



U.S. Marines and Sailors with Wasp Amphibious Ready Group and 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit come ashore via landing craft, air cushion from USS Wasp to conduct noncombatant evacuation exercise during Composite Unit Training exercise at Onslow Beach, Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, April 17, 2024 (U.S. Marine Corps/Elton Taylor)

After Afghanistan

The Need for a New Noncombatant Evacuation Operation

E.R. “Elle” Klein

With the noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) in Afghanistan almost 3 years past and a NEO in South Korea an ever-present possibility, it is time to reevaluate the framework that governs the roles and responsibilities of Federal agencies in these life-and-death operations. What the Afghanistan NEO demonstrated—and what conflict on the Korean Peninsula bodes—is that the present framework buckles, if not collapses, under pressure. The United States must rethink the way it conducts NEOs if it is to properly protect

noncombatant U.S. persons and allies in the increasingly unstable geopolitical terrain. This article argues that it is time for a new executive order that designates the Department of Defense (DOD) instead of the Department of State (State Department or State) as the lead agency in what could be called extraordinary NEO events.

The State Department is designated as the lead Federal agency for initiating a NEO; DOD is directed to take a supporting role. These responsibilities were established in 1988 in Executive Order 12656 (and its amendment in 1998), which outlines a whole-of-government approach for the “assignment of emergency preparedness responsibilities” across executive departments.¹ Under section 1310

of the order, State is directed to provide overall foreign policy coordination, continuity of government, and other national security emergency preparedness activities that affect foreign relations, including the “protection or evacuation of United States citizens and nationals abroad.”² Concomitantly, DOD, in section 502, is directed to “advise and assist the Secretary of State and the heads of other Federal departments and agencies, as appropriate, in planning for the protection, evacuation, and repatriation of United States citizens in threatened areas overseas.”³

The executive order is implemented via a memorandum of agreement that was signed in 1998 and authorizes the Secretary of State to exercise overall responsibility to:

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1. Protect U.S. citizens and nationals and designated other persons, to include, when necessary and feasible, their evacuation to and welfare in relatively safe areas; 2. Reduce to a minimum the number of U.S. citizens and nationals and designated other persons subject to the risk of death and/or seizure as hostages; 3. Reduce to a minimum the number of U.S. citizens and nationals and designated other persons in probable or actual combat areas so that combat effectiveness of U.S. and allied forces is not impaired.⁴

DOD may independently “prepare and implement plans for the protection and evacuation of Department of Defense noncombatants worldwide,”⁵ but regarding the evacuation of other U.S. citizens, nationals, and other designated NEO-eligible persons, DOD’s role is to “assist the Secretary of State in carrying out its responsibilities [above], where militarily feasible.”⁶

The bottom line is that the State Department, not DOD, has the authority to both initiate and lead official NEOs across the globe. The concern, and the impetus for the recommendation in this article, is that State has shown itself to be ill-equipped to successfully handle this grave responsibility.

A Brief History of NEOs

The Afghanistan evacuation is an obvious case in point, but by no means the only one. Earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis, hurricanes, civil unrest, and armed conflict are just some of the circumstances that require U.S. persons, special immigrants, and others to be evacuated from foreign lands. As of the publication of an October 2007 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, the State Department had initiated more than 270 NEO events since 1988.⁷ Some were limited and required only minor support, while others were incredibly complex, requiring robust assistance from other U.S. Government agencies, host-nation governments, and the U.S. military. Examples of both limited and complex NEOs include Liberia (1990), Somalia (1991), Rwanda (1994), the Central

African Republic (1996), Albania (1997), Kuwait (1998), Turkey (2003), Lebanon (2006), and South Sudan (2014), all of which depended on DOD plans, personnel, and assets.

Of note among NEOs—and proving in the wake of Afghanistan that past is prologue—is the iconic U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam in April 1975, during which more than 50,000 people were evacuated, including over 5,000 U.S. citizens. In this dangerous and complicated effort, U.S. Servicemembers had to contend with fractured chains of command, bureaucratic delays resulting in near-empty flights, a sea of panicked Vietnamese civilians surrounding the airport, and the rapidly advancing North Vietnamese forces that cut off escape routes and attacked the U.S. compound with rockets. Foreshadowing a scene from Kabul, the last flight from the airfield in the city of Da Nang took off overloaded and with at least seven people who had desperately stowed away in the plane’s wheel wells only to be crushed to death.

In his account of the evacuation of South Vietnam, U.S. Air Force historian Daniel L. Haulman writes, “During the first part of April, [U.S. aircraft arrived] to evacuate U.S. citizens, third-country nationals, and selected Vietnamese, [but] at first, they carried only a small fraction of their passenger capacity. Lines grew to a mile or more, and some people waited for more than twenty-four hours.”⁸ Haulman adds that the U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam, Graham Martin—just as would later be the case with Ambassador Ross Wilson in Afghanistan—“wanted to preserve an atmosphere of normality and calm in the South Vietnamese capital. He feared that a sudden massive American evacuation would lead to the kind of panic that had erupted in Da Nang, and he wanted to prevent the collapse of the South Vietnamese government.”⁹ Haulman concludes his account with:

Members of the armed services drew several lessons from the evacuation experience. Fragmented command and control hindered the operation. . . . A single military commander, and not the Ambassador,

should have controlled all military forces involved in the final phases of the evacuation. . . . A single agency should have defined the reference hour for execution [of flights]. The definition of who qualified for airlift evacuation kept changing, which routinely expanded the number of refugees to be evacuated. The Vietnamese evacuation demonstrated the value of a single theater airlift manager, the effectiveness of integrating strategic and tactical airlift resources, and the critical importance of adequate ground-support personnel to mission success.¹⁰

Despite Haulman’s astute observations of the interagency problems that plagued the evacuation, the hard lessons of Vietnam remained unheeded. Tragically and shamefully, the harrowing events of Kabul in August 2021 were an uncanny echo of the events of Saigon some 46 years prior.

The Afghanistan NEO was not only predictable; it was predicted. In 2019, Army Major Charles Hoke predicted a “major evacuation” from Afghanistan. He was shockingly prescient as he implored his readers in his now tragically titled “Covenant Backed: The U.S. Evacuation of Saigon to an Unknown Future in Kabul” to study past NEO events and take preemptive steps to enable better coordination between State and DOD to avoid “unnecessary failures.”¹¹ Like Haulman, Hoke conducts a thorough study of the evacuation of Vietnam along with other historical NEO examples, and then applies the implications of those failures specifically to Afghanistan. Hoke believed NEOs mattered to our national security and emphasized: “The significance of understanding past evacuation successes and failures enables effective planning efforts to overall strengthen U.S. national interests and its reputation in the global community.”¹²

Hoke was not an agent of doom and gloom, but rather an optimist who hoped his warning would inspire the State Department and DOD to embrace the lessons of the past, work together, and ensure the success of the Afghanistan NEO for which he believed we were destined. He highlights the need for



Damage Controlman 2nd Class Gage Zimmerman explains registration process for Noncombatant Evacuation Operations Tracking System during training exercise for Citadel Pacific 2022, Naval Air Facility Atsugi, Japan, August 18, 2022 (U.S. Navy/Rafael Avelar)

advanced planning¹³ and argues for military planners, specifically at geographic combatant commands, to become familiar with the evacuation procedures and doctrine of North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies to ensure better interconnectivity of authorities and processes.¹⁴ He even proposed using biometric data to register and more efficiently track evacuees.¹⁵

Hoke also emphasized the strategic need to evacuate Afghans who supported the U.S. and coalition mission, stating: “A successful evacuation including of select Afghan nationals would see a return of the \$126 billion the United States has invested in building the Afghan government and security forces . . . a return investment would consist of saving people who have shown their devotions to U.S. interests and to the global message of reassuring U.S. allies it will rescue people who support America.”¹⁶ Recognizing what turned out to be a grim reality,¹⁷ Hoke noted that if Afghans who worked for the United States were left behind, they would “face attacks or executions once the U.S. presence has left.”¹⁸

Failure to coordinate between DOD and the State Department has repeatedly impeded NEO success, with profound

consequences. In its June 2007 report regarding the evacuation of Americans from Lebanon the previous summer, GAO described State as facing “challenges in three key areas that impeded the evacuation efforts—the magnitude of the crisis, State’s shortcomings in communicating with the public, and State’s difficulties working with DOD.”¹⁹ The report also noted that “State and DOD have different institutional cultures and systems, which impeded their ability to work together” and that State and DOD “speak different ‘languages.’”²⁰

Clash of Cultures

NEOs aside, interagency dysfunction is well documented during the years of stability operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Attempts at reconciliation during the early years of the war on terror led to high-level discussions regarding the need for a joint-interagency version of the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986.²¹ Such recommendations, which would have literally required an act of Congress, left even proponents feeling as if DOD were from Mars and State were from Venus.²² If State and DOD were unable to develop protocols

for synchronization during 20 years in two different conflict zones, it is unlikely they were going to collaborate a few days before a mass evacuation. As in the fable of the Scorpion and the Frog, the State Department and DOD will remain true to their own mission sets. The dream of a joint-interagency version of the Goldwater-Nichols Act—a dream this author once held—continues to elude reality.²³

In response to the June 2007 GAO report regarding the Lebanon NEO, State did take action to alleviate the breakdowns in communication and coordination with DOD. However, these measures were still wanting in 2019 when Hoke published his warnings, and they proved insufficient to bridge the institutional gaps for the scale of the crisis NEO of Afghanistan.

GAO subsequently issued another report in October 2007, assessing the State Department’s guidance, plans, and training to prepare for and manage evacuations of Embassy staff, dependents, and American citizens.²⁴ The report addressed State’s emergency action plans used for preparing for such evacuations.

In addition, the report noted that State’s *Emergency Preparedness*

Handbook, used to create emergency action plans for U.S. Embassies around the world, was “too generic, voluminous, and not particularly useful in preparing for the possibility of evacuation.”²⁵ The report exposed that 40 percent of reporting Embassies stated that emergency action plans had not been updated for the past 18 or more months,²⁶ that they had no particular methodology for estimating the number of U.S. citizens in a particular country (and often underestimated the actual number),²⁷ and that there was no “systematic process to collect, analyze, and incorporate lessons learned from previous evacuations.”²⁸ The report’s understated conclusion was that State’s training, processes, and emergency action plans “could be improved.”²⁹

The recommendations from the report included:

- designating an entity within the State Department to ensure that emergency action plans are prepared, reviewed, and updated annually
- reporting lessons learned

- reviewing training for staff
- strengthening crisis management exercises to best fit the realities on the ground.³⁰

More important, and broadly supportive of this article’s recommendation, the October 2007 report found critical deficiencies not only with the State Department’s internal procedures but also with the State-DOD memorandum of agreement itself, which, the report remarked, “could limit these agencies’ ability to effectively work together during a large-scale evacuation.”³¹

The Afghanistan NEO

The United States “had invested \$837.3 billion on stability operations and reconstruction activities in Afghanistan over the past 20 years”³² and sacrificed at least 4,126 lives and 20,713 wounded between 2001 and 2021 in Afghanistan.³³ This investment of blood and treasure, however, achieved limited success and diminishing returns, leading to a withdrawal.³⁴ The beginning of

the end was April 14, 2021, when President Joseph Biden announced that the United States would begin a “final withdrawal” from Afghanistan, to be completed by September 11, 2021.³⁵

On July 2, with no fanfare, the United States withdrew all troops from Bagram Airfield, which was then “transferred” to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).³⁶ Just 45 miles north of Kabul, Bagram—the hub of U.S. military activity in Afghanistan, the heart of the U.S. counterterrorism campaign for 20 years, and the “key launchpad”³⁷ for the military’s departure from Afghanistan—was no longer under U.S. control. Officially, the NEO had not yet begun, though it was obvious that the situation was quickly deteriorating.

On July 8, President Biden announced that “our military mission in Afghanistan will conclude on August 31.”³⁸ The ANDSF immediately collapsed, “paving the way for the Taliban to re-establish control of Afghanistan.”³⁹ On August 12, Secretary of Defense Lloyd



Marine with Special-Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force Crisis Response accounts for passengers on manifest at Entebbe, Uganda, after evacuation from U.S. Embassy in Juba, South Sudan, January 3, 2014 (U.S. Marine Corps/Robert L. Fisher III)

Austin and Secretary of State Antony Blinken informed Afghan President Ashraf Ghani that the “United States will begin reducing its civilian footprint in Kabul, and would accelerate flights of Special Immigrant Visa applicants.”⁴⁰

The next day—August 13, 2021—the U.S. Embassy in Kabul officially declared a NEO.⁴¹ But it was too late. With Bagram and its two large parallel runways no longer an option for staging a NEO, the only airport available was Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA), a smaller and much less secure facility in Kabul. This complicated efforts to “safely call forward Americans and at-risk Afghans for evacuation.”⁴² Not surprisingly, security at HKIA went quickly from concern to crisis: “Four Afghans were crushed to death in the first four days, and U.S. troops remained concerned that crowds could break open a gate and riot.”⁴³ Real-time reporting of the chaos was filled with fear and hardship for Afghans not yet (or ever) to be evacuated. The Internet was inundated with images of hundreds of Afghan civilians desperately swarming a U.S. C-17 Globemaster on the runway as it taxied for takeoff, some of them briefly clinging to the aircraft as it lifted off before falling to their deaths. Horrifyingly reminiscent of the Vietnam evacuation, human remains of a tragic stowaway were found in the aircraft’s wheel well when it landed in Qatar.⁴⁴

On August 26, a bombing by the so-called Islamic State in Afghanistan occurred at the Abbey Gate entrance to HKIA. Thirteen U.S. Servicemembers and 170 civilians were killed. Hundreds more were wounded.⁴⁵ Although 124,000 people had been evacuated, “even under the most conservative estimates at least a few thousand people were left behind.”⁴⁶ Secretary Blinken stated in congressional testimony that between 100 and 200 Americans were left behind.⁴⁷ Subsequent reporting placed the number of those wishing to leave to be much higher. Moreover, it is estimated that around 78,000 Afghan allies were abandoned to the Taliban.⁴⁸ On August 31, the NEO concluded, the last military flight departed HKIA, and the U.S. mission in Afghanistan had officially ended.

The Investigation

Less than 2 months later, on October 22, 2021, U.S. Army Central Command, at the direction of U.S. Central Command, initiated what became known as the Abbey Gate Investigation. The report and accompanying documents (enclosures 1 and 2) were declassified and released in October 2022.⁴⁹ The investigation eerily documents the fulfillment of Hoke’s warning of a repeat of Vietnam. The State Department was unable to secure flights,⁵⁰ was said to be generating and sending out “fake visas,”⁵¹ and was continually changing the guidance for evacuation.⁵² “There was a lot of goodness,” but attempts at protecting specific people—by the White House, Members of Congress, four-star generals, and other well-intentioned powerful people—generated “a lot of external pressure”⁵³ and proved to be a “distraction from the main effort.”⁵⁴ Confusion regarding State and DOD synchronization and a lack of preparedness and support by State were at the heart of this NEO, and the investigation on the bombing documented many of the State-DOD issues regarding the NEO.

Despite GAO’s earlier recommendations and Hoke’s prescient warning, the Afghanistan NEO showed that the State Department and DOD coordination issues remained. Whether one believes the evacuation of Afghanistan was a success, a failure, or—in the words of former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley—“a tactical success, but strategic failure,”⁵⁵ State’s and DOD’s ability to cooperate toward a safe and effective NEO in high-threat areas deserves, at the least, serious scrutiny. In brief, policymakers delayed seriously planning for the NEO, and the Afghanistan evacuation proceeded “in the absence of guidance from main State and without senior State leadership.”⁵⁶

In the Abbey Gate Investigation, Rear Admiral Peter Vasely, commander of U.S. Forces–Afghanistan, stated that the U.S. Embassy in Kabul would “push back” on any military plan to draw down and prepare for a NEO, lest the planning



effort appear like a “power grab by DOD.”⁵⁷ He added that this reticence to properly coordinate NEO planning was a “conscious decision with [acting U.S. Ambassador] Wilson about not letting ANDSF [and the Afghan government] know that we were planning for a NEO” and that they “didn’t want to let the cat out of the bag.”⁵⁸ According to Admiral Vasely, it was not until August 14 that the State Department and Embassy began to fully mobilize for the NEO. He stated, “I was seeing that the government was collapsing. . . . Ambassador Wilson saw it as a photo opportunity.”⁵⁹



U.S. Soldiers and Marines assist with security during Department of State noncombatant evacuation operation at Hamid Karzai International Airport, Kabul, Afghanistan, August 19, 2021 (U.S. Marine Corps/Victor Mancilla)

Marine Brigadier General Farrell Sullivan, commander of Joint Task Force–Crisis Response, stated that attempts to get “the Embassy to discuss NEO [were] like pulling teeth”⁶⁰ and that the “challenge was getting the Embassy to even consider NEO planning.”⁶¹ He added that the military “had very little traction with the Embassy on NEO planning. The Embassy did not fully participate in NEO planning until a week prior to the fall [of Kabul].”⁶² As the situation devolved, however, the Embassy and the military conducted a rehearsal of concept drill for the NEO on

August 6, less than 2 weeks before the NEO declaration on August 14.

State’s portion of the plan was vague both on the prioritizing of evacuees and on plans for temporary safe havens. This poor planning displayed “a disconnect between what [the military was] seeing on the ground and the urgency [the Embassy was] displaying.”⁶³ The military continued to plan nonetheless, with the assumption that the Embassy’s interest in the NEO would be “last minute.”⁶⁴ This assumption, consistent with NEO declarations in the past, was correct. In one macabre example related by an Army

officer present during the evacuation of the Embassy in Kabul, some “State Department personnel were intoxicated and cowering in rooms,” and others were “operating like it was day-to-day operations with absolutely no sense of urgency or recognition of the situation.”⁶⁵

The inability and unwillingness for State Department and Embassy personnel to anticipate, plan, and direct the large-scale NEO in Afghanistan, and the military’s inability to influence its State counterparts, is indicative of the inherent failure of the current NEO policy framework. The massive scale of U.S. persons



U.S. Marines and Sailors with Wasp Amphibious Ready Group and 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit come ashore via landing craft, air cushion from USS Wasp to conduct noncombatant evacuation exercise during Composite Unit Training exercise at Onslow Beach, Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, April 17, 2024 (U.S. Marine Corps/Elton Taylor)

and Afghans who were successfully evacuated was achieved only through the courage, grit, and determination of the individual Servicemembers who worked a miracle and the ultimate sacrifice made by 13 of their comrades. Afghanistan may be the latest example of this near-total breakdown, but unless there is a major change in policy it will not be the last.

Under the Biden administration, there have been, thus far, five non-natural disaster NEOs—in Afghanistan (August 2021), Ukraine (February 2022), Belarus (February 2022), Sudan (April 2023), and Haiti (July 2023). The 2023 Sudan NEO, like many others in the past, suffered interagency communication issues, and critics denounced the State Department for failing to robustly reach out to all U.S. citizens and announce a timely NEO.⁶⁶ Later investigation revealed that the evacuation plans for Sudan had either

not been written at all, or written at the last minute, and did not reflect any training or logistics for the eventuality of the event in which the lion's share of the operations were passed to DOD.⁶⁷ A July 2023 article in *SOF News* undiplomatically claimed that “the Department of State has an abysmal record of conducting Noncombatant Evacuation Operations especially when it comes to social unrest and instability in conflict zones” and warned that as long as State has “ultimate responsibility” for NEOs, it has a “duty to up [its] game.”⁶⁸ Change needs to be made to the NEO executive order itself, and it needs to happen now.

Currently, the disconnect between what is authorized and what occurs on the ground in these complicated NEO operations plays out like Kabuki theater, reciting the theme of coordinated operations while acting out the tension

between the lead actors. The extraordinary NEO of the future requires the military to take the lead in executing all phases of the operation.

The Emergency Preparedness Executive Order and NEO Memorandum of Agreement

The grounding documents that established the Department of State lead for NEO could not have predicted the complicated operations required for NEOs like Afghanistan or to enable preparations for a possible NEO on the Korean Peninsula. The executive order and memorandum of agreement directing State and DOD responsibilities have been in force for several decades and do not provide specific guidance for effective interagency coordination in large-scale, high-threat situations.

To be fair, the executive order was never intended to give specific guidance

on NEOs. Its scope was much broader, encompassing all manner of emergency preparedness, outlining the “lead” and “support” responsibilities of 26 different Federal departments, agencies, and commissions for a wide variety of national security–related emergencies. At the heart of the document is the commitment to the most basic axiom: Department and agency responsibilities are based, whenever possible, “on extensions of regular mission of the departments or agencies.”⁶⁹

The memorandum of agreement, also decades old, was not drafted with war zone situations such as Afghanistan in mind. But it does contain an interesting precedent for a DOD-led NEO via the case of Naval Station Guantanamo Bay. Although there is an Embassy in Cuba, and the Secretary of Defense is to act “in conjunction” with the Secretary of State, it is DOD that has “primary responsibility for preparing and ordering the execution of plans for the protection and evacuation of all noncombatant U.S. citizens and national, and designated other persons, in the U.S. Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.”⁷⁰ Given the sensitive nature of our operations, to include border patrol and detention operations, at Guantanamo Bay, this DOD-led NEO exception opens the door for making other relevant exceptions.

Expansion of DOD authorities in extraordinary NEOs need not list specific countries in advance but rather be conditions-based, triggered by certain events on the ground, such as when intelligence reports show increased instability or movements toward armed conflict. A new executive order would provide for a process in which the Secretary of Defense is designated as the lead, by the President, on an ad hoc basis. The President could then designate countries or regions as extraordinary for NEO execution, as need arises, albeit well in advance of crisis or conflict. Examples from Iraq during Operation *Iraqi Freedom* and, of course, Afghanistan during operations *Enduring Freedom* and *Resolute Support*—as both countries had ongoing named military operations with a large U.S. military presence fully

capable of planning for and leading a large and complex NEO—could be used to inform and outline specific conditions and criteria for a DOD lead.

Looking toward a NEO possibility in South Korea would need to inform the new executive order. In this case, the State Department would be authorized to retain lead authority regarding the entrance of evacuees to temporary safe havens in other countries as well as coordinating directly with the Department of Homeland Security regarding the repatriation of U.S. persons. State may even take a lead role, in coordination with DOD, regarding the evacuation needs of the host nation and other foreign partners—liaising with our allies to assess support to third-country nationals and working the visa applications for host-nation special immigrants or other authorizations as appropriate. The overall command and control, however, would be with DOD, specifically in this case with the United States Forces Korea (USFK) commander.

DOD-Led NEO Requires Increased Jointness

Under present authorities, the flow of joint NEO command and coordination does not support effective and efficient operations. In the Joint Staff Publication 3-68, *Joint Noncombatant Evacuation Operations*, updated in the wake of the Afghanistan NEO, a block and line diagram displays a dotted line with NEO operations originating from several starting points—the Secretary of Defense, the Washington Liaison Group, and the Secretary of State.⁷¹ At the outset, there is little evidence of a clear line of decisionmaking. Positing two different diagrams, one for NEOs and one for extraordinary NEOs, would help clarify operational command and control below the level of the President.

Of note is a slight, but meaningful change in the Joint Staff’s flow diagram in the wake of the Afghanistan NEO. Specifically, there is a box below the Secretary of Defense—formerly labeled “Geographic Combatant Commanders”—that is now labeled

“Combatant Commanders” to broaden the scope of commands to include both geographic and functional commands, such as U.S. Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM).

This broadening is significant, as USTRANSCOM is doctrinally at the heart of DOD support to NEO. When authorized by the Secretary of Defense:

*CJCS [the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff] coordinates the deployment and employment of U.S. forces in support of a NEO and monitors U.S. force participation in the protection and evacuation of noncombatant evacuees. The CJCS also recommends transportation movement priorities to [the Secretary of Defense] and the use of USTRANSCOM to provide the appropriate transportation resources in support of [State Department] requests. In addition, the CJCS coordinates with the Secretaries of the Military Departments and Combatant Commanders on evacuee personnel accounting actions.*⁷²

In addition, USTRANSCOM maintains the Joint Intelligence Operations Center Transportation website, which provides detailed overviews of ports and airfields worldwide and thereby allows USTRANSCOM to coordinate with other command elements on the capabilities, capacity, and security of air points of embarkation for evacuees. Though adding a specific box for USTRANSCOM would be a better recommendation, at least this latest version of the flowchart enables one to better see the flow between *any* combatant command and USTRANSCOM.

The future possibility of a NEO in South Korea is a notable example of a complex operation. USFK is a subunified command under U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, with complicated operational and administrative authorities over other component commands—the Eighth Army, Command Naval Forces Korea, Marine Forces Korea, the Seventh Air Force, Special Forces Korea, and Space Force Korea. Taking the lead from the State Department would only be the first step toward a more efficient and effective NEO.

On the Korean Peninsula, where a NEO would most likely occur concurrently with reception, staging, onward movement, and integration operations, planning and training for a NEO would need to be robust. The readers of this journal understand that the U.S. military's "jointness" is the jewel in our defense-capabilities crown. It is what continues to give us advantage over our near-peer Russia and pacing threat China. However, joint capabilities are "highly perishable."⁷³ The new executive order would require DOD to ensure that its joint authorities and processes are in place and properly exercised specifically for NEOs in order to ensure the interoperability of all of its joint assets.

USFK Commander General Paul LaCamera recently expressed to Congress the magnitude of any possible NEO, stating that "evacuating noncombatants from the Korean Peninsula in a crisis would require herculean and multinational efforts" for the more than 2 million foreign nationals residing in the Republic of Korea, which is required to "protect noncombatants while creating a maneuver space for the military to deter and defeat aggression."⁷⁴ History and recent events dictate that the authority and responsibility for such a massive operation must be placed squarely in the realm of the military. It is time we helped our military by giving them the authority to lead when the NEO is extraordinary. JFQ

Notes

¹ Executive Order 12656, "Assignment of Emergency Preparedness Responsibilities" (Washington, DC: The White House, November 18, 1988), 53 FR 47491, 3 CFR, 1988 Comp., 585, https://archives.federalregister.gov/issue_slice/1988/11/23/47491-47512.pdf. Executive Order 13074, "Amendment to Executive Order 12656" (Washington, DC: The White House, February 9, 1998), 63 FR 7277, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-1998-02-12/pdf/98-3847.pdf>. This executive order adds to section 501 (lead responsibilities of the Secretary of Defense) this item (501(16)): "Subject to the direction of the President, and pursuant to procedures to be developed jointly by the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State, [the Secretary of Defense shall] be responsible for the deployment and use of

military forces for the protection of United States citizens and nationals and, in connection therewith, designated other persons or categories of persons, in support of their evacuation from threatened areas overseas."

² Executive Order 12656.

³ Executive Order 12656.

⁴ Memorandum of Agreement Between the Departments of State and Defense on the Protection and Evacuation of U.S. Citizens and National and Designated Other Persons From Threatened Areas Overseas, Washington, DC, 1998, <https://prhome.defense.gov/portals/52/documents/pr%20docs/dodod%20memo%20of%20agreement%20on%20protection%20and%20evacuation.pdf>.

⁵ Memorandum of Agreement.

⁶ Memorandum of Agreement.

⁷ Government Accountability Office (GAO), *State Department: Evacuation Planning and Preparations for Overseas Posts Can Be Improved*, GAO-08-23 (Washington, DC: GAO, October 19, 2007), 2, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-08-23>.

⁸ Daniel L. Haulman, "Vietnam Evacuation: Operation *Frequent Wind*," in *Short War: Major USAF Contingency Operations 1947-1997*, ed. A. Timothy Warnock (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 2000), 88, <https://media.defense.gov/2012/Aug/23/2001330098/-1/-1/0/Oper%20Frequent%20Wind.pdf>.

⁹ Haulman, 88.

¹⁰ Haulman, 92-93.

¹¹ Charles E. Hoke, *Covenant Backed: The U.S. Evacuation of Saigon to an Unknown Future in Kabul* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies, 2019), 38, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1083433.pdf>.

¹² Hoke, iv.

¹³ Hoke, 32.

¹⁴ Hoke, 33.

¹⁵ Hoke, 33.

¹⁶ Hoke, 36.

¹⁷ See, for example, stories cited in T.A. Frail, "The Tragic Fate of the Afghan Interpreters the U.S. Left Behind," *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 2016, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/tragic-fate-afghan-interpreters-left-behind-180960785/>.

¹⁸ Hoke, *Covenant Backed*, 19.

¹⁹ GAO, *State Department: The July 2006 Evacuation of American Citizens From Lebanon*, GAO-07-893R (Washington, DC: GAO, June 7, 2007), 3, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-07-893r>.

²⁰ GAO-07-893R, 2.

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