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# policy dialogue brief

Critical thinking from Stanley Foundation Conferences

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

A Project of The  
Stanley Foundation  
and the Center for  
a New American  
Security

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Center for a  
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This brief summarizes the primary findings of the conference as interpreted by the project organizers. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this brief. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

## The Roots of the United States' Deteriorating Civilian Capacity and Potential Remedies

### Executive Summary

The roundtable discussion identified past and present challenges confronted by the US government in revamping its international affairs agencies.

- The record of past initiatives highlights the importance of contemporary domestic and international political imperatives as well as attitudes toward public service at the time of the initiative.
- The purpose of strengthening and reforming the civilian agencies should be to integrate US foreign policy tools into a coherent whole with clear strategic objectives.
- The essential ingredients of holistic reform are authorities to empower the agencies, resources to leverage the desired change, and top-quality personnel to execute the plan.
- Participants heard about a new “hybrid model” proposal with prescriptions to bolster USAID’s preeminent role in economic development, strengthen the State Department’s ability to plan and mobilize resources, and give the international affairs agencies an institutional ally in the White House.

On June 12, the Center for a New American Security and the Stanley Foundation convened the second of a series of roundtables as part of their joint project, “What an Engagement Strategy Entails—Is the United States Government Properly Equipped?” The meeting focused on past lessons and current realities for the reform of US civilian international affairs agencies to orient them toward the adoption of a coherent and integrated global engagement strategy. For the historical context, the project commissioned a paper from Sarah Harting and Nora Bensahel of the RAND Corporation. A second piece reviewed the major options for strengthening the civilian agencies, proposals that are bound to be on the next president’s foreign policy agenda. This paper was written by Anne Richard and Paul Clayman, both of whom have been responsible for budget and planning issues in their government service. Participants in the meeting shared the assessment that filling the civilian capacity gap is a formidable challenge, and any effort must take stock of the historical background and potential pitfalls.

## Mobilizing Civilians for International Engagement—A Look at the Past Record

The discussion began by examining the precedents for a major scale-up of US civilian international affairs agencies. Nora Bensahel and Sarah Harting conducted four case studies, all of which had or have overseas operational responsibilities, focusing on:

- Cooperation Administration (Marshall Plan).
- United States Information Agency (USIA).
- United States Agency for International Development (USAID).
- Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS).

The authors highlighted a number of commonalities among the examined cases, beginning with the importance of contemporary geopolitical context. Each major initiative was very much a creature of its time: the Marshall Plan for war-ravaged Europe, USIA and USAID for different aspects of the Cold War, and CORDS for the war in Vietnam. Given that each of these efforts was a direct response to a contemporary national security challenge of a traditional variety, this raises the question of whether there are imperatives in today's international climate that could drive a major civilian initiative.

The prevailing civic norms of these earlier times likewise had an impact. There was a widely shared sense of duty to the nation that drew Americans to public service. However, today more young people view nongovernmental organizations as their opportunity to make an impact. Despite a recent spike in the number of Foreign Service exams administered, there has hardly been a groundswell of interest. In order to make these careers more attractive, the federal government should aim a public awareness campaign at young people who are about to embark on their professional lives.

Bensahel and Harting also noted direct parallels between discussions during past efforts and current debates. For some issues, our predecessors made identical points—stressing that certain agencies have in-built strengths and weaknesses, battles over bureaucratic turf, etc. The civic-mindedness of the times notwithstanding, earlier efforts also struggled with personnel recruitment in the face of a limited supply of specialized skills to meet the nation's needs. Despite their ultimate success in generating resources, there were constraints and resistance in each case.

Given the range of civilian functions that need to be strengthened, participants saw a need to distinguish focused reforms from contributing to a durable infrastructure. Post-conflict situations and fragile states, for example, require certain instruments to promote stability, while long-term development operations require a sustained investment in economic reform and in the precursors to growth. At the same time, participants recognized the need for a comprehensive and holistic effort. Three maxims emerged as hallmarks for any truly holistic approach:

**Authorities.** As agencies are reformed, they must also be given the authority to achieve the intended aims of those reforms.

**Budgets.** The civilian agencies will not be able to reinvent themselves without an investment of financial resources.

**Personnel.** Human resources are critical; revitalization of the agencies will depend on good leadership at multiple levels of the bureaucracy.

## Options for Strengthening US Foreign Operations

The second segment of the discussion focused on the current debate over how to shore up civilian agencies and the proposals that have been most prominent. The idea of a Cabinet-level agency for foreign assistance was used as a backdrop by Anne Richard and Paul Clayman for reviewing which set of options is best. The meeting's organizers asked them to evaluate reform prescriptions, particularly in terms of their practicality.

The ultimate aim of reform, stressed one participant, should be to spur the agencies toward a whole-of-government effort aimed at meeting strategic international objectives. Since this is unlikely to be achieved in one great leap, the paper and discussion focused on measures to intensify planning and harmonize different activities and functions. Since the White House is a focal point for interagency processes, participants discussed the roles of the National Security Council (NSC) and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Participants saw advantages and drawbacks in these institutions. As a link to the president, they can be a source of political will and strategic overview. They are also prone to being absorbed in the crisis of the moment or being reinvented with each new administration. One participant noted

that OMB is usually looking for budget cuts, not budget increases, but it is considerably more supportive of the Department of Defense budget than it is the State Department's. Another participant pointed out that the NSC's true role is to resolve interagency disputes.

## A Hybrid Model for Reform

Skeptical that creating a new Cabinet-level Department of Development is feasible, Clayman and Richard offered their own hybrid model incorporating essential elements of other ideas. They propose to strengthen USAID by incorporating the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) into the agency. They would create a new NSC directorate to be a voice in the White House for development. Several participants thought it would be useful for this NSC office to integrate development into the national security strategy or to launch a new product: a quadrennial foreign assistance review. The authors suggest enhancing capacity at the State Department by giving a key planning and strategy role to the recently created foreign assistance (F) office at State and also create key new senior positions in the department's regional bureaus.

The hybrid model would also pull together the secretary of state, the administrator of USAID, and other senior officials into a board of directors for foreign assistance, similar to the MCC board and with a mandate for regular meetings. The virtue of combining USAID, MCC, and PEPFAR would even out the focus on the full range of developing countries—not reward only the good performers. While the hybrid model is proposed as an alternative to the creation of a new agency that is seen as overambitious, this alternative is hardly modest itself.

## Prospects for Success

Though the bureaucratic and budgetary hurdles may be daunting and the issues complex, the participants reiterated the need for bold action to give US foreign policy more coherence, impact, and effectiveness. As one participant pointed out, an overly pragmatic or cautious approach six years ago would have ruled MCC or PEPFAR out as impossible. Another, highlighting the need to invest in governmental infrastructure for international affairs, flagged the need for well-placed advocates for the 150 Account.

Harking back to the historical examples, and the international contexts and imperatives that drove those earlier initiatives, one participant drew a par-

allel with recent intelligence community reform. Here was a core instrument of statecraft, being updated to deal with 21st-century global challenges. Yet the comparison cut both ways. Setting aside whether or not the intelligence reforms were well considered or effective, they were devised in response to the compelling threat of terrorism. As the United States confronts a much broader array of 21st-century global challenges, the question was posed whether a major reform push can be driven by a purpose that is not on a classical national security threat basis. Some in the meeting were optimistic that political leaders might respond positively to national goals couched in terms of America's contribution to the global good.

## Participant List

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## The Center for a New American Security

The Center for a New American Security (CNAS) develops strong, pragmatic, and principled national security and defense policies that promote and protect American interests and values. Building on the deep expertise and broad experience of its staff and advisors, CNAS engages policymakers, experts, and the public with innovative fact-based research, ideas, and analysis to shape and elevate the national security debate. As an independent and nonpartisan research institution, CNAS leads efforts to help inform and prepare the national security leaders of today and tomorrow.

## The Stanley Foundation

The Stanley Foundation seeks a secure peace with freedom and justice, built on world citizenship and effective global governance. It brings fresh voices, original ideas, and lasting solutions to debates on global and regional problems. The foundation is a nonpartisan, private operating foundation, located in Muscatine, Iowa, that focuses on peace and security issues and advocates principled multilateralism. The foundation frequently collaborates with other organizations. It does not make grants. Online at [www.stanleyfoundation.org](http://www.stanleyfoundation.org).

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