

The Department of State and the U.S. Marines: A case study of tactical interagency interaction

Regional security officers (RSO) in the embassies have strong interaction with the military, specifically the Marine detachments assigned to embassy security. RSO's are State Department Foreign Service Officers that are charged with providing embassy security—and that includes everything from theft within the embassy to a secure environment for embassy personnel outside of the embassy. Obviously, a pivotal tool for the RSO is the Marine detachment that is assigned to the embassy. In fact, the Marines report directly to the RSOs—this is the only instance of a military unit reporting to a civilian (other than the president as Commander-in-Chief).

The Marines are a great tactical tool as well—they provide a tactical capability that is fundamental to defending the embassy. This tactical security allows the rest of the embassy personnel to conduct its work with much greater ease and efficiency. As the Department of State notes,

While primary protection of the embassy is the job of the host government, in the form of guards, should an embassy be attacked and that protection fail, the Marine Security Guards' mission is to delay any hostile group long enough to destroy classified material and aid in safeguarding the lives of diplomatic personnel. MSGs also assist in evacuating embassy personnel and other Americans living in the country should that be necessary.¹

Moreover, the Marines often become a social focal point for the embassy and within the foreign country. They become important liason's to the local populace with their emphasis on charity work² and the annual Marine Ball.

Moreover, since the September 11th attacks, there has been increased emphasis within embassies on pursuing counterterrorism actions. The Marines and other parts of the military play an important role in that effort. As it states on U.S. embassy web sites,

Special agents formulate plans to deal with various emergency contingencies ranging from hostage taking to evacuations. Often, in times of crisis and political instability, DS special agents rely on the U.S. military for assistance. Since the early 1990s, special agents have worked closely with the military, especially the U.S. Marine Fleet Antiterrorism Security Teams, which have provided emergency force

¹ <http://www.state.gov/m/ds/protection/c8760.htm#msg>

² For example, their annual Christmas "Toys for Tots" campaign and their emphasis on working with local orphanages.

protection support for Department of State operations in a number of countries when the host government was unable to do so.³

There is institutionalized training between the Marines and the RSO. All future RSO's spend a few days at the Marine Guard school at Quantico. There are Marine representatives at the DOS security office headquarters in DC and there are RSO reps in Quantico on a permanent basis. RSO training takes place for 6 months and working with the Marines is a large part of that training.

The RSO relationship with the Marine detachment also has an impact on the morale of the embassies. If the relationship is bad, then it can affect everyone. The Marines themselves are most attentive to this. Every 4 months, there is a react drill for the Marines when Marine inspectors from the regiment come to drill the Marines and talk to the RSO about their performance.

It is a largely successful relationship with few problems. The problems that do exist tend to be caused more by personnel problems than any sort of intra-institutional misunderstanding. This seems to be due to the routinized training program as well as the clear need for a strong relationship "on the ground." Clearly, it is in everyone's best interest for this relationship to work smoothly and to be clearly established beyond any one personality.

³ <http://www.state.gov/m/ds/about/overview/c9004.htm>