

WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE?:
ADJUSTING THE ROLES OF U.S. STRATEGY IN EUROPE TO
COUNTER TRANSNATIONAL THREATS

BY XXXXXXXXXXXX

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14. ABSTRACT Despite the increased globalization and interoperability of the world, the ability to detect, track, and perhaps capture or defeat transnational threats remains a challenging problem. U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) lists countering transnational threats as one of its highest priority efforts. Execution in sovereign Europe, however, requires a whole-of-government approach with a Federal agency other than the Department of Defense leading the effort. U.S. strategy does not clearly define transnational threats, nor does it provide adequate implementation guidance to counter such threats. In practice, U.S. partners and allies in Europe are highly capable of countering transnational threats within their borders without the need of assistance from the U.S. military. Realigning USEUCOM to a role supporting diplomatic and other civilian actions to counter transnational threats will ultimately promote a more efficient use of military resources in the region and concentrate focus on better defined military priorities.				
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U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) should downshift the “counter trans-national [sic] threats” mission in Europe to a supporting role under a U.S. whole-of-government effort which would result in a better focus of combatant command (CCMD) resources to other priorities within U.S. strategy, such as countering Russian aggression and building partnership capacity with other nations.¹ Despite the increased globalization and interoperability of the world, the ability to detect, track, and perhaps capture or defeat transnational threats remains a challenging problem. Current U.S. strategy documents provide minimal information on the definition and scope of such threats along with the desired security objectives in this arena. As an additional consideration, the U.S. offers more of a supporting role in Europe because the continent is highly advanced with ample capabilities within its military, intelligence, and diplomatic efforts to identify and appropriately handle transnational threats. The collaboration necessary to counter transnational threats between nations is an area of national interest best led outside of the U.S. military.

There are several factors to consider when interpreting and implementing strategy at a CCMD. This analysis will begin with a look at grand national strategy and overarching U.S. priorities to counter transnational threats. The published documents are not integrated through the various levels of strategy and guidance. They lack clarity on priority and definition of these threats. In turn, this divide misleads USEUCOM and other government organizations from successfully implementing a unified strategy related to transnational threats. Next, a look at the political and military dynamics in Europe specific to these threats will help evaluate the impact of multiple international powers. Both military and political leaders are involved in the decision making process to enhance the region’s security. Allies and partners, independently and

¹ United States European Command, “Commander’s Priorities,” accessed 30 August 2020, <https://www.eucom.mil/organization/commanders-priorities>.

collaboratively, continue to take significant steps to disrupt and isolate these threats without direct aid from the U.S. military. Finally, counterviews to the points above provide some objective insights to consider. Some may say there are areas, such as Iran and Turkey, which require more collaboration with partner nations and a higher dependence on U.S. economic and military support to counter transnational threats. However, the Department of Defense (DoD) should only retain inherent support roles as part of the broader government effort because it is primarily a warfighting organization, uniquely equipped with abundant warfighting resources rather than retaining diplomatic or economic bargaining power.

An Undefined Problem Set

For a CCMD to understand and adequately support U.S. strategy, it is necessary to begin with a review of national, defense, and military guidance. Priorities of effort in countering transnational threats are misaligned at various levels of strategy. This contrast partially results because the mission of countering transnational threats is abstract and limited in the published strategies of the U.S. Government. The 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy limits the focus of “transnational threats” to terrorists and transnational criminal organizations.² The Summary of the National Defense Strategy published the following year effectively separates these actors with a heavy focus on terrorism; in fact, “transnational criminal organizations” is only briefly mentioned for threats in Africa with undefined general support from Europe.³ The lack of definitions from higher headquarters guidance leaves room for subjective interpretations by USEUCOM as it shapes its strategy for specific implementation in the European theater.

Different definitions for transnational threats obscure requirements, thereby blurring focus in this

² Donald J. Trump, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America” (The White House, December 2017), 10.

³ Jim Mattis, “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America” (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018), 10.

mission set for the CCMD. However, strategic guidance in deterring Russia or maintaining interoperability with partners is unambiguous and well-defined throughout all layers of guidance. The priority to counter transnational threats—be they terrorists, criminal organizations, or something completely different—is tangential at best. As a result, USEUCOM’s implementation of the strategy to counter transnational threats is equally disparate.

Echoing unspecific guidance for national security, defense, and military strategies, there is equally no clear delineation as to which U.S. Cabinet Department has primacy when considering whole-of-government efforts in countering transnational threats. Current military guidance through the Joint Chiefs of Staff suggests the Departments and “interagency partners [should] consider their relative equities to determine if action is warranted.”⁴ When considering any plan involving networks and whole-of-government actions, however, military leaders have obligations to analyze potential threat networks to include “criminal organizations because these organizations provide material support to insurgent and terrorist organizations.”⁵ The DoD within the interagency wields several advantages due to its budget, strength, mobility, and flexibility. There is a natural tendency within the military’s culture to take over actions with its large footprint. Conceivably, other agencies are happy to accept military might with its plentiful resources to support non-military efforts.

With U.S. strategy unclear in defining transnational threats and minimal implementation guidance to counter the threats, USEUCOM similarly lacks cohesion or “jointness” in executing this part of the strategy. Not all allocated forces and military service components in the CCMD support USEUCOM’s partial mission to countering transnational threats. The Marine Corps

⁴ Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Countering Threat Networks*, Joint Publication 3-25 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 21 December 2016), I-1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, V-16.

Component, for instance, does not have any preparatory operations, exercises, or initiatives dedicated to supporting this objective within its Fiscal Year 2020 to 2026 Campaign Plan.⁶ Because not all components fully support USEUCOM's mission in planning and execution, there is a natural discord if all services work separately to meet an end state, even if it is an unclear objective. This effect is strikingly similar to some of the characteristics leading up to the efforts to pass the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reform Act "in order to prioritize 'jointness' among the services."⁷

Additionally, there is a tendency for U.S. forces to overstate requirements to remain relevant, gain more resources—such as time, money, and manpower—or elevate priorities of resources such as intelligence assets and specialized personnel. Artificially inflating a mission, wittingly or unwittingly, naturally diverts focus from other priorities of effort within the command and causes residual inefficiencies within the organization. A part of so-called "mission creep," this exaggeration has the potentially dangerous possibility to not only cause confusion for military organizations and unity of effort, but it can also stretch the actual assigned missions too thin and lead to ineffective execution.

USEUCOM's ability to enhance and employ a joint force yields better results by executing one of its foundational priorities: support the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The 2018 National Military Strategy Description speaks heavily on relationships with allies and partners, and the USEUCOM Theater Strategy similarly mentions working with NATO and allies over 50 times; however, there are a mere eight references to transnational

⁶ "Fiscal Year 2020-2026 Campaign Plan" (PowerPoint presentation, U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Europe and Africa, Stuttgart, Germany, 21 April 2020); "MARFOREUR/AF Command Brief FY 20, Theater Crisis and Contingency Response Forces in Readiness" (PowerPoint presentation, U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Europe and Africa, Stuttgart, Germany, 19 September 2019).

⁷ Kathleen J. McInnis, *Goldwater-Nichols at 30: Defense Reform and Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2 June 2016), 1.

threats within the Theater Strategy.⁸ Working with allies is such a fully prioritized and integrated mission set in USEUCOM that the organization’s motto is “Stronger Together.”⁹ The countering transnational threats mission, on the other hand, lacks synchronicity with written guidance and execution by the military service components and allocated forces. In this manner, countering transnational threats—which remains limited to terrorists and criminal organizations per national guidance—becomes more of an effect or appended requirement rather than a clearly defined end state.

Political and Military Actions and Dynamics

Following a review of higher-level guidance, an assessment of actions and historical execution of countering transnational threats within USEUCOM’s Area of Responsibility (AOR) is prudent. Unlike many of its sister continents, such as Africa or South America, where economic struggles, civil unrest, corruption, and widespread criminal activities are legitimate concerns leading to instability, Europe’s countries are generally self-capable. The Netherlands, Poland, and Germany, for example, showed European countries’ independent competence and expertise by stopping potential terrorist attacks without U.S. military assistance.¹⁰ Despite the ease of access through the Schengen area and various other European agreements allowing individuals’ freedom of movement across the region, including large numbers of migrants, solutions to restrict the movement of threat actors often require diplomatic actions rather than

⁸ The Joint Staff, “Description of the National Military Strategy 2018” (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2018); Tod D. Wolters, “United States European Command Theater Strategy” (U.S. European Command, June 2019).

⁹ Tod D. Wolters, “United States European Command Theater Strategy.”

¹⁰ Zack Newmark, “Dutch forces arrest two plotting terrorist car bomb attack by year’s end,” *NL Times*, 26 November 2019, accessed 31 August 2020, <https://nltimes.nl/2019/11/26/dutch-forces-arrest-two-plotting-terrorist-car-bomb-attack-years-end>; Daniel Tilles, “Ukrainian Muslim convert detained for planned terror attack in Poland,” *Notes from Poland*, 10 December 2019, accessed 31 August 2020, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2019/12/10/ukrainian-muslim-convert-detained-for-planned-terror-attack-in-poland/>; Justine Coleman, “4 suspected ISIS members arrested in Germany allegedly planned attacks on US bases,” *The Hill*, 15 April 2020, accessed 31 August 2020, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/terrorism/492877-4-suspects-arrested-in-germany-allegedly-planned-to-attack-us>.

militaristic. In a USEUCOM strategic environment layout updated 7 May 2020, the CCMD loosely categorized migrant movement and even pandemics as transnational threat considerations in the wake of the novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19).¹¹ Although these are legitimate concerns in the AOR, issues like civilian migrant flows and pandemics are not threats that should be in the top tier of dedicated DoD-led action. To reiterate an earlier point of mission creep, this is overstating the mission of USEUCOM as a warfighting and allied partnership command. The confusion misdirects USEUCOM operational focus for allocated units to properly employ their forces in support of the published security and defense strategies. Department/Ministry of State officials between sovereign country leaders, their administrations, and perhaps non-governmental organizations are better suited over the military to lead in the collaboration efforts on migrant concerns. The World Health Organization within the United Nations (UN), as an additional example, is much more capable of handling pandemics like COVID-19 and should not be confused with CCMD staff planning for combat operations.

In a large AOR with 51 sovereign, independent states, countering transnational threats is largely dependent on the continuing efforts of diplomats and their interactions with other organizations and multilateral institutions such as NATO, the UN, and the European Union. USEUCOM's participation in countering transnational threats through violent military action is overly aggressive and counterproductive to national interests. USEUCOM implicitly recognized this dilemma in a brief from April 2020, which categorized transnational crime as a primary military security issue after analyzing CCMD challenges and interests across the interagency within the AOR.¹² This categorization is a challenge because countering transnational crime is

¹¹ "EUCOM Strategic Opportunities/Challenges" (PowerPoint presentation, U.S. European Command, Stuttgart, Germany, 7 May 2020).

¹² "USG Interagency in EUCOM AOR" (PowerPoint presentation, U.S. European Command, Stuttgart, Germany, 20 April 2020).

not a true military mission, but it does require a whole-of-government solution. Countering the criminal organizations' aspect of transnational threats is best kept at other agencies to leverage civilian cooperative relationships across international diplomatic and law enforcement channels rather than remain as a prioritized DoD function in Europe. Although differing national identities, varying politics, and close geographic proximities can stress various international relationships within Europe, multi-national partners involved with exercise planning continue to forge cooperative dynamics. The work and positive relationships between military planners of the U.S. and allies and partners routinely yield successes in meeting military objectives prescribed in exercises like Trident Juncture, Juniper Cobra, and Combined Endeavor. Similar to forming international actions to counter transnational threats, however, the reality is that working with partners begins and ends outside the military based on strategy, national priorities, and international agreements. There are no national allies or partnerships without diplomatic actions leading to these continued interactions across borders.

Because the U.S. Congress controls government funding, security and non-security assistance funding in Europe also signals increased confidence with European partners and allies. One report from 2015 ranks Europe and Eurasia as the region receiving the least assistance funding at \$492 million; the Western Hemisphere received \$1.326 billion, primarily assisting Colombia and Mexico, and Africa received an astonishing \$6.935 billion to assist several nations.¹³ By not funding European military assistance like other regions, the U.S. Government effectively, as Mara Karlin wrote, “outsource[ed] regional security in places where U.S. interests

¹³ Derek S. Reveron, *Exporting Security: International Engagement, Security Cooperation, and the Changing Face of the US Military*, 2d ed. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 129.

are not immediately threatened.”¹⁴ This non-action is a clear message from Congress that there are few security concerns in Europe within the broader scope of grand national strategy.

The U.S. Government provides European financial support through other avenues for specific DoD missions outside the scope of countering transnational threats. Implemented specifically to counter Russian aggression after its annex of Crimea in 2014, the massive European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) budget averaged over \$5 billion annually across the past few years.¹⁵ Seeing EDI as a form of general foreign assistance funding, allied and partner nations may delay expansions of their own infrastructure in anticipation of U.S. support.¹⁶ The EDI funds are dedicated to a unique part of the USEUCOM mission, yet some decision makers—again, using the concept of mission creep—may stretch the intent of “deter Russia” to other actions such as staff assist visits, constructing facilities, and expanding critical infrastructure to defray costs to partners. As one of the largest overall contributors to NATO in finance and military capacity, member nations rely on U.S. involvement for port security, intelligence capabilities, and deterrence. Therefore, plans, exercises, and other military actions have a cultural imperative to deter Russia rather than provide any real focus on countering transnational threats.

Alternative Views

One argument for the military to lead the countering transnational threat effort in Europe is that terrorists, under a narrower definition of transnational threats in U.S. strategy, have had some success around the AOR and continue to disrupt U.S. military planning and execution.

¹⁴ Mara Karlin, “Why Military Assistance Programs Disappoint,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2017, accessed 19 September 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2017-10-16/why-military-assistance-programs-disappoint>.

¹⁵ Paul Belkin and Hibbah Kaileh, *CRS In Focus 10946 The European Deterrence Initiative: A Budgetary Overview*, (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 16 June 2020).

¹⁶ Ashley Tressel, *CRS: Funding EDI in OCO could Affect Partner Countries' Commitment*, InsideDefense.Com's Ground Vehicles Report (Arlington, VA: Inside Washington Publishers, 14 August 2018).

Some European countries implemented diplomatic pressures in response to Iran's support of terrorism; in part, Europe's initiatives prompted the U.S. to stand up the Countering Transnational Terrorism Forum in 2019.¹⁷ In the U.S. Department of State's 2019 Country Reports on Terrorism, nearly all European nations have some integrated counterterrorism effort with the U.S. Government against the Kurdistan Workers' Party—a group notably originating in the NATO country of Turkey—the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, and other terrorist organizations.¹⁸ Terrorist groups are more creative and unconventional in their tactics, techniques, and procedures. Similarly, actions to counter terrorist groups must also be unique and innovative. As such, the problem set requires more than just a military solution.

Armed conflict by itself is ineffective at suppressing terrorist networks. The use of drones is generally the military tool of choice to attack known terrorist sanctuaries. Audrey Kronin notes, however, that drones should be used as “part of a long-term political strategy that undermines the enemies of the [U.S.]”¹⁹ Exacerbating the issue, no clear diplomatic avenues exist to resolve differences because the U.S. does not negotiate with terrorists. Due to this policy, actions against terrorist groups require increasing efforts outside of DoD mandates, such as U.S. Agency for International Development initiatives for education and agricultural programs to support reform, Department of Justice efforts for jurisdictional and rule of law issues, or the Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control to control economic sanctions.²⁰ Through their investment in counterterrorism actions, European countries, much like the U.S.,

¹⁷ Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2019” (U.S. Department of State, 30 July 2020), 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Audrey Kurth Cronin, “Why Drones Fail: When Tactics Drive Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 4 (July/August 2013): 44–V.

²⁰ Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2019.”

must continually seek long-range solutions through various diplomatic and economic tools such as sanctions and financial constraints over military options.

Critics may also argue that some parts of the European continent remain unstable despite the robust interactions and agreements between most countries in the region. As a result, USEUCOM must remain cognizant of transnational and other threats when building military plans and exercises. In his 2020 testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, USEUCOM Commander General Tod Wolters stated, “[Violent Extremist Organizations] remain a transregional threat with decentralized command and control, finance, and facilitation networks spanning from conflict zones into Europe.” He also gave detailed examples of areas in Europe considered hotspots for these threats, such as Israel and even the Iran-Turkey border, where Turkey has acted independently against NATO and U.S. efforts.²¹ With his extensive knowledge and insight of the region, it is clear the combatant commander views “transregional” threats as a source of instability in the region. Without clarity from higher headquarters, the knowledge and experience of the commander is a cornerstone in planning guidance. Reflecting what he testified to Congress, it is reasonable to assume his guidance in USEUCOM plans and exercises incorporates concerns about transregional threats.

Despite the commander’s testimony and planning guidance, execution and coordination of combat plans, nevertheless, still require cooperation with partners, especially with Europe’s stability and capabilities as a collective. The entrance to or exit from partnerships and alliances rests with diplomatic efforts, not military decisions. However, partnerships do not always last, and the tumultuousness of actions across the globe in an environment of great power competition

²¹ General Tod D. Wolters, “Testimony,” Senate, *Statement of General Tod D. Wolters, United States Air Force, Commander United States European Command to United States Senate Committee on Armed Services*, 116th Congress, 25 February 2020, 7-8.

yields some uncertainty. Stephen Walt theorizes that countries form alliances either through balancing (i.e., joining the opposition to have greater security) or bandwagoning (i.e., joining the greater threat to avoid or divert an attack).²² Although initially supporting Germany in World War II, for example, the Soviet Union concluded the conflict as an ally of the U.S.²³ Germany and Japan were some of the U.S.'s fiercest military enemies at the time. Fast-forward 75 years, and these relationships completely inverted, epitomizing the notions of Walt's insights. The reasons for a nation joining in or defecting from an alliance are, indeed, complicated, yet this is not an issue requiring a forward military effort. USEUCOM serves to support and foster affiliations within existing alliances and partnerships created through diplomatic efforts, not to lead non-military efforts in these relationships. Ultimately, Europe combats transnational threats through efforts largely outside of the U.S. military.

Conclusion

In combining these analyses, it is clear that the DoD must maintain an effective relationship with other U.S. government agencies, especially in a peacetime environment. However, the military's primary role is rooted in tradition, theory, and policy as only one instrument of national power. Carl von Clausewitz emphasized that "[physical] force to compel our enemy to do our will" is part of a country's political objective in war; he further wrote that when "the political object will not provide a suitable military objective...[the] military objective must be adopted that will serve the political purpose."²⁴ Without a kinetic war in the area, USEUCOM maintains relevancy through training, deterrence initiatives, and other actions to

²² Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (Spring 1985).

²³ "Cold War History," *History*, accessed 24 September 2020, <https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/cold-war-history>.

²⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 75, 81.

support U.S. policy objectives. By assisting with the distribution of aid packages, training with partners, and maneuvering forces and equipment during a peaceful exercise, the U.S. military continues to project power, which inherently deters threats. Indeed, these actions in the context of negative aims likely assist in preventing war in the region, but, as highlighted earlier, terrorist attacks continue with local authorities leading actions in their respective countries.

Therefore, USEUCOM should concede as a support arm for diplomatic and other foreign affairs efforts in the theater to counter transnational threats. This adjustment would help align and prioritize military efforts to more applicable and better-defined mission sets within U.S. strategy. When the strategic ends are unclear, the ways and means will continue to be ineffective. By shifting this role to a secondary part of the CCMD's mission, USEUCOM and its components can refocus resource-constrained assets to deter Russia and continue its historical supporting efforts to the self-sufficient abilities inherent across European nations. Sovereignty prevails in Europe, and military organizations do not execute direct action to capture or defeat transnational threats; diplomatic, financial, economic, and other means are the first line of defense. The CCMD should only advance the countering transnational threats objective to a higher yet supporting priority when other efforts in the interagency require military assistance. A whole-of-government approach is necessary as part of a unified effort across the interagency, but current actions to counter transnational threats in the region are not militaristic in nature. Therefore, entities from perhaps the Department of State working through diplomatic channels, the Department of Treasury in stifling funding support, or the Department of Justice with law enforcement civilian-military cooperation may be more appropriate to conduct such actions in sovereign Europe. Realigning the task of countering transnational threats to another agency will not only ensure the U.S. military maintains its dominance as the premier warfighting

organization in Europe, but it will also enhance the effectiveness and autonomy of allies' and partners' capabilities for years to come.