

Chapter 1

Failed States and the International Community

Ten Years After 9/11: A Shifting Paradigm?

John Herbst¹

When the Berlin Wall fell, thinkers in the global community began to talk about the need for a new, post Cold War conceptual framework. Who was going to be the next George Kennan and identify 1) the defining problem of the international system and 2) the right strategy to meet it?

Frank Fukuyama created a stir in the late 1980s with the optimistic notion that history had ended with the victory of liberal democracy. This did not mean that there would no longer be war or other international problems. It did mean that the great contest between Communism and liberal democracy was over, one champion was left standing and the world would be ordered in a liberal democratic way. Time has demonstrated the limitations of this insight.

Samuel Huntington created a large splash in the mid-1990s with the view that we were in a clash of civilizations. His analysis was immediately both misunderstood—as a clarion call to the West to stand up against other “civilizations”—and controversial.

The 9/11 Consensus?

September 11 appeared as a clarifying event. History was not over. Maybe Huntington was

right, some said, though many disagreed. This was not a clash of civilizations. It was a war of terrorists—later, violent extremists—against civilization. Or it was a war within the Muslim world to determine its future direction.

Whatever the interpretations of Huntington’s thesis, there was no disagreement that we had entered a new world disorder. The Cold War may have put us on the edge of Armageddon, but the post-Cold War world was exceptionally messy, and dangerous in new ways.

In this new world disorder, failed and failing states and ungoverned spaces represented a new challenge. Thanks to the interconnectedness of global society—in economics, transportation and communication—and the destructive power of modern technology, it was suddenly possible for sub state actors—terrorist groups or criminal syndicates—to wreak enormous damage on countries at a distance.

Since sub-state actors can nest in ungoverned spaces, countries in turmoil can become major threats to distant lands. Things seemed very clear in the fall of 2001, as the United States built an international coalition to drive the Taliban from power and Al-Qaeda from Afghanistan. Things were less clear two years later as the U.S. built another, more controversial coalition to topple Saddam Hussein, but found itself facing a real insurgency by the fall of 2003.

¹ This opinions expressed herein are solely those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect those of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Are We Leaving the Post 9/11 Period?

Seven years later—today—international forces are still on the ground in both countries. The U.S. has lost nearly 6000 troops and spent hundreds of billions of dollars in these countries. The U.S. troop presence is drawing down steadily in Iraq and, with the failure to sign a Status of Forces Agreement, the withdrawal should be completed soon.

Against this backdrop, it is not uncommon to hear in Washington that such massive “nation building operations” are not part of our policy future. According to some skeptics, such operations are inherently impractical, and expensive. The popular blogger Andrew Sullivan hosted several posts along these lines. Columnist George Will, once an enthusiastic backer of the Iraq adventure, also turned sour on “nation building.”

Moreover, we are also starting to hear that the U.S. is moving out of the September 11 world. To support this point, commentator Peter Beinart in a 2010 blog notes that in that year’s mid-term elections, Iraq/Afghanistan played no role; the only foreign policy issue raised by Congressional candidates was China because American voters are worried about the impact here of Chinese economic policies. Beinart also pointed to President Obama’s November Asia trip (India, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea) as evidence that we are turning our attention properly to the Pacific.

Implications for Policy toward Failed and Failing States

Why, you might ask, are we taking this quick twenty-year review of thinking on the international system? Because such thinking, especially in influential circles in Washington,

will influence what we can and will do in un-governed spaces. This is especially true in tight budget times and following a mid-term election in which the American people apparently voted to put government on a diet.

To be honest, this is a problem that I have been expecting for a long time. I spent my last four years at the State Department (2006-2010) trying to build the Civilian Response Corps (or CRC).

My near enemy in that mission was the bureaucrats at State and other agencies, and their Hill allies, who thought that there was no need for a new structure to work in this field. These were people who believed that our civilian operations in Iraq and Afghanistan were adequate or that some other part of the government, their part, should have this responsibility.

But the far enemy was always that distant specter, that following frustrating operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the American political system would decide that it never, ever wanted to do that again. And it would zero out funding for any capacity associated with that effort. There is historical precedent for this. After Vietnam, Congress removed vital capacity from USAID—and the CIA and the Pentagon—that would have been extremely valuable to our operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The CRC was and is an effort to restore lost capacity.

Thanks goodness, we have not reached that critical stage. And while Washington may be devoting more time to East Asia, it is premature, with the Iranian nuclear issue continuing to loom, to conclude that we are turning our attention from the Middle East. And if the advocates of military action have their way, there may be an urgent need for the expeditionary civilian capacity represented by the Civilian Response Corps. Yet even with that caveat,

the rumblings against “nation building” are growing.

The sudden, belated attention Washington is finally giving to our runaway deficit spending compounds the problem. Our long-term financial health and, therefore, our national security require that we find a way to reduce the deficit sharply. That will require major spending cuts and it would not be surprising for near-sighted Congressional budget hawks to see our modest, new civilian capacity for stability operations as an unnecessary expense.

A Prudent Response

In this environment, how do we protect what we have built and build further? First, we need some clarity on the breadth of the danger. The U.S. Government impetus to build civilian capacity for ungoverned spaces was certainly a response to our unsatisfactory civilian operations in Iraq in 2003. But the problem that such civilian capacity addresses is much broader.

There are 40-plus states with major governance problems around the globe. While at some point our political system may decide that we no longer want to invest in Iraq or Afghanistan or Iraq-and Afghanistan-like situations, those 40-plus countries are not going away; and some of them will pose threats to us best dealt with by the civilian capacity of the CRC. While the factors I cited at the beginning make distant ungoverned spaces potentially dangerous for us, close by chaos is always a threat.

We saw again in the winter of 2009 that we do not yet have the civilian experts and system to manage the crises that erupt periodically

in Haiti. We have seen over the past several years the growing danger to the U.S. coming from the under-governed city streets of northern Mexico. However tired we are of “nation building,” we will need civilian capacity to address the danger of chaos-induced refugee flows from Haiti or drug flows and drug-fueled violence from Mexico.

Moreover, despite our budget woes and frustrations with Iraq and Afghanistan, 2011 witnessed once again the American interventionist impulse. This time in Libya. Yes, the Obama Administration placed limits on our involvement and chose to work through NATO. But there is no question that through whatever mechanism we engaged, the U.S. Government has some responsibility for ensuring that post-Qaddafi Libya does not fall into chaos. To have a chance of doing this right, we need our new civilian capacity.

Second, we need to explain the different uses of this capacity. Yes, it was created for large stability operations, but it can and far more often will be used in small and conflict prevention operations. This capacity really does represent smart power, that ounce of prevention that can save the lives of American soldiers by stabilizing a situation before there is a need for troops.

We have a good example of this in Southern Sudan, which held a referendum in January of 2011 in which it voted for independence from Sudan. In July it declared its independence. This turn of events was not a surprise.

The U.S. and the global community have a large stake in what happens in South Sudan. Roughly speaking, there are three possible outcomes: a relatively smooth transition to independence, a civil war or the emergence of a failed, independent state, ie, a new ungoverned space.

Either of those last two outcomes would lead to a humanitarian catastrophe and refugee flows that would further destabilize East Africa, including Uganda, Ethiopia and Kenya. The chaos could provide cover for extremist groups to move into new areas in East Africa.

To avert this, the U.S. Government began working with the UN, the AU, the EU and other international partners months before the January 2011 referendum. Initially under the direction of Special Envoy for Sudan Scott Gration (who is currently the U.S. Ambassador to Kenya), the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) has put the CRC into the field to develop the capacity of our small Consulate in Juba, to help identify/address problems that increase the chance of north-south friction and to enhance state capacity in the South. The CRC established a presence in the 10 South Sudan state capitals and other key locations in the country.

This is just the sort of expeditionary diplomacy that the Obama Administration has been trumpeting since coming into office. The UN has also made an extraordinary effort to place its personnel in all state and provincial capitals. While South Sudan's transition to independence has faced some difficulties, it has thus far averted the two dire outcomes of civil war or the emergence of another failed state. The preventive work of the U.N., the U.S. and other—placing trained civilians throughout South Sudan—has played an important role in preventing the transition to independence from spiraling out of control.

This Sudan operation is the first soup-to-nuts CRC mission that will demonstrate the utility of this new capacity. Thus far, the results have been very good.

The Need for Focus and Humility...

The third thing that American practitioners of civilian response must do to protect their baby in the months ahead is to be focused and realistic. Focus means that we must limit our attention to problems that have a clear impact on the national interest. We must be able to explain in a simple way why the missions we undertake are important for American interests. Why we should spend our time and money there despite astronomical budget deficits and high unemployment at home?

Realism or humility means that we must understand our own limits as we consider an operation. Can we truly stabilize a tottering friendly government? Will our intervention both relieve/avert a catastrophe and allow us to get out before our public grows weary with the operation?

...And Friends

We also need friends and partners. The experts in this room are very familiar with TransAtlantic relations, including the old bugbear of burden sharing. This concept grew out of the defense burdens of maintaining the Alliance, but the concept has broader application. As we anticipate the American political class taking a more jaundiced view of stability operations, it is important for its advocates to be able to point out that the U.S. has many partners in this field. That we are not doing this alone.

Fortunately, this is not a problem. There are a dozen countries active in this field, and the number is growing. We have close ties with all of them, and with the UN, the EU, the AU, and others. In fact, peacebuilding is

one area where our partners are outspending us—whether we are talking about Australia, Canada, Germany the Netherlands or the EU. This forum is a good example of the cooperation between the EU and the U.S. in this field, though I believe we can—and must—enhance that cooperation in practical ways.

QDDR

There is one more thing that we need to make sure that the CRC is a permanent part of the U.S. national security structure. The Administration must embrace it, deploy it and resource it. It appears to be the intention of Secretary of State Clinton, having worked through her first Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR), to do just that.

There is some irony in the Administration's handling of this issue. It arrived in office with the correct notion that the field of conflict prevention and response was critical and new resources were needed to do it. It placed this issue as one of the centerpieces of the QDDR; but it also decided to take a blue sky look at the problem that paid, initially little attention to the work that S/CRS had done. The result was 1) months-long paralysis on this issue within the QDDR as different parts of the bureaucracy tried to claim the responsibilities that belonged to S/CRS and 2) a reluctance to use S/CRS and the CRC as crises emerged and CRC capacity became available. This was evident as S/CRS was largely shut out of the planning for post-earthquake reconstruction in Haiti.

The cloud placed over S/CRS and the CRC by these short-sighted decisions had unintended and unwelcome consequences. The Senate

appropriations subcommittee marked down S/CRS' 2011 budget request from \$160 million to \$50 million, pointedly noting that there was no reason to fund a capacity that the Department was not using in a crisis like Haiti.

Fortunately, the QDDR team came to its senses and the final report recommended the empowerment within State of the CRC and an S/CRS successor organization. Unfortunately, the QDDR has yet to implement these decisions. As this article is edited—early November, 2011—State Department officials are saying that the QDDR will implement these decisions by the end of the year. Let's hope that happens.

Secretary Clinton has let it be known that she will be a one-term Secretary of State. That means that even if President Obama wins a second term, there will be a new Secretary of State in 2013. There is no reason to suppose that the new Secretary will have an interest in Secretary Clinton's QDDR. If the QDDR is to have any meaning it must be implemented while Secretary Clinton still has the authority—to ensure that its changes are institutionalized. If the decisions related to the CRC and S/CRS are not implemented for another six or eight months, they are not going to be firmly in place by the time a new Secretary takes office, which means that this capacity will be in a state of flux through the new Presidential election.

If the QDDR is implemented in a timely fashion, if high level support for the CRC is evident and if the force is used in current operations, its future prospects become much brighter. Even if we turn away from large operations in the near future, there should always be room for an efficient mechanism that promotes order, relieves misery and reduces the burden on our troops.