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US Foreign Policy Increasingly Flows Through Pentagon

(IPS)

U.S. foreign policy is becoming increasingly dominated by the Pentagon rather than the State Department, and Congress is doing virtually nothing about it, according to a new report released here Thursday by several human rights organizations.

That domination is being achieved not only by the creation of new military aid and training programs controlled by the Pentagon -- particularly those related to the so-called "global war on terror" -- but also by the growing power of "combatant commanders", top officers who oversee military operations across entire regions of the globe, according to the report, entitled "Ready, Aim, Foreign Policy".

Indeed, a major strategy document prepared last year by the U.S. Southern Command (Southcom), which oversees all U.S. military operations in the Caribbean and Latin America south of Mexico, proposed that Southcom coordinate all relevant U.S. agencies, including civilian agencies, "to address the full range of regional challenges".

As Southcom Commander Adm. James Stavridis described SouthCom's role in a lecture here earlier this year, "...(W)e want to be like a big Velcro cube that these other agencies can hook to so we can collectively do what needs to be done in this region."

The new report, which was co-authored by the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), the Centre for International Policy (CIP), and the Latin America Working Group Education Fund (LAWG), mainly addresses the balance of power between the Pentagon and civilian agencies working in Latin America.

But the three groups, which have issued annual reports on trends in U.S. military aid to the region for the past decade, conclude that what is happening in Latin America is indicative of what is happening in other

regions as well.

"Our organisations focus on Latin America, so our examples are from that region, where some of the Defence Department's military aid programs were pioneered," the report noted, citing changes in the laws governing military and security aid that effectively gave the Pentagon the lead in U.S. anti-drug efforts..

"But this trend affects U.S. foreign policy worldwide," according to the report, which called on Congress and any new administration that takes power next year to reassert civilian control.

If permitted to continue, current trends will "diminish Congressional, public and even diplomatic control over a substantial lever and symbol of foreign policy. It will undercut human rights values in our relations with the rest of the world, and increase the trend toward a projection of U.S. global power based primarily on military might," the report concluded.

Indeed, the new report the latest in a series of studies that have warned of the increasing militarisation of U.S. foreign policy, especially under the administration of President George W. Bush.

Last May, for example, the Centre for Public Integrity (CPI), an independent watchdog here, published on its website data that it had compiled regarding the flow of billions of dollars in Pentagon-controlled funding to repressive governments, such as Pakistan, Djibouti, Uzbekistan, and Ethiopia, that the State Department would have been unlikely to have approved under long-standing human rights or other provisions in the U.S. foreign-aid law. The CPI project, "Collateral Damage", found that Congress exercised little or no oversight over the disbursement of much of the aid.

Reports by Congress' Government Accountability Office and even the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) have echoed concerns that the influence and operations of the State Department and other civilian agencies operating in countries overseas have been overwhelmed by the much greater resources and manpower of the Pentagon and its combatant commands.

"(The) bleeding of civilian responsibilities from civilian to military agencies risks weakening the secretary of State's primacy in setting the agenda for U.S. relations with foreign countries and the secretary of Defence's focus on warfighting," according to an SFRC report issued in December 2006.

The shift in the civilian-military balance of power has been facilitated in three main ways, according to the new report.

They include the attempted expansion of a Pentagon-run, 300-million-dollar-a-year military aid programme, known as "Section 1206", into a permanent global fund with nearly a billion dollars to spend on friendly militaries; proposals by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to restructure foreign aid in a way that would transfer management of U.S. military aid to the Defence Department and consequently reduce Congressional oversight; and the assumption by the combatant commanders of a growing coordinating role for all U.S. agencies, as set out in Southcom's "Command Strategy 2016."

Part of the problem derives from the huge imbalance in resources between the Pentagon, whose annual budget of some 600 billion dollars exceeds that of all the world's other militaries combined and includes some 1.68 million uniformed personnel, compared to the State Department which, with some 30 billion dollars, has, according to one estimate, fewer foreign service officers than the number of musicians employed in all of the U.S.' military bands.

That imbalance has been made stunningly clear in Iraq where the Pentagon has repeatedly complained that the State Department and other civilian agencies have been unable to come up with the manpower and expertise to oversee reconstruction. As a result, billions of dollars in economic aid has been channeled through the Army Corps of Engineers rather than the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

In other battlefields in the "war on terror", particularly in Africa and Asia, the military is increasingly engaged in humanitarian and development work, such as digging wells and building schools -- activities that have traditionally been under civilian control.

"It is not acceptable to say 'State is broken,' and shift responsibilities to the Defence Department," said WOLA's director, Joy Olson. "If State is broken, fix it."

While both Rice and Secretary of Defence Robert Gates have pushed Congress to provide more money to the State Department and USAID - - Gates even devoted an entire speech late last year to the necessity of spending more on U.S. "soft power" vis-à-vis the "hard power" of the military -- the response has been muted at best.

While the Pentagon, like Gates, clearly understands that Washington faces regional challenges that are not susceptible to military solutions, according to the report, its sheer size compared to the civilian agencies give it an increasingly dominant role in relations with other countries, greater even than that of the resident ambassador who traditionally has been the main coordinator of U.S. policy and representative of the U.S. government in foreign states.

The risk is that the security dimensions of the bilateral relationship are given greater weight, often at the expense of other key considerations, such as human rights, equitable development, and the rule of law, according to the report. In addition, a greater emphasis on sustaining and building up local militaries, which may be repressive and corrupt, may actually prove counter-productive.

"U.S. military assistance -- a risky foreign policy tool in the developing world, even at the best of times -- is increasingly provided in response to narrow defence priorities, while our diplomats and our Congressional overseers, who are charged with guarding our larger national interest, are cut out of the picture," it said.