

July 2024

The Unified Command Plan for A New Cold War

David Stilwell

United States Air Force Academy, david.stilwell@edu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/spaceanddefense>



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Aviation and Space Education Commons](#), [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [Eastern European Studies Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Leadership Studies Commons](#), [Near and Middle Eastern Studies Commons](#), [Nuclear Engineering Commons](#), [Science and Technology Studies Commons](#), and the [Space Vehicles Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

Stilwell, David (2024) "The Unified Command Plan for A New Cold War," *Space and Defense*: Vol. 15: No. 1, Article 10.

DOI: 10.32873/uno.dc.sd.15.01.1250

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/spaceanddefense/vol15/iss1/10>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Space and Defense by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

The Unified Command Plan for A New Cold War

Cover Page Footnote

General Stilwell -- Senior Leader Essay

The Unified Command Plan for A New Cold War

David Stilwell

To my former colleagues in DoD: stop chasing Pakistan. And stop trying to get China to talk to you. You can be forgiven for these—you've been conditioned to look at the world as independent and unrelated regions, each with its own unique challenges, with everything going to CENTCOM to execute the top priority task of preventing another terrorist attack on the homeland. Even at the national level your political masters bought into the End of History argument in 1991, which made it difficult to appreciate the growing threat from China across UCP lines that separate the INDOPACOM's PRC from CENTCOM's Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. In short, CENTCOM needs to think of itself as the Team on China's Western Flank.

Defense of the Homeland (implied: preventing another terror attack) was rightly the highest priority immediately following 9/11, but it drove a previous CENTCOM commander to advocate for cooperation with China to counter Uyghur "terrorists" (even though the Uyghur East Turkestan Independence Party was never designated a terrorist organization) long after PACOM commanders concluded that China was a much greater threat to the US than ETIP. It's as if our 4-star COCOMs don't talk to each other.

For the last 30 years, since the end of the first Cold War, and since the national security apparatus shifted its attention almost entirely to the Middle East, this partitioning of the globe (and the consciences of senior leaders) seemed harmless. But nobody outside now-INDOPACOM noticed a significant change in the language of Chinese leadership that should have put all in the Pentagon, and the Beltway, on notice that there was a serious challenger waiting in the wings. Until Xi Jinping abandoned China's successful "hide and bide" strategy, Beijing was reserved in expressing the long-term aspirations of the Chinese Communist Party. So we were lulled into complacency despite PRC pronouncements beginning in 2008 that the global financial crisis green-lighted the PRC's move to "the center of the global stage". This is when Beijing's disinformation campaign of "the US in decline" and advocacy for Dr Graham Allison's Thucydides Trap theory originated. The New Cold War began 14 years ago but it took a Pandemic and a Balloon to get ssto take the threat seriously.

How is this possible? We simplified global problems by reducing them to artificial regional boundaries, without consideration to how the regions interact. And after 2001 we prioritized CENTCOM over all others, assigning promising officers to the primary theater where promotion potential was highest. In doing so we failed to develop an integrated global awareness, and without that, we missed the obvious challenges and opportunities where those artificial regional boundaries touched. With the happy exception of two Service Chiefs, we now

have a senior officer 3- and 4-star cohort with almost no recent experience in the INDOPACIFIC and definitely no long-term experience in the region. We stared at the immediate without a thought to the future and we are now led by a senior officer cadre who have mastered the last war (Counter Terror, Counter Violent Extremism) but are ill-equipped to deal with great power competition. A quick look at how State and Defense divide the world into intellectually bite-size chunks demonstrates the simplistic approach the UCP takes to a complex world (See Figures 1-2).

What the UCP has failed to do over the last 30 years is to integrate those regions; instead, each has focused on either Counter-Terror or Great Power Competition. Given the global nature of the China challenge, and that it is weakest on the CENTCOM-INDOPACOM border, now is the time to address this shortfall.

Consider the case of Pakistan and India. Pakistan was assigned to CENTCOM, while India is in INDOPACOM. Although the long-term conflict between Pakistan and India (both nuclear powers) has great potential to damage US interests, the ability of US Combatant Commanders of the two regions to speak intelligently about the India-Pakistan situation is limited. State department includes both India and Pakistan in the South and Central Asia (SCA) bureau, but there is little cross-talk between State and Defense. Meanwhile SCA's awareness of and interest in the PRC is also limited.

Worse still, Pakistan figures far more prominently in Pentagon discussions than India, where 1.4 billion democratic Indians hold infinitely more potential to cooperate on shared security interests as a counterweight to the PRC and as an economic partner replacing post-COVID China. Even so, in October DoD approved \$500M in upgrades to Pakistani F-16s—these are a direct threat to Indian security and a boon to PRC intelligence collection. And while Quad (US, India, Japan, Australia) discussions focus on PRC's repeated border aggression against India, we continue to bolster Pakistani offensive capabilities while Pakistan's erstwhile ally China builds roads and pipelines for Pakistan in disputed territory in Kashmir. No wonder Delhi questions our sincerity.

The declaration of an “All Weather Relationship of Strategic Cooperation” between Pakistan and China should have told CENTCOM leaders to be measured in the relationship. Back when combat operations in land-locked Afghanistan were at their peak, we needed access to Pakistani airspace, something for which we paid dearly in economic and political capital. When Islamabad made that too difficult, DoD shifted to the Northern Distribution Route. That should have marked the end of this very lopsided US- Pakistan relationship, but the chasing of Pakistan continues.

And it's not just the India-Pakistan seam that should cause a re-think. China and Pakistan's “All Weather Partnership of Strategic Cooperation” should have at least started a conversation in the Pentagon about moving Pakistan into INDOPACOM's AOR. Or better yet, the Administration should have directed DoD and State to align regional commands/bureaus while creating a mechanism to significantly blur the geographic and cognitive lines between

China and Central Asia, acknowledging that the PRC's explicit goal of global hegemony begins in its near abroad. China is an expanding global threat, but our outdated maps refute that development.

Strategically, Islamabad went all-in with China with the \$60B China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) a decade ago; CPEC is how Beijing intends to bypass strategic chokepoints in the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea and gives the PLA an overseas Navy base to ensure access to Arabian Gulf energy which it desperately needs. CPEC saddles Pakistan with an impossible debt burden that it has tried to ameliorate with the IMF (pushing good international financial aid through Islamabad to Beijing) while providing Pakistan precious little. CPEC would see Pakistan's Arabian Sea port of wadar turned into an energy transshipment hub, with PLA Navy port facilities as well (if the Djibouti and Cambodia models hold).

Beyond Pakistan, Central Asia presents opportunities that an integrated look at the world (or at least Asia) would make clear. The PRC's Shanghai Cooperation Organization seeks to establish a collective security mechanism on China's weak western flank; however, it is doomed by the multiple geopolitical contradictions represented by its membership. A single US Counter-Terrorism-focused command is not equipped to leverage the opportunities provided by the obvious seams in an SCO that puts open conflict between Pakistan-India and China-India on full display.

Kazakhstan recently shifted allegiance from Moscow to Beijing, likely due to higher payouts for elites in Astana. If NATO's courting of Ukraine drove Moscow to open hostilities in February, how much more would losing its traditional sphere of influence in Central Asia to long-time rival China? It wasn't that long ago that Moscow invaded Afghanistan to prevent this sort of destabilizing influence on its southern frontier. The history of that conflict (yet another stunning Russian defeat) is documented well in the movie *Charlie Wilson's War*—worth a review as the Great Game in Central Asia (this time between Russia and China) shifts to a new phase. Central Asia is not exclusively a CENTCOM problem; it is equally impactful to EUCOM and INDOPACOM, and yet we operate off a UCP that limits our ability to take advantage of the opportunities presented by this region.

This is not *Charlie Wilson's War*. It is the New Cold War, a global multi-domain competition. If Integrated Deterrence is going to mean anything, the Pentagon and the Interagency need to acknowledge 14 years of very clear signaling from Beijing that a Rejuvenated China seeks to replace the US "at the center of the global stage". DoD must scrap the old UCP and create something that looks a lot more like the Single Integrated Operational Plan, expanded beyond nuclear conflict. The National Security Strategy touts the idea of Integrated Deterrence—here's an opportunity to take a great leap in that direction.

Unified Command Plan

***David Stilwell** (USAFA '87) retired from the Air Force as a brigadier general and served as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2019-2021. He performs research and lectures as the Fox Fellow for Future Pacing Threats at the Institute for Future Conflict, U.S. Air Force Academy.