

What an Engagement Strategy Entails: Is the United States Government Equipped?

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The Benefits of Augmented Civilian Capacity

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One of globalization's key features is a level of interpenetration and interdependence that raises the stakes—for the United States' interests, security, and economy—of events and trends that had previously been more remote. Although this challenge has been recognized for a decade or more, the US national security and foreign policy institutions have yet to be updated in response.

Whether American power is in decline or not, Washington's ability to translate its economic and military strength into favorable outcomes has been diluted by the post-Cold War emergence of new and sometimes competing global power centers. For every problem in which the United States has an interest, there seem to be more variables in the equation. From rising powers to criminal and terrorist networks, workers in the global supply chain, and civil society leaders, this is an age of stakeholder proliferation.

In other words, there is a thickening web of global connections by which the actions and conditions of people at all different social strata affect us. Foreign workers compete with their American counterparts, which makes their wages and labor rights matters of real concern to Americans. At the same time, countries with growing middle classes represent new markets for goods and services from the United States. Some bloggers around the world have gained an audience that gives them significant influence over public perceptions. Emerging powers such as China and India have long been important international players, as their fast-growing economies and expanding roles in the global financial system give them additional clout. Product safety authorities in China (or the lack thereof) determine whether or not American children's toys are safe. And local public health systems across the globe are the crucial lines of defense against pandemics.

The United States therefore can only help steer world events by being well connected to this panoply of actors and equipped to interpret the complex dynamics that drive

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political currents and policy decisions in foreign capitals. This should be the essential aim of any effort to strengthen the US civilian agencies: *to extend America's lines of communication and cooperation widely enough to give us insight into and relationships with the actors on whom future peace and prosperity hinge.* In the same way that globalization collapses the distance in many international dimensions, the United States must shrink its distance from others—better understanding their concerns, building closer relationships, and responding more diligently and creatively to emerging developments.

Indeed, as a global power animated at least partially by the promotion of ideals and progress, the United States not only has interests around the globe, but also an interest in overall global conditions. A bipartisan foreign policy gathering in which the authors took part stressed the importance of placing the terrorist threat in a broader context:

The ultimate aim of the extended battle of ideas is to strengthen a global consensus around shared goals. Such a focus will help the United States to better see beyond itself toward a strategic concept that takes in the fuller picture of the world—our interests in the world as a whole and interests we share with others. Ultimately, the objective is to have more of the world feel a stronger kinship with the United States, in part through a more concerted effort toward increased prosperity and peace.¹

This is why we need stronger civilian agencies—to build the most widespread, inclusive, rules-based world community possible.

Before such a massive capacity-building effort can be launched, though, the requisite resources must be generated. The palpable and widely recognized need for stronger civilian agencies has not yet been paired with the political will to mandate and underwrite them. A convincing case for such an investment still needs to be made. One key to making this political sale will be to make the problem and the solution tangible. It will be easier to win support for budget increases if there is a clear image of how that investment will actually advance our interests, ideals, and security.

In that vein, what follows is a list of some positive results that should flow from expanding the team

of representatives who are tending to America's interests and values internationally. The authors defer to the numerous excellent resources that offer more rigorous and detailed proposals regarding the nature of such expansion—though we have singled out a few of their prescriptions. Our objective is rather to take stock of the wide range of activities needed, and to draw an easily graspable picture of those potential benefits.

Ultimately, there will have to be systematic evaluation and measurement mechanisms to ensure that these benefits are not being dangled casually, but rather will be pledged and delivered. Public diplomacy can be judged on the basis of international opinion research, and multilateral diplomacy can be evaluated by measuring international support for US positions and initiatives in intergovernmental forums such as the UN. For the purpose of an analysis brief aimed at building the case rather than planning implementation, though, the authors seek only to highlight clear results that would materialize (each in italics), rather than define precise ways to quantify these projected outcomes. Such a description leaves key questions still open—such as whether and to what degree these outcomes and benefits are politically compelling, and how to best make the case on their behalf.

The brief is divided into the different contexts in which the international affairs agencies operate: bilateral relations (i.e., government-to-government and nation-to-nation), multilateral relations (intergovernmental), and shaping favorable conditions globally. Some of these divisions are blurry, owing to the same complexity that is the backdrop to this analysis.

For the most part, the brief highlights the resource gap by focusing on the civilian “workload” associated with a shrinking, fast-changing world, yet there are two other closely associated needs. With such a comprehensive view of US national interests and values and such ambitious objectives, the strengthening of civilian capacity will need both a clear strategy and a coherent unified approach to guide the effort. In this and many other senses, the civilian agencies seek to emulate the Department of Defense, which uses extensive planning to support sustained commitments and sizable personnel floats to invest in the capacity of its human resources.

Bilateral Relations

- **Stronger traditional political relations.** The same global dispersal of power and interdependence that prompted a redistribution of diplomatic personnel away from close allies like Britain and France has also expanded the agenda with less powerful countries. As American concerns heighten over terrorism, good governance, trade, and energy security, so does our need to sustain ongoing dialogue with a broader segment of the host government. Rather than strengthening these bilateral relationships, however, recent years have witnessed a fraying of traditional alliances. Better-staffed embassies, more experienced personnel, and improved tools for information sharing and analysis will expedite the rebuilding and improvement of the United States' bilateral relationships. Diplomats will be equipped to carry out more sophisticated planning, to track goals set and progress achieved, and to invest more energy in the time-consuming processes of building relationships and cultivating sources of information.

For every country in which the United States has a diplomatic mission, the ambassador and country team of a more adequately staffed embassy will produce plans with clear objectives and evaluations showing progress toward them.

- **Deeper diplomatic relations that extend beyond the regime holding power.** Other national governments are the natural and proper focus of our diplomatic relations. That said, the pitfalls of overinvesting in a particular leader, be it Boris Yeltsin or Pervez Musharraf, are by now well known. When the United States personalizes a bilateral relationship, it runs the risk of being caught flatfooted when political winds change, or being discredited by the mistakes of its friends.

There are indeed readily identifiable channels through which we can build a broader and more durable relationship with key states. Many individuals, for instance, assume different kinds of leadership roles through the years, showing an evolution of influence long before rising to elective or appointive office—presuming they do eventually enter government, which is not always necessary for influence. Likewise, certain sectors of society can be crucial for achieving progress, such as the organized labor movement Solidarity in 1980s Poland or lawyers in Pakistan today.

The trade-offs and tensions at play when communicating with a government's critics should not be taken lightly. But then again, the issue is not new, and there clearly can be a cost from catering too much to the government of the moment. The United States must also invest in public outreach programs that reach beyond elites to connect with local influentials and ordinary citizens. We count on our professionals to strike a strategic balance among various outreach targets, rather than simply concentrating all their efforts on the government of the moment.

US diplomats can ensure that when political leaders and civil society rise to prominence, they are not new to us. There will be less resentment toward a United States that is viewed as indifferent to ordinary citizens. As this approach becomes the norm, host governments will see it as unexceptional.

- **More accurate information and assessment.** The Pandora's box that the United States opened by invading Iraq is the extreme case of a policy based on simplistic assumptions about another society. Obviously, few societies and political systems are as closed as Saddam's Iraq was, but the general point stands: understanding how things look from inside other countries can be critical to the success of US policy initiatives.

To gain additional insight into political, social, and economic dynamics within host countries, it will be vital to extend the US diplomatic apparatus beyond major cities into smaller population centers and rural areas.² This information and analysis will translate into more effective policies, greater ability to persuade and build support for American positions, and enhanced influence.

According to studies of key nonproliferation challenges and coercive diplomacy, in-depth political assessments are important even in dealing with dictatorships. Leaders who have been subjected to international isolation, including strongmen such as Libya's Muammar Qaddafi, take careful readings of the domestic pressures around them, just as any politician does. US policy therefore must be based on the best possible understanding of the calculations being made by other leaders.³

As embassies and agencies strive continually for more sophisticated assessments, drawing on

wider sources of information, the US approach to issues in a given country will be better informed and more tailored to that country.

- **True partnership with aid recipients.** When it comes to promoting economic development, ensuring that aid efforts have strong local roots in the country and support of local leaders is a sine qua non of economic aid. So-called “local ownership” of development efforts is widely viewed as absolutely vital. This is especially difficult for aid efforts that are spread across an extremely Balkanized and rigid set of mandates and led by an agency (USAID) that has become largely an administrator of contracts and grants rather than a true change agent in its own right. In late 2007, the official US HELP Commission called for an overhaul of our foreign assistance program, with the following proposed covenant with developing nations:

When leaders and the people dedicate their energies to development and institute policies that drive toward self-reliance, the United States should do everything it can to assist them in accomplishing their goals....

Partnership requires a long-term commitment from both parties. When all agree on common priorities and make investments that are commensurate, everyone is accountable for the results, and sustainability is achieved through mutual accountability.⁴

Locally owned, as opposed to donor-driven, development efforts will be based on and measured against plans and priorities that make sense in the local context and enjoy local support. In contrast to the traditional US approach, they will focus on ground-level impact rather than just the handover of quantities of goods, services, or grants.⁵

- **Wider trade and investment opportunities for US businesses.** The global spread of prosperity benefits US interests in two ways. Broadened participation in the free exchange of goods and labor—particularly among the world’s poorest, for whom a wider market might be within their own region of the country—goes hand in hand with curtailing ungoverned spaces, exploitive black markets, and predatory criminal gangs. And as more people join or approach the global middle class, the international economy will offer new opportunities

for the superpower that is a central player in the global trading system.

Commercial and economic diplomats will work on behalf of US interests on both fronts. They will help to build healthy business environments at all stages of development and serve as guides for Americans interested in trading with or investing in the local markets.

- **Strengthened governance and respect for the rule of law.** Support for democracy, human rights, and good governance is yet another area in which adapting to local conditions is the key. The oft-heard critique that elections do not by themselves produce a functioning democracy (and can actually be a step backwards, e.g., Burundi 1993) underscores the importance of broadening US support for institutional reform and capacity-building efforts both to precede and follow the holding of elections.

As with the other dimensions of bilateral relations, stronger diplomatic representation will manifest itself in priorities, plans, and strategies that are well matched to the particular country’s situation. US foreign policy will give clear and visible shape to the dictum that elections do not equal democracy.⁶ In parallel with reduced suspicion about the US loyalty toward despised leaders and lack of concern for everyday people, support for democratic change will over time regain its luster as a universal ideal and lose its close and singular association with the United States.

- **Steady erosion of terrorist networks.** While most policymakers and experts agree that counterterrorism must be conducted at multiple levels (e.g., state sponsorship, state capacity, “root causes”), the question of where to put the emphasis remains controversial. A number of the state-capacity requirements that have come from UN committees, for instance, have been the functional equivalent of unfunded mandates—burdensome to-do lists, lacking in local context, seemingly for the purpose of a massive global inventory. Frankly, the same perception of US counterterrorism cooperation feeds resentment on the part of those governments for which development challenges are a much higher priority—yet another piece of the image of a mainly self-interested America.⁷

As with development and governance aid, counterterrorism cooperation on the basis of practical local needs and priorities will build a stronger sense of shared purpose and have a more sustainable impact. Meanwhile, US efforts globally will be better targeted and less scattershot (using our enhanced civilian capacity to make fine-tuned assessments of terrorist threats), and the replenished reservoir of international good will can both reduce the appeal of terrorism and produce allies who are forthcoming with help when it is needed most.

Multilateral Relations

- **More effective international regimes and institutions.** Dysfunctional diplomacy among members of intergovernmental forums undermines not only the United States' particular interests and agenda, but also the promotion of the global common good (for example, the basic ideals of the UN Charter itself).⁸ In fact, we could call for a sea change in the diplomatic culture within the UN—toward a collective focus on real-world problems and away from pure political tests of wills between delegations—and set that standard as a test of the health of the international system. In a sense, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's 2004-2005 push for reform was just that.⁹

The very demands that militate for a buildup of US diplomatic capacity also call for stronger intergovernmental bodies of various kinds. Regional and subregional organizations are becoming important forums to deal with issues of the immediate "neighborhood." If no reform is forthcoming of the composition of the UN Security Council, there must instead be an expanded and/or parallel version of the G-8 to incorporate the rising and risen powers into a high-level consultative mechanism. Moreover, the intergovernmental architecture of Asia—the relative roles of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the ASEAN Regional Forum, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—poses a special challenge for the US role in the Asia-Pacific.

Augmented diplomatic capacity will be able to represent the United States more effectively at varied regional, thematic, and alliance intergovernmental organizations, as well as in the universal forum of the United Nations. Even in

settings where the United States is not a key player, our participation will yield added insight into others' concerns. Optimally, our representatives will work with others to build a mutually reinforcing complementarity among the organizations—a web of agenda and action that could contribute substantially to a stronger international community.

- **Broader backing for the United States in intergovernmental organizations.** With greater investment in and emphasis on diplomacy in multilateral settings—and a more deft and sensitive approach in its overall diplomacy—the United States can boost the frequency with which it prevails in debates and votes in international forums. The ability of US diplomats in intergovernmental organizations to conduct fact-to-face outreach determines the number of foreign delegations that can be consulted, as well as the sophistication with which arguments are marshaled and tailored, leading in turn to effective persuasion.¹⁰

While the United States already gets much of what it seeks at the United Nations, improved multilateral diplomacy will reduce the number of governments that resist US positions as a show of independence or to balance against the perceived danger of unbridled American power.

- **Creation of new international legal regimes.** As the Advisory Committee on Transformational Diplomacy's working group on the State Department of 2025 acknowledged in its 2008 report, "The United States must lead the formation of new international law, standards, and practices in emerging areas such as climate change, genetics and nanotechnology."¹¹ Through investment in expanding the expertise housed within the US civilian corps, and by expanding the capacity of diplomats at US installations in key capitals to engage on these and similar issues, the United States can advance the process of establishing new, broadly based international rules to govern these emerging areas of opportunity and potential conflict. This will require expanding the US diplomatic service to include more scientists, physicians, and technology experts.

Proactive involvement in writing the rules for emerging areas of international law will reinforce America's national interest in shaping rather than resisting a rules-based order.

Shaping Favorable Global Conditions

Even though many of the measures discussed above call for better tailoring of diplomacy to individual countries and regions, Americans can and should also expect an impact on global conditions. After all, if the challenges stem from a shrinking interdependent world, so should the results.

- **Increased international support for the United States and its policies.** Joseph Nye defines *soft power* as “getting others to want what you want.”¹² As the United States better attunes its policies to the concerns of others, builds and maintains relationships, and puts greater effort into consultation and listening, it will build an international political environment that is more receptive to its wishes. In substantial part, that will be because the agenda will become more reflective of others’ wishes, but Washington will also find increased support for its particular concerns. In other words, contributions to the greater global good will be compensated (at least in part) by greater acceptance of American interests.

With more representatives to extend its diplomatic reach, the United States will less often find itself to be the issue and source of controversy.

- **Reduced sympathy for elements hostile to the United States.** Recent experience has taught us the importance of legitimacy and moral authority. It is absurd that a group like Al Qaeda whose mode of operation is macabre destructive displays actually draws broad international sympathy, but seeing our own failure and not just the enemy’s evil will be key to turning this around. In any battle framed as David against Goliath, David is more popular. America must shed its image as Goliath. While the US military and law enforcement must keep pursuing terrorists, victory will only result from the steady erosion of sympathy for the terrorists.¹³

Working to align the United States better with the rest of the world will make it harder for our adversaries to peddle the image of a clash of civilizations or of globalization as neo-colonialism.

- **Recasting America’s image as a peaceful power.** The perception of the United States as militarily aggressive takes hold because our military face is the one we show to the world. Between the Iraq War, the seemingly omnipresent footprint

of forward deployment, and the military’s assumption of civilian functions, it’s little wonder. It is therefore absolutely vital that we bring this back into balance.

Added civilian personnel, innovative dispersal of these representatives outside main embassy buildings, broader consultation, and more effective public diplomacy will acquaint international publics with more Americans who are not wearing uniforms.

- **Fewer conflicts.** Effective diplomacy can prevent and contain conflicts. A deeper understanding of the motives driving both states and nonstate actors will enable US policymakers to anticipate potential conflicts and head them off. While they aren’t always sufficient to prevent armed confrontation, measures such as negotiation, adjustments to the incentives, raising the costs of resorting to violence, and responding to unmet aspirations will—in combination, crucially, with a more unified international community—reduce the incidence of war and deployment of US forces to combat. The relevant core (civilian) capacities are a strong grasp of the dynamics fueling the dispute, relationships with the parties and their allies, the ability to mobilize other influencers, skill at marshaling international support, and ready access to incentives.

Effective diplomats and other civilians can not only show a different face to the world, they can actually help keep our troops from being sent into combat.

- **More efficient and appropriate use of the US armed forces.** Chronic underinvestment in US civilian capacity has contributed to steady mission creep in the US military. Servicemen and women regularly perform an array of functions that fall outside of traditional military training or skill sets. By deploying members of the armed services to rebuild infrastructure, constitute local governments, mediate disputes, identify reconstruction priorities, set budgets, and perform other nonmilitary tasks, US policy has diluted the effectiveness of the armed forces and detracted from the military’s ability to focus on what it does best: countering threats and restoring stability.¹⁴ By separating out these functions, providing capable civilian partners for the military, and allowing the US armed

forces to focus on the tasks it alone can do, the results of military engagement and intervention can be expected to improve.

With more civilians to work on reconstruction, security sector reform, border control, and other tasks that have migrated toward the military, there will be less need for the military to do them. Deployed forces will find themselves working alongside more civilian colleagues, who themselves have greater capability and resources. The reliance on stop-gap measures, such as provincial reconstruction teams, that blurred the civilian-military line, will dwindle.

- **Mounting 21st century responses to 21st century threats.** The vulnerability of failed states to terrorism, armed conflict, extreme poverty, human rights abuse, and regional discord is clear. By their nature, military responses to such threats come into play only after a situation has already deteriorated and escalated. Through the use of well-trained, well-equipped, and adequately staffed civilian capacity to help stabilize fragile states, the United States can help avert many of these consequences, while reserving the military for its core missions.¹⁵ This is another reason post-conflict reconstruction is so vital; one of the biggest risk factors for violent conflict for a country is having endured earlier rounds of conflict.

The mounting risk of “threats without borders” such as global pandemics, international financial meltdown, and global climate change is becoming more widely recognized, but emerging challenges still demand a greater commitment of resources. For instance, the strengthening of public health systems in underdeveloped countries is essential both for local development and to prevent the spread of communicable disease.

Stronger civilian agencies will work in a preventive mode, spot problems before they become acute, and be well-versed in best practices and the formation of partnerships. They will also be capable of responding to emergencies for which there is no warning (such as earthquakes) to limit the humanitarian consequences. The creation of standing civilian surge capacity—spanning a full range of geographic and functional areas of expertise—would help plug this gap.

At various points in this analysis, the proposed addition of human and financial resources is couched in terms of an investment. In some instances, the replacement of military personnel with civilians or a timely preventive action that averts a crisis (and the associated expense of humanitarian relief) will yield direct savings. Overall though, it is an investment in building a more peaceful and prosperous world—the kind of world that is good for the United States and the greater global good.

The essential point about the weakened condition of our civilian agencies is this: the United States’ capacity to deal with the rest of the world and affect global conditions falls far short of our stake in those relationships and conditions. A chorus has arisen within the national security and foreign policy professional community. The secretaries of state and defense and the senior military leadership have all highlighted the problem. The proper scale-up of resources, however, will require much greater political will than we have seen to date. Public concern about the poor state of relations with other countries shows voters’ potential receptiveness.¹⁶

As we go forward, however, that leaves a number of important questions: What will it take to build a political constituency behind heavy investment in civilian infrastructure? Who are the natural political leaders and opponents of such an effort? How can this effort avoid being pitted against calls for the expansion of the military?

Endnotes

¹ *Revitalizing International Cooperation: A Bipartisan Agenda*, Stanley Foundation Policy Dialogue Brief Series, Muscatine, IA, 2007, p. 2.

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³ Bruce Jentleson, *Coercive Diplomacy: Scope and Limits in the Contemporary World*, Stanley Foundation Policy Analysis Brief Series, Muscatine, IA, 2006, pp. 6, 8-9.

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⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁶ Indeed the post-Iraq foreign policy discourse is producing ideas for such a reorientation. See Francis Fukuyama and Michael McFaul, “Should Democracy Be Promoted or

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¹⁶ Better World Campaign and UN Foundation, “The New American Consensus on International Cooperation: A Presentation of Key Findings from Focus Groups and a National Survey,” http://www.unfoundation.org/files/pdf/2007/UNF_National_survey2007.pdf.

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About the Project

What an Engagement Strategy Entails addresses the weak condition of the United States’ civilian international affairs agencies. An impressive range of specialists have highlighted the importance of diplomacy, aid and trade, democracy promotion, and public information for US national security. Becoming more effective in all of these areas, however, will require a major upgrade of the associated government infrastructure, which in turn will need a political push from top leaders. This project will look at that problem in its largest dimensions and context.

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