



Admiral Kurt W. Tidd is the Commander of U.S. Southern Command (DOD)

An Interview with Kurt W. Tidd

JFQ: We last featured U.S. Southern Command [USSOUTHCOM] in 2006, and it seems that a number of issues remain the same, although others have emerged. How does USSOUTHCOM fit into the new National Military Strategy?

Admiral Kurt W. Tidd: The new National Military Strategy exists as a result of some fundamental changes in the geopolitical landscape. Leaving the Joint Staff and going to USSOUTHCOM, I had the benefit of spending several years listening as both General [Martin E.] Dempsey and then General [Joseph F.]

Dunford began to develop this strategy, particularly General Dunford. The National Military Strategy focuses on multidomain security challenges that are now *global* security challenges. It provides a useful intellectual organizing construct by going to a regional geographic command and thinking through the role of a geographic combatant command as a member of an enterprise.

That gave us a useful way at USSOUTHCOM to move away from stovepiping regionally and instead considering what is going on around the world in *relation to* the region. As we thought about it, it became apparent that if Russia is worth paying attention to, we must not just pay attention to their actions in the Middle East, Europe, and Ukraine; we should pay attention to them globally. The reality is that Russia is active all across the USSOUTHCOM region, as is China, as is Iran . . . and evidently so are the violent extremist organizations, so the plus one. I don't want to overstretch the intellectual model, and so I think that periodically we do see some weapons proliferators on some North Korean-flagged merchant vessels, but they are not a big player in this theater. So, we've got three-plus-one instead of the four-plus-one scenario.

When you think about USSOUTHCOM, you immediately think drugs. Nobody doubts that illicit drug-trafficking coming largely from this region is a scourge on American society. But when you try to think from a military perspective, and then from a national security perspective, you realize there are multitudes of illicit commodities trafficked. The one that we pay attention to right now in the United States happens to be cocaine because of the sheer volume and dollar amounts involved, thus the ability for criminals to generate significant finances. But when we look at the security situation in Latin America and the Caribbean, for instance, it's not the commodity that is responsible for the insecurity. Instead, it's a manifestation of the insecurity, it's a source, it's a generator of income, but it is by no means the only one. Then we simply follow that logic: If we could wave our hand and cocaine

disappeared overnight, we would still have security challenges in this part of the world. Why is that? It's because of threat networks—transnational transregional threat networks—that are the real underlying security challenge in these areas.

We then begin to look at the spectrum of threat networks and note that they run from purely economically motivated criminal networks to purely ideologically motivated terrorist networks. And the more we study them, the more we realize that there is this intermingling and interweaving of the two, and so they are not pristine; that is, neither exclusively criminal nor exclusively terrorist. We've got plenty of examples. Hizballah is the classic case-in-point of a terrorist network that routinely engages in criminal activity to raise funds for its terrorist activities in another part of the world. We are well aware of instances where we've had criminal networks that may be wittingly or unwittingly supporting terrorist networks either to move or to generate income or to do other sorts of things. So, we find that like all networks, if we take a network-view of these problem, we find lots of overlaps, lots of intermingling, lots of nodes where they occupy the same space, and it runs the spectrum of corrupt government officials; it may be money-launderers or traffickers in forged documents. From a strategic perspective of a theater commander, if we take a look at it through this network lens, I think that provides a much clearer view of what they're doing and how they threaten security. We find, too often, that before we thought these networks were a product of the insecurity, but in reality, they are responsible for much of the insecurity in the way that they both prey on society, undermine and suborn governance, and corrupt officials.

The proper role of our national security enterprise should be to focus on these threat networks. As we look at the lexicon of networks that we developed in our counterterrorism campaigns, it included "find-fix-finish." We also spoke in terms of "detect, illuminate, and disrupt." In the USSOUTHCOM area of operations, that disruption piece, that endstate piece, is almost always going to be partner-nation

law enforcement, partner-nation military supporting partner-nation law enforcement, or U.S. Federal law enforcement officials who have the appropriate authorities. In the past, we have gotten ourselves cross-threaded because we focused on the counter-drug mission, so there was a lot of friction on the military side. Is the counter-drug business a legitimate military mission? Moreover, on the law enforcement side, there was a little bit of mistrust—for instance, law enforcement felt that their mission space was being encroached on, and so rather than working together cohesively, I think that the military and law enforcement worked at cross purposes.

When we start talking counter-threat networks, we find our U.S. partners—law enforcement partners—rapidly recognize that there is a real trust, particularly when we focus on those areas where we have expertise and capacity in support of law enforcement entities. We focus on the detection and illumination piece and develop that picture. Then the people who have the authorities to conduct the disruption piece are able to work together. With some painstaking trust-building, we find that there may be opportunities for us to knit together a more cohesive team. Not under DOD [Department of Defense] leadership, we are just a supporting element within this overarching construct. Similarly, working with our partner-nation military contacts, we find that they absolutely understand a counter-threat network approach, and they view that as a valid military mission, and so again, we do not find ourselves working at cross-purposes.

It also gives the logical underpinnings for other activities that we traditionally conducted, such as building partner capacity. The troubling question was that we needed to build partner capacity, but in order to do what? When we look at this particular construct in the counter-threat network approach, it becomes clear: We build the capacity of partner-nation law enforcement working hand-in-hand with U.S. State Department programs and we build partner capacity with our partner-nation's military to conduct an effective,

efficient endstate in order to conduct the disruption piece. Now we've got the sort of logical underpinnings that make for a more cohesive network that we can then place on top of these threat networks and work together. We are still in the theoretical development of that construct and then in the communication of that construct in a way that does not breed mistrust because that is a big challenge, but I think that DOD wants to be viewed as a partner, as a trusted and supporting partner in this enterprise, and that should lead to even greater success.

JFQ: What was the catalyst in undertaking a sea change in your reframing of USSOUTHCOM's operational requirement and your approach to it? Some might cite the reasons of relative stability, lack of state conflict, growing middle class, demographic trends as indicators of progress. Was there the perception that the old way of doing business was inadequate?

Admiral Tidd: Having worked this challenge from the perspective of, first, the vice J3 on the Joint Staff and then, subsequently, as the J3 on the Joint Staff, I found that one of the responsibilities is the management of the global force allocation process. Not making the ultimate decision—that's for the Secretary of Defense—but I did try to match up stated policy priorities with available military resources. For years, USSOUTHCOM has been chronically under-resourced, and so going to the command, I asked myself why is it that no one doubts the scourge on society that drugs produce, but it has been almost impossible to make the case that resources are desperately needed. It kind of led to this intellectual journey—trying to find a way to reframe this strategic challenge in a way that might, at least, make a more compelling case. At the same time that we are trying to better understand if there is a better way to go after the security challenges that we face, and the counter-threat model provides a much more useful and compelling argument.

The new National Military Strategy was also being developed. Recognizing



Dominican Republic air force A-29 Super Tucano participates in initiative between U.S., Colombian, and Dominican Republic air forces on procedures to detect, track, and intercept illegal drugs (U.S. Air Force/Justin Brockhoff)

that we've got this crossroads of activities by three of the four global security challenges, it became critical that headquarters, instead of being inwardly focused, be outwardly focused. It also became critical to find the means, connections, and linkages to plug in with our [U.S. Pacific Command, U.S. European Command, and U.S. Africa Command] partners. We always had a longstanding, solid relationship with our U.S. Northern Command partners, but again, this provided the underpinning rationale to be able to do it much more than the narrow commodities-based perspective of the counter-drug mission, and I think that opened the optic to look at human-, weapons-, and gold-trafficking as well as these rivers of people that head from south to north, and to understand how that provides a potential threat vector of people who have a nefarious intent to use that as an avenue to enter the United States.

The sea change also created opportunities for a richer series of connections and thus a great understanding across the joint force of exactly what the security concerns are in this part of the world. But I think it also created a new understanding of opportunities. For instance, in our South American partners, we have some tremendously capable, professional partners that have aspirations of their own, that view themselves not exclusively as South American or Latin American; they have global interests and global aspirations. It allows us to work closely with Pacific-facing nations—Colombia, Peru, and Chile—who have interest in working with U.S. Pacific Command in the broader U.S. Pacific security arena.

JFQ: How will these adaptations in your strategy and approach affect USSOUTHCOM's downstream activities?

Will they cause you to reexamine how and where you are investing and engaging with regional partners?

Admiral Tidd: It gives us a more strategic focus for communications, so—as opposed to coming in and talking about a counter-drug mission, which almost always tends to be a tactical-level discussion—it allows us to come in and talk much more broadly, on a theater security perspective, and to take a strategic approach to that and to understand how linkages of activities occurring in the Middle East can directly affect these partners at home. The phenomenon of rapid radicalization that occurs via the Internet has led to concerns among our regional partners. In the past, there was a tendency to believe that we are isolated from it; that it is part of the Middle East, and we don't have a terrorism problem in our country. That was a

widespread and strongly held belief not only in the United States but also on the part of many of our partners in the USSOUTHCOM area of operations.

But when we saw self-radicalized individuals in Europe as well as the United States, I think that led to a change in thinking. Countries that previously believed they did not have a terrorism problem began to realize that there were small pockets of individuals within their countries that were susceptible to radicalization. We needed to do a much better job sharing information, exchanging ideas, as well as understanding the routes of self-radicalization and steps that might be taken to head it off before it takes firm root. We needed to share best practices across all of our regional partners, and I think that gave us a compelling reason to talk to each other as opposed to sometimes almost telling them how to do their security business in the counter-drug mission. Too often, partners would rightfully turn to us and state, “Hold on a second. The only reason that I am having these security problems is because of the insatiable American demand for drugs.” That is absolutely true. That is a piece of the equation that we always had a difficult time addressing in the military sphere. Now when we talk about threat networks, it gives us a much more equal basis to sit at the table as equal partners and to share ideas on how we can solve some of the problems.

JFQ: You have been talking about expanding USSOUTHCOM’s aperture to focus on transregional and transnational threat networks and not simply the commodities they traffic. How can a geographic combatant command markedly affect these networks?

Admiral Tidd: Much of it comes from building our own friendly network, and understanding all the partners and players who are in that friendly network. Many times, those activities are confined within U.S. country teams within U.S. Embassies within individual sovereign states. How can we develop the means to link together these various activities?

Because as a geographic combatant command, we have a regional perspective and an opportunity, so we can now work with each of our partners within the individual country teams to stitch together these various effects. Much of it is by building the best possible picture, sharing that picture within each individual country team, and then achieving “unity of command.” But obviously, there is no such thing as unity of command in this instance because these partners are individual nation-states, sovereign territories, and our representation is rightfully our chief of mission within each of those states.

How can we stitch together each of these effects? In our military lexicon, we always hope for unity of command, but that doesn’t happen in the interagency community, ever. Unity of purpose we sometimes are able to achieve, but really what we are hoping to achieve in this case is unity of *effects*. Self-supporting, self-synchronizing effects occur because we are all orienting on a common operating picture, and we do the best job we can of building that picture, receiving information from as many partners as we can, kind of putting all of those individual tiles together into a mosaic and then sharing it with our interagency partners.

JFQ: What role does domestic and international demand for narcotics and other illicitly trafficked goods play in fueling the profits reaching these threat networks? You mentioned a little bit of this before. How does USSOUTHCOM engage outside of its area of responsibility to address that end of the system?

Admiral Tidd: One of the challenges is that we don’t have a military mission in the demand-reduction piece of it. To the extent that we are able to apply broad pressure across the length and breadth of these networks, it will challenge the ability of the networks to be able to move that commodity. There is the other piece of the problem; we look at illicit flows in the case of human-trafficking and movement of people. We also look at what are the push factors that cause people to leave. It is primarily generated

by insecurity in the individual countries, so we work together with our interagency partners, largely led by the State Department and [the U.S. Agency for International Development], to try to address the local level, and expanding beyond the local level, these areas of insecurity. We support the efforts of the Department of Justice to help countries develop a judicial system capable of effectively administering justice so that a conviction can be achieved. Then there’s got to be effective governance that produces an incarceration system so that an individual who has been convicted doesn’t find a safer, more secure place to conduct his illicit business inside of a prison. It’s the full ecosystem, if you will, of the justice circle. The military has to work its piece of the larger picture and help our fellow partners come together to address the entire circle; otherwise, we are trying to empty a sinking boat with a thimble, and we’re never going to make a whole lot of progress.

JFQ: Can you discuss your military imperatives and why they are important? How do you gain traction with concepts that may not resonate with the culture and beliefs of foreign societies governed by security forces?

Admiral Tidd: That’s the challenge, isn’t it? Ultimately, because we have longstanding, positive military-to-military relationships with many of the countries throughout the Caribbean and Latin America, we work together well, and one of the questions that I think we all are interested in is how can we not only effectively become better military organizations, but also ultimately contribute to the security of our nations and work together. For a number of years, we’ve had a number of different programs that addressed individual issues, and it seemed that what was needed was an overarching organizing construct to pull these together to explain why is it that we do these things. In the end, if it’s about becoming a modern, effective 21st-century military, what are some of the attributes of those militaries? I try to pull together

these threads into a tapestry—each one is important in its own right, but ultimately all the threads are interdependent, so to advance them requires them to work together.

Probably the most obvious and longstanding example is the work that USSOUTHCOM has done in advancing is that respect for human rights has to be a foundational attribute of a modern military. We've had difficulty in the past because often we were viewed as preaching and beating up some of our partners over this topic of human rights. We've got to find a way of understanding why it is important to have a foundational respect for human rights. It's not because it's a superficial or nice-to-do thing. It's what allows the security forces to derive their legitimacy. It's what underpins their purpose for being, where the military, police, or security forces is viewed by the population at large—not just the elites, not just the government—as protectors and not as predators. USSOUTHCOM is getting ready to celebrate the 20th anniversary of its human rights office, and that is something we are exceptionally proud of.

Another example is a longstanding program that has been going on, largely centered within the office of USSOUTHCOM's command sergeant-major. We have long recognized in the U.S. military that its backbone is a capable, professional senior NCO [noncommissioned officer] corps. We have told people that's the secret sauce that makes the military as effective as it is. Officers may dictate what the standard is, but it's the NCO corps that enforces it and makes sure that it pervades the entire organization. It is the living, breathing ethos of the organization. Whatever the NCO corps accepts, that is the maintained standard. Let's think about that. If it's important, if respect for human rights is important, you have to make sure that your NCO corps understands that, believes it, espouses it, and lives it. The two are interdependent.

The next one we took a look at is recognizing how we can take advantage of the human capital to solve critically different problems. If we want to be

a more effective military, we've got to find the right way to incorporate fully qualified women into all the branches of the Armed Forces. Again, it's not because it is social engineering or some sort of social experiment; it's because we learned by being pragmatic. Consider our special operations forces in Afghanistan and then Iraq. They were unable to approach half of the human terrain because they could not speak with any of the women, and yet women are enormous sources of information and understanding of what's going on. If we are going to be successful, we need to understand that. So, they successfully incorporated women into their forces.

The challenge we've got to overcome are cultural ones. I need people who look at problems from different perspectives, have different ways to get to a solution, and, no great surprise, it turns out that women solve problems differently than men. Why would we not want to incorporate that creativity into the deck of cards that we've got available to us as we are solving problems? We've got to find a way to adjust to that. Unfortunately, in some circles, we have reduced whether people can be effective team members to how many push-ups they can do, how many sit-ups, how fast can they run a mile-and-a-half, two miles, three miles. That is a simplistic way of looking at this problem. Yes, those are important abilities, and don't get me wrong, I don't mean for one second to undervalue that one has to be a fit individual to succeed on the modern battlefield. But that's not the only attribute that we need. As we have discovered, we need to measure for tenacity, willingness to execute the mission regardless of how difficult or challenging it is, and creativity—coming at problems from different perspectives—so that I can have a competitive advantage against my adversary. How do we measure those things? We still are struggling with providing a holistic look at what attributes we value most.

But this won't happen overnight, just as a 6-, or 8-, or 10-year-old boy imagines himself as a Soldier, Marine, Sailor, Airman, Coastguardsman, as he imagines himself serving and taking the steps to

prepare himself. Similarly, a young girl at that same age, if she sees the commander of a geographic combatant command who happens to be a woman, who is also supremely qualified, if she sees a woman who has successfully completed the ranger program, if she sees women who are fighter pilots and captains of ships leading Marines and she recognizes that those individuals are valued for who they are, she will also develop the skills she needs to successfully compete and achieve to get to that point. So that's the third imperative.

The fourth one is this concept of jointness, which *Joint Force Quarterly* helps support. We've been on this path toward jointness for well over 30 years. We are still struggling, but the one piece that I would take from having our joint force engage in combat operations as full joint force partners, now for a decade and a half, is that there is nobody in today's leadership who questions the value of jointness and the understanding that we will never fight as separate Services. We can help our regional partners gain that understanding. They are at various stages along this same journey because, ultimately, none of them has the resources, none of us has the resources to be able to solve problems individually. I would say that the time is now to extend that further. It is not just military. If you were going to be an effective joint officer, you've got to understand the role that you play as part of a security team that includes the military, Intelligence Community, law enforcement, diplomatic community, NGO [nongovernmental organization] community, as well as and understand the roles and contributions that they can make. You can't just state, "I'm only going to do NCO development and jointness." It is an interdependent mix. I think that working jointly has made us stronger. We're not there yet, it's a path, it's a journey that we are on with mixed results. Ultimately, it's cultural change, and I think that we can help our regional officers. JFQ