THE ISSUE
- Facing political and budgetary constraints, the United States must be more selective and disciplined in how it scopes and executes stabilization in conflict-affected countries to ensure it meets clearly defined U.S. and partner political goals.
- The U.S. government’s Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR) framework provides an opportunity to clarify and streamline stabilization assistance, though implementation will require sustained leadership, an interagency roadmap, new processes, bureaucratic incentives, and a review of authorities and resources.

STRATEGIC FRAMING
Like it or not, countries beset by instability from terrorist organizations or contested by state-based adversaries will continue to pose national security challenges to the United States. In the face of these challenges and given political and budgetary constraints at home, the United States must be more selective in how it scopes and executes efforts to consolidate gains after military operations and build institutional resiliency against adversaries.

The Trump administration released its Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR) framework on June 19, 2018, which is a strategic document to guide U.S. government efforts to maximize the effectiveness of stabilizing conflict-affected areas. Following the large-scale reconstruction efforts of the early 2000s in Iraq and Afghanistan, the SAR recognizes changing geopolitical realities and U.S. domestic political and budgetary constraints that will shape future stabilization efforts. This interagency framework, co-produced by the Department of State (DoS), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Department of Defense (DoD) provided the first-ever U.S. government unified definition of stabilization, recognized as an “inherently political endeavor involving an integrated civilian-military process to create conditions where locally legitimate authorities and systems can peaceably manage conflict and prevent a resurgence of violence.” The SAR defined roles for the key agencies involved in providing stabilization assistance to foreign countries. DoS is designated as the overall lead for stabilization efforts, formulating the political strategy. USAID is intended to be the lead implementor for non-security stabilization assistance, bringing considerable technical expertise. The SAR specifies that DoD is a supporting element in providing security-related stabilization assistance in support of civilian-led efforts. Other U.S. government departments and agencies may also play roles in stabilization under this organizational rubric. The SAR also highlighted the intended short-term nature of stabilization efforts, typically lasting between one to five years, agile, and adaptive to host country needs. Furthermore, the SAR underscored the need to coordinate and burden-share with allies and multilateral institutions in bolstering support for locally legitimate actors on the ground.
The SAR rightly responds to U.S. taxpayer fatigue regarding previous U.S. reconstruction efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan by focusing on cost-effectiveness and allied support for future U.S. foreign assistance programs. However, stabilization efforts should also be placed in a broader context. Conflict in the twenty-first century has become increasingly localized in nature and often results in longer, more violent clashes between state and non-state actors. It is also characterized by state-based competitors, which can exploit localized conflict and undermine the institutions of allies and partners. Indeed, given the emphasis the Trump administration has placed on prioritizing great power competition in both the U.S. National Security and Defense Strategies, future stabilization policies also need to account for competition with U.S. adversaries such as Russia and China. Traditional conflict phases are also melding together, such that stabilization operations may well take place during active conflict than following a ceasefire or temporary cessation of hostilities and share strong characteristics with preventive activities. Planning for stabilization should be required at the outset of any military operation, reevaluated as the environment shifts during operations, and deployed in parallel as conditions permit. Accordingly, there are three strategic frames with which to view the SAR’s recommendations: 1) consolidating gains after kinetic operations; 2) reinforcing resiliency in allied and partner institutions at the state and sub-state levels; and 3) synchronizing stabilization operations with shaping, preventative, deterrence, and kinetic operations and activities across the U.S. government.

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The SAR implementation process opens the door for several challenges and opportunities for the future of U.S. stabilization assistance.

THE STABILIZATION ROADMAP

Those operationalizing the SAR must define success and envision what that success looks like in practice. DoS, USAID, and DoD and other U.S. government actors (or the “U.S. interagency”), and international donors should develop clear shared political goals and metrics to guide stabilization, thinking about stabilization as a critical early part of a longer roadmap to peace and security. Agency- and department-level goals can be integrated to achieve the desired shared outcomes; importantly, these goals must acknowledge and reconcile differences between partner priorities and U.S. foreign policy objectives. International coordination between bilateral donors and multilateral institutions—especially those with field presence or perceived local legitimacy equal or greater than that of the United States—is also critical to avoid duplicative programming and align efforts behind shared goals. U.S. strategic priorities will require local political will and the capability to sustain commitment while the missions are in country. These priorities need to be adapted into context-specific goals that reflect an aligned vision of stability between international donors, the U.S. government, and local leaders.

Too often, these priorities have not been aligned, which ultimately leads to stabilization failures. For example, U.S. high-level policy in Syria has been highly inconsistent over the years, from starting primarily as an anti-Assad approach to shifting to being primarily an anti-Islamic State strategy—all while local programs on the ground were still ongoing. This inconsistency of high-level U.S. policy, as well as the general mismatch between U.S. priorities and local partners’ understanding of those priorities, created great confusion and ultimately led to less successful stabilization practices.

Natural and inherent tensions will likely result among U.S. political goals, other donors with which the United States seeks to burden-share, and local actors through which stabilization’s enduring success will be determined. The U.S. interagency will need to create a process and set of criteria to determine areas of convergence between donors and local leaders to wrestle with, evaluate, and balance these tensions. These criteria should be graded, reviewed at least every three to six months, and include: 1) partner political will; 2) overlap between partner and U.S. political goals; 3) contributions of allied and partner resourcing and technical expertise; 4) U.S. political will and resourcing sustainability over the one to five-year period; and 5) partner ability to transition.

DoS policy leadership must drive a rigorous, integrated approach to defining success and a “theory of change in meeting political goals.” This approach should also incentivize and accept feedback from interagency staff members, implementers, and most critically, from local
partners. Without these, the SAR framework risks being a “check-the-box” exercise.

**SUCCESS IN THE U.S. INTERAGENCY**

The SAR avoids context-specific, explicit directions to DoS, USAID, and DoD, even though 86 percent of surveyed U.S. government experts were unclear about which U.S. government agency had responsibility for different elements of stabilization. This is understandable at some level; the SAR is a high-level policy document deliberately lacking detail. However, these roles, goals, and leadership structures must be clear in theater and between interagency partners in Washington, D.C. and abroad. Stabilization “success” is now a jointly achieved goal with shared responsibilities. Nevertheless, each U.S. government department and agency will define success differently based on its respective role within operationalizing the SAR.

Regional bureaus, agencies, and departments are siloed in the countries in which they operate, creating an added challenge: there is little systematic interaction or coordination to minimize duplicative activities or strategize effectively, and little effort to achieve consensus on priorities and responsibilities. While U.S. embassies and regional bureaus must chart the political strategy for a given country, the process, criteria, and roadmap for implementing stabilization within that defined political strategy must be driven (and empowered to be driven) by the DoS Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, in coordination with other interagency members.

**ENGAGING LOCAL ACTORS**

Local actors—especially those with a high level of local legitimacy—have a pivotal role to play, especially in defining partnership goals and maintaining focus on longer-term stability. Stability can easily be compromised if local champions do not embrace the same vision as the United States and its bilateral and multilateral partners. Building strong local partnerships provides a wide range of protection and support to U.S. implementers on the ground, also creating a sense of local ownership over the progress. A challenge to engaging with local actors will be that local legitimacy does not always translate to credibility in the eyes of the U.S. government. Partner vetting processes will require flexibility and focus on shared goals. If the United States only engages with partners it deems to be legitimate, it runs the risk of excluding key stakeholders that could—if included in the process in some way—lend local legitimacy to and inform stabilization efforts. Although not addressed directly in the SAR, this will be a key issue in its operationalization that should be resolved on a case-by-case basis.

**ASSESSING, MONITORING, AND EVALUATING SUCCESS**

Prior stabilization efforts have failed—or are believed to have failed—for several reasons, often due to unrealistic goals and timeframes, a lack of adequate resources, coordination, and leadership across U.S. government authorities, not to mention inadequate baseline assessments and progress measurements. Efforts to track progress towards desired outcomes should build in flexibility—and tolerance for failure—and feed learning into refined strategies, allowing them to adapt when needed. Doing so will require appropriate indicators and stronger assessment, monitoring, and evaluation (AM&E) tools that leverage modern data gathering and analysis. AM&E strategies should consider the design and full lifecycle of the stabilization program.

Operationalization of the SAR requires heretofore unseen interagency cooperation, including efforts to assess, measure, and evaluate progress. Indicators across DoD, DoS, and USAID do not necessarily have to be the same because roles and responsibilities within the SAR are different; however, they should be consistent and not contradictory, and the U.S. interagency should strive to define common metrics for determining success in meeting U.S. political objectives as the ultimate goal for stabilization activities. Policymakers need to conduct situational evaluations that identify the stability and instability factors in each context, recognize the cultural dynamics, identify key actors and authorities with which to develop relationships and coordinate, and understand grievances affecting the local population.

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It is tempting to focus AM&E efforts on the easily measurable. The number of teachers trained or bridges repaired can indeed be tracked but rarely indicate progress to a desired outcome via an established process. At the same time, measuring outcomes can be challenging; hence the need to focus on process over output indicators. Process-driven milestones can appear less engaged with outcome-oriented thinking but can strike a balance between setting an overarching goal and offering flexibility in the course of achieving it. Process milestones may also be more conducive to sharing across the U.S. interagency, to assess
how well the overall stabilization approach is working (e.g., as a function of programmatic cycle time, specific task time, completeness, degree of duplication, and cost). They also should be easily digestible for policy, congressional, and public audiences to calibrate planning and programs and to ensure transparency and accountability.

**TRANSITION STRATEGIES**

Ultimately, success in stabilization operations means the transition of donor support away from such operations. Success is the achievement of such sustainable peace and stability that U.S. engagement—at least on stabilization—is no longer needed. USAID is in the process of reforming the way it thinks about strategic transitions, endeavoring to assist countries on their “journey to self-reliance.”

Self-reliance may not be a feasible outcome in the short-term for the fragile and conflict-affected states so often the focus on stabilization programming; however, the seeds of the longer-term development critical for ultimate transition should be planted during stabilization operations and the concept of the journey with an end is a useful one.

**CHALLENGES TO SAR IMPLEMENTATION**

The tensions that exist across, among, and within actors carrying out U.S. stabilization are well known, as are the differences in culture between those in Washington and those in the field. Additional challenges that will need to be addressed as the interagency works to implement the SAR include the following:

**CREATING AND RESPONDING TO A STABILIZATION DEMAND SIGNAL**

U.S. embassies lack a standard operating procedure for requesting stabilization resources; instead, requests come from ambassadors who either have past experience with stabilization activities in other countries or who take it upon themselves to investigate how to respond to stabilization needs. As such, there is not a systematic way to create a global “demand signal” for stabilization resources from the field to inform future policy planning or appropriations. In addition, much like there is a U.S. interagency mechanism for responding to humanitarian crises via the USAID-led Disaster Assistance Response Teams and for mobilizing for military operations via DoD, the United States needs a way to call forward stabilization personnel, technical expertise, and resources expeditiously for stabilization.

**NON-STATE ACTORS AS STABILIZATION PARTNERS**

In cases where central government support is not possible and the United States seeks to partner primarily with non-state actors for stabilization activities, the imperatives of ensuring alignment of objectives and robust AM&E grow even stronger. The U.S. interagency lacks a “playbook” or framework for working primarily with non-state actors and performs assistance missions through ad hoc authorities, increasing risks for misalignment of priorities, lack of connection to political goals, instigation of state sovereignty and governance authority challenges, and uneven oversight.

Access to non-state actor stabilization contexts may also be challenging. The U.S. interagency created the Syria Transition Assistance Response Team platform to respond to the complex humanitarian and stabilization needs in Syria from perimeter countries and eventually in northeast Syria.

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**LITTLE ROOM FOR INNOVATION**

Given significant “scar tissue” surrounding the failures—and perceived failures—of stabilization in the last 20 years, there is little room for experimentation or error in the implementation of future stabilization assistance. Operationalizing the SAR will require a cultural shift to enable innovation and periodic setbacks on a pathway to success within a framework involving rigorous planning, AM&E, and offramps if programs do not meet political objectives in the one- to five-year timeline.

**RESTRICTIONS TO PREVENT AID DIVERSION**

For important national security, legal, and accountability reasons, the U.S. government and other donors have implemented reviews and restrictions to prevent diversion of stabilization assistance to terrorist organizations. However, in practice, these restrictions have severely impeded assistance delivery to critical areas and access to local civilians, which can undermine U.S. political objectives. Tradeoffs, rigorous review of programs, and vetting are inherent and necessary features of navigating conflict-affected areas. The U.S. interagency should strive for greater transparency on the rationale and process for
restrictions and capacity to review programs to ensure timely response—to enable changes in the field resulting from a restriction being upheld or removed.

**DOD’S AUTHORITIES FOR STABILIZATION**

The SAR identifies the appropriate, supporting role for DoD in the conduct of stabilization. DoD has a limited mechanism to perform stabilization activities under the Overseas Humanitarian Disaster and Civic Aid (OHDACA) authority. However, in fluid, complex, and contested environments, when stabilization assistance must flow in parallel with military operations, there is a “golden hour” in which to begin inserting these resources when partner will, capability, and legitimacy may be at a peak but before civilian stabilization experts are able to arrive in the area. The U.S. interagency and Congress should review whether the necessary authorities are in place to allow for an agile and disciplined response.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Stabilization will be a necessary way for the U.S. government to secure gains following military operations and to strengthen allied and partner resilience in the face of state and non-state actor challenges. The SAR provides a starting point for guiding selective and targeted stabilization given U.S. political and budgetary constraints. In order to operationalize the SAR effectively, the United States government needs to:

- Acknowledge that while the SAR defines U.S. stabilization programs as being “short term” in nature, these programs must fit into a broader stabilization-to-peace continuum. The short-term approach to stabilization stated in the SAR should not substitute for, but in fact, reinforce longer-term U.S. and partner objectives;

- Conceptualize stabilization as an integrated, political process that must be planned before and deployed in parallel with military operations. Stabilization can consolidate gains after kinetic operations and reinforce resiliency in allied and partner institutions at the state and sub-state levels in environments contested by both state and non-state actors;

- Codify and promulgate policies, processes, roles, and responsibilities for SAR implementation across the U.S. interagency. DoS Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations should be the primary lead for the stabilization process, criteria, and assessing performance vis-à-vis political objectives defined by the embassy country team and regional bureaus, supported by USAID and DoD;

- Sustain authorizations and appropriations by the U.S. Congress for DoS and USAID to perform their leading and implementing roles for integrated and disciplined stabilization. Review authorities and resourcing for stabilization in light of the SAR, including those needed by DoS, USAID, and DoD, and in partnership contexts involving non-state actors, to determine if revisions to or new authorities and resources are needed;

- Require U.S. embassy country teams to establish clearly defined political objectives connected to country or regional strategies for stabilization support in order to access stabilization funds. Where stabilization resources are needed for transregional or sub-state challenges, DoS regional bureaus should provide this justification; and

- Improve AM&E practices for stabilization programs by increasing data-sharing across the interagency and defining process indicators by which to measure progress toward stabilization and ultimate political goals.

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ENDNOTES

1. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)’s International Security Program (ISP) and Project on Prosperity and Development (PPD) are conducting a project to assess how to operationalize the U.S. government’s Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR) framework, released in June 2018. This is the first of two CSIS Briefs presenting the project findings and recommendations resulting from workshops, stakeholder interviews, and research and analysis. This project is made possible by the support of Chemonics International, Inc.


