



DOS 101: FOREIGN POLICY ADVISORS

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Amanda Cronkhite: Welcome to A Better Peace: The War Room Podcast. I'm Amanda Cronkhite, assistant professor of political science at the U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies and an associate editor of The War Room. It's a pleasure to have you with us. As part of our continuing effort to help military officers better understand the State Department, today we're going to focus on one specific office, the Office of State Defense Integration under State's Political Military Bureau. POLADs short for Foreign Policy Advisors, build partnerships and bring foreign policy expertise in matters pivotal to both state and DoD. Specifically, the State Department explains their role this way. The POLADs, our State Department officers assigned to commands as advisors to leading U.S. military leaders and commanders to provide policy support regarding the diplomatic and political aspects of the commander's military responsibilities.

The POLAD program expanded dramatically after 9/11 as military officers in Iraq and Afghanistan required more onsite expertise and counsel from diplomats. Military presence in areas indefinitely is not something DoD is set up to do after all. Being there all the time is usually state's role. As a 2021, there are over 80 foreign service officer POLAD positions in 11 states and six countries. With us today to help explain the POLAD program is an experienced diplomat. She has served all over the world in places as diverse as South Africa, Belarus and New Zealand. Of particular interest today are her multiple roles as a POLAD. She was an advisor to the commanding general of the U.S. Army North before turning to recruitment of other foreign service officers to be political advisors and helping them decide where to place them. She is currently the director of the Office of State Defense Integration and manages the POLAD program. Please join me in welcoming to the podcast Ms. Andrea Gastaldo.

Andrea Gastaldo: Thank you.

AC: Thank you for joining us, Andrea.

AG: Thank you for having me.

AC: So since we're talking about a position that to many people is unfamiliar, I'd like to start by referencing as popular pop culture mean. What my friends think I do, what my family thinks I do, what society thinks I do, what I actually do. So what does a POLAD actually do?

AG: Thank you, Amanda, for the question. It's a great question because we even have that question within State Department and in the Pol-Mil Bureau sometimes, and even within the POLAD program, because it varies. It's not a complete, it depends answer, but it really varies. So foreign policy advisors or the POLADs are actually located in geographic combatant commands, functional commands, components, and some positions at the Pentagon. So what they do can depend also on where they are, but the number one thing that they do is inform the commanders or the directorates where they work of what the foreign policy objectives are, State Department and how those foreign policy objectives can actually nest with, align with and synchronize with DoD plans and exercises sometimes and training.

And this is something that's an ongoing thing. So what a POLAD might do at one command six months ago may be completely different than the new POLAD coming in. And as something that years before people used to think of POLADs as only being senior foreign service. That senior foreign service isn't... Shall we say it's an old takeaway from original POLAD program because the POLADs up to September 11th were all senior foreign service officers. They were all what we would call a two-star equivalent, an FEMC for State Department speak. And so there was a development with September 11th of an increase. And so the POLAD program expanded so greatly that we now have POLADs that are actually more junior in the State Department. They're what we call an FSO3, FSO2 and FSO1. And those are Major equivalents, Lieutenant Colonel equivalence and Colonel equivalents respectively.

So what they do depending upon where they are, is really dependent upon what the mission focus is. We have a POLAD, for example, at PACFLEET, who specifically is advising that PACFLEET Admiral on everything water and how it impacts the countries that PACFLEET interacts with. But then on African side of the house, we actually have POLADs at the more junior level who may be inside the J5 working with specific geographic areas. Because AFRICOM is so large for an area of responsibility that they actually need to break it down into smaller sizes and bite sizes for them to work the portfolios. So the advising is critical, understanding the commander's intent and where the commander wants to get to their mission set is critical for the POLADs as well. And it is a learning position. I state that up front because it's not something that the commands are looking for veterans, former veterans to come into. They're looking for people who are actually fluent in state speak and can actually speak to state's desires and states view of an area.

AC: Since the job is so variable, let's narrow talking a little bit to the past year, recent events. Can you give me some examples of what POLADs have done relative to the pandemic?

AG: Oh, absolutely. So the pandemic was actually what I call the reality check for a number of DoD commands. DoD like the rest of the U.S. government wants to support the administrations and also support their fellow American citizens. The POLADs themselves would lead for inter-agency discussion at those geographic commands, especially INDOPACOM, EUCOM, AFRICOM, NORTHCOM, SOUTHCOM and CENTCOM. And what happened initially, if we can remember back in February, March was a lot of discussion about repatriation.

Well, that also involve the POLADs at TRANSCOM who were able to talk to and walk through what the actual reality was on the possibility of repatriating all American citizens. Now, most of your audience does not realize that American citizens are in almost every country, if not every single country in the world, on any given Tuesday in the numbers, upwards of nine to 11 million plus. That's a lot of people. And actually, when put into context of reality is not a number that is easily or feasibly moved and repatriated for anyone, either commercial, charter or military means. So what the POLADs work to do is number one, inform the commands, let them know where there were pockets and areas where they really might need help. Number two, make sure that TRANSCOM was also aligned with what State Department was doing for assistance. So they understood the assistance that was being given and offered where possible with the missions overseas. And number three, also informed on what the actual requirements were, because this was not a mission set that was small in scope or size.

And it was also a question of how long would it run. So the POLADs were pulling information from State Department and from the Counselor Affairs Bureau, and then pushing that information out to their commanders. The TRANSCOM POLADs, especially were working with our office and with the department to ensure that there was an understanding of what military capacity could be put towards that effort and what could not. Because for military readiness, you could not simply pivot everything and say, "We're going to pick everyone up." That was not feasible or tenable. So the number of American citizens always actually exceeds the capacity to assist. We do what we can where we are. And that includes the fact that we actually at State Department are in locations where DoD is not. So we were also informing through the POLADs, what the conditions were on the ground in some locations where they normally don't go and where they might've been a request for assistance.

That was the repatriation effort.

Moving from that we moved over to vaccine distribution. And that was a two-part effort because it was vaccine distribution, both for DoD and their personnel, eligible family members, DoD siblings overseas, and local staff. And then there was the department of state effort with the vaccine effort to get vaccines doses out to the department of state personnel overseas, eligible family members and their local staff. Now, there was a difference. And so at that point, the Defense Logistics Agency POLAD stepped forward, huge effort and worked very hard to ensure that the DoD vaccine distribution effort was in line with the requirements on the ground for getting vaccine into those countries. Just the basic thing of getting it through customs was something that had not previously been worked through at that scope or level. And so that was

something that was being done worldwide with the assistance of the Defense Logistics Agency POLAD.

The single individual, but he was tied into the rest of the commands and the command POLADs through my office. And also just as a network itself. So that was for DoD vaccine. For the department of state medical side, we were working from my office and with the POLADs in the field to ensure that we actually had, shall we say alignment, maybe not synchronicity perfectly but alignment with the Department of Defense's command surgeon's office. So that there was a way for us to know where DoD was putting its vaccine, where State Department was putting its vaccine. And if there were pockets of people from DoD who were not able to get it at their location, could they get it at State Department? So that also worked with the POLAD program and we were able to cover everyone who officially was offered the vaccine overseas around the world.

AC: Wow. That sounds like a huge undertaking on multiple fronts over what I assume was a fairly long year. Well, it was a long year for everyone. But the pandemic, they keep telling us they're hoping it's a once in a century thing. So let's talk about what POLADs do when it's not a pandemic. Do you have any examples speaking very generally of when you think POLADs were especially helpful to commanders, maybe something that changed the commander's vision or a plan or a trajectory?

AG: Sure. Well, we have POLADs in not too many places where there's just a taskforce. So taskforce POLAD, the command is not a lesser command, but it's a very specific agile mission set. And I can tell you that we had a POLAD that was in CJTF-HOA, Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa a couple of years ago. And because of their huge area of responsibility all the way down the coast of Africa, there was a natural disaster as happens sometimes a lot of flooding, and there was a request to go down to assist a specific country. I'd rather not name. Everybody was gearing up for it. The issue is that actually the host nation was not really a fan of the assistance or at the very least did not want that assistance to be publicized.

And so the POLAD's role in that was really to convince the commander that while they may think that a SEAR, a search and rescue effort might be what the command wants to do. If the host nation doesn't want to do it, you actually create a problem set by forcing it upon them because you don't force things upon host nations. They have their sovereignty. We respect that sovereignty 100%. So what they did instead was actually co-ordinate the assistance in a different manner and actually showed through a neighboring country that was also hit what they could do to help. And by the time it came down to it, they actually did get approval to assist that initial first country because they realized that the help was just specifically for that humanitarian assistance disaster relief in the particular area of search and rescue.

So this is where the POLAD is a pivotal person to advise. Look, although you may have the means and resources to assist, if the host nation is not interested in the assist, please let's not push this too hard because our relationship as Department of State is the permanent relationship. It's

long-term. And we have to really look at what the impacts in the second and third order effects are when any agency comes in and pushes something that's not asked for, required, requested. So that POLAD actually helps speak to that particular nuance relationship. And this happens around the world. We've had instances of this happen in CENTCOM and the CENTCOM instance I would love to talk about, but it's classified, but it was a huge impact for the POLAD and the commander and understanding what would happen on the ground if things went as we call it sideways.

In addition, it can be a smaller effect. When I myself was a POLAD, I actually worked with, and this is a very strange one, the Government of Mexico, specifically with their request to assist the state of Texas. They were at the political point where they didn't refuse to assist the federal government in the United States when hurricane Harvey hit, but they wanted to offer their neighbors in Texas assistance. And so I actually worked with the Secretary of State for the state of Texas, rather than the secretary of state for the United States in working an agreement for them to provide support to the Rio Grande Valley and to offer their items that the state of Texas could accept. And that's something that's very different than what we normally do as foreign service officers working overseas.

But in this case, it's something that, again, it's a learning role. So you expand your experience and education on what is possible when you go into a POLAD position.

AC: Wow. Okay. That's fascinating. So you're talking about it as a learning role. So what officers do after their POLADs, because presumably this is not something that is a forever position. So what are some of your alumni doing now?

AG: That's a great question. So years ago we actually did have a... I wouldn't call it a problem, but it was a challenge where we did have foreign service officers do back to, back-to-back POLAD positions. And rightly so, we were called on it saying, what is the effect and assistance that those officers actually give back to the Department of State because they are foreign service officers? So we've actually changed that solution set and we've made it so that there has to be a hard gap between POLAD positions of five years. That's the recommended time. So if they come back to the department, but as of right now, when we say, "Come back to the department," they come back in a big way. As of today, we have 13 sitting ambassadors that are former POLADs. We have four chargés [d'affaires] that are in lieu of the ambassadors because the ambassador is not in location.

We have three deputy chiefs of mission, two principal officers, otherwise known as console generals. We have a special envoy and acting assistant secretary to deputy assistant secretaries, an NSC director, and several others who are executive directors or chiefs of staff for regional bureaus. Now, that's huge because the POLAD program itself only represents 1% of all foreign service positions that are available. And yet the numbers I just gave you at that level, we're talking that on the leadership side of the house, they're representing in far greater numbers than the 1% of positions that they fill. So that's always the possibility of them moving forward and

moving up. And some of those that actually are working as deputy assistant secretaries were actually chiefs of mission already after their POLAD position and have moved over to deputy assistant secretaries.

So what we look for in the POLADs themselves are people not only willing to learn, but also to give back to the Department. We really want to make sure that they come back to the Department and use their now expert knowledge on DoD and relationships and the culture of DoD back in the Department to actually help maintain and strengthen the relationship in the inter-agency, not just with DoD, but in the inter-agencies all around.

AC: Oh, wow. Okay. That's cool. I guess the skeptic in me, we were speaking to one of your colleagues on another podcast and he talked about State's diversity and inclusion measures. State's reputation for being a pale, male and Yale. And I was quite happy to see earlier this year that State appointed its first diversity and inclusion officer. So I'd like to talk about diversity in the POLAD program. What parts of State do you draw from? How are your diversity stats relative to the rest of the department? And how can a program that is very small and has this kind of agile, but nonetheless targeted mission, how do you deal with diversity and inclusion issues and within that POLAD community?

AG: So I would be remiss if I did not add that the current diversity and inclusion officer for the Secretary of State is a former POLAD and-

AC: Oh, fabulous.

AG: ... she was not listed in the list, I just gave you because she came in after departing the department, but she is - absolutely was a former POLAD. But as far as how the inclusion goes, first off, one of the things that we have, and we have this challenge at Department of State is the POLAD program is geared towards foreign service officers. But we had an issue with the name. A lot of people still think, "Oh, it's back in the day. Its political advisor." Well, no, it's not. It's a foreign policy advisor. So we draw from, and we are the most conaly diverse office or program in the department. We have consular officers, economic officers, political officers, public diplomacy officers, and management officers. And I myself, I am management officer. And I worked as a pol-mil officer and worked as a POLAD very successfully.

What we're looking for are a breadth of experience and the willingness to learn. So we're looking for those officers who are not so keyed into what they've done as a cone, that they can only stay within that cone. There's no such cone as POLAD. So we're looking for people who actually will be willing to say, "Oh, I was a foreign policy advisor to this command." They may never go to that command ever again. We would like to have gender parody of 50-50%. We did get to it back in 2016. We had 2016, 2017 - we've had 50-50% females and male. Unfortunately that has dropped off. I have tried very hard to recruit female officers because I think they bring something different to the approach for the commands themselves. And there's no pushback from

the DoD commands of wanting a specific type of officer. So I want to put that out there. DoD actually in watching what they do with their officers and diversity is a role model for us on how we can increase our own.

Right now, I believe there are 17 or 16 affinity groups. We have members for almost all of those groups within the POLAD program. I did an informal poll earlier this year and approximately 30% of our POLADs self-identified as being a member of one or more of those affinity groups. We have single females. We have same-sex partners in the POLAD program, married, that are stationed overseas. And in POLAD commands, we have a background that is incredibly varied because the focus again is, are you willing to go on to something that can help another agency and learn, and then bring it back? So while we have, I understand the pale, male and Yale situation, we have actively tried hard to recruit others from other backgrounds that would help get us off of that marker as we say. In addition, we would say that we have a special focus on mentorship that we are trying to mentor these POLADs so that when they leave, they always consider the POLAD program, not specific to themselves, but to others.

So that if they are a member of that affinity groups that they turn around and say, "Hey, I was a POLAD. I was successful as a POLAD. I recommend the POLAD program." Because it's based again on what is their experience breath and their willingness to learn. Those are two critical pieces for the POLAD program.

AC: That's great and I'm thrilled to hear it. And obviously for any underrepresented communities, mentorship is one of the most important things people can do as they go on. I want to switch gears. Now, my students at Army University are mostly majors and colonels. I spend a lot of time expressing concern that a tactical win with a strategic loss is not actually a win. It is just a loss. If you could talk to my students, what would you wish they thought more about? Or what guidance would you if given a room full of up-and-coming army officers able to speak to them? What do you wish they knew more of based on your experience as a POLAD?

AG: One of the things they have to realize is that, that particular group from the colonels down is the group that actually is having less and less contact with the inner agency. So when I look back at the relationships between DoD and department of state, and then you go back 10 years, we probably had the most intersection... We'll go back 12 years, the most intersection of State Department officers with DoD and other inner agency in Iraq and Afghanistan. So DoD officers, NCOs were able to see us in the field, see us in the fields of conflict, see us able to work through the stress with the stress and with the stressors involved and succeed. But they also had the understanding that when they left and they redeployed, we stayed. There was an understanding also of their deployment times being different than ours.

So some of them, for example, Air Force was in the field and sometimes in Iraq for three months out of a time. Marines for nine months out of the time. We were there the solid year, and many of us who went to Iraq and Afghanistan did multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. So that we became very knowledgeable as to how things were going and we saw DoD as not being

permanent because they kept rotating out. And we ended up going back in. Now, when I say permanent, I mean, permanent in the sense of, we are always looking at our locations as whether or not we can staff them. Not just now, but in 2030, 2040, 2050, the locations we leave, we desperately want to go back to. I can tell you that I, amongst other colleagues are some of the people who would love to serve again in Iran, because we're waiting to get back in there. This is a dream of ours to do this before we leave service. I served in Basra, Iraq. When we left there, even though it was years after I had served, it was heartbreaking because for us, our best contribution is when we're talking to people on the ground, having those relationships and building them. So what I would tell the soon to be colonels and others is that when you're talking to inter-agency understand, it's not simply the approach that's different. It is what we consider to be the goal. The goal is different because we're not looking at it in phases. We're not in phase five for State Department. For us, our steady state would like to be that we have the relations with the local staff and the local economy and the local governance and leadership. We are able to get them to understand what we are bringing and offering as a country, helping build those relationships.

And it's not simply about visas. It's also exchange programs. It's also having the conversation as to what does your country have that we can learn from and what do we have that we can offer to you? And so that's a different approach than coming in, having a very specific problem set, solving it and departing. For us, countries aren't problem sets. They're countries of people in relationships that if we build those relationships and make those connections stronger, we will be able to achieve the foreign policy goals that hopefully bring a more lasting, I hate to say lasting peace around the world, but that is the goal.

And so there's a difference in how we are looking at everything, but we welcome their assistance where it makes the most sense, but it doesn't necessarily make the most sense everywhere.

AC: Okay. So that's actually a really good point that leads into my next question, which is some of my students are going to be going out obviously to take command in places. So these are the colonels, mostly. If they're unfamiliar with the POLAD program, or if someone who hasn't necessarily been attached to one of the COCOMs before, how would you explain or sell the POLAD program to that person. That person as you said, may just now be getting into the ranks of the military, where they're really working with inter-agency people regularly, and they don't have that background. What would you say to those people?

AG: Sure. And thank you. I would say first off, understand that we are all working for better understanding of what the United States does. And the Department of State is a critical piece to that because we are the ones that are actually in locations that the Department of Defense is not. We cover the entire world and DoD covers its portion of it. It covers it, but we're actually on the ground everywhere, pretty much with the exception of a few countries. Because of that, we want to get to know you and the POLADs themselves being located at commands are probably easiest way to get to know the Department of State. Now, we're a flat organization. The Department of

State is incredibly flat compared to DoD. We don't stand on protocol. We use first names. We don't mind people cold emailing us. If we're able to answer the email, we'll do it right away. And so if you go to a command that happens to have a POLAD, or if it's related to another component that has a POLAD, because we don't have them everywhere, reach out to that POLAD, make yourself known. One of the things I always recommend for POLADs is keep your door open, make sure you walk around, make sure you know every single JDir or director that there is at your component. And so that they get to know you and there's a conversation that happens. This is something that's again critical because the more we know each other and how we work, the better they understand, especially... And I'm going to put this out there, for the planners. Especially for the planners who want to do things, they have that, shall we say, scope of feasibility that's right there to say, yes. That's a possibility.

It's something we welcome. The POLADs welcome conversation. We are by nature curious, and this is something I throw out there because when I was at Fort Leavenworth, I did an elective class where they're talking about personality types. And the instructor had listed something like 24 of them across the board and said, "Put down the one that's number one." I was the only person to put down curiosity as number one. And I thought that's a huge difference because that's not something that necessarily DoD is looking for, but it is something department of state often does. And so I would say, if you talk to your POLAD or if you're in the schoolhouse, the inter-agency student from department of state, I guarantee you they will have a conversation with you. I guarantee you they will not care what your rank is or your MOS.

They are wanting to talk to you as a person, because that's our greatest strength is really making those relations and making those connections. And I'm still in touch with a number of my colleagues from my Fort Leavenworth class back in 2012. And I am so happy that they're out there. A lot of them are still in DoD. Others have moved on, but we're still in touch. And that's because again, we make the relationships and try to keep them going.

AC: Well, thank you for that, Andrea Gastaldo. It has been lovely talking to you today on A Better Peace. And thanks to all of you for listening. Please send us your comments on this program and all the programs. And send us suggestions for future programs. Please rate and review this podcast on your podcatcher of choice, which helps others find us. We're always interested in hearing from you. Until next time, from The War Room. I'm Amanda Cronkhite.