations has allowed it to demonstrate fully the flexibility and robustness of those joint operations. For example, former U.S. secretary of the Navy Raymond E. Mabus Jr. noted that when he was visiting Afghanistan, he was impressed to find that Navy submarine officers

were involved in Joint combat operations being conducted in the mountains. The fact that submarine officers were skillfully engaging in land-based operations illustrates some of the many the positive benefits of Joint operations and military culture.⁶⁰

U.S. Special Operations Command

USSOCOM, a functional combatant command established in 1987, also has its headquarters at MacDill Air Force Base. As its name connotes, it is in charge of the special forces of the U.S. military, who engage in direct operations and actions such as short-duration military strikes, unconventional warfare operations, psychological warfare operations, special reconnaissance missions, civil affairs, counternarcotics operations, counterterrorism operations, and foreign internal defense or counterinsurgency operations, including assisting foreign forces to directly carry out the combat and noncombat aspects of operations in their own countries. Like the other combatant commands, USSOCOM is led by a four-star general or admiral.

The special forces units of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force fall under the combatant control and command of USSOCOM. The Army's special forces units are a part of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command, which has its headquarters at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The Navy's special forces units fall under the U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command, which has its headquarters at Naval Amphibious Base Coronado, California. The Marine Corps' special forces units are a part of the U.S. Marine Forces Special Operations Command, which has its headquarters at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. The Air Force's special forces units fall under

the U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command, which has its headquarters at Hurlburt Field, Florida. These units of the Services' special forces commands come under the command and control of the commander of USSOCOM and are assigned to geographical combatant commands. Also under USSOCOM is the Joint Special Operations Command, which has its headquarters at Fort Bragg. The fact that all of these special forces units carry out their operations jointly under the command and control of USSOCOM shows that the command functions as intended.⁶¹

U.S. Transportation Command

USTRANSCOM, one of the four functional combatant commands, was established in 1987 and has its headquarters at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois. Its role is to provide transportation support to the other unified combatant commands, the military Services, DOD agencies, and other government organizations and units. On the whole, these activities involve transporting people and materials for combat operations as well as normal peacetime operations.

These activities occur worldwide and involve air, land, and maritime transportation. Therefore, USTRANSCOM involves the participation of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Space Force, and Coast Guard, as well as civilian federal workers and contractors. The fact that all the military Services are robustly involved in these operations means that USTRANSCOM functions as a quintessential Joint military organization.

The role of USTRANSCOM is vital for warfighters involved in combat operations in the seven geographical combatant commands and the other three functional combatant commands. A key axiom in logistics and logistics

management is ensuring that what is needed is available where and when it is needed. Having access to the right amount, type, and quality of military personnel and materiel is pivotal to the success of combat missions and operations. Therefore, Joint military transportation operations are very important to all the Services as well as all of the unified combatant commands.

Traditionally, USTRANSCOM is commanded by an Air Force general. In 2015, Air Force general Paul J. Selva, the commander of USTRANSCOM, was nominated to serve as vice chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, which demonstrates that the leaders and personnel of USTRANSCOM are often perceived as serving within a Joint military command organization that promotes a particularly vigorous Joint military culture.

USTRANSCOM consists of three Service component commands—the Army’s Military Surface Deployment and Distribution Command, the Navy’s Military Sealift Command, and the Air Force’s Airlift Mobility Command—and one subordinate command—the Joint Enabling Capabilities Command. These air, land, and maritime transportation components further buttress the Joint military functioning of USTRANSCOM. Some units of USTRANSCOM specialize in the prepositioning of personnel, weapon systems, transportations systems, and combat support systems to ensure that they can more easily and readily be rushed to wherever they are needed.

The nature of these tasks means that USTRANSCOM functions out of necessity as a Joint military organization. It uses air, land, and sea transportation, thereby necessitating the involvement of numerous Services and other organizations, as well as intermodal transportation, since the movement of a particular item from its starting point to its destination often

involves two or more types of transportation. These realities of transportation dynamics further deepen and expand the Joint operation and Joint military culture of USTRANSCOM.⁶²

U.S. Strategic Command

USSTRATCOM, established in 1992, is another functional combatant command whose headquarters is at Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska, and which is often commanded by either a four-star Air Force general or a four-star Navy admiral. Its key mission is to deter, detect, and prevent strategic attacks against the United States and its allies. USSTRATCOM is responsible for the command and control of U.S. nuclear weapons, global missile forces and defense, the combating of weapons of mass destruction, analysis and targeting, and Joint electronic warfare.

As indicated by these functions, all of the U.S. military Servicemen are involved in USSTRATCOM operations, meaning that USSTRATCOM operates as a true Joint military command. In particular, the strategic forces of the Air Force and Navy are the more prominent and pivotal units of USSTRATCOM, due to the fact that the Air Force's land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), its strategic bombers, and the Navy's submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) are the primary strategic nuclear arsenal strike forces of the United States. These ICBMs, strategic bombers, and SLBMs constitute the nation's *nuclear triad*, which refers to the fact that these strategic nuclear arsenals can be launched from land (by ICBMs), air (by strategic bombers), and/or sea (by SLBMs). This nuclear triad ensures that the United States can survive a first-strike attack of nuclear weapons from an enemy country and launch a subsequent strike of nuclear weapons

against that country. Its is because of this reality of a credible second strike that the nuclear triad greatly enhances the nuclear deterrence capacity of the United States.⁶³

U.S. Northern Command

USNORTHCOM is a geographical combatant command whose headquarters is at Peterson Space Force Base, Colorado. Its area of responsibility covers the mainland United States, Alaska, Canada, Mexico, and Puerto Rico, as well as the air, sea, and land approaches to these areas. USNORTHCOM was established in 2002 as a result of the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States. The command has unique responsibilities, one of which is to serve as the primary defender of the mainland United States in the event that the United States is attacked or invaded.

USNORTHCOM is tasked with assisting civilian authorities at national, state, county, and city levels with managing natural and manmade emergencies and disasters. This, of course, must happen within the legal limits permitted by the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878, which places limits on the role that the U.S. military can play in the area of civilian law enforcement, but if a national emergency is declared, such legal limits do not apply.⁶⁴ To handle its assistance to civil authorities, USNORTHCOM offers many activities and projects through its Defense Support of Civil Authorities programs, which facilitates strong partnerships with numerous civilian agencies at the federal, state, county, and city levels. For example, USNORTHCOM has a partnership with multiple units of DHS, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). USNORTHCOM played vital roles in helping manage response and recovery activities related to

Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Hurricane Sandy in 2012, and other similar emergencies. In this context, the relationship between USNORTHCOM and the U.S. National Guard is also important, since National Guard units in all 50 U.S. states are responsible for handling natural and manmade disasters and emergencies in both their respective states and other states that may need additional help.

Due to USNORTHCOM's responsibility to protect the mainland United States, Alaska, Canada, and Mexico, it is very closely linked to the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), a combined organization of the United States and Canada whose primary task is to defend and protect of the aerospace of North America. Like USNORTHCOM, NORAD has its headquarters at Peterson Space Force Base, and the commander also serves as the commander of NORAD.⁶⁵

As a geographical combatant command, USNORTHCOM possesses the necessary component forces of the U.S. military Services. These include two subordinate unified commands—Special Operations Command-North and Alaskan Command—four Service component commands—U.S. Army North/U.S. Fifth Army, Air Forces Northern/First Air Force, U.S. Fleet Forces Command, and U.S. Marine Corps Forces Command—and three joint task forces—Joint Force Headquarters National Capital Region, Joint Task Force Civil Support, and Joint Tasks Force North. As shown by these component forces, USNORTHCOM, like all the combatant commands, functions as a true Joint combatant command.⁶⁶

U.S. Africa Command

The geographical combatant command USAFRICOM, established in 2008, has its headquarters at Kelley Barracks in Stuttgart, Germany. Its area of responsibility covers the continent of Africa, excluding Egypt, which is a part of USCENTCOM. Like other geographical combatant commands USAFRICOM includes components of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force, therefore functioning as a true Joint combatant command.

USAFRICOM has played important roles in handling terrorist crises in the Sahel region of Africa, the Horn of Africa (especially in Somalia), and other parts of the continent, as well as in helping military forces in African countries increase their capabilities. Camp Lemonnier, the U.S. military base in Djibouti, is important to both USAFRICOM and USCENTCOM due to its location on the Gulf of Tadjoura. USAFRICOM also plays prominent roles in handling humanitarian crises in Africa. For example, the combatant command's role in handling the Ebola crisis in Liberia in 2014–15 was critical and ultimately successful.⁶⁷

U.S. Cyber Command

USCYBERCOM is a functional combatant command that was established in 2018 and has its headquarters at Fort George G. Meade, Maryland. As its name indicates, it is responsible for U.S. cyber defense and cyber warfare. More specifically, it is tasked with operating and defending DOD information systems and networks, conducting full military cyberspace operations in all domains, and providing support to the commanders of all unified combatant commands. Since cyberspace covers and penetrates all aspects

of life and society, the role and importance of USCYBERCOM is sure to grow in the future.

As a Joint combatant command, USCYBERCOM consists of members of all branches of the U.S. military. It includes the U.S. Army Cyber Command, the Navy's U.S. Fleet Cyber Command, the U.S. Marine Corps Forces Cyberspace Command, and the U.S. Air Force's Sixteenth Air Force. These Service components further deepen and expand the Joint military operations profile and Joint military culture of the combatant command. USCYBERCOM has a close relationship with the National Security Agency (NSA), which is indicated by the fact that the four-star general or admiral who commands USCYBERCOM also serves as director of the NSA.

The fact that we live in a digital economy today makes USCYBERCOM essential to the economic well being and security of the United States. Cyber attacks—especially from foreign countries—against certain aspects of the U.S. economy is a matter of grave concern. USCYBERCOM works with the DHS and many other federal agencies to minimize and manage these cyber attacks, ensuring that this Joint combatant command will always be of great importance to the country.⁶⁸

U.S. Space Command

USSPACECOM, established in 2019, is a geographical combatant command in charge of U.S. defense and military activities in the space domain. Like all other combatant commands, it consists of members from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force and is headed by a four-star general or admiral. It has its headquarters at Peterson Space Force Base, Colorado.

With many aspects of technological systems—especially in the high-technology sector—and much of the U.S. economy tied to space technologies, systems, and resources, the role of USSPACECOM is vital to the United States, since USSPACECOM protects those technologies, systems, and resources. As many other countries are also involved in the space domain, it is the duty of USSPACECOM to fully understand the space policies, systems, and activities of those countries so that it can best advance U.S. interests in the space domain.

Future dynamics will surely lead to a growth in importance of the space domain for the United States and other countries. This reality means that the work and responsibilities of USSPACECOM will also grow. The expanding roles of private corporations in both civilian and defense space programs will lead to more opportunities for USSPACECOM, as increasing public-private partnerships with private corporations can quickly accelerate space technological advances in the United States and beyond.⁶⁹

Recommendations

Based on the knowledge gained from this study, the functions of USTRANSCOM need to be expanded. A possible new name for the command would be the U.S. Logistics Command, which may better reflect its current and future role. The fact that USTRANSCOM is in charge of the air, land, and sea transportation needs of the other unified combatant commands means that it is also involved with the supplies and storage functions for those commands.

Another recommendation is for the chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff to have two vice chairmen: one who will continue the duties of the current

vice chairman and the other who will focus on the needs of the commanders of the 11 unified combatant commands. Having a vice chairman who focuses solely on the needs of the combatant commands will be very helpful, especially since there are so many of them.

Conclusions

As this study shows, all of the 11 unified combatant commands operate Jointly, with forces of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force engaging in combat and noncombat operations and activities. It is also important to note that the leaders of all of the combatant commands regularly emphasize, deepen, and project the strong Joint nature of their commands. The leadership structure of each of the combatant commands consists of three officers: the commander, who is always a four-star general or admiral; the deputy commander, who is often a three-star lieutenant general or vice admiral; and the chief of staff, who is often a two-star major general or rear admiral. A common practice is to ensure that no more than one officer from each of the five military Services occupies a high leadership position in each of the combatant commands. Therefore, if the commander of one combatant command is a four-star Army general, the deputy commander will be a Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, or Space Force officer, and the chief of staff will be an officer from one of the three Services not already represented. By representing three of the five military Services in the DOD, this leadership structure helps expand the Joint nature, functioning, and culture of the 11 unified combatant commands.

This study also offered a detailed analysis of Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, which aimed to enact, foster, and promote Joint functioning and

culture among the U.S. military Services to enable them to more effectively and efficiently engage in both combat and noncombat operations and activities. The act presented three major changes that impacted the organization and activities of the DOD: it increased the power of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; encouraged officers of all Services to serve in Joint positions; and increased the powers of the unified combatant commands and their commanders, who now report directly to the U.S. president and secretary of defense rather than to the Service chiefs.

The first two changes represent means to an end, the end being the third change. Expanding the powers given to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and encouraging officers to serve in Joint positions helped the unified combatant commands function more Jointly. One of the main roles of each of the U.S. military Services is to recruit, train, and arm its respective personnel and then assign them to one of the 11 unified combatant commands. It is the combatant commands that are then responsible for the combatants and all other field operations of the U.S. armed forces. This dynamic ensures that the combatant commanders more prominent than many other four-star generals and admirals in the U.S. military.

As this study has shown, the 11 unified combatant commands were among the most important of the U.S. military reforms introduced by Goldwater-Nichols in 1986. The best way to appreciate the centrality of these combatant commands is to imagine that the powers given to them were not part of the Goldwater-Nichols reforms. If that was the case, the Joint nature, functioning, and culture of the U.S. armed forces, and that the combatant commands have fostered, would not exist. Therefore, this author concludes that the 11 unified combatant commands ultimately constitute

the centerpiece of, and provide the most essential toolset for, the achievement of Goldwater-Nichols.

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