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It All Starts with Training

Crisis Prevention and U.S. Foreign Affairs Agencies

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Introduction and summary

Significantly improved training courses and professional development opportunities are critically needed at core U.S. foreign affairs agencies, namely the Department of State and United States Agency for International Development, or USAID. Without enhanced training, diplomats will continue to lack the broad range of tools they need to deal with the many complicated and challenging global issues they regularly encounter whether on the ground or back in Washington.

A key tool is being better at conflict prevention given the increasing regularity with which political instability can emerge anywhere in the world. Secretary of State Clinton noted, “With the right tools, training, and leadership, our diplomats and development experts can defuse crises before they explode.”¹

With the right training, diplomats and development experts can advance democracy, galvanize economic growth, and strengthen the rule of law before a conflict emerges—not after.

As political dynamics around the globe continue to shift unexpectedly, preventing and responding to expensive and destructive global crises will need to be a cornerstone of our foreign policy—particularly if the United States wants to become more effective internationally and avoid costly engagements over the long run. In order for that to happen, our diplomats and development experts need to possess the right skill set and tools.

This paper looks at current conflict prevention training in foreign affairs agencies and how this training can be improved.

Recent government reviews highlight why conflict prevention matters

The Obama administration has conducted a broad series of reviews on how U.S. diplomacy and development are organized and conducted around the globe.

Central to all of these reviews is that the United States needs to do a far better job of preventing, mitigating, and resolving violent conflicts and crises.

The reviews include, most notably, the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, or QDDR, released in December 2010, a Presidential Study Directive on Global Development policy issued in September 2010, and the recent Presidential Study Directive on preventing mass atrocities announced in August of 2011.² USAID's recently released policy framework incorporates many of the goals of improved crisis prevention identified in these reviews into its policy priorities and operating principles.

The QDDR is admirably blunt in recognizing that the U.S. approach to preventing and managing crises is usually too slow and ad hoc. The U.S. government often failed to bring appropriate expertise to bear and largely failed to institutionalize even basic lessons learned.³

A number of statistics from the QDDR make clear how pressing conflict prevention is for the United States:

- Close to 60 percent of State and USAID's foreign assistance goes to 50 countries that are in the midst of, recovering from, or trying to prevent conflict or state failure.⁴
- More than 25 percent of State and USAID's personnel serve in the 30 countries classified as highest risk for conflict and instability.⁵
- More than 2,000 civilian personnel are currently deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq.⁶

Prevention is also cost effective: According to the Carnegie Commission on the Prevention of Deadly Conflict, for every \$1 dollar spent on prevention it would cost \$60 to intervene militarily after violence erupts.⁷

Moreover, Brown University's Costs of War Project estimates that the total cost of the ongoing U.S. involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan has been more than \$3 trillion.⁸ While that number is an estimate, it makes obvious that the U.S. government remains willing to expend enormous resources responding to crises while shortchanging even modest investments in better training our officials to prevent them.

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This approach resulted in the United States contributing almost half of total world military expenditures last year. (see Figure 1)

The QDDR issued this clarion call:

We start by embracing crisis and conflict prevention and resolution; the promotion of sustainable, responsible, and effective security and governance in fragile states; and fostering security and reconstruction in the aftermath of conflict as a central national security objective and as a core State mission that must be closely supported by USAID and many other U.S. government agencies.⁹

The QDDR dedicated an entire chapter to “Preventing and Responding to Crisis, Conflict and Instability,” and established a new undersecretary for civilian security, democracy, and human rights whose primary role includes preventing and responding to crisis and conflict, securing democracy, and advancing human rights.

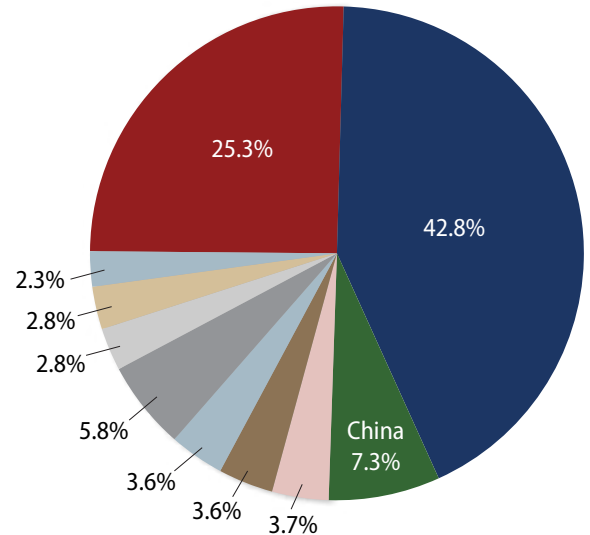
The QDDR also created the new Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, or CSO, within the State Department. It officially launched in November 2011, and it builds on the former office of the Coordinator for Stabilization and Reconstruction, which was established in 2004 to lead, coordinate, and institutionalize U.S. government civilian capacity to prevent or prepare for postconflict situations and to help stabilize and reconstruct societies in transition from conflict or civil strife.

Like the QDDR, the Presidential Study Directive on U.S. Global Development policy called for a better balance of “civilian and military power to address conflict, instability, and humanitarian crises,” and the administration’s recent Presidential Study Directive on mass atrocities identified mass atrocities and genocide prevention as a core national security interest and moral responsibility.

Similarly, USAID’s 2011-2015 policy framework noted that the agency would develop new approaches “to equip staff and partners with the skills to analyze and respond to dynamics of conflict and instability.”¹⁰

FIGURE 1
A big piece of the pie

Top 10 shares of world military expenditures, 2010



Source: Credit Stockholm International Peace Research Institute; <http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/factsheet2010>

What is crisis prevention?

Throughout the paper we use the term “crisis prevention” in its broadest sense to include everything from the use of conflict early warning systems to efforts to helping a nation build durable peace as it emerges from a conflict.

Crisis prevention is often divided between “direct” prevention and “structural” prevention. Direct prevention refers to immediate, short-term efforts to avert a deadly crisis or conflict such as intensified senior-level negotiations or deploying a peacekeeping force in the midst of escalating tensions. Structural prevention efforts are longer term and seek to address underlying causes and triggers of potential violent crises through economic development or building more accountable and equitable institutions.

So on paper, crisis prevention is a U.S. government priority. Translating the administration’s rhetoric into reality, however, is tremendously difficult, and it would likely require far more disruptive changes to current systems than any of these reviews acknowledge. The USAID policy framework is an important start, but unless significant institutional reform occurs in the near future no meaningful change will happen.

Better training is only one piece of the puzzle. Policymakers need to forego the instinct to manage the inbox and focus greater attention on over-the-horizon threats before they become full-blown crises. True conflict prevention requires policymakers to make recommendations when information is imperfect and the costs of action are high. In a constrained budget environment the margin for error is slim.

But transforming how U.S. civilian agencies address conflict prevention will demand more than major institutional shifts—it will also require a much larger and more difficult to execute sea change in the cultures of both the State Department and USAID with support from Congress, as we detail in the paper.

Still, training is a good place to start. Our research for this paper made abundantly and sometimes painfully clear that the state of conflict prevention training at both State and USAID remains shockingly limited, ad hoc, and uncoordinated. Training has little or no link to career advancement, as opposed to our military branches, and it is often seen as an inconvenience rather than an asset.

Many of the U.S. government officials making key decisions on conflict prevention at State and USAID hold almost zero formal training in the basic precepts

that would allow them to be effective in this role. This is not to blame those dedicated officials and educators currently conducting conflict prevention training in affiliation with State and USAID. Instead, it is a serious indictment of the broader system in which these frustrated officials find themselves embedded.

This paper explains why crisis prevention training for officials at the State Department and USAID needs to be improved, evaluates the institutional changes in crisis training arising from the QDDR and other official reviews, and makes a number of practical recommendations to strengthen this training going forward amid an era of increasing federal budget austerity.

The paper also explores the stark differences between how training is approached in the U.S. military as opposed to the civilian foreign affairs agencies, and looks at the competing conflict assessment models among the civilian agencies themselves.

Our key recommendations to improve crisis prevention training include (all are discussed in greater detail later in this report):

- Tying promotions directly to conflict prevention training
- Giving post bid preference to those Foreign Service officers who complete a certified core curriculum in conflict prevention training
- Requiring all incoming State and USAID officers to take a basic course on conflict prevention¹¹
- Providing for additional training for Foreign Service officers deploying to a conflict-prone country
- Requiring Foreign Service officers to complete a year of advanced training to be eligible for promotion to Senior Foreign Service
- Establishing the personnel capacity for civilian international affairs agencies to do better training
- Creating a new cone within the Foreign Service dedicated to conflict prevention
- Synchronizing USAID's operating expenses with its program budget

As the map from the 2011 Failed States Index at the beginning of this report illustrates, the number of countries around the globe at risk of unrest and wholesale violence remains disturbingly high. Unless the United States can get ahead of this curve and do a better job in crisis prevention and mitigation, the costs to America—and its national interests—will remain untenable.

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