



# National Power and the

# Interagency Process

By GEORGE T. RAACH and ILANA KASS

## Summary

Inhibitions about using force can distance the military from participation in interagency decisionmaking. As a result other instruments of national power may be exhausted before serious attention is given to the unique capabilities of the Armed Forces, and then only with a deep sense of having failed in employing other means. The interagency process, especially when military planners are involved throughout, can represent a significant force multiplier, but it suffers from deficiencies in methods, actors, and structure. Military officers, accustomed to a settled and demanding system of staff work, may be frustrated by governmental mechanisms which are known for elasticity and ambivalence. But the military should remain engaged in the interagency process both to make it more effective and to ensure that the military voice is heard at the table. Officers can educate the interagency community about military capabilities and, more importantly, about the limitations of force.

American strategic culture holds that military force is a last resort. As a people, we are not entirely comfortable with using force until the other instruments of national power—economic, diplomatic, political, and informational—have been wielded. Given our history, values, and ideals such reluctance is understandable. In this context, cautious use of force with its potential for vast destruction and loss of life reflects wise statesmanship.

This cultural bias, however, often isolates the military from the other instruments of power. In fact, some policymakers consider the use of force as an admission of foreign policy failure. As a result, force is regarded as a separate instrument that is somehow in-

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compatible with other means. This perception of military power undermines efforts to achieve a more synergistic application of national power today with increasing frequency before as well as during crisis.

This article does not argue that force ought to be either a primary or an ordinary instrument of policy. While one can envision scenarios in which the Nation might strike preemptively, or prior to exhausting other means, they are exceptions to the rule. Employing combat power should virtually always be a final recourse. Nor is this article concerned with generating additional power. It does not suggest that future dangers will require new weapons systems or that diplomatic and economic techniques should be reshuffled and reprioritized. Rather, it is about enhancing power through the integrated and synergistic use of the various instruments of power. It begins with the premise that there must be a close, interdependent relationship among economic, diplomatic, and military instruments, and especially in crises. If the United States is to enjoy a measure of order and stability in the conduct of world affairs, this synergism must be routine, must occur across the spectrum of relations, and must be applied with vision and conviction.

### The New Order of Crisis

Future crises are likely to differ significantly from those of the Cold War. When the focus was the Soviet Union, and the overarching doctrine of containment guided our actions, coordinated use of national power was usually effective. However, coordinated efforts since the Persian Gulf War have been uneven. Events of the last year or so indicate a worrisome loss of effectiveness in applying power synergistically.

A new world order, regardless of its form, brings with it a new order of crisis. Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and even Korea are all

crises of the new order which have been intricate and difficult to understand. By contrast the standoff against the Soviet Union was not only comprehensible but, given each side's capability to destroy the other, included a premium on avoiding extremes. Today such constraints rarely apply.

Coupled with the increased complexity of problems is a relative decrease in conventional military power. Reduction in the size of forces and the slowing of some high technology programs mean that there will be less decisive force, qualitatively and quantitatively. This relative decline in capability is more apparent when one contemplates force improvements underway in many other states and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

A low level of military superiority does not necessarily mean that power cannot be used decisively. However, when it is applied it may well be with greater risks and narrowed options. To compensate for a decline in U.S. strength and increase in that of potential adversaries requires innovative ways of bolstering the effectiveness of national power—both to deter and to win on the battlefield. Greater effectiveness calls for improved productivity in applying instruments of power and, in turn, requires better interagency dynamics in dealing with crises.

### Power and Process

Force and combat *multipliers* often describe measures that improve effectiveness or productivity at reasonable cost. To exercise command and control more competently, improve the lethality or accuracy of fires, and develop new doctrines for employing forces are examples. In effect, multipliers allow commanders to do more without proportionate increases in force size or cost.

The term *multiplier* is particularly used to describe tactical or operational enhancements. To cope with future problems, a comparable multiplier is required at the strategic level. What might be called power multipliers are needed, and improving the interagency process to optimize instruments of national power is one way of bringing them to bear.

When working properly, the interagency process determines the national interests at stake, defines immediate- and long-term objectives, and considers the best ways of achieving ends with minimal risk. In an-

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other light, this process is the mechanism which drafts, coordinates, and assesses national strategy and oversees its implementation. Ideally, it is a forum for creative and visionary use of national power, where participants look for opportunities to complement and enhance the capabilities that others bring to the table.

Yet based on most daily press accounts, the process is in disrepair. Within the government the degree of dysfunction depends on the agency's point of view. Still, in the course of numerous interviews with players from various agencies, there was no satisfaction expressed in the health of the interagency process.<sup>1</sup> What is supposed to happen, why it doesn't, and what professionals can do about it are issues worth exploring.

### Structures and Fractures

On the face of it, the interagency process is designed to ensure that information and options are developed and passed up the line and that decisions and guidance are passed back down to the staffs which must write the orders and oversee their execution. A Presidential Review Directive, initiated by the National Security Advisor, defines the scope of the process, identifies interested agencies, and appoints an executive agent or lead agency.<sup>2</sup> This may be a cabinet agency like the Department of State or Defense or an organization like the Agency for International Development, which establishes the coordination process, sets the agenda, drafts policy recommendations, and conducts meetings. This lead agency also implements decisions unless that responsibility is passed to another organization.

The interagency hierarchy is designed to provide information and refine options while also allowing participants to voice opinions, offer recommendations, and for better or worse advance bureaucratic agendas. In theory, the action officers who operate informally or as members of task forces and special councils provide information to mid-level officials who comprise an interagency working group (IWG). Meeting at the direction of the lead agency, the IWG coor-

dinates issues, sifts through information, and passes analysis, together with policy options and recommendations, to the Deputies Committee.<sup>3</sup>

The committee includes relatively senior officials from various departments and agencies.<sup>4</sup> It can usually make some decisions and members can agree to proposals affecting their departments or agencies. For the most part, the members are not experts on the problem at hand, but if their representatives to the IWG prepare them well, they usually have a sound grasp of the issues, risks, and likely outcomes. Initial responses to crises often result from the deliberations by the deputies, but for critical decisions the deputies defer to the principals.

The principals include departmental secretaries, senior officials, agency directors, and the National Security Advisor.<sup>5</sup> Their meetings may directly involve the President and Vice President, or the results of meetings may be presented to them for approval.<sup>6</sup> Decisions resulting from these meetings and approved by the President ought to lay down markers and commit all governmental offices to an agreed course.

While this description is somewhat simplified, it highlights the guidelines prescribed by the Clinton administration. In the main, it appears to be a sound approach to a complex business and to include those who control various instruments of power. Yet there are significant problems that affect the quality of decisions, the effectiveness of actions, and the ability to synchronize power.<sup>7</sup> Fractures are evident on several levels involving process, personalities, and structure. For military officers used to a defined framework and clear-cut decisionmaking the interagency arena can be especially frustrating.

Unlike the structured coordination of military staffs, membership in the interagency process is not fixed and varies from crisis to crisis.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, this offers flexibility and facilitates tailoring a team to include those who are critical and exclude those who are not. On the other hand, it often means that those who participate in the process have little experience in crisis management and must operate in an unstructured environment which provides little compensating support. In the military

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system position is important, while in the interagency process personalities are key.

Personalities can dominate interagency deliberations—especially if process management is ineffective—and personal or organizational agendas may take precedent over larger crisis-related issues.<sup>9</sup> The result is often chaotic and disruptive. For example, policy papers are often presented for coordination on short notice, often late on Fridays, in what appear to be deliberate attempts to forestall detailed study and reasoned comment; or initiatives of limited value are advanced in ways that detract, often bypassing existing chains; or the time and energy of action officers, who ought to be providing pertinent information, are diverted to studies of dubious merit.

Structural and personality-dependent impediments work against the synergistic application of power. If lead agencies lack experience in setting goals and objectives or guiding interagency groups through the coordination process to specific policy recommendations, it may result in time-consuming meetings without agenda or purpose in which information is not refined and options are not developed. In some recent cases, the process has been so chaotic that the Deputies Committee has met before the IWG has focused the discussion or prepared the agenda. Failures of this sort produce tardy or poor decisions, which further complicates matters.

The feedback from decisionmakers to those who must develop implementing plans is often sparse or obtuse, indicating weaknesses in process and personalities. There have been occasions when action officers (and sometimes principals) who should have known about decisions reached up the chain were not informed in a timely manner. This inevitably results in wasting energy and falling behind in the time-sensitive matter of crisis management. The system never fully recovers and continues to lurch through the crisis. The initiative is thus invariably lost and reaction becomes the *modus operandi*.

Finally, lead agencies, responsible for making policy and decisions in the planning phase, may not have the resources and expertise to oversee implementation. This is especially true where operations involve large numbers of players working over consider-

able distances, under tight time constraints. Problems of implementation are also exacerbated when implementing instructions are couched in vague language open to different interpretations.

### Can It Be Fixed?

Rather than focusing diplomatic, economic, and military power in complementary fashion, power is being diffused. Embargoes may be imposed, negotiations may take place, and there may be some vague idea that the military can be called on to accomplish an ill-defined purpose unrelated to the real problem except in a very general way. This is hardly synergistic action. It seems to fall more into the category of muddling.

On the surface, military players in the interagency process appear to be poorly positioned to improve it despite the fact that they stand to lose the most if the muddle becomes something worse. Some aspects of the process are unlikely to change much, and it is important to realize that at the outset. For example, to expect the civilian-dominated interagency process to remodel itself in the image of a military staff system is anticipating too much. Despite the fact that the military staff process works well, there is cultural resistance to surrendering flexibility and ambiguity that many see as necessary. Additionally, few are eager to subject their offices to an unfamiliar architecture which appears to threaten prerogatives of turf.

Nevertheless, if one accepts the unchangeable and works within certain parameters, several initiatives could begin to restore interagency relationships and transform the process into a power multiplier. First, although many military officers see the process as frustrating, burdensome, and counterproductive, withdrawal is exactly the wrong approach. The faults in the system are readily apparent and foregoing it is tempting. The interagency process will continue whether the military plays or not, however, and ultimately the Armed Forces must deal with the flawed results. Instead, officers should focus on making the system more effective. To do that, military staffs at all levels must be willing participants who understand the system and can work to improve it.<sup>10</sup>

**military officers in the interagency process can contribute by asking the right questions**

Understanding the system goes beyond a mere description of the mechanism. It includes knowing the personalities of players and their agendas and the rationale behind them. It means looking for points of agreement rather than bones of contention. An effective interagency process depends largely on trust among the participants, and developing trust depends on understanding and a willingness to help move the process along. What may be surprising to many in the military is that they usually know more about other agencies than those agencies know about DOD or about each other. The key is to build a robust base of knowledge and apply it in ways that enhance the process without attempting to control it.

Second, officers working in the process as members of OSD, joint, or service staffs must be willing to educate nonmilitary players about the capabilities and, especially important, the limits of military power, and also to market ideas and positions effectively. As the former Commander in Chief of U.S. Atlantic Command pointed out, “The necessary first step in shaping effective interagency groups is making known what skills and resources one brings to the table.”<sup>11</sup>

Education involves more than a list of what force can and cannot achieve. It must touch on relevant theory about how force is applied, how the military assists other departments and agencies in accomplishing common goals, how actions by other departments can pave the way for effective and efficient use of force, and how other agencies must decide where the role of the Armed Forces leaves off in order to translate battlefield results into politically relevant outcomes. Officers should not hesitate to help others understand what is feasible, what is not, and where cooperative use of power can be most effective. This requires not only knowledge but vision.

Both education and marketing must be approached in ways that gain the willing support of other members of the interagency process without undermining mutual trust. This is crucial. It is important to remember that by virtue of training and discipline military officers are accustomed to crisis and can

often operate more efficiently in crisis situations. This attribute should be used to inform, persuade, and assist other members in applying national power.

Third, while standing interagency working groups may be less commonly used today than they were four years ago, they should not be.<sup>12</sup> Working in isolation until the proverbial balloon goes up does not improve the process. Though few formal, standing IWGs have been constituted, this does not mean opportunities for informal coordination or forward-looking exchanges should go begging. Officers at all levels who are likely to be part of the interagency process should look for chances to form or participate in such groups. When that is not feasible, they should at least regularly seek out potential counterparts. Even if this results in nothing more than a handshake and exchange of telephone numbers, the system will be stronger for the effort. Having the measure of one’s colleagues has great value.

Finally, military officers involved in the interagency process can contribute a good deal by asking the right questions. They must ensure at the outset that terms are properly defined and that every assumption makes sense. Dialect, if not language, differs from agency to agency, and it is important to overcome varying cultures at the beginning.

Other points for investigation include the process itself, the role of the military in the crisis at hand, and the degree of risk policymakers are willing to accept. Simply asking whether another agency has been consulted might be illuminating. For example, if there is concern over the use of economic power, inquiring if the Department of the Treasury and the National Economic Council (which is coequal to the National Security Council) have provided input may elicit a more potent concept. Similarly, inquiring into the details of the end state and specific military role in achieving it can open new vistas—as can queries about alternative courses of action in case of failure of the proposed approach. When a decision appears to be forthcoming, questioning whether or not the risks involved are fully understood will do much to assure proper force size and structure.

When decisions are made, questions must be asked to ensure that policies and concepts are stated in language that makes sense across the cultural lines of the agencies

which will implement them. No member should assume that something will happen perforce. That is not the history of crisis management or the interagency process. Collegial questioning serves to ensure that national power is focused and that the ends, ways, and means of strategy, as well as the risks of both action and inaction, are all fully considered.

As indicated at the outset, present predilections against the use of force may seem to banish military power to a distant, unwelcome, and misunderstood role. Yet global conditions suggest that this is the wrong solution. In fact, the synergistic use of all instruments of power, including force, can serve as a strategic power multiplier, and the interagency process is one way to achieve that end. But the interagency process is clearly broken.

Will the course suggested above resolve the myriad problems which plague the interagency process? Not entirely. However, simply allowing the process to drive itself deeper into chaos is not in the best interest of national security and sooner or later will lead to greater disasters. What is proposed is a beginning, albeit modest, to set the process on the way to improved effectiveness.

The amount of military power that can be brought to bear in the future will be relatively less as force levels are drawn down and threats become more sophisticated and intricate. At the same time, the risks and consequences of failure will be great. Unless instruments of national power are wielded effectively, efficiently, and in concert, the ability of the Nation to take unilateral action and to lead a coalition will be diminished.

Unlike the Cold War, there is no overarching policy to guide us. In these circumstances, the organized application of limited resources to achieve crucial objectives becomes more difficult and more important. Thus the interagency process, for better or worse, is a necessary mechanism. The military cannot revitalize the process itself, nor should it. However, the steps outlined above, though frustrating or unwelcome, can both reduce organizational stress and improve effectiveness to a level where all participants are engaged and revitalization becomes possible. Ultimately, such a renewal may be in the interest of the Armed Forces most of all, so it is up to them to begin. **JQ**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on research undertaken to define the quality of relationships among agencies and departments. Interviews were conducted with more than twenty officials from action officers to members of Deputies Committees.

<sup>2</sup> Presidential Decision Directives numbers 1 and 2 spell out the interagency process in the Clinton administration.

<sup>3</sup> Membership on IWGs varies from action officers to assistant secretaries, depending on the importance of the issue. In some cases, a group is comprised of action officers who report to an IWG executive committee made up of assistant secretaries which, in turn, feeds into a Deputies Committee.

<sup>4</sup> An NSC briefing listed the members of the Deputies Committee as the Deputy National Security Advisor, Deputy Assistant for Economic Policy, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, National Security Advisor to the Vice President, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Deputy Director of Central Intelligence.

<sup>5</sup> According to NSC sources, the usual principals include the National Security Advisor to the President, Secretaries of Defense and State, Ambassador to the United Nations, Director of Central Intelligence, Economic Policy Adviser, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

<sup>6</sup> Sometimes this is done in a formal NSC setting, but often the venue is less formal.

<sup>7</sup> While the leadership styles of some senior officials had an influence, several individuals interviewed indicated that the uneven quality of national security decisions over the past year were as much the result of a failed interagency process as of personalities.

<sup>8</sup> Some argue that the process is not *process* at all, but merely the trappings of process. However, this does not square with actual workings, which suggests the problem is more a case of dysfunctional process than the absence of process.

<sup>9</sup> Bureaucracies are inherently adversarial. But normal bureaucratic gamesmanship can be disruptive during crises when time for reasoned decisions is at a premium.

<sup>10</sup> Relationships at action officer-level appear to be healthier than those at mid- or upper-level. Bureaucratic friction, though present, does not have the same hold that it does at upper echelons. Yet there is a downside as well. Officers who are detailed to civilian agencies must not allow themselves to be captured by the host agency, but rather should use their organizational skills to help focus that agency's effort.

<sup>11</sup> Paul David Miller, *The Interagency Process*, National Security paper 11 (Cambridge: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, 1993), p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> During the previous administration, there were a number of standing interagency groups and several interagency coordinating bodies which met periodically, even when there were no crises on the horizon. This proved to be valuable and created the sorts of positive dynamics that facilitate responsive crisis management. While some standing working groups remain, their meetings are often infrequent, poorly attended, and unproductive.