

Realigning Puerto Rico

The Unified Command Plan through the Lens of Strategic Competition with China

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Introduction

In August of 2021, a research request from Puerto Rico's Assistant Adjutant General for Air to examine the question of whether or not the Puerto Rico Air National Guard (PRANG) should be realigned under US Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) instead of US Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), led to the development of this research study.

At first, this investigation analyzed current PRANG capabilities and the roles and missions it would be able to support. However, as the research ensued, it became evident that focusing on the possibility of switching the PRANG alone could lead to a situation where a state's National Guard force would be split between two geographical combatant commands (GCC). In addition, Puerto Rico also possesses an Army Reserve garrison at Fort Buchanan which should be considered as well.

It soon became clear that any answer required a total force approach. This shifted the focus to assessing the logic of realigning Puerto Rico itself to USSOUTHCOM. As a result, this analysis addresses a possible GCC boundary change between USNORTHCOM and USSOUTHCOM, requiring a Unified Command Plan (UCP) review. Although this study focuses on Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands should also be included as a part of a boundary shift given their proximity to Puerto Rico.

Since the creation of the first UCP in 1946, Puerto Rico has been assigned to commands that specialized in the Caribbean region. From the initial Caribbean Command (CARIBCOM), which assumed command of all US forces in the

*This study was made possible by the teamwork of the Air War College faculty who assisted with the revision and publishing process. Their work is truly commendable. I would like to specifically thank Col Galen Ojala and Col Mark Coggins, who assisted with the many revisions to get to this point. I would also like to thank my family, especially my wife, for supporting me during the hard times and long hours where I was literally "TDY at home." The views expressed in this research study are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the US government, the Department of Defense, or Air University. In accordance with Air Force Instruction 51-303, it is not copyrighted, but is the property of the United States government.

Caribbean islands, to US Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), which absorbed CARIBCOM and added Central and South America to its area of responsibility, Puerto Rico has fallen under the responsibility of commands focused on the protection of US interests outside of the continental United States and the internal security of Latin American countries against communist subversion.¹ However, the creation of USNORTHCOM ultimately led to Puerto Rico being realigned under USNORTHCOM for reasons that favored civil support needs over military needs.² This study seeks to analyze this 2008 realignment decision through the lens of strategic competition with China, a current reality that was not a part of the 2008 US National Security Strategy (NSS), and answer the question of whether or not Puerto Rico should once again be aligned under USSOUTHCOM.

The global landscape has changed significantly since the 2008 UCP iteration that transferred Puerto Rico to the recently created Northern Command. The 2006 NSS, released immediately prior to the 2008 UCP, did not place a priority on the threat of Chinese influence in the western hemisphere. On the contrary, the 2006 NSS acknowledged that democracy had made significant advances in Latin America “with peaceful transfers of power; growth in independent judiciaries and the rule of law; improved election practices; and expanding political and economic rights.”³

The NSS thus focused on the goal of keeping the western hemisphere as “a hemisphere fully democratic, bound together by goodwill, security cooperation, and the opportunity for all our citizens to prosper.”⁴ The 2006 NSS sought to accomplish this goal by helping countries in the hemisphere to a path “of sustained political and economic development” to ensure that America’s neighbors were stable and secure.⁵ In regards to China, the 2006 NSS generally focused on encouraging China to “meet the legitimate needs and aspirations of the Chinese people for liberty, stability, and prosperity.”⁶ The 2006 NSS further urged China to act as a responsible stakeholder, work together to advance the international system, enforce international rules, and contribute to international stability and security.⁷ However, subsequent Chinese global assertiveness has significantly changed the global landscape, leading to the recent focus on strategic competition.

The 2017 NSS initiated the shift to today’s strategic competition. It identified that “China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity” and noted that the US would respond to political, economic, and military competitors around the world.⁸ The 2017 NSS contributed to the development of the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS), which cemented inter-state strategic competition as the primary US

national security concern.⁹ China's influence has continued to expand in the western hemisphere, becoming a driving threat in Central and South America.

This study visits the issue of realigning Puerto Rico with USSOUTHCOM by first taking a historical look at alignments of the Caribbean in previous UCPs. Secondly, this study discusses civil support considerations that drove the 2007 UCP decision to shift the alignment of Puerto Rico away from USSOUTHCOM to the then recently created USNORTHCOM by addressing the relevance of those factors. The study then focuses on why defense support for civil authorities (DSCA), foreign humanitarian assistance (FHA), and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) should not have been the drivers for the 2007 UCP decision. The discussion then shifts to an analysis of objective criteria for a future UCP change that addresses the importance of having a US-based power-projection capability within USSOUTHCOM as part of a deterrence argument to best meet the demands of strategic competition and show US commitment to the region.

Hypothesis

A UCP realignment of Puerto Rico to USSOUTHCOM supports the demands of strategic competition by demonstrating US commitment to the region, addressing issues resulting from the alignment of Puerto Rico to USNORTHCOM, and allowing for USSOUTHCOM to better meet national security objectives by allowing USSOUTHCOM to execute deterrence and project power from a sovereign US territory.

Puerto Rico and the Unified Command Plan (UCP): A Short History

The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) established an organizational directive in 1946 that later became known as the UCP.¹⁰ It identified and recommended changes to “missions, responsibilities (including geographic boundaries), and force structure of each combatant command” as necessary to the President through the Secretary of Defense.¹¹ The UCP directive set forth basic guidance for unified commanders, established missions, functions, and force structure, and delineated areas of responsibility (AOR).¹² The DoD periodically changes the UCP to adapt to shifting priorities, new political realities, emerging threats, or declining dangers.¹³ From the first UCP in 1946 until the creation of USNORTHCOM, Puerto Rico was aligned with a geographical command in charge of executing US defense and projecting power to protect US interests separate from the continental United States (CONUS).

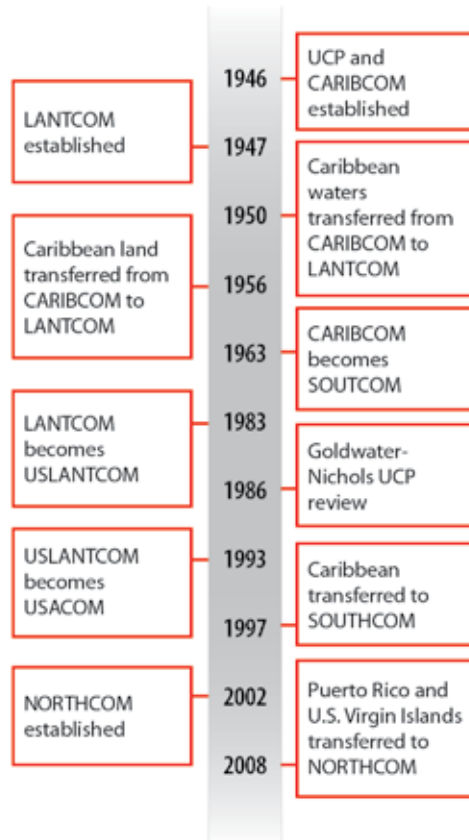


Figure 1: UCP Changes and Caribbean

Source: GAO¹⁴

The original UCP in 1946 established the Caribbean Command (CARIBCOM), whose responsibility was to defend the US against attacks through the Caribbean, secure the Panama Canal and US bases in the region, and support the Atlantic Fleet (subsequently LANTCOM).¹⁵ With the exception of certain fleet units, CARIBCOM was given command of US forces in the Caribbean Islands and the Panama Canal area to accomplish its mission.¹⁶ However, the mission for CARIBCOM changed in 1956 when the responsibility for securing bases and possessions in the Caribbean transferred over to LANTCOM along with the defense of the US from attack through the Caribbean.¹⁷ This change led to a mission change for CARIBCOM, which was addressed in the 1956 UCP reorganization. With the exception of Mexico, the 1956 UCP now made CARIBCOM

responsible for representing US interests and for administering the Mutual Defense Assistance Program in Central and South America and the Caribbean Islands.¹⁸ With this change, CARIBCOM started to resemble what USSOUTHCOM is today.

In 1962, the JCS recommended that CARIBCOM be redesignated as USSOUTHCOM to “more nearly reflect the actual geographical responsibilities of the command” and facilitate relations with the Latin American governments with which it interacts.¹⁹ In addition, this new title emphasized US interest in encouraging Latin American countries to improve internal security against communist threats associated with the region during this timeframe.²⁰ The late 1960s did not bring any significant changes to the UCP structure, but things changed in 1971, when a study was requested to justify the need for USSOUTHCOM.

This 1971 study was part of an effort to reduce US presence overseas.²¹ However, the JCS opposed shuttering USSOUTHCOM and believed that it would not be in the best interests of the US due to political conditions throughout Latin America and continued Soviet interest in the region.²² Except for a shift from contingency planning to disaster relief, USSOUTHCOM continued to operate as it normally had, providing for the defense of the Panama Canal.²³ USSOUTHCOM survived another closure threat in 1975, but lost Headquarters, US Naval Forces Southern Command, and Headquarters, US Air Forces Southern Command.²⁴ USSOUTHCOM’s force reduction led to further calls for its disestablishment.

In 1981, USSOUTHCOM was deemed “too deficient in organic forces, command, control and communications (C3) capability, and headquarters assets to remain viable as a unified command.”²⁵ As a result, consideration was given to eventually transition USSOUTHCOM to a sub-unified command of LANTCOM, where it would continue to participate in Latin American political-military affairs, security assistance, and counterinsurgency missions.²⁶ The subsequent UCP decision resulted in the creation of US Forces, Caribbean, at the end of 1981, which combined LANTCOM’s two subordinate commands and established its headquarters in Puerto Rico.²⁷ However, in 1982 USSOUTHCOM’s strong objections led the JCS not to pursue making USSOUTHCOM a sub-unified command, endorsing the status quo instead.²⁸ Another attempt to end USSOUTHCOM took place after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe.²⁹

In 1991, the idea of absorbing USSOUTHCOM into a combined America Command was proposed. However, concerns about the resulting vast span of control prevented it from being created.³⁰ By 1997, the CJCS asked to transfer the Caribbean, the Gulf of Mexico, and a part of the Atlantic to USSOUTHCOM.³¹ USSOUTHCOM thus joined US Pacific Command (USPACOM) as one of

two commands responsible for states and territories outside the CONUS but within their respective AORs, with USSOUTHCOM once again regaining Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands.³² However, the new geographic boundaries for USSOUTHCOM did not last.

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, led to the JCS to propose the creation of USNORTHCOM, a new command focused on the homeland defense mission. Until that time, US Joint Forces Command (USJFCOM), which the 1999 UCP had established, led the defense of CONUS and Canada. The establishment of USNORTHCOM in 2002 led to USJFCOM becoming a functional command and gave USNORTHCOM the responsibility to defend the US (out to 500 nautical miles), Canada, Mexico, and Alaska.³³ It also contributed to discussions about a new America Command that would merge USNORTHCOM and USSOUTHCOM, an option that never materialized. The creation of USNORTHCOM also led to AOR responsibility changes for Puerto Rico.

UCP discussion over transferring Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands to USNORTHCOM began in earnest in 2007, when USNORTHCOM and USSOUTHCOM requested that the DoD's disaster response for that region be transferred to USNORTHCOM.³⁴ The change became effective with the execution of the 2008 UCP.³⁵ This decision focused on missions associated with disaster response. However, the strategic environment has changed since then, requiring/necessitating a UCP update. The following section addresses why disaster response should not have been the driving factor for transferring Puerto Rico to USNORTHCOM by specifically addressing FEMA, DSCA, and FHA concerns.

Assessing a Disaster Response Argument

Is Defense Support of Civil Authorities (DSCA) Unique to USNORTHCOM?

In addition to defending the homeland, USNORTHCOM also executes missions in support of domestic disaster relief operations via Defense Support for Civil Authorities (DSCA).³⁶ However, this mission set is not unique to USNORTHCOM. INDOPACOM responds to domestic disaster relief operations in US states and territories in the INDOPACOM AOR, such as Guam and Hawaii. Puerto Rico would not be disadvantaged being within the USSOUTHCOM AOR with respect to disaster relief. Joint Publication (JP) 3-28, Defense Support for Civil Authorities, provides joint guidance for domestic disaster relief operations.³⁷

DSCA provides support by active duty military forces under Title 10 and National Guard forces under Title 32 in response to requests from civil authorities for “domestic emergencies, law enforcement support, and other domestic

activities.”³⁸ DSCA operations are conducted in the US homeland, which includes “the continental United States (CONUS), Alaska, Hawaii, United States territories, and surrounding territorial waters and airspace.”³⁹ DSCA operations are meant to supplement the efforts of other US government (USG) agencies in support of state and local emergencies.⁴⁰ Except for extraordinary situations, DSCA places military personnel in a support role under another government agency that coordinates the federal response.⁴¹ Concerns may exist about USSOUTHCOM’s ability to execute DSCA given its prior experience in executing large scale FHA operations during 2010’s Operation Unified Response in Haiti, but actions taken by USSOUTHCOM to adapt to the situation since then show otherwise.

FHA and USSOUTHCOM: A Capability that Mirrors DSCA

FHA contributes to the humanitarian relief efforts of a host nation’s civil authorities and agencies.⁴² Like DSCA, the US military normally conducts FHA operations in support of USG departments and agencies.⁴³ Similarly, FHA operations may occur on short notice to provide aid in crises.⁴⁴ However, unlike DSCA, FHA is executed outside of the homeland. Prior to Operation Unified Response, USSOUTHCOM’s directorate command structure had been untested in a major crisis and posed integration challenges that hindered the execution of large military operations.⁴⁵ Specifically, USSOUTHCOM’s command structure did not follow a traditional joint staff organizational structure:

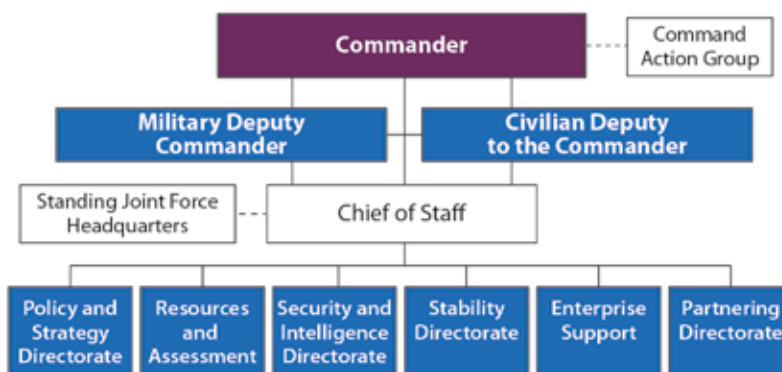


Figure 2: USSOUTHCOM Organizational Structure After 2008 Transformation

Source: GAO⁴⁶

As the disaster response expanded to include additional units and staff, this organizational structure prevented the seamless integration of additional joint

staff personnel into doctrinal directorates. As a result of the challenges that Operation Unified Response presented, USSOUTHCOM transitioned to a traditional Joint staff structure:

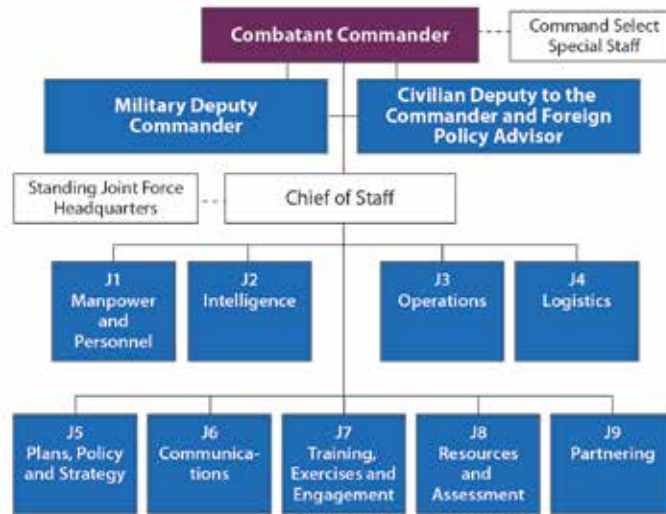


Figure 3: USSOUTHCOM Organizational Structure Adopted for Operation Unified Response

Source: GAO⁴⁷

The new command structure, which was implemented one week into the disaster, provided the command with the capabilities to better conduct Operation Unified Response by establishing the operations division, elevating logistics and other critical functions, and improving communications.⁴⁸ Today, this new command structure also allows USSOUTHCOM to execute similar operations under DSCA, with the primary difference being that under DSCA, USSOUTHCOM would primarily work alongside interagency partners. As an interagency partner, FEMA would also work alongside USSOUTHCOM to assist civil authorities in disaster response, given that FEMA regions also cover US territories.

FEMA Support and USSOUTHCOM's Hurricane Disaster Response

The decision to transfer Puerto Rico to USSOUTHCOM does not mean that FEMA would not be able to provide support. The Stafford Act established the current statutory framework for disaster response and recovery, which also includes FEMA operations.⁴⁹ As the primary agency in the federal response to natural disasters, FEMA is responsible for “responding to, planning for, recovering from, and mitigating against disasters.”⁵⁰ FEMA is organized into ten regions.

Each region serves as the focal point for organizing and coordinating state and federal emergency management for incidents within the region:



Figure 4: Map of the Ten Federal Emergency Management Agency Regions

*Source: Joint Publication*⁵¹

As shown in Figure 4, Puerto Rico is assigned to a specific FEMA region, the same way that Guam is also assigned to a region. FEMA Region II coordinates support for New York, the Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico, providing emergency federal assistance only after Puerto Rico exceeds its emergency management system capacity and the governor submits an emergency declaration request for assistance.⁵²

FEMA and DoD DSCA/FHA combined played a role in the 2017 disaster responses to the Hurricane Maria and Hurricane Irma landfalls in Puerto Rico. The incident prompted a whole-of-government response that not only included USNORTHCOM, but USSOUTHCOM as well. USNORTHCOM worked alongside FEMA, assisting with response and recovery operations in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands.⁵³ USSOUTHCOM's efforts were shadowed by the disaster response in Puerto Rico, but played a key role in support of the Eastern Caribbean Leeward Islands.

USSOUTHCOM activated Joint Task Force (JTF)-Leeward Islands (JTF-LI) to execute FHA Foreign Disaster Relief (FDR) support to St. Martin and Dominica. JTF-LI specifically supported USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance efforts in coordination with the governments of Dominica and St. Martin.⁵⁴ Combined, JTF-LI transported more than 340,000 pounds of supplies and evacuated more than 2,200 US and foreign personnel stranded by the hurricanes.⁵⁵ In addition, USSOUTHCOM's FHA/FDR actions in 2017 demonstrated its ability to support disaster relief operations commonly associated with

DSCA, which would come into play if a UCP change results in a transfer of Puerto Rico to USSOUTHCOM.

Applying UCP Principles to a Puerto Rico Realignment

Determining UCP Principles

The UCP process identifies and recommends changes to “missions, responsibilities (including geographic boundaries), and force structure of each combatant command.”⁵⁶ Historical UCP processes provide an objective basis for UCP change recommendations. 1995 proved to be a critical year for the UCP process. Two sets of principles were developed separately as part of 1995’s UCP process that are still relevant today. These were developed by the Roles and Missions Commission of the Armed Forces and by the Joint Staff.

On May 24, 1995, the Roles and Missions Commission of the Armed Forces declared that “the central purpose of the Department of Defense is to conduct effective military operations in pursuit of America’s NSS.”⁵⁷ The commission set out with the goal of ensuring DoDs ability to conduct “effective, unified military operations” and “fully implementing the Goldwaters-Nichols Defense reorganization Act of 1986.”⁵⁸ The report included a section reviewing Combatant Commander’s (CCDR) geographic responsibilities under the UCP. The commission developed six broad principles for UCP reviews:

1) The geographic responsibilities of the CCDR should correspond to areas of recognized or likely strategic interest to the United States.
2) The size of each AOR should accommodate the CCDR’s representational obligations and other responsibilities. The CCDRs spend much of their time involved with politico-military dealings with security officials of countries in their respective AORs; the number of those countries is a major factor in the CCDR’s span of control. Other significant factors include the region’s political, economic, religious, and cultural diversity; its physical size; and the presence of strategically important areas of conflict (or potential conflict) such as territorial disputes or other hostilities among countries.
3) Seams between CCDRs’ AORs should be reviewed to ensure that they do not split areas of strategic interest or exacerbate existing political, economic, religious, or cultural differences.
4) Sufficient land area, sea area, and airspace should be included in each AOR for the CCDR to carry out assigned missions and, if necessary, wage an effective unified military campaign against any plausible adversary.
5) The distinction between geographic and functional CCDRs should be preserved (i.e., functional CCDRs should not have AORs).
6) The responsibilities assigned to the functional CCDRs should be reviewed periodically for overlap and consolidated where practical.

Table 1: Six Broad Principles for UCP Reviews

*Source: Department of Defense*⁵⁹

The Joint Staff also developed its own principles for analysis to be used in evaluating potential UCP changes. These principles were approved in May 1995:

1) Any changes must support the NSS, National Military Strategy, and public law.
2) The UCP must maintain strategic focus to support national security interests.
3) The UCP must consider diplomatic and international obligations.
4) Geographic boundaries must support enduring joint operations in peace and war.
5) AORs must optimize span of control.
6) Changes to the UCP must conform to the “art of the possible”—be doable, realistic, sellable, and affordable.

Table 2: Principles for Analysis in Evaluating Potential UCP Changes

Source: GAO⁶⁰

Combining both principles form an objective foundation to recommend future UCP changes for the USSOUTHCOM AOR. The table below incorporates the principles from Table 1 and Table 2 and combines similar ones into one, yielding a total of nine:

1) The UCP and any changes must maintain strategic focus to support national security interests as specified by the NSS, National Military Strategy, and public law.
2) The geographic responsibilities of the CCDRs should correspond to areas of recognized or likely strategic interest to the United States.
3) The UCP must consider diplomatic and international obligations.
4) AORs must optimize span of control. The size of each AOR should accommodate the CINCs representational obligations and other responsibilities. The CCDRs spend much of their time involved with politico-military dealings with security officials of countries in their respective AORs; the number of those countries is a major factor in the CCDR’s span of control. Other significant factors include the political, economic, religious, and cultural diversity of the region; its physical size; and the presence of strategically important areas of conflict (or potential conflict) such as territorial disputes or other hostilities among countries.
5) Geographic boundaries must support enduring joint operations in peace and war, to include sufficient land area, sea area, and airspace for the CCDR to carry out assigned missions and, if necessary, wage an effective unified military campaign against any plausible adversary.
6) Seams between CCDRs’ AORs should be reviewed to ensure that they do not split areas of strategic interest or exacerbate existing political, economic, religious, or cultural differences.
7) The distinction between geographic and functional CINCs should be preserved (i.e., functional CCDRs should not have AORs).
8) The responsibilities assigned to the functional CCDRs should be reviewed periodically for overlap and consolidated where practical.
9) Changes to the UCP must conform to the “art of the possible”—be doable, realistic, sellable, and affordable.

Table 3: Combined Principles for UCP Reviews

Source: Author

Applying UCP Principles to a Puerto Rico Realignment

The first UCP principle states that the UCP and any changes to it must maintain strategic focus. The other principles address specific aspects of the AOR that would need to be considered to do so. The 2008 UCP, which led to the shift of

ownership of Puerto Rico to USNORTHCOM, took place in an era where strategic competition with China was not a part of the NSS. The 2017 NSS initiated the shift to today's strategic competition by identifying that competitions and long-term rivalries are "long-term challenges that demand our sustained national attention and commitment."⁶¹ The 2018 NDS further solidified inter-state strategic competition as the primary US national security concern.⁶² Given these priorities, a UCP review must be considered for USSOUTHCOM to continue to compete successfully against China's influence in the region and support national security interests, to include a realignment of Puerto Rico within with the USSOUTHCOM AOR as a part of the next UCP planning process.⁶³

A recommendation for the realignment of Puerto Rico under USSOUTHCOM for a future UCP will need to support national security interests and meet the combined principles for UCP reviews. First, China's present involvement in the region makes it of strategic interest to the US. Second, the change does not impact the principle of distinction between geographic and functional commands nor does it bring up an issue with overlapping functional responsibilities due to the change being geographical and not functional. However, the principle of span of control plays a role in the realignment decision.

The principle of span of control addresses several related factors. One of the factors includes the need for the AOR to accommodate the CCDR's representational obligations and other responsibilities. The addition of Puerto Rico would not impact the CCDR's foreign obligations, including politico-military dealings with security officials of countries in the AORs, since the change does not add another country to the AOR. Similarly, the change does not add another strategically important area of conflict, nor does it expand the AOR size by a significant amount in relation to the rest of the AOR. Also, the addition of Puerto Rico to USSOUTHCOM does not expand the region's political, economic, religious, and cultural diversity, given the common Latin American culture and origins that Puerto Rico shares with many of the other Caribbean and Latin American countries already in the AOR.

Even though Puerto Rico is not a part of the USSOUTHCOM AOR, Puerto Rico actively contributes to USSOUTHCOM's mission of rapidly responding to crises, building regional capacity, and working with our allies, partner nations, and USG team members "to enhance security and defend the US homeland and our national interests."⁶⁴ For example, as a part of the National Guard State Partnership Program (SPP), Puerto Rico regularly engages with Honduras, the key USSOUTHCOM partner that hosts USSOUTHCOM's JTF-Bravo. The relationship that the Puerto Rico National Guard (PRNG) established with Honduras is unique. As citizen-soldiers of Puerto Rico, many members of the

PRNG are bi-lingual Spanish speakers, which makes their presence “invaluable when it comes to bridging the language barrier between the local populace, military, and civilian personnel.”⁶⁵

Puerto Rico routinely hosts Honduran delegations as part of the SPP that provide the opportunity “to exchange experiences, build relationships and help strengthen the relationship between Honduras and the United States.”⁶⁶ For example, the SPP has contributed to the cooperative partnership between the Permanent Commission of Contingencies of Honduras, which included Honduran military officers, the Puerto Rico National Guard Emergency Operations Center, and the Puerto Rico Emergency Management Agency.⁶⁷ Together, they conducted a tsunami exercise to test and validate the Caribbean Tsunami Warning system.⁶⁸ Puerto Rico’s involvement, common language, and cultural ties with Honduras positively impacted diplomatic and international relations.

The relationship that Honduras and Puerto Rico share contributes to the principle of international and diplomatic obligation, given that the US is reliant on the government of Honduras for the basing of JTF-Bravo.⁶⁹ This relationship also demonstrates a weakness in regards to the principle of geographic boundaries supporting enduring joint operations in peace and war. The addition of Puerto Rico to USSOUTHCOM contributes to this principle. It specifically supports joint operations and training in times of peace in a place under US control.

Currently, USSOUTHCOM is dependent on other nations in the AOR for basing, training, and executing its missions. As noted above, one such example is JTF-Bravo on Soto Cano Air Base, Honduras. JTF-Bravo conducts and supports joint operations and maintains a forward presence to enhance regional security, stability, and cooperation.⁷⁰ However, JTF-Bravo does not have the authority to conduct lethal or kinetic operations from Honduras.⁷¹ These types of restrictions are common and individually dictated by each host country where the US operates. In addition, basing in foreign countries also exposes the US to shifting political winds. For example, last year’s election in Honduras resulted in the election Xiomara Castro, the wife of a leftist former president that was ousted in a 2009 coup.⁷² Hondurans have hope that the Castro administration will provide an opportunity to alter their nation’s relationship with the US, which many Hondurans say remains asymmetrical and exploitative.⁷³ It was not that long ago that a change of administration resulted in US forces being asked to leave from its forward operating location in Manta, Ecuador.

In 1999, the US and Ecuador agreed to a 10-year lease where US military surveillance aircraft would be allowed to conduct counter-drug flights to detect drug-trafficking flights and vessels that departed from the region.⁷⁴ The base allowed the resumption of US counter-drug surveillance flights, which two-thirds

had reduced after the US closed Howard Air Force Base in Panama in 1999. Howard Air Force Base was the last sovereign US location within the US-SOUTHCOM AOR and was closed as part of the process of returning the Canal Zone to Panama.⁷⁵ The closing of Howard Air Force Base meant that anti-drug operations depended on Ecuadorian support. Ecuadorian support changed when President Correa was elected in 2007, near the end of the lease term. President Correa refused to renew the lease and instead sought Chinese investments to make Manta “the gateway to Asia.”⁷⁶ Puerto Rico can thus contribute by providing a sovereign US basing solution from which USSOUTHCOM could execute peacetime joint training and deter aggression, defeat threats, and respond to crises free from the concerns of regional partners’ internal politics.

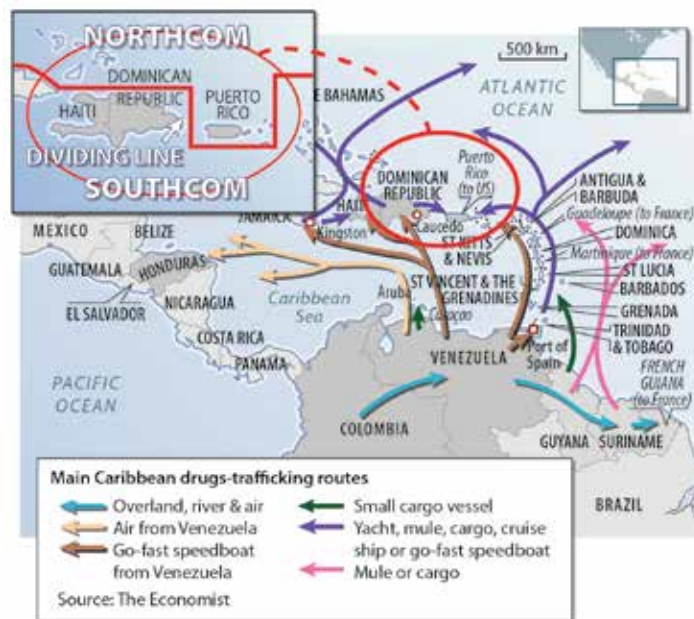


Figure 5: Main Caribbean Drug-Trafficking Routes

Source: *The Economist*⁷⁷

The USSOUTHCOM AOR also violates the UCP principle pertaining to seams between CCMDs’ AORs that split areas of strategic interest. Currently, Puerto Rico is separated from the rest of the Caribbean partners that share common cultural heritage and language by the nature of being assigned to USNORTHCOM. Puerto Rico’s assignment to USNORTHCOM separates it from the Dominican Republic, which is assigned to USSOUTHCOM and splits key aerial and maritime drug-trafficking routes from South America to the Caribbean into two AORs. Figure 5 shows major drug-trafficking routes. It also

includes an inset that shows the line separating USNORTHCOM and USSOUTHCOM between Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic.

Although USSOUTHCOM's Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S), a subordinate command under USSOUTHCOM, is able to integrate interagency and international partners to execute its mission of countering illicit trafficking operations across the AORs, transferring Puerto Rico to USSOUTHCOM would place the Caribbean under one combatant command and thus remove the seam that currently splits this area of interest. Finally, the transfer of Puerto Rico to USSOUTHCOM would be cost-neutral since the additional funding required to assume the planning roles associated with natural disaster preparedness would transfer from USNORTHCOM.

Puerto Rico and Strategic Competition: A Deterrence Argument

China's involvement in South America began in earnest in 2008, when China increased its investments in South American mining and extractive sectors in the middle of a commodity boom.⁷⁸ Since then, South America has shifted its investments to focus more on telecommunications and security cooperation.⁷⁹ In addition, China continues to push propaganda with the goal of improving public opinion in Latin American countries regarding China. Although a number of Chinese activities in the region are financial in nature and would require an economic counter, the US military also has a role deterring and countering Chinese activities in South America that go against US national security interests as a part of an integrated deterrence plan that includes the ability to project power within the AOR.

The upcoming NSS will highlight integrated deterrence and the role that it will play in national security. Integrated deterrence is not just integrating all instruments of national power across domains, theaters of competition, and across the spectrum of conflict to deter an adversary from acting in our national interests.⁸⁰ The alliance system is crucial to integrated deterrence as well. It lets our adversaries know that "they're not just taking on the United States, they're taking on a coalition of countries who are committed to upholding a rules-based international order."⁸¹ As a result, the US must demonstrate its commitment to them. The transfer of Puerto Rico to USSOUTHCOM can play a role in integrated deterrence against China and its activities in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean by demonstrating US commitment to the region.



Figure 6: PRC Activities in South America Snapshot

Source: US Republican Party (GOP)⁸²

The placement of US forces inside a foreign nation is significant because it projects military power and capabilities that can respond quickly.⁸³ Just as important, a physical US presence “is an essential means of reassuring allies and deterring their adversaries.”⁸⁴ One disadvantage of placing US forces outside CONUS is that the risk exists for the US to be involved in a conflict almost automatically if the host country were to be invaded by an enemy.⁸⁵ A second disadvantage is that countries impose restrictions on what missions US forces can execute from within their borders. However, such placements are needed because they communicate to allies US commitment to their country. Although the transfer of Puerto Rico to USSOUTHCOM does not involve the direct placement of US military forces in a foreign nation, transferring Puerto Rico to USSOUTHCOM similarly communicates US commitment to the USSOUTHCOM AOR by assigning permanent forces to USSOUTHCOM’s AOR. The transfer further shows commitment without the risks inherent with the placement of US forces in another country. Lastly, the US will need to be clear in its messaging regarding the

purpose of such a realignment. Lack of clarity and specificity increases the likelihood of misinterpreting the deterrence message that the US attempts to portray, limiting deterrence effects.⁸⁶

Conclusion

The 2017 NSS initiated the shift to today's focus on strategic competition. It identified China's and Russia's challenges to American power, influence, interests, security, and prosperity.⁸⁷ However, current USNORTHCOM and USSOUTHCOM AORs have not been adapted to best meet the challenges from these competitors. Their boundaries still reflect the priorities of the 2006 NSS, which focused on the challenges posed by global terrorism and transnational criminals.⁸⁸ As a result, the AORs of both geographic combatant commands (GCCs) need to be examined to determine how each should be poised to meet America's strategic challenges.

The UCP plays a key role in the process of assigning the military mission requirements to support US national security objectives. Over the years, changing threats in the Americas have led to UCP changes resulting in AOR boundary changes. Many of the changes focused on shifting security issues within the Caribbean. However, the threat has once again shifted since the last UCP change as China now poses a greater threat to stability within the Americas.

A change of AOR boundaries in the Caribbean, to include realigning Puerto Rico with USSOUTHCOM, can play a significant role in US regional engagement, competition, and contingency and crisis operations in the region. First, it demonstrates US commitment to the region by establishing a permanent US force presence within the USSOUTHCOM AOR. Second, it allows the US to enhance its deterrence posture and its ability to project power without the risks inherent with the placement of US forces in another country. Lastly, the transfer also addresses the seam issue that the 2008 UCP created, which split key aerial and maritime drug-trafficking routes from South America to the Caribbean between two AORs. As a result, the transfer of Puerto Rico to USSOUTHCOM must be considered within the next UCP, so the US is better poised for strategic competition in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean.

Areas for Further Study

This study specifically focused on the UCP and Puerto Rico's GCC alignment. However, the seam between USNORTHCOM and USSOUTHCOM is a boundary that may need to be addressed as well. Questions remain as to whether or not the Gulf of Mexico should also be included under the USSOUTHCOM

AOR as it historically once did, but any such changes need to be re-evaluated further. The author does not suggest the realignment of Mexico. However, coordination between USNORTHCOM, USSOUTHCOM, and Mexico, which sees itself as an active member of two AORs, should be reassessed to identify any relational gaps that a strategic competitor could exploit. ◻

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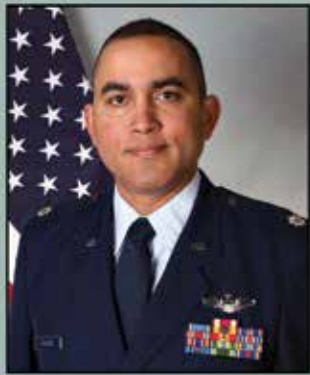
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