

Team of Rivals:

Building Civil-Military Synergy in the Interagency

by Jeffrey S. Han

Though force can protect in emergency, only justice, fairness, consideration and cooperation can finally lead men to the dawn of eternal peace.

Dwight D. Eisenhower

A cord of three strands is not easily broken.

Ecclesiastes 4:12

In the summer of 2009, in the aftermath of the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, I deployed as a newly-minted, active duty, Army civil affairs officer to Sri Lanka. The challenges at the time—widespread destruction of infrastructure, landmines embedded in critical agricultural and residential areas, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians— required a great deal of communication between the governments of Sri Lanka and the United States, as well as among assigned U.S. government agencies.

It was important for the U.S. government to maintain relations with the Sri Lankan military that controlled access to the areas of conflict within the Northern Province. Military personnel could operate in remote, austere locations, such as the war-torn conflict-affected areas, with very little

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logistical support. At the same time, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) had the potential to provide a substantial amount of funding and supplies through various humanitarian assistance programs. However, it took time, arguably the entire eleven-month deployment, for embassy representatives to fully understand the benefit of having military representatives assigned to the embassy and how they could be integrated into other interagency programs.

A majority of the civilian U.S. government representatives at the embassy had a difficult time understanding the role of military personnel assigned to a country outside a combat zone. Even after receiving thorough briefings on the capabilities and goals of the military elements, senior interagency officials were skeptical of the ability of relatively junior military personnel to handle sensitive engagements with the Sri Lankan government and populace. Even after full disclosure of all operations to the Country Team, there were still some officials who suspected clandestine activities. Lessons learned from this experience have contributed to a view of how to improve this process and achieve greater unity of effort when it comes to civil-military cooperation within the interagency. However, this experience also shed light on many of the underlying inefficiencies and shortcomings in this cooperation, especially in a non-combat environment in which the military primarily takes a back-seat role.

This article examines this problem and highlights steps the U.S. government can take to improve interoperability between civilian and military organizations. I begin by exploring the potential causes of disharmony among various government institutions, especially with regard to the civilian-military divide. Then, I examine some of the resulting negative consequences and shortcomings revealed by recent history and current practices. Finally, I propose possible resolutions, including career progression incentives and programs that could

encourage greater civil-military collaboration early in individual careers. The focus of this effort is cooperation and collaboration among junior to mid-level personnel at the operational and tactical levels of civilian and military organizations.

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Additionally, any discussion on the interagency in the context of civil-military relations centers on the elements of national power: diplomatic, informational, military, and economic (DIME). It is tempting to conveniently oversimplify and associate each of these elements with a corresponding agency in the pursuit of U.S. foreign policy interests. However, this would deny the complexities of the world today. While the components of the interagency have competing interests and priorities in the pursuit of foreign policy objectives, it is necessary to see these components as strands in a cord that must bind together as tightly as possible in order to achieve maximum strength. Any goals or objectives that run counter to this interwoven unity dilute the strength of American power. Recent struggles in U.S. foreign policy would lend some credence to such a view.

Roots of the Divide

According to prevailing theories in psychology, cultures or groups come together when individuals are united by common purpose. Members interact with one another, are psychologically aware of one another, and perceive themselves to be a group. Further, a

work group is a collection of people who share a definable membership, group consciousness, a sense of shared purposes, interdependence, and the ability to act in a unitary manner.¹ In the “forming” stage of a work group, members seek to get to know one another, understand the task, and acquire the necessary resources to accomplish the task.² Organizations such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) recognize the value of this concept by encouraging team-building exercises at the beginning of important planning sessions.

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In the military, group formation often comes about through shared hardship or other formative experiences, especially at the early stages of individual careers. Typically, the first chance that civilian and military representatives have to bond is when they come together to address a pressing, real-world problem. By the time this civil-military alliance produces the rapport and trust necessary to foster genuine teamwork, precious time has passed, and the problem set has grown far more complex. Making the process of building bridges outside of individual agencies even tougher are factors that degrade unity internally. From the military perspective, one of the Principles of War is unity of command, which drives unity of effort. However, in the absence of overarching leadership for a particular campaign or operation, subcultures supersede broad identification of military members with one another. There is understandably a distinction between active duty

Soldiers who work full-time with one another regularly for extended periods of time and reserve counterparts who mobilize temporarily and sporadically. Members within Army special operations forces, Special Forces, Navy SEALs, and other “elite” units tend to hold members of Civil Affairs and Military Information Support Operations in lesser regard, despite the fact that each of these branches receives specialized training to qualify members for special operations and often at the same schools. The perception that certain accomplishments and sacrifices are unique to “Green Berets” makes Special Forces Soldiers internally very cohesive but withdrawn from military personnel outside the “brotherhood.” Other branches must prove themselves through shared experiences of hardship or other discriminating factors.

There is a similar distinction within civilian agencies such as the State Department and the USAID. Foreign service officers (FSOs) within the State Department distinguish themselves from other employees as a result of the rigorous vetting process they undergo, which includes a multi-step application and interview process as opposed to the more simplified hiring process for non-FSOs. A noticeable class divide results. After serving as a major in the U.S. Army Signal Corps, one information management specialist describes it this way: “I was proud of the title ‘communicator,’ which the military considers a distinguished profession. ...It quickly became obvious during my first tour that this was not the case in the State Department, where the title is viewed as somewhere equivalent to ‘janitorial staff.’”³ In USAID, there is a similar distinction between FSOs and other positions, such as personal services contractors. The discrimination that results is subtle but significant, especially when undertaking initiatives that require the approval of the highest-level officials at an embassy, such as the Deputy Chief of Mission or the Ambassador, who are FSOs themselves. As in the military, shared accomplishments

bring with them the bona fides that provide the context for relationships. In the absence of other weighing factors, the more selective and well-regarded the accomplishment, the greater is the sense of camaraderie. The result is an informal hierarchy of confidence and trust that sometimes undervalues the contributions of those outside this informal group.

The underlying dynamics of loyalty contribute to an even more pronounced parochialism when working with other organizations. Even with internal differences, the fact that employees share a common identity allows the organizations to function reasonably. There are regulations and operating procedures that mandate the flow of work by individuals, somewhat mitigating the influence of informal groups and personal preferences. Outside of these organizational guidelines, however, the only trait interagency components share is that they are U.S. government employees. While this is a unifying force, it rarely contributes to enhanced professional cohesion. The lack of trust and common purpose among organizations within the government is simply impossible to overcome without great effort.

A member's academic pedigree can also exacerbate the differences between civilian and military representatives of government. In civilian circles, prestigious schools and impressive resumes contribute to the likelihood of high-caliber performance, especially in positions requiring political savvy. Civilian officials, such as FSOs, often present formidable academic credentials from elite educational institutions and will likely have advanced degrees to boot. Similarly, in USAID, there are a significant number of FSOs who have served in the Peace Corps or who boast of work experience that speaks favorably to their worldly IQ. These qualifications distinguish certain individuals and provide an edge in advancement through networks of senior official alumni. Despite the fact that many military officers have impressive

educational experience and some, such as retired General David Petraeus, have advanced degrees from Ivy League schools, there is an unshakable view that the general military population is less educated and sophisticated than civilian officials when it comes to international affairs. This is a stereotype that must be resolved in order for civil-military cooperation to advance beyond theoretical constructs.

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Within the military, the equivalent to a distinguished resume is the military file that details various experiences, awards, qualifications, certifications, and ratings. In uniform, many service members literally wear their badges of honor from previous training. Additionally, military officers proceed through their formative years in cohorts that bond them through shared experiences. Officers will gravitate toward classmates from various commissioning sources, such as the service academies. Enlisted Soldiers will bond with peers who “check out” in terms of certain military schools, deployment locations, or postings.

Needless to say, civilians who have never had the opportunity to gain these experiences and qualifications are at a disadvantage when it comes to gaining the trust of military members. Even civilians with prior military service suffer in the eyes of military men and women because of the length of time civilian officials have been away from the service. Prior military civilian officials miss out on the promotions, deployments, and experiences of military personnel who continue to serve. Furthermore,

military professionals base their esteem for their colleagues on a perception of hard work as measured by results and willingness to sacrifice for the greater good. When it comes to interactions with civilians, the 24/7 military work ethic sometimes does not reconcile with civilian practices such as timesheets, abstract goals, and departmental priorities.

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The Problem Set

Biases that result from disparate backgrounds feed a dysfunctional working civilian-military environment. When it comes to developing goals and plans, each organization will pursue courses of action that serve its own best interest, rather than pursuing the greater good or, even, the collectively optimal path. In political theory, the Bureaucratic Politics Model is best summarized by the phrase “where you stand is where you sit.”⁴ This model applies very appropriately to the issue of civilian and military organizations working through “stovepipes” of information that are processed internally within each agency but are difficult to translate to the outside. These stovepipes are designed to efficiently deliver information up and down each respective organization’s hierarchy without consideration or regard for any collaboration that might need to take place. Communication architecture in each department is a very tangible manifestation of this exclusive system. Each government agency uses distinct networks and systems to

process and share information. The Defense Department excludes other agencies in regular correspondence through classified information networks. Employees of other branches of government, such as USAID, do not have access to these networks. It takes a great deal of effort to transmit information between networks, even when threats are imminent or when events require urgent interagency communication. Institutional firewalls, therefore, exist to preclude routine collaboration. It is notable that after the WikiLeaks scandal, the State Department removed access to all of its diplomatic cables from the secure Defense Department SIPRNet.⁵ This action severely limited an important means of transmitting strategically and operationally significant information among agencies. That an agency was able to take such unilateral action without much objection or “blowback” demonstrates the extent to which organizations are isolated from one another.

The negative consequences of discord among the elements of national power are increasingly grave, as military, political, and societal threats to American interests are emerging all over the world. The attacks of September 11, both in 2001 and 2012, saber-rattling from pariah states such as Iran and North Korea, and the persistent presence and growth of violent extremist organizations illustrate the wide range of security challenges the U.S. government faces in the twenty-first century. All of these threats are increasingly intertwined with civilian populations that are motivated by conditions such as food and water availability, educational opportunities, and the absence of law and order. Grievances against economic or political policies and cultural differences trigger conflicts in today’s world more often than do the actions of a country’s leader or its standing army. Combatants are just as likely women and children recruited into paramilitary organizations or criminal enterprises, as they are military-aged males in uniform. Neither the

military nor civilian institutions can address these problems on their own. They must work together to find solutions and dedicate all available resources precisely and quickly in order to prevent issues from becoming more complicated.

Examples of some of the consequences abound in recent history. As this year marks the tenth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, the rebuilding of the country after the end of the first phase offers an illustrative example. Senator Claire McCaskill (D-Mo.), a critic of Iraq war policy, said that interagency cooperation was an “utter, abject failure” and that government divisions worked at cross-purposes, forming a “circular firing squad.”⁶ At the operational level, poor coordination with other agencies—especially early in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)—led to the duplication and waste of resources.⁷ The lack of cooperation impacted cooperation at the tactical level as well. The Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction noted the comments of an Army effects officer during OIF who pointed out the frustrating outcome of these dysfunctional processes:

We had minimal coordination with State and USAID. Sometimes we were pushed to implement their programs like the micro loan program. This was funded by USAID but implemented by Iraqis and the Iraqis for the most part weren't supposed to know where the money came from. There were supposed to be certain standards for applications but how many Iraqis can write up a business plan? It was intended to be in-kind where we provided items and not cash but did they really think we could go inspect some baker's shop, see that he needed an oven, go to the market, buy the oven, and then deliver it to his place? We had other patrols to run. In the end we usually gave them money directly to make the purchase themselves.⁸

Results such as this are due to a lack of trust and familiarity among interagency organizations at the outset. There is no centripetal force to consolidate the various interests, knowledge bases, and resources in a focused approach toward common goals. Instead, these elements not only dilute the elements of national power, but also often conflict with one another. A brigade commander during OIF cited “lots of fratricide between CERP [Commander's Emergency Response Program], USAID, and even USACE [U.S. Army Corps of Engineers]” in addition to lack of transparency as one of the more problematic aspects of wartime spending.⁹ “Fratricide”—inadvertent attack on a member of the friendly force—is usually not intentional, but subsequent tragic deaths or injuries are

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significant combat losses nonetheless. In the case of uncoordinated expenditure of funds for projects or similar lines of effort, civilian and military agencies can unknowingly contradict one another's goals, send conflicting messages to host nation beneficiaries, and contribute to corruption and other problems that exacerbate the conditions the projects are intended to address in the first place. Improved communication and collaboration is essential to avoiding these kinds of issues.

Outside of a combat environment, the problems caused by lack of interagency cooperation are just as prevalent, if not more so. The DoD leverages a number of foreign policy tools that would ideally benefit from close interagency collaboration. The Overseas Humanitarian Disaster Assistance and Civic

Aid program is an over \$100 million annual appropriation¹⁰ that can be leveraged to great effect when distributed in concert with

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complementary development and diplomacy programs. In addition, there are numerous foreign military equipment procurement, personnel exchange, and technical training programs that would benefit from thorough collaboration among various stakeholders representing the U.S. government abroad. While there is certainly awareness and oversight of these programs by ambassadors and other civilian representatives both abroad and in Washington, the funding and planning decisions usually default to the military commanders and their staffs at regional combatant commands, as well as senior officials within the DoD. At the tactical and operational levels, interagency representatives are simply too overwhelmed with their own responsibilities to take on coordination outside their assigned tasks. The most successful application of these policy tools tends to occur in those environments in which civilian and military personnel informally build great personal relationships and develop trust in one another over time. When personality conflicts or assignment turnovers emerge, inadequate mutual understanding and unstable relationships between individuals at an informal level risk the success of even the most simple and straightforward programs. It is imperative that both civilian and military systems encourage collaboration that ensures success regardless of idiosyncrasies and personnel reassignment.

Civilian-led U.S. government programs

also leave some room for improvement when it comes to foreign policy and civil-military cooperation. The mission of USAID is partly to “further U.S. interests” and to carry out “U.S. foreign policy by promoting broad-scale human progress at the same time it expands stable, free societies, creates markets and trade partners for the United States, and fosters good will abroad.”¹¹ To the extent that advancing U.S. interests is a priority, USAID stands to benefit from integrating its programs with U.S. military efforts abroad. The encouragement of “stable, free societies” is at least one goal in common with the military. In theory, the military would be a natural partner to provide resources toward humanitarian assistance (using the tools mentioned above) and security, which are essential to building up impoverished communities. In practice, however, there are tendencies by many USAID officials and representatives of similar civilian agencies to shy away from collaboration with the military, fearing negative perceptions by host nation partners and nongovernmental implementing organizations. Some of this reluctance can be attributed to misunderstandings on the part of civilians. Many have never worked with military personnel and are not familiar with civil-military interactions. A better understanding of the people who make up the military would easily reveal shared interests and similar practices in engaging populations and governments abroad.

Potential Solutions

The difficulties facing interagency cooperation can be compared to the challenges of integration and collaboration within the military branches of service. The shortcomings in the relationships among the services became apparent in 1980 during Operation Eagle Claw, the failed attempt to rescue American hostages in Iran during the Carter Administration. The Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, passed in response

to the failure, paved the way for greater collaboration within the military by creating environments in which the branches of service are forced to work together.¹²

Subsequently, the service chiefs established joint commands and assignments for this purpose. In addition, a military officer's career progression has increasingly depended on his or her joint credentials. Mid-level military officers have the desirable option of attending a sister service education program to obtain credit for professional development. This kind of concept should apply to the interagency to the maximum extent possible. At higher levels of command, interagency cooperation exists and is developing as interagency positions become ingrained in the military hierarchy. There are already political advisor and senior development advisor positions for State Department and USAID representatives at major military commands, such as the geographic combatant commands and theater special operations commands. In turn, military officers have opportunities to gain experience working at other government agencies through prestigious fellowships and internships and seek these assignments in order to advance their careers. On the other hand, there is no strong incentive for civilians to seek positions within military units other than possibly geographic location preference and individual curiosity. Taking existing measures further to promote career progression that depends on evidence of interagency proficiency would be a powerful incentive for creative up-and-coming leaders.

In addition to promoting formal administrative structures that force interagency integration, organizations should foster the shared experience that contributes to the much-needed bonds among professionals within the interagency. Collaboration does exist at senior levels such as the War College or similar advanced academic programs, but these occur too late in career progressions to alter the

proclivities of leaders whose formative years are behind them. It is important to incorporate interagency training throughout career development in various institutions in order to feed the ideal that we are all "one team" working toward a common purpose: to serve the people of the United States and advance our interests as a nation together. At more junior levels, the Foreign Service Institute, to a certain extent, offers seats for certain courses to military personnel when they are available. However, these are very few and far between. Furthermore, much of this training focuses on preparing for major combat operations, such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan. With the U.S.

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presence, the necessary collaborative work in these environments and associated funding decreasing, it remains to be seen how much longer this type of training will continue.

While it may not be appropriate to promote civilian and military integration at all stages of career development, it is worthwhile to determine venues that would be conducive to improved interagency relationships, while developing leaders with a more expansive view of their professions. Interagency training and education should start at mid-career after the individual professional has mastered or developed sufficient understanding of his or her own career field. Combining redundant programs that train similar skill sets, such as foreign language proficiency, can promote cooperation and cut aggregate costs. In an age of budget cuts and program reductions, what better way to maintain streamlined focus on departmental goals and build camaraderie?

Members of interagency organizations can also find common ground in advanced education. Shared experiences in academia are great starting points for interagency partners looking for solutions to problems of mutual interest. Early in career development, fellowships and other programs that group civilian and military personnel into cohorts may encourage the development of academic roots in

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common. Rhodes Scholar and East-West Center degree programs present great environments to build lasting relationships with future leaders in the civilian sector. However, only a handful of military officers per year are able to gain these types of experiences. A more useful means of promoting collaboration might be to sponsor degree fellowship programs for a cohort of interagency representatives. Existing advanced civil-schooling programs and internships could evolve into one-for-one exchanges and include a follow-up requirement to share lessons learned.

In addition to shared experiences, it is necessary to promote and leverage positions and organizations devoted to working as helpful catalysts for improved interagency collaboration. The number of existing internships, offices, and positions dedicated to facilitating collaboration between civilian and military institutions should increase and have more influence within each organization. In their current form, Army Civil Affairs units and offices such as USAID's Office of Civil-Military Cooperation are tiny specks within the overall

structures of their respective organizations. The Civil Affairs branch, which is the only branch exclusively dedicated to fostering interoperability among civilian organizations and the military, is the smallest in the active duty Army. Even with the rapid expansion of the 95th Civil Affairs Brigade (Airborne) and the recent creation of the 85th Civil Affairs Brigade, most military personnel are unaware that these units exist, much less of their purpose. The average Soldier, Sailor, Marine, or Airman has no concept of interagency collaboration and how it is relevant to his or her role in modern-day military missions. Civil Affairs personnel exist to bridge this gap. Likewise, civilian offices, such as USAID Civil-Military Cooperation (CMC), exist to educate and inform their organizations about the military and how to find common ground on issues that confound both sides. However, entities such as the CMC are new concepts that have mostly developed out of the need to coordinate efforts in major combat operations. It is unlikely that these entities will grow or even endure into the future without a significant push from higher levels of the government. In order to foster greater civil-military cooperation and improve the performance of each side, both civilian and military organizations must empower their liaison entities and provide substantial resources with which to expand.

Conclusion

The potential benefits of fostering improved civil-military collaboration and cooperation are obvious and many. Bringing to bear all the elements of national power into a synchronized force will have a much more potent effect on the prevailing problems of the nation. By ensuring that defense, development, and diplomacy are unified against existing threats, the U.S. government sends the best of the nation out to the world as a cohesive team rather than a collection of individuals with diverging

interests. During the almost 30 years since the passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act, joint military power has deployed in awe-inspiring ways. The almost effortless expulsion of Saddam Hussein from Kuwait and the successful hunt for Osama bin Laden have been two examples that demonstrate the prowess of the military and its proficiency as a joint force effectively employing all of the elements of military power at its disposal. To a certain extent, the successful hunt for Osama bin Laden also provides a hint of the potential of interagency cooperation as our civilian intelligence resources were an overwhelmingly potent tool in this case.

It remains to be seen what an even further invigorated and unified interagency can achieve in the future if the capabilities of all of our civilian and military organizations can be brought to bear. While there will always be challenges and unexpected threats requiring action, it can be just as satisfying and much more cost effective to prevent conflicts rather than fight them. This would be the true power of a civil-military collaboration applied to full potential. The available tools will increase with the continued development of society, and there is a vast pool of talented individuals who will be able to anticipate and address the challenges of the future before they become problems. Society should be able to answer President Kennedy's famous challenge of "ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country" by responding with a branch of public service that best employs a given talent. All government employees are ultimately servants, and they owe the American people their very best. Our nation's best is yet to come. **IAJ**

Notes

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