

# Interagency Cooperation: An Ambassador's Perspective

**by Thomas J. Miller**

*Editor's Note: Many interagency challenges are enduring. The following article was originally published in one of the Simons Center's earliest editions of the InterAgency Journal in 2011. The editors of the Journal invite our readers to ask themselves what has changed – for better or worse - since this article was originally published.*

In 2011, it is difficult to think of any event or issue that is any longer confined to the domain, authority, and purview of a single agency in the U.S. government. This is a far cry from the State Department I entered as a foreign service officer (FSO) in 1976, where the majority of work was restricted to State Department players, there was little interagency cooperation or input, and perspective seldom went beyond the department. As the Indochina analyst in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) and at the U.S. Consulate in Chiang Mai, Thailand, my entire audience was the State Department front office, the functional/geographical bureau, or the embassy in Bangkok. As an INR analyst, I worked on National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs)—definitely an interagency product—but even then, I would offer the INR perspective on a take-it-or-leave-it basis (and take a footnote if I did not agree with the NIE's conclusions). Similarly, in Chiang Mai, other agencies were represented, but while State Department personnel provided some administrative support, these other agencies pretty much did their own thing, with little interaction with the consulate.

The world has become more complex and analysts now deal with issues that were not even on their scope 35 years ago. FSOs now work more closely with other agencies to produce and implement more effective foreign policy. Many books and articles have been written about the need for better interagency cooperation because it is often the lack of such cooperation that undermines the policy. Indeed, the establishment of the Center for Complex Operations and introduction of legislation on interagency professional development by Representatives Ike Skelton and Geoff Davis in the U.S. Congress are just a couple of concrete manifestations of the recognition of the need for better collaboration between the different parts of the U.S. government.

While not claiming to be an expert on the subject of interagency cooperation, my sense

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from reading some of the literature is that it is heavy on theory and rather thin on practice. It also sometimes mistakenly presupposes that simply identifying the problems will lead to solutions. My experience during three decades of government work and the last six years of collaborating with the U.S. government as head of three international non-profit organizations is that solutions are not simply a matter of accurate diagnosis. Rather, deeply held mindsets based on an agency's parochial views of other agencies' positions and perspectives have handicapped interagency coordination across the board.

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Though not any more objective than those involved in non-State Department agencies, I have given a lot of thought to the importance of interagency cooperation in the formation of good policy and implementation of that policy. Fifteen years ago, I lectured on the importance of interagency cooperation to new officers at the State Department's Foreign Service Institute. I based my lectures on my own practical experience and perspective of what worked and what did not. However, in the more complex world of 2011, I offer an updated version of my personal ten practical suggestions. I do so knowing that many readers of this article will be members of the military services and will have a very different set of experiences. Hopefully this article can be the start of a dialogue facilitated by the Simons Center in which different foreign policy players in the U.S. government will come to a better understanding of their partners'

perspectives. In turn, I hope this increased understanding will lead to closer collaboration in the formulation and implementation of U.S. foreign policy.

## **Ten Simple Thoughts for Improving Interagency Cooperation**

### ***1) The interagency process can be a force multiplier.***

All foreign policy issues have dimensions that extend beyond the traditional State Department diplomatic practice. For instance, solutions regarding transnational terrorism demand not only a perspective from traditional diplomacy but also, inter alia, from the military, development experts (U.S. Agency for International Development [USAID] and others), the Justice Department, the FBI, Homeland Security, and the intelligence community. Indeed, the State Department's recently issued Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) recognizes that the co-equal legs of dealing with national security challenges are defense, diplomacy, and development. Interagency cooperation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for effective policy because since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, an entire world of new actors plays a very important role. From my own experiences since leaving the State Department, I can attest to the importance of the non-profit sector as key actors in the effort to make the environment less hospitable to terrorists.

We have seen that effective cooperation can be a force multiplier relating to U.S. assistance to the agricultural sector of Afghanistan. USAID, the Departments of Agriculture, State, and Defense, and a number of lesser players, all mirrored by their parent agencies in Washington, have been involved in various efforts to aid Afghan agriculture. Recognizing that such complexity can either be a divider or multiplier, the ambassador very wisely appointed

an agricultural czar to coordinate these disparate actors in order to maximize the chances of making such cooperation a force multiplier.

Whoever is sitting at the head of the table or leading an interagency effort should be inclusive and recognize that other agencies within the government as well as players outside the government can add value if the leader creates a welcoming environment and values each agency's input. Policy has much less chance of succeeding without active buy-in from all agencies involved in the project. Although easy to propose, obtaining buy-in is often difficult to accomplish, as the various players come with different outlooks and agendas. If they are to contribute, they have to be convinced that these perspectives and agendas will be heard and respected.

***2) An ambassador should never have to invoke the authority granted to him/her.***

After World War II, it became established practice that the State Department be the lead agency for all non-military foreign policy matters. This notion was institutionalized over many years and in theory not seriously challenge. Decades ago, a practice was set in motion presenting the U.S. ambassador with a letter from the President that designated the ambassador and the State Department as the lead agency in overseeing all foreign policy matters except those involving the theater military commander.

Unfortunately, some ambassadors believe this is an iron-clad rule without exception and have resorted to using this letter as a blunt hammer with others in the embassy. Using this approach can sometimes make the collaboration process go astray. The reality is that other agencies will be more cooperative if they are asked and not ordered to implement a policy. Ambassadors should recognize and work with the reality that other agency heads have two bosses, the ambassador and their parent agency.

The challenge for the modern-day ambassador is to lead not by invoking the President's letter but in a manner that helps other agencies realize it is to their best interest to follow his/her lead.

Ambassadors should create a King Arthur round table mentality where no one agency dominates, and input from all is welcome. Invoking a sense of "I'm in charge-ism" will quickly lose the cooperation. Everyone knows the ambassador has the "letter"; the challenge for an ambassador (or any other agency head if they are chairing the meeting) is never to pull out that letter to justify their authority. This is not unlike the cops with holstered guns on the street—they are most effective if they do not have to draw the revolver.

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***3) You learn more with your eyes and ears than with your mouth.***

Any approach to a problem includes a strategy and a plan before acting. What is not always emphasized is the need to ensure that others have the opportunity to advance their ideas before that strategy and plan are locked in concrete. Leaders should encourage others to state their perspective before offering their own. This process is particularly important if one carries the authority of ambassador or deputy chief of mission, for others around the table might not want to offer differing points of view once those leading the meeting have voiced theirs.

***4) Park your agency agenda at the door.***

Sometimes people get so hung up in pushing the parochial concerns of their particular agency that they forget the larger objectives of our country. First and foremost, agency personnel

should keep the overall U.S. interest in mind as they work through various issues. This is extremely hard to do as a practical matter. One has to go no further than our Congress to witness how often a member will put a particular state's or even district's priority ahead of the broader interest of our country. How many times have we seen unnecessary and expensive weapons systems that the leadership of the Pentagon does not want foisted on them by powerful members

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of Congress solely because they represent jobs in their district or state? How many times have we seen our foreign aid dollar limited in its effectiveness when a "Buy American" mandate forces us to purchase a much more costly product? How can we justify our efforts to help less developed countries by using a politically driven, heavily subsidized U.S. food aid program that destroys the local market? I am not advocating people ignore their own particular agency's perspectives, however, I believe they should do their best to keep the larger objective in mind as they work through different options.

**5) *Sweat the details: Agree on timelines and resources before adjourning the meeting.***

Often interagency meeting participants argue for hours over different approaches to a difficult problem and then, in an exhausted state, adjourn the meeting once a common overall approach has been decided. Those who do not agree with the conclusions can drag out implementation endlessly if specific timelines and benchmarks are not agreed upon. Similarly, participants can make great decisions but neglect to consider

where they will find the resources to implement those decisions. A great decision without the resources to implement is essentially no decision at all. If an agency does not have the proper staff to carry out any decision, it simply will not get done. Too often senior people delegate the issues of timelines and resources to others and then wonder why their decisions were never carried out.

**6) *Record everything.***

Many interagency discussions occur where there is either no note-taker or the notes are inadequate. It is important to have a note-taker who thoroughly understands both the content and context of the discussion. Meetings recorded by stenographers who can take notes rapidly and verbatim but have no idea about the substance of the discussion often result in notes that make little sense afterwards.

During my time as an ambassador, I would ask one of my more senior people to take notes, and I would try to do likewise. Immediately after the meeting, we would compare our notes and ensure what we had recorded was an accurate and full reflection of the meeting. I would then circulate those notes to key meeting participants and request they respond by a time certain with any comments, corrections, or differences. Following these simple and, some would say, common sense steps can minimize disputes as to what was decided.

**7) *Share responsibility for the work.***

Often, the person leading the meeting takes on the lion's share of the preparation, action, and follow-up resulting from the meeting. This is a big mistake for several reasons. First, it often results in a single agency taking on more than it can handle and as a consequence getting second-rate results. Second and even more important, failure to share responsibility for parceling out the work often results in a lack of buy-in from the other agencies. From my experience, when one agency dominates and the other players remain

silent, it may indicate the silent players have adopted a passive-aggressive attitude toward the dominant agency, and they will do little to cooperate in the implementation of the decisions made. Often the lead agency is oblivious to this resistance until it is too late to take corrective action. One additional point is that sometimes those who are to implement the policy are not included in the meetings. It is essential that they are fully briefed and made to feel part of the process.

**8) *Use the chain of command in both directions.***

Interagency disputes should be resolved at the lowest level possible. Too often, the boss will waste scarce time and resources trying to resolve every difference when subordinates could have done so more easily. A micromanager will stifle the initiative of subordinates. Before getting involved, the more senior people should give their subordinates the flexibility and freedom to resolve disputes. Their subordinates should take the initiative by recognizing such differences and attempting to resolve them at their level. If subordinates cannot settle their differences, they should not hesitate to buck it up the chain of command for resolution. I have sometimes noticed a hesitancy to do so because it can be perceived as failure. The boss should make it clear that it is acceptable to kick a problem up the chain of command if those working it cannot resolve it expeditiously.

**9) *Do not over classify or hide behind a veil of secrecy.***

The entire WikiLeaks episode has focused public attention on the subject of classified information. Reading the stories of many of the State Department cables that have been released, one is struck that much of what has been made public is intuitive and not particularly astonishing. What is surprising is perhaps the fact that we expected far more revelations than have emerged. Indeed, some of the cables

have probably been classified at a higher level than warranted. Classification of documents is a necessary element of doing business with sensitive sources involving important issues in the U.S. government. However, it is occasionally abused in instances where some people are not permitted to be party to a discussion because they either lack the proper clearances or access to the information being considered. Sometimes this is legitimate; other times it is used as an excuse to stifle dissent or exclude people who have other perspectives from a deliberative process.

While volumes could be written about over classifying or improperly classifying information, the point is that the classification of documents should not be used to exclude those in an interagency deliberation who may not possess all the requisite clearances. Doing so is akin to turning off part of one's brain.

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**10) *Wear both your own shoes and the other person's shoes simultaneously.***

It is important for meeting participants, particularly those leading an interagency deliberation, to constantly stay aware of other participants' positions and the rationale for those positions. Otherwise the meetings will rapidly degenerate into a zero-sum game, and participants will focus on winning for their agencies rather than achieving the objective. Those leading the meeting must be sensitive to the positions of others in the room to avoid some leaving the room believing there may be specific outcomes, while others leave the room scratching their heads and, in the extreme, planning to sabotage the process.

## Conclusion

Nothing advocated in this article is either particularly brilliant or surprising. While the purpose of this article is to share some reflections and experiences in making the interagency process work more efficiently and effectively, much of it applies equally to everyday interactions with family and friends. All of the ten points made above are intuitive, but I am struck by how many times rational, intelligent people engaging in an interagency process lose sight of the basic tenets they use on a daily basis in interactions with others.

It is my hope that these points—often learned as a result of my own failures—will be useful suggestions to help others in interagency deliberations. Although written from the perspective of one who worked for the State Department, it is intended for all who are trying to formulate and implement the most effective American foreign policy possible. **IAJ**

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