

SPOOKS IN WOLF'S CLOTHING

We've known for some time that the military was rolling out its new-and-improved HUMINT function, the Defense Clandestine Service. But this article—laying out the ambitious goals of the program—is all the more interesting given several events that transpired since the NCS announcement: specifically, the Benghazi attack and the Petraeus resignation.

Part of the logic behind the move, the article explains, is that CIA is already overstretched; this will allow CIA to task DIA resources with the collection driven by military, rather than policy, needs.

The project was triggered by a classified study by the director of national intelligence last year that concluded that key Pentagon intelligence priorities were falling into gaps created by the DIA's heavy focus on battlefield issues and CIA's extensive workload.

Over and over, the article suggests the CIA is so busy in part because of its involvement in the drone program.

Through its drone program, the CIA now accounts for a majority of lethal U.S. operations outside the Afghan war zone.

[snip]

The CIA is increasingly overstretched. Obama administration officials have said they expect the agency's drone campaign against al-Qaeda to continue for at least a decade more, even as the agency faces pressure to stay abreast of issues including turmoil across the Middle East. Meanwhile, the CIA hasn't met ambitious goals set by former president

George W. Bush to expand its own clandestine service.

If the drone program has sucked up CIA's time, the agency doesn't appear to be complaining about it. On the contrary, the recently-departed David Petraeus demanded more drones, not more resources for HUMINT.

The suggestion, then, is that CIA is too busy to collect HUMINT because it is so busy being a paramilitary organization.

But look at the topics DIA is said to be focusing on.

Among the Pentagon's top intelligence priorities, officials said, are **Islamist militant groups in Africa**, weapons transfers by North Korea and Iran, and military modernization underway in China.

[snip]

"The CIA doesn't want to be looking for surface-to-air missiles in Libya" when it's also under pressure to assess the opposition in Syria, said a former high-ranking U.S. military intelligence officer who worked closely with both spy services. Even in cases where their assignments overlap, the DIA is likely to be more focused than the CIA on military aspects – **what U.S. commanders in Africa might ask about al-Qaeda in Mali**, for example, rather than the broader questions raised by the White House. [my emphasis]

With the argument thus laid out, Greg Miller might well have said, "DIA needs the DCS to avoid another Benghazi." After all, not only did CIA not have advance intelligence about an attack militants with ties to AQIM were planning (to say nothing of suspect loyalties among the militia we were relying on for security), but

they didn't have that intelligence because they were too busy trying to collect loose surface-to-air missiles in Libya. Precisely some of the jobs the article says DIA will now take over. CIA screwed up in Benghazi, and so now it is handing off its screw ups to DIA.

"Benghazi" may not have been the reason given for the DCS when it got rolled out in April, but clearly the folks who will have to convince Congress are using the Benghazi attack as a convenient excuse.

But what will happen to DCS given recent and potential future changes with the personalities involved?

U.S. officials said the changes for the DIA were enabled by a rare syncing of personalities and interests among top officials at the Pentagon and CIA, many of whom switched from one organization to the other to take their current jobs.

[snip]

The DIA project has been spearheaded by Michael G. Vickers, the top intelligence official at the Pentagon and a veteran of the CIA.

Agreements on coordination were approved by Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta, a former CIA director, and retired Army Gen. David H. Petraeus, who resigned abruptly as CIA chief last month over an extramarital affair.

As Petraeus diddled himself out of a job, it presented an opportunity for commentators to note that CIA can't succeed as the paramilitary organization Petraeus pushed it to be. If the new CIA Director heeds this sound advice—and returns its focus to HUMINT—will there really be the need for DCS?

And what happens to the DCS if its god-father, Michael Vickers, takes over at CIA?

Meanwhile, will this Russian doll structure we've been using for covert ops—JSOC guys hiding inside CIA ops protected as covert operating outside the AUMF—survive the departure of Leon Panetta, who seems to have brought his covert halo with him when he moved from CIA to DOD?

All the dance partners are changing again, and it's unclear whether the new partnerships will have the same goals as they currently do.

Ultimately, it seems the question will rest with Congress. While Miller suggests DCS will retain the limits (and benefits) of Title 10. Yet those sentences are none too convincing.

Unlike the CIA, the Pentagon's spy agency is not authorized to conduct covert operations that go beyond intelligence gathering, such as drone strikes, political sabotage or arming militants.

But the DIA has long played a major role in assessing and identifying targets for the U.S. military, which in recent years has assembled a constellation of drone bases stretching from Afghanistan to East Africa.

The expansion of the agency's clandestine role is likely to heighten concerns that it will be accompanied by an escalation in lethal strikes and other operations outside public view. Because of differences in legal authorities, the military isn't subject to the same congressional notification requirements as the CIA, leading to potential oversight gaps.

U.S. officials said that the DIA's realignment won't hamper congressional scrutiny. "We have to keep congressional staffs and members in the loop," [General Michael] Flynn said in October, adding that he believes the changes will help the United States anticipate threats and avoid being drawn more

directly into what he predicted will be an “era of persistent conflict.”

Behind all that blurring of Title 10 and 50 is JSOC, the final doll in that Russian doll structure.

The DIA has also forged a much tighter relationship with JSOC, the military’s elite and highly lethal commando force, which also carries out drone strikes in Yemen and other countries.

And this comes as Admiral William McRaven renews his call for more autonomy and money for SOCOM, something for which there is more institutional opposition than there is to DCS.

Will Congress go along with this effort to hide the covert ops inside covert ops?

On its face, this article makes a very neat argument that DCS will help us avoid the next Benghazi. But underlying it, inside that Russian doll, appears to be an effort to continue picking and choosing between Title 10 and 50.

Update: As @CustosDivan noted, I made DIA’s effort to be the CIA even more real than this move already makes it—by erroneously calling the new organization, the Defense Clandestine Service, the National Clandestine Service, which is the CIA deal