

Whole of Government is *Half* an Answer

by Michael R. Eastman

Stability and reconstruction operations have garnered a great deal of negative attention over the past decade. Both supporters and opponents of these missions acknowledge the vast array of inefficiencies, bureaucratic squabbles, and economic waste associated with reconstruction efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Certainly, there have been genuine difficulties associated with stability and reconstruction operations in our recent experiences. Some are due to the enormous complexity of rebuilding a war-torn society. However, the preponderance of responsibility is properly laid at the feet of those government organizations charged with executing these missions. Having assigned blame, there is also no shortage of solutions offered to fix the problem. Proposed reforms generally involve adding to bureaucratic overhead, shifting and consolidating governmental responsibilities, or simply lamenting what could be done if only this department or that agency pulled its share of the load.

A different approach is necessary. An objective look at government-centric reforms highlights the inevitable shortcomings of fixing stability and reconstruction operations by tinkering on the bureaucratic margins. Organizational resistance to these missions will not be overcome by adding a bureau here or an assistant secretary there. This is not necessarily bad news. In a post-conflict environment, the primary governmental agencies charged with executing stability and reconstruction work face significant, understandable limitations on their abilities to perform these sets of tasks.

However, political objections and organizational culture notwithstanding, the requirement for some stability and reconstruction capacity is likely to be with us for the foreseeable future. Despite recent official statements indicating a reluctance to commit to further long-term reconstruction efforts, history has shown that rebuilding societies to preserve the hard-fought gains of war has been as persistent as war itself. Not only has the U.S. been involved in more than a dozen stabilization and reconstruction operations in the past two decades in places such as Haiti and Afghanistan, the United Nations has also conducted sixty missions under its auspices since 1948.¹ Failing to

Colonel Michael R. Eastman is an Army officer currently serving as Special Assistant to the Chief of Staff of the Army. Previously, he commanded a battalion in Iraq providing military support to civil capacity, governance, and economic programs for Provincial Reconstruction Teams. He holds an MS and PhD in political science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and an MMAS from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College.

improve on our current approach only ensures that future stability and reconstruction efforts remain hampered by the lack of preparedness and capability that marked our initial efforts in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

To prevent a repetition of these shortcomings, reforms should focus on redefining those tasks best suited to our existing governmental structure and institutionalizing

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them to the exclusion of others. An enduring solution leverages the strengths of our agencies as currently structured while recognizing their weaknesses. The military, for example, has a clear role in reestablishing basic services in the aftermath of a conflict. Expanding its role into long-term reconstruction projects ignores serious shortcomings in the Department of Defense (DoD) for this type of work. Similarly, the State Department must retain the lead in foreign diplomacy efforts but is ill-suited to coordinate the entire spectrum of local development projects. No amount of interagency cooperation will create efficiencies on the scale needed for this particular approach to be effective. At the same time, it is critical to acknowledge the vast, untapped potential in private and nongovernmental organizations.

To achieve a lasting solution, we first need a redefinition of terms. Stability and reconstruction have come to mean different things to different agencies and are often used interchangeably. Semantic clarity should be followed by a clear division of labor. Select interagency structures must be responsible for developing and monitoring long-term strategic plans. The military should be tasked with the

immediate reestablishment of essential services while the State Department coordinates the transition to civilian oversight of longer-term programs. To the extent possible, the private and nongovernmental sector should provide the expertise and services necessary to carry out these and other missions. This approach leverages capabilities present in our current government structure while avoiding the tendency to pursue expansive, duplicative transformation plans that run counter to organizational realities.

Redefining Fundamental Terms

Interestingly, the State Department's 2010 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) does not define stability operations. Stability as used in this blueprint document is a descriptive term connoting the absence of disruptive elements or forces in a state. It is a condition to be achieved or preserved, rather than a discrete set of tasks to be pursued. This presents real problems for practitioners attempting to prioritize between short-term actions intended to address immediate needs and longer-term programs that focus on achieving enduring change. Often, the two are in direct conflict. For example, short-term employment projects common in Iraq and Afghanistan have immediate benefits but inherently distort private labor markets and local expectations in the long run.² Absent a clear definition of tasks and purposes, both short- and long-term projects can and have been used in the pursuit of stability.

As currently employed the term reconstruction is also problematic. A common sense definition of the word implies simply rebuilding what existed before. In practice, however, that is seldom the case. Reconstruction over the past decade has come to mean replacing systems, infrastructure, and practices with more modern, often Western versions of what existed before—in short, nation building. Too often this is done with little thought to the sustainability

of the end product. Even less deliberation is given to whether or not a practice, institution, or system is culturally appropriate. Countless examples exist of modern water distribution systems, power plants, and schools that begin to fail as soon as the ribbons are cut due to a lack of maintenance, insufficient skilled labor, or insensitivity to local political dynamics.

This practice is not intentionally malicious or wasteful. It is frequently the result of well-intentioned, Western experts applying their technical knowledge within the constraints of U.S. governmental construction and contracting standards. Setting aside the propriety of this approach, it certainly begs the definition of reconstruction.

Current Army doctrine does little to clarify the situation by including a broad range of activities under the umbrella term of stability and reconstruction operations. Specifically, “*Stabilization* is the process by which underlying tensions that might lead to resurgence in violence and a breakdown in law and order are managed and reduced, while efforts are made to support preconditions for successful long-term development,” while “*Reconstruction* is the process of rebuilding degraded, damaged, or destroyed political, socioeconomic, and physical infrastructure of a country or territory to create the foundation for long-term development.”³ On the one hand, there is clear recognition that the military role is one of supporting interagency actions in a broad sense, with the emphasis in stability operations on the short term. However, the manual goes on to add that “in the event civilians are not prepared to perform (their assigned) tasks, military forces will assume that responsibility.”⁴ These additional tasks include rebuilding national institutions, reviving the private sector, and developing representative government, a list that blurs the line between stability and reconstruction by requiring the same organization do both short- and long-term work simultaneously.

Clarifying basic terms is a necessary first step toward improving effectiveness. From a military perspective, stability operations have their conceptual basis in the tactical. Their goal

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is to address immediate humanitarian, security, or economic needs. Whether intended to draw support away from an insurgency, restore essential services in the absence of functioning government, or simply prevent looting or retaliation among a populace, stability operations aim to create a short-term effect and set conditions for the longer-term work of reconstruction.

In 2005, DoD Directive 3000.05 defined stability operations as actions taken to “provide the local populace with security, restore essential services, and meet humanitarian needs. The long-term goal is to help develop indigenous capacity for securing essential services, a viable market economy, rule of law, democratic institutions, and a robust civil society.”⁵ In 2009, stability operations were redefined to include support for “rebuilding basic infrastructure; developing local governance structures; fostering security, economic stability, and development; and building indigenous capacity for such tasks.”⁶ While both definitions have merit, the distinction between setting conditions for reconstruction efforts and actually conducting reconstruction remains blurred.

Simply creating an artificial distinction

between short- and long-term efforts is insufficient. However, it is useful to differentiate between what is generally meant by stability *per se* on the one hand and reconstruction on the other by focusing on the nature of the intended effects. Actions taken for the sake of immediate stability and security may achieve lasting results, but that should not be their primary goal. Utilizing a limited version of the original 2005 DoD directive, *critical stability* operations can be defined as: actions taken to provide a local populace with security, restore essential services, and meet humanitarian needs--without the caveats toward institution building. Reconstruction can then be redefined as *sustainable stability*: reconstituting the political, socioeconomic, and physical infrastructure of a country, in partnership with the affected population, to restore a state to pre-conflict conditions. These definitions, though simple, have several advantages.

By focusing on the nature of the intended effects, practitioners can draw a clear distinction between critical stability operations and sustainable stability, thereby enabling better prioritization of efforts and allocation of tasks to the agencies best suited to perform or

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monitor them. Assuming the DoD focuses on critical stability operations to the greatest extent possible, training and doctrine can be tailored to institutionalize these skills without diluting limited funds in an attempt to replicate the

expertise of other agencies. The immediate effect of critical stability operations also accounts for the rotational nature of deployed forces, which minimizes the need to transfer responsibility for longer-term, institution-building efforts to multiple units over time.

Dropping the term “reconstruction” from our vocabulary does away with the confusion of multiple meanings and the tendency to link reconstruction to large projects, democratization, and top-down nation building. The proposed definition of sustainable stability maintains key components of current operations. However, long-term outcomes become collaborative efforts, which are evaluated within the social, political, and economic context of the country being stabilized rather than a desire to reshape a post-conflict environment in ways reflective of Western society. Not only are these operations likely to be significantly less expensive, but they are resistant to claims of cultural insensitivity. Further, sustainable stability applies both to preventive actions and post-conflict scenarios in ways that reconstruction by its very nature does not. That certainly does not make results any easier to achieve, and it requires greater reliance on host country and international partners for implementation. However, a more limited, nuanced definition of stability focuses future governmental reforms in a way that current usage of the term reconstruction does not.

With a distinction between critical and sustainable stability as a starting point, we can then assign roles and responsibilities across existing government agencies, acknowledging that the current fiscal demands on the nation require more than simply adding to government or doing more with less.

The Limitations of Current Reform Efforts

Three primary government organizations have been charged with post-conflict stability

operations over the past several decades: the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and DoD, predominantly in the form of the U.S. Army. Each of these three organizations possesses varying levels of capacity to carry out this mission and differing levels of expertise related to the myriad tasks involved.

The obstacles to post-conflict operations are well known. In general terms, the Army alone possesses the capacity in manpower, equipment, and funds, to execute the bulk of stability and reconstruction operations. However, post-conflict reconstruction has never truly been accepted as a core task in Army culture. If it were, directives intended to elevate stability and reconstruction operations as co-equal to major combat operations would be unnecessary. Consequently, institutional expertise and doctrine in this type of mission are lacking. The State Department, while ostensibly possessing the requisite expertise in good governance and rule of law, suffers from a lack of deployable civilian capacity and an inability to perform large-scale missions without significant military support, as evidenced in both Iraq and Afghanistan.⁷ It also possesses a long-standing culture that emphasizes the central role of the embassy as a coordinating arm, further limiting its ability to synchronize countrywide, reconstruction efforts. USAID, while the most experienced arm of government in the area of long-term economic development, increasingly relies on contracted organizations, often with mixed results and frequently without an integrated, overarching strategy that aligns with its foreign service or military counterparts.

These organizational shortcomings necessarily result in a hybrid, frequently ad-hoc approach to stability and reconstruction operations, with the military in the lead in some cases, the State Department in others, and the role of USAID generally ill-defined in both.

This trial-and-error approach to post-conflict reconstruction is exacerbated by differences in operating emphasis, organizational timelines, and agency cultures. The resulting friction is marked by missed opportunities, a lack of coordination, and far too little to show for our national investment of blood and treasure.

Historically, efforts to correct these shortfalls focused almost exclusively on either expanding existing governmental agencies to perform reconstruction tasks or creating synchronizing agencies to improve interagency coordination. For example, DoD 3000.05 directed the military to elevate stability and reconstruction operations “to the same level

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as major combat operations,” a daunting task in the current fiscal environment.⁸ This effort included a significant investment in education and training, development of a directorate of stability operations, numerous working groups, and additional flag officer oversight.⁹ Conversely, recent statements from senior defense leaders indicate a decision to minimize future commitments to long-term military reconstruction missions. Although driven by understandable budgetary concerns, it remains unclear how organizational desires will align with political realities in the coming years.

The recently released QDDR offers another example of governmentally-focused

reforms. The document opens by declaring the Department of State the lead agency for “responding to political and security crises” and identifies several steps intended to bolster critical civilian skills, empower USAID, and improve the cost-effectiveness of development initiatives, all unquestionably vital for future stability and reconstruction missions.¹⁰ Such initiatives, though well intended, underestimate the challenge of overcoming organizational culture and bureaucratic inertia.

The State Department is the logical choice to represent the nation in stability and reconstruction efforts. Unfortunately, the State Department’s culture is one of government-to-government diplomacy and “lacks...expertise in relief, reconstruction, and development, as well as the operational capacity” to perform this complex mission.¹¹ Efforts to address these shortcomings are praiseworthy, and improving the capabilities of USAID is an important step forward. Problems arise when theoretical concepts meet with reality on the ground. Aside from the difficulties already experienced in building a deployable corps of civilian

over grassroots execution, it is unclear how centralizing control under the embassy will improve effectiveness.

Reenergizing USAID enjoys the greatest consensus as a positive step. With a long history of development work and a cadre of deployable experts, returning USAID to the forefront of post-conflict reconstruction efforts makes good sense. Yet even this initiative faces serious obstacles. While nominally the implementing arm of State Department policies, differences in organizational culture, budget authorities, and outlook between USAID and State remain significant. Put simply, diplomacy and development are not the same.¹³ Organizational culture clashes between USAID and the State Department impede consensus on the development of strategy. This problem is only magnified when development funding allocations frequently reflect transitory, legislative branch interests rather than prioritized, strategic decisions.¹⁴ Even the addition of a coordinating agency like the recently inaugurated State Department’s Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations is likely to fall short in attempts to bridge the gap when strategic planning remains a joint effort between two organizations lacking a shared organizational culture. This is no new revelation; numerous scholars and practitioners have identified the limitations of this endeavor. Options already offered to bridge the divide range from elevating USAID to Cabinet status to creating a new, independent agency focused strictly on development and reconstruction.¹⁵

Such approaches overlook the vast potential in synchronizing government oversight with private, civil, and nongovernmental organizations already performing a great deal of work in post-conflict environments. By focusing strictly on improving interagency cooperation, reformers assume that stability and reconstruction work demands a purely governmental solution. This is not necessarily

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experts, State Department plans to utilize the chief of mission as the integrator of potentially hundreds of different organizations, contracts, and programs face significant hurdles.¹² With minimal staffing, difficulties operating in a conflict environment without military support, and a culture that favors high-level diplomacy

the case. Limited recommendations to expand civilian capacity and increase funding as the only feasible ways to improve effectiveness are similarly flawed. Organizational realities and the lessons of the past decade would seem to argue against both. A more appropriate way ahead breaks from this well-worn path.

Government certainly has a role in developing a strategic vision, funding stability and reconstruction operations, and monitoring implementation. Success in this effort requires greater interagency cooperation, which necessarily includes making better use of the regional combatant commands and gathering a corps of deployable civilian experts. Improving strategic coordination among key governmental agencies in existing structures and focusing the military on the immediate tactical mission of critical stability allow each organization to play to its strengths. At the same time, we should avoid the chimera of a wholly governmental solution.

Guideposts for Future Reform

Reforming our national approach to stability operations is an exceptionally complicated task and one well beyond the scope of this article. However, if the revised definitions for critical and sustainable stability are accepted, they do lend themselves to a set of proposed principles that can guide this effort.

The first principle: **The government owns the role of strategic stability planning.** While the State Department's chief of mission retains overarching responsibility for U.S. activities in a given country, neither the embassy nor a bureau located in Washington, DC, is the optimal setting for long-term strategic planning. Instead, we must continue to mature interagency representation and cooperation at the combatant commands. These commands are regionally focused by design; possess significant staff, planning, and intelligence gathering capacity; and have a vested interest in maintaining

stability in their areas of responsibility. This is not an attempt to militarize development work, and measures may be necessary to ensure that planning is not narrowly focused on security concerns at the expense of other aspects of sustainable stability. Stability plans would clearly require joint approval from both the State Department and DoD. However, migrating day-to-day stability planning to the combatant commands ensures that existing regional interagency capabilities are maximized in times of peace as well as war.

The second principle: **It is an inherently governmental responsibility to monitor the implementation of stability-oriented projects and programs.** Not only does this ensure that American funds are spent responsibly, but centralized oversight serves to synchronize efforts with strategic intent. Even allowing for wide variations in local requirements, a uniform approach to contracting, inspections, and labor practices ensures that implementing partners and local populations across a country receive equal treatment. A revitalized USAID assisted by a growing corps of deployable civilian experts is, in principle, the most appropriate agency to perform this role. Tasks especially suited to the agency's mission would include refining national-level plans for local conditions, identifying appropriate local and nongovernmental partners, and monitoring implementation.

The third principle: **The armed forces are responsible for implementing immediate post-conflict critical stability tasks.** Training and doctrine should focus on those skills necessary to address humanitarian, economic, and security needs in the short term, which is a subset of the much more expansive list of tasks currently under consideration. Additional focus will be necessary to better define the transition from critical to sustainable stability. However, this avoids the pitfalls of young Soldiers and Marines acting as heroic amateurs, dabbling

in long-term development projects they are rarely suited to perform. Despite a much narrower definition of critical stability, the list of tasks and skills necessary for success remains significant but manageable for a military under increasing fiscal pressure.

The fourth and final principle is aimed at leveraging the potential in nongovernmental partners: **Look to civic, private, and nongovernmental partners for the implementation of sustainable stability tasks whenever possible.** This simply acknowledges that the structure of development aid has evolved over time. As depicted in the 2010 Index of Global Philanthropy and Remittances, “government aid accounted for only 25 percent of the developed world’s total economic engagement with the developing world,” trailing remittances, global philanthropy, and private investment.¹⁶ Trying to solve the entire problem with one quarter of the funds makes little fiscal sense, particularly in the current economic climate.

Partnering with nongovernmental entities also taps into their hard-earned expertise and frequently their familiarity with the country in question in ways that cannot be achieved by a purely governmental approach. Local groups have the best sense of local conditions, and while vetting would certainly be needed to prevent abuses, an engaged USAID could certainly undertake this role. Of course, there are sure to be occasions when local conditions prevent the entry of volunteer, private, or civic organizations. In such instances, our recent experiences with the rapid growth of private security companies in Iraq and Afghanistan would seem to indicate that a market-based, contracting approach to stability operations could attract sufficient business interest to fill the gaps. Tasking the military to perform long-term projects well outside its professional expertise is hardly the best option, for reasons previously mentioned.

Political rhetoric opposing all forms of nation building notwithstanding, stability operations will be with us for the foreseeable future. Unfortunately, budgetary pressures, political weariness with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and organizational cultures will all gravitate away from preserving the hard-fought lessons of the past decade. The American people and their leaders must understand that engaging in effective, sustainable stabilization is extremely cost-effective in the long run. Rather than capitulate to short-term, political considerations, governmental reforms should be undertaken now in order to optimize our existing structure for future operations and institutionalize what we have learned. This is best achieved by a clearer allocation of roles and responsibilities, underpinned by a common understanding of the meaning of critical and sustainable stability. By relying more on nongovernmental and civic organizations for implementation under the strategic guidance and monitoring of government, the U.S. can position itself to more effectively perform these critical missions in the future. **IAJ**

Notes

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