



Interorganizational Cooperation

Part I of III: The Interagency Perspective

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In 2012, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed the Armed Forces to expand the envelope of interagency cooperation.¹ His edict inspired a profusion of Department of Defense (DOD) literature catalog-

ing the challenges of working with non-DOD organizations. This article is part one of a three-part series that features the other side of the story: interorganizational cooperation from interagency perspectives. Over the

course of this series, authors from U.S. Government, intergovernmental, non-governmental, and treaty-based organizations argue that broader inclusion of non-DOD perspectives into joint doctrine encourages the identification and propagation of much-needed inter-organizational best practices.

This installment features perspectives from U.S. Federal executive departments and agencies (hereafter referred to as *organizations*). We address many differences among our organizations that can disrupt the planning and execution of interagency agreements. This article argues that better awareness of such

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issues among organizations—especially a recognition of which differences offer opportunities for compromise—would foster improved interagency negotiation and unity of effort throughout whole-of-government endeavors. The following sections sort the differences into three broad categories: *purpose* (goals and objectives), *process* (methods of work and decisionmaking), and *people* (attitude and communication). The sections below address each category in order of increasing potential for compromise. The examples demonstrate that organizations do not willingly budge on purpose-based differences, while process differences offer some room for negotiation. People, however, appear the most malleable in that small efforts yield high payoffs throughout planning and execution.

Differences in Purpose

Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, defines *unity of effort* as “coordination and cooperation toward common objectives, even if the participants are not necessarily part of the same command or organization.”² By definition, common objectives or shared purpose are a prerequisite for unity of effort. Naturally, governmental organizations were created to fulfill different functions. For example, the Department of State considers diplomacy the art and practice of conducting negotiations and maintaining relations between nations, while DOD provides for the security of the United States and its interests. When two or more organizations cooperate, their divergent high-level purposes could naturally cascade into opposing objectives at lower organizational levels. This divergence could be exacerbated by three differences: interpretation of higher level guidance, geographic areas of responsibility, and time horizons.

Interpretations of Higher Level Guidance. Competing objectives are often the result of U.S. agencies interpreting the same strategic guidance in different ways. The National Security Strategy contains general guidance and prioritization. In the absence of more

specific comprehensive direction, organizations tend to define their objectives along organizational lines. Early U.S. Government in-fighting in Afghanistan was partially due to the George W. Bush administration’s cancellation of a detailed Presidential policy directive for managing complex contingencies.³

Additionally, blurred congressional jurisdiction contributes to different interpretations of higher level guidance. Co-chairs of the 9/11 Commission report, for instance, related this problem as it pertained to the Department of Homeland Security, stating that “the jurisdictional melee among scores of Congressional committees has led to conflicting and contradictory tasks and mandates for DHS.”⁴ Unfortunately, congressional jurisdiction is not the only blurred line causing competing purposes.

Geographic Areas of Responsibility. A well-documented difference between organizations is the misalignment of their areas of responsibility. There is a notable disparity between DOD, State, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) boundaries in North Africa and Southwest Asia. Each organization has valid reasons for its own convention that support organization-specific purposes. Some agencies group countries based on cultural, historical, or economic connections. DOD deliberately separates India and Pakistan to foster discrete military relationships, while State combines them to address issues that pervade the entire region.⁵ The geographic mismatch can also be challenging when a country is clustered with lower priority nations under one organization but grouped with higher priorities in another. Such mismatches precluded comprehensive strategies for countering terrorism and piracy in Africa.⁶

Organizations also tailor their boundaries with inconsistent sizes and scopes. DOD prefers larger, continent-sized groupings, while State and USAID favor smaller subdivisions. USAID has challenges operating within the wide aperture of DOD’s combatant command planners because the vast majority of USAID’s strategic planning occurs within the respective host countries. USAID’s

bottom-up, country-specific approach to strategic planning allows it to better involve host-country governments and local civil societies in solving their own issues, leading to more sustainable and effective solutions.

Despite clear benefits in doing so, organizations are not open to changing their geographic alignment. In a 2012 audit conducted by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), State and USAID stated that the improved geographic alignment associated with the standup of U.S. Africa Command improved cooperation among the three organizations. Despite this acknowledged success, significant objections to a wider alignment of world regions remain. State raised concerns that adjusting its regional bureaus to look like combatant commands would signal a “militarization” of diplomacy, unnerving partners and allies. The Department of Health and Human Services echoes this sentiment, stating that many Americans do not realize the mere fact that the organization represents the U.S. Government can affect relationships in unpredictable ways. Whereas in some relationships this fact is likely to open doors, in others there may be resistance to assent to U.S. wishes for the sole reason that opposition to the United States is a domestic political necessity. Other organizations, such as the Department of Justice and Department of Commerce, cited different reasons, including the burdens of retraining and relocating personnel. Additionally, all agencies professed a need to retain the authority to change their boundaries to adapt to changing mission requirements. All of these factors led GAO to conclude that a government-wide geographic alignment is unlikely, and thus the resulting disagreements over priorities and objectives will endure.

Time Horizons. Finding a common purpose may also take extra effort when different time horizons are involved. A U.S. military civil affairs officer in Afghanistan spoke plainly to a USAID official in Afghanistan, stating, “Our objective is to fight and kill al Qaeda and the Taliban. Your objective is to build a democratic central government. Right



U.S. Army veterinarian trains local Afghans as part of joint effort including Provincial Reconstruction Team Farah, 438th Medical Detachment Veterinary Services, and Special Operations Task Force–West to promote public health in Farah Province (U.S. Navy/Matthew Stroup)

now, our objective is number one, and the consequences of our actions will be your problem in six months.”⁷ Many organizations agree that this type of difference, which may generate inconsistent planning benchmarks with subsequent effects, is not uncommon. While State and USAID perspectives on relationships and programmatic results can stretch into decades, DOD outlooks tend to be much shorter. Thus, viewpoints on downstream effects can be valid yet dissimilar. In extreme instances, DOD may be the first U.S. implementer of civic engagement in an area. As such, these interactions can shape the environment and set expectations of local groups for other governmental organizations, even undermining access for humanitarian partners.

When DOD-USAID coordination is absent, DOD activities may lead local groups to develop unrealistic goals for future governmental interactions, leading to disappointment, resentment, and

possible anger toward the United States. It can also undermine many of the tools USAID uses to motivate populations to engage in solving their own problems. For example, early in Operation *Enduring Freedom*, the U.S. military was incentivized to achieve “quick wins” in civic and humanitarian assistance activities. As a result, commanders spent large sums of money quickly often without considering the downstream effects. One unintended consequence of cash infusion on Afghanistan’s agrarian economy was a change in consumer behavior for veterinary services. While USAID had been conducting long-term livelihood training for veterinarians and vet technicians in the country, the military’s free veterinary services completely undercut the ability of USAID-trained veterinarians to make a living. As a result, farmers chose not to pay for local services because they could wait and receive free civic services from military programming.⁸ A contemporary

USAID official eloquently summarized that spending money quickly in unstable areas usually means unstable results.⁹

Best Practice: Finding Shared Purpose. Different interpretations of higher level policy usually only see resolution at the highest level. The National Security Council (NSC) staff can settle such disparities by issuing clarifying guidance in the form of Presidential policy directives that clearly state goals and responsibilities for a particular mission.¹⁰ Another possible mechanism to encourage shared purpose is a congressionally mandated review to include national security. Although the State Department and USAID 2010 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review is not congressionally mandated, it identified the need to turn to other governmental agencies for experience and expertise in performing international functions. Both Homeland Security and Justice viewed this recognition as positive. Given

that congressionally mandated reviews may better instigate change, the U.S. Government could benefit from mandated reviews for all Federal executive departments or those departments only participating in the NSC system.¹¹ A single comprehensive Quadrennial Security Review for those departments under the NSC system also could be beneficial.¹²

But not all interagency friction occurs at a level that warrants NSC or congressional attention. At the operational and tactical/field level, organization officials have to work through challenges. Organizations may have varying functions, but those do not prevent a shared purpose for a portion of the mission. “Promote Cooperation” is a DOD forum in which combatant commanders request input and feedback on their plans from non-DOD counterparts. Simulations and workshops can help organizations find common ground that previously did not exist. In geographic combatant commands, military planners determined that there was a need to track, integrate with, and support efforts with State Department activities to preclude the need for a noncombatant evacuation operation executed by the military. The functional combatant commands also embed civilian organization liaisons into their command structures.¹³ Even if objectives cannot align, the liaisons and humanitarian advisors can look one or two organizational levels down to identify opportunities of mutual interest, for instance. Homeland Security and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) also benefit with embedding DOD liaisons in their organizations, which can prevent late resource requests that end up in unfilled requirements.

With respect to differing time horizons, organizations with a longer view can seek short-term cooperative opportunities with partners who have less time available. These opportunities, if taken, may overcome unintended consequences toward government efforts. Because unity of effort requires common objectives, when there is no obvious shared purpose the organizations must actively seek common ground. The idea is not to force an unnatural cooperation but rather

to find the hidden symbiotic relationship that provides mutual benefit. A shared purpose is the first step toward a framework of cooperation: a shared process.

Differences in Process

Once interagency participants share a purpose, they can plan the shared process to achieve it. U.S. Government organizations typically codify mutually beneficial arrangements in the form of a general memorandum of understanding (MOU) or a detailed, more binding memorandum of agreement (MOA).¹⁴ An example of a successful shared process is the Homeland Security National Response Framework (NRF).¹⁵ This off-the-shelf plan establishes roles and responsibilities for orchestrating the government’s comprehensive domestic disaster response. An example of how process differences preclude a much-needed agreement is in the stalled International Response Framework (IRF).¹⁶ The current Federal system for foreign disaster response, led by USAID, is effective for normal disasters. However, complex overseas catastrophes involving infrastructure collapse (for example, Haiti) or radiological events (such as in Fukushima), especially in developed or big modern cities, beg for an international response capability comparable to the NRF. Such complexities aggravate the process difference of would-be participants. To arrive at a shared process such as an MOA or MOU, U.S. Government organizations must first compare the processes—namely, decisionmaking and methods of work—of their individual organizations.

Decisionmaking. Many organizations view DOD as overly bureaucratic. The department’s sheer size and complexity can make liaison and cooperation difficult for other organizations. For starters, DOD’s enormity can cause a resource and power disparity. Smaller organizations may be reluctant to cooperate for fear of their efforts being co-opted and/or losing turf and resources.¹⁷ Other organizations do not have the manning or time to participate in planning events or other settings to the extent that DOD does or might expect. Similarly, the broad

mission set and needs of DOD make it difficult for civilian agencies to find points of contact that can speak with finality.

Each organization has its own decisionmaking habits and may employ command structures that are more flexible and fluid than those of DOD. Staffing decisions for a special project or specific incident may be based more on individuals’ subject matter expertise than on their rank, grade, or position. This facilitates application of the best resources to a given problem, but it may also cause temporary changes to traditional chains of command or result in coordination points that reside at different levels within each respective organization. Some organizations may also take a different approach to managing an incident. While DOD manages largely through individuals within a rank structure, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) manages disaster response through an internal committee known as the Disaster Management Group. So while action officers in DOD may only need the approval of an individual, action officers within HUD may need the approval of an entire committee.

Methods of Work. While DOD is accustomed to global connectivity, it is easy to forget that sharing data with interagency partners may not be as easy. Much of the information that DOD possesses is classified, and the rationale for many decisions requires access to classified material. The inability to quickly declassify this information so it can be shared with non-DOD and U.S. Government organizations hinders effective engagement by many DOD senior leaders and action officers. Additionally, the lack of linguistic expertise and cultural sensitivity on the part of many DOD members is a hindrance to effective cooperation.

Some organizational cultures are diametrically opposed to that of DOD. The military’s strict chain of command and requirement to unquestioningly follow lawful orders are foreign to organizations such as the Department of Energy (DOE) and its need to challenge and question, which are hallmarks of good science. Other practices such as addressing everyone, other than the most

senior leadership, by first name may be mistaken by DOD as disrespectful, while non-DOD meeting attendees are often mystified when everyone leaps to their feet when a general walks in. Working hours can be another contrasting trait. Although many organizations maintain a constant high operational tempo, some operate according to “traditional business hours.” This can create challenges during time-sensitive operations such as disaster response. Although organizations such as DOD, DOE, or FEMA may be able to vet and approve actions quickly, including at night and over weekends, traditional hour operations may have staff working extra hours in support of an incident. The reachback of these other organizations to headquarters or leadership for technical assistance may be delayed during non-work hours because the organization is not structured or staffed to maintain its full suite of capabilities 24/7.

Best Practice: Compromise for Shared Process. DOD has learned in the last decade that trying to predict a partner’s reaction to a situation can be clouded by a common tendency known as mirror-imaging: assuming the other side will act in a certain way because that is how you would act under similar circumstances. In recent conflicts, mirror-imaging has led to poor assumptions and offended partners. Without awareness of a partner’s organizational culture, mirror-imaging can also be a problem in interagency cooperation. By improving organizational cultural awareness, U.S. Government organizations can compare their processes to find room for compromise. The resulting interagency plan will reflect not only a vetted shared purpose but a shared process as well: one that incorporates decisionmaking mechanisms and methods of work compatible for all participants. For example, under the NRF, several organizations that are accustomed to leading have yielded in the name of a shared purpose and process. FEMA is designated as the supported organization and a host of governmental organizations, including DOD, are in appropriate supporting roles. As FEMA assigns missions to meet specific assistance requirements, it also tells DOD what is needed, where

to take it, and how that assistance will be integrated into the larger Federal support operation. Complex overseas catastrophes involving chemical or radiological events, such as Fukushima, reinforce the need for a comparable IRE. Additionally, DOD information-sharing obstacles facing non-DOD personnel during time-sensitive operations underpin the need for more efficient ways of doing business.

It is important for DOD representatives to remember that organizational process differences are just that: differences. There is not a right or wrong organizational culture—just one that best suits the purpose of the organization. Avoiding the tendency to mirror-image will prevent poor assumptions and temper expectations. Each organization should clearly articulate its needs, resources, abilities, authorities, and, most importantly, its constraints. Many issues arise from one party making assumptions about another party based on its own way of doing things. Clear communication of requirements and timelines upfront affords the opportunity to mitigate missed connections down the line. To reinforce positive communication among organizations, MOAs and MOUs are good foundations for a shared process, and an accessible DOD central repository would enhance awareness on how the department interacts with interagency partners.

People: Communication Makes Workarounds Work

People actively search for a common purpose. People compromise to forge a common process. People make decisions, and people do the work—with other people from other organizations. U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) representatives reported that their ability to work effectively with interagency partners in Iraq and Afghanistan depended almost entirely on developing positive interpersonal relationships based on trust.¹⁸ There are three types of communication differences that have stalled personal relationships in the past: terminology, information-sharing, and attitude.

Terminology. Anyone who has experienced a DOD meeting knows the military

speaks a unique language peppered with jargon, acronyms, and high-tech PowerPoint lingo. But a unique language has evolved at other organizations as well, and each side is often unaware that a common word has a different meaning to the other. One well-known example is the word *intelligence*; while in fairly common use (as in “medical intelligence”) on both the military and civilian sides, it can cause difficulties in other settings when it may be interpreted as a form of espionage. Many organizations echo this sentiment. Without prior knowledge, DOD partners can also read a more militaristic intent into innocuous DOD terms such as *targeting* when, in fact, a DOD author may only be referring to selectivity and focus with no context of violent action whatsoever. While militaristic terminology can make interagency players question DOD’s intentions, withholding information can cause longstanding issues of trust.

Information-sharing. Often the military is required to withhold information out of operational necessity. However, what looks like a clear operational necessity to DOD will not always appear as clear-cut to other organizations. A senior civilian State official expressed his frustration at his organization’s lack of awareness of DOD special operations missions: “None of us knew in many cases what they [DOD] were doing until an operation had already taken place. There was one really bad issue where Special Forces killed the wrong guys, and [the country team] had to explain it all to [Afghan president Hamid] Karzai without even having known such an operation would take place.”¹⁹ DOD is not expected to curb this practice, only to ensure the decision to withhold information is a calculated one because even justified instances can erode trust.

Even more damaging cases of withheld information are those due to negligence. Another senior civilian was more incredulous when DOD withheld mission results long after a mission went bad: “They bombed a wedding party; we heard about it way after the fact. If we had heard sooner, we could have helped mitigate the effects.”²⁰

Attitude. Organizational cultures also affect how individuals act and treat



U.S. military humanitarian assistance capabilities support emergency relief efforts at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant (U.S. Air Force/Shane A. Cuomo)

others. Mirror-imaging was shown to lead to poor assumptions about decision-making practices and methods of work used in organizations. The same concept can apply to individuals with equally damaging results. Differences in organizational attitude are merely unjustified perceptions—that is, stereotypes. Even though a person works for an organization with a certain reputation, uniform, rank, or grade, there are, quite often, more similarities than expected. A senior USAID official relayed his change of heart about working with military officers in Afghanistan:

Ambassador Khalilzad asked a bunch of military planners to come in and do planning. The idea among USAID . . . staff that we'd have five colonels working with us to do our planning . . . was uncomfortable. But the more we got to know them, the more we respected their talent, skill, hard work. . . . We realized we were on the same team. They pushed us, challenged us, made

*us think. Most USAID people never work with the military, so this whole experience was new.*²¹

Another USAID official explained a progressive experience in Afghanistan: “At one point I [told senior officials in Washington] that I thought we had a hell of a lot in common with the uniformed military, which was rebellious to say and stunned them. I said that they are operational, mission oriented, have a command and control structure and chain of command, plan well and do strategies well, and we [at] USAID do all the same.”²²

Best Practice. Cross-organizational communication fundamentals are an easy fix with huge payoffs throughout the planning and execution of an interagency endeavor. Given enough time, U.S. Government representatives learn that people from other organizations are not as different as they assumed. If DOD personnel can avoid the prescribed missteps and get off on the right foot, they can

build vital interpersonal relationships without struggling to earn respect over many months or years. More frequent personal interaction will only accelerate the process and build trust. For example, USAID encourages DOD field personnel to reach out directly to USAID country staff in both tactical and strategic planning. At the same time, USAID strives to educate its own staff as to why DOD may be engaging in activities that could be considered within USAID’s purview and how to productively interact with such activities. USAID continues its DOD outreach to build on cooperative efforts with its new policy on cooperation with DOD.²³

One aspect of this policy is already proved. Interagency collocation was widely recognized as a best practice in Afghanistan. Collocation at multiple levels of decisionmaking made possible regular joint analysis and planning and facilitated relationship development and mutual learning.²⁴ Almost immediately after Lieutenant General David Barno,

USA, took command of the combined forces in Afghanistan in 2003, he moved his headquarters to the Embassy compound. Barno and Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad saw each other for a few hours every morning and every evening. The Ambassador emphasized the benefits of collocation: “Being . . . so close facilitated more frequent interaction, not only by telephone. . . . We made a commitment that what was important was the mission, that we were a single team.”²⁵ Collocation helps mitigate all three identified categories of differences. Neighbors learn each other’s language, they feel obliged to share information as much as possible, and they give respect and trust where it is due.

Perhaps practice makes perfect. The more opportunities organizations have to collaborate in more detail on a recurring basis, the better prepared they will be to collaborate during a crisis. Increasing the number of contact points and collaborative projects among agencies will bring greater familiarity for each of the others. It is the relationships fostered on a continual basis that will facilitate efficiency when time is of the essence.

More interaction in force development venues will also allow subject matter experts to better identify and proliferate much-needed best practices. Although war college students will read lessons learned such as from the State Department and USDA, the other 90 percent of the military will not look for those perspectives. DOD joint force development continuously grows in importance due to the acknowledgment that no single military Service can win a war on its own. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States learned that no single governmental organization could stabilize a war-torn region alone. A similar theme emerged at Fukushima and in Haiti. If DOD continues to be asked to support executive decisions in nontraditional military operations and complex catastrophes, which are likely callings for DOD in the years to come, then interagency force development at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels must be cultivated.

This article raises awareness on U.S. Government organizational purpose, process, and people differences. By presenting non-DOD perspectives, we aim to facilitate DOD interagency cooperation through improved awareness of negotiation pitfalls. By definition, unity of effort requires unity of purpose. Partners may have different purposes for the task at hand, but comparing objectives across time, space, and organizational level can unearth commonalities. Once a shared purpose is found, comparing process differences will identify friction points that must be negotiated before codifying a shared process. Where purpose and process differences present significant structural barriers to compromise, interpersonal relationships just take a little effort and are widely recognized as the most important facilitator in interagency cooperation. As new interagency differences and best practices emerge, broader inclusion of interagency perspectives into joint doctrine ensures these updates are captured throughout the continuous cycle of joint doctrine revision. It broadens the audience and truly expands the envelope of interagency coordination per the Chairman’s remit. The second installment of the Interorganizational Cooperation series expands the envelope further beyond the U.S. Government with perspectives from intergovernmental, nongovernmental, and treaty-based organizations. JFQ

Notes

¹ Martin E. Dempsey, *Chairman’s Strategic Direction for the Force: Strengthening Our Relationship of Trust with the Nation* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, February 6, 2012), 5.

² Joint Publication (JP) 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, March 25, 2013), GL-13. JP 3-08, *Interorganizational Coordination During Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, June 24, 2011), which is traditionally the one-stop shop for non-DOD and nongovernmental entities to enter into the joint doctrine hierarchy, is presently under revision with an expected signature date in 2016.

³ Andrea Strimling Yodsampa, *Coordinating for Results: Lessons from a Case Study of Interagency Coordination in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: IBM Center for the Business of

Government, 2013), 13. In an effort to capture institutional lessons from complex operations, the Clinton administration issued Presidential Policy Directive 56, *Managing Complex Contingency Operations*, in May 1997. The Bush administration replaced it in 2005 with the issuance of National Security Presidential Directive 44, *Management of Interagency Efforts Concerning Stabilization and Reconstruction*.

⁴ Frederick M. Kaiser, *Interagency Collaborative Arrangements and Activities*, R41803 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, May 31, 2011), 16.

⁵ John H. Pendleton and Jacquelyn L. Williams-Bridgers, *Interagency Collaboration: Implications of a Common Alignment of World Regions among Select Federal Agencies*, GAO-11-776R (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, July 11, 2011), 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷ Yodsampa, 14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁰ Richard A. Best, Jr., *The National Security Council: An Organizational Assessment*, RL30840 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, December 28, 2011).

¹¹ Presidential Policy Directive 1, *Organization of the National Security Council System* (Washington, DC: The White House, February 13, 2009).

¹² Alan F. Mangan, *Planning for Stabilization and Reconstruction Operations without a Grand Strategy* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, March 18, 2005), 14.

¹³ Pendleton and Williams-Bridgers, 26.

¹⁴ DOD Instruction 4000.19, “Support Agreements,” April 25, 2013, 28.

¹⁵ *National Response Framework* (Washington, DC: Department of Homeland Security, January 2008).

¹⁶ *Independent Review of the U.S. Government Response to the Haiti Earthquake: Final Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Agency for International Development [USAID], March 28, 2011), 86; *Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review* (Washington, DC: Department of State, July 2009), 140.

¹⁷ Yodsampa, 9.

¹⁸ Bernie Carreau, “Lessons from USDA in Iraq and Afghanistan,” *PRISM* 1, no. 3 (June 2010), 144.

¹⁹ Yodsampa, 14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Carreau, 144.

²² Yodsampa, 19.

²³ Alfonso E. Lenhardt, *USAID Policy on Cooperation with the Department of Defense* (Washington, DC: USAID, June 2015).

²⁴ Yodsampa, 35.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.