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Thinking About the 21st Century Security Environment: The Need for a Whole-of-Government Approach

by Gordon R. Sullivan

Despite the American public's misperception of one continuous combat operation in the Middle East, for most of the past decade the U.S. military has been fighting two distinct wars in different countries and terrain and against different enemies. It could even be argued that the number is three: Iraq, Afghanistan and al Qaeda and its affiliates. However, **one major commonality has emerged—the need for more interagency commitment than in any previous war.** This deficiency was common to both wartime administrations, although the reasons behind them are different for each administration.

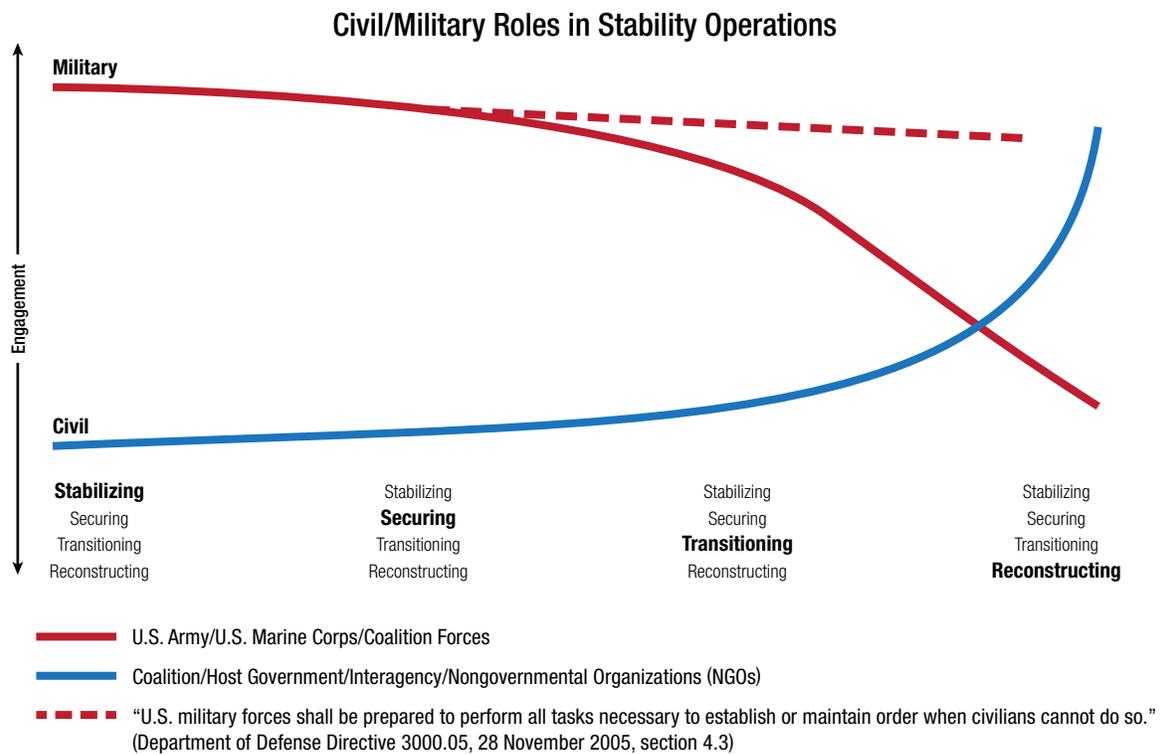
Had there been more interagency involvement, U.S. efforts in both theaters might have been concluded earlier and with a more satisfactory outcome for all participants. Perhaps we would not have been so slow to learn and adapt, as was the case in both Afghanistan and Iraq. More interagency involvement might also have encouraged a civil-military discourse at the strategic level that would have produced more reasonable U.S. strategic objectives, thus avoiding the second- and third-order difficulties in execution and in communication to the American people that we have all witnessed. Operationally, the inadequate interagency effort made the stability, support and counterinsurgency operations much less effective than they could have been.

From a decade of war, we learned that success in these operations requires interagency planning, preparation and execution. We learned—or more accurately “relearned”—that stability, support and counterinsurgency operations require both capitalizing on existing local capacity/capabilities and helping to create additional host-nation capability (not in our image but using American experience to help build what will actually function effectively). We learned to ask ourselves how our processes interact with their processes; what works in the United States does not necessarily work everywhere. We learned that the capability to keep advisors—military (conventional and otherwise) and civilian (to include nongovernmental)—on the ground provides a preventive approach to post-conflict resolution in a more cost-effective manner. Finally, we learned yet again that Americans are both impatient (wanting events to unfold more rapidly than is actually possible) and overbearing (trying to force U.S.-type solutions instead of taking the time to understand the kinds of solutions that mesh with a country's culture, history and social makeup; what the country's people really want; and what is actually possible given the realities on the ground). Both tendencies are visible in Iraq and Afghanistan, and both could have been mitigated by more expansive interagency involvement at the strategic, operational and tactical levels.

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The United States, as a global power, must have a strategic view of our approach to protecting national interests; building the capacity of current and potential allies; and preserving national security in the second decade of the 21st century. Over the past ten years the security environment has changed dramatically. America faces fewer conventional threats (those that operate within clearly established political boundaries). Rather, most of our adversaries operate in the space between “war” and “crime.” Increasingly transnational and dispersed, these enemies employ irregular tactics, terror and asymmetric warfare. For the foreseeable future, the U.S. military can expect to duplicate many of the tasks we now associate with Iraq and Afghanistan—although certainly not on as grand a scale as we have seen since 2001. But equally certain is this: Where our interests are at stake, American forces will be involved in helping to stabilize and secure weak, failing or failed states; assisting in building partner capacity; fighting terrorists; and operating in ambiguous conditions where “victory” may mean only reducing violence to a level that local security forces and institutions (that we help form) are capable of handling. At the same time we will be maintaining that crucial deterrent conventional capability that keeps conflicts from becoming conventional state-versus-state wars.

The military, however, cannot succeed alone. This past decade has taught us that to be successful the nation must develop enhanced interagency coordination with clear lines of authority, resulting in a unified effort that applies all elements of national power—diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence and law enforcement—in a concerted, integrated manner. Despite several worthwhile initiatives from the executive branch, this has been the exception, not the rule.



While there is growing interest in the interagency community, there are no statutory mandates for appropriate action for most departments and agencies; in many cases, no enduring funding line; and no procedural standards that would encourage and/or enhance corporate action. To better prepare for a future that will continue to include engagement in yet unknown other nations, we may need directive legislation mandating greater interagency involvement (including effective use of nongovernmental organizations when feasible) and encouragement of such behavior in our allies. To do this may take a prescient, directive piece of legislation focused on the interagency community—along the lines of what the Goldwater-Nichols

Act did for the joint community. A revamped interagency partnership along with commensurate resources is the centerpiece of such an approach. To succeed in the 21st century national security environment, America must embrace and execute a whole-of-government approach that directs horizontal integration to ensure that its vital interests are not placed at risk. And the United States must not just talk about this approach—we must take the step necessary to make it real.

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