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Regional Focus Works for the National Guard

By Sarwar A. Kashmeri

For the Valley News

A number of my columns have dealt with the economic advantages of leveraging the area's regional economy. In situations where economies of scale are important, New Hampshire, Vermont and other New England states can become more competitive by pooling their interests.

I recently found out that this strategy is also true for the region's National Guard operations, a big-ticket item critical to the country's military strength: Reserve and National Guard troops now account for 40 percent of the force in Iraq and the ratio rises to more than 50 percent when it comes to deployed combat forces.

Federal money accounts for much of the Guard budget, but there are significant state outlays involved.

“Our job in the Guard is to be ready to fight the nation's wars but also to be ready to protect our citizens at home,” Maj. Gen. Martha Rainville, adjutant general of the state of Vermont and head of the Vermont Army and Air National Guard, told me. As significant parts of Vermont's and New Hampshire's National Guard forces are deployed to the Middle East and Afghanistan, there is a real risk that the states will be short of resources to handle local emergencies.

Regional groupings give states much more flexibility, Rainville said, because “we are able to work these alliances to help support both tasks assigned to us.”

Rainville, considered a likely Republican candidate for Vermont's U.S. House seat, has been head of the Vermont Guard since 1997 and is in charge of the state's Military Department, which includes more than 4,000 National Guard troops. She is responsible for a budget of \$118 million, which includes a payroll of \$75 million.

Managing a budget of this size is a weighty proposition, and Rainville has become a strong believer in the power of regional cooperation to make the National Guard more cost effective. But there is another benefit from sharing regional National Guard assets that is not readily apparent.

For a three-month period between the 2004 presidential election and the president's inauguration in January 2005, security across the northern border became a key

military mission for Vermont, New Hampshire and New York. The Department of Defense and Homeland Security wanted to help secure the northern border by bringing federal soldiers from the Army into the border states.

Rainville was opposed to this move. "I spoke very strongly on behalf of the region against it. I felt the last thing Vermonters and New Yorkers and New Hampshire citizens needed were federal troops coming into our towns and states to do this kind of border security mission when we in the Guard have long worked with Immigration and the Border Patrol," she told me.

"I was also concerned about the tension and stress level on our border towns if armed federal troops -- who are very sharp, but trained for conflict -- took over this role."

She pointed out to federal authorities that Guard members have strong relationships with these agencies. "They live here, know the territory, who belongs there and who doesn't."

Rainville's argument was effective and the Vermont National Guard was selected to lead the multistate force that included New Hampshire and New York. This regional National Guard deployment saved \$8 million. Regional missions mean that states don't have to maintain duplicate assets. "New Hampshire has an air-to-air refueling capacity, we don't," Rainville said. "Vermont maintains a fighter wing, New Hampshire does not."

Federal budgets throughout the military are being crimped while the need for homeland security has increased. Competing needs for citizens, including health services and Social Security, "means we will continue to see the military budgets shrink," Rainville said. So, spreading the mission over a number of states means each federal dollar goes further.

Other regional assets include an Officer Candidate School that is partly in Vermont and partly in Connecticut, and a Mountain Warfare school spread out between Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine and Connecticut. Federal military budgets (the largest part of a state National Guard's operating funds) are shrinking and competition at the federal level is intense for National Guard funding.

When states band together, "we are able to make a much more effective case to Congress and the Department of Defense," Rainville said.

Is it easier for the National Guard to work regionally because generals can simply order something done?

"Wrong," Rainville said. "Only ineffective generals believe that. If you have to put your foot down and give orders all the time to get something done, you have failed in conveying the importance of and vision for your mission."

Rainville and her counterparts in New England have worked hard to build trust and relationships, and work to each others' strengths for the common good. "In the end it is building consensus that sparks success, you cannot order consensus, you have got to work at it."

Sarwar A. Kashmeri of Reading, Vt., advises corporations on communications and marketing strategy and is a fellow of the Foreign Policy Association. This twice-monthly column explores the Upper Valley's "business climate," focusing on

the issues and conditions affecting the region's economic health. Kashmeri can be reached at skashmeri@aol.com.

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