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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  
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and the Center for  
a New American  
Security

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This brief summarizes the primary findings of the conference as interpreted by the rapporteurs and co-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 Challenges of Strengthening the US Government's Civilian International Affairs Agencies

### Summary

The roundtable discussion identified a number of key hurdles in connection both with the substance of potential capacity-building measures and in the ways proponents think about and argue for stronger civilian agencies. Meeting the challenges below will be critical for success:

- Proper recruitment and training to give the US government the skill sets it needs most.
- Budgeting that invests resources in permanent infrastructure rather than limited initiatives.
- Meeting the need for surge capacity as well as steady-state functions.
- Proper division of labor and complementarities to leverage the contributions of international, private sector, and nongovernmental actors.
- Keeping the existing military-civilian power imbalance from crippling the effort.
- A coherent narrative that weaves together the problem's varied elements (perhaps as part of a grand strategy).
- An effective public and political communication strategy.
- The commitment and involvement of the president.

To improve the security of the United States and ease the strain on our military, it is imperative that the United States increase its civilian capacity in order to pursue development, aid, and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. Toward that end, the Stanley Foundation and the Center for a New American Security are collaborating on a project entitled “What an Engagement Strategy Entails: Is the US Government Equipped?”

While there has been growing appreciation of the seriousness of the capacity gap—and many experts are studying the problem—there has to date not been an adequate discussion about prioritization or implementable policy proposals. The cosponsoring organizations will focus on these dual gaps—in resources and in serious discussion of viable policy options—with the ultimate aim of significantly strengthening the latter. The Center for a New American Security and the Stanley Foundation convened the first of several of the project's large-group meetings in March 2008. At this conference, called “The Challenges of Strengthening the US Government's Civilian International Affairs Agencies,”

participants gathered to hear presentations and discuss the immediate hurdles in the effort to strengthen the civilian infrastructure of the United States. This policy dialogue brief outlines the discussion and findings of the meeting.

## Scanning the Advocacy and Analysis Environment

The first segment of the discussion took stock of efforts to improve civilian capacity. Some national security experts have described the civilian capacity gap as the health care crisis of the foreign affairs world—everyone knows and acknowledges that there is a problem but there is no simple solution to it. Deeply-rooted interest groups, turnover of key personnel both within and between administrations, and budgetary issues have created a complicated political and organizational situation. Yet there have been efforts to identify potential solutions—numerous studies, reports, and working groups have focused on building the US government’s civilian capacity. Craig Cohen and Noam Unger examined the breadth of work that has been undertaken on the subject in their paper “Scanning the Environment of Advocacy and Analysis.” This overview laid out the commonalities and tensions of past and current research and advocacy initiatives. The authors presented basic areas of consensus among the studies and posed several critical questions that must be answered.

There is broad bipartisan consensus on the need to strengthen civilian agencies and increase the use of soft power. However, there might be resistance and skepticism from stakeholders who believe that only the military is in a position to grow and be effective, that the costs of building civilian capacity are prohibitive, or that the answer is to curtail the United States’ international commitments.

There is a fundamental question here about whether traditionally civilian stability functions—i.e. the “nation-building” missions such as those currently performed by the military in Iraq—should be done more effectively or just be avoided altogether. If the answer is “do it better” rather than “never again,” then further questions arise. Should the United States modernize core institutional capacities or create new specialized capacities? What parts of the US government should be responsible for building, maintaining, and deploying civilian capabilities?

When determining the “how” of civilian capacity, the question is which steps offer the most leverage. One such step is linking effectively with the community outside of the US government; capacity can be amplified by working in cooperation and collaboration with other actors within the private sector, nongovernmental organizations, international organizations, allies, and friends in theater. A proactive, consultative approach would allow the United States to shape the way in which these partnerships might work.

Any discussion of augmenting civilian capacity faces the challenge of personnel recruitment. There may not be enough skilled and dedicated people already in the system to staff new programs or agencies, and the government may lack the funding or leadership needed to mobilize the recruitment process. There is also a larger, related budgetary challenge: policymakers disagree widely about the best process for guaranteeing that civilian agencies have adequate resources. The budget process itself must be addressed to make certain that the costs of these programs are included in the base budget and not tacked on as supplemental items. This will ensure that strengthening civilian capacity is looked at as a long-term investment and that policymakers treat the issue with the proper urgency and commitment. Given the Defense Department’s advantages in both resources and image, proponents of strengthening civilian capacity must develop a convincing argument for why spending money on civilian agencies is better in the long run than continuing to let new functions migrate toward the military.

The role of US “grand strategy” in determining the long-term effort toward building civilian capacity emerged as a point of contention among meeting participants. Some argued that grand strategy is overrated and too general to be of help. Others cautioned against dismissing grand strategy as a potential tool to help reveal what really needs to be done—in other words, having a grand strategy would help the United States with major international challenges such as the effective management of globalization.

There was clear agreement about the importance of leadership in effecting any significant change. Most believed that presidential leadership would be critical. Equally important would be involving Congress early and often in consultation, as was the case with the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act that

instituted major military reforms. Working with the Hill and stakeholder representatives will result in a joint solution that will be more salable and attract broader support.

It should be noted that participants agreed that valuable steps are already being taken by agencies and departments to reform their capacities and build their capabilities. Any future efforts should take care not to throw these babies out with the bathwater but should rather seek to coordinate and implement those ongoing reforms.

## Making the Case for Strengthening the Civilian Agencies

The second portion of the meeting used Suzanne Nossel and David Shorr's paper, "The Benefits of Augmented Civilian Capacity," to frame the discussion. The paper identified concrete objectives for enhanced civilian infrastructure and made a strong case for such an effort based on those benefits. The paper argues that the primary aim of increased civilian capacity should be to extend America's communication and cooperation with others around the world so we can better understand the world around us, better relate to our neighbors and partners, and better respond to emerging developments in a fast-changing world. In grand strategic terms, stronger civilian agencies will help the United States construct a rules-based, inclusive world community.

Better-staffed embassies and improved information-sharing techniques, for instance, can identify clear outcomes in the field and encourage interagency cooperation toward those aims. Better collection and sharing of information can also break down persistent stovepipes.

By providing leaders and citizens around the world with greater interchange with nonmilitary Americans, the United States can restore its image and legitimacy and increase goodwill. The United States can achieve greater impact with its development aid if it tailors its approach to each local context. Increasing US civilian capabilities to engage with international partners will help achieve US aims such as rolling up criminal networks, widening trade opportunities, and giving the United States a more influential voice in the creation of any new international regimes. Ultimately, stronger civilian infrastructure and working with international partners will help pre-

vent conflicts and crises and result in better responses to crises once they happen, thereby reducing the strain on the military.

One question debated by participants was the challenge of measuring, or even describing, "success." Before there can be any mobilization of political leaders behind the idea of increased civilian capacity, proponents must develop a coherent story that describes where to direct new resources, what those investments will accomplish, how to measure accomplishment, how to build constituency support for the projects, and how to organize the implementation. Participants offered the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) as an example of a successful civilian instrument that could be used as a precedent for new investments in international engagement. A program like PEPFAR has inherent advantages in terms of measurability, since health statistics and epidemiology are built into such an effort. Nevertheless, PEPFAR offers a model of innovation and management success that could potentially be applied to other civilian elements.

The civilian capacity issue is nested in the greater question of the civilian-military balance in the United States' global presence. The Department of Defense has moved into traditionally civilian areas due to weaknesses in the civilian agencies' planning, management, and budgets. The thinness of civilian infrastructure draws the military in to fill the void—Combatant Commanders playing traditionally diplomatic roles, service members handing out aid, etc. Improved civilian capacity would allow the United States to be a force for good while freeing up the military to execute its primary mission—fighting the nation's battles and wars. The Bush administration has made some progress on this problem via the so-called "F Process"; the creation of the State Department's Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization; requesting standby reserves in the Lugar-Biden Bill (H.R. 1084); the creation of US Africa Command (AFRICOM) and US South Command (SOUTHCOM); and the National Security Professionals Development program launched by President Bush in 2007.

Moving forward, it is important to have specific information available about costs, explicit goals, and how funds will be managed to meet those goals. Advocates of enhanced civilian capacity must propose the "steady-state" permanent infrastructure

they want to build, in addition to the resource mechanisms that are flexible and agile enough to meet changing demands—including deployable operational capacity for humanitarian crises that demand a surge response.

Participants agreed that language and framing will be extremely important when presenting the case for increased civilian capacity to Congress, the White House, and the public. Participants suggested some ways of framing the issue that might have bipartisan appeal—for example, the argument that as the United States assists other countries in building their own capacity there will be less conflict, the United States will gain more trading partners in the global market, and poverty will be ameliorated. Participants debated whether it would be possible to target different audiences with different narratives about development and aid programs, appealing to some by using the antipoverty argument, to others by emphasizing the security perspective, and to still others by citing a moral imperative. In any case, Congress, high-level leadership, and the public need to know that civilian agencies can help the United States fulfill its interests and values more effectively in a rapidly globalizing world and that there are concrete benefits to be gained from such a capacity.

### Scanning the Political Environment and Prospects for Success

In the final portion of the conference, participants brainstormed the next steps in building political momentum for enhanced civilian capacity. Discussion focused on current administration policy, the upcoming presidential election and transition, public attitudes about enhanced civilian capacity, and how to secure Congressional support.

**Budget and Resources.** The consistent theme of nearly all of the main points was the need for an improved budgeting process. Agencies must better identify and prioritize their resource requests, Congress must not shrink from appropriating the necessary funds, and the Executive Branch must use its political influence to ensure that this matter receives high priority. Until these emerge as the new realities of the budget process, there cannot be meaningful action to strengthen the civilian infrastructure. A related problem is that of human resources and personnel. Agencies must make an effort to recruit and retain the right type of people—particularly for effective international engagement—and the funding for this process must be made readily available.

**Current and Incoming Administrations.** Participants agreed on the need to take advantage of the remaining months of the present administration and use this time to lay the foundations for the next administration's efforts. That will help to position civilian capacity reform relatively high on the transition agenda; otherwise, inevitable priorities like Iraq could overshadow this issue.

It might not be feasible for a new president to undertake a comprehensive restructuring of the civilian agencies, nor is it necessarily warranted. A great deal of political capital would be required for any such effort. Participants had no consensus over major structural reform proposals like the creation of a cabinet-level Department of Foreign Assistance. Many believed that reforming the current system and improving resource prioritization within that system will ultimately be more effective than attempting to create a new agency. Others argued that only a powerful cabinet-level advocate could change the dynamics, at least for development assistance, on Capitol Hill. Given the shortcomings of recent major US government restructurings (such as the Department of Homeland Security and the Director of National Intelligence), the participants agreed that reforms should not be seen as a panacea.

**Social Networking and Relationship Management.** The State Department and other agencies can improve civilian capacity on the ground by better documenting their contacts and the contacts' social networks. This will also allow for smooth transitions when new people come into place.

**Public Attitudes.** Many participants agreed that it is important to engage the American public in the issue of our civilian capacity. Optimally, such an effort could actually build durable and enthusiastic constituencies of support. As a tactical matter, there is still debate about whether a “grass-roots” or a “grass-tops” approach will be more effective. Some argue that it is not necessary to involve the general public in initial efforts at public diplomacy; it will be more efficient to secure the support of “grass-tops” elites first. Others argue that because leaders must consider what pleases their constituents, it is imperative to engage the broader public before leaders will come on board.

However, whether dealing with the general public or elites such as Congress, it will be a challenge to distinguish the idea of spending on civilian capacity from the idea of military spending. There is a

need for a narrative that makes these into two distinct goals in order to insulate the issue for those who are concerned about “militarization.” In addition, it must be made clear that development aid and efforts to bolster weak and failing states are not linked to war and invasion. Collaborations between unlikely partners, such as faith-based groups and liberal, secular humanitarian organizations, can make a strong coalition for political action.

**Moving Forward.** Participants agreed that the push for stronger capacity must incorporate a better ability to make US international engagement demand-driven, rather than supply-driven. That is, we need to be able to seek and embrace input from recipient countries and adapt to local interests and sensitivities, rather than falling back on one-size-fits-all aid and diplomacy. The current administration’s concept of “transformational diplomacy” reinforces the need for investment in diplomatic infrastructure and could have resonance. It evokes the traditional American mission to promote progress and the global common good and could reinforce the link between increased prosperity and empowerment and decreased threats.

There must also be heightened focus on real success stories and a better effort to draw associated lessons. AFRICOM is one example of how successful collaboration between the military and its civilian counterparts might bolster the case for an investment in stronger civilian agencies.

Participants acknowledged the preexisting efforts for such reform; many different agencies and groups have already developed answers to these key questions. The problem is that everyone has different answers to the questions and different ideas about what needs to be done. The urgent challenge is to unite these groups and agencies—at least conceptually—under the umbrella of a coherent effort on behalf of increased civilian capacity so that the various efforts become more than the sum of their parts.

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Affiliations are listed for identification purposes only. Participants attended as individuals rather than as representatives of their governments or organizations.

## About the Project

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

## 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 inform and prepare the national security leaders of today and tomorrow.

For more information about the Center for a New American Security, or to learn more about its projects and reports, visit [www.cnas.org](http://www.cnas.org).

## The Stanley Foundation

The Stanley Foundation is a nonpartisan, private operating foundation that seeks a secure peace with freedom and justice, built on world citizenship and effective global governance. It brings fresh voices and original ideas to debates on global and regional problems. The foundation advocates principled multilateralism—an approach that emphasizes working respectfully across differences to create fair, just, and lasting solutions.

The Stanley Foundation’s work recognizes the essential roles of the policy community, media professionals, and the involved public in building sustainable peace. Its work aims to connect people from different backgrounds, often producing clarifying insights and innovative solutions.

The foundation frequently collaborates with other organizations. It does not make grants.

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