

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

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Volume 30  
Number 1 *Parameters Spring 2000*

Article 9

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2-8-2020

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### Recommended Citation

Steinke, Ralph R., and Brian L. Tarbet. "Theater Engagement Plans: A Strategic Tool or a Waste of Time?." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 30, 1 (2000). <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol30/iss1/9>

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# Theater Engagement Plans: A Strategic Tool or a Waste of Time?

RALPH R. STEINKE and BRIAN L. TARBET

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From *Parameters*, Spring 2000, pp. 69-81.

"Engagement, while not yet widely embraced as a characterization of our basic global posture, seems to me to express quite well what we need to be about in the post-Cold War era, that we need to be engaged in the world, and that we need to be engaged with other nations in building and maintaining a stable international security system." -- Representative Ike Skelton[1]

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For the latter part of the 1990s and into the 21st century, international "engagement" has been and will be the defining term in America's national security and foreign policy strategies. This approach has resulted in a marked change in the rate and scope of US military deployments. On any given day, for example, the US Army has more than 30,000 soldiers deployed in over 70 nations, not including those soldiers routinely stationed outside the United States. To manage this change and the military's implementation of the engagement strategy, the Department of Defense has within the past two years required the regional Combatant Commanders to develop Theater Engagement Plans (TEPs) and report those plans to the Secretary of Defense. The primary purpose of these plans, according to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) Manual 3113.01, is "to develop a process to globally integrate military engagement activities." [2]

This article contends that unless significant changes are made to the management and integration of the national military and national security strategies at the national level, and the TEP development and approval process at the Department of Defense level, the Theater Engagement Plan requirement will amount to nothing more than a useless bureaucratic report. For the TEPs to be useful and relevant, the following actions need to be taken:

- A single body at the national level should be responsible for prioritizing and integrating national engagement activities. The logical candidate is the National Security Council.
- Several changes should be made to improve the TEP process within the Department of Defense, including:
  - . Providing clearer articulation from the Secretary of Defense to the CINCs and the Joint Staff of the purpose for the TEPs and how they are to support the National Military Strategy and the National Security Strategy.
  - . Achieving global integration of the TEPs by making the Secretary of Defense the final approving authority rather than the regional Combatant Commanders.
  - . Achieving greater integration of TEP development and implementation at the CINC level.
  - . Providing distinct and separate funding to the CINCs for the conduct of engagement activities.

## The National Security Strategy and the National Military Strategy

The 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act requires that the President of the United States develop an annual National Security Strategy discussing, at a minimum: vital global interests and objectives; proposed short- and long-term use of all elements of national power to achieve US objectives; and the commitments and defense capabilities required to deter aggression and implement the strategy while achieving a balance among all elements of power.[3] While the National Security Strategy has received varying degrees of criticism since its inception (e.g., some believe it is too vague[4]), it does provide the foundation for the Administration's vision, goals, and resourcing requirements in meeting the nation's security needs.

The overarching strategies set forth in this document have evolved from the 1987 and 1988 Cold War versions, which

emphasized the military as an instrument of power in the containment policy, through the 1990 to 1993 Bush Administration documents focusing on "collective engagement,"[5] to the Clinton Administration's "engagement and enlargement" strategies. President Clinton's 1995 National Security Strategy highlighted the policy for engagement, stating, "While the Cold War threats have diminished, our nation can never again isolate itself from global developments."[6] This notion has evolved to the most recent (1998) version of the strategy, which emphasizes the "Imperative of Engagement." [7]

Engagement has thus become the defining term--indeed, the foundation--for US foreign policy as we enter the 21st century. Whether this is the correct US foreign policy or whether the policy is sufficiently defined is beyond the scope of this article. What we are concerned with here is the nation's and specifically the US military's implementation of this strategy.

The most recent (1997) National Military Strategy, taking guidance from the National Security Strategy and the Quadrennial Defense Review, established three mandates to support the National Security Strategy: shape the international environment, respond to the full spectrum of crises, and prepare now for an uncertain future.[8] These are known as the "Shape, Respond, Prepare" pillars of the National Military Strategy. The engagement component of this policy constitutes the preponderance of the requirement to "shape the international environment." Thus, engagement has taken on virtually equal importance to that of warfighting (respond) and the research, development, and acquisition (prepare now) aspects of our National Military Strategy.

Placing the correct emphasis on each of these pillars obviously entails difficult choices and has been the subject of much debate among the Department of Defense, the services, and Congress. With a finite limit on resources, difficult decisions must be made on the level of appropriations to be dedicated to each pillar. Spending too much on current warfighting capabilities could mortgage the future. Spending too much on engagement activities could detract from our current "respond" or warfighting capabilities. Some argue that near-term, warfighting readiness must always be our first priority. Others suggest that given a static budget, a ten-percent decrement in current readiness with a proportionate increase in engagement activities could ultimately enable us to prevent conflict, if not shape it significantly to our advantage.[9] We believe that selective military engagement, especially where it enhances our ability to respond to crises, is a good strategy and can pay dividends in preventing armed conflict, resolving armed conflict, or winning armed conflict.

### **Peacetime Military Engagement and Theater Engagement Plans**

For the US armed forces, the idea of peacetime military engagement is not new. Since World War II our military forces have been engaged internationally, to varying degrees, with other military forces around the world. US armed forces have long sought to achieve interoperability with America's allies, although efforts have waned somewhat in the past few years because of the lack of a monolithic threat and exponential advances in US technologies. Interoperability efforts have included combined exercises and training, international unit partnership programs, personnel exchanges, foreign attendance at military schools, and so forth. One can envision few scenarios in which the United States commits to armed conflict or peace operations without at least some allied military cooperation. Operations Desert Shield and Storm, Operation Joint Endeavor, and arguably NATO's Operation Allied Force were undertaken with superb allied efficiency because the great majority of the military forces involved had trained with each other in one setting or another. Engagement is thus a military necessity and certainly not a new concept.

Two aspects of military engagement are new, however. First is the requirement to specifically plan and report engagement activities at the regional CINC level. Second is the surge in the number of engagement-related activities during the past few years, albeit more in particular regional areas of responsibility than in others.

To give visibility to ongoing engagement activities and to "operationalize" engagement,[10] in early 1998 the Department of Defense required the regional CINCs to annually publish Theater Engagement Plans. For the purposes of these plans, CJCS Manual 3113.01, published 1 February 1998, defined engagement as "all military activities involving other nations intended to shape the security environment in peacetime." [11] As previously noted, these Theater Engagement Plans were initiated "to develop a process to globally integrate military engagement activities." But why be concerned about "globally integrating" military engagement activities? This answer is not clear in the

manual, but one assumes the answer is found in both political and fiscal issues. The Department of Defense has been working in a resource-constrained environment for most of the 1990s, and global policy integration provides a more efficient use of those scarce resources. Further, global integration allows for a more coherent political application of the National Security Strategy, rather than five or six different interpretations and applications of that strategy.

According to Michelle Flournoy, former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Threat Reduction, regional TEPs were to serve the purpose of providing DOD "a means for looking across all regions" and a potential way of resolving "resource allocation issues." They also were initiated to provide a means for presenting prominent, common regional issues to the Secretary of Defense.[12]

In the TEP, each Combatant Commander is required to establish a Strategic Concept for his area of responsibility and all pursuant engagement activities for the next five years. Each CINC's Strategic Concept and the resultant plan are based upon the Prioritized Regional Objectives he receives in the Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan. While these plans are to be reviewed by the Joint Staff (with the Joint Doctrine Division [J-7] responsible for the overall review process), the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the services, and others, each CINC retains final approval authority for his plan.[13] Once the approved plans are submitted to the Joint Staff, they are bundled into a "family of plans" by the Joint Doctrine Division. Ultimately, they are provided to the CJCS and DOD for review (see Figure 1, below) and approved by the Chairman, JCS, as a family of plans. This initial process took about seven months to be completed and in most cases resulted in a 500-page document.[14]

<b>Theater Engagement Planning Process</b>	
<b>Stage 1</b>	
<b>Phase I</b>	<b>Initiation</b>
	CJCS/CINCs receive planning guidance from Secretary of Defense in Contingency Planning Guidance.
	CINCs receive planning guidance from CJCS in the Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan.
<b>Phase II</b>	<b>Strategic Concept Development</b>
	CINCs' prioritized theater, regional, and country objectives are derived.
	Strategic concept is developed.
	Resources required to execute the strategy are identified at macro level.
	Strategic concepts are reviewed and integrated, then collectively approved by CJCS.
	<b><i>The product is a completed strategic concept.</i></b>
<b>Stage 2</b>	
<b>Phase III</b>	<b>Activity Annex Development</b>
	Specific engagement activities are identified.
	Force and resource requirements are identified at the macro level.
	Force and resource requirements are analyzed.
	Shortfalls are identified.
	TEPs are completed.

	<i>The product is a completed Theater Engagement Plan.</i>
<b>Phase IV</b>	<b>Plan Review</b>
	TEPs are reviewed by the Joint Staff, services, supporting CINCs, and the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy.
	TEPs are integrated into a "family of plans."
	"Family of plans" is approved by the CJCS.
	TEPs are forwarded as a "family of plans" for review by the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy.
<b>Phase V</b>	<b>Supporting Plans</b>
	Supporting plans are prepared as required.

**Figure 1. The Theater Engagement Planning Process.**

Even with the new planning horizon aligning the TEP process with the Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System cycle, this is a formidable planning requirement. It is also a cumbersome, bureaucratic undertaking. If there never was an intent to provide a global engagement plan, then requiring the CINCs to develop a TEP in a detailed reporting format leads one to the conclusion that the exercise was nothing more than a bureaucratic reporting requirement placed upon the regional CINCs.

### **Developing a Process, But to What Purpose?**

As previously noted, the purpose of the TEP is to "develop a process to globally integrate military engagement activities." However, the development of theater engagement plans provides only a partial solution in the integration of global engagement activities and the pursuit of the national military and national security strategies. Missing from this entire process is a central body or mechanism that will ensure the coherent integration of these national strategies and provide an overarching global engagement plan upon which to base the integration of the regional TEPs.

In discussing the "imperative of engagement," the National Security Strategy states, "Today's complex security environment demands that all our instruments of national power be effectively integrated to achieve our security objectives." [15] Currently, however, there is no authority, other than the President himself, who is designated to integrate all of our instruments of national power based on a long-term strategy. To ensure our instruments of national power are being "effectively integrated to achieve our security objectives," such an entity is needed. While that task might be established in another place or fashion, it seems logical that the National Security Council (NSC) take on this role.

Many would assume that the purpose of the NSC is to execute national security policy. However, except in times of crisis, it is fundamentally an advisory body. Its primary functions are to:

- Provide independent policy advice to the President, Vice President, and National Security Advisor.
- Advocate the President's policy.
- Coordinate policy development.
- Provide crisis management.

While the NSC is clearly involved in national security policy *formulation*, it is not responsible for sustained, strategic policy *execution*. During times of national crisis the NSC is directly involved in crisis resolution and does possess "tasking authority." That is to say, during a national crisis and through the powers rendered to it from the National Command Authorities, the NSC can require departments or agencies to conduct specified tasks, provide specific information, or provide manpower and equipment to accomplish tasks.

Current US Joint Doctrine stipulates that the "National Security Council System provide the foundation for interagency coordination in the development and implementation of national security policy." [16] However, while the NSC is clearly responsible for national security policy formulation, in reality it provides the foundation for national security policy implementation primarily during crises. In other words, there is presently no single entity dedicated to ensuring that the United States is globally executing an integrated, focused, and efficient national security strategy.

To execute a coherent, efficient national strategy based on a strategic vision, it does not suffice for the NSC to publish broad policy guidance and monitor daily world events and crises for the President. Closer cooperation and integration of the nation's power bases--diplomatic, military, economic, and informational--are needed. The National Security Council is the right place to ensure this cooperation and integration takes place.

First, the NSC should publish more specific, focused guidance in its National Security Strategy. This guidance should from the beginning prescribe an integrated approach, with sufficient detail to ensure integration at the highest levels. As Michael O'Hanlon, a research associate at the Brookings Institution, noted, the 1998 National Security Strategy "was noticeable for its lack of focus." [17] O'Hanlon went on to say, "It is a dangerous document if it represents an equal lack of focus among top leaders." [18]

Second, the NSC should establish a mechanism or process whereby the statutory members--the President, Vice President, and Secretaries of State and Defense--receive feedback to ensure that the strategy is being globally executed. A comprehensive rendering of such a mechanism is beyond the scope of this article. However, a mechanism or process should be established to ensure that the global engagement strategy is effectively integrated and coordinated among the key executors of the strategy. For example, a periodic briefing, perhaps semiannually, could be provided to the statutory NSC members on the status of the engagement strategy. This briefing could be a joint effort involving the NSC Defense Policy and Arms Control Office, the various NSC Regional Affairs offices, the International Economic Affairs office, and other key offices of the NSC Staff. The briefing would not necessarily include the President, but it could provide the Secretaries of State and Defense an opportunity to assess the global integration and coordination of their respective goals and strategies. Further, a briefing or report of this nature to the Secretaries of Defense and State would not require any change to existing law. Bolder changes, however, might require legislative action.

Finally, with regard to a global Theater Engagement Plan, the NSC is the place where the goals, objectives, and priorities should be articulated. The NSC is organized to ensure the global TEP is best integrated with the efforts of all the federal departments that will contribute to its execution: State, Commerce, Justice, the Central Intelligence Agency, and so on. If the regional TEPs are to be objectively integrated and prioritized in some fashion, that must be done against a clear standard. A global plan will establish that standard. Once a global plan, integrated and coordinated by the federal departments represented at the NSC, is formulated, the secretaries of the major federal executive departments would then be able to issue TEP development guidance to their respective departments.

This is not to imply that the NSC should take over the entire TEP process. However, one way to give the TEPs relevance is to directly link them to clearly articulated, regional, and cross-departmental integrated priorities. A global TEP, based on clear and prioritized national goals established by the NSC, would provide the necessary guidance for making difficult decisions between means and ends. It would reduce the ambiguity and increase the coherence in the structure of the regional TEPs.

## **A Need for Better Guidance**

During the initial formulation of the TEP concept, the Office of the Secretary of Defense never intended to build a global engagement plan. However, if US military strategy is to be pursued in a coherent, integrated fashion, with any relevance to available resources whatsoever, then a global approach is needed. True, the sheer magnitude of this effort may make it too unwieldy, too difficult to accomplish. However, if regional TEPs are not developed in some sort of a coherent, global fashion, then why require a regional TEP at all? Why go through the effort of the TEP process if no ultimate plan is being supported? Little integration is achieved if a CINC approves his own plan, which is then "bundled" into a "family of plans" [19] and sent to the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy for review. And if this review results only in selecting "two or three issues" to take to the Secretary of Defense for resolution, then a great deal of time and energy will have been expended for marginal benefit. This is another reason why some regional

CINCs see the Theater Engagement Plan as not much more than a bureaucratic reporting requirement, and certainly not as a useful planning process.

Currently, the Priority Regional Objectives provided to the CINCs in the Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan provide the foundation for the Theater Engagement Plan. There are two fundamental problems with using Priority Regional Objectives as the basis for developing a TEP: They are not integrated into a global engagement plan, and they are often vague or ill-defined.

Priority Regional Objectives need to receive the kind of review process that is required of the CINCs. As the foundation of the CINCs' engagement planning, Priority Regional Objectives need to be subjected to a rigorous level of approval and oversight reflecting the level of effort expected in the region. If the goal of the TEP is to structure and focus CINC and executive agent activities in their area of responsibility, then the vision provided to the CINC needs to receive a commensurate level of attention. More important, the efforts of the CINCs need to support, and be supported by, all other efforts in their regions. Unless a global engagement plan is developed to identify the global strategic priority interests of the United States, then there is no way to determine which of the Priority Regional Objectives are most important.

In the initial requirement for producing the TEPs, the Office of the Secretary of Defense did not want to give too much guidance for fear of inhibiting the innovation and initiative of the CINCs and their staffs in developing their plans.[20] Some CINCs, however, held another view, believing that more fundamental guidance was needed.[21] A precise definition of engagement, discussing how and why engagement differed in the post-Cold War environment, and, most important, why a Theater Engagement Plan was needed were topics not adequately addressed by Department of Defense officials. Additionally, initial implementation of the TEPs was to be completed over a seven-month period, a relatively short fuse for an undertaking of this magnitude.

Military planners are well versed in the deliberate planning process. Key to this process is a vision, a clear intent, provided by the commander to his subordinates. In this regard, a Combatant Commander and his staff are no different. They need to have at least some articulated guidance on what is essential in the TEP and why they are required to produce one, especially since military engagement has been an ongoing feature of US global military operations for most of the 20th century. Admittedly, much presidential and Defense Department intent can be extracted from published documents such as the National Security Strategy, National Military Strategy, and the Quadrennial Defense Review. However, a clear, focused vision provided by the Secretary of Defense would have been helpful to the CINCs and their staffs, especially since this was the first foray into the TEP development process.

### **Achieving Global and Regional Integration**

As noted, after Theater Engagement Plans are developed by the regional warfighting CINCs, the TEPs are provided to the Joint Staff, services, supporting CINCs, and the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy for review. Since each plan is the CINC's and only the CINC's to approve, any recommendations made by the reviewing agencies can be ignored by a CINC. Thus, any efforts to integrate the plan at the national level, unless the Secretary of Defense himself intervenes, may be futile.

To make the TEP development process more effective, the Joint Staff, Office of the Secretary of Defense, the services, and other departments (like State) involved in executing the engagement policy need to be involved earlier. They need to have some preliminary say in the process and the product to make sure the regional TEPs are coherent from a national and global perspective. This is not to say that CINCs need to be micromanaged or that a "one shoe fits all" policy is right. However, if theater engagement plans are not well integrated, there is potential for the global US engagement policy to be pursued in an incoherent manner. As it stands now, when a Theater Engagement Plan is forwarded for review and integration into a "family of plans," it is virtually a fait accompli.

As the most recent US National Security Strategy sets forth, for any strategy to be successful it must be implemented using all instruments of US power--diplomatic, military, economic, and informational. The defects in integrating this strategy at the national level aside, much improvement can be made to better integrate the national security and national military strategies at the regional level. Again, coordination in the development of Theater Engagement Plans could be productive.

For example, it has not been uncommon for high-level visits from the Department of Defense, the armed services, and the State Department to result in commitments or promises made outside of a CINC's purview. This can and does result in promises being made which cannot be fulfilled by the CINC, leading to failed expectations and reduced credibility of the CINC and the United States.

US military engagement activities are very important to recipient nations. A seemingly less-significant activity such as a ship visit has great visibility in a small country. A US Navy ship visit can provide prestige to a country's leadership and its people, while also providing an economic windfall to local economies. Any such planned ship visits which are not brought to fruition ultimately do more damage to the regional CINC (who is permanently assigned to and responsible for the region) and to the United States than they bring to the Navy alone.

The same holds true for diplomatic visits. Some CINCs consult with the US Chiefs of Mission in each country within their region, while in other instances there is more information-sharing and less true consultation. The end result is that in some cases, instead of pursuing US foreign policy in a coordinated manner, US military and diplomatic efforts are disjointed, resulting in less effectiveness in ultimately shaping the environment to US and allied global interests. For Theater Engagement Plans to be more effective, true coordination and integration is needed among all departments and agencies that are pursuing foreign policy in a given region, whether the State Department, the Department of Defense, or others.

### **Funding Engagement**

In the past, CINCs have had to cobble together many and disparate funding sources to support military engagement activities. One aspect of the TEP process that will be most difficult to improve will be the consolidation and identification of one or at most a few funding sources upon which CINCs can plan and execute engagement.

Engagement activities are conducted by various subordinate commands and agencies in a CINC's area of responsibility, each with its own funding. Consequently, it is extremely difficult for a CINC to plan, with any assurance at all, engagement activities out to five years in the future. For example, a relatively simple bilateral military exercise may have four or five funding sources associated with it. Cancellation of one of these sources may cause the entire exercise to be scrubbed. One recent change which should help is tying the TEP development process in with the Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System. This should give CINCs more predictability regarding the future availability of funds with which to plan and conduct engagement activities.

CINCs are presently trying to overcome this lack of dedicated funding for engagement. For example, Pacific Command has established an Engagement Working Group as a forum to resolve funding and policy issues, and other commands, like Southern Command, "fence" funds to ensure the means are available for engagement activities.

As one senior staff officer noted, compared to equipment and personnel procurement, engagement is comparatively inexpensive. Procuring one less multimillion-dollar ship or aircraft is almost enough to pay for the entire engagement budget for all CINCs for one year.[22] The key problem is that CINCs don't have their own dollars with which to support the national engagement strategy. All funding sources originate with the services and service Program Objective Memorandums. Again, if TEPs are to have any meaning, CINCs should be given their own funding sources to plan and execute the designated strategy.

### **Historical Precedents**

Since the Theater Engagement Plan process was only initiated in January 1998, there are no historical examples that will clearly demonstrate the failure of a TEP due to a lack of global integration or focus. However, there are examples of major federal departments not coordinating their pursuit of a national goal or policy. One such example is the US effort to negotiate an end to Europe's worst war in half a century, the war in the former Yugoslavia.

From the beginning of that endeavor, the efforts of the Defense and State Departments were not integrated nor coordinated. Indeed, in some instances they were in direct opposition to each other. The mission to bring the war in the Balkans to an acceptable, negotiated settlement was beset by "eleven major disagreements between State and the

JCS."[23] The Defense and State Department discord ranged from where the Implementation Force headquarters would be located, to the disposition of US peacekeepers, to the issue of keeping up the bombing pressure on the Serbs while the negotiating team attempted to achieve an 11th-hour settlement.[24] In spite of such differences, the inexhaustible efforts of the US negotiating team finally produced an agreement.

It may be argued that disagreement among key departments of the executive branch is a healthy extension of the balance of powers, ensuring a thorough vetting of issues and the exposure of all arguments germane to a given situation. However, this discord clearly did not strengthen America's hand in brokering the final Dayton Accord agreements. Further, one must acknowledge that a united approach to a crisis, especially one involving negotiations, offers the best chance to resolve the situation successfully.

## Conclusion

Engagement is fundamental to our National Security Strategy. In executing this strategy, the US armed forces will continue to play a pivotal role. Our armed forces also will remain engaged with US allies because it has always made good military sense to enhance cooperation with allies and potential allies. In pursuing our national strategy, we need to make the most efficient use of our available resources in shaping the international environment, responding to crises, and preparing for the future.

Theater Engagement Plans can be an effective tool to ensure the US military is pursuing engagement activities effectively and efficiently. However, in their current form and application, they amount to little more than useless bureaucratic reports. By increasing national security integration at the national level, Theater Engagement Plans could more effectively support national security and the National Military Strategy. Further, their integration within DOD and within each region can and should be significantly improved. The Department of Defense should ensure that all regional plans support a global plan, and the CINCs should ensure their plans support the National Military Strategy and the National Security Strategy. To accomplish this, the CINCs need clear guidance from the Secretary of Defense and adequate financial resources with which to plan and pursue their strategies.

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## NOTES

The authors wish to acknowledge the assistance and insights of Captain Dirk Deverill, USN, and Commander Eugene "Terry" O'Brien, USN, in preparing this article. Dr. Thomas-Durell Young of the Strategic Studies Institute at the US Army War College also provided helpful editorial comments. As with all *Parameters* articles, the views expressed in this article are those of the authors; they do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Harvard University, the Department of Defense, the Department of the Army, or any agency of the US government.

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